

KATIE  
REUS

**DANGEROUS  
SECRETS**



Dangerous Secrets  
By Katie Reus

Isabelle Ballantine has been fighting for independence since she was old enough to walk. Now that she's finally out from under her father's shadow, she won't let anyone stand in her way. It's tough living on her own, working in a bar and keeping her true identity a secret, but things start to look up when a sexy new stranger walks into her life. After working side by side for weeks, Izzy can't figure out why he won't make a move...

To cinch the deal of a lifetime, Adam Marcellus agrees to help Izzy's eccentric father convince his daughter to move home. He'd assumed Izzy would be another spoiled rich princess, but he's surprised to discover his feelings for her are stronger than anything he's ever experienced. When a deranged stalker targets her, Adam finds himself fighting not only an unknown threat—but

an unexpected attraction to the one woman he  
can't have...

Dear Reader,

A new year always brings with it a sense of expectation and promise (and maybe a vague sense of guilt). Expectation because we don't know what the year will bring exactly, but promise because we always hope it will be good things. The guilt is due to all of the New Year's resolutions we make with such good intentions.

This year, Carina Press is making a New Year's resolution we know we won't have any reason to feel guilty about: we're going to bring our readers a year of fantastic editorial and diverse genre content. So far, our plans for 2011 include staff and author appearances at reader-focused conferences such as the RT Booklovers Convention in April, where we'll be offering up goodies, appearing on panels, giving workshops and hosting a few fun activities for readers. We're also cooking up several genre-specific release weeks, during which we'll highlight individual genres. So far we have plans for steampunk week and unusual fantasy week. Readers will have access to free reads, discounts, contests and more as part of our week-long promotions!

But even when we're not doing special promotions, we're still offering something special to our readers in the form of the stories authors are

delivering to Carina Press that we're passing on to you. From sweet romance to sexy, and military science fiction to fairy-tale fantasy, from mysteries to romantic suspense, we're proud to be offering a wide variety of genres and tales of escapism to our customers in this new year. Every week is a new adventure, and we want to bring our readers along on the journey. Be daring, be brave and try something new with Carina Press in 2011!

We love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to [generalinquiries@carinapress.com](mailto:generalinquiries@carinapress.com). You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!  
~Angela James

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# **Dedication**

For Kari. You're a true friend and your continuous support amazes me every day.

# Chapter One

Isabelle Ballantine sucked in a breath as the man she'd been lusting after for weeks walked into the bar. It was hard to think straight with Adam Marcellus anywhere in the vicinity. To keep her hands busy—and to keep from staring—she ran her rag over the mahogany bar one last time before tucking it into the back of her pants. It was Saturday night, but Mad Dog's Bar & Grille hadn't picked up yet. Seven was still too early, but in an hour, they'd be three deep at the bar and she'd be working her tail off.

And hopefully making enough to cover this month's rent and groceries. It was hard to think about bills though when Adam, with his impossibly broad shoulders, was headed her way. He definitely had that tall, dark and handsome thing going on. She wasn't positive, but she guessed he was six foot two *at least*. She was five eight and he stood a little taller than her even when she wore heels. Something she enjoyed immensely.

"Hey, Izzy." Adam ducked under the bar hatch.

"Hey yourself." She wiped sweaty palms on her black pants as he scooted behind her.

He opened and checked the lower beer coolers. It was impossible to ignore what his nearness did to her nerves. When he bent over to rearrange some of the bottles, she shifted to the side and leaned against the bar. From this angle she had a perfect view of his sculpted backside. She almost felt guilty staring at him, but it seemed a sin not to enjoy something so perfect.

He glanced up, and she could feel her cheeks heat up at the intense gaze from his startling green eyes. “Need me to stock anything for you, darlin’?” His deep accent sent shivers straight to her toes. She guessed it was Cajun, but wasn’t quite sure. He rarely talked about himself.

She swallowed hard. “No, I’ve only had a couple sales. In an hour I’ll be calling on you though.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He chuckled before ducking back out.

Once he’d disappeared into the kitchen, her heart rate slowed back to normal. No man had ever had such a ridiculous effect on her before. Maybe it had something to do with his smooth accent, or the way his dark hair always seemed a bit too shaggy, but still looked sexy as sin. Or maybe it was the way he filled out a T-shirt. Or maybe it was all of the above. The man had tight, corded muscles to die for, but not the kind from a gym.



He'd started working with her less than a month ago. She wasn't sure how she'd define his position, but he was somewhere between a bar back and a bouncer. He was sort of a jack of all trades. She'd even seen him in the back helping put up shelves and doing other small construction jobs, but so far he hadn't said much about himself.

They'd hung out a few times, but only in a group. He always made it a point to sit next to her in staff meetings or when a bunch of them shared drinks after work. And she'd noticed she was the only one he called darlin', but the man hadn't so much as hinted that he wanted anything more. She'd love to go out on a date with him, but she certainly wasn't going to ask.

There were some things her southern heritage simply wouldn't allow.

She still didn't know what he was doing working at Mad Dog's. It wasn't something tangible, but somehow he didn't belong. Like he'd be happier doing something else. Of course, she was a multi-millionaire's daughter and she was tending bar so what the hell did she know anyway? According to her overbearing father, she didn't belong here either.

"Hey sweetheart, how about two Miller Lights?" A man from the end of the bar jerked her out of her daydreams.

Gritting her teeth, she dug into the cooler and pulled out the beers. She hated when men called her sweetheart or honey. All men except Adam of course. He could call her any and all of the above.

Pasting on a bright smile, she strolled back to the end of the bar and placed the drinks in front of them. Her night was off to a great start.

Two hours later, her feet ached and panic had set in.

“Izzy, I need those drinks.” Robert, one of the best servers, stood at the server station waving his drink ticket at her.

“I know, give me a sec,” she shouted from the other end of the bar.

Carolyn, the other bartender for the evening, was thirty minutes late. And that wasn’t like her. After serving three mixed drinks and two buckets of beer, Izzy hustled back to the other end.

“Go grab Adam for me,” she said to Robert. When he didn’t move she shooed him away.

Rolling his eyes, he turned around and disappeared through the swinging kitchen door.

“Two margaritas and four martinis,” she muttered under her breath. Of course all the martinis were different.

“What’s up?” Adam’s deep voice caused her to jump.

With all the noise she hadn’t heard him approach. “I need your help. Carolyn still hasn’t

shown up and I can't get Toby on the phone." Toby was the owner of the bar and more or less lived and breathed the place.

"Want me to call him?"

"No, I want you to help me until we get a break. Think you can manage bartending for an evening?" At his frown she continued, "I'll split the tips evenly with you. From the time I started tonight."

He shook his head. "No, we'll split them starting now. I'm not taking your money."

She grinned. "Fine, I'll buy you a beer after work. How about you get started with those ladies down there and I'll catch up on the server drinks?"

He nodded and they both got to work.

By closing time she was ready to go home and soak in a hot tub, but something told her the night had been worth it. Working with Adam had been better than she imagined. The women loved him and she had no doubt their tips would reflect it.

"That's it. Their cab just arrived," Adam called out from the other end.

She glanced up from washing glasses. "Finally." Two slightly tipsy women had been hanging around, probably waiting for Adam to ask for their number. "I'll lock up." After grabbing the door key off the hook next to the cash register, she hurried to the front of the restaurant. She wanted

the place locked down before some late night stragglers stumbled in.

“I’ll finish up with the dishes if you want to start dividing the tips,” she said as she ducked back under the bar hatch. Normally she and Carolyn split the duties, but she felt bad enough dragging Adam behind the bar with her tonight.

“How about you count and I’ll clean?” His deep voice was enough to make her knees weaken.

“You sure?” Her aching feet weren’t inclined to argue.

“Yeah.” He gave her a half-grin and her stomach fluttered. Actually fluttered. Like some teenage girl.

She sat at the bar and spread out the bills and change while he continued stocking and cleaning. “Did you ever hear from Toby?”

“Oh yeah. Forgot to tell you. Something’s going on with Carolyn. That’s why neither of them showed up.”

Carolyn was the closest thing she had to a best friend since moving to town. Sometimes she was a little flaky, but she was incredibly sweet. “Is she okay?”

He shrugged. “I think so, but he didn’t elaborate. Just said they wouldn’t be in tonight. *But*, the staff meeting tomorrow is still on.”

She groaned. “That man is a slave driver.”

“Yeah, but you’ll get to hang out with me so it can’t be that bad, right?”

His words rolled over her like a warm summer breeze. “Guess not,” she murmured.

“How’d we do?” Adam asked when she slid his pile of money over to him.

“Very nice. Do you think you might like to do this more often?”

He shrugged and locked up the cash register. “You ready?”

“Yes, grab my purse please? And you didn’t answer my question.” She waited while he opened the cabinet under the cash register to retrieve her things. He handed it to her across the bar then dimmed the lights.

Keys in hand, he came around to meet her. Finally he spoke. “Whether I work behind the bar or not isn’t my decision to make.”

“I know that, but our sales were *amazing* tonight. I’m sure Toby wouldn’t mind putting you behind the bar a couple nights a week.” Izzy had a feeling their sales had a lot to do with him. Some of the women had refused to let her take their orders, choosing instead to wait for him. That was certainly fine with her. She’d made enough tonight to cover her bills for the rest of the month.

As he locked up she noticed what looked like a couple fighting across the nearly deserted parking lot. A man she vaguely remembered serving

earlier that night grabbed a woman's arm and was trying to drag her toward a truck.

"Hey!" she shouted before jogging across the lot.

"Izzy, wait." She heard Adam behind her but ignored him and picked up her pace.

The other guy looked up and let go of the woman's arm. When he did, she fell onto the asphalt. She cried out as she rolled onto the pavement. The man turned and sprinted toward the lone black truck and sped off before Izzy reached her.

"Are you okay?" Izzy knelt down next to the crying woman.

A second later Adam was by her side and helping the petite woman up. "What's your name?" he asked.

The pretty brunette hiccupped and wiped a few tears from mascara-stained cheeks. "My name is Andrea and my stupid friend left me to hook up with some guy. I tried calling a cab, but couldn't get a ride for almost an hour."

When it was obvious she could stand on her own, Izzy and Adam both took a step back.

"Do you need a ride home?" Izzy asked.

"You wouldn't mind?" she asked through sniffles.

“Of course not.” Like she was going to abandon a drunk woman with no recourse to get home.

“Did you know that guy harassing you?” This time Adam spoke in a clipped tone. Izzy noticed the way his neck muscles corded and his fists clenched by his side.

Andrea shook her head and a few more tears escaped. “No, but he kept trying to get me to go with him. I kept saying no but he wouldn’t listen. He called me a whore and something else I couldn’t understand.” She covered her face with her hands.

Izzy looked at Adam over Andrea’s head with lifted brows. Coconut Bay, Florida, was one of the safest towns in the country. One of the reasons she’d moved here in the first place. Lately however, there had been a string of late-night sexual assaults. And all the women had apparently been taken from various bars. It hadn’t been widely publicized, but the local cops had let their boss know to be on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary. Toby in turn had let the entire staff know. Now none of the female employees were allowed to walk to their cars alone at night.

One look at Adam’s face and she knew he was thinking the same thing. This could have been the guy the cops were looking for. A shudder snaked

through her at the thought that she'd scared off some pervert.

“Come on. I'll drive you home.” Taking the woman's arm, Izzy guided her to her blue Volkswagen Beetle. The young woman stumbled once in her high heels, but managed to right herself before Izzy helped her into the front seat.

She shut the door then turned to Adam. “Did you happen to catch that guy's license plate?”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Damn, no. I'll follow you to her place, then I'm following you home.”

“That's not necessary. Once I get—”

In a surprising move, he placed a finger over her lips, quickly silencing her. “It's not up for discussion.”

Mutely she nodded. The gesture wasn't supposed to be sensuous, but she couldn't stop the way her legs automatically clenched together. What was that all about anyway? A simple touch and she was practically trembling. She slid into the front seat and turned the ignition. Immediately a blast of fresh air hit her face.

March in Florida wasn't particularly warm, but the humidity was killer so she was thankful that at least her air conditioning worked. She glanced at Andrea, who looked dangerously close to passing out. “What's your address?”



“Huh?” The girl’s head snapped up and she blinked a few times as she glanced at her surroundings. “Oh, right.” She rattled off an apartment complex close to where Izzy lived, then her head lolled back against the headrest. Izzy was thankful she knew where the place was because she didn’t have a GPS in her vehicle.

When she finally steered into the complex, Adam was right behind her. With his assistance she helped him carry the dozing woman up one flight of stairs.

Izzy knocked once while Adam dug keys out of the girl’s purse. Worry niggled at the back of her brain. The girl was ridiculously intoxicated, but she hadn’t had that much to drink. Toby was a stickler for cutting people off before they got wasted. And she’d paid attention tonight. Neither she nor Adam had over-served anyone.

Before Adam could get out her keys, the door swung open. A blonde whom she guessed to be in her early twenties answered the door wearing a matching blue-and-white pajama set.

“Oh my God! Andrea!” She hooked her arm under her friend’s armpit to steady her. “Give me a sec okay?”

The roommate disappeared back inside, giving them a moment of privacy.

“I called the cops on the way over here,” Adam murmured.

“You did?”

“Yeah. Even though we didn’t get the plate number, I wanted to let them know we might have seen the guy they’re looking for.”

Why hadn’t she thought of that? Before she could reply, the other girl reappeared. “Thank you so much for getting her home. You’re the bartender from Mad Dog’s right?” At Izzy’s nod, the girl continued, “What happened to her?”

“She said her friend left her to hook up with someone,” Izzy answered.

“That bitch.” The girl raked a hand through her sleep-tangled hair. “Sorry. Andrea has been hanging out with this new girl she met in her chemistry class and this isn’t the first time something like this has happened. Although it is the first time I’ve seen her so drunk.”

“She doesn’t drink much?” Adam asked.

The girl shook her head. “No, never. I’ve lived with her for three years and I’ve *never* seen her like this.”

“You might want to take her to the hospital and have them take a blood sample. Unless she got plastered before coming to Mad Dog’s, someone might have slipped her something because she only had a couple beers. If someone put any sort of drugs in her drink, I don’t know that there’s anything a doctor can do about it, but it can’t hurt to get her checked out,” Adam said.

“I will. And thanks for bringing her home. No telling what might have happened to her.”

As the door shut, Izzy turned to Adam. “What made you suggest taking her to the hospital?”

He shrugged. “My brother-in-law is a cop.”

She fell into step with him as they walked back to her car. “I didn’t know you had any siblings.” As an only child she’d longed for brothers and sisters growing up. Her mom had died during childbirth so it had always been just her and her dad. Well, except for Edna. Her father’s personal assistant had played a big part in her life too. She’d helped Izzy buy her first bra and she’d given her the sex talk when she was fifteen even though by then Izzy already knew everything important.

“One brother and one sister.” He rarely gave away personal details about his life unless specifically asked. Something she normally found refreshing.

She hated when people told her their life story within minutes of meeting, probably because everyone wanted to tell bartenders about their problems. It might be a stereotype, but it was one she found to be increasingly true.

“I’m jealous.” A smile tugged at her lips as she glanced at him.

“You’re an only child?”

“Just me.” She pressed the unlock button to her keyless entry as they neared her car. “Listen, Adam, you don’t need to follow me home. I’ll be fine.”

“Humor me okay?”

Pursing her lips, she suppressed a smile and got into her car.

Adam kicked his truck into gear and followed Izzy out of the parking lot. The back of her silhouette was outlined by his headlights. Not that it mattered. He saw her face every time he closed his eyes.

The vision of her interrupted his sleep on a nightly basis. She usually kept her wild curly hair pulled back at work, but the few times he’d seen it down left him imagining what her long hair would look and feel like against his skin as she rode him.

He rolled his shoulders once, trying to alleviate the tension, but nothing worked. With her dark brown eyes and high cheekbones, she had almost exotic features. The smattering of freckles across her nose only added to the innocent quality about her. If it wasn’t for her fair coloring, he would doubt she was even Edward Ballantine’s daughter.

*Edward.* He cursed the day he’d ever made that ridiculous deal with him. It had seemed so simple at the time. Keep an eye on Isabelle without her knowing his true identity. Five weeks. That was

how long his contract was. It was icing on the cake if he could convince the rich daughter to return to Savannah, but as long as he did his job and she was safe, he and his brother would land the Forester deal.

Not so simple once he met her. Watching out for her certainly wasn't a chore. Unfortunately convincing her to return home was impossible without getting to know her. And he still didn't understand why she was working in a bar barely making ends meet when she had a father like Edward Ballantine. Her father had been fuzzy on those details, but he planned to find out.

And soon.

As he steered into the parking lot of her place, he pushed those thoughts away. He needed to focus on the present and convince her that Savannah, Georgia, was a much better option than Coconut Bay.

Parking wasn't numbered, so he chose a spot next to her. By the time he'd rounded his truck she was still sitting in her car. Leaning against his vehicle, he waited until her door finally opened. Sinfully long legs emerged first. His breath caught. It seemed no matter how often he saw her, he still fantasized what it would be like to have those slim legs wrapped around his waist...and shoulders. Damn, and she was wearing pants. He

hadn't even seen a hint of skin and his cock was already raring to go.

A shudder racked his body. Now was not the time. Hell, there was never going to be a right time for his thoughts. He'd been hired to protect her, not drool over her.

"Sorry, I was talking to Carolyn." Izzy shut the door behind her.

"No problem. Is she okay?"

"I guess so. She wouldn't tell me what was going on, but she apologized for not showing up tonight." Izzy tucked her phone back in her purse, but kept her keys in hand. "Thanks for making sure I got home safe."

He ignored the comment and took a few steps toward the three-story building, forcing her to follow. After what had happened tonight, he was walking her to the door. Her place was on the second floor, but technically he wasn't supposed to know that. He knew a lot about her that she hadn't told him. Like the fact that she had a bachelor's in business development, but a master's in medieval literature.

To say the woman was a mystery would be a sore understatement.

"I'm on the second floor." She motioned straight ahead with her hand as they walked down the short sidewalk.

“Are you working tomorrow morning?” He already knew the answer, but didn’t want her to know he’d checked her schedule. This had to appear impromptu.

“No. I am tomorrow night though.”

“Do you want to get some breakfast after the staff meeting?” Something primal inside him sparked to life when her eyes flashed with desire. If she was anyone but Edward’s daughter, he had a feeling they’d already be inside her place and naked by now. Not because that was his style, but because it was obvious she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

She turned to face him as they stopped in front of her door. “Sure.”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow so we don’t have to worry about leaving your car at work.”

Her brown eyes widened slightly, but she nodded. “Sounds great.”

He guessed she was surprised because up until now he’d kept his distance. Without thinking—or maybe not caring—he reached out and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. The overwhelming need to touch her sometimes scared the shit out of him. Being close to her sometimes wasn’t enough. Her work uniform consisted of black pants and a black tank-top. Something so simple shouldn’t be sexy, but with her long legs and lean frame

anything she wore was guaranteed to drive any man with a pulse crazy.

When she sucked in a deep breath, he realized he was practically cupping her cheek. And the heated look in her dark eyes told him she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. Warmth spread throughout his abdomen. Things could get out of hand so quickly if he let them.

All he'd have to do was lean down a fraction... He dropped his hand and took a step back. "See you tomorrow." Instantly his body mourned the loss of touching her.

If the way her mouth pulled into a thin line was any indication, she felt the same. Wordlessly she turned away from him and let herself inside her apartment. Only when he heard the lock slide into place did he leave.

Once he was back in his car, he let out a long breath. What the hell was the matter with him? He had to be all kinds of stupid to touch her like that. Getting involved with Izzy—*Isabelle Ballantine*—was not an option. Not only was she so far out of his league that it was beyond laughable, she wasn't the sort of woman a man had a fling with.

She was the forever kind of woman, and a woman like her wouldn't settle down with a man like him. He was straight blue-collar working boy and she was class and money. It was just the way of the world.



His phone rang, jarring him out of his mental bashing. When he saw the number he frowned. It was a little after one. “Hey Ben. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” his brother said. “Couldn’t sleep. Figured you’d be off work by now.”

“I’m on my way home.”

“How are things with the rich girl?”

He gritted his teeth. When he’d agreed to this, he’d thought of her the same way. Not anymore. “Her name is Izzy and don’t call her that.”

“Whoa man, chill. I was just checking in. We’ve got two weeks until Edward decides which security company to use.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he said as he took a left turn.

“All right, I will. We landed the temporary hospital gig and the contract for The Devlin Group in Cartagena.”

“We got the Devlin job?” Adam wasn’t surprised about the hospital job. They’d needed to beef up security after a few serious bomb threats and he’d known their bid was right on the money.

Landing The Devlin Group, however, surprised him. Marcellus Security had put in a bid to provide security for six Fortune 500 company executives and their families operating and living in Colombia for a month in a very high profile deal. Adam had been concerned their bid was too

high but he'd been unwilling to cut costs to hire second-rate contract employees. All his guys were ex-military, most of them former Special Forces.

"You better believe it. I've already contacted the team. They'll be ready to go. Of course Marian is already bitching about the paperwork, but I'm sure once she gets her next bonus check she'll change her tune." Ben's voice was light and Adam knew his brother didn't mind Marian's complaining any more than he did.

Marian was their cousin and had been with them since they'd started Marcellus Security four years ago. Back then she'd worked for pennies while pulling sixty-hour-plus weeks. She could complain all she wanted because she'd earned it.

Adam sighed as he steered into his driveway. He and Ben were partners and he hated leaving him and Marian with all the day-to-day business. "I should be back in a few weeks. Listen, we don't *need* the Forester job so if you want me to come back—"

"Forget it. Edward Ballantine might be a little strange, but we've got the right numbers, and if we land this gig, it'll open the door for *government* jobs. That man has all the right contacts and I don't think I need to tell you that's where the real money is."

Yeah, his brother didn't need to tell him that. The security industry was cutthroat but if they

could get in with the government, it would open up contracts all over the globe.

Something he needed to remind himself of when he was around Izzy. He couldn't let his growing feelings for her get in the way of their plan. She might be trying to gain her independence from her family but she didn't have a clue what it was like to starve or worry about getting shot walking home from school.

He and Ben had been taking care of each other since they were kids. He was tired of working for pennies. And this job would change their future.

The man glanced in the rearview mirror as he headed toward the outskirts of town. It didn't look like anyone had tried to follow him from Mad Dog's. He didn't think anyone had time to write down his license plate number.

Still, he might have to lose the truck anyway. The small town police department of Coconut Bay was getting remarkably close to tracking him down. Maybe they were finally catching on to his clues, subtle though they were.

Contrary to what stupid psychologists and psychiatrists thought, he didn't want to be caught. He simply enjoyed screwing with the detectives on his trail. Soon he'd leave for a bigger city, but this is where everything would start for him. This

place held a lot of memories for him so it was only fitting.

His hands fisted around the steering wheel as he tried to steady his breathing. Losing control was something he rarely did anymore.

And that tall, dark-haired bitch had interfered with his plans. He'd been watching Andrea for a month. Now all his planning had gone to shit because of that bartender. As his breathing slowed, he set the truck to cruise control. No need to tempt the fates and get pulled over for speeding. Not when he had more important things to do.

He needed to do something to take off the edge. It had been days since he'd taunted a certain detective. Time for a check in.

He pulled out one of his many throwaway phones and dialed the number. It only rang once.

"Jack here," the man snapped.

"In a bad mood tonight, Detective?" He kept his voice intentionally low, raspy.

Silence.

"Still there?"

"What do you want?"

"How's Maria Martinez?" His last victim should still be in the hospital if he'd done his job right. It was her fault he hadn't been able to get hard and finish what he desperately needed to take off the edge.

“What. Do. You. Want. I’m not going to ask again.” The detective’s voice was heated and angry. He rarely gave in to his anger.

Ah, he’d hit a nerve then. The Martinez bitch was friends with some of the police force. One of the reasons he’d chosen her, but not the main one. “I’m leaving clues for you, but you’re not making progress. Maybe I should work faster.”

“Clues?”

He figured the detective was testing his knowledge. So far his activities hadn’t hit the local papers. “You know exactly what I’m referring to.”

“Damn it, what do you want from me? I’m tired of these calls,” Detective Dennis said.

He wanted recognition for his work, but he wouldn’t beg for it. Something the smart detective should realize soon enough. “The marks on their backs mean something.” He pressed the end button then tossed the phone out onto the highway. That was the biggest clue he’d given so far.

The stupid sluts were half-breeds who deserved what they got. Now it was only a matter of time until the detectives figured out why he was choosing his victims. He smiled as he thought of their reactions.

## Chapter Two

Izzy spared herself one last glance in the mirror, then rolled her eyes at her reflection. Adam would be picking her up in a couple minutes and she was worrying herself for nothing. Technically, they weren't even going on a date. He'd asked if she wanted to get breakfast after the staff meeting. That was it.

Of course that didn't stop her from putting on a jersey halter-style summer dress that accentuated all her curves. Not that she had many, but she capitalized on the ones she did. She'd only known Adam a few weeks, but every time he'd seen her she was fairly sure she'd been wearing her work uniform. The plain black getup didn't exactly scream sexy siren. It was time for him to see her in a different light.

Last night he'd looked like he wanted to kiss her. Not because of her last name, and certainly not because of who her father was. Nope. He wanted her just for her. Or at least she hoped so.

She pressed a hand to her stomach and tried to force the jitters away. It was like she was sixteen again and getting ready for her first date. Her doorbell sounded and she jumped. She quickly

smoothed on lip gloss then grabbed her purse. Almost as an afterthought, she tugged the hair band from her ponytail and left her hair down.

A second later she opened the door to find Adam standing there. She could feel heat creeping up her neck and cursed her Celtic heritage for the billionth time in her life. Simply seeing him shouldn't get her all hot and bothered. "Good morning."

"Morning." He handed her a Styrofoam cup of what she hoped was coffee.

She shut the door behind her as she stepped outside and took a sip. An appreciative sigh escaped. Irish cream. Her favorite. "Mmm, thanks."

"Did you look through the peephole before you answered?" he asked.

She glanced over her shoulder to look at him as she locked the door. "Uh...no, but I didn't think anyone else would be here at six-forty-five in the morning."

"You should start making a habit of it."

"You sound like my dad," she joked.

"I'm serious, Izzy. When I talked to the police last night they asked about the girl's hair color." The tone of his voice caused a shiver to snake down her spine.

"Why?"

“It looks like this guy is targeting brunettes. I’m sure there’s more to it than that, but as of now that’s the only thing they’ve found in common with the women. Or at least that’s all they’d tell me. You need to start paying attention to the people around you.”

“Oh.” Self-consciously she fingered a dark curl. Technically she had auburn highlights, but she doubted some maniac would make the distinction. And Adam was right. She should have known better.

“Yeah, so just be extra careful. Toby’s going to increase our night security after what happened.”

“Good.” She fell in step with him as they walked to his truck. In a surprising move, he held the door open for her. She’d never quite understood the phrase before, but damn butterflies danced in her stomach when he did. It was more proof of his southern upbringing.

When he slid into the driver’s seat and started the ignition, she shifted in her seat and caught a whiff of his spicy aftershave and something else. Something all Adam. Something all man. She cleared her throat. “Where exactly are you from?”

He spared her a quick glance before reversing. “Why do you ask?”

“Hmm, southern manners, a sexy accent I can’t quite place. I know you’re not from here.”



“You think my accent is sexy?” His words were laced with amusement.

She nodded. “You know it is, and I’m sure I’m not the first person to tell you that so quit fishing for compliments. And you still didn’t answer my question.”

His lips curled up slightly at the corners. “I’m from Louisiana.”

“Is that where your family lives?”

A low rumble emitted from him and it took a second for her to realize he was laughing. The deep sound reverberated around the cabin of the truck, enveloping her and completely taking her off guard. She’d never heard him laugh. Not really. This was actually more of a chuckle, but she liked the rich sound. Maybe a little too much.

“You should think about a career in journalism.” He shook his head and took a left turn.

She leaned back against the seat and bit her lip. She did have a habit of drilling people without realizing it. Growing up it had been tough to distinguish between people who wanted to be her friend because of her last name and those who simply liked her. Old habits die hard, she supposed.

“My family lives in Savannah now,” he said as they steered into the restaurant parking lot.

For a moment she considered not saying anything, but since her family lived there as well it might seem odd that she wouldn't naturally mention it. "Mine does too."

"Small world," he said as he put the vehicle in park.

She stared at him, looking for any sort of recognition, but his face remained impassive. He'd never let on that he knew who she was. Just because his family lived in the same city didn't mean anything. She had to stop looking for ulterior motives from everyone she met.

The parking lot of Mad Dog's was already full and once they stepped inside, it was obvious they were the last ones to arrive. At least the meeting hadn't started yet. All the servers, bartenders and hostesses sat spread out across three tables and booths in the corner of the restaurant, waiting for the meeting to begin.

Adam placed a protective hand on the small of her back and her nipples tightened at the feel of his hand on her body. "I'm going to find Toby before the meeting starts," he murmured in her ear.

The feel of his warm breath on her neck sent a ribbon of awareness curling through her. "Okay." She weaved through the empty tables until she reached everyone. Ignoring the curious stares, she slid into the empty seat next to Carolyn.

“Did you arrive with Adam?” her friend whispered too low for the three servers sitting on the other side of the big booth to hear.

Instead of answering, she shrugged. “Forget about that. What’s going on with you?”

A fiery blush spread across her friend’s cheeks. “I’m... I won’t be bartending anymore.”

“What? Why?” She frowned at Carolyn.

Carolyn glanced across the table, and Izzy followed her gaze. The other servers weren’t paying attention to them. One was busy texting and the other two looked half-asleep.

Her friend leaned in closer. “I’m pregnant,” she whispered.

“What!”

Suddenly the dull chatter of the restaurant stopped. Izzy shifted in her seat and looked around. Everyone was staring at them. Turning back around to face her friend, she mouthed “sorry” to Carolyn before taking a sip of her coffee, pretending to ignore everyone.

After a few minutes, everyone resumed talking while waiting for their boss to arrive. Carolyn leaned in and whispered again, “I’ll tell you everything after the meeting.”

Izzy nodded in agreement and leaned back in her seat. This was definitely not the kind of conversation they could have here. She had a ton

of questions, though she had a fairly good idea who the father was.

She'd caught Carolyn and Toby in his office once and while they hadn't been kissing, they'd been standing much closer than was appropriate for employer and employee. Not to mention her friend had looked like a deer caught in headlights when Izzy had stumbled upon them.

Carolyn was a beautiful woman. Petite with big breasts, stick-straight shoulder-length blonde hair—not from a bottle—and a year round healthy tan. She looked like a typical Florida beach bunny. Or a Barbie doll.

Everyone quieted as Toby and Adam walked through the swinging door from the kitchen. Normally Izzy drifted off during these meetings, but something told her she'd be interested in what her boss had to say today.

Adam slid into the empty seat next to her, and the dark gaze he raked over her caused an involuntary shiver to work its way throughout her entire body. Her breasts were still sensitized from when he'd simply placed a hand on her back. If a simple look and touch turned her on so much, she couldn't help but wonder what would happen when they finally got naked together. Well, if they ever did.

