

# **Leather, Lace and Rock-n-Roll**

**By Mia Dymond**

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Smashwords Edition

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Cameron, I can’t believe you’re making me do this!”

Rachel took one look around the jam-packed auditorium of the Diablo Convention Center and felt the sudden urge to lose her lunch. No way could she do what Cameron expected her to do. The mere thought of it was totally ridiculous. She glanced at the closest exit sign and opened her mouth to speak.

“Don’t even think about it,” Cameron said from beside her.

“Why?”

Rachel’s stomach spun and her cheeks heated as Cameron tugged her through a sea of spandex and sequins.

“You tossed your back stage pass, remember?” Cameron’s infectious giggle was swallowed by the sound of hysterical, screaming women.

Rachel squeezed her eyes closed and swallowed hard. *How could I forget?*

Still, she had to try to change Cameron’s mind one more time. “Can’t I just buy you a pair of shoes?”

Rachel glanced down at Cameron’s feet, wrapped in a pair of strappy black sandals that boosted her height at least six inches. Surely the Louis Vuitton pumps in Bergmann’s window could provide a tempting incentive.

A sly grin creased Cameron’s lips. “Nah,” she said as she wrinkled her nose and pulled Rachel through the crowd.

Rachel exhaled in frustration. Cameron had managed to talk her into doing something completely out of her comfort zone. Cameron had this bright idea (one of her best, she claimed) to get backstage to meet world-renowned rock star, Jaydon Hawke, at his concert. A completely Cameron thing to do, but oh so not Rachel’s modus operandi.

Cameron tightened her hold on Rachel’s elbow. “I won’t miss this opportunity, not even for you.”

Rachel frowned. Although she understood Cameron’s excitement, she wasn’t being entirely rational. “You realize less than 25% of women who attempt this feat actually succeed, don’t you?”

Cameron looked at her like she grew two heads. “Where on Earth did you hear that?”

“I didn’t. I researched it. It’s true.”

Cameron shook her head. “You really need to relax, Rachel.”

Rachel gave a heavy sigh. “There’s no guarantee we’ll get back there, let alone see Hawke.”

Cameron stopped and folded her arms. “First of all, let me remind you that it was you who forced me to orchestrate this mission.”

Rachel flinched as guilt poked her. “I know and I’m sorry. I was sure you’d go back there without me.” Rachel tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “If you’ll just wait two seconds, I can run to the hospitality counter and explain. I’m sure I can finagle another pass.”

The mischievous look that overtook Cameron’s face made Rachel’s nerves tremble.

“Too late.” Cameron dismissed her with a wave of her hand and nudged her toward the stage. “Besides, you know as well as I do, I don’t care if we see Hawke or not.”

Rachel paused. She knew good and well Cameron nursed a huge crush on Hawke’s drummer, Sean Pirelli. And apparently, being the object of Cameron’s raging hormones was a dangerous thing.

“Yes, but what if someone sees me?”

Cameron chuckled. “Believe me, Rachel, no one expects to see you here.”

Rachel didn’t know whether to be insulted or relieved. But, Cameron had a point. Rachel had never been to a rock concert in her life and certainly never tried to get back stage.

So she followed behind, both amazed and terrified when Cameron maneuvered them all the way up front and two feet from the backstage entrance. Unfortunately, the massive, bald, mountain of a man standing guard appeared to be unimpressed by Cameron’s tactics.

He gave a slight nod. “Ladies.”

Rachel forced a smile and tried to hide as best she could behind Cameron’s five foot frame.

In her usual sassy manner, Cameron tossed her naturally blonde curls, flashed her black and white VIP pass, and pointed behind him. “We’re supposed to be back there.”

In one practiced swoop, he took her pass and slid it into his left front jeans pocket. “The meet-and-greet was two hours ago.”

Rachel’s nerves skipped a happy dance. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.* Her relief, however, was short lived when she reached for Cameron’s elbow and grasped only air.

Cameron took two steps closer to the guard.

Rachel could only stare as Cameron fluttered her eyelids and molded her soft curves to his hard, muscled body. Then, with a steamy smile, she stood on her tiptoes to caress the top of his smooth, shiny head with her fingertips, and leaned in to tickle his ear with a whisper.

Rachel stole a quick look around the area to make sure they hadn’t attracted any attention. When her gaze rested back on the bouncer, he stood with his hands crossed over his sculpted chest, his head lowered to gaze over the top of his Armani sunglasses, lazily perusing Cameron’s body from top to bottom. Rachel let some of the tension slide from her shoulders. Cameron had everything under control. He was quite obviously occupied for now. Maybe Cameron could pull this off alone.

Cameron braced one smooth, shapely leg against his hip and Rachel’s eyes widened when she noticed the zipper of his black denim jeans strained to restrain his enthusiasm. Rachel moaned under her breath and fought the sudden urge to leave Cameron holding the bag. But once again, loyalty to Cameron stopped her and she shifted from foot to foot, certain they would be thrown out any minute. Instead, he stood morbidly still.

Rachel swallowed hard when Cameron took a step back and placed both hands on the hem of her blouse.

“Now,” she told Rachel.

Against her better judgment, Rachel followed Cameron’s example and in the next second she and Cameron lifted their shirts and presented their lush, firm, bare breasts to the valiant soldier. He cocked an eyebrow and Rachel could’ve sworn his upper lip lifted a millimeter. Although she was totally embarrassed, Rachel felt somewhat relieved that

his gaze was zeroed in on Cameron. And, obviously he'd forgotten all about her legs.

Rachel shook herself free of her temporary insanity and yanked her shirt back in place, shocked that she actually participated. But even more shocking was motorcycle-man's overly satisfied smile as he pushed his shades back up over his eyes, unclipped the velvet rope of the barrier, and waved them through the entrance.

"See?" Cameron smoothed her top with both hands and plumped her breasts back up to the top. "Piece of cake. Now you're ready for Harley's."

"A biker bar?!" Rachel tossed her hair over her shoulder in defiance as she repositioned herself. "No way."

"Way." Cameron threw a playful wink at the burly watch dog still poised at the gate. "You've just proven your equipment is in tip-top condition."

Rachel gave Cameron her best *when hell freezes* look. "From now on, my equipment stays put."

"Well, we're back here. Nothing's stopping us now."

"What exactly did you say to him?"

"I just explained we only had one pass but it would be worth his while to pretend we had two. Obviously, he agreed."

Although still not convinced the whole evening had not been a terrible nightmare, Rachel followed Cameron down the corridor, puzzled by the lack of security. Surely there were more bouncers than the one at the gate. A twinge of apprehension tickled the base of her back bone.

"Uh, Cameron, where is everybody?"

Even Cameron seemed to be bothered by the emptiness. "Kinda weird, huh? You'd think—"

Rachel stopped in mid-step, just in time to stop herself from plowing into Cameron. "What's wrong?"

Rachel glanced around Cameron and her mouth fell open. There, in the flesh, headed straight for them was Jaydon Hawke himself. She looked closer. In the flesh was an understatement. His shirt flaps blew in the breeze behind him, his toned, sculpted abs rippled with each step. And lower, his tight red, leather pants had been left unzipped enough to catch a glimpse of his obliques, carved into a sexy valley leading to a nicely wrapped package between his legs.

"Hey ladies."

Rachel raised her gaze from his groin to his face, a split second before Cameron passed smooth out, her lemon drop curls threatening to smack the cement on the way down. Baffled by both Cameron's reaction and Hawke's arrival, Rachel managed to overcome her confusion long enough to catch Cameron and fold her neatly on the floor.

"Darn you, Cameron, this was your idea," she mumbled.

Rachel squatted beside Cameron and fanned her vigorously, tempted to slap her silly. "Sonuva—"

Hawke's half-curse stalled her motion.

"What now?" she snapped.

Almost embarrassed by her sharp tone, Rachel released a heavy breath. It wasn't his fault her evening had gone to hell.

"I need you to come here for a minute."

Rachel snorted and resumed moving the air around Cameron. She gave Cameron's

shoulder a shake. *For Pete's sake, wake up!* "I can't leave her like this."

"She's fine," he insisted, "it happens all the time. I really need your help."

Rachel rolled her eyes. Of course this happened all the time. Forcing herself to admit Cameron was still out cold, she glanced over her shoulder.

"Oh, God." Her jaw fell open. "What are you doing?"

Hawke stood inches from her with his hands between his legs and a smirk on his face. "Not what you think." He moved his hands to the side. "My zipper is jammed. You're going to have to help me."

Mortified, all she could do was stare like a star struck idiot. *This is not happening.* "You have got to be kidding."

"I wish like hell I was."

Rachel glanced down at his groin and then back at him. "No."

He released a throaty chuckle. "You don't expect me to go out there like this, do you?"

Rachel couldn't help but lower her eyes again. His pants were so tight, it was quite obvious what rested beneath. He'd cause a riot.

Without moving her gaze, she made a last ditch effort to sway his decision. "Just leave your shirt untucked."

Another low, sexy laugh. "You've never seen my show, have you?"

Rachel shook her head.

"My pants really need to be zipped," he said. "My shirt won't stay on long."

Rachel closed her eyes and briefly chastised herself for blindly following Cameron. *This is exactly what I get. First I flash the bodyguard, now this.*

Determined to end the madness, she released an aggravated sigh. "Can you come closer? I really don't want to leave her."

She saw his jaw clench as he inched closer. Rachel glanced back down at Cameron who appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Surely this wouldn't take long. And he did appear to be sincere about needing her help.

Rachel turned and crouched between his legs, positioning one palm on each side of his zipper. Sudden movement under her right hand made her flinch.

"Um." She swallowed hard. "That's only going to complicate matters."

He placed a finger under her chin and tilted her head until their eyes met. "Sweetheart, there's not a damn thing I can do about that."

Rachel's cheeks burnt. There was absolutely no way she would work the zipper around that obstacle. "I don't think I'm the right person for this. Let me get someone else."

Something between panic and amusement flashed in his eyes. "No time. I've got to get out there."

Rachel released another sigh and refocused on her task. The zipper was stuck halfway up the tract. If she could force it back down, he could take it from there.

"Can you squeeze the edges together?"

For a split second she thought he might argue. And then he reached down and pinched the fabric between his fingers.

Rachel moved her hand from the overwhelming warmth of his body and grasped the zipper. After a few quick tugs, it slid free. Just as Rachel was about to declare victory, she heard Cameron's voice behind her.

“That was definitely not part of the plan.”

Sheer, white terror enveloped her as Rachel looked over her shoulder. Too late she realized that in her surprise, her hands lay plastered to Hawke’s groin, her fingers all but wrapped around his anatomy. Cameron now sat on the concrete floor, her legs folded beneath her, both eyebrows raised in curiosity.

“Later,” Rachel mumbled.

She redirected her gaze back to Hawke with every intention of moving her hands. But when scalding heat burnt the distance between them, she lost all good sense. For one split lust-filled second, she actually considered slipping her hands inside to play.

*Good Lord.*

“You’re good to go,” she managed to say. “Be careful zipping up.”

He glanced down between his legs. “Watch your fingers.”

Rachel gasped and dropped her hands as she stood.

He tucked himself deep within his pants and zipped without incident before he extended a hand. “Jaydon Hawke.”

Rachel tilted her head to one side and slid her hand inside his, momentarily at a loss for words. What exactly was she supposed to say to the man whose anatomy she literally held in her hands?

A shiver of awareness tickled her neck as he stroked the back of her knuckles with his thumb. “I’ll have security bring you back after the show. I owe you something.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow, amused that he would offer such a thing. Little did he know, she didn’t need a security escort. After all, she had done just fine by herself.

She extracted her hand from his hold and pasted a polite smile on her face. “That’s really not necessary.”

Cameron cleared her throat and Hawke raised an eyebrow. Apparently, neither Cameron nor he thought her serious. Rachel bit her lip to keep from screaming. She was as serious as the heart attack she was sure to experience in the next few seconds if her pounding heart didn’t slow its pace.

Hawke’s expression turned from one of confidence to one of utter confusion, but the arrival of a familiar face interrupted any further discussion. Rachel took a deep breath to calm her trembling nerves as the bouncer from the gate glanced at her, then Cameron, then at Hawke.

“Everything alright back here?”

“Fine, Max,” Hawke answered.

Max gestured at Cameron with his head. “What about her?”

Rachel turned to look at Cameron, silently pleading for her to release her usual quick retort. Cameron, the traitor, just raised her eyebrows and grinned.

Determined to remain composed, Rachel glanced at Max. “I’ll get some water.”

Max nodded. “Wait here. I’ll take you girls back out as soon as Hawke’s on stage.”

As soon as the order left Max’s mouth, Rachel knew Cameron’s sass couldn’t resist.

“I’m sure we can find the skybox.” Cameron folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head to the side. “Since it’s the only section hanging from the ceiling, it shouldn’t be hard to locate.”

Both the bouncer and Hawke stood silent for a moment and Rachel prepared herself for the worst. Instead, Hawke gave her one last mouth-watering smile before he turned and started toward the stage, granting her a bird’s eye view of his backside in the process.

No wonder groupies fell at his feet. She, however, was no groupie.

“Thanks again,” he said over his shoulder.

“Any time,” she muttered.

Wiping her trembling hands on her skirt, Rachel attempted to regulate her breathing while she offered Cameron a hand. “Are you crazy? He’s ten times your size!”

Cameron only shrugged as she took Rachel’s hand and stood. “Spill.”

“You passed out.” Rachel gave her balls-of-steel best friend a smug grin. “You blew your big chance. And after you flashed your goodies too.”

Cameron gave her a devilish look. “I’ll buy that explanation. But, what exactly did you and Mr. Hawke do while I was out?”

Rachel hesitated, not quite sure how long Cameron had been awake or what she saw.

“His zipper was stuck.”

Cameron’s eyes flashed. “That was an awfully quick explanation.” Rachel could only stare open-mouthed, but Cameron apparently didn’t expect further elaboration. “Maybe you don’t need to relax as much as I thought.”

Rachel’s head spun in relief. “Maybe.” She poked her hair behind her ears and nudged Cameron toward the exit. “C’mon, the show is about to start.”

Cameron smirked. “Think we can find our seats without the hired muscle?”

“I’m not waiting for him, Cameron,” Rachel growled. “I’ve already been humiliated enough for one evening.”

Cameron stopped and grasped Rachel’s shoulder for support while she bent to adjust the strap on her sandal. “Two more minutes. Then we’ll be tucked in the skybox, safely behind tinted glass, enjoying the show.”

Rachel glanced toward the stage and wondered if Cameron would flip out if she suggested they call it a night and go home. “Are you sure you feel okay?”

Cameron looped an arm through Rachel’s and closed the distance to the exit. “Of course. Do you?”

Rachel tossed Cameron’s question through her brain. Physically she was fine. Her heart had resumed its regular cadence and her hands had finally stopped shaking. Mentally, though, the jury was still out.

“I’m fine,” she said finally.

Cameron giggled and bumped her with one hip. “Hawke’s fine, huh?”

Rachel’s body warmed. Fine? No, more like smoking hot. Luscious. Lollipop lickable.

Cameron cleared her throat.

Rachel shook herself free from thoughts of wild, sweaty sex and wrinkled sheets. “He’s okay,” she answered. “Just not my type.”

“Yeah, right.” Cameron paused just outside the door to the skybox and glanced at the electric eye. “Damn.”

“What?”

“Macho man has my pass.”

Rachel shook her head. The only way inside was to scan the pass. “Wonderful. And he has no idea who we are.”

Cameron braced one hip against the door and checked the gold watch on her wrist.

Rachel fought herself from shaking Cameron like a rag doll. “So what now, Cameron?”

“We wait.”

“For what?”

“Rachel, we just exposed ourselves to Jaydon Hawke’s bodyguard.”

Rachel pinched the bridge of her nose. “Don’t remind me.”

“Believe me,” Cameron continued, “the watchdog knows exactly who and where we are. We would’ve never been passed through the gate if he didn’t.”

Rachel didn’t even want to know the specifics of Cameron’s logic and she was past the point of argument. “Let’s just leave.”

“What? No!” Cameron pushed herself off the door and took Rachel’s hands. “Look, the whole purpose of this evening was to break you out of your shell. Have you changed your mind?”

Rachel took one look at Cameron’s sparkling blue eyes and knew she couldn’t lie. “No.”

“Admit it, you’ve had fun.”

Rachel gave Cameron’s hands a squeeze and then dropped them. “Okay, it has been fun.”

“Then relax, we’ll get in there.”

“Yes, but Cameron, my reputation—”

“Will not suffer from being here. You work with people of Hawke’s caliber all the time.”

“True, except I don’t flash them.”

Cameron giggled and rolled her eyes. “No one except me and the guard know about that.”

Rachel couldn’t stop the smile that split her lips. “Can you believe it?”

Cameron nodded. “I knew you had it in you.” She gestured down the hall. “Here comes the cavalry.”

“The big guy?”

Cameron grinned. “No, an usher. And this time, hold on to the pass.”



## CHAPTER TWO

Hawke waved to the sold-out auditorium one last time before he stepped off stage and into the corridor. Only this time, a pack of hungry women swarmed him like angry bees, stingers poised and ready to attack. Hawke noticed a fiery redhead in the front wearing a short leather skirt, her exposed cleavage winking an invitation. He grinned. Some things made this chaos all worthwhile.

“You want her?”

Hawke glanced at his security manager. He wouldn't even have to ask twice. And he knew all too well she wouldn't hesitate to oblige. “Not tonight, Max.”

Hawke waited for Max to ask why. Instead, Max's expression remained blank and he wedged himself between Hawke and the buzzing mob.

Hawke looked back toward the entrance. “So, where are the girls?”

Max pushed a wayward, slender, almost-nude body back behind him. “Not enough attention for one night?”

Hawke snickered as he and Max made their way down the hall toward Hawke's dressing room. “You know who I mean.”

“Blonde and busty?”

“Yeah, her and the one with killer green eyes.”

Max stopped, tossed a look over his shoulder and then raised an eyebrow. “You noticed her eyes? Over her rack?”

Hawke allowed a slow grin to separate his lips. Obviously, they both agreed photographs didn't do the two women justice. No, he didn't notice her eyes first. In fact, with her positioned directly below his line of vision, not to mention kneeling between his legs, he really hadn't cared if her eyes were even open. Her breasts were perfect, probably a C cup from his best guess, and free from the constraint of a bra. Firm and plump with peaked, rosy-pink nipples. Wild, carnal thoughts of ripping the zipper completely out of his pants and thrusting his aching, needy cock in the valley of her cleavage had almost pushed him over the edge.

And then she lifted her gaze and he found himself drowned in a sea of sparkling green emeralds. Not that he wasn't still distracted by her breasts, but those eyes trapped him. Full of curiosity with a touch of dare me thrown in.

No way would he explain that to Max.

“I noticed that too.”

Max hesitated just a second and Hawke felt the silent consideration of his half-assed admission. “She declined your invitation.”

A piercing stab of disbelief sliced Hawke's thoughts. “Why?”

Max shrugged. “Something about ruining her reputation. Guess she didn't realize flashing me to get back here wouldn't help much.”

Hawke frowned. “Really? She flashed you?”

Max nodded. “Both of them.”

No freakin' way. Hawke's ego roared. He literally had to force her to unjam his

zipper, and yet she willingly gave Max a peep show.

“What do I have to do with ruining her reputation?”

“My Intel reveals she’s one of those professional types. Doesn’t mix business with pleasure.”

Hawke gave a confident grin. “Then why is she here?”

Max made a dramatic show of looking around the area. “She’s not.”

“This wasn’t part of the plan,” Hawke mumbled.

“I did my part. You were the one supposed to keep her back here.”

“Now what?”

“I know where they’re headed.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, but you can’t go.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a dive, a biker bar.”

“So?”

“Have you forgotten who you are?”

Hawke mulled Max’s question, tempted to answer yes. The sexy sorceress appeared out of nowhere, aroused him enough to give him an irritating hard on, and then disappeared. He couldn’t let her get away.

“I’m going with or without you.”

Max stopped outside Hawke’s dressing room, folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head to the side. “Think so?”

Hawke smirked. No one got past Max and he knew it. But he also knew Max would do anything necessary to complete his mission, even when he wasn’t quite agreeable. So he tried again.

“What about her friend?”

Max didn’t move a muscle. “Her name is Cameron Tremaine. Give her to Huntington. Groupie Management is his specialty.”

Hawke raised an eyebrow. “Sure?”

“Positive. Call me when you’re ready.”

Hawke stepped inside his dressing room to find Greg Huntington, his manager, waiting as usual.

“Great show,” Greg said as Hawke sat down opposite him.

“Wild.” Hawke rubbed his hands down his face. “I met the most interesting woman.”

“How?”

“I found her back stage.”

“She got past Max?”

“She and a friend enticed Max to let them through the gate.”

“Did you invite her back after the show?”

“I did, but she bailed.”

“Get her name?”

“Max did. Her name is Rachel Newberry. And get this, she’s an architect.”

“Good thing you’re looking for one, huh?” Greg shook his head. “I just heard her name today.”

Hawke felt the tension leave his shoulders. “So you know how to find her.”

Greg raised both eyebrows. “She must really have something you want.”

”Greg,” he hedged, “it’s not what you think.”

Greg tilted his head to one side, obviously expecting an explanation.

Hawke released a heavy sigh. “I had a wardrobe malfunction.”

“A wardrobe malfunction,” Greg repeated.

Hawke threw his head back against the chair. “I got my zipper jammed.”

“Classic!” Greg roared. “You oughta market that strategy. If a beautiful creature had been up close and personal with my one-eyed -”

Hawke cut him off with a snicker. “Believe me, it was definitely stimulating.”

“How did she get it loose?”

“I don’t remember. I was too distracted.”

“Did her friend help?”

Hawke pierced Greg with a menacing stare. “No.”

Greg shifted to retrieve a small card from his pocket. “The welcoming committee left you a message.” He handed the pale pink card to Hawke.

Hawke grinned and opened the card.

WELCOME TO DIABLO

Greg snickered. “What flavor?”

Hawke smudged the lipstick print signature with his index finger and placed it to his lips. “Wild Cherry.”

“How do you do that?”

“Talent,” Hawke bragged.

Greg shrugged. “Anyway, Rachel’s the architect you want. She comes highly recommended.”

“How’d you find someone so fast?”

“Apparently, she’s in high demand. All my contacts agree she’s the best. We can’t go wrong. She’ll sign a confidentiality agreement and she’s your favorite flavor other than cherry.”

“When can we meet her?”

“I’ll call tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds promising.”

“Are you sure this is what you want to do, Hawke?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re at the top of your game.”

“I’m not leaving the game, I’m just changing positions.”

Greg shrugged again and stood to exchange a handshake with Hawke. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“No, not tonight.”

Greg frowned. “You’re not sticking around for the party?”

Hawke shook his head in denial.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Later, Greg.”

He watched Greg leave the dressing room, already rewinding their conversation. Rachel Newberry. What was it about her that demanded his attention? Besides being insanely beautiful and crouched in one of his favorite positions, she hadn’t said much. His groin still throbbed at the memory. She didn’t throw herself at him, tear off his clothes or maul him. Instead she seemed shell-shocked. And very empathetic.

She wasn't impressed.

His ego winced. Not possible. Somewhere in the depths of his mind reality cleared its throat. Who the hell cared if she were impressed? Although her interest would make things easier, it wasn't necessary. Hawke ignored the mocking voice in his brain and squared his shoulders. Another chance meeting would change her mind.

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Rachel's pulse pounded with uncertainty as she and Cameron stood outside the dark, seedy bar known to locals as Harley's.

"We're really going inside?"

"Relax," Cameron soothed. "It looks worse than it is."

Cameron flung open the door and an eerie, cloudy fog welcomed them inside. The thick, choking cigarette smoke floating on the dim rays of light over the bar coated them with its musky smell. Loud, obnoxious rock music shook the walls, while men dressed in skin tight, worn leather kept time with women who were barely dressed. Rachel's lips trembled with a threatened smile. Although the place had a sordid reputation, the atmosphere didn't differ too much from Hawke's concert.

Rachel closed her eyes and swallowed, summoning every ounce of courage she possessed, and stepped inside. Once enveloped by the cover of semi-darkness, she relaxed somewhat when Cameron steered her to a corner table.

"I'll get us a drink," Cameron said.

"I'm going with you."

With a hand to her shoulder, Cameron forced Rachel into a chair. "Sit. You'll attract more attention if you're alone."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she grumbled as Cameron left the table.

