



Cat and Mouse

A Handcuff and Lace Story

By Justine Elyot

Resplendence Publishing, LLC

<http://www.resplendencepublishing.com>

Resplendence Publishing, LLC
2665 S Atlantic Avenue, #349
Daytona Beach, FL 32118

Cat and Mouse

Copyright © 2011, Justine Elyot

Edited by Delaney Sullivan and Brenda Whiteside

Cover art by Les Byerley, www.les3photo8.com

Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-283-9

Warning: All rights reserved. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Electronic release: April, 2011

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

For Delaney, with thanks.

Chapter One

The day this doesn't take my breath away, Layla thought, I will stop.

That day was still far distant, though, for Layla's reaction to the sight before her precipitated the familiar reactions—awe, wonder, fear, exhilaration. All around her, lights shone—the stars above and beyond, the beacons of the city below. Leaning over the safety rail at the edge of the roof, Layla looked down hundreds of feet to the sleepless streets. Pinprick pairs of headlights drifted along the roads here and there, while a cluster of dots appeared to be brawling in the closed-up shopping precinct. But all of that urban ugliness was far away from here. Up here, it all looked beautiful, from the brutalist-style tower blocks opposite her to the distant, shining curve of the River Thames.

She let her breath trickle out slowly, drinking in the nightscape, before stepping back and reaching for her backpack. Time was of the essence. She had to leave her signature and get out of here fast. She retrieved her spray paints and set to work, the intricate tag now coming easily to her where she'd once had to take time and care. The exquisite combination of hearts, flowers and barbed-wire knots decorated the roofs of dozens of the city's dilapidated, residential tower blocks. Layla meant to decorate each one before moving on to the greater challenge of the skyscrapers at Canary Wharf.

"Every helicopter pilot knows my name," she told herself with satisfaction, finishing her handiwork with a flourishing signature. Layla, 2011. "And so does *he*."

Speaking of whom...

Layla packed her paints and hurried back to the rail, looking down into the street. A blue flashing light advanced along the access road. Layla inhaled sharply—he'd been quick tonight.

At least, she calculated, he would have to spend some time dealing with the hooligans outside the shops before he came up to try and find her. There was still plenty of time.

Hoisting her backpack over her shoulder, she shinned back down the skylight ladder, closing it carefully behind her. She knew better than to bother with the battered elevators, so she began a leaping descent of the twenty-three flights of stairs instead, keeping a sharp eye out for discarded needles or other dangers on the way.

She'd just made it down to the central lobby when she saw his uniformed figure, together with his partner, buzzing the concierge outside the heavy double doors. She squashed herself beneath the stairs and waited.

After much buzzing, an elderly man shuffled over to the doors, breathing stertorously and cursing under his breath. "Yeah, yeah, what now?"

"There's a girl on your roof, Sir. I don't know if you realized." Adam's voice, always so strident with that sardonic edge, rang through the dingy lobby.

"Girl? Eugh, better than that pirate radio station last month, at least. Go up. Oh, you want me to come up too? Oy. It's three o'clock in the morning."

"I'm aware of that, Sir."

Layla stifled a giggle, picturing Adam's face, one eyebrow wearily raised.

"Luke, why don't you stay down here and keep an eye on those youths—make sure they've dispersed. This'll only take one of us."

Ha! thought Layla. *He wants all the glory for himself, of course. Mustn't let his partner share any of the credit.*

She waited until Adam's impatient footsteps were distant echoes, followed by the heavier tread of the concierge, before crawling back out. She scanned the hallway for traces of Luke and, finding none, sauntered out onto the concourse.

She knew she would be well and thoroughly hidden in the maze of alleys and walkways that made the estate such a favorite of petty criminals before her pursuer had even made it onto the roof.

* * * *

Lying in her bed, she wondered, for the thousandth time, what would happen if Adam ever caught her? Even worse, what if he got a transfer or just gave up the chase? She had to

admit that the thrill of her nocturnal activities would pall without that extra piquancy his dedication to her capture gave it.

She returned, yet again, to the memory of their first meeting—a memory that she couldn't resist worrying, like a loose tooth, taking pleasure in the danger of it.

She'd been new to her urban sport and inexperienced. One evening, months before, she'd climbed up a fire escape onto the roof of a derelict hospital building, taking some time after completing her tagging mission to enjoy the residual warmth of the summer air and the distant sounds of a calypso party somewhere nearby. She had lain down for a while and stared up at the stars, feeling part of the world for once, and at peace with it. She'd almost drifted off to sleep, but the sound of rough, male voices from somewhere under the roof had roused her to action.

Instantly, she was on her feet, grabbing her backpack and running on clunky, grippy soles toward the fire escape. She had just swung over the side of the building when the heads of two police officers had broken clear of an old trapdoor exit.

"He's going down the fire exit. Let's get back down and catch him at the bottom."

Layla wasn't sure which was the best way to run, so she simply pelted toward a clump of trees, as fast and as far away from the crunching gravel behind her as she could get.

They were shouting and hollering.

"Oi! You! Stop there!"

What a waste of breath all that was! Why didn't they just concentrate on catching up with her?

Unfortunately for Layla, she was a tiny, feisty, five feet two set against their combined lofty heights and long legs, and it soon became clear that they were gaining on her at an alarming rate.

"Luke, take the side gate. I've got him. He's mine."

From the corner of her eye, Layla saw one of the men peel away to her right, running in a wide arc toward what she presumed must be her only escape route.

Behind her, the thump, thump of the other man's regulation boots on the patchy grass was ominously close. She wasn't going to win this race.

In desperation, she whipped her wiry body around to face her pursuer, sending a fierce punch toward his face. At least, it would have been a fierce punch if he hadn't caught hold of her wrist, immobilizing her with insultingly little effort.

“Got him!” crowed her captor.

If Layla hadn’t been so focused on her panic, she would have taken a moment to admire his sculpted cheekbones and sea-green eyes. But there was no time for that. She struggled in vain, her twists and turns only adding to the pain in her wrist.

The policeman pulled off her hood with a flourish, releasing a cascade of corkscrew, black curls and revealing Layla’s kittenish face.

“You’re a girl!”

He stared for a few seconds, and Layla sensed that his shock gave her a minuscule wedge of opportunity. She slammed her free hand down on his shoulder and levered herself up his body until she was able to snatch his lips with hers and press them into a thieving kiss. He made a strangled sound in his throat and jerked his head backwards. In that tiny window of the police officer’s shock and confusion, Layla smelled her chance of escape. It would be a matter of milliseconds before his arm wrapped around her, imprisoning her against his chest. Layla didn’t wait. She thrust her knee upwards as hard as she could.

The police officer howled and staggered backwards, clutching his crotch, those gorgeous green eyes wide with astonished pain.

“You little...” he gasped.

But Layla was on her way, hearing the other man running back to check on his friend.

“Adam! You okay, mate?”

“Oi!” Adam’s enraged cry was like wind at her back, pushing her onward. “I’m gonna have you! You’re mine!”

Knowing she was well out of range, Layla turned and waved. “Bye, Adam!” she shouted. “Sorry I didn’t have time for introductions. If you want to know my name, check the roof.”

Lying in her bed, she spoke those words to herself, once more, as she had done so many nights since.

“I’m gonna have you,” she whispered intensely, her fingers working hard between her thighs, the memory juicing her up so sweetly, so perfectly. “You’re mine.”

She thought again about that ferocious, stolen kiss, the way his lips had been hard at first but with a hint of yield, the potential of voracity. What if he’d trapped her in his arms? What if he’d laid her down in the woods and covered her body with his muscular, uniformed length?

What if he'd held her down and taken her, possessed her, made her belong in a way she had never felt before?

She came, sighing with a strange pleasurable regret, thinking *Adam, Adam, Adam*.

Before she drifted into her dawn sleep, though, the bad thoughts, the reality of it came back. He wanted an arrest that was all, a bit of revenge for his hurt pride and testicles. And she would end up where everyone had always said she would. Where she really belonged.

* * * *

Police Constable Adam Lydgate contemplated his reflection in the locker-room mirror.

He looked tired. Hardly surprising, since it was six o'clock in the morning, and he'd just come off a back-to-back shift. He pulled down his lower eyelids with his forefingers, dismayed at the red rims. He was pale as milk, and his blond crop, usually so neat, needed a wash and a comb.

He looked over to the door, nodding at the duty sergeant as he came in to get changed for his morning shift at the custody desk.

"Long night, Adam?"

"Long day, then long night," said Adam laconically, unknotting his tie.

"Aww, and you were so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when you joined us. Job getting you down?"

"Nah." Adam rolled up the tie, put it in the locker then got to work unbuttoning his once-crisp white shirt. "Not really. It still beats working in insurance."

Sergeant Crow chuckled. "I can imagine. We need more of your kind at this nick. Later entrants, more mature."

"Oi, I'm only twenty-eight." Adam shrugged off the shirt, frowning at his abdomen. Flat as it was, he thought he spotted a fraction of flab. He'd have to get back on the rowing machine tomorrow.

"I'm not saying you're past it, mate. Just, a little bit of life experience goes a long way."

Does it really? thought Adam wryly. *Then why am I obsessing like a teenager over that little vandal, Layla?*

"Don't suppose you managed to collar your mysterious lady of the night, did you?" asked Sergeant Crow lightly, as if he'd read Adam's thoughts.

"She got up Carrington Point tonight!"

“And she got down again, I take it?”

Adam sighed, stepping out of his trousers and reaching in the locker for his jeans. “She’s like bloody Raffles or something. I don’t know how she does it.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get too caught up in it. She’s just a kid with a spray can, mate. Not worth all the effort you put in, in my humble opinion.”

Adam buttoned his jeans, turning away from the Sergeant in case his face was giving away the whirling of his mind.