“Thanks for being so prompt, everyone.” Toby's voice jerked her back to reality. “Last

night there was an incident after closing hours, but thanks to Izzy and Adam what could have been something horrible turned into nothing.”

As he continued to talk about how the restaurant would be increasing security and how great sales had been lately, she zoned out, only picking up key words.

She gnawed on her bottom lip as her mind wandered. It had been nearly a week since she'd called her father. Guilt clasped a firm hand around her heart, but she shoved it away. Every time she called just to chat, he tried to convince her to move home. Something she wasn't ready to do yet.

It wasn't that she didn't love him. Hell, she'd even gotten a degree in Business Development to make him happy, but she couldn't stand the way he smothered her. More than once she'd thought about working for him, but she wasn't sure if she could tolerate his management techniques. He tried to micromanage her personal life. She didn't need him doing that to her professional life, as well. Deep down, she knew he meant well, but it didn't erase the fact that she was an adult and deserved to be treated like one.

The final straw had been when he'd talked to one of her supervisors at her last job on her “behalf.” As an assistant special events planner at a museum she hadn't been very high up the ladder

and that was fine with her. She'd liked getting the entry level job based on her own qualifications and merits. After a stupid conversation at Sunday brunch when she'd simply been venting about some issues she was having with one of her coworkers her father had taken it upon himself to interfere. She'd been livid when her boss had called her into her office and told her what happened. In college he'd made a stink to the dean one semester when she didn't get the schedule she wanted and while that had been annoying, interfering with her job was way too much. It had been beyond embarrassing. He owned half the real estate in Savannah—including the museum she'd worked at—and he'd felt it was his right to butt into her life any way he saw fit.

Maybe moving to a small town to bartend wasn't the best way to deal with him but it was the only way she'd known how to escape without going too far away. It had been easier than she thought to put in notice at the museum. She'd loved working there but it wasn't what she wanted to do forever. Hell, she still had no clue what she wanted. Certainly not work at a restaurant forever but this was as good a place as any to figure it out.

She glanced up when Carolyn nudged her. A moment of panic seized her. Had she missed something important? Was everyone expecting a response from her?

Relief coursed through her that no one was looking at her and Toby was simply talking. "...And Carolyn is no longer going to be bartending. For those of you who don't know, she just graduated so she's going to be taking over the accounting for Mad Dog's. Which leads me to an important announcement. Adam will be working behind the bar with Izzy for the next two weeks, but I will be looking for a permanent replacement. I don't think any of you know, but Adam will be moving back home in two weeks. A few of you have voiced interest in bartending so see me after the meeting..."

She knew Toby was still speaking, but everything around her funneled out. Next to her Adam shifted in his seat. She could feel his gaze on her, but she avoided making eye contact as she built a pyramid out of sugar packets.

He was leaving? It shouldn't matter that he hadn't told her, but for some reason she felt almost betrayed. Totally irrational, she knew that. Still, she'd assumed he'd felt *something* for her. Maybe she'd read him wrong. Certainly wouldn't be the first time she'd been wrong about a guy.

As soon as the meeting was over, Adam turned to her. "Listen, Izzy—"

"Do you mind if I walk Carolyn to her car before we leave?" Sure, she was annoyed with

him, but her friend was pregnant. *Pregnant!* That took precedence over anything he had to say.

His jaw clenched, but he nodded. “Sure.”

Izzy nearly forgot to breathe as she and Carolyn maneuvered through everyone. A blast of warm air hit them as they stepped outside. “Oh my God! When did you find out?” The words were out of her mouth as soon as the heavy glass door shut behind them.

Carolyn grabbed her hand and tugged her along the sidewalk. It’s not as if anyone could hear them inside, but she obviously wasn’t taking any chances. Once they were a few yards away and close to the edge of the one-story building, her friend dropped her hand and wrapped her arms around herself. “I guess you want to know who the father is, huh?”

“Toby?” The word popped out.

She gasped. “How did you know?”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Come on. I’m not blind.”

“Do you think anyone else knows?” She placed a hand over her still flat stomach.

Izzy shook her head. “I doubt it. I only know because I *know* you.”

Carolyn sighed heavily. “Thank God. I actually have a doctor’s appointment I need to get to so I can’t stay and talk, but I promise I’ll fill you in on more details later.”

“Okay. Are you going to tell anyone else?”



“Not right now. In a couple months I’ll have to, but I’m waiting to cross that bridge when I have to.”

“I won’t say anything to anyone. I promise.”

“Even to Adam?” Her friend snickered.

Izzy cleared her throat. “There’s nothing going on between us. Especially now,” she muttered.

“Oh please, I see the way that man looks at you. He’s always staring when he thinks no one else is looking. And he ran off that guy who was always bothering you... What was his name, Mark something.”

“What?” She remembered exactly *who* Carolyn was talking about, but didn’t know *what* she was talking about. There was always a guarantee that some of the male customers would annoy the female employees, but this one guy had been relentless to the point she’d considered talking to Toby about him.

“I can’t believe you didn’t know that. When Adam first started he told that pervert Mark that you were taken and if he knew what was good for him, he’d never come back to the bar.”

“He did that?” Her heart beat erratically. Why hadn’t he ever said anything to her? These mixed signals were going to drive her crazy.

“Uh huh. So, enough with the games. I know you showed up with him today.” Carolyn placed a hand on her hip.

Izzy shrugged. “There’s nothing to tell. He’s apparently leaving in two weeks.”

“Apparently? He didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head and fought the annoyance that threatened to bubble up. She had no claims on him so she shouldn’t have had an expectation that he’d tell her first. “Nope.”

“Well who cares? I know you want him. Why not indulge in a hot fling before he leaves? No complications if things go south. It’s not as if you’ll be working with him forever.”

Izzy bit her bottom lip. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea.

“Oh, speaking of...” Carolyn motioned with a nod of her head.

She followed her friend’s gaze. A few other servers streamed out into the parking lot, no doubt ready to get out of there since they weren’t working. Adam leaned against the brick wall, staring at her. When they made eye contact, he half smiled and her blood temperature spiked about a hundred degrees.

She looked back at Carolyn. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I am. You need to indulge yourself in something absolutely bad. And Adam is just the man for the job.” She fished out her car keys then dropped a quick kiss on Izzy’s cheek. “I’ll call

you later, and I want juicy details so don't disappoint me."

Izzy made the short trek back down the sidewalk to where Adam stood. "Still feel like getting breakfast?"

The hooded look he gave her told her he'd like to get a lot more than breakfast. Which only confused her. Was that why he'd waited to make a move? Had he known he was leaving?

"Yes. Listen Izzy. I was planning to tell you I was leaving," he said.

"Whatever. It's no big deal." She lifted her shoulders noncommittally as they walked to his truck.

He stopped her with a light touch on her lower arm, forcing her to look at him. "Seriously Izzy. I was going to tell you over breakfast today."

The brief contact sent shockwaves straight to the growing ache between her legs. She was in trouble. Serious, serious trouble. Now that she knew he was leaving, she wanted him even more. Her lovers had been few and far between, and she wasn't passing up a chance to experience a man like Adam Marcellus. She'd have to be certifiable to do that.

## Chapter Three

Adam stared at the sexiest woman he'd ever come in contact with and wished he knew what was running through that pretty head of hers. Mistrust was visible on her face, but she was softening up. After Toby had made that announcement about his move, Izzy had stiffened next to him. The movement had been slight, but he'd felt it, and the message in the set of her jaw had been clear. She was pissed. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, he could read her remarkably well. More than anything, it bugged the hell out of him that he'd unintentionally hurt her.

He hadn't wanted Izzy to find out this way. He'd planned to tell her at breakfast. This might not be his real job, but he'd had to give Toby two weeks' notice. His five week contract was almost up. He hadn't convinced her to move back to Savannah but she was safe. That had been his main job, to look out for her and make sure she was okay living down here. He couldn't predict the future, but she was as safe as anyone could be.

Now he really had his work cut out for him with Izzy. Convincing her to move back to Savannah within the next two weeks would use

every ounce of his supposed southern charm. Technically if she didn't move back, he'd still land the Forester deal, but some part of him didn't want to go back to Savannah without her—deal or not. When he knew they'd be working the same shift, anticipation would build in him at the prospect of seeing her.

He glanced over at her since she still hadn't responded. "Well?"

She stood next to the passenger door with narrowed eyes as she studied him. "Okay. I guess I believe you, but you're buying breakfast."

He couldn't bite back a smile at the haughty way she said it. She might want to deny her heritage, but the woman definitely acted like a princess when she wanted. He moved to open the door for her, and leaned close to her ear in the process. "I planned on it, darlin'."

As he shut the door to the passenger side, he inwardly smiled at how easy it was to draw a blush from her. Izzy's cheeks turned pink every time he got close. He fought to get his body under control as he rounded the truck. He was the biggest chump in the world for thinking he could get close to Izzy and not get involved with her.

When Edward had shown him his daughter's picture, he'd known she was beautiful. But beautiful women were a dime a dozen. Especially

beautiful rich women. With enough money, anyone could buy beauty.

There was a lot more to Izzy than looks. Something he'd seen firsthand last night. Not all women would have run at a strange man in an attempt to help a woman they didn't know. But she'd run headfirst into the situation.

Things could have turned dangerous and if he hadn't been there, there was no telling what could have happened. Still, he had to admire her reaction.

As he pulled away from Mad Dog's, Izzy crossed her legs and her colorful dress shifted upward, giving him a better view of her smooth skin. He forced his eyes forward.

Maybe in a different universe he and Izzy could have a normal relationship, but not in this one. She might be working at a bar, but she was out of his league and out of his tax bracket. He'd learned a long time ago how the wealthy thought. His childhood had been spent living with his grandmother right on the edge of the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward, one of the worst neighborhoods in New Orleans. He'd bought his first gun when he was fifteen, purely for the protection of his household. Thankfully he'd never had to use it and it wasn't something he was proud of, but that had been his life back then. Getting a weapon had been necessary because the violence had often spilled

over into their neighborhood. He'd been the oldest and it's not as if his grandmother would have been able to fend for them. She'd been a good woman and had provided a roof over their heads, but she'd been old and frail and stuck raising grandkids instead of enjoying any sort of retirement.

Izzy might be attracted to him, but he wasn't the kind of man she'd settle for. Something he needed to keep reminding himself.

"Are we eating at the pier?" Her voice brought him back to the present.

"Yeah. Is that okay?" He steered into the parking lot. Aunt Sarah's wasn't upscale, but the southern-style food reminded him of home. And he hoped it did the same for her.

Coconut Bay wasn't a big city compared to Jacksonville, the nearest big city, and there weren't many places open this early in the sleepy beach town. Next month would be a different story, when the tourist season picked up.

"I love it here." A faint smile touched her lips as she slid out of the seat.

He inhaled the salty air as they headed up the planked walkway toward the restaurant. When he left here, he'd miss the small town atmosphere, but there wasn't much room for growth, unlike Savannah which was booming. Even though Savannah wasn't his birthplace, it reminded him

of New Orleans. The cemeteries, the architecture and the southern culture. It was just a lot cleaner and there was less crime. Something he'd adjusted to very quickly.

Next to him, Izzy's stomach growled. She met his gaze and a delicious blush spread across her sharp cheekbones. She crinkled her nose in embarrassment and he wanted to do nothing more than lean over and kiss the adorable sprinkling of freckles across her nose.

"Looks like we got here right in time." He held open the door for her. The place was already filling up, but there were still a few empty booths.

The hostess sat them in a booth next to one of the open windows overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The sparkling water was crystal clear and tranquil. Izzy didn't take much time to start questioning him. "So, why are you leaving?"

"My brother's security company is taking off and he needs me." It was a lie, but he swallowed the guilt back down. He hadn't been exactly truthful since they'd met so lying should be easier. Why did it get harder and harder the more he was around her? He needed to turn the focus back on her so she'd stop asking him personal questions.

They both paused as the server took their drink order. "Why are you living here if your family is in Savannah?" he asked as soon as they were alone.



Shrugging, she glanced down at her open menu. “For the same reason you are I suppose.”

*That was doubtful.*

“The grits here are to die for,” she said, effectively changing the subject.

Okay, she didn’t want to talk about her family. He could appreciate that. It also let him off the hook. If she didn’t want to get too personal, she’d steer clear of questioning him.

“Hey Adam, fancy seeing you here.” A female voice he vaguely recognized caused him to look over Izzy’s shoulder at the approaching woman.

Izzy shifted in her seat. When she turned back around to face him, her eyes were narrowed slightly.

The tanned, petite woman had short bleach-blond hair and wore a midriff halter-top over her bikini. She was cute, but her beach shorts were a little too snug around her waist. She placed a haughty hand on her hip. “You never called me last night when you got off work,” she pouted.

Ahh, he must have served her last night. Half a dozen women—all of whom looked pretty much the same as far as clothing and hair went—had given him their phone numbers the night before. After work, all those scraps of paper had been trashed. If he’d known any better, he’d have gotten a job bartending a decade ago when he was randy enough to be interested.

Now his tastes were a lot more discerning. Actually his current taste in the opposite sex seemed to consist of one woman in particular. The one woman he couldn't have. The universe had a screwed up sense of humor. Before he could respond, Izzy did it for him.

"That's because he was with me." Her silky smooth voice had an icy edge to it.

The sharp bite to her words surprised him. She was always so easygoing.

The other woman jerked in surprise, as if seeing Izzy for the first time, though Adam knew the blonde was perfectly aware of Izzy's presence. The woman had a certain amount of nerve to saunter up to their table when it was obvious he was with someone else.

After mumbling a quick goodbye, she hurried out the door.

"Friend of yours?" Avoiding his gaze, Izzy stirred creamer into one of the coffee mugs placed in front of them.

He grinned. "I don't know her, but I think she was at the bar last night."

She looked up and rolled her eyes. "I'm sure she wasn't the only woman interested in you last night."

"Jealous?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Maybe I am.” A dark eyebrow lifted before she averted her gaze back to the menu.

Her response gave him pause. Flirting with Izzy was like playing with fire. A fire he couldn't seem to resist. If he wasn't careful, he was going to go up in flames. After a moment, she looked at him again and the electricity between them was almost tangible. A thick, sensual haze hovered around them. Why couldn't he have met her under different circumstances?

The server returned to take their food order, breaking the intimate moment. After she left, he found his voice again. “Do you ever think about moving back to Savannah?”

“Sometimes I do. My family lives there, but I was tired of seeing the same people every day. I don't plan to put down roots in Coconut Bay or anything, but who knows what the future holds?” She shrugged and continued. “And my father can be a little overbearing sometimes so I guess I needed a change of pace.”

Like hiring someone to watch out for her without her knowledge? That kind of overbearing? He cleared his throat and pushed down his personal loathing. “Overbearing?”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat but answered. “He used to run background checks on all my dates and friends.”

If he had a daughter like Izzy he'd probably check out her dates too. "That doesn't seem so bad."

Her lips pulled into a thin line, making him imagine what it would be like to cover her mouth with his. When she started talking again, his gaze jerked back up to hers. "I was sixteen when he started with that crap. And I'm not talking basic checks. He did extensive background and credit checks on them, their families, and... Never mind. I don't want to talk about my father."

"Good, because I'd rather talk about you anyway." Adam wasn't lying either. He wanted to know everything about the woman.

The rest of breakfast flew by too quickly. He learned that her favorite color was purple, her mother died during childbirth and despite growing up in the South, she despised country music. Somehow, it wasn't enough. He wanted to know what she looked like in the morning, how she liked her eggs cooked and more important, what she liked in bed. It was unprofessional to think of her in that capacity but when he was around her, it didn't matter. He'd had so many fantasies about her it was embarrassing. The only thing he couldn't picture were her nipples. What color would they be? What size? The need to know was driving him crazy.

After the meal was over and they were walking back to his truck, he fought the foreign feeling of disappointment that coursed through him. He didn't want today to end. "Have you been to the Laroque Museum since you moved here?" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

She turned to look at him as he held open the passenger door. "No, I've been dying to go, but I haven't had a chance. Why? Do you want to go?" She snorted in a very un-Izzy-like manner as she slid into the front seat.

Spending a couple hours at a Victorian museum wasn't exactly on his list of fun things to do, but he'd taken a guess it would be right up her alley. "What? You think because I'm a guy, I wouldn't want to go?"

"That's exactly what I think." A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

He lifted an eyebrow. "That's sexist."

"And it's also true."

Instead of responding, he shut the door and walked around to the driver side. "So, you want to go now?" he asked as he started the engine.

Her confused expression was priceless. "Sure?"

"Is that a question or an answer?"

She shook her head and swatted his arm. “No, let’s go. Carolyn’s never going to believe you went with me.”

“I’ll deny it if you tell anyone.” He laughed under his breath as he kicked the truck into reverse.

Seconds after he pulled onto the main road she leaned over and switched the radio dial. “Changing a man’s radio station is just as bad as taking control of the television remote.” He couldn’t hold back a smile.

She grinned and simply pressed the scan button again. Seconds later, some God-awful pop music blared through the speakers.

And she turned the volume up.

“Come on, Izzy. Is this the best you can do?”

Instead of answering, she grabbed a pen from the center console and used it as a fake microphone. When she started lip-synching the words, he found himself fighting a smile. Something he seemed to be doing more of since meeting her.

The past four years had been stressful trying to get a new business off the ground. His brother and cousin depended on him to keep everything together. He’d brought them together to start Marcellus Security so it was up to him to make sure they succeeded. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken a day off. Soon he’d be going

back to his real life, but for now he might as well enjoy his limited time with Izzy.

The longer he was around her, the more he liked her. The attraction was almost a given, but that had nothing to do with actually liking her. Part of him wished she'd been a stuck up bitch. His life would be so much easier if she was.

A couple hours later as they pulled back into her parking lot he was already missing her.

She frowned when he shut off the ignition. "You don't have to walk me to my door again. I don't think that maniac is striking during the middle of the day."

Ignoring her, he gritted his teeth and got out. Criminals didn't act according to a clock. They took advantage of situations, regardless of time of day. Considering the previous crimes, it was doubtful the man the police were looking for would be out roaming the streets now, but Adam wasn't taking any chances with Izzy's well-being. Regardless of the deal he'd made with her father, her safety was his priority.

When they stood at her front door facing each other, he felt like a nervous kid on his first date.

She clutched her purse against her side. "Thanks again for breakfast, Adam."

The way she said his name made him wonder what it would sound like rolling off her tongue under different circumstances. With wide eyes,

she looked at him expectantly, her summer dress fluttering with the light breeze. And he lost all common sense. If he'd ever had any.

He didn't know how it happened. One second she was staring at him with those big doe eyes, and the next second he was kissing her. Rather, they were kissing each other.

She tasted like coffee and mint. He fisted his hands into the tangle of her dark curls, tugging her closer. Her scent, something exotic and tropical, enveloped him.

Their tongues clashed in a fervent need. He sucked on her bottom lip, earning a low moan from her. His cock was like a heat-seeking missile with a mind of its own. Involuntarily, his hips surged against hers.

When her hands slid up his chest and around his neck, he couldn't help himself. He palmed one of her breasts through the dress. Her nipple was rock hard and straining against the thin material.

In small, slow circles, he rubbed his thumb over the peak.

Pulling her head back, she let out some sort of strangled noise. Primal satisfaction rolled through him. The woman was incredibly reactive.

With her neck bared, he zeroed in on the soft skin and lightly raked his teeth over her pulse point before feathering her with kisses.



She clutched his shoulders and lifted one leg so that it was wrapped around his back. All he'd have to do was shove up her dress and he could be inside her in seconds. His cock jerked at the thought.

He backed her up against the door with a thud and with one hand reached around until he cupped her ass. He bunched up the material until he felt skin. He grasped her tighter, needing to feel her against him. Then he froze.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“Are you wearing anything under this dress?” he managed to gasp out. At first he'd thought she had on a thong but as he traced his hand down her curves, there was no barrier.

She shook her head and smiled in what he could only describe as mischievous. “Nothing at all.”

His stomach muscles bunched in anticipation as his hips automatically rocked up against hers. Again. The woman was determined to drive him insane. “Do you always go commando?”

Her dark hair waved seductively around her shoulders as she shook her head again. “Nope.”

Shit, shit, shit. He was thirty-two and the woman was going to give him a heart attack. Though it took all the willpower he possessed, he dropped his hands and took a step back. “We’ve

got to stop, Izzy.” Even to his own ears, his voice was ragged and unsteady.

God, he was ready to take her right up against the door. He’d been about to start slamming into her right outside for anyone to see. He had to get a grip on himself before he did something he couldn’t take back. And if he slept with Izzy, there wouldn’t be any going back. He knew once he had a taste of her it would never be enough and he’d be the one to get burned in the end.

“Why?” She crossed her arms, pushing her breasts up and showing more than a hint of smooth skin. No doubt intentionally. A small, flirtatious smile played across her features when their gazes clashed.

He cleared his throat and tried to concentrate on a semi-decent answer. “We work together.” *Smooth.* He inwardly cursed at himself.

One of her dark eyebrows lifted in a perfect arch. “You’re leaving soon.”

“Yes.” That was all he could seem to get out.

“So what’s the problem? Not attracted to me?” Her eyes strayed downward toward his crotch before she looked at him with an amused, almost haughty expression.

Attraction obviously wasn’t the problem. His erection was damn painful. So how the hell could he get out of this? He was a red-blooded

American male. What reason could he possibly give for not wanting to be with her?

“I’ll see you at work tonight.” Without waiting for a response and before he changed his mind, he turned and hurried back to his truck. Thankfully he didn’t run into anyone on his way. His erection strained painfully against his jeans, digging into the zipper. For once in his life, he knew his fist just wouldn’t cut it. Neither would another woman. Only Izzy could ease his ache.

Once inside his truck, he pounded his fist against the center console. What the hell had he been thinking, kissing her like that? Now that he’d had a taste of her, he wanted so much more. And if she found out the real reason he was in town, she’d never forgive him.

Izzy stepped inside her apartment and sagged against the door. One kiss shouldn’t affect her entire body this way. Her legs shook and though it was impossible, she felt as if her insides trembled, as well.

Adam had looked almost surprised that he’d kissed her. There was no doubt that the sexy man had been turned on. Oh yeah, he’d been turned on something fierce. Some things were simply impossible to deny. She couldn’t figure why he’d stopped though.

He hadn't wanted to pull back. She was almost sure of it. Maybe he felt guilty because he knew he'd be leaving in a couple weeks. That had to be it. And if that was his only hang-up, she'd soon help him get over it.

Starting tonight.

He didn't know it yet, but he was going to be hers for the next two weeks. And there was nothing he could do about it.

She walked the few steps down the short hall to her bedroom, dropped her purse onto her dresser, then opened the top drawer. She smiled to herself as she pulled out one of the La Perla sets she'd never worn. When she'd moved out on her own, she hadn't left all luxuries behind. She might have wanted to be independent, but it was mainly about getting out from under her father's thumb.

And now she was very grateful she'd brought sexy lingerie. The sheer black satin and silk bra and matching G-string were sure to do the trick. In reality, she knew that by the time they got to the part where their clothes came off, he wouldn't care what she was wearing. The sexy getup made her feel better though. Since Adam made her a little nervous—in a good way, but nervous nonetheless—she needed to be somewhat in control.

It had been a couple years since she'd been with a man, and even longer since she'd actually

trusted someone implicitly. With Adam, everything seemed different. *He* was different. He didn't know who her family was and the desire she'd seen in his eyes—and felt against her abdomen—was all about her. Not money, not power, nothing other than her. That was a turn on in itself.

Her cell rang, pulling her back to reality. When she saw the number on the caller ID she tensed, but flipped open the phone anyway. It had been too long since she'd talked to her father, and stubborn and meddling as the man was, she missed him.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, Izzy. Tired of working in a bar yet?”

She groaned and fell onto her bed. All the air rushed from the thick duvet and all thoughts of Adam and sexy lingerie disappeared as she stretched out. Would this conversation ever change? “Drop it, Dad. If that's the only reason you called, then I don't have anything to say to you.”

He sighed that familiar tired sound and she felt a twinge of guilt. “I just wanted to check on you. I haven't heard from you in a while.”

The last words were like a punch to her gut. He might drive her crazy, but they'd always been close. Until recently. Until he'd started trying to invade every aspect of her life and pushing that

she take a job with his company and settle down. Then he'd started setting her up with horrid dates. That had been one of the many final straws. Was it really too much to accept that she simply wanted to figure out what she wanted in life on her own?

"I know Dad, and I'm sorry. I've been busy with work but that's no excuse. How's Edna? Finally decide to make an honest woman of her?"

"Izzy, for the last time, there's nothing going on between us." His words were practically a growl.

She bit her lip to hold back a laugh, knowing she'd gotten a rise out of him. She seriously doubted anything had ever happened between him and his assistant, but she loved teasing him about it. "Whatever you say."

"I swear child, you didn't get that imagination from my side of the family." He chuckled and she could imagine him sitting by his pool with his legs kicked up on a table, sipping a scotch. It was Sunday afternoon and he was a man of habit.

"So how have you been? Taking your cholesterol medicine?"

He was silent for a beat too long. "Of course I am."

"Do I need to call Edna?"

"Damn it Izzy, I'm a grown man. I don't need you checking up on me."

She smiled to herself. “See? It’s not fun when someone meddles in your life. Still, I’ll probably put in a call to her anyway because if I know you, you haven’t upped your vegetable intake either.” Though he’d never admit it, he needed someone to take care of him more than she did.

“What I’m doing is completely different. I just want you to be happy. If you call her—”

“There’s not a thing you can do. And I simply want you to keep your good health. Can’t have you keeling over before I have grandkids.” She said the last part mainly to hush him up.

He choked for a second, she guessed on his drink, before continuing. “Grandkids? Is there something I don’t know?”

Sighing, she sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. “No, there’s not. I’m trying to make a point. You’re still young enough and so am I. And I guess I don’t understand why you’ve been pushing me so hard to settle down lately.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“You moved to another city to get away from me.”

His words embedded deep in her chest. “You know *exactly* why I left, Dad. It’s because—”

“I’m getting another call. I’ll talk to you soon, sweetie.” His voice was gruff and hoarse.

“Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too.”

She knew he'd gotten off the phone because he hadn't liked where the conversation was headed. It didn't matter that she'd been justifiably angry at him when she'd left Savannah, she somehow still felt guilty when she talked to him.

She pushed up from the bed and shoved away her guilt. If she was going to seduce Adam tonight, she had to stop worrying about things she couldn't do anything about. She quickly changed into a bathing suit and grabbed a towel from her linen closet. Work was a couple hours away and for the first time in a while, she didn't have a thing to do.

After tossing a bottle of water and her MP3 player into her bag, she locked up and started the short trek toward the apartment complex's pool. The small pool was nothing compared to her father's Olympic-size monstrosity, but it provided a place to soak up some sun.

She slathered sunscreen on her fair skin and settled onto one of the lounge chairs. Except for two other women, the pool area was empty. It was warm enough to lay out, but the water was undoubtedly too cold. In a month or two the place would be teeming with kids and other residents.

Just as she got comfortable, the shrill ring of her phone shattered the quiet atmosphere. She



didn't recognize the number, but answered on the off chance it was Adam calling from another line.

"Hello?"

"You're going to pay for your interference last night." The voice of the caller was male, but one she didn't recognize.

She shifted slightly in her seat. "Excuse me?" Maybe this was a wrong number.

"You heard me. You get to replace that whore from last night, *Isabelle*." His voice was without inflection and the way he said her name gave her the creeps.

Izzy sat up and pushed her sunglasses on her head. "What did you say?"

"You looked like a slut at the museum today so I'm guessing you're a whore too."

A flash of hot then cold skittered over her skin. This guy had *seen* her? She glanced around, worried he might be watching her.

"Get ready, bitch. Your time is coming."

The line went dead before she could find her voice.

An icy chill washed over her and grasped her chest in a tight, unforgiving hold. She tossed on her cover-up, picked up her towel and other belongings and hurried back to her place. That couldn't have been the man from last night, could it? How had he gotten her phone number? And

what did he mean “replace?” It couldn’t be what she thought, could it?

The implication of his words sent shivers snaking down her spine. Once she was back at her apartment and the deadbolt was in place, she allowed herself to breathe easier, but her pounding heart didn’t abate. Maybe this was a prank.

The phone was still grasped tightly in her hand. The thought of calling the police crossed her mind but she knew they couldn’t do anything about a phone call. They’d just file a report. And if she called her father he’d flip out and probably drive down to see her. Or worse he’d hire a bodyguard—or ten. She tried calling Adam twice but it went straight to voicemail. Next she tried Carolyn but she didn’t pick up either.

Even though she was safely locked behind a door, she couldn’t shake the nerves that had overtaken her body. She set her phone on the kitchen table and wiped sweaty palms on her legs. Growing up, her father had always worried about her safety. Over the years she’d taken multiple self-defense classes so she knew she could take care of herself. Still, to have someone call her personal cell and actually threaten her was damn terrifying. She tried Adam one more time. It rang this time but still went to voicemail. She started to leave a message but ended the call instead. After a quick shower she was going to head to work early.

The call might be nothing but she'd rather be safe than sorry. Being surrounded by people was the only way she knew to stay safe.

## Chapter Four

Adam's cell rang as he steered into the parking lot of Mad Dog's. For the past few hours all he'd thought about was Izzy and that damn kiss. A five-mile run had done nothing to take the edge off. Neither had a cold shower. Now he had to endure the torture of working with Izzy for the rest of the night. She'd called him while he'd been out running but hadn't left a message. Since then he'd tried to get hold of her but she hadn't picked up.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and after a glance at the caller ID, all that edginess tripled. For a split second he considered ignoring the caller.

He suppressed a sigh as he flipped his cell open. "Hello, Mr. Ballantine."

"Hello, Adam. And for the last time, call me Edward. How are things progressing?" he asked.

"Well sir, you know your daughter better than I do. This is tougher than I'd originally planned." Talk about an understatement.

Ballantine chuckled. "Yes, I imagine it is. She's a stubborn woman. Gets that from her mother."

Stubborn, sexy and sweet. A deadly combination. He nodded even though the other man couldn't possibly see him.

"Do you think you'll have her convinced by the deadline?" Edward asked.

"Honestly, I don't know, sir. She likes it here."

"Keep me updated."

The other man didn't like to bullshit on the phone, something Adam appreciated, and he knew their conversation was almost over. He might be sabotaging himself, but if he didn't speak up now, he didn't know if he could live with himself. "She lives in a safe area, she's working at a normal restaurant and she has good friends." He paused for a moment as he thought about last night's attack on the other woman. The guy hadn't gone after Izzy and the truth was, no one was truly safe. Not all the time. Adam decided not to mention the incident to her father. Not yet. He veered the conversation in a different direction. "Sir, it's becoming more difficult to keep my intentions from Izzy.

"How so?"

"We're friends, we work together and...damn it, she's a good person. I don't like lying to her." He couldn't exactly tell the man he was intensely attracted to his daughter.