Twisting her fingers together, Rachel fidgeted and glanced around the room. Two burly guys near the dart board extended a nod. She gasped and lowered her eyes. After tonight, Cameron was on her own. No more adventure for me.

Cameron returned and put four shot glasses on the table. "See anything you like?"

"In this place?" she hissed, picking up one of the glasses and tossing it back.

"Slow down!" Cameron shrieked, grabbing the glass from Rachel. "You don't drink, remember?"

Rachel frowned. "I drink."

"Wine doesn't count," Cameron clucked. "Especially when it's only once a month."

"This isn't going to work, Cameron." Rachel picked up the next glass and swallowed the amber liquid.

Cameron sighed. "Look, Rachel. Every woman feeds a bad-boy hunger and you will too. Just try. Believe me, these men are more than willing to satisfy your curiosity."

"I need another drink."

Cameron scooted a glass across the table with one french-manicured fingernail.

"Drink mine."

By the bottom of her third shot, Rachel felt much more optimistic about Cameron's plan. Except that even the false courage provided by alcohol couldn't convince her to confront a man in this place. Realistically, some of them were attractive but none of them interested her enough to consider something more than conversation.

Her mind drifted back over the events of the evening. Flashing the bodyguard had been truly out of character, but she felt oddly empowered by the experience. Who would have ever thought that two, naked, mountains of flesh could be so convincing? And being one-on-one with Jaydon Hawke's most prized possession? Now, that was definitely an uplifting experience. She drained her glass again and slammed the door on her thoughts. Too much alcohol.

"I don't like anything here," she said adamantly.

"You're being too picky," Cameron scolded. "That guy over there in the corner by the pool table is checking you out. He's not bad."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "And just how much have you had to drink? I can smell him from over here."

"You drank mine," Cameron said wryly.

"No need to worry about that, Ladies," a deep, rich male voice assured them.

Rachel raised her gaze to see two men propped against the neighboring table. She squinted at one of them. Was that a skull and crossed bones? On his forehead?

"Bones and I will be more than happy to buy you another."

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Hawke's nerves tightened as he glanced around the dark parking lot and then at Max. "My Intel is screwed. Nothing I dug up suggested she would even consider coming here."

Max gave him a smug grin as whistles and catcalls echoed in the stillness.

"They're here," he said, scanning the perimeter as they opened the front door.

Once inside, he pointed at a corner table.

"There you go," he mumbled. "Thelma and Louise on your left."

Hawke focused on the table, his eyes bulging in disbelief as the drama unfolded. His green-eyed witch had her tiny fingers wrapped around a glass, slinging the liquid all over the guy next to her. Her friend was busy dodging advances from the other man.

"Bad idea," Max grumbled. "Let's go."

"No," Hawke demanded. "We need to put a stop to that."

Max grunted. "We? Hell no."

Hawke clenched his teeth, not quite sure why anger punched him in the gut. "Yes."

"I'll come back once you're locked in the car."

Hawke's blood boiled and he balled his fists. "I said I'm staying."

Max had the balls to grin. "You gonna stomp your foot and cry too?"

Even Hawke had to chuckle. "Look Max, we can't leave them and you know it."

"All the blonde has to do is plant that spike of a heel in his groin. He'll stop."

"What's her name again?"

"Can't remember."

Hawke grinned. "Yes you can."

"Cameron."

Hawke looked closer. Sure enough, the two women were hell bent on fending off unwanted advances. He watched, actually impressed when Cameron ground her spiked heel into her victim's foot.

"Looks like she took your advice."

"Damn female. Stay here." Max bulldozed his way through the crowd. Without a

second thought, Hawke followed.

And then the swarm of women on the dance floor noticed him. Several sexy winks were thrown his direction.

Max frowned over his shoulder. "Thought I told you to stay put."

Hawke grinned. "You did."

Unfamiliar jealousy flooded Hawke as he approached the table and watched as his sexy sorceress' unwanted suitor stroked her breast. Besides the fact it was totally inappropriate, his own fingers itched to feel her dandelion-soft skin pressed to his hard, primed body. He bit back the smile that pulled at his lips.

"Oh look, Rachel," the blonde drawled, "more company."

"Hawke!" Rachel giggled mercilessly while she swatted traveling fingers from the swell of her cleavage. "You're back! Hold my drink."

"She's blasted," Max pointed out.

Liquid sloshed over the side of her glass as she thrust it at him. "This is my friend, Cameron, and this is Bones," she continued.

Hawke stepped closer and shoved the wandering hands from her body. "Keep your hands to yourself."

With a cocky smirk, Bones inched her skirt up her creamy thigh. Hesitating only a second, Hawke clenched his fist and connected it with the inky name tag on Bones' forehead. The man swayed and rose to fight, moving only the musky air when he dangled from Max's iron grip.

"Get lost." Max tossed him a few feet from the table. "And take Hop-a-Long with you."

After Max hoisted Cameron under one bulky arm, they watched as the two men scurried from the bar.

"Put me down, Hulk," Cameron shrieked.

"Are you going to behave?"

"Do you want me to?" she challenged.

Max set her gently on the floor and stepped out of her reach.

Cameron reached to replace her sandal strap around her ankle. "We had it under control."

Max nodded. "Sure you did."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Hawke asked, halfway between amused and angry.

Cameron crossed her arms over her chest. "Why are you here?"

"I'm satisfying my bad-boy hunger." Rachel reached for her empty glass. "I need more beer."

Hawke stared wordlessly, processing her admission. Bad boy hunger? This was definitely one fucked-up mission.

Cameron snatched the glass. "No more beer. You've had enough."

Rachel moaned. "Now I'll never know."

"You'll know more than you think in the morning," Cameron muttered as she gestured for Rachel to get out of her chair.

"Need some help?" Max asked.

Cameron gave him a cursory glance. "No thanks, Dudley Do-Right, we can make it."

Hawke studied Rachel while she stood and tossed her hair over her shoulder. She

shifted her skirt back in place and buttoned the top button of her blouse. Then she smiled like the whole evening never happened. Even drunk, she was so controlled. Loose-lipped, but controlled.

“Hawke!” a female voice screamed over the music. “It’s really Hawke!”

“Hawke,” Max growled, “You’re an idiot.”

Cameron shoved Rachel through the bar and out the door as a squealing female riot erupted.

“Good grief,” she grouched as she unlocked the passenger door of her car and motioned Rachel inside. “They act like they’ve never seen anything like him.”

“They haven’t seen him like I have,” Rachel murmured as she threw her head against the cool leather headrest.

Cameron pushed Rachel to the middle of the seat. “Oh yeah?”

Rachel gasped and then hiccupped. “I’ve had way too much to drink.”

Cameron pulled the seatbelt across Rachel’s body and locked it securely in place. “I knew something else happened while I was out. Do you want to confess now or in the morning?”

Rachel closed her eyes and moaned. Cameron giggled evilly and shut the door.

After climbing in on the driver’s side, Cameron looked over at Rachel. “You haven’t had enough to drink to pass out.”

Rachel opened one eye. “I might have.”

“No, you haven’t.” Cameron started the car and backed out of the parking space.

“I told you what happened anyway. Sorry, no more to tell.”

“Okay, but something doesn’t add up. He’s not your type, yet you obviously saw something that impressed you.”

Rachel threw both hands in the air. “Fine, I’ll admit it! From my position earlier tonight, I was extremely impressed. I’ve never been so tempted in my life. Are you happy?”

Cameron tilted her head to one side. “Well, not really.”

“Why?” Rachel shrieked.

Cameron bit her lip to keep from laughing. “Because I’m wondering why you didn’t take advantage of that position.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, Cameron, that’s enough! My head is about to explode and I might throw up.”

Suddenly not humored, Cameron pressed the accelerator to the floor. “I love you like a sister, Rachel, but not in my car.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Rachel rubbed her aching temples and took another swig of Gingerale. What had she been thinking? Obviously, her bad boy hunger had been satisfied because hunger was not what she felt this morning. Not even a twinge. Cameron was just going to have to accept the fact that she was beyond help. No more adventures, no more flashing, and no more biker bars. Ever.

Thank God she didn't have any appointments scheduled today. She jumped when the shrill shriek of the telephone on her desk stabbed her eardrums.

"Rachel Newberry," she answered, attempting to disguise her discomfort.

"Ms. Newberry, my name is Greg Huntington. I received your name from a friend of mine who highly recommends your services."

Rachel shifted to a sitting position and chased a rolling pencil around the desk. "How can I help you, Mr. Huntington?"

"One of my clients would like to build a house in the area. We would like to schedule a meeting."

She slapped the pencil with her open palm and wiggled it between her fingers. "I'd love to help you, however, my client list is full at the moment."

And I'm too hung over to focus on my calendar.

She heard a throaty chuckle across the line. "You might change your mind after meeting him."

Him? Her? Who cares?

"I'm sorry, Mr. Huntington, I'm just so busy right now. I could give you the name of \_\_\_"

"My client is Jaydon Hawke."

A tense silence vibrated between them. Her head pounded double time. Any minute now one of two things were going to happen: Her head would explode and scatter what was left of her brain all over the desk, or the alarm would buzz and she'd wake up from this horrible nightmare.

"Ms. Newberry?"

She cleared her throat. "Does Mr. Hawke know who I am?"

Another cocky snicker. "Of course."

Rachel pinched the bridge of her nose. So much for anonymous. "And he still asked you to call me?"

"He insisted. Why?"

Rachel hesitated. How much did this man actually know about her encounter with Hawke? "Mr. Hawke and I have met."

"Yes, I know." A note of arrogance slipped through his response. "I don't understand your hesitancy."

Rachel sighed. Either he didn't know the whole story or he did and chalked it up to rock star drama. Still, she tread carefully. "We met last night under some very ... unusual circumstances. Trust me, after last night's fiasco, you should be surprised he wants to



hire me.”

A loud thump pierced her left eardrum. O..kay... Apparently there were several things he didn't know. She squinted one eye and held the phone at arm's length until he spoke.

“Ms. Newberry, we would really appreciate an appointment.”

Another wave of nausea crested in her esophagus. She swallowed hard, desperate to get him off the phone. “If you're certain.”

“I am.”

“Fine. I'll meet him after hours.” Rachel scribbled Greg's name on her calendar. “Six o'clock this evening.”

“We'll take it. Hawke and his security manager will be there.”

Rachel returned the receiver to the cradle and threw her head back against her chair, only to regret the rapid movement. She squeezed her eyes closed and begged her stomach to behave. Why on Earth had she been so agreeable to meet Hawke? And now what? By now the bouncer had filled him in on all the excitement. Rachel groaned. How was she supposed to know Hawke planned to hire her? She pressed her palms to her forehead and took a deep breath.

Wait a minute.

Cameron was probably right, the beefy bodyguard was much more than muscle. Now she was certain they'd checked her out. And the manager, what's-his-name- she leaned forward and checked her calendar – Greg Huntington. He mentioned a referral from another client. So, had Hawke planned to hire her before the concert?

She reached for the aspirin near the computer. Whatever his reasoning, she was stuck now. Besides, even if she did call and cancel, Cameron would reschedule. In fact, Cameron would welcome the opportunity to flex her muscle at both Hawke and his bodyguard. Rachel released a heavy sigh. Hawke just didn't realize how lucky he was that he'd caught her at a weak moment.

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Lt. Jaydon Hawke twirled the business card through his fingers as Cpt. Max Sterling drove him to meet the mysterious Rachel Newberry. After the unexpected events of the last twenty four hours, he wasn't sure quite what to expect. The sexy woman he had encountered last night was a total surprise. Where was the meek and plain architect that had been secretly followed and photographed? He hadn't been as prepared as he'd thought.

Part of him wanted to believe she arranged the after-hours meeting for personal reasons. After all, they hadn't had an opportunity to talk much at the show. Or at Harley's. But then, Greg mentioned her hesitance at meeting at all. Almost as if she had no intention of ever seeing him again. Hawke scrubbed a hand over his jaw, aggravated by the question marks assaulting his brain.

“Take it easy, Hawke. Stick to the plan. You're just supposed to seduce her, like always.”

Max's booming command caused Hawke to shove his thoughts of Rachel to the side and at least attempt to appear smooth. “What makes you think I'm planning anything more?” Hawke shrugged.

“She’s a suspect and I have to do whatever it takes to get close to her.”

“Something else is going on in that thick skull of yours.”

“Just strategy.”

“If you say so.”

“She’s not what I expected.”

“They never are.”

“No, really. According to her profile, she hardly ever leaves the office, she has one close friend, and she rarely socializes.”

“So?”

“So why the hell was she at the concert?”

“We lured her there, remember?”

Hawke weighed that fact. True, they had approached her client with concert tickets, hoping he would pass them to her. “We provided the bait, but why did she accept?”

“I think the blonde hellcat had something to do with that.”

Hawke snickered. “That is highly possible.”

“You know as well as I do criminals don’t advertise.”

“She doesn’t fit the prototype.”

“You’ve spent too many hours behind a computer, Hawke. I think there’s more to it.”

Hawke folded his arms across his chest. “Oh yeah? Then, please, fill me in.”

“Seems to me you’re caught up in your cover. She’s a young, beautiful piece of tail who didn’t kiss your ass. You want to find out why and change her mind.”

“Gee-zus, Max, she’s a mark!”

Max raised an eyebrow but didn’t answer.

Hawke opened his mouth to argue then decided against it. Max knew the score. Screw the assignment. Rachel’s rejection stung. Not because she wasn’t interested – she was interested, her body had betrayed her in that regard – but because she wouldn’t give him a chance.

Max pulled into the nearest parking space. Hawke crammed on a baseball cap and dark sunglasses and waited for Max to open his door. After Max circled the vehicle twice in his routine check for anything unusual, they sauntered through the front door of the office building.

Max nodded at the security officer seated behind a row of monitors and then steered him onto the waiting elevator. Within the next 30 seconds, the heavy metal elevator door opened, depositing them just outside a closed office door. Hawke glanced at the nameplate. Newberry & Tremaine.

Max gave him a sideways glance. “You ready for this?”

Hawke grinned. Nothing, not even a cold metal zipper could keep him out. “Hell yeah.”

Max grasped the doorknob, strolled into the office, and then nodded for Hawke to enter.

Two steps inside, Hawke stopped short when he caught sight of an amazing heart-shaped ass covered in what appeared to be red silk waving hello from the reception desk. Hawke raised his glasses and looked at Max. Sorry sucker was zeroed in on the same thing.

Hawke replaced his glasses and cleared his throat. Max grinned.

“Hold your horses.” Muffled by the position, the voice at the other end released a

heavy dose of sass into the room. “I dropped my earring and it rolled down here somewhere. Oh, here it is!”

As soon as the figure stood and faced them, Hawke knew this would be an interesting meeting.

The tiny blonde with the gorgeous rack pocketed a gold hoop earring and gave her skirt a tug. “May I—” Her voice suddenly broke in mid-sentence. “Holy cow.”

Hawke flipped through his mental rolodex. Karen? Kelley?

“Cameron Tremaine.” She stuck out her hand and grinned. “And you are Jaydon Hawke.”

“Hawke.” He shifted and accepted her outstretched hand, surprised she didn’t seem bothered that both he and Max could probably describe her lingerie in great detail.

“Okay, then, Hawke.” The devil danced in her eyes as she flicked a gaze toward the back corner office. “Rachel’s on the phone. She’ll be right with you.”

“Thank you.”

Cameron’s ever-present grin remained glued on her face as she turned to Max. “And since you’ve already manhandled me, I guess I should get your name.”

“Max.”

“Max . . .” she hesitated, obviously expecting him to give his last name.

“Just Max.”

“Oh come on, big guy,” she taunted. “Even prisoners give their name, rank and serial number.”

Hawke wasn’t sure if it was the thought of her panties or not, but his blood pressure rose a few degrees. Nobody, women included, challenged Max. His size alone discouraged it. Yet this one, petite, blue-eyed bombshell didn’t appear to give a damn.

“Behave, Cameron.”

Another wave of heat rippled his skin as he turned to see who dared tame the sassy lioness. Relief unknotted his stomach muscles when he saw Rachel Newberry, the same dragon slayer who had conquered the fiery jaws of his metal zipper.

“Mr. Hawke, we meet again.”

As he grasped her outstretched hand, Hawke took a second to consider his strategy while his shaded eyes bounced between the two women. Should he leave Max with Cameron? His first thought was to reschedule, exit stage left, and run. Except that Cameron stood between him and the door and there was just something about her that, well, scared him. Instead, he waited for Rachel to say something. But she didn’t.

So he played it smooth and stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. “Ms. Newberry.”

She squeezed then extracted her hand. “Come on into my office and we’ll review your plans.”

Hawke glanced at Max then cleared his throat. “You gonna be okay out here?”

Max folded his arms across his chest. “I’m not going anywhere, Hawke.”

Convinced Max had everything under control, Hawke turned and followed Rachel down the hall, tantalized by the sway of her curvy hips.

A sense of dread pooled in Max’s stomach as he watched Hawke disappear into the back office. He shifted his eyes to the blonde poltergeist hovering next to him.

“So,” she said in the baited silence, “we meet again also.”

He moved his head about two millimeters to the left, not offering friendly

conversation.

“You would have to be the strong silent type,” she mumbled as she sat on the sofa. She patted the cushion beside her. “You might as well make yourself comfortable. They’ll be awhile.”

Max looked from the sofa, to the front door, and back at her.

She rolled her baby blues. “I won’t bite.”

He bit back a threatened grin. Probably not. But who said it was her he was worried about? Fully dressed in a short business skirt that he knew from experience hid some very biteable thighs, she still excited him. The shoes she wore today once again added height and screamed take me. He swallowed, lost in thought. If she were standing there naked in the high heels, a strand of pearls hanging around her slender neck, he just might possibly latch his mouth onto her and brand her.

He smiled a slow, easy grin. “I might.”

She gave him a full pouty smile. One he wanted to kiss right off her face. “You wish.”

She didn’t know how true her statement really was but Max wasn’t ready to share that fact.

“So, you’re the hired muscle.” She crossed her tiny feet with blood-red polished toenails and propped one elbow against the back of the couch.

Max turned his attention to the third button of her blouse, the one no longer fastened. The same one that revealed a flash of red lace. *Hell’s bells*. What was with this woman and her lingerie? Then again, the lingerie was just a front. His first-hand knowledge of what rested beneath the lacey disguise shaped his thinking at this very point in time.

When her fingers pushed the button back through the slot, he raised his eyes. “Yeah.”

He waited for her to blast him for ogling her. Instead, she continued their conversation as if she didn’t even notice.

“Don’t worry, this place is a fortress.”

“Really.” Max refocused his attention. “Security didn’t even budge when we came up.”

She didn’t appear surprised by his accusation. “Rachel cleared you. Besides, security makes allowances for her clients. They assume there is a bodyguard in tow.”

“What about cameras?”

“We don’t have them in here, but the building is covered.”

“Are all the doors secured?”

She didn’t immediately answer. Instead, she studied her nails, as if bored with his interrogation. “You’re obsessed.”

“It’s my job.”

She narrowed her eyes until they resembled a Siamese cat on the prowl. “Is Hawke in some sort of danger?”

Max chuckled at her suspicion. She was sharp. “The only thing Hawke is in danger of are overzealous groupies.”

“You have nothing to worry about. Rachel is definitely not a groupie.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

He peered over the top of his glasses and waited for her to answer his unvoiced request for explanation.

Her cheeks actually pinkened but her gaze never wavered from his. “Desperate times, desperate measures, and all that jazz,” she mumbled.

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Rachel motioned to a chair beside her desk then sat in her own. Hawke spun the chair around and straddled it.

“Would you like me to dim the lights?” she asked, her eyes twinkling in amusement.

He tilted his head in confusion.

“Your sunglasses,” she explained.

Hawke grinned at her humor and removed the glasses. “Ms. Newberry—“

Soft green eyes full of sincerity caressed his when she spoke. “Rachel, please. After all, I think we’re past polite introductions.”

“Rachel then,” he amended. “You didn’t stick around last night.”

She studied him for a moment, then folded her hands and gave him a half smile. “Can we just pretend last night never happened?”

He paused to consider her question. Could she forget about the interaction between them? Crouched between his legs, her hands dangerously close to giving them both a night to remember didn’t even leave an impression?

“You really want to forget about that?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Most definitely. And I can honestly say I’ve never been in that position before.”

“I have,” he mumbled.

Rachel’s mouth dropped open and Hawke realized too late what had just slipped from his lips. Yet even in her state of shock, electricity crackled between them. Her soft, pale facial features taunted him, dared him to run his thumb across her full, pouty bottom lip. Her clear, emerald eyes reminded him of a prowling tigress and reached deep into his soul to steal his thoughts.

“Well,” She cleared her throat. “Tell me about your plans.”

Hawke forced his mind back on business. House plans. The reason she thinks I’m here. “I don’t really have anything in mind. I’m just in the market for real estate.”

“Since you’re here, I’m assuming that means you’re interested in building a house.”

“Yes.”

Rachel lowered her eyes and scribbled on a note pad. “Will you spend much time there?”

Every single hour of every single day if she were around. “A lot.”

Her head snapped to an upright position, as if she were startled by his admission. “You plan to live here?”

Hawke’s confidence rose a few points. He now had her full attention. “You’re surprised?”

“I assumed you spent most of your time working.”

“I’ve decided to slow down and pursue some other interests.”

Other interests like the sexy, young creature sitting across the desk from him. Her beauty held him hostage each time he looked at her, set him off kilter, and left him with a bad case of cottonmouth.

“What about real estate?” she continued. “Is there a particular area you’re interested

in?”

“No, I haven’t had much time to check it out yet. Any ideas?”

“I design quite a few homes in Pacific Valley Heights.” She slid a colorful brochure across the desk. “The community is exclusive and expertly gated. If you’re interested, we need to make application quickly. The committee meets once a week.”

He gave her a playful wink. “Think I’ll pass inspection?”

“You won’t have any problems.”

He flipped through the brochure without really paying much attention then glanced back at her. “Do you live there?”

She pursed her lips. “No.”

Hawke shifted as he caught a note of avoidance in her tone.

“Where are you staying in the meantime?” she continued, pointedly changing the subject.

“I have a suite at Escondrijo Deserte.”

The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of her mouth. “Desert Hideaway. Very nice place. An appropriate camouflage for someone of your notoriety.”

Mesmerized by the warmth and silkiness of her voice, Hawke felt himself being sucked deep into a sea of desire. And he would kill the person who even thought to throw him a life preserver. “Have dinner with me.”

“What?” She gave him a blank stare, her eyes once again wide in amazement.

“Dinner. You do eat, right?” he teased.

“You want to have dinner with me,” she repeated slowly.

“Yes, Rachel, dinner.”

“Only dinner.”

For now. “Yes.”

Rachel tilted her head to one side as if trying to process his invitation. “Forgive me. It has been my experience that men like you tend to expect a little more than dinner.”

Hawke frowned. An insult? “Men like me?”

“Yeah, prominent, successful, used to getting what you want.”

If she even had half an idea of what he really wanted, she’d turn him down and run. “So, you’ll go?”

She smiled and shrugged. “Sure.” She pushed her paperwork to the side and stood to shoulder a handbag resting on the corner of the desk. “Somehow I don’t think you’d settle for McDonald’s, so I know a place. Maybe you’ll be more comfortable away from Cameron.”

“Is anyone comfortable around her?”

She giggled and he almost came undone. That one breathy little sound made his libido tap dance. “Cameron’s harmless,” she assured him. “A little overbearing but harmless. In fact, we work as a team. You’ve hired both of us. She’s a very talented interior designer.”

“Cameron?” Hawke slid his glasses back in place. Somehow he couldn’t picture her peacefully painting in a corner somewhere. “The same woman who slid past Max at the concert?”

Rachel frowned. “Max?”

“My security manager. The one sitting in your front office. Apparently you two met at the gate.”

Her cheeks turned bright red yet she managed to ignore his push for information and redirect the conversation. “Actually, you and Cameron could probably work out a trade.”

Hawke opened the door and motioned her through. “Trade?”

She nodded and reached around him to pull the door closed. “She has a major crush on your drummer.”

Hawke followed Rachel back into the lobby, relieved to see Max in one piece. That would’ve been hell to explain.

Max eased himself from the sofa. “Where to?”

“Dinner,” Hawke answered.

Cameron’s eyebrows climbed her forehead.

Rachel shrugged. “Would you like to join us, Cameron?”

Cameron grinned. “No thanks. You forget I have a warm, willing male waiting for me at home.”

“Suit yourself,” Max muttered just before he opened the front door.

Rachel frowned. “Who?”

Cameron folded her arms across her chest. “You know who.”