“She’s not a kid,” he said levelly. “Got to be twenty, twenty-one, at least.” *And she certainly doesn’t kiss like a kid.*

“Luke thinks you need to take a step back. Maybe let another copper answer the radio when she’s up to her antics.”

“Well, thanks to Luke for his concern, but I know what I’m doing.” Adam pulled a long-sleeved T-shirt over his head so violently he almost ripped a stitch.

“I’m sure you do, mate, I’m sure you do. Forget I mentioned it.”

But forgetting anything to do with Layla was a tall order for Adam, now. Even before he laced up his civvy shoes and left the locker room, he knew what would be on his mind when he eventually crawled into bed.

That small, taut body clinging to his, those lips deceiving him with their counterfeit desire, that laughing face, bright teeth against milky-coffee skin, before she waved and disappeared into the trees. These were the images that haunted his journey into sleep and sometimes even turned up in his dreams.

But what would I do if I caught her? The question interrupted the firm strokes he gave his shaft, her features materializing on his bedroom ceiling. *I couldn’t just grab her and do what I wanted with her. There’d be paperwork, a trip to the cells, a caution, then that would be it. I could have her prosecuted for assaulting me, and she’d hate me even more. Face it, mate, this is no more than a fantasy.*

Conceding this point, he returned his attentions to his cock, enjoying, in his imagination, a less mundane version of the final arrest scene that ended, not at the custody desk, but with Layla panting up against a wall, and Adam teaching her the error of her ways with long, slow thrusts into her warm, tight cunt.

* * * *

He was in the area car with Luke a few nights later, cruising the streets for signs of disturbance, when the radio crackled into life.

“Adam...are you there? Speak to me, lover.”

Luke almost steered the car off the road, staring at his colleague with his mouth agape.

“What?” Adam thought he recognized the voice, but he snatched up the microphone and said, “Jim? Glynis? Is this a joke? Are you doing impressions or something?”

A husky laugh was the only reply.

“Who is this? Identify yourself.”

“I’m out and about tonight, lover. Come and find me. Come and get me.”

“Layla! Is that you?”

“I’m here for you, baby. I’m waiting for you.” With another low chuckle, the voice disappeared into a crackle of static.

“She is something else,” remarked Luke, shaking his head.

“Right, Luke. Tonight’s the night. Our little ‘artist of the tower blocks’ is painting her final scene.”

Adam’s resolve was accompanied by extra static over the receiver before the more familiar tones of Glynis, one of the radio operators, burst through.

“Reports of illegal, pirate radio activity on the roof of Coniston Tower. Anybody in the area?”

“Show us dealing,” rasped Adam, suddenly having a fairly clear idea of how Layla had pulled that particular little stunt. “Next left, mate. I have a feeling we might be killing two birds with one stone if we take this job.”

Chapter Two

Layla switched off the transmitter and laughed delightedly, hi-fiving her friends Jamal and Grimeboy, who immediately set back to work resetting the frequency.

“You’ll get us into trouble, innit?” Jamal frowned, feeding a thumping bassline into the airwaves for the delectation of their many fans in the housing complexes below. “We’ve only just got turfed off the roof of Edgbaston Tower. If they track us down again...”

“Chill, Jamal, I’m just playing with them. Anyway, I’m off now. Job’s done. Have a good one, yeah?”

She ruffled the stubble over the perfectly shaved zigzags at the back of his head, gave Grimeboy’s shoulders a friendly squeeze and slid down the ladder to the top storey of the tower.

She knew she’d taken a risk sending out her special broadcast to Adam, but she hadn’t been able to resist it, and besides, she’d kept the broadcast short enough that they wouldn’t be able to pin it down to a location.

She felt wicked and insouciant, tripping down the stairs, dancing along the landings, sliding down the final banister to land with a graceful bow in the vestibule.

Rotating her shoulders to reposition her backpack over them, she skipped to the door and headed into the night.

Her breath caught in her chest as soon as her feet hit the concrete. Walking directly toward her, much too close to avoid, was a disgruntled-looking woman in the company of two police officers. And one of them was...

All she could do was keep her head down and walk on, hoping above hope that the woman’s moaning monologue would sufficiently engross them as she passed.

“Every flaming night,” the woman was saying. “Thump, thump, thump, then they get their mates up there for a party. Well, I’ve had enough. I want them out.”

Approaching the threesome, Layla didn’t dare raise her head, but she couldn’t resist a darting, sideways glance at Adam as she drew level. The path wasn’t wide enough to accommodate all four of them, so she stepped onto the grass, suddenly desperate to pull her hood up. But that would draw attention to her. At least her hair was in a ponytail tonight—perhaps without the loose curls he wouldn’t—

He stopped in his tracks and turned his head to her, fixing her for one moment of precious agony with those unforgettable eyes.

“Layla?” he said.

But she’d taken to her heels, thanking her lucky stars for her intimate knowledge of this terrain, veering off onto the grass and toward the garages, dropping down over a wall and into an alleyway few knew existed.

Behind her, he was calling. “Layla, stop! Layla!”

Yeah, because that would be a really good idea.

She fled onwards, between the garages, pulling onto their asphalt roofs and lying on her belly, peering over the edge to observe her pursuer.

She watched him thunder into the shallow low-lying carpark and look around, checking every entrance and exit. Her vantage point gave her the opportunity to peruse him at leisure, a moment of indulgence amidst the adrenaline-pumping urgency.

God, he was hot. Tall and athletic, bulked out even further by the stab vest beneath his uniform sweater, he carried his height well, standing with shoulders back and chest out, moving with confident purpose. The beam of his torch, giant and round, flashed around the empty spaces, and Layla had to shimmy back and press her forehead to the asphalt.

“Layla.” His voice was low, echoing around the shallow basin. “This stops, now. You’ve had your fun. Come out and talk to me.”

Come out and talk to me. Not the aggressive tone of a law enforcer on the offensive that Layla might have expected. He was trying to coax her out. The thought of this made her stomach squirm a little—wasn’t it evidence that he had some regard for her?

He kicked each garage door in turn, sending a deafening clangor around the space.

You’ll wake everyone in the flats! Layla wanted to scold him, but of course, she didn’t.

“Layla. Come out. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Really? Shame. You could bruise my back up against a garage door...

The torchlight faded, and his footsteps moved beyond her hiding place, toward the next block of garages. Creeping forward again, Layla peered over the edge of her aerie and craned her neck, looking for him. The light was gone. He was gone.

She counted to one hundred then she dropped quickly and noiselessly onto the concrete below. It made sense to head back to Coniston Tower, maybe skirt around the rear of the building and get out of the complex via the school field that backed onto it.

Rounding the corner of the garages into the alleyway, she walked smack bang into a large obstruction—a large, warm obstruction that caught her shoulders and upper arms in an unyielding grip.

She gasped and tried to kick out at his shins, but he was ready for her, trapping her foot between his leg and the wall, holding her tight until her arms were twisted behind her back, and she struggled vainly against his superior strength.

“Give it up, Layla,” he said.

She could tell that he was trying not to hurt her, keeping his hold on her firm but not brutal.

“Just stop fighting me for a second and listen.”

She slumped back against him, the top of her head resting beneath his chin. “Go on then,” she challenged him. “Arrest me. I know you’re dying to.”

“Oh, a mind reader, are you?” he teased, his lips brushing her hair. “As well as an escapologist. You don’t know what I want.”

“You just want your statistics,” she said. “I know what you’re like.”

“No, you don’t. You hardly know anything about me. You know my name. You know my occupation. And you know what my lips feel like.”

Layla quivered, instantly reminded. “You know the same things about me,” she said, less querulously this time, her breath catching.

“Right. Not much, is it? I’ve been wondering about you ever since.”

“You know as much as you need to know,” said Layla with a bravado she wasn’t feeling very deeply inside.

“You make out you’re so tough and so fierce. But I wonder if you really are?”

The tide of desire that had rushed through Layla's blood ebbed at once. He sounded as if he cared. He was just trying to play with her. He couldn't really care.

"Just arrest me and get it over with."

"I don't want to arrest you."

"Fine. Then let's fuck, shall we? Is that what you want? Get me on the floor and get inside me? Be my guest."

"Jesus, Layla!"

Adam, apparently dismayed by her harsh invitation, dropped his hold on her arms and spun her round to face him. His eyes, large and dewy with concern, almost killed her. She couldn't look at them. He seemed so *sincere*. And there was pity in the sincerity, awful pity. The one thing she hated the most. Assembling her fiercest expression, she puckered up her lips.

"Come on. Start with a snog."

"It's not a snog you need," he said, pulling her close, more roughly this time.

"Oh yeah? What do I need, Constable? You tell me."

She unzipped her hoody and pulled up her top with one hand, exposing her bra and the smooth brown breasts that nestled in its cups.

"Stop that."

"Why? I want it, Adam. I want you to. Touch them. I dream about you sometimes, taking me up against a wall."

She tried to wrench his hands toward her chest, but he pulled them back, freeing her for that one, crucial second. She'd only taken half a step away when he swiped at the sleeve of her jacket, but she shrugged out of it and broke into a sprint, leaving him to give chase, waving the hoody as he tried to follow her. But she had a good head start, and she was over the school fence and away before he could work out where she had gone in the darkness.

She returned less than an hour later, using the first pale wash of daylight to search every square inch of the garage area.

But her backpack wasn't there. He had it. And with it, her entire existence.

She might as well stop running, now.

* * * *

She lurked in the phone booth across the street from the squat for a full half hour before deciding it was safe to go in. At seven o'clock in the morning, shutters were just coming up on

some of the shops, and people were beginning to drift along on their way to work. It was hard to tell if anyone was awake in the squat—each window was covered by dark, hanging blankets—but she hoped JJ hadn't gone to bed yet. He could usually be relied upon for an early morning cup of tea and a chat before they both fell into their nests of sleeping bags, exhausted by the night's activities. She really, really needed a cup of tea and a chat more than she had done in months.