Edward was silent for a long moment. "Do you or do you not want the Forester contract?"

He gritted his teeth. After high school he'd enlisted in the Marines, and stayed in for eight years. After that he'd done two years of grueling security work in a war zone. He'd been shot at too many times to count, had been hit once and still had slivers of shrapnel embedded in his back from a roadside IED. Nothing he'd done—training stateside or covert operations overseas—had prepared him for this kind of “mission.” He'd rather be dropped behind enemy lines than continue with this façade. Lying to Izzy made him feel like the scum of the earth. Everything had seemed so simple before, but realizing Izzy was an actual person, not part of some deal, put everything in a different light. No matter what he'd done in life, he'd prided himself on his honesty. If it wasn't for his brother, he'd seriously consider walking away from this deal right now.

“Well?” the other man persisted when Adam didn't answer.

“You know I want the contract. I'm also fulfilling my part of the bargain. Five weeks protection detail. If she won't move back, I can't force her.”

“I know that. It would be a lot better for you if she did, though.”

Adam gritted his teeth. They'd signed a contract but something told him that even though he wasn't technically required to convince Izzy to

move home, Edward was expecting just that. A miracle. "I'll contact you if anything changes."

As he got out of his truck he noticed Izzy's car sitting across the parking lot. He'd hoped to arrive earlier than her, but fate wasn't on his side tonight. If it had been, he'd never have put himself in the position to kiss Izzy. In reality, he knew he couldn't blame anyone but himself for that.

Once he stepped inside he expected to see her standing behind the bar, but Carolyn was there instead.

"I didn't think you were bartending anymore." He walked around the bar and clocked himself into the computer.

"I'm not. Toby asked me to cover for a few minutes. He's talking to Izzy in his office," Carolyn said.

Her tone set an alarm bell off in his head. "Is she okay?"

The petite blonde shrugged, but Adam didn't miss the hint of worry that crept into her eyes. "I don't know. She seemed a little shaken up when she came in, but she wanted to talk to Toby first."

That's all he needed to hear. If it involved Izzy, it involved him. He pushed open the kitchen doors and continued through the expansive room toward the back of the restaurant until he stood in front of the office door.

The door was shut. Something that rarely happened. As he raised his hand to knock, the door flew open and he found himself face-to-face with Izzy.

Surprise on her face, she took a step back. “Hey, Adam.”

“Hey. You okay?”

She nodded, then glanced at her feet. “I’ve got to relieve Carolyn. See ya in a bit.”

She brushed past him and had made it halfway through the kitchen before he could protest. A second later the door opened wider and Toby stepped out. “Got a second?”

“Yeah. What’s going on?” He followed his boss back inside the small office.

Toby motioned for him to take a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. Then he perched on the edge of the desk. “Starting tonight, I want everyone keeping an eye out for anything or anyone suspicious, and I don’t want any of the servers walking to their cars alone after work. Male or female.”

“What the hell is going on?” Had something happened to Izzy?

Toby sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “It could be a prank, but Izzy received a strange call this afternoon. Some guy said she was going to pay for her interference last night and inferred that she was going to replace the woman from last



night. Or at least that's what she thinks he meant. I've already called the cops and let them know what's going on."

Shit, maybe that was why she'd called earlier. "Is she okay?"

"She's physically fine, and she only seems a little shaken up. I think she wanted to alert me in case this turned out to be real."

"Do you think this is a prank?"

Toby shook his head. "The guy knew her name. He had her phone number, and he knew about last night. Only a handful of people know what happened here so odds are this is real."

"I'll keep an eye on her tonight." *And every second from this moment forward.*

"Thanks man. I figured you would. I'll alert the rest of the staff as they clock in."

A minute later Adam found Izzy alone behind the bar. "Carolyn already gone?" he asked as he ducked under the hatch.

She nodded as she rearranged some of the beers in the cooler. The bottles didn't need rearranging.

"Listen, Toby told me what happened. You sure you feel like working tonight?"

Finally, she looked at him and the fear in her dark eyes clawed at his insides. "I'm a little shaken up, but I'd rather be here than at my place. This is probably just a stupid prank anyway."

He took a few steps toward her, closing the small gap between them. "I'm going to be here all night and I'm going to make sure you get home safe tonight too." He also planned to stay the night, but he wasn't sure how that would go over. He'd cross that bridge later. Hopefully by later tonight she'd be too tired to argue when he insisted. Not that it mattered. He *was* staying over.

Despite the fact that he wanted her as much as he wanted his next breath, this wasn't about sex. He'd be sleeping on her couch with one eye open. If someone thought they could get to her, they'd have to go through him.

Wearing a ball cap pulled low, he sat in one of the booths at Mad Dog's. From his position, he had a perfect view of the bar, but he was blocked by all the high top tables and throng of people milling around the place.

Loud rock music blared from the speakers, and slutty women swayed to the beat. Some stood, some sat, but almost everyone in the bar was buzzing and having a good time. For a Sunday, the place was packed. Tomorrow was the start of another work week and people were sucking everything out of the weekend they could.

He was taking a big risk, coming back to the restaurant right now, but he didn't care. That stupid bitch, Isabelle, had seen him. And worse,

she'd interrupted him. Andrea, the woman he'd handpicked, had slipped through his fingers. He'd been watching her for weeks and that tall bartender had messed everything up.

Getting her phone number and work schedule had been ridiculously easy. There was only one bartender during the day and the woman was lazy. When she'd taken a smoke break, he ducked behind the bar and grabbed a copy of the work schedule taped onto the computer. By a stroke of luck, a few phone numbers had been scratched onto it. And that bitch's was one of them.

As he watched her move around behind the bar, he gripped his beer bottle tighter. She wasn't even his type. She was too tall, lean and pale but he'd make an exception.

When the crowd started to thin, he threw a bill on the table and walked toward the entrance with a group of drunk men. He couldn't help but notice the other male bartender eyeing her all night. That looming hulk, Adam something, might be a problem if they were involved. If so, he'd find a way to take care of him.

When he was through with her, she'd never stick her nose in anyone's business again. If he let her live. She could be his first kill. His heart rate escalated as he thought about wrapping his hands around her slim neck and squeezing the life from her. His face would be the last thing she saw. The

bruising on her pale neck would be that much more vivid, more beautiful. Maybe that bitch had done him a favor by helping Andrea. He smiled to himself as a new, better plan formed in his mind. He'd use his interruption to his advantage.

The night passed by at a snail's pace, and Adam blamed it all on Izzy. He'd always noticed other men checking her out, but tonight the freaks and jackasses of the world were out in full force. And they were all hitting on her.

To give her credit, she let the lewd comments roll off her back, but he wasn't having such an easy time of it. Maybe it was because he was coming to think of her as being his, or because a freak had gotten hold of her phone number and was harassing her. Or maybe he just wasn't cut out for this bartending business. Either way, the hand on the clock seemed to tick backward at times. Purposely mocking him.

When the last customer had left and he'd locked the door, Izzy set a half-empty bottle of vodka down on the bar with more force than necessary. "Assholes," she muttered.

"What?" he asked as he ducked under the bar hatch.

"Was it just me or was there an extra dose of testosterone in the bar tonight?"

“It’s not just you, trust me. Some of those boys are lucky they’re even walking.” He gritted his teeth as he walked back around the bar. If it hadn’t been for the extra security or Toby’s presence tonight, heads would have rolled. He wasn’t a violent man by nature, but his patience had been truly tested in the past few hours.

“I thought you were going to bust a few heads tonight,” she said as she slid the bottle into the well with the twenty others.

“Was I that obvious?”

A faint smile played across her pretty face. “Just a tad. You scowled at every guy who ordered a drink from me.”

“Not *every* one.” He grabbed one of the tip jars off the ledge and emptied it onto the bar.

She laughed and the silvery sound was like a caress over his entire body. “Just about.” Before he could respond, she continued. “Listen, I know you said you were going to follow me home, and—”

“It’s not up for discussion Izzy so forget any argument you’ve rehearsed.” Now he knew he had his work cut out for him. If she didn’t want him following her home, it was going to take some finesse to convince her to let him stay.

Her dark eyebrows rose slightly. “Oh, I was actually going to ask if you might stay at my place for a little while...just until I feel safe.”

Izzy wasn't a very good liar, and he'd venture to guess she was a terrible poker player. She was up to something. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know what it was though.

Or maybe he did.

Sighing, he joined her as they started the nightly ritual of closing down the bar. The kitchen staff silently worked in the back, shutting down the ovens, while the servers bussed and cleaned their tables. Normally it was relatively quiet after work, but tonight there wasn't even a slight buzz. No one was bitching about cheap customers or planning their week. Other than the muted sounds of the dishwasher, tonight it was deathly quiet. Everyone knew there was a predator lurking around and the feeling of safety one got from living in a small town had vanished.

Izzy luxuriated under the powerful stream of her shower jets as they pulsed and cascaded over her naked body. Adam sat out in her living room, waiting for her. Of course, he didn't know what she had planned or he might not have agreed to stay over.

He might want to protect her, but he was also going to pleasure her. And vice versa. For most of her life she'd played things safe. With the exception of going against her father's wishes and

moving down to Florida for a few months, she'd always done what was expected of her.

Not tonight. Nope, tonight, she was doing exactly what she wanted. Adam might try to deny it, but she could tell how much he wanted her. Every time she looked into his eyes, his lust mirrored her own.

If he was feeling guilty over leaving soon, she'd let him know he had nothing to feel bad about. Running the sudsy loofah over her breasts and stomach, she imagined what Adam's hands and mouth would feel like on her body.

Her thoughts and the rough, netted texture aroused her so much she switched the water to cold. The icy rush cooled her body, but did little to quell her raging insides.

After slathering on lotion and blow drying the dampness out of her hair, she slipped on a matching pink-and-white camisole set. The bottoms were short, but not so short it was *completely* obvious what she intended. If he didn't want her as much as she wanted him, she had to hold on to some of her pride.

She took a few deep breaths, then opened her bedroom door. Adam was stretched out on her couch wearing lounge pants and a T-shirt. He still hadn't noticed her presence so she cleared her throat. "Where did you get clothes?"

Pushing up, he moved over so she could sit next to him. “I always have a small bag packed in my truck.” With a heated look, his eyes roved over her body with blatant appreciation, giving her a boost of confidence.

Before she could blink, the look was gone and the unreadable expression was back in place. She inwardly sighed. “Want a drink?” When he shook his head, she took a seat on the other end of the couch. Feeling inexplicably nervous, she tucked one foot beneath her and decided to forge ahead. “Listen, about what happened today—”

“Izzy, that kiss was a mistake.”

“Why, because you’re leaving?” *Please let that be the only reason.*

He rubbed a hand over his face. “It’s complicated.”

“Do you have a wife or girlfriend back in Savannah?” If so, she’d kick him out right now.

“No.” His green eyes widened, but his one-word answer convinced her.

She scooted down the couch and was relieved when he didn’t put distance between them. Their knees touched and she could swear she felt an electric shock between them.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I can’t... Damn it Izzy, it wouldn’t work out between us.”



Okay, there was one other thing she hadn't thought of until right then. It didn't seem possible, but she had to ask. "Are you gay?"

"No!"

If he was single and he wasn't gay, then there was no problem. Still, she wouldn't beg him. She sat there for an extended moment, waiting for him to say something. Anything.

The heated look in his eyes said he wanted to strip her and take her right on the floor. And he had to know she'd gladly let him. But he didn't make a move. He simply sat there like a mannequin.

Finally he spoke. "I can't start anything with you, Izzy."

She bit back a sigh and stood. "Goodnight then. Thanks for staying over. I really appreciate it." She'd already brought out a pillow and blanket, but she said, "If you need an extra blanket, there's one in the hall closet."

He didn't try to stop her when she walked away, and despite her resolve to stay strong, she brushed away a few errant tears as she shut her bedroom door behind her. She knew she was being stupid, but couldn't stop the hollowness that settled in her stomach.

Adam fell back against the couch and shoved a pillow over his face. The hurt and confused look

on Izzy's face made him wish the earth would split open and swallow him whole. He never should have kissed her. He'd made a deal with her father to look out for her and attempt to convince her to move home, *not* sleep with her. Not to mention he'd sworn to himself long ago he'd never get involved with another wealthy woman.

When he'd been young and stupid he'd fallen for a rich girl and gotten burned. *Bad*. She'd all but admitted she'd been using him to get back at her father for not letting her go to her college of choice. At eighteen he'd thought he loved her, thought they had a future. He'd been with a few girls before her but everything about her had been perfect, classy. She'd laughed in his face when he'd asked if she'd write to him in boot camp. Everything he thought he'd known about where their relationship was headed had died in that moment. She'd made it perfectly clear that girls like her didn't end up with boys like him. He shuddered as he remembered her words. Brutal but true. Yet she'd still wanted to fool around until he left. He'd actually felt dirty then when she'd told him that.

Still, Izzy wasn't Amanda and he wasn't eighteen anymore. While he might not have a future with her, he owed her a better explanation. Standing, he tossed the pillow to the floor. She didn't deserve the way he'd treated her.

He knocked once on her door. A few seconds later, her door swung open. Her peaked nipples were visible through the satiny material of her skimpy top. A top he guessed she'd worn to drive him crazy. Not that it mattered. Anything she wore was guaranteed to do that. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to look at her face.

Her dark eyes were wide and seemingly fathomless. A man could drown in those eyes. And he knew he would if he took the next step. *Apologize and walk away*, he ordered himself.

He opened his mouth to offer some sort of lame excuse, but the next thing he knew, they were kissing.

*Again.*

Alarm bells sounded in his head, but when she hoisted up and wrapped her legs around his waist, he knew there would be no turning back. The action was so smooth, so natural, as their bodies meshed together.

The thin material of her shorts and his pants was the only thing separating him from being inside her. She ground her hips against his in an erotic dance as her hands came up around his neck, pulling him tighter against her. As if that were even possible.

Their bodies pressed together so tightly, he could feel the beat of her heart. Or maybe that was his own.

Grabbing her ass, he shifted her body and took the few steps into her room until they collided with her bed. As she tugged at the hem of his shirt, he lifted hers off in an uncontrolled jerk. When her breasts were bared, the air rushed from his lungs.

For the first time in years, he felt unsure of himself. Somehow he forced himself to move slowly as he pulled her skimpy shorts off. Her legs were a mile long and silky smooth.

He let his hands linger against her skin until he reached her ankles, then feet. He'd never thought of feet as particularly sexy but as his gaze settled on her painted pink toenails, he grasped her ankle then kissed the inside arch of her foot.

"Ah." She let out a tiny moan.

When he glanced at her, his throat seized. The black wispy thing she wore as panties couldn't even be called that. A slash of material barely covered her mound and he could see straight through to the dark thatch of hair.

He wanted to kiss her there but his cock was so hard he could barely think straight. Everything about Izzy was perfect and the last thing he wanted to do was screw this up. There were a million reasons he shouldn't be doing this, but one very good one why he should.

Next he tugged the thin straps of her panties and pulled them down. He discovered they were

G-string. No surprise. He didn't know why she'd even bothered wearing anything.

Holding onto her ankles, he placed a kiss on her inner calf, then one on her knee and finally he kissed and licked her inner thigh. He wanted to tease her as long as possible. Though it was becoming increasingly harder when his own body was demanding release.

He shifted his body and nestled between her legs.

"Did you forget something?" she murmured as she wiggled her hips.

"Patience." It was the only word he could manage.

If he'd started licking her pussy, he wouldn't have been able to stop and he wanted to touch the rest of her first. He had no idea what their future held and he planned to do everything right the first time.

It was hard to believe she was naked and beneath him and wanting him as much as he wanted her. He finally got to see what he'd been fantasizing about for weeks. The reality was so much better than the fantasy.

He ran his hands over her smooth, ivory skin, and shuddered. He continued down her ribcage and full hips.

His gaze zeroed in on her breasts and he couldn't tear his eyes away. In all his fantasies,

he'd had to wonder about those nipples. Her light pink buds hardened under his caresses until simply touching with his hands wasn't enough. He captured one of the rosy buds between his teeth and tugged. Her back arched as he raked his teeth over the other one. Lifting his head back, he lightly blew on them, earning him another gasp from her.

"Adam," she moaned and locked her ankles behind his back in a vise-like grip, urging him on. But he wasn't ready. Not by a long shot.

He sat up and gently tugged on her legs. "Not yet, darlin'."

Mercifully, she loosened her hold on him and he scooted even lower. Grasping her hips, he continued licking and laving her breasts before trailing kisses down her lean stomach. She inhaled sharply when he kissed the sensitive skin above her mound.

He couldn't imagine not tasting this woman—his woman—before taking her. Silently she widened her knees and shifted her hips.

He paused and glanced up, loving to see her like this. All for him. Izzy fisted the sheet underneath her. Keeping his eyes on her face, he traced a finger down her slit but didn't penetrate.

"You're soaking wet," he murmured.

At his words, her eyes opened a fraction. There was no denying the desire on her face. “What are you going to do about it?”

Without pause, he pushed his finger into her.

When he did, her back arched again and her tight pussy clenched around him. Maybe he should warm her up, but he added another finger and pushed deep inside her. She hissed out something indistinct, but if the blissful expression on her face was any indication, she enjoyed it.

Without giving her much of a chance to get used to the intrusion, he flicked his tongue over her clit. It already peeked through her pussy lips, pulsing and swollen and begging to be kissed.

Over and over, he teased the pink nub while he moved his fingers in and out of her. He pulled all the way out, dragging his fingers against her inner wall, then pushed back in, burying his fingers knuckle deep. More than anything he wished it was cock.

Her inner walls clenched around him with increasing momentum. The faster he moved his fingers, the louder she panted.

“I’m so close.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, her vagina contracted wildly around his fingers.

Her climax hit fast and hard. Her legs trembled around his face and her cream rushed over his fingers but he didn’t stop teasing her with his

tongue. When she dug her fingers into his hair and cried out, a satisfaction he'd never experienced before surged through him.

Slowly he withdrew his fingers then tasted them. Salty and sweet. Her eyes widened as she watched him and those perfect lips of hers parted slightly.

The only thing between them now was his pants. And that was about to change.

“Condom?” It was the only word he could manage to get out. He'd brought a few, but they were in his discarded jeans out in the living room.

“Top drawer.” Her voice was scratchy and hoarse.

He reached over and opened the drawer. To his undying relief, the box was new. Quickly he shimmied out of his pants then ripped open the packet and sheathed himself. Later—and there would be a later—he'd let her do it for him, but if she rubbed her hands over his cock right now, he wasn't sure how long he'd last.

He moved so that he was cushioned between her long legs.

“Are you sure about this?” he whispered, afraid to break the moment.

A wide grin split across her face, revealing a perfect row of white teeth. “Oh yeah.”

When he had her answer, he pushed into her. Her body accepted him but she was so tight, he



knew it wouldn't take him long. She clutched at his shoulders and locked her legs behind his back as she began moving her hips. Her frenetic movements mirrored his own.

He palmed and tweaked her nipples as their bodies danced together. When her fingers dug into his back, he knew she was close to coming again. Or maybe it was a continuation of her first climax. It was impossible to tell.

Her inner walls were already contracting around him in rapid succession. It wouldn't take much to give her another release.

He reached between their bodies and rubbed his thumb over her clit. And that was all it took. The brief contact sent her flying over the edge. Her entire body tensed and her legs tightened as she hit her climax.

Adam had never had a problem with stamina. It wasn't something he prided himself on. It was just the way he was. When Izzy finally let go, just as quickly, he came too. It hit him like an unexpected tidal wave. The orgasm ripped through him with uncontrolled pleasure. He fisted the sheets underneath them instead of fisting her hips because he didn't want to bruise her skin.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally collapsed on top of her.

When a few moments passed, she chuckled and shoved at his chest. "You're squishing me."

“Damn.” He fought to catch his breath and rolled over.

“You can say that again.” Propping up on one elbow, Izzy turned to face him with satisfaction written all over her face.

*Damn, damn, damn.* He couldn’t believe they’d just had sex. No, made love. What they’d just shared was more than sex. And since when had he started thinking of sex in those terms?

Despite the heat flowing through him, a dose of apprehension found its way to the forefront of his brain. After tonight, if she ever found out the real reason he was in Coconut Bay, she’d never forgive him. So he planned to make damn sure that never happened.

Izzy snuggled closer to him and seconds later, her steady breathing was the only sound penetrating the quiet room. In her sleep she threw a leg over his lower body. Normally he needed a few minutes to regroup, but his cock—which had been at half mast—was already growing again. He groaned and shifted against the tangled sheets. If she didn’t wake up soon, he was in for a long, painful night.

Bright headlights suddenly appeared in his rearview mirror. The vehicle started gaining on him. He tightened his hands around the steering wheel of the truck he’d stolen. He’d been so

careful about taking the girls, about wearing gloves, about everything. He checked the speed limit. Not speeding.

Slowly, he reached over with his right hand and clasped his revolver. He preferred to use a knife on his victims but he always carried backup. As he slid the weapon into his lap, the other vehicle sped up and zoomed around him.

He pushed out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. No one knew who he was. He was still safe. Still smarter than everyone.

When he neared his destination, he grinned to himself. Leaving this bitch's body at this particular park was perfect. It was less than half a mile from the police station. He'd checked out the park earlier and there were no video cameras on the east side. Still, he pulled his ball cap low as he put the truck in park.

It was early. Way too early for anyone to be up. Right before sunrise. He quickly removed the tarp from the young woman's body. She shivered but didn't open her eyes. Well, eye. One was swollen shut.

She'd been a fighter even when she'd been blindfolded. Lowering the drug dosage and adding the blindfold had been an experiment. It had been interesting. He'd immensely enjoyed pounding his fists against her soft flesh but he still preferred his women docile when he fucked them. Unlike the

last whore he'd taken, he'd been able to finish with this one.

Grabbing her ankles, he dragged her toward the end of the bed of the truck. For a moment he cupped her cheek. She flinched but still didn't open her eyes.

He tested her pulse. He could barely feel it. Wrapping his hands around her neck, he thought about what it would be like to squeeze the life from her. He increased the pressure but her eyes remained closed. Not even a flicker of awareness now.

*No.*

He loosened his grip. When he finally took that next step, he wanted to see the life drain from his victim's eyes. Sighing, he scooped her up and trekked toward the merry-go-round. It squeaked as he dumped her naked body on it.

Grabbing one of the bars, he spun it before walking away. It wouldn't be long before someone found her. He was almost done in Coconut Bay. That little tease, Andrea, wouldn't get away from him and neither would that interfering bitch Isabelle.

Andrea would be easy to take. He'd been watching her long enough. She might be hiding out at her place right now, but she'd let her guard down soon. Hell, she had to leave if she wanted to

go to school. That left the tall bartender. Once he got her alone, it was over for her.

## Chapter Five

Izzy opened her eyes and smiled against Adam's muscular chest. She knew it was real, but she couldn't believe last night had actually happened and that he was in her bed. Tall, sexy-as-sin Adam was stretched out beneath her in all his male glory looking good enough to eat.

The thin sheet covering their bodies didn't cover much. If anything, it looked like he was... She lifted her head. Damn, he was hard.

"You finally awake?" he growled, his deep voice enveloping her.

She turned her head to meet his smoky gaze. "How long have you been awake?"

"Too long." The words came out hoarse and uneven.

"Is that right?" She raked a teasing hand down his chest.

In response, his jaw twitched. Smiling, she reached under the sheet and grasped his cock. His neck muscles corded, and his entire body seemed to tense under her light touch.

"You're a machine."

"I don't hear you complaining," he said before his mouth hungrily captured hers. Their tongues

danced and clashed with surprising need. She couldn't ever remember feeling this intense physical pull toward anyone. Sex had always been just that. *Sex*. Something she enjoyed but could live without. Now a raw, primal hunger burned in her belly as Adam caressed her body.

When his head dipped to one of her breasts, she kicked the sheet off so she could see what he was doing to her. He took his time, circling her areola until it puckered into a tight bud. From this angle she had a perfect view of one of the tattoos on his back. It was a skull with two rifles crossing behind it. She wasn't sure, but if the USMC tattoo on his arm was any indication, she guessed that one was a Marine Corps tattoo, as well. Normally she didn't like tattoos but on him, they were incredibly sexy. She wanted to run her fingers and mouth all over them.

Sunlight streamed into the room through the blinds, illuminating the bed in small ribbons of light. She hissed when he sucked hard on one of her nipples, taking it fully into his mouth.

Her breasts were fairly small, something she'd always been self-conscious about before. Not now. Adam made her feel special, treasured almost. When he stared at her naked body he practically worshipped her with his eyes.

Reaching between them, she fisted her hand around his hard length and squeezed. He moaned,

and the small sound reverberated against her sensitive breast. She loved what he was doing to her, but she suddenly needed to taste him.

“Adam,” she murmured and pushed at his shoulder with her other hand.

He lifted his head after a few seconds.

“Get on your back.” Her words were a subtle order.

He paused, as if taking orders was a foreign thing. Which it probably was. Everything about Adam was dominant. He was definitely all man. But this morning, he was going to do what she said.

When she had him underneath her, she straddled his waist and rubbed the folds of her sex over his length, but didn't let him penetrate her. He didn't have a condom on yet anyway and she planned to tease him. She was so wet it was almost embarrassing.

She traced her fingers down his chest and abdomen, savoring the feel of his taut skin. His muscles tightened underneath her fingers.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he muttered.

Grinning, she shimmied down until she was kneeling between his legs. She ran her hands up his muscular thighs and dug her fingers into his skin. Not hard but she wanted to feel him strain against her. Undeniable energy hummed through him.



His cock bobbed in front of her, begging to be kissed. When she leaned over it, his hips jerked. Grinning, she met his gaze while she fisted the base of his cock. The length was impressive, but it was his width that had her feeling sore and stretched this morning.

Last night had been everything she'd fantasized about and more. He would be leaving soon and she wanted to get her fill of him.

Adam watched as Izzy grasped the base of his cock. He nearly came undone as her slim fingers wrapped around him and squeezed. When she bent to take him in her mouth, her dark hair fell around his waist, creating a curtain.

Her perfect pink tongue tentatively licked the head of his cock, circling the mushroom cap in teasing strokes. Normally he didn't like to give up control in the bedroom but for Izzy and for *this*, he had no problem letting her take the reins.

In a surprising move, she leaned down farther and sucked him all the way in her mouth. There was no way she could completely take his length, but she was damn close. As she started to stroke him, she lightly scraped her teeth over his head.

His entire body jolted at the unexpected contact. She continued using her hand to stroke him as she sucked and licked. He knew it

wouldn't be long before he came and he desperately wanted to be inside her.

Adam threaded his fingers through her hair and tugged her head up. As if she completely understood, she leaned over and grabbed a condom from the dresser.

With shaking hands, Adam plucked it from her hand and ripped it open. His cock felt like a club between his legs and it had only one thought. To be inside Izzy. After he sheathed himself, he grabbed her hips and flipped her on her back.

This wasn't going to be sweet and gentle. Earlier when she'd been teasing him, he'd felt her damp pussy rub over him but he wanted to make sure she was ready for him. He slid one finger inside her. When he pulled his hand away, he was covered in her juices.

With a hard stroke, he pummeled into her as if it was his last day on earth.

Something deep inside him wanted to claim her. Wanted to let the entire world know she was his. He'd never experienced something so primal and he wasn't sure what to do with those feelings.

He could feel her vagina drawing tighter around him. It wouldn't be much longer. The woman was so receptive to his every touch, it amazed him. She was like a stick of dynamite. All he had to do was touch her and she practically exploded.

As she reached around him and dug her fingers into his backside, he bit back what little self-control he had to keep from coming. His balls pulled up painfully tight with need.

Bending down farther, he slanted his mouth over hers and tasted her. When she groaned into his mouth and sunk her fingers deep into his skin, he let go of his control.

She didn't have to tell him she was coming. Her body spoke volumes. As her vagina began milking him in rapid contractions, he could actually feel her orgasm wash over him as they found their release together. It was the most unique thing he'd experienced.

With a few final thrusts, he emptied himself into the condom before collapsing onto the tangled sheets.

Wordlessly she sidled up next to him and laid her head on his chest. "We could have been doing this for weeks," she murmured against his skin.

Grinning, he kissed the top of her head. "I'm going to take a shower. Want to join me?"

She shook her head and scooted over to lay her head on her pillow. "No way. I need a little time to recover."

He shook his head and chuckled before walking into her bathroom.

Her stomach clenched at the sight of his sculpted naked backside. A man didn't have the right to look so good. When she heard the running water, she forced herself into action and slipped a summer dress over her head. She might want to stay naked all day, but her stomach was demanding sustenance. Since she didn't have anything in her refrigerator, she grabbed her purse and sunglasses. She needed a shower too, but was a little too tender to join him this morning. And something told her that if she got in there naked with him, he'd want to get busy again.

She rapped on the door and stuck her head in. "I'm going to grab us some coffee."

His response was garbled, but it sounded like he said "okay." It was barely seven, but if she didn't hurry, the coffee shop down the road would be packed before she made it there.

As she predicted, the shop was starting to fill up, but after a short wait in line she was sitting in her car with two steaming cups of coffee and a small box of assorted pastries. Her stomach rumbled for the tenth time so she pulled out a blueberry mini-muffin. Her mouth was watering, but the second she started the ignition, her cell rang.

Her heart stuttered when she saw Adam's number. She rolled her eyes at herself and took a calming breath before answering. She was in

serious trouble if the sight of his name on her caller ID got her twisted up this much. “Hey.”

“Where are you?” His words were clipped.

She frowned. “I told you I was going to get coffee.”

“You said you were going to *make* coffee, not get it. Some maniac could be out there watching you right now. What the hell were you thinking?” he growled.

She hadn’t been thinking about anything other than him and the night they’d spent together and how much she was looking forward to doing it again. Thinking about potential stalkers wasn’t second nature to her. He was right though, and that annoyed her.

With the cups secure in the holders, she tossed the muffin back in the bag and glanced in her rearview mirror before kicking her car into reverse. “Can we talk about this later? I’ll be back in five minutes and I don’t want to talk on the phone while I’m driving.”

“Damn it, Izzy, what were you thinking.” This time it wasn’t a question, but an accusation.

“Uh, I was thinking that I’m hungry and if you’re not nicer to me I’m not going to share with you.” She knew she should apologize but his attitude put her defenses up.

He sighed but it sounded like he'd lost some of his earlier steam. "We *will* talk about this Izzy... Be safe."

When they disconnected, she pushed down the twinge of guilt bubbling up. She tried to tell herself that the crazy stuff happening in town was only at night and the women being accosted had been taken from bars. Not quaint coffee shops in the middle of the day. But Adam was right.

Palm trees and closed shops flew by as she drove through the downtown area. She missed her historic hometown of Savannah, but Coconut Bay was fine for now. It wasn't as if she wanted to settle down there, but it had seemed the perfect place to get away from her father and experience a nominal amount of freedom. If only for a few months.

If she was completely honest with herself, she'd chosen the town because it wasn't too far from her home. Though she'd rather chew on glass than admit that to anyone. Especially her dad.