Rachel paused for a minute and tossed her hands in the air. “Of course! Maxwell,

your ca—”  
“Have fun, Rachel.” Cameron stood from the couch. “And call me when you get home.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

The ride to the restaurant was a true test in restraint for Hawke. Seated inches away from him, Rachel sat quietly with her hands folded in her lap. Meanwhile, he fisted his own hands in an attempt to keep them to himself. He swallowed another dose of irritation. Normally there would be a whole lot of touchy feely going on between them by now. Yet, she appeared relaxed and not the least bit interested in anything other than casual conversation.

“Romero’s is just up the next hill, Max,” she said into the silence.

Hawke turned to look out the window. Romero’s Elegancia sat at the top of a hill overlooking the sleepy desert below. The two-story, adobe building was the only structure in the area, surrounded on all four sides by a wooden fence. Tonight, bright moonlight bounced off the water feature in front, streaming a path to the front door where waiters in white evening jackets waited to greet each guest. Rachel was exactly right, this place wasn’t McDonald’s.

“Take the second left,” Rachel said into the darkness. “We can go in the back entrance.”

Max steered to the back of the restaurant, stopped beneath a green canopy, and then opened the back passenger door. He gave Hawke a nod. “Call me when you’re finished.”

Rachel gave Max a smile. “You’re welcome to join us.” Max offered Rachel a hand and lifted her from the car. “Thank you, Miss Newberry, but Hawke can handle this on his own.”

“Rachel,” she said softly.

Hawke raised an eyebrow. Would Max take the bait?

With his usual lack of emotion, Max nodded. “Rachel. I’ll wait out here.”

Hawke exited behind Rachel to find her already in conversation with the maitre de. “Hello, Manuel, nice to see you again.”

“Buenos Noches, Rachel. Would you like your usual table?”

Rachel nodded and Manuel led them to a corner table upstairs, away from the crowd.

“Obviously you come here often,” Hawke said.

“I’ve been here a few times,” she admitted as he pulled a chair out for her. She turned to look around the area. “Why do I think this isn’t a coincidence?”

He shot her a wicked grin as he sat opposite her. “I called ahead.”

She arched one fine eyebrow. “Before you asked me to dinner?”

“I had high hopes,” he teased.

He watched as her face paled and she shuddered ever so slightly. “No, really, Rachel, I didn’t have a reservation.”

He signaled the waiter who arrived shortly with wine in hand. Hawke poured two glasses then leaned back casually in his chair, amazed at what an enigma Rachel



presented. Not only was she physically beautiful, she was gentle and extremely intelligent. Not his usual mark.

Rachel lifted her glass and downed half of the scarlet liquid before he could take his first swallow. He watched her set the glass back on the table and then focus her gaze on his chest. He looked down to see what held her attention and noticed his shirt had managed to free itself from several buttons, exposing smooth, bare skin. He glanced back at her and saw her nipples tighten beneath her silky blouse.

“Hungry?”

She snapped her eyes from his chest and met his head on. The look he found told him she wasn’t hungry, she was starved.

He felt himself harden and opted for casual conversation. “You didn’t say whether you enjoyed the concert.”

Rachel lifted her glass again and swallowed the remaining contents before she spoke. “Actually, I learned a few things.”

“Really?” His interest piqued. “This is the first time I’ve ever been told my show was educational.”

“I found out several things.” Her sparkling eyes flashed in the candlelight. “I discovered that your security guard is a breast man, and that most women are not there to hear the music. But most importantly, I learned that it’s perfectly acceptable to go to a rock concert bare-bottomed with my panties in my pocket.”

Hawke choked on his wine, coughing as the liquid fire burned the back of his throat and the vision of Rachel without panties knocked him on his ass.

“Don’t mind me, Hawke.” She handed him a napkin. “Sometimes I’m a little too matter-of-fact for my own good. Brains instead of beauty.”

He stopped sopping the wine from his shirt. “What?”

“I said, brains instead of beauty. Brainiacs like me tend to be quite verbal.”

“Who told you that?”

“No one.” She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. “Forget it.”

“Whoever said that was a blind idiot,” he mumbled as he tossed the wet napkin on the table.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere with several napkins. Within seconds, Hawke was dry and dinner was ordered.

“Look, Hawke.” Rachel folded her arms across her chest and leaned back in her chair. “It’s very sweet of you to compliment me, but it’s not necessary. I know the score. I’m not the party girl you saw at the bar. Cameron decided I needed a night out, that’s all. Gorgeous, successful, famous men like you hang slinky beautiful supermodels from their arms. Not women like me.”

Hawke tossed her words back and forth in his mind. She honestly believed every word she said. And if he disagreed, he risked cementing her warped image of him.

“You think I’m gorgeous?”

She eyed him narrowly from across the table. “I forgot egotistical.”

He unfolded her arms, took her hand in his, and braided their fingers. “I thought you were beautiful when I first saw you last night, even more so when you extracted me from the jaws of death, and absolutely breathtaking tonight.”

Rachel’s eyes bounced from their enjoined hands into his eyes. He witnessed her inner battle as she digested his compliment. *Believe me.*

“Thank you,” she said finally. “You’ve probably worked very hard to perfect that line.”

Hawke frowned at her response. She was genuinely oblivious to the extent of her beauty. And her brains doubled the effect. But what was more incredible was her belief that he was feeding her a line. Fine. He’d go along.

He laughed lightly. “It’s my best one.”

Hawke reached for his glass again, almost hurt by her accusation. And why the hell was he so concerned? He took a long drink and glanced around the room in an effort to reel in his unusual irritation. Only, much to his dismay, things would not get better anytime soon. A cold chill climbed all thirty three vertebrae of his spine when he spotted two reasons for Rachel’s conclusion walking straight toward him, dressed to the nines with tanned skin and cleavage leading the way.

He set his wineglass on the table and glanced at Rachel to see if she’d noticed. I told you so resonated from the depths of her eyes but she only shrugged.

Hawke actually grimaced when the two women stopped at the table. He took a deep breath and stood. His only option now was to see how this played out.

“Hawke,” the tall blonde purred, “I had no idea you were still in town.”

Hawke planted a brief kiss on her cheek. “Hello, Ava. I decided to stick around after the show this time.” He leaned to greet the second, red-headed woman in the same manner. “Nice to see you too, Erica.”

Ava moved her gaze to Rachel. “Business or pleasure?”

Before he could set Ava straight, Rachel scooted back her chair and stood to extend a hand. “Business,” Rachel answered for him. “Rachel Newberry.”

Ava’s lips split into a grin as she halfway shook Rachel’s hand. “Is that what you call it these days, Hawke?”

Hawke’s eyes widened and for the very first time in his life, he didn’t have a clue how to respond. Again, Rachel beat him to the punch.

“I can assure you we really are discussing business.”

Ava narrowed her violet eyes, obviously suspicious. “What kind of business?”

Hawke waited a split second to see if Rachel would once again intervene and then realized she couldn’t. His own confidentiality agreement prevented it. Damn, where was his back-up?

“Hawke.” Rachel laid her hand on his forearm. “Why don’t you tell Ava about the real estate development venture you’re interested in.”

Warmth seeped into his skin and spread over his body. Rachel was sheer genius.

Hawke smiled at Ava and Erica. “Would you ladies like to join us and hear about it?”

Ava didn’t hesitate. “I think not, Hawke. You know I find that kind of talk boring. Besides, we’re meeting someone.”

“It was very nice to meet the two of you,” Rachel said as she sat back down.

Ava gave Rachel a cursory glance. “You too.”

She leaned to place a kiss on Hawke’s cheek. “You know the number if you get tired of real estate.”

Hawke didn’t answer, relieved when Ava and Erica wiggled out of sight.

He sat down with a whole new respect for Rachel’s intelligence. “How did you know she wouldn’t want to talk real estate?”

Rachel lifted one shoulder. “Lucky guess.”

“Well, you’re right. Ava doesn’t talk business much.”

Rachel lowered her head for a quick moment and then lifted it. “Did you know approximately two million women in the U.S. have breast implants?”

Hawke paused. How was he supposed to answer that? And more importantly, should he?

“Umm—”

“And,” she continued, oblivious to his hesitance, “6% end up having them removed.”

Again, Hawke sat silent. Only, this time he let his gaze drop to her chest. He didn’t even have to ask. Nothing implanted there. And the result was absolute perfection.

He raised his gaze and cleared his throat, hoping his next response would satisfy her. “Really?”

She nodded. “Yes. The American Medical Association monitors those surgeries closely.”

Hawke shifted. Somehow the talk of breasts, implants or real, had him achy and uncomfortable. And his position wasn’t helped much when his mind flashed visions of yanking Rachel out of her chair, plastering her to the table, ripping open her blouse and sampling hers right then and there. Luckily, the waiter arrived with dinner and both he and Rachel were preoccupied with eating.

Throughout the meal, Hawke carefully kept conversation light and far away from anatomy. Much to his relief, Rachel seemed to relax and forget all about the earlier events of the evening.

As soon as the plates were cleared, Hawke pulled his cell phone from his pocket, dialed and then asked Max to meet them at the back door. “How about a moonlight stroll?” he suggested after he disconnected.

Rachel placed her napkin on the table. “As nice as that sounds, Hawke, I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I’ve got some things to finish back at the office.”

“You work long hours,” he said carefully as he helped her from the chair.

A small smile of enchantment touched her lips. “Yes.”

“Maybe next time,” he suggested, escorting her back out of the restaurant and into the car.

“Hawke,” she began hesitantly as Max drove to Newberry & Tremaine, “I’m sure there are plenty of women waiting for you at the hotel who would love to take a moonlight stroll.”

He snickered in the darkness. “You’ve read too many tabloids.”

Rachel dismissed him with a wave of her hand. “I don’t read those magazines. Only thirty three percent of the articles printed are based on fact anyway.”

He bit his lip. If she hadn’t read the tabloids, then his PR worked. He’d managed to convince her he was a careless, free spirit, loving and leaving women all over the world. Except he wasn’t.

Somewhere, down deep in his heart, a part of him wanted to set her straight. Why was that so important? He shook his head. Normally by this time of the evening he’d be naked, sweaty and satisfied. Yet, tonight he’d gotten more pleasure out of taking her to dinner. Even if she avoided his advances.

Max brought the car to a stop and stepped out to open the back door. Hawke took Rachel’s hand and led her through the front door of the office building.

“Hawke, this really isn’t necessary.” She frowned. “The building provides 24-hour

security. I'll be fine.”

He pulled her onto the elevator. “Good to know.”

He leaned casually against the wall railing as the doors closed. “Are there cameras in the elevators?”

“No, just in the hallways.”

He pushed himself off the railing. “So, no one could see what happened in here at any given time.”

“No.”

He moved closer and circled her with his arms, gently placing one hand in the small of her back. “And, if something did happen in here, only the occupants would know.”

Rachel answered with a slow nod.

“Do you want something to happen in here?”

Her eyes glowed in the heat between them. “Yes.”

Hawke swallowed her whispered consent as he lowered his head and captured her lips. Within seconds of contact, he fought the urge to wrap his fingers around her hair and pin her to the wall. To lift her skirt over her creamy thighs and drape one long, shapely leg across his hip. White-hot flames traveled the length of his body. A breathy moan left her lips and taunted his libido to put them both out of misery.

Yet, despite the electricity boiling his blood, his insides quivered at the tenderness of her kiss. His heart threatened to jump out of his chest. She felt so right. Warm, soft, pliable, his for the taking. But not here. Not now.

His head swam as he lifted his lips from hers. “Just for the record, Rachel, brains are beautiful.”

Hawke forced himself to release her long enough to push the button to open the elevator doors. Knowing full well they were now in the view of several strategically-placed cameras, he returned her to his embrace. With a heavy sigh, he placed a kiss on top of her head, then turned her and nudged her through the open doors.

“Sweet dreams,” he told her as the doors slid closed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Max tapped Rachel's business card against the table as he waited for his team to arrive and wondered how the hell they were going to pull this off.

Manuel Diego was a crafty prick and when Uncle Sam called his SEAL team for help, Max knew the mission would be more than they bargained for. Chasing terrorists was a bitch, especially one who had managed to evade capture.

It hadn't been his first choice to plant Hawke in his current role but he had to admit, so far so good. Hawke proved himself a dedicated soldier and better yet, a communications genius. They had yet to find a computer Hawke couldn't hack. Who in their right mind would've ever known he also possessed rock star quality? Traveling the world as a major rock star had definite benefits and Hawke had opened several doors in the investigation. In fact, it had been Hawke's undercover work that had brought them to Diablo, Arizona, hot on Diego's heels. And, until Hawke got up close and personal with Rachel Newberry he'd been confident.

Maybe Steele would be a better candidate for extracting information. Steele's combination of smooth talk and surfer-dude good looks pried information out of even the most stubborn bastard. He operated on the basic principle that even a criminal had his balls squeezed by the warm, promising grip of a woman, and Steele made it a point to find her first. Once he worked his magic, the criminal was putty in his hands. There was only problem with that scenario, Hawke would never agree. And, in all reality, Max couldn't blame him. The mysterious Miss Newberry was one fine female specimen.

Max propped his scuffed combat boots on the table, folded his arms behind his head, and allowed his thoughts to drift back over the latest cast of characters in this mission. Most specifically, the stacked, blue-eyed blonde from the concert.

Normally he didn't give Hawke's groupies the time of day, but this one demanded his attention. His undivided attention. Compared to his six foot plus, she was tiny, just over five feet tall with an attitude twice her size, and his animal instincts roared to tame her. Yet, something about her spelled wild. He winced when his cock jumped. Oh, hell no. He slammed the door on his thoughts, relieved when the three other soldiers entered the suite.

He glanced at Steele. "Well, any red flags?"

"Maybe."

Max eased to the front of the couch and waited for him to elaborate.

"Pacific Valley Heights is clean, however, Rachel Newberry is dodging shadows."

"How so?" Max rubbed his jaw.

"She hasn't been in Diablo long. She was employed by Bridgewater & Austin in New York City."

"Impressive firm."

"She left New York City in a hurry."

Max's gut clenched. "Why?"

"Apparently, her architectural degree wasn't the only thing that impressed William

Bridgewater. They were lovers for almost two years. When Bridgewater's wife caught on, all hell broke loose. In the end, Bridgewater blamed the whole thing on Rachel and fired her. Rachel packed her bags and left town."

Max snorted. "That's it?"

Steele nodded. "So far. Cameron Tremaine is interesting, though."

"Tell me about it," Max muttered. "Has she done time?"

Steele snickered. "No, nothing like that. She doesn't have a criminal record. She has, however, had a stalker in the past."

"Who?"

"Ex-boyfriend. He is doing time. The arrest report is hilarious."

"How so?"

"The responding officer found him with a black eye, a bloody nose, and his hands tied behind him with nylon."

"Rope?"

"No...pantyhose."

Max shook his head in disbelief and pinched the bridge of his nose. Pantyhose. She used pantyhose to tie up her stalker. Unbelievable. Resourceful, but unbelievable.

He wondered what kind of weapon she branded to beat him. Probably one of those high heeled contraptions she wore. The ones that made her legs go on for days. The same accessories that would look perfect on her naked body.

Someone cleared his throat and Max glanced up to see Hawke wearing a shit-eating grin. He quickly forced his thoughts away from Princess Seduction. In fact, the further away from her he stayed, the better.

Convinced he was back in his right mind, Max eased himself off the couch. "Any information about Rachel's activities at Bridgewater?"

Steele shook his head. "Zilch. She had little contact with anyone but him."

Max glanced at the second soldier. Best damn tracker he'd ever known. Silent and dangerous, able to slip undetected in and out of the darkness. "What about movement, Shadow?"

"I've followed her for a week. Same routine. No indication she meets anyone for a drop. If I didn't know better, I'd say the green-eyed groupie went to the concert for one reason."

Just as Max anticipated, Hawke jumped all over that accusation. "She's not a groupie."

Steele shot Hawke a puzzled glance. "Hawke, women who hang out back stage are groupies."

"Well, yeah," Hawke agreed, "but not Rachel. She actually ran away from me."

Shadow steepled his fingers and grinned. "She's playing cat and mouse."

"No. She's not interested." Hawke released a heavy breath. "When I took her to dinner, she held me at arm's length the whole time. She thinks I'm a cocky, spoiled player."

Shadow shrugged. "You are."

Although he knew Hawk's reasons for defending Rachel, Max still felt there was more to her reluctance. "The whole seduction scenario sounds fishy to me."

Shadow grinned. "Why?"

"I know firsthand the blonde hellcat had to pull her backstage. Rachel obviously went

by force.”

Hawke smirked. “The hellcat has a name, Captain.”

Steele and Shadow both lifted their eyebrows.

Max folded his arms across his chest and refused to fall for Hawke’s pitiful attempt to trap him. “All I’m saying is that Rachel doesn’t fit the prototype of a gold digger. And, her professional reputation is spotless.”

Max watched a mischievous grin cross Hawke’s face. “See? She came to see me.”

Shadow shook his head. “This assignment’s made you such a diva, Hawke.”

“So how does she fit in Diego’s organization?”

Despite his desire to defend Rachel, Hawke slipped back into soldier mode. “I intercepted an e-mail from one of her clients last week. Apparently, he sends a lot of foreign business her way. Plans are shipped to her in a standard cardboard tube. She adds the finishing touches, re-packages the product, and then returns them via courier.”

Shadow nodded. “Sounds plausible.”

Hawke’s eyes narrowed. “These plans, most for commercial buildings, never materialize. Not one structure exists.”

Shadow lifted an eyebrow. “There’s something else in those tubes.”

“Exactly.” Hawke shrugged. “My guess is plans for Diego’s nuclear weapons.”

“Sonuvabitch.” Shadow’s eyes widened. “You really think she’s a part of his network?”

Max answered for Hawke. “For now. We have to wait for Hawke to work his magic to know for sure.”

Hawke grinned. “My pleasure.”

Max took full advantage to wipe the cocky smirk from Hawke’s face. “You sure you’re up for this?”

“Hell yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Cut the bullshit, Hawke. It doesn’t take Einstein to see the chemistry between you two. You’ve got to keep your head in the game.”

“My head is in the game.”

“You’re sure it’s the right head? Because you can’t screw up. We have one chance with this guy.”

“Have I ever let you down, Captain?”

“No. Just so we’re clear.”

“Crystal. Besides, you work for me, remember?”

“I kick myself in the ass every day for letting you talk me into that.”

Steele snickered. “Where do we go from here, Captain?”

“Follow the plan. Hawke keeps up appearances. You and Shadow monitor the movement and communications.”

Hawke nodded. “Speaking of appearances, I’m scheduled to be in Sacramento Tuesday.”

“Convince her to go with you. While we’re gone, Shadow can tap the office. Steele, you have pest control.”

“Me?”

“Somebody has to make sure the office stays vacant.”

“Rachel and I are supposed to meet the housing committee Monday morning.”

“Where?”

“Same building as Newberry & Tremaine.”

Max stood. At least the place was secure. “Well then, let’s get this party started.”

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Rachel felt moisture coat the back of her neck as she and Hawke entered the posh offices of the Pacific Valley Heights Neighborhood Association. With any kind of luck, the director would take one look at Hawke and approve the application without discussion. Unfortunately, Lady Luck always seemed to avoid her.

“Impressive place,” Hawke said from beside her.

Rachel forced a smile and nodded. “Image is very important to the Association.”

Rachel’s stomach dropped at the sound of determined, click-clacking high heels, so loud it echoed off the glass windows surrounding the reception area. Only one woman’s shoes pierced the tile like that. Well, only one woman’s other than Cameron’s.

“Good afternoon, Rachel.”

Rachel took a deep breath, adjusted her armor and prepared for battle. “Hello, Monica.” She turned to Hawke. “Jaydon Hawke, Monica Kensington.”

Monica gave Hawke her regular plastic smile. “No introduction necessary. So very nice to meet you, Mr. Hawke.”

Rachel stifled the urge to gag. “Hawke, Monica is the director of the neighborhood association.”

“Yes.” Monica’s smile never wavered. “Please, step into my office and we’ll review your application.”

Rachel couldn’t help but feel somewhat perplexed. She faxed Hawke’s application immediately after dinner last week. A phone call this morning confirmed their meeting. She and Hawke followed Monica into a back office and took two seats in front of an executive desk.

Rachel frowned. “I was under the impression we’d meet the committee this morning.”

Monica folded her hands in front of her. “Yes, well, that is normal protocol as you know, Rachel. However, there’s a problem with Mr. Hawke’s application.”

Rachel felt her blood begin a low simmer. “What seems to be the problem?”

“The board feels there are simply too many unfinished structures at the present time. We feel it best to wait to extend another invitation until the current projects are complete.”

The simmer grew to a full rolling boil and Rachel fought to keep her composure. “Those projects are all mine, Monica. The board is fully aware that the progress is on schedule and the homes will be completed by the target date.”

Monica gave a cocky sneer. “I’m sorry, Rachel, your assurance is simply not good enough.”

Rachel’s heart pounded and suddenly some very unladylike language lined up on the tip of her tongue. She opened her mouth to blast Monica’s explanation into a thousand, tiny little pieces when she felt pressure on her thigh. She looked down to see Hawke’s hand there, his fingers pressed into her skin. Immediately, putting Monica in her place became her second priority. She lifted her eyes to face him, ready to demand why he had distracted her. Instead, she only had time to wet her bottom lip before his mouth captured hers.



Caressing, massaging, easing hers open.

Lost in the desire of Hawke's kiss, Rachel felt her anger dissipate, very quickly replaced by red hot lust.

And then he gave her lips one last peck and retreated.

Rachel blinked in an effort to clear her vision. Hawke raised an eyebrow. Monica cleared her throat.

Rachel turned back to Monica. Although she wasn't convinced Hawke's kiss helped matters, Rachel mentally stuck one hand on her hip and wagged a finger in Monica's face. *Take that and shove it right up your committee.*

"Monica, you know as well as I do that Hawke's application will be approved on his name only. The paperwork is simply a technicality."

Monica's face paled. "Well, I suppose I could make an exception."

"You do that." Rachel moved to the front of her chair. "Because if you don't stamp that application approved in the next five seconds, I'll call each member of the committee personally."

Rachel waited as Monica hesitated, probably for Hawke's benefit, and then reached into her desk drawer. In the next second, she thrust the application at Rachel, complete with approval.

Rachel gave her a smug smile. "Thank you. We're due to break ground this afternoon."

Monica's face reddened. "You couldn't have possibly gotten permits this quickly."

Rachel shrugged as she and Hawke stood. "You forget who he is, Monica."

*And those were my lips he kissed.*

Monica stood and tossed another plastic smile at Hawke while she extended a hand. "Yes, well, I apologize for the misunderstanding, Mr. Hawke. Welcome to Pacific Valley Heights."

Hawke gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Thank you, Ms. Kensington."

"We can see ourselves out," Rachel told her.

Once clear of Monica's office, Rachel practically ran for the exit.

"Rachel," Hawke said from beside her, "slow down."

Rachel came to a screeching halt just outside a set of elevators. With a quick glance around the lobby, she grabbed Hawke's hand and pulled him inside the first empty one. She gave the close button a hard slap and exhaled when the doors slammed together.

She counted to ten and desperately tried to slow her breathing.

Lost in her anger, Hawke's voice reminded her she wasn't alone. "It amazes me how well you women get around in those things."

Rachel glanced at him and noticed he looked at her shoes. The two-inch Louis Vuitton sandals she'd bought at Cameron's insistence. It was a wonder she hadn't broken her neck.

She sighed to dispel her tension and then smiled for good measure. "Talent, I guess."

Hawke reached to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. "You okay?"

"Of course, why?"

"She was brutal, Rachel."

"Maybe so," Rachel agreed, "but we managed to get around her."

Hawke chuckled. "We certainly did. You should've seen the look on her face after I kissed you."

Rachel's breath gave an involuntary hitch. Another incredible, mouth-watering, panty-dampening kiss. One she could've continued while undressing him and doing him right there on top of Monica's desk.

The same one that couldn't be repeated.

"About that kiss," she began while her knees threatened to buckle.

Hawke's low husky response didn't help matters. "You liked it."

She stood speechless, unable to dispute that fact. He took advantage of her silence and stepped closer. Against her will, she placed a palm on his chest to stop his movement. However, the warmth from his skin seeped into hers and made it doubly difficult to speak.

"Yes, I did." She'd be a lying fool if she didn't admit it. "But, I need you to understand something."

Hawke's eyes sparkled as he nodded for her to continue and for a brief moment she questioned his ability to take her seriously.

