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Jane Leopold Quinn

UNDERCOVER

LOVER

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EROTIC ROMANCE

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

UNDERCOVER LOVER

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DEDICATION

Thank you to Russ Lucas, former Chicago police officer, for his law enforcement expertise. Any liberties in accuracy are my own responsibility.

As always, thank you to my husband, Paul Quinn, for his loving support.

UNDERCOVER LOVER

JANE LEOPOLD QUINN

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Chapter 1

“Unhhh...Ohhh, God...” The sounds tore from her throat in deep, raspy growls. Liz’s hips undulated in time to her heartbeat as shudders rolled through her body.

She’d set the scene in her bedroom: glowing candles, fluffy pillows, the covers pushed to the bottom of the bed. She settled against the pillows to play with her toy and fantasize about her sexy neighbor. It was all his fault. *His* fault she had to resort to her vibrator.

Sweeping her lashes closed and swirling the tip of his imagined cock through the cream pooling in her cleft, the presence of Mr. Mysterious seemed to invade the room. The sight of his broad shoulders and chest dominated her mind’s eye. Arching her neck, she moaned, “God, yes...” He teasingly nudged himself into her sheath, pulsated, pulled out, and then did it again. She gasped, panted, drove herself mad pretending this ecstasy came from him, from the imagined wicked gleam in his eyes knowing he tormented her unmercifully.

Part of her knew the truth—that her dangerous, pretend lover wasn’t really here, his cock only plastic and batteries. But it felt so real, the rotating ridges and length stimulating all her innermost nerve endings. Concentrating on the sensations, she tortured her lower lip and thrust her new lover in as deeply as possible. The rotating tip polished over the ultra-sensitive knot of nerves inside and always brought her to orgasm. Always. *Ah, yes.*

In her illusion—her *delusion*—long, muscular, hairy legs rasped against her tender inner thighs. She heard his groan as he tracked the tips of his fingers along her skin from her knees to her drenched pubic hair.

“*Baby,*” he’d whisper huskily. “*I’m gonna fuck you blind. I’m gonna eat my way down your body ‘til your luscious clit pops into my mouth like a ripe cherry.*”

Groaning loudly at the fantasy fucking, at first she tried to catalogue her feelings, to catalogue everything about him. The rakish flash of the gold hoop in his ear turned her on. So did his demonically-trimmed goatee, and she wasn’t usually fond of facial hair.

She stopped thinking and succumbed to the forces inside her body, squeezing her thighs together to keep the vibrator in place. Her hands slid over her belly and breasts, squeezing and twisting her nipples, the dual sensations heavenly. Oh, God, her clit throbbed. It needed...something. It wanted lips, the soft suctioning of a man's lips feasting on the tender nub.

On a sob, she speared her fingers through the lubricant, stroked faster and faster on the sides of her clit, smoothly and rhythmically, until the added friction drove her over the edge. She arched her hips, grinding her heels into the sheets, groaning guttural sounds until the waves passed over her. Pressing her hand on her mound contained the electric aftershocks. She didn't want to pull the vibrator out or even hit the off button. All she wanted to do was curl up and cry. How could such a profound climax—a good thing—make her feel so alone?

Because you are alone.

The euphoric orgasm inspired by the dark-haired stranger should have consumed her, but quickly cooling perspiration on her face and between her breasts reminded her that she was absolutely alone.

Self doubt and insecurity did not factor into Elizabeth Aspen's usual repertoire of emotions. A popular and busy actress in local Chicago theater productions, she exuded confidence and enjoyed her sexy, flirtatious persona. She enjoyed her freedom, but sometimes she feared that very same freedom. It also meant loneliness.

Several months ago, she'd been callously dumped by her boyfriend, Fred Travis. At first she'd been shocked when he announced he'd been transferred to his Houston office. He'd accepted that move without even discussing it with her. Then he delivered the final coup de grâce. He didn't want a small time actress going with him.

A small time actress? She considered the stage her life and was thrilled to be working. How could she have missed his contemptuous attitude? Both her sister and her best friend said she was well rid of him, but it hurt to have her career belittled by someone you thought cared. So, now, she would focus on her career, swearing off men and relationships.

She loved acting, and, after a hectic day, she loved coming home to her adorable yellow stucco coach house. Inside, the peaked roof gave her enough height to stand upright in the loft bedroom. The main floor had just enough room for her cozy furniture. A glamorous, spa-like bathroom and large walk-in closet completed the perfect home, a slice of snug normalcy in contrast to her chaotic life as an actress.

A few weeks ago, she'd first noticed the hunky guy living in the Victorian next door. She'd been shocked at the intense jolt of carnal pleasure his dark, dangerous good looks had sent through her belly.

Sex on two legs. Worn jeans lovingly encased muscular thighs. His straight, black mane flopped over his forehead accentuating deeply set eyes and an angular face. A mustache and closely cropped goatee couldn't soften his strong jaw line. And the glint of a gold hoop in his left ear did not, in any way, lead her to suspect he might be gay.

This afternoon she'd spotted him climbing the porch steps, gorgeous in jeans and black leather jacket. His long hair, broad shoulders, and tight butt, combined with a face like an ultra-sexy Jake Gyllenhaal, made him irresistible. It was absurd to compare him with the blond-haired, lithe Fred.

Their features were as opposite as a clear, uncomplicated day and the sexy, preternatural night. A night promising breathtaking, sensuous passion and uninhibited, rough sex.

Rough sex? She'd never had rough sex in her life, but the thought of Mr. Hunkalicious holding her down, his fierce expression focused on her reactions as he sensuously tortured her body... She squeezed her eyes closed, forcing aside the lustful yearning. She'd surreptitiously watched that gorgeous butt take the steps two at a time. Flushing hot with imagining the bulge she'd glimpsed behind his zipper, her heart pulsed in her throat, her breath came fast, and her nerves tautened with a ravenous, sexual desire.

Nothing else would work but to employ the services of Mr. Fake-nine-inch-cock to get thoughts of the flesh and blood guy out of her system.

Chapter 2

Sam Bolt felt like a snake for spying on the woman. He hadn't intended to. He'd been prowling around his apartment, the only light the flickering TV. Saturday night and he paced his apartment, having no idea what to do. Beer and pizza? Beer and burger? There must be a game on TV somewhere, or something "tech" on the History Channel, but none of that really interested him. He lived with a stormy soul these days and didn't give a flying crap what team played what game. Idly gazing out his window on this frosty October night, he got an unexpected eyeful.

He'd seen her entering the coach house when he came in and asked the landlord her name. He wondered what the sexy Liz Aspen had planned for tonight and chanced a glance across the short distance to her house.

"Holy Mother of God!"

There she was, naked as a jaybird. His cock throbbed, blood quickly stiffening the length. His forehead broke out in flop sweat. *Christ!*

"What the hell is she doing?" he muttered. Shocked, amazed *anything* shocked him any more, he couldn't force his gaze away from the window. *This* was interesting. It had been what felt like centuries since he'd been interested in any woman. He had no time or place in his life right now for relationships. Other than with Jack Handy, he hadn't had sex in way too long.

But tonight!

Whew!

He'd seen her bundled in winter clothing, but what lay underneath blew his mind. She had the body of a goddess. Plump breasts, flat belly, and curvy hips whetted his appetite. He ordered himself to cease and desist his voyeurism, then gasped for air like a beached fish when she lay back on her bed. His mouth dried, jaw dropped, and his eyeballs popped when she spread her thighs and twisted her wrist back and forth to screw in the vibrator.

"You dog," he berated himself, pressing his nose against the windowpane. Why had he never seen this before?

I shouldn't be watching.

She pushed the thing in hard and lay still. His fingers itched to do something. To help. To pump that sucker in. To watch her sweet, wet cunt swallow it.

Fuck.

If he were there, she wouldn't need the fucking vibrator.

Her other hand swept her body, trailing fingertips over her belly, up to cup a breast, to pinch a nipple. He couldn't actually see the tight bud but could imagine the taste of it, taste the sweet, hard ball of it against his lips, against his tongue. He groaned aloud when she plucked her nipples in little frantic movements.

He panted. He forgot to breathe. Sweat formed beneath his mustache. His eyes burned dry from not blinking, not wanting to miss a thing. How long had it been since he'd even *seen* a woman's nipples let alone pinched them? The sight of her like a flesh and blood *Playboy* centerfold in a porno movie knocked him flat on his proverbial ass.

Fisted hands balanced him against the window frame. He wanted to touch, desperately needed to touch something. One hand crawled to his belly, over the placket of his jeans until he grasped his cock and squeezed.

I really need to do this more often.

His breath came fast and sharp.

Her thighs widened. She reached down and pulled the vibrator out, then pushed it in again.

Out.

In.

"Christ Almighty," he muttered, the hoarse growl vibrating through his chest.

Her hips arched upward, her heels digging into the sheets. She was having a fucking whopper. He decided then and there that one day Liz Aspen would get another sort of fucking whopper. *His* kind.

Damn.

His aching nuts tightened excruciatingly into his groin. He cupped them through his jeans with one hand and carefully released the stiff length of his cock with the other.

"Oh, God, she's gonna kill me," he groaned. She slid a hand over her pale belly, into the dark curls between her thighs, and into the slit. He could well imagine what she felt there. It might have been an eon for him, but he could never forget the secret parts of a woman's body. He groaned again, squeezing his eyes shut but only for a second. Too much was going on, and he didn't want to miss any of it.

He'd handled his share of clits, strummed and suckled them. He licked his dry lips in

anticipation. Anticipation of what? He was here. She was over there. No way in hell could he do anything about it. He violently needed to be with her, he wanted to be on top of that naked, goddess body.

Her body shimmied and arched. Amazingly, he could see her with only a few candles in her bedroom for light. What he couldn't see, he desperately imagined. Deliberately, he tightened one hand on his cock, bracing himself on the window frame with the other.

She stretched luxuriously, arched her hips, rubbed her palms over her nipples as if soothing them. She'd probably been pinching them too hard. If he had the chance, he'd torture them just enough to drive her as crazy as she drove him right now.

He couldn't take his eyes off her, couldn't stop stroking his dick. *Shit!* He imagined rearing over her spread thighs and plunging into her hot, wet...

Sonofabitch!

Past the point of no return, his fist pumping his cock, he had no choice but to detonate. Watching her orgasm almost brought him to his knees as he spurted in blistering hot streams. "Jesus Christ!" Thick cum coated his hand, and he bonked his head against the glass. "Ow!" His breaths came shallow and sharp as he rolled his forehead back and forth on the arm balanced on the window frame.

He pressed his eyes shut at the force of his self-induced climax. Jacking off was the next best thing to being there. What wouldn't he give to actually curl up around her, to feel that body, all that smooth skin spooned against his. Then they'd do it for real, in every way known to man. They'd trade off at being on top. Lord, he envisioned the sight of her straddling him, hair cloaking her shoulders, layering over her breasts. His big hands would hold her small waist, hold her speared hard on his cock. He'd even like to use the vibrator on her and watch her come. Up close and very personal.

What would it be like to have a normal relationship with a woman? A normal life with brightness and happiness. A soft, willing woman who doesn't have torturously dark moods and demons—real and mental—to fight. He groaned. A long, frustrated groan. The distance between them wasn't just physical. The difference was between his career and her life. He needed a quick, meaningless lay. He needed to feel his cock sheathed in a hot, tight cunt. Then sleep. No strings.

Chapter 3

The firefly, tinkling sound of her cell phone awakened Liz. It wasn't quite the same as a fairy tale kiss, and definitely no prince hovered over her. "No, go away." She just wanted to go back to sleep and dream about nine inch flesh and blood cocks. But the insistent ringing wouldn't go away. She grabbed the phone, pressed *on*, and said, "Bailey, what's up?"

"Hey, Liz, we're meeting up at the Cedar Room. Aren't you coming?"

Coming? Yeah, I've been coming all right.

She shifted her head on the pillow. The last thing she wanted to do was go out.

"Come on, hon. No pressure. Just fun."

Bailey, her best friend, knew how to tempt her. Rehearsals didn't start until next week, so she could sleep in. For God's sake, she was only twenty-eight years old, much too young to stay home alone on Saturday night.

"You coming?"

"Sure, Bail. What time?"

"Anytime you can get there. We'll try to grab some tables, or be at the bar."

Within twenty minutes, she'd changed into chic, black butt-hugging slacks, three-inch stiletto ankle boots, and a ruby-red sleeveless turtleneck sweater. She donned a leather blazer, locked her front door, and sprinted to the cab stand. "Damn, it's cold," she muttered. At least the cab was warm.

The break up with Fred had been painful. How had she not realized how little he respected her. Obviously, he wasn't the right guy for her, but someone else would be. She allowed herself a small bit of regret Mr. Hunkalicious wouldn't be there tonight.

Sam had kept watch. Why, he didn't know. He watched while she punched her pillow, while she curled up cuddling it to her breasts—lucky breasts. Time passed. He dozed off in his easy chair. Like the proverbial moth to a flame, he gravitated back to the window. She wore a dark bra and a thong.

Damn, a thong.

It wasn't hard to fantasize lying right there in her bed stroking his cock while she pranced around in her underwear. He fantasized eyeballing the satiny elastic in her crack when she turned her back and teasingly bent over.

God.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them, he gaped as she pulled on a pair of tight black slacks over the God blessed thong and sat on the bed to slip her feet into stiletto boots. *Damn, she's going out.* She grabbed a purse and disappeared.

A kind of voyeuristic, obsessive curiosity had him racing to clean himself off, shove his legs into dress pants, and slip on a black T-shirt. Grabbing his sport coat, he charged out the door of the Victorian in time to see her flouncing down the street.

The gods were on his side, because he waved down a cab right behind her and got out at the Diplomat East Hotel, right behind her. He blew a sigh of relief when she headed for the bar instead of the bank of elevators. At least she wasn't going to a room. It wasn't part of his fantasy for her to sleep with another man tonight.

I'm just curious. Who wouldn't be after the show she'd put on?

She didn't flicker an eyelash of recognition when he walked by her, hooked a stool at the opposite side of the U-shaped bar, and settled in to spy, um, observe. He'd also snagged a closer glance at her face. She looked soft. And hot. Dark hair and full, red-tinted lips emphasized her amazingly light eyes. He shifted uncomfortably on the barstool, easing the fullness of his cock against his zipper. Would she recognize him from the house? He'd seen her around, she must have seen him.

He nursed a beer, then another while watching her. She met up with several people, giving little finger-wiggling waves to the guys and quick air kisses to the girls. She laughed easily with the body builder bartender when she ordered a drink. Lots of women liked that type. Maybe she did.

Fuck!

Not that he wasn't in shape, too. He'd been on the police force for five years and an undercover tactical officer for a little over one.

Between staring into his beer from time to time so he didn't constantly stare at her, he brooded about how his life had gone so off kilter as to be stalking a woman in a bar. Guilt for his part in hurting his little brother, Petey, shadowed his life. It was why he'd become a cop. At eighteen, he'd stupidly, rashly beat up Petey's dealer, who then got revenge by selling the drugs that put the teenager into a coma. The boy had lived, but left brain damaged, almost a grown man with the mind of an eight year old. He'd never told his family his part in it. Catching the bastard and putting him away was his mission in life.

He spotted her weaving toward him through the crowd. The guy trailing her swung her onto the dance floor. She had some hot moves. Really hot moves. The music slowed, and he wanted to be the one dancing with her. He imagined he wasn't the only man here who wanted to hold that body. She'd feel good in his arms. His breath released in a whoosh. Finishing his beer, he stuck a finger in the air to signal the bartender for another one. Just as his drink arrived, she headed back to her table, grabbed her leather jacket, and left. Alone. What the hell? He tossed some bills on the bar and followed.

Sauntering down the street a half block behind her, he was glad she wasn't with some other guy. He'd already seen her naked, but he wanted to see her in the flesh, in person. Head to head. Belly to belly. Sex to sex. He pictured her beneath him, her full breasts, nipples tight, his fingers spearing between her thighs into her juicy pussy. Sweat coated his upper lip, and he plunged his hands in his jacket pockets to reflexively pull the sides over to camouflage his hard-on. Of course, it was dark, and no one could see it.

He tailed her, slinking close to the buildings. She hadn't spotted him, but you never knew what a suspect would do. That he thought of her as a criminal in order to rationalize his surveillance bothered him. Pathetic bastard. He needed a hobby.

Head bowed, concentrating on the justification of his activities, he almost missed her truncated scream. At the sound, he glanced up in time to see her being yanked into an alley. "Shit." By the time he got there, he wasn't sure who would be hurt more. On the ground, she kicked and flailed her fists and feet for all she was worth, her screams echoing off the brick walls. The mugger had gripped her sweater but couldn't get a decent hold on her.

"Sonofabitch." He hurtled onto the guy, grabbing him by the back of his jacket. Unless it became necessary, he didn't want to draw the off-duty .38 snub nose clipped inside his waistband.

Before being toppled off, the mugger got in a vicious punch to her stomach.

Sam heard her retching, gagging sounds, but the asshole took advantage of his distraction to slug him right smack in the nose, knocking him flat.

"God damn it!" He saw lights, sparks of pain, and fought to stay conscious. The woman's safety depended on him. Trying to stand, he got as far as his knees.

The mugger kicked him in the belly.

"Fuck." He forced himself again to his feet.

The woman screeched and darted toward them.

The would-be robber apparently decided enough was enough, placed a hand on her chest, and pushed her back. Then he ran, disappearing out the mouth of the alley.

Sam stumbled to the street after him, but the guy vanished. No sign of him. Not even the sound of running feet.

SonofaGoddamnitch!

Furious at being hammered, he must really be slipping to let some punk get the drop on him. Doubled over, his hands on his knees, he roughly sucked in air. He hurt but didn't think anything had ruptured or broken. The guy wasn't going to magically reappear, so he wiped blood and snot from his face with the back of his hand and retraced his steps.

"Are you okay?" She'd buckled down to the dirty ground of the narrow alley. He knelt at her side.

"Why were you following me?"

"And you're welcome for saving your life."

She glanced at him, her eyes wide in stark terror. Christ, the woman was in pain and obviously scared, and he was being bitchy.

She bit at her bottom lip, gulped for breath, and rolled to her side to hoist herself up.

He surged to his feet to offer her a hand, but she shrugged it off. This pitiful, battered woman, trying to get her feet under her to stand, was a far cry from the hot body he'd seen through her bedroom window.

He caught a glimpse of her thigh through a tear in her slacks. *Shit*. Ripped clothes and a heel on one of her boots had broken off, and he stood gawking and thinking about her naked.

"Come on. Let me help you up," his voice raspy from his own pain. His emotions fluctuated from guilt that the guy got away to relief it was over.

This time she took his hand. He gripped her wrist to leverage her up.

The minute she made it upright, she doubled over. "Ahhghh." She covered her mouth with her hand, stumbled over to the alley wall, and vomited against it.

He stood helplessly behind her, his hands outstretched toward her, watching to make sure she didn't fall again. He didn't know how else to help her, since vomiting was kind of a personal thing. This wasn't the first time he'd seen a person *ralph*, and he swallowed convulsively—always had a hard time listening to these sounds—and ordered himself to wait. He braced her body with his, sliding his palms over her upper arms, holding her long hair out of the way.

He inspected the alley for anyone else who might be hiding out in the dark. In the frigid air, the smell from a nearby dumpster made *him* gag, but at least garbage and broken glass wasn't littering the ground. No one walked past the mouth of the alley. What if he hadn't followed her from the bar?

Jesus, he didn't want to think about that.

She put an arm out to brace herself against the brick wall and panted, her head drooping.

He couldn't see her face but felt her narrow shoulders shivering. Shock, cold, and fear. He opened his jacket and pulled her in to shelter her with his warmth. Then to his surprise, he began to croon comfort words. He didn't want to put his arms around her middle but felt an overwhelming need to protect her.

When it seemed her stomach had calmed enough, he steered her away from the vomit. Wrapping a palm around her nape, he urged her head against his chest. "Just rest a minute." He widened his stance to pull her into the refuge of his body and held her loosely against him, smoothing the fingers of his other hand up and down her back.

She stiffened at first but, under his soft murmuring and gentle touches, she eventually sighed and relaxed. It occurred to him this was exactly where he wanted her except they were standing, and she was sick and in pain.

God, she felt good. Her cheek rested comfortably over his heart. Through their clothes he felt the soft cushions of her breasts on his chest. At six feet, he towered protectively over her. With a slight dip of his head, he could brush his lips over her temple, back and forth. Then he didn't want to stop.

She balked. "What are you doing? I've just thrown up." she stammered, flattening her hands on his chest, and weakly pushing him away.

He didn't want to let her go. Sliding his hands up her back, he gently cupped her shoulders and pulled her against him again. The woman had just been attacked. He didn't want her to think he'd finish the job.

"Why were you following me?" she asked again, her nose buried in his shirt. "And, yes, I do thank you for saving my life."

"You're shaking. Let's get out of here and get you to the hospital."

"No!"

"He punched you. You might have cracked ribs or ruptured something."

"I don't." She took a deep breath to prove it to both of them. "I just want to go home."

"Your head hit the pavement. Does it ache?"

"No." She pulled out of his arms. "Just a little one." She touched the back of her scalp and winced.

"Here, let me." He gently probed, finding a walnut-sized lump high on her head.

She whimpered.

"You've got a bump here. Do you feel dizzy or nauseated any more?"

“No, no. I feel fine. Thank you, but I just want to go home.”

“I’ll take you. Do you have somewhere to go or someone to stay with you? You might have a concussion.” He snagged her purse off the ground and handed it to her. “At least he didn’t get this.”

“Thank you.” Clutching it tightly to her chest, she added, “I’m all right. I just want to get out of here.”

“Okay. You recognize me, don’t you? I live in the house next to yours. You’re safe with me. I just want to get you home.”

“Unh hunh.”

“My name’s Sam. Your name is Liz, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Liz, let’s go. We’ve overstayed our welcome in this alley.” He attempted an encouraging smile, slid his arm around her waist, and steered her toward the mouth of the alley. She hobbled on her one broken heel, which, since she didn’t seem to be too upset about it, he took to mean she felt worse off than she’d admit.

Chapter 4

Sam paid the cabbie and helped Liz out. At the door to her coach house, he said, “I’m coming in for a while to make sure you’re all right.” He reasoned that taking advantage of her shock and confusion to get inside was for her own good.

He reached in, patting along the wall until he found a light switch. A chandelier above the dining table flooded the space with light. He quickly surveyed the little house and noted the layout—galley kitchen and living room in front, three doorways in the back, and a spiral staircase spiraling up to a loft—then he shut the door and nudged her toward the couch.

She headed for the kitchen table instead and slumped into a chair. Her elbows on the table, she buried her face in her hands. She didn’t cry, but she wasn’t okay. He’d seen mugging victims before. You could never predict how they’d react. Shock didn’t have a timetable.

“Christ,” he muttered, moving swiftly toward her. He gently rested a hand on her shoulder and, as if he’d knocked her flat, she collapsed onto the table, her shoulders shaking with sobs. Kneeling at her side, he gently smoothed his hand in circles on her back. As an experienced cop, he should be professional and objective, but he wasn’t with her. It had been too close a call. “Liz, you’re safe now.” He needed to keep her in the here and now.

She tried to hide behind her hands, but he carefully uncovered her face. He brushed his thumb over the bruise on her jaw. A smile played at his mouth, her beauty obvious even with her eyelids drooping over mascara-smudged eyes, her hair kinking out in a mess, and her breath stinking of vomit.

“Don’t look at me. Please, go away,” she begged in a fragile voice.

“I’m not going anywhere until I’m sure you’re okay.” He lightly stroked her shuddering shoulders. “Liz, would you like some water or hot tea?”

Her ravaged expression broke his heart. He hadn’t kept her from being attacked, but he’d do anything in his power to protect her now.

Hold up, there.

A cop doesn’t get personally involved with a victim. But this wasn’t just any anonymous victim. This was his neighbor. One he barely knew: yes. One he was attracted to? Hell, yes!

Nevertheless, the lines had blurred. He hadn’t been involved with a woman for a long time, and this one already hugely interested him. Of course, he doubted she’d appreciate his timing.

Make sure she's all right. Stay with her for half an hour. Then leave. Going any further with this is a bad idea. A really bad idea.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand and urging her to the couch. "Sit here while I get you some tea. You have tea, don't you?"

She turned into his arms. For a moment, she melted against him, her hands resting on his chest. Heat radiated from her body through their clothes all the way to his skin. He tightened his arms and brushed his lips across her forehead like he had in the alley.

Shit!

He wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

She glanced up at him. "Your lip's cut." She tentatively patted the abrasion. "I'm so sorry."

Licking his lip, he caught the taste of her finger before she lowered her hand. The muscles in his shoulders tensed. He wished he had a quick and easy way to soothe the turmoil in her light eyes.

Slow. Slow. Be careful with her.

"I need to take a shower." She changed the subject, her voice a raspy whisper. "You should go."

She clutched his T-shirt, her fingers like claws. It sounded like she wanted him out, but her cheek resting on his chest sent a slightly different message. "Go ahead and shower," he responded. "*Do* you have tea?"

Her eyes met his, and she nodded.

He'd never seen spellbinding silver gray eyes like hers before, and he lost his concentration for a moment.

"It's..."

"Go ahead." He forced his mind to the matter at hand. Tea. "I'll find it. The kitchen isn't that big." He smiled and caressed her cheek with his finger.

Christ.

His eyes closed in pleasure at the perfection of her soft skin. He wanted to kiss her, and that was exactly what she *didn't* need at this point. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't. Shouldn't. But he did nudge his nose into the shelter of her neck. She shivered. At least he thought it was her. It could have been him. She affected him, made him feel protective. His nature and job were to protect, so this shouldn't be any different. But it was. He didn't want to let her go.

"You can leave."

“Not yet. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

She studied him for a long moment, probably gauging his trustworthiness.

He winked and grinned. “You can trust me.”

She licked her lips in a nervous gesture, frowned, and drew in a quick breath.

“Come on,” he cajoled. “When have I ever let you down? In all the time we’ve known each other?” He wanted her to smile.

Trying hard to slow down the rush of adrenalin pounding through his body after the fight in the alley, he realized he clasped her arms too tightly. “Go ahead.” He gently peeled her fingers off his shirt. “You’re safe now,” he said, conveying all the confidence he could muster and hoping she didn’t spot his hard-on.

She turned and headed for the bathroom. Tottering, she caught herself on the door jam and threw a befuddled look over her shoulder.

“Do you need any help?” He raised his eyebrows in a hopeful expression, a half smile quirking his lips. Her eyes widened in alarm, then narrowed in anger. Ashamed he’d asked the question, he said, “I’m sorry, Liz. Don’t worry. I’ll make the tea.”

She paused a few seconds more, her eyes searching his.

“It’s okay. Go ahead.”

Way to go, you stupid putz. Spook her even more.

She must have decided he wasn’t likely to rape her, because the door clicked shut. He waited until he heard the toilet flush and the shower spray start before he went to work finding tea bags and a teapot. Engrossed in his thoughts, he leaned on the counter waiting for the water to boil and absently surveyed her house.

He exhaled a sigh of—of what? Home. Her house felt like a home. His own apartment wasn’t a rat hole. He’d lived in those. Sparsely furnished by the landlord, he hadn’t taken the time to add anything. Dreary and drab, though, in comparison to hers.

He felt an ache, an emptiness in his heart, and the feel of her place filled that hole. Obviously, she had excellent taste. He strode the short distance across the room and prowled along the book shelves. Running a forefinger over the neat spines, he recognized romances, mysteries, biographies and big picture books of foreign cities.

She owned a small TV. Of course, he didn’t have a big plasma screen himself, but he’d have to get her a bigger TV if he planned to spend any time here. Prickling on the back of his neck warned him. He’d been lost in his thoughts and hadn’t heard the shower stop or the bathroom door open.

Ho-lee... She was naked except for an oversized towel clutched to her breasts. Wet hair fell

to her shoulders and down her back. He knew that body, but she didn't know that. Wouldn't that just clinch him as a slime ball? His jaw tightened, hands fisted, his cock ached. To serve and protect. That was the Chicago cop motto, and her protection was his immediate concern.

Their eyes caught and held, hers now washed of all makeup but still wide with the remnants of shock. His chest burned with the need to breathe. He wanted her right now, injuries or not.

Slow down.

He ground his teeth in frustration. One signal from her, and he'd take this to the next step. The couch. Her bed in the loft. And he could think of wild things to do on those spiral stairs.

It became a staring contest, and she blinked first. A flush covered her cheeks, and she apparently realized her absence of clothing. Clasp the towel protectively, she backed into another room and closed the door with a firm click. He didn't move a muscle, staring at the doorway, hoping against hope she'd come out naked.

Right. That's going to happen.

Jerking when the teapot whistled, he turned back to his kitchen duties, but all senses attuned to another click from that door. Ah. He spied her in his peripheral vision. She'd barricaded herself in a thick green sweater from neck to mid-thigh. Black slacks, fuzzy socks, and her hair skinned back in a high ponytail completed the armored-up look. He'd seen this in mugging victims. The more clothes the better. He shivered. Thank God, she hadn't been raped.

"Sit down," he said soothingly, nodding toward the living room. "The tea's ready." She huddled tightly in the sofa's corner, black and green dark against the snowy background of the couch. He'd never known anyone with the nerve to have white furniture. Very impressive.

Her eyes followed his every move. "I don't know your last name or anything about you," she said awkwardly.

He handed her the steaming cup. "I don't know much about you either, so we're even," he said. "There's a lot of sugar in it. It's good for treating shock." He was too dirty to sit down on her furniture, so he leaned against the bookshelf, trying not to look menacing. She seemed more curious than afraid of him, certainly a step in the right direction.

She held her mug like a shield and watched him over the rim. "Do you want to sit down?" She sounded a bit more confident.

"Ah...no. I'm filthy." He indicated the alley dirt on his pants.

She placed her cup on one of the red leather coffee tables and said, "I'll get you a towel. How's that?"

God. She's not throwing me out. It was like the mugging hadn't happened, and they were on a date. He spread the big towel she handed him over the seat of the side chair. Even with the cloth under him, he didn't want to risk dirtying the couch. The chair put him closer to her, too. Leaning

back, he crossed one ankle over the other knee jiggling his foot nervously. He had a feeling she'd definitely kick him out if she knew what he'd seen through her bedroom window.

Drumming his fingers on the chair arm, he tipped his head toward the fireplace. "Electric?"

"Uh huh. Home Depot."

"Mm. Nice." He nodded slowly, his gaze flitting around the room, desperately trying to think of something else to say. Their gazes locked, hers dropping when his didn't. He studied her freely until her gaze, shimmery and still shocky, crept back to his. They remained staring at each other for a long moment.

He finally took a shaky breath and asked, "Are you feeling better?" The long silence had unnerved him.

Her lips parted, glistening from the swipe of her tongue.

That swipe shot right to his groin.

"I still don't know anything about you." She drew her knees up protectively in front of her chest and peered at him through long lashes.

Damn, back to the knees up as a barrier. Her signals were extremely mixed. He wasn't normally a big conversationalist, but he sensed as long as they kept talking, the easier she'd be with him. That would be to his advantage.

Get it through your head. She's not going to sleep with you tonight.

"So...?"

"So?" What had she asked?

"Who are you? Where are you from? Do you have family? You know, the usual stuff." She gave him a hint of an amused smile.

"My name's Sam Bolt."

"Bolt?" She choked off an outright laugh, her eyebrows lifting.

"Yeah." He chuckled, glad to entertain her, even at his own expense. It was her first smile, and it lit up her amazing eyes.

"It kind of sounds like a romance novel hero. At least it's not your first name. Bolt Stone, savage love god," she intoned, then tried to cover her rude snort with a cough.

He pursed his lips and nodded, as if seriously acknowledging her characterization, then ruined it by wiggling his eyebrows in a Groucho imitation.

She dropped her head against her knees, her shoulders shaking silently with laughter.

"I appreciate your confidence." And he chuckled, loving her sense of humor.

"Sorry." She laughed aloud. "So what do you do?"

Tactical guys tended not to advertise their jobs, but he wasn't going to lie to her. "I'm a cop."

"Oh, wow. You could have arrested that guy."

"Yeah, if I'd have caught him. Bastard sucker punched me," he admitted ruefully.

"Are you carrying a gun?"

He hesitated a moment. "Yup."

"Why didn't you take it out? That would have stopped him pretty fast."

"I'd only pull it as a last resort. You seemed to be beating up on him pretty good." His mouth quirked with humor.

"Well, yeah, until he punched me in the stomach. Shouldn't we report this?"

"Technically, yes, but even at the time, he was long gone. He didn't get your purse, and you weren't seriously injured."

Her lips pursed belligerently. "He ruined my Jimmy Choos."

"Your Jimmy whats?"

"Boots. They're designer boots."

"Did you get a look at him? The guy, I mean, not Jimmy Whatsis."

"Not really, did you?"

"Just his clothes. I can file a report in the morning. That'll make it official. Okay?"