As she pulled up to a stoplight, her car jolted violently in sync with the sound of crunching metal. Her head snapped back against the headrest with the force of the impact. Groaning, she touched the back of her neck as she looked in the rearview mirror. She cringed and cursed under her breath.

A black truck had run into her. She hit the steering wheel with her palm. Just what she needed this morning. Flipping on her turn signal, she planned to pull into the empty parking lot of Yanna's Jewelry Boutique, but before she had time to react, the truck reversed, then slammed into her again.

A bolt of terror surged through her. This was no accident.

Glancing around, she realized there were no other vehicles on the street. Her heart went into overdrive. "Think Izzy, think," she muttered to herself.

The light was red, but no other cars were coming from either direction. Her Volkswagen Beetle was a V6, but probably couldn't outrun the mammoth truck behind her. If she could manage to get back to her place, she'd be okay. Or at least she prayed she would.

She glanced up and down the street. Other than the coffee shop, every other place was closed. She had nowhere to run.

Gunning her engine, she shot out into the intersection. Sure enough, the truck followed a second later. Her throat clenched. *Oh shit!* This guy was serious. There was a tinted strip across the windshield, making it impossible to see anything inside the vehicle other than a big

silhouette. She might not know what he looked like, but she knew exactly who it was.

She leaned over to grab her fallen purse, but another sickening jolt had her scrambling back for the wheel. She needed to call Adam, but her phone was in her purse on the passenger side floorboard.

Tightly clasping the wheel, she floored it. Unfortunately the truck did the same.

Panic like she'd never imagined settled deep in her bones. He was gaining on her fast. If she couldn't get back to her place before—no, she couldn't think like that.

Her tires squealed as she made a sharp right turn. She sped up even more as she pulled onto the four-lane road that led from downtown to her apartment. The drive was a mere three minutes, but it suddenly seemed like an eternity stretched out before her.

Keeping an eye on the rearview mirror while trying to watch the road in front of her, she once again made an attempt for her purse. This time she snatched it up.

As she righted herself, she looked in the rearview mirror again only to see a deserted stretch of road behind her.

“What the he—”

Another jolt jarred her entire body as she struggled for control of the wheel. She glanced



over her left shoulder. The guy had hit her again and had now moved up next to her.

Unsure what to do, she gripped the wheel and yanked to the left. The impact against the other vehicle had the desired effect.

The truck swerved to the far side of the other lane, close to the grass median. The only thing that separated them from the opposite road. Luckily—or maybe unlucky for her—there was no one else on the road.

Her heart slammed against her ribs as her limited options flared through her mind. She'd only have one chance to gain the upper hand so she took it. She jerked the wheel and raced across both lanes, ramming into the truck once again. She wasn't sure if she took him by surprise, or if she just hit his truck in the right spot, but that last push was all it took to shove him into the dipped median. Her gaze stayed riveted on the rearview mirror as she sped away. It didn't flip, but the truck swerved into the grassy ditch.

Her neck and shoulders ached, but she ignored the pain. Without waiting to see what happened, she took the next exit. As she paused at the yield sign, some of her panic subsided. No one was behind her.

With shaking hands, she fished out her phone. Her fingers felt numb as she dialed Adam.

“Where are you?” He answered on the first ring.

Unexpected tears sprung to her eyes at the sound of his voice. Even if he did sound angry.

She quickly relayed what had happened. After telling her he was calling the police, he disconnected. As she pulled into the parking lot, Adam came rushing down the sidewalk to her car.

She opened the door and before she could say a word, he enveloped her in a crushing hug. Her legs nearly gave out so she was thankful for his support.

“I’m okay.” Though she didn’t want to give up his warm, safe embrace, she finally gave his chest a small shove.

“Come on.” Practically dragging her, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder until they were back inside her place and sitting on the couch. “The cops are on their way.”

Her hands were still shaking as she grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it to her chest. “What about the guy who tried to kill me?”

“They’re sending someone down to route 64 to check everything out and they’re sending two detectives here.”

“I left the coffee and muffins and stuff in the car,” she blurted. She realized how ridiculous she sounded, but was unable to censor herself.

He frowned at her for a second, but he stood. Reaching behind his back, he pulled out a scary looking black and silver gun and placed it on the table.

Her eyes widened. “What the hell is that? And why do you have it?”

Ignoring her questions, he motioned to it. “There’s no safety and there’s a round already chambered. That means it’s ready to fire. Use it if you have to. Don’t open the door for anyone but me, including the cops. I’ll be back in a few seconds.”

*What?* She stared at him in disbelief but he retrieved her keys from the kitchen table and disappeared out the front door before she could think of a suitable response.

She was surprised he’d listened to her silly request, but something told her he wanted to check out the parking lot and make sure she hadn’t been followed. Not that it really mattered. Her would-be attacker obviously knew where she lived anyway. She seriously doubted he’d happened to stumble across her at the coffee shop. *Hell, or maybe he had.* It was a small town. The thought that someone was walking around, completely free to terrorize women sent another shiver through her.

Instead of using her time alone to calm down, all she managed to do was imagine all the horrible

things that could have happened to her while staring at Adam's gun. Why on earth would Adam have a gun? She'd noticed a few tattoos on his body last night—and a bold USMC one scripted across his left forearm—so she knew he'd been in the military, but she'd had no clue he carried a weapon. Her father had guns but they were all antiques, solely for the purpose of display.

A minute later, he walked back in carrying everything, including the purse she'd forgotten about.

“Why do you have a gun?” She should probably have been more worried about the maniac who'd tried to run her off the road but the fact that Adam carried a weapon was unnerving.

He handed her the Styrofoam cup of coffee. “Your car looks horrible.”

She took it, only so she had something to keep her hands busy, and ignored his statement. “What's up with the gun?”

He frowned at her as if she were a child. “I have a concealed weapons permit.”

“That still doesn't answer my question.”

Adam shrugged. “I always carry a gun.”

“Why?”

He shrugged again, which only infuriated her more. “Old habits die hard I guess.”

“Do you mean your time in the Marines?”

“How do you... Oh, my tattoos.”

Despite the tense situation, a smile touched her lips. "I was going to ask you about that big one on your back."

Her doorbell rang, interrupting them. Adam immediately tucked his gun back underneath his shirt before leaving Izzy in the living room.

Adam schooled his features before opening the door. He'd damn near lost a decade of his life in the past half hour. When Izzy had called in a panic, something inside him had shifted.

He didn't know what it was, but the thought of losing her was worse than the thought of losing any job. It was worse than any nightmare he'd ever had. If it was possible, he'd call Edward right then and tell him the deal was off. But if he did that, he knew exactly what would happen.

Izzy would never speak to him once she learned the truth. He couldn't be certain Edward would tell her, but he couldn't take the chance.

When he opened the door, two men dressed almost identically in dark jeans, polo shirts and sports coats stood on the other side. They flashed their badges and when he was satisfied they were real, he nodded.

"Please come in." He moved aside, giving them room to enter.

"I'm Detective Simmons and this is Detective Dennis." The one with the blond hair spoke and

motioned to the black-haired man standing next to him.

Detective Dennis looked vaguely familiar and he wondered if there was any relation to their boss, Toby Dennis. Adam made a mental note to ask Toby later.

He shut and locked the door behind them before motioning they should follow him into the living room. "I'm Adam Marcellus and this is Izzy Ballantine."

Izzy stood as they entered and shifted from one foot to the other. "Do you gentlemen want any coffee?"

When they both shook their heads, she practically collapsed onto the loveseat. Both detectives took a seat on the longer couch so Adam joined Izzy. Seeing her so shook up brought out all his protective instincts, but more than anything, it pissed him off. Whoever had done this was going to pay.

Again, the blond officer spoke. "Ms. Ballantine, can you tell us exactly what happened?"

She raked a hand through her dark curly hair and scooted an inch closer to Adam. "Just call me Izzy, and I'm not sure what happened other than someone tried to kill me."

"How do you know someone wanted to kill you?" the same detective asked.

One of her perfect eyebrows arched in annoyance. “I don’t think they were trying to run me off the road simply to chat, do you?”

Adam smothered a smile while the other detective cleared his throat. This time the dark-haired man, Detective Dennis, spoke. “What can you tell us about the truck? Any distinguishing features?”

She started to answer when the detective’s phone rang. Adam reached out and squeezed her hand and was rewarded with a grateful smile. They were both silent as the other officer stood and walked toward the kitchen to talk on his phone.

Izzy pushed down her annoyance. They were supposed to be there to help her and the cop was taking a call. Whatever happened to common courtesy? Something like this would never have happened if she’d been back in Savannah. Her father would have... She stopped her train of thought.

She couldn’t believe it, and even though no one could hear her thoughts, she realized she sounded like a snob. She wasn’t in Savannah, and no one knew who her father was. Besides, hadn’t she always told herself she hated getting special treatment because of her last name? Maybe there

were more advantages to being a Ballantine than she realized.

Simmons, the blond detective, flipped open his pad. “Ms. Ballantine—”

“Call me Izzy.”

He cleared his throat. “Izzy, can you tell us if the vehicle had any distinguishing marks or stickers?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t see anything noticeable, but I was also trying to stay alive, not check out the paint job.”

“What about the driver? Could you tell if it was male or female?”

“It was hard to see anything but I’m guessing it was male. The silhouette was broad.”

He nodded slightly as he jotted it down.

The detective started to ask another question when his partner returned with a dark expression on his face. “We’ve got to go,” the dark-haired one said.

Frowning, Detective Simmons stood. “I’m sorry ma’am.” He glanced between her and Adam. “Do you two live together or...?”

Their unspoken question was obvious. Would she be alone at any time?

Before she could answer, Adam spoke. “I’ll be with her until this guy is caught.”



Relief flooded both their faces then Simmons nodded curtly. “Good. We’ll be in touch as soon as possible.”

Izzy couldn’t get rid of the sick feeling as the door shut behind them. “Do you think they found another girl or something?”

Adam’s jaw was set grimly. “It’s possible.”

She hated the helpless feeling that bubbled up inside her. It sat in her chest, suffocating her. She didn’t want to sit around and do nothing. As a thought occurred to her, she eyed Adam warily. He probably wasn’t going to like it. “I have an idea, Adam.

“Why does this sound like something I’m going to regret hearing?” His voice was dry.

“I think the guy who ran me off the road and the guy who made that prank call is the same person. It’s probably also the same guy who tried to kidnap that girl...Andrea something.”

“You’re probably right, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“I want to go see Andrea.” Before he had a chance to respond or try to talk her out of it, she turned on her heel and disappeared into her room.

It was obvious the police were low on manpower so if they couldn’t help her then she was going to help them. In the back of her closet, she dug out her bag of seriously neglected art supplies. Combined with her full-time work at the

bar and worrying about paying bills, she hadn't had time to sketch. A 12 x 16 pad and a couple pens and pencils were all she needed at the moment.

After shoving everything in her oversized purse, she stepped from her closet to find Adam leaning against the doorframe, eyebrows lifted.

"What?" she asked.

"Care to tell me why we're going to visit that girl?"

"I know she was out of it, but what if she remembers something now? I'm pretty good at sketching faces. We might be able to get something from her." If her father had taught her one thing, it was to never back down. Depending on others was something she'd never quite gotten used to anyway. Even if the girl didn't remember anything, at least Izzy hadn't sat around and done nothing.

"What if I tell you this is a stupid idea and that you should let the police do their job?"

"I'm going anyway. Unless you plan on keeping me hostage, you can either join me or stay here."

"That's what I was afraid of," he muttered.

Adam risked another glance across the interior of his truck at Izzy. By the stubborn set of her chin, he knew there would be no talking her out of her

plan. All he wanted was for her to stay safe at home. Being out in the open like this made things difficult, especially when she had no clue he was being paid to protect her. The thought of anything else happening to her—No, he wouldn't think like that. Just because his feelings for her were personal didn't mean he couldn't handle watching her.

As they drove, he continually checked the rearview mirror and took a few unnecessary turns in case they were being followed. Izzy hadn't said anything about his driving route, so he guessed she was too caught up in her own thoughts to notice or care. He'd taken a chance letting her know he carried a gun, but she seemed to be taking it in stride. With everything that had happened today, he was sure that was the least of her concerns.

He might not be in the military anymore, but some things would be ingrained forever. After spending eight years in the service, and almost six of those years overseas, carrying a gun had become as natural as breathing. Hell, after growing up in the slums of New Orleans, he'd probably still carry one regardless. Real monsters existed and it was time Izzy realized that.

“How do you even know this girl is home?” he asked as he steered into the parking lot.

“I don’t, but it’s Monday morning and her roommate said she had chemistry class with the girl who ditched her. The only college close to here is the University of North Florida.”

“So?”

“With the exception of my freshman year I didn’t schedule any classes this early on a Monday. Since she’s chosen to live here instead of directly in Jacksonville she probably—”

“All right, Columbo, I get where you’re going with this.” Adam shook his head at her reasoning. She was probably right, but it didn’t negate the fact that he didn’t like bringing her out in the open. He put the truck into park and turned toward her. “You sure you want to do this?”

“If you didn’t want to help, then you didn’t have to come with me.”

He grunted in response. Even if he hadn’t been hired to protect her, nothing could have kept him from going with her.

She hooked her purse on her shoulder and slid from the vehicle. He gave the parking lot a quick once-over as they walked toward the building. No one had followed them but he hated how open everything was, how exposed Izzy was making herself. The guy kidnapping those women hadn’t killed anyone but it was possible Izzy had pissed him off and he didn’t want to simply take her. He might just want her dead. The attack on her in

daylight hours had shaken him more than her apparently.

She looked at him with questioning eyes when they stood in front of the door. "Ready?"

He nodded as she knocked on the door and attempted to ignore what her scent did to him. Shifting his feet, he tried to think of anything but her. And failed miserably. She had a citrusy, almost exotic smell, but after the morning they'd shared, he knew some of what he was experiencing was the smell of sex.

Izzy nudged him with her hip, breaking him out of his thoughts, and grinned. "Quit looking at me like that," she whispered.

"Like what?"

"You know *what*. Try and control yourself until we're through here."

He leaned down until he was an inch from her ear. "No promises."

Her brown eyes darkened at his words. She opened that perfect mouth to say something when the door swung open.

He stifled a groan and turned toward their interruption. It was the brunette girl they'd helped the other night. And she recognized them.

"Oh my gosh, it's you guys! Thank you so much for stopping by. Please come in." Still in her pajamas, the girl they knew only as Andrea opened her door and stood back.

They followed her into her living room where clothes and purses were strewn everywhere. Even the treadmill had shirts hanging on it. She plopped down on a purple beanbag chair and motioned to the futon/couch. "I'm Andrea Barclay by the way."

"Izzy," she said as she sat. She placed her purse by the coffee table, which was covered with empty pizza boxes.

"I'm Adam." He shifted on the uncomfortable seat and tried to ignore the nauseating whiff of stale food.

"I've been meaning to stop by and see you to say thanks, but I've been sort of staying in since what happened."

Izzy crossed her legs and smiled. "I completely understand. Did your friend ever take you to the hospital?"

"Yes, and they found traces of GHB in my system. I spoke to the cops who took my statement, but I haven't heard anything since." She shrugged and crossed her legs Indian-style.

Adam was quiet as Izzy quickly launched into what had happened to her earlier that day, including the phone call from yesterday. He was surprised by Izzy's honesty, but maybe she had the right idea. By the time she was through, Andrea's face had paled considerably.

“I can’t believe that. If anything happened to you because of your help, I’d never forgive myself.” Andrea sat up straighter and wrapped her arms around herself.

Izzy pulled the big sketch pad out of her purse. “I was wondering if you could remember anything from that night. Like what he looked like.”

“The night is really fuzzy, especially after you helped me get home, but I’ve seen the guy before.”

“You have?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t realize it until last night. I had a nightmare and when I woke it hit me that I’ve seen him before at a few different bars when I’ve been out with my girlfriends. He’s really weird, always sitting by himself. And always staring at me. If he hadn’t stared so much, I might not have remembered him. I wish I’d remembered earlier. I know I need to tell the police, I’ve just been too freaked out to leave my place.”

“This might sound weird, but do you think you could describe him and let me draw him?”

“Uh, yeah... Are you working with the cops?”

Izzy shook her head. “No, but after what happened, I can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

Andrea smiled and stood. “You want to use our kitchen table? It’s got a flatter surface.”

“That was impressive Izzy,” Adam said as he started the ignition to his truck.

Her face turned a delectable shade of pink as she mumbled, “Thanks.”

For the last hour she’d questioned Andrea about the smallest details of the man’s features, and now she had a possible sketch of the guy the police were looking for. His only concern had been her safety, but she was out here trying to bring down some maniac all by herself.

Since he’d met her, she’d done nothing but surprise him. It was his own personal prejudices, but he’d assumed she’d be a spoiled princess defying her rich daddy by trying to “make it” on her own, then run back home when things got tough. But ever since he’d known her, she’d worked her ass off at the bar and had done nothing but give and give to everyone around her.

If his grandmother could see him now she’d probably roll over in her grave. She’d taught him not to judge people based on where they came from, but he’d done exactly that. What had he been thinking making that kind of deal with Ballantine? He was afraid if he told Izzy the truth now she’d kick him out of her life. He couldn’t afford that. And not because of that stupid deal. If he wasn’t around, anything could happen to her.

“I’d pay good money to know what’s going on in your head right about now. You look like



you're trying to figure out the meaning of life." Izzy's silvery voice tugged him out of the clouds.

He ignored her statement. "Where to now?"

"The copy shop, then the police station." She hugged the pad to her chest.

She was quiet so he didn't bother trying to talk either. He had too much to think about. Like the fact that if he stayed on this path, he'd end up falling hard for the one woman he could never have. In his gut he knew he'd already crossed a line though. He wasn't just falling for her. He *had* fallen for her.

"Shit." The reality of his situation was starting to settle in and spread like acid through his system.

"What's wrong?"

He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. "Uh, I need to fill up with gas."

She eyed him warily, but she didn't comment as he steered into the parking lot.

As they walked through the automatic glass doors of the copier store, his cell phone rang. When he saw his brother's number, he immediately tensed. "You go ahead and make those copies. I'll be right here."

Her flips-flops made squeaking sounds as she walked across the linoleum floor. The store was basically empty, but he kept his eyes trained on her as she asked an assistant for help.

“Hey, Ben.”

“Hey, brother. How’s it hanging?”

Despite the constant tension flowing through him, he smiled hearing his brother’s voice. “Could be better.”

“Then I’m about to make your day. Hell, I’m about to make your year.”

“I don’t have time to play twenty questions. What’s up?” He watched as Izzy walked to one of the big copiers.

“I just spoke to Rick Devlin. After he read over the portfolio for the project next month, he wants to lock us in for all their international security work for the next year.”

His words hit Adam with the force of a Tomahawk missile. “Rick Devlin, as in—”

“The CEO of The Devlin Group. Yep.”

“What kind of numbers are we talking here?”

“Ten mil.”

It was impossible, but he felt his heart stop. The amount wasn’t entirely profit and The Devlin Group didn’t have ties to the government, but this was what they’d been working toward.

“Did you hear me?” Ben asked.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah. I don’t even know what to say. Good work.”

“How about you pack up your stuff and head home? We’ve got work to do.” The excitement in

his brother's voice almost convinced him to do just that. Almost.

"I can't." He couldn't leave Izzy. Not now.

"If this is about Ballantine, forget it. I know landing the Forester job is your dream, but we don't need him anymore. This job will open up so many doors for us. We'll get those government contracts on our own."

"It's not that."

"Then what? It's not as if he's going to blacklist us. He's eccentric, but he's not an asshole. I thought you'd be happy."

He snorted. Happy couldn't describe what he was experiencing. But that feeling was overshadowed with a sense of responsibility. One he hadn't counted on. "I am. I can't leave Izzy right now."

Silence.

"Are you still there?"

"I'm here. I just can't believe you're falling for another rich girl." The bitterness in his brother's voice was almost palpable. Adam wasn't the only one who'd gotten hurt by Amanda all those years ago. Ben had been a few years younger and while he'd never admit it, he'd had a small crush on her. She'd always been so sweet to Ben and their sister. When she'd admitted she thought they were nothing more than white trash completely beneath

her, it had crushed his brother. But Ben didn't know Izzy the way he did.

Adam gritted his teeth and bit back a sharp retort. His brother was only looking out for him. "Izzy isn't like Amanda. Not even close, so don't go there. And this isn't about her. I signed a contract with Ballantine and someone's *stalking* her. Even if I hadn't signed a contract, I can't leave her unprotected right now."

There was a long pause. "Stalking?"

He rubbed a hand over his face. "I don't want to get into the details."

"Shit, man. I didn't realize. I don't know what to say."

He didn't expect his brother to say anything. If he could just convince Izzy to get out of Coconut Bay, she'd be out of harm's way. And maybe he'd get a decent night's sleep again. "There's nothing to say. Tell me more about what Devlin said."

"I'll email you the details. I've been going over some new resumes but I want you to check out their credentials too before I add them to our database."

"No problem." He sighed after they disconnected. Leaving his brother with so much responsibility wasn't fair. Adam knew that, and if the roles were reversed, he'd probably be annoyed too. The men they picked had to be reliable. Not only did they need the right background and

training, they needed good credit and they needed to be able to leave within twenty-four hours sometimes. Since they were using contract employees their database had to be up to date at all times.

He hung back as Izzy stacked her copies together and stuck everything into her purse. His hand itched to dial Edward Ballantine, but what if the old man told her everything?

Adam immediately dismissed the thought. He might be ten kinds of stupid to stay, knowing things were going to end badly, but in the end, what choice did he really have? He couldn't risk leaving Izzy unprotected.

## Chapter Six

Izzy couldn't explain the sense of liberation at what she'd done. It was small, but to think she might actually be stopping someone from hurting other women gave her a sense of pride. Something she hadn't expected.

She certainly didn't want to bartend the rest of her life, but she knew she couldn't work for her father until some major things changed between them. After the way he'd interfered with her old job, she could only imagine what a nightmare it would be if she actually worked for his company.

Pushing those thoughts away, she slid the copies of the drawings into her purse. She joined Adam who was waiting near the exit with an unreadable expression on his handsome face. "Ready to go?" she asked as she closed the gap between them.

His distracted smile made her wonder what had changed. Ever since she'd convinced him to come with her to Andrea's, he'd been acting different. Distant. And she couldn't figure out why.

The balmy spring air hit them as they walked across the parking lot. "Do you regret what's happened between us?" The words were out so

fast she hadn't realized she was even going to ask him. She hated when she did that. *Think before you speak*. It was her mantra, but one she could never quite seem to remember.

His eyebrows knitted as he glanced at her, but the answer was immediate and firm. "No."

The tension in her chest loosened a little. Adam wasn't a liar. If it wasn't that, then something else was going on with him. Maybe it had something to do with the phone call he'd taken. Either way, it didn't matter. As long as he didn't change his mind about being with her until he left, she didn't care.

The sudden thought of him leaving sucked the air from her lungs. She knew he'd be gone soon, but the reality of having to give him up now that she'd had him was like a punch to the stomach.

She paused for a moment as he held open her car door. "Your mom certainly raised you right," she said as she slid into the passenger seat.

For a brief second, his dark eyes flashed with...something indefinable. Pain? It was there so quick, then it was gone. She wasn't sure if she'd imagined it. The door shut too quickly.

When he got into the driver's seat, she thought about letting it drop, but her curiosity wouldn't allow it. "You mentioned your brother and sister."

He glanced at her as he started the engine. "That's not a question, Izzy."

“I know.” She chewed on her bottom lip.

“If you’ve got a question, just ask it.”

“You never mentioned your parents.”

He rolled his shoulders in a casual motion, but it was obvious he was tense. “There’s nothing to tell. My grandmother raised us.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t satisfied her curiosity about his family, but she knew when to leave well enough alone.

Minutes later they pulled into the small downtown police station parking lot. Two squad cars and three non-marked vehicles were there. Adam was out and around opening her door before she’d even gathered her stuff together.

The simple, square lobby of the one-story building was basically deserted. A row of empty chairs sat against two sage colored walls, and a woman Izzy vaguely recognized as an occasional patron of Mad Dog’s sat behind the receptionist’s desk.

She smiled when she saw them. “How can I help you?”

“We’re here to see either Detective Simmons or Dennis,” Izzy said.

“You’re in luck. Detective Dennis here. Who should I say is asking for him?” She picked up the phone and stared at her expectantly.

“Izzy Ballantine.”



Instead of sitting in one of the uncomfortable looking chairs, Izzy took a step back so the woman wouldn't feel like they were crowding her. Seconds later, a door she assumed led to the interior offices opened, and out stepped Detective Dennis. He was by himself.

"Is everything okay?" A slight frown marred his face as he glanced back and forth between them.

"I stopped by Andrea Barclay's place this afternoon." She pulled out a couple copies of her drawings. "I asked her to describe the man who tried to attack her Friday night. She's seen him out before."

Wordlessly, he took the papers and stared hard at the man's face. After a long beat he looked up. "You shouldn't interfere with a police investigation. You could be putting yourself in danger."

"You should be thanking me," she muttered.

Izzy knew she was treading on thin ice. Andrea herself had admitted that she hadn't remembered anything until this morning. Still, as far as Izzy knew, the general public still had no clue what was going on. Maybe they were following leads and hell, maybe they *were* stretched thin, but it was young women in her demographic being targeted. She couldn't help it if she got riled up.

“Uh, Miss Ballantine?” The receptionist’s voice caused her to turn.

“Yes?”

“Can I have a copy of one of those?” Her voice cracked a little.

“No problem.”

The woman shot Detective Dennis a mutinous stare as she half stood and leaned over to grab one.

“Thank you for dropping this off.” He looked like he might say more but instead he just looked at the picture again and frowned.

When she felt Adam’s touch on her elbow then saw the look in his eyes, they made a hasty exit toward the door.

The fresh air had a somewhat soothing effect when they stepped outside.

She chewed on her bottom lip as they pulled out of the parking lot. Adam was still being quiet and she wanted to drag him out of whatever hole he’d fallen into. When she saw a sign for the beaches, she pointed. “Hey, turn right here.”

He shot her a questioning look, but made the turn. “Where are we headed?”

“The beach.”

“Might be a little too cold for swimming.”

Maybe or maybe not. It was late afternoon and neither of them worked on Monday nights so she figured he’d like the break. Unless he had other

plans... “You can take me home if you’ve got stuff to do tonight.”

He snorted as he turned right on 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“After what happened today I’m not letting you out of my sight, darlin’.” The dominating note in his voice sent shivers skittering over her skin.

While the thought was appealing, she didn’t want him to feel like he had to babysit her. As if he read her thoughts, he continued. “I’m also not letting you out of my sight for a lot of other reasons.”

The sexy way his mouth lifted at the corners sent her heart into overdrive. It was hard to think straight around him. Why hadn’t she met him when she’d been living in Savannah? Hell, she might have never left if she’d had a man like that in her bed. She mentally shook her head in an attempt to push away the thought. Where had that idea come from anyway? This was supposed to be a fling. Nothing more.

Something she needed to remind herself of. Adam was leaving soon. Getting attached would only bring her grief.

“Want to park by the pier?” His deep voice cut into her thoughts.

She cleared her throat. “Sure.”

The parking lot was filling up, but she doubted it was with people rushing to the beach. Probably

early birds eating at the restaurant on the pier. Coconut Bay had an odd mix of elderly people and college students so most restaurants and bars did pretty well. They got an early rush and a late rush all year round. Couldn't beat that kind of steady business.

Izzy left her purse in the car, but tucked it under the front seat. There might not be much crime—current events notwithstanding—but she didn't want to tempt the fates.

“You never mentioned what part of Louisiana you're from,” she said as they strolled down the wooden planks.

He was silent for a solid moment until they reached the sand. As he bent down to take off his shoes, he answered. “New Orleans.”

The simple answer spoke volumes. Pain echoed behind his words. She slipped off her sandals and fell into step with him as they headed down to the ocean. “Were you there for Hurricane—”

Before she could finish he cut her off with a sharp shake of his head. “No. I'd just returned from overseas. I'd barely been home a week. We—my brother and sister—left before it hit. Took us weeks to get back in the city though. Everything we had was destroyed.”

“Is that why you moved to Savannah?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“What were you doing overseas?”

He shrugged, his shoulders tense. It was obvious he didn’t like talking about himself but she wasn’t going to let that stop her. “That last trip I was in Iraq.”

“In the Marines?”

He shook his head. “No, not that time, though I did spend a good bit of time there in the Marines. I was in for eight years—Force Recon for most of those—but when I got out I did private security work for a couple years. Spent practically two solid years overseas. The pay was good and all the guys I worked with were former Special Forces too. The kind of guys you want to have your back in a firefight.”

It didn’t surprise her that Adam had been Special Forces. It did surprise her that he was talking so much and she wasn’t going to let this opportunity to learn more about him go to waste. “Why did you get out of the military?”

“I loved everything about the Corps but I wasn’t a lifer. Some families make it but a lot don’t. I wanted...” he paused and she wasn’t sure he’d continue. Finally he did. “I wanted roots and a normal life and I knew I’d never get that if I stayed in.”

“Do you ever miss it?” His voice had been so full of pride and patriotism when he’d said the word Corps.

He shot her a quick glance, his gaze hooded and his words heated. “Sometimes I miss the adrenaline rush. I haven’t found anything that remotely compares to it until I met you.”

She swallowed at his words. *Holy shit*. It was an odd compliment but probably the nicest thing any man had ever said to her. And she had no clue how to respond.

The water lapped against their bare feet as they walked along the shore. The salty air enveloped them in a light, refreshing wind, making her thankful she’d decided to come here. The sun danced off the glistening ocean, illuminating the scattered shells. In a couple months it would be too hot to truly enjoy the beach. And Adam wouldn’t be here anyway.

As she dug her feet into the cool sand, Adam took her hand in his. He’d never struck her as the hand-holding kind of guy, but a lot of things about him were starting to surprise her. She smiled at him and fought the crazed butterflies dancing in her stomach when he returned it. Well, his version of one anyway.

Eventually he tugged on her hand. “You ready to go back?”

She shook her head and took a couple steps into the water. Contrary to what he'd said earlier the water was incredibly warm. The sun was low in the sky, but it still hadn't set, giving them enough warmth. By her guess, they had at least an hour and a half before dusk. Plenty of time to do what she planned. She glanced around. The stretch of beach was completely deserted. No homes, just palm trees, sand dunes and clear water. It was like their own private oasis. When her feet touched the warm water she inwardly smiled. *Perfect.*

He frowned. "What are you doing?"

In response, she lifted her dress by the hem and pulled it over her head before tossing it onto the sand.

"Shit, Izzy!" He glanced around.

"Come on. I do this all the time." The water lapped against her calves as she took a couple steps back.

"You go skinny-dipping all the time?" His eyes narrowed on her body and she couldn't help her response. She hadn't worn a bra with the dress since it had one built in. Her nipples peaked painfully under his scrutiny.

A couple more steps back and she was up to her thighs. The warm water lapped around her skin. She shivered at the erotic sensation of being practically naked and in the ocean.