What the heck.

"I've worked extremely hard to maintain my professional position in Diablo."

"According to my sources, you're well respected."

"I hope so. But that kiss insinuated I have ulterior motives for keeping my business."

Her heart hammered as that sexy, undress me grin overtook his lips again. "I saved you from a temper tantrum."

Rachel dropped her hand from his chest and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "I know that, thank you by the way, and you know that, but Monica doesn't. Believe me, she thinks our business is not architecture."

Hawke's fingers caressed the edge of her chin as he tilted it to face him. "Who cares? We know it's professional. So far."

Rachel fought the urge to shake him. Of course he didn't care, publicity was nothing new to him. Negative or otherwise. She, however, avoided it at all costs.

"This is very important to me, Hawke," she answered finally.

With a soft smile, Hawke moved his hands and stepped back. "I understand and I'm sorry."

Rachel's heartbeat jumped. Sorry? He was sorry? She fought for the right response. He totally misunderstood and honesty was always best in her book.

"Don't be sorry," she said quickly, "because I'm not. The timing just wasn't right, that's all."

He braced himself against the side wall and studied her for a moment as if he didn't know how to respond. And then he completely shocked her. Again.

"Fly to Sacramento with me."

Rachel grabbed the side railing for support. "What?"

"Tomorrow. I have a public appearance in Sacramento. Maybe if you spent a little more time alone with me, you'd change your mind about our professional relationship."

Rachel took a deep breath. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind what kind of relationship they'd have if they managed to be totally alone. A mind-blowing sexual one. And, as much as she hated to admit it, she didn't think she was strong enough to deny him.

"I can't." She tried to block out the sound of her brain cursing her.

She waited for him to ignore her response and insist. Yet, when she moved her gaze

to his, she found a look of total understanding. Almost as if he did consider her feelings.

“The offer still stands.” He pushed himself off the wall and punched another button on the panel. “Call me if you change your mind.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Once back in his suite, Hawke threw his head back against the sofa while his brain worked overtime. What the hell was her problem? Maybe the kiss they shared had been too much too fast. Too fast, anyway. Personally, the punch of that kiss had knocked him for a loop. He'd kissed quite a few women in his time, but never had he felt so connected to someone. Just the thought of the velvet warmth of her curved, pouty lips tucked between his made him hard. Her soft, full mouth was tailor made for his, caressed him, burnt him with the sweetness. His cock nudged him. Damn, why was she so difficult?

Hawke caught a glimpse of Max as he entered the suite and headed toward the kitchen. After the refrigerator door and several cabinet doors slammed shut, Hawke was convinced Max's morning hadn't been much better than his.

"Need a beer?"

Max sat down in a chair opposite Hawke and toasted him with a dark bottle. "Got one, thanks. What about you?"

Hawke sighed. "Wouldn't help me."

Max took a swig of beer then balanced the bottle on his knee. "Lay it on me, Hawke."

Hawke shook his head and grinned. "You don't want to hear it."

"Probably not, but let me have it."

"It's Rachel."

Max nodded. "Figured."

Hawke laid his head back against the sofa. "Extraction won't be easy from her."

"What's the problem? I don't recall you ever having trouble snagging women. Rock star or otherwise."

"I've played the part of the ultimate ladies' man for so long, I'm not sure I know what I'm doing. Rachel doesn't see me as Hawke. She actually avoids me, rather than falls at my feet. And now I'm so damn frustrated I could punch something."

Max snickered. "You won't be satisfied until you bed her."

"What the hell did you just say?"

"Your mission is to do whatever it takes to get to Diego. If that means sleeping with your mark for information, then that's way it goes."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"You want me to put somebody else in? I'm sure Steele would be happy to be re-assigned."

"No. I can handle it."

"There's another tube on the way."

"Damn. Business is booming."

"We've got to get Shadow in that office. Did you convince her to go to Sacramento?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?"

"I told you, she's difficult. Closed. Cautious. Hell, I've never seen a woman so damn controlled."

“You have it bad.”

Yeah, he did. He just wasn't ready to admit it. “I just need time to break her.”

“We don't have that kind of time.”

“It won't do any good to push her. I left the invitation open. Maybe she'll bite.”

“You have a back-up plan?”

“No.”

Max took another swig of beer and swallowed. “Good luck with that.”

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The office was deathly quiet when Rachel arrived. *Where the heck is Cameron?* She blew her bangs off her forehead as she tossed Hawke's paperwork to the desk and plopped down in her chair. After dealing with Monica this morning, a little distraction would be nice right about now.

Rachel glanced at the application now stamped with approved in big, bold letters. She nibbled the end of her pen, desperately trying to control her fractured thoughts and concentrate on the contracts in front of her. What was wrong with her? She never had trouble keeping her mind on business.

Rachel blinked the fuzziness from her eyes and attempted once again to read. Words and terms slurred together as her mind drifted back to Hawke.

Why exactly did he kiss her? In all reality, she really didn't care. Besides the fact that she thoroughly enjoyed his lips on hers, he'd saved her from an embarrassing temper tantrum. She rolled her eyes at that thought. Actually, he saved Monica. Two more seconds and he might have witnessed Rachel crawl over the desk and sink her claws into Monica's holier-than-thou attitude. Not that she was complaining, but was he always so forward? She sighed. The odds were in his favor; he didn't need to be forward. Jaydon Hawke could sit back and watch women flock to him. There was no need to court, no need to date, no need to impress. All he had to do was snap his fingers and a willing female appeared. And although she found herself willing, Rachel refused to mold herself to suit Hawke. Especially since she still wasn't convinced monogamy was part of his vocabulary.

She tossed her pen to the desk and folded her arms across her chest. Hawke's reputation dictated the necessity of a willing woman on his arm. A beautiful, enhanced woman willing to soothe his ego for a day or two. The type of woman she wasn't. Granted, she was no virgin, but one time sexual affairs were not her thing. She preferred getting to know her partner and building somewhat of a relationship before she jumped into bed with him. If she even decided to.

It had only been one small kiss. She snorted. Okay, two small kisses. Two small, electrified kisses that weakened her knees and dampened her panties was more like it. And, after experiencing the skill of his talented lips, she only dared to imagine the wealth of his sexual expertise.

Rachel shivered and her body shifted into overdrive as she remembered the sight of his toned chest peeking through his shirt, a vision she'd figured out might possibly be repeated. The type of men's shirt Hawke usually wore had seven buttons and each time she'd seen him, his shirt was only buttoned from the fourth button down. Her body warmed at the thought of rubbing herself against his sculpted pectoral muscles. Up and

down, back and forth, until she burnt him with unbelievable friction. In fact, if there weren't cameras in the hallway, she just might've unbuttoned him and experimented. She giggled and fanned herself with a contract. Shameless hussy. Thank God she held exclusive rights to her fantasies.

She jumped at the obnoxious buzz of the telephone and took a calming breath before she answered.

"Newberry & Tremaine."

"Caught ya!" Cameron's voice sang smugly over the line.

So much for control. "Caught me what?"

"You were thinking about something naughty."

*Oh, yes I was.* "Don't be ridiculous, Cameron," she scoffed. "I'm working."

"Uh-huh, you're out of breath, you're working so hard."

Rachel allowed herself a smile. Some things were worth hard work. Especially when sex was involved. Shocked by that epiphany, Rachel attempted to redirect the conversation. "I thought you had a coffee date."

"He stood me up," Cameron said flatly. "I waited an hour."

"Jerk."

"Jerk," Cameron echoed. "I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

Rachel frowned at the boisterous wailing of a horn. "Are you calling from your car?"

"Uh-huh," Cameron responded, "and I'm having a hard time holding my mascara tube. I need my mouth. See ya in a few."

Rachel shook her head as the connection ended. Cameron was fearless. A little outrageous maybe, but extremely courageous. Cameron embraced life with a vengeance, bound and determined to enjoy every minute and she swore she would teach Rachel a lesson in riskiness. Rachel smirked, secretly envying Cameron's bravery. Little did Cameron know she had her work cut out for her.

True to her word, Cameron blew in like the wind several minutes later. Rachel heard the front door slam shut then Cameron's determined footsteps down the hallway. Rachel pushed her hair behind her ears, shuffled the paper in front of her, and sat up in her chair.

"Rough morning?" Cameron tossed her sketch pad on the desk.

Rachel pinched the bridge of her nose. "No."

"Then why are you stressed?"

Rachel took a second before she answered. Most women would kill for her stress at this particular moment. "I'm not."

"Spill it, Rach." Cameron flopped down in a chair and propped her feet on Rachel's desk. "Like my sandals?"

Rachel nodded.

"Prada," Cameron confirmed. "Now, what's happened this morning?"

"You wouldn't believe what's happened to me in the last twenty four hours."

Without another word, Cameron lifted one leg and with one toe, knocked the phone off the hook.

Rachel frowned and reached to put the phone back together. "What if a client calls?"

Cameron chased Rachel's hands from the phone with one foot. "Cell phone. Now, I want details."

Rachel brushed her bangs off her forehead. "It all started last night when Hawke kissed me after dinner."

“I saw the tape.”

“What?!”

Cameron shrugged. “That’s what you get for playing kissy-face in front of the camera.”

Rachel took a deep breath.

“Keep going,” Cameron prompted.

“That was just an innocent kiss. You didn’t see the one inside the elevator.”

“Were you naked?”

“No! But, that kiss was incredible. I swear, Cam, I couldn’t breathe and my knees turned to jelly.”

“That good, huh?”

“Yeah, but then I came to my senses.”

“About what?”

“Look, the man is a major rock star. His moves are probably published in a handbook somewhere.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Anyway, I wrote that one off as a show off. And then we met with Monica today.”

“And how was that?”

“It started out horrible, but then things got interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

Rachel explained Monica’s reluctance to approve Hawke’s application. “So, Hawke kissed me again, right in front of Monica.”

“Was it another innocent kiss?”

“That kiss was anything but innocent.”

“I’m sure that proved your point.”

“That’s another thing. How professional does it look for me to have my client’s tongue crammed in my mouth?”

Cameron burst into a hysterical fit of giggles. When she thought Cameron was finished, Rachel continued. “That’s not all.”

“There’s more?”

“Yes, there’s more. And all thanks to you. If I’d just let you go to the concert alone, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Rachel, you’re the only one I know who would even consider your situation a mess.”

“Cameron!”

“Okay, relax. Now tell me what else.”

“Hawke asked me to go to Sacramento and I said no.”

Cameron sat deathly still. Not one blonde curl bounced. Not one long eyelash blinked.

Rachel reached across the desk and shoved her in the shoulder. “Say something!”

“I’m trying to find the words.”

Rachel groaned and cradled her head in her hands, desperately trying to keep her patience with Cameron.

“Rachel, you’ve got to put the past behind you and stop being so careful.”

Rachel raised her head and frowned. “I’m not being careful.”

“You’re scared.”

“Not really scared, just...cautious.”

Cameron grinned. "That's the same as careful."

"Okay," Rachel admitted, throwing her hands into the air. "I'm being careful."

"Jaydon Hawke." Cameron sighed. "Yum. Yum."

Rachel echoed Cameron's sigh. You don't know how true that statement really is. "Amen, sister." Rachel shook the clouds from her head. "But, he's a client."

"Yes," Cameron agreed, "he is a client. Have you finished drawing his plans?"

Rachel gave a slow nod, the meaning of Cameron's question starting to hit home.

"You can't avoid him."

Rachel snickered. "Believe me, I don't want to avoid him."

"Where exactly is he taking you?"

"I have no idea. All he said is Sacramento for a public appearance."

"Do you think he's a serial killer?"

"What? No!"

"Then go. Who cares where or why?"

"You make it sound so easy."

"Look, Rachel, this is the chance you've waited for. Step outside your comfort zone. Have fun and just go with the flow."

Cameron stood and tapped the phone with one professionally-manicured fingernail.

"Call him, Rachel."

"I will."

Cameron walked across Rachel's office. "Now." She tapped a cardboard tube propped against the wall. "Want me to take this down to the mailroom?"

"No, thanks though. I'm not done with it."

Cameron opened the door. "The phone is next to your left elbow."

As soon as Cameron left the office, Rachel flipped open her appointment book and watched Hawke's cell phone number pulse in black and white. She drummed her fingers against the desk and thought long and hard about what she was about to do. Obviously, years of pampering made Hawke extremely difficult to discourage. So why not just give in?

Before she could back out, Rachel grabbed the phone and dialed. Her heart beat a jungle rhythm as she listened to each ring, part of her hoping he wouldn't answer. Instead, his strong, deep voice answered on the third ring.

"Rachel?"

She fought the ridiculous urge to swoon. What was so damn intoxicating about his voice? And what made him so sure she was calling? She glanced down at her own phone and sighed. Of course. Caller ID had ratted her out.

Not sure how to approach the subject of flying to Sacramento with him, she stalled. "Hawke?"

"I asked first," he teased.

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Yes, it's Rachel. Maybe we need a code word."

"How about gorgeous?"

Here comes the ego. "How about arrogant?"

Hawke hesitated a moment and she thought maybe she'd offended him. She opened her mouth to apologize when his throaty chuckle tickled her ear. "On second thought, scratch the code word. Change your mind about Sacramento?"

A shiver of uncertainty crawled up Rachel's spine and almost caused her to make up



another excuse. “Yes. I’d love to go.”

“What changed your mind?”

Rachel opened her mouth and then snapped it closed before her usual honesty barreled through. She took a deep breath and chose her words carefully. “My schedule isn’t as full as I thought.”

“Great! I’ll send Max for you in the morning.”

Rachel closed her eyes and silently hoped she made the right decision. Her lips began to tingle and suddenly the warmth of Hawke’s kiss invaded her senses. “See you then.”

Rachel dropped the receiver back in the cradle, her body on fire. The man was a true professional in the art of seduction, she’d give him that. And there was no doubt in her mind he’d use every secret weapon he possessed on her. She squeezed her legs together and fidgeted in her chair. Cameron had a point. Hawke was exactly what she needed to relax.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Rachel took a long look around the jet's interior and swallowed hard before she forced her brain to process what she'd agreed to. Her spontaneity was now officially out of control. She moved her gaze to rest on several swiveling chairs in the center bolted to the plane's belly and decided the one in the middle would be the better choice. If the plane were to crash, being sandwiched between Hawke and Max just might cushion the blow. And really, what a way to go.

Rachel forced thoughts of tangled metal out of her brain while she melted into the buttery leather seat, snapped the silver seatbelt across her lap, and silently said a prayer. While she made several, mental, life-altering promises, Hawke and Max settled into the neighboring seats.

She caught Hawke's frown out of the corner of her eye. "Are you nervous?"

Rachel bit her lip. *Terrified*. "Not really. Airplanes have the lowest death rate per one hundred million miles of travel."

Hawke glanced at Max. "Did you know that?"

Max nodded. "I also know that if this plane does crash, we don't have anything to worry about until we get ready to land." He grinned at Rachel. "Forty five percent of crashes happen on landing."

Rachel couldn't stop the smile that split her lips. The delectable Max was a closet-case nerd.

Hawke shifted in his seat. "I vote we talk about something other than plane crashes."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything," Rachel mumbled.

"Don't be." Hawke dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "I spend a lot of time in the air."

Max pushed himself out of his chair. "No need to mention what you do up here."

Hawke's eyes widened and Rachel stifled a giggle. The warm feeling of camaraderie between the two men took the place of fright for a few brief seconds. And then the plane's engine roared to life. Rachel grasped the armrest until her knuckles turned white.

Max nodded toward the nose of the plane. "I'll be up front."

Hawke turned in his seat to face her. "Rachel, have you flown before?"

She gave him a weak smile, one she hoped would disguise her terror. "Once or twice," she managed to say. "I don't get out much."

"How about a drink?"

She gave him her best *yeah, right* look. Didn't he remember how well she held her liquor? "No, thank you. I'll be fine, really. I brought a magazine to distract me."

Rachel leaned forward to pull her Architectural Digest out of her bag just as the plane lurched. The breath left her lungs in a whoosh as the seatbelt gave her stomach a nice sucker punch.

"On second thought," she said as she braced herself back against the seat and squeezed her eyes closed, "I'll just sit here and enjoy the ride."

"Rachel."

She groaned and rolled her head toward the sound of Hawke's husky voice. She forced her eyes open. "I'm being ridiculous."

Heat warmed her as he placed her hand in his and braided their fingers. "I promise, we'll be fine."

She gave his hand a slight squeeze to convince him she wasn't afraid. "Of course we will. Mechanical failure accounts for most air accidents and I'm sure you checked out the plane, right?"

"Um, no."

Rachel's eyes rounded until her vision blurred. The man obviously spent thousands of dollars on an eye-catching machine and didn't check the mechanical systems? Her mouth fell open to speak but nothing came out.

"Max did," Hawke assured her, "and he's sitting in the cockpit with the pilot."

Rachel released a slow breath and attempted to compose herself. "Max can fly this beast?"

Hawke's throaty chuckle soothed her knotted nerves and she began to feel tension leak from her muscles. "I haven't found anything Max can't do."

Attempting to distract herself from the fact the plane was now creeping down the runway, Rachel glanced around the cabin. "Did you design this yourself?"

Hawke twisted his lips. "No, I leave design to people like you."

"It's very tastefully done."

"Glad you approve. How long have you been an architect?"

Rachel paused for a brief moment, partly to curb her panic as the plane left the ground, but mostly to consider her response. "Ten years."

"You've been in Diablo that long?"

She shook her head. "No. I moved here from New York."

"Must've been quite a change," he said. "Why did you leave New York?"

Suddenly his questions hit a little too close for comfort. "Change of scenery. What about you? Why Diablo?"

"You."

The plane gave a slight bounce. "Me?" she squeaked.

Hawke nodded. "The first time I laid eyes on you, I knew Diablo was the place for me."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Sounds like there's a song in there somewhere."

Hawke grinned and her stomach flip-flopped. "Diablo seems like a nice place. I like the location, away from the spotlight, yet close enough if I need a fix."

Rachel gave a slow nod. Away from the spotlight. She so understood. The only difference – she wouldn't need a fix. "What do you usually do during these flights?"

Hawke gestured with his head behind them. "There's a king size bed in the back."

Rachel's pulse jumped. Once again, she failed to think before she spoke. Yet, heat flooded her thighs and she wondered just how firm the mattress was on that bed. In the back of the plane. Away from everyone else. She lowered her gaze to her hands just in case he could read something in her eyes.

Her skin tingled when he lifted her chin with one finger and caressed her eyes with his own. "I sleep, Rachel."

She sat hypnotized by his admission, not sure how to respond.

"Would you like to see it?"

“I’m not sure there’s time,” she whispered before she could stop herself.

Hawke’s brow furrowed for a split second and then his eyebrows rose with realization. Her cheeks warmed when his lip curled in a smirk. “I only meant I think you’ll appreciate the design.”

Rachel fought the urge to bang her head against the seat as Hawke unsnapped her seatbelt. Deciding silence would be the best option, she stood from her seat and followed him to the rear of the plane.

Hawke opened a door and waved her inside. “Well?”

Rachel took a moment to glance around the room. The cabinets and closet were ornately carved from oak and the carpet actually massaged each footstep but it was the king sized bed in the center that drew her attention. Although the headboard, footboard, and all four posts were equally beautifully carved from oak and the top was adorned in a black and white checkered comforter, it was the shiny black sheet peeking from beneath the blanket that stroked her curiosity. Most likely silk. The kind that would feel cool and crisp against a heated body and wrinkle easily with movement.

“Rachel?”

“Hmm?” Her gaze scanned the length of the bed and back again.

“Do you like it?”

Rachel shook herself free from thoughts of tangled bodies and wrinkled sheets. “Oh, yes, it’s beautiful, Hawke.”

She traced her fingers over the ridges in the closest bed post. “I’m fairly sure this is hand-carved.”

Hawke braced one hip against the armoire. “You really know your stuff.”

Rachel gave a weak smile. He wouldn’t be quite so impressed if he knew that fine craftsmanship wasn’t exactly what she’d been thinking about up to this point.

The door squeaked and Max poked his head around. “Sorry to interrupt, but we’re ready to land.”

Rachel tilted her head to one side. “How did you know we were back here, Max?”

Max nodded at Hawke. “You want to take this one, Hawke?”

Rachel felt the blood drain from her face and resisted the urge to smack her hand against her forehead.

Hawke took her elbow and guided her back into the cabin. “He just assumed, Rachel. Not too many places to go on an airplane.”

Rachel heard Max’s muffled laughter as he headed back to the cockpit.

Within the next hour, Max pulled the rented Suburban to the curb and then turned to Hawke. “Francine knows you’re coming this time, right?”

Hawke nodded.

Rachel’s brow wrinkled. Francine? A publicist? She glanced out the smoked windows. Right outside the car, a three-story Brownstone stood proud in the middle of what appeared to be an exclusive housing addition. A well-manicured, landscaped lawn surrounded the house, complete with a white picket fence around the entire area. Where were the cameras? The screaming women? And what kind of public appearance could he possibly make here? Before she could question him, Hawke slid out of his seat and Max pushed the door closed. Her door opened a few seconds later and Hawke extended a hand. Still puzzled, she accepted and left the car.

After they climbed a set of fairly steep steps, Hawke opened the large wooden door

and nudged her inside. Within milliseconds, the silence was broken. Only, not by adoring female fans. Instead, a blood-curdling scream pierced her eardrums.

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Steele watched his target swing her silver Lexus SC 430 into an empty parking space in front of the coffee shop then fling open the car door and step out, chattering like a magpie into her cell phone the whole time. He pried his fingers from the steering wheel and flexed his knuckles. Who the hell gave this woman a driver's license?

His pulse pounded as her heels pierced the sidewalk. Steele swallowed hard. Damn, she worked those shoes like a true professional.

He waited to leave his truck until she entered the sidewalk café. Once inside, he wanted to throttle Captain Sterling. The place was jam packed with serious early morning coffee drinkers. Tall ones. She was tiny. His skills would be sorely tested.

He eased into a corner in the back of the room and attempted to blend, keeping a careful eye trained on his mark. She stepped to the counter, tossed her curls over her shoulder, and more or less seduced the guy behind the counter when she batted those long eyelashes and gave him a sexy smile. Within seconds, she had a cup in her hand, topped with a mountain of whipped cream. Steele watched in awe as her tiny pink tongue darted from her mouth to pull the creamy substance inside. He exhaled hard. *Someone please give her a spoon.*

He took half a second to check his location and pull himself together.

He glanced back at the counter.

She was gone.

Blood pounded in his temples. Adrenaline raced through his veins. He took a quick analysis of the perimeter. He knew for a fact she hadn't left the premises; she would've had to walk passed him to do it. Besides, the crowd was elbow to elbow, an exit that quick would've required her to crawl. No man in his right mind would've missed her delectable little ass on all fours.

The windows were in the front and the only way out one of them was through them.

Steele pushed himself off the wall and headed toward an opening in the back of the room. The head, of course. Momentary relief seeped through him until he stepped out of the noise and into a secluded hallway.

"Hello, handsome."

He managed to keep from pummeling her by balling his fists.

"Looking for me?" Her very intimidating man-eating smile told him he'd found trouble. With a bold, capital T.

"What makes you think that?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. We'll play your way. I've had you in my rearview mirror since you pulled away from the stoplight at Second and Elm an hour ago. I'm actually impressed you managed to keep up."

Steele forced himself not to blast her for almost killing both of them several times during the last hour. Instead, he crossed his fingers and lied through his teeth.

"Busted." He gave her what he knew to be his best ladykiller smile. Maybe it would knock hers for a loop. "That was my half-assed attempt to meet you."

She narrowed those deep blue, Siamese cat-like eyes. "Really. So, I'm supposed to

believe this is a feeble attempt to pick me up?”

He gave a half laugh. “Believe it or not, yes.”

“Do you have a name?”

“Brett.”

She stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Brett. I’m Cameron.”

“I know.”

“How?”

He tapped the cup she held. “It’s written in red.”

She gave him another smile, one just as sly as the first. “Well, I’m so sorry, Brett, but I happen to be involved.”

He raised an eyebrow. Pretty smart chick. “Maybe he should think twice about leaving you alone.”

“He doesn’t mind. I carry pepper spray in my purse. Besides, he’s a bodyguard and as big and bad as the Terminator, with an attitude to match.”

“Too bad. In that case I won’t waste any more of your time.”

“See ya,” she sang.

Steele focused on nothing other than walking a straight path out the door and didn’t allow himself to concentrate on anything else until he was seated behind the tinted windows of his truck. Irritated and hard as a rock. *I am so screwed.*

He punched Shadow’s number into his cell phone. “You almost done?”