"Sure, good idea. Thank you."

"So where were we?" His face ached from the sucker punch, but the adrenalin rush kept his cock hard and uncomfortably prominent. It took everything he had to sit still and keep it hidden. "What's your name?"

"Liz," she interrupted herself. "Oh, I didn't tell you my last name. I'm Liz Aspen. Elizabeth really."

"What do *you* do?"

"I'm an actress."

"Oh, yeah? That's great." He'd never met an actress. She certainly looked gorgeous enough. "What've you been in?"

“Local theater. I had a line in a movie once, though. Johnny Depp was filming here in Chicago, and I auditioned. “You want sauerkraut on your hot dog?” she said in a weary, fast food server tone.

He chuckled.

“You can see what a pivotal plot point it was. I thought about various ways to say it for the most impact. Should I be sultry, or business-like, or bored?”

“What’d you decide on?” He found himself amused and fascinated.

“Sultry.” She winked seductively. “He actually looked startled when he heard my rendition and couldn’t come up with his line. The director yelled “cut” and ordered me to dial it down. The scene ended up cut from the movie after all that, but I at least got a sexy look back from Johnny Depp!”

“Yeah?”

Fuck Johnny Depp. Probably wanted the same thing I want.

And weren’t things getting better and better? She seemed very comfortable with him now.

“Yeah, well... I guess you’d have to have been there.” She gave a little dry chuckle.

“Are you in something now?” Her lovely face became animated, her eyes sparkled, and well, he just loved to see her smile. She needed it after what she’d been through.

“I’m rehearsing at Nine Fools Theater for a play called *Tartuffe*.”

He nodded, he hoped knowingly, having no idea what play she was talking about.

“You know the depth of my affection for him; I’ve told you a hundred times how I adore him.”

He stopped in mid-nod when she continued.

“Shall I defend my love at the expense of brazenness and disobedience?”

“I play Mariane. She’s the heroine. It’s a challenge for me. I don’t usually do seventeenth century plays, but it’s been fun, too.”

Damn, she is way out of my league. Thanks for the reminder.

Ah. Time for a quick break. “Well, I gotta go,” he said, abruptly pushing out of the chair, hoping she didn’t focus in on his erection, still stiff as a pike. “If you ever need...anything, you can call me. Do you have something for me to write my number on?” He headed for the kitchen.

She levered herself up, too. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about me. I really appreciate what you did for me. Thank you.”

On a piece of paper, he penned his cell phone number. “Just call me if you need anything, okay?”

They met at the front door and reached for the knob at the same time. Even after the evening’s more recent events, he had a hard time not thinking about her earlier activities. He thought of her lying in her bed, naked and luscious, her long legs stretched open. Needing to do this as much as he needed air, he slid his arm around her waist, pulling her flush against his body. He wondered if she felt his hard-on through her heavy sweater. His other hand tunneled through her hair to finger the bump high on the back of her head.

She clutched at his lapels and winced, her eyes darkening in pain.

“I’m sorry.” His whisper elicited a moan, a soft sound deep in her throat, not desire but pain, writhed through his belly. He’d already wanted her—even before they’d met in that alley. He traced her jaw, the crest of her cheek, the bridge of her nose. He wanted to make it all better for her—no pain, no fear. She felt soft and firm at the same time. With his fingertip, he shaped the little dip in the middle of her upper lip. She smelled of delicately scented soap or lotion, of something delicious.

Her eyes flickered shut on a soft, “Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again. “I want to kiss you. I mean I’m not sorry I want to, I just need to kiss you.” She took a heavy breath that pushed her breasts against his chest. Her front teeth gleamed white as they dug into her lower lip. God, he wanted her mouth. With a throaty growl, he covered her lips with his, shaking with the effort to keep his tongue from spearing into her mouth. One attack tonight was enough. He brushed and nibbled her lips lightly, biting her lower lip with exquisite restraint.

She clutched his shirt. Her lips hungrily massaged his. He lost his battle.

The second his tongue entered her mouth, she stiffened, shaking her head, pushing at him. “No.” She turned, trying to get away.

He released her with a low groan, his breath rough.

“You’d better go.” She sounded as out of breath as he, breathless, but there was a firm edge to her voice.

After tasting her and the heavenly feel of her in his arms, he had no intention of letting this end. They hadn’t really begun, but they weren’t through by a long shot. No way. Making his reluctance clear, he murmured, “Okay. For now.” He lifted her chin with a finger and kissed the corner of her mouth. “Good night, Liz.”

He liked her, liked her home. She had a sense of humor. Savage love god? She was spirited, had fought for her life.

And, yeah, she had a sweet body. She made him want things he’d refused to allow himself to want since his wife split. Things he’d forced himself to put on hold.

No, he and Liz Aspen were not through.

Chapter 5

When Liz woke on Sunday morning, she felt as if she'd been run over by a truck. She dragged herself out of bed but only made it as far as the couch. Coffee and a heating pad on her stomach made her feel a bit better. Had last night really happened? Had she really been mugged and then saved by her delicious neighbor?

A shiver wound uncomfortably through her.

You were so irresponsible to walk down the street at night and put yourself in danger. You know better. Thank God for Sam.

She buried her face in her upraised knees.

She'd recognized him the minute he'd sauntered into the bar last night. He'd watched her but didn't approach. She hadn't known his name, but close up or from afar, he was definitely vibrator-worthy.

As nauseous as she'd been, she still checked him out in the cab coming home. Unshaven, his goatee blended into the dark stubble on his cheeks. His beard had brushed softly against her cheek when he stood close behind her, softly when he bent to kiss her at the door. He'd stared at her with shadowed, inky eyes as if he knew her well.

His beautiful lips had been cut and bloodied.

Oh, God, I caused that. I'm an idiot. I not only risked my life, I put his in danger.

He'd held her hair back while she vomited. How humiliating. The heat of embarrassment washed over her but became another heat when she remembered his gentle treatment of her. They'd fit, her head nestled safely on his chest. For a few magical moments, she'd been where she was supposed to be. "What the hell does *that* mean?" she muttered.

Then the compelling kiss at the door. Being held in his muscular arms, the heat of his body, the warmth of his breath bathing her face, felt so right—until he took it further. His slick tongue had filled her mouth, overwhelming her senses.

She hadn't been able to deal with it after everything that had happened. Sam Bolt was sensory overload personified. She didn't really know anything about this sexy man who could make her forget her name with one kiss. "Ahh..." A wonderful kiss.

“It’s time.” She could barely move. Time to get ready for Sunday dinner with her parents. Too late to cancel now, but it would take all her acting talents and expertise at makeup to disguise her haggard face, aching body, and weary spirit.

* * * *

“Why are you so distracted today, honey?” Bailey Quarles, her best friend and a much too perceptive, gorgeous, blond, six foot two hunk of masculinity, had a yen for men.

His concern scattered her deep thoughts, and she glanced at the script she’d absently used to fan her face.

“Did you meet someone?”

“Why do you say that?” She attempted a nonchalance, since she wasn’t sure what exactly to say about Saturday night.

“Because you keep sighing and drifting off.”

He’d freak out if he knew she’d been mugged after leaving the bar.

Perched in the wings while they ran lines, he elegantly crossed his legs and settled back in the folding chair, waiting for her response.

She tried distracting him. “Maybe I’m working out the scene in my mind.”

“Huh. Darlin’, you forget how well I know you. And I also know what sighing and drifting means.” He arched one eyebrow over his handsome face, a bit of business he used quite effectively on the stage and for sure in the gay bars as well.

“Well, I did finally meet my neighbor. The guy in the big house.”

“Oh, yeah.” He leaned forward and balanced his elbows on his knees anticipating a dishy story. “The dangerous, mysterious hunk? And?”

“Well, I’d seen him before, but we’d never talked.”

“What did you talk about? And would I like him?”

“Bailey, he’s all hetero, so don’t even think about it.”

His laughter echoed in the backstage area. “Honey, you sound pretty possessive. How cute is this guy?”

She couldn’t help chuckling, too. “Oh, all right, you got me. He’s really good looking, but it’s not so much that as it is his presence.”

Bailey’s gaze wandered out into the theater. He constantly surveyed his surroundings and

marked everyone's location. "His what?" He raised his eyebrow sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay. He's tall, dark, and diabolically sexy."

"Sounds like just what you need after that boring finance guy."

"You never liked Fred, did you?"

"Nope. He wasn't good enough for you." He put the emphasis on *you*.

"Thanks, Bail."

"Is this guy nice besides being a major hunk?" His questioning turned surprisingly serious.

She thought back to the man who'd held her hair back when she vomited. The man who rescued her and then made tea. "Yeah, he's nice." She gave a little smile. "Oh, and he's a police officer."

"Mm mm. Better and better. Handcuffs and what not. You must have made quite an impression on him."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I think he's in the back of the theater, Lizzy girl." He tipped his head in that direction. "I've been watching him look for you for the last ten minutes."

Her gaze followed Bailey's and *whoa!* Sam Bolt in the flesh. So to speak.

All day she'd daydreamed about him and his kiss, probably the main reason she'd had so much trouble remembering her lines. The kiss had almost made her forget about the attack. Her heart thumped with pleasure and some surprise that he'd sought her out. Surprise that he knew how to find her.

She'd created an erotic fantasy around him and actually meeting him hadn't tarnished it one iota. In fact, now his attractions had magnified. He'd been a kind and sensitive man wrapped in a buff body. Plunking the script on a table, she headed off the stage and strolled up the center aisle as if drawn to him by velvet ropes.

Whoa. Don't go there.

At least not yet.

His dark gaze roamed appreciatively over her, trailing from her head to her toes and back up. His lips quirked in a smile, and his long legs ate up the length of the aisle as he strode toward her, his unblinking gaze capturing hers. She salivated at every sensuous movement.

Black jeans encased long legs. What was it about black jeans on a man? He'd hooked his thumbs into the front pockets, which outlined the zipper placket. His hands seemed to cup a major bulge and called attention to his narrow hips and muscular thighs.

“Hello, Elizabeth,” he said with a trace of teasing humor.

He knew what she was looking at. Her poise faltered.

Elizabeth ?

Her gaze swept up to his masculine face, then narrowed. “Elizabeth?”

He winked, his lips quirked. She deserved that. She’d be pissed if he stared at her breasts. “Mr. Bolt.” She affected a queenly air.

The sophistication of his starched white dress shirt and buttery-soft, black leather jacket was an amazing contrast to his jeans. He couldn’t have looked sexier with his thick black hair and neatly trimmed goatee.

“Hi.” He cupped her shoulders and kissed her.

The touch of his mouth electrified her. He had to know they had an audience, but it didn’t deter him. Word of this would be all over the theater, even the whole theater community, in short order.

He slid his tongue along the seam of her lips. Her mouth opened on a gasp, and she automatically tightened her grip in warning. Part of her wanted to throw caution to the winds and fall into the pleasure settling so at home in her sexual pulse points. But enough was enough.

He set her back, sliding his palms down her arms until he held her hands. His large, leather textured palms engulfed her.

“Well, Mr. Bolt. What brings you here?”

“I came to take you to dinner. Can you take off?”

“Dinner?” The simple dinner invitation sent tendrils of heat across her skin. “How did you find me?”

“You mentioned the name of the theater last night.”

“And you remembered? A man who listens? That’s impressive.”

“Glad I could impress.” He grinned rakishly.

Damn, he’s a gorgeous man.

She didn’t think any actor in Chicago looked this dark, dangerous, and sexy.

“Yeah, dinner. Can you go?”

“Um, okay.” She stepped back, needing the space to regain some composure. What was harder was dragging her gaze from the dynamic compulsion in his chocolate brown eyes. Eyes that sizzled hot and sparkled with humor. How the hell could he throw her so off kilter? “Sure, I

can leave any time. Just give me a minute to freshen up.”

She changed clothes quickly while giving Bailey the scoop. Back at Sam’s side in only twenty minutes, she liked his approving grin. Black leggings, a mint green, silk camisole top, and her ruby red, fake fur, crop jacket happened to be one of her favorite outfits. And black and white hounds-tooth spike heels made it even sexier.

“Colorful outfit.” With an appreciative grin, he offered his arm. “You look great.”

“So do you.” She ran a finger down the starched placket of his shirt. The movement brought her breast in contact with his arm, and she could feel the ache even through all the layers of clothing.

He stilled, watching her finger, then tipped his head to hold her gaze.

She inhaled sharply at his sensuality, and then felt another heat behind her. Sam confirmed it, finally glancing up.

“Lizzie, honey, are you going to introduce us?”

She lowered her finger. Bailey, that troublemaker. Amused, she responded without relinquishing Sam’s gaze, “Sam this is my friend, Bailey Quarles. Bailey, this is Sam Bolt.”

The two men shook hands. Being gay certainly didn’t cancel out Bailey’s testosterone. Of course, he would be assessing Sam’s fitness, physically, as well as for boyfriend material.

“Where’re you two going for dinner?” Bailey gazed at Sam.

His gaze might reveal a bit more lust than Sam would be comfortable with, but his response would be interesting since Bailey was her best friend. Sam was a cop, and some of them weren’t known for being tolerant.

To her relief, Sam smiled easily. “Café Rusticus.”

“Oh, good choice,” Bailey affirmed. “Have a good time, kids.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek.

She sighed with relief. So far her friend seemed to approve of Sam.

On the way out, Sam winked, his lips quirked in a victorious grin as if he knew he’d passed a test.

He’d wanted her last night but had been sensitive enough to control himself. She’d just been mugged, after all. Tonight might bring a different outcome. Or not.

* * * *

Café Rusticus, a lovely little Italian restaurant just west of the Loop, was popular with local politicians and visiting celebrities. The maitre d' apparently knew Sam and escorted them to a corner booth. Instead of sitting opposite each other, he nudged her over so they sat on the same side. His hands rested warmly on her bare shoulders for a moment when he slid her jacket off. His gaze held bad boy vibes along with warm appreciation. He put her in mind of a soft bed, cool sheets, and his muscular body caging her in. She'd have to simmer down or combust, but she loved watching this rough-edged looking man play nice.

Chapter 6

A trio of thick candles flickering at the center of the table provided romantic lighting. The sounds of Andrea Boccelli serenaded softly in the background. Soft lighting, lovely music, and a handsome man gave her a warm, pampered feeling. Still, a little warning tickled, though. She didn't really know that much about him, and more importantly, didn't intend to become involved with another man too quickly.

When their drinks arrived, Sam tapped her wine glass with his beer mug. "I never developed a taste for wine. I don't drink hard liquor either. But food I like. All kinds."

"You look to be in pretty good shape." She sipped her wine.

To say the least. But this wasn't her first date with a hunky man. "Do you work out?"

"Yeah, I run."

"Nice. Not all Chicago cops are in shape."

He suddenly slid his hand over her waist, palm flat over her stomach.

She swallowed back a startled gasp at his intimacy. But the heat in his touch, close to her sex, sent her senses into overdrive. Into hyperventilation range.

Breathe.

"You feel like you're in pretty good shape yourself." His warm breath bathed her cheek, and he sounded like a roughly purring lion.

"Thank you," she murmured. Her temperature spiked at the intoxicating feel of his body. She lifted a hand to his chest but dropped it back onto the table. If she touched him again, she might want to slip her hand inside his shirt and feel the... Would his chest be smooth or hairy? As if it mattered. *Warning. Warning. Stay in control.*

He tipped up her chin with a long forefinger, his gaze lingering on her eyes then her mouth. "You can touch. It won't hurt me." His whisper was hushed, soft lips brushing over the corner of her mouth.

"It might hurt me," she whispered back, caught by the intensity in his dark eyes.

"I'll fix it." His lashes lowered, lips parted signaling a kiss.

"Ma'am? Sir?"

She swung a startled gaze to the waiter. Hovering over the booth, he held up two plates of hot food and grinned. "Sam." She nudged his shoulder, nodding toward the waiter.

"Mmm." His gaze locked on hers for a moment more. "Okay, okay, we'll eat now. Play later."

That certainly sounded like a promise. "Let's back this off a little," she warned. "It's just dinner." He didn't need to know how he tantalized her. His cockiness quotient already spiked pretty high.

"So," he continued as if they hadn't practically been on top of each other. "Are you from Chicago?"

"Yeah. My folks live on the northwest side. This is delicious." She indicated her entrée.

"Do you have brothers? Sisters?"

"One sister, a year older. You?"

"Two brothers," he replied, emptying the bottle of beer into his mug.

Finally, some information. "In Chicago?"

"Unh hunh."

"Where'd you go to high school?"

It's like pulling hen's teeth. Hopefully, he'll add in another word here and there.

"St. Barnabas."

"You're kidding! I went to St. Malphius." She laughed. "What a coincidence."

"St. Mal was our sister school. We lived just down the street. What year did you graduate?"

"Ninety-seven. You?"

"Ninety-nine." He lifted an eyebrow in amusement. "I guess I'm younger."

"So, you're kind of like a little brother," she teased.

"Not likely, lady." His lopsided smile and the waggle of his eyebrows said differently.

Oh, God, he's definitely not like a little brother.

He brushed his fingers along her jaw and cradled her face.

"What are you...?" Warily, she searched his suddenly very close eyes.

Before she finished asking, his beard brushed her chin, and he kissed her, infusing her senses with a creamy Alfredo taste. His moan reverberated through her heart. It was amazing that such a powerful man could kiss so delicately, so unsettlingly.

Her fingers tightened around his wrist. At first she meant to push him away but, in the end, held on. He didn't press it, just kept up a gentle and consumingly passionate pressure. This man could break her heart. Could she risk the pain?

Even so, she melted against him, his intensity comforting and frightening her at the same time. He cupped her neck, massaging it, his palm hot on her skin. She rested her hand on his chest, his heart pounding against it.

Slowly, slowly, they each backed off. The kiss ended, their lips barely touching. Maybe the intensity had become too much. For her part, however charming and sexy he was, she didn't want to move that fast tonight. She needed to make it clear. Maybe dial this down a notch.

"Sam, are you married?" Her question was blunt, but it needed to be asked.

"Not now."

"Are you divorced?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure?"

He lifted her chin and gave her a serious look. "Liz, I'm not married now. I wouldn't lie about that."

"Because cop or not, I'd kill you if I found out otherwise." She only half meant the threat.

"It's not easy being a cop's wife. Especially undercover. Our hours aren't regular, and we dress like hell." He gave her a disarming smile.

"Not to mention the danger," she added.

"Right. The danger. And uncertainty. I don't blame her."

"Do you have kids?"

"No, thank God."

"You don't like them?"

"Oh, I like them. I just wouldn't want mine to be from a broken home." Drawing a deep breath, his gaze seemed to be elsewhere, distracted, his eyes sad.

"I'm sorry, Sam. Whatever the problems were, it's always hard to break up a marriage."

"How about you?" An appreciative smile eased onto his face. "Married? Engaged? Being an actress, you must have a lot of men trailing you."

She leaned forward, giving him a faux stern look. "Well, I don't know what you think about actors, but we don't all sleep around," she scolded.

He held up both palms as in *I surrender*. “I didn’t mean that. I’m just asking.”

Well, I suppose it had to come out. “A few months ago, my boyfriend moved out of town.”

“Damn. Were you serious?”

“Yup.” She felt a tiny twinge, but it didn’t hurt as much to talk about it as she thought. “He made some snarky remarks about my career. Maybe he would have been happier if I’d been a Hollywood star or on Broadway. As it was, Chicago theater wasn’t good enough for him.” She didn’t try to suppress her bitterness.

“You’re kidding. What an asshole.”

She laughed aloud, warmed by his sympathy. “That’s okay. He *was* an asshole. Bailey warned me about him from day one.”

“Didn’t like this guy?”

“Nope, but then he probably doesn’t believe anyone’s good enough for me.”

“What about me?”

“The jury’s still out on that, no doubt, but he certainly thought you were...well, hot.” She gave him an admiring once over.

He chuckled. “Well, unlike some cops, I’m not freaked out by gays. But he wouldn’t want to try anything, either.”

She grinned. “I can’t promise he won’t, but I’ll try to protect you.”

“Does that mean you’ll keep on seeing me?” he asked, suddenly very serious.

“Time will tell, buddy. Time will tell.” She smiled, though, to give him some sort of encouragement.

At her door, she let him know she had an early rehearsal.

He didn’t bother hiding his disappointment, but didn’t push it either. Sliding his fingers up into her hair, he touched the bump on her head. “Do you still have a headache?”

“No.” She winced. “But it does hurt when you press on it.”

“I’m sorry.” He gently cupped her head and kissed her temple. “You’re sure I can’t come in?”

She snickered, amused by his persistence. “Good try, pal, but no. Not tonight.”

“Another night then.”

There was no mistaking the certainty in his voice. She also accepted the fact that she wanted

more with him, too.

* * * *

Liz answered her cell on her way out of the theater the next evening.

“Pizza tonight?”

“Sam?” She hadn’t recognized the number.

“Yeah. How about pizza? I’ll pick it up and meet you at your door.”

She hesitated, not because she didn’t want to see him, but not sure of what she might be getting into. This wasn’t like Fred’s sedate courtship, but then look what had become of that.

“Do you have plans?” His interruption brought her back from the past.

“Um, no, as a matter of fact.”

“It’s just pizza.” He echoed her from the night before. “I’ll bring beer, too.”

“Well, okay,” she finally agreed.

“I’ll pretend that was more enthusiastic than it sounded.”

Laughing at his sarcasm, she said, “Okay, see you in about an hour.”

“You bet! What do you want on it?”

“Anything but onions and anchovies.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

* * * *

When Liz opened the door, he kissed her on the cheek, handed her the pizza box, and joked, “Honey, I’m home.” He put a six pack of beer in the fridge, opened two cans and handed one to her. Taking a sip, he asked, “What’d you do today?”

“It was a long day of rehearsals. This is nice.” She indicated the pizza. “I probably would have just had cereal and toast. How about you? Arrest anyone today?”

“No, just did paperwork.”

She moaned in pleasure at the first bite. “Good pizza. It’s just what I needed after a hard day

on a hot stage.”

“So, to repeat my question of last night...”

“Yes, and that was?” She knew exactly what he meant.

“You’ll keep on seeing me?”

It was a surprisingly hesitant question coming from a man who looked like he did and acted so confidently. His dark gaze, full of tension and question, locked with hers. Pizza forgotten. Beer forgotten. Everything disappeared as he leaned forward and brushed a fingertip along her jaw.

“Hm?” His frown hinted at a bit of self doubt, a bit of vulnerability.

“Yes.” She felt about as susceptible. Damn. Even being an actress hadn’t prepared her for this love scene.

Come here.” He took her hand, pulling her onto his lap. “I’ve been waiting hours to do this right,” he murmured. Softly, his mouth closed over hers.

Her lips parted on an indrawn breath, his tongue seemed to melt into her mouth, filling it, exploring, plundering it with increasing heat. She wouldn’t stop him. Couldn’t. The carnal sounds rumbling from his throat and his hungry kisses beguiled her. A raw moan escaped her throat, and she responded, winding her tongue around his, exploring his mouth with lush, penetrating movements

His fierce embrace, the muscles of his hard chest when she slid her arms around his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair, electrified her. He was good. Very, very good.

He wrapped a palm around her breast, the heat of it searing through her clothes.

Arching against him, she sobbed, “Yes.”

He took her mouth again, opening it wide, suctioning her tongue, caressing it.

Wildly, she yanked at his shirt, pulling it from his waistband to get to his skin.

He grunted sharp, hot puffs of breath against her cheek and nipped, with stinging bites, the sensitive skin of her neck.

Senses assaulted on every level, her arousal blossomed with his plundering of her mouth, with his palm embracing her breast, with the electrifying graze of his teeth over tender skin. She squirmed, her nipples prickling painfully against the soft silk of her bra. She whimpered, felt her sex softening and opening, wanting to be filled.

Jesus.

Her need grew desperate, agonizing.

He suckled at the hollow of her throat, up the center to her chin, the sharp nips excruciatingly

erotic. Heat exploded in her, melting her muscles and sizzling through every vein as his swollen erection pressed on her hip. “I want you inside me.” He hadn’t even touched her there, at her core, but that’s where she wanted him. Her nails dug into the muscles of his shoulders.

“Yes...naked,” he rasped.

“Unh hunh.” Her breathing fractured, became a sob.

He slid her top up and off, tossing it over his shoulder. Unhooking the front closure of her bra, he gazed open-mouthed. “So beautiful,” he said in an erotic purr. He licked the tips of her breasts with big, wide sweeps of his tongue. Around and around he traced, until that sweet mouth of his latched onto her sensitive nipple.

“Oh!” His teeth raked her nipple, then he soothed it with the wet, silky heat of his mouth. She tightened her grip in his thick hair, imprisoning his head with a frenzied strength. “Yesss.”

Acute sensations connected her nipples and sheath, flooded her nerve endings. She whimpered when he pushed her away, not understanding why.

Abruptly, he stood her up between his knees and roughly tugged her pants down.

“Oh, shit, a thong,” he intoned reverently. “God damn...”

“Sam.” she moaned, a thick finger spearing inside her. Then, two. Or three? “OhGodohGod.” She bore down, her thrusting hips begging for more. He pumped slowly, deeply, filling her, twitching his fingers inside her, grunting with every thrust. He continued drawing on her nipples while his fingers stayed buried far up inside her. The wet, sucking sounds and the scent of her juices infusing the air aroused her more. She shuddered in counterpoint to his thrusts, faster and faster. “Please...” she chanted.

“Easy, baby. I’ll get you there.”

“Oh, damn,” she sobbed.

His thumb slid against the underside of her clit, along one side, then the other. Up and down, round and round until she stiffened and cried out at the beginning of her orgasm. The walls of her vagina violently clenched around his fingers relentlessly massaging the sensitive spot deep inside.

A scream locked in her lungs, guttural moans coming out instead. His mouth closed again over hers, suckling her tongue, pulling her cries into his mouth. She rocked in his arms, clutched his hair. He lavished her mouth with kisses, his lips soft and moist, slipping back and forth over hers. When she fell limply against him, his fingers left her body. She wanted more. As if he did too, he picked her up and carried her up the spiral stairs to her bedroom. Without hitting her on the metal. Very talented.

Chapter 7

Sam high fived himself at giving her devastating orgasm. Settling her on the bed, he stood over her, taking a good long look. He grinned. She was wrecked, almost naked except for her slacks and the scrap of lacy thong wrapped around her knees.

“Baby,” he murmured, pulling them off. “Your breasts...”

Her chest expanded shakily as she lowered her eyes to her own breasts. When she looked up again, he was mesmerized by her astonishingly light eyes. Glazed eyes that she closed in passion.

“...are awesome,” he finished.

Her eyes lazily opened, and she giggled. “Awesome?”

Shit. Awesome. What are you? Fourteen?

“Yeah, awesome.” He quirked a grin. She affected him in ways he thought long gone. Moonlight shone through the window, the pearly glow of her breasts and belly contrasting with dark nipples all pointy tight. She was so much more beautiful in person and in the flesh.

He watched as he brushed a knuckle into her belly button and over the gentle swell of her belly to the dark, curly hair between her thighs. “What a pretty pussy,” he murmured.

She moaned, her hips surging.

Caressing, gently yanking the strands, he curved his fingers into her crease, swirling them around her clit, plying her hot cream through the furrow, and wetting every inch. So much wetness. He marveled at her amazing responsiveness. His middle finger circled her opening and slipped inside. “Ahh...” He almost wept at the feeling. His lips parted, his eyes closed at the pleasure in her sheath, still all wet and soft from before. She convulsed around his finger, again, so soon. Still.

She gasped sharply, turning it into a rough, sustained moan. Shifting restlessly, her hips bucked. “Sam, yesss.”

He drew his finger out. She panted when he slid it over the bud, burrowing two drenched

fingers along each side of her clit. She wasn't done.

Good. Neither was he.

She gripped the sleeves of his shirt. "More..." she growled, whispery soft.

Christ.

"Undress me, honey," he ordered. "Take my shirt off." He fingered her clit again for incentive.

She whimpered, her mouth opening wide.

"Don't worry, baby." She squeezed her eyes closed and shook her head in distress. "I'll come back. That's a promise."

Unsteadily, she sat up and knelt on the bed in front of him. Her hands shook, her upper teeth nipped at her lower lip, but she unbuttoned his shirt without a fumble. Sliding it off his shoulders, she splayed her fingers caressingly over his chest, pressing and flicking his nipples, plucking them with sharp fingernails.

"Jesus." He angled his head so he could gaze down his nose and watch her in action. Her tongue snaked out, and she took turns suckling each flat, sensation-loaded point into her mouth. He shuddered, his belly muscles jerking at the almost unbearable pleasure. She paused, peering up at him from inches away, those light eyes luminously sparkling. He gazed back, breathing like a racehorse through flared nostrils. Apparently, she liked what she saw, because she bent again and tongued him. He sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. God, he didn't remember it feeling so good. Tipping his head back, he groaned loudly when she bit one button center and rocked it between her teeth.

"Liz..." He burrowed his hands on her nape, under her hair, and cupped her head, urging her gaze up to his. "Take off my pants. Now." He stood, kicked off his boots while she unbuckled his belt and unzipped him. His jeans dropped like stones.

She didn't hesitate, first tracing questing fingertips over the erection straining the front of his black cotton briefs, then wrapping her hand firmly around his prick.

"...feels good."

She slid her hands around his hips, catching in the elastic waistband.

He groaned at the loss of her hot fingers on his hotter cock. "Baby..."

When his shorts went downward, his cock sprang out. He felt seared hot and rigid as a telephone pole. "Fuck, baby." Yeah, he needed to fuck her fast. But something kept him from pushing her back onto the bed. He had to see what she'd do next.

She took his cock in both hands, held it tightly, rolled it between her palms. He watched her soft, white hands circle his blood-engorged prick. It felt so good he wanted to bawl.

“Shit...” His breathing quickened and he begged, “Suck me...” Some women didn’t like to do it, but God, he wanted to fuck her mouth, wanted to watch her take it deep, wanted to feel her hot tongue playing with him. His pulse raced with anticipation. “Please, baby, I want to see your sweet mouth around my cock.”

She gave a little sob then glanced up at him, her mouth open and ready for him. The tip of her tongue wetted her lips, maybe to tease him? His hips thrust involuntarily.

“You want me to suck you? Like this?” she crooned, her voice soft and breathy. She extended her tongue to touch the tip of his cock, catching the drop of pearly fluid oozing there.

He inhaled sharply and groaned. His cock throbbed, becoming stiffer than he would have thought possible. “Yeah, please.”

She licked her lips.

He closed his eyes briefly at the exquisite anticipation but snapped them open. He didn’t want to miss a second of this. Gazing expectantly down the flat plane of his body, he locked his knees. It wouldn’t do to fall down now.

“I’m going to slide your cock in my mouth,” she whispered the promise. “And suck you.” Then with a soft, very erotic cry, she enclosed the wide head between her lips and swirled her tongue over the tip, around and around, dipping into the slit.

“Jesus.” It wasn’t a prayer. Well, maybe it was. A prayer that she wouldn’t stop the shockingly intense, sensual blow job. She buried him as far as she could, worked wetly and noisily at the length of his shaft, her head bobbing until he lost his mind. Her tongue tortured him, twitching over the sensitive vein along the underside of his dick. He removed one of his hands from her scalp and circled the base of his cock. He had to squeeze himself, the pressure unbearable.

She pried his hand off and replaced it with both of hers, clasping the shaft, swirling her tongue over his cock head.

“Jesus, my balls,” he gasped, gripping her scalp with both hands.

So good at following directions, she gently plumped his nuts in the warm cradle of her hand.

“God damn. You little witch.” His voice rasped, his heart pounded wildly, dizzying him as the blood drained from his brain to his cock, pooling and broiling in his groin. Her head bobbed intermittently, suctioning fiercely then gently tonguing the slit. He didn’t know what she’d do next.

“Baby...unh...oh God...” His hips jerking, he twined his fingers tightly in her hair, panting loudly. Semen churned from deep inside his balls up through his shaft, and, with excruciating intensity, shot blistering, thick cum down her throat.

Roaring, he thought he’d never stop coming. And, God love her, she took what felt like every

gallon of it, her suctioning and circling tongue continuing to torment him. Her palm followed his rapidly tightening balls until she held them securely against his groin, fingers massaging the sensitive spot behind them. "God damn," he exclaimed in a shaky, husky voice. "You don't have to swallow it, honey." He gently caressed her cheeks. "Just spit it out. I'll clean it up...holy, sweet God..." Clinging to his cock, she breathed rapidly through her nose, the faint whistling causing his body to buck at another surge of pleasure. But he had nothing more to shoot.

Her mouth slowly slid off his tender cock, that feeling re-igniting his arousal. The hand holding his balls opened and dropped slowly to caress his inner thigh.

She buried her face against his thigh, and in a hushed voice said, "I don't need to spit it out."

Say what? She swallowed...?

He dropped to his knees and cupped her shoulders. "Liz, baby..." He still wasn't in control of his voice.