Pushing aside the perennially unlocked door, she stepped over the usual, oblivious bodies in the hallway and headed for the kitchen. Result. JJ was heating his kettle over his little camping stove and frowning over some political pamphlet.

"Morning, sister," he said, looking up and smiling. "Good night subverting the orthodoxy?"

"Yeah, well, no."

"Oh dear. Grab a mug and tell uncle JJ all about it."

Gratefully, Layla found the least chipped mug and dropped a teabag into it just as steam began to gush from the kettle spout.

JJ added water, sugar and some milk—after sniffing the carton—then he put down his pamphlet and pulled his spectacles low over the bridge of his nose.

"You seem troubled," he said. "As are we all. But more so than usual."

"Have you had the police round tonight?"

"No. No loud music for once. You think they've identified you?"

"I've lost my backpack. I think a copper's got hold of it."

"Oh dear."

"Yeah, oh dear. My mobile, my cards, my addresses...my life. Gone."

"But you're still here."

"This is it, now. What you see is what you get."

"You're like that Nina Simone song, aren't you? *Ain't Got No, I Got Life*. But that's all you need."

"No, it isn't." To Layla's horror, her chin started wobbling and she gulped back a bitter lump with the scalding tea. "It ain't enough anymore. I've got nothing. And I'm sick of it."

"Hey, talk to me, love."

But Layla pushed away the tea and stomped upstairs to her corner of the squat, ready to cradle her head and sink into the dark escape of sleep.

Thunder woke her in what seemed like moments later. Except, not thunder. A fist at her door. “What?”

“Someone at the door for you.”

She perked up instantly, clutching the sleeping bag to her chest.

“Copper?”

“Fuck off! Would I let a copper in? No, some geezer. Tall, blond.”

Layla couldn’t answer for a moment, too busy fighting for breath. “Tell him I don’t live here no more,” she croaked.

“He’s got something of yours. Backpack.”

“I don’t live here no more! Tell him! But try and get the backpack, first.”

She heard the gusty sigh of the person on the other side, then his clomping footsteps on the stairs.

Suddenly, convinced that Adam would barge past and try to find her anyway, she went over to the moldy sash window and lifted it, looking down to the yard full of broken appliances and tipped over bins.

She’d just swung her legs over the ledge when Adam appeared through the side gate. The sight of him almost tipped her off balance, and she had to clutch hard at the windowsill to stop from falling. Out of his uniform, he looked less intimidating but no less mouthwatering, in tight jeans and a trim, green T-shirt that showed off his muscular arms and matched the color of his eyes.

“Go on, jump,” he said, positioning himself directly beneath her. “I’ll catch you.”

Layla, giddy and strangely exhilarated at being caught like this, laughed.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, innit.” She shook her head, resigned. “You might as well come up.”

“I’ll wait ‘til you’re inside, if that’s okay with you. Had enough of frantic chases across the length and breadth of East London for one day.”

Layla hopped back inside and shut the sash, then made her weary way downstairs to open the front door.

Adam appeared at the corner of the street within seconds, toting her rucksack, breaking into a trot when he saw her.

“Are you here to arrest me?” she asked bluntly.

“No,” he said, running up the steps and handing over her backpack.

“Oh, don’t tell me. You’re here to save me.”

He escorted her back inside and followed her up the stairs to her cold, draughty room.

“Do you need saving?”

“You probably think I do.”

He looked around at the bedroom, with its peeling paint and exposed wiring, its ill-fitting window and its moldy skirting boards. “I think most people would make that assumption, taking a look around.”

“It ain’t Buckingham Palace. I can’t afford anything better.”

She sat on the sleeping bag and Adam came to perch next to her, drawing his long legs up to his chest and leaning against the wall.

“So, you’ve found me,” said Layla, suddenly awkward. “You win. What now?”

“You talk to me.”

“You interested, then?”

“Of course I am. That’s why I’m here. Why do you live here, Layla? Why don’t you have anywhere better to go?”

“‘Cos there ain’t anywhere better. I grew up in care. Couldn’t get fostered, couldn’t get adopted, dropped out of school. Nobody made me go, Adam. Nobody cared. Did some dodgy stuff here and there, spent a month in Holloway prison—no, I’m not going there again, I’m telling you right now. Criminal record means I can’t get a job, no job means I can’t get a flat. Hey presto. This is where I am. Bottom of the pile. Cream rises to the top. Shit sinks to the bottom.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that. It’s not your fault you were in care. Where were your parents?”

“Dad—who knows? Mum—chose her violent, fucking, psycho, bastard boyfriend over me. Don’t even know where she is, now. Perhaps he’s killed her.”

Layla’s shrug was meant to be hostile, but she cursed the way her shoulders shook, even when Adam took her hand in his and closed his fingers around it.

“Shit, Layla, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t...be sorry...I can’t stand...sympathy...”

But the floodgates had opened, and Layla hid her face in Adam's shoulder, battling with her lungs until the choking sobs had been beaten back, and she was able to breathe again. He held her close, patting her back soothingly, waiting for the power of speech to return to her.

"Why are you being so nice? You're a cop," she said accusingly.

"Most cops are nice, y'know. And I want to help you. Just haven't been able to get you out of my head since...that thing at the old hospital."

"That kiss, you mean?" She grinned through her tears.

"Yeah. That." Her eyes blurred but defiantly held his, challenging them to look away. They couldn't. "Just because your childhood and youth were a write-off, doesn't mean your life has to be."

"I can't see a way out."

"There's always a way out."

She put a fingertip to his cheek, which was stubbled after the long night shift. It was as if she was hypnotized by his manly beauty, just wanting to take this moment and drink it in, even if he was a cop, even if he was bound to be wasting her time with his fake sympathy.

"Layla," he whispered.

"Kiss me."

"You're a witch."

"Kiss me."

A tear splashed from her eye as he ducked in toward her, and he kissed it away before redirecting his lips to hers. Before her thoughts gave way to sensations, Layla found herself comparing this kiss to the last, finding it utterly different, less savage, but just as intense. It was a passionate gesture, yet a tender one, and if she had doubted Adam's sincerity earlier, she really couldn't anymore. He meant this.

The comparisons swirled away, chased off by the slow, steady sweep of erotic desire Adam's sensitive lips introduced into her. All that existed now was his hand at the back of her neck, the prickle of stubble on her cheeks and chin, his coffee-smelling breath and his mouth. Oh, that mouth. It poured life into her, life and fragile hope. She opened up to him, allowing his tongue to enter her fortress, breaking through every barrier of reserve.

They fell sideways on to the sleeping bags, sighing and entangling. Layla was trapped in bonds made of Adam's limbs, and she wound her arms and legs around his until their pelvises

bumped together, and their chests and stomachs rolled against each other. Still kissing, they rocked from side to side, Layla's hands in Adam's hair, his fingers pressed into the nape of her neck, until he managed to tumble her onto her back and straddle her, tongue now scouring her more deeply than ever. Her breath was short, and she arched her spine, moaning into his mouth.

He pulled his tongue away, slowly, deliberately, taking time to run its tip along her teeth and into the crevices of her cheeks before breaking into a series of shorter kisses.

Layla felt that things were about to move up a gear. They were serious enough now, but this could get out of control.

"God, I want you," he whispered, dropping random kisses over her face and forehead and neck and collarbone. "I shouldn't...but I want you."

Layla twitched at that 'shouldn't' but dismissed it for the moment, too far gone in lust to process anything in depth.

"It feels too good to be wrong," she said. "You feel so good."

She slid her hands inside his T-shirt, letting them travel up and down his back, bumping over every knob of his spine until they reached his shoulder blades. He reared up a little and pulled the garment off, treating her to the sight of his broad chest and tight abdomen before falling back on her, apparently ravenous for more kisses.

One of his hands slid between their bodies, mapping the curves of her breasts and the flat basin of her stomach before sneaking beneath the elasticized waistband of her joggers. His fingers crept lower, causing her to circle her hips and lure them to the place where they were most wanted—her hot, wet pussy.

"Oh my God," she gasped, feeling them, long and slim, inside her knickers and over her swollen clit.

Her fingers pinched and clawed at his back, urging him onwards in his explorations while their mouths continued to bump together.

"You're wet," he moaned. "So wet. Do you want this?"

"I want it. Fuck me, Adam. Please fuck me. Want to feel you..." Her hands tugged at the belt of his jeans, jingling the buckle.

"Layla..." He began pulling her sweatpants over her hips then he stopped. "Shit!"

"What?"

"No condoms. You got any?"

“Sorry.”

His long exhalation of pure frustration fanned her face.

“It’s okay, babe,” she crooned, stroking his disheveled hair. “We can save that for later. Besides, I think you need to sample the dish before you buy...know what I mean?”

Adam buried his nose in her hair, shaking his head from side to side then he pushed himself up on his forearms, grinning wickedly. “I take your point. A taster. I’m up for that.”

He pulled off her joggers and knickers, and she parted her thighs for him, spreading herself wide.

Down into the depths of the split he bent, hot breath then stubble tickling her so that she squirmed. He breathed in deeply through his nose then his tongue arrived, just where it was most needed. She melted, sighing with delight, eyeballs rolling back in her head, eyelashes quivering. He had the most exquisite touch, drawing a pattern around and around her clit with the tip of his tongue, driving her ever so delicately wilder and wilder.

“Mmm.”

She heard his noises of appreciation and lifted her bottom from the sleeping bags, pushing herself into his face. He grabbed the offered buttocks and held her in position at the hips, spreading her arse cheeks wide as he feasted until she trembled, and her legs turned to liquid.