“Leaving now. Where are you?”

“Outside Lombardo’s Cuppa Joe.”

“You don’t drink that stuff.”

“She does.”

“Then why are you outside?”

“I think we’re in big trouble?”

“We? Explain.”

“I’ve been made.”

“Hell, Steele! How?”

“I have no idea. One minute I was watching her and the next she had me cornered.”

“This is classic. Guess you know what happens next.”

“Nothing.”

“When Sterling and Hawke hear about this—”

“They won’t.”

Shadow gave a hearty laugh. “Oh, hell no. I can’t keep this to myself.”

“You will or I’ll tell them about your new hobby.”

“Damn, Steele. You wouldn’t even know if Claire hadn’t told you.”

For once in his life Steele truly appreciated his mischievous twin sister. “Doesn’t matter. You keep my secret, I’ll keep yours.”

“Agreed.”

“I managed to convince her I was trying to pick her up.”

“She buy it?”

“I think so. But, get this. She said she’s involved with someone and I would swear on my left nut she described Sterling.”

“This gets better and better.”

“Did you get the tube?”

“Yeah. The decoy is on its way back to Diego.”

“I’ll meet you back at the hotel. You just remember what we agreed.”

“Affirmative.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Die, fool!”

Rachel glanced at Hawke, sure someone should call the police. Hawke just shook his head and led her down a hallway to a large room. Inside, perched in front of a big screen television, were two dark-haired boys, both attacking video game controllers like they truly tried to kill them. Rachel released the breath she'd taken a good few seconds ago.

Hawke rushed into the room and sprawled out on the floor. “Batman Arkham Asylum! Sweet!”

Both boys dropped their controllers and tackled Hawke.

“Hawke, man, you didn't tell us you were coming.” The larger of the two boys gave Hawke's right biceps a punch.

“I told Francie,” Hawke mumbled from beneath the pile.

The smaller boy scrubbed his knuckles across the top of Hawke's head. “She didn't tell us.”

Still in shock at the turn of events, Rachel glanced at Max. He shrugged and walked to the heap of bodies squirming on the floor.

“Cool it, killers.” Max scooped the boys off Hawke and tucked each one under a bronzed bicep. “Did you notice Hawke brought a *girl* this time?”

The room fell silent and four curious eyes hit her head-on. With shock still buzzing her brain, Rachel smiled.

Hawke stood and positioned himself beside her. “Guys, this is Ms. Newberry.”

Max set each boy on the floor and then nudged the tallest, who stepped forward and offered his hand. “Nice to meet you ma'am. I am Antonio.”

Rachel gave his hand a squeeze. “Nice to meet you too, Antonio. Please call me Rachel.”

The smaller boy, a carbon copy of the first, thrust his hand at Rachel. “I'm Romeo.” He turned to Hawke. “Ella es un bebe' caliente!”

Rachel raised both eyebrows. *One hot babe?*

Hawke smirked. “She speaks Spanish, Romeo.”

A wave of red climbed Romeo's face and tinted the tips of his ears.

“Thank you, Romeo,” Rachel said softly, “I'm flattered you find me attractive.” She leaned down closer to his height. “You're no tan mal ousted mismo.”

A big cheesy grin lit Romeo's face and he glanced back at Hawke. “Take that, Hawke, she says I'm not bad myself.”

Hawke chuckled. “Stay away from my woman.” He gave Romeo a playful punch to his left shoulder. “Can you guys entertain Max? Rachel and I need to talk to Francie.”

A mischievous smile crossed Antonio's face as he glanced at Max. “We got Call of Duty yesterday. You in?”

Max accepted his offer with a tone of challenge. “That's a definite affirmative, soldier.”

Hawke took Rachel's hand and led her from the recreation room and down yet



another hallway. Her brain was still numb from shock. Where were the cameras? The reporters?

“Hawke.” She tugged him to a stop. “What exactly are we doing here?”

“Checking on my kids.”

Rachel opened her mouth and then snapped it closed. Of course he’d fathered children.

Hawke resumed their path down the hall until they met a young, extremely attractive brunette walking toward them, a laundry basket balanced on one hip. The second she saw Hawke, the basket hit the floor and she lunged herself into his arms.

Rachel stood silent. Not one muscle dared move. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears and her blood threatened to scald her insides. Hawke brought her to meet the mother of his children?

Rachel pinched the bridge of her nose. Maybe she should’ve worked the marriage question into her interview. Reality came back to slap her in the head. What interview? She’d agreed to accompany Hawke without asking one single question. Her newly-adopted *don’t ask, just do* policy screamed in hysterical laughter.

After a quick embrace, the woman stepped back from Hawke and stuck out her hand. “Oh God, I’m sorry,” she said, tucking a piece of hair behind one ear. “I’m Francie, the kids’ mother. You must be Rachel.”

Hawke told Francie about her? Rachel swallowed hard and made a quick decision. She’d be diplomatic but she needed specifics about this whole arrangement. Since her voice had obviously decided to play hide-and-seek, she simply nodded.

“Come on in the kitchen.” Francie turned and they followed her into an enormous, brightly lit room. Rachel glanced at the table on one side, which her architectural eye told her was mahogany. It appeared to be freshly polished and the centerpiece, a beautiful tea pot that was most likely sterling silver, would make Cameron drool. No doubt about it, the woman had taste.

Francie motioned them to sit at the table and then grabbed a book from the counter before joining them.

Rachel laid a hand on Hawke’s forearm. “Why don’t I go see what Max and the boys are up to?”

“No, stay,” Hawke insisted.

“This sounds personal, Hawke. I—”

“Please.”

Rachel couldn’t resist the blatant sincerity in his deep, dark eyes. “Okay.”

Francie giggled. “Didn’t think I’d ever see this.”

Rachel felt her cheeks heat. Although somewhat embarrassed, she felt a pinch of satisfaction. If nothing else, Francie knew Hawke wanted Rachel there next to him.

“We need to discuss visitation,” Hawke told Francie.

Rachel’s eyebrows climbed her forehead. Visitation? *Ohgawdohgawdohgawd*. They weren’t even divorced yet. She made a quick lurch to stand, caught her heel on the chair in the process, and stumbled into Hawke.

Hawke grasped her elbow to steady her. “Rachel, where are you going?”

“This is certainly a conversation I do not need to be a part of.” She forced out the words as calmly as possible.

Hawke’s brow furrowed. “Huh?”

Rachel took a deep, steady breath. "This is between you and Francine."

For a brief second, the only noise in the room was the ticking of the kitchen clock. Then Francine burst into laughter.

"Oh, Hawke, you idiot! She thinks we're married!"

Rachel's eyes grew wide once again as she glanced at Francine. "You're not?" Oh great, open mouth, insert foot. "I'm sorry for my assumption. More than 70% of couples live together rather than marry, but still, this is between the two of you."

Francine giggled. "She's very intelligent, Hawke."

Hawke grabbed Rachel's hand and pulled her back into her chair. "Francine and I aren't married, Rachel. We don't live together, and we've never been a couple."

"But she said she's the boys' mother."

"I'm the house mother." Francine gave Hawke a stern look. "You didn't tell her?"

"No," Hawke mumbled.

"I run this home for kids who are about to be adopted," Francine explained. "Once they leave the state's custody, they live here until the adoption process can be finalized. Hawke is a gracious benefactor who apparently doesn't have any brains."

Relief surrounded Rachel like a warm blanket.

"Hawke provides a scholarship for their education," Francine continued. "In return, he insists on visiting the kids regularly once they are settled in their new homes."

Rachel stole a glance at Hawke. He gave her a weak smile. "We have more fun if I keep my visits quiet."

Bursts of laughter and machine gun fire floated down the hallway.

"Quiet is not part of the vocabulary around here," Francine mumbled.

Hawke cleared his throat. "Did the Morales's sign the contract?"

Francine flipped open her book. "Yes, everything's in order. Antonio and Romeo are pumped about the whole thing."

Rachel smiled at Francine with a newfound respect. This woman she really liked. She had energy, spunk, and better yet, obviously kept Hawke's head out of the clouds.

Francine nudged Rachel's elbow. "Do you play video games?"

Rachel chuckled. "No, coloring book and sketch pads are more my thing."

"Good." Francine motioned at Hawke with one hand. "Go play. Rachel and I will be in here if you need anything."

Hawke's gaze bounced from one woman to the other and Rachel fought the urge to giggle. "Go, Hawke, she prompted.

As if her consent was all he needed, he left the kitchen with a sexy smirk.

Spending the remainder of the afternoon talking with Francine and watching Hawke's interaction with the boys gave Rachel a whole new look into the man inside Jaydon Hawke. She found he was genuinely concerned about Antonio and Romeo, and at the same time they treated him as a big brother. There were no rock stars present today. No smoke and mirrors, just Hawke, rolling around on the floor, shooting creatures with his video game controller, basking in fun. So not what she expected.

In fact, when she and Hawke were seated back on the plane, she was almost disappointed. She wondered if he would retreat back into his familiar rock star persona.

"Did you have fun?" Hawke asked as the plane flew across the sky in the evening sun.

Rachel nodded. "I did. Francine reminds me a lot of Cameron."

Hawke snickered. "You think? I have a feeling Cameron is one in a million."

Rachel leaned back in her seat as the plane gave a slight bounce. Desperate to keep herself distracted, she rolled her head toward him. "Hawke, why didn't you tell me where we were going?"

"Honestly, I didn't even think about it. Things are so hush-hush when I travel."

She nodded, a little guilty for asking. She'd been so focused on his desire to remain in the spotlight that she didn't even stop to think that secrecy was second nature to him.

"Besides," he said with a grin, "I wanted to surprise you."

"You did."

"And?"

*And now I'm really going to have to practice restraint.* Rachel cleared her throat.

"And what?"

His grin slipped and she saw something close to disappointment flash in the depths of his eyes. Then, just as quickly, it disappeared.

"I'm going back next week. Come with me."

Unbelievably tempted, Rachel stopped herself from a hasty response. If she agreed, she became one of those women. The ones who catered to his every desire.

And lost her identity in the process.

Cameron's plan for Rachel to have fun with Hawke would have to be altered just a bit.

"I'm sorry, Hawke, I'm booked solid next week." Which was the truth.

He frowned. "Every day?"

She nodded and prepared for an argument. Instead, he seemed to accept her excuse and settled back against his seat. He laid his hand on the arm rest, palm up, and raised an eyebrow. She gave him a smile and rested her hand in his.

"Maybe another time," he said into the silence.

"Maybe," she agreed.

## CHAPTER NINE

After a long, sleepless night of trying to make sense of Rachel's reluctance, Hawke was tired and pissed off. Damn that woman. Why was she so stubborn?

His feet felt heavy as he paced the floor. Even after their trip to Sacramento, she refused to open up. And it was his own damn fault. Never in his life did he expect his cover to come back and bite him in the ass. Most women would kill for an opportunity to be seen next to him. But then, Rachel wasn't most women.

He needed a new game plan. He stopped pacing in mid-step, almost frozen in place by his next thought. Cameron. A fleeting sense of fear wiggled up his spine. It was risky, confiding in Cameron, but the result may be worth the pain. But did he have balls enough to call her? No. Instead, he'd delegate. He punched the speed dial on his cell phone.

"Greg, call Cameron Tremaine and tell her meet me here in an hour."

Hawke heard a dull thud across the line. "Don't you think I should ask her?"

Not in the mood to argue, Hawke released a frustrated breath. "Just call her."

"You're sure about meeting her alone?"

"Positive." Hawke hung up to avoid any further discussion.

He exhaled loudly while he resumed his earlier pace. This better work. Mainly because he'd never had to work so hard for female attention in his life. And once again, he didn't have a back-up plan.

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Thirty minutes later, Max cringed as the heat-seeking missile dressed in designer clothing descended on him without warning and attempted to breeze past with a sexy wink. He extended an arm and grasped her elbow to bring her to an abrupt stop.

"Hold on there a second, sex kitten."

Her eyes pierced him like daggers. "Sex kitten?"

He gave her a lazy smile in response.

"In case you've forgotten, my name is Cameron." She sighed impatiently and glanced at her elbow. "Now, unhand me. I have a meeting with Hawke."

Max chuckled at her haughty tone and led her away from the elevator. "No one told me."

"Hawke is expecting me," she insisted through gritted teeth. She struggled to free herself from his iron grip as he pulled her further down the hall.

"If I had a dollar for every time a pretty face claimed Hawke expected her, I'd be a rich man."

"Listen, Neanderthal," she screeched as she spun out of his grasp, "I bruise easily!"

Max looked down at her pale skin and loosened his hold. He knew damn well he wasn't hurting her, but just to keep the peace, he'd humor her. This time.

"It's Max, and I don't bully beautiful women."

"Could've fooled me." She cut her eyes at him and rubbed her elbow.

“Stand right here.” He stabbed numbers on his cell phone. A few short words later, he disconnected.

“You’re late. Hawke expected you an hour ago.”

She stuck out her tongue.

Max shifted his weight and for a split second considered shoving the pink temptation back in her mouth with his own tongue. Instead, he fueled the fire. “You can go up after you do one thing.”

She squinted. “What’s that?”

“Rub my head. For luck.”

Her eyes widened. “You are absolutely out of your mind!” she squealed.

Possibly. Max shrugged and leaned against the elevator door. “Either that or show me the goods.”

The she-devil in a blood-red short skirt appeared to study him intently for a minute, as if weighing her options. He knew she wouldn’t back down from his challenge. And that made him hard. Crazy hard.

Finally, with a look that would make a centerfold seem innocent, she closed the distance between them. Her tender touch burnt his skin as she walked her fingertips up his biceps, raised a small, delicate arm, and caressed the neatly polished surface on top of his head.

Gee-zus. A man of his word, Max pushed himself off the door and motioned for her to board the elevator. He swallowed hard and hoped to hell she wouldn’t notice how hard she made him. She gave him an unladylike snort as he followed her inside the open doors.

Eternally thankful their short ride was silent, he delivered her to Hawke’s suite and made a quick exit. A little of her went a long way and he planned to take that up with Hawke later. Just not now. He needed a break. A long one.

Cameron stormed through the door of Hawke’s suite, her blonde curls bouncing with each step.

“Hawke, you better tell that bouncer down there to keep his hands to himself.” She tossed her zebra-print purse to the couch. “I only flashed him to get backstage, not as an invitation.”

Hawke grinned. According to Max, she had quite a way with invitations.

“What took you so long?”

Cameron shrugged matter-of-factly. “Patience builds character, Hawke. Besides, I’m on my own time.”

He sighed. She wasn’t going to make this easy.

“Now,” she continued, plopping down on the couch, “to what do I owe the privilege of this visit?”

He winced. “I need your help.”

She batted her eyelashes. “Rachel?”

“How’d you know?”

“Honestly, Hawke,” she scoffed, “you’re not the first adventurer to attempt to conquer Mt. Rachel.”

“I don’t want to conquer her, Cameron. I just want a chance to get to know her.”

She squinted at him. “I just might be able to help you,” she began, raising his spirits,

“on one condition.”

Damn. He probably should’ve expected this. “What’s that?”

“I want your drummer.”

“Pirelli?”

“Yes, Pirelli. On a platter.”

“I can’t just hand him to you, Cameron.”

“No,” she agreed, “but you can arrange a private meeting.”

Hawke gave himself a mental pat on the back. She had no idea how easy that would be. Petite, flamboyant, busty blondes with baby blue eyes were exactly what Pirelli ordered. Not information she needed to know.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Great! What do you want me to do?”

“Clear her schedule, except for me.”

Cameron studied her nails as if bored with the whole idea. “Rachel keeps her own schedule.”

“And Pirelli just might have a girlfriend,” he countered.

She laughed and bounced off the couch. “I’ll hand it to you, Hawke, you have exceptional bluffing skills.”

“I’m not bluffing.”

She threw her purse back over her shoulder. “Yes you are. But I’ll help you anyway.”

She walked to the door and paused with her hand on the doorknob. “By the way, I’m free every night this week.”

Hawke frowned. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got a meeting. I could only spare you ten minutes and your handsy bodyguard used most of them.”

He swallowed hard. “But, what about strategy?”

She smiled mischievously as she flung open the door. “I don’t need strategy.”

She gave Max a cursory glance over her shoulder and swung one hip at him as she swayed down the hall.

Max heaved a muffled curse and entered the suite. “Women should not be allowed to shake their asses in public. Especially an ass like hers.”

Hawke ran a hand through his hair. “Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Max pushed the door closed. “You expect me to believe that?”

Although aggravated by Cameron’s ability to manipulate his plan, Hawke couldn’t help but envy her spunk. Yet, admitting he appreciated Cameron’s attributes would be extremely dangerous. One look at the *no trespassing* warning on Max’s face said it all. Hawke opted for non-response.

Max didn’t seem to be bothered by his silence. “You’re still in one piece.”

“Actually, it wasn’t too bad.”

“The ass or the conversation?”

Hawke snickered. “The conversation.”

“Anything I should know?”

Hawke opened his mouth to tell Max about their bargain and then decided against it. “She agreed to help me with Rachel.”

Max snorted. “Not too sure that was smart, Hawke.”

“You might be right.” Especially since now Hawke was sure Max wanted Cameron.

“How about we discuss it over lunch and a beer?”

Max frowned. “You’re not gonna get plastered and share your feelings, are you?”

“No. I just thought we both needed to unwind.”

“You want to stay in or go out?”

“Out. I need some air.”

“Agreed.” Max led the way out the door.

While they waited for the elevator, Max called ahead to clear their exit from the hotel.

“Back door,” he said as they stepped off the elevator.

Security waited at the back door and quickly shuffled Hawke into the waiting Suburban. Max opened the driver’s door and then reached to remove a baby pink card from under the windshield wiper. He tossed it across the seat before sliding behind the wheel. “You have mail.”

Hawke flicked the card open with one thumb and read the message:

I WON’T DENY YOU, HAWKE

Max steered out of the parking lot. “What flavor?”

Hawke smudged the familiar lipstick print with his index finger. “I’m thinking Wild Cherry.” He licked the lipstick from his finger. “Yeah, Wild Cherry.”

“Want me to check it out?”

“Nah.” Hawke tossed the card to the seat beside him. “It’s harmless.”

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Cameron sat cross-legged on the sofa in the reception area and erased the last name from Rachel’s appointment book, almost labeling herself a traitor. Rachel would kill her if she knew about the deal Cameron made with Hawke not more than three hours ago. She released a long breath and blew the eraser crumbs to the floor. Too late now, she wasn’t about to undo all her hard work. Not after she spent all afternoon lying through her teeth to convince so many people Rachel was actually taking some time off.

She paused for a brief moment to analyze her motives behind this whole zany scheme. Never for a moment did she regret agreeing to help Hawke. After the short amount of time she’d met with him, she felt confident he was sincere about his feelings for Rachel. And realistically, Sean Pirelli had nothing to do with it. Especially since his earlier phone call when he agreed to work her in.

Cameron reached for the phone beside the sofa and dialed Hawke’s number. Rachel just needed a gentle push, for her own good. She worked an earring loose as she waited for Hawke to answer.

“Hi, Rachel.”

She stuck her tongue in her cheek. “Not Rachel, Zippy.”

“Cameron?”

Cameron tossed the earring to the table in front of the couch. “Well, duh. Don’t you have caller ID?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, who else do you know at Newberry & Tremaine except me and Rachel?”

“No one. What did you call me?”

“Zippy, your codename.”

She heard him release a long breath and she took the opportunity to continue. “Since

you're so anxious to zip right through this, I did what you asked. There's just one catch."

"What now?"

"You're out 25 pairs of concert tickets, six backstage passes and fourteen french kisses."

"Pirelli was the trade."

"Well, I hit a snag and had to do some fast talking. Rachel's a pretty hot item, Hawke." She gave an exaggerated sigh. "She has a waiting list a mile long, but if you want, I'll call everybody back and explain the circumstances."

Hawke gave a half laugh. "No, Cameron, I'll have Greg make the arrangements. But fourteen french kisses? Whose idea was that?"

Cameron giggled and decided to let up just a bit. "No one's. I just threw that in to yank your chain." She sneezed. "By the way, fifteen bouquets of roses is overkill, don't you think?"

"Were you snooping?"

"I signed for the deliveries. All of them."

"They're not all roses."

"Technicality, Don Juan. We could have a funeral in here."

"Did you clear the whole week?"

Cameron cleared the moisture from the corner of her eye with one finger. "Yes, I came to your rescue. I rescheduled everything except the ribbon-cutting dinner for the new wing at the hospital. Are you going?"

Her question was only a formality. The black tie affair attracted anyone who was anyone in Diablo. Of course he'd attend.

"Yes," he answered.

She waited a split second and then went in for the kill. "Do you have a date?"

"Are you asking?"

Cameron shook her head so hard she thought her brain would flip over. "What? No!"

"Max is available."

Suddenly, she felt the conversation was headed for a dangerous curve. "Enough. Do you want my help or not?"

He answered with a low chuckle.

"Anyway," she continued, "blazing a path for you wasn't easy. Rachel won't be happy when she realizes this will set her People project back."

"Her what?"

"She didn't mention Professionals for People?"

"No."

Cameron tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. "Maybe I should let her tell you."

"Too late. If you don't tell me, I'll put Max on it."

"Fine." She huffed and damned her big mouth. That's all she needed, Super Spy on her back. "Rachel and I support a local charity, Professionals for People. We, along with other professionals in the community, help to provide housing for the less fortunate here in Diablo. We're supposed to complete a house before the hospital shindig."

Cameron paused and took his silence as a quiet victory. That's what he got for thinking Rachel would fall at his feet. "Does that soothe your ego?"

"Yeah," he said. "What exactly does the charity provide?"

"Everything. Lawyers draw up deeds, contractors build the houses, and electricians



wire them. Rachel normally draws the plans and I do the interior design.”

“You sound dedicated.”

“I am,” she agreed, “but it’s really Rachel’s passion. She started the whole thing about five years ago.”

“Why didn’t she say something?”

“Rachel prefers to keep her involvement quiet.”

Cameron gave him a minute to process that information and used the silence to question her matchmaking effort. If Hawke truly wanted to get close to Rachel, he would need to respect her privacy. Was that even possible?

“I wouldn’t do this for just anyone, Hawke,” she said finally, “You better not break her heart.”

“I won’t.”

“Seriously, because I’m not afraid to take on Bigfoot to get to you.”

“I get it, Cameron.”

Only halfway satisfied, she eased off for the time being. “Just so we’re straight. By the way, I think we need to re-negotiate our agreement.”

“Why?”

“I think Sean has his own charity. Is she blonde or brunette?”

He chuckled and she knew he wouldn’t answer the question. Especially since she’d already kept her end of the bargain. “Thank you, Cameron.”

“You’re welcome.” The bell over the front of the office door announced a visitor and Cameron looked up to see Rachel enter the office. “I gotta go.”

Cameron disconnected and leaned to place the receiver back in place.

“Who died?” Rachel tossed a cardboard tube across the sofa table in front of Cameron.

Cameron sneezed again. “No one. All of these are for your sniffing enjoyment.”

“From who?”

“Not that I read the cards or anything, but they’re from a Mr. Jaydon Hawke, rock star extraordinaire. Just what exactly did you do in Sacramento?”

“Not what you think.”

Cameron clutched the appointment book against her chest and leaned back against the sofa.

“That’s why he’s called twice and sent truckloads of flowers. Must’ve been some trip.”

Rachel cut her eyes at Cameron then glanced down at the appointment book. “Please don’t tell me I’ve had another cancellation.”

Cameron bit her lip. Please don’t kill me. “That frees you up for the whole week.”

“I told Hawke I was booked the whole week.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to look desperate, Cameron.”

“He sounded persistent when he called.”

Rachel snorted. “Of course. He’s used to getting exactly what he wants.”

Cameron smirked. “He wants you, girlfriend.”

“No, he wants the thought of me.”

“That’s a really blonde thing to say, Rachel. Even I don’t get it.”

“Hawke likes the thrill of the chase, Cameron, and since I’m running, he’s thrilled. If

he ever caught me, he'd be bored."

"Then beat him at his own game."

"You are insane." Rachel rolled her eyes.

"That's no secret," Cameron agreed, "but as long as you have the upper hand, the universe is balanced. Besides, I thought we agreed you'd try him on for size."

Rachel's eyes flickered and Cameron suspected Rachel hadn't forgotten.

"We did, but—"

"But what?"

"I'm not good at this."

Not willing to let Rachel quit, Cameron made the one suggestion she knew Rachel wouldn't argue with. "Use the week to work on his house."