She slid her fingers through her hair, holding it back. Eyes wide, she peered dazedly at him.

"Damn!" He hadn't had a blow job in a long time and never one this good.

She whimpered, her face contorted.

He tipped up her chin. "What's wrong?"

"It...w-was... Oh, Sam," she cried, throwing her arms around his neck, bringing her body up until the softness of her breasts collided with his hard chest.

He gathered her shivering body in a possessive embrace. "Baby." He kissed the top of her head, her ear, the side of her neck. She dug at his shoulders, her sharp nails scoring him. He nibbled his way along her jaw and up to her salty, wet lips. "Don't cry." Her lips grazed against his.

"God, that was good." *Christ. Just let me get the sonofabitch up again. Soon.*

"Your turn, sweetheart." Reaching behind her, he pulled off the quilt, and pushed her down onto the sheets. He stretched out over her and kissed her again. The earthy taste of his cum, the carnal scent of him on her skin aroused him. Not that he needed any help in that department. He deepened his kiss, his tongue swiping in every corner of her mouth, thoroughly possessing her. He wasn't sure he'd ever been so enthralled by a woman's lips before.

God, he needed to sleep, but he wanted to show his appreciation. Kneeling between her legs, ass resting on his heels, he hiked up her knees. Caressingly kneading her sleek inner thighs, he opened them to the sight he'd been hungering for. In the dark, he imagined her swollen clit throbbing like his cock. She cried out when his fingers speared through her molten juices, his thumbs capturing the sweet little nub and stroking it.

"Oh, Sam, yes..." Her hips jerked. She met his gaze, her mouth open, silently pleading for more.

He groaned at her aroused female musky scent. Circling her hole with his forefinger, he dipped it in shallowly once, twice, keeping his movements random, becoming addicted. Toying with her. Wanting to fuck her. Please, God, let him be ready. His finger burrowed in deeper. He watched it, swirled it around just inside the rim of her vagina, felt her muscles clamp on.

“Jesus, baby.”

She moaned when he drew her clit into his mouth. Suckling, swallowing her juices, he stroked her with his tongue, increasing the friction when he felt her body stiffen.

“God, Sam, please...please come inside me,” she begged.

He could not believe how hard he was, how fast he'd recovered. Widening her thighs, he lifted them over his arms. In the space of a heartbeat, he thrust into her--one smooth, long plunge until their short and curls mingled. Until his balls slapped her bottom. “Yeah, baby.” He couldn't hold back a guttural groan, arching his back and suspending motion, locked inside her, his eyes screwed shut.

God, she was tight. He didn't know how long he could last. Her passage pulsated, clutching him.

“God, Sam. You're so...big.”

Gasping on a proud chuckle, he bumped her hips up higher.

“Yessss,” she cried.

He didn't think he could go any deeper, but his cock lengthened. She held him in, her silken sheath contracting, milking his dick.

She swiveled her hips, and grabbed the backs of her thighs pulling them higher. “More.”

The sound of her order did it. It had been too long. She wanted him to fuck her. He wanted to fuck her. He slowly pulled out.

Her head rolled back and forth on the pillow, her face contorted in agony. “No, no...”

He groaned, thrusting back in, plunging to the hilt. In pure reflex, his hips rolled and pumped, driving again and again.

Deafened by the blood pounding in his ears, nothing mattered but the feel of every exquisite, slippery inch of her sheath gripping and pulsating around his cock. “Now...now,” he murmured. He pulsed, filling her deeply in a searing explosive release.

“Shit!” he exclaimed, his voice distressingly raw.

Holy God in heaven!

He'd come inside her. No condom. He collapsed on top of her. Her eyes opened in shock at

his weight. He immediately rolled them to their sides, still connected.

Shitshitshit!

He berated himself, and still he cuddled her closer until her soft moans calmed and her breathing evened.

If I'm so devastated, then why don't I pull out?

Chapter 8

Rumbles of thunder woke Sam before dawn. He crawled out of Liz's bed and stood for a minute gazing down at the sleeping woman. Lush and warm sprawled on her stomach, her long legs stretched from her sweet, round bottom and tempted him to crawl right back in. Her ass invited nibbling, and he'd done plenty of *that* during the night. He didn't want to leave.

It had been like a fantasy, an orgy of pleasure. One of those *Penthouse Forum* letters: spy on beautiful woman masturbating, plot to meet her, stroke every inch of her soft body to orgasm.

He closed his eyes, reliving that moment when she took him in her mouth, that moment when he became most vulnerable. A guy never knew how it would turn out. Some said there was no such thing as a bad blow job. Well, that's true, but there *were* variations. When she sucked him off, nothing had ever been like that before. His cock throbbed hungrily, hardening inconveniently.

Not now.

She rolled restlessly to her side then unconsciously scootched away from the wet spot on the bed.

God, what did I do?

No condom. The whole night—no condom. What an idiot. The first time had been a mistake, the rest of the times just God damn stupid. What had he been thinking to put both of them at risk? He'd wanted her so much, had been overwhelmed from the moment he saw her, so consumed with lust. They'd just met, but the mugging, their date—all somehow speeded up their intimacy.

Ugh. Now I'm getting into girlie words. I have to get out of here.

He carefully pulled the comforter over her, reluctantly giving up the view of her pretty ass. He had a buy, and if he didn't leave now, he'd never make it.

Shit, shit, shit.

So he left her a note. "I'm sorry," it said. "I didn't use a condom. We'll talk later. I've got to go to work." Creeping down the spiral stairs, bitching to himself, he acknowledged this was the first time in his life, outside of marriage, he'd done it without protection. She'd been fantastic, and he was a bastard.

He didn't want to shower when he got back to his apartment to change clothes, the scent of her on his body too potent. He wanted to carry it around with him all day to remind him he was human. To remind him of the other side of life, the side without drug dealers and guns and death.

Jeans, cowboy boots, T-shirt, denim jacket, and Sox cap represented his undercover persona. He wore a holstered .45 service revolver on his right hip hidden by the jacket. His .38 caliber snub-nose, five-shot was clipped inside his waistband on the left side. He tucked his police star inside his boot. The fantasy-come-true of fucking Liz had distracted him, but now, in real life, he had a job to do.

He never parked anywhere nearby his home. After slipping from the back door of the Victorian, he jogged the four blocks in the drizzling rain to pick it up. On the way, he reviewed his plan.

KISS. Keep it simple stupid. Meet up with the drug carrier and identify the money man. The plan wasn't to rush to arrest the mules, he needed to get closer to the dealer. Going it alone, without police backup, was not only dangerous, but a career killer, against all established procedure. But he had his reasons. Maybe the wrong ones, but they were personal. One way or the other, he intended to take down the dealer who'd put Petey in a coma. He thought of those old Western wanted posters. "Wanted dead or alive." Dead came first for a reason.

Then maybe he could get on with his life.

* * * *

"Madison, you're late."

"Parking." Sam threw out the offhanded remark when he strode through the front door of the dingy diner. Even criminals had to deal with traffic and parking. Tommy Kane, looking like a nerdy accountant type with his short, greasy hair, had all the brains and money needed to be the boss. Kane's innocent sounding name completely misrepresented him. But then his own undercover name, Sam Madison, didn't sound too terrifying either. You'd think they were just two buddies out for a good time, but they carried cut narcotics for delivery to the money man.

"Why do you put up with that old rattletrap?"

He rubbed his thumb against his fingertips. "Cash, man. Maybe after today I can afford a chauffeur."

"You got a lady now, Madison?"

His stomach jolted, praying they wouldn't find out about Liz. "Lots of 'em."

"Yeah, spread it around." Looking for a laugh, Tommy leered at his henchmen. He occupied the back booth of the down-and-out diner, while his people sat at the counter and surrounding

tables, none of them close enough to overhear anything Tommy didn't want heard.

Sam slid into the booth and ran his fingers through his hair and brushed them over his beard. *Liz*. He could smell her on his hands. Smoothing his fingers over his mustache to keep the scent close, he wanted to hang on to it as long as he could.

Shit! Focus, man.

"Coffee, Madison?"

"No. We need to get this done. I don't want to spend all day on it."

"You got something better to do? Maybe get back to the old lady?"

He frowned, staring through the diner's grungy picture window as a woman huddling under an umbrella skittered past. He needed to deflect Tommy's sudden attention to his love life. His blood ran cold at the fear Tommy knew where he lived. "Yeah, sure, I'll have to decide which one."

"Franklin." Tommy beckoned to a foot soldier on a stool at the counter. "Go get that babe, and bring her back for Sam."

Fuck. He was actually a little afraid of the big ox. Franklin wasn't stupid, the goon just smart enough to be extremely unpredictable and dangerous. Built like a professional wrestler, his neck supported a bullet-shaped skull covered in crusted sores. Sam slid out of the booth faster than Franklin could get his ass off the stool. "Hey, I can get my own women. I don't need a moron like Franklin doing my trolling."

"Why don't you go get her? I'd like to see how you operate." Kane nodded a disappointed Franklin back onto the stool.

"Tommy, I don't want her now." He tried to cover his exasperation. "I just want to do this exchange. Women can wait."

"Well, if you don't want her, maybe I'll send Franklin to get her for later."

Fuck. He didn't want that asshole Franklin approaching an innocent woman. "Franklin 'll just scare her off with his gruesome face," he said dismissively.

"Hey! Who you calling gruesome, fucker?" Franklin charged off his stool.

He stuck his palm out. Franklin slapped it down. The creep weighed more than Sam, but Sam had the height. And the smarts. He took his advantage and slammed the shithead against the wall. "I'm calling you gruesome, and I'm gonna keep on doing it until I get tired of it." He gave a final push then pretended to dust off Franklin's lapels. "Leave the woman alone." He glared into the goon's eyes. "There's plenty where that came from, and, after this deal, we'll all have enough for any woman we want."

"Stop it, you two. They're here."

Glancing out the window, he saw a black stretch roll past the diner and turn into the alley two buildings down.

Show time.

The diner emptied in record time with Sam, Tommy, and Franklin going out the front, the rest out the back door. They pulled up their collars, the rain pelting down heavily now. Sidling down the block, they turned the corner into the alley. Bad guys sure loved dirty, stinking alleys. The minute the limo door opened, a well-dressed man emerged.

Dominguez. Petey's dealer. He finally found him. Dominguez probably wouldn't recognize him after all these years, but he'd know the fucking bastard anywhere. Tamping down his emotions—now wasn't the time for them—he watched Tommy approach Dominguez, watched as Dominguez's gaze swept the alley. It stopped at Sam.

Sam stared back through the pummeling rain. Recognition dawned in the other man's eyes. Then everything went to hell.

"Fuck," Sam muttered as he drew his .45 and backed toward the mouth of the alley. This op was over. Dominguez had recognized him. He hadn't forgotten that beating. Sam didn't figure he would've.

Wouldn't you know, the ever suspicious Tommy Kane turned and mouthed, "What the hell...?"

Sam didn't take his eyes off Dominguez. That's where the order would come from. Dominguez hesitated only a second before he shouted for his bodyguard to shoot.

The bodyguard took aim. Too far from the mouth of the alley to escape, he heard the foomp of the silencer. It wasn't true a silencer made no sound.

Backing up quickly, he felt the sting of a round plowing across his upper arm. He heard the one that whizzed past his ear at the same time he felt the burning path in his scalp. Franklin finally got the picture and drew his 9mm. He hated Sam and didn't need an excuse to gun for him.

Before the shots stopped echoing off the surrounding brick walls, he'd slipped around the corner out of the alley.

Well, that went all to fucking hell. The reality slammed into him. *You've just made the biggest mistake of your life by doing this without backup.* A quick glance over his shoulder assured him no one was behind him.

He had to get out of there. Now!

In seconds, someone would come from the alley. Running along the sidewalk, he stayed close to the buildings until he came to a doorway. He didn't care where it went, he had to get out of sight. Unfortunately, in the tiny vestibule of an apartment building, and, through the dirty glass door, he'd be in sight of anyone on the street. Ringing buzzers, he knew someone inevitably

would blindly buzz him in.

Thank you, God. He prowled a hallway that couldn't be seen from the front door. An apartment door opened, and a woman's curly gray head appeared around the frame.

"Get back inside," he snapped. "And lock the door. Don't come anywhere near it again." He hoped she'd follow his orders since they were punctuated by the sight of his .45 clearly visible along the length of his thigh. "Call 911. Tell them shots were fired."

A resounding bam followed.

He leaned against the wall, catching his breath, trying to plan his next move. He had to get out of there quickly before Kane and Dominguez figured out where he'd gone. Pacing back to the hallway leading to the front door, he peered around the corner and spotted the bodyguard and Franklin skulking past. Jerking back, he leaned against the wall. Fighting the wooziness from his head wound, he dropped to a crouch and peeked again. Clear now.

He looked down the two intersecting hallways and spotted a door at the end of one, helpfully marked *Exit*. It automatically closed and locked itself. Perfect. Unfortunately, the entire hallway was in plain sight of the front door.

Sirens. His cover was surely blown when Dominguez and Tommy compared notes. As much as Dominguez would like to kill him, Sam didn't think he'd admit being beaten up by a cop, or rather a punk kid *before* he became a cop. Dominguez would keep his mouth shut about that part anyway.

All this time in tactical, and he'd never seen Dominguez on the street. He had enough clout to hide out under the radar.

"I've got to get out of here." Everything was all fucked up, and he needed to think. He had to make a break for the back door and hope the alley was empty. Sprinting to the door, he glanced over his shoulder. Clear, so far.

The door slammed shut behind him. Creeping through the alley, using dumpsters for cover, he got to the street. If the coast was clear, he would holster his gun and walk casually in the opposite direction of the cop cars. He didn't want to risk blowing his cover just in case. Tommy, Dominguez, and the rest, he hoped, were undoubtedly long gone by now.

Of course, if he was smart, he'd stay put and identify himself to the officers. Disoriented by the agonizing pain from his head wound, it was just a graze, but it felt as if lightning strikes raked his scalp. Maybe the bullet had scraped a nerve. Shaky, heart pounding, and growing more confused, he tried to remember where he'd parked his car. Tommy could have it staked out by now. He needed a new plan.

His vision going hazy, he nevertheless spotted a dully blinking neon sign a block away. *AVERN*. It didn't take a genius with all his faculties intact to know what that meant. Sliding onto a stool in the bar, he ordered a beer and hunched over, trying to regroup. Not following protocol was tantamount to shooting himself in the foot career-wise. But exhaustion, no sleep to speak of the night before, nothing to eat since then, and running through rain-soaked alleys made for kind

of a rough day. This wasn't his first mistake, not even the first mistake of the day.

Fuck.

Relatively safe and warm with a beer in front of him, the events of the last hour settled in. And, no, he wasn't any better off for the beer.

"You know you've got blood running down your face?" the bartender remarked conversationally as if he saw it every day. Probably did.

Sam raised his hand, felt around his temple, and came away with the sticky substance on his fingers. Peering at them as if *he'd* never seen blood, he reached for some bar napkins and blotted his head just above the ear. *I've been fucking shot.* The stinging in his head and burning of his arm came back ten-fold.

Pushing off the stool, he headed unsteadily down the back hallway to where the johns should be located. Closing and locking the door, he inspected the tear in his jacket, yanked it off, and stared at the shallow gash across his upper arm. A little bit of blood trickled from it, and he mopped it up with scratchy brown paper towels. His head looked completely different. That bled like a sonofabitch. Weirdly, his baseball cap hadn't been dislodged. He cleaned that wound as best he could with cold water and the damned, miserable industrial paper towels. He'd better get the hell out of here before the bartender could describe him. As if the guy would want to get mixed up with the police *or* the bad guys.

Throwing some bills on the bar, he stepped warily out the front door again. The adrenalin rush had worn off, his whole shoulder aching worse than before, his temples pounding with every heartbeat. He'd been fucking shot. Grazed, but still shot. He had to get somewhere safe and quiet so he could clean up and think about his next move. He checked the building numbers and started walking north, moving as quickly as he could, and keeping his eyes peeled for a cab.

The rain turned to sleet and lashed his skin. He shook from shock, and sweat burned the furrow above his ear. His alternatives were slim. He couldn't go home and certainly not to his folks. He didn't want to go to the hospital unless things got much worse. If he was smart, he'd identify himself to the cops. He wasn't that smart at the moment. That left only one place he wanted to be right now.

Chapter 9

In the loft, Liz straightened up suddenly. Was that a knock? She supposed it could be Sam. Jesus, they'd forgotten to use a condom. She wasn't sure she wanted to see him. They'd made a big mistake, and she didn't want to repeat it.

Knock, knock.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, her eyes widened. She heard a click, the knob turned, and the door began to open. Momentarily frozen in fear, all she could do was stare.

"Liz?" The voice was low, a whisper.

A burglar who knows my name?

"Liz, are you here?"

It couldn't be.

The door opened wide, and Sam stumbled in.

"Liz, I need help." He groaned. "Awk..."

"Sam!"

He collapsed face down on the floor.

"What happened?" She knelt at his side, pushing at his shoulder.

He yelped. "Shot. There."

"I'll call the police."

"No! No..."

"But you're hurt. Shot. You've got to go to the hospital."

"No, don't." His voice was muffled by the sleeve of his jacket.

“Where were you shot?”

He mumbled.

“Where, Sam? Wake up. Talk to me.” Her voice rose hysterically.

“Right...”

She glanced over his body.

“...shoulder.”

Oh, God. The shoulder nearest her, and she’d poked at it. “Can you roll over, Sam? Let me see it.”

“Blood.” He sounded woozy.

“Just roll over.” As he turned, she tried to remove his jacket, wincing every time he moaned. “Oh, my God! Your head!” That scared her. “Please let me call an ambulance.”

“N...”

His teeth were so tightly clenched, she could hardly understand him.

“Just clean ‘em. Soap and water. Hot water. Bandage...aspirin... I’ll be fine.”

Okay, she’d do this his way for now. If he got worse or developed a fever, she’d call an ambulance. Turning on more lights, she collected towels, a basin of hot water, and soap. She wondered if antibiotic ointment worked on gun shots wounds.

“Can you get to the table?” She put her hands around his waist and tried to hoist him up.

“No. Just fix ‘em here,” he groaned groggily.

He obviously didn’t want to move. He must be in more pain than he’d admit. She finished slipping his jacket off, rolled it up, and put it under his head. One wound slashed across the hard bulge of his bicep. She pushed up the sleeve of his T-shirt and began delicately daubing the deep scratch with soap and hot water.

He hissed.

“I’m sorry.” She thought being gentle was the right way to go. “I’m trying not to hurt you.”

“...just do it. The faster, the better.”

She heard his whispery groans. Kneeling close against him, she felt the rigid tension in his body. “That’s right, the faster, the better. Less pain. Right?” she muttered more to herself than to him.

“It’s all right, Liz. Wash it out good. I’ll survive.” He closed his eyes and took a deep, shaky

breath.

She had to control her own fears for his sake, but being a tad pissed, she griped, “You know I’ve never done this before, don’t you? If you’d gone to the hospital in the first place, they’d be better able to tend to you.” In her worry, she poked a little too hard.

He jerked. His eyes opened then slid shut.

“Don’t pass out on me, or I *will* call an ambulance,” she snapped.

“It’s not that bad.” His voice was barely there.

She slathered the antibiotic cream over the open wound. “Now what’ll I use for a bandage? I have to put something over this.” She found if she talked to herself, it helped her keep focus.

He didn’t answer. The contrast between his dark hair and beard emphasized his pallor. His eyes remained closed, but his breathing sounded fine. “A pillow case. That’s what I need.” She took the clean cloth from the linen closet, cut it into strips, and wrapped one around his upper arm, tying the ends in a knot like she’d seen on TV. “There. Watching all those old Westerns on TV Land finally pays off.”

Now for his head. “Oh, God, this looks horrible.” A shallow furrow ran from the corner of his eye straight back into the hair above his ear. “Sam, does your head hurt?”

“Huh? Liz, are you there?” His hand swayed in the air.

“Sam, are you awake? I’m right here.” She brushed the back of her hand over his forehead. “No fever. Yet. One down, and one to go.” She’d picked up confidence. Her stomach was tied up in knots, but she could do this. “Just let me clean this one.” She brushed her fingers under the lower edge of the gash and resisted the urge to kiss his temple.

Just tend to business. Don’t try to figure out what’s going on right now.

She went through the same procedure on his head wound. His groans came louder, the skin thinner over his skull, the nerve endings closer to the surface. “I’m going as fast as I can.”

“Hey, gimme a kiss.”

Her hand stilled.

Are you kidding?

“Settle down, Sam. You’re delirious. I’m almost finished.” Nearing the end, adrenaline leaching from her body, the shakes started deep inside. She took a deep breath and sat back on her heels to collect herself.

Calm down. Finish the job.

The shakes lessened, and she gently smoothed ointment onto the wound. “I should cut your

hair here.”

“...unh...no.”

“Stop moving your head. Okay, okay, I won’t touch your hair. Just let me get this cream on. I think a couple of Band-Aids will work here.”

“So, I’m not gettin’ a kiss?”

“Sam, stop it. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you’re not getting a kiss. A smack is more like it.” Equal amounts of exasperation and fear claimed her.

“You wouldn’t hit a man with a head wound, would you?”

“Obviously, you’re feeling pretty punky now, so watch out I don’t kick you out.” He did look kind of cute lying there at her mercy. Now, *she* must be getting delirious. It wasn’t every day she encountered gunshot wounds and doctored them. And it wasn’t cute. Heat flashed through her, flushing her neck and cheeks. She’d saved his life.

Now, don’t overdo this. You’d better pray infection doesn’t set in and that he doesn’t develop a fever.

“Can you get up? Go to the couch?” She’d done all the work on him while he lay on the floor, and now her back ached.

“Yeah, I can get up.” He demonstrated by climbing slowly to his knees, gripping the back of the sofa, and levering himself up. “Dirty...” His jaw tightened in pain.

She left him balanced with both hands on the back of the couch and got a sheet. Spreading it over the white sofa, she slid a shoulder under his left arm, helped him around to the couch, and lowered him as gently as she could. She put a pillow under his head and struggled to take off his boots.

His eyes closed, and he panted. “I’ve gotta go,” he muttered, trying feebly to stand.

“No. Rest. It’s all right. Don’t worry.”

“Aspirin.”

Weak, but he gave in to her orders. “Right here.” She offered a glass of water with two aspirins in her palm.

“More.”

“Not too many.”

“More. Four. My head’s killing me.”

What’s the use? He’s been shot. If that doesn’t kill him, aspirin won’t.

She couldn't believe she'd just tended gunshot wounds. Just like in *Deadwood*. Shot. She choked on the thought. How did she come to know someone who'd been shot?

* * * *

Sam's eyelids cranked open.

Where the hell am I?

His apartment didn't have a vaulted ceiling. Disoriented, he pried himself off the soft surface, swung his legs over and sat up. "Unh, God." Pain ripped through his head and sliced across his upper arm. He gasped in a breath, rested his elbows on his knees, and propped his head in his hands. And discovered the bandage on his temple and gook in his hair.

Slowly, very slowly, he turned his head, surveying his surroundings. The only light in the room shone over the sink in the kitchen behind him. Liz's house.

He bit the inside of his cheek to squelch a groan. "Christ," escaped in a whisper. He couldn't believe he'd come here after being shot. He'd wanted to be somewhere safe, and he'd chosen Liz. How could he have been so stupid to put her into this kind of danger? He had to get out of here. A smart man would have gone to the ER. A smart cop would have. He hadn't been smart, had he?

He heard rustling clothing and glanced to his right. Liz slept in an easy chair, legs tucked under her. Looking all warm and cozy wrapped in a fuzzy blue robe and matching slippers, she lay on her side, hugging a bed pillow to her cheek.

Forgetting his pain for a moment, his heart did funny leaps watching her sleep, her mouth open, little snores issuing from her nose. He dropped his hands to dangle between his knees and smiled. She wouldn't like it if he heard her snore.

Warning! So many times he'd come home to his wife to find her waiting for him in her robe and slippers. Sometimes she'd been sleeping and sometimes not. Usually she waited for him loaded for bear.

Again and again, he'd told her he wasn't out fooling around, he was working. Round and round they went. Why couldn't he call her, especially at night, to let her know he was all right? How did he expect her to sleep at night and then be able to go to work in the morning if she didn't know where he was or what he was doing? If she didn't know whether he'd even come home? Eventually, she hadn't been able to handle it and left him. After their divorce, she married a guy who worked in a library. A librarian, for Christ's sake. You couldn't get much safer. The worst thing that could happen would be books falling on top of him.

He vaguely remembered he'd been pretty much out of it when he'd gotten here. But Liz had taken care of him and, apparently, hadn't kicked him out. Maybe he should disappear before she woke up and blasted him.

Scooting to the edge of the cushions, he felt the ache in every muscle in his body. How badly had he been hurt? He'd been shot in two places but neither deep nor life threatening. Why was it so hard to stand? Nevertheless, he pushed himself to his feet and stood swaying. His knees wouldn't hold him up.

If he could just find his jacket and get to the door, he could let himself out and get the hell out of Dodge. God damn, he had to take a leak but didn't want to risk using her john and waking her. The pain at his first step shocked him. "Shit," he hissed.

"Mmmm."

Breathing through clenched teeth, he slowly turned his head toward the sound of her moan. Thankfully, she didn't wake up. Worriedly, though, he watched as she arched her back and wriggled, trying to get comfortable.

Don't wake up. Don't wake up, he silently pleaded, staring at her as if willing her back to sleep.

She groaned loudly, rubbed the small of her back, and stretched her legs. She made adorable little smacking noises with her mouth. From snoring to smacking. She'd flay him alive if she knew he heard all this.

He tried to back away. Contrary to his wordless orders to go back to sleep, her lashes blinked, and she gazed at him with bleary, reddened eyes.

"Shh." He held his forefinger over his lips like a little kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. This could be really funny under different circumstances.

"Wha...?"

She looked so sweet, so soft and rumply, her expression mystified. He really wanted her tender, sleepy body stretched out against his. Wanted her to hold him. Take away the pain. His eyes swam with unaccustomed wetness, and he blinked back the threatening tears.

Jesus, you wuss.

"Sam?"

"Shh. I'm leaving. Thank you for everything." His voice was shakier than he'd have liked as he backed toward the front door.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Sam," she said, sounding sleepy but getting stronger. "Oh, my God, sit down. Let me look at you, get you something to eat, some coffee." She pushed herself from the chair. "Are you still in pain?"

He held out his hands, palms up, to ward her off. She headed right toward him, and, in his vulnerable state, if she hugged him, he wasn't sure he wouldn't break down.

“I have to go. I’ve got to straighten this out.” Babble, babble. He had no idea what he was going to do.

“You can’t leave yet. Let me check your bandages first and give you some breakfast. You should at least clean up.” She spoke softly but determinedly.

His brain told him to get out of her house. What had he been thinking to involve her in this? But another part of him, lower down, begged him to stay.

Her light eyes were filled with worry. She cared what happened to him. Faced with a long-denied desire for warmth with a woman, he made a decision he hoped he wouldn’t regret. Grungy, still in pain, and hungry, he asked. “Would you mind if I took a shower?”

He got that chest-aching feeling again. His hands fisted at his sides to keep from reaching for her. Her hair flattened on one side and stuck out at the top, and he wanted to smooth it down and mess it up again. Run his fingers through the long, silky strands. Bury his face and cry.

Whoa, dog. You are losin’ it.

“Okay, that’s fine. Just let me get in there first, and then it’ll be all yours.”

“Liz.” She’d be upset when she saw herself in the mirror. Women always hated when they looked disheveled. And men always loved it. “Liz, you look beautiful in the morning.”

She, right on cue, brushed at her hair, pushing her fingers through the tangles and wincing.

He shook his head. “No, I like it. I wish I’d mussed it up instead of passing out like a lump on the couch.” He held her gaze for several beats, felt heat flush his cheeks too, the breath sucked right out of his lungs.

What the hell?

Chapter 10

Before he could move, she backed away and slipped into the bathroom. He heard the toilet flush, water running, then spitting. The door opened, and she emerged still snuggled in the soft, thick robe.

“All yours,” she said. “I put out some towels, washcloth, and soap. Use the shampoo if you want. It might be kind of girly but...”

“Thanks.” Lightheaded, heart thumping, stomach knotting, and every bone in his body, especially the boner in his jeans, wanted her. He knew what she looked like under that robe. He needed to put his hands on her. Grubby, smelly, achy, and still every thought in his brain fixated on her. He stared, panting, not able to look away.

Come on, you’ve been shot. You’re in pain, exhausted, vulnerable.

He’d come to the one place he knew he’d be safe, safe being a relative term, though. This wasn’t safe. Thoughts of her had already intruded on the job, had distracted him.

Shit. I’ve got to get out of here.

He stood there like a big dope. What he wanted—her warmth, compassion, sensuality, her normal life—he couldn’t have. He had a score to settle with Dominguez, and, until that happened, he couldn’t afford to get involved with a woman. He was a fool to think otherwise.

Damn it. Wrong time, wrong place.

Right woman.

He tried to deny the truth of his growing feelings for her, but he feared it was already too late.

She dropped her gaze first. “I’ll get some breakfast started. You go.”

He obeyed quickly. Some might call it running away. Closing the door, he urinated, keeping himself upright by leaning one palm against the wall. He didn’t want to think. His mind wouldn’t cooperate. What had happened with them the other night, what he wanted to happen in the future, had to be dealt with. But he couldn’t escape the fact of his failures with Petey and his ex-wife.

Shit.

Rousing himself to turn on the shower, he untied the bandage on his arm, and satisfied himself

the wound was no longer bleeding. Same with his head. Man, he'd been lucky. A few inches closer to his brain, and he could have been toast.

He stood in the shower, hot water beating on his aching muscles.

God, it feels good. Hunh, her water pressure's a hell of a lot better than mine.

He shook his head, wet strands flinging into his eyes. Dizziness had him slapping his palms against the tile.

Ugh.

Twenty minutes later, he shakily emerged from the bathroom bare-chested, a bath sheet wrapped around his middle. Holding his dirty clothes, he wasn't ready to put them on again. Glancing at the kitchen, she was busy at her tasks. Damn, she looked cute in sweats, the kind that clung to her slim legs and showed off her firm ass and flat belly.

She turned and surveyed him, her eyes lowering to his feet, then back up to his waist, his chest. The sight of her teeth nipping at her lower lip re-ignited the desire two bullet holes in his body and the best of intentions apparently couldn't quell.

Then, unbelievably, a sudden intake of breath, and the smell of food overrode everything else. He hadn't eaten for he didn't know how long. Starving, his stomach let off a loud growl. His head reeled with the need for a meal. Licking his lips, he glanced longingly toward the stove.

"Sit down before you fall down, Sam. Have something to eat. Then I'll re-bandage you."

He sat. She set down a cup of coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs in front of him. His stomach growled again at the delicious smell.

"Mm, thanks." He waited to dig in until she joined him with her own plate.

"Go ahead," she urged.

"These are great."

"I guess being shot gives a guy a good appetite," she said, somewhat peevishly.

"I haven't really eaten since...um." He gazed at his eggs as if they could tell him. "Since the pizza." She stared into her plate. Obviously, she wasn't happy about something, and he could well imagine he was the cause.

After she put the plates in the sink, she gathered her nursing supplies. His body jerked in reaction to the touch of her warm fingers on the sore gash across his arm.

"This still looks pretty raw," she said in a husky whisper. "Does it hurt?"

"Nah." It ached like the devil, but he wasn't going to admit it.

His eyes met her pale ones, misty with unshed tears. Her breasts rose and fell with short

breaths. His palms itched to touch her. His body hardened in erotic anticipation. Clean, fed, and safe, and he couldn't help himself. With a low groan, he pulled her onto his lap and captured her lips with a demanding, reckless kiss. She responded, fueling his hunger. He cupped her face in his palm and swept his tongue into her mouth.

She stiffened for a second, then softened against him, returning the kiss, clearly wanting him as much as he wanted her.

Oh, yeah.

“God.” She broke away, gasping for breath.

God, yes.

He felt like he hadn't taken a deep breath for hours. Holding her, kissing her, was so right, so necessary to his existence. Soft breasts pressed against his bare chest. Strawberry nipples hid just under her sweatshirt. He wanted them *now. Now*. His free hand slid under the thick cloth, across the tender skin of her bare stomach.

In a flurry of arms and legs, she scrambled off his lap. “Sam, what are you doing? You were shot! Why in the world did you come here instead of the ER?”

“I was trying to distract you.”

“Well, it didn't work, did it.”

He tightened the towel around his waist and slicked his fingers through his still wet hair. “It wasn't that bad. See?” He indicated his head. “Just scratches.”

“But why'd you come here?”

Why?

“And what happened? Were you making an arrest? Did you shoot someone?”

“I didn't fire a shot.”

“You're not going to tell me about this, are you?”

“I can't, Liz. It was undercover. I'll leave if you want me to.”

“I don't know what to do with you.”

“Come back to my lap is what you should do.”