“Izzy, this is the last thing we should be doing right now.”

“Loosen up, Adam.” Now she was waist deep.

He muttered something too low for her to understand, but after one last glance around, he quickly stripped to his boxers. When he stalked toward her in the water, she felt like she was his prey. Not that she minded.

She wanted to be caught.

Just when he thought he had her figured out, Izzy surprised him again. A maniac was stalking her and she wanted to go skinny-dipping at the beach.

The water splashed as he pushed through the waves. When he was barely a foot from her, she turned and dove under.

She popped up a couple feet away, her curly hair slicked back.

“Izzy—”

She dove under again. Seconds later, he felt a sharp tug on his boxers. When she came up for air this time, he grabbed her by the hips and pulled her flush against his body. “You’re insane,” he rasped.

She shrugged, reached under the water and grasped his cock. “No one is going to see us. If someone walks by—which I doubt—we’re completely covered by the ocean. Besides, are you complaining?”



His stomach muscles clenched as she slowly stroked him. It seemed all she had to do was touch him and he was ready to combust. "Hell no."

Wordlessly, she shifted her body against his, causing him to groan aloud. Still wearing her panties, she stroked the covered folds of her sex against his cock. When she started rubbing her breasts against his chest in an erotic motion, he nearly exploded right there.

The subtle stimulation was the perfect effect.

Stilling her movements, he grasped her hips before running his hands up her waist and ribcage until he cupped both her breasts. They were small but perfect. Perky pink nipples hardened and peaked under his touch. They fit perfectly into his hands.

As he tweaked and palmed her breasts, he shifted so that her back faced the shore. The area was deserted, and he'd be able to see for miles if anyone was coming, but he still wanted to keep an eye on their surroundings. Izzy didn't seem to notice the slight move at all.

With a free hand, he pushed down the thin scrap of material separating them.

Teasing her mercilessly, he enjoyed the little whimpering sounds she made each time he flicked across her clit.

He continued to massage and stroke the sensitive nub before testing her slickness. When

he inserted a finger she began grinding against it. She didn't hold back or deny what she wanted. He loved that about her. When it came to sex, she enjoyed everything about it.

"Please, more." He barely heard her plea above the sound of blood rushing in his ears.

"What do you want?" he asked before sucking one of her earlobes between his teeth. He'd discovered how sensitive she was there.

She jerked once and her grip around his neck tightened. "I need more," she whispered. The desperation in her voice matched the electric energy humming through her.

He crushed his mouth against hers, needing everything she had to offer. For a split second he contemplated being gentle, but the primal side won out. Raw need took over as he ate at her mouth. She was just as hungry as him.

Their lips meshed as he thrust inside her. Like a hot, silk glove, her inner walls tightened and molded around him with no mercy.

As he continued pushing deep inside her, something changed inside him. It was a subtle shift, but he felt it with his entire being. She was his now.

That thought scared the hell out of him.

They'd only been intimate for a couple days, and now he couldn't imagine *not* waking up to her face. Didn't want to imagine a life without Izzy.

She clawed at his back as they found their rhythm. Unintelligible whimpering sounds escaped her as he pounded into her. Her soft breasts rubbed against him. He savored the feel of her smooth skin and beaded nipples against his own rough chest.

He could feel her inner muscles contracting around him, milking him as she started climaxing. Her dark eyes glazed over as she threw her head back.

For a moment all he could focus on was the soft curve of her neck. The way it arched delicately as she came.

“Adam,” she moaned.

For some reason the sound of his name on her lips made him lose it every time.

He came long and hard, emptying himself inside her.

Water rushed around them as they both came down from their high. Her exotic scent enveloped him as she feathered kisses against his neck. When she sagged against his body, something foreign gripped his chest and squeezed tight. Izzy trusted him completely to keep her safe. Around him she was unconcerned about anything else and it was obvious that was because of trust.

Her breaths were still shallow and uneven as she lay wrapped around him. Instinctively he tightened his grip.

He kissed the top of her head and tried to push his feelings aside, but it was useless. He loved Izzy. Had realized it for longer than he'd admit. She'd dug her way under all his defenses and now he was screwed. No matter what happened, he knew he'd lose her in the end. Even if they didn't come from completely different worlds, he'd been lying to her from the moment they'd met. He knew her well enough to realize that it wasn't something she'd forgive easily. She'd left Savannah to get away from her meddling father and they were blood.

Once she found out the truth about him, it wasn't hard to see how things would play out. Adam might be crazy for falling for her, but he wasn't stupid. They had no future.

## Chapter Seven

Jack Dennis clutched the stack of papers Isabelle Ballantine had given to him. He didn't recognize the face she'd sketched. His gaze trailed to Megan. She sat behind the receptionist desk, frowning at the picture.

"You recognize this guy?"

She glanced up at him. "No, but if I see anyone that looks like him I'm running in the opposite direction."

"Good idea," he muttered before heading toward the back.

He'd grown up in Coconut Bay and nothing like this had ever hit the town. Once he was in the conference room, he tacked up the picture Isabelle had drawn underneath the pictures of the four women who had been assaulted. The first two and the woman they'd just found had been raped, but the third had only been assaulted.

*Only.* He hated that word. As if that made the trauma she'd experienced any better.

Each woman fit the same description. All brunettes, exotic in appearance, all petite, weighing less than or close to one hundred ten pounds. None of them was able to identify her

attacker, even though he'd kidnapped the first three without a mask. The fourth woman he'd blindfolded—something new—and he'd beaten her severely. She'd been able to talk to them for only a few minutes at the hospital before she'd passed out. And she'd been completely incoherent even when she'd been awake. Her tox screen had come back with fewer drugs in her system than the other women, but her brain had swelling. Jack had just gotten the call that her doctors had put her in a medically induced coma.

He turned at the sound of the door opening to see his partner enter. "Hey, Andrew."

"Hey, man. What's that?" His lips pursed into a thin line as he nodded toward the picture Jack had tacked up.

"Isabelle Ballantine brought this by. She apparently decided to question Andrea Barclay on her own and came up with this." The sketch of the attacker was pretty decent. Slightly crooked nose, fairly sharp cheekbones, normal looking. He looked like anyone they might see on the street. Totally unassuming.

"Think we can use this?"

Until now the only thing they'd known for sure was that the perpetrator was Caucasian with dirty blond hair. "I think this is a pretty damn good place for us to start. It's too soon to publicize this, especially before we speak to Ms. Barclay

ourselves, but I think this is the break we've been waiting for."

"Leaking this picture might spook him anyway."

Jack gritted his teeth. Maybe scaring the guy out of town wasn't such a bad thing, but he wanted to catch him. This monster had been terrorizing his town. Jack wanted answers and justice. And by the development of their guy's actions, he was getting progressively worse. He hadn't raped the third woman, but he had beaten her so bad that she'd need a lot of time to heal. Thankfully she wouldn't need reconstructive surgery.

But the fourth woman he'd not only raped, he'd taken his time hurting. Her face was a swollen mess and she might not ever come out of that coma.

It was possible the guy hadn't been able to follow through because the power of raping wasn't enough anymore. He'd increased the violence on the fourth woman and had been able to sexually assault her. Soon that wouldn't be enough for him. He'd probably kill his next victim.

"Has the FBI called back?" Andrew asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Not yet. I'm sure they're stretched thin and until we're sure this is an actual serial rapist, they

might not send anyone down. Until then we're stuck with our limited resources." He rubbed a hand over his tired face.

Two hours of sleep last night. Three the night before. He felt as if he was hanging on by a thread and he needed to be on top of his game.

"We'll catch this bastard." Andrew's voice was less than convincing.

They had no DNA evidence and they didn't even know where the assaults were taking place. He shook his head and leaned against the conference room table. "How's Maria?" He should have gone to see her himself, but guilt held him back. The third victim was his best friend's kid sister and he hadn't been able to stop this. Until he could bring her good news, he couldn't face her.

His partner shrugged. "She's better than Sharonda Herrera, but she still doesn't remember anything about the guy."

The heavy traces of GHB and Xanax in her system had messed her up. The large doses of benzodiazepines left all the women in near comatose states, all with significant memory loss.

Andrew walked to the oversized corkboard and placed his hands on his hips. "I wonder why the Barclay woman remembers his face and the others don't."



Jack picked up her file, which was lined up on the table with the others. “According to the hospital records, her dosage was considerably less than the others.”

“Which implies he’s feeding them more drugs there...wherever *there* is. And that doesn’t help us at all.” Andrew raked a hand through his normally immaculate blond hair.

Before Jack could respond, the door opened again. This time it was Sheriff King. And they had little to give him.

“Tell me you boys have good news.” The older man crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe.

“We might have a lead.” He quickly filled his boss in on everything.

When Jack finished, his boss didn’t seem as pissed as he’d been the last couple of weeks. As the sheriff left the conference room, the only thing he ordered them to do was run a detailed check of Isabelle Ballantine and the man she worked with, Adam Marcellus. Something Jack had already planned to do.

“You ready to head to Ms. Barclay’s?” he asked his partner as he put on his sports coat.

“Sure, let me make a phone call first.” Before Jack could respond, Andrew had disappeared out the door.

As he waited, Jack stared at the bulletin board. This guy was taunting them. Jack's eyes narrowed on one of the pictures. It was of the symbol the guy carved into his victims. Two half moons back to back. He and Andrew knew it was a clue. They just didn't know what it meant.

They'd run it through the FBI's ViCAP database and come up empty. It was possible this guy had gone on a serial raping spree somewhere else in the country but it was unlikely. Even if his DNA wasn't in the system, his method of marking his victims would be. All his victims were seemingly disconnected from one another. But not to the killer. To him, there was something about the women he liked. Something specific.

He stared at the symbol as if it could tell him more. Unless he and his partner could figure out what the hell it was, this guy wasn't going to stop. If anything, he was escalating with each attack. The next woman might not survive.

He pounded the center console of his rental car with his fist. After that near miss with that bitch Isabelle, he'd had to dump his truck and rent a car from two counties over. He'd eventually buy another truck, or perhaps a van, but he had to work fast.

As soon as he killed the Ballantine woman, he was moving to another town. Somewhere with a

bigger population this time. Maybe Miami. There were a lot of people there illegally. People not willing to go to the cops.

For a split second he contemplated packing up and leaving right then, but that bitch had seen his face. On his way back into town, he'd seen her and her boyfriend pulling out of the police station. She might not remember much now, but the cops were closing in faster than he'd imagined and it was only a matter of time before she remembered seeing him at the bar.

Hell, she'd served him at least a dozen times. He had a face people forgot, but the way things were going, he was pushing his luck.

The police were holding a lot back from the public, but it was only a matter of time before they figured out how the girls were connected. He started his car and steered out of the parking lot. He'd followed Isabelle and her boyfriend to the pier, but it was obvious they were going to be a while. And he couldn't afford to be caught loitering.

Didn't matter anyway. He knew where she lived, and if the work schedule he had was correct, she worked the next two nights. Tomorrow was too soon, but if everything went according to his plan, he'd be able to grab her the next night. It would just take the right amount of planning.

After setting the timer, Izzy slid the casserole dish into the oven. Chicken Florentine was the easiest thing she knew how to make and it took limited prep time. Cooking the spinach had taken minutes before tossing all the ingredients into the dish. In less than thirty minutes it would be ready.

Adam was still in the shower washing off the salt and sand. The entire drive back to her place—all five minutes—he'd been giving her strange looks. Not necessarily bad, but she couldn't figure out what was going on with him.

She'd taken her shower first and now he was taking his sweet time. She poured herself a glass of wine while she waited for the timer to go off, and all she could think about was the man in her shower. As they'd left the beach they'd both realized they hadn't used a condom. She was on the Pill and he swore he was clean—and she believed him. She wasn't worried about getting pregnant or anything, but she was worried about things getting too complicated. Adam was leaving. *Leaving.*

And she'd gone and had sex without a condom. Something she'd never done before. It was a matter of trust. Around Adam she didn't think straight though. With him, she felt that small grip of control she always held in relationships slipping away. She snorted to herself.

Relationship? She'd been so sure of herself, so ready to have a quick fling with the hot bartender. Why couldn't she think more like a guy?

"What smells so good?" Adam's voice startled her.

She glanced up from staring into her wine glass to find Adam standing at the kitchen entrance wearing jeans and nothing else. Of course that top button was undone. Immediately her mouth watered and thoughts of food fled. She inwardly cursed. It was like she'd turned into some sort of sex maniac overnight.

As she ran her tongue over her bottom lip, hungrily thinking about what it would be like to do it on her kitchen table, the buzzer went off. She averted her gaze to his face and fought the heat rushing to her cheeks. "Chicken Florentine. I made extra so I hope you're hungry."

When she started to rise, he held up a hand. "Sit, I'll serve you."

"I could get used to this," she murmured and took another sip of her wine. Instead of waiting, she walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"If you distract me like that, we'll never actually get to eat today." He chuckled.

The deep rumble vibrated from his body to her own, making her irrationally pleased. He didn't

laugh often, but when he did, it affected every nerve ending she had, straight to her pinky toes.

She ran her hands up his chest and lightly scraped her fingers over his skin before dropping her hands. She was starving and he was right. If they started something now, they'd likely never eat.

“Want a beer?” she asked.

“Please.” He set the large spoon down on the counter after serving both their plates and sat at the table while she grabbed him a drink.

Just as they both picked up their forks, Adam's phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID, then cringed. “It's the bar.”

She sighed and put her fork down. “Might as well answer it. With everything going on...”

He stared at his cell for a short beat, then flipped it open. “Yeah?”

Izzy was silent as he spoke. She gathered that he was probably talking to Toby, but his one-word answers didn't give her much information.

Finally he snapped the phone shut and rubbed a hand over his five o'clock shadow. “Toby wants to know if we can come by in about an hour.”

“Is it work related?”

“I don't think so. His cousin—Detective Dennis—is waiting for us.” He shook his head as he picked up his fork.

She bit back a sigh and took a bite of the casserole. If the cops wanted to see them again, she doubted it was because they had good news. *Just great.*

Jack Dennis paced back and forth the length of his cousin Toby's small office. After running a background check on Isabelle Ballantine he couldn't believe who her family was. He didn't understand why she was living in Coconut Bay, but she obviously had the money for protection and he wanted to convince her to get it or leave town. She'd caught a killer's eye and if he could save one woman before this guy struck again, he'd do everything he could.

A shuffling sound made him turn toward the entry. Isabelle and Adam stood in the doorway.

"Ms. Ballantine, thank you for coming down here."

She shot her boyfriend a hooded look, then returned his gaze. "Just call me Izzy. Where's Toby?"

"He had some sort of liquor emergency. I think he went to the ABC store to pick up some extra bottles or something."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So why are we here?"

He pointed at the two folding chairs as he took a seat on Toby's rolling chair. "You guys want to sit?"

She shrugged and the boyfriend shot him a protective glare. Instead of sitting, the other man leaned against one of the filing cabinets next to her. He'd run Adam Marcellus's background too. Jack was thankful Isabelle had someone like Adam looking out for her. Mr. Marcellus had an impressive military record. Eight years with Force Recon in the Marines. Six of those were spent in Africa, Afghanistan and places Jack was sure weren't on his record.

The reason Adam was in Coconut Bay was unclear since he owned a security company in Georgia. As far as Jack could tell, small-time security details weren't his specialty and he and Izzy didn't seem to have a working relationship. It was definitely more intimate. Since he'd been with Izzy during the attempted attack of Ms. Barclay though, he wasn't a viable suspect. And anything else between them wasn't his business.

"Where's your partner?" Adam asked before he could speak.

"He's following up on a lead...thanks to you." He returned his gaze to Izzy. "I'm sorry I wasn't more vocal at the station but you took me off guard dropping off that sketch." After talking to Andrea Barclay, they'd decided to run with the



picture. They'd faxed it to all motel and hotel owners in the area and they'd gotten one hit. Andrew had headed down there with one of the bike cops. Jack on the other hand had drawn the short straw and had to come down here personally on orders from Sheriff King.

"So you still haven't answered the question. Why are we here?" She re-crossed her legs and lifted a dark eyebrow at him.

"I wanted to apologize for leaving your place so abruptly this morning. The reason we left is because we found another victim. It was...bad. The man we're after is getting more dangerous and it's possible you're his next victim. The Coconut Bay Police Department isn't huge. We're going to get someone to patrol the restaurant and around your apartment complex, but it's not going to be enough." He cleared his throat as he tried to formulate his words. This was a delicate thing to bring up, but he didn't know a way around it. "As a precaution we ran background checks on both of you. I know you've had some safety issues in your past so it wouldn't hurt to hire extra security." He didn't voice it aloud, but she could certainly afford it. And since she could, he couldn't see a reason for her not to.

At his words, her face turned an ashen gray. *Shit*. Maybe he had overstepped his bounds.

“Safety issues?” Adam’s eyebrows rose in concern as he shifted to look at her.

Instead of looking at her boyfriend, she kept her eyes on Jack as she stood. Icy venom dripped from her voice. “Thank you for the warning. If that’s all, I believe we are through here.”

Before he could respond, she disappeared from the room in a couple long strides.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Adam asked.

Jack stood and put his jacket back on. Apparently the boyfriend didn’t know who she was. Or if he did, he obviously didn’t know what she’d been through as a kid. “That’s not up to me to tell you. If I were you, I wouldn’t let that woman out of my sight.” His phone rang, saving him from answering anymore questions. He flipped it open and walked out of the office. It was his partner.

“Tell me you’ve got good news.”

“Oh yeah. The manager let me into the room, but it doesn’t look like anyone’s been here for a few hours. There’s still some stuff here so chances are, this guy’s coming back. I’m going to stake out the place for a while,” Andrew said.

Jack strode through the restaurant kitchen as he talked. “All right. I’ll pick up coffee and meet you there in about half an hour.”

“Sounds good.”

He pushed open the swinging door to the main bar area as he was disconnecting. Izzy sat on one of the bar stools talking to one of the servers. She spared him a quick glance before averting her gaze. Sighing, he exited the restaurant.

Something told him she and her boyfriend would be having an interesting conversation tonight. He might have overstepped his bounds but at this point he didn't care. If something happened to her and he hadn't done everything he could to stop it, he couldn't live with himself.

## Chapter Eight

If it wasn't likely to land her in jail, Izzy would wring that cop's neck for bringing up her past in front of Adam. Okay, maybe she wouldn't, but she'd like to. She sat on the barstool waiting for Adam to meet her, but dreading it at the same time. He was probably going to have questions and she didn't blame him. She'd left the office abruptly but that cop had taken her by surprise.

"You ready?" Adam asked as he walked up.

Unable to answer thanks to the cotton filling her mouth, she nodded.

He was silent as they exited the restaurant and walked to his truck. She thought he might make idle chitchat as he held the vehicle door open. No such luck. Halfway back to her place, he still hadn't said anything. She allowed herself a small breath of relief. Maybe he wasn't going to question her after all.

"Are you going to explain what the detective was talking about before you ran from the room?" Adam's deep voice sliced through the air.

"Uh..." She stared out the windshield at the red light. Normally it took minutes to get back to

her place. Apparently the universe was not on her side tonight.

“Well?” he pushed.

“Well nothing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, you don’t get off that easy.” The truck jerked to life when the light changed.

“Excuse me?”

“If something happened in your past that affects what’s going on, I should be aware of it too.” He glanced over his shoulder and switched lanes, but wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“It doesn’t affect anything that’s happening now. Trust me.”

“Fine, you tell me about those scars on your shoulders and wrists and I’ll tell you about my ‘safety issues,’ as that cop put it.” Along with his tattoos, she’d noticed them the first time they’d gotten naked together. She hadn’t asked what they were from out of respect for him. It was probably a chickenshit thing to do, throwing this in his face right now, but she had a pretty good feeling he wouldn’t answer. Truthfully, she didn’t want him to answer because she didn’t want to talk about her past. Even if it was wrong, this was her only defense against answering him.

His jaw clenched in response. She leaned back in her seat as he steered into the parking lot of her complex. When he put the car in park, her hand

was already on the door handle, but he stopped her with a light touch on her knee.

She turned to look at him. With limited lighting in the enclosed space, his green eyes looked almost black.

“Those scars are cigarette burns.”

Bile rose in her throat as she thought about someone hurting him that way, but she didn't respond. Her jaw wouldn't work. How did one respond to something like that anyway? The truck's cabin seemed to be closing in on her.

“I told you I was raised by my grandmother,” he said.

At her nod, he continued.

“I—we, my brother and sister, have different fathers. Well, my brother and I have the same father, but...” He cleared his throat and guilt poured through her veins.

She'd forced him into this corner because she was trying to hide part of herself from him. “Listen, Adam, we don't have to talk about this right here.”

“No, I do. You deserve this much.” The way he said those words niggled at something in her brain, but when he continued she brushed it away.

“Our father split days after Ben was born. And my mother left not long after. When I was about nine and my brother was seven, our mother showed back up in town with a two-year-old

daughter and a new husband. They stuck around for about a month before she discarded Callie the same way she'd done with us." He rubbed a hand over his face and shook his head, as if clearing out cobwebs, before continuing.

"That's the boyfriend I got those scars from." He motioned to his shoulder.

The way he said *those* left a hollow feeling in her stomach. "They didn't stay together?"

He shrugged, but the motion looked strained. "My mother didn't stay with any of her men very long. Over the years she'd show up for a few days with another new loser in tow. For the most part they were all nasty bastards. The year I turned sixteen, I broke her current boyfriend's jaw and she finally stopped coming around."

A gasp escaped. "Why?"

"Guy tried to touch my sister."

She bit back another gasp. "I hope you broke more than his jaw then."

Adam's lips tugged slightly at the corners. "I never took you for the violent type."

"If my math is correct, your sister was nine."

He nodded and his jaw clenched again. "So that's it about my crappy childhood. Your turn."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "There's not much to tell. When I was fourteen I was kidnapped and held for ransom. I almost died, but didn't. End of story." There was a lot more to the

story than that, but she didn't feel like divulging all of it at the moment. She ignored her noisy conscience. He'd opened up to her but she was too much of a chicken.

Instead of getting annoyed with her, he reached out and cupped her cheek. Then his hand moved lower until his thumb rubbed the tiny scar along the side of her neck. "Is that was this is from?"

"I can't believe you even noticed it." Thanks to literally the best surgeons in the world and over a decade, the scar was almost invisible.

"I notice everything about you," he murmured before leaning forward and capturing her mouth with his.

The kiss was sensual, yet somehow chaste. He tugged on her bottom lip playfully before pulling away. Even after the brief touch, his voice was ragged when he spoke. "Come on. I want to get you inside. We're sitting ducks out here."

After gathering her purse and what was left of her wits, she walked back to her place with Adam. Once they were safely behind locked doors, he checked her entire apartment.

When he disappeared into her bedroom again, she assumed he was double checking everything so she started a pot of tea and put a bag of popcorn into the microwave. All she wanted to do was to curl up on the couch and watch a movie.



She heard the bedroom door open as she was pulling out the bag of popcorn. “Do you want some popcorn?” she called out.

Adam walked into the kitchen wearing a T-shirt, running shorts and tennis shoes.

Izzy frowned at him. “What are you doing?”

He held out the gun, which she simply stared at. Weapons didn’t scare her necessarily, but touching them always left butterflies in her stomach. And not in a good way.

“I’m going down to your gym, but I can’t go if you’re not protected.”

Sighing, she took the hunk of metal and plastic and laid it on the counter next to her. “Fine. Go.” In all reality, she shouldn’t be annoyed that he needed a break, but a tiny part of her was. After the day she’d had, she just wanted to cuddle up on the couch with Adam and not think about the outside world.

As if he read her thoughts, he tugged her by the hips until there wasn’t an inch of space between them. “Izzy, I’ll only be gone an hour. I just need to burn off some steam, okay?”

Despite her annoyance, she felt herself smiling. “Okay.”

“I’m taking your extra set of keys. Don’t open the door for anyone but me. Promise?”

She nodded.

He shook his head and took a step back. “I want to hear the words.”

“I promise.”

As soon as he’d gone and she’d locked the door behind him, she put in a movie and collapsed on the couch. She hadn’t thought about the kidnapping in so long and now the memories were pounding inside her head. Even the previews couldn’t distract her.

As she started to turn up the volume her cell phone buzzed across the coffee table. Immediately she tensed, worried it might be her would-be attacker again. It wasn’t but when she saw her father’s name on the caller ID, her tension didn’t abate.

She started to put the phone down, but guilt stopped her. After the things Adam had told her about his family, she knew she didn’t have it so bad. Or bad at all really. Her father might be insanely meddling and overprotective but he’d never hurt her.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hello, sweetie. I wasn’t sure if you’d pick up.”

“What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to check on you, make sure everything was okay.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Her mind raced. Had the police contacted him?

“No reason. You’ve been on my mind all day, that’s all.”

“I’m okay so don’t worry.” Even she could hear the strain in her own voice and her father would pick up on it if she wasn’t careful.

“I didn’t call to bother you about moving home, I promise. Is there something else I should know about?”

She couldn’t tell him everything, or he’d probably send an entire security team. And that wasn’t something she was willing to live with now. “I was thinking about the kidnapping.”

“Ah.” He was silent for a long beat, probably because she’d surprised him. Rarely, if ever, did she talk about that nightmare. “Did something bring this on?”

“Not one thing in particular.” She crossed her fingers at the small lie. Despite their differences, she rarely lied to her father. If anything, she was sometimes too honest, something he claimed to hate. She seriously doubted it though.

“You know if you need me, I’m here.”

She did know and appreciated it now more than she’d ever imagined. Adam had father figures who had put cigarettes out on his skin. Maybe she should be a lot more grateful. “I know and...and I do miss you, Dad. I just can’t handle you interfering in every aspect of my life.”

“I’m willing to admit I handled the incident at the museum poorly.”

“That’s just it. You shouldn’t have done anything at all. I’m an adult and that was my *job*. Something you had no business interfering with.” She kept her voice soft, not wanting him to feel like she was attacking. They’d already had this conversation before and she didn’t want a repeat of the last blowup.

“You’re right.”

“I...what?” She frowned, wondering if she’d heard correctly.

“I said you’re right. What I did was stupid. I could tell you I was just trying to look out for you, but in hindsight, I overreacted to a private conversation you and I had.”

Izzy wasn’t sure she trusted his admission. “Are you just saying that because it’s what you think I want to hear?”

“No. I’m saying it because it’s true. I acted like a jackass and did the one thing I never wanted to do. I pushed you away.” She could hear the sincerity in his words.

“Wow, uh, thanks Dad.”

“I just hope you don’t let my mistakes keep you from working for me. You have a good opportunity and I’d hate to see you pass it up.”

She sighed at his words. “I’m not sure if I’m ready to work for you. I know *you* think I am, but

no matter what, everyone will think I got the job because of you. Actually, they'll *know* that's why I got the job. Then what happens if I screw up?" She didn't know where the words came from, but they gushed from her like a geyser.

"Well, first off, if you screw up, it's not the end of the world. I do it all the time. Just yesterday Ms. Priddy was telling me what a crazy old man I am."

Despite herself, a small chuckle escaped. "I don't know what you'd do without her."

He sighed heavily. "Me neither... And so what if you get a job because of me? You'll simply have to work harder to prove what you're made of. I won't lie. It'll probably be tough at first, but you're a Ballantine. You can handle it."

Since she wasn't quite ready to face the possibility of working for him, she veered the conversation in a different direction. "Thanks for calling tonight, Dad. I really needed to hear your voice."

"You don't ever have to thank me for that."

She smiled to herself. "I know."

After they disconnected, she stared at the flashing television screen. She turned up the volume and pressed play. As she stretched out on the couch, she tried to focus on the movie, but her father's words played over in her head. Sighing, she punched one of the pillows in an effort to get

more comfortable. He thought she could handle running one of his projects so why didn't she?

Adam flipped off the television as he stared at Izzy's sleeping figure. During the day she was always going at full speed. Now however, her brow was slightly furrowed. Asleep and so still, she looked almost peaceful.

He checked the lock one more time, then jumped in the shower. Tomorrow he'd have to go back to his place and grab more clothes, but he had just enough to last him another day.

Starting tomorrow, he had to do what he came here to do in the first place. He had to convince Izzy to move back to Savannah. The sooner the better. Before his job had been all about making sure she was safe—which she wasn't anymore—and possibly convincing her to move back. Now the thought of not seeing her face every morning was depressing.

If he was starkly honest with himself, he wanted her to move back to Georgia for purely selfish reasons. Yes he wanted her safe, but he also wanted her close to him. Staying over at her place had only solidified it for him. Living with Izzy permanently was something he could get used to. The thought of living with a woman should scare the hell out of him, but it didn't. His experience with Amanda had fucked him up for a

while. For years he hadn't dated women who made more money than him. He'd known it was his own bullshit but it hadn't mattered. He'd been young when she'd broken his heart and her words about him not being good enough had buried themselves deep in his psyche. Once he'd started doing private security work overseas and pulling in more than he ever imagined, he'd realized his income "requirements" had been beyond stupid. He was still the same person inside no matter his yearly salary.

Some of those insecurities had reared their ugly head when he'd gotten involved with Izzy but the longer he was around her, the more he realized income didn't matter. No matter what, he was going to convince her to move back to Savannah. The thought of life without her was...dull, lonely.

He thought he'd taken out all his aggression on the treadmill and weights, but unbridled energy still hummed through him. The pummeling jet streams from the showerhead did little to help. Adam twisted the knob to the off position, quickly dried off, then tugged on a pair of boxers.

Trying hard not to wake Izzy, he gently lifted her from the couch and walked her to her room. "Izzy?"

She stirred in his arms as he laid her onto the bed. "What?" she mumbled as she shifted against one of the pillows.

“Do you want to sleep in your dress?”

“Uh uh.”

After slipping her dress off, he pulled the sheet and comforter back and over her before getting in next to her. He wrapped his arm around her as she positioned her back against his stomach and chest. Twenty minutes later, as he was staring at the ceiling, Izzy surprised him.

“You awake?” she asked.

“Yeah.” His response was a whisper.

“Me too.”

“Something on your mind?”

She was silent for a long beat and he wasn't sure she'd answer. Finally she spoke. “I'm sorry about what happened to you growing up.”

His first instinct was to shut down the conversation but he resisted. It wasn't pity he heard in her voice. “It's okay.”

“There's something I need to tell you.”

“I'm listening,” he murmured into her hair.

She shifted and turned over so that they faced each other. He propped up on one elbow.

Her hair spilled out onto the sheets and over her chest as she lay against the pillow. “The reason I was kidnapped...was because of my family. You said you're going to be helping your brother with his security business, right?”

His throat refused to move so he nodded.

“Have you heard of Ballantine Industries?”



At the moment, he wanted the world to open up and swallow him whole. He loathed lying to her like this. “Yes.”

“Edward Ballantine is my father.”

His eyebrows rose in shock. It was feigned, but thankfully she didn’t seem to notice. Talking about her father was the last thing he wanted to do.