Rachel raised an eyebrow and bobbed her head from side to side as if considering the suggestion.

"And," Cameron pressed, "maybe you should tell him about your People project."

Rachel shrugged. "He probably already knows."

Cameron swallowed hard. "You think?"

"Nothing gets past Max."

"Yeah, Secret Agent Man," Cameron mumbled, more than agreeable to let Max take the blame.

"I'll think about it." Rachel took the appointment book from Cameron and headed back toward her office.

Cameron folded her arms across her chest and shook her head, both annoyed and proud that Rachel wouldn't give in easily. "You think entirely too much."

## CHAPTER TEN

Rachel had just dozed off when somewhere in the depths of her subconscious she swore she heard a telephone ring, but her brain refused to let her believe it. Instead, peaceful REM patterns took over and returned her to a warm, dream-filled cocoon.

And then the obnoxious noise intruded again.

Why didn't someone answer the ringing beast? Rachel groaned and forced herself awake enough to realize the noise came from the phone on a table beside the bed.

Half irritated, she rolled over and answered. "Hello?"

"Miss Newberry?"

Rachel sat up, rubbed one eye with her free hand, then glanced at the clock next to the phone. 2:00 a.m. "Yes?"

"Sorry to bother you, Ma'am, but this is the Diablo Fire Department central dispatch. There's been a fire in the Pacific Valley Heights addition. It's one of yours."

Rachel didn't give the dispatcher time to explain any further. She mumbled a quick thank you, slammed down the phone and sprung from bed.

Minutes later, Rachel crammed the car in park, shoved open the door, and sprinted toward the smoldering structure. Heat penetrated her pores as tiny bits of ash fell from the night sky like snowflakes and stuck to her sweat-dampened skin.

"Rachel!"

Rachel only vaguely recognized her name as she came to an involuntary abrupt stop when she bounced off a hard-bodied fireman in her path.

"You can't go any closer."

She lifted her now-watering, burning eyes to see Rick Martinelli slide his helmet from his head.

"How did this happen?"

Rick brushed his forearm across his forehead then wedged the helmet between one arm and one hip. "We don't know for sure yet."

She dug deep for patience. "Guess, Rick."

"Arson."

"Why?"

"No way to know."

"How extensive is the damage?"

"Total."

Rachel fumbled for her cell phone then realized she left it behind. "I need to call Hawke."

"He's on his way. The captain made the call." Rick handed her his helmet and then shrugged out of his jacket. The scent of burning wood assaulted her nostrils.

"Here, put this on."

She frowned. "You'll need that, won't you?"

Rick shook his head. "Fire's out. I won't be going back in." He gave her a lopsided grin. "Besides, I'm not standing out here in my nightie."

Rachel gasped, thrust the helmet back at him, and grabbed the coat. "Thank you."

Rick replaced his helmet. "You're welcome." Rick turned and headed back toward a row of fire trucks. After several steps, he tossed her a wink over his shoulder. "By the way, I always appreciated your legs."

Rachel gave him a weak smile, squeezed the coat tighter around her, and then glanced back at the area where Hawke's house had begun to take shape. Absolutely nothing had been spared by the angry flames.

"Oh my God."

Rachel flinched at the sound of Cameron's voice beside her. She tucked several pieces of hair behind her ear. "At least it was just the frame."

Cameron nodded. "Yeah, but still, who in their right mind would do something like this?"

Rachel could only shrug.

"And how did they get in here?" Cameron demanded.

Rachel paused to analyze Cameron's comment. An iron privacy fence surrounded the neighborhood. The only way in was either through the front entrance and past a security officer or over the top of the fence.

"I suppose they could've climbed over," Rachel mumbled.

"Maybe."

Rachel stole a glance at Cameron, dressed in a cute yellow sundress and matching sandals. She groaned and pulled Rick's coat closed.

Cameron tapped her on the shoulder. "Care to explain why your jacket has Martinelli on the back?"

Rachel swallowed hard and opened the coat. "When the dispatcher called me, I hurried over."

Cameron giggled. "You forgot your shoes too."

Rachel looked down at the bedroom slippers on her feet, the ones with yellow smiley faces all over them. She gave Cameron a sideways grin. "I told you, I was in a hurry. I see you took time to dress."

Cameron grunted. "I didn't have a choice. The booming voice on the other end of my phone call told me to quote, Get dressed and get the hell over here so you wouldn't be alone, end quote."

Rachel bit her lip to stifle a giggle. "Max?"

"The one and only. It's probably only a matter of seconds before he blows in here."

Rachel glanced at the now scorched area. "Surely they can clear this out tomorrow."

"Um, Rachel." Cameron waved a hand in front of Rachel's face. "Does Hawke know about you and Rick Martinelli?"

"No, we didn't discuss past relationships." She shrugged. "Besides, his list is longer than mine."

"Yeah, but he's not walking toward you with one of his conquests, just yours."

Still distracted by the ashy carnage in front of her, Rachel didn't bother to respond. Her relationship with Rick was the furthest thing from her mind. Until Cameron spoke again.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. August."

Rachel moved her gaze to focus on the three men who now stood next to her. Max appeared his business-as-usual self. Rick shook his head at Cameron's introduction.

Hawke appeared very interested in Cameron's greeting.

He raised an eyebrow. "Who's Mr. August?"

After a few awkward seconds of silence, Rick cleared his throat. "That would be me."

Instinct told Rachel she should explain before the conversation took a dangerous U-turn, except just as she opened her mouth, Max folded his arms across his chest and took control of the conversation.

He turned to Cameron. "Does your mother know you look at that stuff?"

Someone sucked in a short breath. Someone else, most likely Rick, muffled a curse.

Cool as a cucumber, Cameron just grinned. "I only read the articles."

Rather than stop right there, Max poked Cameron again. "Care to share what you've learned?"

Rachel placed both fingers to her temples. "Stop! Please. Nobody reads anything like that." She turned to glare at Cameron. "At least I don't think so. Rick volunteered to pose for a fireman calendar."

Obviously amused, Hawke grinned. "What about the other eleven months?"

"My crew," Rick mumbled.

Rachel gave an impatient huff and desperately tried to redirect the conversation. Especially since Hawke now stood beside her and she couldn't help but picture him oiled and glistening. "Max, what about the fire?"

"The investigator will call me tomorrow. Everything's still too hot to search."

Although disappointed, Rachel already suspected as much.

"Okay, then." Cameron jingled her car keys. "Since we've all discussed my reading preference and the fire is out, I say we all call it a night. Besides, Rachel's not dressed for conversation."

Rachel groaned. "Thanks, Cameron."

Hawke's eyes widened. "You're not?"

"I left in a hurry." Rachel folded her arms across the front of Rick's coat.

Max shook his head and followed Rick back toward the fire engine.

"Want me to follow you home?" Cameron twirled her keys around her fingers.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine."

Cameron looked at Hawke then back at Rachel. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Come on," Hawke said from beside her, "I'll walk you to your car."

Rachel felt Hawke's hand press against the small of her back. Even through the heavy, thick coat, electric shocks of desire ran the length of her body. She led him across the cleared area planned for the house and into a clump of trees where she'd parked her Mercedes.

Hawke stopped and looked around the grassy area. "How'd you get in here?"

Rachel pointed at a thicket of trees opposite them. "There's a gate on the other side. Originally, I toyed with the idea that this might make a good point for a private entrance. Now I'm convinced."

"You really thought this out, didn't you?"

"Apparently not." The realization that someone might have entered the property through this entrance didn't make her happy. "Why would someone do this? You have any enemies?"

"Probably," he said without hesitation, "but maybe it's not actually arson. The fire chief told Max this is the first fire they've had in this addition."

“Rick’s hardly ever wrong,” Rachel mumbled.

Hawke leaned against the driver’s side door and shot her that sexy smirk again. The one that made her think naked. “You seem to have a lot of faith in Mr. August.”

Rachel entertained the thought of telling Hawke about Rick, but then decided against it. She was too distracted to explain. How could one man make her wiggle with just a look? “We’ve been friends a long time.”

Her heartbeat gave a hard thump and she braced herself for his interrogation, readily prepared to tell him only what was necessary. Instead, he reached out, grasped the front of her coat, and pulled her against him. Her heartbeat kicked up a couple more notches.

“So, since you’re parked in the middle of these trees, why don’t you slide out of this coat and I’ll return it on my way back to the Suburban?”

Rachel opened her mouth, fully intent on issuing a polite *thanks-but-no-thanks*, and then the finely strung threads of her restraint snapped.

“I don’t have much on underneath,” she whispered.

He raised a hand and caressed the side of her face with his knuckles. “Show me.”

Empowered by his touch, Rachel knew she was a goner. Suddenly, nothing mattered more than pleasing the man in front of her. No more denial, no doubt, no regret.

She took a small step backward, her body cursing the separation, and unbuttoned each button of the coat. Once open, she shrugged each shoulder. The coat fell to the grass.

She stood morbidly still, watching him scan the length of her body now clad only in a white silk nightgown that barely touched the tops of her knees. His eyes glowed like fireflies in the darkness.

“C’mere, baby.”

Rachel returned to the circle of his arms and thought she might possibly combust. Even the summer night breeze that moved the silk against her torso couldn’t cool her. Braced against her car in the moonlight with his shirt fully open this time, Hawke posed as her own personal Adonis, poised for her touch. She rested her hands against the corded muscles of his chest and hoped that touching him would take the edge off her desire.

Her breath hitched when he ran his palm under the edge of her nightgown and up her bare left thigh until he rested his hand at one hip.

“If I would’ve known you’d come dressed like this, I’d have started a fire days ago.”

His familiar rasp started a needy ache between her legs. God, his voice did things to her. His fingers began a circular motion on her abdomen. Butterflies danced under her skin.

Rachel couldn’t even put two words together to formulate some sort of response, all too aware that his touch made her very, very stupid for the moment. Then his lips touched the sensitive skin of her neck and all conversation escaped her. She released a groan and pressed herself tighter against him.

The hard length of him stretched against her stomach and suddenly she couldn’t get close enough.

She moved her hands from his chest, feeling her way down his abdomen and across the carved indentions of his obliques. Desperate to feel what she already knew to be pure temptation, she tucked her fingers into the top of his jeans, making sure to press herself against his thighs as she grazed the tender skin beneath.

Hawke released a muffled curse and reached between them to pop the top button of his pants as he nipped the top of her shoulder. Rachel let a smile split her lips,

encouraged by his obvious desperation. She pushed his hand to the side and moved hers inside his pants to squeeze the bulge between his legs. He groaned and thrust his hips into her touch.

His reaction set her body ablaze and her breathing became labored.

“Hawke,” she panted, “touch me.”

He lifted his lips from the top of her shoulder and moved them to the tender skin behind her ear. “Tell me where, sweetheart.”

His lips continued their assault on the pleasure point behind her ear and she stood, melting like a stick of butter, attempting to decide which body part he should touch. A decision she couldn't possibly make at this particular moment.

“Somewhere,” she said over a sigh.

He gave a low, husky laugh and moved his hands from her midsection to slide each spaghetti strap of her gown down each shoulder until he exposed the tops of her breasts. Hawke placed a soft kiss on her lips, cupped a breast in each hand, and then licked over the swollen rise of flesh. Rachel gasped, pressed herself further into his touch, and tightened her hold on his shaft. Determined to make him as crazy as she, Rachel stroked the length from top to bottom and back again.

A low, feral growl left his lips and he released her long enough to unwrap her fingers. “Easy, honey.”

He placed her hands back against his chest and then eased the silk from her breasts until her nipples stood at attention, begging for his touch.

“Beautiful,” he moaned.

Rachel gasped when he bent and took one nipple in his mouth. Pure brazen wanton desire took control of her body as his tongue swirled over the tender flesh. She began to tingle between her legs. She wound her fingers through his hair and urged him to take more of her. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and her head spun until she thought she'd leave the ground. And then the tingling turned into vibration.

Rachel couldn't have stopped if her life depended on it. Her body and the song it now sang belonged to Hawke.

He placed a tender kiss on the peak of one nipple then took the other between his lips. The vibration now became a full-fledged hum and all she could do was hold on. Several short whimpers left her lips and she tightened her hold on his hair. Fireworks exploded behind her eyelids and she struggled to breathe.

Hawke raised his head and gave her a very heated, testosterone-injected smile. “Did you just ...?”

Much too satisfied to deny her reaction, she released a contented sigh. “Oh yes I did.”

Before he could answer, the sound of someone clearing their throat broke the tender moment. Rachel's eyes widened and time stood still. She glanced down at her now naked, extremely sensitive breasts and then back up at Hawke.

Hawke pulled her flush against him. “I'll be right there, Max.”

Rachel released a whoosh of air from her lungs. Only Max. This time. Still somewhat hidden in the shadow of Hawke's body, she replaced the straps of her nightgown on her shoulders and eased her breasts back inside the silk.

“You know,” she said into the stillness, “only ten percent of women ever experience that particular sensation. You're very talented.”

Hawke laughed softly and planted a kiss in the valley of her cleavage. “Come to the

hotel with me,” he said against her heated skin.

For the first time in a very long time, Rachel wanted to kick caution in the teeth. Her body screamed for her to agree. Her heart assured her it was safe with Hawke. And then the mad scientist in her brain took control.

“Not this time,” she whispered.

Hawke lifted his head. “No?”

She shook her head and struggled for the right words. “I’m just not ready.”

His lips twitched. “I’m pretty sure you’re more than ready.”

Rachel gave a half laugh. “Yes, well, I think we both know that’s true, but I’m not sure spending the night with you is a good idea.”

He placed one hand on her hip and gently tapped her temple with his free hand.

“Whatever you’re fighting in there is extremely annoying.”

“Tell me about it,” she mumbled.

“Okay, so if you won’t put me out of my misery tonight, will you at least let me take you to the hospital gala?”

Rachel frowned. “How do you know about that?”

“I have a ticket.”

“How do you know I do?”

He cocked his head to one side but didn’t answer.

“Max,” she murmured.

Hawke drew her into his arms and kissed her forehead. “Say yes, Rachel.”

She gave him a gentle smile and traced the edge of his jaw with her index finger.

“Yes.”

He placed his lips to hers in one last, lingering kiss and then released her to scoop the coat from the ground. “I’ll return this for you. Do you want Max to follow you home?”

She sat in the driver’s seat, tempted to tell him she’d just follow him to the hotel.

“No, thank you, Hawke.”

Hawke tossed the coat over one shoulder. “Call me if you change your mind.”

She frowned. “About the gala?”

His low, husky snicker filled the heated distance between them just before he answered.

“No.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rachel adjusted the thin strap of her emerald gown one more time before pronouncing herself ready. Her hand shook slightly as she pushed a wayward tendril of hair off the side of her face. Good grief, you've been to a thousand of these *things*. Just not with Jaydon Hawke. When she agreed to go with him, she had no idea she would be this much of a basketcase. Truth be told, she should be relaxed. Especially after last night's romp in the trees.

She took one last look in the mirror and slid the mascara wand over her eyelashes. Flinching at the shrill tone of the gate buzzer, she groaned as the wand connected with her right eyeball.

"Oh...ow!" She blinked several times and then pushed the intercom button to speak. "Hawke?"

His sexy rasp reached through the box and tickled her nerve endings. "Am I early?"

"No, come on up." She rattled off the security code and waited on pins and needles until he rang the doorbell.

Taking a deep breath, she poised herself and opened the door. Only to find herself totally unpoised immediately.

The sight of Hawke lounged against the doorframe weakened her knees. The black jacket he wore showcased his broad shoulders and toned arms, the white shirt beneath was unbuttoned to the waistband of his pants to reveal his tempting, tanned, sculpted chest and steel-plated abs. Rachel wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. No tie. Her eyes continued downward to his tailored pants fastened around his lean waist, cupping his package and daring her to unwrap him.

Hawke snickered and pushed himself off the frame. "Rachel, if you really want to go to this thing, we better leave now. Otherwise, we won't make it. Not the way you're looking at me."

Her cheeks burned. "Oh, sorry."

He grinned and ran his knuckles down her arm. "Don't be sorry, we could just stay here."

As good as he looked, she wasn't convinced she was ready for those repercussions. Rolling her tongue back inside her mouth, she pulled herself together.

"After I spent three hours in front of a mirror?" she teased, "I don't think so, Handsome."

He placed his hand to the small of her back as they left the house and approached the limo, only losing contact long enough to open the door. As she bent to enter the limo, she remembered too late about the barely-there neckline of her gown and glanced at the two passengers already seated.

"Hey, Rachel," Max greeted huskily from behind his trademark tinted lenses.

"Hi, Max." Although a little embarrassed, she fought the urge to giggle. Even though Max had already seen the girls, she was somewhat comforted by the glasses.

Greg nodded as Hawke slid next to her. "You look great."

“Thank you.” Almost immediately, Hawke took her hand and pressed it against the top of his thigh.

Rachel’s head spun as Greg explained the tactical procedure of their entrance at the convention center during the short ride. There was so much planning involved in everything concerning Hawke.

When they arrived, she watched Max unfold his burly frame from the car first and scan the area before he signaled for Greg. Hawke stepped out next and instantly, flashbulbs popped in the dark night, echoing like fireworks off the downtown skyscrapers. With Max positioned firmly in front of him, Hawke extended a hand and gently pulled her from the seat. Rachel drew a deep breath. *This is it. Now I’ve officially become arm candy.*

She glanced at Hawke and for a split second considered ducking back into the car. But when his incredible smile lit his face, running away was the furthest thought from her mind. She balanced one bare, smooth, long leg on the pavement and stood, holding on to his hand for dear life. As if he sensed her uncertainty, Hawke drew her next to him and tucked her to his side.

Once inside the banquet room, Rachel glanced over her shoulder to see Max pull the heavy oak doors closed behind them and position himself just inside the doorway. Rachel tossed him a thankful smile then led Hawke to their assigned table where Cameron and Sean were already seated.

Cameron’s eyes sparkled with curiosity as Hawke pulled out Rachel’s chair. Rachel gave her a smug *wouldn’t-you-like-to-know* smile.

Hawke leaned down and placed a tender kiss on her cheek. “I’ll be right back.” He glanced at Sean. “C’mon, Pirelli, it’s showtime.”

Rachel nodded and then glanced around the room. How many people had seen that kiss?

“So, Rachel.” Cameron leaned forward, braced her elbows on the table, braided her fingers and rested her chin on top of her hands. “What gives with you and Music Man?”

Rachel grinned. “Not what you think. We just spent a little more time together.”

Cameron gave her head a slight nod and for a moment Rachel thought Cameron might actually accept her explanation. She should’ve known better.

Cameron’s lips suddenly split into a mischievous grin. “How was it?”

“Cameron!” Rachel bounced her gaze nervously around the room. “Lower your voice.”

“How was it?” Cameron whispered.

“Nothing happened.” Unless she counted the most incredible, fully-clothed orgasm after the fire. Rachel scanned the room until her gaze froze on Hawke’s long, lean form. His powerful, well-muscled body moved with easy grace as he mingled, the rich outlines of his shoulders straining against the fabric of his jacket. Even in a crowd, the heat that emanated from his body beckoned her. Her mouth watered as she watched him carry himself with a commanding air of self-confidence.

“Rachel, really.” Cameron handed her a napkin. “Just do him.”

Rachel snapped herself out of lustful appreciation. “I can’t.”

Cameron waved a hand in the air. “I know it’s been awhile for you, but you probably haven’t forgotten how.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “No, Cameron, you know how I feel about meaningless sex.”

“And your reasoning is one I’ll never understand.”

Rachel sighed. “Me either.”

Cameron tapped a fingernail against her wine glass. “The sparks that fly between the two of you are fiery, sister. I don’t think sex with Jaydon Hawke would even come close to meaningless.”

“You know what I mean.”

Cameron tilted her head to one side and wrapped a curl around one finger. “You’ll want more than once with him.”

“That too.” Rachel shrugged and made the one admission she couldn’t deny any longer. “I don’t want just sex from him.”

Cameron released the curl then started the process again. “You want a relationship.”

“Yes.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Oh come on, Cameron, we’re talking about Jaydon Hawke, mega superstar, first class sex symbol of the world.”

Cameron couldn’t be swayed. “Who happens to be your escort to the Diablo Memorial Hospital Gala in Diablo, Arizona.”

“There weren’t any groupies available.”

Cameron giggled. “Nice try. I don’t think so.”

Rachel opted to change the subject. “You know, I think Max likes you,” she said nonchalantly.

Cameron winked. “You get an ‘A’ for effort. Don’t think you can escape the subject.”

“I’m just trying to be realistic. What could he possibly see in me? I’m boring to men like him, Cameron. I work long hours and then go home. To sleep. Any time I have left for socializing is for things like this. B-O-R-I-N-G,” she huffed.

Cameron shifted her eyes Hawke’s direction and made a clucking sound with her tongue. “Um, yeah, probably not. He’s wearing a very obvious I’m-going-to-have-you look.”

Rachel glanced back at him and felt her thighs heat. Cameron was exactly right.

Cameron nudged Rachel’s elbow. “And your expression is so take me, you couldn’t wipe it off if you tried.”

Hawke shook hands with the mayor and then he and Sean walked back toward the table. Although now very hot and bothered, Rachel giggled, suddenly relaxed by Cameron’s gentle teasing. “You have such a way with words.”

Cameron shrugged. “Hey, I call it as I see it.”

“See what?” Sean asked as he returned to Cameron’s side. “Come on.” Cameron stood and took his hand. “I’ll show you.”

Rachel watched as Cameron led Sean to the dance floor, wiggling her hips at him the whole way. She sighed softly, envious of Cameron’s confidence.

“Would you like to dance?” Hawke asked, interrupting her thoughts.

A dark shadow clouded the table before she could answer and her response stalled on her tongue when she looked up at their unexpected female guest.

The familiar honey-dipped drawl made Rachel’s skin crawl. “Hello, Rachel. Fancy seeing you out and about on the town.”

Rachel struggled to keep her voice steady. “Nice to see you, Monica.”

“I see you’re entertaining again this evening.”

“Hawke is a guest speaker.”

“So I heard.”

Monica paused, obviously waiting for Rachel’s response. Rachel twisted her napkin around her fingers instead. She wouldn’t give Monica the satisfaction.

“Well,” Monica said finally, “you two have a nice evening. It was nice to see you again Mr. Hawke.”

Monica didn’t wait to hear Hawke’s response and stalked away in a heavy fog of perfume. Rachel resisted the urge to fan herself.

Rachel heard Hawke clear his throat before he spoke. She stifled a giggle at her next thought. *Probably to get better air flow.*

“Let me guess,” he drawled, “she’s the chairman of the hospital board.”

Rachel twisted the napkin tighter. “Not this time. She’s just on the fundraising committee.”

“Is she always this polite to you?”

Rachel smirked at Hawke’s sarcasm. “That was for your benefit. She rarely speaks to me.”

“She’s jealous.”

Her hands stilled. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Hawke untangled the napkin from her fingers, threw it onto the table and stood.

“Enough.” His dark eyes pierced hers as he lifted her by the arm. Pulling her from the chair, he pushed her through the crowd and out onto a corner balcony without explanation.

“Now.” His tone was soft but strong. “You and I need to get a few things straight.”

Still stunned by his dominance, Rachel only stared as he continued.

“I don’t know who convinced you that intelligence is not beautiful but they were a damn fool. And you’re an even bigger fool if you believe something so ludicrous.”

“Hawke—”

He silenced her with one hand. “I’m not done. Not only are you insanely beautiful on the outside, Rachel, your insides are amazing. Your ability to compose yourself is outstanding. Your heart is big enough for at least three people, and your dedication to your work and your friends is incredible. Now, ask me again why Monica is jealous.”

Rachel folded her arms and shifted to one side. “You rock stars really are dramatic.”

Hawke released a husky laugh. “See? You have this uncanny sense of humor and I, for one, think it makes you hot.”

“Hawke, you don’t really know me.”

“I do know one thing,” he began easily. “A little bird told me about the charity you support and the time you devote to it.”

“A big, burly bird or a little, blonde bird?”

“Never mind.” He dismissed her concern with another smirk. “I’d really like to get to know you.”

Despite her best effort, her smile slipped. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Yes, I would,” he insisted, inching closer.

Rachel felt her hair tickle her shoulders as she shook her head. “Sometimes people aren’t who you think.” This was something she knew for a fact. No way would she let him convince her otherwise. “And sometimes it’s better to believe what you think rather than know the truth.”

“Not necessarily.”

“You don’t think so?”