“Hah!” she exclaimed. “You're charming and sexy and fascinating.”

“Those all sound good,” he responded, reaching for her hand.

“And dangerous. Sam, we need to discuss the condom issue.”

“I’m not sorry for what happened, not for the sex, but, yes, we should have used a condom.” He stood. “I’ve never done that before. I’m all right. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time.”

“I’m fine that way, too,” she confirmed.

“And if you’re pregnant, we’ll deal with it.” Jesus, just that thought made him dizzy. The conversation scared the shit out of him. This was no time for a child in his life.

“I’m not pregnant.” She slid her fingers through her hair.

“Liz, I mean it. We’ll handle whatever happens.” He’d always been so careful, couldn’t believe he had sex without protection.

“I’m on the pill, but it was still stupid and irresponsible.”

Thank God. “I agree.”

She turned, nudging past him. “Good, that’s settled. Now, you need to leave,” she said determinedly.

Yes, I need to leave. It’s best.

Yeah, sure. Christ, his headache returned with a vengeance. Closing his eyes against the pain, he couldn’t think straight.

She picked up his clothes from where he’d dropped them on the floor and held them out.

Fuck.

Inconvenient timing, but his cock jutted hard and prominent against the front of the towel. *Ya think she notices?* He took his clothes from her hands and dropped them on the floor again.

She gave him that classic woman’s irritated expression—pinched lips and flared nostrils.

Instead of following her orders, he pulled her into his arms.

She slapped her hands flat onto his chest to block him. “Don’t.” She sucked in a sob, a sharp rasp of a sound. “I want you to go.”

“You kissed me.”

“No, I didn’t. When?”

“Earlier. Don’t deny it.”

She jerked out of his embrace. Turning her back on him, she braced her palms on the counter.

“I’m not gonna leave you like this,” he murmured softly, his lips skimming the shell of her ear. He tightened his fingers around her waist.

She shivered.

He swept her hair from her nape and pressed his lips against it. His bare chest met her back, and he nudged her firm ass with his dick.

“You’ve been shot.” Her voice trembled. “How can you think about this?”

“I’m all right now. You helped me, and I’m grateful,” he whispered, gently suckling her earlobe.

She stiffened her shoulders, trying to shrug him away.

“Baby, you feel so good.” He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her back against him. “You taste so good.” He widened his stance, surrounding her with his height and breadth.

“What are you doing, Sam?” she whimpered.

He nudged the sweatshirt out of his way, and brushed his lips across her shoulder. “I’m making love to you.” Turning her in his arms, he lowered his forehead to rest on hers. She panted softly but didn’t pull back. He kissed her nose and cheeks, brushing his lips over her closed eyes. By the time he took her mouth, he was lost in her sweet silkiness. Unfortunately, when he closed his eyes, his head whirled. Should he kiss her and pass out—or—not kiss her.

Desire dominated him. This wasn’t the moment to wuss out and collapse. There was so much he wanted to do to her. “Shit,” he muttered, his world turning to gray.

“Sam, Sam, what’s the matter?”

Her voice was a distant hum.

“Oh, God, don’t faint. Help me get you to the couch.”

Shit, no. Please don’t pass out.

He struggled. His legs felt like spaghetti but, with her arm around his waist, they made it to the sofa. He couldn’t stay on his feet for a minute more. Dazed, his brain all muddled, he collapsed onto the cushions pulling her on top of him. He heard her protestations but purposefully kept his grip on her. Rolling over, he trapped her between the back cushions of the couch and his body.

* * * *

Sam woke, rolling slowly to his back. His head ached and felt far from clear, but he struggled to open his eyes. He tried to raise his arm to rub his face, and pain slashed sharply through the muscles of his shoulder.

“Liz?” Jesus, he sounded weak. No answer. He gingerly pulled himself to a sitting position, had to rest his head on the back of the couch to ease the dizziness. His heartbeat thumped in his chest in tandem with his wounded temple. He traced the bandage, and the events of yesterday came back to him in a rush. “Shit. I was shot.”

What an absolute fuck up he’d made of everything. Breaking so many police procedures could get him fired. He knew better than to go to a buy without backup. He should have identified himself to the cops when they arrived on the scene. He should have gone to the ER. He was a tact guy for a reason—to get drug dealers off the streets and specifically to get the dealer who screwed up Petey’s life. Going it alone violated departmental procedure and becoming emotionally involved could get him or others killed.

Then he’d stupidly come here to Liz, complicating her life. In his delirium last night, he’d needed her help. He needed her.

Well, fuck, broad daylight now, and he was alone. Hoisting himself off the couch, he spotted a piece of paper propped against the coffee maker in the kitchen. Lurching toward it, he read the note.

I’ve gone to rehearsal. There’s coffee in the pot. Just turn it on.

No I’ll see you later or even Have a good day.

Ho-kay. Obviously, he’d been kicked to the curb. He didn’t blame her. It was in her best interest that he get out of here, out of her life. He had one priority, and he couldn’t forget it. A woman, especially one as beautiful and sexy as she was, would distract him from his objective.

At the door, he took one last look around. He’d taken another shower, and the fragrance of her soap inundated his senses. Drying himself on her soft towels was a luxury. Her bright, comfortable house was like the woman herself. She’d washed and dried his jeans and T-shirt. He must have been dead to the world to not have heard that.

Maybe some day he’d have a chance at a normal life. He’d have what his parents have. He wouldn’t be alone any more in a barren apartment and a barren life. It was necessary now, but he hoped it would be over. He’d do what he had to do to make it be over soon.

Because he wanted more. And he wanted it with her.

* * * *

“Could this day last any longer?” Liz muttered.

“Dying to get home to Sam?” Bailey asked, winking teasingly.

Bailey didn’t know it, but what happened last night superseded anything else that had ever happened to her. She’d actually tended to a man with gunshot wounds. That gave her the shivers.

Good God, so many things could have gone wrong. They'd looked to be minor, but what if they'd become infected?

He wouldn't be at her place when she got home. She'd purposely left a non-encouraging note propped on the coffee maker. He had problems in his life that he didn't want to, or couldn't, share with her. Maybe she could help him, but he wouldn't let her. They barely knew each other. Except in bed. Making love with him was amazing. An erotic dream for sure. Her stomach muscles clenched, and her face heated at the memories.

"The man was *in* tense," Bailey said.

Startled out of her thoughts, she frowned at her friend.

"Honey," Bailey said. "You don't think a dangerous, earring-wearing stud is going to escape my notice, do you?"

Yeah, a dangerous stud. Bailey had no idea how dangerous.

"Is he as hot in the sack as he looks?" His grin flashed, handsome face wreathed in smiles.

"I wouldn't know," she replied primly.

"Hmm." He wasn't buying her denial.

Chicago had a small, gossipy theater community, but if she asked Bailey to keep it confidential, he would. "Bail, this isn't for general consumption, but something's going on with him. He came to my house last night, and he'd been shot."

"Holy cow, honey! This isn't good."

"I know. But he's confusing, too. He can be sweet and tender." Sex with Sam was great. It had been a long time since any man had aroused her so deeply. Fred had been an okay lover, but Sam's intensity and skill took her breath away. Literally and figuratively.

At times, from the look in his eyes, he seemed to cherish her, to need her. Why else had he come to her last night? Maybe he didn't want to need her, but his conflict, his hunger, seemed to be for something more than sex.

The pizza night, she'd gazed down the line of her body to see him nestled between her thighs, rustling his beard over her mound, a stray bit of light glinting off the gold hoop in his earlobe. His darkly intent eyes looked rakish and sexy. Looks weren't deceiving.

She'd squirmed with anticipation, hip joints aching from the width of his shoulders holding them apart, the wet heat of his breath bathing her exposed folds. Instinctively, she knew he'd be a good lover and gasped when his tongue speared through her cleft and set her clit afire with ravishing jolts. Her heels had levered her upward, awkwardly directing him. He'd told her to slow down.

Patronizing bastard. He'd controlled her movements and slid his fingers through her pulsing,

wet pussy. Stop. She'd wanted to say stop. Then his lips clamped around her clit. Astonished and delirious with sensation, she'd let him suckle. God, what heaven.

Bailey's fanning her with his script brought her back to the present.

"Yeah, girl, I can see your confusion," he said, his white teeth flashing in his full out laughter.

Chapter 11

Sam hadn't left a note, but the bathroom and kitchen had been straightened up, and he'd washed out the coffee pot. He must have been raised well.

Before she could change clothes, she heard a knock at the door. Her traitorous heart hammered. Maybe he was back. When she pulled the door open, two big hands pushed her, and she landed hard on her butt. She opened her lips to scream, and a hand in a black leather glove clamped over her mouth.

"Shut up, bitch!"

Wide eyed, she nodded, his hand moving up and down with her head. The man roughly pulled her to her feet, swung her around, and propelled her toward the couch.

Oh, God, rape. No one'll hear me scream. Her mind whirled with the possibilities.

A bald head topped an overwhelmingly large body in jeans and a black trench coat. He stuck his wide, dusky face against her nose and snarled, "You're gonna keep quiet and be a good girl, aren't you, doll face?"

Brown. His eyes were hard, brown nuggets, his cheeks pockmarked. She concentrated on his facial features in case she survived this and could describe him to the police. *In case* she survived. She choked back a sob.

"I said shut up." He took a roll of gray tape and a switchblade from his coat pocket. Pushing her into the cushions, he held her down with one knee planted on her stomach. He cut a piece of the tape and slapped it across her mouth.

She hyperventilated. Couldn't breathe, her mouth covered with tape, her chest crushed. *I'm gonna die.* She'd never thought anything like this could happen to her. She wouldn't make it easy for him, though.

Arching her pelvis, she tried to push him off her belly. He easily caught her batting fists and brutally yanked her arms over her head. She stared into his eyes, watching his expression for what he'd do next.

He focused on her wrists, wrapping more tape around them. When he sat up, she was too scared to move her arms even though it left her body undefended.

“Where’s your boyfriend, bitch?”

Boyfriend? She shook her head.

The man gripped her jaw, tightly squeezing her neck. “Bolt,” he snarled. “Where’s the asshole Bolt?”

She shook her head again. Her lungs ached. She couldn’t get a deep breath and was terrified of smothering to death.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know where he is. He’d never leave a sweet little babe like you for long.” The man heaved to his feet.

She groaned, the sound lost behind the thick tape. The sudden removal of his knee from her stomach brought more pain, and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes into her hair.

The man’s expression turned savagely sensual as his gaze raked her body from neck to thighs.

She couldn’t stop trembling. His gaze focused on her breasts. *No, God.* He drew his hand down her chest and cupped a breast, squeezing it to the point of pain. She stared into his eyes, trying to read him, trying to be ready for whatever would happen next. It would not happen without her fighting back.

“Mmm. Nice, baby.” He squeezed again.

Her whole body quaked. She whimpered. His tongue snaked across his lips.

At that moment, she heard a knock at the front door. Shrieking as loudly as she could under the tape, she thrashed her legs, kicking at the man.

He grabbed her up and yanked her to his side. Looking through the peep hole, he sneered, “Bolt.” Shoving her against the wall, he opened the door to lure Sam in.

She twisted and tried to scream a warning.

“What the hell...? Liz!”

The man pulled a gun from his waistband and pointed it at Sam. She lurched and fought, trying to throw off his aim.

Kaboom!

The sound roared through her brain. God, no! Sam! Please don’t let him be hit. The man knocked her to the floor. She caught a glimpse of the closed front door, with no Sam dead or dying on the inside.

The blast of the gunshot had been too close. She couldn’t hear a thing. The man dragged her

over to the phone. He picked it up, holding it to his ear. His lips moved, sharp, short movements, spit spraying onto the phone, onto her face. He put his arm around her shoulders, stuck the mouthpiece against the tape over her lips, and squeezed her until she moaned into the phone.

Sound came back to her in little bits, and she heard him say Sam was welcome to join them, but he wasn't letting the woman go.

Then she heard loud and clear, "Are you crazy, Bolt? You're a dead man." He flung the phone into the cradle.

She heard sirens in the distance. Please, God, let them be coming for her. What could she do? He waved the gun near her face. She could still feel the heat from the barrel.

"You in the house. Come out with your hands up."

Oh, God, just like in the movies.

Her phone rang.

The man picked it up.

She took her chance and started kicking him.

The phone to his ear, the man shouted at her, "Get down, you bitch." Then into the phone said, "What are you going to do, Bolt? Are you coming in?"

"Who's this? Unh, Sergeant Anderson, is it? I want Bolt. Get him on the phone."

She couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, just this guy's demands and threats. She didn't know if she felt any better now the police were here. She could still be killed.

"Bolt! You're gonna be sorry you ever touched me. Do what I say, and your lady *maybe* won't get hurt."

This is revenge against Sam?

"I want two million dollars and a free pass out of here. An SUV, and I'm taking the woman. When I'm out of the city, I'll drop her off. As long as no one is following me."

"No, I won't trade. I'll take both of you, but she's staying."

Then it was quiet. He forced her to sit, and, after slicing the tape between her wrists, he pulled them behind her back and re-taped them.

Every fifteen minutes the phone rang. He got more and more wired and demanded to know the status of the SUV and money. The police apparently tried to negotiate, but he never changed his demands. She hyperventilated again, trying to calm herself. This guy would never let her go.

On one of the phone calls, he said, "Sure, Bolt, I'll let you talk to your girlfriend." He held the phone to her ear. "Say something, honey. Oh, wait, you can't talk." He leaned into the

mouthpiece and taunted, “Her mouth is taped shut, asshole. Say something, baby.” He prodded her by pinching her breast.

She moaned into the phone.

“Liz, you’ll be all right. I’ll get you...”

Sam’s voice. He sounded calm, in control. She squealed high-pitched sounds. Even if it only showed him she was alive, it was worth it.

The man now paced her house from front to back. He checked the back door to make sure it was still locked. He opened the refrigerator. “Don’t you have anything to drink in this dump? So, lady, did your boyfriend tell you about me? He never should have screwed around with me.”

She stared helplessly at him. Wrists taped behind her back, she’d never felt so physically vulnerable. Her mouth taped closed, she was still terrified of smothering.

“Thought he’d got his baby brother away from me, but that never happens. Once I get ‘em, they’re mine forever.”

His intent gaze frightened her. She had no idea what he was talking about. Sam had mentioned he had brothers, but he’d never talked about this guy.

“Thought he could beat me up and get away with it? Fucking asshole!” He paced the kitchen area, his strides becoming more and more agitated. “Where the hell are they? I’m not gonna wait forever.”

His cold, evil gaze connected with hers. She’d never taken hers off him with his wild ramblings and movements. Now he focused in on her. He looked like he had one thing on his mind.

She couldn’t stop the whine coming up from deep in her belly. He stalked nearer, fists clenching and unclenching.

“Yeah,” he growled, a sneer making his face even uglier. “You know what’s gonna happen, baby, don’t ya? Maybe you’ll like it better than with pretty boy.” He grabbed her upper arms and wrenched her to her feet.

She huffed sharp, horrified breaths into the sticky tape, never taking her eyes off his. Her hyperaware mind screamed, *Don’t! Don’t!* Her heart thundered in her chest.

Ring.

She almost choked on her own spit.

Ring, ring.

He stared at her, his jaw tight, the joint below his ear moving rigidly.

Please. Please answer it. She didn't blink, just watched for his next move. There was nothing to say he *would* answer the phone.

Ring, ring.

She prepared herself to fight him off as long and hard as she could.

He blinked, several times, pursed his lips as if weighing his options.

Whatever was going on in his brain, answering the phone finally won out.

"Yeah," he snapped. "It's outside?" He glared at her.

She was under no illusion she was out of danger now.

"Yeah, I'm here. I want everyone back, except Bolt. He can watch me take his girlfriend." He threw her a glance that promised retribution.

Her stomach contracted even tighter in terror.

"Drive it right up on the sidewalk, driver's side by the door." He listened a moment then bellowed, "Do it!" He nervously paced, muttering, losing control.

This was it. He would kill her and escape before the police could do anything about it. She heard pounding on the door.

Then Sam shouted, "Dominguez! The SUV's in place. Let her go and take me."

He sounded so good. If the worst happened, at least he'd be near.

"Liz, are you all right?"

"She can't talk right now, but she *is* having a good time, *aren't* you, baby?"

"Liz, it'll be okay. Soon."

"Yeah, asshole. Everything'll be okay. You're not gonna screw with me and get away with it."

"Dominguez, let her go. She's not involved in any of this. You want me, you can have me."

"Why would I give up a sweet little package like her for an asshole like you?"

"You hurt a hair on her head, and I'll tear you limb from limb." Sam's voice went from demanding to threatening.

"Enough of this chit chat. We're coming out. That SUV'd better be in position, or she's dead right now, right in front of you." Dominguez slid his left arm around her neck and squeezed, forcing her toward the door.

Chapter 12

Liz jerked and fought, afraid of passing out from the pressure of his arm around her neck. Flashing stars danced in her vision, and she couldn't get a deep breath. Dominguez held her upright, because he needed her as a shield. He opened the front door, and before stepping out, transferred his gun from the hand at her neck back to his right hand.

The bright lights blinded her. She turned her head away. Giant spotlights shone glaringly on the house. A dozen police cars, fire engines, and ambulances, all with their lights flashing, dotted the street. A helicopter droned ominously above them. If she'd been scared before, this was worse. Soon everything would be all over. Either she'd be dead now or dead later out in the country. In no way did she believe he'd let her go.

The police ranged haphazardly in front of them, the SUV close, driver's side door yawning open and waiting. She did not want to get in there. Closing her eyes, she prayed whatever happened would happen fast. He held the gun to her temple. The cold metal felt savage against her skin. She was defenseless with her hands taped behind her back.

Open your eyes, Liz. Look at me. Look at me, baby.

In her head. The words were in her head. At first they didn't mean anything, just low sounds beneath all the other noise.

Look at me.

Sam.

Liz, baby, open your eyes.

She cranked her eyes open a slit, saw the thick arm cloaked in dark wool imprisoning her neck. Her lashes lifted, she let her gaze roam under the level of the lights, the cops, the cop cars, back down to the arm restraining her. These might be the last things she ever saw... A strange peace took over. It was out of her control.

Look at me, love. Look away from him. Look at me.

She didn't think she could be any more terrified. If she died, could she do it with dignity? Did that even matter? Sam. She found his face in the crowd, their eyes locked. He was so beautiful, the sweet and sensual memories came back to her. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

She gagged but was too frightened to moan. She wanted to scream and never stop but was too terrified to make a sound. She lost Sam in the crowd. Her gaze flicked desperately from face to face. It looked like a scene from a movie. A scene out of a nightmare. Surely this many people could save her. She struggled, testing his hold.

Dominguez tightened his arm across her throat, the gun's mouth lethal on her forehead.

There, she found Sam again. The blades of the helicopter still thwapped overhead, and the police radios still squawked. Everyone waited for Dominguez to make his move. She wished something would happen. Just to get it over with.

Sam scrunched his nose. What was he trying to say? He hunched forward, bobbing his head.

Faint, sweetheart. Fall down. Look at me, baby. Sink down.

Faint? That'll just make it easier for Dominguez to throw me in the SUV.

Trust me, Liz.

Her name, his voice in her head. Trust him. *I do. I trust you.*

Do it, baby. Faint.

Her gaze on Sam, she let her weight carry her downward.

Crack!

Showered with blood and gore, hot and clotted, she screamed behind the tape across her mouth. Dominguez pulled her under him when he collapsed. Brain and bits of bone fragments filled her field of vision. She screamed and the screams stole her breath. *OhGodohGod, help me.*

Someone with strong hands plucked her up under her arms and plopped her over his shoulder. Her hands, still taped behind her, made the pressure on her diaphragm, where it pressed against his shoulder, more severe. She fainted. For real.

She came to cradled in Sam's arms, her cheek against his bulletproof vest, his dark eyes searching hers as they fluttered open. Her wrists had been cut free, but the gray bands still encircled them.

Frightened and sick, her mouth and cheeks still stung from the tape being pulled off. Too exhausted to scream now that she could, she buried her face in the shelter of his neck and clung to his shirtsleeves, her fingers wrapped around the cloth in a death grip. His arms safely enclosed her. She'd never thought it would happen again, and she didn't want to ever let him go.

Every time a paramedic knelt next to her, she cringed and clutched Sam tighter. "No, no. Don't," she whimpered. He shook his head at them too. She could feel the movement.

"Honey, you're safe now. Let the EMT look at you. To make sure you're okay."

She shook her head and clung. "No...no."

“Liz.” He tipped up her chin. “Did he hurt you?”

Her eyes widened. He couldn’t see this was hurt?

“I mean...did he touch you?”

Of course he touched me. How does he think I got gagged and tied? Oh. “R-rape?” she whispered against his lips inches away from hers.

“Yeah, Liz, did he hurt you that way?” He sounded very calm, matter of fact, but his chest heaved hard like he’d been running.

She buried her face in his neck again and shook her head.

“Liz, look at me and tell me.” He didn’t sound so calm now.

She touched his cheek with shaking fingers and said, “No.”

“Thank God,” he murmured. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why...?”

Ignoring her question, he continued, “Please let the paramedic look at you. You’re in shock. In pain. They need to take you to the hospital.”

“You have to go with me. Don’t make me go alone.” Pain in her throat made her voice scrape low and husky. She desperately held on to him. Nothing made sense otherwise.

“I’ll be with you, honey. All the way. Will you let me stand up and carry you to the ambulance?”

“In a minute. I can’t go now. Just let me calm down a minute, then I can get up. I don’t think my legs would hold me up.”

“I’ll carry you. You don’t have to walk.”

She lay hunched in his arms. Safe. She could nearly forget what had happened as long as he held her. He didn’t ask her again, but she could feel the tension in his body. He wanted to get her to the hospital just as much as she did not want to go there. But the police and paramedics weren’t going to let her alone. It wasn’t like she could get up and walk away from this nightmare.

“Sam, stay with me...please...don’t leave me alone.”

“Absolutely, darling. Let’s go now.”

She reluctantly nodded.

He rose first, knelt, picked her up like a baby, and carried her to the ambulance. He helped put her on the stretcher and held her hand while they rolled it inside.

“Sam!” He’d let go.

“I’m here,” he assured her as he scrambled in after her.

The paramedic lowered the stretcher flat.

“No, not flat. I need to sit up.” She panicked, afraid she wouldn’t be able to breathe.

“Let her sit, Meg.”

He held her hand on one side, and the paramedic put her on a heart monitor and oxygen, and placed a pulse meter on her forefinger. She winced at the jab of the needle on the back of her hand for the intravenous drip. She didn’t think she needed all of this.

Before she knew it, she was whisked through the ER doors and into a cubicle.

“Sam. Sam!” They cut her clothes off. “No,” she shrieked.

His head popped up, his body leaning over hers, face close. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m here.” He kissed her cheek, pressing his soft beard against her. Tears leaked from her eyes. She felt suspiciously drowsy, and her head rolled to the side. They must have put something in the...

The next thing she knew, she was in a room, not hooked up to anything but the intravenous drip. Sam sat in the chair next to the bed, his hand lying on the mattress.

Her eyes opened, and she turned her head toward him.

He said, “Do you want me to call anyone?”

He sounded distant. Disengaged.

“No.”

“Your parents?”

“No, I don’t want to worry them. I’ll be all right.”

“They’re probably going to hear about it on the news. You’d better call them before that.”

He was right. She also knew as soon as her parents got here, he would leave. She felt his withdrawal, his discomfort, his impatience to be free of her.

She wouldn’t hang on to him if he didn’t want to stay. Sicker at heart than she wanted to admit even to herself, she gave him her parents’ number and took the phone when he handed it to her.

“Mom?” she began. “Hi, Mom.”

God, they’re going to freak out.

“Hi, honey. You sound funny. Is something wrong?”

“No, Mom. Everything’s okay now. Um...”

“What do you mean? What’s the matter?”

She heard the panic in her mother’s voice. “I’m all right, but I’m in the hospital. Illinois St. John’s.”

“Liz, what happened? Were you in a car accident?”

“No, I’m all right. They’re not keeping me overnight. But it’ll probably be on the news,” she added hesitantly.

“Tell me what’s going on. Jack! Come here!”

The fear in her mom’s voice was heart-rending. “Someone broke into my house, but the police came right away.”

“Oh my God! Jack, Liz is in the hospital.”

“Can I stay with you for a couple days?”

“Of course, you can.”

“The police need to investigate, and then the place has to be cleaned up.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m fine.”

“We’ll be there as soon as we can. Are you all alone?”

“Someone’s here with me.”

“Will they stay ‘til we get there?”

“Yes, he’ll stay.” She looked pleadingly at Sam. That was the least he could do.

“Who is it? A doctor?”

“No, he’s a policeman.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“No, he can’t talk to you right now...oh...wait...Sam...no...” He pulled the phone out of her hand. Then she heard only one side of the conversation.

“Mrs. Aspen? Oh, Mr. Aspen. This is Detective Bolt. No, your daughter is fine now, just shook up. I can drive her to your house. She’ll be released in the next hour or two. Any time? We’ll call you again when we’re on our way. Thank you. I’ll put Liz back on.”

“Dad?”

“What’s going on?” Her dad sounded frazzled.

“I’m really fine. Just a couple of bruises and scrapes.”

“Who’s that man? That officer?”

“Um...Detective Bolt? He’s been with me the whole time.” She stole a look at Sam who stared at her with such a deep frown his eyebrows met in the middle.

“You’re not in trouble or under arrest, are you?”

“No, no, nothing like that, Dad. And everyone’s being nice to me, don’t worry. They’re letting me out soon. It’s not bad enough to keep me overnight.” All she could do was keep assuring him.

“We’ll be waiting for you. How long will you be? We can be there right away.”

“No, no. I won’t be too long. I’ll call when we’re on our way, okay?”

“Okay, honey.”

“Okay, bye, see you soon. I love you.” She handed the phone back to Sam and lay back on the pillow, letting out a sigh. “Is there some tranquilizer in this?” She indicated the IV bag.

“Yeah, I think so. Are you feeling sleepy?”

“Can they let me go before I do go to sleep? I’d rather do that at home...um...at my folks’.”

“I’ll go check.” He left the room before she could take another breath.

What the hell was going on? Why did that man want to kill Sam? She’d been trapped between them and had no idea why. To make matters worse, as safe and protected as she’d felt earlier in Sam’s arms, and as caring as he’d been, now she felt alone. In his obvious attempt to distance himself from her, he’d been stiff and unsmiling. Well, so be it. Too tired right now to think about it, her jaw cracked with a yawn. Could she get out of here before she fell asleep?

As if in answer to her question, two doctors came in trailed by a uniformed police officer and two other men in suits. One doctor looked in her eyes with the little flashlight, checked her blood pressure, and listened to her heart. The other one made notes.

No sign of Sam. Her insides felt numb. He’d gone and wasn’t coming back for her.

A spark of anger crackled through her body. Damn him.

I was the one held hostage. I was the one almost killed.

She’d never tell her family the whole truth, though, would never hear the end of it, about the dangers of living alone, yadda, yadda, yadda.

“I need to get to my parents’ house. I don’t have my purse. It’s still in my house. Can someone get it to me? They live on the northwest side. If someone will lend me cab fare, I can go. I’ll pay you back,” she babbled away. Anything to prove to them she was okay. Anything to get out of there.

The doctors left, but the men in suits, the detectives, stayed. She wasn’t ready to give them a statement yet. They agreed to question her tomorrow at her parents’ house.

When they left, the nurse helped her get dressed. Her clothes had been cut off in the ER, so they gave her a pair of green scrubs and some slippers. The nurse helped her into a wheelchair and then wheeled her down the hall. On the main floor, when the elevator doors opened, a swarm of reporters with cameras and lights literally attacked her.

“No, take me back up!” she cried.

Before anyone could jump in the elevator with them, the nurse jammed at the close button, and they rode back up to the third floor.

Okay, now what?

The nurse patted her shoulder but didn’t offer any suggestions. God damn it, exhausted and alone, did she have to think of everything herself? About to suggest that if they’d call a cab, she’d walk out a back door under her own steam, Sam appeared.

“I’ll take care of her. We’ll go through the basement loading area,” he said to the nurse.

The nurse looked from Sam to Liz for confirmation.

“It’s okay, I’m a policeman.” He showed her his badge.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Liz echoed. “I know him. He’ll take me to my parents’ house.”

Wordlessly, he rolled her down the hall through swinging doors to a freight elevator. Silently, they rode down four floors to the basement, rolled past the big metal food tray holders, past mysterious closed doors, past a double door labeled *Morgue*.

“I have an unmarked car right outside. Can you walk out? It’ll be faster than transferring you from the wheelchair.”

She nodded and started to push herself off the arms of the chair before he locked it into place.

He caught her as she started to fall. Being with him was painful enough, but having his arms around her was much, much worse. He half carried, half walked her to the passenger side of the car and carefully placed her inside, buckling the seat belt. His every touch was utter torture. Between that and the shock, tears welled, but she blinked furiously to keep them from falling. She’d be damned if she’d show him needy and pathetic. She did snuffle a lot, though, to get it all up while he walked around the car to the driver’s side. She gave him the address, and they sped off into the night. It should only take about thirty minutes, because there would be no traffic at this hour.

“How soon do you think I can get back in my house?” She leaned on the door armrest and lethargically watched the dark, silent cross streets fly by.

“You want to go back? To live?”

“Yes, it’s my home.”

He was quiet after that, white-knuckled fingers clutching the wheel in the prescribed ten and two positions, his face set into a grim expression. The only conversation they had was when he gave her his cell phone to call ahead. Her parents hovered at the front door when they arrived.

“Liz.” He turned in the seat toward her.

Her heart tripped with anxiety. Would he explain why all this had happened?

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to see you again,” he told her in a chilly voice. He gazed at something past her shoulder outside the car, because he certainly wasn’t making eye contact.

“That guy said you two had a history. He said he wanted revenge.”

“Shit.”

“Something about your brother.”

He leaned back against his door, putting physical and emotional distance between them.

She caught the motion of her parents approaching the car. Apparently he did too, because he put up a hand as if to stop them.

“Please just give us a minute, then Liz’ll come in.” He turned back to her. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Yeah, okay, Sam. I understand. I’ll see you around. Or not,” she added furiously. “You don’t need to feel obligated.” She pushed open the passenger door, turning on the overhead light and making the mistake of glancing back at him. His ravaged, grief-stricken expression shocked her to her core. She had the very odd and very real feeling that she was abandoning *him*.

The overhead light going on signaled her parents, and they descended on the car. He acknowledged her mom and dad, but in the crush of their exclamations and of her being hustled in since she only had on the thin scrubs, Sam vanished.

All she wanted was to take one of the pills the doctor had given her and go to sleep. How had she lost control of her life? She’d become involved in Sam’s life in a big way, and now he left with no explanation. Liz asked her parents to wait until morning for the story, assuring them she was all right. She needed to sleep. Needed to be alone. A cold feeling filled her stomach. She’d be alone all right. Without Sam.

Chapter 13

Shit. Sitting with Liz in the hospital brought back too many memories. Memories of Petey in a coma. The horror of the fear his brother would never wake up. Horror as to what he'd be like if he *did* wake up. They'd already said the oxygen had been cut off to his brain, and the fifteen-year-old wouldn't be the same.

At eighteen, Sam had known he'd carry the guilt of his actions for the rest of his life. His parents and Jeff, his older brother, had been devastated. He never wanted them to find out the truth of his direct responsibility for Petey's condition. He hadn't poisoned his little brother with drugs, but beating up Dominguez led to the overdose.

Now, eight years later, another life had been impacted by his actions. He'd almost gone mad imagining what had gone on inside Liz's house. The monster, Dominguez, finally found his revenge. He would have gladly given himself in exchange for her, but his sergeant wouldn't let him.

Thank God for the accuracy of the Leupold scope on the sniper's rifle. Now, he'd had to sit in a hospital room with Liz. Liz who'd almost paid the ultimate price because of him. He was poison to the people he cared about. Thank God, he wasn't in too deeply with her.

Liar.

Sure, they had great sex. All he had to do was touch her, and the sparks flew. She welcomed him into her body like she welcomed him home. But he didn't belong with her, or inside her. What had he thought to risk destroying her life?

Well, he hadn't thought with his brain, had he? His little head *had* no brain. It just wanted her—the lush, sweet slide of his cock, her soft, pearly skin, and the look of intense sensuality on her face when she came.

He shook his head trying to erase that memory. No, didn't work. Liz Aspen was an un-erasable experience. She represented everything he didn't deserve—home, comfort, love.

As well as hot sex. His cock twitched, swelled, balls tightening and aching just thinking about it.

Son of a bitch!

He had a lot to answer for. The white shirts, his superiors, had quite a few questions regarding his history with Roberto Dominguez. The review board hearing was coming, and he'd prepared for it since going into the academy. He couldn't run from it forever. I.A. questioned him. His union rep tried to stop him, but he insisted on telling it all. He just couldn't hide any more. If it ruined his career, so be it. He deserved it. Petey, and now Liz, had been harmed by his actions, and he couldn't change any of it.

