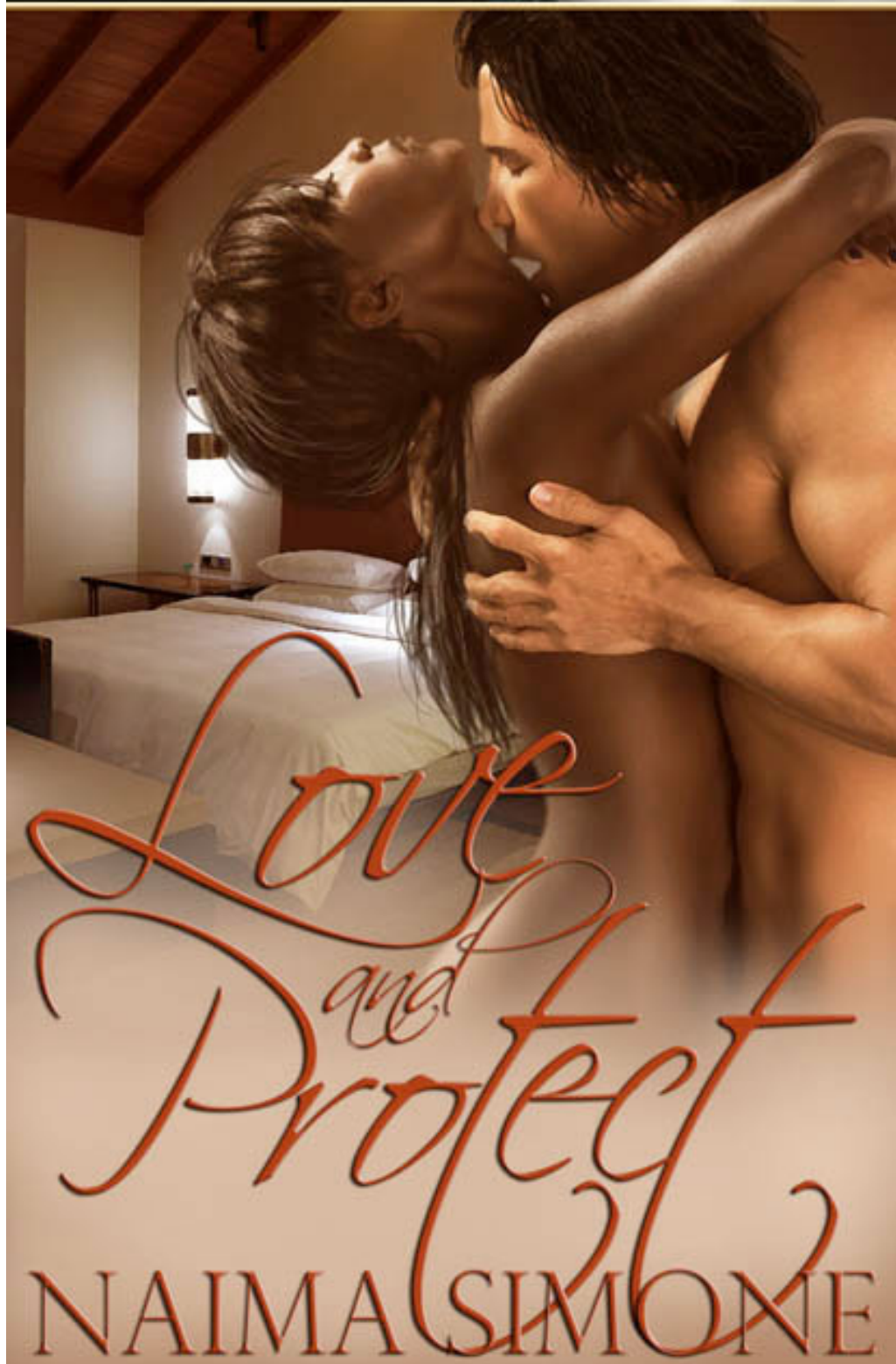


ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



Love and Protect

Naima Simone

Ex-DEA agent Erin Montgomery is reluctantly back on the job, posing as the sex-kitten groupie girlfriend of rock star Sean Ledger. She'll be joining his band's tour to try to catch an obsessed, dangerous fan. Tormented by nightmares of her failed last assignment, Erin's not exactly eager to be drawn back into the fray. But once she meets Sean, all rocker, all man and dripping with raw sex appeal, she knows she's right where she belongs.

Sean is reluctant to have someone investigating his crew, but when he meets Erin, his objections fly out the window. The beautiful, hard-bitten agent turns him on like no other woman ever has. Sean's caught glimpses of the fiery passion lurking under Erin's cool front and he's determined to break through her hard exterior and make her his.

But Sean's stalker is still at large and she's made it clear she's willing to stop at nothing – even murder – to get him.

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Love and Protect

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LOVE AND PROTECT

Naima Simone

Dedication

To my husband and children. You define my success.

Acknowledgements

To my Father. All things are possible through You who strengthens me. I am so blessed to be a daughter of an Impossible God.

To Gary. You keep me grounded while encouraging me to reach for the stars.

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To the Southern Magic chapter of RWA. Thank you for the chocolate and the shame!

And Daddy, faith *is* hope standing on tiptoes.

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Chapter One

"No!"

Erin jerked awake. Her chest heaved as she stared with unseeing eyes at the ceiling. A shiver racked her body and the raw burn of the scream scalded her throat as years of conditioning crumbled under the nightmarish images that even now assaulted her.

God, she hated sleeping.

She threw the covers aside, swung her legs from the couch cushions and sat up. Reaching forward, she grasped the MP3 player and 9mm off the coffee table where they waited for her like old, comforting friends. Maria Callas' *La Mamma Morta* poured into her ears and, with smooth motions born from years of practice, Erin broke down the weapon piece by piece. The practical, brisk task belied the emotional storm brewing inside her. Like Linus' security blanket, the classical music, combined with the routine of dismantling and cleaning the gun, calmed her racing heart and thoughts. The cold metal in her hands reminded her that as long as she held it, she remained in control.

Brick by brick, block by block, she rebuilt the white concrete wall in her mind. Behind its impenetrable shield she shoved all the memories, the debilitating emotions of fear, pain and anger. The safeguard firmly in place, her calm reasserted itself. Her heart slowed, her pulse resumed its normal pace and the perspiration dried on her skin. With the barrier once again erected, nothing could shake her. Nothing.

When the already-pristine gun was cleaned and reassembled, she methodically began the task again. And again. The psychologist she'd seen for all of two months had had plenty to say about the "soothing" habit. Obsessive compulsive...avoidance... Blah, blah, blah. Whatever. She was disturbed.

Fine.

As long as it kept the demons at bay.

The cell phone next to her jumped and vibrated against the table. Her gaze flicked to the digital clock on the other end of the table and back to the buzzing phone. Two a.m. Who would be calling at this hour? Hell. Who would be calling her, period?

She snatched the phone, flipped the cover up and pressed it to her ear. Long-ingrained habit kept her from speaking first. Whoever waited on the other end knew who they'd called. Besides, late-night phone calls rarely meant a wrong number. Bad news, maybe, but seldom wrong.

"E?"

Surprise shoved the suspicion aside. Only one person called her that.

"Braedon?"

"Hey, partner."

Ex-partner. Erin narrowed her eyes at the sound of Braedon Roberts' drawled greeting. Even after a years absence, the honeyed accent never failed to remind her of lazy days and sweet iced tea. Too bad sweetened shit gave her a toothache.

"Long time, no hear from."

"And from your overwhelming enthusiasm I can tell how glad you are that I called." The chuckle in her ear attested to how little her flat welcome offended him. Then again, as long as she'd known him, not much affected that good-ol'-boy, South Carolina humor. The man could laugh with you one minute and put a bullet through your head the next. His ruthlessness and focus had made him a damn good undercover agent and partner. Those same characteristics made her wary of this late-night call.

"What do you want?"

"Sweetheart," he tsked, "ever heard that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

"Since I'm not trying to catch a damn thing, maybe you can cut to the chase and tell me what you want."

"Okay, fine. I see a year-long hiatus has only sharpened that tongue of yours." A heartbeat of silence passed. "How about your edge?"

A dull roar burst to life in her ears, growing louder with each passing second. Her heart pounded in concert with the rising noise. Sweat prickled her suddenly clammy skin. Hell no. Hell. No. Only one reason existed for him to ask her that. Only one...

She slammed the phone shut and threw it on the couch. She eyed the damn thing as if it would sprout fangs and strike.

Seconds later, it vibrated again. She edged away from the sofa. *Buzz.* A glass of wine sounded good. *Buzz.* Damn. He wasn't going away. On the fourth ring, she crossed the two steps to the couch and snatched up the phone with a swipe of her arm.

"What the fuck do you want?" she snarled, the white cement wall in her mind fracturing under the weight of her anger and panic. Her fingers curled around the phone and threatened to crack it in half. "Get it off your chest so I can tell you to go to hell and you can leave me alone."

"Erin, please. I wouldn't come to you if I didn't need your help. If I didn't need *you.*" His sigh echoed through the phone at her hostile silence. "It's been a year, E. A year since you've shut yourself off from the world, from me. I'd hoped in that time you'd stop blaming yourself for Jack's—"

"Get on with it," she snapped, cutting him off. Wheeling around, she paced in front of the coffee table. If he continued down that line of conversation she would hang the phone up and smash the thing with the butt of her gun. She refused to go there with him.

With anyone.

She ground to a halt and pressed a fist to her forehead as if she could hold back the tide of memories that threatened to consume her.

"I'd hoped you'd healed," Braedon said. "But I don't have the luxury of allowing you more time. I need you, E. I have a job and you're the only person I can turn to. The only person I trust."

"Then that means we're both fucked." She didn't trust her damn self. She still jerked awake at nights, sweating from nightmares, her only solace music and a gun. With her faulty brain, if she were the one person he trusted, then he, too, was screwed bigger than shit.

"You're the best agent I know —"

"History."

"Cut it, Erin," Braedon bit out, all traces of his Southern drawl erased as the hard inflection of the DEA-operative-turned-security-consultant commandeered its place. "You're the only one who believes you're damaged goods. I don't care if you lost a whole damn team. It doesn't change the fact that you're the best."

God, if she'd only been so lucky. At least a team of cops went in to an operation knowing and accepting the possibility of losing their lives. Jack...her stomach clenched and an invisible hand squeezed her throat, slowly strangling the breath from her. With a will born of sheer desperation, she shoved the stabbing grief behind the wall, already mortaring the cracks. "Like I said. History," she gritted out.

"Erin, I've never asked you for anything in the years we've known one another. I'm asking now. I'm begging if that's what it takes to get you to listen—really listen to me. My friend has asked for my help but it's a job I need you for." Frustration tinged his voice. "You probably don't remember but I used to mention a guy I went to school with who was in a rock band. Well, his name is Sean Ledger and he's in trouble."

Sean Ledger. The name ricocheted inside her mind. *No fucking way.*

Despair. Terror. Helplessness. Feelings she'd believed buried with a horrific childhood were resurrected and clawed from the grave to drag her back down to its dark, desolate depths.

Suffocating her.

"E?"

"Back off, Braedon." She closed her eyes and instantly an image of Sean Ledger appeared. Except not as the lead guitarist of the rock band Odyssey looked today but as an angry, seventeen-year-old youth. "Shit," she murmured, dropping her head back. Opening her eyes, she stared at the white spackled ceiling.

"Erin?"

"I'll call you back."

"Erin, dammit!" Braedon barked in her ear. "Don't you hang up on me again."

"Then don't make me," she retorted, desperation sharpening her voice.

"If I don't hear from you in fifteen, I'm calling *you* back," Braedon warned, his voice an ominous growl.

"Fine," Erin snapped and flicked the cover closed. Her hand dropped to her side as if the small phone weighed a ton. The irony of being asked to help the person who had once been her savior wasn't lost on her.

She stalked to the couch and crumpled blankets and dropped onto its soft cushions. They might as well as have been boulders for all the notice she took of their comfort. She propped her elbows on her thighs and cradled her head in her palms. It felt as if she'd been ripped open and every painful memory, every shameful secret were on public display. She'd endured the rigorous policy academy training, survived the bumfuck her career had become. And yet, here she sat, trembling like a child terrified of things that went bump in the night.

She didn't experience many moments like these—at least not while awake—and only the dark memories of her childhood could conjure these flashes of weakness.

Sean Ledger.

What were the damn odds? Unless she counted the brief flashes she'd caught of him on television, Erin hadn't seen him in fifteen years and had refused to think of him in nearly that long. She would've had to have immigrated to another country not to know of him and his success, but she'd made it a point not to follow his career.

Erin had let go of him a long, long time ago out of necessity. And yet for three years—from age ten to thirteen—a quiet teenage boy four years older than her had been the only security she'd known. Even at so young an age, Sean had been an old soul. As if his stormy gaze had seen too much, experienced more than any boy had a right to. Then again, at ten so had she. She'd lost everything—her home, her family—and her only constant, her only security, had been him.

Images of the tall, quiet, dark-haired youth he'd been bombarded her. Sean walking her home from school—an intimidating bodyguard for a scared, grief-stricken little girl. Sean surprising her with a cupcake, a single lit candle set in the center to celebrate the eleventh birthday everyone else had forgotten or didn't care to remember. Sean sleeping on the floor at the foot of her bed as the door creaked open to admit a large, dark shadow creeping toward her.

Sean, fists flying, punching and pulling the heavy weight of her foster father off her small, thirteen-year-old body...

"Shit!" Erin exploded from the couch, her shin bumping the coffee table and sending it skidding across the hard wood floor. Again, agitated strides carried her across the room and then back. She crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed her palms up and down the gooseflesh pebbling her skin.

Fifteen years. Fifteen long years ago. That scared, defenseless girl who needed protecting no longer existed...and yet... Erin slammed to a halt as if an invisible wall had sprung up in front of her. She no longer required help but now Sean did. He needed her just as she'd needed him in that shadow-filled room.

Erin whirled on her heel, curling her lip in a silent snarl. Damn, she hated debts. And while the boy Sean had been wouldn't have expected repayment for his act, she

did. Especially now when she found herself in the position of being able to repay what he'd given her.

She owed him on behalf of that terrified child.

"Shit," she repeated, the whisper tired even to her jaded ears. Rubbing the nape of her neck, she flicked a glance at her wristwatch. Approximately two minutes left before Braedon started ringing her phone off the hook. Dread congealed in her stomach, a weight that seemed to grow heavier with every step that brought her closer to the desk and phone. With a sigh, she picked up the cell, flipped the cover up and dialed her ex-partner's number.

"You had a minute and a half left before I started dialing," he barked in lieu of a greeting.

"I know." Erin returned to the couch and perched on the edge of the cushions. She rested her elbow on her thigh and palmed her forehead. "What is Sean Ledger to you?"

"He's my best friend." He sighed. "My dad was a police officer. When I was seventeen, Dad brought Sean home and he never left. I later found out Sean had been arrested for assaulting his foster father after the bastard had tried to molest a little girl in their care. We lived like family for four years and have remained close as brothers since."

Fuck. Braedon had no clue he was talking about her.

"What are the details?"

A heartbeat of silence hung between them and she could almost feel Braedon's quick mind processing her words and deciphering the meaning behind them.

"Do you know who Sean is?"

"Sure do," she snorted. Braedon had no idea how well she knew him.

"Forgive me, sweetheart." He chuckled, mistaking her dry response. "With you, I had to ask. I don't know if you still listen to that hog-calling stuff you used to."

"Only if you still listen to the same pussy metal you used to."

"Point taken." She could hear the smile in his voice. "Erin, Sean is being stalked."

"Tough titty. Isn't that part of the whole celebrity gig? Panties in the mail? Nudie pictures and vows of undying devotion?" Erin fell back against the couch. "Cry me a river."

"You're all heart, Erin."

She shrugged at his sarcasm. She might have already resigned herself to taking this job but it didn't mean she'd play nice.

"You're right though. It started out that way but a week ago his car was vandalized. The windows busted out, the body dented and scratched."

"Well, hell, Braedon, that could be anybody." She blew out an irritated gust of breath. "Scorned lover. Jealous husband. Even kids pulling a prank."

"It wasn't."

The certainty in his voice gave her pause. Fine. There was more to this than he was willing to go into over the phone. Erin heaved another sigh. "Okay. So, the rock star is a smart man. He hired the security firm headed by an ex-agent to protect him. So what do you need me for?" Erin forced the dismissive tone, even though her heart pounded in her chest like a snare drum.

"Erin," Braedon said, "Sean is a good man and an even better friend. He's worried this person won't stop at lashing out and will target those close to him." Braedon hesitated briefly before continuing. "They start a three-month tour in two weeks. I don't have an employee who could pull this off like you, Erin. You are the best and this is personal. I need you in on this. It would be routine for you." She could imagine him thrusting his fingers through his brown curls. She'd witnessed the frustrated gesture often in the past. "Please, E, come to New York and meet Sean. I know what I'm asking of you. I know the position I'm putting you in—"

"No, you don't."

"Yes, sweetheart, I do."

"No. You don't." Erin shook her head for emphasis, even if he couldn't see the motion. One of the strongest and most capable men she knew, Braedon had always had her back. If any person could wear the label of friend, then it would be him. Still, even that relationship couldn't coerce her to return to the hell of being responsible for another person's life.

Only the debt a thirteen-year-old girl owed to a seventeen-year-old protector who'd saved her from a horror no child should ever endure could do that. She grimaced, a shaky breath escaping her lips. "If you had any clue, you would've chosen someone else. You're betting on the wrong horse."

"I'd take my chances with you any day."

She cringed at his soft reply. He was a fool to place his trust in someone he'd seen combust right before his eyes.

"Please, Erin. I need you. Say yes."

Eyes squeezed shut, her head dropped until her chin grazed her collarbone. She wanted to shout no. His trust and belief in her be damned. She hadn't asked for it, and she didn't want it. Shit. Shit. *Shit!* She didn't want this—didn't *need* this in her life right now.

"Yes."

Chapter Two

The notes leapt from the guitar, aggressive, demanding, sexual.

Eyes closed, Sean allowed the emotions churning in his chest to echo in the music he pulled from the electric instrument resting on his thighs. If the melody held an angry edge, he didn't pull back but pushed it harder and harder. It throbbed over his skin, consumed him from the inside out, swelling until the music crashed and ebbed into complete silence. The sound of his rough breathing filled the soundproof recording studio like small blasts. His head fell back and he slowly inhaled, then released the breath on a soundless sigh. A quick glance to the left and his eyes fell on the clock. Six a.m. And any moment, the studio door would open and his chickens would come home to roost.

"Shit." A short huff of laughter escaped him as he bent his head over the guitar once more.

Flashes of dark, tinted windows clinging to a scratched car frame flickered like an ugly movie reel. Webbed cracks over a smashed windshield. Ugly, angry dents marring the passenger door. Even now he could feel the crisp bite of the October night stinging his nose and throat while the crunch of glass under the heel of his boot like teeth grating. Emblazoned in his brain was the image of the single black rose that lay like an oily stain across the slashed, cream-colored leather seat, a small rectangular card attached to the thorny stem. That night Sean hadn't needed to lift the card to inhale the pungent burning-leaves-and-roses perfume or see the elegant script scrawled across the top to know what he would find.

Persephone.

Helplessness hadn't been his companion since childhood but that night he and the old albatross bumped fists like long-lost buddies.

As if it were seconds ago instead of weeks, bitter rage at the violation and senseless destruction clawed his chest. He detested the sense of vulnerability, of not being able to defend himself or those he loved. Of feeling like his fate, his safety – his life – dangled at the whims of someone else. Out of his control.

What he hated more was that partial responsibility lay at his feet.

Or more specifically, his dick.

He realized the futility of blaming himself for the actions of others. But deep inside, located in the who-the-fuck-are-you-kidding section of the subconscious, Sean couldn't hide from one glaring fact. When his car had been smashed to hell and beyond, he'd been balls-deep in a pussy. In the pussy of a woman who would be forgotten as soon as he delivered the obligatory morning-after phone call.

The bashing of his car had been the actions of a woman scorned. And the psychological reports Braedon waved in his face couldn't alleviate the ball of guilt that knotted his gut like a damn kidney stone. What if she was one of the women he'd fucked and forgotten? What if his actions had been the trigger to set the stalking off?

Then his not being able to keep his dick in his pants was as much responsible as Persephone's insanity.

And the truly damaged part of it all?

He hadn't enjoyed it. Not really.

The nameless, faceless women he met at concerts and parties weren't enough anymore. In his heart he knew there had to be more. For years he'd believed that the pleasure found in a snug, hot pussy was all he required. Successful, lasting relationships were endangered species in this day and age. Add the demands of his career and commitment shot past endangered and headed straight for extinct. Yet, at some point, what had been harmless fun stopped seeming so...harmless. Even as he gratified his cock, a fissure in his soul cracked a little wider with each encounter. A dark emptiness expanded, the chasm deepening with another woman, another meaningless fuck. And still he couldn't walk away from what his body, his nature, demanded. It was a damn double-edged sword. He fucked and the emptiness grew, yet the sex provided the only connection he had. The only companionship he allowed himself to beat back the loneliness.

What did it say about him that as soon as he pulled out of a pussy, he needed space, clean air? He needed to scrub off the cloying scent of woman and sex that clung to him like a burr.

When had the dissatisfaction started? The knowledge that there should be something more? Better question. When had it started to eat at him? Sean shifted, edgy as a whore in church with the uncomfortable thought.

He loved women. He loved sex with women. Their vulnerability, their softness, their taste.

Nature deemed them more delicate, their pleasure not as easy to attain. And when they placed their trust in him to reach the ultimate ecstasy they sought—trusted *him* to give it to them...

Their pleasure was his.

Lately, the no-strings, faceless bodies hadn't been enough.

Damn, he shook his head.

Fucking was making him maudlin as hell.

Another reason to quit the one-night stands.

Inhaling, Sean closed his eyes and pressed his fingers to the guitar chords as the other hand strummed a familiar melody. Almost immediately his spirit calmed, the music soothed. He let his mind go—no more thoughts of vandalized cars, empty souls and emptier sex.

He just...played.

* * * * *

Erin pulled her truck into the studio parking lot, jerked the gear into park, and after a brief hesitation, shoved the door open.

Wednesday 0600 hours.

Not a problem. Early mornings didn't bother her.

Neither did the overly cool October morning. Didn't faze her a bit.

Wednesday 0600 hours on a nippy October morning in an outfit that could be generously described as skimpy. Houston, she had a damn problem.

She grumbled long and creative curses under her breath, insulting everything from Braedon's brain to his dick.

Erin slid out of the car and in the second after the door slammed shut, she caught a glimpse of herself in the smoked glass. And scowled at the reflection. A shirt and leather pants that looked as if someone had thrown a damn bucket of water on her. Tight as fuck.

Oh yeah, Braedon had to die. *Routine job*, her ass. He'd omitted some very important details. Like playing a sex kitten, a groupie girlfriend to the rock star for the length of the assignment. Bastard.

She hooked the strap of the pink, sparkly, ultra-feminine bag over her shoulder. One more reason to exact revenge on her so-called *friend*. No way in hell would she have been caught dead with this frou-frou bag—the damn thing offended her eyes and pride. With a growl, she turned toward the low brick building that housed the studios where the rock band Odyssey recorded.

And didn't move.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip and stopped just short of pain as the familiar manacle of suffocation slowly squeezed her throat, heralding a panic attack. *Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth.* She refused to give in to these anxiety episodes. She wouldn't let them shake her.

And yet she stood, unable to propel her feet toward the building where Sean Ledger awaited her arrival. And that was the crux of it. Not only did she have to deal with the panic of undertaking her first assignment since her mental meltdown but once she crossed the lot and stepped into that building she would come face-to-face with her past and all the terror, weakness and insecurity she'd managed to bury deep. Her life was the definition of "shit happens".

I can do this. I can do this...

Inhaling another deep breath, she forced one foot forward. Then another. And another. In several too-short moments she'd entered the studio, cleared security and stood in front of the closed door to Room A. The fists at her sides tightened and her nails bit into the skin of her palms. It was a job. In the six years she'd been an officer,

three of them as an undercover agent, she'd had many assignments similar to the role this one called for. True, the nature of this job may not have been what she'd expected, but the goal hadn't changed. Determine if one of two women on the band's crew could be the guitarist's stalker.

Then the slate between her and the rock star would be clean and she'd return home.

And never answer the goddamn phone again. Or at the very least look at the caller ID first.

Taking another deep breath, Erin reached for the handle and pushed it down. The soft click of the latch disengaging reverberated like a sonic boom in her ears. She entered the room.

"Oh," Erin breathed, her hand tumbling limply back to her side. The heavy door closed behind her with a muted thud. The poignant notes of a guitar riff wrapped her in its warmth, cocooning her.

The music drew her into the room like a helpless child following the Pied Piper. The pure melody of the guitar was at once aggressive and sensual. And so beautiful. Simply...beautiful.

Erin took in a deep breath, her eyes closing. Not until several moments after she'd released it did she identify the elusive feeling that had settled over her. Peace. It had been so long since she'd felt anything other than the terror-laced grief that gripped her every time she closed her eyes. But now that ever-present beast retracted its claws and released its tenacious grip on her psyche, leaving heavenly quiet in its wake. Only her music—the soothing, pure sounds of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven—had ever calmed her savage beast. Never something like U2's *With or Without You*. Musical snob, yes, but even she knew the classic rock song he played with stunning skill. She refocused on the guitarist and her gaze skimmed up the black-sleeved arm to the shoulder hunched over the body of the instrument. Her inspection touched on the column of a lightly tanned throat. Glanced over the strong, shadowed jaw that followed. Dark strands of hair swayed against a lean cheek as the guitarist nodded in time to the music.

Sean Ledger.

Her hands curled into tight fists at her thigh. Even though she'd seen images of him over the years, her mind persisted in picturing him as she'd last seen him. An angry, handcuffed youth being hauled out the front door of their foster home. Now the man who the media branded the "brooding, sexy member" of Odyssey warred with that image. She hadn't been prepared to see him again. Hadn't been prepared for the impact of the man.

The pictures hadn't done justice to the sexy mouth with its full bottom lip or the high cheekbones hinting at an Asian ancestor. They hadn't captured the rich thickness of the dark hair drawn away from his face by a rubber band or the thick, black fan of lashes resting on those sharp warrior's bones.

Erin couldn't control the shiver that shuddered down her spine. When she'd been a child, Sean had been her protector, and she'd loved him as a big brother—the only

security and safety in a world hurtled into chaos. But now, staring at the long, slim fingers strumming the guitar strings, coaxing the lovely sound from the instrument, it wasn't affection that hummed through her veins or vibrated over her skin. Lust. Want. She swallowed. Would those same, elegant fingers play across skin as they did the strings of the guitar, eliciting devastating pleasure? Would they be as clever...as knowing?

Whoa.

His head lifted, drawing her attention. Black, ridiculously long lashes parted, revealing a stormy gray gaze, blurred and unfocused. As she stared, the haze dissipated and his eyes sharpened on her face. The melody never changed. The rhythm never faltered. Neither did his intense scrutiny. She imagined she could feel the bold touch of his eyes across her brow, down the slope of her nose, over her mouth. Before she could stop herself, Erin moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and watched his eyes fasten on the nervous gesture. His gaze flicked back to her eyes and he watched her with narrow-eyed speculation. For a panicked moment she feared he recognized her. The urge to stroke her cheek almost overpowered her. Gritting her teeth, she fisted that same hand to keep it down at her side. *The scar is gone*, she reminded herself, *so calm the fuck down*.

She shoved the flash of anxiety down. Besides, why would he recognize her? Sean was familiar with Elise Grayson, a disfigured, weak, vulnerable child. Before him stood Erin Montgomery, a smooth-cheeked ex-DEA agent.

She longed to look away. Her mind screamed, *Evade! Evade, dammit!* But her body refused to obey. In that moment, the hunter became the hunted. Something dark and sexual entered his stare. A primal part of her she hadn't known existed responded with a sudden pulsing between her thighs. Blood rushed to the folds of her sex and she fought the urge to squeeze her thighs together to alleviate the ache. Her nipples tightened against the lace of her bra. She willed her hands to remain at her side. Sent a mental order not to palm the sensitive mounds and won the battle...barely.

Erin inhaled a deep breath, the exhalation slow and deliberate. Though it cost her, she schooled her features into maintaining a mask of indifference.

Control.

If anybody understood the importance of control Sean Ledger would. After her conversation with Braedon and her acceptance of the assignment, she'd researched the guitarist past the magazines and fan sites. She'd read the blogs that revealed what the polite celebrity rags didn't. Sean had a reputation.

Rumors abounded of a hedonist who knew a woman's desires better than the woman herself did. Women gossiped about an intense sexuality that pushed his partners to explore and press beyond their boundaries. Erin suppressed a flinch. The thought of someone possessing such complete power over her body horrified her.

As if able to peer into her mind and read her thoughts, Sean's gaze darkened, the promises—or threats—of just how he could make her lose absolute control shadowing his eyes.

A heartbeat of silence passed between them.

"Hello." The chocolate timbre of his voice glided over her skin and transported her to shadowed rooms, candles and writhing bodies. *Oh. Shit.* And she was waist-deep in it.

Oh. Shit.

Copper eyes like a newly minted penny. Skin the flavor of coffee with generous servings of cream. A sleek fall of hair framed delicate features. Suck-me lips glossed to pouting perfection. A long-sleeved white t-shirt stretched across full, perfect breasts and bared a tight abdomen. Tight black leather pants hugged slim thighs like a lover and left little to the imagination. Not the length of those long, sexy-as-hell legs or the sweetly curved mound between her thighs.

Fuck. How was it possible to be jealous of a pair of pants?

She stared at him, meeting his gaze without the demure lowering of lashes or sly flirtation he often encountered with women. Yet he knew he hadn't imagined the lust he'd glimpsed when he'd first looked up and found her eyes on him.

Her eyes...he frowned. In spite of the warm, amber color and the flash of arousal he'd noticed they were empty. *No, not empty*, he corrected himself. Old. Tired. As if she'd endured so much hurt her eyes alone voiced what she couldn't—or maybe refused to—speak of. He understood that kind of pain, was intimate with it. The inexplicable urge to stand, cross the room and enfold her in his arms rose in his chest as a memory that wasn't a memory wavered at the edge of his mind and disappeared. His frown deepened. Something niggled at his subconscious—he felt as if he should know this woman, but that was impossible. If their paths had crossed no way in hell would he have forgotten. No way in hell.

"Erin Montgomery," she said, her voice firm, no-nonsense. And with a natural, sensual huskiness that eradicated all thoughts of pain and offering comfort. Eradicated everything except the need to hear broken cries of pleasure in the dark. *Hold up, wait a minute.*

Erin Montgomery. Braedon's friend. The agent masquerading as his lover to discover the identity of the stalker.

For the first time since he'd laid eyes on her, emotions other than lust crowded in. Resentment. Relief.

Resentment that he was being forced to investigate members of his crew as potential suspects. Resentment that he had to keep secrets from his friends, his band members. And relief that maybe an end to this nightmare might, with Erin's arrival, be in sight. It ate at him that once again he was failing to protect those he loved. Like a wormhole had opened and sucked him back to the past, he found himself in a dark

room full of shadows, fists sinking into flesh, his foster father's blood flying from the punches Sean landed. A wide pair of traumatized eyes in a small, scarred face. He'd saved his little foster sister that night. But because he'd lost his temper and had been carted to jail for the battery of his foster father, he'd lost her in the system. Had she suffered in her next foster home? Had she been safe without him there to watch over her?

Holy fuck.

Where had that come from?

Sean rose from his chair and slipped the guitar strap over his head in a jerky motion. He hadn't thought about that night in years, hadn't allowed himself to because of the guilt and grief that had engulfed him—that claimed him even now as if the incident had occurred minutes ago instead of years. He crossed the short distance to the corner packed with equipment and carefully set the 1959 Les Paul Standard on the stand against the wall. He brushed a small stroke over the instrument, lingering, before turning back to face Erin. Maybe it was the wounded shadows in her eyes that had invoked the onslaught of memories. Memories of her face may have been a bit blurry to him years later but the pain that had darkened eyes too young to have experienced such emotion would never fade.

Shaking the memories off, he studied the woman before him. Braedon had assured him his ex-partner was the best undercover agent he'd ever worked with. That she was professional, intelligent and cool under pressure. Sean didn't doubt it. Though her watchful gaze remained steady and clear, Sean hadn't missed how it had scanned the room, taking in every detail. Yet her body remained still. No fidgeting, no shifting.

Just perfect control.

His pulse leapt into full throttle and an answering throb echoed in his cock. Maybe that flawless discipline and self-control lay at the source of this admiration and fascination. Beautiful. Strong. Disciplined. He couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to have a woman of such strength willingly submit to him—to give her body in to his keeping. To trust him with her pleasure when he would bet his left nut Erin Montgomery didn't trust easily.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Erin," Sean murmured, eliminating the distance between them in seconds. He extended his hand toward her. Several silent moments passed. Erin glanced down then back up before slowly stretching her hand forward and clasping her palm to his. The slim fingers wrapping around his in a firm grip were strong. Confident. And sexy as a motherfuck.

Erin nodded and removed her hand from his. She crossed her arms over her chest and her full breasts plumped, treating him to a display of cleavage that would make a grown man cry in gratitude.

Her shrewd gaze noted the direction of his attention. A slim brow arched high.

"They're breasts. Last time I checked every woman had a pair."

Surprised laughter burst past his lips. "Touché." He tucked his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "They are lovely, by the way." Before the small vee of her brows could form a full frown he nodded. "Thank you for coming, Erin. Braedon speaks highly of you."

The potential scowl cleared and a wry twist that he couldn't accurately call a smile curved her lips. Mimicking his stance, she slid her hands in the back pockets of her pants. The position thrust her breasts forward and inched the hem of her white shirt up to reveal a thin slice of cocoa skin.

Chocolate had always been his favorite flavor.

"We didn't call him 'Blarney' for nothing," she said. "He briefed me on your situation. Including the recent vandalism to your car. No offense but she fucked that car up."

"That she did." The vicious destruction still possessed the power to make him want to hit a woman for the first time in his life.

"Guess you really pissed her off by going back to that woman's apartment."

Sean stared down at her. She met his gaze, her eyes unblinking, steady. There hadn't been a hint of accusation in the statement yet those words stabbed deep, as they confirmed what he'd suspected. The empty one-night stands. The meaningless sex. His punishment.

She jacked an eyebrow high. "You still believe it's not possible she's someone you know?"

He was already shaking his head. "No. Not possible."

"Braedon considers two of your crew members viable suspects." She slid a hand from a back pocket and tapped a soundless rhythm on her leather-covered thigh. "The fact is the stalking started a year ago—about the same time the two women on your crew were hired. Combine that with the access to you this woman seems to have..."

Sean fought to keep the resentment from his voice. He realized how damning Braedon's information appeared. But Sean had learned abandonment at an early age. Being dumped on a playground by a mother who valued the attention of a boyfriend more than her nine-year-old son had taught him that lesson well. In his adulthood, he'd found the family he'd missed out on as a youth, and he refused to accept that a member of his adopted family was capable of the harassment and terror of the past year. That kind of betrayal—his stomach clenched. No, it wasn't possible.