“When I was fourteen, two of the gardeners grabbed me after school one day. I struggled, which is how I got the scar. They took me to a rundown house and locked me in a closet for days.”

“Damn.” He reached under the covers and grasped her waist, pulling her closer to him. That hadn’t been in her father’s report.

She shook her head. “For days one of the men talked about all the...things he was going to do to me. His partner wouldn’t let him touch me until they had the money. They never planned to let me go either. Something they reveled in reminding me.”

Everything around him funneled out but her delicate face. “Izzy, you don’t have to tell me any of this.”

“I want to. I was rescued before he could follow through with his plans, but I still have an aversion to small spaces.” She slid an inch closer and wrapped a leg around him.

“I can understand why.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

“My father is really overprotective. Sometimes he crosses the line into ridiculously overbearing territory and I know the kidnapping is part of the reason.”

“I’m sure it’s because he loves you.”

“I know it is. Part of the reason I moved here was to get away from him, but now...” When it was obvious she wasn’t going to continue, he lay back against the pillow and pulled her with him. Her head rested on his chest as he stroked up and down her spine. Why had she told him all of this?

As if she read his mind, she spoke again. “I’ve never told anyone about that. I don’t know why I told you now.”

Adam sighed and his grip increased around her. “You’re the first person I told about my scars.”

Not even the first girl he thought he’d loved. Maybe it was subconscious, but he’d never opened up to Amanda. He’d only let her see what she wanted. The quintessential bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. She might have known where he came from, but he’d never let her into his world.

Izzy was different though. She wasn’t a spoiled teenager using him for anything. He took a deep breath and steeled himself for a rejection. What he

had to say next he might loathe himself for later, but he had to do it just the same.

“Come back to Savannah with me, Izzy.” His words sucked all the air out of the room.

She lifted her head and stared at him. The seconds that ticked by felt like an eternity. Their breathing was the only sound in the room.

Her dark eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I leave in less than two weeks. I don’t want to go back without you.” He wanted her back home to keep her safe but he also wanted her to come with him because he loved her. He was going to tell her father the deal was off as soon as the guy after Izzy was caught. Eventually he’d have to tell her about the stupid deal he’d made with her father but his main priority was keeping her safe right now. If he admitted what he’d done and she kicked him out of her life, she’d be exposed to a maniac. He couldn’t risk that.

She chewed on her bottom lip and he could practically see a war waging in that pretty head of hers. Finally she spoke. “Why are you working here? In Coconut Bay?”

He swallowed down the bile. Now came more lies and half truths. “To get away from my family.” *A lie.* “My brother and I started our own security company. We’ve been working our asses off for four years.” *The truth.* “I wasn’t sure if that’s what I wanted to do for the rest of my life

so my brother told me to take a couple months off and figure things out.” *Another lie.* The words tasted bitter in his mouth. As soon as she was safe back home and he’d called things off with her father, he’d come clean. He had to. The lying would kill him otherwise. And he wanted something real, something long-term with her. He couldn’t start it based on bullshit.

“You sound like me.” A small smile played at the corner of her mouth and he wanted to kick his own ass.

When she laid her head back down he silently prayed she wouldn’t ask any more personal questions. A few minutes later, her steady breathing told him she was asleep. She hadn’t answered his question, but at least she hadn’t said no.

## Chapter Nine

Jack took a sip of his coffee, then cringed as he put it back in the cup holder. “This coffee sucks.”

“Next time I’m buying,” Andrew muttered without looking up from his notepad.

Jack shook his head and looked out the windshield. From where they sat across the parking lot of the Motel 8, they had a perfect view of room 103. So far, there hadn’t been any movement. The motel owner swore he’d rented a room to the man in the sketch they’d sent out. If this was where their guy was staying, they were going to catch him this time. He could feel it in his bones. They were so damn close.

“Hey, Maria Martinez’s father is Cuban right?” Andrew asked, cutting into his thoughts.

“Yeah, why?”

“Just listen for a sec. The first victim, Sasha Sorrentino, what’s your guess on her ethnicity?”

Turning, he frowned at his partner, wondering where this was headed. He had all the victims’ faces memorized. Dark hair, pale skin, sharp, exotic features. “Possibly Spanish and European descent.”

Andrew slid out a piece of paper from one of the manila folders and handed it to him. “Correct. Spanish father and Russian mother.”

“So what’s your point? The second victim is Ann Meyers. She looks like the all-American girl next door.”

“She might not look like it, but her mother is Ecuadorian.”

Jack frowned as he took the second paper his partner handed him.

His partner continued. “The fourth victim is African American and Cuban. And I don’t know for sure, but Andrea Barclay, the woman he *tried* to kidnap, looks like she might have Native American roots. I’m guessing on her mother’s side considering her last name.”

“That’s my guess too.” Jack nodded as his partner jotted something down. “So our guy is targeting what, women of mixed ethnicity? Don’t you think that’s kind of a stretch? There’s got to be something else linking them together.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Instead of just using government databases I’ve been running his ‘calling card’ in the computer, and this is what I’ve come up with. It didn’t make sense until now, and yes, it might be a stretch, but it’s all we’ve got to go on.” Andrew handed him a printout Jack hadn’t seen before.

The attacker's *calling card*, as they'd come to refer to it, was the strange symbol he cut into his victim's backs. Except for their boss, they hadn't told anyone else about it. Not even the civilians on staff knew about it.

The two half moons he inflicted on his victims were positioned back to back. They weren't deep enough to scar the women permanently, but they certainly made them bleed.

"What *is* this?" He handed the paper back to his partner.

"It's an old alchemical symbol used in botany. It represents plants that are the result of crossbreeding."

"Crossbreeding? So you really do think this guy is targeting his victims based on race?" Jack asked.

Andrew's shoulders lifted slightly. "I've heard of crazier reasons."

"So why is he harassing Isabelle Ballantine then?"

"She interrupted him. You've got to think that this guy puts a lot of time and effort into stalking his victims and—"

"And she interrupted him."

"Exactly."

Jack shook his head and took another sip of the nasty coffee for the sugar rush. "If this is true,

then we're going to need to start cross-referencing... Hey, look at that."

His partner averted his gaze across the parking lot, toward the building. "Is that a light?"

It was muted, but a dull glow was coming from room 103. Like it was coming from the bathroom.

"Shit." Jack shoved the coffee cup back into the holder. Some of the liquid sloshed over but he ignored it. He pulled his gun from his shoulder holster.

Andrew did the same and nodded at him as he opened the passenger door. Jack followed suit and opened his own door.

Their boots crunched over the gravel as they half-crouched, half-ran across the parking lot. He kept his eyes trained on the curtains—which hadn't moved—until they sat behind an old Cadillac.

"You go in front. I'm going around back. Wait ten seconds before knocking," Andrew whispered.

Jack nodded and glanced at his watch. His partner scanned the area before sprinting down the side of the building, then disappearing around the corner. Looking around, Jack was relieved to see the parking lot devoid of people. There were quite a few cars, but hopefully everyone was in for the night.

A quick look at his watch told him it was time to move. Keeping his gun out in front of him, he



stayed low until his back was against the stone wall of the motel.

He knocked once, but stayed out of the way of the door. "Police. Open up."

Silence.

He knocked again, this time louder. "Police."

This time he heard movement, but still no answer. He lifted his foot, ready to kick the door in, when he heard a shot. "Shit."

There wasn't enough time to run around back. Kicking in doors was television bullshit. He shot the doorknob off. The door swung open. Using caution, he swept the room with his gun. Empty.

The back window was open, and the dingy curtain fluttered in the breeze. His radio buzzed. "Jack, where the hell are you?"

Keeping his weapon ready, he answered with his free hand. "I'm in the room. Did you hear that shot?"

"Yeah I heard it. Bastard clipped me," he groaned before the radio cut off.

His partner's words sprung him into action, but before he charged through the back window, he needed to know his head wasn't getting blown off. "Do you have a visual?"

"He ran into the woods back here."

Jack stepped onto the small wooden table underneath the window and hoisted himself through. As soon as his feet hit the ground, he

buzzed the station. “Officer down. I need backup now. Repeat. Officer down.”

Squatting, he checked his partner’s pulse.

Andrew swatted his hand away. “I’m fine, man. Just get me out of here. We’re like sitting ducks.”

He hated moving him, but his friend was right. Behind the motel, thick woods stretched for about a mile and other than the lights from some of the rooms, there was limited visibility. As he talked to the dispatcher he continued talking to his partner. “Can you walk?”

Still leaning against the wall, Andrew pushed against it. “I think so.”

Unwilling to put his weapon up, Jack used one arm to lift him and together they hobbled back around the building. Sirens sounded in the distance.

As Jack helped him to lean against one of the cars in the parking lot, he inspected the wound. “Looks like it went all the way through.” He ripped his jacket off, then took off his shirt. “I’m going to wrap this around the wound to control some of the bleeding.”

Andrew groaned as Jack tightened the shirt. “Hurts like a son of a bitch, but I’ll live... Listen, I know who shot me.”

Jack froze as ice flooded his veins. “What?”

“I don’t *know* him, but it was the same guy from the sketch. Damn it, this hurts.” He clutched his shoulder but thankfully didn’t lose consciousness.

An ambulance, a fire-truck and two squad cars rumbled into the parking lot, one behind the other. “Sit tight.”

Jack ran into the middle of the lot and waved them over. When he was back by his partner’s side, he continued. “Are you sure about who you saw?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s him.” He fell forward and grasped his forehead. “Feel...dizzy.”

“Don’t say anything else. Save your strength.”

Jack helped steady his partner as the EMTs rolled a gurney over to them. One of the EMTs strapped an oxygen mask over his partner’s face as they hoisted him into the back of the waiting vehicle.

As the ambulance pulled out of the parking lot, Jack cursed to himself. This guy had just shot a cop. He was already escalating his attacks but this was different. Jack jogged over to one of the idling squad cars. They needed to put out an APB on this guy and fast. After he made the call he headed back to the motel room. This guy had left in a hurry which meant he might have gotten sloppy.

Izzy opened her eyes and shot straight up in bed. Her heart pounded erratically against her ribcage as she looked at the indentation in the bed next to her. Light streamed underneath her bedroom door. The sight immediately soothed her.

With everything going on, she'd been extra jumpy the past couple days and couldn't seem to shake that feeling that she was constantly being watched. In her head she knew it was because of the creepy phone call and the guy who'd tried to run her off the road, but being near Adam was the only thing that seemed to calm her.

A quick glance at the digital clock on her nightstand told her it was six. She'd be getting up in an hour or two anyway. Might as well get out of bed now. She picked up a discarded T-shirt from the floor and slipped it over her head. Her bedroom door squeaked when she opened it. She walked the few feet down the short hallway to the living room.

Adam looked over from the couch as she stepped into the room. His features immediately softened when they made eye contact. "What are you doing up?" His words were almost a whisper.

She shrugged as she walked over to the couch and sat next to him. "Couldn't sleep."

"Me neither. Check this out." He pointed toward the television screen with the remote control.

The Asian reporter's voice grew louder as Adam increased the volume. "*Deputies are investigating a series of attacks in the Coconut Bay area. The wanted man's identity is still unknown, but police have issued a composite sketch...*"

She leaned forward on the couch, as if she could somehow hear better. When Adam shifted, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I put on coffee a while ago. You want some?"

"That'd be great." She gave him a brief smile then returned her attention to the screen. She couldn't believe they'd used her drawing. Maybe that meant they were closing in on the maniac. After five minutes of listening to the same thing over and over, she switched to another news channel, hoping they'd have something more recent.

The male reporter on this channel had much more interesting things to say. "*It hasn't been confirmed, but a source inside Coconut Bay Hospital tells us a police officer has been wounded and is currently in intensive care...*"

"Adam, get in here."

A few moments later he walked in carrying two steaming mugs. "Here." He handed her one as he sat next to her.

“Thanks.” She held on to her drink and shifted so that she was snuggled up against his side.

“This is probably the biggest thing to happen here in decades,” Adam said.

“I know, right.”

After ten minutes of listening to the same report, it was obvious they weren’t going to release the name of the injured officer. They probably didn’t have the name in the first place. The department wouldn’t release it until the family was notified. Izzy sneaked a glance at Adam’s face only to find him looking at her.

“What?” she asked.

His expression was hooded. “Nothing.”

She bit her bottom lip and broke his gaze. She continued to stare at the screen, but only saw blurry shapes and figures. His heated stare was so potent, she could feel her face warming up.

“Izzy.” Adam’s deep voice broke into her thoughts.

She turned to look at him again. “Yeah?”

“Do you want to talk about what I asked last night?” His face revealed nothing as he spoke.

Izzy cleared her throat. Did she want to talk about him asking her to move to Savannah? No. Definitely not. But she knew they had to. “What exactly do you want from me?”

“I think that much should be obvious.” His voice was dry.

She nudged him with her elbow. "I'm serious. I know we just started...this." She spread out her hands in a helpless gesture. "Whatever *this* is. I guess I want to know what you want from me."

"Everything." His answer was automatic.

"You want...everything?" *What did that even mean?*

"I want to see your face when I wake up every morning and that scares the hell out of me, Izzy. I don't know where this is headed, but I know I've never felt about anyone what I feel for you and I want to give this a chance to go somewhere." His deep voice and words enveloped her.

She searched for the right words. "I've never felt like this about anyone either, but...do you need an answer right this instant?"

Something flared in his eyes. She couldn't put her finger on it, but for a brief moment, he had this vulnerable, puppy dog look in his green eyes. Then it was gone so fast she wasn't sure if maybe she imagined it.

"No." He broke eye contact and picked up his coffee mug. "I'm going to hit the shower." Her heart dropped at the abrupt dismissal until he turned around with a primal, almost hungry expression. "You can join me if you like." The words were hoarse and totally unexpected.

She nodded. "I'll be there in a sec." When he disappeared into her room, she pressed a hand to

her stomach and pushed down the fear and old memories that threatened to surface.

When she and Adam had first met, he hadn't even known who she was. And when he found out who her father was, he hadn't been impressed. Surprised, yes, but not impressed. In her experience, that was unusual.

She wanted so much to believe his words that he wanted her to move back to Savannah, but couldn't help but wonder if there was an ulterior motive. Her gut told her she could trust him. He was definitely attracted to her. She didn't have much experience with men, but unless he was an accomplished actor, that much was very real. And while she might not have experience, she knew how to read people.

The sound of running water pulled her back to reality. She shook her head and stood up. It was time to start trusting people. And she might as well start with the sexy man waiting for her. She took off her shirt and panties and tossed them in the laundry on her way to join Adam.

"That water better be hot," she said as she pulled back the shower curtain.

"Took you long enough." He tugged her by the hips so that she stood under the cascading water with him.

In response she lifted her head to meet his hungry lips. Her entire body shivered with



excitement as their bodies meshed together. A growing ache between her legs spread like liquid fire straight to all her nerve endings. Sometimes she wanted to pinch herself to make sure this was all real.

He shifted so that her back was against the wall and lifted her up. In a few movements, her ankles were locked behind his back and he was sliding into her. Before meeting Adam, sex had always been on a bed, usually with the lights off and never very exciting.

She moaned aloud as she took the full length of him. Grinning at her, he leaned down and nipped her neck and shoulder as he began to move inside her. The light scrape of his teeth over her sensitive skin was intensified tenfold.

Clutching his shoulders, she held on for life as he increased his speed. The cool tiles of the shower against her back did nothing to ease the heat racing through her. With each movement, she pushed closer to the edge of release.

He lifted his head and gripped her hips tighter. His neck and shoulder muscles corded tightly as he rocked into her and she realized how much strength it must be taking him to hold on to her. She was so close, it bordered on painful. Her inner walls tightened around him, and without warning, she surged into orgasm.

“Adam.” His name was a whisper on her lips. She couldn’t manage anything else. Her entire insides turned to jelly as she came down from her high.

With him, it seemed her mind was already primed for that normally elusive climax. In the past she’d always needed a lot of extra physical stimulation before she could even *think* about coming.

“Izzy.” The dark, primal way her name ripped from his chest sounded like a warning. A very good one.

With an inaudible moan, he buried himself inside her and held himself there. She could feel his release pulsing inside her and without warning, a few stray tears escaped. Until Adam she’d never let a man get so close to her. Never let a man get to know her. Maybe that’s why it had always been such a long process to wring an orgasm from her. She’d started to let him see the side of her she kept reserved for friends and family and instead of being turned off, he asked her to move home with him.

A satisfied expression played across his features when he looked at her, but almost immediately his smile fell.

“You okay?” he asked, still breathing heavily.

She nodded and unhooked her legs. “I’m more than okay.” Standing under the powerful jets, she closed her eyes and let the water course over her.

She was falling for Adam. No doubt about it. Unfortunately she had no clue how to handle it.

Jack scrubbed a hand over his face. After three hours at the hospital, his eyelids felt as if they had sandbags weighing on them. At least Andrew was going to be okay. He’d lost a lot of blood but the wound hadn’t been critical.

He opened the evidence bag containing a biology textbook they’d found at the scene and placed it on the table in their conference room. With gloved hands, he pulled it out. They’d already dusted for prints but he still wanted to be careful.

Flipping through the book, he realized it wasn’t just a college textbook, but a teacher’s edition. A few pages were heavily underlined and highlighted. It was the botany section. His heart leapt into his throat. Maybe his partner had been on to something.

As he set it down, Megan stepped in. “Hey.”

He frowned when he saw her. She wore jeans and a T-shirt and with her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail and no makeup, she looked like she’d just rolled out of bed. “What are you doing here

so early?" The sun wouldn't be up for a few hours yet.

She shrugged. "I heard about Andrew and when you weren't at the hospital I knew you'd be here."

Everyone was either at the hospital or out patrolling looking for the asshole who'd shot his partner. With a department their size they only had two detectives and with Andrew bedridden, it was up to him to figure out what this guy would do next. "Thanks for coming by but you really didn't have to."

Megan's lips pulled into a thin line. "I put on a fresh pot of coffee. Should be ready soon. What can I do to help?"

Jack glanced at the book, then at her. It might be a long shot but he had nothing to lose. "I need you to get me the fax number, phone number and email address for the University of North Florida's dean."

She nodded. "No problem. What do you need it for?"

"I'm following up on a hunch." He didn't tell her any more. Not yet. He wanted to be sure first. The university was far enough away that they might not have seen newscasts releasing the photo of the serial rapist. There might not be a connection but he wanted to see if there had been

any sexual assaults on campus or if anyone in administration recognized this sketch.

While he waited for Megan he pulled out the file they'd been composing on the three—four victims.

They'd all attended the same university but at different times. They didn't have any overlapping classes, no teachers were the same, they were all working toward different majors, only two were in a sorority and those were different. Maria, the third victim, had only been there for two semesters before her attack. The other three were about to graduate. Nothing in their schedules or lifestyles except the college linked them together. They were young and pretty of course, but that was where their similarities ended. "Why are you picking *them*?" he muttered.

The sound of Megan clearing her throat caused his head to snap up. "I got what you needed."

"Good. Thank you." The sooner he got this information out, the better. As he took the slip of paper from Megan, he flipped his file open to the first victim. Something had to have set this guy off and if the first attack was personal and he could figure out why, he could bring this guy down.

## Chapter Ten

Jack looked up as Megan set another fresh cup of coffee in front of him. “You’re an angel,” he murmured.

The station was filling up but she’d stayed on with him the past few hours, poring over the files in case he and Andrew had missed something. Definitely above and beyond her job requirements as a receptionist.

Her lips curved up slightly. “Then you’re really gonna love me now. I’ve got Dean Keyes on line two.”

Immediately he reached for the phone. “Detective Dennis here.”

“Hi Detective, this is Dean Keyes. You can call me Matthew.”

“Thanks for calling me back.”

“I got your fax and email and wanted to talk to you personally.” His voice was concerned.

“Good. We’re working an investigation right now and I need to know if there were any unusual sexual assaults in the past year or even recently.”

“There were a few assaults on campus but all the cases have been closed. That’s not why I

called you back. I recognize the person in the picture you sent me.”

Jack’s heart rate tripled. That was more than he’d hoped for. “Is it a student?”

“No. The sketch is of a professor who used to be employed here.”

“Used to?”

“He was let go a couple months ago due to inappropriate behavior toward one of our female students. He didn’t actually assault her but he was trying to use his position to influence her for...sexual favors. It wasn’t the first time he’d received a complaint but it was the first time we had proof. We’ve had a hell of a time filling his position but—”

“What did he teach?” He had a feeling he already knew the answer.

“Biology.”

“I need his name and the name of the student.” Jack wasn’t asking.

The dean cleared his throat nervously. “Ah, I don’t know if—”

“Someone is stalking and raping women. Don’t give me some bullshit about—”

“You’re right. His name is Phillip Gray and the student is Sasha Sorrentino.”

A low buzzing started in Jack’s ears. Sasha was the first victim and he didn’t believe in

coincidence. “Can you send me everything you’ve got on Gray?”

“Fax or email?”

“Email. Is there any possibility he’d have access to student records, addresses, stuff like that?” Jack tapped his pen against the table. That had to be the link. With the exception of Sasha he might not have taught the other women or even known them personally, but he might have been able to find out their addresses and ethnicity.

“He’d have no business going into their records but...anything is possible.”

After they hung up, Jack felt as if he could breathe again for the first time in months. This was the best lead they’d gotten. Once he got the information he needed on Gray, it would only be a matter of time before he found him.

Phillip Gray grabbed his hat off the dresser and adjusted it in the mirror. Soon things would be back to normal. After he took care of that meddling bitch he was gone. Maybe he’d head out west instead of Miami.

As he walked out of the bedroom, he ran his hand along the bureau and kicked up a layer of dust an inch thick. He quietly shut the door behind him, descended the stairs and checked the blinds on all the windows in each of the three rooms. Everything was secure. Just as he’d left it.



Still, it didn't hurt to double check. Everything had to be perfect tonight. His soft-soled shoes were silent as he walked across the tiled kitchen floor. For a moment, he listened at the door leading to the garage-turned-game room. Silence.

Good. Maybe she was done throwing a fit.

He opened the door. She still sat blindfolded in the chair where he'd left her. Her hands were tied behind her back and her ankles were secured to each chair leg. Her head lolled to the side, but she was aware of him. He could feel it.

Finally her head snapped up. "Who's there?" Her voice came out shaky, and with a trace of something else. Raw fear.

"Eager, aren't we?" he murmured.

"What do you want from me? Where am I?" Now there was nothing but pure panic in her shrill words.

Smiling to himself, he shut the door leaving her alone and terrified. He drank in her fear, let it course through him. Soon she'd be begging for her life. Soon she'd be promising her soul away if he'd just make the pain stop. This one wasn't getting drugs.

The girl was still shouting questions, but her voice was muffled through the door. The owners had turned their garage into a playroom for their little brats, adding extra insulation.

Not that it mattered. The nearest neighbor was half a mile away and the owners only came here during the summer. No one would hear her—*their*—screams.

Jack leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. Andrew was still in the hospital—and driving the nurses crazy. He'd finally gotten a hold of Sasha Sorrentino. She admitted that her old professor had been creepy but she hadn't thought he'd be capable of hurting her like that. After showing Phillip's DMV photo to Andrew, however, they knew he was the guy. They just couldn't find him.

Sighing, he opened his eyes and stood. He felt like he should stay but he needed a few hours of sleep. He'd been making calls all day, trying to hunt down people who knew Phillip. Unfortunately the list was short. He'd left half a dozen messages with the guy's step-brother—a beat cop in North Carolina—and still hadn't heard anything back.

After Gray had lost his job he'd basically fallen off the radar. He'd broken the lease at his condo and just disappeared. Every now and then he'd take money out of his bank account but after the last big withdrawal a month ago, there hadn't been any movement.

As Jack shrugged into his jacket, his phone rang. When he saw the Raleigh area code, his heart rate quickened. “Jack here.”

“Detective Dennis?”

“Yeah.”

“This is Ben Romano. I got a message that you wanted to talk to me about Phillip?”

Jack clutched his phone tighter against his ear. Christ, let this be the break they were waiting for. “Yeah. He’s a person of interest on a case I’m working right now and—”

The other man snorted. “He’s probably the main fucking suspect.”

Jack was silent for a moment. He’d wanted to tread lightly. If he attacked Phillip or accused him of something, he ran the risk of alienating his best lead. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. I haven’t talked to that bastard in over a decade. Whatever you think he’s guilty of, I’m sure he did it.”

“So you two aren’t close?” He asked the obvious.

“Hell no. My mom married his dad when I was eighteen. I moved out that summer so I didn’t spend a lot of time with him but that little fucker was weird.” His voice was filled with disgust.

“Weird how?”

“He didn’t have any friends and he was always dissecting stuff. Plants, bugs, and I can’t be sure if

he actually did it, but my mom was afraid he'd killed a couple of the neighbors' pets. With a father like that it's a wonder he didn't do worse."

"Your step-father?"

"That guy was a raging racist. Blamed all his problems on anyone who wasn't white. Typical ignorant bastard. Can't believe my mother ever married him."

"Was he abusive?"

"Nah, not to her. But I saw him rough the kid up a couple times when I came home for summer break. He said he was trying to toughen Phillip up. Hell, the kid even tried to join the police force—probably to please him—but he failed the psychological test. I'm not supposed to know but my mom let it slip."

This guy definitely fit their profile. "Are they still married?"

"No. He died about five years ago. Heart attack. She moved up to live near me not long after. I'll ask her, but I doubt Phillip has contacted her. She'd have told me."

Jack bit back a sigh. He'd been hoping they were close. Now he had a history on the guy, but he wasn't sure how much good it would do him if he couldn't find him. "Is there anything else you can think of that might help?"

"In your message you said you were with Coconut Bay PD, right?"

“Yeah.”

“They used to vacation there.”

“They?”

“My mom, step-dad and Phillip. For the last three summers he lived with them, they always spent a month down there over the summer.”

A burst of adrenaline shot through Jack. “Did they own any property?”

“No, nothing like that. They just rented whatever condo was cheapest.”

So much for that angle. “Thanks for calling me back, I appreciate it. If you think of anything else—”

“There is one thing. It might be nothing but he used to have a massive crush on a black chick who summered there with her family. His old man put an end to that *real* fast. I know from my mom that he tried to see the girl in secret, but she broke up with him because she thought he was a coward. After that happened, my step-dad’s truck got water poured in the gas line. The kid was really passive aggressive so who knows if it was him or not.”

“You remember the girl’s name?”

“I remember she was rich. Like, really really rich. Her last name was...Sands. Don’t know the first name though.”

“Thanks, you’ve been really helpful. If you think of anything else, you’ve got my number.”

“No problem. Hey, what did he do anyway?”

Jack massaged his temple. He didn't want to get into the gritty details with this guy but he owed him something. “He shot a cop.”

“No shit.” The other man let out a low whistle.

As soon as they disconnected, Jack fired up his computer. He was going to find this guy if it killed him.

Izzy popped the top on another beer and handed it to one of the few patrons at Mad Dog's. “You want me to add it to your tab?”

“Sure. Thanks Izzy.” Don smiled as he took the beer. “You got a light?”

“You know you can't smoke in here.” She placed a hand on her hip. Don had been coming to the bar for about fifteen years, long before she'd been around, and back when smoking had been legal.

“I know. I'm going to take it outside,” he grumbled.

She pulled out the silver lighter she always carried and slid it across the bar to him. “I'll watch your drink.”

He winked and grabbed the lighter before heading toward the front door.

“How're you feeling?” Adam's voice sounded close to her left ear.

She swiveled and clutched a hand to her chest “Jeez, I didn’t even hear you.”

He grinned and her heart stuttered. “Any excitement tonight?”

“No, you haven’t missed any excitement in the past *three* minutes.” He’d been hovering over her like a hawk. Not that she wasn’t grateful, but she couldn’t imagine what he thought could happen to her in a restaurant when she was surrounded by people.

“Has Toby been up here to talk to you yet?”

She shook her head and tried to ignore what his presence did to her senses. “No, last I checked he was still on his phone.”

Adam frowned. “Me too.”

When they’d arrived at work ten minutes ago, Toby said he might have some information from his detective cousin, but then he’d gotten a phone call and they hadn’t talked to him since.

“You want to come to my place after work?” Adam’s question came out of nowhere.

Before she could answer a customer interrupted them. “Hey lady, can I get a beer down here or what?”

Izzy turned to see where the rude voice came from. The man had a buzz hair cut and wore a leather jacket with fringe. From where she stood it looked like he had the beginnings of a healthy beer gut. She walked to the other end, gave him

his drink and ignored the annoyed attitude he threw her way.

Some wannabe biker was the least of her problems. As she walked back to the other end of the bar, she picked up a few dirty dishes and set them in the small sink next to where Adam stood. “Would you mind watching the bar for a few minutes?”

“Why? Where are you going?”

She cleared her throat. “The ladies room.”

“Oh...right. No problem.” He grabbed one of the dirty glasses and started washing it.

She patted the black mini apron tied around her waist to make sure her cell phone was still there. She ducked under the bar and hurried toward the back. Once in the bathroom, she checked the three stalls. They were all empty.

She locked herself in the last one and sat on top of the closed toilet lid and tried to steady her breathing. What was wrong with her? *Everything was happening so fast with Adam, that's what.*

For so long she'd lived in this state of distrust. If she hadn't known someone from the time she was in grade school, she wasn't likely to let them into her life. The few times she had, it had ended disastrously. Most of the men she'd dated turned out to be assholes who cared more about social status than her.



She pulled out her cell phone and hit one of her speed dials.

Her dad answered on the second ring. “Hi, sweetie. How are you?”

“Hi, Dad.” She wasn’t exactly sure how to handle this conversation.

There wasn’t a lot she could hide from him and he picked up on her anxiety right away. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s great. I want to ask you something, but I don’t want you to jump to conclusions.”

“Okay.” His voice was cautious.

“If I move back home, and this is a strong *if*, I want to know exactly what you plan on hiring me to do.”

He was silent for a long beat, but finally he spoke. “I want you in charge of marketing and development. At the start, you’ll have to get your hands dirty so to speak by visiting a lot of the jobsites so you get a feel for what Ballantine Industries is all about. You’re not going to start out at the bottom, but you certainly won’t be at the top either. You’ll have a boss just like anyone else.”

“Who?”

“Larry Hoffman.”

“Oh.” She’d known him since she was five. And she liked him. A lot. Definitely a plus.

“He’s a good man and more importantly, he won’t micromanage. He’ll guide you. He’s looking to retire in a few years and he wants someone competent—and *trustworthy*—to take over the reins.”

Marketing was definitely one of her strong suits. She knew how to sell. It was in her blood. She chose her next words carefully. “That sounds like something I might be interested in.”

“Is this something you’re serious about? Larry has been looking for the past six months and can’t find anyone he thinks is right for the job. I’m not going to tell him about this unless you’re absolutely serious.”

“I am, Dad. I’m ready to move home, but I have to know you’re not going to micromanage my life. Personal or otherwise. I can’t live like that anymore. If I butt heads with someone over something, I have to know that you’ll let me handle things myself.”

He blew out a long breath. “I know I deserve some of that. I’ve already moved your stuff out of the house and into a condo downtown.”