“Oh fuck, oh jeez, oh Adam, Adam,” she cried, as she often had in her room, alone, with only her fingers for company. But this was real. He’d brought her to orgasm, and now she felt like a helpless limp thing completely under his spell.

At least, she hoped, it was a good spell. A kind one, meaning her no ill.

“Wow,” she whispered to his smugly smiling face once he’d arisen from his task. “You ate that all up, didn’t you? Good boy.”

“You taste fucking gorgeous,” he answered. “I’ll want second helpings. And we’re buying condoms the minute the chemist opens over the road.”

“Yeah. But first, I want to get a mouthful of you. Get those jeans off, Officer.”

He obliged her, kneeling up to show his upright cock to its best advantage. *And quite an advantage it was, too*, thought Layla admiringly, her mouth watering at its promising length and girth.

She took it in her mouth as if it were the rarest morsel at a fine banquet, rolling it around inside her cheeks, lapping at the shaft and flicking her tongue over the tip, getting the measure of it before setting to work in earnest.

Squeezing his balls and the base of his shaft, she drew it further in, sucking hard and licking, taking it slowly at first while her jaw muscles adapted to his size, then speeding up. She took her cues from his shallow breathing and small moans of helpless pleasure, increasing the pressure as they picked up in speed and frequency. His hand landed in her hair, losing itself in her curls, grabbing and pulling compulsively, and his knees seemed ready to give way. She knew he was close. She wanted to give him everything, something he would never forget. She reached behind his testicles to his perineum and pressed her fingers hard into the sensitive flesh there.

She heard her name coincide with the rush of warm, salty fluid into her mouth and down her throat and felt his backward slump onto his heels, crumpling over her, his head on her back until she released his cock and straightened her spine, bringing his lolling weight onto her shoulders.

They embraced, falling back on to the sweaty nylon, exhausted.

“You know, for a cop, you’re quite lovely,” she whispered, holding his drowsy head between her breasts.

“Fuck these double shifts,” he yawned back. “Might have to sleep...before...the chemist...”

She watched his eyelashes flutter against his pale skin for a long, long time, never wanting the moment to end.

Chapter Three

The chemist had been open for several hours by the time Adam fell out of dreamland.

He smelled his surroundings before his eyelids unglued. Where was he? Wherever it was, it was musty, the damp scent overlaid with the heavy perfume of patchouli from a joss stick burning somewhere nearby. It wasn't home.

He focused on a patch of ceiling, the plaster peeling away, then the memory gushed back, and he reached for Layla, whispering her name.

She wasn't there.

He sat bolt upright, peering around the dismal, little room. She was gone, and so was her backpack. What was left, held in place by a saucer holding a tea light, was a note.

"Dear Adam, I'm sorry. I really like you, but I don't do emotion. Getting close to people isn't for me. Please don't try to find me. Love, Layla."

He crumpled it in his fist, swearing in exasperation, before uncrumpling it and reading it again, as if her unschooled scrawl might give some clue to her whereabouts. Clearly, she had bailed out of the squat for good. Where could she have gone?

He made his way cautiously down the stairs, in case he encountered any hostile squatters, but they all seemed to be asleep or out.

In the kitchen, a man in John Lennon spectacles was reading a book and drinking tea. He looked relatively civilized. Perhaps he might be able to help?

"Hi," said Adam awkwardly, sticking his head around the door into a jungle of pot plants and jars full of dried pulses.

"She's gone," said the man, deadpan, looking up from *The Levellers*.

"I know. Left a note. Any idea...where?"

The man put down his book and frowned at Adam. “No,” he said. Then, after a pause, he added, “You her boyfriend?”

“I...don’t know. In a way, I suppose.”

“Well, if you don’t know, perhaps you should. That girl’s been fucked over by society. She doesn’t need to add being fucked over by a man into the bargain.”

“I don’t want to fuck her over! I want to find her. I want to help. I know she’s had it rough.”

“How can you help, then? You a millionaire?”

“No, but I care about her. That’s a start. Or isn’t that good enough?”

The man sighed and poured a cup of tea. “Yeah.” He pushed the cup over to the edge of the table. “Have a cup of tea. My name’s JJ. Yours?”

“Adam.” He sat gratefully and sipped his tea while JJ gave him a fuller version of the sad story Layla had told him earlier.

“Look,” said JJ eventually, once the cups were drained to the leaves. “I don’t know where she’s gone. But you know Layla—look in the high places.”

Adam grinned. “True. She’ll be up there, somewhere.”

“With the stars.” JJ smiled back. “It’s the closest she gets to peace. Listen, mate, if you find her, take care of her.”

“I will.”

* * * *

Adam scrunched up his eyes and stared again at the map. One hundred and twenty-nine tower blocks in this borough alone. If he added the total from the neighboring boroughs, it was close to a thousand—a thousand buildings with Layla potentially perching on the roof. Where to start?

He could register her as a missing person and make her a priority case. No. She wasn’t in a high-risk group; his superiors would question his motives. What if he pretended she was in a high-risk group? That she was suicidal or mentally ill? No, too many problems could ensue.

There was nothing for it but to investigate each and every tower block, one by one, until some clue presented itself.

But first, he had to go to work.

* * * *

Layla shivered as she peered over the edge of the building. It was the highest residential tower block in the area and close to the river so that a strong estuarine breeze was a constant feature of her perch. Luckily, a squat, square shed offered some shelter, its windows long boarded up, its breeze-block wall scarred with multi-colored graffiti. She would have to elude the caretaker, if and when he ever came up here, but that shouldn't be a problem.

An interesting feature of the building was its elevator shaft, housed in a narrow, separate tower and connected to the apartments by concrete walkways on each of the twenty-seven floors. If Layla needed to make a getaway, she would have to drop down onto the walkway and make a break for the lifts—this gave her the great advantage of seeing any enemies coming before they saw her.

Sheesh. Enemies. She should listen to herself.

You aren't in a cowboy film, girl. Cops and robbers though...

Except that the cop was her friend. Or wanted to be, if she could only let him in. It would never be worth it, though. These things never were.

* * * *

Adam and Luke fastened their padded stab vests and checked that their duty belts were properly supplied with personal radios, incapacitant sprays, extendable batons and cuffs.

The summer evening was too warm for the hi-vis jackets they usually wore, so they strolled out of the locker room in their shirtsleeves, pausing at the door to don helmets.

"I hate walking the beat," moaned Luke. "I was hoping we'd get the area car today."

"You always want the area car."

"It's safer. Hate foot patrol in the summer. Hot weather brings all the villains out. And it gets antsy round the big estates. It only takes one wrong look to spark a riot, sometimes. Loud parties, open-air dealing, ugh."

Adam let Luke's grumbles rattle on, concentrating on looking up to the roof of every tower they passed on their walk down to the tough, riverside neighborhood of Poplar.

"If you were going to live on a roof," he interrupted, having heard enough about opportunistic muggings in the parks, "which one would you choose?"

"Eh?"

"If you went into hiding," explained Adam patiently, "on a tower block roof. Which one?"

“The highest one?”

Adam turned to Luke, filled with inspiration. “You know, I think you’ve hit on something. The highest one. That makes sense.”

“Who’s in hiding on a roof? Oh, don’t tell me...”

“Shh. What’s the tallest tower? That one!”

He looked ahead to where one of London’s most iconic, brutalist-style tower blocks loomed in all its chilling, concrete splendor.

“Aren’t those ones down on Old Ford taller?” demurred Luke.

“That’s the one. I’d put money on it. Come on.”

They hastened through the streets of dilapidated, low-rise blocks, ignoring catcalls and hostile stares, toward the soaring monolith at the epicenter of the housing development.

“This is about that Layla girl, isn’t it?” Luke accused. “You shouldn’t get obsessed, Ad. It’s pointless. Let her go.”

“It isn’t pointless. She’s, um, absconded from her home. If she gets up there, she might jump.”

“I didn’t hear that one radioed in. Who told you that?”

“A concerned housemate.”

“What concerned housemate?”

“Just shut up and see if you can find the concierge.”

“Look, I don’t like this. I’m going down to patrol the shopping precinct.”

“What, on your own?” Adam wheeled around, sneering. “You know it’s dangerous to be alone in uniform around here.”

“It’s dangerous to go chasing girls on the roofs of tower blocks.”

“What’s she going to do, Luke? Spray paint us to death?”

Luke shook his head and shrugged.

“Listen, you can stay off the roof with the concierge if that makes you happy. I’ll go up there alone. But I need to see that she’s safe. That’s all. And try to talk her down.”

“I still want to see the radio record,” grouched Luke, but he went off to call the concierge regardless. “And I’m asking Sarg for a different partner next shift,” he shouted over his shoulder.

* * * *

The sun was already pitiless, beating down on the flat roof of the tower so that Layla was forced to seek refuge in the piss-stinking, breeze-block hut. All over the wall, the tag 'E14 CREW' was sprayed, over and over again. Layla wondered if she knew any of the E14 Crew. If not, and if this was their regular meeting place slash hideout, she might be in for some trouble later.

Voices from the topmost walkway interrupted her fearful musings, and she peered around the rotten doorframe, leaping back when the uniformed figure of Adam hove into view, accompanied by another police officer and a harassed-looking man in overalls.

How the hell did he work that one out? Less than twenty-four hours, and he's found me already. Was it so obvious? Did I actually want to be found, on some level? The highest level.

She smirked at her own unintentional pun, then sprang into action as soon as the men were off the walkway and headed along the deck toward the shaft that acted as a rubbish chute as well as providing access to the roof.

She grabbed her backpack and scurried to the edge of the building, jumping lightly down onto the walkway and looking swiftly back to make sure Adam was nowhere to be seen. She had a matter of critical seconds, while the men were in the opposite shaft climbing up, to get across the walkway and into the elevator tower. But she made it with ease, lurking by the lift buttons and peering through the narrow window to observe the activities above.