"I know what Braedon thinks, and while I respect his opinion and appreciate his help, I don't believe it. No one in the group or our crew would betray me, much less cause me harm. We're a family."

Incredulity flashed in her eyes and he wondered at its source. "You *think* no one would betray you."

"I know."

A tense silence stretched between them. She stared at him, a hard glint of steel in her eyes, as if she expected him to back down and everything dominant in him rose to meet her challenge. Her hard stare, coupled with the quirk of her eyebrow, declared her authority—and demanded his submission. She had the wrong man for that. Anticipation licked through him. Anticipation and lust.

Ass-kicking, dick-stroking, balls-tightening lust barreled a destructive path through his system.

The smooth, coffee and cream skin. The penny-brown eyes. The plump, perfect breasts that pushed against the tight cotton of her shirt. The slim, tightly toned body that he could easily imagine under him, thighs spread wide as he pushed his cock between drenched, swollen pussy lips. Would she take him easily? Or would her sex clench around his dick, resistant at first and only able to take him in increments? He could almost envision the dark-pink lips stretched wide around his cock as he buried an inch inside her pussy. And waited while the muscles quivered and accepted him. Then he'd bury another inch...

He wanted her tied, blindfolded and kneeling more than he needed to fucking breathe.

Erin Montgomery for damn sure wouldn't be faceless. Staring in her gaze, a tiny voice whispered that maybe the emptiness would be filled with this woman—with this woman, the dark stain of shame wouldn't taint his soul. He wouldn't want to wash Erin's scent from him but rather wear it like a damn Boy Scout badge of honor.

"You ever fuck one of the women Braedon identified?"

Her blunt question caught him off guard. He quelled the instinctive anger that surged like a geyser at the insulting question. Instead he removed his hands from his pockets, the move slow and deliberate.

And took a step forward. Eliminating the space between them.

If he hadn't been studying her so carefully he would've missed the flinch she almost stifled. As if she almost recoiled from his close proximity but stopped herself in time. Now that was telling. Did she resent anyone infiltrating her personal space or just him? He stored the reaction away to dissect later.

"Are you asking for personal or professional reasons?"

"Oh, definitely professional," she scoffed. "If you fucked one of them and didn't call the next day maybe all of this comes down to an insane woman scorned."

Sean stared at her and pretended her words hadn't scored a direct hit. He forced his arm to remain at his side instead of rub the spot over his chest where her jibe had struck dead on.

"Let me assure you, Erin, I don't dip where I work." He paused and tilted his head to the side. "And for the record? I always call the next morning."

Erin didn't remark and her expression remained unchanged. Yet the "yeah, right" echoed in the room.

"You know, Erin, I take that back." He dropped his gaze to her lips. "For you, I would change my mind."

"About?"

His eyes flicked to hers. "Fucking a woman I work with."

That glimmer of alarm had to have been a figment of his imagination. "Pretend," she enunciated, stretching out the syllables as if speaking to a child—or an idiot. "I'm sure you grasp the meaning of pretend."

"Oh quite." Sean nodded. A week ago he hadn't been enthused about a sham lover. But now—now his hands prickled with the anticipation of touching her. Kissing the strong, elegant fingers he could easily imagine capable of wielding a weapon...easily imagine those same fingers folded around his cock, stroking him... Another man may have been wary of letting a woman like Erin near his dick, but Sean craved it like his next breath. "And from Braedon's assurances I'm sure you have tons of experience in this field but I have to ask...are you going to be able to pull this off?"

Erin scowled, offended.

"Let me explain," Sean said. Damn. Even the woman's glare was a turn-on.

"Please do," she said in a saccharine tone that didn't fool him a bit.

"I have eyes, Erin. I noticed your reaction when I moved close to you a few minutes ago." He paused and raised an eyebrow. "Kind of makes me think you don't like to be touched."

"So I'm not the kumbaya type."

"I take it you're not thrilled with this assignment."

"I am positively giddy with joy." She bared her teeth in a grin that resembled The Joker—wide and mean.

God, she was hot. Yet, even as arousal shot through him, amusement quirked the corner of his mouth. A first for him. A woman had never inspired laughter and lust at the same time. "For appearances' sake, we're supposed to be lovers. If you object to the pretense, why did you take this job?"

A wry smile twisted her lips. "Obligation."

Curiosity sparked at the enigmatic *obligation*. Another mystery to uncover. Call him Sherlock Holmes, because he wanted to unravel every secret she held.

Sean lifted a hand and traced the delicate, stubborn line of her jaw with the back of his fingers. To her credit she didn't flinch. Steady, defiant eyes stared into his. And if not for the hitch of breath on his skin he would have believed her unaffected.

"Do you know what being my lover means?" God help him, he couldn't keep the throb of desire from his voice. With little effort, this woman could flip the tables and have him begging to kneel before her and lick her pussy, feast on her cream.

"Oh yeah," she assured him with a smirk. "I do. Unfortunately, I'm not fond of the leash law for myself, only pets."

"Such a smart..." Sean paused and flicked a glance down to her soft, full lips, "pretty mouth."

"Don't push me." The sensual curve to her mouth flattened, matching the cold warning in her bronze stare.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Sean said, though that was his exact intention. Push past that thick wall and the cold façade that warned others from treading too close. Sean wanted in. "I'm giving you the insight and information needed to perform your role to the best of your ability."

"And knowing how you fuck is going to accomplish that?"

Damn, the sound of "fuck" on her lips might as well have been a stroke on his dick. He studied the derision in the arch of her brow and the twist of her lips. He took in the pulse at her throat...it beat a little too fast. Desire, not disdain. He knew a woman's body. Observing her signals of pleasure let Sean know where to caress or suck, told him how long or hard to touch. He'd made an art of it. And Erin wasn't immune to him.

Good, dammit.

"No," he replied, "but knowing how a woman I fuck behaves will accomplish it." Her eyes flared. The pulse in the dip of her throat beat harder and Sean lowered his hand from her face to the slender column of her throat. He cupped the back of her neck and brushed the pad of his thumb over the throbbing vein.

Her hands rose to his waist and gripped either side.

"I've never had you, Erin. I don't know if you like to be pounded into orgasm or eased into it. I don't know if you scream your lover's name or breathe it on a long sigh when you come. And you've never been under me. You don't know that I like to watch a woman's face when I lick her pussy to see the moment ecstasy takes her. Or that sometimes I want a woman to finger-fuck herself while I watch. There's nothing sexier than a woman who owns her pleasure. Since you don't know what I want, Erin, what I need, you can't act like a woman who's been with me. Not if I don't tell you how."

He bowed his head over hers, a breath of space separating them. The two of them were the only ones in the room but he whispered in her ear, his words for her alone. Her clean, soap-and-water scent captivated him like the most expensive perfume.

"My lover knows her pleasure comes first. I can spend hours touching and licking her nipples. If the most sensitive area of her body is the tips of her breasts, I'll suck them until she comes. It's about her needs, her desires. Understanding this, she wants my touch, seeks it. If I brush her arm, she leans into it, twisting until my fingers skim her breast, needing more. She knows I'll give it to her."

His breath heaved in and out of his lungs, her nearness hurtling him past arousal into blistering lust. Shit. No one had ever stirred him to this heightened state before. A part of him cautioned him to step back, maintain some distance, because this *draw* she had on him didn't make sense. Sean acknowledged the warning even as he shifted, eliminating the minute space that had been between them. Her lush, full breasts thrust against his chest. He glanced down between them and, *fuck*, the hard points of the

thickest, juiciest nipples he'd ever seen protruded against her thin, white shirt and stabbed into his chest.

Sean didn't bother to restrain his tortured groan. His cock lengthened beneath his zipper and demanded to have its own look. Not once since reaching maturity had Sean lost his control. His childhood had been a clusterfuck of chaos. For half his life he'd been at the mercy of the capricious whims of his love-addicted mother and the apathetic foster care system. Both had taught him valuable lessons about maintaining command over his temper and emotions. His emotions did not overrule his head. Not in anger or passion. Ever.

But that had been before Erin had walked into his studio with her copper eyes full of secrets and a body that made Jennifer Lopez appear like a prepubescent girl. Hell, he didn't know whether to pull her close and soothe the shadows from her gaze or pin her against the wall, let loose the arousal eating a hole in his gut and fuck her until neither of them could stand.

"That's fascinating," Erin mocked, but the sarcasm didn't conceal the harsh, labored puffs of breath. She was *affected*. But he didn't want to just *affect* her. He needed her to *crave* him. "Still, I think I can handle pretending to be your lover. I don't need a dress rehearsal." She lifted her hands between them, flattened her palms on his chest and pushed. He didn't budge and she edged back a step.

He smiled.

"As long as you understand. And Erin?" She arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest. The defensive gesture wasn't lost on him. "Resist me all you want in private. I'll probably enjoy it. But in public? The control is mine." He shifted forward and ignored the press of her arms into his chest. Placing a bent knuckle under her chin, he tilted her face up to his.

"And so are you."

Chapter Three

Now how the fuck was she supposed to respond to that?

Riiight. Anger. Outrage.

Pounding heart. Leaping pulse. Quivering pussy. Bad.

Rage. Good.

"I know how to do my job, rock star," she said and the derision sounded believable even to her ears. "You stick to playing music and signing autographs and I'll do what I'm good at."

"Glad to hear it." Without warning, Sean moved in close and plastered his chest to her back. His arms enveloped her, jerked her close and his wide palms pressed against her abdomen, setting off butterflies the size of raptors. Long fingers splayed wide and almost grazed the bottom swell of her breasts. She swore she could feel the calluses through the thin layer of her shirt and wondered how they would feel against bare skin.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Shh. They're on their way in," he whispered in her ear and nuzzled her hair. For the first time she he'd taken her in his arms she heard something over the frantic beating of her heart. The muffled sound of conversation filtered in the room from the other side of the door. "Here's your opportunity to prove what you claim. Showtime."

"Who—"

Before she could complete the question, the studio door opened and three men strolled through. Their chatter came to an abrupt halt as their eyes glued to her and Sean. A heavy silence descended on the room and the only thing missing was the loud chirp of crickets.

Her heart battered the wall of her chest as if fighting to free itself. Sweat coated her suddenly clammy palms and prickled under her arms. Oh God. She hadn't been undercover in over a year. The last time had been with...no, dammit. Not now. *Focus*. Erin inhaled a slow, deep breath and struggled not to make it obvious that she hovered on the brink of hyperventilating.

Sean's arms tightened around her. "Easy," he crooned, nuzzling the hair that covered her ear.

Whether it was the solid weight of his embrace or the whispered assurance, she dragged herself back from the ragged edge of panic. A debt to repay. He needed her. Focusing all her attention on those two facts, Erin exhaled and plastered a smile on her face and hoped to God it was sultry.

"Hey," Sean greeted the three men who continued to stand just inside the doorway. "You're early."

The one closest to the door, who she recognized as Lucas Gilliard, Odyssey's bass guitarist, arched an eyebrow as a slow, sensual smile curled his mouth. "Or just in time," he drawled, a hint of an Irish brogue lending charm to his voice. "Carry on. Don't mind us."

Sean snorted. "I have many vices but exhibitionism isn't one of them."

"Oh, I don't know. Depending on who's doing the watching it could be fun," Erin interjected.

Surprise and interest lit Lucas' expression at Erin's provocative comeback while the drummer, Khalil David, arched an eyebrow. Christian Scott, the band's lead singer, remained stoic, his unsmiling face revealing nothing.

Behind her Sean stiffened and his fingers clenched against her flesh before relaxing.

"Now that's interesting, baby," he murmured. Her stomach dipped at the endearment, even though she realized it was directed to Erin, the sex-kitten lover, not Erin, the woman. Then her gut reversed direction and shot straight up to her throat as he stroked a path up her torso, between her breasts to cup her chin. He angled her head back so she stared into his gray gaze and the firm grip ensured she didn't glance away. Pretense. All a pretense. The arousal in his hooded inspection was for his friends' benefit. "I learn something new about you every day."

"How about we learn her name?" Khalil interjected.

A faint smile touched Sean's mouth before he released her chin and faced his friends' curiosity. "My bad," he apologized. "Erin Montgomery, I'd like you to meet Christian Scott, Lucas Gilliard and Khalil David. Christian, Luke, Khalil, this is Erin." His hands dropped to her hips and cradled them between his palms. "She's coming on tour with us as my guest."

Three incredulous stares shifted to her. As the silence grew louder with each passing second, she surmised bringing women on tour didn't occur that often.

"Guest?" Christian shaped the word as if he'd never uttered it before.

Khalil inclined his head toward her. "Sorry for talking around you, Erin, but we've never heard of you before today. So we're a bit..."

"Shocked as shit?" Lucas supplied.

"Surprised," the drummer added, tone as dry as the glance he aimed at his friend.

Lucas shrugged and turned toward Erin with an apologetic smile. "Okay. Forgive us if we're surprised. We've always had one steadfast rule and that's no chicks on tour."

"True," Sean agreed. "But Erin is special. And worth making an exception for. I asked her to join me."

"And excuse me," she interrupted, stepping forward. With one hip cocked out to the side and hands planted on her waist, she embraced the persona of Sean's uninhibited sexual partner and threw herself into it. Allowing a smile to curve her lips, she arched an eyebrow high. "Last time I checked I didn't have feathers growing out of my ass, so I think that excludes me from being a 'chick'."

Lucas had the grace to appear chagrined. "I didn't mean—"

"But wait, don't take my word for it." She flashed him a smile. "See for yourself." She turned a slow circle and faced Sean again. His eyes narrowed on her face and the heat scalded her...emboldened her. Her leather pants opened with a jerk and a flick of the metal clasp and arousal flared like dry lightning in his gaze.

Hooking her thumbs in the waistband, Erin slowly dragged the pants down her hips. And lower. And lower...

"Erin." Sean shifted close, so close his hard chest grazed her nipples. An electric charge zinged straight to her clit as if it were connected to the tight peaks. Her flesh pulsed and tingled. She sank her teeth in her bottom lip but the minute pain only heightened her hyper-awareness of her flesh. He rested a hand on her waist then slid it over her hip and beneath the gaping leather. The hot weight of his palm cupped her ass and the hard squeeze he gave her flesh punched the breath from her lungs. She may have whimpered.

"No, Luke." Sean's eyes burned down into hers. "No feathers."

"Damn, I need a cigarette," Khalil muttered.

The pounding of blood in her veins didn't decrease when he stroked his palm up and out of her pants. The brush of his knuckles against the skin of her abdomen as he refastened the clasp elicited a soft gasp from her...and drew cream from her pussy to moisten the flesh he'd been inches away from.

"Give us a minute," Sean called over her shoulder. Once the door closed behind the three band members Erin exhaled a shaky breath and backed away from him.

He studied her and Erin forced herself to meet his intense inspection.

"I'm impressed."

"Good. It's what I live for." The sarcasm leapt to her lips and tumbled out, an automatic reaction to the effect he had on her body.

"Satisfy my curiosity, Erin. How far would you have gone?"

"I guess neither of us will know, will we?"

He nodded and the short strands he hadn't captured in the small ponytail brushed his high cheekbones.

"Next to Braedon, they know me better than anyone. They wouldn't have expected me to allow you to expose what I consider mine."

"Damn," she scoffed, "Possessive much? I'm glad this shit is temporary and pretend. I'd probably shoot you in your sleep."

"While I'm with a woman, I don't share. But possessive?" he questioned softly. "Before today, I wouldn't have agreed with you. But in the last half-hour, you've challenged a couple of things I've always believed." Before she could snap a comeback about that enigmatic statement, Sean eliminated the space between them in two short steps. He crowded her with his big body, blocking out everything but him. "And Erin?"

Don't fool yourself. We *are* going to fuck." He paused and his lashes lowered, gaze hooded and sensual. "And there won't be anything 'pretend' about it."

* * * * *

Later that evening, Erin cast a glance around the enclosed, roped-off section of the VIP section of the nightclub.

She and Sean had arrived at the club tonight with his band and several crew members to celebrate the kickoff of the tour. The heavy, pounding bass pulsed around her, providing background music for the threat—the promise—that echoed in her head like a shout in the damn Grand Canyon.

We are going to fuck.

She shivered. *To fuck...to fuck.* God, she wanted it. Obligation and repayment of debt be damned. The need to get nasty with the rock star clashed with the objectivity she struggled to maintain.

And, damn, it was a struggle.

As if underscoring her dilemma, a hard, calloused palm eased up her thigh, sliding under the short skirt of her dress. Erin shifted and slid her leg high along Sean's until the bent knee rested on his thigh. The hem of the black strapless sheath barely covered her ass. Yet she didn't care because the wet, throbbing flesh between her thighs was pressed to thick, solid muscle. One shift and she would orgasm in front of God, country and the VIP section of the nightclub.

"You smell wonderful."

"It's soap."

Sean chuckled and cupped the nape of her neck as his mouth grazed the corner of hers. She stiffened—she couldn't help it. But his grip tightened, controlling her instinctive flinch.

"Don't pull away from me."

Erin stilled, every muscle in her body doing a perfect imitation of a statue at the command and the domineering grip on her neck.

Allowing her lips to curl into a sultry smile, she straightened and rose up on a knee. With an agile move that would have made a lap dancer jealous, Erin threw her leg over his lap, straddling him. Planting her palms on the booth behind his head, Erin leaned forward and lowered her hips until the thick ridge of Sean's cock was an exquisite pressure against her swollen folds and throbbing clit. His fingers rose to her waist, gripping the curve. She bit back a moan. This was for show. To release that starving sound would mean she derived pleasure—*oh fuck, he was so hard*—from this—*damn, he would stretch the hell out of her*—charade.

Breathing deep and harnessing her traitorous flesh under control, she lowered her head until her nose bumped his.

"Let's get something straight, rock star," she murmured, and almost patted herself on the back that the steady command betrayed not one iota of the heat thrumming through her body. "I know we have to play close, but I have one abiding rule. No kissing. No tongue or lip contact. And no *accidental* touching my mouth with yours. Got me?"

He stared up at her, silent, considering. "I take it you have something against kissing."

"Not at all. I'm cool with it." She paused. "As long as you don't try it with me."

"Any particular reason why?"

"Yeah." She arched a brow. "Because I said so."

"So I can touch you everywhere else," Sean released his hold on her flesh and swept the pad of his thumb over her cheek, "just not your mouth. Is that what you're saying?" She ground her molars together in irritation...and to lock the groan of pleasure behind her teeth. A small smile curved his lips as if the clenching of her jaw amused him. He repeated the caress, lingering on the sensitive skin beneath her ear before his hand dropped away, leaving a tingling that resonated in her sex.

By the time this night was over, her damn thong would be so drenched she would have to wring it out.

"You have a gift of twisting words around." Erin tsked. "No wonder women bow down at your feet. Literally."

"Not you, Erin." He leaned closer, avoiding her mouth, instead whispering along the skin a couple of inches west. "Bowing at my feet would have that pretty mouth of yours too far away from where I really want it. But kneeling? Definitely."

Kneeling's good. Kneeling is...good. "I'm beginning to believe every word they say about you is true."

Sean drew back and examined her face. "And what are they saying?"

She snorted. "That you don't like to be tied to a woman. Unless you're doing the tying, that is."

Sean cocked his head. Lust flared in his eyes, and she could almost see the image of her legs spread-eagled, bound to his bed, tongue-fucked, reflected in his eyes. Or maybe that was her perverted mind projecting her desires. Her nails curled into the leather behind his head and she wondered if she left claw marks behind.

"Does that disgust you, Erin?" His voice lowered and arousal beat at her as hard as the rapid pulse in the base of her throat. "You can't understand how a woman would willingly give control over to a man, making herself vulnerable and completely at his mercy? Power, authority is too important for you to ever consider submitting to a man, isn't it?"

Erin stared at him, a flash of emotion that felt too much like fear racing through her. Hell yeah. The idea of handing over that kind of power to someone, leaving herself

vulnerable and weak...she narrowed her eyes. "Why, Dr. Phil," she drawled, "when did you grow hair and develop a BDSM fetish? I didn't recognize you."

The laughter rumbled deep in his chest and erupted in a loud bark. His head fell back on his shoulders. He shot her a look and the chuckles started all over again. Her heart zoomed to Mach 3. From the lack of fine lines around his eyes and mouth, Erin suspected true, joy-filled grins were as rare for Sean as they were for her. That he'd shared one of those rarities with her blew her away. His entire face participated. Gray eyes turned to molten silver. Cheekbones carved from the sharpest stone lifted as his mouth curved, revealing straight white teeth she could imagine sinking into the tender skin of her upper thigh.

The man made her burn.

"Damn, you make me feel good." He raised his hands to her face, cradling her jaw with one while the other cupped the nape of her neck.

"Let me ask a question then." The amusement ebbed into a lazy sensuality that wrapped its tentacles around her and immobilized all action and thought. "You don't kiss. I got that. But tell me, what does 'not kissing' involve?"

His low, sexy voice whispered over her skin. She shivered.

"One of my fantasies includes kissing and tonguing that sweet pussy of yours. Laying you open so I can lick all that juice, swallow it. Does that count?"

Oh God.

"And what about my cock? All I can think about is pushing it between your lips." He held two long, blunt-tipped fingers together and pressed them forward, penetrating her mouth as if it were the cock he described.

The chocolate-and-sex flavor of him exploded on her taste buds and, with a helpless whimper, she curled her tongue around the invading digits, sucking more of his taste into her mouth.

"Would your mouth surrounding my cock be considered a kiss, Erin?"

"Get a room."

Lucas plopped down next to them and snatched her from the rabbit's hole of eroticism she'd hovered over. She pulled away...or tried to. The hard hand at her neck tightened, checking the movement. Unable to rip her eyes from the hooded gaze studying her face, Erin could only remain motionless in the dominant hold as Sean slowly withdrew from her mouth. His fingertips, hardened from holding guitar picks and plucking wire strings, were a rough, sexual pressure on her tongue. Even after he'd cleared her lips, the grip at her neck remained for several long moments before falling to her hips.

"*Och*, now that was fucking hot."

Amusement and a faint Irish brogue filled his voice as Erin damned to hell the blush heating her cheekbones. She cast the bassist a glance and he grinned, winking.

"Don't mind him, Erin," Khalil interjected as he lowered himself on the other side of them. "He's just horny and irritated he can't bring his harem of women on tour with us."

Lucas met Khalil's dry barb with a finger...the middle one. Unoffended, the drummer snorted.

"Sorry, Luke. I play with gloves, not balls and bats."

Erin chuckled at the byplay. She lowered her gaze and met Sean's half grin. The smile melted from her lips as the warm affection in his expression did things—flip-flops-in-the-gut things—to her stomach. *Oh. Shit...*

"So, Erin," a voice called from the rounded corner of the booth, "tell us a little something about yourself. We've heard next to nothing about you."

Erin swiveled her torso and met Christian's cool stare. And smothered a sigh. Swinging her leg behind her, she shifted off Sean's lap and settled back down next to him. With monumental effort, she reached for a confident, sexy smile and the cover story she, Sean and Braedon had agreed on.

"There's nothing much to tell really. I'm from Providence but I moved to New York a few years ago to model." And she had headshots on a fictitious modeling site to prove it, thank you very much.

"A model." Christian accepted a bottle of beer from the offered tray of a leather-clad waitress. "You're going to be able to miss three months worth of work to go on tour with us?"

His shrewd gaze perused her skimpy dress and stiletto boots without a word. But his cold expression labeled her a gold digger. Not that Erin cared how the lead singer perceived her. But if his interest impeded her search for Sean's stalker, they would have problems.

"No, not at all," Erin replied to his inquiry. She slid her hand over Sean's thigh and felt the muscle contract under her touch. "My schedule is...flexible."

"Which benefits me." Sean cuffed her wrists and interrupted his friend's interrogation. He stood and drew her to her feet in one sinuous motion. "Let's dance."

"Whatever you say." Not that he gave her much choice as he led her out of the VIP section and down the curved staircase to the lower level of the club. Rock music blasted from the sound system and writhing bodies crowded the dance floor.

Sean ushered her around the perimeter of the dance floor, toward the rear of the club where the flashing strobe lights didn't reach.

As soon as the shadows enclosed them in a private cocoon, he turned and cupped her hips in his big palms, gave them a light squeeze and slid them around to the small of her back. *He holds me like his guitar.* His big palm smoothed up her spine, firing thousands of nerve endings to life. A twinge of desperate alarm sparked in her chest. This...this attraction shouldn't be so powerful, so intense. It defied reason. Her career had been spent surrounded by men—working with them, spending long nights on

stakeout with them, fighting side by side with them. She hadn't wanted to lick every bare inch of their skin as if they were sex on a stick.

"I thought Christian was going to bust out an ink pad and run your prints for a moment there."

His wry statement gave her a lifeline to clutch. "He's protective. And suspicious. I'm guessing it's not common practice to bring women on tour."

"You're the first," he acknowledged and delivered another slow, sensuous stroke. Sean lowered his head and the heavy silk of his hair brushed her forehead. "Did you know that you arch into my hand like a pretty pussy...cat?"

She controlled the twitch of her lips that wanted to curl in humor. "Clever."

"I saw that." Sean tapped the corner of her mouth. He lingered, applying firm but gentle pressure to the seam of her lips before dropping away. The touch was small, yet the faintest flavor of his skin remained. Dark. Exotic...him.

"I think you like when I touch you, Erin."

His whispered words hit too close to home. To the truth. "You think too much," she scoffed even as her heart drummed in her chest. "And you touch too much. Didn't your mother ever teach you to keep your hands to yourself?" *Damn.* Even as Sean's warm gaze cooled and became shuttered, Erin wanted to snatch the words back. She, better than anyone, knew Sean's mother hadn't taught him jack shit. She'd abandoned him to the foster system before she could educate him about anything other than neglect.

"No," Sean said, shaking his head. "She never got around to sharing that lesson with me. But," he said, a sardonic curve lifting his lips, "since you object, your turn. Touch me."

His long fingers bit into the slight indentation of her spine. She couldn't contain the shiver that darted up her back. Gray eyes, almost black in the shadowed corner, narrowed on her face and Sean pulled her closer until her breasts flattened against the hard plane of his chest. She glanced down and the black material of her dress and his cotton t-shirt melded together, impossible to tell where one began and the other ended. And the image of her naked breasts plumped against his bare chest rose in her mind. Her nipples tightened as if imagination had taken a sharp turn into reality. The hard tips ached and only God Himself could have kept her from pushing forward just a little, the small pressure offering some relief.

"*Shit.*" Sean's harsh groan echoed above her head. He shifted and a solid thigh slid between hers and pressed it to the mound of her sex.

Her body stiffened as if one hell of an electrical current had passed through her system, firing up every cell and neuron until they blazed with a debilitating heat. Well, not every part of her. Her sex was drenched, creaming against the unyielding pressure between her legs. The involuntary clench of her thighs around the invading muscle set off a pounding in her swollen clit, in her taut nipples, in her dry mouth. *One stroke*, her libido whispered, *one stroke and the ache won't hurt so much.* Erin gave in to the seductive invitation and ground the damp folds against Sean's thigh. Her cleft stroked over the

rigid muscle and the hollow need pulsing inside her core increased, grew hungrier and emptier.

"Erin," Sean whispered, the hoarse sound part demand, part plea. Strange coming from this particular man. Yet the palm that worked down her back to cup her ass and hitch her leg higher on his didn't beg or ask. The touch was all command and it ordered her to ride, grind...come. "I could make you come so easily, baby." He traced the cleft of her ass. Even through the silk of her dress, that faint caress rocketed her from want to blazing need. "I can make you come, make the ache go away."

"No," she breathed even as her hips rolled, once more dragging her wet slit over him and hauling herself closer to orgasm. The small, rational part of her mind that recognized this as a colossal mistake struggled to lift its head above the waves of lust. But her arousal was a category-five storm and reason was being tossed about like driftwood.

"You won't let me give it to you? Then take it." The erotic demand licked at her clitoris, and the small muscle jerked in response. She wanted—God, how pale that word sounded. "Want" didn't describe the insanity that turned body against mind, reason against lust. It didn't express the hunger that had her clawing his arms as if he'd become her anchor.

He shouldn't be this necessary...

"Stop fucking thinking," he growled in her ear, one hand still clasped to her back, the other lifting to her neck and burrowing deep in her hair. The small sting to her scalp coaxed another spill of liquid arousal from her sex. She flinched, snapping her head back. His grip tightened and so did the coil of lust in her stomach. "I told you—don't pull away from me."

Rebellion at his hard demand for her submission churned with the unfamiliar need to yield. The emotions battled for dominance and Erin felt a spurt of fear for the woman Sean could transform her into. One who begged for his touch. One who couldn't breathe without it.

One who would break if she didn't have it. One like her mother.

"No," she gasped, wrenching free of his hold. She stumbled back a step and inhaled a deep breath. Her heart thundered in her chest but not because of arousal. "I—I have to go to the bathroom. Excuse me."

"Erin—"

But she had already escaped.

Too bad she couldn't outrun herself that easily.

Chapter Four

Coward.

She ran. She had actually turned tail and ran.

Correction. Was still running. Erin turned down a dark hallway, not sure if it led to the bathroom and not caring. Just as long as it provided space and a place to think. A place to regroup.

Damn Braedon. If only he had left her alone. If only she hadn't answered that damn phone. If only...

Holy. Shit.

The breath was punched from her lungs as cognitive thought took a sudden vacation. Her muscles locked, leaving her paralyzed, like some bird-poop-splattered statue. Blood pumped through her veins to pool in her clit and pound with arousal.

A couple stood in the shadows at the end of the dark corridor. They didn't notice Erin. With their bodies fused together and mouths locked in an erotic duel, their focus belonged solely to each other. Their harsh, excited breathing filled the space. And so did Erin's.

As Erin watched, the man jerked his mouth from the woman's and trailed his lips over her cheek and down the slim column of her neck. His lover's head fell back on her shoulders, granting him access to her skin. Pleasure suffused her features.

Even as her mind ordered her to turn around and walk away before they spied her standing there, Erin's feet didn't move. The woman's arousal called out to her, connected with her until it was *her* stomach that quick fingers trailed down. Her shirt yanked up so her lace-covered breasts were exposed to hungry lips.

She bit back a whimper.

Torture.

Her nipples pebbled. A sweet ache pulsed in her sex and clenched in time to the throbbing in her clit. Cream gathered on her swollen folds, coating the thin silk of her underwear. The man's hands fell to his lover's waist as he lowered his head to her bared breasts. His lover tunneled her long, elegant fingers tunneled through his thick dark hair, clinging to his head and crushing him closer. Erin's breath caught in her throat. His lips closed over the woman's nipple and sucked hard on the flesh, taking half the breast into his mouth. Erin's moan mingled with the woman's.

Her hips rolled like a wild wave against him and, with a low growl, his hands dropped farther down to dig into the soft flesh of her ass. He held her still for a rough grinding of pelvis to pelvis. Cock to pussy.

Erin swallowed hard, her throat feeling as if she'd just crawled through the damn Sahara in a sandstorm. All the moisture in her mouth had tunneled south to pool between her legs.

The man lifted his head and his lover's soft cry of disappointment turned to a wail of pleasure when his hungry lips descended on the neglected breast. He drew from her flesh, his cheeks hollowing from the hard suction.

Erin's world narrowed to the writhing couple. Her chest heaved. She breathed in lust instead of air. As if it couldn't help itself, her hand lifted from her side, slid over her stomach and rib cage and brushed the underside of her breast. She hesitated, trembling, before moving over the small mound and grazing the rock-hard tip. Her teeth sank into her lower lip. Her lashes fluttered but didn't close. Again she swept her fingertips over her nipple and groaned at the tug of arousal that arrowed straight to her clit. Her pussy wept as if pleading for more pleasure, more stimulation.

She obliged.

Erin raised her other hand and uncertainty gave way to lust. She sighed as she rubbed circles around the nipples but moaned when she clasped and tweaked the points to just this side of pain. Her sex quivered at the exquisite pleasure.

At the end of the hall, the man straightened, leaving his lover's breasts uncovered and open to his gaze. His hands dropped to his belt and opened it with hurried, almost frantic, motions. He reached inside his pants and he pulled his cock free. Moisture returned to Erin's mouth, flooding it. She slid her tongue over her lips, wetting them, and recognized the talons digging their claws into her womb as hunger.

Big fingers encircled the base of his cock but just barely. The mushroom tip capped a long, pale rod that stood at erect attention, jutting toward the woman as if seeking her. Or demanding her touch.

Mimicking Erin's gesture, she licked her lips and sank to the floor. As her knees hit the ground, she reached out and encircled his cock. Together they stroked, both hands covering the head and then retreated back down to the base. His lips moved as if murmuring an endearment to his woman. He lifted his hands from his erection and sank both into her hair, holding her head steady. His hips thrust forward and pierced the seam of her lips.

Erin froze. Her heart thudded against her rib cage. Each beat echoed in her head and drowned out the loud, harsh groan from the end of the hall. Her arms dropped to her sides.

"Don't stop," a dark voice whispered in her ear. Calloused fingers circled her wrists and lifting them, returned her hands to her breasts. Large palms covered hers for a moment before falling away and settling on her hips. "Touch yourself."

A whimper escaped her lips, her eyes closed. Part anger at not hearing Sean come up behind her and another part mortification at being caught tugging at her nipples. She shook her head and started to remove her hands once again but Sean stopped her.

"Don't." He shifted and his chest pressed to her shoulder blades, his thighs spread wide on either side of her legs. His cock nudged the small of her back. The scent of sandalwood invaded her, permeating her senses and skin. Surrounded her. "Let me see how you like to be touched, Erin," he coaxed, his lips moving against her hair. "Show me what you want."

Oh God, how could she say no to that request? She didn't want to deny him. Or herself.

She clamped on her nipples again, sending lust shooting through her blood, setting fire to the tips of her breasts, her womb and pussy. The pleasure had been intense before but now – with him watching – it scorched her.

Erin opened her eyes and immediately focused on the couple. Damn, it was sexy. Hot.

Seeing the woman's lips stretched wide over the cock that shuttled in and out of her mouth touched a place deep inside Erin that she hadn't known existed. She could almost feel the ridged length rubbing against the roof of her mouth. The flared edge of the cock head bumped over her tongue. Except it wasn't this stranger who gripped her hair and buried his cock in her mouth.

Sean. It was Sean.

"Pull your top down." His rough growl stroked over her skin, shoving her closer to sensory overload. When she hesitated, the timbre deepened, hardened. "Now, Erin."

Trembling, she released the clasp on the hard points to hook the edge of her strapless dress. With a small tug, her breasts were exposed to the cool air. A part of her brain screamed, *What the hell are you doing?* But her dripping sex and the lust tearing at her womb overrode modesty and sense. All that mattered was pleasure and the man standing behind her. She lifted her hands back to her nipples and gasped at the contact of bare flesh to bare flesh. Clasping the hardened tips between her fingers and thumbs, she squeezed hard.

"Damn, that's sexy," he praised. The fierce hold at her waist pinched her skin. "Is that how you like it, pretty Erin? A little rough? A little pain with your pleasure?"

She groaned, closing her eyes.

"No, baby, open your eyes," Sean murmured. "I want you to look at her. See how she strokes his cock. She loves having him in her mouth. He's not forcing her. She wants it."