He also knew he had to go to his family and admit his part in what happened to his younger brother. Petey's coma and subsequent brain damage were his fault. His actions set up the chain of events that ruined Petey's life and almost cost Liz hers.

* * * *

Taking a deep breath before walking through the door of his childhood home, he fought the prickles of anxiety eating at his stomach. The Chicago bungalow had seen the best times of his life, and now he would taint all the good memories. He would also confess his part in Liz's being taken hostage.

"You don't have to forgive me. I don't expect it. I don't deserve it." He sat on the edge of the couch in the family room. Petey had been put to bed. His brother Jeff and fiancé, Sherry, sat at the other end of the couch, his folks, Dorothy and Carter, in their separate recliners. He'd told them everything in a flat, unemotional voice, leaving nothing out, not any one of his stupid, disastrous mistakes. Shoulders slumped, elbows balanced on his knees, hands dangling between them, he sat, completely subdued. Defeated.

"My job is in jeopardy, as it rightly should be." He scrubbed his face with his hands, pushed them through his hair, holding it back for a minute before it flopped back onto his forehead.

Without a word, his mother stood and headed for the kitchen. He wondered if he should follow her. She'd given birth to all of them. One child's life ruined by another child's actions. Stunned was the only way to describe the expression on his father's face. These people taught school. They knew nothing about the dangerous life he lived. They hadn't known about his tactical assignment. God, what a mess he'd made of things. He didn't have a clue what to do. Jeff, a fire fighter, faced danger every day, but his actions hadn't hurt their little brother.

Not able to bear the silence one minute longer, he pushed off the couch and crept into the kitchen. Dorothy faced the sink, staring out the window into the dark back yard. He stopped just inside the door. Her kitchen always smelled of baking. *Always* had, ever since he and his brothers had been little kids. The memory choked him up now. He'd ruined everything. "Mom, I'm so sorry," he whispered.

His mother turned, tears in her eyes. "Sam, my baby."

"I know. I'm so sorry about Petey. If I could change it, I would. You don't deserve this. No one does." He moved toward the big wooden dinner table in the middle of the kitchen, leaned on it, his fingers splayed.

"No, I mean you. You're my baby too."

He shook his head. "No." It was all he could do to keep from sobbing.

"Sam." Suddenly right next to him, she moved quickly and quietly in stealth mother mode.

He flinched at her hand on his shoulder. Her touch became firmer as her arm slid around his shoulders. He had to be half a foot taller than his mom, but she pulled his head to her shoulder and petted his hair. He couldn't control it any longer and made a terrible, low sound, his tears coming fast. "I'm sorry, Mom." He slid his arms around her waist and let her motherly warmth console him.

"Baby," her voice broke. "I love you. So much. It wasn't your fault. Petey wasn't your fault. You tried to help him."

"No, Mom, don't..."

"No, you did. You were young. That horrible man was already killing Petey." Her voice

broke. “Petey was killing himself.” She sobbed harder, held him tighter. “We didn’t know how to reach him. I might have beat that bastard up too, if I could have. So would your dad. And Jeffie.”

She pushed back a little and took his face in her hands. “Look at me. Sam, we love you. You’re our son too. You did what you did out of love. How could you have known what would happen?” She kissed his cheeks, his forehead. “We’re so proud of you. Of what you’ve done all these years.”

“You didn’t know what I was doing.”

“We knew you were a policeman. One of the good guys.”

“Mom.” Tears ran down his face, dripped into his beard, and he wiped his face with a shirt sleeve.

His mother chuckled through her tears. “Just like when you were a kid and cried, you wiped your eyes with your sleeve then, too. Do you know how much like that little boy you looked just now? Oh, God, you’re a big boy now, aren’t you? Over six feet tall with that darling beard.” She tugged at the hair on his chin, then just held him, crying and laughing, too.

“You don’t hate me?”

“That’s not possible. Believe me, if you’re ever a dad, you’ll know.”

His body tightened. He laid his cheek on her shoulder, his face turned away from her. “That’s not likely.” Grief welled again, this time for Liz.

“Oh, it’s likely all right. Just give yourself time and forgive yourself. We forgive you, baby.”

“Mom? Can I just go out the back door and leave? I can’t go back in there and look at Dad and Jeff.”

“No. Sammie. Just go in and say goodbye. You have the courage for that. You don’t have to talk about this any longer, but you have the courage to say goodbye and accept their forgiveness. To get past this, you have to do that much.”

He took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“Then, soon, I want you to come back and tell us about this woman.”

His gaze jerked toward her. “How did you...?”

Her smile broadened. “I didn’t...until now. Not for sure. Come on, honey. Say goodbye, and then you’re out of here. And come home soon. I love you.” She held his face, brushing tears from beneath his eyes with her thumbs.

Driving back to his apartment, he tried to put everything that had happened into perspective. His life had fallen in the dumper, but his family still loved him, inexplicably forgave him, and loved him. His career might be over, but he would survive.

* * * *

Liz stayed holed up in her parents’ house for two days. They were wonderful people, both free spirits at heart. Her father had settled into public relations for a not-for-profit for autistic kids. Her mom owned a small jewelry shop which carried original artisan-designed pieces.

The Aspens were hysterical when they discovered she’d been part of the hostage situation. Her sister, Miry, had seen it on CNN. Fuzzy distant shots of her being pulled out of the house, of

her being held with a gun at her head, naturally shocked all of them. They could just make out the tape across her mouth. They feared she'd been raped. She assured them she hadn't.

They put the phone permanently on the answering machine because of the reporters and only responded if the police called. Each night, she awoke alone in the darkness, sheets and blanket twisted right out from under the mattress, cold sweat washing her body. Her heart pounded, stomach ached, her throat tightened as she relived the attack. Fear of smothering, fear of rape, the pain of his knee in her belly, his arm around her neck—she'd been terrified she would die right there in front of her house, the place she'd always considered her refuge. Even so, she missed it.

Sam didn't call the first day. She felt as if she could barely breathe for the heartbreak. Sitting huddled in the kitchen on the second day with her hands cupping a soothing cup of hot tea, she also fought the anger at being attacked in her own home. Anger at the man. Anger at Sam for apparently being the cause and not here to confront.

What had she expected? After the shooting, he'd held her and called her love and sweetheart and darling.

I guess that was just for the moment, to calm me down, to make me be a good girl, and go to the hospital.

She pushed thoughts of him far, far away. They both got what they'd wanted out of the relationship.

Pfft.

And they didn't really have a relationship. She sternly told herself to forget the great sex. Sam obviously had.

Pushing the chair back, she paced. She didn't care about him. Not about whatever the story was with his brother. Not about the sadness and disconnect she sensed in him.

Don't think about the hot sex, the sweetness, the softness of his beard on her skin, the thoroughness of his kisses.

God! Stop it!

She rubbed her temples with her fists as if wiping away the memories.

On the third day after almost being killed, her landlord called and said everything had been cleaned up outside her house, and that a cleaning crew took care of the inside. She could go home. Of course, her parents didn't want her to go back there and live alone, but she insisted.

Bailey came over soon after she got home and told her rehearsals for the play had been put on hiatus for a few weeks while the producers trolled for funding. They went to lunch at the Cedar Room to celebrate her recovery. A couple glasses of champagne later, and she had a delightful buzz.

“You don’t look good, Liz.”

“Well, thanks a lot, Bailey,” she snapped. “I really needed that.”

“I’m sorry. I mean you look tired. Are you sleeping?” He tried to grasp her hand.

“I’m fine.” She felt disoriented. She wasn’t fine.

“Honey, you can’t fool me. You’ve been through more than anyone I know. You deserve to be worn out from it.” He tipped the bottle of champagne in her direction asking if she wanted a refill.

She nodded yes to the drink, but admitted, “No. I still wake up in a cold sweat. Sometimes even when I’m awake.” She met her friend’s eyes, blinked away incipient tears.

“It’ll get better in time, sweetie, but until it does, you can talk to me. Any time. You know that.”

He held her hand in silence. Murmuring conversations at nearby tables, glass and silverware tinkling, all these sounds disappeared into the white noise in her mind.

“So what’s happening with the stud muffin, girl?” Bailey asked, changing the subject.

She jerked out of her daze and pouted at her friend. “Why couldn’t he be more like you? Loyal and sensitive.”

“Ha. If he were more like me, I’d have him in *my* bed. Seriously Liz, he got you shot. He got you held hostage.”

She shuddered at the memory and poured herself another glass of champagne.

“He’s dangerous for real,” he added.

“Why don’t we go away for a few days? A vacation. We could go somewhere fun. And warm.” She tried to come up with a city. “New Orleans. Let’s go there.”

“You know I’d love to go, but I’ve got a gig at the Blackstone.”

“Yeah. I guess I forgot.” Bailey sang hot jazz numbers in the lobby bar of the famous hotel downtown.

“Why don’t you go?”

“Alone?”

“Yeah, it would do you good to have some time to yourself. Shop. Eat. Drink. Par-tay. Hey, maybe Jordin would go with you.”

“No, I’m not really that close to her. Not like with you.”

Their food arrived, and they waited for the server to leave before speaking again.

“Okay, I’ll go by myself.”

“Don’t sound so defeated. You’ll have fun. Get away from all the bad stuff that’s happened here. See the sights, and you’ll come back refreshed,” Bailey assured her.

“Sure I will.” Well, at least she’d made a decision.

“And,” he reminded her. “I’ll only be a phone call away.”

* * * *

Wandering Bourbon Street, Liz decided she wouldn’t dwell on Sam. She’d live in the moment and not focus on lovers strolling arm in arm along the historic streets. Ornately decorated balconies and heavy, moss-laden live oaks added to the romantic atmosphere. She walked her feet off so she could sleep at night and stuffed herself at every recommended gourmet restaurant she had time for.

She refused to think about Sam. Damn him, she’d gotten along without him for twenty-eight years. She could do it again. He was just one man. She wouldn’t waste her time wondering about him, about the mysteries of his past or about what he might be doing right this minute.

* * * *

Lost in thoughts of Liz, Sam stared at her darkened house and the blackness of her bedroom window. Was she still at her folks’? Was she all right?

You deserve this torture.

He couldn’t take it any longer. He had to know what was going on with her. His sergeant hadn’t let him take part in the investigation and definitely wouldn’t let him interview her. So, all he had access to were the written reports. She’d been mugged and held hostage. He hated to think of her body covered in bruises, hated to think of her being afraid. If the sniper hadn’t killed Dominguez with one shot, he, Sam, would have done it point blank. Another person he cared about being the victim of that asshole tore him up inside.

That’s why, the next morning he found himself driving to the northwest side, retracing his tracks to her parents’ house. He had to check on her. He didn’t mind if she hated him. He didn’t blame her. He just needed to be sure she was okay.

“Is Liz here?” He felt like a high school kid asking for his prom date.

“You’re the police officer who brought her home, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Detective Bolt.”

Stay professional. Act like you’re not personally involved.

Fucking idiot.

“Come in. Liz isn’t home now.” Mr. Aspen ushered him inside. “Would you like some coffee, Detective?”

“Um, no, thank you, though.” The living room looked nice, just like his folks’ house. Pretty and pristine. He imagined the recliners and TV were set up in a well-used family room. Motioned to the sofa, he started to sit but popped back up when Mrs. Aspen entered. “Did she go back to her place? I haven’t seen...um...”

“No, she went on a vacation. Do you need her to answer more questions? I thought she’d finished with the police. The other officer said she had.”

“No. I...um...I was just following up.”

“Good,” Mrs. Aspen interrupted. “Because she was pretty shook up even though she tried to hide it for our sakes.”

“Can you tell me where she went or how long she’ll be gone?”

“Sure. I guess that’d be all right. You are with the police, after all.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t show you my badge.”

“Oh, no, I know you are. We saw you the night you brought her home.”

He pulled his ID out anyway. “So, where did she go?” He tried to be patient but wanted to bellow his frustration if he could get a deep enough breath.

“New Orleans.”

“Okay. Does she have friends there?”

“No, she just wanted to get away,” Mrs. Aspen said.

“Could you tell me where she’s staying?”

“Unh, sure. Let me get the slip of paper. I have it in the kitchen by the phone. Are you sure we can’t get you anything to drink?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” He was about as fine as...well, he didn’t know what. But he wasn’t fine.

“The Monteleon in the French Quarter, Detective. She’s staying a week.”

“Okay. When will she be back?”

“Well, she just left yesterday, so a few more days. She’ll be back Saturday.”

“Thank you. If you hear from her, would you tell her that Sam, Detective Bolt, asked after

her?”

“Yes, we sure will,” Mrs. Aspen responded. “That’s very nice of you to be concerned. This whole thing was awful for her. We didn’t want her going away alone, but she insisted she’d be all right. Liz can be stubborn.”

Mr. Aspen added, “She’s always been independent, wanting to do everything by herself, but I’m sure the officer isn’t interested in this.”

“Thank you for the information. I appreciate it.” He almost laughed aloud. He *was* interested. He wanted to ask them all about her, wanted to know all her childhood secrets. They smiled at him when he left and offered him good luck.

But now, all that mattered was how fast he could get the next flight to New Orleans and find her. On desk duty, he had plenty of comp time coming to him. At home, while he packed, he booked a flight that afternoon to New Orleans, and called the Monteleon for a reservation. He’d figure everything else out when he got there. His stomach churned thinking of her in the bars. The guys would be all over her. He hoped she’d learned her lesson about walking the streets alone at night.

Chapter 14

In the early evening, Sam landed in New Orleans. Warmer and balmier than Chicago, sultry heat wrapped damply around him, raising a sheen of sweat just when he didn't want to look grungy. By the time he got to the hotel, all the crazies and tourists roamed the streets. First, he'd try to find Liz. If necessary, he'd use his badge at the front desk to get her room number. At this point, though, he didn't want to call attention to either of them.

She didn't answer when the hotel operator put him through to her room. Damn. What now? Look through the hotel dining rooms and bars first then hit the streets? Yeah, that's a plan.

A little cooler now, he strolled past Café du Monde, peered at the crowds there and didn't see her. Delicious smells wafting from the Central Grocery reminded him he hadn't eaten. Buying a muffaletta, he wolfed it down and continued prowling the narrow streets. He picked jazz clubs at random and checked them out. What would he do if he saw her cozying up to another man? Hell, he'd rip the guy's guts out.

On the flight down, he'd gone over and over his reasons for following her. At first he tried to tell himself it was to make sure she was all right. But that wasn't the whole truth. She wasn't just another nameless victim. Yes, he felt responsible for getting her involved in his mess, but there was more. He didn't want to name it, and it was damned inconvenient. Stupid. She represented everything he wanted in life but didn't deserve. So why had he come? He should just let her get on with her life. Son of a bitch that he was, though, he couldn't let her go.

He also knew it could be like finding a needle in a haystack to think he could spot her this way. He'd be better served by sitting in the hotel lobby and waiting for her to come back.

And if she's with some man...well, I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

Nursing a beer, he ensconced himself at a table at the hotel bar so he could watch the front doors. Two hookers approached him, but he wasn't interested. It didn't take them long to move on to greener pastures. After more than an hour of sitting on his fanny and brooding, look who should walk through the revolving doors. Liz Aspen. He almost missed her, but something about those legs caught his eye.

A red leather skirt showcased her spectacular legs. A soft black sweater hugged her breasts.

And she was alone.

Thank you, God.

Should he go to her now? Why the hell had he flown all the way down here? Now, he wasn't sure what to say. Normally, because of his line of work, he made decisions on the fly. This time he wasn't one hundred percent sure of his reception. Their short affair had been intense, and she'd been as into it as he'd been.

As fast as that he became hard.

And while he wasted time mulling things over, she'd made it to the elevator, and the doors closed.

Fucking idiot.

He'd give her time to get to her room, then he'd call.

* * * *

Liz welcomed the privacy of her own room. New Orleans, although a wonderful city, exciting and beautiful with great music and terrific food, felt lonely. The lovers surrounding her, all the sex for hire, the free sex, it all made her think about Sam. She had to sit down, her knees almost giving out at the memory of their lovemaking. Slouching, resting her head on the back of the chair, she allowed herself a moment of recollection. Maybe she should reacquaint herself with her battery-operated friend to take the edge off and help her sleep.

But it isn't Sam.

Between horrific memories of the trauma and the sexual frustration, Lord knew she needed sleep.

The jangle of the phone startled her out of her reverie. Who'd be calling at this time of night? Probably her parents or Miry. They worried about her and hadn't wanted her to travel alone. But she'd needed to be alone.

"Hello?"

"Liz."

Her stomach dropped, and she had to sit again.

Sam.

"Um...hello, Sam." *Oh, God.* "How did you know where to find me?"

“Your parents told me.”

“Okay...”

“Are you all right?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” Her heart pounded so hard surely he could hear it through the phone.

No, I’m not all right.

“Well, I just wanted to make sure.”

“I’m fine,” she said in a clipped voice. “Just taking a little vacation. A little R and R.” Nerves frazzled, mouth dry as dust, she could hardly get a deep breath. Just hearing his sensuous, husky voice sent shivers down her back. Thank God she was sitting down, because her knees would never have held her up. How had she ever thought the vibrator could take his place?

Damn him.

She had to say something. The silence stretched on and on until she wanted to scream. “Is that all? You just called to see if I’m okay?”

“Yes. Well...no.”

He wasn’t any more glib than she. A ray of guarded hope flickered through her heart.

“Um.”

She giggled uneasily, both of them tongue-tied. Doubling over her knees, she folded her arms around her achy stomach. God, she wanted him.

“Liz?”

His husky voice played with her senses. “Yes?”

“Can I come up?”

“Up? To my room? Where are you?”

“In New Orleans.”

“New Orleans?” she whispered.

“Downstairs in the hotel bar.”

“The bar?”

“Yeah, are you going to repeat every word I say?”

“You’re here at the Monteleon?”

“Yes. Can I come up?”

She panicked. “Um...no.”

“No?” He sounded surprised.

Oh, God.

“Why are you here?”

“Liz, please. I don’t want to talk down here surrounded by people.”

“I’ll meet you.”

“Unh...okay. I guess that’ll be all right.”

“It’ll have to be. I’ll be there in five minutes...unh...ten.”

“I’ll be here.” His laugh sounded strained.

“Unh hunh.” She hung up.

Thank God, she’d said ten. Nine of those minutes would be needed to pace the room to shake off her nerves. “Oh my God, Sam’s here. Here in the hotel,” she muttered. Excitement bloomed in her heart, suffused her skin with heat. This wasn’t a coincidence. He’d gone to her parents, found out where she was, and came after her. Fighting for a deep breath, she needed to lower her heart rate to normal, or as normal as she could get it knowing Sam Bolt waited downstairs in the bar.

Twenty minutes later, she stalked out of the elevator doors and into his arms. No one wore jeans as well as he did, and the black T-shirt hugged his muscular chest. Incredibly, his hands shook when he slid them around her waist. His strong arms tightened around her, and he signaled his intent with parted lips and dark lashes layered on his cheeks. His mouth covered hers in a kiss full of sweet wonder and desperate need.

She melted into him. The tighter he drew her to him, the steadier he grew. His harsh groan when he deepened the kiss reverberated through her skin. She responded with a whimper. His soft beard tickled her cheeks, and she angled her face to snuggle against it. He ravished her mouth with his tongue, and she ravished his in return.

Then oblivion. She surrendered. She knew him, knew his body, knew his desires.

And hers. He’d come after her. It had to mean he cared. She wanted to forget the hurt and confusion of the past and focus on the intense ecstasy of this moment, but, still, she wondered why he’d come.

He lifted his head. She could see his pulse beating at the base of his throat.

“Come on.” Plastering her to his side, he pulled her into the dim recess of the bar. He seated

her at a small table in a dark corner, drawing their chairs together so their knees touched. He held her face in both hands, urging her chin up with his thumbs. “Liz...”

She tried to control the dizzying storm inside her. She’d missed him, had ached for him.

“I missed you,” he said.

Right or wrong, she wanted him. Wanted to be with him, feel his naked body next to hers. On top. Beneath. He’d come after her. At this moment, that was all that mattered.

But a shred of sanity forced its way into her mind. “What are you doing here, Sam?”

“I...”

“May I get you a drink, Miss?”

She blinked, reminded they were in a public place. How could she think when he looked at her with that much intensity?

The lust rolling off him in waves was barely held in check. His lips were swollen with their kisses.

And the waitress stood there.

Oh, God.

“Whatever he’s having.”

“Draft,” he said. “Two.”

“Yes, sir.”

He scooted closer and hung his arm around the back of her chair, his fingers teasing her shoulder. She angled her neck like a cat when he ran them up and massaged her ear. He grinned, a victorious show of white teeth, and then his lips pressed her cheek. “Mm. You smell fine, lady.”

“Huh.” Her breath came out in a huff. His warm lips brushing her cheek was a huge distraction. “I bought it here.”

“Well, it’s turning me on.”

“Bal à Versailles,” she sighed, surprised she could remember the perfume’s name under his seductive nips.

“Hunh?”

He probably didn’t care about the name of the perfume and was using this as a distraction. “Sam, you haven’t answered me. Why are you here?”

He let her shift away from him, but he kept his arm draped along the back of her chair. “I was

worried about you.”

“You weren’t worried enough about me to call those first three days. Why now?” She pressed her lips together, folded her arms across her chest, and scowled.

“I didn’t know if you suffered from any after-effects.” His intense gaze was unnerving.

“You mean like post traumatic stress?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, uh huh, I do. I wake up in the middle of the night sweating and shaking thinking about what almost happened. What did happen. I can still feel his hot brains coating my arms. I can still feel the tape stuck over my mouth. That was almost the worst. I was afraid I’d smother to death. So, yeah, I suffer from after-effects.”

His eyes met hers, tremendous guilt shimmering in them.

“I deserve an explanation. After all, I was almost...killed, and I don’t even know why.”

The waitress returned with two tall glasses of beer. Her mouth dry as dust, she took a sip.

He gulped his. “I’m sorry, Liz.”

“What was between you and that man. That Dominguez?”

“What’d he say?” he asked evasively.

Oh, so we’re going to play a game, are we?

“He said you beat him up, and it had something to do with your brother.” She drew a shaky breath and looked away, the memory of Dominguez’s foul breath and spittle spraying her face haunting her.

He sat back in his chair, putting distance between them.

Talk about body language. “Listen, your business is your business, but I was almost killed because of it. But hey.” She lifted her arms in the air in an *I’m through with this discussion* gesture. “We can end this right now. We had a good time.” She rolled her eyes. “But we don’t owe each other anything more.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. More telling body language.

“I’m going to my room. We go our own ways. Maybe if we see each other in Chicago, we wave and that’s it.” She didn’t get this. He flew all the way to New Orleans but now wouldn’t talk. She’d been an idiot for caring about another guy who didn’t care about her. Sex didn’t a relationship make, and that’s all they’d had. She’d tried to get him to talk, to explain it all. Whatever they meant to each other, there was no hope of anything deeper if he couldn’t tell her the truth.

Drained of emotion or maybe full to bursting with too much emotion, she rose to leave. "Good bye, Sam." Before she got two feet from the table, he caught her, his hand clamping around her wrist.

"Can we go upstairs and talk?"

"No. Talk here, Sam."

"Will you come back and sit down? Please?"

She followed him back to the table wondering how much more of this she could take.

The waitress started to approach them, but he waved her away. He pulled their chairs close together and began. "Dominguez was a drug dealer who provided drugs to my younger brother, Petey." He paused. Looking toward the bar, the front window of the bar, he seemed to be gathering himself. "I beat him up."

"He said something about that. When did this happen?"

"A long time ago. I was eighteen."

So this is it. Dominguez had told her some of this, but now she saw how it affected Sam. "I'm so sorry. Is Petey okay?"

"He's not on drugs any more." His abrupt answer seemed designed to end the conversation.

"Well, that's good then." She wasn't ready to end it, sure there was more. "And Dominguez waited all these years for revenge?"

"I'd been hunting him since I joined the force. He recognized me the day I was shot and obviously figured out I was a cop. I thought I got away, but somehow they found me, and I led them to you. I'm sorry." He dragged his fingers through his hair, and met her gaze, his eyes shimmering with emotion. "You can't know how sorry I am."

"What a mess. Are you in trouble with the department?"

He met her eyes again and nodded. "Yes, my career's in jeopardy. That's minor compared to the harm I've caused you, though."

"It means a lot that you told me about it. If I can do anything with your bosses to help, I will."

He took another gulp of beer, his expression so forlorn, so lost, his mouth tight and grim.

She wrapped her hand around his. "I'm glad you're here," she whispered.

He paused, studying her face for a long moment. "Can we go upstairs now?"

"Oh, God." She closed her eyes. "You are single-minded, aren't you?" She was too easy when it came to him, but he'd been honest. That meant so much.

“I’ve missed you.” He pulled her hand to his jeans and placed it on his erection. “In fact…”

She swallowed convulsively. Her fingers closed around a penis as hard as the beer glass, with his heat penetrating all the way through the thick jeans.

“Liz,” he hissed, drawing in a sharp breath when she squeezed.

She felt the surge, the pump of blood beneath her palm. Her fingers wandered to the curve of the tip. When he growled, she petted him. In a haze of flirtatious, sensual fever, she purred in a mock Mae West voice, “Why, sir, is that a…gun in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?” She stumbled a little on the word gun but managed to wiggle her eyebrows. Her smile turned weak as the intensity in his very beautiful, dark eyes signaled how aroused he was.

“Glad to see you, baby,” he rumbled through clenched teeth. “Can we go up yet?” He braced one of his arms on the table, the other rigid behind her on the back of the chair and surrounded her with his heat.

Whatever the hell brought him here, she didn’t care where it ultimately led. She just wanted him and that lovely, thick cock inside her. She leaned into the shelter of his arms, against his chest, and lifted her face to kiss his neck .

“Come on.” She gave his cock another all encompassing squeeze from the tip all the way to his groin.

Chapter 15

The door slammed shut, harder than she'd intended, but it didn't matter. His hand on her bottom propelled her into the room and pushed her onto the bed. She kept her grip on his belt, caught a loop in her fingers, and brought him down with her. "Sam." She groaned his name, his weight blasting the breath out of her.

He pulled up, his knees on either side of her hips and stretched her arms above her head, holding her wrists with one hand. His other hand rested on her chest. "Breathe." For a minute he gently pushed, helping her even out her breathing. But only for a moment. Cupping her breast through her sweater, his fingers flicked and massaged her nipple.

"Even through your sweater, I can feel this hard little puppy," he said in a silky purr.

She whimpered, arching her back. She could feel the electricity racing through her veins, all the way to her clit.

He leaned in, taking her nipple between his teeth, through sweater, through bra, and nipped it, the sting a lovely torture.

"Sam, take it off. I want your mouth on me." She twisted her body, stretched out under him, vulnerable and desperate. She strained, stiffening against the hand holding her wrists above her head. The position, the same as in the attack, didn't terrify her this time because this was Sam, but she couldn't help feeling a moment of panic.

"Don't be afraid." Somehow he knew about her fear.

"He pulled my arms above my head and held me down," she whispered.

"I'm sorry." He hesitated, guilt evident in his eyes.

"It's not the same," she reassured him. And it wasn't. "I want this."

His eyes blazed with emotion. His free hand flicked open the buttons of the sweater and spread the edges apart. "Jesus." It sounded like a prayer. His lips traced the lace of her bra, slipping his tongue under the scalloped edge. He nipped at the inner curve of her breasts, then closed his teeth over a lace-covered nipple, rolling the other between an expert thumb and

forefinger.

She bucked, the sensations rippling through her body. She'd missed him so much. Missed the sexual, passionate woman he'd found in her. "Sam." His name was her mantra. She wanted to tell him to fuck her, to suck her, to please her in every way. And she wanted him flat on his back with her bending over him, sucking his long, hard cock into her voracious mouth.

He released her hands, leaning back.

"No," she whined when he stopped plying her nipples.

He just gazed down at her, one eyebrow raised, his lips quirked. The ambient light from the city filtered into the room, illuminating the face hovering above hers, his dark hair drooping over his forehead, midnight eyes glittering. God, he looked diabolical. Seductive. Addictive. This was Sam. And she wanted him. His eyes flashed with an emotion she recognized. Desire. She arched reflexively, slipping her hands up his neck into his hair, and demanded, "Fuck me, Sam."

Nodding, he removed his clothing, then her sweater and bra, and slid her skirt off her hips. "Oh, baby." She was left in panties and thigh highs. "You're killing me with these," he groaned, flicking the elastic band of the panties.

"I'm sorry," she panted, the sharp snap arousing. "I'll never wear them again."

"You'll wear 'em every time," he growled back, nipping at her bare skin above the stocking top. He pressed his cheek on her, blew heated breath against the thin silk over her mound. "What the hell were you thinking wearing these without me around to see 'em?" He traced the lace. "Would you have slept with another man, Liz?" His voice grated menacingly.

The implied jealousy, and especially the uncertainty in his voice, thrilled her.

He swept both hands over her breasts, wrapping his palms around them, brushing his thumbs close to, but not quite touching, her nipples.

She watched the pebbled tips tighten, moaned at the ache, at the sensitivity that felt like a band around her chest.

He licked and kissed her belly, dipping his tongue into her belly button. "Hunh? Liz. Answer me," he commanded, his teeth sharply nipping the tender skin just above her mound.

"Sam. No. Never." She'd say anything to keep the amazing feelings coming. "God, do that again." Even the pain aroused her. She flexed her hips in invitation.

In an instant, he pulled her panties down her legs. "This, hunh?" He tugged her pubic hairs with his teeth.

"You're driving me crazy," she moaned. She wanted him, wanted the cock jutting from its thick, dark nest between his thighs.

"That's the plan, sweetheart. You're not going to do this with any other man. Are you?"

“You damn bastard,” she snarled and pushed her fists against his shoulders, both aroused and angry with his possessiveness.

“Oh, ho, you want to play rough, do you?” he chuckled wickedly.

At least that’s the way it sounded, and she *loved* this side of him.

* * * *

Sam hovered over her, balanced on his elbows. He closed his mouth around a nipple, suckling and tasting her, the scent of her skin, of her perfume wreathing through his brain.

He wanted his cock inside her but couldn’t resist first licking his way down her belly. She squirmed, arching, pushing her pussy in his face. “I know what you want, baby.” He dipped his tongue into her folds, hearing her gasp when his tongue touched her clit. Jesus Christ, he loved her clit.

His tongue washed and teased the stiff nub, his fingers gently tugging at the lips surrounding it, rimming her hole until she moaned loudly.

“Sam,” she whimpered.

“What do you want, honey?” he teased.

“Suck it, baby. Please...”

He obediently drew her clit into his mouth and ravished it.

“Oh, oh...too...”

At the distress in her voice, he gentled the pull of his lips and used the flat of his tongue to drive her pleasure. Without slowing, he peeked at her.

She watched him, her eyes wide, her fingers clutched in his hair.

“Do you want me to fuck you, baby?”

She nodded, yanking hard on his hair. “Come here, come here,” she begged, urging him up over her.

Damn. He couldn’t believe how the sharp tugs on his hair excited him. His eyes closed in bliss when she threaded her fingers through and grasped the strands.

“Sam...”

Oh, right. He came back to earth. He had her where he wanted her, and he’d follow her

directions. Rising above her, he caressed his cock, brushing the head through the juices of her weeping pussy. He had to grit his back teeth to keep from shooting off too fast.

“Sam!”

And then he thrust. All the way in. One smooth glide into her heavenly tight cunt. He couldn’t stifle a loud groan. Finding her mouth again, he kissed her hard, driving his hips into her. He’d been waiting a long time, a lifetime, for her.

She panted.

He loved it when she panted.

She cried out.

He loved it when she cried out.

Fuck! He couldn’t think any more. His body took over, and he buried himself inside her, over and over, surging deeply, pushing her toward the headboard. “Liz. Oh, fuck.”

“God, yes,” she sobbed.

He’d wanted her so badly, had hardly been able to wait for her. And then he exploded, convulsing into her, his semen coming in pulsing thick jets. He couldn’t stop the aftershocks, couldn’t stop the rotation of his hips. “Jesus,” he groaned into the cradle of her neck. Her fingers still gripped his hair, and it still *fucking turned him on!*

She slowly opened her eyes and met his gaze.

He almost said it. The first words almost out of his mouth were going to be *I love you*.

Instead, he said, “Are you okay?”

Her answer was the wide-eyed, open mouth expression on her face. A little fear, a little awe, then her hands dropped from his head to the bed in surrender. “Very.”

* * * *

Liz awoke, her bottom pressed spoon-wise against a ramrod-stiff male appendage. Flushing, hot sweat broke out on her body. Even so, she didn’t want to move away from the furnace behind her.

Delicately he caressed her belly and thighs, smoothing gentle fingers across her hip, up over her breasts. She’d never been so thoroughly made love to, or so well. Extraordinarily generous and giving, he’d aroused her to the heights of her climax before he had his own. No one she’d ever known had the expertise of this man.