Her heart made a lunge for her mouth when she saw Adam leaning over the railings, looking down almost directly at her. *Thank goodness for smoked glass*, she thought, or rather smoked Perspex, because glass never lasted five minutes in the communal areas of these blocks.

The thought that he must be hell-bent on finding her both warmed and chilled her blood. She had underestimated him. He was no quitter, and he would keep pounding the pavements and checking the roofs until she was found...then would he make her his? Would he? Or would he decide she was too much trouble?

If you've got any sense, sweetheart.

No wonder people said love was such a painful thing.

Oh shit, not love. I never wanted that.

She wanted to run over to him, announce herself, throw herself into his arms. And how tempting those arms looked, with their white shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal strong wrists and

tanned forearms. The look of disappointment on his face was so real and so huge that she began to think he really must care about her.

She swallowed, tried to control her breathing—and her thinking. This was weakness. And out here, weakness would get you killed.

She calculated that the men were on their way down now, so she ran down one flight of stairs and hid on the walkway below.

She could hear them above her again, their voices carrying on the warm wind.

“Just thought...reports of a girl...if you see anything, let us know.”

Then the rattle and vroom of the lift shooting upwards signaled that she would soon be alone again, safe again. For now.

* * * *

“Fool’s errand.” Luke’s pace along the concourse was fast, indicating his level of irritation. “Now can we go and do some police work? Please?”

As if in response to his plea, their radios crackled into life.

“Reports of anti-social behavior outside the betting shop on Poplar High Street. Anyone free?”

“Show us dealing,” said Luke loudly, and the pair headed off in the shadow of the huge tower, Adam craning his neck for eyes that he sensed were there, even though he couldn’t perceive them.

Later on, when the two of them returned to the station at the end of their shift, the sergeant stopped them and offered them overtime.

“We’ve had a tip off that there’s going to be a gang fight down on the Brownfield—E14 Crew versus the Bow Boiz. Either of you up for it?”

Luke shook his head, citing a hospital visit that Adam knew was really a hot date in town, but Adam pondered the proposition a moment longer.

The Brownfield was where the tower stood. And even though he’d searched and found no evidence of Layla, some nagging thing inside him—an instinct—told him that she might be there all the same. If she was, and there was trouble in store, he wanted to be there.

“I’m in,” he told the sergeant. “What if I take up an observation position on the top of the tower? That could help.”

“Yes, we were thinking of that. We’ll get a group of you on the roof.”

“Perfect.”

“Your presence there might even defuse the situation. If the E14 Crew know you’re there, they might call the whole thing off. Let’s wait and see. Any trouble and you radio for armed officers, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay, off to the briefing room with you. And thanks. You’re an officer worth your salt, Adam.”

Adam glowed with the unexpected praise all the way to the briefing, though he couldn’t help a twinge of guilt. If the sergeant knew his real reasons for volunteering for this hazardous job, perhaps he might retract his kind words.

* * * *

The sun was going down, and a welcome shadow had fallen to the side of the breeze-block hut in which Layla sat, chewing on the cereal bar she’d brought with her from the squat kitchen. The London skyline at sunset was a sight to behold. She munched contentedly, rapt and forgetful of all her woes, just for the time it took for the skies to glow red and the spires to be bathed in their golden light.

“All those people, millions of ‘em,” she whispered to herself. “Are they all luckier than me?”

Perhaps they were, for the very next moment she heard the unwelcome sound of the skylight creaking open on its hinge. Half-choking on her cereal bar, she leaped up and headed for the walkway, backpack dragging along by one hand.

Whoever had come up was too quick for her, though. She felt herself yanked backwards by her hood, which fell down, revealing her tumble of glossy ringlets.

“Oi, oi, what’s this, then?”

She didn’t recognize the voice, but he sounded young, teenaged and local.

“It’s a girl, innit? You’ve seen a girl before, KDef?”

Oh God, it’s a whole gang of them.

Mocking laughter came from behind her, at least half a dozen voices peeling into the evening air.

“Yeah, but what’s a girl doing here? Pussy ain’t invited tonight.”

Layla tried to shrug out of her jacket, but the youth pulled it tight so the zipper pressed into her neck.

“I’ll go then,” she gasped. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize this was your yard. I was just taking in the sunset. I’ll go.”

“Eh, bruv, she didn’t realize this was our yard. ’Cos there ain’t ‘E14 Crew’ sprayed all over every inch of the place, innit?”

More laughter, crueller this time.

“You musta knew it,” said another, a tall, slender man, festooned in gold. “I think you must be here ’cos you looking for a pimp, right?”

“No! I don’t want a pimp. I’m sorry. Just let me go, yeah?”

“Well, tonight ain’t the night to be looking for pimps. We got business, serious business, with some disrespectful youth. Tell you what, though, darlin’—you one fine piece of pussy. Perhaps we give you a little treat when we finish? What you say, bredrin?”

The boys and men ranged behind her tormentors—at least twenty of them, now—catcalled and made gestures of excited approbation.

“Okay, that’s settled. We show those Bow Boiz who’s boss in this hood, then we come back and show this buff ting who’s boss in her cunt, right? Who’s gonna tie her up for me?”

Layla screamed and kicked, but the man held her tight, his hand over her mouth wedging it back hard when he sensed that she was about to bite.

“Oh, you a fighter. I think I want you right now. Keep a watch out, bredrin. I’m going to teach this bitch to scream.”

He dragged her into the hut and threw her hard on the concrete floor so the side of her head banged on the concrete. She tried to push herself up, but he was already pulling down his tracksuit pants, one foot on her stomach keeping her down.

“We’re gonna party hard when those Bow Boiz are gone,” he promised, flashing a gold tooth in a terrifying grin. “Party hard in your panties, darlin’. But I get to go first.”

All the boys round here had such cold, dead eyes, Layla thought. Whatever their racial color—and the E14 Crew were a multi-colored bunch—there was a hardness you couldn’t get through. Some of them were barely into their teens. She wondered if she had that hardness, that cold dull stare. She probably did. This was what she was—what she was worth. A fuck doll for a gun gang. That was all she could hope for, now.

“Do your worst,” she snarled.

“Hey, you might like it.” The man knelt down, straddling her. His cock was pierced, she noticed through her hard shell of protective indifference. Survival, survival, staying alive.

“Babylon!” The cries from outside were sharp and urgent.

The man leaped back up, pulling his track pants over his erection.

“Fuck.” he cursed. “Later, darlin’.” He turned to shout outside. “Anyone got a belt or some rope? Need to tie the ho.”

“No time, man!”

“Shit! Don’t move!”

With those words, he left her, joining his gang in the swift shimmy down through the skylight.

A dazed Layla almost didn’t need the exhortation not to move. Her legs were bruised, and she had banged the back of her head on the concrete at some point. All the same, she managed to drag herself to the side of the roof and gaze down below where a trio of police cars were parked haphazardly across the concourse, their occupants presumably on their way up.

And I’d bet my last pound one of them is Adam. If I had one.

She had to get off the roof. If Adam didn’t find her up there, the gang would. But she could only stand with some difficulty, and her progress over to the walkway was slow and painful.

Sitting on the edge, ready to drop down onto the walkway, she took fright. It wasn’t a big jump, but she knew her injured leg would crumple under her, probably causing even further damage. She rolled laboriously onto her stomach, letting her legs dangle over the edge. This way, she only had about six feet to drop, and she could roll over onto her hip if her leg wouldn’t co-operate.

Behind her she heard the swoosh of the elevator door opening, and she kicked her good leg out in a moment of panic, suddenly caught between the impulse to jump and the desire to scramble back up onto the roof, away from whoever was coming out.

Too late.

Chapter Four

“Layla!”

He ran up behind her, grabbing her by the hips and lifting her down.

“What’s happened to you, love? You’re bleeding. Who’s done this to you?”

Hating herself for it, she burst into tears.

“Talk to me!” he commanded her, almost roughly. A group of other uniformed officers swarmed past them, obviously curious, heading for the shaft.

“The E14 Crew,” sobbed Layla.

“They were here? Hold on a moment,” he shouted to his colleagues. “She says she’s seen them.”

The officers stopped and leaned back on the balcony rail, watching with interest.

“On the roof?” asked Adam urgently.

Layla nodded into his chest.

“But they left?”

“Yeah.”

“How long ago?”

“They left when they saw your cars. Minutes.”

“We didn’t see them on the way up.”

“They never crossed the walkway.”

“They must be in one of the top-floor flats! Let’s do a door-to-door. Bring them all in on suspicion of assault.”

“They’ll be tooled up to the back teeth,” objected one. “I say we call for back-up. If they’re in one of these flats, they aren’t going anywhere with us hanging around outside, are they?”

“Okay, radio it in. But they aren’t getting away with this. What did they do?” Adam was speaking to Layla again, urgently, his thumb stroking her hairline.

“Found me up there. Their leader—he was about to...to...”

“Did he touch you?”

“He didn’t have time.”

“Good. Look, I’m going to call an ambulance. Get you down to casualty.”

“I’m all right.”

“For fuck’s sake, Layla. You’re going to casualty. Stop being your own worst enemy for five minutes.” He took his radio and asked for an ambulance to be sent to the tower.

While they waited for it, and for the extra officers, Adam and Layla stood on the walkway looking down at the darkening vista.

“Where were you off to, then? When I found you?” asked Adam.

“Truth? No idea. The next high-rise along maybe.”

“You couldn’t have lived like that forever. What are you so scared of?”

She didn’t dare look at him.

“Getting hurt,” she said at last.

“Well, you got hurt tonight. Was that better than...than...being with me? Really?”

“Better than you leaving me,” she whispered.