And she did.

As Erin and Sean watched, the woman pulled her mouth from his cock, bent forward and laved the shaft like an erotic lollipop before swallowing him whole. "Oh God," Erin breathed. Arousal streamed through her veins and pleasure replaced blood as her life-giving sustenance.

"You like that," Sean said, sure of the knowledge. "Has a man ever taken your mouth, Erin? Have you let a man breach your throat, sweetheart?" He touched her neck and brushed a caress up and down the column. "Answer me."

The hard note edging the demand should have earned him her elbow in his gut. Instead Erin arched into the possessive caress that smacked of his dominance. She shook her head.

"No," she gasped.

"Look at them." Sean grasped her chin and tilted her head down. "Imagine that's me fucking your sweet mouth. My cock thrusting past your lips to your throat."

Soft locks of hair brushed her neck as he skimmed a kiss over the sensitive skin. The caress blazed a trail straight to her aching pussy. Her hips undulated and the rigid length of his cock nestled in the crease of her ass. A harsh curse ripped past his lips and he surged forward. Through the thin material of her dress, his erection rubbed the skin between her cheeks and she released a small, animalistic growl. Erin abandoned one nipple and drove her fingers into Sean's hair, nails digging into his scalp.

A wicked chuckle tickled her skin. "You want that, don't you? Believe me, baby, I crave it more than my next breath."

Noise from the couple drew their attention. Groans of pleasure reverberated down the hall. The man's hips bucked and his cock surged back and forth at a furious pace. His hands cradled the woman's head, holding her still for the fierce fucking. She whimpered but it wasn't a pained sound. No. It was needy. Erotic.

Suddenly, the man stiffened and his head dropped back on his shoulders. His mouth hung open and he squeezed his eyes shut. His body jerked once. Twice. Three times. A rough cry of ecstasy reached Erin and Sean and her fingers flexed against his scalp. Giving a hard twist to her nipple, she shuddered. Convulsions trembled through her frame and swelled in her clit.

"Don't you dare, dammit," Sean growled in her ear. "Not without me."

The ominous words rang in her ear. Sean abandoned his hold on her chin and grabbed her hand. He turned, jerking on her arm. Erin stumbled before quickly regaining her balance and following him farther down the hall.

Moments later she found herself in a dark room, her cheek pressed to a wall and Sean wedged against her back.

"You're going to come for me, Erin." His knees dipped and as he straightened, his cock notched against her ass, raising her to the tips of her toes.

Erin slapped her palms to the wall and rolled her hips, grinding against the erection parting her cheeks. Every reason why this was a bad idea went AWOL. Inhibition fled in the face of need. She just *wanted*.

Sean stepped back and cool air kissed the backs of her thighs, the globes of her ass and the wet flesh between her legs. A shiver quaked down her spine. She should have

experienced at least some embarrassment. Hell, the flimsy skirt of her dress was tucked at her hip, her ass bared to Sean's eyes and touch.

Oh God, his touch...

A sinful caress, heavy with sensual promise, traced the bottom curve of one cheek and traced the crease bisecting her ass. She shuddered, amazed at the eroticism of the forbidden, dark touch. *Only with him*. The caress wouldn't have been sexy if it had been anyone but Sean. She'd had a few lovers over the years and none had been able to elicit the pleasure he did with one touch. Erin turned her head until her forehead rested against the wall. Her eyes closed on a revelation.

This man would demand everything from her—her body, her submission, her control.

And God help her, she was going to give it to him.

Damn, she was beautiful.

With everything in him, Sean knew he had sunk deep. Over-his-head deep. This beautiful woman who embodied the dichotomy of hard and soft, vulnerability and strength had ensnared him.

Muscular thighs encased the tender flesh of her pussy. Even as she bent forward, exposing the delicate nape of her neck, the sturdy line of her back declared her strength. He skimmed the lace garter that edged her thigh-high stocking...and holstered a small gun.

Did it make him fucked in the head that the obvious sign of power and strength hardened his dick more?

Sean gripped the short black skirt of her dress in his fist and bunched the material at her hip. All the blood in his body seemed to have surged to his cock, where it throbbed behind the zipper of his pants. He stared at her firm flesh as he smoothed his palm down her satin skin, fascinated when the muscles in her ass flexed and relaxed under his hand.

"Shh," he soothed when Erin trembled beneath his touch. "You're so perfect. God, baby, I want to have you come on my fingers. Feel your sweet pussy squeeze me. I want every last ripple."

"Sean," she whispered. The sound, so unlike her usual confident, commanding voice, rocked him. Erin was giving him what he was certain she'd never permitted another person.

Her back.

He pressed a lingering kiss to the vulnerable nape of her neck in acceptance of the significant sign of trust, certain she wasn't aware of the significance behind the action.

"I have you, baby." He gripped her hip in his left hand and smoothed his right over her waist and stomach to rest on the silky skin directly above her pussy. Erin's small catch of breath ricocheted in the pregnant silence. Sean wanted to draw this moment

out—he'd hungered for it since looking up in the practice room and finding her eyes on him—but damn if he could wait another second.

His fingers burrowed between her thighs. Her cry and his groan ripped through the quiet. Her wet, soft flesh surrounded him as he tunneled through her slit. Silkier than he could have imagined, the slick juices coated his fingers, making him yearn to suck the cream clean. But that would mean having to leave the hottest pussy he'd ever touched. "You're drenched, Erin," he said, circling the hard nub of her clit. With a murmur of assurance and tightening his grasp on her hip, he controlled the involuntary jerk of her body.

"Don't." She panted. Her hand dove from the wall to handcuff his wrist. He allowed the restraint but only for a moment. With a small, controlled movement, he flicked the pulsing button, drawing a ragged moan from Erin that stroked his cock like a tight fist.

"Don't what, baby?" he insisted, not letting up on her soaked flesh. Abandoning her clit, he slid through her swollen folds. Back and forth. Back and forth. Until her hips followed the cadence of the sensual rhythm. "Don't stroke this hot pussy? Or don't stop?" He added two more fingers so three separated the folds, passed over her clit and rubbed through her sensitive sex. "Erin?" Sean slowed his ministrations, then stilled. "Answer me." His voice hardened.

Her hips writhed as if trying to force him to resume. It wouldn't work though. A faint, grim smile touched his lips. He wanted her answer. He needed to hear she craved his touch. Needed to know he wasn't ensnared in this mystifying, consuming desire alone. "Answer me, dammit," he commanded.

"Fuck, yes." Erin snarled and released his wrist to seize his hand. She pressed his fingers hard against her sex, showing him what she hungered for.

And it wasn't in him to stop.

He plunged deep in her clenching pussy.

"Oh God," she cried out, her body arching like a tightly drawn bow. Her hands returned to the wall with a slap. She moaned and the sexy sound sent a spike of lust to attack his balls.

"Shit," he growled. "You're so fucking tight, baby." Her pussy quivered around his fingers. He felt every contraction as her flesh struggled to accommodate the invasion. Sean withdrew.

"No," Erin gasped.

"Oh baby, I'm not going anywhere," he pacified her, sliding two back into her pussy. This time her body had an easier time accepting him. The thick, wet walls of her sex clasped him, surrounding him in an erotic cocoon. "Erin, baby..."

He finger-fucked her.

Her juices bathed him, easing the taking, allowing him deeper. It was so damn good. So sweet.

The suction of her wet flesh, her whispered pleas and his soft words of praise filled the small room. He released his grip on her waist and slid his hand through the cream coating her sex. Once his fingers were covered, he circled and thumbed her clit. With one hand in her hot pussy and one working her clit, Erin didn't last.

Her hips rolled and bucked harder under his touch. The walls of her sex rippled, her clit hardened. Recognizing how close she hovered over the edge of release, he pushed her, plunged harder and pinched the tortured nub. *So close...almost there...almost...right there...*

Erin stiffened. Her neck arched. A keening wail of ecstasy escaped her throat as her head fell back and she convulsed in his arms. Her pussy milked his fingers. Her clit pulsed under his touch. Sean didn't stop. He rode her through the orgasm and gave her every bit of it she could take...and continued to fuck her even when her whispered pleas begged him to stop...don't stop. She sagged against the wall and he leaned forward, feathering kisses to her nape, neck and shoulders.

He took advantage of having her in his arms while he could. Post-release shudders quivered through her slim frame, temporarily weakening this strong woman. Again he experienced that foreign—but somehow natural—urge to comfort Erin. Sean surrendered to it and tightened his embrace. For several long seconds he buried his nose in her neck and inhaled her unique, clean scent of soap and woman. He sighed. And though his cock howled for release, he was...content.

* * * * *

Like a bullet fired from her favorite 9mm, Erin burst from the dark room. Even as she stumbled into the hall, her face flamed.

What had she done?

The question assaulted Erin. And she wanted to yell at her conscience to shut the fuck up.

But telling her subconscious to shut its trap was a small step over into crazy she didn't want to take. Still...what the fuck *had* she done?

Her drenched panties provided that answer loud and clear. That and the residual ache of pleasure that resonated through her pussy. She'd come apart under Sean's expert touch. To be more exact, he'd made her explode like a damn Fourth of July firecracker.

She could still see his ravenous expression as she'd turned in his arms just in time to watch him lift the fingers that had given her so much pleasure to his mouth. His eyes had closed just as his lips had sealed around the cream-soaked digits. A hum of pleasure had vibrated in his throat as he'd slid them free and he fixed a hooded stare on her face. That look had promised her what they'd begun in that bathroom wasn't finished by a long shot.

Erin ached to do what seemed like a fast-forming habit with Sean...retreat. Cut loose from this club and go hide under the covers in her hotel room until she felt brave enough to pull her big-girl panties back on and face Sean.

Shit. What did she say to him now that he'd been buried in her pussy and he'd made her implode from the best orgasm she'd ever experienced?

Gee, thanks?

Damn, this was awkward.

But this was *modus operandi* for Sean. Playing music and making women come were his fortes. Mortification spun an abrupt one-eighty to anger. The only person who'd had their world rocked in that bathroom had been her. Remembering his expert touch, Erin almost cringed. He'd known exactly where and how to touch her. Nothing special had occurred for him while she'd catapulted from "what's the big deal about sex?" to "super freak" status. Sean probably handed out orgasms as if they were community service.

Bastard.

"Are we going to talk about it?" Sean asked from behind her.

"No," Erin growled.

"Denial, Erin?" He tsked and, reaching out, cuffed her upper arm, halting Erin in her dash toward the packed club. As if anticipating her intent to snatch her arm free, he spun Erin around and grasped her other arm in a firm grip. He took one step forward. And another. For every move he made, she backpedaled until she found herself barricaded between his body and the wall behind her.

He released her arms and flattened his palms on the wall, reinforcing her cage. Sean shifted and the large bulge that pressed against his zipper bumped her stomach—the same *bulge* that had ground against her ass not ten minutes ago. Even now the phantom pressure of his erection in the crease of her ass had her pussy clenching.

"Did I neglect telling you how you taste?" The low murmur curled in the pit of her stomach, spiraling out to make love to her nipples, womb and clit. Erin bent her head, hiding her face from him. No way could she hide the arousal stroking through her sex, heating her from the inside out. "Like rain. Like the drizzle after a thunderstorm. So sweet, clean and fresh. But still holding the flavor of the storm, the earth. Erin, look at me."

Ignore him. Ignore him...

She lifted her head and was ensnared by a gaze as intense as the storm he mentioned.

"I can still taste you." Sean brought his hand to his mouth and rubbed the backs of his fingers over his lips. Mesmerized, Erin followed the motion. "I can still smell you."

Oh God.

The man made her burn.

"You should have washed your hands before leaving the bathroom," she stammered. Mortified heat blasted up her neck and singed her face. *Aw fuck.*

A surprised beat of silence passed between them before his low, husky chuckle slid over her like rich, sweet honey...the same golden honey of his skin.

"Have I mentioned how much I adore your mouth?"

He cupped her jaw. His calloused palm rasped her skin and she had to struggle not to close her eyes as the erotic caress set off mini-detonations in her clit and womb. His thumb did a slow sweep under the curve of her bottom lip, veering close to touching her mouth but stopping just short of the danger zone.

"Explain it to me."

"Explain what?" she asked, almost cringing at the hoarse tone. God, why didn't she just coo while she was at it?

"Tell me why I can't take your mouth the way I want," he growled as his hand tightened on her jaw and his thumb indented the skin beneath her lip. The firm touch pressed the tender flesh inside her mouth against the bottom row of her teeth. "I can't look at your mouth and not imagine licking it, sucking it. Biting it." His silver gaze flicked up and met hers for a brief moment before returning to her mouth. "I want to discover for myself what your flavor will be. Strong and sharp, like a shot of alcohol that goes straight to my head? Or will you be sweet, pure and so damn addictive you would be in my system before I realized what hit me?" Sean leaned forward until their foreheads met and his moist breath brushed across her lips. If she licked her lips she wondered if she would taste his peppermint-and-sex scent. "Tell me why I can't find out."

The flow of oxygen to her brain ceased and in that moment Erin didn't know why. What explanation could stand against the images he'd painted on the canvas of her mind? His thumb grazed her lip.

Pleasure ricocheted in her breasts, nipples and stomach.

Pleasure and horror.

And she remembered. Her reason for not wanting him or any man to touch her mouth came crashing back in a painful clash of memory, image and sound.

Her father. Her mother's pained cry. Helplessness. Betrayal.

It was devastatingly crystal clear now.

Blood that had pumped lust through her veins froze over. Legs that had trembled beneath the weight of arousal stiffened. Erin tilted her head back, desperate to place even an infinitesimal amount of physical and emotional distance between them. "My mother loved my father. Even when the bastard slapped and punched her, she loved him. One of his favorite forms of torture was making nice, being affectionate. He'd kiss her, and once she'd been conned into a false sense of security, he'd bite down on her lips and tongue until she cried, begged...bled."

Sympathy covered Sean's face. Compassion softened his eyes. And she resented all of them.

"He used an intimate act against her."

"No," Erin objected, shaking her head, "he used her love and vulnerability to abuse and control her."

"He betrayed her trust, Erin. Control and terror aren't the same thing."

"So says the man who gets off on seeing women tied up." She let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Shit, Sean, it doesn't take a degree to understand your need for control. I researched your background and it was as unstable as hell. It's no huge jump to conclude that, as a result, you value authority and command. And one of the places you exert your dominance is in the bedroom. I get it." And as a woman whose childhood had been decided by the whims and desires of fucked-up adults, she even understood it. Still, empathy only stretched so far. "Just don't try to convince me it has to do with trust or anything more than scratching an itch. That's bullshit."

"You know what I get, Erin?" Sean asked. He released his hold on her face and returned his hands to wall, his arms and body once more hemming her in. "You're scared."

Her mouth dropped open in disbelief. *Scared? Her?*

He nodded as if she'd voiced the questions aloud. "There may be some truth in what you said about me. I admit that. But what about you? An agent. A keeper of order. Because of the abuse you witnessed as a child, you have the need to bring order to chaos. Freud would have a field day with you, sweetheart."

Fuck Freud. Sean was doing a pretty good job of dissecting her himself. And damn if it didn't strike right to the heart of her. Erin wanted to rail at him, to tell him to shut his mouth, get out of her head. Instead she remained paralyzed, unable to move a muscle as he shifted closer. They stood plastered together from chest to thigh and every breath she inhaled carried him on its scent.

"You equate affection, love with weakness. Because it means allowing someone to breach that tough-as-shit barrier to the woman below. And it's the woman who can be hurt while the cop can't." *Stop*, a small, pained voice whispered inside her head, *you don't know what you're talking about*. But he did. Somehow he'd discovered her secret—to love meant to be betrayed, to lose. And she refused to be broken like that again.

"Baby." Sean grazed his lips over her temple in a tender gesture that twisted her stomach in fear and delight. "Erin, let me—"

"We should get back," she interrupted, terrified if she allowed him to finish the sentence she would agree to anything he requested.

He dipped his chin in a slow nod.

"Okay. And for the record, baby," he murmured as his elbows bent and the hardened tips of her nipples poked into his chest. In that instant, arousal resurged to combat the memories. The lust that never fully vanished in his presence made another

appearance, going from simmer to inferno in zero to sixty. "Tying a woman up doesn't get me off. It adds to it, but that honor belongs to being embraced by a woman's pussy. To having her wet flesh pulling and dragging me deeper inside."

His rumble of pleasure in her ear dragged a spurt of cream to coat the lips of her sex, to flood the panel of her panties. Her womb spasmed, clamping down so hard Erin ground her teeth together to hold back the moan of desire building in her throat.

"I bet you could take all of me, Erin," he whispered. His tongue flicked her earlobe and her hips bucked, bringing her swollen clit in contact with the rigid erection pushing against the front of his pants. This time she couldn't contain the erotic groan that welled.

"Yeah, you could. It would be a tight fit but I could bury every inch of my cock in your pussy until I was balls-deep. It would probably take a while getting in you. And I'd watch your face the entire time. I'd want to see your eyes glaze over, your mouth part on each breath, each cry. I wouldn't miss that moment when you lose yourself to passion, to pleasure. Seeing you let go would be just as good as fucking your tight pussy."

Her chest heaved as she envisioned every word he described. Her sex rippled, pounded. A storm gathered in her clit and all it would take was one stroke, one grind against his cock to release its fury.

She squeezed her eyes closed and almost cried out in frustration when he eased away from her. The irony that he granted the space she'd sought only moments ago didn't elude her. Now she wanted to drag him closer, rub her nipples over his chest and ride the ridge of his cock until she exploded over and over again.

"Erin?"

Her eyes snapped open. Sean stood several inches away, his hands in the front pockets of his slacks, his gaze fixed on her. Alarm fluttered in her chest. Something flickered in that penetrating stare—something too insightful and sharp for her comfort. As if he could see past the tough façade she erected to the fragile woman beneath. She suppressed the urge to reach up and stroke the cheek her scar had once marred. But the moment, and whatever she'd seen in his eyes in that brief second, had disappeared. At her thigh, she slowly unclenched her fist. Without glancing down, Erin knew small half moons dented her palm. "What happened to your mother?" he asked pointedly.

Her shoulders stiffened, her back going straight as a swell of pain and grief steamrolled right over her. She sucked in a deep breath and beat the worst of it back. When she spoke, Erin made sure none of the agony reflected in her voice.

"She's dead. My father murdered her."

"Oh, baby," he murmured, taking a step toward her. Erin held up a hand as a signal for him to stop but Sean didn't heed it. He advanced until the wall of his chest pressed against her hand. She pretended not to notice the way it trembled over his heart.

"I don't want your pity."

"You don't have it." His abrupt answer stunned her into speechlessness. "What do you need it for? You survived a hellish situation. Admiration, yes, pity, no." In the next moment her hand was enfolded in his larger one and cradled to the warm skin of his neck. Sean lifted his other hand to cup the nape of her neck. "When I was seventeen, my foster father tried to rape another child in his house. I had noticed the way he had been watching her and one night he came in her room and..." His voice trailed off as if he were transported back to that dark room, taking her with him.

Erin's heart leapt to her throat and drummed a thunderous beat. She couldn't gather enough moisture in her mouth to reply as he described the bogeyman of her childhood. "He hadn't known I'd taken to sleeping on the floor at the foot of her bed. When he grabbed her I attacked him. To this day I can still hear her screams..."

His lashes lowered and a spasm of emotion passed over his face before his eyes captured hers once more.

"Sweetheart, I know about nightmares. Sometimes I wake up in a cold sweat from dreams where I'm bound on that floor, helpless, unable to protect her. The truth is we both survived fucked-up childhoods and are stronger for it. But even the strongest person needs to be held in the darkest part of night when the past comes calling."

Sean released her hand and smoothed the pad of his thumb along her jawline. "I could warm you. Keep the cold and loneliness at bay. Use me, Erin. My body, my arms, my cock. They're all yours if you'd just take it...take me. The past wouldn't find you in my bed."

Oh God. What she wouldn't give or steal to forget. Just for a night. Her mother's death. The attack. Jack...

Desire warred with logic and she straddled the thin, rickety line between. Would a few nights of forgetfulness and pleasure be worth the emptiness that would swallow her whole when his arms were no longer available to chase the dark away?

In the end, only two things remained unchanged. She had a job to do and a debt to repay.

Inhaling a deep breath, Erin took a step back and Sean's hands fell to his sides.

"Erin..."

"We really should be getting back."

Pivoting on her heel, she tried convincing herself that the emotion tunneling a hole in her gut was not loneliness...and that his offer didn't call to her like forbidden fruit.

Chapter Five

They were good.

Damn good.

Erin had stationed herself in the dark wing of the stage at the onset of Odyssey's concert an hour ago. During her research on the band, she'd come across one review describing them as a cross between Bon Jovi and Nine Inch Nails. Yeah, she could see it now. The band possessed the fun, energy and flash of the legendary eighties band and still harnessed the grittiness of the nineties industrial rock group.

Christian was the perfect front man—charismatic, engaging, sexy. His smooth, husky voice flowed from him, as perfect an instrument as Sean's and Lucas' guitars or Khalil's drums. Her attention veered to her charge. Though not as animated as Christian, Sean still commanded attention—especially female attention. A cross between Brandon Lee's *The Crow* and Slash of Guns n' Roses, he exuded the same brooding sexuality onstage that he did off, drawing eyes to the lean face and exotic cheekbones framed by the tousled dark fall of hair. The short sleeves of his black t-shirt revealed the wiry strength of his arms and the loose blue jeans couldn't conceal the power of his thighs.

Thighs that would part a woman's legs and settle between them. Muscles that would strain as he surged forward and buried his cock in her warm, wet sex. A ripple of lust undulated through her stomach, culminating in a rush of moisture at her mind's traitorous images. *Get a grip.* Erin clenched the laminated backstage pass that hung from her neck, the plastic making an ominous crack under the pressure. She had control of her body.

She. Had. Control.

Ha! And men *did* read *Playboy* for the articles.

"Hell," Erin muttered. Men didn't jack off to the prolific stories in *Playboy* and the hunger that had burned within her a week ago had erupted into a damn bush fire—raging and out of hand.

FUBAR.

It described the past five days perfectly—Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition.

The kickoff of the tour had been hectic, the first four cities flying by in a blur of stadiums, screaming fans and hotels. And though she'd made initial contact with the two crew members she was to investigate, the chaotic pace hadn't permitted time or opportunity to make headway into the case.

The only progress she'd made was in upping the number of orgasms she could rub herself into in one night.

Three and counting.

Her cell phone vibrated at her hip and, after a glance down, Erin reached inside her pocket. The only good thing about the tiny, blue coat dress was the side pockets. At least tonight she didn't have to carry a ridiculous purse with only enough room for a phone and her attitude.

She flipped the top open. "Yeah."

"E," Braedon greeted in the clipped accent of the soldier. Immediately, her focus sharpened to home in on the telltale note in her ex-partner's voice. This was no casual call to check in. Something was up. "We got a development. Can you talk?"

Casting a cursory scan of the backstage area, Erin noted no unusual activity or interest in her phone call. Still, a healthy dose of paranoia made for a good agent. She edged farther into a shadowed corner.

"Go ahead."

"We tracked down the Sacramento boutique that funky perfume came from. The clerk remembers the scent because of the unusual mixture of oils that created it." He snorted. "Imagine not many people are fans of the burned-leaves smell. Still, the clerk's a little vague on the details of the woman who requested and bought it since the transaction was over six months ago. He said a woman of medium height, slim, probably Caucasian. I hacked their system and gained access to their charges. Gillian Beacham and Tracey Craig shopped in that boutique when the band had a concert in Sacramento earlier this year." Frustration added more bite to his brisk tone. "The shop couldn't tell me exactly what fragrances they bought so we still don't have conclusive proof. Have you discovered anything new?"

"Nada," she replied and didn't hide the disgust welling up inside her. Her ineffectiveness in the past week pissed her off. "I haven't had a chance to get next to them yet."

"Erin, hurry."

Dread congealed in her stomach, greasy and nauseating. Her fingers tightened around the phone until the plastic bit into her skin. "Why? What's happened?"

A short but heavy pause ensued. "We received another letter. The front desk at the Philadelphia hotel neglected to send it up to Sean until the day after the band left. So the hotel forwarded it to Sean's manager. He passed it on to me."

Another gap of silence where Erin almost shouted at him to spit it out.

"Erin, this one was more threatening than the previous letters. She's still fixated on Sean with the usual 'we were meant to be together' and 'you're mine'. But the line that has me worried the most is the 'get rid of the bitch or I will'."

Her eyebrows arched high.

"I'm going to take a wild guess and assume 'the bitch' is me."

Braedon's irritated growl came through the phone clearly.

"Not a joke, Erin. She seems to be unraveling faster since the incident with the car. We need to catch her. Fast." The grimness in that last word set her heart to pounding. "Another thing. There wasn't any postage on the envelope."

"Fuck."

"Exactly."

* * * * *

"Daddy!"

The six-year-old jumped off the curb, a blur of denim and green cotton as he busted out of the screened front door, hopped off the front porch and streaked across the yard toward the black sedan. A tall, distinguished man emerged from the back of the car. Years seemed to fall from his weathered face at the sight of the boy. The tired lines creasing his cheeks and forehead eased into a welcoming, joyful smile. He nodded a thank you to the bodyguard holding the rear door open for him, and, dropping his black briefcase to the pavement, lowered to one knee, stretched his arms wide and waited to catch the little boy hurtling toward him at breakneck speed.

Erin followed several paces behind Jack, smiling at the little boy's delight. It had been a month since he'd last seen the father he adored and inquired about daily. As an informant and witness for the DEA in a case against one of the largest drug cartels in the state of New York, Jack Sr.'s life had not been his own for the past year. Now, as the trial of the drug lord wrapped up, he was returning to his family in preparation for entering the witness protection program.

For the past six months, Erin had been assigned to the protection detail of his family, including Jack. The father had demanded the best for his son.

And she was the best.

After scanning the empty drive and the woods surrounding the small house, Erin dropped back, watching father and son reunite.

"Daddy!" the boy yelled again, his small legs and arms pumping, bringing him closer to his father.

A glint, like the sun reflecting off glass, snagged Erin's attention. Her head snapped in the direction of the abandoned barn at the edge of the property. The branches of a denuded tree cast its skeletal shadow on the walls peeling off red paint.

Erin's gaze narrowed. A frisson of unease scuttled down her spine. Her hand moved to the gun holstered at her side. She flicked the strap open with her thumb and removed the weapon. Slow. Wary. Her eyes inspected the woods, the pitted drive that led to the home, the yard. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Yet she frowned, concentrating her search on the lone window...

Clean window.

Her eyes narrowed.

The blood froze in her veins.

Nothing on the old, dilapidated barn was clean. Except for that glass.

Too late.

"No! Jack!" Before the words ripped from her throat, Erin sprang into motion, sprinting across the yard and throwing herself toward the small child.

The bullet ripped through Jack's chest, propelling him forward and into his father's arms.

"Nooooo, Jack!"

Erin jerked to consciousness, eyes snapping open. Her heart hammered as if determined to blast past the barrier of her rib cage. Blood pounded in her ears. Sweat glued patches of her t-shirt to her body. Terror and grief commingled in a noxious mix that brought bile to her throat, scalding the tender lining like acid. Reason insisted she lay on the couch in a Virginia hotel room but her mind remained on that humid, bloody driveway.

A shudder racked her body. She'd lost count of the times she'd suffered this same nightmare. It had been a little over a year since she'd witnessed Jack's death. Exactly fourteen months since she'd crouched next to him and watched, helpless, while his blood pooled beneath his small, frail body.

Motions born of long-ingrained habit had her scrabbling under the pillow for the MP3 player and gun, her tools to calm the racing of her heart and provide some measure of control and mindlessness, if not peace. Her hand brushed the smooth, cool surface of the 9mm and the smaller MP3 player. A slight tremble shook her hands as she placed the gun on the table in front of her. Plugging the earbuds in, Erin pressed the power button on the player. Nothing happened. She tried it again. Still nothing.

A glance down showed the battery life was nil. Fuck! She flung the electronic device to the couch. She'd always—*always*—kept the MP3 player charged. She tunneled stiff fingers through her hair and gripped the roots tight until her scalp tingled at the slight sting. Already her routines were changing. For the past year, she'd fallen to sleep with music and a weapon until this assignment, this tour...Sean.

That the nightmare would attack with a vengeance didn't surprise her. After five silent nights, she'd expected it—taking on her first assignment in a year, confronting her past, grappling with the unexpected and blindsiding lust for Sean...still, the grief, terror and blood of the dream never failed to leave her shaken.

Unless she wanted a repeat of her failure with Jack she couldn't afford to be shaken while on this assignment. Christian continued to watch her and the two women she'd come to investigate couldn't be tipped off by inconsistent behavior. And then there was Sean. Always Sean.

Pushing to a sitting position, Erin wrapped her arms around her torso, offering herself comfort and knowing from experience none would be forthcoming.

She knew what had brought it on. Braedon's phone call. The increased threat to Sean. Her fear that she would fail...again.

She should have never taken this job. Never placed herself in the position of being responsible for another person's life.

Never allowed Sean to touch her.

Never permitted him to gather her close, bring her pleasure. Make her feel alive.
To let someone in meant losing them. To abandonment. Fate.
Death.

The nightmare reinforced that stark, painful reminder.

Erin lowered her arms and scooted to the edge of the couch. She planted her feet on the floor, paused, then reached for the 9mm with a sigh. Her hands worked the familiar process of dismantling and reassembling the gun without conscious instruction from her brain. The calming routine was embedded in her subconscious.

But it was not nearly as calming as she'd hoped. She clicked the ridged barrel in place, then laid the weapon on the coffee table to start the process over again.

"Erin?"

Instinct had her snatching up the gun and aiming it. Her finger straightened alongside the barrel, tensed and prepared to pull the trigger.

Sean didn't even glance down at the gun pointed at his chest. His focus remained on her face, his gray eyes touching each feature before meeting her gaze again. He slowly lifted his hands from the guitar that hung in front of him and turned his palms to face outward. "Don't shoot."

"Dammit, Sean," she growled, his dry tone pissing her off more. Erin jerked the gun down so the muzzle was aimed at the floor instead of him. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I don't sneak," he informed her, arching an eyebrow. Sean shifted his guitar to his hip.

Shi-it, Erin thought. Miles and miles of honey skin stretched up, up and up from his low-waist jeans to the sexy dip at the bottom of his throat. In that instant, her thoughts took a tailspin from nightmares and blood to skin and sex.

She wrenched her scrutiny from his half-nakedness and returned it to safer territory – the deadly weapon in her hand. After setting the gun on the table once again, Erin resumed cleaning it as if the state of world peace depended on it.

Sean remained standing at the end of the couch.

Ignore him. Ignore him and he'll go away.

He settled into the armchair flanking the couch.

Damn. Erin closed her eyes, shutting him out while her hands continued with the routine task. She'd only shared the time after the nightmares with her gun and music. Never another person. Allowing someone to witness her vulnerability, her weakness...it was terrifying.

The romantic, stirring notes of *Concierto de Aranjuez* filled the room. Her hands stilled on the weapon. Her breath caught in her throat. Only when the pressure became a dull ache in her chest did she exhale. Oh God. It was simply...beautiful. Sean played the difficult piece with the speed, precision and heart of a classical guitarist. Amazing.

The pure notes of the guitar calmed her heart and thoughts as if the MP3 player pumped music in her ears.

He'd calmed the savage beast.

Sean didn't speak and neither did she. His head and body bent over the instrument, and the lilting notes wrapped around her, comforted her.

Erin returned her gaze to the gun. With slow, deliberate motions she reassembled the weapon and replaced it under her pillow. Like a child, she lay back on the couch and allowed the music to tuck her in. Curling into a fetal position, she stared across the room until her eyelids became too heavy to hold open.

Her last thought before sleep claimed her was Sean's arms hadn't comforted her after the nightmare...but his music had.

* * * * *

Elise.

Shock vibrated through him like a discordant chord. *Elise Grayson.*

Sean stared at the sleeping woman curled up on the couch as if protecting herself even while unconscious. She resembled a young child lying there, the voluminous gray t-shirt and baggy pajama bottoms swallowing her slim frame. Her breath exited her nose on a light snore. Those flickers of recognition that had jerked at his memory taunted him now. He'd brushed them off as inconsequential.

Now they mocked him.

It had been the vulnerable, almost-hunted look Erin had worn as she'd aimed that gun at his chest. A fucking scary moment. He'd been less than half kidding when he'd told her not to shoot.

But he'd witnessed that expression too many times to have forgotten it. Or to forget the fierce need to protect that rose within him.

The last time he'd seen that haunted fear had been fifteen years ago when he'd been an angry seventeen-year-old being hauled out of his foster home in handcuffs.

The image of the child superimposed itself over the woman. Fuck. It had been right there in front of him. The fleeting flashes that had tugged at him had been memories, instances of recognition.

The eyes.

Even without the scar that had puckered her cheek, he should have recognized Elise—*Erin*—by her eyes. From the time she'd arrived on the doorstep of their foster home as a scared, traumatized ten-year-old, her eyes had swept away his bitter rage, replacing it with a powerful protectiveness he hadn't experienced since. Now the inexplicable need to soothe Erin made sense. Only one person had ever inspired the feeling in him. His instinct had recognized what his mind hadn't.

Erin had been his lifeline. She'd been his reason for hanging on in a world that had thought him useless, unwanted and hopeless. His purpose for staying in that home and not leaving for the lure of the streets had been to protect her.

And now she was here, helping him.

"If you object to the pretense of being lovers, why did you take this job?"

"Obligation."

The words from their initial meeting resurfaced. Emotion filled his chest and rose to his throat, squeezing until the breath exploded from his lungs on a hoarse cry. He glanced down at Erin and choked back the raw sound. She continued to sleep, undisturbed. Sean ran a trembling hand through his hair, then rubbed a palm over the back of his neck.

So many times over the years he'd worried about the scared little girl he'd been forced to abandon. Who had shielded her? What kind of woman had she become?

Now those answers were here, ready to be uncovered, locked inside the woman sleeping like the child he remembered. Foremost among those answers would be explaining the horror locked so deep inside that it tormented her even in her sleep.

He knew the hell she'd endured as a child—had experienced some of it with her. And he also knew how the past could tear at your soul like a rusty knife, leaving jagged edges behind that never seemed to completely heal. He wasn't a stranger to pain, humiliation...shame.

But those were old scars. The fear that had darkened her eyes as she'd pointed her weapon at him—those demons were fresh.

He'd been on the dark balcony playing his guitar when the first scream had ripped through the night. The terror and grief embedded in the animallike sound had lifted the hairs on his arms and neck. In the next instant he'd recognized the sound as coming from Erin. Heart lodged in his throat, he'd barreled through the balcony door and into the hotel suite, afraid his stalker had somehow entered the room and attacked her.

The sight of her trembling with that gun had been almost as unnerving.

Sean scrubbed a hard palm down his face and wished he could scour the pain-filled scream from his mind as easily. While the music had calmed Erin and lulled her into sleep, the acrid taste of panic still coated his mouth. Hell, the strongest, most stringent mouthwash wouldn't eradicate it. Only feeling her skin to skin, assuring himself she was safe, could do that.