“How can you be cold, Liz.” He nuzzled her ear.

“Huh?”

“You’re shivering. Am I going to have to warm you up?” he chuckled teasingly. “Again.”

“Oh,” she responded distractedly. “I’m not cold.” She snuggled back into the shelter of his warmth.

“Good, because I’d hate to have to do any of this.” He splayed his hand downward over her belly, brushing his palm over her mound, curving his fingers into her sheath.

She arched, covering his hand with hers and pressing, as if he needed any encouragement. Two fingers speared easily inside her. She wiggled her bottom, wedging his cock into the crease. She could get used to this. Used to him.

“I like when you do that.” He interrupted her thoughts.

“Ahh.” He scissored his fingers inside her. “Do what?” she sighed.

“Wiggle.” His fingers slid out and spread the slick wetness around her clit.

A breath escaped on a moan. Her hips shimmied.

“Like that,” he whispered, rubbing the sides of her clit. “I love to make you come.”

She vaguely heard him, the sensations taking over her brain. She felt them, though. Her insides quivered, rattled like little crystal pieces as he played and teased and tormented. Her climax would never happen. He kept her on the edge for so long, she was afraid she’d die before her release came.

“Ooo...” Her cry surprised her as she tumbled over the edge, hips jerking, thighs squeezing his hand between them trying to contain the climax. Contain the surprising turn in her life. God, she didn’t want this to end.

Chapter 16

Even though exhausted and barely able to walk in the morning, they decided to get up, get dressed, and see the sights of the Big Easy. Instead of a big breakfast at Brennan's, they found a table at Café du Monde. The morning air felt comfortably cool, and they decided to sit outside in the sunshine drinking strong chicory coffee and coating their cheeks and clothes in powdered sugar from the beignets.

She laughed, a happy, carefree sound, her smile, a self-satisfied tease. "You have white all over your beard."

Sam took the golden opportunity to stroke her fingers with his tongue when she brushed at the sticky stuff in his mustache. Damn, but she tasted sweet. She drew her tongue across her upper lip to taunt him. Her lips pursed in a kissing motion, and her eyes focused on his mouth when he smoothed his tongue down to the sensitive spot between her fingers. Her gaze, gleaming with playful sensuality, slowly rose to his and held. He rolled his tongue around her finger mimicking her sucking his cock.

"Ohh..." Her teeth nipped at her lower lip, eyes wide with devilment.

He brushed his fingers over her soft cheek and felt the amazing connection, even more powerful than what had been between them during the night hours.

Then, the clatter of dishes interrupted his thoughts.

She blinked as if coming out of a trance. Turning beet red and looking guiltily around, she scolded him, "There are people here." But she looked as aroused as he felt. "Behave."

"You know, that's one of the things I like about you," he said in a voice more hoarse than he would have liked. Sliding closer and draping his arm over the back of her chair, he added, "You're proper when we're in public, but you like to play dirty in private."

"Unh hunh." She smiled wickedly and winked.

He nuzzled her neck, biting her earlobe delicately. He wondered how she'd take it if he told her he'd watched her boldly and very improperly masturbate.

Many eyes followed them when they left the café. Even in a town of lovers, they'd just provided titillating entertainment for the crowd, and he couldn't care less. Conscious that his problems were far away in another state and that he was glued to the side of this beautiful, sensual woman, he felt liberated and extremely lucky. If only he didn't feel quite so guilty for not telling her everything. Like about Petey's coma and brain damage.

"You know, this is the first time we've been in the daylight together." She smiled. "You're pretty cute."

He tightened his arm around her waist and returned her smile. "And you're beautiful." God, she was stunning. Daytime or nighttime, she glowed. Candlelight or sunlight, she took his breath away. That heated, fuzzy feeling flowed through him again. Again? It hadn't stopped since he'd laid eyes on her last night.

Haltingly, because they kept stalling in the middle of the sidewalk to kiss, they wandered the narrow, historic streets, past St. Louis Cathedral, and along Royal Street to the antique shops.

"Oh, Sam, can we go in?"

"For a price, m'dear." He grinned and twirled the end of his mustache.

"And that would be?" She moved into his body, nudging their bellies together, flirting outrageously right back.

He tightened his fingers around her waist, prodding his aroused cock against her stomach. "Twenty minutes of full frontal nudity."

"Okay," she answered immediately, nipping at the side of his neck. "Only twenty?"

Her heated breath bathed his skin. "Mmmm. Not so fast, darlin'. I wasn't finished." Huskily, he barely managed to eke the words out. "Twenty minutes with you lying on top of me."

"I don't see any problems with that." She wasn't daunted by his negotiating technique as she brushed her thumb over his lower lip. "You're making it too easy for me, baby."

Grinning, she turned and fled into a shop, leaving him outside listening to the tinkle of the little bell over the door.

I should've asked for more.

He entered the shop chuckling. No doubt about it, he'd have more.

She oohed and aahed over every piece of old jewelry in the display case. Although busy trying to hide his erection, he noted the pieces that especially fascinated her. She repeatedly sidled back to a necklace that the salesman, sensing her interest, had placed on the counter. Sam casually leaned over her shoulder, which had a two-part bonus. He could hide his boner, which hadn't subsided, from the salesman and, at the same time, press it against her luscious ass.

“You have the prettiest ass, honey. I’m just dying to see that thong again,” he whispered into her ear. “What are those stones?” he asked aloud.

She subtly pushed back at him with said beautiful ass, smiled devilishly, and said, “Amber. Isn’t it lovely?”

He grasped her waist, hooked his chin on her shoulder, and said, “Let me buy it for you.”

“Oh, my God, no. You can’t do that. It’s too expensive.”

“I want to.” The scent of her perfume, *bal-a* something, drove him nuts. He gave a quick nipping kiss to the side of her neck. This way he would be with her always. She’d have a remembrance of him when this was over. Because, as good as this was, he was afraid it couldn’t last.

Shit, don’t think that far ahead. Just think about the now.

After handing over his credit card, he insisted on placing the piece around her neck, his fingers circling her collarbone and grazing over the soft spot in the middle. Turning her to face him, he stared at her delicious beauty, and traced the little gold rings that attached the smooth amber nuggets together.

“Sam, thank you. It’s like a fairy necklace.”

Their gazes met. Their hands collided over the chain, his bigger one caressed hers from fingertips to wrist.

God, give me just a little more time with her.

He yearned for this normalcy, well, if lust and sex and hot woman could be called normal. It could in *his* book. “You are so beautiful,” he said, stepping closer so no space remained between them. His hands rested possessively on her shoulders, and he angled his head to kiss her.

The bell on the shop door jingled, and he realized they’d become the *show in the main lounge*. Again. “Come on, baby. Let’s get out of here.”

Half a block down Royal, a sudden rain shower hit. They sought shelter under an ornate second floor veranda, and he pressed her against the brick wall, kissing her senseless. He needed to put his arms around her, needed to kiss the living daylights out of her. She belonged to him now. She would forever wear his fairy necklace, and he’d live on in her heart. And she’d live in his.

She slid her arms around his waist, splaying her fingers possessively across his back. Overwhelmed by the happiness he wasn’t used to, he wrapped both hands around her neck, tipping up her chin with his thumbs. Sipping delicately from her lips, he nibbled, tasting the remaining sticky sweetness of the beignets they’d eaten. Her warm breath hitched as she tried to catch his lips to deepen the kiss. He had too much fun teasing her into a frenzy.

Her hands clutched his waist, and she pulled his hips closer, sliding her palms down over his

ass.

“Sweetheart, maybe we should go back to the hotel and take a nap, huh?” he suggested, while she nuzzled his neck and caressed his rear end.

“But I need dinner to build up my strength, darling, we’ve been on the move all day.”

“You’re a little teasing witch, but you taste so sweet, I’ll forgive you. I think I’ll sprinkle powdered sugar all over your body, then lick it off.”

“Okay.” Her head dropped back, and she sighed. “That’ll be quite pleasant.”

“It’ll be more than pleasant, I can promise you, sweetheart.” He raked his lips over hers, thrusting his tongue in her mouth, pumping slowly just as he’d like to do with his cock. If it were just a little darker, he’d skim his fingers beneath the sexy miniskirt, up the thigh highs he’d slobbered over when she put them on this morning. She’d purposely teased him with a glimpse of the teeny thong threading her crack.

Fuck, yes, we need a nap!

“Dinner,” she murmured against his lips. “Then nap,” she promised, making air quotes with her fingers.

The Court of Two Sisters turned out to be the closest restaurant, so that’s where they ended up. The central courtyard had been wiped dry from the rain shower, and twinkly lights in the trees and candles on the tables provided a soft romantic glow.

After they ordered, her fairy necklace caught his gaze. It gleamed as if lit magically from within by centuries of the amber’s history. He feasted his eyes on her beautiful face. She’d worn her hair up for coolness in today’s humidity, exposing her graceful neck. Little wispy tendrils curled over her temples and around her ears.

She met his gaze, her lips parted slightly.

Her pinkened cheek drew his fingertips, and he brushed them across the smooth skin, eliciting a little crooked smile from her. Her lashes lowered in pleasure then opened again, brimming with tenderness and passion.

“Have I told you how lovely you are?” he murmured.

“Not for a while.”

He traced her lip, her jaw and continued down her neck to rest on the golden amber stones. Slipping a finger under the links, he tugged gently bringing her closer. Her breath came faster, and the swell of her breasts enticed his fingers to wander lower. He trailed over the upper curve, hungrily watching his hand rise and fall with her rough breaths.

His palm itched to cover her soft flesh, and his mouth watered at the button of her nipple, stiff and distinct enough to show through bra and top. A potent desire swamped him. It was only the

appearance of the waiter that brought him to his senses. He didn't want to be anywhere else but touching and loving her.

Eating became his torment, envious of every morsel she brought to her lips. He begrudged every second his mouth wasn't on her. He tasted nothing, remembered nothing of what he ate. His whole mind centered on getting her back to the hotel and into bed.

Her eyes matched his with the same heated emotion. He wanted her so much. Wanted to make love to her while the fairy necklace circled her neck, wanted her to never forget that he gave it to her.

The tip of her tongue stroked over her upper lip, and she walked her fingers across the table to tap on the back of his hand. "Are you about finished?"

His face felt stiff when he finally cracked a smile. Now it was her turn to hurry him along.

He was so there.

* * * *

Sam's hand curved around her bottom, and he ushered her into the hotel room. It had been a wonderful day. He'd always been near her, his arm around her shoulders as they listened to a street jazz band. He'd trudged into the shops with her, never complaining, always attentive. His absorption in her, having this gorgeous man focusing all his considerable attention on her, awakened her as if she'd never loved before. Caught up in fascination and the sexual draw and in this magical day in this magical town, her heart knew they were meant to be together.

Now, in the dark room, she turned to him, ran her hands over his incredibly hard-muscled chest, around his neck, into his hair. He rested his hands at her waist and pushed her onto the bed. She went easily, wanting the feel of his weight on her. She saw the sparkle of calculation in his eyes.

He sat up on his knees and splayed his big hand on her belly. "I want to tie you up," he growled.

"Oh, God," she groaned. Her eyes widened. Her tongue traced her upper lip. Her nipples ached, her sheath softening, open and wet.

"I won't hurt you," he whispered, his lips hovering, his breath warming her face. He drew her lower lip between his teeth, the bite barely restrained, then his lips quirked. "I promise."

She wanted to test the limits with him. Live life with him. "Yes," she hissed.

He spread both palms over her belly, around her waist, and flipped her over onto her stomach.

She gasped when the bed bounced as he stood. She turned her head to watch him. Possession ran both ways. “Take off your clothes,” she commanded, but could only manage a whisper. “Let me watch.” He had such a spectacular body, and she wanted to take it all in.

His chest heaved, his expression suddenly unsure.

She wanted to assure him. “Whatever you want.” Her voice had a rough edge. She started to raise herself onto her elbows to watch.

He growled, “Stay down.” He dragged her arms above her head. “Don’t move.” He pulled his shirt off, unbuckled his belt, slid the zipper down, carefully, and dropped his pants, never releasing her gaze. His sexy black cotton boxers hugged bulging thigh muscles like a second skin. He looked great in clothes, great in underwear, and absolutely the greatest in nothing at all.

He shucked the boxers. Her gaze roamed over his body with its broad shoulders and that thick, black hair layered over his muscled chest. The lower half of him tapered to narrow hips and a flat belly. Yum. She licked her lips in a rush of greedy need. “I want to suck your cock.” The responding surge of his penis, its bob, the flex of his hips, made her grin. He wasn’t the only one with the power. She rested her cheek on her arm while he rustled around the room.

“Scarves, what do you have?”

She knew what he was looking for. Oh, God, he would really tie her up. Her breath came out in a sob. “Stockings...” Oh, yeah, she was willing to sacrifice an expensive pair of thigh highs for this.

“One chance to back out.” His expression turned sober as he knelt on one knee next to her hip. “Liz, are you positive?”

“Stop.”

His expression showed pure devastation, but he wiped it off as fast as it appeared. She loved him fiercely in that moment. He cared enough, had control enough, to put her feelings first.

He breathed through his open mouth, his chest rising and falling in alarm.

“Stop...talking and do it. I want you to.” *I love you.*

Quickly up again and rummaging through the drawers in the bureau, he found a pair of stockings, apparently not needing to be invited twice.

She gasped when he pulled her to her knees and removed her sweater and bra. Sliding his palms from her shoulders up her arms, he caressed her until his hands circled her wrists. He wrapped a stocking several times around her wrist as cushion, then tied it to a wrought iron curlicue. Liz dipped her face against that captured arm and opened her mouth on her hot skin. “Kiss me. Please, kiss me.”

Chapter 17

He started on her back, his lips to her shoulder. Loosening the band that held her hair, he pushed it from her nape and kissed her. Kissing her lips was awkward, but he scootched her up a little more to make it possible.

She sobbed into his mouth. “What are you going to do? Tell me.”

He repeated his actions on her other wrist, wrapping it completely to protect it before attaching the elastic end to the bed. “I don’t know. I haven’t decided,” he groaned. Caressing her arms, he brushed the flattened sides of her breasts, pushing his fingers underneath to get to her nipples. Kissing her spine, he smoothed his palms down her body, his fingers nudging under her to meet around her waist.

He tugged at the zipper of her skirt, pulling it down her hips.

She felt his hot breath in the small of her back, felt his tongue drag wetly over her bottom cheeks. He straddled her knees, keeping her legs together between his. She tried to imagine what he saw: her body stretched out, her bottom defenseless, naked except for thigh highs and the thong. It even turned her on to think of what she must look like.

Hot breath bathed the crease where her bottom met her thigh. He nibbled there. *Nibble, lick, nip.* Over and over until her pussy lips ached unbearably. He brushed his thumbs over her cheeks, slid them down the center, wickedly tightening the silk elastic.

She couldn’t stop moaning, constant grunts and sighs escaping from deep inside her. She felt vulnerable and exposed, wild and wanton, and so inflamed she wanted to scream. She trusted him. She wanted him. Any way she could have him.

He parted her cheeks with his thumbs. She buried her face in the sheets, tried to control her panting. He massaged along the crack in small circles, kissed the small of her back again, nipped and stroked her bottom with his tongue. She wanted to spread her legs, to let him in, but he’d squeezed them together.

He picked up the band lying at the small of her back and snapped it gently, a dark and thrilling sensation. She’d never known it could be so sensual.

“Oh, baby,” he murmured huskily, sliding the thong down her legs. Gliding over her, cloaking her back, he asked, “Are you okay?”

She bobbed her head in a yes.

He backed off and slipped an arm under her waist to draw her to her knees. Sliding his hand around to cup her mound, he slipped two fingers along side her clit.

She jerked her bottom, rubbing against his cock like a cat in heat.

“Jesus,” burst out, along with his breath, at her ear. He shoved the broad head of his penis between her thighs, over her cleft, wetting the length of it with the juices seeping from her body. Moaning, she held still. In this new position, he touched her in ways he hadn’t before. He surged, dipping to prod his cock into her sheath in short, tormenting movements. She shimmied her hips in a silent message to enter her fully. He needed orders. “Oh, God. Yes. Damn you, harder!”

“Yes.” His voice was lost in his groan. “Holy Christ, you feel good. So tight. Unh...yes!”

She arched her back with the pleasure of his tight, full fit inside her. Her muscles flexed and yielded to his cock. Tears rolled from the corners of her eyes into her hair, her forehead pushing into the pillow. His heat, hard muscles, hot skin, surrounded her. “My clit. Please...”

He released the grip he had on her hip, slid his hand around, took her between thumb and forefinger and pinched.

“Harder,” she begged.

He slid his penis almost all the way out.

“No...” In agony, a wonderful kind of agony, she felt ready to explode. He was so much better than the vibrator, she thought deliriously. The thick head of his cock stretched her, stroking her tissues deep inside in an agony so startlingly carnal and so unbelievably right. Fighting for a breath, she ground out, “More.”

He thrust in, a shallow, pulsing stroke.

“Hard,” she grunted, loving the stuffed full sensation of his cock.

He thrust again.

“Harder,” she sobbed, rolling her forehead on the pillow. She felt his restraint, his control.

“Don’t hold back. Just do it,” she pleaded.

“Baby.” His fingers gripped her hips, holding her still.

He withdrew and, without warning, he stroked into her, fast and hard, just the way she wanted it, had begged for it. Their shouts echoed in the room.

“More,” she panted.

“Jesus, yes.” His growl heralded a change in tactics.

And she got what she’d been pleading for.

He eased out, the head just barely there, then thrust back in. With every in-thrust, he growled, the sound of his voice going lower and lower into a grunt.

She felt her throat tighten, then felt nothing but his cock, the potent, sensations of ecstasy.

He howled, stiffened, his fingers digging painfully into her hips holding them still.

Her channel, flexing and massaging him, brought his explosion, the fiery flood of ejaculate pulsing into her. She pulled on her restraints. Fully realizing her submissive position broke her last bit of control. Burying her face in the pillow, she didn’t register her own desperate howls, the sounds coming from deep inside, and she went over the edge to join him, not able to stop her whimpering.

His body surrounded her. “I’m sorry if I was too rough, baby.” He sounded a bit weepy, too.

She didn’t have the words to express how she felt. Her brain had detonated along with her body. She tried to form words, but only whimpers, low and rasping, soft and whispery, came out. The heated breath of his murmurs tickled in her ear. She groaned. “I’m...fine...”

Some time later, she awoke to find him entwined around her, his front to her back. She smiled sleepily, listening to his light snore. Her wrists were loose, with the stockings still wrapped around them, and a wanton lust came over her. She wanted to tie him up. Wanted to suck his cock, lick it, caress his balls with her tongue, to make him explode in her mouth. She stealthily worked the stockings off her wrists and rolled over to grasp his arms before he came awake.

* * * *

“Unh...” Sam protested the disturbance. Sleep. That’s all he wanted. He didn’t think he’d slept in a month, maybe more. Between work, the shooting, and his amazing woman, he’d been strung pretty tightly.

What’s going on?

He was sure he’d been snuggled up to a soft, sweet backside of the woman he’d tracked down. They’d had the most amazing...

Rolling to his back, he stretched his arms above his head, enjoying the pull of his muscles. His eyes closed, he smiled and flexed his neck, digging his head in more deeply on the pillow.

He felt a tickle on his chest, like little bugs’ legs crawling all over him. “Ow.” His nipple. He tried to drag his arms down to brush the little bastards off. And couldn’t. Still more asleep than

awake, he tugged again.

“Ow.” This time his eyes popped open, and he pretty near had a heart attack. Hovering at his side, she bent over his torso, teasing him with her long hair and taking turns biting and sucking his nipples.

“Jesus...”

She rolled one between her teeth.

He panted and sought her gaze. Fully awake now, the tables had been turned, so to speak, and he found himself duly tied to the bed posts. “Unh...no...” He arched his body, uncomfortable with the submissive position. “Liz...what...?” His stomach roiled with nerves. He felt much too vulnerable.

She effectively quieted him, whispering shushing sounds, nibbling up his neck, over his jaw and across to his ear. Her hair fanned around them like a curtain shutting out the world. She leaned over his face, running her fingers up his outstretched arms, caressing, kneading, circling his wrists, reminding him of his restraints. As if he could forget.

Beautiful.

Her movement put her nipples right over his lips, and he pulled one into his mouth before she could get away.

She squealed and sat up, wrapping her hands around his arms and dragging her fingers back to his shoulders.

Damn.

She tugged at his underarm hair, twisting the strands in her fingers. How the hell could this torture turn him on? “Mm.” He felt the tightening of his cock, the searing ache, and the throb of blood through his veins. His fluttering stomach muscles contracted, he wasn’t sure what would happen next. With a hiss, he clenched his back teeth, but it didn’t stop the little grunts and whimpers slipping from his throat.

She caressed him, trailing her fingers over his chest and molding his muscles with her palms, paying special attention to his nipples and the darker area around them. That’s when he noticed he couldn’t breathe right.

...excruciating...

His cock bobbed, ached and wanted. He shifted his legs restlessly, opening his thighs. She hadn’t caressed him anywhere near there, but the sensations raced over his skin, through his muscles and blood. Seriously afraid he would come before she touched his prick, his hips arched in readiness. Not sure why being subdued would turn a tough guy like him on, he groaned at his confusion and at the contradictory eroticism.

“Sam, open your eyes.”

Slowly, he cranked them open.

She peered at his face with a worried look on hers. She massaged his chest and his sides, placing her palm over his heart. “Are you okay?”

He nodded jerkily, taking a much needed deep breath. It seemed neither of them could get a good breath around the other.

“Do you want me to untie you? Because I will if you don’t like this. I just wanted...I mean I thought you’d like...I’m sorry.” She leaned over him reaching for his wrists.

He had a decision to make. Fast. Suck a nipple in or... “No,” he whispered, his lips millimeters from the sweet, pebbled tip.

Their eyes met, both surprised, but no one more surprised than he. He had never been restrained like this in his life and didn’t like it one bit.

Except he did like it. With her.

“Don’t untie me.”

I’m insane.

“Give me your breast,” he ground out.

She cupped her breast in her palm and offered it to him.

Holy Christ!

He couldn’t blink. Her eyes sparkled with a million lights. Her lips made an O, then puckered. He knew what she wanted. Latching on, he heard groans loud and clear. Hers and his. He suckled and swirled his tongue over the tip.

She balanced over him, her arms on either side of his head shakily holding herself up. In fact her whole body quivered above him.

He reluctantly released her nipple, brushing his nose against the wet tip. “Finish this. I need to get my arms around you.” He wasn’t sure she heard him, his voice so low and husky he could barely hear it himself over the roar of blood in his ears.

She hesitated.

“Do it, baby.” He nudged his hips up. “Suck me...”

She breathed roughly, her mouth slightly open, a breath in, a whimper out.

“Christ, please...”

Then her mouth covered him in hot, wet silk. Her lips clamped around the ridge below the head. Her tongue played in the slit, her hands wrapped tightly around the shaft.

Jesus. Go all the way down.

His gut twisted, hot with tension. With anticipation. With lust. He thrust up to show her what he wanted.

Down she went. As far as she could. It was all mouth, a scrape of teeth, her swirling tongue, her fist holding what didn't fit.

"Yes." His voice was high and begging, his throat thick with passion and pure want. "Liz," he groaned. He could feel her humming moans on his cock, then her high-pitched whimpers. He forced his eyes open watching her bob up and down to service his fucking cock.

She'd pulled her hair to one side so he had a clear view of her face, of her lips pulling, her cheeks inflating and deflating, her hair tickling his thighs. "Holy Christ!" He thrust with his hips, fucking her mouth. His sudden eruption spilled thick, forceful jets into her mouth. He didn't know for sure if she swallowed it this time. He'd arched and squeezed his eyes shut on the exquisite pleasure. Tears seeped from the corners of his eyes and trickled down to pool in his ears.

Chapter 18

Sam slumped over the counter in the bathroom, his fingers splayed on the surface supporting his weakened body. He blinked, shading his eyes from the bright, unforgiving overhead light.

Holy Christ! What am I gonna do?

Bent over at the waist, he buried his face in his arms. Shocked at his own possessive wanting, he had never, in all his twenty-six years, been this wrung out from sex. His cock actually hurt. His thighs, as well as his stomach muscles, ached from the strain. He slowly finished unwrapping the stockings from his wrists, bringing back the memory of every glorious second of the night before.

I love her.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror, not really seeing anything except his dark hair and eyes. As shocking as this revelation was to him, he felt a comforting warmth spreading through his chest. "Oh, baby. I do love you," he whispered to the mirror.

His belly clenched. In the mirror, he watched his already hardening cock. She made him want to have everything, to do everything with her. Almost made him forget he'd never told her the whole truth. He cradled his penis then remembered he gripped his cell in his other hand.

"Hell." He'd gotten up from the bed to use the john and had seen his phone blinking away. The bathroom light, the memories of what they'd done, distracted him, but he finally accessed the text message.

Oh, Christ.

Petey in hosp hi fever. call me. The message was from Jeff.

What had he thought? Look what his love had done to Petey, then to Liz. He brought destruction to the people he loved. He needed this message to remind him of that.

I've got to get out of her life. I owe Petey too much.

Again, his note to her was brief.

Sorry. Petey's in the hospital. I have to go home.

* * * *

"What aren't you telling me, Liz? What happened in New Orleans?" Bailey and Liz were brunching at the Swedish restaurant four blocks from Liz's house. "He's gorgeous, but more importantly, he cared enough to come after you."

Liz felt the blush warm her cheeks. “Well...” She hesitated.

“He found you, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

Her friend should have been a police interrogator. He trained his patented intensity on her and wouldn’t let go until he got every bit of information. A large chunk of it would never be revealed to a living soul. The things they’d done in bed had been over the top. Amazing, hot, sensual, depraved. Absolutely wonderful. And she was very much afraid she’d never see him again.

“Liz...”

She groaned. What had happened to him?

“Can I take it that you haven’t talked to him since you’ve been back?”

She nodded.

“The snake!”

“Yeah.”

“You could call him.”

“If he wants me, he can call.” She bit into her cinnamon roll.

“But, Liz, it’s the new millennium. Girls can call guys now, you know.”

“Yeah, but he left me.” She concentrated on chewing.

“What do you mean he left?” Bailey’s gaze hardened.

“Just what I said. He had his fun and then left.”

“You mean he walked out?” He sounded incredulous.

“Yeah.” She couldn’t look at her friend. “In the middle of the night.”

“God damn it! I’m so sorry, Liz.”

“It’s okay,” she said in a quiet, defeated voice. “It’s a learning experience. I woke up in the morning, and he was gone.”

“No message?”

“Nothing.”

“God! I hate the man.” Bailey tapped the table with restless fingers.

“I handled it maturely. I huddled in my room until time to go home. I was furious with myself

but couldn't seem to get my act together." And she never did find that pair of thigh highs.

Bailey wrapped his fingers around hers. "Well, move on then. A man like that isn't worth a minute's more thought. He's not *worthy* of you."

"Yeah, I know." She felt abandoned. Her days with Sam had been amazing. "Well, she who has never lost love has never felt love, or some crap like that. Stupid saying!" He'd left her as surely as Fred had.

* * * *

"Sammy, that lady is looking at you."

"Petey, it's not nice to point at people. Especially ladies," Jeff advised, but all three men turned to look at the *lady*.

Holy shit.

The lady was Liz. Sam caught her gaze before she lifted her chin and looked away.

Take that, dog! He hadn't seen her since New Orleans . His cock swelled at the memory. He'd stuffed her stockings in the drawer of his bedside table. Unfortunately, she stood right next to the display window that originally captured Petey's attention.

"Hi."

Oh, God, Petey spoke to her.

"Do you know Sammy? Do you like Legos, too?"

"Sammy?" Wide-eyed, she looked stuck with no way to escape.

There was nothing else to do but brave his way out of this. He'd almost told her he loved her, had almost let it slip during the most wonderful sex of his life. He'd accepted she was more special to him than any other woman had ever been. Then the text message. Petey had been taken to the hospital with a high fever. His brother was his responsibility and first priority. Didn't Petey suffer for his actions every day? Hadn't Liz been through enough because of him?

Petey's fever had dropped, he'd recovered quickly, and then had been released from the hospital. Today, he and Jeff were taking him on a shopping excursion to celebrate.

And now his youngest brother was talking to her. What were the odds they'd run into each other on Michigan Avenue? Damn, she looked good. Why couldn't the woman wear slacks? But then why should she? She had spectacular legs.

“...look so neat, don’t they?”

He came up behind Jeff just in time to hear her response to Petey. She kept her face in profile and hunched her shoulders. Every bit of her body language shouted a message—*ignore the bastard.*

What’s she mad about? Surely a sick brother is more important than the best fuck...ur...love making in the world.

She concentrated on Petey and his questions.

When he got to the window, Petey said, “This lady thinks they’re cool. Aren’t they, Sammy? Can we go in?”

“Sure, Petey,” Jeff replied.

Sam, still tongue-tied, kept silent.

“Petey,” Liz said. “I hope you find something you like in there. Have fun.” She grinned at him, gave a fleeting smile in the direction of Sam and Jeff. “Bye bye.”

“Liz?” His voice shook with emotion.

Fuck. Way to go.

“Sam,” Jeff said. “Why don’t you introduce us to your friend?”

He should have known Jeff wouldn’t miss a thing. All he’d done was say her name, and his older brother probably had it all figured out.

Well, Jeff didn’t know everything. Thank God.

“Liz, these are my brothers. Jeff.” He pointed to his older brother. “And Petey.” He nodded at the brother bouncing on the balls of his feet with Lego fever.

She offered her hand to Jeff. “It’s nice to meet you. Hi, Petey.” She shook hands with Petey, too. “But I don’t want to hold you guys up.”

Her face glowed with sweetness—sweet on the outside and fiery hot on the inside. His breath caught like a big bubble of pain in the middle of his chest. Whatever had happened between them, she didn’t let on to Petey how obviously pissed she was at him.

Taught well by his mother, he completed the introduction. “Jeff, Petey, this is Liz Aspen. She’s a neighbor of mine.”

“Liz.” Jeff, a too-smooth operator, smiled at her in his charming way. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Jeff, why don’t you and Petey go inside and start hunting up some stuff. I’ll be right in.”

Jeff's gaze shifted back and forth between the two.

Sam gave him the brother's hairy eyeball signal to am-scray.

Jeff laughed and said, "I hope we see you again, Liz." Giving Sam a wink, he shoosed Petey into the store.

Left alone with Liz, he wasn't sure that was the best idea. She didn't look too sure of it herself. He'd never been this dumbstruck with a woman before. "Um ... hi."

In a brisk, business-like voice, she said, "Your brothers are nice. It looks like you're all on a family outing, so I won't keep you. Okay?"

He tried to catch her gaze. She looked everywhere but at him, obviously searching for escape. But something contrary in him wanted to thwart her. He'd be free and clear if he let her leave now. So, why didn't he? She wanted to go. Did she no longer care, or was the amazing sexual heat the only thing between them?

And boy was there heat!

"How've you been?"

Well, so much for letting her go. What a dumb shit.

She started in surprise. "I'm fine," she declared, but she sounded more breathless than confident. "Just fine."

"Are you in a show now?"

"Yeah."

The uncomfortable pause stretched and stretched. She gazed somewhere in the vicinity of his shirt buttons, her eyes never lifting above his chin. If she'd just give him a sign as to what she thought, what she wanted from him.

Doesn't she want closure? Isn't that a woman's thing? She's just going to let me dangle? He recognized the irony of this. He wanted to break things off, didn't he? But it killed him that she didn't cling to him.

"Listen, Sam, I have to go now

He crowded her against the glass, an intimidation technique. Big mistake. He squeezed his eyes shut, letting the delicate scent of her perfume slither through him. She still wore it, damn her. His cock jerked at the memory of the night he'd made her submissive to him. And then had been submissive to *her*. He grated his teeth, growled in frustration. Only Liz could tie him up in knots, literally and figuratively.

Why didn't he just let her go? It would be best. She'd been through enough because of him. He couldn't remove himself from Petey's life, but he could from hers.

“Bye, Sam.” Her voice crackled with anger. Her breasts rose and fell roughly.

Let her go. Let her go. Do not stop her. Do you hear me? Do not reach out to touch her.

Control gone, he wrapped his fingers around her upper arm and stepped closer until his chest brushed her breasts. Too many clothes. Jackets, sweaters, and shirts. Too many God damn clothes. Her face turned to his. She looked into his eyes.

His touch affected her. He loved her. It could work. Surrounded by her heat, the shrill cacophony of the mall shoppers disappeared. He lifted his other hand to caress her cheek.

“Sam! Liz! Come look at Darth Vader. He’s a giant Lego man. He’s really neat.”

Vaguely hearing Petey’s voice in the background—*no, not yet*—he moved another step closer to her until her soft breast pressed against his hand. She tried to turn, but right there at the store window, she had nowhere to go. Her low moan washed through his senses. Her chin tipped up, lips parted. All he had to do was lower his lips... Her pale eyes sparkled vividly. He just wasn’t sure if it was anger or desire.