Hawke leaned back against the balcony railing. “Do you believe everything you’ve heard about me?”

“I haven’t heard much,” she mumbled.

His soft laugh wrapped her like a warm blanket. “Surely me and my gaggle of groupies have crossed your home page at one time or another.”

She had to grin. “I did read something like that.”

“And you’d rather believe that than know the truth?”

Rachel imitated Cameron’s patented eye roll. “It’s not the same, Hawke, you’re a celebrity. The average Joe doesn’t have the opportunity to discover the truth.”

Hawke pushed off the railing. “But you do. Would you rather keep me away because of what you think is the truth?”

Rachel looked him straight in the eye, still very afraid of the consequences of her answer. “No.”

“I’m offering you the chance to make your own decision.”

“Why?”

“I trust you.” His fingers rubbed small circles on her bare shoulder. “You want me, Rachel, and I refuse to let anything stand in your way.”

She was now convinced he could see right through her. Flames licked her cheeks. “Sure of yourself, aren’t you?” she squeaked.

“Very.” He stepped closer and caressed the side of her jaw with his knuckles. “After last night, I’m positive. It’s simple chemistry. I want you, you want me.”

Rachel wanted to deny his observation, but her denial wouldn’t hold water; her body reacted too violently to his touch.

She cleared her throat and demanded her body behave. “I’m not some sponge-brained groupie, Hawke.”

“Far from it.” He moved his hand down to caress the hollow of her neck.

Rachel closed her eyes and a small, barely audible moan escaped her lips. His soft touch made her limp with need. Coming to her senses, she quickly batted his hand away.

“Okay, I give. I do want you. But you know as well as I do, it will never work.”

“Why?”

“Because I won’t settle for a one-night stand and that seems to be your specialty.”

His eyes flashed hurt. “Do you really believe that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so abrupt, but you’re a musical icon. Women literally throw themselves at you and stuff panties in your pocket on a nightly basis.” Rachel tossed her hands in the air. “I don’t even know if Hawke is your real name. And really, if I’m going to scream a name in the throes of passion, I prefer it to be a real one!”

Hawke only stared, obviously not expecting that particular excuse. And then she caught a sparkle in the depths of his eyes.

“That is my name and I’ll make absolutely sure you scream it.”

Rachel released a long, heavy sigh. “I don’t have anything to offer you.”

He tipped her chin with his finger. “You have much more to offer than you think.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She could so easily fall prey to his hypnotizing charm. Slowly she stepped away from his tempting touch. “Let me think about this.”

He shrugged. "Think about it all you want. You'll only make yourself more frustrated."

Rachel knew he was exactly right. Yet, like Cameron said, she shouldn't make it too easy. She gave him a wide smile. "I'm willing to take the chance."

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Max shifted his weight and forced his queasiness to the bottom of his stomach as he watched Pirelli press the fiery vixen closer to him and position himself between her legs. One more inch and he could do her right there on the dance floor. Who the hell danced like that? His face burned when Pirelli's hand slid from the small of her back to squeeze one round globe of her ass.

Max glanced across the room and spotted a fire extinguisher hanging behind glass in a corner. That would put a kink in Casanova's game. Max shook his head to clear his thoughts. Who the hell cared? He wasn't on playground duty tonight. He glanced back at the couple just as she swatted Pirelli and moved his hand back to her waist, but it wasn't two seconds later before Pirelli went for it again. Max held his breath, sure he would have to peel Pirelli off the floor any second. Instead, she glanced Max's direction and smirked.

And then wiggled her ass against Pirelli's hand.

Behind his shaded lenses, Max gave her a stare he used right before wringing a neck. Or slicing an artery. Only, she had no idea she was on the receiving end.

Finally releasing his gaze, she swatted Pirelli again and giggled as she led him back to their table. She then swayed toward the bar.

Max elbowed Huntington in the arm. "Here comes Trouble."

Huntington tightened his hold on his wineglass, loosened his tie, and took a swig of wine. "Hey, Cameron."

"Greg." She nodded as the bartender handed her three glasses.

She turned to face Max and tilted her head to the side. "I'm taking two of these back for Hawke and Rachel. Do you need to taste them first?"

Max shifted his weight, prepared to beat her at her own game. "What's your poison?"

"Wine. Red. Most likely sour. Do you need to know the year?"

Max shrugged. "Why not?"

She squeezed her eyes closed for a split second and then opened them. "I have no idea. Shall I ask the bartender?"

Totally stimulated by her smart mouth, Max folded his arms across his chest and prepared to play. Then he remembered Huntington stood next to him, a witness to their game. "No, Cupcake," he answered smoothly. "I trust you."

Huntington coughed and a splash of wine hit Max's shoulder. Max thumped him on the back with added force.

Huntington frowned. "Thanks, Max."

She gave them both another narrowed stare then left. Max exhaled a long, slow breath.

Huntington cleared his throat. "'Uh, Max, did you just call her —'"

"Strategy, Huntington."

Huntington swallowed the remaining wine in his glass then reached for another. "Good idea." He signaled at Hawke to step to the podium. "It's time for Hawke to

speak.”

Returning to his table, Greg downed the glass of wine in several seconds and glanced at his watch. Another half hour and they could blow this popsicle stand. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Although he wasn't quite sure about Hawke's decision to slow down, he fully supported it. And, seeing Hawke with Rachel only helped his argument. She had a way of calming him, bringing him into the real world, away from the glitter and glam of fame. Simply put, she provided the kick in the ass he needed to keep from becoming too cocky. Maybe Hawke was onto something.

“Mr. Huntington?”

Greg knocked over his wine glass, startled by a sultry, female voice. He blinked several times to clear his vision, pleasantly surprised when he was able to focus. Her polished appearance screamed wealth and confidence. A diamond necklace sparkled around her long, smooth neck, the longest link dangling a large stone just above the valley of her ample cleavage.

“Yes, I'm Greg Huntington.” Part of him wondered why she approached him and the other, more stimulated part didn't really give a damn.

“Monica Kensington.” She gestured at the chair across the table. “May I sit?”

“Please.”

“My sources tell me you're Mr. Hawke's manager.” She leaned forward, granting him a bird's eye view the skin beneath her dress. “The hospital board is very grateful for his willingness to help raise funds for the new wing.”

“Hawke is honored to participate, Ms. Kensington.” His gaze traveled the surface of her chest before returning to her face. “He feels it's the least he can do since he intends to move into the community.”

Her eyes twinkled. “And are you moving into the community as well?”

Greg leaned his head to one side and suddenly decided against that position. “No, I work out of Los Angeles. Hawke is just one of my clients.”

“I see.” She reached across the table to run one red fingernail across his knuckles. “So we won't be seeing much of you.”

He shifted, still not entirely sure how to interpret her attention.

“Thing is, Mr. Huntington,” she continued, her voice heavy with heat, “I'd personally like to see more of you around here.”

He cocked an eyebrow and tried to remember how many glasses of wine he drank. “How much more of me?”

Suddenly her toes caressed the hardness between his thighs. “All of you,” she whispered.

Greg swallowed hard while his erection saluted her. “Give me ten minutes,” he answered hoarsely, “then I'll be able to walk out of here.”

As soon as Hawke finished dazzling the crowd, couples returned to the dance floor and several champagne corks popped.

Cameron leaned toward Rachel. “Do you need a break?”

“I could use one.”

Rachel followed Cameron to the ladies' room and crowded next to her at the mirror. “So why are we in here? Your nose doesn't need powder.”

Cameron pulled out her lipstick. “Who said anything about my nose? We've been so

busy you haven't told me about your trip with Music Man."

Rachel shrugged. "What's to tell?"

Cameron colored her lips then made a smacking noise with her mouth. "If there's nothing to tell, you need to drop him like a hot potato."

Rachel sighed, then smiled. "Well, you know how I feel about flying. All I could think about was crashing. But I sat between Hawke and Max."

Cameron bobbed her head from side to side. "Not a bad place to be in an emergency."

"My thought exactly. We had a really good time."

Rachel paused and Cameron eyed her reflection in the mirror. "And?"

"I'm thinking about sticking a toe or two in to test the water."

"What changed your mind?"

While Rachel elaborated on the rest of the day, the gleam in her eyes made Cameron's gut clench. Maybe she shouldn't push so hard. Rachel could end up heartbroken. In fact, chances were pretty good this thing with Hawke would end, badly or not. Could Rachel pull this off? Could she have a fling without attachment?

"Cameron!" Rachel waved a hand in front of Cameron's face. "Hello?"

"Sorry." Cameron backed up against the counter. "Continue."

"He has kids. He took me to meet them and their mother."

Cameron dropped the lid to her lipstick. "He's married? I'll kill him and Max can't stop me!"

"Wait!" Rachel placed a hand on Cameron's forearm. "I was kidding, sort of."

"Sort of? What does that mean? How do you sort of have kids?"

Rachel picked up the lipstick tube and handed it to Cameron. "The kids are foster children and Hawke is their benefactor. Francie is the house mother."

Cameron shook her head and tossed her lipstick into her velvet clutch. "Wow. A humanitarian. Didn't see that one coming."

"Me either. I was pleasantly surprised. And, you should've seen Max."

Cameron tilted her head to one side. "What about him?"

"He was just one of the kids."

"Huh." Cameron opened the door and waved Rachel through. "Sorry I missed that."

Rachel and Cameron made their way back across the conference room, stopping and chatting along the way. Once back at the table, Rachel put her bottle up to her lips and let the cold water slide down her scratchy, dry throat. Conversation always made her thirsty, but it seemed worse tonight. Maybe it had something to do with Hawke and his luscious self. Every time he looked into her eyes or grazed her with a touch, her mouth went dry.

Cameron plopped down in the seat next to her and picked up a program to fan the air around her. "Is it hot in here?"

Rachel searched the room until her gaze landed on Hawke. "Definitely so."

"Rachel?" Cameron stopped fanning and leaned over. "What did you drink?"

"Water. Where's that wine you brought earlier?"

"Right there." Cameron pointed. "Just go easy."

Rachel chuckled. "Why? So I don't get drunk and have my wicked way with Hawke on top of the table?"

Cameron gave her a sideways look and took a swig of her own wine. "Maybe. Do you have to be drunk to do that?"

Rachel leaned back her head and swallowed the whole glass of wine. "I'm not going



to get drunk.” She set the glass back on the table and noticed Sean and Hawke headed toward them. Cameron elbowed Rachel’s arm. “Speak of the devil. Why don’t you guys leave early?”

Rachel took Cameron’s wineglass out of her hand and took a sip.

“Enough.” Cameron snatched it back.

Hawke stopped in front of Rachel and extended his hand. “Dance with me.” His rich, velvet voice wrapped her like ribbons of silk.

Without a word, Rachel took his hand and they glided onto the dance floor. Hawke wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. Rachel laid her head on his chest, inhaling his musky scent. The room began a slow spin.

Rachel held tighter to Hawke and blamed the dancing and her overactive heartbeat. She attempted to follow his lead and managed a few more steps when she felt disconnected from her body. She knew that if he weren’t holding her so close, she would slide down his body onto the floor.

She lifted her head from his chest and blinked her eyes several times. “Hawke, I really need to sit down.”

Hawke lifted her chin. “Rachel?”

She stumbled and grabbed Hawke’s arm to keep from kissing the floor. Her legs felt like jelly and her vision blurred.

Hawke guided her to the table and Rachel stumbled again, this time almost tumbling head first into the floral centerpiece. Cameron frowned.

“How much has she had to drink?” Hawke asked.

Cameron reached to reposition the flowers. “One glass of wine. She’s not drunk.”

“I have to go to the ladies’ room,” Rachel mumbled.

“Good idea.” Cameron took her arm. “I’ll go with you.”

They made it to the hallway before Rachel’s legs buckled and she slid toward the floor. Cameron held on and managed to ease her down against the wall.

Cameron squatted beside her. “Rachel, you’re scaring me.”

Rachel rolled her head to the side. “I’m scaring me too. Cameron, I can’t feel my arms or legs.”

“Just sit here and relax.” Cameron stood and headed back to the gala. “I’m going for help.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Rachel mumbled.

Cameron hurried back into the conference room, fighting the urge to sprint and scream. Since that would attract way too much unwanted attention, she forced herself to walk ... really fast. Unfortunately, Max and Hawke stood on the far side of the room.

Weaving her way through tables and waiters, she finally stopped beside Max. She wrapped her fingers around his biceps, although halfway was all she could manage. “I need you in the hallway.” She glanced at Hawke. “You too.”

“What’s wrong, Cameron?” Hawke asked.

“Rachel’s sprawled in the floor—” Suddenly, her lips were pressed against Max’s palm.

“Not here.”

Hawke didn’t wait for her answer and left the room. Cameron glanced up at Max with narrowed eyes. And then bit down hard on his middle finger.

She expected him to curse, both the pain and her, but instead he held her lips hostage

and gestured behind her with his head.

Cameron whipped around so hard she almost tumbled into Greg and Monica. Max gripped her waist to keep her upright.

Greg laughed. "Guess we've all had a little much to drink."

Cameron all but shouted at him. "I'm not drunk, you lush, just—"

This time Max gave her curls a serious yank. "Yeah, she just needs to sleep it off."

Greg gave a goofy grin. "We're going to call it a night. Do you need anything before I go?"

"As a matter of fact," Cameron said, "I do. Could you please tell Sean I'm leaving with Rachel?"

Greg gripped the back of a chair. "Actually, he—"

"Huntington will deliver the message." Max put a hand to the small of her back and pushed her to move.

"Where are Hawke and Rachel?" Monica asked.

Max nudged Cameron further from the table. "Waiting for us in the hallway."

Hawke had managed to get Rachel upright and into a chair outside the door, but she was still limp and incoherent when they reached her. Her eyes were open but not focused.

"Get the car, Max." Hawke lifted Rachel into his arms.

"Done. It's parked at the side entrance."

Max opened the limo door and motioned Hawke through. Cameron felt two very large hands on her backside as she bent to make sure Rachel rested comfortably in Hawke's lap.

She scowled at the owner over her shoulder. "Watch the hands, Mr. Big."

Max didn't offer an apology and shoved her inside just before he crawled in beside her and barked orders at the driver.

As they sped through town, Hawke held Rachel on his lap, tenderly sweeping her hair out of her face and whispering to her. Max punched numbers on his cell phone, spoke in some sort of bodyguard language, then dialed again.

Cameron dropped her head into her hands. What on Earth happened tonight? She knew for a fact Rachel didn't drink anything other than one glass of wine. She racked her brain for answers, interrupted when someone shook her shoulder.

"Hey, did you hear me?"

She lifted her head to address the hey man. "No, Frankenstein, I'm kinda freaked out right now. Listening to you isn't my first priority."

He pursed his lips. "Did you eat or drink anything that she did? Does she have some kind of medical condition that could have caused this?"

Cameron prayed for patience. "No medical condition. I didn't eat off her plate and she didn't eat off mine."

"How do you feel?"

She gave him an over-exaggerated smile. "Peachy. And you?"

He totally ignored her sarcasm and kept firing questions. "What about alcohol?"

"She only drank the wine I offered you to taste."

"Did you ever leave the table unattended?"

"Yes, Daddy, we went to the ladies' room."

Max paused and his chest rose and fell with several deep breaths. He peered over the top of his sunglasses and she caught the dim sparkle in his eyes. She cursed her smart

mouth. Apparently, he read more into the daddy comment than she intended.

“When we came back, she drank some water and the glass of wine. I only sipped mine.”

Max didn't answer and the questions stopped. Cameron breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back against the seat.

Once at the hospital, Max opened the door, stepped out, and scooped Rachel from Hawke's lap. “I'll be back for you two.”

Cameron shook her head. “We're right behind you.”

“I said I'll be back.”

Cameron glanced at Hawke then back at Max. “I'm not letting her go in alone.”

All of a sudden, Joe Cool blew his cool all over her. “So help me God, you come out of that car and I'll turn you over my knee and paddle your ass here and now.”

Hawke inhaled a sharp breath. Cameron sat motionless, her eyes wide. Max slammed the door.

Before she could formulate an appropriate response to his threat, other than paddle me, please, he returned and flung open the door.

“Out.”

Cameron left the car with Hawke behind her. Max shuffled them through the Emergency Room and then into a private waiting room in one corner.

“As soon as the doctor takes a look at her, we can go in.”

Cameron crossed her knees and swung one leg as she listened to Hawke and Max and tried not to panic.

“What do you think, Max?” Hawke's normally smooth, husky tone held a slight quiver.

“I'm thinking drugs.”

Hawke released a rough breath. “What the hell?”

Max shrugged. “She can't even stand straight. Either that or she's allergic to something.”

Cameron's leg stilled. She glanced down at her knees and noticed her earlier movement had inched the hem of her dress to her upper thigh. She stole a quick glance at both men. Hawke's head was now lowered in his hands. Max, however, appeared to be staring straight at her. Those sexy dark lenses prevented her from knowing for sure. With no other choice, she wiggled the fabric back to its rightful place at mid-thigh.

She cleared her throat. “All those people know and respect Rachel. Why would one of them drug her?”

Hawke raised his head. “The drug might not have been meant for her, Cameron.”

Cameron felt her eyes widen to at least quarter size. “You?”

Hawke nodded.

She looked at Max. “Really?”

Max echoed Hawke's nod. “There's some sick fu-, uh people, in the world.”

Cameron's body began to tremble. She stood and stepped to the door. “I'm going to check on her.”

The door snapped shut behind her. Max waited three full seconds then stood and cracked the door, just to be sure the pint sized firecracker was out of earshot. When he couldn't spot her, he eased the door closed.

“Rachel's the target, no question in my mind.”

Hawke scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "Diego doesn't have the decoy yet."

"True, but he may already suspect something."

"I don't think she realizes what's going on. She's a pawn, that's all."

"You're supposed to have evidence to back that up."

"Working on it." Hawke leaned his head back against the top of the chair. "What happens when Diego finds out the package is empty? He won't hesitate to kill her, Max."

"You know what you have to do."

Hawke lifted his head and glared. "No."

"Why the hell not?"

"She finally trusts me."

"Try again."

"She'll never understand."

"This is a mission. You knew the repercussions going in."

Hawke released a hard breath. "There has to be another way."

"There's not. I suggest you do it now before someone else makes the decision for you."

"I will soon." Hawke scrubbed a hand down his jaw. "Should I go after Cameron? She's about to fall apart."

"Give her some space, Hawke. It won't be long until she's back to normal." Max released a heavy sigh. "God help us all."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The annoying buzz of the alarm clock forced Rachel to unglue her eyelids and open her eyes enough to realize she was pinned to the mattress by a pile of blankets that weighed at least a ton. Puzzled, she attempted to roll to one side without success. Why on Earth was she wrapped like a mummy? Last time she checked, it was July and at least ninety degrees on a cool night. Desperate for silence, she finally laid a hand across her stomach and then maneuvered it up and out the top of the blankets. Luckily, the alarm was only an arm's length away. She gave it a quick slap and immediately the room was quiet again.

Now wide awake and beginning to feel suffocated, Rachel attempted to stick out one leg and found it impossible. For one foggy moment she wondered if this was some sort of feeble attempt to prevent her escape from the bedroom. She took a deep breath and tried again, this time shoving her leg with brute force. Five pink toenails shone in the early morning sunlight.

In an attempt to figure out how she ended up somewhat of a prisoner in her own bed, Rachel gave her brain a mental shake. Immediately, fragments of memory assaulted her. The gala. Hawke's challenge. The wine. She frowned. Too much wine? She shook her head. She only drank one glass. The hospital. Rachel's eyes widened. Yes, she went to the hospital last night. Something about the wine. She forced herself to focus. Alcohol poisoning? And then she remembered. Her drink had been laced. With what, she didn't know. In fact, it was quite possible no one said.

One person had information she needed. She gave the alarm clock a nasty stare while she reached for the phone beside it. A couple of more hours of sleep would've been nice, especially since no one expected her to work this week. The plastic handset slid across her palm and Rachel realized the blankets had to go. She tapped out Hawke's number on the keypad, tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder, and then rolled the blankets down past her stomach like a set of blueprints while she waited for him to answer.

Static and what sounded like angry mumbling greeted her after the third ring.

"Good morning," she said sweetly.

"Rachel?" Sleep only made the rasp in his voice sexier. "It's 6:00 in the morning."

"Sorry, my alarm was set. I usually have to get up to work."

"Oh, I'm up." Hawke snickered. "It might just take me a few minutes to work."

Despite herself, she couldn't help but wonder just exactly how long it would take him to work. She imagined him propped up in bed, the pillows plumped behind him, one leg bent at the knee and the other extended. One arm bent behind his head, the other resting across his hip. Relaxed, sexy, and waiting. For her.

"How do you feel this morning?"

Rachel bit her lip to prevent a brutally naughty answer from slipping out. "Not so bad," she answered instead, "except I don't remember much."

"Do you remember anything?"

"Some, but I'd hoped you could fill me in."

“Really? I figured since Cameron was there, she took care of that.”

“Cameron’s here?”

She stayed to make sure you slept.”

Rachel suddenly understood the blanket prison. “What else do I need to know?”

A pregnant pause resonated between them and for a minute she thought he’d hung up. And then a rustling sound echoed over the line. Her libido went on full alert. The thought of crisp linens slithering over the hard lines of Hawke’s body made her breasts swell and her body burn.

She squeezed her eyes closed. “Hawke, are you naked?”

“Yes, aren’t you?”

“No!” She smashed her legs together in an effort to ward off a now very pesky tingle up and down the inside of her thighs.

“Why not?”

“I don’t sleep naked.”

“Too bad.”

“Why? It’s not like you’d see me or anything.”

“No?”

She sighed. That was a rhetorical question and he knew it but she surrendered anyway. “Okay, maybe.”

“You’re still in bed?”

“Yes.” Mostly because she was trapped.

“How much longer are you gonna be there?”

“I was just about to get out.”

“So...you wearing the slinky white nightie?”

She hesitated, not quite sure how to interpret his question. Hoping her assumption was correct, she grinned and glanced down at her nightgown, this time white cotton and quite modest. “A red, lace teddy,” she lied.

“How many buttons?”

Oh...phone sex. Why not? “No buttons,” she taunted, “hooks.”

She heard his breath hitch.

“Hooks?”

“Yes, four, right down the center.”

His voice took on a whole new husky tone. “Unhook them.”

“I’ll fall out.”

“I know.”

Rachel exhaled in defeat. This whole seduction routine was just making matters worse. “Okay, I give. I’m not wearing a red, lace teddy.”

“Nuh-huh. You started this, now we’re going to finish.”

She switched the phone to her other ear. “I can’t ad lib, Hawke,” she huffed.

“Yes you can.” His voice grew heavy.

“Cameron is in the other room.”

“So?”

“You’re—”

”Hard as a rock, sweetheart. The least you can do is give me something to think about in the shower.”

Shudders of pleasure raced through her body as she imagined running her hands up

and down the length of his erection. Stroking and squeezing while he encouraged her with naughty words whispered in her ear. She scrubbed a hand across her forehead. This wasn't exactly what she planned.

"The hooks, Rachel," he prompted.

"Fine," she relented, "there. I unhooked them."

"Sorry, babe, you can do better than that."

Rachel shook her head at his persistence. Okay, wiseguy, you asked for it.

She gave a breathy whimper. "I've unhooked them now, Hawke. My breasts are exposed, screaming for your touch."

"Do you want me to touch?"

*Yes, yes, yes, a thousand times, yes.* "I'll die if you don't."

"With my hands," he countered, "or with my mouth?"

The phone slid from her hold and banged the floor. With a pure adrenaline rush, Rachel tossed the blankets from her legs, threw herself on her stomach, and looked over the side of the bed. Luckily, it lay within her reach and she could retrieve it with little effort. Hopefully she didn't wake Cameron with all the commotion, but at least she'd have a few seconds to recover.

Rachel pressed the phone back to her ear. "First your hands."

"I remember what happens when I use my mouth."

She let desire guide her. "Oh yes," she said over an exhaled sigh, "and while you touch me, I'll touch you."

She heard a muffled curse cross the line. "And I won't use my hands."

He released a tortured groan. "You can't."

"Oh, yes I can. I want to return the favor."

This time his groan turned to a growl. "Uncle."

"Are you sure?" Rachel suddenly felt very empowered as a vixen. "You won't be disappointed."

"Stop, Rachel." His tone was somewhere between demanding and well, begging. "I want this to be personal."

Rachel gave a feigned sigh. "If you insist." Hawke's momentary plea for time-out brought her back to her senses. "Besides, I didn't call to get you all hot and bothered, I just wanted to find out more about last night."