He rose to his feet and padded to the shadowed dining area. After settling his guitar on the stand set against the wall, he returned to the foot of the couch. Erin hadn't budged from the ball she'd curled into. Once more, helplessness and the need to protect surged in his chest, chipping away at a heart he'd believed beat for music alone. Sean knelt next to the sofa, never removing his eyes from her.

He reached out and stroked the back of a knuckle down her cheek. The same skin that had been marred by a pink, ridged scar. A year after she'd been in their foster

home, she'd confided in him about how she'd received the mark. Her father, in a drunken rage, had split his daughter's cheek open with his ring when she'd tried to protect her mother from one of his many beatings. He'd vowed then she would never suffer terror like that again. He'd kept his promise fifteen years ago but what about the night after that...and the night after that... His heart seized in his chest as if a tight fist were squeezing it hard.

Erin had been the one thing in his miserable, lonely life that had been his. And he kept what was his.

He rose to his feet. And bent down to slide his arms under Erin's sleeping body and lift her from the couch. Music hadn't been the only thing in his heart. For fifteen years, the ghost of a little girl had been firmly entrenched.

Sean straightened with Erin cradled close to his chest. He lowered his head, pressed his nose to her dark hair and inhaled. The no-nonsense vanilla scent and warm, solid weight of her in his arms calmed him as nothing else could. He stood there for several moments allowing her heat to seep into his pores, reassuring him of her safety, her presence.

Relief and joy at discovering the child he'd protected and loved coursed through him. But as he entered his darkened bedroom and gently laid her on top of the covers, it wasn't innocence or brotherly love that had him settling behind her and curling around her sleep-warm body.

No, it was the need of a man to feel his woman close that had him pulling her into the curve of his body. To know that when she turned in the middle of the night it would be him she reached for.

It would be his arms that chased the demons away.

Chapter Six

Warmth. Comfort.

Erin snuggled deeper into the snug cocoon of blankets and pillows, determined to grasp that last bit of otherworldliness that existed between sleep and awakening. With the soft pillow underneath her head and the heavy weight of the covers at her waist she could stay in bed for —

She cracked open her eyes and peered down her body. Gray t-shirt. Gold skin and muscled arm. Another glance revealed relaxed fingers resting against her stomach.

What the fuck?

Years of training restrained the impulse to leap from the bed. Though her breathing maintained the same deep, steady rhythm, her heart hammered in her chest.

She was spooning with Sean.

Behind her, the solid weight of his cock pressed into her ass, his strong thighs cradled hers and the wide stretch of his chest rose and fell against her back. Surrounded on all sides. Jesus, it felt good.

She couldn't remember anything in her life feeling this...good.

Panic gripped her by the throat like a rabid pit bull. She had to get the hell out of this bed. Before she became addicted to waking up in his embrace.

"Where do you think you're going?" The sensual timbre of his sleep-roughened voice rumbled in her ear as his arm tightened around her waist, effectively halting her slow slide across the sheets.

"Back to the couch I fell asleep on," she retorted, and jerked free of his retraining hold. Getting the hell out of his bed loomed paramount in her mind as she scooted on her ass across the mattress. She planted her feet on the floor. "How the hell did I end up in here anyway?" Rising, she tugged on her oversized t-shirt. "I think I would remember sleepwalking into your bedroom..."

"Actually, I don't think sleepwalkers tend to remember their walks."

Erin whirled around to face him but the scathing comeback died a quick death on her lips. Sean studied her. His hooded gaze unnerved her. He'd rolled to his back and had crossed his arms under his head. The position revealed the tightly toned muscles of his arms in sharp relief. Golden skin stretched over a sculpted chest and abs before disappearing beneath the white sheet pooled at his hips. The breath rushed from her lungs as if jabbed with a hard fist. Dark tufts of hair under his arms drew her stare. Hell, when a man's underarms were sexy, he definitely had it going on.

Her body screamed to life. Nipples tightened into hard points and the flesh at the apex of her legs grew wet beneath his sensuous inspection. Underwear became a curse

as it molded to her swollen folds. Erin squeezed her thighs together but it only succeeded in making the pulsing ache in her clit worsen.

"I followed through on a promise."

"What?" All that lickable expanse of skin must have left her befuddled because she had no clue what he was talking about.

"Why you're in here." His lids seemed to fall lower until a sliver of molten gray was visible. "I promised that your nightmares wouldn't find you in my bed. And they didn't." The full curve of his bottom lip hardened. "They won't."

Her stomach bottomed out. "What do you mean they won't?"

"No more sleeping on that couch alone with a gun under your pillow. From now on you'll be in here, in my bed. With me under you."

"You," she swallowed hard, "you've got to be kidding me."

Sean unfolded his arms and lowered them to his sides. Palms pressed to the mattress, he pushed to a sitting position. He shoved the blanket to the side and Erin didn't know whether relief or disappointment sang through her as she caught sight of the dark sweatpants that dipped low on his hips.

"Oh, I assure you, sweetheart, I'm very serious." In a smooth motion, he turned toward the edge of the bed, swung his feet over the side and stood. Several moments later, he'd rounded the bed and halted inches from her. "The only reason you should scream and sweat in the middle of the night is if I'm fucking you into orgasm, not from a nightmare. I'll be damned if you spend one more night alone, having to cope with no one to hold you through it."

"Newsflash," Erin gritted out from between clenched teeth. "I've had bad dreams before I met you and handled them just fine. I don't need you riding to my rescue like some knight in shining armor."

"What if I want to, Erin? What if I can't think of a better way to spend the night?" he murmured, lifting a hand and brushing the pad of his thumb over her jaw. The gentle caress threatened to break her, to entice her submission to his demand. "I may not be able to fight your demons for you, Erin, but I can have your back while you do. And when you wake I'll give you my arms, my body to soothe away the ache and pain."

Oh God. She'd been lonely so long. What would it hurt to take advantage of the comfort and forgetfulness he offered for the duration of the assignment?

Her.

It would hurt her when a couple of weeks from now she woke up back on her couch, shaking from another dream, his body no longer available. It would shatter something in her. No. She shook her head. She couldn't afford that. She couldn't afford *him*.

She shook her head, dislodging his touch from her face.

"Or let me guess, you don't need anyone." A small half-smile lifted a corner of his mouth. "Which is bullshit. Everyone—even you—desires to be touched, wanted. Maybe something happened to convince you it's easier to deny it but, baby, you can't fool me. You want in that bed as much as I want you there." His silver gaze glittered and he shifted a step closer. "As much as I need you there." Sean grasped the hem of her shirt and gave it a small, firm tug. "So take it off."

The words took a long moment to register. When they penetrated, she stumbled back a step as if the order had sucker punched her in the chest. Sean's unyielding grip on her shirt brought her to an abrupt halt. He couldn't possibly be ordering her to remove—

"Take it off," he repeated, confirming her suspicions. The implacable tone brooked no argument and even as indignation at the command rose her nipples tightened and poked against the thin, gray material. His gaze dropped to her breasts and, like a bolt of lightning streaking through dark storm clouds, an emotion deeper and more primal than lust flashed in his eyes. Her breath caught and her heart drummed in a wild beat.

"You've lost it. Gone 'round the damn bend." She crossed her arms over her chest and cocked her hip out to the side, desperately attempting to bluff her way past the arousal winding an insidious path from her nipples to her clit. "And what do you suppose I wear, then? Oh wait," she continued, tapping the corner of her mouth, "I know. A thong, right? Ooh, wait. I got it. A dog collar and thong."

In the span of seconds, his lips seemed to become fuller, his cheekbones sharper. His gaze lifted to hers and she stared into pure sex.

Pure, grade-A sex.

"No," he murmured. "You have it wrong. I'd prefer you wear nothing at all. I want you stripped naked, that huge wall you have erected lowered, leaving you bare and open to me. Since you won't, I'll start with this shirt."

His words seemed to echo as if they'd been shouted across the vast emptiness of the Grand Canyon. The resulting silence hummed, vibrated, *sang* with lust. With promise. With sex.

"Fuckin' kidding me," she scoffed. Yet the words trembled even to her ears. Depending on a dismissive short wave to convey her opinion of his suggestion, she pivoted on her heel, ready to yank herself free of his grasp. "You can kiss my—"

"What?" Quicker than her reflexes could react, his body pressed flush against her back. She stumbled and he snaked his arm around her hips, preventing her from tumbling face first to the floor. His hold tightened until nothing but the insubstantial material of his sweatpants and her pajama bottoms separated their flesh from each other. The skin of his bare chest seemed to burn through her shirt to the skin of her back and shoulder blades while the hard ridge of his cock thrust between the cleft of her ass and notched against her lower back. Strong thighs supported her legs, almost cradling them. Instinct had her clutching his arm, fingers denting the skin.

"What, sweetheart?" he breathed, the soft brush of air warming her ear. "What can I kiss? Since I can't have your mouth, what about your nipples? The soft lips of your pussy? Gladly. I'll lick and suck them until you beg me to stop."

"Get off me." She bucked her hips in an attempt to throw him off balance, but only succeeded in wedging the ridge of his cock tighter against her ass.

Counter-fucking-productive.

"No." He shook his head and the thick curtain of his hair tickled her neck and cheek. "Not until you take the shirt off."

"No, dammit." She squirmed against his hold.

"Okay."

His quick acquiescence should've made her suspicious, but the relief that knifed through her smothered any misgivings. She took a step forward.

And plunged into hell...and heaven.

"Oh. My. God."

The breath exploded from her chest as she arched into the hands that cupped and squeezed her breasts. Her hands flew up to clutch his thick forearms. His low chuckle stabbed a spear of lust straight to her core. Her sex clenched as if begging for what her breasts were receiving. She wasn't a small woman but his big hands covered her. She'd always considered the size of her breasts a blessing and curse. But as he squeezed the full mounds and his whispered "perfect" echoed in her ear, she felt perfect.

Utterly, completely perfect, and the realization caused tears to well in her eyes. She blinked to keep them at bay.

He cupped the undersides of her breasts and squeezed the hard tips. Her head fell back on his shoulder and she locked a cry behind clenched teeth.

"I heard that," he crooned. Firm tugs to her nipples had her strung so tight she swore she vibrated. "Don't hold back with me." His voice hardened with the command and delivered hard, erotic twists to the throbbing tips as her punishment. He alternated between pulling, tweaking, pinching until she writhed against him, her movements restless, pleading. "Take it off."

A power play. She understood the motive behind this torture even though pleasure shredded her mind.

But she refused to give in.

"No." She breathed the word.

"Fine." For a fleeting second she believed she'd won, that he'd ceded this battle of wills. His hands dropped from her flesh and she squelched the sting of disappointment, convincing herself relief squeezed her heart.

He shifted away and came to stand in front of her. "Still no?"

She tilted her head back, her chest rising from the pleasure that echoed in her breasts, stomach and sex. In the space of minutes, he'd reduced her to one living,

breathing ache. But damn if she'd surrender this battle. More than sex stood at stake here. He demanded *intimacy*. If only he'd requested a quick fuck. It would have been easier to submit.

"Hell, no—"

In a move too fast to track he bent and latched on to her nipple and sucked the hard tip deep...deeper...

A cry of shocked pleasure ripped from her throat. His rumble of approval pulsed over her flesh and around the nipple surrounded by his lips and tongue. She thrust her fingers through his dark waves, knotting in his thick hair as she tugged him closer. Her shirt might as well have evaporated for all the barrier it provided against his hungry teeth and lips. His tongue circled the taut bud, tugged and then lapped. Hard hands stroked up her back and cupped her shoulders, holding her in place for the erotic torment. He controlled her body.

His hands, mouth and even his hips, held her captive and under his complete domination. And dammit, *yes*, she wanted to be dominated. Wanted him to continue sexing her nipples, stabbing at the hard peaks with the pointed tip of his tongue.

He switched from one nipple to the other. His lips drew the neglected peak deep into the hot cavern of his mouth and sucked it so hard she gasped at the corresponding pull deep in her womb. Her pussy wept and her clit pounded with an insistent throb she couldn't ignore. She arched her hips forward and grazed the rigid length of his erection. A half sigh, half whimper escaped her lips. *More*. She needed more of him against her clit.

He shifted away and denied that pressure she craved.

She growled in irritation.

In desperation.

He straightened. And stepped back, abandoning her breasts. *What the hell?* She could've punched something...preferably him.

"I'll give you what you need," he promised in that sexy, low voice that had drenched the underwear of countless women. "Tell me you'll take the shirt off."

She blinked up at him.

Disbelief stole her voice, slowed her reaction. Finally, comprehension broke over her like a bucket of ice cold water. "You asshole," she growled. The urge to commit violence rode the same razor-thin edge as pleasure, warring for dominance. And just for kicks, humiliation joined the party. It mortified her that this insane arousal was one-sided. "Is this some fucking game to you?"

Anger and lust darkened his gaze, the storm clouds going steel gray. If possible the skin over his cheekbones tightened even more and the sensual curve of his lips disappeared as they firmed into a grim straight line.

"A game?" He moved closer, so close the cock he'd denied her bumped against the flesh of her abdomen. "Fuck no. It's give and take. I'll give you what you need, what

your pussy is begging me for, but you have to take the fucking shirt off." He reached out and trailed a path of fire up her thigh, not stopping until he grazed the crease where her torso and leg connected.

His touch moved inward until he lingered inches below the flesh that needed it most. Another rush of moisture trickled from between her swollen lips, further dampening the panel of her underwear. His gaze captured hers, holding her prisoner while the tip of his finger swept back and forth, advance and retreat, inching closer to the heart of her then drawing back. He teased her, watched her.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip and her lashes lowered.

Sean's eyes narrowed. "Look at me," he ordered, voice rough and demanding obedience. "I want to see it."

It? Then he traced her slit and heat poured through her, singeing every neuron and synapse in its wake. Oh damn. If by "it" he meant the lust that whipped at her clit—the pleasure that made her want to throw him to the bed and sink down on his dick—than she wanted more of "it".

"Christ," she moaned.

"Yeah." He nodded. "That's what I wanted to see. Right fucking there." He repeated the touch. Harder. Firmer, pressing into her the tiniest bit. She whimpered and widened her legs. "More?" he asked.

Erin nodded. Sean's touch traveled the same path again and dipped deeper but still not enough. There was no way he couldn't feel the creamy evidence of her desire even through the soft cotton, but she didn't care. She hungered for this, for more.

"Not enough?" he asked, as if reading her mind. It seemed as if her vocal cords had collapsed and she could only answer with a shake of her head.

His fingers deserted her but before she could utter a protest, they delved beneath the bands of her pajamas and underwear. No gentle foray or soft question. His hand dove between her thighs and cupped her bare, wet flesh. Her body jerked hard and a keening wail climbed up her throat. Her hands flew to his waist and she held on tight. The palm of his free hand rose to her neck and cupped the column, controlling the violent shudder that racked her body.

Not orgasm, but pleasure so acute it neared pain.

"Fuck, baby," he groaned, his grip tightening around her neck. "You're dripping in my hand. You're so damn wet."

The heel of his palm ground against her clit and dragged another hoarse scream from her. She couldn't keep her eyes open. No way could she fight against the pleasure that strung her on a rack of pure lust. She widened her stance even more until, with a subtle rock of her hips, she rode his wide palm.

"Yeah, sweetheart, ride it." He caught her rhythm and as she moved forward, his hand slid down in a hard glide through her folds, parting and stroking the heated, desperate flesh. As she rocked back, he reversed the caress and the stroke culminated

with a firm circle over her engorged clit. Her head fell back and his other palm cradled her nape, supporting her.

"More?" When she didn't answer right away, he squeezed her neck. Erin met his intent stare. "More, sweetheart? Do you want to take more?"

"Yes. Give me more," she whispered, not caring that it sounded more like a plea than a command.

Heat lit his eyes seconds before a long finger speared into her sex. She cried out, hovering on the knife's edge of pleasure. And it still wasn't enough.

"Baby, you're tight," he rasped, his eyes closing briefly. When he reopened them, the heat consumed her. "So fucking wet and tight."

She couldn't respond, could barely breathe past the lust. He waited several moments, his hooded stare focused on her face, before drawing out and pushing back in.

Full.

And good. *So good.*

Her hips followed his movements and her sex melted around him, grasping at the penetration.

"There you go," he praised, playing her flesh like his prized guitar. "Two fingers, sweetheart. Take two for me." He didn't wait for her agreement but on the next plunge, Sean added another, stretching her farther.

Oh. Damn. She bowed, her neck arching into his grasp.

Then the finger fuck began.

Fire blazed along her skin, dewing her throat, chest and stomach. He probed and thrust. With every withdrawal, his palm rolled over her clit, forcing her closer and closer to an imminent explosion.

"Please," she wailed, hips twisting, *"please..."*

"Take. It. Off."

This time when she met the determination in his eyes, she couldn't summon the anger. Pleasure was a separate entity and it twined around and in her, dragging her beneath its dark undertow.

His hand slid up her nape and plunged into her hair. He drew her face close to his until his words were mini-explosions against her lips.

"I'll let you come. I'll make this pussy cream harder than it is now." He gave her head a short, hard shake. "But take the fucking shirt off."

Chapter Seven

Her hands were already at the hem, grasping the material and tugging it up her body and over her head before he finished the demand. She tossed it to the floor behind her. The cool air caressed her sensitive nipples and she shivered at the additional sensation.

The heat of his scrutiny grazed her flesh as if he'd reached out and touched it. She should have felt some modicum of embarrassment or shame, but none emerged. It didn't stand a chance in the face of her hunger.

She expected him to grab her, pull her close, resume finger-fucking her. The soft caress to her jaw, throat and collarbone knocked her off center. The tenderness in the midst of brutal arousal shook Erin and she didn't know what to make of it. Or him.

"Sit on the bed." He didn't wait for her compliance but guided her backward. Submitting to the gentle but firm pressure on her shoulder, she lowered her bottom to the edge of the mattress. His hands went to the drawstring knotted at the front of his sweatpants. With a sharp tug, the string loosened and Sean reached beneath the waistband and pulled his cock free. The large, heavy column speared upward, almost reaching his navel. Thick veins etched the underside, visible to her startled gaze as he fisted his erection and stroked.

Her mouth watered. Her heart pounded. Her pussy clenched. Jesus, it was...huge. And so damn sexy she couldn't wait to feel the heavy weight of it in her mouth. Erin slicked her tongue over her lips, desperate for a taste. Sean shifted closer, so close the scent of his skin—sandalwood and sex—surrounded her. His thighs caged hers, his cock captivated her. Still, she held back, uncertain.

"You said you would give me what I wanted," she murmured, lifting her gaze past his cock to meet his unwavering stare.

"This is what you want," he replied, voice quiet as he thrust a hand through her hair. The other encircled the base of his cock. With a small motion, her head was tilted back and she met his unrelenting, molten eyes. "Open your mouth, baby. Suck me inside. Take me deep."

Sean nudged her lips with the engorged head. Helpless to do anything but obey, she let him in. And groaned. His flavor exploded on her tongue. The salty essence of the pre-cum that dotted the small, narrow slit at the top of the cock head. The sweet taste of his skin.

Her lips closed around the tip and she and sucked hard.

"Oh fuck, that's good," he praised, the sensual whisper another caress to her already overheated flesh. "So pretty. So fucking pretty."

He withdrew and the bulbous head was a heavy weight as it slid over her tongue. Moments later it returned, followed by more of the thick stalk. Erin forced her jaw to relax to accommodate the width. Her tongue stroked the underside of his cock, tracing the veins she could feel in stark detail.

Her pussy throbbed and ached as arousal whipped her clit into a frenzy. She could imagine his cock stretching and filling her sex as it did her mouth. Long, sure strokes that gave her more and more. His hand freed his cock to join the other at her head and hold her steady for the fucking he gave her.

"Wider," Sean instructed. A low, pleasure-filled groan escaped him as she complied. His hips flexed, pushing another small increment of his cock in her mouth, toward her throat. Alarm seized her for a moment and his hold on her scalp tensed. "No, baby, let me in. Don't hold back with me. Let me..." he groaned again as she slowly relaxed her jaw and throat, "in. Yes, that's what I need."

His cock pistoned back and forth between her lips. She felt taken, marked—as if tomorrow, and every day after, she would still feel the imprint of his cock on her mouth and tongue. Her cry vibrated around his dick and her hands left the mattress to grab the hard muscle of his thighs. His flesh seemed to expand in her mouth until she wasn't sure she could handle more of him.

"Damn, that's it." The grip on her head was like a vise as the pace of his hips increased so all she could do was hold on. "I'm about to come, baby. Come right down your throat. Where I want to be."

The raw words stroked over her nipples and clit and Erin swore when the first burst of cum hit her tongue she almost plunged over the edge with him. She sucked on his cock, determined to have every last drop of his desire for her, until Sean cradled her jaw and slowly withdrew from her mouth.

He bent over her and his lips brushed the curve of her ear. Erin sank her teeth into her bottom lip as the seductive massage of her scalp and the sensual sweep of his thumb over her skin lulled her to savor the sensory attack.

"Do you get it now, Erin?" He placed a soft kiss to the patch of skin below her ear. "What I need, you need. Your hunger is mine. Submit to me, baby, give to me so I can give you all that you want. That we both crave."

She struggled to open her eyes and meet the piercing gaze above her. In the morning light that streamed through the cracks in the curtains, his stare penetrated the hard, nothing-can-touch-me façade she showed the world. It was as if he saw beneath the mask to the bruised and aching heart that wanted to trust, but didn't know how. So many years had passed since she'd extended it to anyone.

In this moment, she accepted what he'd been telling her about the power and pleasure of submission. In this moment, she commended her body into his keeping, trusting that he wouldn't abuse this intimacy.

She just *trusted*.

He palmed the ball of her shoulder, gave it a small nudge, silently ordering her to lie back on the bed.

As he tugged the elastic band of her sweatpants Erin's hands shot out and shackled his wrists. Years of protective instincts rushed forward, slicing through the haze of desire. Yes, she trusted him but her shields had been born in the fires of insecurity, hurt and betrayal. She desperately desired to lower them, give him — *them* — this but...

"Shh," he soothed, and paused as if saying without words that he would wait until she was ready. Erin searched his face for any sign of impatience or frustration over her wavering. His steady gaze met hers and in it she spied nothing but patience, understanding and hunger. Those three emotions combined elicited her surrender more than a deluge of lust could ever have. She loosened her grip on his wrists. With a small nod, Sean pulled her pants and panties down her thighs. With a flick of his hand, he shucked the clothing behind him. His heated scrutiny scorched her bare skin and set her pussy on fire as his eyes settled between her legs. He encircled her ankles and lifted her feet to the mattress's edge, increasing the feeling of exposure and vulnerability. "Are you with me?"

"Yes, Sean." She exhaled. And gave in. "Touch me."

He thrust a finger inside her. Her head fell back between her shoulders just as her hips arched off the bed and into the caress. After a couple of strokes another finger joined the first and once again pleasure built, climbing toward orgasm. He fucked her and her anxiety slid away as if it'd never been. When his hand pressed her thighs even wider, she complied, greedy for just the feeling of him buried deep, stretching her sex.

"Such a pretty pussy," he crooned. The hot, sexy words were like fuel thrown on the flames of arousal. She whimpered and rolled her hips, undulating in a wild rhythm. "I want you to come, baby." He continued stroking her, but slowly lowered to his knees. Erin glanced down her torso and he stared at her from between her spread legs. As she watched, Sean leaned forward and placed a soft kiss to the inside of her thigh. Then he closed his eyes. Inhaled. After a long moment, he met her gaze again and the breath he released was like a current of heat over her clit. "But when you do," he continued, the deep rumbled of his voice sending a shiver through her, "I want your cream on my tongue..."

The first lick through her sensitive folds tore a scream from her that left a burn on the tender walls of her throat. She arched so high off the mattress Sean had to snatch his hands from her sex, clamp her hips and force them back down.

His lips rubbed, his tongue dragged through her slit and then thrust into her quivering pussy. Her inner walls tried to clamp down hard on the invader. But he withdrew and licked a fiery path back to the top of her sex. His tongue lashed at her clit, plied delicate flicks. Then, with a growl that vibrated against her labia, he sucked. Ate her like a condemned man feasting on his last meal. Erin bucked hard against his mouth, almost throwing him off.

"That's it," he whispered and planted soft kisses to the tormented clit. His tongue swiped through her folds once more. And then again. He groaned. "Fight for it, sweetheart. Fight me for it."

"You promised," she cried out, writhing under the sharp lash of pleasure. Hard hands pinned her down to the bed. "You promised to let me come."

"Patience, baby."

"Fuck patience," she growled, rearing up. "Fuck *me*."

The firm pat to her pussy ripped a scream from her throat. It wasn't a slap. It didn't hurt. It *burned*. It burned good.

Another tap electrified her clit. And another raced her at Mach speed toward orgasm. And Sean didn't let up but continued the erotic spanking, driving her to the edge of a cataclysmic explosion Erin wasn't positive she would survive.

"You like that, don't you, Erin?" She could only whimper in response to the soft, sexual question. His chuckle breathed across the hypersensitive lips and she gasped. "I could make you come by spanking this pussy, baby. Do you want to come?"

Another sharp pat set her on fire. Her hips undulated and Erin cried out. Lust had striped away all modesty and she hovered on the edge of begging him to finish her.

"Or how about..." he murmured.

His mouth latched on to her clit and drew it into his mouth. He drove two fingers deep into her pussy and twisted.

Erin screamed. Trembled. And imploded. Every cell, neuron and fiber of her being detonated. And oh God, she was dying...

Resurrection brought the sight of Sean crouched over her body like a wild animal. His molten stare licked over her face, neck and breasts.

"Fuck, baby, that's beautiful," he breathed. Lowering his head, he placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to her jaw. "Come for me again, Erin. Next time I want all that hot cream on my cock instead of my tongue." Another kiss to her throat. "I want to be buried so deep in you, Erin. It's past need." For a long second Sean rested his forehead on her collarbone and his grip on her hips flexed restlessly. "It's necessary," he whispered and she almost believed she'd imagined the soft declaration.

Imagined or not, at that moment, she would have promised him the key to the fucking city. Pleasure stole through every limb and yet a hum set up under her skin. There was more he had for her. She craved more.

"Fuck me, please," she pleaded. Clutching his taut biceps, she hauled herself up and stroked her tongue up the strong column of his throat. Sweat, sandalwood and *him* filled her mouth. "Please. Give me your cock."

Erin tilted her head back in time to catch the flare of lust that lit his eyes. His chest rose and fell on a long breath. Relief surged through her as he edged off the bed. Damn, the man was a pagan tribute to sex and decadence. His sweatpants were pushed low, revealing lean hips, the taut curve of his ass and the tops of his thighs. The cock she'd

sucked dry rose in a proud, stiff mast to his navel, the wiry hair at its base a dark nest. She'd had his cum on her tongue and down her throat and yet she craved to feel the heavy weight of his cock between her lips again. And again.

"Turn over."

She jacked her eyes from his erection to the hard beauty of his face. Several seconds passed before the order registered and still she hesitated. Sean tilted his head to the side and repeated it, the tone soft yet brooking no argument.

"Turn over, Erin."

A sliver of embarrassment stabbed her chest but damn, she needed his cock in her more than she cared about whether her ass was perfectly shaped. Rolling over, Erin kneeled on her knees then fell forward to plant her palms on the bed.

"Damn, you're beautiful." A wide palm flattened on the small of her back and smoothed up her spine. "So strong, powerful and lovely." Firm lips pressed hot kisses to each curve of her bottom. "You humble me, Erin."

His words leashed her to him stronger than any shackle. She felt beautiful. She felt sexy. Powerful even in the position of submission. Sean moved behind her and the rustle of sound like clothing whispering reached her ears.

"Sit up, Erin."

She straightened, her hands falling to her thighs.

"Put your arms behind your back."

She closed her eyes. Sean had given her pleasure. He'd provided comfort in the dark, lonely hours of the night. He'd played her to sleep.

She slipped her arms behind her and pressed her wrists together.

And didn't flinch when Sean bound her hands.

Heat from his chest scorched her back. Sean's fingers encircled her throat like a necklace. He nuzzled the shell of her ear and his whispered "beautiful" caressed her senses and skin. With one more brush of his lips, he released her neck, placed a palm to the back of her shoulder and pushed her down toward the mattress. Her shoulders pressed to the mattress and she turned her head to the side, her cheek crushed to the blanket. The submissive posture rendered her completely open to him. Her surrender left her vulnerable.

The bed dipped as Sean placed his weight behind her and between her spread thighs. Her womb clenched and a spill of moisture seeped from between her engorged pussy lips. As he took a hold of her hips, she realized what she'd begged him for loomed moments away. She moaned.

When the hard length of his cock speared between her ass cheeks Erin had to clamp down on her bottom lip to trap the cry of desire. The slow drag of his hard erection switched from her bottom to her pussy and this time she couldn't have held back the groan. The pleasure of that thick, big cock rubbing through her swollen, sensitive lips shuddered over her, through her.

"Please," she whimpered and rolled her hips in an attempt to position his erection where she needed it most. Not that Sean was having any of that. A small swat on her ass stilled the movement and shocked the hell out of her. But the pop didn't stun her as much as the fire that attacked her clit. She didn't go for that BDSM shit. Or did she?

"Still." Sean's hold tightened and he shifted closer. "Be still."

"Condom?" she gasped the question, desperate to have the thick shaft inside her. Now.

"I took care of that, baby," he assured her, and stroked his dick through the drenched lips and dark curls between her thighs.

She sucked in a sharp gust of air at the contact.

"I'll always take care of you." Sean rubbed the smooth bulb crowning his cock over her clit and her hips bucked at the whiplash of pleasure. And she received another pop on the opposite cheek.

Erin cried out. "Don't."

His hand stilled over her flesh. "You're in no position to use that word," he admonished and massaged the smarting spot.

Did she want this...this depth of submission that she'd never imagined for herself? Or did she want more of the pain-laced pleasure? Her pussy clenched and quivered, offering its vote. More.

"More," she gasped.

A moment of silence passed before he shocked her by trailing a warm, moist kiss from her neck down her back to the bound hands at the base of her spine.

"That was hard, wasn't it?" he stated the truth as if he'd felt her internal battle. "That's what I want, baby. Your struggle and then your surrender. It's so sweet because I know it's not easy—because it's yours." As if in reward, he gifted her with another heavy pat to her ass directly over the same spot. Erin whimpered and cast away her inhibition, performed a perfect swan dive into a pleasure she'd never experienced, had never believed herself capable of.

"Yes," Sean praised and continued the erotic assault. Her cries echoed in the room and soon they turned to pleas.

"Sean, please," she mewled, "fuck me. Please, I need your cock."

Another hot kiss singed her spine. "Don't move. You're going to take me slowly, carefully."

Her cheek rasped the cover as she feverishly nodded. Anything. Just...

Fire and ice—pleasure edged with a hint of pain stole her breath from her lungs as he penetrated her pussy. Erin inhaled slowly through her nose and exhaled on a long rush of wind. Her muscles spasmed around his cock, and she felt stretched and branded.

"Damn, you're tight," he gritted behind her. His unyielding grip on her flesh tightened even further, holding her steady as he withdrew and pressed deep, gaining another inch.

Withdraw. Stroke. Another inch.

She shuddered. A bead of sweat rolled off her forehead and was absorbed by the blanket beneath her cheek. It had been so long since she'd had sex. Even as her pussy creamed for him, the walls clamped down, trying to prevent his dick from going deeper. The stretching, the burn made Erin gasp. How could it hurt and feel so damn good at the same time? She craved even more.

"Shh, sweetheart, relax," Sean urged and then with a grunt, buried more inside her. "Easy. You can take me. We have all night, baby."

His cock surged past the swollen lips and into her wet, clenching pussy. *More. I need more.* Erin gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut tighter. *I don't want to be empty anymore. God, don't let me be empty anymore...*

The tiny sobs caught her unaware. She didn't realize they came from herself until Sean's big palm smoothed up her back, massaged her neck and returned to her hip.

"Almost there, baby," he promised with a short thrust of his hips. "Almost," the broad head and flared cap rubbed over the clutching walls, setting off a dozen fiery pulses deep in her womb, "there. Ah fuck." His growl mingled with her low keening wail.

Her muscles clutched at his dick, quivering around the thick stalk that claimed and marked every niche of her pussy and bumped her cervix.

"Sean." All Erin could do was call his name. In plea or demand, she didn't know. Didn't care as long as he moved.

Erin released a needy moan as he gave her more of his cock. The short, hard thrusts rocked her, pounded into her. One of his hard palms moved from her hip to grab the belt that bound her hands together. The musky scent of sex and sweat surrounded them, coated their skin. The wet suction of his cock burying in her drenched slit joined the symphony of his low murmurs of encouragement and her answering cries.

Erin's eyes shot open and her lips parted on a soundless scream. The orgasm, when it came, ripped from her soul. Like an atom bomb it exploded and mushroomed, the swells radiating out to every limb of her body. Sean didn't give her body quarter. The quick, powerful strokes drove her over the edge and catapulted her into the dark abyss.

She dove headfirst, like a virgin sacrifice, and dimly she heard Sean follow her.

As the cataclysmic ecstasy ebbed and her hands were freed, darkness crept over her, dragging her into its welcoming embrace.

And Sean's.

Chapter Eight

Water from the showerhead streamed down her back. Erin bit back a groan of pleasure, the steady cascade like a bone-melting massage on her spine. Turning, she swiped up the bath cloth and bar of soap and lathered it until generous suds covered it.

As she swiped the cloth over her face, shoulders and lower to her breasts, a different kind of moan broke past her lips. Nipples, swollen from hours of sucking and licking, were sensitive to the touch. But then again, what on her body wasn't?

Not one inch of her remained a mystery to Sean. He'd learned her body, becoming acquainted with places that made her shiver or cry out for mercy.

Hell, if they offered PhDs for fucking, Sean would graduate *summa cum laude*. Scenes from the previous night and early this morning flashed through her mind like a porn movie.

Her with Sean's cock working in and out of her mouth. Her legs spread wide as he licked and sucked her pussy. Her, bound and on her knees as she received the first erotic spanking of her life. Her being fucked into oblivion.

Heat simmered under her skin and the tender muscles in her pussy spasmed at the memories. *Un-fucking-believable*, Erin marveled.

Even tired and sore, she craved more.

With herculean effort, she dragged herself away from the erotic musings and finished her shower with efficient speed. Minutes later she twisted the shower knobs, cutting the water off. The sudden silence surrounded her and ingrained habit had her pausing, listening. Nothing came from the bedroom. Sean had been asleep when she'd slipped from under him and the covers.

She reached for a towel and rubbed the water from her body before tucking the ends between her breasts. She padded the short distance to the door that opened into the bedroom. Just as she reached out to grab the knob, her hand hovered and then dropped back to her side.

The dreaded morning after. Or afternoon after, as the case may be. They had fucked and napped the morning away. Their two o'clock sound check loomed, giving them an hour to shower, get dressed...and face each other.

Erin sighed, her head dropping back between her shoulders.

What would she find on the other side? Sean might still be asleep but he would waken soon. What would he say? What would he do? Kiss her? Hug her? Or would he tap her ass like the proverbial pat on the head, telling her job well done and move on?

Shit.

She wouldn't find out by hiding in the bathroom.