“I thought you had guts,” said Adam, checking nobody was looking their way before twining his fingers with Layla’s. “Thought you were so brave. But you aren’t, are you?”

“In my past—”

“This isn’t the past. This is now. If you keep letting the past poison the present, you won’t have a future. And I’m not one of those people who abandoned you or hurt you. I’m me. And I care about you. And I want you. I want you to be happy.”

Layla swallowed a harsh retort. It was like a reflex, now. He was right. He’d done nothing to hurt her and everything to show her that he was worthy of her trust.

Way down below, an ambulance car, blue light flashing, pulled into the parking lot.

“They’ll get your head looked at,” sighed Adam. “Nasty bump like that could be serious. And your leg, too.”

“I’m sorry. For causing you...all this...” Those wretched tears were close again.

“I’ll come to the hospital when all this is finished. Though I suppose you’ll have bunked off again and found some other trouble.”

“No. Not, this time.” She looked up at him, hoping he could see sincerity in her eyes. “I’ll wait for you.”

“I don’t know if I believe that.”

“I mean it. I’ve finished with...all this.” She waved her hand at the looming blocks that dotted the landscape, flooding it with fluorescent light.

“Yeah, well. We’ll see.”

Sidling with her into the lift tower, out of sight of the other officers, he held her, kissing her for as long as it took for each number on the rusted panel to light up in sequence. When the number twenty-seven glowed, they broke apart.

The lift doors opened with a ping, revealing a pair of paramedics with a wheelchair.

“This the patient?”

“Layla. She’s had a nasty bump to the head and her left leg’s a bit off. Plus general bruising. Just needs a quick once-over, I reckon.”

They helped her into the chair, despite her protestations.

“I can still walk, you know! Just got a bit of a limp.”

“All the same, let’s be on the safe side, eh?”

They wheeled her into the lift.

“I’ll be back to take your statement,” Adam said.

Layla felt like grinning at the romance of his parting words.

“I’ll wait,” she said as the doors slid shut.

On the way to the ambulance, they were crossed by a platoon of police officers running across the concrete, boots thudding urgently.

“Be safe up there,” she whispered, looking up at the top floor and clenching her fists until the nails dug crescent moons into her palms.

* * * *

More than once during the long, long wait in Accident and Emergency, Layla contemplated walking out. She knew that unless she passed out or threw up, she wouldn't be treated as a priority case, and she watched dully as stretchers full of people with terrible injuries or heart attacks or strokes were wheeled past.

These were the minority, though. Mostly, she was surrounded by people who'd drank too much and fallen over, or gotten into a fight. On the fringes, anxious mothers tried to keep their bawling youngsters away from the worst excesses.

It was three o'clock in the morning before she finally saw a doctor, who diagnosed a mild concussion and a torn ligament. He suggested she go home and rest.

"I ain't got a home," said Layla.

"Well, that's a problem then, isn't it? Do you have friends or family you can stay with?"

"Someone's picking me up when he finishes his shift. I'll wait outside."

"Not the person who assaulted you?" The doctor frowned.

"No, definitely not him."

"All right, then."

Luckily, it was a balmy night, and Layla enjoyed the warm air, putting her bandaged leg up on a bench and looking at the stars.

The night was coming to an end. Soon a new day would dawn.

She hung on to that thought, refusing to entertain her usual negativity, keeping it close to her heart. A new dawn with a new life that included love and being loved. Was it really as she had always thought, just a fairytale, or could it actually happen? Adam's face in her imagination gave her hope. She tried to paint him with an invisible aerosol, tracing the lines of his face, the full lips, the sea-green eyes, the high hairline and the blond crop that he slicked back behind it. She should learn to paint properly. Perhaps she could sign up for a class?

She had nodded off to sleep by the time the sun rose.

A hand around her wrist woke her, together with a low voice in her ear.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

She spluttered to life, panic enveloping her until she saw the face she had been mentally painting before her descent into dreams.

"Good thing I'm not in uniform," he said softly. "They'd have asked me to move you on. Why didn't you stay inside? Go to the canteen or something, you silly mare."

“I just wanted a bit of air.” She sat up, unable to prevent a beaming smile from taking over her face. “I’m so glad you came. So glad you didn’t give up on me.”

“I’m glad you stayed. I really wasn’t sure you would.” He sat down beside her, taking her hands in his and squeezing them tight.

“What happened back there?”

“You were right. They were all squeezed into one, top-floor flat, waiting for us to go. But we didn’t—we brought them all into the station for questioning about what happened to you. And, as it happened, the flat was full to the rafters of guns and drugs. So a good night for the statistics and the area.”

“Good night for us,” yawned Layla, laying her head on Adam’s shoulder.

“You call that good? Getting roughed up and nearly raped? I’d hate to hear your definition of a bad day.”

“A day without you.”

“Oh, you old romantic.” He squinted down at her, grinning crookedly, then he kissed her forehead and helped her to her feet. “Come on then. Let’s get you home.”

* * * *

Home, she thought, staring up at the bathroom ceiling through the steam. *I have a home.*

Three days after sustaining her injuries, Layla felt fit and well again. Fit and well enough to...her toes curled under the bubbles as she thought about what was to come that evening.

Adam had cooked dinner after his shift, and they had been coy and giggly as teenagers over the casserole and wine, both knowing what they wanted and what was going to happen later.

“Did you remember to go to the chemist?” she’d asked, scooping out ice cream, too shy to catch his eye.

“Uh huh,” he’d said. “Think I’d forget, did you? Not a chance.”

“Sprinkles?” She’d pushed the dish over.

“Bit of chocolate sauce’ll do for me.”

“You’ve enough sauce without the bottled kind.”

They’d smirked at each other.

“Get on with it, then,” blurted Adam at last. “Let’s eat this and, and...are you sure your leg’s okay?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

And I've waited long enough.

Not that there hadn't been smooching. Long, ravishing kisses on the sofa and the bed, lasting hours, and everything that fingers and tongues could do had been done.

She brought her chin back up above the bubbles, remembering the way his lips had felt against her clit last night, and how he'd tasted.

"Are you ready for a hand in there?" He was in the bedroom, probably pacing to and fro, Layla thought with a giggle.

"I'm fine, I can get out by myself, now," she shouted. *I'm always ready for your hand, all the same...*

He seemed to read her thoughts because he ignored her assertions of independence and came in, taking the towel from the rail and wrapping it around her once she stood upright.

"I know you can do it yourself," he said, guiding her out of the bath. "But I have ulterior motives. Let me get you dry."

"I'd rather you got me wet."

"Cheeky!"

He gave her damp bottom a light smack, and she squealed. Then he set to work rubbing the warm, soft sheet all over her body, catching the suds as they dripped off her breasts or slid along her collarbones. He turned her around and patted her vigorously, slipping the towel between her bottom cheeks and her thighs until she was smooth and ready.

When she turned around, he had laid aside the towel and picked up a bottle.

"Aloe vera?"

"What? It's a good moisturizer. So I'm told. Here, I'll show you."

Layla purred as he stroked the silky liquid into her back, reaching around to coat her breasts and nipples, which stiffened further at his touch.

Her stomach was next for the treatment then Adam's fingers found her pubic triangle and massaged their way down to the creases of her thighs before retiring to her rear again. He worked his palms into her buttocks until they glistened, then he knelt and repeated this on her legs.

By the time he'd finished, she was slippery-shiny and desperate to feel his fingers deeper and harder. She leaned back so he had to stop her with a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Hang on. I need to take my clothes off first. Let's go to bed."

"I'm going to ruin your bed sheets."

“I don’t care.”

He nudged her into the bedroom, sitting her on the edge of the bed while he attempted to break the world record for stripping down.

“It’s a shame, though,” said Layla slyly, standing up and walking to the balcony doors, pulling open the blinds.

“Do you want the whole city to see you naked?”

“I don’t care. I want to do it outside, Adam. On the balcony.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. I love your flat.”

Adam grinned. “Thought you would.”

It was on the twenty-third floor of a former council block given over as affordable housing for people who worked in essential jobs, but couldn’t necessarily stretch to inner London rents.

“So...what do you say? It’d save your sheets. And it’s dark. If you kept the blinds shut behind, nobody could really see us. Go on, Adam. I want to see the stars.”

“You’re something else.” But Adam was smiling devilishly, and the upright curve of his cock betrayed his interest in the idea. He moved up behind her, pressing his taut chest and firm erection into her slippery back and arse. “God, you feel good. I’d take you out there on the concourse as long as I got to have you. Go on, then.”

She depressed the handle and stepped outside, into the never-quite darkness of the London summer night.

The cool air made her nipples pucker, but remnants of the day’s warmth floated on it, too, kissing her oiled skin with its sweet humidity. She held onto the rail and looked across to the financial district with its variety of skyscrapers, her heartsoothed by the sight of the Gherkin and the distant dome of St Paul’s.

“Oi! That’s not the view I want you to admire,” chided Adam, turning her around to face him.

“It’s nice, but I prefer this one,” said Layla, smiling at his muscular torso and wrapping her slippery arms around him. She lifted a thigh, sliding it up and down his hip so that her damp pussy came teasingly close to his cock.

He took a handful of her bottom and dipped his head, slipping a nipple into his mouth and sucking it hard, the tip of his tongue flicking at the underside until Layla groaned and writhed. She ground her pelvis into him, rocking back and forth on her good leg, curling her other around his tight butt and keeping it close.

This was intimacy, real intimacy, and somehow she wasn't scared. The next level was within her reach, nothing standing in her way anymore. She was going to jump. She was going to step off that ledge and fall free, into space. Into love.

One hand held onto the back of his neck, the other skidding easily between their oily bodies, finding his tight balls and giving them a squeeze.

"Is all this for me?" she asked huskily, tilting herself back, offering her widened pussy lips.