“Liz,” Jeff interrupted. “If you’re not in a hurry, maybe you’d like to see Darth Vader.” Jeff looked significantly at the two of them. “Just for a minute.”

Humor Petey was the message. Of course Jeff had another reason for being out here. He wanted to know what was going on.

“Jeff, Liz might be on her way somewhere.”

Petey barreled toward them. “Come on, Liz and Sam. Darth Vader is neat.”

She took advantage of his distraction and pulled away from him. Grinning at Petey, she said, “Well, then, let’s go see him. I loved *Star Wars*. Did you see all the movies?”

Petey towed her off, leaving him alone with Jeff, rocking back and forth, heel to toe, toe to heel, smiling mischievously. “So, little bro, things looked kind of intense out here.”

“She’s just a neighbor of mine.”

“She have anything to do with your sudden trip to the Big Easy before Christmas?”

“Mmm...maybe.”

“Well, when you’re ready...” Jeff left the rest of that idea unspoken. “She’s very pretty and is even nice to Petey. That says a lot about her.”

He nodded, fearing Jeff gave up too easily as they traipsed into the store in search of *Star Wars* villains.

A couple—three or four—bulky shopping bags later, and the three Bolt boys trooped out of the toy store. Petey had Liz enthralled talking about his pets, and how he could now make Lego

animals.

She didn't seem bored or uncomfortable. She looked amazing. His heart practically burst open with feelings he'd rather not have. Cold and unemotional had always served him well. Feelings just brought pain. All he had room for were feelings toward his family.

Push 'em back, man. It's over. Move on.

Maybe not. Maybe it's not over.

"I'm hungry. Anyone else hungry?" Jeff said, heartily rubbing his hands together as if he were going to power up the grill.

"Yeah," responded Petey. "Hey, Liz, you want to go to lunch with us?"

"Oh, thank you for the invitation, but I don't want to get in the way of your boys' day out." She looked at Petey and Jeff but not at him.

"Come on, Sammy, invite her," Petey wheedled.

"Okay, that's settled. We're going to lunch," Jeff said. "Where?"

They all paused. Everyone looked at everyone else. She looked a little like a trapped deer in the headlights.

"I know a place near here that has the best hamburgers and onion rings. How would that be?" She obviously gave in to the twin steamrollers that were Jeff and Petey.

Before anyone else could jump in, Sam said, "That sounds good."

"Boston Blackies, and it's practically across the street."

"I know that place. Yeah, let's go there." Jeff enthusiastically grabbed Petey's arm and off they went. "Last one there has to pay," he hollered over his shoulder.

"Oh, I'll pay all right," he mumbled. "Hold it." He again grabbed her arm when she turned to follow the other two. "Just a minute. I want to talk to you."

"Didn't you hear? Last one there has to pay. They've got a big head start."

"Liz, we have to talk."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, my God, a guy who wants to talk. Will wonders never cease?"

Well, hell.

"I'm sorry about New Orleans."

"Oh, you are, are you? Sorry about what exactly?" She jerked her arm free, but he grabbed hold again. "Listen buddy, you and I don't owe each other a thing. Not any more. We're even. I

only hung out here because Petey asked me. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. So, we'll eat lunch and say goodbye."

"How do you figure we're even?" He had no idea what that meant. They'd never be even. He'd put her in harm's way and almost got her killed. "You don't owe me anything. And besides, I don't know why you're so mad."

Her eyes flashed a freezing message. "Um, fucking me and leaving me?"

"Didn't you see my note?"

"I didn't see anything," she stated defensively.

"Well, I left it on the dresser." He sounded confused. "Didn't you see the piece of paper? My brother was sick. I had to leave."

"No. No, I didn't." She sounded uncertain but came back in full force. "And it's convenient you say that now. Why didn't you just wake me and tell me? I would certainly have understood." Obviously still furious at him, she pulled away. "Would you let go of my arm? I don't want to make a scene."

He dropped his hand but hemmed her in against the store window again. "You think I'm lying?" It never occurred to him she wouldn't see the note. Had it fallen off the dresser somehow?

She glared at him, her lips in a flat line of anger. "I really don't want to talk to you. I think now I understand what happened with Petey. He wasn't born that way, was he?"

He felt sick to his stomach. It was true that Petey had been taking risks with drugs, but Sam, in his frustration and anger, made the situation worse by interfering. If he'd kept his head and temper, he would have handled things differently. Maybe he could have saved Petey from a life time of the effects of brain damage.

"No," he answered. "He has problems because of my actions."

"And you can't forgive yourself, can you?"

He just shook his head. He couldn't stop feeling guilty. His heart still ached at his part in this.

She placed a hand on his arm, the weight of it light but comforting. He wished he could tell her what she really wanted to hear. He wished he wasn't such an emotional mess. She deserved better.

"Sam, I know you think things won't get better, but Petey seems happy. Jeff didn't act like he hates you. It looks like you've been forgiven. But you have to work this out in your own mind."

"I'm sorry, Liz. I'm not fit for a relationship right now. If I were, it would be with you." He couldn't tell her he loved her. It wouldn't be fair.

“Tell Petey I had to get home to feed my...my...cat. Tell him I’m sorry, but I know he wouldn’t want my cat to go hungry.” She slipped past him. “Good bye. I really hope, for your own sake, that you forgive yourself. You’re one of the good guys.”

Her boot heels tapped as she walked away from him. Her last words had echoed his mother’s.

No, no, no. Don’t go!

Rooted to the spot, he willed his feet to go after her, but the rest of him wouldn’t move.

Please don’t go.

But she was soon lost in the crowd.

At the restaurant, Petey expressed his disappointment. “How about if I bring her home to see you some time, pal?”

Jeff gave him a speaking glare. “Don’t make promises...” he muttered darkly.

His burger tasted like sawdust. The beer did nothing for him. It was best to let her go. He wasn’t attached to that apartment. He could find another.

First, he’d have to board up the window overlooking hers.

It, once again, smacked him in the face. He’d missed out on something good.

Shit.

Chapter 19

Liz restlessly trailed around her house. There wasn't much walking space, but she prowled every inch, reminding herself of Elizabeth Taylor in the movie *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. She felt antsy, horny. Lonely. It had been a shock to see Sam at the mall. He'd said he left a note when he left New Orleans. Why would he lie? But she hadn't seen a note. Was it possible he told the truth?

She climbed the spiral stairs to her bedroom. She didn't really want to look, did she? *Mm hm, his light's on*. A shadow passed across his window. Even though it was dark, she backed to the wall. If he happened to look over, she didn't want him to think she stalked him.

Her gaze caught movement at the back of the yard. She squinted at the alley behind the Victorian. There it was. Another movement. People. More than one. Two. No, three. A feeble light in the alley showed people skulking along the side just out of the glare from the street lamp.

She jerked at the surprise when the street light suddenly went dark, not knowing if she heard, or *imagined* she heard, the tinkling of glass falling to the concrete. Did they throw something to break the light? Her heart thumping in her throat, her imagination started working in overdrive. Frozen in place, her stomach tightened with nerves. Should she call Sam or the police? For sure, something was going on.

Sam. Of course, call Sam. Reaching for her cell, she dialed his number, got the machine

Crap.

He was there but screening his calls.

"Sam, it's me," she whispered even though no one outside could hear her. "Um...don't think I'm weird or something but... someone's... There are people are in the alley and..."

Click.

"Liz? What's going on?"

"Sam, oh thank God."

"Someone's in the alley?"

His apartment went dark.

“Sam, are you all right?”

“What did you see? I’m looking out right now.” He sounded like a cop.

It didn’t help her nerves any. “I think at least three people are in the alley. One of them broke the street light.”

“Liz! Hang up and call 911. Report a burglary in progress. Tell them Tactical is on the scene and needs backup.”

Panic drove her voice high. “Sam, don’t go…”

“Do it! Do it now! And stay inside. Make sure your doors are locked.”

Click.

She immediately called 911 and reported it the way he said. The dispatcher asked for the tactical officer’s name. She told her Sam’s name and that it was his apartment house.

Her eyes had become accustomed to the dark, and she had a pretty good view, through the yard, and into the alley. Oh, good God! A dark figure slipped out the front door of the big house. The way it stealthily crept around the porch, it had to be Sam. She could see, quite clearly, the metal of his gun glinting in the little light available. He held it against his thigh.

Oh, Sam, what are you doing?

Where the hell were the police? And the three men? She searched the alley as far as she could see, tried to search the yard but didn’t see any movement. She blinked several times to moisten her eyes, opened them again and practically passed out.

A figure climbed up on the porch at the other end, behind him. Her mouth opened, but she couldn’t scream, couldn’t utter a sound.

Sam!

She had to get to him. Even if the cops got here now, he was still in danger. And even though they knew a cop was on the scene, he could still be shot.

His position on the porch was near the side of her house. She could slip out her own back door and warn him somehow, but she had to do it now. Time had run out. She raced down the spiral stairs almost tripping in her haste.

Be careful. You can’t help Sam if you’re lying in here with a broken leg.

Snicking open the back lock, praying the sound wasn’t loud enough for anyone outside to hear, she slowly opened the door and slipped out.

Crouching low in the shadow of her house, she acclimated herself to her surroundings. She

peered into the darkness, looking for Sam, until she saw a figure on the porch.

That must be him.

She looked to his left for the other man. A bulky shape loomed. Then she heard the sirens.

God. Finally.

The man on the porch behind Sam turned. He must have heard the sirens, too. Where were the other men? The wind rustled the trees, their leafless branches clacking together in a kind of tuneless music and covered any other sounds.

She shook with terror now. The bad guys could shoot him. The cops could mistake him for a bad guy and shoot him.

Calm down, calm down.

Maybe the bad guys would run away when they heard the sirens.

Blaring, the shrill sounds clamored loudly, and when they stopped, the sudden silence deafened her. Flashing lights jumped around, bouncing off the surrounding houses. Cop cars careened through the alley creating a bluish, eerie scene.

She crouched in the shadows at the side of her house. Her feet slipped in patches of left over snow collected near the foundation. Peering over at the porch, Sam, or the man she thought was Sam, bending low, the dully glinting gun barrel now raised chest high.

God...the man behind...taking aim at him.

“Sam! Behind you!”

All hell broke loose. Gunshots, people shouting, more sirens...more pop, pop, pop... someone bellowing her name... then...

Nothing.

* * * *

The next thing she knew was that she lay on her back, scrunching her eyes at the bright lights glaring on her. Someone cut off her sweater.

There goes another outfit.

Her world went black again.

She woke briefly, now on the move, the wiggly motion—she thought nonsensically like a

grocery cart with a wonky wheel—made her stomach jump. When the grocery cart took a corner too fast and skidded to a halt, she opened her eyes. Her head lolled to the side. She saw men wrestling.

“Liz. God damn it! Let me go, assholes!”

One man’s arms flew up, pumping forward in swimming motions. Other men kept trying to grab his arms and shoulders. Oh, my God, she was in the hospital again. Transfixed, she could only watch. The man stopped fighting, his arms falling to his sides. She got a good look at his face. Familiar. Her eyes drifted closed on a sigh.

“Liz! Don’t...”

On the move again, her gurney bounced sending shooting pain through her chest. She groaned.

“Damn it, man. Get him away from her.”

“Liz, baby.”

She cranked open her eyes. This time the struggling man came closer. “Sam,” she whispered.

“She’s awake. She said my name. Sonofabitch, let me go!”

“Take it easy. She’s still in a lot of pain.”

“Sam...wha...happened?” Her voice made a jagged, croaking sound. His face loomed right over her. His lips touched hers, lightly and delicately.

“You’re gonna be all right, baby. They’re gonna fix you up,” he sobbed. “I love you. Love you, Liz. You’ve gotta be all right.”

“Blood.” His face and clothes were covered with dried blood. “You hurt?”

“Baby, you’ll be fine. They just need to get the bullet out of you.”

“Me?” This was happening to her?

“Yes, honey. Oh, God, you were shot.”

“Come on, officer. Don’t upset her any more.” A man in a white coat gripped him by the shoulders. “Come on, get hold of yourself.”

“Me?” she whispered again. She was so tired. In and out of a twilight consciousness, sometimes things were clear, then they floated away. “Die?”

Held back by the white coated man, Sam’s face contorted in a grimace of horror, and he shouted, “No, no, baby, you’re gonna be fine.”

She didn’t care anymore. The movement had stopped, a mask covered her nose and mouth,

her eyes closed again, and her world faded away. She had some really strange dreams.

She'd climbed to the top of the Sears Tower and clung to a telecommunications mast. Sam climbed up the side of the building just like Spider Man. Maybe he was Spider Man. He lost his grip and slipped several floors. She stretched her arm down. Maybe she was Rubber Woman. She almost touched him. "Grab it," she dream-screamed.

Her eyes popped open.

Unh...the light.

"Doctor, her eyes opened. She's awake."

"Well, put her out again. I'm not finished."

Not finished with wh...?

* * * *

Sam precariously balanced himself tipping back on the legs of the chair outside Liz's hospital room. Head resting on the wall, he squeezed his eyes shut, just for a moment. He felt so tired but too wired for sleep. She'd been wheeled into the room, her folks and sister by her side. The technicians made sure the machines and IVs were hooked up, and she was stable.

"You Sam Bolt?"

A male, not very friendly voice interrupted his dark thoughts. Another doctor probably. "Yeah." He cracked his eyes open to see a man standing over him. "And you are?"

"Tom Seeger, Liz's brother-in-law."

"Yeah?"

"Want to tell me what happened?" Seeger's voice sounded deceptively soft.

Strung out emotionally and in a vicious, guilty mood, he snarled, "I already gave my statement." Seeger hovered aggressively in front of him, the thumb of one hand hooked in the front of his jeans pocket. The other arm hoisted a baby securely on his hip.

Not intimidated by Seeger's hostile stance, his lips quirked in an automatic smile at the cute kid.

"This is Crystal." Seeger nodded at the baby and smiled his pride. "Can you show your toothless little smile to the man, Cryssie?"

Cryssie cooperated by grinning, drool and spit bubbles dripping down her chubby chin.

Distracted, Sam almost missed what came next.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened so I can explain things to my wife?”

Seeger’s voice contained a quiet menace that Sam didn’t think for a moment meant the question had anything to do with his wife. “Liz’ll tell her what she wants her to know.”

“Well, I want to hear it from you, Bolt.”

Christ, he was too tired for this. Rising, he found them to be so alike in build that if this did degenerate into a punching match, it could well be a draw. Except *he* wasn’t the one holding the baby. The baby, thinking Sam wanted to take a turn holding her, picked this moment to flap her arms toward him and bounce.

Seeger settled her more securely against his side and glared at Sam. “She’s been put in danger twice now because of you.”

What could he say to that? It was true, fuck it all.

“*Serious* danger. This time she was shot.”

“You know, Mr. Seeger, I know all this. What’s your point?”

His voice deepened into a growl. “My point is that I don’t want it to happen again.”

“It won’t.”

“Does that mean you have no more enemies?”

God, this guy wouldn’t give up. And besides, he couldn’t answer that question. “I’m undercover,” he said.

“Well, Detective Bolt, that doesn’t answer my question. Liz doesn’t need any more trauma in her life, and I don’t want Miry and her folks worrying about it either.”

“I don’t need you to run my life, but it so happens I agree with you.” He hadn’t shot Liz himself, but he was directly responsible for everything bad that had happened to her. “I’m leaving just as soon as she wakes up, and I’m sure she’ll be all right. She saved my life.”

My worthless life.

He hated letting Seeger dictate to him, but the man was right.

“Yeah, she did.” Seeger smiled then, showing his admiration for Liz. “She’s fearless, that one, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Sam responded unhappily. Too fearless. She shouldn’t have to run outside just to protect him.

“Where’s this going between you two?” Seeger switched to serious again.

“I don’t think it’s any...”

“Yeah, it *is* my business. Liz is family. Her welfare is my business.”

“Jesus, I already told you I’m leaving. I’m not arguing with you.”

“J-j-je,” Cryssie slurred wetly.

“No, no, sweetie. Bad word.” Seeger pursed his lips and shook his head at his baby. He addressed Sam without taking his gaze from the kid. “So you care about her, or you wouldn’t still be standing here.”

Suddenly the door to Liz’s room flew open. “Tommy, what’s going on out here? We could hear everything.” The woman glared at Seeger. “Oh, there’s my baby. Come to Mama, sweetie.” Then she turned the same black look on Sam and held out her hand. “I’m Miranda, Liz’s sister. You’re Sam Bolt?”

He hesitated to take her hand at first. Over her shoulder, he saw Liz’s parents poised on each side of the hospital bed, watching the show at the doorway. Liz appeared to be asleep. Then sheer courtesy took over, and he shook Miry’s hand. “Yeah.”

“Guys, why don’t you come in? Liz’s in and out of it, but I’m sure she’d like to see both of you when she opens her eyes.”

Miry gazed at him with a calm regard. No spite, no agenda other than an attempt to defuse the situation. He started to back away.

“Sam,” she said. “Will you come in for a minute? She’s been saying your name. I think she needs to see you to make sure you’re all right.”

All right? She needs to know if I’m all right? She’d been shot, not him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. How could he feel any more raw? She’d put her life on the line, and she worried about him. He owed her. He owed her everything. “Sure,” he responded. He faced the dregs of society every day, but facing Liz scared him shitless.

* * * *

“I think she’s coming out of it. Oh, Jack, come here.”

Who’s Jack?

“Liz, wake up, honey.”

She didn’t want to, couldn’t. Her eyelids felt too heavy to open.

The back of her hand felt like it was being tickled. Voices, all talking at once, laughing and crying. The bed shook. She groaned, speech beyond her capabilities at the moment. Very slowly

she slit her eyes open, closing them again.

“Come on, Liz. Open your eyes. You’re gonna be all right, honey. Wake up.”

She recognized her mom’s voice, but that was the only thing she was sure of.

“Honey, it’s Mom. We’re all here. Dad and Miry.”

“Liz,” Miry said, “Cryssie wants you to open your eyes. Sam’s here too. He’s been so worried about you.”

“Wha...happen...?”

“You’re going to be fine, hon...”

The next time she woke, she opened her eyes immediately. She was alone. In the quiet night, she heard the machines surrounding her beeping, hissing, gurgling. She flexed her fingers.

Someone on soft shoes entered the room and leaned over the bed. “Liz, you’re awake. Good. Do you have any pain?”

“Thirs...” The only movement she could make was to slide her tongue over dry lips.

“Okay, all I can give you is ice chips.”

The woman spooned a few small pieces of ice into her mouth. “Mmm,” she said encouragingly. “I know. I bet even the ice tastes good. My name is Michele. I’m your night nurse. Janice is your day nurse. She’ll be here later.” While Michele talked, she took her temperature and smoothed the pillow and covers. “Honey, you’re doing fine. Pretty soon you’ll be able to go home.”

“Where is...?”

“Sam?”

“Unh.”

“Actually, we made him get out of the room for a couple of hours. You have one really great boyfriend. He’s been wild worrying about you. They practically had to handcuff him when you were being taken into surgery.”

Her gaze followed the nurse around the room. “Tell me,” she croaked in a dry-throated whisper.

Michele chuckled, “He shouted and made a ruckus. Two cops held him back so they could get you into surgery. I heard he was a cop, too.”

She couldn’t process this information. She didn’t think Sam was her boyfriend, but maybe she didn’t remember everything. “Mom? Da-?”

“Your family was here too, but the doctor suggested they go home and get some rest. You’re in stable condition. Nothing really to worry about, and they needed to get some sleep.”

“Okay,” she mumbled.

“Would you like Sam to come in?”

“No.” She didn’t want him to see her like this, so weak and stuck with tubes and things.

Chapter 20

Sam listened outside Liz's hospital room. When she said no she didn't want him to come in, he felt like bawling. He couldn't blame her. Look at all the trouble, to say the least, he'd caused her. And now she didn't want to see him.

What if she never wanted to see him again? He deserved that. It would be better for her if he did leave. She saved his life by shouting even though it almost cost *her* life. He should at least thank her. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

The nurse came out of the room and nodded conspiratorially to him. "She's pumped up with drugs. Don't take her seriously right now."

He stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, his arms folded across his chest, and gazed at her. She appeared to be asleep. His heart thudded uncomfortably in his chest, painful thoughts careening and colliding with the pleasurable. Wild memories of her sweet body draped over his couldn't beat off the horror of hearing her shout the warning and then seeing her shot. He struggled to corral his fear together with his love, trying to even out his emotions and knowing he never could. Unbidden, a smile creased his face as he remembered how nice she'd been to Petey. If he ever wanted to settle down, she'd be the one.

Whoa! That's a little over the top? I don't want to settle down. I can't. Remember, fool? Some women can't hack being cops' wives. She'd be forever bugging me about when I'm coming home. Angry if I have to miss some important event like the birth of our kids.

Well, I'd make sure that didn't happen. Somehow, I'd be there for her.

But she didn't want to see him. Cold clutched at his stomach, encasing his heart in ice, and spreading outward. Slowly and stiffly, he tiptoed over to the bed, checked her vital signs on the monitors, and confirmed her breathing was regular, her chest rising and falling steadily.

Be safe, sweetheart.

He bent over her, brushing his lips gently over her dry ones. In an agony of uncertainty, he squeezed his eyes shut, controlling his emotions, pushing his deepest feelings, his darkest fears, as far inside as possible. He loved her, but he'd caused too much trouble for her. All this stuff would forever be between them. Reality hit him. Any hope he'd ever had of life as a normal man with a wife and children to come home to just crashed and burned.

"I'll always love you, Liz. Be happy," he whispered over her sleeping body, wondering, hoping somehow she heard him.

* * * *

Staring moodily out the window at the dreary, rainy day and a bullet hole in her shoulder certainly made the whole hospital experience pretty miserable.

“Liz?” She heard the tentative voice coming from the doorway.

“Hi, it’s Jeff. Remember? I brought Petey to visit. I hope that’s okay.”

“Oh, hi, guys.” This was a surprise but a nice one.

“Hi, Liz. You got shot?”

She laughed at Petey’s excitement, and the movement hurt. She supposed it was an adventure, like a real-life TV show for him.

“Hey, Petey, be polite. Sorry, Liz.”

“That’s okay, Jeff. Hi, Petey. And yes, I did get shot.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes, a little, but they’ve given me a lot of medicine, so the pain isn’t so bad.”

“Good.”

Her eyes shifted back to Jeff. “How did you find out about this?”

“Well, for starters we heard it on the news. Then Sam called to warn my parents. The damn reporters somehow got his name and tracked them down. Liz, you saved Sam’s life.”

“Yeah, you saved my brother’s life. I’m sorry you got shot, though,” added Petey.

“Thank you, honey.” She smiled at him. “I’ll be all right.” Both brothers looked so much like Sam, the same midnight hair, dark eyes. It hurt seeing them. She’d felt his lips feather over hers, thought she’d heard him say the word *love*.

“You gonna marry my brother?”

She winced when Petey plopped himself onto the foot of the bed.

“Peter!” Sam barked.

When had he arrived?

Petey’s head swiveled toward his stormy looking brother at the door.

“Get off the bed. She’s in pain,” Sam growled.

Stunned by his vehemence, Petey, as shocked as Liz and Jeff, jumped up immediately, his distressed gaze snapping back to her.

“Petey.” She lifted the hand without the IV. “I’m okay. Here, hold my hand a minute.” She glared at the figure in the doorway. The heart monitor beeping sped up. Jeff glanced at the machine and back at her. You couldn’t keep a secret hooked up to a heart monitor.

No one moved. The three men loomed, taking up all the breathing room, all looking at her. Jeff and Petey shifted their gazes to the doorway, then back to her. She couldn’t read Sam’s expression, his face hidden in the shadows.

All of a sudden, Jeff switched into gear, and said, “Petey, let’s go get some pop.”

“But Sam’s here.”

“Yeah, we’ll bring him some. Let’s go,” he said, hustling Petey out of the room.

Sam didn’t so much as make eye contact with his brothers as they pushed past him, his gaze glued to hers.

“Hi, Petey.” From the hallway, a woman’s voice greeted the young man. “Is this the room?”

Sam’s eyes closed, and he winced. *Shit*, he mouthed.

“Sam, honey.”

Sam, honey? Liz’s stomach flipped. *What now?*

“Is this young lady your friend, Liz?”

A middle-aged couple brushed into the room past Sam but stopped just inside the door.

“We won’t stay long, dear. We wanted to thank you personally.”

Her head spun. All these people crowded at the doorway, all looking at her. Sure she didn’t look anywhere near her best, she also started to feel much worse. To put the clincher on matters, she burst into tears, squeezing them out of tightly closed eyes. Oh, God, her shoulder hurt. Her chest hurt.

“Oh, Liz, We’re so sorry to have upset you.” The woman slowly approached the bed and placed a palm on her cheek. “You’re warm. Are you in pain?”

She stared into the woman’s eyes and moaned, “Unh hunh.”

“Sam, go get a nurse.”

The woman rubbed the back of her hand, the one with the IV, in a soothing motion. It didn’t stop the flow of tears, though.

Janice, the day nurse, bustled into the room. “What’s the matter, Liz? Are you in pain?”

She nodded.

“Here.” Janice wrapped her fingers around the drug control.

She’d forgotten about it in all the fuss.

“Press this. Remember?” The nurse placed her thumb on the control and helped her push.

In only a few seconds, she felt the lessening of pain, a wonderful serenity flowing through her veins. Her muscles began to relax. She could breathe easily again.

“Honey, press it any time you need it. You can’t overdose. We won’t let you. Pretty soon you won’t need it at all. Don’t worry, you’re doing fine.” Then she turned to the visitors. “You probably shouldn’t stay too long. She’s still pretty weak.”

“We won’t,” Jeff said as he and Petey returned. “We just wanted to thank her. Liz, you don’t know who these people are. I’ll just introduce them, and then we’ll leave.”

She felt strong now that the pain had melted away, not so scared, so out of control.

“This is Dorothy and Carter Bolt, our parents. Sam’s parents.”

She stared at her visitors. Sam’s parents. In all the fuss with the nurse, she hadn’t noticed he’d moved to her side. Aware he’d placed his hand on her pillow, she glanced up and inhaled sharply. So much pain showed in his red-rimmed eyes. In too much of her own shock to have the energy to decode his expression or his feelings for her, she gave in and closed her own. It was safer to escape into sleep. Right now she felt too sick and overwhelmed to care.

* * * *

His family meant well, but Sam wished to hell they hadn’t come. He owed Liz his life, but he hadn’t wanted his parents involved.

When she shouted his name and then screamed, he knew she’d been shot. It should have been him. Tommy Kane should have just killed him.

His heart constricted. He wanted to hold her in his arms, to protect her, to love her. Taking a deep breath, he released it shakily, more shakily than he wanted.

A shuffling of feet reminded him everyone was still in the room. He wasn’t sure how long they’d been watching. “Liz, my folks are here to thank you, and then they’re leaving. Guys, she’s tired.” He gave them a look which begged them to leave quickly.

His mother hustled forward again. “Yes, we’ll let you rest, honey. We just wanted to meet you. We’ll talk to you another time when you’re feeling better. Then we’d like to have you over

for dinner.”

“Mom,” he warned.

“Sam,” she said in the same warning tone and rewarded him with a glare.

He got the significance. No matter how he felt about it, his mother would do as she wanted. He’d have to have a talk with his family so they understood why he had to back away from Liz. They could have her over for dinner, but then that was it. No more contact. Not for any of them.

“Thank you, dear.” Dorothy kissed Liz on the cheek and patted her hand.

Carter added, “We’ll see you later. You get some rest now. Jeff, Petey, say good bye, and let’s go.”

Petey bounded back into the room. Her face relaxed, and she smiled at his younger brother. It warmed his heart that she was so sweet with Petey. Finally, everyone left, the only sounds the heart monitor and automatic blood pressure machine.

“I’m sorry about all that. They’re a little overwhelming when they’re all together. Thank you for putting up with them.” He hated his emotion clogged voice.

“It’s all right. They were nice.”

Her eyes closed in exhaustion, and she took a gentle breath. “I’ll see you soon, Liz,” he whispered. He couldn’t dump her when she was at her lowest point, and especially since she’d almost given her life for him. But he couldn’t give her any kind of a future.

Some day she’d realize it was for the best.

* * * *

Of course, her parents wouldn’t let Liz go home to recover. She *wanted* be alone. Over the course of three days in the hospital, she slowly remembered all that had happened. The bad guy had raised his gun to shoot Sam. She’d screamed a warning. The bad guy turned toward her, and shots rang out. She felt something burn through her shoulder and heard Sam shout her name. Whatever happened after that was still murky. All she knew for sure was the slug that hit her had hurt like the devil.

For two weeks, she’d been cosseted, fed, and driven to the doctor. Flowers from her friends littered the house, but now the last of them had died.

She missed working. She had to get back to the theater. What if they gave the part to someone else? And she really, really, *really* wanted to go home. Climbing her spiral stairs would be no problem, her shoulder not necessary for that. She’d sleep on the couch if she couldn’t get up the stairs. Everything she needed was on the main floor anyway. Bathroom, kitchen, TV, books, clothes.

Only one little problem. Sam had done it again—disappeared from her life. In the hospital, she vaguely remembered hearing his voice, hearing him say, “I love you.” The nurse told her he’d been waiting down the hall, he’d refused to leave the hospital, but she hadn’t seen him again until the day his parents visited.

Arghh. He makes me so mad.

Well, it’s over.

Whew. It felt good to get that decided. If he still lived next door, she’d move. It would be sad to leave her cute little house, but she’d do what she had to.

Finally, the doctor said she could go home but not back to work for another week. Her parents still worried, but she insisted.

Miranda, along with the baby, drove her home. Miry dusted and cleaned the place, then they ordered pizza and watched an old movie on AMC.

“Were you this frustrated with Tommy?” she asked Miry.

“Yeah. Sometimes.”

“He’s taken to married life and fatherhood very well, don’t you think?” Liz asked.

“Yeah. He’s a great father.” Miry thumbed the volume down on the remote and asked, “Do you really care for Sam?”

“Yes, I do. Did,” she amended. “He blames himself for his brother’s condition, and I understand that. But he won’t forgive himself. No one holds him responsible but himself. He won’t let me care for him, not really. Sex is wonderful. He’s passionate and loving, but he can’t seem to handle the emotional part.”

“Honey, as much as you want to fix him, you can’t,” Miry said. “You have to face the fact that he may never be able to be with you.”

What could she say to that? Under the circumstances, she certainly deserved something more from Sam than to be ignored. She rested her head tiredly on the back of the couch and sighed.

“If you want Tommy to talk to him...” Miry offered her husband’s services. “Man to man?”

“No!” she exclaimed, jerking upright, wincing and sucking in a breath at the pain in her shoulder.

“Liz, I’m sorry. Just lie down.” Miry helped her stretch on the couch. “Let me get you some pain medication.”

“Could you? I know I’ll be better by tomorrow. I just need some sleep in my own home.”

Miry kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll stop by tomorrow and see how you feel. Cryssie, kiss Aunt Liz goodbye.”

“Don’t worry about me. Bye bye, Cryssie. I love you.”

Alone at last, she nestled into the couch cushions. She’d go upstairs later. Right now, being in the bedroom with the view of...*his* apartment was too painful. Better not to look. Better not to think about him—right now anyway. But still, everything in her house held memories. When she felt stronger, maybe she’d move.

Chapter 21

“Honey, I can’t stand to see you like this,” Bailey said.

They shared a bottle of wine, ensconced comfortably on her couch. “What exactly do you mean?”

“Talk to me. Tell me all of it. You’re keeping it all inside, and it’s eating you up.”

“Being held hostage and being shot are kind of traumatic,” she said sarcastically.

“Yes, darling, I can imagine.”

“I tried to warn Sam, and I ended up being shot. Then he dumps me.”

Bailey nodded, urging her to continue.

“We had a wonderful time in New Orleans and great sex...” Tears trickled down her cheeks. “Shit.” She doubled over, her face buried in her hands. “I’ve tried to keep it together.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t keep it together. Face it and let it all out.”

“What’s there to face? I care for a man who can’t care back.”

“Why not? Do you know?”

She rested her head on the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling. “He’s tormented by something he did years ago that hurt his younger brother. He didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“Uh huh. There’s more to this than sex, isn’t there.”

“He can be so sweet and sexy.”

“What does he do that’s sweet?”

“I saw him downtown,” she said, waving her hand in the air in a dismissive gesture. “With his brothers.”

“What was he like with them?”

She smiled. “Sweet. All the brothers were sweet. I spent some time with them in the toy store. Sam, Jeff, and his youngest brother, Petey. He’s brain damaged from a drug overdose.”

“He sounds like a nice guy. There’s more to him than you’ll admit. Have you talked to him

about any of this?"

"No."

"Maybe you should. Isn't it possible he does have feelings for you?"