Man up. She inhaled, held it and released it. Then grabbed the knob and twisted. She snatched the door open before she could chicken out—and slammed into a solid chest.

In direct contrast to the hard wall of muscle, the hands that folded around her arms were gentle, steadying. That fast, the blood and all coherent thought drained from her head and shot straight for the border—straight to her pussy.

“I don’t like waking up alone,” Sean murmured, lifting a hand to brush back a strand of hair that had escaped the messy ponytail she’d scraped her hair into before showering. The backs of his fingers skimmed her cheek and then traced the line of her jaw. She tilted her head up, forcing herself to meet his molten gaze even though she wanted to duck her head and hide from his piercing stare. Sean shifted closer and the heat in his eyes matched the cock prodding her stomach. He really *didn’t* like waking up alone. “You owe me.”

As he lowered his head, his lips grazed her temple, the prickly dusting of his five o’clock shadow scratching her skin. Clever fingers slipped beneath the knot of her towel and loosened the fluffy terry cloth. One small step back allowed the towel to fall to the ground but the cool air of the room didn’t have a chance to chill her skin. His body covered what the fallen towel bared.

With a strength that wowed her, Sean cupped her thighs and hiked her up. In the next instant her back was pressed to the wall and his cock head nudged the swollen folds of her pussy.

“Oh fuck,” she gasped as he penetrated her slick sex.

His chuckle warmed her shower-dampened skin.

“That’s the idea.”

* * * * *

“Hey, we were about to send the National Guard to look for you two,” Khalil teased, an elegant brow arching as Erin and Sean entered the hotel suite where band and crew had gathered for a pre-concert dinner. The drummer winked at her and Erin felt as if a neon sign blinked *freshly fucked* on her forehead. When they’d returned to their hotel room after the sound check, Sean had stripped her, laid her out on the coffee table and treated her like an all-you-can-eat buffet. As if the quickie they’d shared before leaving the suite had been only an appetizer. Dammit. Was she *blushing*?

“Lucas volunteered to go after you but we didn’t trust him not to snap pictures when he found you,” Khalil added.

“I promised they would only be for my private collection.” The bass guitarist’s faint lilt made the lurid offer sound charming.

“I’ve seen your collection, you kinky bastard.” Khalil snorted and turned toward the table, groaning under the weight of a varied spread of food.

“Glad you could make it,” Christian greeted her and Sean.

Erin met the lead singer's light-brown gaze. He hadn't lost his suspicion and, unlike his band members, remained aloof.

"You're worse than a bunch of damn old women." Sean snorted. He guided her farther in to the room with the warm weight of his palm on her back—a palm that just thirty minutes ago had been cupping her ass and lifting her pussy to his mouth.

God, she had it bad. She couldn't keep her eyes or thoughts off him or the amazing things he'd done to her body. He'd coaxed the same beauty from her body that he drew from his guitar. Simply magic.

Get it together, dammit, Erin chastised her heart and libido. Sure, they'd had good—scratch that, hot as hell—sex. But there still remained a job to do. And Erin couldn't afford to forget that once her assignment was completed, she and Sean would go their separate ways. If she didn't tug her head out of her ass she would be returning home with a broken heart. Not acceptable.

"Erin," Sean drawled.

God, the way he said her name. She lifted her eyes to his. "Are you hungry? I can fix you a plate."

In that moment it dawned on her that she stood in the room with the band and crew. The entire band and crew—including the two women she had been hired to investigate. The opportunity that had eluded her for five days suddenly arrived with a big fat bow adorning it.

She curled her lips in a smile and turned to lay a hand on Sean's chest. "Actually, I'm a little tired." An amused snort sounded behind her. Erin resisted the urge to flip Lucas off. "Would you mind if I went back to our room for a little while before the concert?"

"Not at all, baby," Sean agreed and lowered his head to press a kiss to her cheek. Concern laced his words but his eyes reflected his skepticism. "I'll come to the room when we're ready to leave."

"I'll be ready." With one last smile she cut an unhurried path to the hotel door that belied the anticipatory pounding of her heart. As soon as the door closed behind her and she stood in the deserted hallway, Erin inhaled a deep breath. And released it on a slow hiss.

Focus.

Quickly, Erin strode down the hall. As if flipping a switch, she emptied her mind of everything except the job she'd been brought in for. As the only two female crew members, Gillian Beacham and Tracey Craig shared a room. And didn't that simplify matters? A wry smile twisted her lips as she approached their door. With a swipe of the pass key Braedon had arranged for her, she stepped into the empty hotel room.

A tidy living area with couch, table, television and lamps revealed nothing out of order. Erin cast a cursory search over the room but her attention soon moved to the closed bedroom door. Quick steps carried her across the room. Erin raised her hand to the doorknob and twisted. She swung the door open and paused for a long second on

the threshold. Two queen-size beds with a common nightstand dominated the large room along with a long dresser whose top drawer no doubt contained the requisite Gideon bible.

The difference between the two women was evident in the states of neatness on the separate sides of the room. An unzipped suitcase with clothes spilling from its depths sat next to a rumpled, unmade bed. In direct contrast, covers that would have made Sergeant Foley from *An Officer and a Gentleman* proud were pulled tight across the bed. A medium-sized suitcase stood like a good soldier at attention against the wall.

Thirty minutes and a thorough search later, Erin returned to the common area. Frustrated. Her careful toss of the room had revealed nothing. No perfume. No stationary. Nothing except what the women appeared to be—nomadic employees of a rock concert tour.

Erin huffed out an irritated breath and planted her fists on her hips. This put them back at square one. Not true, she grimaced and headed toward the door. At least at square one they'd had two suspects. Now they had none.

Grasping the doorknob, she paused then slowly pulled the door open—and plowed into a wide, solid chest.

"Damn."

"And I was going to say fancy meeting you here." Christian crossed his arms over his chest.

Double damn.

* * * * *

"So...I'm waiting."

Erin closed the door to her and Sean's suite behind her and faced the lead singer. His eyes bore into hers and the twist of his lips indicated that whatever explanation she offered wouldn't be good enough.

Wasn't he in for a surprise?

"First, I need your word that you will keep what I tell you between the two of us."

Christian snorted. "Not a chance in hell."

"That's what I thought." She smirked. Reaching into the pocket of her jeans, Erin removed her cell phone, flipped it open and speed-dialed a familiar number. The deep voice answered on the second ring. "What do you have for me?"

"Trouble, if you don't speak to a certain rock star."

Braedon sighed. "Fuck. Who?"

"See for yourself." Holding his skeptical gaze with her own, Erin stretched her arm out toward Christian, offering the phone. "Do you know Braedon Roberts?"

He nodded.

"Do you trust him?"

Instead of responding, Christian accepted the cell phone and pressed it to his ear, his gaze never breaking from hers. "Hello...hey, Braedon." A series of emotions crossed the lead singer's face. Shock. Concern. Anger. He didn't say much but listened to Braedon's explanation with several nods and sounds of agreement. Finally, he said goodbye and held the phone back out to her. "Here. He wants to speak with you."

Erin took the phone. "Braedon."

"Hey, E. Christian agreed to keep quiet."

"Thanks. Sorry I had to pull you in." Especially since she was careless enough to have been caught snooping by Christian. Damn, that rankled.

"No problem. Have you found out anything?"

Her frustration returned. "Nada." She sighed. "Look I'll go over it with you later. But bottom line? We may need to start looking elsewhere."

"Dammit," Braedon growled and Erin could imagine him dragging his fingers through his brown curls. "Well, I think I might have something on my end. I'll keep you posted."

"All right. Talk to you soon."

"Take care, E."

She snapped the phone closed. Silence permeated the room as she and Christian stared at each other as if they were gunslingers in a high noon shoot-out. He hooked his thumbs in the front belt loops of his jeans and sized her up. His inspection took in her sheer lilac shirt with the black leather corset laced tight over it and traveled down to the tight leather jeans tucked into knee-high stiletto boots. After a return trip he locked gazes with her again.

"So you're a cop."

The statement was coated in skepticism and a reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "Agent, actually."

"Braedon explained about the stalking." Anger crept into his voice. "Is that why you were in Gillian and Tracey's room? Checking them out?"

"Yes." Erin tilted her head to the side and crossed her arms over her chest. "And before you give me the whole speech about them being family, save it. I received it from Sean."

"I have family I wouldn't trust if God notarized their tongues," he said. "If they had to be investigated and cleared, then so be it. Sean is one of my best friends and I care more about his safety than their hurt feelings. Which makes me ask—why didn't he want us to know how serious this had become?"

Her respect for Christian elevated several notches. "I think he didn't want you to worry. And he's concerned that this person will come after you, Lucas or Khalil to get to him. Which is why he brought Braedon, and ultimately me, in. Regardless—" She cut a hand through the air. "The point is he didn't. Braedon promised me you wouldn't say anything. Are you going to stick to that?"

Christian gave her a terse nod. "I'll honor it." A mean smile twisted his lips. "But as soon as all of this is cleared up I'm kicking his stubborn ass."

Erin dropped her arms and rubbed her hands together in mock glee. "Ooh, can I get a ticket?"

The frown cleared from his brow and he chuckled. Christian studied her for several quiet moments. "I really thought you were a gold-digging groupie."

Erin snorted. "I was beginning to think you had a love-jones for Sean."

Shock slackened his features. "A what?"

"Well, you did seem jealous."

He scrubbed a hand down his face and let out a bark of laughter. "Understand this. I hit for one team. No switching."

"Fine." Erin held up her hands in surrender, grinning. "You set me straight...no pun intended."

Christian's eyes lit up with laughter and for the first time since they met, he smiled at her. Whew. If Sean hadn't ruined her for other men, she would be lusting after the handsome lead singer. Wow...

Wait a minute. *Ruined her for other men...*

Oh shit. She was screwed six ways to Sunday.

"What's wrong, Erin?" Concern replaced humor as Christian stepped forward and gripped her arm.

"Nothing," she stammered. *Nothing except I've fallen for a man who will break me.*

"Okay." Christian released her arm but didn't move away. "So what do we do now?"

"We don't do anything," she stressed. "You go on as you have before and I continue to do my job."

"Right." Christian nodded. His eyes brightened and an unholy smile spread across his face. "Except before I didn't know who you were and now I do."

"Yes," Erin agreed but unease slithered in. She narrowed her eyes on the mischievous grin.

"Just checking."

* * * * *

Sean enjoyed women.

Loved them.

Fucked them.

He damn sure didn't get possessive over them.

Correction. He didn't get possessive over a woman unless she was Erin.

Christian was his best friend, and yet the sight of him and Erin standing close together, giggling like two schoolkids, made him want to punch his friend in the face. The unfamiliar feeling unnerved him. Fuck that. Scared the shit out of him.

This wasn't protectiveness that surged through him—as a teenager he'd shielded Erin, so he knew the difference. No, the urge to rush over to the couple and insinuate himself between them was more base, animalistic. More like she-mine-not-yours. Shit, he was starting to sound like a caveman.

He lifted the bottle of beer to his lips and tried to drown out the voice that insisted he cross the crowded club and claim the woman who belonged to him. Hell, if he did, no one would blink an eye. Their cover as lovers would explain the behavior. But the knowledge that it would have nothing to do with the job and everything to do with him not wanting another man within ten feet of Erin kept his back glued to the wall.

Christian bent his head over Erin's and whispered in her ear.

Fuck it.

Weaving his way through the throng of people, he grimaced as an image of him pounding his animal-skin-covered chest popped into his mind. It still didn't stop him from seeking out his woman and his friend.

His woman. He didn't pause or stumble as the thought ricocheted against the walls of his mind. The idea of claiming any woman as his should have him heading for the hills. But it didn't. Just as the boy had recognized the little girl as his to protect, the man acknowledged and accepted the woman as his to keep. To shield. To...love.

Erin had been the first person to ever love him unconditionally. She'd captured a piece of his heart eighteen years ago and last night, she'd secured the rest.

Erin glanced over Christian's shoulder as Sean approached them. At the same time, his friend turned, propped a shoulder against the wall and grinned at him. Sean barely flicked a glance at Christian before reaching out and encircling Erin's upper arm in a firm grip.

"Let's dance."

Her eyes narrowed but a sensual curve tilted her full lips. She moved into Sean's hold and shifted forward until her breasts pressed to his chest. The leather corset she wore over the see-through purple shirt prevented him from feeling the hard points of her nipples but he envisioned how the taut, thick beads would thrust up to him, demanding his mouth and tongue. His body tightened in response to the picture his cock throbbed behind the zipper of his jeans.

"Of course," she cooed, the sexy brush of her voice like a caress over his skin. Sean bent his head and almost bumped his nose against hers. Inches separated their faces. Her breath traced his lips. His eyes captured hers. The pounding of his heart coincided with the pulsing in his dick, both tormenting him for different reasons. Being close to her, inhaling her scent, having her flesh pressed into his set him on a course similar to a boat sailing into the Bermuda Triangle—straight ahead and never to return again.

Erin stared at him a moment before a small half-smile lifted a corner of her mouth.

"After you," he murmured.

She cut a path to the crowded dance floor with him in her wake. He studied the clench and release of her ass under those fuck-me leather pants. Sweat prickled his palms and trailed down the indentation of her spine. He could have blamed it on the crush of bodies in the hot club but his mind, his heart and his cock knew better.

Once they reached the middle of the dance floor, Erin pivoted and faced him. Another sensual smile shaped her mouth. God, he needed that mouth under his. He craved it like his next breath. He bent his head, the hunger so acute all he could focus on was crushing his lips to hers, feeling their texture, tasting her flavor. As if sensing his intention, she turned her head to the side and his lips brushed her cheek, just missing her mouth.

Frustration surged in him. The need to eradicate the fear that formed that barrier swelled in him so strong he had to force it down. She'd surrendered her body to him last night, but her trust—represented by the kiss she continued to withhold—he longed for it with a yearning that consumed him. He wanted all of her.

And it stung his soul that she refused to give him that sign of faith.

He enfolded her in his arms. His heart sighed...plummeted into a free fall.

He stroked her arm, running his palm over her shoulder to cradle the base of her neck. He massaged the muscles there while his right hand rested on her hip. Giving in to the desire to touch her, Sean nuzzled the base of her throat and grazed the pulsing vein with his lips. A rumble of pleasure vibrated under his mouth. So he did it again. And again.

"Sean."

"When did you and Christian become such good friends?" He lifted his head and squeezed the nape of her neck. "Earlier he was still giving you the evil eye. Now you two are best buddies."

"We came to an understanding." Her nails bit into his back through his shirt, and he recognized the slight sting as the warning she intended. "You want to let up on my neck?"

"Sorry," he apologized and eased his hold. Shit, he had to get it together. "What kind of understanding?"

A wry smile quirked her lips. "He busted me leaving Gillian and Tracey's room so I had to tell him the truth about my identity."

Relief and chagrin clenched his gut. "I'm going to kick his ass," he growled, his friend's shit-eating grin taking on a new meaning.

"Funny. That's the same thing he said about you."

Sean's eyebrow arched. "So that scene with him pushing up on you..."

"For your benefit. Payback, he called it."

Sean pursed his lips. "And you went along with it?"

Erin grinned. "Yeah."

"You do know I wanted to knock him on his ass for breathing the same air as you." Arousal roughened his voice and he didn't care if she detected it. Erin's eyes widened and air whistled through her parted lips on a small gasp. Sean abandoned the hold on her neck and tunneled his fingers through her hair. Her eyelids lowered. *Damn, she was so sexy.* He tugged at the soft, dark locks in his hand and she whimpered. "Open your eyes."

Giving in to his command, Erin met his gaze, causing his balls to tighten at the lust brightening her amber eyes. "I almost punched my best friend in the face for being near you. For looking at you as if he wanted to kiss your pretty breasts, suck those hard nipples. For imagining fucking your tight pussy."

"Sean," she murmured as she clung to him.

"Yeah, Sean," he whispered and lowered his head to place a hot kiss to her cheek. He flicked the tip of his tongue over her skin and the taste stirred the hunger churning in his gut. "Say my name again," he demanded, giving her head a small shake.

"Sean."

Damn, he needed to be buried deep in her body, filling her. Only then was he complete. "Tell me I can have you. Here. Right now."

Erin nodded, twin flags of color pinkening her cheekbones. "Yes. Please."

"Fuck, I love 'please' on your lips." He nipped the underside of her jaw. "I'm going to hear that word again tonight. And again," he vowed.

A small moan escaped her throat and stroked his cock.

"I'll have sweet sound again too," he promised. "Let's go."

Chapter Nine

The door to their hotel suite had barely shut before he had her back pinned to the wall, his palms planted on either side of her head. His gaze dipped to her lips. "Your mouth?" he questioned, raising his eyes back to hers. "Still off-limits?"

She nodded and attacked his shirt. "Anywhere else," she gasped as she fumbled the first couple of buttons. "Kiss me anywhere else." Erin released a whimper as she freed the last button and spread his shirt wide. Long, dark lashes lowered, hiding her chestnut gaze from him. Quick breaths passed through her parted lips, luring his attention to the sensual curves.

God, he wanted to taste her mouth.

He slid his hand up her neck to cup the delicate line of her jaw. His thumb pressed into the skin directly under the plump curve of her bottom lip. The pressure tugged her mouth open a fraction wider, allowing more of her peppermint-scented breath to bathe his lips. He wanted to savor that scent himself on his tongue.

"Sean," she whispered. He heard the warning in his voice, but more than the caution, he detected the fear beneath.

"Shh," he soothed.

In that moment he almost begged her for a kiss. For what it represented. He almost pleaded with her to give him what she'd denied everyone else. Admittance to the inner sanctum of her heart. Last night had reflected her belief that he wouldn't take advantage of her body. But she hadn't given him the same trust with her soul, her spirit. Sean shoved aside the fear that Erin ever would.

Inhaling through his nose, he tilted his head back and away from temptation. Instead he lowered his head and opened his mouth over the elegant column of her neck. He sucked in the clean, unique taste of her and the flavor exploded on his tongue.

The mingled scents of soap and her skin enveloped him, welcomed him. He groaned, trailing his mouth and tongue lower to dip and swirl into the indentation at the bottom of her throat.

As Sean lifted his head, Erin leaned forward and put her mouth on his chest. Her teeth bit into his flesh and she sucked his skin between her lips and teeth, lashing it with her tongue.

"Harder, baby," he growled and captured her head between his hands with a hard grip to her scalp. He crushed her to his chest. "Bite harder." He groaned and fisted her hair as she sunk her teeth deeper into muscle and skin. "Hell yeah. That's it. Mark me, Erin."

The sting of her bite arrowed in a direct path to his cock, his balls. The taste of pain heightened the pleasure until he knew all it would take was one stroke to his dick and he would explode. And he wanted that. Not yet though. He wanted her right there with him. Right now it was the only way available to reach her, to creep past that wall she'd erected and defended fanatically.

Stepping back, he released her and forced her mouth and hands to fall away from him. His gaze locked on the arousal staining her cheeks and parting her lips. Sean grasped the edges of his shirt and shrugged free of it.

As the material slid soundlessly to the floor, he realized Erin hadn't moved. Instead she stared at his bare chest, teeth sinking into her full bottom lip as if the sight of his naked skin turned her on. Damn, that was hot.

"Keep up, baby," he murmured.

Her eyes jerked upward and met his. Following his lead, she reached for the lacings at the bottom of her corset. With a small tug she loosed the leather and pushed it down her hips.

His breath became strangled in his throat. *Fuck me.* Large, dusky nipples jutted against the sheer material of her shirt. Without the leather lingerie to support them, the generous weight of her breasts demanded a lot of the thin material. His hands could do the job. Reaching out, he traced the areola of one breast. The nipple hardened at the contact and his mouth watered for a taste.

"Open it." His hand dropped to his side and clenched into a loose fist as he waited for her to accede. "Open the shirt."

She didn't make him wait. The shirt sagged and opened under her fingers until the gaping cloth framed either side of her bared breasts. He stared for a long moment, shaken by her beauty. Would she ever fail to shake him? Make his cock throb? His heart pound?

God, he hoped not.

"Touch yourself," he whispered. His gut twisted with hunger. "Touch your nipples. Pinch them. I want to see you pleasure yourself."

Desire pebbled her nipples. The hard, thick tips begged for a caress.

"Do it, baby." Anticipation clenched in his chest, grabbed him by the throat when her hands spread over her abdomen, under her breasts. "Now."

The tone, hoarse with desire, seemed to give her the push she needed. Her hands rose and covered her breasts, palming the weight, squeezing them.

"There you go," he praised and reached for the button on his jeans. If he didn't release his dick the damn zipper might become a tattoo. "Just like you did in that hallway. Do you know how sexy it was watching you squeeze your nipples? I wanted it, baby. Show me again." The demand sounded more like a plea...or a prayer.

Erin gripped the tips, her touch almost awkward and self-conscious under his gaze.

"See what you do to me, Erin." Sean lowered the zipper and reached inside his pants, freeing his aching cock. He fisted the rigid length, stroking up from the base to cover the broad head and returning back down. He gritted his teeth against the stab of lust in his balls. "Look at my cock, baby."

Her stare fell to his dick and lust surged up the erect shaft, a bead of clear liquid trickling from the small slit at the top of the cock head. Her tongue peeked out, licking her bottom lip, and more of his seed slickened the head. As if his shameless display unlocked her inhibitions—or made her momentarily forget them—Erin circled the tips, then tugged and rolled the hard nipples. She groaned, her face twisted in a mask of lust.

"Lick your fingers," he instructed, voice a dark growl. "Suck them and wet those lovely nipples."

This time Erin didn't hesitate. She lifted her fingers to her mouth and sucked them between her lips. Her parted lips revealed the swirl and stroke of her tongue and fuck if he didn't crave that on his dick. Now.

He moved toward her as she rubbed damp fingertips over the distended peaks. Releasing his cock, he tipped her face up with a knuckle under her chin while his other hand rested on her waist. His erection bumped the soft flesh of her abdomen.

"Since the first time I saw your breasts, I wanted to drag my cock over those nipples. I didn't last night but I'm fulfilling my fantasy tonight." His hand slid over her jaw and into the heavy fall of hair. Bending his head, he nuzzled the dark mane and rubbed his lips over the curve of her ear. "Right after you suck my cock as pretty as you did your fingers."

Snagging her hand with one hand and stroking his cock with the other, he guided her toward the bedroom. After they entered, he slammed the door shut with the toe of his boot. Maintaining his hold on her hand, he whirled Erin around. With an animalistic rumble, he surged forward. Gripping her hips, he dragged her toward him.

"One taste," he promised but whether the need to suckle her brown flesh was for her or himself he couldn't say.

"Sean." The cry was ripped from her throat as his mouth closed over the hard, naked tip of her breast. Her back bowed, she clawed at his head. He shifted a hand to the base of her spine, supporting her. "Sean. Please."

That was the first "please" of many entreaties he'd vowed to hear that night, he noted with satisfaction as his tongue stabbed at the hard bead. He wasn't gentle. But Erin didn't seem to want gentle. Hot. Hard. Wild. The nails digging into his scalp telegraphed her need. And he gave it to her.

Deep pulls at her breasts elicited more desperate cries from her lips. God, he would bet money that her pussy creamed for him right now.

"You're so perfect," Sean whispered over her damp skin. "God, your nipples." He licked the one in his mouth, dragging his tongue over the tip like a big cat. "So damn good." Switching breasts, his lips closed over the neglected tip and his fingers clamped down on the peak he'd abandoned. "I could come from this alone."

Erin wedged a hand between them and cupped his cock through his jeans. She stroked up, squeezing hard and returning back down in the same pattern. Up. Squeeze. Down. Squeeze.

His hips bucked and his body quaked under her hand. Damn, this would be over before it started if he didn't slow down. Sean lifted his head from her flesh and sympathized with her whimper of objection. Cuffing her wrist, he removed her touch from his erection.

"Take off your clothes, Erin." It was not a request.

In several hurried moments, she had shrugged the shirt off, fumbled with the metal clasp on her leather pants before jerking them open and down her legs. She paused to toe her stiletto heels off then finished pushing the pants and her panties off. She stepped free of the small pool of leather and lace and stood in front of him, naked, arousal apparently eradicating any hint of modesty or embarrassment.

His eyes licked a trail from her face to her breasts, down her stomach and to the dark triangle between her legs. The drenched, dark-pink flesh of her pussy didn't elude his perusal. His cock throbbed at the thought of dipping his tongue and lapping up all that cream.

He lifted his inspection back to hers. "Go to the bed, baby. On your knees."

While she headed toward the bed, Sean walked to a black bag near the nightstand. He reached inside and pulled free what he would need.

Erin watched him as he approached the bed. Knowledge of what he intended for her brightened her eyes as her gaze dropped to the leather ties he grasped in one hand and the large, penis-shaped sex toy he dropped to the surface of the nightstand.

"Hold your hands out, wrists together," he commanded.

Erin slowly lifted her arms and complied with his demand, fist to fist. With quick, practiced motions he bound her hands together. He let a length of the leather fall to the bed and guided her into the position he required. Following his murmured instructions, Erin knelt on the mattress over a pillow he tucked under her hips, her ass raised and elbows bent. Sean tied the leather strap to the metal frame at the head of the mattress.

Her dark hair fell around her face as she tilted it back to meet his gaze. Light from the lamp streamed over her body in a golden glow, giving her the appearance of an ethereal, sensual goddess against pristine white sheets—a goddess bound and aching to be fucked.

Sean stood over Erin, enthralled by the sight of her. The red flush of arousal riding high on her cheekbones. Full lips, parted by heavy breathing. The grind and flex of her hips against the pillow. All the telltale signs revealed her desire but failed to mask the uncertainty in her pretty eyes. Or the nervous dart of her gaze to the leather ties binding her wrists.

What did it cost her to allow him to bind her and remove her control? Even as she offered her hands, did she wonder if he would betray this gift? He'd give up his guitar

before he did that. The only way he could eliminate any lingering worries was to show her.

He trailed a path down the leather and then gave it a slight tug, making sure the knot around the bedframe held. Satisfied the tie would remain secure, he moved closer to the side of the bed. The mattress bumped against his knees.

"Shh," he murmured. He lifted a knee and settled it on the bed next to her elbow. His thigh brushed her shoulder as he angled his hips closer. With a gentle touch to her jaw, he turned her head to the side so the crotch of his jeans was on eye level with her hungry stare. His cock strained against the black denim as if demanding freedom—demanding entry into the hot, moist mouth awaiting it. "Enough. You only have to say enough and I'll stop," Sean assured her, stroking a hand over her thick, dark hair. "Remember this, Erin. I would never hurt you. Never betray what you've given me. Trust me, baby, and I'll give you what you need. Everything you need."

He touched her chin and tilted it up, forcing her eyes to meet his. "Understand?"

He waited until she nodded before removing his hand and going to the zipper of his jeans. The rasp of the metal teeth lowering sounded thunderous in the hush of the bedroom.

Her tongue peeked out, moistening her full lips. Her gaze followed the motion of his hand. He loved how she looked at him, not hiding her hunger. With one last tug to the zipper, his dick sprang from its confines and the broad head grazed her cheek, wringing a small gasp from her parted lips. A heated burst of air caressed the cap of flesh.

"Please," she whimpered.

Number two. The second plea was a featherlike stroke over his cock and sent a surge of lust up his erection to knot low in his stomach. He relished the pleasure. A harsh groan ripped past his lips and he fisted her dark locks to drag her head back.

"Open for me." *Open your heart to me.* The plea whispered through his head but it was her lips that obeyed the demand and he slid his dick between them. He narrowed his eyes against the pleasure of that first penetration. The mind-blowing sensation of being sucked into the hot, wet cavern of her mouth was almost as good as sliding into the fiery depths of a tight pussy. Almost.

Her moan vibrated down his erection and he shivered, gritting his teeth. His grip in her hair tightened, his other hand circled the base of his cock. He stroked the throbbing length and pushed deeper into the welcoming depths of her mouth.

"That's it, baby," he rasped. "Deeper. Take me deeper."

She obeyed, her full lips stretching wide and sucking his cock in another increment. Her tongue worked the underside of his erection as her head bobbed back and forth. Fuck, it was good. But he wanted—needed—more.

Twisting his body, Sean released his cock and pulled free of her hungry mouth to reach for the sex toy he'd laid on the bedside table. She studied it and him with aroused interest.

"You're so damn beautiful," he praised as he stretched his arm out and traced the rubber cock down her spine, circling each firm globe of her ass.

She stiffened, her ass flexing as he dragged the toy down the dark line of her cleft. Her hot, quick breath bathed his inner thigh through the denim jeans.

"Enough?" He reminded her of the safe word, his movements stilling as he waited for her signal.

With one word she could end this. *God*, he almost pleaded, *don't say it. Don't say it...*

The small shake of her head sent a spurt of relief and elation spiking to his throat. Digging the fingers of his free hand in her tangled hair, Sean tugged on the silky strands. The effect of her on his heart and body clawed at his voice so it came out as a raw command. "Suck my cock."

Her lashes fluttered once at the order before lowering and her mouth opened for the glide of his dick past her parted lips. He grunted, couldn't hold it back. "That's it. Good girl."

She was so damn good at the suck and pull on his dick. Her tongue swirled around the cock head, then paid special attention to the sensitive skin underneath the cap. His hips jerked, the movement an involuntary flinch of pleasure, as her pace quickened and her mouth tightened. The suction was incredible and he felt it clear to his balls.

Yet the pleasure didn't compare to the wonder squeezing his heart.

God, seeing the arousal that flushed her face as she lost herself in the blowjob—in giving him ecstasy—mesmerized him.

With one more stroke of the toy between her cheeks, Sean tucked the thick rubber cock underneath the curve of her ass, between her thighs. He slid the dildo forward, parting the lips of her pussy. Her drenched pussy. Sean lifted a corner of his mouth, satisfied at the evidence of her desire glistening on the toy.

"Your pussy is so wet." He tapped the dildo against one taut cheek, leaving a damp spot behind. Her moan, muffled by his dick, accompanied a small shimmy of her ass. He clenched his teeth against the desperate suction of her mouth. With a tight smile, he tapped the other cheek and slid the toy back through her drenched folds. "You like this."

Her reply was another hard draw on the head of his cock. He released a hiss of pleasure and gripped the locks of hair tighter, arching her neck back. Sean pressed closer, his jean-clad thigh grazing her outstretched arm. "Wider," he commanded, gliding into her hot mouth, into heaven. "Take more."

Her lovely eyes were glazed with arousal and her ass thrust back and forth as he worked her pussy lips and clit with the rubber cock.

"I have more to give you," he growled. He narrowed his gaze on the sight of his rigid flesh shuttling in and out of her hot mouth. The cum boiled in his balls and tingled at the base of his spine, signaling he couldn't hold out much longer. "Say yes." His hips

gave a hard flex before he somehow dragged his dick from her mouth. "Say yes, dammit."

"Yes," she wailed, the sound ending on a sharp, high scream as Sean unerringly located the entrance to her sex and plunged the toy deep into her pussy. She threw her head back, the cry of ecstasy resounding in the room long after her mouth hung open on a soundless gasp. Waiting.

Sean answered the invitation. He dragged the toy from her sheath, allowing only the large rubber cock head to linger inside. Without warning, he drove the toy deep, twisting the cock to massage the clutching walls of her pussy.

She screamed, jerking against the leather binding her tight to the bed. Her body bucked against the pleasure, her back bowing as if trying to hurl off the lust riding her. She turned her glazed stare up at him, and he knew in that moment she'd gone to a place that exceeded simple pleasure. She'd gone to a place where only he and the agony of ecstasy existed. Only he could grant her the release she craved, that her body begged for. And he wasn't ready to concede, yet.

"More," Sean bit out, the arousal whipping at his sac and dick, hardening his voice. "You'll give me more." He tightened his grip in her hair and lowered her head back to his cock, sliding it past her open lips and into her mouth, the swollen head hitting the roof of her mouth. The width forced her jaws to widen, stretch. And still he wanted more. She had it to give him.

"Suck it." Her mouth closed around him and drew him deep, deeper than she had before. "That's it, sweetheart. Take me."

He thrust the toy into her weeping channel, mimicking the action with his dick in her mouth. Her scream vibrated down the length of his shaft and hummed in his balls.

"Fuck," Sean snarled. Lust whipped at his balls, causing his seed to rise to the base of his cock. He couldn't hold out much longer. "Come, dammit. Come."

The guttural command unlocked the last bolt of her inhibition and she exploded. She released his cock with a shattered cry as her body shook and writhed under unseen whips of pleasure that lashed her body.

"God. Baby," he bit out. As the shudders of ecstasy calmed, she lowered her head back to his aching, impatient flesh. "Come back to me, Erin. Finish me." The last word was wrenched from him on a harsh groan. Ecstasy seized his balls, surged up his cock as she sucked his flesh. He only needed three hard, quick strokes in her hot mouth and cum jetted from him in long, powerful spurts. His chest heaved, the breath dragged from his lungs. Lust's tight bindings slowly loosed him and he dropped his gaze to the woman who had sucked him to heaven.

He stroked his hand down her head and over the damp strands that clung to her back. Staring down into her heavy-lidded eyes, Sean dragged the rubber cock from her pussy. As the large toy slid over swollen tissue, she shivered and loosed a ragged moan.

Sean tossed the rubber cock on the nightstand before reaching down and loosening the leather ties that bound her. Once freed, she rolled to her back, chest rising and falling in time with the labored puffs of air she exhaled.

"I want that again." She lifted her gaze to him. "Promise me we can do that again."

"Sweetheart, that's a promise I can definitely keep." He plucked the pillow from under her with a low chuckle. Arousal suffused her features, transforming her into the most sensual, carnal creature he'd ever seen. It looked beautiful on her. Because he had placed it there. Because she had allowed him to place it there.

No other man had been able to transport his female warrior to this place of pleasure. No man except him. Erin had been created for him.

Now just to make her believe it...

"I'm not finished with you yet."

A gust of laughter rife with disbelief burst from her. "What?"

"I'm not finished," he repeated and reached for her again. He nudged her chin up, tilting her head back on the pillow. Her back arched and her lovely breasts were offered up like a sacrifice. "I have a fantasy to make reality." Bending his knees, he trailed the head of his cock down the center of her chest. He let it rest there for only a moment before drawing a damp line around the mound of her breast.

Erin whimpered and he glanced up to see her eyes slowly close. Unable to hold back any longer, Sean circled a hard nipple with the head of his cock, damp with the moisture from her mouth. The stab of that beaded tip on the slit of his cock punched the breath from his chest. He switched to the neglected breast, caressing it with his cock, loving the touch of that peak to his flesh. A wet dream come true.

"I can't get enough of you." He rose to his full height and shoved the denim down his thighs. "Bend your knees, Erin, and put your arms around them." Anticipation reverberated through him like the beat of a drum as she exposed her soaked pink pussy. He didn't smother his groan as he toed off his boots and rid himself of his clothes.

Her body called to him like the most sensual melody. He answered, returning to the bed. With a hiss of pleasure, Sean cupped the drenched flesh between her thighs—the flesh he intended to get drunk on.

Erin stiffened and emitted a sharp cry, her back arching high off the bed.

"Easy, baby, easy," he crooned. He massaged her clit and ground the heel of his palm into the wet, clenching opening. Immediately her flesh flooded his hand with her cream.