"All for you, love, all the time."

Adam reached behind him, knocking cushions off the pair of garden chairs that sat on the balcony. Once they were on the floor, he dropped carefully to his knees, tipping Layla onto them before pouncing on top of her.

With much sighing and chuckling, they made the most of the aloe vera, pressing their bodies close and swerving all over each other. The kissing and lunging turned to urgent humping, Adam's slippery cock jerking between Layla's lower lips, coating itself in a combination of the oil and her juices.

"I've got the condom on. Are you ready?" he whispered into her ear.

Layla smiled up at the stars overhead.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm ready."

She wrapped her stronger leg around Adam's hip again, her heel bouncing in the small of his back as he made his long-awaited entrance. He glided inside, smoothly and swiftly, making Layla gasp at the unusual feeling of fullness. Then he did something no other man had ever done with her. He took it slowly.

Used to furtive shags in alleys or under piles of moldering sleeping bags, Layla had never been made love to. Sex had been a commodity for exchange, a bargaining chip in a savage and loveless world. What was she to make of this?

He held her, he kissed her through each long, slow stroke, he told her she was gorgeous, sexy, tight, wet, beautiful, so hot, so good. Then he did the thing she feared the most—he looked into her eyes and dared her to look back.

Lost in the liquid green whirlpool, she let all her senses merge until everything became the sex. His eyes, the distant traffic, the mix of London air and aloe vera, the taste of his skin were all caught up in the maelstrom inside her, spinning with it, taking her toward that ledge with each thrust until she tipped and fell.

The orgasm was long and uncontrollable; she shut her eyes and let the darkness carry her through it, hearing Adam's rasping breath in her ear, his labored whisper of, "Yes, love, yes."

The stars were pink and purple now, and Adam's eyes, when she opened hers, were all pupil. His teeth were gritted and he was hissing, screwing up his face then opening his mouth wide to emit a startled grunt.

He looked crazy, but she loved him more at that moment than she had ever loved anyone or anything.

"I love you." She spoke it aloud.

Once he'd flopped down beside her, holding her tightly so as not to roll off the cushions and onto the concrete floor, he returned the words.

"I love you, too, Layla, 2011. You were worth the chase."

She chuckled, stroking his damp hair. "And now I'm well and truly caught."

"And I didn't even need to cuff you."

"Hey, the night is young."

She stood up on wobbly legs and pattered over to the balcony rail.

"It's so lovely up here," she said. "I can't believe I'm allowed to live here. I can't believe I've been so lucky."

Adam pressed himself up behind her, his chin resting on her shoulder.

"I'm the lucky one."

Down in the street below, a blue light flashed its way around the corner and Layla twitched instinctively, looking around for an escape route.

Adam clasped her around the waist and laughed into her hair.

"There's no need to escape now, love. You're safe."

"But you aren't," she said, twisting her neck toward him.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, I’m thinking about those handcuffs of yours. Thinking I might like a little demonstration.”

She felt the twitch of Adam’s cock in the crease of her buttocks, and she chuckled softly. “Oh, you like the sound of that?”

Adam’s reply was rueful. “Well, yeah, I do. Thing is...I haven’t got any handcuffs *here*. They’re only for my work kit. We don’t take all that stuff home.”

“Oh...pity. But who said we had to have the actual cuffs? Couldn’t we just make-believe?”

“Pretend? What, like...role-play?”

“Yeah. Like this.” She put her palm on Adam’s strong naked thigh and pushed it hard, so he had to step back with a surprised grunt. “Look at me! I’ve vandalized the building, and you aren’t going to let me get away with it.”

Before he could move, she ducked under his arm and fled through the balcony door back into the flat.

She laughed at his yell of “Oi!” and ran around the other side of the bed, looking for hiding places, though the small size of the flat lent few opportunities for concealment.

Adam was fast and strong, and he soon cornered her in the kitchen. But she managed to topple a pile of aluminum cans for recycling, sending them skittering over the floor so he had to move aside and let her dart past him again, eluding the arm that lashed out toward her.

Yelping with fearful exhilaration, Layla played her best game, leaping over toilet seats and flattening herself into corners, defending herself with ironing boards and scrambling under beds until Adam triumphed, hauling her out of the darkness with a satisfied growl.

“You can’t touch me, Officer,” Layla said with a grin. “I ain’t done nothing.”

“You have the right to remain silent,” he said, his voice menacingly low.

Layla watched him, biting her lower lip and feigning arrogant contempt while he repeated the caution.

“Wrists,” he barked.

She held them out, mock-pouting.

“I want my brief,” she whined.

“You’ll get what you’re entitled to, believe me,” Adam told her. “And you’ll get what you deserve.”

“What’s that, Officer?” she breathed, wiggling a flirtatious hip.

He pretended to lock the cuffs.

“Turn around,” he ordered. “Against the wall.”

Layla braced her forearms against the bedroom wall, keeping her wrists together as if they really were locked tight.

Although she was already naked, Adam performed the motions of patting down her clothing, clapping his hands from her shoulders along her sides, all the way to her ankles.

“I’m clean,” said Layla.

“I’m not convinced. I think I’m going to have to go for the full body search down at the station. I’ll radio you in.”

Speaking into an imaginary walkie-talkie, Adam took Layla’s arm and marched her around the bedroom a couple of times until they arrived at the ‘station’—his bed.

Thrown backwards onto the duvet, Layla was gratified to see that Adam was once more fully erect. The thrill of the chase obviously had the same effect on him as it did on her.

“Spread ‘em,” said Adam, clearly struggling to suppress a grin.

“Am I still cuffed at this point?” asked Layla politely.

“Yes, keep your arms above your head.”

Layla wrinkled her nose at her arresting officer.

“You won’t get away with this,” she said. “I’ll make a complaint.”

“Complain all you like,” said Adam gruffly, pulling her legs apart and kneeling between them. “Fact is, you’ve broken the law and you’re going to pay. Did you hear about the new legislation?”

“New legislation?” Layla laughed, feeling that she was probably going to enjoy the change in legal procedure.

“Yeah. Government passed it last week. If an officer feels that a suspect deserves a second chance, he can let her go.”

“Sounds great!”

“There’s one condition.”

“What condition?”

He hooked his elbows beneath her knees and raised them, transferring the right leg so that both dangled from his left arm, leaving his right hand free. Layla, her lower half raised and resting on her coccyx, thought that the sudden exposure of her bottom cheeks might have something to do with this new penalty.

“You have a choice. The case goes forward for prosecution, or...you accept...”

His hand patted her behind lightly. *Oh yes*, Layla thought, *I wasn't wrong*.

“No way!” she gasped.

“Your choice. Spanked or locked away for all eternity...which one sounds like the better deal?”

“Oh, you bastard.” Layla shuffled her arse against the duvet, pretending to struggle, but she was definitely interested in testing out this new policy as the wetness gathering at her core would testify.

“Extra strokes for swearing at me, Missy,” said Adam with a fearsome frown.

“Oops. Oh my God. What a choice. Well, I guess, I don't want to rot in jail. That would be a waste of a young life.”

“I quite agree. So you'll pick Option B, then?”

“If Option B is the one that ends with my release.”

“Oh, it does! It ends with a really *amazing* release, actually. But it starts like this.”

A light smack fell on her behind, causing Layla to squeak and wriggle, but he had her held tight, knees pressed together into his side, and she couldn't move far.

The spanking wasn't hard, but it was hard enough to get the endorphins shooting around like pinballs, and Layla fell into the sensation, letting the heat build until she was ready to burst if she didn't get his cock inside her soon.

“Jesus, Adam, please,” she moaned, rotating her hips with strenuous urgency.

“That's ‘Officer’ to you,” he said sternly, laying on two final hard slaps.

“Officer...whatever...I'm so horny I can't stand it...”

“Well, that's good. If you're sincere about giving up your life of crime, I might be able to reward you.”

“Oh, I am sincere, really sincere, so fucking sincere. Oh, God.”

His thumb landed on her clit as if proof of her genuine penitence might be found there.

Whatever he did find there was obviously convincing, because within seconds, he was burrowing in the dresser for more condoms, keeping Layla's arousal at an unbearable peak with his wicked, probing fingers.

"You like being chased, don't you, Layla?" he asked, finding the pack and working on the foil.

"I like being chased by you. You're the only person who's ever bothered. If I ran away from care or...other guys...they just let me run. You didn't let me run. That's how I knew."

"How you knew?"

"That I wanted you."

Adam slicked on the rubber, looking Layla in the eye.

"I'd never just let you run," he said.

"I know. And I won't. I'll lie right here, for as long as you want."

She kept her eyes locked onto his as he bore down inside her and sheathed his cock, feeling so sweet, so hard, so right.

"That's a long time, Layla," he said.

"You've caught me."

About the Author

Justine Elyot started writing for fun in 2006 and had her first story published by Black Lace in 2009. Since then, she has produced two books, numerous novellas and a ridiculous amount of short stories for publishers including Black Lace, Xcite Books, Total E-Bound and Noble Romance.

Justine loves to talk to her readers and can be found at <http://justineelyot.com>.

Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning - where the DJ's are discussing 'going commando' - a.k.a, wearing no undies. She's captivated by their conversation, and decides to shed her panties in favor of 'going commando' and the freedom that wearing no underwear brings. Enthusiastic Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the 'send' key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter, Shyra Lawrence, has sent him an erotic, enticing message about 'going commando.' Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra that it's almost painful! Working day in and day out with voluptuous Shyra has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's...

GOING COMMANDO.

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

***Shadow Hunter* by Aurora Rose Lynn**

A menacing shadow lies over Evan Fox, a NYPD detective. Months earlier, he believed his job was done. The terrorist who almost took countless lives on a subway train is searching for the beautiful woman who foiled his attack. Evan needs to get into her apartment to protect her, but will his actions be seen as simply a way to get her into bed?