“What are you talking about?” She didn’t know if she should be grateful or very annoyed.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. I knew you’d *eventually* move home. I didn’t know when, but I knew when you did, you wouldn’t be coming back to the house. Thought I’d save you the

trouble. You don't have to stay in the condo either and I didn't hire a decorator or anything. I just wanted you to have options and I figured you'd want your space when you moved back."

For her dad, that was an incredibly big step. Sure, he technically should have let her pick her own place, but she knew he wouldn't change overnight and picking a fight was the last thing she wanted. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll move home tomorrow."

She smiled even though he couldn't see her. "I can't do that. I've got to put in my notice and pack up my apartment here."

"I'll hire movers."

"Dad, no. I can handle it."

"By yourself?"

"I didn't say that." She wasn't quite ready to tell her father about Adam. Until she got a grip on her own feelings, she wouldn't mention him.

"Is there someone in your life?"

"*Dad.*"

"Okay, okay. If there is someone, and if it gets serious, you will bring him home?" The way he asked the question tugged at her heart.

Her and her father had always been close growing up. When she was old enough to move out though, she'd started to crave her independence and they'd butted heads. He wouldn't give her breathing room and she hadn't

been willing to compromise. So for the last couple years they'd fought and bickered more than they'd gotten along. Something she couldn't handle any longer. She missed her relationship with her father.

"Of course I will."

"When can I expect a definite answer?"

She raked a hand through her hair. "I'm giving you one now. I might need a week to settle in once I move back, but I'm telling you now that I'll take the job."

"I'll give you two weeks once you get back. That's a month over all. I'll contact Larry in the morning and have him email you what to expect."

"Shouldn't you run this by him first?"

"No, he's seen your resume and he wants you. I'm sure the fact that you're my daughter has a lot to do with it, but he's been dragging his feet hiring someone. You're more than qualified for this job, Izzy. Don't get hung up on your last name. I have faith in you and so does Larry."

"Thanks, Dad."

After they hung up, she slipped her phone back into her apron. The bathroom was still quiet when she exited the stall so she splashed cold water on her face.

She might be making a huge mistake, but she had to take the chance. Not just with Adam, but with her life in general. She had to stop running

away from her heritage. Deep down she knew that's what she'd been doing these past couple of months. Hiding.

It was time to face up to her life and actually challenge herself. Working for her dad excited and terrified her at the same time. But maybe that was a good thing. And the thing with Adam, well, she'd just figure that out too.

She patted a paper towel over her face and went back out to relieve Adam. She found him building a pyramid out of straws. "Bored?" she asked as she ducked under the hatch to join him.

He nodded. "Just slightly."

"Did Don already leave?"

"Paid and gone." He patted both his pockets, then pulled a lighter from one and handed it to her. "I forgot. He said to say thanks and he'd see you in a day or two."

"Thanks." She slipped it into her back pocket. "Have you seen Toby yet?"

"Still no sign of him."

She glanced back down at the near empty bar then back at Adam. "Would you mind watching the bar one more time?"

He shook his head and lightly gripped her hips, pulling her against his body. "Did you start dating me so you could pass off your workload?"

"Ha ha." She leaned up to kiss him.

His eyes flared with surprise for a moment but just as quickly his lips hungrily covered hers. Holding onto his shoulders in a tight grip, she savored his taste and the way his big hands slid up her back as he devoured her. Pressing her body tighter against him, she let out a tiny moan as heat pooled between her legs.

Adam jerked back suddenly, his green eyes dark with passion. “Shit, Izzy. Save that thought for later.”

She definitely would. This shift couldn’t end soon enough. Smiling, she wiggled out of his embrace and made her way through the kitchen. She felt a little bad quitting on her boss now, but the sooner she got it over with, the better for everyone.

Adam watched Izzy walk away and fought his physical response. The woman could get his blood pumping with a short kiss. Simply watching her hips sway had him reacting like a randy teenager.

Hell, he even found her light snoring adorable. That alone told him how far gone he was. He scrubbed a hand over his face and glanced down at the two customers. He started to go check on them when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket. After he saw at the caller ID, he looked back toward the kitchen entrance.

“Will you two be okay for a minute?” he called down to the two customers.

Barely looking up from the game on the television, they both nodded so he picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“Adam, how are things?” Edward asked.

He ducked under the bar hatch and headed for the front door. There was no way in hell he could risk Izzy overhearing this. “I’ve still got time, sir.” He hadn’t told her father about the stalker in Coconut Bay yet and he planned to keep it that way. He was handling things his own way and he didn’t want Edward interfering.

“I was calling to congratulate you on landing the Forester deal.”

“What?” he asked as he walked down the sidewalk. He took a seat on one of the benches, unsure if he’d heard right.

“Just got a call from Izzy and it looks like she’s moving home in a couple weeks. Don’t know how you did it, but you held up your part of the bargain so I’m holding up mine.”

He paused for a long beat as he digested the other man’s words. Izzy had made a decision? Since when? More important, why hadn’t she told him? “Sir, I don’t know if I had anything to do with her decision.”

“I expected a different reaction.”

*Me too.* “Sorry sir, it’s just...I don’t want the job. Either we have the right numbers and proposal or we don’t. I don’t want this job based on some crazy deal.”

“Nonsense. I’ll send our standard contract to your office and let you and your brother take a look at it before we get started or make any more decisions.”

“Sir, I don’t want—”

“Take a night to sleep on it. You’ll see that this is the best decision for your company.”

“Sir—”

But he was talking to himself. Sighing, Adam snapped his phone shut and scrubbed a hand over his face. He wasn’t taking the job. He’d have to tell his brother and he already knew how that was going to go over, but he didn’t care. Izzy was everything he’d ever wanted and they had a shot at something real.

“Damn it,” he muttered to himself. Telling his brother was going to be a pain in the ass.

“Bad time?” A voice caused him to jerk upright.

“Detective Dennis.” He nodded at the man and stood.

“Call me Jack, please.”

“You here to see Toby?”

He shook his head. “You and your girlfriend actually. I think we might have made a break in



the case and I just wanted to make sure she was doing all right.”

They both started to walk toward the entrance when the unmistakable sound of gunfire filled the air. And it was followed by a blood-curdling scream.

*Izzy.*

## Chapter Eleven

Toby's office door was open and he was typing on his computer. Izzy knocked as she stepped inside. "Hey Toby."

He glanced up. "Just the woman I wanted to see."

"Uh oh."

He grinned and pushed the keyboard away from him. "Nothing bad I promise. I just wanted to let you know that Jack—Detective Dennis—is on his way down here. He wanted to thank you again for the sketch and I think he's going to be hanging around here for an hour or two."

She frowned. Had something else happened? "Why?"

"He's coming down here to keep an eye on things for a couple hours."

"You mean he's keeping an eye on me?"

He lifted his shoulders apologetically. "Pretty much."

"I guess that's a good thing. Well, relatively speaking." She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am this is happening. I can’t even imagine what Adam’s going through.”

“Adam?” She tilted her head to the side.

“Oh come on, I’m not blind. Anyone can see you two are together.”

She could feel warmth spreading up her neck and cheeks. She was *not* having this conversation with her boss. And she needed to talk to him about something else anyway. “Listen, I know this is probably a crappy time, but I have to put in my two weeks’ notice.”

His head fell back against his chair. “Is this about the attacks?”

“Not exactly. I’m moving home.”

“Damn, girl. You know we’ll miss you but there are four servers already lined up wanting to bartend.” He smiled slightly and any guilt she’d felt disappeared. They would definitely live without her.

“I’m going back up front to relieve Adam. If your cousin shows up I’ll buzz you. Unless you want me to send him straight to your office?”

“Send him here.”

Back up front, Adam wasn’t there. She ducked under the bar and placed two fresh beers in front of the patrons. They were so engrossed with the television, she didn’t bother asking them where he’d gone. She opened the front door and peered

outside. When she didn't see him, she hurried back through the restaurant and into the kitchen again.

"Have you seen Adam?" she asked Bryan, the only cook behind the grilling area.

He glanced over his shoulder as he dropped chicken wings into a fry basket. "No, but I haven't been paying attention."

She chewed on her bottom lip. Raw panic started to rise inside her. It was stupid because she knew Adam could protect himself but the thought of something happening to him made her sick. "Do you have a second to spare? I just want to check out back, but with everything going on I don't want to go alone." Everyone in the restaurant knew there was a criminal on the loose.

"Sure." He wiped his hands on his dingy white apron.

As they walked past Toby's office he didn't glance up from his phone conversation. She pushed open the heavy metal door and stepped out back. With one of the two floodlights not working, half the area was dark. Directly behind the restaurant was a small parking lot reserved for the employees—one she never used—and two large dumpsters. Immediately the smell of rotting food accosted her. She held a hand over her mouth. "Gross."

"Tell me about it," Bryan said.

“Adam? You back here?” she called out.

A beer bottle rolled out from behind one of the dumpsters and a strange feeling filled Izzy’s belly.

“Damn cats,” Bryan said.

Instinctively, Izzy reached out and grabbed his arm. “Let’s go back inside.”

Before he could respond, a man wearing a baseball cap stepped out from behind the dumpster. And he was pointing a gun directly at them.

“What the hell?” Bryan immediately stepped in front of her, shielding her from the other man.

Without warning, the other man shot Bryan in the chest. It was like everything happened in slow motion. The sound of the gun was surprisingly loud. Not like what she’d seen on television. Bryan flew backward and landed in a puddle of water, his body making a sickening thump against the pavement. She wanted to go to him, but couldn’t.

From somewhere deep inside her, a scream erupted with shattering intensity. She knew it might be the only chance she had to alert anyone to her situation. The back door was too far to run. He’d shoot her in the back if she tried.

He didn’t want her dead. At least not yet. That much she was sure of. And that might be her only advantage.

The man wearing the hat moved toward her and she automatically took a step back. “Try and run and I’ll empty this into your back.” His words were monotone, dead, and they stopped her in her tracks.

“Izzy.” She turned at the sound of her name.

Adam and Detective Dennis appeared from around the side of the restaurant. The detective had his gun drawn. Unfortunately she now stood in between them and her would-be attacker. They both jerked to a halt when they saw her. Shuffling sounded behind her.

She started to turn when an arm circled around her neck and steel pressed into her lower back. Despite her desire to stay calm, heat and cold rushed through her entire body as raw fear threatened to overtake her. She prayed she wouldn’t start hyperventilating.

“Move and I’ll shoot her. I might not kill her, but she’ll be paralyzed from the waist down,” the man gripping her shouted into her ear.

He took a few steps back, dragging her with him. Her heart pounded erratically against her ribcage, but she kept her eyes on Adam.

Adam looked positively feral. Possessed almost. As if he could literally rip out the man’s throat. Adam took a step forward and the man’s grip around her neck tightened.

“Take another step and I’ll blow her away. I mean it!” he screamed in her ear.

“Come on, Phillip. We know who you are. I talked to your old boss and step-brother today. You don’t want to do this,” Detective Dennis spoke, his words provokingly calm.

“You don’t know shit.” He took another step back, farther away from them.

The detective lowered his gun but didn’t sheath it. “We can talk about this. So far you haven’t killed anyone so you’re not in that much trouble.”

Izzy’s gaze fell to where Bryan was barely breathing. He wasn’t dead yet, but if they didn’t call an ambulance soon, he would be. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the back door creak open, then close. Good, that meant someone was calling the cops.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child.” He took another step back and Izzy’s heart rate increased so fast she could barely hear anything above the blood rushing in her ears. Unless she wanted a bullet in her back, she had no choice but to move with him.

Her breathing became shallower, unsteady. She couldn’t go anywhere with him. It meant certain death. She knew it and by Adam’s heated gaze, he knew it too. The detective kept talking and her attacker kept pulling her back farther but she kept her eyes on the man she loved.

Life sure had a messed up sense of humor. She finally found the right man and she might not ever get to tell him how she felt. There were a whole mess of other things she should be worrying about right now, but all she cared about was staying alive so she could tell Adam she loved him.

Adam's green eyes practically glowed under the moonlight. Like a wolf ready to attack. Then he did something surprising. He took a step back. It was small and she might not have noticed if she hadn't been staring right at him. Unfortunately, the man with the gun noticed it too.

He withdrew his gun from her back and aimed at both of them. "Don't make a move."

Sirens sounded in the distance.

That bastard was pointing a gun at Adam so when he moved back another step she decided to take a chance. If she didn't, she was sure to end up on the eleven o'clock news. She elbowed him in the ribcage using all the force she could muster under the circumstances. He grunted and stumbled, but didn't lose his grip around her neck.

The sirens grew even louder. Damn it, why didn't they turn them off? The loud announcement of their arrival might be her death warrant.

Before she had time to contemplate anything else, the man started firing at Adam and Detective Dennis. Loud pops sounded in her ear, then everything around her muted. She shook her head



and tried to fight back as he dragged her along the pavement, but all her movements were slow, sluggish.

What the hell had he done to her? She tried to think when something slammed against her head. A sharp pain was followed by absolute numbness. Even though her brain was screaming in panic to stay awake, she slumped against him as darkness swallowed her whole.

Adam dove behind a dumpster. Jack followed a second later. Pings ricocheted off their metal protection. A few more shots fired, then silence.

Adam watched as Jack pulled out his radio. "Dispatch, this is Delta 20. Officer needs assistance. I repeat, officer needs assistance."

Static rustled. "Delta 20, this is dispatch. What is your location?"

"220 South Street."

"Officer and ambulance already on their way. We received a distress call five minutes ago."

That's all Adam needed to hear. He peeked around the dumpster. "Shit!" They were gone.

"I've got my cell on me. I'm going after him." Heedless of the detective's protests, he raced back toward the front of the restaurant. The sound of squealing tires spurred him on.

As he rounded the building, he saw a dark blue sedan speeding out of the parking lot. Keys

already in hand, he sprinted for his truck. If he couldn't keep up with this guy, the cops would never get to her in time. Maybe they'd never find her at all. And she'd be—no! He was going to get to her.

He jumped into the front seat of his vehicle and burned rubber as he tore out of the parking lot. Instead of heading down Main Street, he hooked a sharp right onto a side street, then made a left onto Livingston which ran parallel to Main Street.

The guy wasn't stupid. He was heading out of town. It was his only choice. But if he saw Adam following, there was no telling what he'd do. He might get nervous and throw Izzy from the vehicle. The thought of Izzy alone and scared with this maniac did something foreign to his entire body. He'd been in some of the worst shit holes in the world, but nothing prepared him for the terror he now experienced.

He felt so damn helpless without a weapon, but given the chance he'd rip the guy's throat out with his bare hands.

As he passed under a green light, he glanced down a side street and saw the car speeding in the same direction. He allowed himself a brief breath of relief. If he could keep them within his sights, he knew he could save Izzy.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket. Trying to keep his eyes on the road, he fished it out without glancing at the caller ID. “Yeah?”

“It’s Jack. Why didn’t you wait? I’ve already put out an alert.”

“I’m tailing the guy right now. He’s heading out of town so you better tell your guys not to try and pull me over for speeding.”

“You don’t have a weapon! What the hell are you going to do if you do catch up to him?”

“I’ll figure that out when that happens.” Livingston was coming to an end so he turned a sharp left onto a side street and headed back toward Main Street. He was nearing the edge of town.

Jack cursed, then said, “Keep them in your sights, but wait for backup. I’m seconds behind you.”

At the light, he made a right onto Main Street and his heart skipped a beat. “Shit!”

“What is it?”

“The road forks and he’s not anywhere in sight.” He had two choices. One road led toward a stretch of beach. The other led toward Jacksonville and away from town. He tried to think what he would do if he wanted to kidnap someone.

“I’m taking the route to Jacksonville.” He glanced both ways, then sped through the red

light. He needed to catch up to the guy before he hit the highway. Once that happened, it'd be impossible to track him.

"I'll head the other way and alert everyone of the situation. I'll call you back."

They disconnected and Adam fought the bile rising in his gut. If anything happened to Izzy, he'd never forgive himself. He didn't know how this had happened. He should have been with her, protecting her. Not on the phone with her father.

Guilt ate at his soul as he sped down the road. Trees flew past him at increasing speed. The road stretched far enough in front of him that he should have been able to see any other cars but there was nothing.

He clutched the wheel and slowed the vehicle enough so he could execute a U-turn without killing himself. Silently, he sent up a prayer and hoped someone was listening.

The man who had taken Izzy wanted her for a reason. A sick reason. He wouldn't want to take her far. No, he'd take her somewhere close and without witnesses. If he'd attempted to take the highway, he'd risk Izzy overtaking him or causing a wreck.

He pulled his phone back out and started to dial Detective Dennis when his phone buzzed again, flashing the detective's number.

"Yeah?"

“I don’t think he’s headed toward the highway.”

“I agree. I’ve already turned around.”

“This guy used to obsess over this girl who stayed every summer with her family. I just got off the phone with the station. They finally got her old address.”

“Let me guess. She’s got a place on the beach?”

“She did—or rather her family did. It’s not theirs anymore”

“It’s a stretch.” Even Adam knew that. He knew the area Jack was talking about. Where the road forked in the other direction, there was a long stretch of houses. Huge beach houses with about half a mile in between each. Most of them were only used during the summer months by their wealthy owners. Finding the right house would be like finding that proverbial needle in a haystack.

“It’s the only lead we have.”

“Where is it?”

He rattled off the address and Adam cringed. He didn’t know the area well, but he knew how long it would take him. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be there in ten,” Jack said.

“Keep your damn siren off,” he growled.

“I planned on it. Call me when you get close.”

Adam's hands tightened around the wheel as he sped along the pavement. There was only one road in and out of where he was headed. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to kill this son of a bitch.

## Chapter Twelve

Izzy opened her eyes and bit back a groan. She tried to move, then realized her hands were tied behind her back. Her head throbbed and her movements seemed muted as she shifted on the floor.

Rolling onto her back, she tried to take in her surroundings. It looked like she was in...a child's playroom? What the hell? The walls were bright pink. Some sort of monstrous Barbie castle sat in the corner. She tried to move again and saw that she was splayed on a Dora the Explorer rug. From where she lay, she could only see one door. Which meant there was only one way out of here. *Wherever here was.* "Damn it," she muttered.

"Hello? Is someone there?" a female voice whispered.

Izzy's head whipped around. She ignored the pain fracturing through her skull. A couple feet behind her a petite woman was blindfolded and tied to a chair. "I'm here. Where are we?" she whispered back.

"I don't know, but he'll be back soon."

"Who?"

“I don’t know who he is, but he said you were going to watch me die,” she whispered again, her voice cracking.

Izzy’s throat seized up as the woman’s words sank in. Shapes and shadows swam in front of her but she forced herself into action. She’d been kidnapped before but she wasn’t a kid anymore and she wasn’t helpless this time. “Hold on.” With effort, she fought through the cobwebs in her brain and struggled to get up on her knees. Izzy half crawled, half scooted toward the girl, careful to keep her movements as silent as possible. Luckily she was on carpet. If the girl was right and someone was coming back, they needed to get free. Her ears were still ringing a little, but at least her equilibrium wasn’t too screwed up.

When she was right next to the girl she leaned close to her ear. “I’m going to pull off your blindfold with my teeth. Don’t freak out.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Can you lean forward a little?” She was too weak to get on her feet just yet.

“I’ll try.” Despite having her hands fastened behind the chair, the girl did as Izzy asked.

Using her teeth, she tugged at the blindfold. When it fell around the girl’s neck, Izzy jerked back in surprise. It was the girl she’d helped the other night. “Andrea?”



Andrea's eyes lit up in recognition. "Where are we?"

Izzy shook her head. "I don't know, but we're getting the hell out of here."

"These ties are impossible to break. I've tried." A few tears slipped down the girl's face.

Izzy shifted so she could look behind her. Andrea's wrists were bloody and raw. She bit her lip. The only way they had a fighting chance was if their hands were free. She tried pulling the restraints herself and grazed something in her back pocket.

The guy had taken her apron with her cell and keys, but he hadn't gotten to her lighter. "I have an idea, but it's going to hurt."

Eyes wide, the girl nodded. "Okay."

She dug into her back pocket and freed her lighter. Next she wiggled and shifted so that her restrained hands were in front of her. She was flexible, but if it wasn't for the fact that her arms and legs were so long, she wasn't sure if she could have maneuvered that way. When Andrea saw the lighter, her jaw clenched, but she nodded in understanding.

"Don't make a sound," Izzy whispered.

Izzy moved behind her and started to burn through the plastic flex cuffs. The damn things were nearly an inch thick. Andrea started to whimper so she stopped. The girl's head whipped

around. Tears streamed down her face, but her words were clear. “Don’t stop. Whatever he’s going to do to us is worse than this.”

Izzy nodded and flicked the flame back on. The rancid smell of the burning plastic smelled almost like an electrical fire. She prayed he wouldn’t smell it before they were free. After a few seconds it snapped open.

When Andrea’s hands were free, she gave her the lighter. With bleeding, burned wrists and hands, the other girl fumbled with it until she managed to hold it steady under Izzy’s hands.

Burning, searing pain ripped through her as the plastic melted onto her wrists. The cuffs were tight, giving very little wiggle room. The agony was so acute, it was as if her hands were actually on fire. She bit her lip hard. The acrid taste of blood filled her mouth, but somehow she restrained from crying out. Andrea was right. No matter how much it hurt, anything he planned to do would be a hundred times worse.

After what felt like an eternity, but was probably only twenty seconds, her hands snapped free. She batted away the involuntary tears running down her face. “He’s going to smell this soon.”

Andrea looked down. “What about my feet? We don’t have time.”

“Hold on.” Without waiting for a response, Izzy grabbed the chair and maneuvered it so Andrea was lying on her back. Thankfully the girl didn’t weigh much.

He’d tied each leg to a chair leg, but without the floor as a barrier, she could slip out of it. “You’ll still have the flex cuffs attached to your ankles so make sure you don’t get caught on anything,” Izzy whispered.

Andrea nodded and stood on shaky legs. By her bruised face, Andrea had already endured some abuse. Her top was also ripped open, but Izzy wasn’t going to ask any questions. They could worry about that later.

“Look for anything we can use as a weapon,” she said.

They both started to look around the room when the sound of the handle rattling stopped them both in their tracks. Too late.

They didn’t have time to make a decision. Izzy grabbed the chair and rushed toward the entrance. If they could take him off guard, even for a split second, they might have a chance. If not, and he had a gun, they were as good as dead. Or worse.

The door opened and raw adrenaline surged through her. She tapped into something animalistic. With strength she didn’t know she had, she heaved the wooden chair above her head

and slammed it into the man. His eyes widened as the chair connected with his upper body.

The man fell back onto the tiled floor of what looked like a kitchen. They were in a house! Which meant they could escape.

The man lay groaning on the floor so she picked up the broken chair and slammed it down on him again.

“Come on!” she screamed at Andrea.

Andrea was right behind her, breathing hard and limping. “We need to call the police.”

“No time. Come on.” Looking for a phone when they could be running wasn’t an option. She didn’t know where they were and she had no clue how long it would take the police to trace a call anyway.

They needed to get away from this guy. And fast. The kitchen was attached to a wide open living room. Floor length blinds were pulled shut so she ripped them open to reveal a sliding glass door.

She quickly unlocked it and they both raced outside. The sound of waves and a salty wind embraced them immediately.

“We’re by the beach?” Andrea said, incredulously.

About twenty yards and they’d be right on the beach. Izzy looked to the left and right. There weren’t any visible houses.

“You bitches!” Slurred shouts from inside spurred them both into action.

Without knowing where they were headed, Izzy grabbed Andrea’s arm. “Can you run?”

The girl nodded so she tugged on her hand. “Stay close.”

They darted across the patio and onto the grass. Heading to the beach would make them open targets and it was damn near impossible to run on sand. She hurried toward the side of the house. It had to lead to a street. And a street would lead to cars and people.

Those were her only thoughts. Escape and survive. Andrea was limping, but she kept up. “Do you know where we are?” Izzy asked as they raced toward the end of the long driveway.

“I think we’re on LeHigh Road.”

“Where’s that?”

“It leads back to town and it’s the only way in and out of here. It’s a small peninsula. There’s a house about every mile, but no guarantee anyone will be home.” Andrea panted and clutched her side as they reached the road.

“Which way?” Izzy asked.

Andrea pointed to the right.

Izzy stared down the dark road. “If we just run down the road, we’ll be sitting ducks.”

Andrea nodded and they both glanced behind them. “So what do we do? He’s going to come after us.”

There were signs for pending construction, but instead of homes, woods were parallel to the street they now stood on. “We’ll have to use the trees as cover.” Izzy looked down at Andrea’s bare feet. “Can you make it?”

“Hell yeah,” she grunted.

They darted across the street and into the cluster of trees. Izzy wasn’t familiar with the area, but if they used the trees as protection, they just might survive.

Adam pulled out his cell phone and dialed Detective Dennis. He answered immediately.

“Is that you behind me?” the detective asked.

“Yeah. How far away are we?”

“Less than sixty seconds. Watch my lights. I’m not pulling into the driveway. We’re going to park about thirty yards away, then sweep the house. You were in the Marines, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

Half a minute later, the detective slowed down and turned off his lights so Adam did the same. They parked on the side of the road on a patch of grass and got out of their vehicles almost simultaneously. From where they were, he had a

partial view of the house through overgrown hedges. Other than that, scattered palm trees and scarce foliage sat between them and the beach.

Not good for trying to stay invisible. At least the sun was down. If the guy was looking out for them, the darkness was the only thing that might help them.

Using hand signals, Jack motioned for him to follow. They crouched and headed toward the hedges. Once they were on the edge of the property, Jack handed him a Glock. "Be careful with it," he whispered.

Adam slid the action back, chambering a round. Jack nodded his approval, then motioned that he would be sweeping around the front of the house and Adam was to take the back.

Using the hedges as cover, Adam raced along the edge until he came to a small opening. Squeezing through, he hid in the bushes until he'd visually scouted the area. When he was sure he was alone, he made a quick dash for the side of the house.

Gun in hand, he hugged the wall until he came to the edge of the house. After a quick glance around the backyard, he crept around the corner until he reached the patio.

Lights were on downstairs and the sliding glass door was open. Long blinds fluttered in the wind,

but it was the only sound coming from inside. Blood rushed in his ears. Were they too late?

He shoved the thought away and inched along the wall until he was at the door. After a silent prayer, he swiveled and entered a living room. Empty.

It connected to a kitchen where remnants of a broken chair were scattered across the tile. Careful not to disturb anything, he maneuvered around the furniture in the living room and stepped over the pieces in the kitchen before pushing the half-open door completely open.

He'd expected a garage, but it looked like a game room for kids. A lamp with a pink shade gave off an eerie glow, casting shadows around the room. He was about to leave when he spied something on the floor. Keeping his gun in a protective stance, he grabbed what looked like two sets of burned up flex cuffs.

Hope immediately coursed through him. Maybe Izzy had escaped. He didn't understand why there were two sets though.

A shuffling sound behind him caused him to turn. Jack stood in the entrance. "The rest of the house is clean. Someone's been here, but it's empty now."

Adam handed him what he'd found. "I think she escaped."



“Hot damn,” Jack muttered under his breath as he pulled out his radio. “I’m calling to check on the backup.”

“I’m going after her. If she escaped, I’m guessing she ran for the woods, not the beach,” Adam said.

He started for the door, but Jack stopped him. “Wait a second, cowboy. I’m going to drive back down half a mile and enter the woods from there. You’ve got about fifteen minutes until my guys arrive. I’ll tell them you’re out there, but it’s dark so be careful not to get your ass shot.”

Adam nodded and raced out the back door with Jack right behind him. There was no way in hell he could completely predict what she’d do, but Izzy was a smart woman so he had to take a chance she’d headed for the woods.

Branches and leaves slapped Izzy and Andrea in the face and legs the deeper they raced into the woods. Her pants were ripped, but Izzy was thankful they were taking the brunt of the abuse. After five minutes of straight running, Izzy slowed and held up a finger to her mouth and pointed to a large oak tree.

The half moon and stars were their only source of light now. Creepy shadows illuminated all around them. Andrea winced as they leaned against the tree.

“How are your feet?” Izzy whispered.

The girl shook her head and wiped away stray tears. Empathy filled Izzy for the other girl. She bent down and quickly untied her shoes. “You’re a lot shorter than me, but I think my shoes might fit.”

Andrea didn’t even argue. She rubbed the soles of her feet before slipping on both tennis shoes. “Do you hear anything?”

Izzy shook her head and glanced around. It was impossible to tell where they were headed. Unless they had more light, they might as well be going in circles. “Do you think we should keep running or walk?”

Andrea bit her lip. “He might be tracking us by now. Maybe walking?”

Izzy agreed. “Okay. Take one of these.” She bent down and picked up two fairly solid sticks. If he came at them, there was no way she was letting him take them back. She’d rather die immediately than be subjected to a slow, torturous death.

Just as they started to emerge from their resting spot, rustling sounded. They both glanced at each other and froze. Andrea’s eyes widened, so Izzy held a finger to her lips and pointed down. They both squatted low. Izzy knew they’d probably left a trail wider than the Mississippi River behind them.

With the wind and various woodsy sounds it was hard to figure out where the noise was coming from. A loud grunt sounded, then a crash, then a shout. Like maybe someone fell. Izzy held her breath. *Maybe it was the police.*

“Stupid bitches!”

When he shouted, Izzy’s hopes fell. He was closing in fast. They slowly stood and when more rustling sounded, they moved until they were on the other side of the tree. If they ran, he’d hear them. Izzy pointed toward another cluster of thick trees. “Walk quietly.” She said the words low. The only acknowledgement she had that Andrea heard her was when she did as Izzy said.

As soon as Andrea was hidden by the camouflage of the woods, Izzy made her move. The night air had grown quiet. Too quiet. The longer she stayed, the higher the chance of being discovered.

She risked one glance behind the tree to see if their attacker had shown himself yet. Her heart jumped in her throat.

He stood two feet away from her.

By the expression on his face, she wasn’t sure who was more shocked. Her or him. She had nowhere to go so she screamed for Andrea. “Run!”

The loud shout jerked him out of his surprise. Stick in hand, she advanced and swung at him. He

ducked out of the way and she stumbled on a tree root. Still clutching her makeshift weapon, she sprawled on her back.

He lunged at her, but she rolled over and barely missed being tackled by him.

“Why couldn’t you just mind your own business?” he growled, and stumbled backward, nearly falling.

Obviously when she’d hit him with that chair, she’d done some damage. Not enough though. The psycho was still standing. She didn’t respond to him, fearing it would deplete her energy and piss him off even more.

A bit unsteadily, they circled each other. He’d lost his gun at least, but he had a wicked-looking knife in his hand. She hadn’t really seen him up close until now, but the dead look in his eyes told her he’d enjoy using it on her. And he wouldn’t be quick.

A blurred movement from out of the corner of her eyes caused her to turn.

“Don’t move.” Adam appeared as if out of nowhere, and he was aiming a gun right at the man’s chest.

The man looked at Adam, who was about twenty yards away. Then he looked back at her. She was only five feet away.