Sean stared down at the evidence of her desire on his fingers and palm and couldn't resist the enticement. Closing his eyes, he sampled her taste and groaned as the earth-after-a-thunderstorm flavor detonated on his tongue.

He needed more.

Craved more.

Sean lay on the bed and slid between her spread thighs and over the pussy that tempted him like Eve's apple. Unlike Adam, he wouldn't be damned by partaking of it...he would be empowered.

She trembled beneath him, a fine tremor that didn't speak of fear but arousal. Shaping her ass with his palms, Sean exerted the slightest pressure on the flesh and drew her toward his waiting, hungry mouth.

He dove in.

The first swipe through her lips gathered her juices on his tongue. The second drew more from her tight slit. He groaned, drowning in her cream, in the sweetest pussy he'd ever tasted. He licked from the clenching entrance to the hard, protruding clit cresting the top of her sex. He swirled his tongue around the pink nub, sucking it gently. Beneath him, she writhed, grinding against his mouth with erotic, wild rolls of her hips. She grunted with each buck of her pelvis, with each pull of his lips on her clit.

"Harder, Sean," she demanded in a sexy growl that vibrated over his cock. "Suck me harder."

Sliding his hand from one rounded curve of her ass, he slipped it between her thighs and buried two fingers deep in her pussy. The spasming walls imprisoned them in a desperate grip.

"Damn," he moaned as he thrust harder in the tight vise. "I want in this tight pussy, baby. Let me in." He flicked her clit then stabbed at the swollen button with the tip of his tongue. Her cry clenched his gut and the furious rolling of her drenched labia over his mouth had his hips thrusting, his cock driving against the bed. He wanted to squeeze his cock so fucking badly but that would mean releasing her ass or removing his fingers from her pussy. Not going to happen.

Erin arched her back like a sleek, sexy feline. Her entire body reached for the orgasm he dangled just beyond her reach. Her head rocked from side to side and her torso undulated with each thrust of her hips.

"Please," she gasped. Number three. Each plea only whetted his desire to elicit more from her lips. "Sean." Harsh pants signaled how desperately she wanted to come as did the steady flow of cream on his tongue.

"Hell yeah, baby." Her juices coated the fingers he thrust in her pussy, the wet suction sounds hurtling his desire higher even as he pursed his lips over her engorged clit. Between the furious strokes and the urgent sucking of her clit, Erin couldn't hold out. She jerked under his mouth, her scream reverberating in the dark room. Strong pussy muscles clamped down on his fingers, the tight grip almost painful. Her clit pulsed under his tongue while her body stiffened. Muscles strained as the orgasm detonated. He didn't let up until she went limp beneath him, panting.

But he wanted more.

In the space of a moment, Sean crouched over Erin and grabbed her hips.

"Damn, Erin, I want in you," he breathed and patted one moist fold. He chuckled, the sound hungry to his own ears, as she shuddered under his touch. "You want my

cock, don't you, baby? You just came all over my mouth and still you want my cock in your pussy." Sean leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on the curve of her jaw. "So do I, Erin. I'm not alone when I'm inside you."

Lust rode him hard. He wouldn't feel complete unless he was balls-deep in her pussy. But he didn't forget to protect her. Thoughts of being encased in her tight pussy added impatience to his movements as he reached down for his pants and grabbed a foil-wrapped square from the wallet in the front pocket. With a sharp twist of his wrist, he ripped it open and discarded the wrapper. In record time he had the latex rolled down his cock.

Shifting forward, he placed a palm on the inside of either slim thigh and held her open, exposed to his gaze. He couldn't resist sliding his erection between her wet slit. Inhaling a shuddering breath, he watched his cock nestle between the swollen lips one last time before pulling back. Had he believed he possessed control when it came to her?

"Hell," he growled. Control was fucking overrated.

He tucked the broad head between the slick pussy lips and thrust. And groaned. God, it was...heaven...and hell. Her wet heat clamped down on the tip like a greedy mouth. Only better. So much better. He adjusted his hold on her thighs, squeezing the firm flesh before sliding down to grip the muscles that ran along the back of her legs. He hefted her legs up to give himself leverage and rob Erin of hers. Holding her steady, he pulled free of her tight pussy before plunging more of his cock deep between the swollen folds. A cry ripped free from Erin and her back arched hard as she took more of him inside her.

"Again, baby, again." His hoarse voice reflected the effort it took not to shout with pleasure over having his hard flesh encased by such a sweet pussy. With her, sex was how it was meant to be—fulfilling, intimate...cleansing.

Sean glanced down and saw half his cock remained to be coated by her cream. He ground his teeth together and locked his jaw as he withdrew from her body until the cock head bumped her entrance. Tightening his clasp on her, he paused a brief moment. Erin tensed beneath his hands, her harsh breaths filling the silence, as she clawed the sheets beneath them. Then with a hard flex of his hips, he drove forward and buried the entire length of his cock in her pussy. That cry he'd asked for tore through the room, clenching his gut even as the walls of her sex clutched his erection. He felt...surrounded. Protected.

He felt as if he was finally home.

This woman knew him like no other. She'd been a part of his soul for eighteen years.

Her swollen lips stretched around his cock like a tight glove. Her muscles spasmed, adjusting to the abrupt penetration and the demand his width and length placed on the small channel. He could come from the minute contractions alone.

"Please," she gasped, head thrown back, hips working. "Fuck me, Sean. Please."

Numbers four and five.

"Baby," he grunted, dragging his dick from the wet depths of her body only to rock forward again. He shook his head as if he could clear it of the lust clouding his mind. Yeah. As if he could be inside her and not be consumed by pleasure. *Not. Happening.* "You were made for me. This sweet, hot pussy is mine." *You're mine.*

Falling forward, he braced his hand next to her head on the mattress. He gripped her hip with the other.

"Come on, Erin," he ordered, "take this cock. Fuck it."

A dark growl rumbled from her throat and she bucked her hips, riding his dick like a damn jockey. Her pussy gripped, milked and took him, her juices flowing from between her lips with every stroke.

"Dammit." The shaky bonds of control he'd managed to maintain snapped. He blanketed her body with his. The thin lines of perspiration coursing between her breasts mingled with the sweat on his chest as he covered her. He slid his hand from her hip to cradle the base of her throat. His cock speared her pussy, pounding the rippling flesh. Every thrust propelled him closer to the sweet oblivion he could find only in her body and arms.

"Sean," she cried, her body writhing furiously, seeking. God, she was so close. He could feel it in the tightening of her sex, the incredible, sexy, wet suction of her pussy pulling his cock deeper...deeper...

She came apart beneath him. The slim frame shook with the force of her orgasm and her muscles milked his flesh, demanding he follow her into the abyss.

He surrendered. His body jerked over hers and his teeth sank into the tendon running between her shoulder and neck as the welcoming darkness claimed him.

Before the fall into oblivion he acknowledged until this woman, he'd never made love in his entire life.

Chapter Ten

Her eyes snapped open, the trapped scream an acidic burn in her throat. Blood pounded in her ears like a relentless drum, the same cadence of terror beating over and over.

Inhaling, Erin closed her eyes and willed away the remnants of the nightmare. Gingerly, she slid her hand underneath the pillow her head rested on but only found the cool surface of the sheet instead of her gun.

Sean's bed. No gun. No MP3 player.

With cautious movements, Erin moved from under the heavy weight of Sean's arm and thigh. On silent feet she eased from the bed and escaped the room. She crossed the dark common area of the hotel suite and entered the second bedroom. Only once Erin reached the bathroom and clicked on the light did she release the pent-up breath she'd held.

She flattened her palms on the marble surface of the vanity and dropping her head between her shoulders, she allowed the despair to consume her. Not just from the memory of Jack's death but the demise of the hope she'd harbored that she would find peace in Sean's bed. How stupid was she to believe that in his arms the dreams wouldn't find her?

Nothing would cleanse the blood from her hands. Absolution did not exist for her.

And now she faced another failure with Sean. Would he too become a casualty on her watch? Fuck. She couldn't handle that. If Jack had shoved her toward the edge of insanity, losing Sean would heave her over.

Damn Braedon. He should have left her alone. If only she had never answered that phone.

And if "if" was a fifth, she'd be fucking on-her-ass-drunk.

She twisted the faucet and cupped her hands under the cold gush of water. Leaning over the basin, she splashed her face a couple of times and turned the spigot off. By the time she'd patted her face dry, her heart had ceased to race and most of the dream-induced tension had faded. By the time she grasped the doorknob to the bathroom door and crossed the dark bedroom, her resolve had hardened.

Get the job done. Find out who stalked Sean and then get the hell out of Dodge.

So what if she'd gone and done something as stupid as falling in love with him. That was her problem, not his. He had never made promises of forever...not even tomorrow.

She yanked open the bedroom door and, for the second time in as many days, slammed into a hard, bare chest.

The same chest she'd sank her teeth in hours earlier.

Image after image assaulted her. His cock stroking between her lips. In her pussy. The gleam in his silver gaze that she had almost convinced herself resembled tenderness. Affection.

The feelings tangled and twisted with the residue of the nightmare until she couldn't dissect one from the other. It seemed as if the dark and his nearness amplified her confused emotions until she transformed into a seething pot ready to explode.

"Breathe, baby." A hard, calloused palm curved around the nape of her neck. She inhaled, trapping his familiar scent in her lungs. The calm voice and soothing touch dragged her back from the jagged edge of the abyss.

"What are you doing up?" she rasped.

"I felt you get out of the bed and heard you leave. If you'd had to use the bathroom, there's one in my room. So I figured it was something else." Firm but gentle fingers massaged her tense muscles. "Another nightmare?"

She wanted to clasp the tenderness she heard in his voice to her heart and cling to it. Instead she moved out of his hold. His grip tightened for a brief moment before relaxing, and Erin realized he allowed her to step away. How fucked up did it make her that the knowledge aroused and angered her?

"It's nothing."

"Nothing," he repeated and the sensual curve of his bottom lip disappeared as his mouth tightened in irritation or frustration. "And here I mistakenly believed we had pushed past the bullshit level and I had earned your trust."

"This has nothing to do with trust," she replied with a slight tilt of her chin.

"This has everything to do with trust," he argued, reclaiming the space that separated them. She squared her shoulders as if erecting the shield that would keep this conversation from touching her. "You give me your body but still refuse to let me in, to allow me past a certain point. Everything has to be under your control—on your terms."

He edged closer until she had to tip her head back to maintain his gaze. "Fair warning, baby. If I have to, I'll go at that wall like a fucking battering ram until it comes down."

She narrowed her eyes and hoped the show of irritation concealed her fear of his threat. He could do it. He could take everything from her and leave her with nothing but an aching emptiness when he walked away. "We fucked, Sean. End of story. Don't make more of it than what it is."

"No, Erin," he contradicted her with a small shake of his head.

She rallied back quick with a taunting curl of her lip. "Buyer's remorse, Sean? I gave you what you wanted. You've had me tied up and on my knees. Now when it's not what you thought, you complain. Well, tough titty."

"You're damn right it's not what I thought." He reached up and cupped the back of her neck. He lowered his head and for a heart-stopping moment she believed he would crush his mouth to hers. "I've had my share of nameless fucks. You think you can cheat both of us by withholding your mind and heart. Sure, you gave me your body but it's not enough. Without this," he pressed his free palm to her chest, directly over her heart, "it's just a fuck."

Erin twisted her head, the movement desperate, frantic.

Sean tightened his grip and held her still. He demanded all of her but what would he give her in return? A few more nights? She couldn't...even if he hinted at a little more...but thank God he didn't. She would grab onto it with everything she had.

"You're a coward."

Her lips parted and she blinked up at him, shocked.

"Yeah." He nodded, taking advantage of her silence. "You're a coward. You can go undercover, protect people. But when it comes to placing your trust in anything but your gun, you turn tail and run."

He dropped his hand from her neck and released her, allowing her to step back and place distance between them.

"I've known you all of what? A week? And you expect me to —"

"You've known me longer than that...*Elise*."

Shock. Pain. Shame. *Elise*. He'd called her *Elise*.

The sarcasm and anger vanished, leaving every emotion wiped clean like an erased chalkboard.

Nothing. Numb.

"When did you find out?"

"Last night." He raised his arms and for a moment she believed Sean was going to reach out, pull her into his arms and comfort her as he'd done so long ago. Instead he slid his hands in the front pockets of his pants. "Were you going to tell me?"

She pinned him with a look that asked what-the-fuck-do-you-think. It was bad enough he knew the truth. Why would she invite his pity? "Why would I?"

"Because every day for the past fifteen years I've wondered what the hell happened to you?" Rage suffused his features. The skin tautened over his high cheekbones, thinned his full lips. "You were the closest person I had to a family. All I had to care for in a fucked-up existence. When I returned looking for you —"

"You came back?" she whispered, the heart of the child who had yearned for someone to care for her beating a thousand miles a minute.

"Of course," Sean snapped as if offended she'd have to ask. "But they had already moved you out. I never stopped wondering about you. I even tried to look you up but," a wry, humorless smile twisted his lips, "now I know why I never found *Elise Grayson*. Name change."

He studied her, his stare intense. "What happened to the scar?"

Her hand lifted unerringly to the spot on her cheek where the mark had marred her skin. "I had it removed."

And yet a name change and the most skilled surgeon's hand couldn't remove the scars that dug deep into the soul.

"You and I faced what no kids should ever have to. And I protected you then. Do you really think I would betray that same trust? Is that why you refuse to let me past that damn wall you've built?"

"Dammit, Sean." She slashed her hand in the air as if she could terminate the conversation as easily. "Again, this has nothing to do with trust."

"Don't fool yourself," he murmured. "The thought of being vulnerable and exposed terrifies you. It would take the ultimate act of faith to let me in and believe I wouldn't use your vulnerability against you. That I wouldn't abuse the trust you placed in my keeping."

She stared at him, the words giving him what he wanted to hear locked in her throat.

"My mother abandoned me on a playground when I was nine years old," Sean murmured, his intent gaze never wavering from her face. "I cried for her months afterward, even though in truth she'd ditched me years earlier. Every time she didn't come home for several nights in a row because she'd 'fallen in love' with a new boyfriend or spent money on a gift for a man rather than pay rent or buy groceries, she dumped me. And yet, even after she didn't return to the playground and social services placed me in my first foster home, I still waited for her to come for me. I didn't give up hope until a year later."

He widened his stance and crossed his arms over his chest as if bracing himself for the story to come. Part of her longed to tell him this wasn't necessary, not to go on, but the objection, too, stuck in her throat.

"My first home was a disaster. I was willful, defiant. I could tell they didn't care about me and I didn't give a damn about them. I was in denial about my new circumstances and refused to meet them halfway. And by the time I realized my mother wasn't coming back, I became unresponsive and depressed. I stayed there a little over a year before they moved me."

In her mind, she could envision the little boy he described—thin, tall for his age with a mop of black curls and gray, angry eyes. Her heart went out to the child he'd been.

"The second home wasn't so bad. The parents there were pretty nice, especially the father. He took an interest in me. For the first time someone cared about my welfare beyond receiving a check. I'd never had a man in my life—the succession of losers my mother paraded in and out of our apartment didn't count." He paused and the muscle along the hard line of his jaw jumped. Dread congealed in the pit of her stomach.

"Sean—"

"He took me to the park, helped me with my homework, comforted me when the grief over my mother became too great. He was my lifeline in a world that didn't give a shit about me," he continued as if he didn't hear her. "So the first time he touched me I was afraid to tell anyone. Not because I would get in trouble but because I would once again be alone with no one who cared whether I lived or died."

The pain. Oh God, the pain. It exploded in her chest and radiated to every limb of her body. No, she groaned and stumbled back a step until her shoulder hit the doorjamb. Please. *Not that...not him...*

"For three months he molested me and I said nothing. But finally I couldn't take it anymore. Being alone was better than feeling like a piece of meat. Of feeling like less than nothing. So I told a teacher. I don't think the social worker believed me, but they moved me out of the house anyway. I was eleven. Abandoned, abused and alone at eleven. I hated the world, life and myself. I didn't give a damn about anything. Until you."

Erin couldn't not touch him anymore. She reached for him, cradled his cheek in her palm, laid her forehead on his shoulder. After a moment, his arms came around her and she shivered. Her heart felt like someone had cleaved it in two with an axe. She hurt for him, for the little boy who had had his trust and innocence betrayed by someone who should have loved and protected him, not abused him. Understanding what he'd experienced, it seemed a miracle he'd cared for her, had taken her under his wing.

"The night before you arrived at that home I had decided to end it. I hurt so fucking bad. So fucking bad. I had bought a gun off the street with money I'd stolen and had intended to go blow my head off. But then I saw you with your big brown eyes, scared and so small." Sean nuzzled her hair and his breath was a gentle caress on her temple. "You gave me a reason to open my heart again when I didn't believe it possible. I couldn't say fuck the world because that included you. And you were my incentive to not take the easy way out. I needed you so much more than you needed me. You saved me."

He smoothed the back of a knuckle over her cheek and their eyes met. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?" he whispered. "I would never harm you. I would walk away from you before betraying what you've placed in my keeping. You, more than anyone in this world, have nothing to fear from me."

She understood. And her mind accepted it. But her heart—the heart that known only duplicity and pain—struggled to discard the wariness and suspicion that had been instilled in her from childhood. Indecision warred with fear. But, like the coward he'd called her, the fear won out and lodged in her chest like a massive fist. Her decision must've been reflected in her expression because Sean loosed a bitter chuckle, dropped his head back on his shoulders and tunneled all ten fingers through his dark hair.

"Baby," he sighed, raising his head. "I loved you as a child. And even though I didn't recognize you when we met again, I was still drawn to you. Yeah, I wanted you but it's so much more than that. But, I'll keep waking up with a throbbing cock rather than settle for half of you."

The bottom dropped out of her stomach and she wanted to scream, rail at him for demanding from her what she couldn't give him. Whatever *it* was had been ripped from her heart years ago by an abusive father and a mother who hadn't loved her enough to walk away. Her hands fell away from him and she stepped back, placing space between them. "So unless I agree to your demands there won't be sex between us?"

"Erin." Sean shook his head. He held his arms out to her but, like her, let them drop to his sides. "I'll be waiting for you," he murmured. "When you're ready to put aside your fear, place yourself in my care and trust that I won't betray it or you, I'll be waiting."

"Sean—"

"Come to bed," he murmured and turned toward his bedroom. "We're heading out early tomorrow."

Chapter Eleven

When you're ready to put aside your fear, place yourself in my care and trust that I won't betray it or you, I'll be waiting...

The words haunted her like a relentless poltergeist. They'd pursued her through the night as Sean held her. He'd stuck to his word. Both of them. He'd promised to hold her through the night but he'd also vowed not to fuck her until she'd surrendered herself to him completely.

At first, as he'd curled his body around hers, she'd believed he would give her a few hours of forgetfulness, drown her in his special kind of pleasure. But that hope had been quickly snuffed out when his even breaths had tickled the back of her neck. Hope was for suckers.

"Erin."

She whirled around to face Sean. The early morning sun glinted off the dark shine of his hair and caressed the golden skin over his forehead, chiseled cheekbones and sensual lips. Shit, would there come a time when the sight of him wouldn't tear at her womb, her clit...her heart? After last night, being with him in the harsh light of day and pretending to be his devoted lover offered a new kind of torture.

"Yeah?" she replied, and cringed at the longing evident in that one word.

"Coffee."

Her eyes dropped to the two lidded cups he held in his hands. Murmuring a thank you, she accepted one and sipped it. Black. Just the way she liked it. But of course he knew that.

Fuck it. She needed a minute.

"When are we leaving?"

"In about fifteen."

"I'll be back in ten."

Erin walked off before he could question or stop her. She headed toward the second of the tour buses, skirting the edge of the preparation activity. In a matter of days, she'd gone from complete solitude to never having a moment to herself. She needed it. Today more than ever.

Just ten minutes before she had to return to that tour bus and have every touch brand her, burn through skin, muscle and tissue to the aching, hungry core of her. A constant reminder of all that she could have but that Sean had promised to withhold.

That's not true, a small voice contradicted. If you go to him, he'll take you.

Go to him turning over her body, heart and trust.

Her body she could do. Her heart, as much as it pained her to admit, had been his since he'd laid a pallet at the foot of her bed to protect her from the creatures in the dark.

But trust...she'd spent too many years alone, fending for herself, counting only on herself. Deep inside her lived the little girl who'd never known what it was to come first in someone's heart. Even her mother, who Erin had adored, had placed her husband above her daughter and, ultimately, her own safety.

In the secret places of her heart, Erin just wanted to be wanted.

She hungered to be loved.

Sean had it wrong. He believed she didn't trust him. No. She didn't trust herself. Because Erin knew if she surrendered her body, heart and mind to him in the end she would crawl out with nothing.

No identity.

No love.

She would become her mother.

Erin came to an abrupt halt at the border of the hotel parking lot. Her fingers tightened around the cup of coffee. *No*. Sean was nothing like her father. He wouldn't subjugate or raise his hand to a woman. She realized this with every fiber of her being, especially after what he confided last night. But if Sean made her feel loved would she willingly bind herself to him?

Her head snapped up and she stared blindly ahead.

Good God. *Would I?*

She inhaled and trapped the breath in her lungs.

Fight or flight.

This assignment narrowed down to those two choices. Fight the desire for Sean that threatened to transform her into a woman she didn't recognize. Or run, take flight, back to the safety of her old world before Braedon and his phone call.

Return to nightmares with only her gun and music for comfort. Or weather the dreams enclosed within strong, warm arms and surrounded by a hard body that the terrors of the night would have a tough time getting past.

Continue through life alone, isolated, but never suffering the pain and heartbreak from allowing people in and eventually losing them. Or surrender and experience being loved – even if for a little while.

Leave Sean and experience pain now.

Or stay with him and endure it later when she left.

She'd spent so many years cold...

Her feet had carried her across the parking lot even before her head acknowledged the decision her heart had accepted.

A hoarse cry of pain tore through the air and jolted chills down her spine.

She took off at a dead run toward the band's bus.
The cry. The pain.
It had come from Sean.

* * * * *

Sean knelt next to the wreckage that used to be his guitar.

Ignoring the jagged edges that bit into his flesh, Sean gathered the fragments of mahogany and maple wood. Only the neck remained intact, although the slashed strings sprung out in different directions.

It seemed as if pain and grief replaced the blood in his veins, making every part of his body ached in agony. He hadn't uttered a word since the initial shout when he'd entered the bus lounge and spied the destroyed instrument on the floor. And yet he recognized that the almost-animallike sounds of suffering emanated from him.

His head dropped between his shoulders and the air bellowed in and out of his chest, each breath like a shard of glass in his throat.

Oh Jesus. It felt as if someone had died. In a way, *something* had. His connection with the man who had saved him from a life that would have led to incarceration or death. Dale Roberts. Braedon's father. He'd been sitting in a cell after attacking his foster father when the stern-faced police officer with the blue eyes had read the arrest report and peered into his face for a long moment. The next morning Sean had been released to Dale's care, brought to his home and engrafted into his family. From seventeen years old until Dale's death several months after Sean turned twenty-eight, the retired police officer had been his savior, his friend...his father.

Dale had also gifted him with the 1959 Les Paul Standard that lay in pieces around his knees.

It was like losing him all over again.

He reached for another piece of the maple top and his hand froze midair.

So consumed by his grief, he hadn't noticed the black rose half hidden under the lip of the guitar case's storage compartment. For the first time since finding the destroyed instrument, an emotion other than sorrow and pain overwhelmed him. Rage. A consuming rage.

He snagged the flower from the floor and, ignoring the stabbing thorns, crushed it. Persephone. The bitch.

The bitch!

With a flick of his hand, he cast the rose to the floor and raised his bleeding hand and uninjured one to his head. Sean fell back against the couch and raised his knees to his chest. With his elbows planted on his knees, he cradled his head between his palms and rocked back and forth.

God, it hurt. It just fucking *hurt*...

Her no-nonsense scent of fresh soap hit him first before the clumsy, gentle stroke down his hair.

He hauled Erin into his lap. As soon as her weight fell against his chest, his arms locked around her and he buried his face in the welcoming haven of her neck. Her legs draped over his thighs and she twisted so her chest pressed into his. She wound her arms around his head, holding him.

She didn't say a word...just embraced him. Sheltered him.

And in her arms he felt safe to finally let the tears lodged in his chest fall. The sobs racked his body, ripped from the depths of his soul. Erin held him through it all.

And when only the hollowed-out hole in his chest remained, she pressed her lips to his damp forehead and whispered it would be okay.

For the first time since entering the bus and seeing the destruction of his guitar he began to believe it might.

He didn't know how long they sat on the floor with the carnage of his guitar littered around them. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. When the shrill ring of her cell phone cut through the silence it sounded like a mini-detonation. Erin reached under her to the back pocket of her jeans and removed the phone.

She flipped the cover up. "Yeah?"

Her body stiffened in his arms. After a nod the person on the other end of the call couldn't see and a curt goodbye, Erin snapped the phone shut. Her voice when she spoke belied the tender caress to his hair.

"That was Braedon." Her cold tone sent a sliver of ice through his chest. "We've found her. We've identified Persephone."

* * * * *

"So here's what we know..."

Braedon stood over the wood-grain table set in the middle of the bus lounge and planted several papers on its surface. Sean shifted forward, curious for the first glimpse of the person who had stalked his every move for the last year. The first piece of paper appeared to be an itemized receipt. The second he recognized as his cell phone records. The third was a blown-up copy of a New York state driver's license.

Mallory Blanchard. He now had a name and a face.

He studied it, riveted.

Long blonde hair fell over her shoulders and framed a lovely face. Her license stated she stood five feet five inches and weighed one hundred and twenty pounds. Blue eyes. Organ donor. No corrective lenses.

Too bad the Department of Motor Vehicles didn't disclose when someone was certifiable.

"Do you recognize her, Sean?"

His head snapped up and his eyes collided with Braedon's. Blue too. But neon bright, not the faded-sky cerulean of the woman's image staring up at him from the table.

"No." He shook his head. When Braedon peered at him silently, he repeated the motion, more definite. "No, I don't."

"What he's trying not to ask is 'how do you know for sure?'"

His gaze swung to Erin, who stood next to him, but he found no condemnation in her steady stare. He felt as if his sins were being splayed out for the world to view and jeer. Yet he didn't receive a sense of censure from her.

If he'd loved her before, the acceptance made him devoted.

He returned his attention to the photo.

"I can't know for sure," he acceded. "How did you find her?"

"Your phone records, Sean."

Oh sweet Jesus.

His words to Erin from that first day in the studio came back to taunt him.

And for the record? I always call the next morning.

"I slept with her." The grime of shame coated his throat and was reflected in the grit of his tone. A hundred bars of soap couldn't clean him of the dirt that seemed to smear his soul. His fear that he had somehow drawn this woman's psychotic focus had been realized.

A hand slid into the back pocket of his jeans.

The small touch and enormous sign of faith jerked him from the bout of self-flagellation and warmed him.

"I cross-referenced the numbers from your phone records for the past year with the list of names I obtained from the perfume boutique. It was a long shot but we got a hit." Braedon tapped the table beneath the driver's license. "The call on your phone was dated a year ago. Mallory Blanchard visited the boutique a month later. Coincidence that it was the same time Odyssey had a concert there? I don't think so."

He shook his head. "We took this information and investigated her. She is — was — a sales representative for a pharmaceutical company. I say 'was' because three months ago the company fired her. Even with all the traveling the job required, she charged expenses that couldn't be verified for business purposes."

Braedon turned to the briefcase on the couch behind him and popped the lock open. After retrieving several sheets he laid them on the table. Leaning forward, he skimmed down the three columns of numbers and pointed to certain highlighted entries.

"Here is the list of charges the company supplied me with." At Erin's snort, Braedon grinned and shrugged a wide shoulder. "Semantics, dear Erin. Semantics. Anyway, notice the dates of the highlighted charges," he tapped the yellowed lines, "coincide with tour dates, personal appearances and promotional interviews of the band."

Braedon moved the pen to the next paper and pointed to specific dates. "It's how she followed you from city to city. And since the charges were made to her company, her name didn't show up in our initial search. But once we compared the company name to certain dates within the last year, we had her."

"Wow," Erin tsked beside him. "She was paid to stalk."

"In a nutshell," Braedon agreed.

Sean studied the sheets of paper splayed across the table. He supposed he should feel relief and gratitude that Mallory Blanchard had been identified and this year-long nightmare appeared to be coming to an end. But it wasn't gratefulness that swarmed over him, in him. He felt violated. Cornered. Hunted.

He felt like prey.

And unfortunately, as his destroyed guitar evidenced, the predator remained at large.

"She's here." He glanced up from the table to find Braedon's and Erin's eyes on him.

Braedon dipped his chin. "Yes, I believe so. And from what happened here this morning, she's close and pissed."

"Fuck," Sean breathed, his eyes closing. He clenched his hands into fists and even then he could feel the splinters of wood that used to be his guitar digging into his palms. The destruction on this bus had been a sign of her uncontrollable rage. And fury that hot would spill over. To his friends. Crew members. Erin. Deep in his gut, an anger to match his stalker's boiled and seethed, flaring up to his chest. She couldn't harm them. He wouldn't allow it.

"What now?" he questioned, opening his eyes, resolve shoring up the rage that raged within him.

It was Erin who answered. She removed her hand from his pocket and crossed her arms over her chest. Pinning him with a look so full of deadly purpose it chilled the rage in his blood, she arched a brow high.

"We catch the bitch."

* * * * *

The departure schedule had been shot to hell. The buses remained at a standstill in the hotel parking lot as the three of them went back and forth, argued and treated each other to stubborn silences. Thirty minutes later, a plan had finally been hashed out to capture Mallory Blanchard.

"So, are we *finally*," Erin cast a pointed glance in Sean's direction, "in agreement?"

"I still don't like it."

"I know," she gritted out. "But are we in agreement?"

Sean blew out a rough breath and dragged a palm over his face. "Yes, dammit, we're in agreement."

Erin waffled between wanting to dropkick Sean and needing to kiss him. His stubborn protectiveness irritated the hell out of her...and made her want to grin like a lovesick fool. She glared at him instead.

"It's a good plan, Sean," Braedon assured his friend. He perched on the edge of the couch, his elbows resting on the table. "She's followed a pattern the last few weeks. Your car was vandalized after you'd spent the night with a woman. She sent that letter after Erin joined the tour."

"And last night, if she was at the club, she would have seen us together as close as ever, even after her warning," Erin added, referring to the letter Mallory had left at the Philadelphia hotel. Sighing, she crossed the small distance to Sean and laid a palm on the solid warmth of his back. "It will draw her out, Sean. You'll make the announcement about the 'special woman in your life' during your pre-concert interview. If she remains true to form, she will react."

His jaw tightened and a tiny muscle jumped along the rock-hard line. "I don't like using you as bait."

"She'll never have a chance to come near either of you," Braedon promised as he rose from his seat. "We'll set you up in a different hotel than the band and arrange a decoy room, as well as surveillance on the floor and the front desk."

And didn't that just rankle? Erin itched to be in on busting Mallory Blanchard. Just five minutes with the bitch to make her pay for the terror campaign she'd waged for a year. But thanks to Mr. If-You-Go-I-Go, she had to depend on Braedon to bring her down.

As if sensing her eyes on him, Sean met her intent inspection with one of his own. He didn't speak, but when he trailed the back of his fingers over her cheek, she leaned into the caress, addicted to the smallest touch.

"I know what you're thinking," he murmured. At her raised eyebrow he continued. "This is your job and you're damn good at it."

Erin widened her eyes and gasped. "You should have a 900 number and charge \$2.99 per minute."

He chuckled and brushed a gentle touch down her throat. "I have always believed you are a strong, capable woman. It's only one of the many things I admire. But I can't have you hurt. Not for me." His hand dropped away and she resented the loss. "Not because I couldn't keep my dick in my pants."

The disgust in the bitter statement stabbed her in the heart. Anger at this faceless woman welled up and spilled over. "Don't do that."

"It's nothing I haven't thought before," Sean admitted with a derisive twist of his lips. "Or you. Woman scorned, remember?"

"Fuck that." She sneered. "I was stupid."

His smile, though small, was real this time and it flipped her heart over. "No one could ever accuse you of being stupid, Erin." He cocked his head. "Stubborn. Caustic. Sarcastic —"

"Able to drop a man to his knees with a well-placed fist."

"But not stupid."

Behind them, Braedon cleared his throat. Damn. She'd forgotten about him. Erin pivoted slowly on her booted heel and glared at him. *One. Freakin'. Word.*

As if heeding her warning, he held up his hands, palms out, and grinned. "I was just wondering if we were good."

"Yes, we're fine. All systems go." Giving him one last say-anything-and-lose-a-nut scowl, she pushed past him. "I'm going to the hotel for coffee before we head out."

"There's coffee here, Erin," Braedon called out helpfully.

"Shaddup."

She descended the tour bus steps, his chuckle following behind her. The odds of her hearing the end of his teasing were nil to none. Inhaling, she held the breath for several long seconds before releasing it. The parking lot teemed with crew members rushing back and forth, preparing for their departure for the next city. Onlookers lurked along the outer perimeter, watching the activity.

Anticipation and adrenaline rushed through her veins at the thought of what the next locale would bring. She hadn't experienced this kind of charge since she'd been with the agency. If she didn't count last night in Sean's arms. Or the night before that.

Hell, or every minute she spent by his side.

Damn, she had it bad.

"Hey, Erin."

She glanced up at the sound of her name. Spying Christian waiting at the front of the tour bus, she moved down the last step and headed in his direction.

"Hey." She scanned the immediate area around them to ensure they couldn't be overheard then nodded to the lead singer to continue.

"Is everything okay?" Concern etched his face, hardened the full, sensual lips. "We saw Sean's guitar." He cast a narrowed look over her shoulder and Erin granted him a quiet moment to gather his composure. When he shifted his gaze back to her, he had regained control but fury and hurt darkened his brown eyes. "We all know how much that guitar means to him. Is he..."

Beat up. Bruised. Grieving.

"He'll be okay."

"Shit, I hate this." He scowled and slammed his fist into his open palm, the gesture frustrated. "It's been a year. You'd think this woman would get a damn clue." He emitted a humorless chuckle. "But then she's crazier than a shithouse rat. There's no reasoning with crazy."

"Pretty much," Erin agreed, her stomach taking a dive as if she'd just hurtled down a roller-coaster loop. There wouldn't be any reasoning with the person who could wield such senseless destruction as she'd witnessed on that bus. Mallory Blanchard had intended to hurt Sean. She'd succeeded with fucking honors.

Christian nodded. "How much longer, Erin? Since Braedon's here, does that mean he has good news?"

"Yeah." Erin lifted a hand, hesitated then rested it on his forearm. The tense muscle jumped under her touch. "Hopefully this will soon be over."

Again he nodded.

"Christian."

"Yeah?"

Erin swallowed in an attempt to hydrate her mouth and throat. An idea had been churning in her head. And while a warm glow combined of excitement and trepidation coalesced in her gut, the resident fear of rejection did too. Oh hell, what the fuck? "Do you know where the nearest music store is?"

She noticed the moment understanding hit him. Surprise and delight suffused his features. A slow grin stretched his lips.