"Bailey." Her hostility reared. "Haven't you heard what I've been saying? He doesn't want a permanent relationship."

"Maybe the emotions were too much for him. Maybe he's frightened of them."

"He's a cop."

"That doesn't mean he's not afraid of relationships. Maybe you're underestimating him. And yourself."

"The point is he's not interested in seeing me again."

"Well, you wouldn't know for sure..."

"Yes, yes, you're saying I should talk to him. I get it."

Bailey lifted an eyebrow. "Maybe you owe it to both of you."

* * * *

Sam, as he did every day, went to the station. Still on desk duty, he sat there, answered the phone, did paperwork, transcribed other officers' notes. He'd become a damned secretary. He'd seen Liz's lights. It took all he had to stay away from her. If he moved, the temptation would be gone. Why didn't he just find another place? Damned if he knew.

Lost in thought, shoulders slumped, he made notes with one hand, the other holding up his head which always felt too heavy these days. He finally noticed how quiet the squad room had become and realized someone stood in front of his desk.

"I'd like to report a crime."

* * * *

Sam's head snapped up. He couldn't believe his eyes. Liz. Here in the station. He leaped to his feet so fast he almost knocked his chair over.

Good going, guy. Look as clumsy as a demented ox.

"Are you all right?" Fuck, she looked good. A gorgeous, sexy Liz right in front of him and the whole squad room. She wore a swishy, flowery skirt slung low on her hips. The hem of her tank top rode just above the waist of the skirt. Her high heeled sandals were barely held together with tiny straps. Damn. Her long hair flowed in soft waves around her face and shoulders.

Christ almighty.

He'd bet every guy in this place had a hard-on by now. He did. "Why are you glaring at me?"

Smart opening, jerk.

"That's the first thing you can think of to say to me?"

He tried to delay the inevitable. "Where have you been?"

"I'm surprised you noticed." she sniped.

"What does that mean?" His heart beat in rapid fire pounding.

"You disappeared! I didn't."

He lowered his head, rubbing the back of his aching neck. This sure wasn't how he imagined it would be to see her again. He caught the gaze of the guy at the desk across from his.

Shit.

Then he glanced around the room. There wasn't a pair of eyes not directed at them. Even his sergeant stood in the doorway of his cubicle.

"Shit."

"Okay, I'm out of here. I don't need this."

She looked spitting mad. It had to have taken a lot of guts to come here. "Liz." He reached for her. She'd already turned away and didn't see his hand. "Liz," he repeated, coming around his desk. Projecting a calm on the outside that didn't translate to his insides, he grasped her hand and towed her toward an empty interview room. Making sure it didn't have a two-way mirror and that the recording devices had been turned off, he closed the door behind them.

"Sit down." He motioned to a chair.

"No."

Stubborn witch. "Please?" he said.

She sat in the offered chair and said, "Can they," she motioned toward the door, "hear us?"

"No, I made sure of that." He sat in the chair next to her.

She shifted a few inches away.

He didn't care for that message, but then why had she shown up here looking like every man's wet dream? He didn't think anything could be harder than having to talk to his family, but telling everything to this woman terrified him. "You look fantastic, Liz."

"You know, now that I'm here, I'm not sure why." She fidgeted, wouldn't look at him.

"Why did you come, then?"

"I'd like to get some things straightened out once and for all."

"Yes. Well..."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What's going on with you? Is there something between us?"

He briefly met her eyes, then focused on the blank wall behind her. He talked. He paced around the table. No way could he tell the story and sit still. "I know you've guessed the truth about Petey."

She didn't say a word except for a sharp intake of breath and an "oh" when he told her about Petey's coma. Told her in detail about how, as a nineteen-year old college guy, he tracked down Dominguez who'd sold drugs to his fifteen-year old brother. How he'd beaten the asshole senseless. The only reason he'd stopped was that he heard sirens in the distance. Dominguez retaliated by overdosing Petey. "I thank God every day Petey came out of the coma, but now he's brain damaged. God, I'm so sorry." He sat down and thrust his fingers through his hair. Shaking his head, he added in raspy, broken voice, "I wanted to be a cop. Undercover. To get that son of a bitch."

Tears trickled down her face. "Oh, Sam, it wasn't your fault," she snuffled.

"Yes, it was."

She went to him and cradled his head against her breasts, running her fingers soothingly through his hair. "Dominguez was the bad guy. You tried to save Petey."

"Then look what my actions caused. Dominguez broke into your house...almost...killing you." He came to his feet and grabbed her shoulders. Strung out and exhausted, he squeezed them and exclaimed, his voice rough with pain, "What do I need to do to pound it into your head? You were shot because of me, damn it!"

"It wasn't your fault," she spat back, clasping his arms.

He shook his head in consternation. "I hurt my ex, too. She couldn't hack being a cop's wife."

I don't blame her." Shrugging her off, he paced the narrow aisle around the table. He'd worked too fucking hard all these years to be unemotional. All his adult life, he'd had to hide his guilt and pain. *I can't do this.* "I don't want any more people I care about hurt because of me. If I hadn't come to you after being shot, Dominguez never would have found you."

"You care about me?"

He groaned and scrubbed his face with his hands. God, he was so tired, so defeated, so alone. "Christ, Liz, what're you doing to me?" She was everything he wanted—feminine and sexy, sweet and passionate. His hard-on would be permanent.

"But you care about me?" she persisted.

"It doesn't matter if I do...did, or not. My life is too dangerous." His heart and mind were divided, but it mattered to him. That they *were* involved. That he'd never forget her. That every woman from now on would be a weak imitation of her.

"So, you're just going to throw away what we have?"

"Had," he said, inching his way around the table.

I don't want to.

"You don't trust me to be able to live with this? You don't have enough faith in me?"

"It's not that."

Christ. Don't weaken, man. Cut her loose.

"Then what is it?" She leaned over the table toward him.

He growled, his voice low, controlled, and husky. "It's because I've never been able to have a decent relationship with any woman. I don't deserve you."

Why won't she give up and go?

"What about what I deserve?" she retorted.

"You deserve better than me."

But I want you.

"Look what you've been through because of me, and now you're here. You're either completely stupid or completely I don't know what. You deserve to be happy."

"I was happy with you. Weren't you happy?"

"Yes," slipped out before he could stop it. "No! Would you just go? I don't have anything to offer you." He turned his back. He couldn't look at her while he sent her away. He didn't have that much courage. He heard the scrape of her chair, the rustle of her filmy skirt when she rose, the clicking tap of those sexy high heels.

"Sam," her voice came from over at the door, clear and strong. "I'm in love with you. But I can't talk you into loving me or taking a chance with me. Your story breaks my heart. Poor Petey. And poor Sam. Of course, I understand why you feel so guilty. It sounds like Petey had been on a free fall, and you did the only thing you could think of to help him. You didn't overdose Petey, Dominguez did.

"I don't blame you for what you did, and you shouldn't punish yourself for the rest of your life by denying yourself love. I'm sure your family doesn't want that. Do they know?"

"Yes." He rigidly held onto his control.

"From the way they acted at the hospital, I'm positive they don't blame you. You use this as a way to cut yourself off from people who care about you."

"But I screw up every relationship I've ever had." He couldn't look at her. Every muscle and joint in his body ached with his unyielding determination to keep her out.

"And don't write Petey off. Yes, he has problems..."

“For the rest of his life,” he finished bitterly.

“Sam, he’s a sweet, loving guy. He was so caring of me in the hospital. Give him credit. Don’t think of him as a lost cause in order to feed your guilt.”

“I don’t.”

“No? As long as you let the guilt rule your life, you won’t see Petey as a real person who has intelligence and love to give back to you.”

He had no response. Good God, she was right.

“Sam, Dominguez and Tommy Kane were the bad guys. They and others just like them are the ones out there filling kids with drugs. You’re one of the good guys trying to stop them. Don’t let them win by taking love away from you. Take a chance with me. Trust me.” Her voice softened. “I love you.”

She must have opened the door, because all of a sudden he could hear the sounds outside in the squad room, phones ringing and people talking.

“It all boils down to the fact that you have to make the decision. You know where I live if you change your mind.”

He could tell from her voice that she almost broke down. Then the sounds of the squad disappeared. She’d closed the door on him.

After all this, she’d still take him back?

* * * *

I told him to come to me when he was ready. If. It took all I had to leave him. You can’t force someone to love you. I was right to tell him to make his own decisions? There’s nothing more I can do. Now, it’s up to him.

God damn his misguided stubbornness.

Liz put her soup bowl in the dishwasher, wiped her hands, and leaned against the counter. A whole body flush stole over her. Even her hair felt sweaty. They’d had so much fun wandering around New Orleans that day, and God, what a night! Her thoughts turned bittersweet. No amount of passion had erased her hurt and anger when he turned up missing the next morning. Now, she believed he’d left her a note. He hadn’t lied.

* * * *

“Yeah?”

“Is that the way you always answer the phone?”

Oh, crap.

Sam dug himself out of his funk. His mother didn’t need to know what an asshole he was. He forced his voice to a decent tone. “Yeah, Mom, most of the time.”

“Oh, well, as long as it’s not just with me.”

“Ha ha, Mom.” Dorothy Bolt, an expert at being a sugar-coated toughie, had put up with four men and knew how to handle them.

“What’s up? Everyone okay?”

“Yes, honey, everyone’s fine. Jeff and Sherry are arguing about, or at least discussing, what

flavor wedding cake to have.”

“And what’s so hard about choosing chocolate?” He had a long-standing love of chocolate anything. He lost his train of thought for a moment. The image of licking the dark, sweet confection off Liz’s body sent his head reeling.

“...you love it, but Sherry wants worms.”

“Yeah...unh... Hunh?” He hadn’t been paying attention.

Dorothy laughed outright. “Worms. Sherry wants worms. You’re not listening.”

His brain rejoined the conversation. “Oh, yuck!”

“I thought that would get your attention.” Her laugh chimed in his ear. “Do you have your tux yet?”

“Ugh, the wedding’s still two months off.”

“But you don’t want to wait ‘till the last minute. You’ll end up with some powder blue prom thing.”

It was his turn to laugh. “Mom, I think you’re talking about you and Dad. I seem to recall some old pictures.”

“Oh, God, those were the days. Everything was so much simpler.”

“Well, yeah, if a powder blue tux was your biggest decision.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. It’s just the way I want to remember it.”

He couldn’t respond. He was working on his guilt feelings about Petey, but he wasn’t there yet.

As if sensing a downturn in the conversation, she asked, “What are you doing home this evening? Or are you going out later?”

“Unh...I’m just watching TV.”

“Sam,” she began hesitantly. “What about Liz?”

“What about her?” he replied warily.

“Well, I thought...maybe...”

“You mean because she saved my worthless hide?”

“Sam, no one thinks of your hide as worthless.” By her tone of voice, she was obviously exasperated with him. “And, yes, you do owe her a thank you.”

“Mom, the best thing I can do for her is to keep away. She suffered enough because of me.”

“Does she feel that way? Does she blame you?”

“I’m sure she does.”

“Sam...”

“Well, she should.”

“I thought we had this ironed out. What those bad people did to Liz and to Petey is not your fault.”

“But I set the wheels in motion.”

“Stop it, Sam! Stop playing the martyr. Stop pushing love away because of some over-inflated sense of responsibility.”

“But it all *is* my fault.”

“Damn it! Am I going to have to get rough with you?”

“Mom, calm down...”

“Don’t you tell me what to do. I’m your mother. All I want is for you to be happy.” She started sniffing, on the breaking edge. “You deserve to be happy. You deserve to fall in love and have babies.” Then added, “Preferably after getting married.”

He couldn't help chuckling.

"Do not laugh! Liz seems like a perfectly nice young lady. But if she's not the one for you, someone else is."

"Okay, okay, Mom."

"Don't patronize me, buster. Don't let a good woman get away because you're too afraid to take a chance."

"I'm not afraid..."

"Yes, you are. I've waited long enough. I want daughters-in-law and grandchildren."

"You're getting Sherry, and, if I know Jeff, you'll get your grandkids sooner rather than later."

"Oh, Sam, we're talking about you."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"Honey, you're a wonderful guy, and you deserve a wonderful girl."

"But Liz may not be the one after all. How can I be sure?" He felt tired and deflated.

"You don't always know right away. Sometimes you do, and sometimes you're pretty sure." His mom paused. "Do you want to see her again?"

Silence. He'd tried so hard to ignore thoughts of her. Tried very, very hard not to go to the window to check her out.

"Hon?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Would you call her? For me?"

"Mom..." He heaved himself out of his chair, kicking at the ottoman.

"No, I mean it. I said we wanted to have her over for dinner to thank her. Maybe this weekend. Yes, that's it. You call her for me. Okay?"

"Damn it, Mom." He paced his tiny living space like a caged tiger.

"Don't swear at your mother, young man. Do this one thing for me, and I swear I'll never pester you again."

He barked a laugh. "And why don't I believe that?"

"Sam, I'm serious now. Call her. Invite her over for next Saturday night."

"Saturday night!"

"Yes. Let's say six-thirty. We'll see you both then. Oh, gotta go. Your dad's wanting his hot fudge sundae." She raised her voice, "I'm coming, Carter." Back to Sam, she added, "Love you, sweetie. Bye."

Well, that was pleasant. The woman's a steamroller. Why did she have to bring up Liz? What if we hook up, and she can't hack it? I might be on duty all night, and she'd be home waiting for me.

The fear doubled him over. So many thoughts. So many pictures in his head. Coming home to warm and sexy Liz. If she were sleeping, would she mind if he woke her by climbing into bed and kissing her all over?

How will I know if I don't try? Maybe it could work. I just don't want to get her held hostage or shot on my account.

Other cops have families.

Children. Liz with a baby. Pregnant. Her narrow waist growing with his kid. He'd like to give a kid the same kind of life he'd had growing up. She'd give a baby beauty and courage.

His thoughts wouldn't let him alone. The more he brooded, the more possible it became. He

already knew they suited sexually. More than suited. Even with experience, she was still innocent in some ways, but she hadn't been afraid to do the things he wanted. She'd enjoyed being tied up.

He found himself at the window overlooking her coach house. She moved around in her bedroom, slipping into clothing, bending at the waist to fluff her hair.

Shit! She's going out.

Chapter 22

Sitting at the bar of the Cedar Room, Liz felt like a million bucks. Maybe half a million. She looked hot. Black leather mini skirt, thigh highs, and three inch spikes emphasized her slim legs. With a red tank, she defiantly wore the amber fairy necklace as her good luck charm. It had been given to her with love. Although Sam had apparently decided he couldn't be with her, the necklace reminded her of their intense emotional and physical connection in New Orleans. She traced a finger over the delicate beads, felt them warm against her skin.

She intended to move on with her life and felt like celebrating her survival from kidnappers and bullet wounds with chocolate martinis. Mmm... mmm... mmm. A chocolate martini, a stool at the bar, and a handsome man next to her—yes, that's the ticket. Sipping slowly, she responded to the man's question. No, she didn't live around here. Oh, Lord, this was going to be a long night. In her peripheral vision, a familiar figure strolled in. "Gak." She swallowed hard and gasped for breath.

What the hell is he doing here? Be cool. Don't let him see his effect on you. But her heart still pattered in excitement.

She pretended an interest in the conversation, hoping her eyes didn't roll to the back of her head in boredom. Maybe Sam wouldn't spot her. Maybe she could slip out. She certainly had no more interest in staying here.

Put the glass on the bar and...

A hot, wet drift of breath washed over her shoulder.

"There you are, darling. I hope you weren't waiting long."

Her eyes went wide as the man she'd been listening to scowled, probably thinking she'd made a fool of him. Covering her tension, she turned, making her gaze much more casual than she felt, and said, "Do I know you?" *Zing. That* got him. Sam's eyes narrowed as if he knew her game.

The other poor man soon withered under Sam's testosterone-charged glower. He muscled his way in between the two stools, to loom intimately over her.

"Well, ah..." the man behind Sam sputtered.

"That necklace is beautiful on you."

His rough, jungle cat purr was so quiet she almost didn't hear. Her eyebrow lifted, her head tilted then she realized she'd heard him right. But that wasn't their problem. There had always been a physical attraction between them. His face poised mere inches from hers, the heat in his dark eyes telling her all sorts of things about lust and sex. She wanted love. Did he? Lust wasn't enough, not any more. She stiffened and turned, focusing her attention on the burl-veneered bar. If her heartbeat hammered any faster, she'd pass out.

"My mom invited you to dinner." He slid his hands around her waist and pulled her, shoulder first, into the shelter of his arms, screening her from Mr. Boring.

"This is why you came here? To invite me to dinner?" A drop of perspiration trickled down between her breasts. She gripped the bar, afraid to let go. Afraid she'd fall. Afraid to look at him.

"No." He slid his fingers under the fairy necklace and splayed them over the skin of her chest.

Her lips parted on a soft sigh. His heat surrounded her.

“Dance with me?”

His voice in her ear, his steamy breath bathing her neck completely melted her. She held her breath as he moved his hand from her chest to caress her jaw, gently back and forth, broadening the movements to stroke her earlobe, then trace her lips with his thumb. She resisted the urge to draw his thumb into her mouth. “Why are you doing this to me?” She closed her eyes and arched her neck in pleasure.

As if she had no volition of her own, she allowed him to coax her off the stool and to be enfolded in his embrace on the dance floor. She held her arms in front of her, her fists tightly clenched as a barrier. After everything they’d said to each other, what brought him here now? She wanted it to be a good reason. She felt the strength in his arms around her waist holding her tightly. He swayed back and forth in place, his cheek next to hers. Just holding her.

God, he feels good, so utterly male. Strong and warm and virile.

But then, she already knew that. Her fingers unclenched. She needed to touch him.

Be careful, girl. You don’t want another love ‘em and leave ‘em chapter.

Her palms rested on his chest, cupped over the intense beating of the heart beneath his T-shirt. Without thought, she rubbed her fingers over his nipples, biting her lower lip as a low moan escaped before she could call it back.

He responded by wrapping long fingers around her nape, directing her head up, her lips to his. Heat, wet delicious heat. Lips, firm and full, pressed sensuously on hers. Oh, God, right here on the dance floor. She broke away for a breath of much needed air.

Her wants, her needs and desires for Sam Bolt launched her own responsive passion. Angling her head to meet his kiss, she slid her arms up his shoulders and around his neck, clutching the long, thick strands of his hair.

His voice tickled, moist and hot, in her ear. “Let’s go home, baby.”

He just wanted sex. Her heart shattered.

You fool. Fell for it again, hunh?

“Noo...” She slid her hands to his shoulders and pushed. “You’ve been out of my life for, what, God, I don’t know any more. No calls, no visits, no nothing. If sex is all you want, forget it.” She wanted him to hurt as much as she did.

He licked his lips, lowered his lashes for a second then raised his dark, haunted gaze to hers. “I’m an idiot.” He lifted his hand to cup her cheek, dipped his thumb to hold her chin. “I’m so sorry I put you in jeopardy.”

“Is this all because you feel responsible for me?”

“Yeah, partly.”

She pushed harder against his chest.

“No, don’t pull away, baby.” He held her upper arms. “I’ll always feel responsible for you.”

She barely heard the music of the jazz combo over the hammering of her heart, and, in a room full of people, she felt completely alone with him. “Sam, this is just too difficult. I don’t want you to be here because you feel you owe me.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s not why I’m here.” His expression took on an earnestness she hadn’t seen before. “When we weren’t dealing with muggers and murderers and bullets weren’t flying, I thought we had something good going.”

Their faces inches apart, her gaze trapped in his, she said, “Yeah, me too.” She could scarcely breathe, hadn’t let herself believe how much she wanted to hear these words from him.

"From the first minute I saw you, you fascinated me." His warm, moist breath bathed her cheeks.

"You mean aroused? Come on, be honest." She searched his eyes, very dark in the dimly lit bar.

"Yeah, that too, but it's more. Liz," his voice lowered to a soft, sensual confession. "I love you."

Her heart fluttered hopefully. "Love?" He'd said that at the hospital, but he'd thought she couldn't hear. He'd put her through so much, she wasn't going to make it easy for him. "Because I saved your life?"

He gathered her into his arms again. She couldn't resist relaxing into the peace and safety against his chest.

"Darling Liz, you saved my life all right, but not how you think." He nuzzled her ear, his steamy, wet breath tickling her neck.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, her resistance fading fast.

"You make me want what I didn't think I could ever have." He brushed his lips over her eyes, breathing lightly on the side of her cheek.

She loved the feel of his soft beard on her lips and chin. "What...?" Her voice was a dreamy, mesmerized sigh.

"I know I've been a putz, but I'm here now, and if you'll give me a chance, I'll do everything humanly possible to make you happy. Come home. I want to make love to you."

Thankfully, he held her up because her shaky knees might give way. They did that a lot around him. He locked his arm tightly around her waist, his erection pressed hard and hot, even through layers of clothes, against her stomach.

"What do you want," she persisted, cupping his cheek, sliding her fingers through his close-cropped beard, kissing the side of his neck. His words, his mouth did torturous things to her, and the feel of his strong, firm body touching her from knee to chest combined to make her listen.

"I want you beside me for the rest of our lives. I want to marry you, to have children with you." His voice broke. He wrapped a hand around her nape, cupped her head. "Look at me, Liz. I need you. I want to make love to you. I can't let you go."

Her eyes filled with tears. He said everything she wanted to hear.

"Baby, why did you go outside after I'd told you to stay in your house?" he asked in an agonized whisper.

"I went out to warn you, you idiot! You could have been shot." She desperately, tightly, gripped handfuls of his shirt.

"And *you* were. I was terrified you'd died." He held her face in the V of his fingers and thumb.

She looked into the darkness of his eyes, saw the fear for her. Believed it. Her heart turned over. "But I'm not. I survived for you. To love you."

* * * *

She didn't notice much in the cab ride home. He had his hand inside her top, completely engulfing her breast as they kissed in the back seat. Safely inside the front door of her house, he kissed her again, his fingers entwined in her hair, holding her head still. His lips brushed her cheeks, over her eyelids, down her nose, across to her ears. Wanting, needing him, she begged,

“Kiss me again.” He obliged by closing his mouth over hers, by spearing his tongue inside. Her tongue danced with his, just as fiercely, just as passionately. He pulled her tank over her head, cool air bathed her shoulders. His big, hard body, here for the taking, tightening her nipples. “Sam,” she cried when he moved his mouth to the lace edge of her bra.

“You have the best underwear, sweetheart.” His fingertip traced the trim of the scallops, following the trail of lace flowers as they led to her nipple. “And I love what it holds, baby,” he whispered huskily as his nose nuzzled over the same path his fingers had taken.

She arched against him with a low moan when his lips closed around the aching tip. Looking down, even though dark inside her house, the sight was like a black and white movie. Her white skin, black bra, his pale cheeks, dark hair.

“Oh, God.” Fire exploded in her belly. “Yes,” she urged him on, his teeth rocking the nipple through the tracery of the fabric, the edge of pain streaking along her nerves. She wriggled her hips against his, wanting his thick cock, wanting it thrust inside her where he belonged. “Did you mean it? That you want...me? And kids?”

“Yeah,” his voice muffled by his mouth on her breast. “If you’ll have me. Please have me...and, if you don’t, I’ll badger you until you *will* have me.”

* * * *

Enough of this.

Sam pulled her toward the spiral stairs, pushing her up ahead of him. “Oh, God, Liz,” he choked, both hands crawling under her skirt.

Oh, yeah, thigh highs.

She laughed aloud.

He palmed her bottom. Flicked the thong. “Oh, baby, you’re killing me. Get up there, woman. I’m gonna make you sorry you wore those things around me.”

“I’ll never be sorry. I’ll wear them all the time, and *you’ll* be sorry.”

“Oh, man, yeah. Let’s get these clothes off.” He held her at arm’s length. “Do you have any idea what you look like? Thong panties, thigh-highs, and stilettos. Jesus Christ!”

She fucking teased him with her wicked smile. “Say it again.”

His hands encompassed her waist, and he repeated, “Do you have any idea...”

“No. What you said in the bar.” She drew closer and shimmied her belly against his cock.

“Come home?”

“Well, if you don’t remember.” She turned, showing him her back.

Taunting him with her bare bottom and thong panties, she drove him nuts. “I’ll show you it’s not a good thing to tease me too much.” He crowded behind her, inching her toward the bed until she landed flat on her stomach. Still sassy, she cocked a shoulder and watched him as he quickly shrugged out of his clothes. He was going to make her pay. She just didn’t know when to stop playing with him. Thank God. His eyes glazed as he curled his hand around his pulsing dick, dry rubbing it from the base to the tip.

She started to roll over.

“No,” he growled, holding her with a palm on the small of her back. He cupped her bottom cheeks with both hands then loomed over her, sliding his erection along the length of her crack.

He nibbled open-mouthed, kissing and licking across her shoulders, the nape of her neck, down her spine, which brought him up again kneeling between her thighs. He continued sweeping

his lips over her bottom and nipping her with teasing bites. Following with big wet swipes of his tongue, he traced the elastic of the little non-panties with his tongue, skirting the crease.

The little witch didn't know when to stop. She shimmied her hips, pumping them against his face.

"I'm dying here," she sobbed.

His fingers massaged her again, lightly smoothing over her cheeks, turning into sensuous compressions, manipulating the folds and creases. With a long, deep groan, he hooked his fingers under the elastic and pulled the thong off, watching it slide from between her cheeks. He heard her muffled cries, her face buried in the pillow.

The panties could come off—yes. Thigh highs—no. He smoothed his palms along their length from the toes of her pumps up to the tops of the stockings. Over and over, up and down the same territory. His arm snaked around her waist and pulled her up. Kneeling between her thighs, he took in the sight of her. Exposed, open. He slid his hand around to the front of her body to ruffle her pussy hair, fingering it, rhythmically pressing her mound and gently yanking the short strands. Staying only long enough to drive her wild with not knowing what he'd do next.

He played with the lips sheltering her sex, parted them, and smoothed her generous juices around the outside of her vagina with his fingertip, stroking inside for the first sensitive inch.

"Sam," she moaned, thrusting her bottom at him, shifting her hips.

But he wasn't through tormenting her. "Liz," he ground. "Oh, God, baby, I'm not going to make it." Yes, he *was* through. He rolled her to her back and loomed over her. "I need to be inside you, baby." His fingers pumped into her once.

"Yes..." she moaned.

Clothed only in thigh-highs and stilettos, she made an erotic dream come true. Pushing her thighs up and out, he brought his palms to her knees and trailed them down to her ankles. He slipped the high-heels off and placed her feet flat on the sheet, her knees as far apart as he could get them, then sat back on his heels to look his fill.

She panted, groaned, and tried to reach for his penis.

He grinned, swirled his fingertips in the moisture from her hole to her clit, scissored the sides. "What do you want, sweetheart?"

"Sam." She arched again. He dragged more moisture to keep her clit wet and slippery. She dug her heels in the bedding and arched higher. "I want you to fuck me," she demanded, her mouth opening on a loud moan.

He came over her, his tongue sliding over her lips. "I. Love." He poised his cock at the entrance to her body. "You." He stretched out the *you* as he stretched over her. "Will you marry me, honey?" He entered her slowly, just a little bit. "Please?"

She gazed up at him. Her hips followed the movement of his cock. "I...love...you...too... Now fuck me."

He laughed. "Such language. I'm an innocent boy. How can I teach you good manners?"

"Innocent, my butt," she groaned.

"Will you?"

"Sam..." she whimpered, clearly wanting him to plunge inside her.

"Not until you say you'll marry me." His arms started to shake with the effort of holding his cock just inside her when he wanted to thrust all the way in and fuck her senseless.

"That's...blackmail."

His voice deepened and simmered with conviction. "Whatever it takes, honey."

“Just do it already.”

“Well?” He almost wept.

“You mean it?”

He nodded, his breath catching.

Her hands slid around his waist, over his butt, and she pulled him into her. “Yess.”

He cried out, shaking and whimpering. He closed his eyes in the total ecstasy of driving all the way home inside her.

She shook her head from side to side. “Yes. More. Damn you, harder.”

“You are one demanding female. I don’t know how I stand you.” He collapsed on top of her and continued his powerhouse thrusting. He wound higher and higher, felt the pressure in his cock, his balls contracting.

Her climax came first, in one long shriek.

He followed, pumping thick jets of cum into her, gasping her name.

“Christ, you killed me.” He rolled them to their sides facing each other, still joined, still panting. After his heart rate came back to normal, and he could speak, he whispered, “Liz, deep down I wanted what I was afraid I could never have. I thought I didn’t deserve you.” He smoothed his lips over the scar on her shoulder. “I still don’t.”

She opened her mouth.

He cut her off with a long, lingering kiss. “You’ve shown me it’s okay to love you. Boy, is this hard. I’ve never talked so much about this in my life.” Before she could respond, he said, “I promise I’ll be the best husband and father I can be. I want this chance with you.” His voice broke.

* * * *

Liz shushed him. Shushed him by caressing his face with her lips, smoothing them over his eyelashes, the crests of his cheeks, the tender skin of his neck below the dark hairs of his beard. He’d never sounded this serious or emotional before. It moved her more than she thought possible. For a big, tough guy like him to break down and open up, to shed his fears, to expose himself, gave her the strength to respond in kind.

She felt his softened penis slip out of her, the loss of him exciting her sensitive tissues, the feeling as sensual as the first penetration of his thick cock. He pulled her closer and cradled her head on his shoulder, his arm protectively encircling her. Peace. He wasn’t going to run away. He would stay so she could give him a family of his own and a way to deal with the guilt he couldn’t completely let go.

Her hand rested on his stomach, her fingers teased the dark hair trailing to his resting cock. His belly bounced, tense because of her exploring fingers. “A couple of ground rules, though.”

“Mm?”

She dragged her fingers through his pubic hair, snagging the strands, jerking them a little. “Yeah.”

“What?” he asked, his voice trailing off.

The bastard was going to sleep. She yanked harder.

“Ow.” But he didn’t rouse himself to move a hand to stop her. “What?”

“No more kidnappings and shootings? Okay?”

“Okay, but can I still watch you masturbate?”

“What?” She tried to shift to a sitting position, but he was quite awake now and quite lying over her.

“I saw you. That first night.”

“Huh? What do you mean you saw me?”

His teeth gleamed whitely against his dark beard, the gold hoop winked at her.

“Sam.” She tried to push at his chest, but he wasn’t budging.

“You really should close your curtains if you don’t want to entertain the neighborhood.” Still grinning, he pumped his hips, his cock hardening against her hip.

“Sam, what the hell are you talking about?” He couldn’t have. Oh, my God, he did. “You saw me through the window?”

“Uh huh.” He kissed the side of her face, nudged her neck up with his nose to access her neck.

“Is that why you followed me that night? Because you’d already seen me naked? Oh, my God, you pervert!”

“Don’t be mad, honey. I was already hot for you even before that night.” His lips brushed over the mounds of her breasts and down the center.

“But my little porno show didn’t hurt, did it?” Her embarrassment turned to amusement quickly enough. “You probably told yourself I knew you were watching?”

“It occurred to me.”

“Well, it never occurred to me that you, of all people, were peeping through my window.” She giggled, “You probably never imagined you were the man I fantasized about that night.”

“Yeah?” His lips enclosed a nipple.

“Mm.” His mouth, his wonderful, talented mouth drew on her nipple. He suckled deeply. “Oh, God, yes, like that. Bite me soo gently. Like that. Puleeze,” she begged.

He spoke no more after that.

That was acceptable to her. As long as he sucked and lapped and bit, he could be as quiet as he wanted. She writhed and pushed her breast in his face, gripped his hair, held him tightly. Again, he rose over her and gave her the pleasure of his thick cock sliding slowly into her hungry sheath. She cried out with the building pressure and stretch of her vagina around his steadily thrusting penis.

She could feel herself contracting around him and called his name, screeched his name. And all of it came together in a fine explosion that rocked her hips up to meet his on the way down.

He shouted at his own ejaculation. Grunted with each thrust. Didn’t pull out, just pumped until he was dry.

“Baby?” he spoke drowsily as he again fell to her side. “Before I forget or pass out and die, my mom does want you to come to dinner Saturday.”

She laughed gently at his non sequitur. “Yes, my love. I’d love to come for dinner.”

“Would you do it again? Just for me?”

“What?”

“Masturbate,” he said darkly.

“You mean after all this, you’d want to watch me play with my vibrator?” That idea actually turned her on.

“Oh, yeah, baby,” he readily replied. “I have a feeling it’ll turn you on as much as it’ll turn me on. And I can help.”

Their laughter continued as they turned toward one another, face to face, sex to sex, and

dozed off dreaming of dinners and vibrators. And the future.

THE END

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Jane Leopold Quinn is a multi-published author of highly sensual novels, novellas, and short stories. She loves the creative process and is constantly, madly writing and revising the “next great book.” Nothing gives her more satisfaction than bringing two people together for a happily-ever-after ending. Writing romance is the greatest job in the world and is her passion and niche in life.

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