Although she's moved on with her life, Grace Baxter, a former FBI agent, endures life under the shadow of her troubled past. Once she opens the door to the handsome police officer who stood by her when she needed someone to care, there is no turning back. She thought she knew him, but she was wrong. The shadows of the past merge with those of the present. Who is the hunted and who is the hunter?

***Cuffed Again* by Mia Jae**

The Chief Financial Officer of the non-profit Cerise Thacker runs has been cooking her books. The DA fears the CFO's deep family roots will come after Cerise, particularly after the CFO states he will "fucking see to her death." So she's whisked away in a Yellow Cab into a short-term police protection program to keep her safe. The cabbie? Isaac Walker, undercover cop. For the duration, Isaac will be her protector, even though she doesn't want protection.

Thing is Cerise and Isaac are not strangers. They'd shared a role-play domme/sub encounter about a year earlier—neither of them revealing who they really were. Now they are thrust together in a situation of extreme danger and passion where Isaac must remain in control of the situation at all costs, even though he so very much wants to give it up to Cerise. And Cerise must do everything that Isaac says to the letter, even if she doesn't want to.

That is, if they want to get out of this thing alive.

***Handcuffs and Leather* by Kim Dare**

All Constable Hadley wants to do is put the last few weeks behind him. As if being taken hostage wasn't bad enough, he's had to deal with all the stupid publicity that's surrounded him ever since. And the fact that he hasn't slept since that night isn't helping him feel any better about the world, either.

The last thing Hadley needs is a shrink wandering around inside his head trying to dig up all his dirty little secrets. When he finds out he's being sent to Dr. Rawlings—the man he's had a crush on for months—Hadley knows his life has finally hit rock bottom.

The only thing that could make things worse for Hadley would be Dr. Rawlings finding out how he feels about him. But fate wouldn't be that cruel to him—would it?

***Stripped* by Celia Kyle**

Sometimes life just required tequila...and vodka...and a shot or two of whiskey for good measure. Jasmine Wright, Jazz to her friends, has reached that point. And now all that liquor is making her clothes fall off—in the middle of the street. Good thing a friendly neighborhood police officer stops to help.

Sheriff Ian Blackwell has loved Jazz since high school and then some. When their relationship burned out so many years ago, he wasn't sure he would recover. Now he's getting a second chance, and he won't Jazz slip away from him this time. He has her naked and at his mercy, and he's going to keep her that way. Forever.

***Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing***

***Lie to Me* by JL Wilson**

Grace Jamison has always been unlucky in love but this is ridiculous. What was supposed to be a blind date has turned into an FBI sting operation, complete with handsome Special Agent Ben Braden, a train ride and chase through the Badlands, and a final confrontation at a safe house—which turned out to be not so safe. If she can survive that, she can probably survive having her heart broken by Ben...unless she can convince him to take a chance on love.

***Secrets of the Heart* by Jannifer Hoffman**

Nicole Anderson owns a successful costume design business, has a wealth of small town friends and sleeps in a lonely bed haunted by demons from the past. She's convinced herself her life is exactly the way she wants it and has shot down every marriageable man within a fifty-mile radius.

When Hunter Douglas is assigned the task of delivering a deceased friend's children to their aunt, he must first convince the belligerent Nicole Anderson that she actually had a sister. Though forced to take his two charges to Minnesota, Hunter fully intends to persuade Ms. Anderson to allow the children to return to New York with him —without sharing his own little secret. The last thing he wants to do is fall in love with a woman who lives in a small Midwest town with neighbors who seem to know every move he makes.

As the heat index between Nicole and Hunter rises, a bizarre puzzle begins to unfold involving false birth certificates, a stolen suitcase, odd pictures, an elusive stalker, and a grandfather's legacy that could turn deadly.

***Home for a Soldier* by Tatiana March**

Grace Clements is unemployed, lonely and broke. When she agrees to marry Rory Sullivan before he ships out to Iraq, she expects nothing but a Las Vegas wedding, a key to his New York apartment, and a divorce two years later. Instead, she gets a three-day honeymoon and a heart full of dreams of what could be... if he loved her.

Ten years ago, Rory Sullivan lost someone he loved. He gave up a life of wealth and privilege and joined the army. Hiding behind a wall of isolation, he avoids all emotional ties - until injury

sends him home to recuperate. Home to Grace, whose quiet dignity and gentle concern break through his defenses. As Rory fights his feelings, his gruff resistance drives Grace away.

But even when he believes she has betrayed him, he can no longer forget her. Can he make peace with his past in order to win back his wife?

***The Bargain* by Desiree Holt**

Lara McKee's life came to a crashing halt the night her husband was killed in a carjacking and she lost their unborn child. Now she channels all her energy into her job as assistant to Cole Cassidy, sexy CEO of Alamo Construction. Cole's own life is a mess. A shotgun marriage based on a lie and the fiery death of his wife on the highway have left him with a child to raise that's a constant reminder of his first wife's lies and deceit. Both of them have written marriage out of their future.

But Cole desperately needs someone to mother the child and take charge of his personal life. When he proposes a marriage of convenience to Lara, who still yearns for motherhood, she shocks herself by accepting. And so these two people, carrying a van load of emotional baggage, begin to build a life together under almost impossible circumstances. Conflict builds over the child, whom Lara falls in love with at once and Cole ignores.

Beneath the daily conflict, love unexpectedly begins to grow. But at the moment they dare to explore their feelings, anger over the child erupts and the night turns into a disaster that nearly destroys the marriage. Slowly, bit by bit, they begin to re build their relationship, carefully nurturing these new feelings. But it takes another near-tragedy before they can finally get past the hurdles to complete happiness and truly become a family.

***Checkmate* by Kris Norris**

For years he's hidden in the shadows...watching...hunting. His attempts have never been successful, until now. And his game is just beginning.

Kendall Walker and her brother, Trace, share a passion for adventure racing. But when Trace is kidnapped by a psychotic figure from their past, Kendall finds herself immersed in an adventure race beyond anything she's ever known. And if she doesn't reach each checkpoint in time, Trace will die. She'll do anything to get her brother back, even surrendering to a man intent on becoming her lover. Luckily for her, Dawson has other plans.

Special Agent Dawson Cade doesn't know how his life went from complacent to complicated in what feels like a heartbeat. He has absolutely no leads on the bastard terrorizing Kendall, and he can't stop himself from wanting to take her into his bed. He knows he needs to keep distant, but when circumstances force him to succumb to the desires of a man intent on possessing Kendall, Dawson must face the truth. He's going to be Kendall's next lover, even if she doesn't know it yet.

And as the race begins, he can only hope he's able to save Trace, and keep Kendall from sacrificing herself, in a game where even victory has a price.

***Harvest Moon* by Janet Eaves**

After her sadistic husband is dead, Winifred Butler believes herself finally free of his horror. But he continues to torment her from the grave as his secrets and lies, treason and terror, bring Agent Tom Green to her door. She is as determined to keep her past a secret as Tom is committed to bringing her secrets to light. Only one of them can win. So both must fight the attraction to the other, knowing they have everything to lose...

***A Perfect Escape* by Maddie James**

A changed identity. A secluded beach. A sniper.

Megan Thomas is running for her life. From Chicago, from the mob, from her husband. She runs to the only place she feels safe—a secluded cottage on an east coast barrier island.

Smyth Parker is running from life. From work, from society, from a jealous ex-wife—his only consolation the solitude of Newport Island. He doesn't need to anyone to screw up that plan. And he sure as hell doesn't need to complicate it with Megan Thomas.

But when Megan fears she's been found, she runs to the only safe place she knows, and straight into the arms of the one person who might be able to help, Smyth. Her escape might yet still be perfect. Or is it?

***Rough Edges* by Jannifer Hoffman**

When Julia Morgan M.D. miscarries twin girls, she divorces her husband, believing he is to blame. He forces her out of her position at the hospital and threatens her credibility as a doctor if she attempts to practice medicine. Without mentioning her medical degree, Julia accepts a position as nanny on a Colorado ranch 900 miles away.

Dirk Travis is in trouble. His wife has gone missing, and his housekeeper is threatening to quit. He is in desperate need of a reliable person to look after his four-year-old twins. Even though Julia appears to be the answer to his prayers, he can't help but think she's a bit too perfect.

Both insist their relationship will be business only. While those plans start to go awry, other things begin to happen. People are getting killed and Dirk is the prime suspect, but that doesn't stop the heat index from rising between Dirk and Julia, even as she appears to be the next target.

***Worlds Apart* by Kris Norris**

Two cultures—one dusty planet. Intergalactic relations have never been so hot.

Starship Captain Samantha Grier has only two options—crash land her warship on an unknown planet inhabited by God knows what, or drift through space. She never counted on becoming part of a colony of barbarians, or becoming the center of attention for their illustrious leader...a man more than capable of claiming both her heart and her body. Too bad not everyone is thrilled by the new sleeping arrangements.

Griffin can't believe his good fortune. Not only did the humans arrive just as their power grid was failing, but their Captain is a vision of beauty. With blue eyes and fair skin, he knows instantly that she's his intended mate. But claiming her is the easy part. When brutal attacks bring the two cultures to the brink of war, will he be able to keep the colony together, while maintaining his role as her mate? Or will the tension leave them worlds apart?

Find Resplendence titles at the following retailers

Resplendence Publishing

www.ResplendencePublishing.com

Amazon

www.Amazon.com

Barnes and Noble

www.BarnesandNoble.com

Target

www.Target.com

Fictionwise

www.Fictionwise.com

All Romance E-Books

www.AllRomanceEBooks.com

Mobipocket

www.Mobipocket.com

1 Place for Romance

www.1placeforromance.com