"You know what, Erin? I think our next stop has just the place you're looking for."

Chapter Twelve

"What's going on? Can I get a hint?" Sean asked, Erin's mysterious behavior pricking his curiosity.

She'd been acting secretive and tight-lipped since the concert had ended. Now, as they entered their hotel room for the night, her enigmatic behavior had increased.

"Umm..." She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes as if considering his question. "That would be no."

Sean chuckled at her abrupt, dry response. "Not much of a negotiator, are you?" Considering how the day had started, he was amazed he could laugh. Yet staring at the back of Erin's head as she led him through the hotel suite's sitting room toward the bedroom, maybe he shouldn't be so surprised. This woman had an effect on him that defied reason. No one touched him like Erin. No one had his heart like Erin.

"Negotiating implies that you have a choice." She squeezed his fingers. "Now shut up. This is my first time doing the whole surprise thing and you're not making it any easier."

"A surprise?" Sean gasped, grinning. "Now I'm really curious. By chance does it include leather, latex and paddles?"

"Perv."

He laughed again as they entered the bedroom. Erin released his hand and turned to face him. Sean glanced around the room but besides the usual hotel bed, armoire, desk, chairs and night tables he didn't detect anything explaining her mysterious behavior.

"Don't tell me," he teased, spreading his arms wide. "The chintz bedcover is a different shade of red."

Her eyes narrowed on him. "At this moment I'm really wondering why the hell I went to the trouble of doing this."

Another slow scan of the room didn't reveal anything new. He returned his gaze to her and shrugged. "I give up. What are you doing? Besides making my cock hard?"

Her lips firmed, displaying her expiring patience, but the red-tinged cheekbones betrayed her pleasure at his words. Damn. Didn't she know all she had to do was exhale and his dick pounded? Or inhale?

Hell. Just exist.

"Did you know I can see your nipples in that shirt?"

The thin, white material and black bra underneath did nothing to hide the thick, distended tips. *Thank God.* "My mouth has been watering all night to suck and lick them. I can almost feel those juicy nipples on my tongue."

She stared at him, copper eyes wide. Hunger lit the bright depths and it called to him. He answered. As he crossed the room, the distance between him and Erin disappeared. He pressed his chest to hers and the hard peaks of her breasts stabbed into his skin as if the barrier of their clothes had disappeared.

"Erin," he groaned, lifting a hand to the dark hair that fell over her shoulder in a thick curtain.

"Wait, wait." She brought her hands up in between their bodies and planted her palms on his chest. Erin shook her head and, after blowing out a hard, rough breath, took a step back. "You are a damn big distraction."

He grinned in spite of his throbbing cock. "That's a compliment."

"You would think so," she grimaced. Rubbing a hand over her hair, she exhaled again and frowned up at him. "I feel like Apollonia in *Purple Rain*. But I swear if you try to backhand me like Prince did, I'll break your arm."

Purple Rain? The eighties movie? What the hell was she talking about?

Before he could ask if she was running a fever, Erin rounded the side of the bed and went to the closet. With a jerk on the mirrored door, she slid the panel back and reached inside. Moments later she lugged a large package from its depths. She didn't stumble under the weight but carried it easily. Her casual strength was so sexy. He remembered Erin when she had been frail and delicate. Comparing that image to the woman before him now only increased her sexiness to immeasurable proportions. She'd battled circumstances that would have broken a lesser person. Yet it had only honed her will.

As she neared him his regard shifted from her to the package.

Wait... he narrowed his gaze. *That wasn't a box. It was a...*

He jerked his eyes to her face, knowing the disbelief and shock that squeezed his chest was reflected in his expression.

"A guitar?" he rasped, his heart hammering so hard he thought it would explode. "You got me a guitar?"

Erin shrugged, her discomfort clear. She laid the black guitar case on the bed and stepped back. She rubbed her palms over her thighs and crossed her arms under her breasts.

Then dropped them to her sides.

Then took another step back.

The obvious signs of awkwardness wrenched a heart he'd thought broken this morning.

"Well." She stretched her arms out toward the bed and guitar case when he continued to stare at her, not moving. "Are you going to open it?"

"Yeah." He nodded and glanced down and away from the woman tearing a hole in his soul. Clearing his throat, he scrubbed his hands down his face. "Yeah," he repeated, moving one foot in front of the other toward the bed.

His hands trembled as he reached out for the latches on the case. Fuck, the wall of his chest was going to be bruised and battered from the pounding his heart inflicted. A dull, loud roar echoed in his head, deafening him. He opened the metal latches and lifted the top of the case, and time seemed to slow to half-speed. The roar in his head erupted in a clashing crescendo.

The cherry sunburst top of the Gibson Les Paul gleamed up at him. His fingers tingled to touch the solid-body electric guitar, to feel the weight of it in his hands. Sean swallowed past the constriction in his throat. His fingers weren't the only thing tingling. For the second time in a damn day he was going to cry. There had to be a rule in the Man Law against weeping two times in twenty-four hours.

"I know it's not your guitar. Christian said there were only about two thousand of those made and we couldn't find one. But he said this '58 was a great guitar. He promised me you would like it..."

He tore his gaze away from the instrument to glance at Erin. She frowned, as if picturing his friend's painful demise if Sean didn't like it. A small spurt of amusement bubbled in his chest. "It's beautiful," he assured her.

Her glower cleared to be replaced by another of those discomfited expressions, this time tinged with hope. "Yeah?" she asked.

He nodded, swallowing past the stranglehold love had on his throat. Love for this woman who had claimed she didn't know love but had just expressed it in the most magnificent and touching way possible. If he'd pointed it out to her Erin would no doubt deny it but she'd just told him without words that she loved him.

Hell, there definitely had to be a law against crying like a big, damn baby.

"What are you waiting for?" Erin shooed her hands toward the guitar.

Giving in to his desire, Sean blinked hard, bent forward, and lovingly caressed the neck and body of the guitar before lifting it from the red-and-black-swirled lining. Joy welled up from a place deeper than his heart. His soul. His spirit. That place created specifically for her.

As he held the guitar to his chest he stared across the room at her. He strummed the strings and the melodious tone they produced vibrated over his skin. Beautiful.

Just like the woman.

"Thank you, Erin." The three words were inadequate to describe the love squeezing the hell out of his heart but she wasn't ready for the three words he really wanted to utter. He closed his eyes for a brief moment before reopening them. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Her soft reply was accompanied by a softer smile.

"When did you have time to do this?" Sean couldn't keep his hands off the smooth, vibrant surface of the guitar. He stroked the instrument, already cherishing it. "You were with me all day."

A smug smile turned up her lips. "I have my ways."

Sean arched an eyebrow, her reply igniting a flame that was never extinguished but continually simmered under his skin. He approached the bed and carefully, lovingly replaced the instrument. After closing the case and snapping the latches with as much care, he hoisted it by the handle and placed it flat on the large desk several feet away.

Pivoting around, he fixed his gaze on her, the deceptive slimness of her body. The slender lines hid a strength and will forged in the fires of a traumatic childhood. Like a phoenix, the beautiful, indomitable woman before him had risen from the ashes.

How could he not love her?

"Come here." Arousal and emotion roughened his voice and he didn't try to conceal her effect on him. He wanted her to see it, to be aware of the hold she had on him. She had willingly submitted her body to him, giving him control, when the truth was she possessed all the power.

Erin tilted her head to the side and considered him in silence. "Is this my reward?"

"Oh yeah." He nodded. "And no backhand." The *Purple Rain* reference elicited a smile.

"That's good." She crossed the room on silent feet. "I think I'd miss the arm I would have to snap."

He laughed softly, sliding his hand over her shoulder and under the heavy cape of hair to cup the vulnerable nape of her neck. He massaged the skin and tendon and the shudder that passed through her reverberated in him as well. He raised his hand to join the other and both tunneled upward, through her dark hair, and massaged her scalp. Erin groaned and her lips parted on a soft sigh. Sean continued to knead and stroke and the sigh soon escalated to a pant.

He bowed his head and allowed the soft, peppermint-scented breath to bathe his lips. His mouth hovered centimeters from hers and God, he wanted her kiss, her tongue, her taste. She stiffened. Her eyes remained locked with his, and she didn't step away from him, but the tension that invaded her body telegraphed her wariness.

But more than her kiss, he wanted her trust. And he refused to betray her by taking what she didn't willingly — freely — give him.

Except now, with the gifting of the guitar, he realized he had her heart. He hoped that one day she would give him what he longed for most. Love *with* trust.

He tilted her head back at an angle, exposing the underside of her jaw to him. He brushed his lips over the skin beneath her ear then traced the small shell. A shiver shuddered through her body and his stomach clenched, his cock hardening at her responsiveness. Needing to feel her reaction again, he nuzzled the spot between her shoulder and neck. And was rewarded with another tremor.

Releasing her head, Sean stroked his palms over her shoulders and down her arms. He drew her hands back and behind her and wrapped his fingers around both wrists. With his free hand, he stroked a light caress over her collarbone and then slid inside the collar of her shirt, trailing small circles down to the first button. In no hurry, he released each small disc, revealing a sliver of skin and black lace. Nudging her shirt apart, he splayed his fingers wide on her abdomen and stilled. He inhaled, taking the scent of her in his lungs. Erin tilted her head back and granted him more access to the skin he desired. God, did he desire it. Craved it to the point of obsession. On some level, he could relate to the stalker's fixation. Every look, breath and movement captivated him.

His mouth opened over the cord of her neck and he sucked the skin between his teeth, dragging a moan from her throat. He tongued the flesh, branding her. Sean drew on her skin but, *Jesus*, it wasn't enough. He needed to do the same at her breasts, her nipples.

Lifting his head, Sean leaned back to slide his hand up her stomach, coming to a halt just below her breasts. "I want your nipples in my mouth. Can you feel me curling my tongue around them, pulling, sucking? Biting?"

Her body gave an almost-imperceptible jerk but enough movement that he tightened his hold on her wrists, his knuckles resting on the rise of her ass. He smiled and the gesture felt tight on his face. "You like the idea of that, don't you?"

She lifted her eyes to meet his and he immediately felt like a match struck by the flame in her hot gaze. Without breaking her stare, he released her wrists, skirted his fingers under her shirt, soothed over the skin of her shoulders and pushed the material down her arms. She trembled as the cool air kissed her almost-naked torso but he wanted to believe it wasn't the air-conditioned chill that sent a shudder down her spine. He liked to think it was his touch, her need for him. Flicking a gaze from her face to her lace-covered breasts, Sean drew a line from the base of her throat, down the valley of her breasts and to the waistband of her short skirt.

"You're so beautiful, baby. All I can think about is getting naughty with you, a little dirty." With a short tug, the front clasp of her bra opened and he slid his hands over her shoulders, sliding the straps down her arms and off. "Shit," he breathed the word, as he lifted his hands to the generous curves. With a groan that vibrated in his chest, he bent his head over her and rubbed his cheek over a tight nub. She whimpered. "So thick. So hard for me. God, they're lovely," Sean whispered but instead of putting his mouth to the flesh that beckoned him, he snapped his eyes up to hers. "You do it." His hands flexed on her breasts. "Offer them to me."

Straightening, he waited while her hands stroked up her abdomen and cupped the flesh he turned over to her. "Oh God, that's sexy, baby. Perfect."

His cock throbbed at the sight of her supporting her breasts. And as she squeezed a nipple, he had to cup his erection or else drag it out and demand to fuck the beautiful mounds.

"Give them to me, Erin."

Obedient, she shimmied closer and offered the gifts up to him like a sacrifice. He lowered his head and closed his mouth over a taut nipple and sucked it deep.

"Oh God," she gasped. His tongue curled around the tip and tugged. With a low cry, she released her flesh and speared her fingers into his hair.

"Put your hands back, Erin," he ordered and delivered a lick to a rock-hard bud. "Do it for me."

Her breath exploded from her lips in harsh pants but she did as he demanded. In reward, he sucked hard on a tip and lashed it with his tongue. He raised his head and stared into her eyes. "Touch them, baby. Roll your nipples."

"Sean." Her voice hitched as she complied and gripped the points, squeezing them. When she pinched her flesh he engulfed her fingers and nipples in his mouth. He bathed both with his tongue. Erin cried out.

"Please don't stop," she pleaded. "Please don't."

Sean moved to her other breast and loved it as he'd done its twin. By the time he lifted his head, Erin writhed as if tortured. Hoarse cries broke free past her lips. His lips and tongue razed a damp path up her chest, neck and back to her ear. His teeth nipped at the sensitive lobe and Erin jerked under the tiny bite of pleasure and pain.

"Tell me, Erin. What do you want?" His hands slid down her abdomen to the waist of her pants, then smoothed back up, over her breasts and shoulders until he cradled her head between his big palms. He stared into her eyes, trapping her. "It's just you and me in this room, baby. Tell me."

"I want your cock in my mouth. I want to suck you and have you come in my mouth again."

It was his turn to shiver as he remember how she looked taking his flesh. Even now he could feel the flutter of his tongue under his cock head. He groaned and pressed his forehead to hers.

"Damn, I want that too." He placed an open-mouthed kiss on her neck, shoulder. "What else? Do you need my mouth on that sweet pussy?"

She whimpered, sinking her teeth into her lip.

"Yes, I need that."

He nuzzled her cheek. "I can't wait to get my tongue on you...in you. All that cream for me." He hummed and swore he could already taste the sweet, sexy flavor of her essence.

"Sean." The broken whisper was a sound of surrender. He recognized the yielding. With one last kiss to her jaw he skimmed the loosened bra straps over her shoulders and down her arms until they cleared her wrists and drifted to the floor. She stood naked and bared to his gaze and he couldn't help remembering when it had been a battle for Erin to remove her shirt for him. How far they had come in such a short time.

He held his palm out to her. With no hesitation, Erin placed her hand in his. Satisfaction and joy filled him at the small sign of trust as he led her to the floral-print armchair flanking the king-sized bed and lowered her onto the seat.

Grimacing, Sean lowered his zipper, reached inside his jeans and freed his cock. Already the swollen head leaked pre-cum and his balls were drawn tight to the base of his dick. If he didn't have her mouth soon he would embarrass himself for the first time since his teenage years.

He shifted closer between her spread thighs. And closer still until the head of his cock nudged her lips. "Open for me, baby."

He stripped off his shirt then lowered a hand to the base of his cock, holding his shaft steady as he pressed forward. Erin's lips parted and her breath, moist and cool, bathed his flesh before the wet stroke of her tongue. "Oh fuck," he groaned as the broad head and thick erection breached her mouth.

Heat. Wet. Pleasure. Insanity.

All contained between her pretty lips.

Sean couldn't tear his gaze away. The heavily veined cock pierced her lips, stretching them wide around the width. *Oh Jesus*. He gritted his teeth, fighting back the animallike growl of wild lust. "Suck it, Erin."

He returned his hand back to her head and held her steady while he gave a slow flex of his hips and sank just a little deeper into the hot depths of her mouth. Her tongue stroked the underside of his cock, a hungry moan escaping the throat he ached to plunge down. Damn, the seductive sound fisted his dick as surely as her mouth did. "That's it, baby. Suck my cock. Take it deep." The urge to close his eyes and just *feel* almost overwhelmed him. But when he thought about missing a moment of her loving his cock...yeah, he kept his gaze on her.

"Tomorrow, every time I look at your mouth, swollen and pretty, I'm going to picture how you look right now."

His jaw locked tight, he pulled free of her mouth, dragging his cock over the full swell of her lips.

"No," she protested on a low moan that squeezed his balls. He wrapped his hand around the base of his cock—it was either that or come all over her throat.

"I'm not finished," he murmured and sank back inside. "Damn, I can't hold out much longer, baby. Open up for me again." Lust whipped at his balls and blazed up his cock. The sizzling at the base of his spine signaled an imminent explosion but fuck if he would come over her chest. He wanted to come deep in her mouth, down her throat. He wanted Erin to suck him dry.

"That's it, baby. Let me in." Half demand, half plea, he pushed forward, penetrating her mouth once again. He groaned. Her cheeks hollowed out as she suckled his flesh. His hips bucked, taking her mouth with short, hard strokes. Part of him realized he might be too rough but his cock had a mind of its own and he was so close...

"Dammit!" His hoarse shout burst from him seconds after his cum surged up his cock and erupted in her mouth. The jetting stream must have startled Erin because she paused but almost immediately she swallowed, taking more. His soul may have been torn from him along with his seed. She'd held nothing back while loving him—she'd been so unselfish in giving him pleasure. It humbled him. Damn, she made him weak.

As his heartbeat returned to normal and his breathing slowed, he stroked her hair and marveled at this woman's spirit.

"Are you okay?" Was that his voice? It sounded as if he'd just swallowed a truckload of gravel.

"Very okay," she said, smoothing her fingers over the flesh at his hips and slipping lower to the dense hair at the flared base of his cock. She caressed the stretched flesh and sent an unbelievable bolt of lust to his spent flesh.

"Stand up for me," he murmured. When she complied, he squatted down, knelt at her feet and tugged down the zipper on the inside of her knee-length boot. He bent her leg at the knee, lifting her foot from the floor, and pulled the boot free. He repeated the action on her other foot. After removing the shoes, he quickly stripped her of the black miniskirt and lace panties underneath.

"Come sit back down, Erin." As soon as she was seated on the chair he shifted forward between her spread thighs. Her legs widened, making room for his body. The hard muscles of his chest pressed into the softness of her hers. Several more moments passed before he pressed a soft kiss to her collarbone and drew back. His hands lowered to her lap and curled around her fingers, lifting them to the arms of the chair.

He lifted his gaze to hers and met the heat that sizzled his skin, gripped his heart.

"Do you trust me?"

Chapter Thirteen

Do you trust me?

For a long, quiet moment they remained still and their chests rose and fell in sync. Sean's breath caressed Erin's skin. His leather belt indented the soft flesh of her inner thighs. Erin took in every sensation. She savored each one individually and together.

His gray gaze pinned her to the chair. He studied her face as if trying to detect the smallest uncertainty or doubt. Erin sensed that if he did detect any hesitation on her part he would walk away. Sean demanded her trust, her complete faith in him.

And it was the one thing she owned that she could freely give.

"Yes." Erin nodded.

He closed his eyes but not before she spied the flash of relief and delight. When he met her gaze again, satisfaction was stamped on his sensual features. Satisfaction and a hard eroticism that stole her breath.

"Don't move your hands." He applied brief pressure to her fingers, emphasizing the command. She squirmed on the seat, her pussy flaming at the sexual intent she read on his face. The plans she read in his expression were dark, dominant and sexy as hell.

His scrutiny dropped to her chest and her nipples hardened under the heavy inspection as if he'd caressed the taut tips.

"I want to carry this picture of you around with me," he murmured, almost as if he were talking to himself. Shifting backward, he lowered his arms, his touch a brand on her thighs. "You, sitting wide open for me, your pretty nipples hard and thick and your pussy creaming. You're so wet, baby," he growled. "And I'm so thirsty."

Without warning, he dove between her legs. A shattered cry ripped from her chest as his tongue swiped through the swollen lips of her pussy as if she were an erotic treat. Her back arched off the back of the chair. Her hips scooted back as if trying to evade his tongue and the pleasure that seemed almost too much to bear.

But with a grunt, he gripped her hips and dragged her to the edge of the seat. A sound somewhere between a groan and a scream escaped her lips as his tongue lapped at her saturated folds. She gripped the arms as if they would lend her some purchase in the erotic tsunami he'd just cast her into. Erin stared down the length of her body, past her heaving breasts and sweat-dewed stomach to the dark triangle between her thighs.

Sean's expression of such pure pleasure almost made her come. He devoured her and he looked as if he hungered for so much more. His tongue was killing her, pushing her further and further toward the edge. He hummed against her flesh. His lips closed over her needy clit and sucked.

"Sean!" she screamed, writhing under his mouth. Her hands abandoned the chair and dug into his hair. He immediately lifted his mouth from her pussy. Her juice dampened his lips and they glistened in the dim lamplight.

"Put your hands back, Erin." His hoarse demand should have infuriated her but instead she did as he ordered and slapped her palms back to the arms. "Good girl," he praised and as a reward circled her pounding clit with the pointed tip of his tongue.

"Please, Sean," Erin begged, not giving a damn how desperate she sounded. "Suck me. Suck my clit. Hard."

His gray eyes glittered with lust before he lowered his head and blew a soft breath over the hard, tortured nub.

"Don't tease me," she whimpered, her hips rolling, seeking. "Please fuck me, Sean. Finish me."

"Are you going to say that when my cock is in your pussy?"

The muscles in her sex spasmed and her stomach dipped. "Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to hold you to it," he assured her.

Then he stole her sanity by plunging three fingers into her pussy.

A harsh cry seared her throat. The tendons in her neck ached with strain as her head slammed against the back of the chair and her body bowed under the pleasure and pain of being stretched and breached.

Hard fingers bit into the skin of her hip, holding her steady for the finger fucking. It was as if she'd plummeted into madness. Pleasure seemed to steal her sanity, morphed her into a creature focused solely on the ecstasy he could give. Damn, she needed—craved—more. If she had breath she would have demanded he not stop until she couldn't take another inch and he didn't have any more to give.

"Damn, that's beautiful." He pumped her sex and her hips bucked. A growl of approval rumbled in his chest. "Fucking beautiful."

Erin stared down her body and watched, riveted, as his fingers disappeared between the swollen lips of her pussy. His palm followed the rise and fall of her body, riding the swell, pressing against her folds. God, she ached to touch him—his head, shoulders, anything. But obedience and pleasure kept her wrists cuffed to the arms of the chair.

He pulled free and liquid arousal gleamed on his fingers. They stared down at the evidence of her pleasure. It meant so much more than lust. On his hand glistened trust, surrender, vulnerability.

Love.

She loved Sean Ledger.

The stark realization of it trapped and freed her. Held her trapped to this chair, submitting to Sean's touch and demands. Freed her to sit in this chair, clutching its arms, trusting he wouldn't hurt or take advantage of her. A paradox. Love chained and it liberated.

And as she watched Sean lift his fingers to his mouth and taste her, she understood that love transformed lust into a combination of the two that transcended description.

"Please." Sean's eyes narrowed at her husky invitation and he sucked more of her cream from his hand. His gaze remained locked with hers until he lowered his head to her pussy. The barely there brush of his breath on her wet curls was her only warning before he sucked her clit between his lips. While she writhed above him, a slave to the sensations racking her body, he circled her clit, stabbed at it with the pointed tip of his tongue...

"No," Erin cried, disobeying his command and grabbing for Sean when he shifted away from her tormented flesh. Dammit, he had to finish her. She was so close...

Sean grabbed her wrists in his hands and pushed to his feet, pulling her with him. In little time he had her stretched out on the bed, staring up at him as he stood beside the bed, divesting himself of his pants and underwear.

Oh Jesus. Golden skin seemed to stretch from the top of his head to the soles of his long, narrow feet. The thick fall of hair fell around his face and neck. Strong shoulders and a wide chest tapered down to a slim waist and tight, muscled thighs and calves. And his cock...a sigh shuddered from between her lips. His cock had enslaved her.

The veined column speared from a dense, black thatch of hair, the thick, bulbous cap wet with pre-cum. She wet her lips with a quick, greedy swipe of her tongue. She wanted to rake through those wiry curls, take his erection in her mouth again and taste that tantalizing drop of cum that signaled his arousal. The temptation proved too much to resist. Propping up on an elbow, Erin reached out. *Just a small sample.*

Sean's hand shot out, seizing her wrist inches from his cock. "Not yet." He squeezed once before releasing her then lowered his hand to his cock and wrapped it around the broad base. Every bit of Erin's attention transferred to the long fingers that squeezed up the thick shaft to the wide, dark head. Another drop of clear liquid welled on the tip but soon disappeared under Sean's hand. When it emerged again, the smooth crown was shiny with the fluid Sean had smeared over the stretched skin. A groan brimmed in her throat, accompanied by the resurrected need to taste and savor.

"Move to the middle of the bed," he instructed. His husky voice stroked over her senses and body. Erin shivered as she complied and scooted over the bedcovers until she reached the center of the bed. The fluffy hotel pillow cradled her head, and even though Sean had seen and licked the most intimate parts of her body, she had to combat the urge to cover her breasts and pussy with her palms. How fucking Victorian.

Sean's knee depressed the mattress, drawing her attention from her discomfort. The muscles in his thighs tightened like a well-oiled machine. His heavy sac swung below his cock, a slow pendulum. Sean stretched toward the nightstand flanking the bed and

grasped the small, foiled square on top. With skilled hands, he ripped the foil open and quickly sheathed his cock with the condom. He returned one hand to the base of his cock and smoothed the other up her calf and retraced the path to her ankle. The erotic intent in the dark inspection warned and tantalized her. He gripped her ankle, and with a gentle but firm tug, parted her legs.

"Lift your arms." Her arms bracketed her head, her breasts raised by the action. His gaze lingered over the hard points crowning the rounded flesh. Several heated moments passed before he dragged his eyes up to meet hers. The glittering lust felt like a blast of fire on her skin. "Lift your arms over your head and grab the edge of the mattress. Don't let go until I tell you," he directed, voice hoarse.

The second knee joined the first on the bed and he crawled between her legs and over her supine body like a sleek cat. Sean's fist pressed into the mattress next to her arms. His face lowered until his mouth brushed the patch of skin where her scar had once existed. Her heart and pussy clenched at the tender caress.

He leaned back on his heels and palmed her thighs. With slight pressure, he widened her legs even more and then moved closer. At the first nudge of his cock head against her folds, Erin sank her teeth into her bottom lip. She closed her eyes and waited for that initial penetration and stretching. No matter how many times they fucked, her body still had to adjust to the width and heaviness of his cock.

"Look at me." The weighty dominance in the order forced her eyes open. "Don't stop looking at me. I want you to see what being in your pussy does to me."

She couldn't have torn her gaze away from him even if the room had exploded around them. Not when the dusky skin over his cheekbones tautened and his full, sensual lips firmed into a grim line. Not when his face transformed to a mask of undiluted pleasure as the broad knob of his cock breached her pussy and nestled inside.

She groaned, tormented. Her hips arched up, pleading for more. He acquiesced to her wishes. With another thrust and then another, he buried more of his cock in the depths of her pussy. The clasp rippled around the invader. She writhed beneath him, pain-laced pleasure morphing her into a sexual creature she didn't recognize. He pushed her to an emotional and physical edge that she had no control of. Whether she careened into the abyss or hovered over its edge depended completely on Sean.

The loss of control liberated her.

Enflamed her.

Hard fingers seized her twisting hips and pinned them to the mattress.

"That's it," he crooned, his cock tunneling another increment into her pussy. "Take me. Keep your eyes on me."

Erin hadn't realized she'd closed them until that moment. She obeyed his command and focused on the perspiration glistening on his forehead and the droplets that rolled down his temple to cling to his clenched jaw before plopping to his corded forearms. His hooded stare fastened on her pussy struggling to take his cock.

"Fuck," he muttered, his voice a rough breath, "your pussy is stretching around my cock. I can feel you swallowing me." He withdrew, the heavy drag of his erection setting off mini-explosions in its wake. "Damn, you're tight. So hot and tight." The press forward began again, followed by the incredible fullness. "Only a little more, baby," he rasped, lashes lowering briefly before fluttering open.

"Sean," she cried out, tossed and drowning in the waves of pleasure. She clutched the tangled bedcovers and her heels scrabbled for purchase on the bed. He'd been deep in her pussy before but now, tonight...her body no longer felt like her own—now it belonged to both of them. He touched places she hadn't realized existed. The desperate thought entered her mind that never again would she be complete unless he was balls-deep, nudging that lonely, empty place that had never been filled before him—the place no one but him would be able to fill.

"Erin." The name sounded raw. He fell forward, his palms slapping the mattress beside her arms and head. His lips feathered frantic kisses over her face, the control he'd wielded so ruthlessly cracked. His cock throbbed in her heated depths. Even through the latex, Erin swore she could feel the flow of blood pulse through the veins lining the thick shaft. He rolled his forehead back and forth over hers, his whispered words heating her skin and lips. "You feel so good. So tight. So good. Squeeze me, baby." When she tightened the walls of her pussy, he emitted a tortured moan. "I can feel you surrounding my whole cock." His big body shuddered over her. "Take your arms down, baby."

"What do you want me to hold on to?" she whispered.

"Me."

Stunned, she went still and her arms remained extended over her head as his meaning sunk in. Pleasure that had nothing to do with sex suffused her. It wound around her heart and contracted, refusing to let up. Slowly, she lowered her arms and circled his strong, muscled shoulders—and held on tight.

"Now your legs," he urged, rolling his hips forward and rubbing his pelvis against her clit. She moaned and hurried to comply. "There you go."

Setting a pace that offered her no quarter, Sean rode her. His cock plunged into her pussy, each drive rolling his hips forward to rotate against her throbbing clit. Her whimpers turned to cries and pleas as he fucked her with abandon. With each thrust, her sheath sucked him deeper until her sharp gasp of breath came on the tail end of every lunge. The wet suction of her sex over his cock filled the room, along with their harsh breathing and the slap of flesh against flesh.

His teeth sank into the tendon that corded her neck and Erin grasped him tighter, clinging to him. She turned her head and rested her cheek on the sleek, damp slope of his shoulder. She lifted her heels higher up his back and the movement allowed him even more access into the seemingly bottomless depths of her pussy and Sean's growl vibrated over her skin.

He pounded into her, claiming every inch of her sex as his own. Sliding a hand between their bodies, he pressed his thumb over the sensitive nub above her pussy. Lust shot through her with the speed of a sniper's bullet, originating from her clit and exploding to all limbs of her body. She screamed into his shoulder, so close to release she could feel it shimmering inside her. So close but so far...

"C'mon, baby," he urged, tension beating beneath the hard tone. "Come for me. I want to feel this pussy tighten around me like a hungry mouth." His hips slammed against her once more and ground against the hard button of flesh, rotating in a tight circle—and sent her spiraling into oblivion. She threw her head back, a scream tearing from her throat. She held on to him as if he were the only tangible, safe thing in a world that had suddenly erupted in fire and heat. She died in his arms. And was resurrected in love.

Sean's harsh cry seared her ears and followed her into the dark. A dark that was as comforting as the strong, warm arms that cradled her close.

And for the first time the dark wasn't something to be feared but welcomed.

* * * * *

No!

The sharp report of the shot reverberated in her ears as Erin jackknifed from the covers. Her chest heaved and the damp trail of tears she must have cried in her sleep tracked her cheeks. Blood. Erin swiped her palms over her face as if she could erase the images. So much innocent blood.

"Hey, baby." Sean's sleep-roughened voice enveloped her at the same time his palm smoothed up her arm. Erin stiffened. She couldn't help it. The terror and tension of the nightmare still rode her. Her skin itched in protest of being touched.

"Come here," he murmured, levering up to press his back against the headboard. He ignored her hands-off signal and reached out, gathering her close to his chest. Erin squeezed her hands in between them and flattened her palms on his chest. But her strength meant nothing compared to his determination. His arms tightened around her back and soon the fight drained out of her. She gave in. She buried her face into the safe haven of his chest and curled her fingers into the same warm skin.

"Nightmare?"

Erin nodded.

"Same one?"

Her response came slower this time but again, she nodded.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Her lips had already shaped the word *no* so it shocked the shit out of her when she heard *okay* come out of her mouth.

It seemed as if that one word unplugged the torrent that had been building up inside her for over a year. The story of Jack's death and her ultimate failure poured

from her in an ugly, detailed deluge of pain and guilt. Sean remained silent throughout the story, the steady thud of his heart beneath her ear and the comforting stroke of his hand over her back providing the strength to continue.

With the telling came a cathartic cleansing that released the burden she'd shouldered for so long. The loss over Jack's death would never fade completely but the grief and shame that had atrophied her heart slowly fell away and love pumped blood and forgiveness into the shrunken organ.

Sean lifted his hand and caressed her head, smoothing the tangled strands.

"You are the strongest, bravest and most beautiful woman I've ever known." His chest lifted beneath her cheek and a hard breath shuddered from his lips. "I'm humbled by you. By the child you were and the woman you've become." He rubbed his lips over her forehead, his breath a soft sigh over her skin. "As a child you had no one to defend you and yet you dedicated your life to protecting others."

She closed her eyes and her nails dug deeper into his chest. "I failed —"

His arm tightened around her back and his voice hardened. "No, you didn't. And I don't want to hear you say that again. Evil exists in this world, Erin. You can combat it and even win sometimes but you won't all of the time." His hand lowered from her hair and cupped her cheek, tilting her head back to meet his gaze. "Failure is not having the balls to stand up and face the wickedness. You have nothing to be ashamed of, baby. Nothing."

"I killed them," she whispered the admission that she'd never revealed to anyone, not even Jack's parents. "I hunted his murderers down and killed them in cold blood. It's why I haven't returned to the agency. I can't with blood on my hands."

"Erin," he sighed, brushing the pad of his thumb over her cheekbone, "if you're looking for me to condemn you for what you did afterward, I'm sorry but it's not going to happen. Yeah, some people might claim two wrongs don't make a right and vengeance is mine says the Lord. Me?" He gave a sharp bark of laughter. "You live by the sword, you die by the sword. And don't ask me to feel sympathy for animals who would shoot a child down in the street like a dog. There are monsters out there waiting to prey on the weak. If they're dealt justice, I won't quibble over the method."

He lowered his head and pressed his forehead to hers and she wondered if he referred to the man who had preyed on him so long ago. That man—who had stolen his innocence and abused the love Sean had been so ready to give—Erin wouldn't have possessed any qualms about taking out.

"Have you ever..."

"Gone looking for him?" He completed her thought with a slow nod. "Yes, I did. About ten years ago. I don't know what I planned when I saw him again but..." He shrugged. "Anyway, it didn't matter. He'd died a couple of years earlier from a massive stroke. His wife had moved not too long after that."

"I..." *Am humbled by you. Can't imagine my life without you. Love you.* "Would have killed for you."

A small smile full of tenderness and understanding curved his lips. He pressed a kiss to her cheek, the gesture sweet. "I think that may be the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me." She released a gust of breath that was half chuckle, half sigh and he cupped her cheek. "I haven't told you, Erin, but I'm so fucking proud of you. Of the woman you've become. Beautiful. Compassionate. Invincible."

"I'm not," she contradicted, shaking her head as tears stung her eyes. How could he say that after what she'd just confessed about Jack?

"Yes, you are, baby," he murmured, stilling the gesture. "Not many people could have survived your hellish childhood to grow into a protector instead of the protected. You made it through Jack's death. It may have floored you for a while but it didn't take you out. Invincible."

The tears that had threatened spilled over. She shut her eyes to prevent the undignified flow but they refused to stop. *Oh fuck.*

"Baby," Sean whispered and pulled her into his arms, his lips pressed to her temple. The sound of her low, rough pants filled the room until even they faded away.

Invincible.

Erin opened her swollen lids and lifted her head. Their breath mingled. She tasted the flavor of his kiss on the air that escaped his parted lips. She inhaled, trapping the scent in her lungs. He tasted of promise. Hope.

Him.

Sean had called her brave. And she wanted to be. At least for him she wanted to try.