He shifted so that Izzy blocked him from Adam’s weapon.

Raising the knife, he lunged at her. She tried to dodge him and tripped on another root. Something sharp dug into her foot, piercing her already raw skin. She didn't bother to stifle a cry of pain as she rolled onto the hard earth. Her shoulder took the brunt of the impact but it was better than being stabbed.

Behind her she heard Adam shouting something, but she couldn't make out his words over the sound of blood rushing in her ears. Knife still in hand, her attacker was closing in on her.

He was almost on top of her. Using all her strength, she kicked out at him and aimed low. When her foot connected with his inner knee, he grunted and crumbled next to her.

She tried to scramble away but he caught the edge of her shirt and held fast. With his other hand he raised the knife. She lifted her arms, trying to deflect the blow but braced herself for the pain.

Loud shots rang out.

With wide eyes, he stopped midair as if he'd hit an invisible wall. The knife in his hand fell to the ground and he slumped back with a sickening thud. Something wet hit her face. She touched her fingers to her cheek, but it took a second to realize it was blood.

Crimson poured from the four holes in the middle of his chest. Izzy stared at the limp body,

unsure what to feel. Relief? Horror? Uncontrollable shudders racked her body so she wrapped her arms around herself.

Unable to move, she watched as Adam checked his pulse, then a moment later Adam's strong arms encircled her. She buried her face in his chest, unable to express anything other than tears. He murmured something too low for her to understand against her hair. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. His presence made her feel better. Safe.

"You came for me" was all she could manage. Her throat was so tight it hurt.

His arms tightened further. Enveloping her in warmth. "Baby, of course I did." He leaned back and wiped a few stray hairs out of her face. "Are you...okay? Did he hurt you?" His eyes were tormented, his face a mask of concern.

"He didn't touch me." But he could have. Her skin crawled at the thought of that sharp blade cutting into her. She could still see it. The jagged length gleaming as it swung toward her. She fought off a shiver but it was no use.

Adam cursed under his breath and tucked her face into his shoulder, his hands stroking over the length of her spine. Protective and soothing all at the same time. She tried to get closer to him, wanting to take all his strength. "You're okay, Izzy. I'm never letting you go again."

His words caused something inside her to burst. She didn't bother to hide her response. Her grip on him tightened. She absolutely loved this man. Had known it but had been too afraid to tell him. "Adam, I..."

The sound of crunching leaves caused them both to turn.

It was Andrea. "Is he dead?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Yes," Izzy answered, clenching her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering and because she was afraid she'd start crying at any moment.

"He had both of you?" Adam looked back and forth between them.

Izzy nodded. "Yes."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Come on. We're not too far from the road. I've already called Jack. They can come back for the body."

She wasn't inclined to argue. As they started to walk, her knees buckled as she stepped on a stick.

"Damn it, Izzy, I'm sorry. I should have—" He shook his head in disgust as he swept her up in his arms.

Wrapping her arm around his neck, she laid her head against his shoulder and soaked up his warmth and strength.

Andrea looked over at her as they trudged over the leaves and branches. "Thank you doesn't seem adequate, but it's all I've got. I wouldn't have

made it without you.” She swallowed and wiped a few tears away before averting her gaze.

Fighting back tears, Izzy nodded at her and closed her eyes. A few minutes later, the sound of sirens and people talking forced her to raise her head. “What’s going on?” she whispered in Adam’s ear.

When he turned, his hair tickled her nose. “Jack probably called in the National Guard.”

“That’s fine with me.”

As soon as they emerged from the woods, men and women in uniform rushed at them. And they were all asking questions at once. “I can walk,” she said quietly.

Adam’s grip tightened around her. “You’re sure?”

She nodded and when he let her down she put a reassuring arm around Andrea’s shoulder. The pretty brunette’s eyes were filled with unshed tears and Izzy was afraid she’d pass out at any moment.

She threw what she hoped was a pleading look at Adam. He turned to the two officers trying to talk to them and placed himself in front of her and Andrea. “Before they answer any questions, they both need to see a medic. And they’re not talking to anyone but Jack Dennis.”

One of the men hustled off in the other direction and Adam led them to the back of one of



the ambulances. "I'm going to find Jack. Don't move."

When she was alone with Andrea sitting on the back of the ambulance she looked at her. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"He didn't rape me if that's what you're asking." She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "But he made it clear he was going to."

"Did he say anything else to you?"

"Not anything that made sense. He called me a whore and a lot of other racial slurs. And he said he wanted you to watch what he was going to do to me. Do you think...do you think I could call my parents?"

"As soon as Detective Dennis gets here, I'm sure he'll let you call whoever you want. Just hang tight. The worst part is over." She hoped her smile was reassuring, but didn't have the strength to do much more.

One of the EMTs walked over and immediately started firing questions at them. The man's demeanor was gentle as he examined them but it didn't make the situation any easier. Despite her desire to curl up in a ball and hide under a rock somewhere, she found the energy to talk. In a few hours, she'd be at home in bed with Adam. Something told her Toby wouldn't make either of them go into work tomorrow.

## Chapter Thirteen

Adam traced his finger down Izzy's bare arm. Shallow scratches nicked her soft skin and a few bruises dotted her arms. She shifted against the sheets, but didn't open her eyes. He could tell she was awake so he pulled the sheet down, exposing her naked breasts. When he rubbed a thumb over her nipple, the corners of her lips curled up.

"Does the fact that I was almost killed yesterday mean anything to you?" she asked, eyes still closed.

"You're alive, aren't you?" He tried to laugh, but the vise around his chest tightened, and his laugh came out more like a bark. He'd almost lost her last night. The thought made him break out in a cold sweat. It also made him want to lock her up and never let her out into the real world again.

He didn't know that he'd ever get over witnessing her almost die. If he could, he'd go back and kill the guy all over again. "Open your eyes."

"Depends. You plan on making me breakfast?" She opened one eye and he rolled his eyes.

"I'll make you anything you want, woman." He leaned down and nipped her jaw. "Come on. I

want to talk. Don't make me beg," he growled in her ear when she still didn't move.

Sighing, she propped up on one elbow to face him. "Somehow I don't see you begging for *anything*."

He draped a hand over her naked waist as they stared at each other. "Listen darlin', I've got to go out of town for a day."

Hurt and confusion played across her face for a moment. "Today?" The question came out raspy and he forced himself to continue. Before he could move on with her, he needed to take care of some things.

"Now that I know you're safe, there's something I need to do and it can't wait."

She frowned at him and bit her bottom lip in that sexy way he was coming to love. "Is there something wrong?"

"Not anymore." He reached out and cupped her cheek. The burning need to touch her was so great it scared the shit out of him.

For the first time in his life he knew what was important and he wasn't going to let anything get in his way. But before he came clean with Izzy, he had to clear things up with her father and with his brother. He owed his brother an explanation for why he was turning down the deal in person. They'd worked their asses off to get where they were today and he knew he was turning down a

shit load of money. He just couldn't do this over the phone. Savannah was about two hours away. If he left in an hour, he could talk to his brother first, then meet Edward before lunchtime. And it would give him enough time to make it back to Izzy tonight.

"When you will be back?" She tried to scoot away from him, but he clamped down on her hip.

"Don't be angry, Izzy. I'll be back by tonight. If you don't want me to go, I won't." While he wanted to get this over today so he could come clean with Izzy and start things fresh, he wouldn't leave her if she asked him to stay.

"It's important to you?"

"Very."

"Well what is it?"

"I can't tell you and I'd rather not lie. You're going to have to trust me."

She sighed and fell against the pillow. "Fine. I guess."

"When you say fine do you really mean it or is this something you're going to hold against me when we're old and gray?"

At his words she turned to look at him with wide eyes. "What did you just say?"

He swallowed under her intense scrutiny. Izzy was different from any woman he'd ever known. He not only loved her, he was impressed with the way she handled herself under pressure. She'd

been frightened but she'd still gone out of her way to comfort the other girl last night. "You didn't misunderstand me."

"*What* didn't I misunderstand?" Her words came out hoarse.

"I love you, Izzy. You have to know that."

A wide grin spread across her face, and before he could guess what she planned she sat up, pushed against his chest and straddled him. "I love you too." She grabbed him by the wrists and held them above his head as she leaned forward and kissed him.

An invisible force loosened around his chest. He'd never opened up about himself to anyone the way he had to Izzy. He hadn't realized how nervous he'd been she wouldn't respond when he admitted how he felt.

As her tongue rasped against his, his cock surged forward. Reaching between them, he cupped one of her breasts and strummed one of her nipples until it turned rock hard under his touch. She moaned into his mouth and when she rubbed over his erection, he stilled.

He wanted to take her fast and hard but after the night she'd had, he couldn't. Gently, he cupped her cheek. "Hey, do we need to change your bandages?"

Frowning, she turned her wrists over to look at them and nodded. "Unfortunately yes."

She had superficial burns around the edges of her wrists. The doctors said she'd heal completely, but if left unchecked they could get infected. He hooked her by the waist and lifted her off. "Come on before I forget to be a gentleman."

She slipped out of bed and started to follow him to the bathroom, but he stopped and picked up a T-shirt.

"What are you doing?" she asked, when he handed it to her. "Aren't you going to change my bandages?"

"Yes, but after you put some clothes on."

She glanced down at the erection his boxers couldn't hide and grinned. "You're like a machine."

"Only around you," he muttered before heading to the bathroom. She didn't have much in the way of first aid stuff, but the staff at the hospital had given her plenty of backup supplies.

A few seconds later she walked in wearing a shirt that barely skimmed the top of her long legs. Not the shirt he'd handed her. "Damn, Izzy. That's not clothes."

She sat on the edge of the sink and held out both arms. When she moved like that, he got a flash of the skimpy hot pink scrap of material she considered underwear. "I don't want you to forget me while you're gone."

“Not possible,” he chuckled as he pulled out a roll of gauze. At the intent expression on her face he stopped what he was doing.

He encircled her wrists with his hands a little higher than the burns so he wouldn't agitate her skin and pulled her close. “I've got to take care of something today, but it has nothing to do with us.” Technically it did, but he couldn't give her more to worry about. Not when she had so much on her plate right now. When she didn't respond he continued. “It's family stuff, Izzy.” He bit back the lie. Once he took care of things, he'd tell her everything.

“Okay. You're still making me breakfast before you leave.” It wasn't a question.

He shook his head and suppressed a grin as he started to take off her bandages. His princess was going to be just fine.

Izzy shut the front door behind Adam and sagged against it. She couldn't believe he'd left today of all days, but for once, she was actually going to trust someone. It sucked he was leaving, but she'd promised Detective Dennis she'd drop by the station this morning as a follow-up. If she was honest with herself, she didn't mind Adam leaving too much mainly because she needed a few hours alone to decompress. Everything hadn't truly hit her, but she was sure it would soon enough.

She heard her phone ringing from the other room and rushed to get it. When she saw Carolyn's name, she debated whether to answer. She didn't feel like talking to anyone, but if she didn't answer her friend would worry.

"Hey, Carolyn."

"Izzy, how're you feeling? Do you need me to come over? What can I bring?" Her friend shot questions at her like a machine gun.

"I'm still a little shaken up, but I'm totally fine. I promise. If I need anything I'll call."

"Okay, I guess." Carolyn didn't sound completely convinced.

"Will you please stop worrying? Except for a few scrapes and bruises I'm alive and healthy."

"Have you called your father?" Carolyn was the only person in Coconut Bay who knew about Izzy's strained relationship with her father.

She hadn't told her dad about anything that had happened because she knew he'd insist she come home immediately, or worse, send her a ten-man bodyguard team. "No."

"Are you going to?" she demanded.

"Yes, I'll call him... Actually, after I drop by the station, I'll take a mini day trip to see him." It was only two hours away and after all she'd been through, she really did want to see her dad. He'd be pissed she'd kept him in the dark about everything, but he'd get over it.



“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

“Jeez Carolyn, you’re already sounding like a mom. I’m fine.”

After five minutes of convincing her friend she was capable of driving, she changed into a blue knee-length wrap dress and kitten heels. As she swiped on mascara in the mirror, she still couldn’t believe everything that had happened in the span of five days. She’d fallen in love and almost been killed by a raging psycho. Savannah was suddenly looking pretty good.

She grabbed her purse and headed down to the police station. The sooner she got this over, the sooner she’d be on her way to see her dad.

Adam braced himself for his brother’s reaction as he stepped into the waiting elevator of their building downtown. They’d rented out the bottom two floors to other tenants but the entire third floor was theirs. When he stepped out Marian glanced up from behind her desk.

Her eyebrows raised. “You back already?”

“Sort of. Is Ben in?”

She nodded but didn’t say anything else. He opened the door to his brother’s office to find him frowning at his computer screen.

“Problems little brother?”

Ben looked up and grinned. “Not anymore. Good to see you, man. I take it you’ve finally come to your senses and are back to stay?”

“I’ve still got to pack up some stuff, but I’ll be moving back in a couple days.”

“Good because we’ve got our work cut out for us. In about seven days, we’re going to have more work than we know what to do with.”

“What are you talking about?” He took a seat on the uncomfortable metal chair.

“Have you had a chance to review Ballantine’s contract? We need to have a team ready immediately. I’ve already called and emailed the guys I know you’ll want for this gig.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m not accepting the contract.” Adam hated doing this to him, but he hoped his brother understood. It was why he’d come in person. He owed his brother enough respect not to have this conversation over the phone.

“It’s a little too late for that.” Ben crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair.

Blood rushed in Adam’s ears. “What the hell are you talking about?”

His brother shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I signed it.”

“What do you mean you signed it?”

Ben shrugged. “We’re partners, bro. I thought we both wanted this deal. What’s going on?”

We've got the numbers and the guys. If you're freaked out about taking on such a big contract, don't. This is what we've been working toward."

"It's not that. I...I want to start a life with Izzy. I didn't mean to fall for her but it just happened. Taking this deal with Ballantine seems wrong."

Ben's head snapped back in shock. "You love her or something?"

Adam nodded. "As in till death do us part."

His brother let out a low whistle. "Shit."

"I'm going to see Ballantine. I can't go through with this deal."

Ben shook his head. "I hope she's worth it."

"She is." Worth more than any deal or any contract.

"If we hadn't landed the Devlin job I might be ready to kick your ass over this." Ben's voice lightened, letting Adam know his brother was fine with it.

"So we're good?"

"We're fine, man. Just make sure you tell her the truth."

Adam frowned at his brother. "What?"

"Tell her the truth. Once you've talked to Ballantine, you still need to come clean with her. You might have to do some groveling, but don't start anything with a lie."

“I know.” And he did. He was going to tell her everything. She might be pissed but she loved him. She’d have to forgive him.

Fifteen minutes later, he’d made it to the other side of town. Of course he’d hit all the green lights. Normally it took him a solid half an hour to find parking and get to the Ballantine building.

Ms. Priddy looked up as he exited the elevator and greeted him with a warm smile. “Mr. Marcellus. Wonderful to see you again. He’s expecting you so go right on in.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Edward looked up as he entered and motioned toward one of the chairs. “Adam, good to see you. Please take a seat.”

He sat, but couldn’t help but wonder if the older man would be so happy to see him in a few minutes.

Before he could say anything, Edward spoke. “I assume you’ve been by to see your brother so congratulations are in order. Are you a scotch or whiskey man?”

He cleared his throat. “Nothing for me now, sir. Listen, I need to talk about the Forester deal. I spoke to my brother and we want out.”

Edward’s eyebrows rose, but for some reason, Adam was under the impression that he wasn’t all that surprised by the statement. “Why?”

“I love your daughter, sir.”

The other man was silent for a long beat. Finally he spoke. "So why don't you want the Forester deal? We can keep our arrangement between us if you're serious about her."

"No. I'm not starting my life with her based on lies."

"Your life?"

"Yes sir. I'm marrying Izzy." Technically he hadn't asked, and the southern part of his upbringing knew he should be asking the other man out of respect, not telling. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. It wouldn't be real. Whether Edward approved or not, Izzy was Adam's.

"I see. And have you told her about our arrangement?"

"No, sir. But I'm coming clean tonight." Maybe he should have told her before he'd gone but he'd wanted everything taken care of so they could start fresh.

"And there's nothing I can do or say to change your mind?"

"No." He knew he wasn't the kind of man Izzy normally dated or even close to being in her league, but he would love her like no one else could.

The other man's lips tugged up slightly at the corners. Adam didn't know him well enough to know what that meant, but he braced himself for

whatever was to come. Edward started to speak when the door opened up.

Adam turned, expecting to see Ms. Priddy. All the air sucked out of his lungs when he saw Izzy standing in the doorway.

Her mouth opened in shock. A mix of emotions crossed her face almost simultaneously. Shock, confusion, then raw anger. And it was all directed toward him.

“Isabelle. What are you doing here?” Edward asked nervously.

She ignored her father’s question as her gaze narrowed on Adam’s face. “You know my father?” The question was an accusation.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“How long?”

His vocal cords wouldn’t work.

“How *long*?” Her voice raised a few octaves.

“Since before I met you.” The quiet statement dropped with the intensity of a nuclear bomb.

“Bastard.” Her dark eyes narrowed to slits before she turned on her heel and exited the office.

He jumped from his seat and raced after her. As he sprinted down the hall he saw Ms. Priddy returning from the restroom. Okay, that explained how Izzy had gotten past her. “Izzy, wait!”

With her back to him, she pressed the elevator button but didn’t turn around at his request. He

touched her upper arm as he neared her, but she yanked it away as if he were poison.

“Don’t touch me.” Her words were coated in ice, and she refused to look at him.

“Damn it Izzy, will you just let me explain?”

She whirled around, unshed tears filling her beautiful dark eyes. “Did you make some sort of deal with my father?”

“Yes.” Hollowness settled in his gut as she shut down right before his eyes. He could see it in her expression when he said the word.

“Was part of the deal to convince me to move back home?”

“Yes.” What else could he say? He’d wanted to tell her the truth, but not like this.

“What about sleeping with me? Was that part of the deal too?”

“No! Izzy, everything between us is real.”

She swallowed and turned as the elevator dinged. “I don’t want to see you again, Adam.”

“Izzy, just let me explain everything.” He could hear the desperation in his voice and didn’t care if he had to get on his knees and beg. He couldn’t let her walk away.

She stepped into the elevator and shoved at his chest when he tried to follow. “My name is Isabelle. Only friends get to call me Izzy, and you’re... I don’t know what you are, but you’re

not my friend. You're nothing but a lie." She moved back as the doors swished shut.

He felt as if there were a vise around his heart. Each breath he took, it tightened with excruciating intensity.

Adam jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder.

"You feel like a drink now?" Edward Ballantine's lips were pulled into a thin line and his eyes were filled with misery. *Good*. The other man couldn't possibly feel as bad as Adam, but if he was going to be dying inside, he wanted company.



## Chapter Fourteen

### *4 Weeks Later*

In a red-and-black matching bra and panty set, Izzy stared at her closet in despair. If she didn't hurry, she was going to be late. Not exactly the kind of impression she wanted to make on her first day at work. Especially since she was the boss's daughter.

Finally she pulled out a sleek black single-button jacket to go over a black pencil skirt and simple white blouse. Safe outfit and safe colors. Not exactly her style so she slipped on a pair of red peep toe sling back pumps. Just a splash of color.

Her cell phone rang just as she grabbed her purse and was headed out the door. "Hi, Dad."

"I hope you're already on your way. Don't want to be late today."

"Haven't we talked about this already?"

He chuckled. "I know. I'm just giving you a hard time. I, uh, I'm not meddling, but I wondered if you'd finally decided to listen to Adam."

She cringed as she hit the elevator button. Adam had called, sent flowers, emails, letters and even an annoying singing telegram. Talking to

Adam or even about him was too painful and if she was honest, she still held a little resentment toward her father. He'd apologized and she knew he meant well, but her broken heart was barely hanging on. Knowing she'd soon be busy with a new job was the only thing saving her sanity. If she was busy, she couldn't dwell on the man who'd broken her trust and her heart. "Dad, I don't have time right now."

"Damn it Izzy, you *know* he tried to turn down the Forester deal."

Yeah, because her father had only reminded her a hundred times. She didn't care. Adam was still a liar. "So what?"

"He loves you. Why can't you just listen to him?"

She steeled herself against her father's words. "That doesn't change a thing. He lied to me. For all I know, everything he told me was a lie. Besides, why is he still on the job if he *supposedly* planned to back out of it?"

"I've already told you I threatened to sue him for backing out of the contract and tie him up in court for years. Quit coming up with bogus reasons not to listen."

"You wouldn't have sued him." Her father might be a lot of things, but he wouldn't do that to Adam. Not that she cared either way. Or at least that's what she tried to convince herself of.

“Of course not, but he’s a good man and I wasn’t going to let him pass up a lucrative contract because of a mistake I made. I never should have roped him into my little charade.”

“I’m over him anyway. In the future, I’d rather not talk about him if you don’t mind.” Even to her own ears, this sounded like a blatant lie.

“Whatever helps you sleep better at night.” Her father’s condescending tone grated against her ears and on her nerves.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she snapped. Man, she did not need this on her first day.

“Nothing. You told me to butt out of your personal life so I am. That’s the last time I’m bringing Adam up. I’ll probably come by and take you and Larry out for lunch today.”

She tossed her phone into her purse after they disconnected and took a few deep breaths. She was totally over Adam so it didn’t matter that he’d planned to back out of a multi-million-dollar deal for her or if he sent her a thousand bouquets of flowers. She was over him.

Adam stared at his computer screen as it shut down. Today had been another long one and he was about to fall over on his feet. He’d met with two new potential clients but he’d been distracted to the point of being rude. All he could think about was Izzy. For the past month her face had

haunted his dreams with increasing frequency. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. She wouldn't return his calls or emails and he couldn't force her. He wasn't going to stop though. Not until she listened to him. As he packed up his briefcase and stood, his brother stepped into his office.

"You look like shit, man." The first words out of Ben's mouth.

"Thanks a lot."

"I'm serious. Come on, we'll hit a couple bars tonight. Get your mind off her."

"Leave it alone, Ben. Don't you have a date tonight anyway?" He maneuvered around him and stalked toward the door.

Work was the only thing that took his mind off Izzy and even that wasn't working lately. Talking about her was the last thing he wanted to do. Something he couldn't seem to get through his brother's thick skull. Unfortunately, it seemed every time he turned around, that's all Ben wanted to talk about. He was through talking. He'd been by Izzy's condo over a dozen times but she'd never been there. Or if she was, she hadn't answered the door. Tonight he planned see if he could catch her before she got home.

His brother cleared his throat obnoxiously. "I talked to Edward today and he might have mentioned that Izzy was going to be out with

coworkers for happy hour. The bar isn't too far from here."

With his hand on the doorknob, Adam stilled at his words. "You're sure?"

Ben grinned and slapped him on the back. "I'll drive."

Ten minutes later, they sat at a high top table in one of the local hotspots sipping on ice cold beers. It seemed the whole damn city was there for happy hour. Much to his brother's annoyance, he'd already scared off two women looking for a good time. Or maybe they just wanted to score a couple free drinks. Either way, he didn't care. He wasn't interested and couldn't fake a civil conversation. And Izzy still hadn't shown up.

"Did Ballantine really say Izzy was going to be here tonight?"

"I swear, he said... Shit. Don't look now, but I think your girl just walked in."

"Knock it off." He glared at his brother, not wanting to talk or meet any more women. After this drink, he was gone. He loved his brother but he figured he'd lied just to get him to stop feeling sorry for himself.

"*Isabelle*. Over there." Ben nodded behind him. Adam turned and his heart skipped a beat. She'd just walked in with a group of people. Two women and three men. And one of the men was standing a little too close for Adam's taste.

Every primal instinct inside him told him to go over there, throw her over his shoulder and leave. The civilized part of his brain, however, told him to turn around and shut the hell up. For the sake of not going to jail tonight, he swiveled back to his brother. "Order me a shot."

Ben grinned and waved over their waitress. "Two shots of whiskey and another beer for each of us."

The woman nodded and disappeared back into the crowd. Adam glanced over his shoulder again and watched as Izzy's group made their way to a high top table not too far from theirs. She still hadn't noticed him.

"You gonna talk to her or what?" Ben's voice forced him to tear his gaze away from her.

"She looks good," he muttered under his breath. Too good. That only pissed him off. He'd been miserable for the past month and she looked like she'd just stepped off the cover of a magazine. Designer suit, her hair was tamed into some sort of twisted bun that was probably supposed to look professional, but just made her look like a sexy librarian. To top it off, she was wearing come-fuck-me shoes. And that's exactly what he wanted to do. His cock was at full alert thinking about the past month without her. Using his fist had gotten old fast.

“So stop being a pussy and go talk to her. This is what you’ve been waiting for.”

He ignored his brother. Like a masochist, he looked at her again. If that guy moved one inch closer, he was going to go over there and—

As if she felt the weight of his gaze on her, she glanced in his direction. She did a double take. Her mouth fell open for a second before she snapped it shut. Almost immediately she broke eye contact, then leaned in close to whisper something to the man next to her before getting out of her seat.

The man nodded, then motioned for their waitress. Adam watched her maneuver through the growing crowd and realized she was heading for the restrooms.

“I’ll be back.” He threw the words over his shoulder. He was going to talk to her all right and she was going to finally listen.

Moments later, he pushed open the heavy wooden door to the ladies’ restroom. Izzy was wiping a paper towel over her face when he walked in. She blinked when she saw him.

“What are you doing?” The words came out as a gasp.

He looked under the three stalls. “Are you alone in here?”

Mutely she nodded.

“Good.” He flipped the lock into place. “Who the hell is that guy you’re with?” He hadn’t meant to start like that. He’d wanted to apologize and tell her how much he’d missed her. Instead, everything came out all wrong.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “None of your business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, darlin’.” He took a step toward her.

“Don’t call me that. You have no right to call me—”

“Wrong again,” he growled, taking another step in her direction.

Instead of retreating, she moved forward until she stood inches away from him. He stared at her full lips and memories flooded him. Her exotic scent enveloped him, and his cock, which had been at half mast before, lengthened painfully against his zipper. It took a second to realize she was pushing him in the chest and saying something about him being a jackass and a liar.

Without caring about the consequences, he grabbed her by the arms and brought his mouth down on hers. Every fiber inside him wanted to take her right up against the wall and fuck until neither of them could walk straight.

For a brief moment, she protested, but when her arms wrapped around his neck, he knew he’d won. Hungrily their lips clashed. Her fingers dug



into his skin as she ground her hips against his. He started to push her up against the door when a loud banging brought him back to earth.

She suddenly shoved at his chest and tried to put some space between them, but he wouldn't let go of her arms. He'd spent too many long weeks without her.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" she demanded.

He ignored the question. "Who is that guy you're with?"

Izzy rolled her eyes. "He's a colleague. Today was my first day at work so I decided to go out for drinks with a couple people in the office. I don't want to talk about him though. I want to know what the hell you're doing in the ladies' bathroom."

Another bang sounded on the door, but they ignored it.

"I think it's obvious why I'm in here. I want to talk. Then I saw you looking like *this* and talking to that guy and I lost it." That man would never know how close he'd come to getting knocked out.

Her eyes narrowed at him. "Looking like *what* exactly?"

He dropped her arms and motioned with his hands. "Like sex."

Her lips curled up slightly at the sides in a tiny smile. That had to be a good thing, but he prepared himself for the worst.

They stared at each other until she broke the silence a few seconds later. "I've missed you," she said quietly.

"I've missed you too." More than he'd imagined possible. When she simply looked at him with those big brown eyes, he continued. "I really messed things up didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did." She paused and placed a perfectly manicured hand on one of her hips. "So how do you plan on making it up to me?"

"What?" Had he heard right?

"You heard me. If you're serious, I'll expect foot rubs on demand for the next year and complete control of the television remote. And that's just the beginning."

"You're very bossy."

"Yes. I am. I'm also very demanding."

"How about forgiving?" He suppressed the hope burgeoning in his chest, preparing for another rejection.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I know you tried to back out of the deal. I've just been so angry with you for lying I couldn't talk to you."

"Damn it, Izzy, I'd give up my left nut for you." The words were coarse and not what he'd meant to say.

An unexpected laugh burst from her, and his chest tightened. He'd missed that sound. She reached out and placed a gentle hand on his chest. "That's not exactly the poetry I dreamed of, but it'll do."

"Marry me, Izzy." The words came out of his mouth of their own volition. He hadn't planned to say them. Hell, he hadn't planned to see her.

Her eyes widened, but she didn't remove her hand from his chest. "Are you seriously proposing to me in a *bathroom*?"

"Yeah."

A small smile tugged at her lips. "Okay."

"Is that a yes?"

She leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You're not completely off the hook, but it's a yes. I only have one stipulation."

"Anything."

"We're making up a story about your proposal because I'm not telling people you proposed in a ladies' restroom."

"Deal." He leaned down to kiss her when another annoyed knock sounded at the door.

She groaned. "Let's get out of here before they kick us out."

"Where are we headed?"

"My place. We have a lot of catching up to do." She winked over her shoulder as she unlocked the door.

Raw anticipation coursed through him at her words. They still had a lot to talk about, but talking was the last thing on his mind.

# Epilogue

## *1 Year Later*

Izzy couldn't stop smiling if her life depended on it. She glanced at her husband—*husband*—as they descended the stairs toward the reception area. The actual wedding ceremony had passed in a blur. She was sure the rest of the night would probably be just the same.

She couldn't believe she'd spent a year worrying about the small details of their wedding and now that the day was here, she only cared about the honeymoon.

“Do you know all these people?” Adam murmured so low only she could hear. He pulled at the collar of his tux, looking nervous and sexy at the same time.

“Nope. It looks like Dad invited half the city though.” She'd told her father she'd wanted something small and simple but he hadn't listened. He'd given her a lot of space this past year so she'd let him have the big wedding. It wasn't worth the argument and she figured she was his only daughter and she was only doing this once anyway. When it came down to it, she didn't

care where they were or who came. Only that she and Adam were married.

As the DJ announced their first dance, the idle chatter stopped and their song started. Unexpected tears stung her eyes as he swept her onto the dance floor. In her head she knew they were surrounded by people, but she had eyes only for him.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look today?” His deep, intoxicating voice and the heated look in his eyes sent shivers straight to her pinky toes.

A smile tugged at her lips. “Only about a hundred times.”

“Get used to it, *wife*.”

Her breath hitched as he pulled her tighter against him. For the first time in her life, she knew exactly what she wanted. And in his arms was the only place she wanted to be.

## **About the Author**

Katie fell in love with romance at a young age thanks to books she'd pilfered from her mom's stash. Years later she loves reading romance almost as much as she loves writing it. However, she didn't always know she wanted to be a writer. After changing majors too many times to count she finally graduated with a degree in psychology. Why psychology? People and motivation fascinate her. She now spends her days writing fast-paced romantic suspense and dark paranormal romance.

Though born and raised in Florida she's lived all over the East Coast and now lives in the Deep South. When she's not creating stories she can usually be found spending time with her husband or one of the many eclectic animals they've adopted over the years.



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