Even as her stomach clenched with the faint tinge of fear and uneasiness, she pushed up and straddled his body. Surprise crossed Sean's expression a moment before a heavy sensuality suffused his features. Her pussy was pressed to his abdomen, and the rigid length of his cock rode the crease of her ass. She wiggled her hips, pressing the sensitive pad of her pussy into his hard muscles. God, how shallow did it make her that it delighted her she could harden this man's cock so easily? He'd transformed her into a vain nympho. And she loved it.

Loved him.

Inhaling a deep breath, Erin leaned forward and slid her arms up until her chest pressed to his and her arms rested on either side of his head. His hands stroked up her back before settling on her waist.

Erin's heart pounded a hard rhythm inside her chest and rose to continue its relentless beating in her throat. Her mouth dried up like the Sahara on a sunny day.

Damn. This was harder than she'd thought.

"Tha—" she stopped, swallowed, cleared her throat and started again. "Thank you."

Sean brushed a caress over her jaw. "For what?"

"For listening. For being on my side."

"Always, Erin."

"I, uh..." *Damn, this was hard.* "That first night in the club you told me you would keep the cold and loneliness away. Thank you for keeping your promise."

Images of her mother crying out in pain as her husband viciously bit her lip, turning the gesture of intimacy and love back on her, flashed before Erin's eyes. But Sean, staring up at her, his silver gaze warm with desire and an emotion that made her heart pound harder, shoved them away. His face—his beautiful, sensual face—bolstered her courage.

She kissed him.

Sean stiffened beneath her. With her eyes fastened on his face she didn't miss the shock that widened his eyes. Or the fierce desire and savage possession that hardened his features seconds before his fingers speared into her hair, gripped her scalp and held her head steady as he stole control of the kiss.

His mouth devoured her like a starving man at an all-you-can-eat buffet. The skill and patience she'd come to associate with Sean had deserted him and his tongue plunged between her lips with more unrestrained passion than expertise. He lifted his head, slanting his mouth over hers again and again, sucking her tongue between his lips.

He possessed her. Took her.

Loved her.

Both hands clasped her head now, holding her still for his wild claiming. Erin reveled in it. Her first kiss was like jumping into a ferocious storm and being swept up in its winds. Sean slid down until he once again rested on the pillow, his breath bellowing from his lungs.

"Kiss me again, baby," he pleaded, raising his head for one last hard kiss pressed to her lips. "I've waited so long. Kiss me."

Gladly. Now that she'd had a taste of him she couldn't give it up. Nothing of her fears or anxiety remained. Only desire for this man existed.

Erin opened her lips over his and pushed her tongue between his lips. She swirled her tongue over and around his. Led by instinct and passion, she nipped at his lips. Stroked the roof of his mouth. Dueled in an erotic battle that didn't have a loser but left them both victorious.

"Slower, Erin." He cradled her face as if she were the most precious person in the world. His breath brushed her mouth and she wanted to taste the scent of rain, thunder and him for herself. "I've dreamed about your kiss for so long. Now that you've given it to me, baby, I want to savor it. So, please, for me, go slower."

How could she resist that? She couldn't.

She touched her mouth to his and marveled at the curious, delicious blend of soft and firm. Funny how lips that gave her so much pleasure by sucking her breasts and sex could measure out the same pleasure with a kiss. Their mouths melded, tongues made love. How could she have gone so long without experiencing this intimacy?

Because of Sean. This could only be shared with Sean.

Needing more, she shifted her hips, moving lower and lifting up until the head of his cock bumped the entrance to her swollen, wet pussy.

With no hesitation, she sank down, taking him inch by inch. His cock stretched her, the slight burn of his penetration snatching her breath away. She pushed herself up and planted her palms on his hard chest. The movement stabbed him a little deeper in her pussy.

"Easy, baby," he cautioned, shifting his hold to her waist. "Wait. I need to protect you." Stretching his arm out, he yanked open the drawer in the bedside table. It seemed as if her weight was negligible to him as he twisted to reach inside for the condom. In seconds, the protection was grabbed and ripped open. She raised her hips and the slow drag of his cock over the sensitive tissue in her pussy elicited a low groan of pleasure. Unable to help herself, Erin lowered over his stalk again. God, she was so full. So complete. And she'd only swallowed half of his length.

"Erin," Sean growled, and gripping her waist, hoisted her off his erection. Her gasp was lost in his moan. With hurried motions, he rolled the latex down his cock. Returning to lay back against the pillow, he grasped her hips again and aimed his cock head for her pussy. The broad tip pressed past her drenched lips and entered the tight flesh beyond. "Okay, baby. Easy. Relax your pussy. You can take me."

Again, his cock filled her to overflowing. The position made him more difficult to take. She could feel her muscles flutter around his thick staff as she struggled to accept him from this angle.

"Sean," she whimpered. "Oh God. I can't...it's too..."

"Relax, baby," he repeated. His blunt fingertips dented her skin as he lifted her up his cock and lowered her, each downstroke conquering another increment of his flesh. "That's it. You're so good."

The last word ended on a raw groan as Erin worked her hips, rocking them back and forth, determined to claim every bit of his rock-hard flesh. She glanced down and saw a little less than half his cock had yet to be surrounded by her pussy. Sinking her teeth in her bottom lip, she pressed down harder. She wasn't aware of the small mewls of pleasure and pain that escaped her until Sean halted her.

"I want you to fuck me, Erin," he ordered, voice harsh. Rearing up, he captured her mouth. His tongue plunged deep as he lifted her off his cock and thrust into the tight, wet sheath. She cried out, threw her head back between her shoulders. She swore she could feel every vein that corded the thick erection drag over her sensitive tissue. Could feel the minute contractions of her muscles as she adjusted to the impalement.

"Oh baby," he whispered, leaning back to stare down at the place where they connected. Needing to see for herself, she flattened her palms behind her on his hard thighs and gazed down. *Oh God.* Only a couple of inches remained free of her cream—the last few inches toward the base of his cock. Witnessing the wide column disappear between her swollen lips was the most erotic sight she'd ever seen. "It's so pretty. Your

pussy spreading for my cock. Sucking it deep.” He groaned and stared up at her from a sexy, hooded gaze. “Only a little more left for you to take. Don’t stop, baby. Take it. Fuck my whole cock.”

As if she needed encouragement. Using her body weight as leverage, Erin arched her hips high then dropped hard on his cock.

The breath whooshed from her lungs. From this position, this angle, his dick felt thicker, larger. It touched places that would forever be branded by his erect flesh.

“God, you feel good,” he groaned. “Come here.” He cupped the back of her neck and drew her forward. Another kiss. Another clash of lips, teeth and tongues. He tore his mouth from hers to trail his lips over his chin, down her throat to her breasts. His arms slid up her back to hook over her shoulders and hold Erin in place as he lowered his head to her breasts.

A strangled scream clawed past her constricted throat. Her nipple disappeared between his lips to the blistering moist heat beyond. Lightning strikes of pleasure arced from the tips of her breasts to her clit like mini-blasts. Erin ground her hips against the flat plane of his pelvis, desperately trying to gain pressure on the tortured clit. Sean switched his attention from the nipple he’d finished suckling to the neglected peak and drew hard on it, with no mercy. She gasped as a nip of pain sharpened the edge of ecstasy.

“Sean, please,” she begged, hips rolling and bucking. “Let me ride you. Let me fuck you.” She wanted it. Hungered for it. She needed to bring him pleasure this time, take him to that sweet oblivion.

He released her flesh with a wet pop. His molten gaze rose to hers, and slowly, deliberately, he leaned back against the headboard and curled his fingertips over the top. And held on.

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip, shifted her palms to the flat plane of his abdomen and stroked her pussy up and over his shaft. Damn, he was so large, no matter what move she made her pussy quivered and pleasure speared through her sex, straight to her clit. Erin tilted her pelvis forward and buried his cock inside her until none of his length remained outside her swollen lips.

She repeated the unhurried movements in an erotic cadence that stoked the already blazing fire within her depths. Long drags up his cock and protracted strokes back down ending in a tight, wet circle that gifted her pulsing clit with just the right amount of pressure.

Sean watched her through narrowed eyes, the corded tendons of his arms standing out in stark relief as he continued to clutch the headboard. Combined with his ridged abdominals, Erin recognized the amount of control he exerted to let her have him at her leisure. To fuck him at her pace. Like a sleek, dark panther, he observed her as if waiting for that weak moment when he could strike and consume her.

He didn’t have long to wait.

The knot of pleasure in her pussy tightened and grew at the same time. Her hips circled and bucked wilder, harder at the end of each abbreviated stroke.

"Sean," she gasped as she galloped ahead toward orgasm on his cock. "Sean."

She didn't have to call him again. As if reading her thoughts, he jerked forward, lowered his arms and thrust a hand through her hair while he slid the other between their pelvises to the hard, throbbing nub at the top of her sex. He drew her head down and feasted on her mouth at the same time pressing his thumb to her clit.

Erin screamed into his mouth and his marauding lips muffled the sound.

Stroke. Press. Stroke. Press.

Stroke.

She splintered. Came apart. Tore a hole in the stratosphere she soared so high and plummeted down just as fast only to be sent flying again. Dimly, she heard Sean's hoarse cry, felt his cock jerk in her pussy. His arms came around her, pressed her to his chest and offered the safety she hadn't experienced for fifteen years.

She let herself go.

Chapter Fourteen

Her eyes snapped open.

For the second time that night she lay awake, jerked from her sleep. Instead of a dream this time it had been a sound. Or at least the echo of a sound.

Years of training had taught her to regulate her breathing and maintain the camouflage of sleep even when wide awake. She maintained the pretense, listening intently for the slight noise she thought she'd heard.

Behind her Sean didn't stir, his chest rising up and down against her back and the soft breath on her neck steady. Erin remained still, alert...and heard nothing.

Shit, she scoffed, sex was making her jumpy...

There it went again.

Whisper soft – like the click of a lock engaging. Almost imperceptible.

Almost.

In one quick, silent motion, Erin vaulted to a sitting position and threw back the covers. As soon as her feet touched the floor, she twisted around and shook the arm that had encircled her waist seconds ago. Sean's eyes opened so abruptly it took her aback. The fog of sleep cleared from his eyes in the next instant as he took in her position, crouched next to the bed.

Erin pressed a finger to his lips, warning him to be quiet, and flicked a glance toward the closed bedroom door. In seconds Sean transformed from a heavy-lidded, sensual creature to the boy who had fought for her fifteen years earlier. The skin over his cheekbones tightened, reflecting the fierce warrior heritage he carried in his veins. His generous lips thinned into a grim line and a tiny muscle jumped along his clenched jaw.

One moment Sean stared at her and the next he rolled from under the covers, his jeans in hand. Erin straightened to her feet and rushed around the edge of the bed. Time was of the essence. They had to move and be ready for their visitor. The worst thing they could do was give her the advantage.

Automatic pilot took over. She had faced dangerous situations before but the stakes were higher now. The man she loved was in immediate danger. She couldn't fuck up.

Not like with Jack.

Even if it meant her life, Sean would walk away from this.

As she jerked Sean's shirt over her head, her heart slowed to a slow, steady beat. Her mind raced ahead and turned over the options they faced.

In seconds the stalker who'd tracked Sean for over a year would enter this room. Of that, Erin had no doubt. Every nerve in her body jangled in warning. In moments the shit was going to hit the fan.

Her gut twisted. Fear and panic filtered through the calm she'd wrapped herself in. What happened with the decoy room Braedon had arranged? How had she found them?

Erin cast a glance at Sean.

I can't lose him. I've lost almost every person I've cared about. I can't...

Not bothering with her skirt, she crooked her fingers at Sean, motioning for him to follow her across the room. Not a sound filtered through the thick quiet as they moved as one away from the bed, placing more distance between them and the bedroom door.

She turned, seized his biceps and stretched up on the balls of her feet until her lips brushed the rim of his ear.

"We have about ten seconds before she comes through that door," she murmured. "No hero shit. Promise me." When Sean frowned and looked as if he would object, she shook her head hard. "I'm the agent, dammit. No damn heroics. She could have a weapon and my gun is out there. Shit," she swore, furious at her costly blunder. "I'd planned to retrieve it after I gave you the guitar. But I was..." *Sidetracked by sex. Damn. What a fucking bonehead.*

He lowered his head and placed his mouth next to her ear.

"I'll follow your lead on this, Erin. I trust you." Hard fingers squeezed her hip. "But the same goes for you. No hero shit or all bets are off."

She nodded and led him to the dark corner of the room. Everything in her focused and narrowed on the door across the room.

The door cracked open.

The sliver of space seemed like the mouth of a black hole. And out of the shadows crept a darker shadow. Like a parasite separating from its host, the inky bent shape straightened bit by bit into the shape of a woman.

Beside Erin, Sean stiffened.

The baseball cap hid half the woman's face and her dark clothes camouflaged her body—yet the gun clasped in her hand was clearly distinguishable.

Erin remained still. She didn't move a muscle.

The woman scanned the room. The brim of her cap swung around the room like a telescope as she studied the open closet door and its dim interior. Her attention lit on the bed and remained there for several long seconds. The malevolence emanating from her as she examined the rumpled bedcover and sheet sent chills over Erin's skin that had nothing to do with the cool air in the room.

Finally, she moved from the bed and explored the wide sitting area with its armchairs and coffee table. It glossed over the guitar on the table and moved over Erin and Sean in the dark corner.

Just as anticipation rose up in her chest and Erin tensed, preparing to move, the woman's head swung back to the corner they hid in. The sinuous and sudden movement reminded her of a cobra. Cold...deadly.

Erin couldn't see her eyes, but the weight of the malicious stare aimed at them felt like a heavy winter coat. It was eerie.

Unsettling.

And freaky as fuck.

Yet it didn't compare to the chill that infiltrated her soul when the woman's mouth curled into a large smile.

A black-gloved hand lifted. With a flick of her wrist, light flooded the bedroom.

Erin stared into the face of the woman who had stalked and terrorized Sean for a year.

Mallory Blanchard had come calling.

"Why, hello." Mallory tilted her head, a winsome smile quirking her lips. But the dull gleam off the cocked weapon dispelled the image. "Surprised?" Mallory asked as if Erin were a guest at some fucked-up Alice-in-Wonderland tea party. As a matter of fact, she felt as if she'd careened down a demented rabbit's hole.

"A bit."

The grin dropped from Mallory's lips. As Erin stared into the flat, dead gaze she had the impression of peering into the black depths of an icy grave.

Deadly.

Insane.

"Hello, Sean." Mallory arched an eyebrow. "I received your invitation."

"I wasn't aware I'd extended one." If she could have, Erin would have kissed him for the steady, calm response.

"Of course you did," Mallory tsked, shaking her head as if in disappointment. "When you announced to the world that you had a special woman in your life I knew you meant me. It was your way of telling me it was finally time for us to be together." She cut her eyes toward the disheveled bed. "But you've been fucking *her*. I'll eventually forgive you, but now I have to kill her." Mallory delivered the threat as if she were reciting her grocery list. No emotion. No change in expression. No feeling.

"You believe you can murder someone and just walk away?" Sean asked.

Good, Sean. Keep her talking until I get an opening...

"I have the gun," Mallory reminded him. As if they needed reminding. "And it isn't murder." She frowned, as if confused why he couldn't understand the reason she had to shoot Erin in cold blood. "It's protecting our love. You tainted it and now I have to cleanse it. Otherwise we can't move forward."

"The ends don't justify the means."

"Don't judge me," she snapped and for the first time, her detached façade cracked and allowed Erin a glimpse of the rage seething beneath. "A year! An entire year of sacrifice. I've picked up and moved to wherever you were. I've had to watch you screw other women. And I've done it all for you. Everything I've done has been for you and our love." The slightest tremble shook the gun in her hand and Erin's breath caught in her throat. One twitch...that's all it would take... Desperation like she'd never tasted coated her tongue in an acrid, grimy film.

Please, Sean, keep her calm. Don't set her off.

"Why all the drama with 'Persephone', the rose and the perfume?"

"And here I thought it fitting with me having to live two lives. One where I had to keep our relationship secret from those who wouldn't understand. And the other life with you. Like Persephone, I was split between two worlds. Personally, I thought the perfume was a nice touch. The meaning behind the scent was my little inside joke. It reminded me of the hell of having to live every single moment without you but holding out for the season I would eventually be with you."

Mallory's eyes softened, taking on a glassy glaze that was slightly more alarming than the hard, aloof stare. "I knew you remembered me," she murmured. "Sometimes I wasn't sure but after what you said today...I should have never doubted you." Mallory glanced again at the bed. Such longing twisted her pretty features that Erin wanted to look away. She understood that kind of yearning—it wrenched her heart every second she was with Sean.

Funny how she and this demented soul should have that in common.

Mallory backpedaled toward the bed and Erin's muscles tightened. All she needed was the smallest opening to disarm the other woman. But as if reading her thoughts, Sean's stalker lifted her eyes to Erin's and her grip on the weapon firmed. The barrel aimed straight at her chest. *Shit.*

With the gun stretched out in front of her, Mallory perched on the edge of the bed. Her free hand grappled with the twisted sheet, yanking it closer until the white cotton pooled at her hip. Keeping her eyes and the gun trained on Erin, the other woman fisted a handful of the material and buried her nose in the folds. Her lashes fluttered as if in ecstasy—as if the scent on the sheets was orgasmic.

Images of making love with Sean on those same covers darted through Erin's mind and nausea gripped her stomach. The woman's perverted actions intruded and somehow...tainted the beauty of their joining. Erin fought the urge to charge across the room and snatch the sheet from her.

"I remember what it smelled like to fuck you, Sean. To have you come on my belly and throat." The singsong quality of her voice faded to a hum of pleasure. Mallory inhaled again as if she could trap his essence inside her. Mallory lowered the sheet. Even though the weapon remained cocked and ready, her voice signaled she'd traveled far from the hotel bedroom.

"I can still picture when we met after your concert a year ago. I found out what club you were headed to and managed to get in." She angled her head to the side, a slight and humorless smile tilting the corner of her mouth. "Do you know a blowjob will get you into any place you want? A club. A hotel room. Just suck a man's dick good and he'll hand you the world. My stepfather taught me that. And he was right." Mallory shrugged. Her nonchalance at admitting to her parent's molestation and the resulting promiscuity turned Erin's heart and stomach. The admission was both pitiful and sickening.

"Do you remember how we fucked all night? For hours." Lust narrowed her eyes, parted her lips and caused a soft pant to lift her chest up and down. "I'm not an idiot. I realized I was just a one-night stand but when you called me the next morning I knew you wanted more. Just like I did."

Damn. The phone call had triggered her delusions. How ironic that if Sean had wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am-ed her, she may not have become fixated on him.

"So you stalked me —"

"Loved you," she snapped. "But when you kept fucking other women I had to start punishing you."

"You mean terrorize me, don't you?"

"Love hurts," she responded, her expression transforming back to the blank slate that revealed the fractured mind of a sociopath. Erin swallowed back the burn of bile scalding her esophagus. She could well imagine where Mallory had learned that particular lesson from. "And I was hurting from your betrayals and insensitivity. Of course no man can keep his dirty cock in his pants, but when you went home from the club with that trashy bitch it was like a slap in the face. Your car was a small price to pay."

Mallory dropped the sheet to the bed as if unable to bear touching it any longer. She also moved the gun to her lap, but the muzzle remained pointed in Erin and Sean's direction. Taking advantage of the lowered weapon, Erin edged away from the corner, her palms flat on the wall behind her, her shoulders tensed and ready to launch.

"Don't fucking move or I'll blow your head off your damn shoulders." The calm order paralyzed her. Mallory hadn't batted an eye but the cool, eerie tone chilled the blood in Erin's veins. The woman was as dangerous — if not more — than any drug lord she'd ever faced.

"What do you mean, Sean confessed his love for you?" Erin spoke for the first time, hoping to start Mallory talking again and distract her.

The other woman studied Erin through her flat, cobra-like gaze as if she realized what Erin planned but decided to play along.

Mallory didn't even blink. "Sean is mine and I won't allow anyone to come between us." She rose from the mattress in a fluid motion. "You shouldn't have fucked what's mine." She lifted her arm. Time slowed until the gun ascended at a crawl.

Erin weighed her options in that beat of time. She felt Sean tense beside her and realized he would intervene regardless of his promise to follow her lead. Shit! No matter which decision she made, she wasn't faster than a speeding bullet. So it came down to what body part could take a hit without sustaining much damage, still allowing Erin to take Mallory down.

In her head, she pictured the action. How each muscle would flow and contract. How long each movement would require to execute.

"Mallory."

Mallory's head whipped in Sean's direction, drawn by his voice. An expression of such bliss lit her features it was almost painful to see. The gun wavered in Mallory's hand and lowered a bit as she took a small step toward Sean.

That tiny bit of distraction was the opening Erin needed.

With a burst of speed and strength, she shoved off the wall and jetted across the room. She slammed her shoulder into the other woman's soft midsection. Mallory shifted to the side but a second too late.

"Dammit, Erin," Sean shouted. "You said no heroics."

But she had already plowed into Mallory and they slammed against the wall instead of the floor as she'd anticipated and hoped for. *Fuck*. On the floor she would have had the upper hand. But now she struggled with Mallory over the gun while trying to control the smaller woman's body with her own.

Insanity made Mallory as strong as an ox and as mean as a pit bull.

Mallory fought Erin in eerie silence.

Not even a grunt as Erin rammed her shoulder into Mallory's chest and shackled her wrists with both hands. Still, the disturbed woman yanked free of her grip and bucked Erin off.

It all happened in seconds...and an eternity.

As Sean charged across the room, training kicked in...and out. Erin's leg shot out at a perfect ninety-degree angle. The impact of her foot connecting with flesh and metal vibrated up her calf. Grim satisfaction swelled in her chest at Mallory's sharp cry. Not to mention the clatter of the gun hitting the floor.

Sending up a grateful prayer that the gun hadn't discharged upon impact, Erin didn't permit Mallory time to recover. She dropped her toe to the ground for a quick touch before skipping forward and slamming her foot into the other woman's stomach in a powerful roundhouse kick.

With an outraged scream Mallory stumbled back. Her arms flailed as she tried and failed to gain her balance. Another kick, this time to the chest. Mallory tumbled over the back of the Queen Anne chair and hit the floor with a jarring thump.

And stayed there.

Erin's breath rasped in and out of her chest. She stood there, staring down at the motionless outstretched legs of Sean's stalker.

Sighing, she strode forward.

"Erin." Sean snapped, fury stamped on his features. At some point he'd recovered the gun that had dropped to the ground and grasped it in his hand. "What the hell was that? Fuck!" A steady litany of obscenities poured from his lips as he crossed the room toward the chair and the fallen Mallory.

"I'm fine." Following Sean, Erin approached the chair, cautious. The other woman hadn't moved from where she'd hit the floor after flipping over the chair.

So when Mallory's foot lashed out and connected hard with Sean's shin, neither of them was prepared.

Oh shit. She stumbled back toward the bed and could only watch in horror as Sean crashed to the floor.

Mallory leapt to her feet and charged. Arms outstretched, screaming like a crazed banshee, the woman's hands clamped around Erin's throat and squeezed. Sharp nails bit into her skin.

The mattress hit the back of her knees and her ass smacked the bed. As if sensing victory, Mallory pressed her advantage and poured her weight behind her hold.

The lack of air scalded Erin's throat. The smaller woman's unbound hair fell forward to brush her face. Mallory's empty, glacier stare bore into hers. Promising death.

Suddenly, Mallory's death grip loosened and then fell away. Her eyes widened and rolled toward the back of her head, lids shutting and concealing the rage and madness that had swirled in the ice-blue depths. A loud groan was the last sound she made before sagging and falling on top of Erin, out cold.

Sean stood before her like an avenging angel, the gun in his grasp, the butt—which he'd just struck Mallory over the head with—facing outward. Erin pushed Mallory's body off her and slowly sat up. Rubbing her bruised and burning throat, she inhaled a shuddering breath and relief flooded her. Sean was safe and the nightmare finally over. As she stared at him, love swelled her heart.

"I thought you said no heroics," she rasped through a sore throat.

The fierceness that hardened his expression softened until a small smile curved his lips. With an arched brow he extended the gun toward her, handle first.

"I lied."

Chapter Fifteen

Police, paramedics and hotel security swarmed the hotel suite like a busy hive.

Officers streamed in and out of the bedroom, conferring with the paramedics who had swept in an hour earlier. Not that the cops would get much out of Mallory at the moment. She'd been unconscious since Sean had hit her with the gun and restrained her wrists and ankles with the same leather ties he had used to bind Erin to the bed. How was that for irony?

Movement from the bedroom door snagged her attention. Two men dressed in paramedics' uniforms wheeled a stretcher between them. Mallory, a sheet pulled to her waist and a stark white bandage wrapped around her head, lay still, almost lifeless. Her pallor matched the bandage, and if Erin hadn't been on the receiving end of the other woman's manic gaze, she wouldn't have believed her capable of stalking and threatening a man's life.

Like a funeral procession, the paramedics guided Mallory across the room and all conversation ceased.

Shock. Disbelief. Anger. The emotions warred inside her chest. Disbelief and sadness over the seriously disturbed woman who had suffered at the hands of an abusive stepfather. Anger over the campaign of terror she'd waged for a year.

"That woman is going to burn in hell for the pain she's caused."

Erin didn't reply to Braedon's comment but inside she agreed with him. No matter how unbalanced the woman had been, she'd come to the hotel room with one intention—kill Erin and possibly Sean. As much as Mallory may have suffered as a child, Erin couldn't muster any regret for tonight's outcome. Chances were high Mallory would end up in a psychiatric hospital. Hell, it didn't matter whether it was iron bars or a padded room, as long as she was locked up and unable to terrorize anyone else.

Beside her Braedon sighed. "I still can't believe she found you and Sean."

Erin shook her head. "Don't beat yourself up over it, Braedon. Mallory was not your typical psycho. She was smart and resourceful." Although Erin would make it her number one priority to discover the identity of the asshole who had sold Sean out for a blowjob. After the hotel fired him, the unlucky bastard would have to deal with her. "Nothing could have kept her away from Sean. You could have put him up in Fort Knox and she would have found him."

"Damn, that's scary as hell." Braedon said, shaking his head. Erin snorted at his summation. If that wasn't the understatement of the millennium. He nudged her shoulder with his. "You okay?"

"Right as rain."

"Always so strong, huh, Erin?" His lips curled in a small smile that held a touch of sadness. "You'll be relieved to know that I've had another room set up for you and Sean. In a different hotel," he grumbled, his scowl hot. "I'm going to have words with the management here. *Strong* words that will include the phrase 'sue your fucking pants off'." His brow cleared as he cut a glance down at her. "Anyway, I know you have to be tired. So let me know when you're ready to crash."

As if he were a powerful magnet she couldn't resist, Erin located Sean. The same detectives who had interviewed her were questioning him, notepads in hand. He had pulled on a shirt and the black cotton molded to the muscles in his chest and abdomen as he leaned forward to hear the detective's question. Even as he replied, Sean's gaze lifted and collided with hers. That quick, the breath whooshed out of her chest. He inspected her, touching her face and lower as if verifying for himself she was safe. Even as he nodded in response to a question from the detective his eyes heated. *Fuck*. Even in the crowd of people, Erin wanted him. Needed him.

Loved him.

God, how she loved him.

And now that her purpose for returning to his life had concluded, so had her assignment. She no longer had a reason to stay with him. Her debt had been fulfilled. But Jesus, the thought of leaving him cut a hole in her heart. Returning to the insulated, empty world void of emotion, pleasure...of Sean...would be like watching a black-and-white movie after having enjoyed vivid, beautiful color.

In just a few days, she'd come to love him not with the hero worship of a little girl but the consuming, powerful love of a woman. And this woman craved what had been denied her all her life. To belong. To be loved. To stay.

In the time they'd spent together Sean had never said he loved her. He wanted her, yes, but desire didn't equal love. Not to mention emotions under the tumultuous circumstances that had thrown them together couldn't be trusted...

Yet she knew her love for him wasn't the result of some fucked-up version of Stockholm syndrome. Her feelings were genuine, the real thing.

Because if they weren't her heart wouldn't throb like a bitch.

She dragged her hungry gaze away from Sean and turned away.

Then drew up short and hard.

Fuck that. He may not have mentioned love but he was *hers*, dammit. She'd fought for him in that bedroom and she'd fight to be with him now. Going back to that gray existence wasn't an option. Losing Sean all those years ago and watching Jack die had taught her that life was precious and too damn short to not grab and live the shit out of it.

True, Sean hadn't said the words, "I love you" but he couldn't touch and hold her like he had and not care. Still, she whirled around and leveled a glare on him, he *would*

say them. She had several ways of making a man talk...and none of them included leather ties or dildoes.

"Lead the way." Erin transferred her attention to Braedon. "I'm ready." Her friend cocked an eyebrow and wore a huge grin that nearly blinded her with its wattage. "What?"

"Nothing." But his smile remained as he tugged her into a tight embrace. Shocked, Erin remained stiff in his arms. They had been partners and friends for years but never had they shared displays of affection. He released her just as fast as he'd hugged her. Braedon stepped back and cupped her shoulders, his blue eyes burning like the living heart of a flame. "I love you, Erin. So much," he whispered before pressing a hard kiss to her forehead. "You're one of my best friends. And you deserve every happiness life has to offer."

Left speechless and off kilter, Erin could only stare after him as he pivoted and stalked across the room toward the door. A pool of warmth rippled in her gut. The declaration of love hadn't been from the man she'd expected but it still felt...good.

* * * * *

Her muscles screamed with fatigue. Between the sexual Olympics with Sean and the struggle with Mallory, every part of her body protested. Erin bit back a moan as she pulled her shirt over her head. Sean's shirt. With a sigh she dropped it on top of the mattress, leaving her clothed in the skirt and boots she'd donned before the police had stormed their hotel suite. The room had found on short notice contained a desk, chair and table but the only furniture that interested her was the king-sized bed.

"Now that's a sight a man could become accustomed to returning home to."

Erin spun around, heart in her throat.

Sean stood in the entrance to the room, his shoulder propped against the door casing. His arms were crossed over his chest but the nonchalant pose didn't fool her. Eyes bright with arousal scrutinized her.

"Really," she drawled, aiming for nonchalance. She cocked her head to the side and hoped he didn't hear the tremor in her voice. "Are you sure? I'm not wearing handcuffs or a collar. I know how you like your toys."

"That can be easily remedied." Sean stepped into the room and the dark promise in his voice clenched her stomach and reverberated in her pussy. The man had turned her into a damn sexual submissive. "You know," he remarked as he stepped fully into the room and shut the door behind him, "I still want to spank your ass for that shit you pulled with that crazy bitch. It's going to be a long time before I can forget her choking you. Thinking you were—" His eyes closed and Erin didn't miss how the muscle along his jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth and visibly calmed himself. Yet when he spoke again, the words were husky with emotion. "I'm definitely thinking you have a punishment coming. But first..."

Black cotton drifted to the floor, falling over the toe of the boot she'd yet to remove. Erin sucked in a breath. If his shirt was on the floor that meant...

Honey golden skin stretched over hard muscle and sinew. Skin she'd licked and sucked hours earlier. Memories scanned through her mind in a continuous loop of film. Her stroking the underside of his cock with her tongue. His mouth sucking her pussy. Her kissing him for the first time.

"First what?" she rasped, eyes glued to his chest.

"First I'm taking you to bed, kiss that beautiful mouth I didn't nearly get my fill of tonight and then fuck you until I convince myself you're safe and mine."

Mine?

The word echoed in her head as Sean lifted one foot then the other, snatching off his shoes. Then, as she watched, frozen, he prowled over to her like a dark panther on the hunt. He didn't stop until he stood in front of her, eliminating her personal space – and from his hard, sensual expression, he didn't give a damn. "We have some talking to do, Erin. In the last few days I've discovered I'm a selfish bastard. I know you have a career, a life. The right thing to do would be to offer you the choice of staying here with me or allowing you to return home with my thanks." Sean shook his head. "But I'm not some self-sacrificing punk spouting that shit about loving you enough to let you go. Fuck that. You're staying here. With me. *I love you, Erin.*"

A dull roar deafened her. All she could hear was the thunderous hammering of her pulse and the blood rushing to her head. She knew she imitated an owl with her wide eyes and parted lips. But damn if she could bring herself to care. She'd been prepared to lay siege to him until he uttered the vow. Yet hearing him actually declare it...

"You *love* me?" she croaked. Hope strangled her and she couldn't get air to her windpipe. But before she blacked out, she needed to hear him repeat those words again.

He peered down at her. "Of course."

"You never told me –" she whispered and swallowed hard to wet her dry throat. "I hoped..."

"Jesus H. Christ, Erin," he swore on a soft puff of laughter. "I fought a man twice my age to protect you when you were a girl. I've nearly killed myself fucking you. I watched over you while you slept." He lifted his arm and brushed a soft caress over her cheek where the scar had once been. "Besides, you've never told me you love me and I know damn well you do."

Love him? Yeah, she labeled her feelings for him as *love* because another word didn't exist that described the incredible completion that filled her when she was with him. That expressed the joy his presence alone could cause to rise up in her heart and soul.

Part of her wondered if she and Mallory were so different. Sean was an obsession for Erin. Her greatest desire was to be him, belong to him and have him belong to her.

He didn't have her heart – he *was* her heart.

"I do," she whispered, nodding. Hope, love, trust, healing, joy...so many emotions coalesced inside her, invading and warming every crevice and crack of her wounded soul. No longer wounded. But whole. Complete. "I love you."

His eyes closed and he whispered words too low for her to discern. Reaching out, Sean cupped her face. Tilted her head back. Settled his lips on her forehead and the gentle kiss created one more chain from her heart to his.

"I love you, baby," he murmured. "So much. God, baby, you own me."

Sean leaned back and stroked the pad of his thumb over her cheekbones. Love burned so bright in his eyes they seemed to be lit from the inside. She, Erin Montgomery, formerly Elise Grayson, had put that fire there.

A choked cry broke free of her chest right before she wound her arms around his neck and pulled him close. With another whispered vow of love Sean covered her mouth with his, tongue thrusting deep. She welcomed the hungry conquering. His hands kept her head still for the taking and she surrendered, reveling in the loss of his control. Savoring his taste. She always would.

He tasted like love.

About the Author

I was born the daughter of a sharecropper...okay, maybe not. But I am the daughter of a pastor, from whom I inherited my love of romance. The man can preach a mean Song of Solomon! (There's that plug, Daddy! You can pay me later!)

Although my first book starred a cucumber named Fred, my first romance came several years later in the seventh grade when I wrote myself as a heroine opposite Ralph Tresvant from New Edition. Through the power of my pen and imagination, Ralph took one look across a crowded stadium, met my dark, mysterious gaze, fell passionately in love and serenaded me in front of everyone—once we had the inevitable fight, a.k.a. black moment, and made up with a passionate declaration of love and fidelity. The same story reincarnated itself many times over the years—with Donnie Wahlberg from New Kids on the Block, Brad Pitt, Denzel Washington and, as recently as last night, Vin Diesel.

Though the characters have changed, my love of love has endured. Shaping the lives of the unique men and women who experience the first, hungry bites of lust, the dizzying heights of passion and the tender, healing heat of love—nothing compares to it. Except maybe discovering new material for love scenes with my husband, the head of Research & Development!

Naima welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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