"Why don't I bring Max and a cup of coffee and we'll talk?"

Something in his response told her she might not appreciate knowing. "That bad?" she said lightly. "I realize I was under the influence of something, but did I dance naked around the punch bowl?"

Hawke released a hearty laugh. "I would've never allowed that to happen. I just want an excuse to see you."

Rachel couldn't have stopped her next thought if she wanted to. And I just want an excuse to have wild, naked, monkey sex with you. She cleared her throat and her mind. "Okay, give me a few minutes to dress."

"You better hurry. Since my shower will be cold, I won't be long."

Rachel hummed to herself as she descended the stairs. Cameron would be so proud. Silently patting herself on the back, she entered the living area barely able to contain her excitement. Cameron sat cross-legged in the floor with her sketchbook.

“Good morning.”

Cameron spun around and placed a hand to the base of her neck. “Good grief, Rachel! Next time stomp down the stairs or something. You scared the snot out of me.”

“That’s what you get for keeping me prisoner.”

“I didn’t have a choice. How do you feel?”

“Fine. Except I couldn’t move when I woke up. You know it’s July, right?”

Cameron shrugged. “The doctor said you would probably be chilled. Besides, you must have slept awful hard last night.”

“Why?”

Cameron cocked an eyebrow. “I thought you fell out of bed this morning.”

“I dropped the phone.”

Cameron’s brow furrowed. “Are you sure you’re okay? King Know-it-all seemed to think you’d be loopy for awhile.”

“Believe me, I’m fine.” Rachel smiled so big she thought her face would crack. “I just talked to Hawke.”

Cameron glanced at her watch. “He was awake? It’s not even 7:00.”

“Wide awake. We had phone sex.”

Cameron giggled as she arranged colored pencils in a line. “I’ve created a monster.”

Rachel lowered herself to the sofa. “I really like him, Cameron.”

“I told you.” Cameron grinned. “Just don’t make it easy.”

Rachel shook her head at Cameron’s advice. Too late. Denying him now would be next to impossible. Her body was just too darn addicted. “Have you finished the sketches?”

Cameron handed Rachel her sketch pad. “How about this for the second floor?”

“Cameron, that’s great!” she said, “Hawke will be impressed.”

Cameron nodded with a slight crease in her forehead. “Hopefully. He doesn’t seem real comfortable with me.”

“He’s just nervous. Putting down roots is new to him.”

“Do you think he’s really serious about that?”

Rachel answered with complete honesty. “I really think so.”

“Maybe you have something to do with that,” Cameron hinted.

Rachel dismissed Cameron’s suggestion. “He had plans before me.”

Cameron gave a mischievous smile while she rolled her pencils with the palm of one hand. “Actually, no he didn’t. You drew them.”

Rachel yanked one springy curl. “Ha ha.” She handed the sketchbook back to Cameron. “But the joke’s on you. Hawke and Max are on their way over.”

Cameron didn’t even bat an eyelash. “I figured they couldn’t leave us alone.”

“I need to know what happened last night. Besides the fact that someone drugged me.”

Cameron’s expression softened. “Hopefully James Bond has more information. By the way, guess who Greg left with last night?” Cameron picked up a yellow pencil.

Rachel glanced down at the drawing. “Who?”

“Monica Kensington.”

“Oh.” Rachel leaned down and tapped a drawing of a corner bedroom. “Make that one blue.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Cameron slammed her book closed and tossed her



pencil on the sofa table.

Rachel frowned in confusion. "What?"

Cameron stood, then plopped down beside Rachel on the sofa. "Monica Kensington, Queen of the Damned, left the hospital gala early with Greg Huntington, Jaydon Hawke's manager."

"So?"

"First of all," Cameron began, tossing her hair over her shoulder, "Monica never leaves a society function early. Second, Greg is young enough to be her son. And third, Monica is a sneaky snake in the grass."

Rachel giggled. "Cameron, it's not a big mystery. Monica just wanted to rub elbows with someone important."

"Maybe. But I still say there's more to the story."

Rachel shrugged. "I do remember that Greg drank a lot of wine last night."

"There you go, then," Cameron said smugly. "He was too drunk to keep his snake out of her grass."

Rachel's eyes bulged. "No way."

"Way," Cameron insisted. "I'd bet money on it."

Rachel moaned. "Thank you for planting that picture in my brain."

"You're welcome."

When the gate alarm buzzed, Cameron grinned and stood. "The cavalry is here. I'll get it."

Rachel giggled. Without her high heels, Cameron's feet were amazingly quiet. "Who is it?" she heard Cameron sing into the intercom.

"Exterminator." Rachel shook her head at Max's response, not sure he realized exactly what he was asking for.

Minutes later, Rachel heard the door open and close. Cameron returned to the living room with Hawke and Max behind.

Hawke took a seat beside her and placed a soft kiss to her lips. Rachel's mouth watered. Her tongue shivered to ask for more. Her body hummed.

"Do you need a few minutes alone?" Cameron drawled.

Rachel felt her cheeks heat. Hawke just grinned. "No." He took Rachel's hand and pressed it to his left thigh.

"Okay then." Cameron sat on the neighboring loveseat and patted the cushion beside her. "Come, James, we need to hear what you have to say."

Rachel glanced at Max, his arms folded across his chest and his expression hidden behind shaded eyes as usual.

"Who the hell is James?" he asked.

Cameron lowered her voice. "Bond. James Bond."

Rachel couldn't help the obnoxious giggle that slipped out of her mouth. Hawke gave her hand a quick squeeze.

Max stood still for a full two seconds, his head turned Cameron's direction. Although his gaze was hidden, Rachel was pretty sure it was focused right smack on Cameron. And in true Cameron fashion, her stare never wavered, her clear blue eyes daring him to respond. Rachel swallowed her giggle, now not quite sure what would happen. Even Hawke didn't offer a response.

Finally, Max unfolded his arms, sat beside Cameron, and stretched his legs in front of

him.

Rachel released the breath she didn't realize she held. "I'm not clear about last night's events," she told Max.

Max gave a slight nod. "According to your tox screen, Someone slipped Rohypnol in your wine."

Rachel frowned. "Rohypnol?"

"Ruffies, the date rape drug."

Rachel swallowed hard. Hawke gave her hand another squeeze. "I've read about it. Apparently the younger male party uses it most. Who gave me a dose?"

"Don't know. We've got a room full of suspects but no leads."

Although she appeared surprised by Max's information, Cameron went after him like a feral cat. Fangs clenched and claws bared.

"The gala was a closed event. The place reeked of buff, beefy trained military types." Cameron tilted her head to squint at Max. "Where was the bodyguard at our table?"

Rachel widened her eyes. The oxygen left the air around them. It was quite possible Cameron had pushed too far.

Max lowered his sunglasses and peered over the top. "If I recall, Half Pint, you delivered the wine to the table."

Cameron's mouth opened and then closed. For the very first time in her whole life, Rachel witnessed Cameron's bewilderment. Rachel waited a few more seconds to speak, just to be sure Cameron wouldn't recoup and fire back with double artillery.

"So, someone in that room laced my drink."

Max pushed his glasses back into place. "Afraid so. Diablo PD is in the process of interviewing each guest."

Cameron cleared her throat. "Why Rachel? After all, every single person in that room knew Hawke was her escort."

Hawke gave Rachel a weak smile. "We don't know for sure Rachel was the target."

Rachel's pulse skittered. "This almost sounds ridiculous. Whoever planned this didn't put a lot of thought into it. I mean, what did they expect to accomplish with Rohypnol? At the very most, one of us would have passed out. Then what? They still would've had to drag us out. They couldn't have done that without being seen."

"Unless they managed to get either of you alone," Max suggested.

"Hawke is never alone," Rachel countered. "Even I know that."

Max shrugged. "Criminals are either really, really smart or really, really stupid."

"I only left the table two times, once to go the ladies room with Cameron and when Hawke and I went out on the balcony."

"Really?" Cameron's eyes sparkled. "What was on the balcony?"

"I needed air. Monica made it a point to stop by our table."

Cameron glanced at Max. "Is she on the list?"

Max shrugged. "The Chief of Police ruled her out."

Cameron snorted. "Of course he did. They're sleeping together."

Max didn't appear convinced. "She slept in Huntington's suite last night."

Cameron turned back to Rachel. "Told ya." She then re-focused on Max. "As you can see, Monica is quite active in the community."

"What about the bartender?" Rachel asked.

Max shook his head. "Claims he didn't do it and no one asked him to. Besides, he had no way to know how the wine glasses were distributed at the table."

Rachel drew a deep breath then exhaled. "So what now?"

"We wait for the police report. In the meantime, just be aware of what's going on around you."

Cameron didn't seem convinced. "Should she be alone?"

A grin finally split Max's lips. "Hawke won't leave her alone. And where he goes, I go."

"Enough." Rachel frowned at the irritated tone in Hawke's voice. He glanced at Max and then back at her. "Rachel, we need to talk."

Cameron stood and dropped her sketch book and pencils into her suitcase of a purse. "That's my cue to leave. Besides, I have a lunch date."

"Sean?" Rachel asked.

Cameron nodded.

"Max can take you with him." Hawke stood and helped Rachel from the sofa. "He's going to the studio."

Cameron slid a pair of sunglasses over her eyes. "Fabulous."

Max grunted and stood from the couch. "There's not a step ladder on the Suburban."

"Don't worry about that," Cameron chided. "I'm sure your big caveman self can give me a boost."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Max shook his head and followed the stick of golden dynamite as she burst through the front door of the studio. As usual, her thick shiny curls bounced off her shoulders and tiny gold bells jingled around her ankle with each step.

Three steps from the door leading into the recording area, he maneuvered around her to block her path. "Hold up, Tinkerbell."

She placed her hands on her hips and peered at him over her sunglasses. "Must you always irritate me?"

"It's my job."

"Well, Hercules, let me through; Sean expects me."

Max shifted his weight and folded both arms across his chest. The lack of noise from inside the studio told him Pirelli might expect her, but probably not now.

"Only authorized personnel are allowed back there."

"Look, Aladdin." She paused long enough for a trademark eye roll. "Don't expect me to rub your lamp."

He smirked. "You know that would make my day." Except she still wouldn't get past him. "If you promise to stay right here, Goldilocks, I'll go tell Grandma you're here."

"Whatever." She plopped down in a chair.

Max stomped through the private entrance, didn't bother to knock, and shouldered his way through the first closed door. Just as he suspected, Pirelli was just about to bang something other than his drum.

Max cleared his throat. The blonde straddling Pirelli's lap gasped softly and pulled her blouse closed.

Irritated, Max kept his tone low. "Pirelli, you have a visitor in the lobby who claims she's expected."

"Shit." Pirelli gave the woman a quick peck on the lips. "Just give me ten minutes, Max."

Max jerked his head at Pirelli's current distraction. "What about Barbie?"

"Could you—"

"No." Max walked to the door. "I'm only here because Hawke would kill me if I didn't do something about this."

Max slammed the door behind him and sauntered down the hallway, back into battle. Ten minutes alone with her would be an eternity. Mentally, he wielded his sword and re-entered the lobby.

He propped himself back against the wall. "Ten minutes, Dollface."

"Ten minutes?" she scoffed. "What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Keep me company."

"That thought just warms my heart," she mumbled.

Max frowned at her statement, pissed off at the whole situation. He took a deep breath and forced himself not to speak. It wouldn't warm her heart much to know what was going on behind closed doors. She obviously had no idea what kind of man she'd

chosen in Pirelli.

“Why are you still here anyway, McGruff?” She imitated his stance by folding her arms across her chest and tapping one foot. “Shouldn’t you be with Hawke?”

“You heard Hawke. He needed some time with Rachel.”

She squinted and cocked her head. “So you get to run interference?”

“Something like that,” he muttered.

“Don’t you ever get time off?”

“Yes.”

“When?” she chided. “You’re always on duty when I’m around.”

“I’m in charge of pest control.”

“I’m not a pest,” she said lightly. “It’s not my fault you just happen to be the same places I am.”

Max swallowed a curse. She was a pest, a tiny mosquito who constantly buzzed in his ear. Asleep or awake, her irritating persistence annoyed him. If he thought he could catch her, he’d put a stop to it. And he knew just the place to swat her.

He glanced at his watch. “Okay, Princess, go on back.”

“Finally.” She tossed her head back and pranced through the doorway. “One of these days, Zeus, you’re going to listen to me.”

Max watched her sway down the hallway, oblivious to how much heartache she’d avoided. Someone really needed to teach Pirelli a lesson. He shrugged. Hell, maybe they’d all get lucky and she’d do it. He had a feeling that once she pierced Pirelli with the poisonous barbs of her tongue, he would run for cover. Max chuckled under his breath, his mood lightened by that thought.

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Rachel heard the front door snap shut then gave Hawke a glance over her shoulder. The moment their gazes locked she knew talking was the furthest thing from his mind. She nearly burst into flames at the look on his face.

Her nipples tightened beneath her blouse. Common sense told her to run. Wild, wanton desire kept her there. Ready, willing and wet.

As if he sensed her silent invitation, Hawke closed the distance between them and locked his arms around her waist. His lips found the curve of her neck and he placed several tiny kisses upward until his whisper tickled her ear. “I can’t keep my hands off you.”

Rachel closed her eyes and took a deep breath, fighting the urge to tear off her clothing and grind herself against him. Desperate to feel the hardness of his body, she reached between them, pulled his t-shirt from the band of his jeans, and slid her hands underneath. Her fingertips danced along the smooth, contoured surface of his skin, tracing each and every muscle, and committed them to memory.

“Oh baby,” Hawke whispered, “your touch makes me weak.”

She released a soft moan when he pressed himself closer, his jeans now strained beneath the zipper. His erection jumped against her stomach. Her heart pounded like jungle drums. His hands left the curve of her hips and slid to her backside, kneading each rounded cheek with a palm. A familiar hum returned to the vee of her legs.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard her conscious clear its throat. Rachel

groaned. *Oh shut up already!* And to prove her point, she lifted one leg and draped it across Hawke's hip. With his erection now tucked between her legs, there was no way she would even consider denying how much she wanted him.

Hawke moved one hand from her backside and slid up the smooth skin of her leg and under her skirt. His fingers caressed the heated surface of her thigh until his fingers grazed the edge of her panties.

"Should I touch?" His whispered tease sent her head spinning as she nodded her consent.

He touched the wet panel of her panties and growled deep in his throat. She thrust her hips toward him. He answered by drawing patterns of heated ecstasy on the silk between her legs. Her head fell back on her shoulders and she whimpered his name.

"Tell me, baby," he urged.

"More," she moaned.

He responded by lifting one edge of the silken barrier and wiggling his fingers underneath. Sensation jerked along her nerve endings as he moved over her tender flesh.

Rachel's mind spun even faster as his fingers played her like a fine instrument. Suddenly, fear and hesitance took a back seat to deep, lust-powered desire. Desire so strong and out of control that even intelligence couldn't harness it. For half a second, Rachel searched her brain for even an ounce of logic to save her. And just as she suspected, logic evaporated into thin air.

Arousal pounded between his thighs as Hawke caressed the slippery flesh beneath his fingers and hoped to God she wouldn't feel the tremble in his touch. He was doing his best to go slow, take his time, let her see how amazing they were together. But he sorely underestimated how damn responsive she would be. The heat from her body scalded him, the touch of her lips branded him, and those little tiny noises she made dared him. Dared him to rip the skirt from her waist and bury his lips between her legs. Dared him to wrap his tongue around her core and love her until she screamed for mercy.

He placed his lips against her forehead in an attempt to keep his very fragile control. He really needed to stop her. She deserved to know the truth before things got even more complicated. But when she reached between them and coaxed his cock from the top of his boxers, all hell broke loose. She wrapped her slender fingers around his length and pulled. All he could do was thrust.

His lips left her forehead and found the valley of cleavage. Her creamy smooth skin tasted like peaches and sunshine, a lethal combination at this point in time. If he were a vampire, he would've pierced her skin to fill his own body with her taste.

Her next long, slow tug on his cock caused his knees to buckle and he fought the primal urge to throw her to the floor and ravish her. Man enough to admit he didn't have the stamina to keep them both upright in his current condition, he attempted to regain control.

Against his will, he lifted his lips from her skin and slipped his fingers from the heat of her body. His own body cursed the loss of her touch as he eased her hand from his pants and placed it against his chest. So far so good. Now if he could just keep it together long enough to lay her on the floor, they would be in business. And then she raised her head and gave him a smile that could make a grown man whimper. A dazed, sexy, *do-me* smile. *Oh. Hell.*

Hawke squeezed her body flush against his, wrapped his arms around her, and lowered her to the carpet. Her blouse now lay wide open, showcasing the white lace cups of her bra, the fabric barely wide enough to cover each nipple. He released a rough breath and reached down to lower his zipper to the end of the tract. He wouldn't have thought it possible but the savage beast between his legs stretched another painful inch.

"Hawke?"

He lifted his gaze to hers and heat sizzled between them. "What, baby?"

"What are you waiting for?"

Hawke paused one whole heartbeat. What the hell was he waiting for? Normally he didn't hesitate, he knew exactly what he wanted and took it. With finesse, of course. But this time guilt nudged him. No doubt, he wanted this woman with every fiber of his being but why? Suddenly, this seduction wasn't part of the extraction. She was more than a mark; his heart would back up that admission. Yet, Diego was closing in and Hawke had no choice other than to do everything in his power to stop him.

He ignored his conscience and bent to kiss the rounded tops of her breasts.

"Absolutely nothing."

She wound her fingers through his hair and urged him closer. "Thank God," she murmured.

Encouraged by her reaction, he ran his tongue under the lacey edge of one side of her bra, taking care to swipe the peak of her nipple in the process. She whimpered and arched her back to push the sensitive flesh closer to his tongue. He closed his lips around the pebbled peak. Her fingers tightened around the strands of his hair. His erection pulsed against her hip.

Sweat droplets danced on his forehead and Hawke once again severely questioned his motive. Although Rachel's body responded to his touch with a vengeance, he knew she would never allow this to happen without trusting him. By nature, she was cautious. Hell, throw a few Ruffies in the mix and she really had major trust issues. But, the taste of her made him an addict desperate for a fix.

Hawke raised himself to his knees, his lips still wrapped around the tender nub of her breast, and then moved to straddle her. With one last swirl of his tongue, he released her nipple and gazed into her face. Her eyes flickered open and flames sprung forward and lured him in. His heartbeat quickened in realization that ecstasy was just inches away.

He lowered his hands to slide his pants over his hips when she laid a hand on his forearm. "I have to get that."

He frowned and then realized the telephone was ringing. She rolled from beneath him and reached for the phone beside the sofa.

Hawke listened, trying desperately to keep her soft voice from tempting him to yank the phone line out of the wall.

"I'll be right there. Thank you."

She hung up and turned to face him. "Can we take a time out? I promise it won't be long."

He clenched his jaw to keep from cursing. "Sure."

"I need to run to the office to pick up a delivery."

As hard as he tried, he couldn't throttle the desperation in his voice. "Now?"

She gave a small nod. "It's important."

Hawke released a heavy sigh and reached to button his pants. Damn terrorist. "Okay,

but when we get back here, the phone doesn't exist.”

“You're going with me?”

“Of course.”

“Can you do that?”

He snickered. “I'll probably be okay in your car, Rachel.”

“What about photographers?”

“Your windows are tinted.”

“And Max?”

“I'll call on the way. He can meet us there.”

Hawke glanced at his watch ten minutes later when they finally pulled under the covered parking area outside the building that housed Newberry and Tremaine.

Rachel parked in her designated space and turned to face him. “Where's Max?”

Hawke grinned and gestured with his head at the burly figure standing beside the driver's side of the car.

“That was quick,” Rachel mumbled as Max opened her door. “Thank you.”

Max gave a silent nod as they left the shadows of the parking garage behind and headed for the entrance.

Stifling hot rays of sunshine reflected off the windows of the skyscraper and into Hawk's face, penetrating the tint of his sunglasses and causing momentary blindness. He blinked several times in an attempt to clear the polka dots from his vision. He glanced around the parking lot, suddenly suspicious of the silence. A lone bird chirped in the distance. A red-hot chill climbed his spine and adrenaline boiled his blood just as a loud pop broke the stillness.

He hurled himself at Rachel and hit the pavement.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tucked in a tight spot between two parked cars, Hawke rolled off Rachel and pulled her to a sitting position. "You okay?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

He followed her gaze to her thigh, smeared in blood. "Max! She's hit!"

Max appeared in seconds, hoisted Rachel in his arms, and headed for the Suburban. Hawke's thighs burnt as he tried to match Max's stride.

Max moved Rachel to one side and threw open the Suburban door with a free hand. "In the truck, Hawke."

Hawke stepped inside the Suburban and scooted to one side while Max set Rachel in the empty seat beside him.

"Give me your shirt."

Hawke yanked his t-shirt over his head and tossed it to Max. Max tore the cotton in half and wrapped it around Rachel's left thigh. It was then Hawke noticed the wound, now seeping blood at a fairly steady pace. Rachel sucked in a quick breath when Max squeezed the edges together.

"Just a graze," he said, "but she may need a couple stitches."

Hawke glanced at Max, ready to demand answers. Max gave his head a slight nod from side to side and closed the door.

Hawke looked at Rachel, now ashy and pale. His heart ached and adrenaline pumped anger through his veins. He reached to smooth her hair from her face. "If you wanted me to take off my shirt, all you had to do was ask."

She gave a weak smile as Max drove out of the parking garage, cell phone tucked between his shoulder and ear and issuing orders to Greg Huntington.

"Max?"

Max twisted the phone away from his mouth.

"Could you please ask Greg to call Cameron and ask her to come get my delivery?"

Max nodded and then continued speaking.

Rachel reached to soak more blood with the shirt and hissed at the contact. "This will be all over YouTube in a matter of minutes."

Mad as hell, Hawke couldn't help but grin. "Now who's being dramatic?"

Rachel raised her head and the pain that sparkled in the depths of her eyes damn near made him grit his teeth in two. "I'm serious." She took a deep breath and then released it. "Check it out."

Hawke bit the inside of his cheek. Even in pain her logic took over.

Max snapped his cell phone closed and caught Hawke's attention in the rear view mirror. "Huntington called Diablo Memorial. No media."

Rachel leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. "Thank you, Max."

Max pulled back onto the main road. "Won't be long."

Hawke gripped the armrest as Max swung the Suburban into the Emergency Room

drive at Diablo Memorial and crammed it in park. In mere seconds, the sliding doors opened and a nurse arrived with a two hundred pound orderly and a wheelchair. Max opened the passenger door, eased Rachel into the chair and then gestured at Hawke to get out.

Both men followed Rachel inside until the orderly stopped in front of a set of metal doors. "Sorry, gentlemen, you'll have to wait out here. The administrator is on her way to take you to the lounge."

Hawke opened his mouth to argue when he felt Max's hand grip his shoulder. "Thank you."

Hawke backed up against a wall and ran a hand across his forehead. "Can this day get any worse?"

A rush of wind swept down the hallway when the entrance doors opened and Cameron blew inside.

"Yes," Max growled. "Your agent is dead meat."

Dressed to the nines as usual, Cameron swayed toward them, the click-clack of her stilettos announcing her arrival.

"What happened? Groupie attack?" Her eyes traveled the distance of Hawke's upper body. "I don't see any scratches."

The same wind that followed Cameron inside tickled the surface of his chest and then Hawke understood. Until that moment, he'd forgotten he was naked from the waist up.

"Did you get the tube?" Max barked.

Her blond curls whipped the air as she shook her head. "Yes, I did. Funny how you're more concerned about design plans than Rachel."

"Relax, short stuff, the bullet just grazed her thigh."

She flicked Max an irritated glare then turned her attention back to Hawke. "Good grief, Hawke, maybe you and Rachel should move into the new hospital wing."

Hawke winced. What a way to start a relationship.

Cameron squinted one eye and tilted her head to the side. "You couldn't convince the nurses to let you back?"

Hawke shook his head.

"Really?" she pressed, "Even undressed?"

Hawke glared in response, hoping she'd drop the subject. Instead, she turned on Max.

"Let me see what you've got."

Max peered over his Aviators. "Excuse me?"

"Take off your shirt, maybe you'll have more luck."

Max gave a low snicker. "You wish."

Cameron shrugged. "Well, lucky me. I have rock star status. I'll let you know what I find out."

When Cameron disappeared behind the set of metal doors, Hawke released a rough breath. "Is it just me or does she just wait for an opportunity to make us look like idiots?"

Max pushed himself off the wall. "I think there's more to it."

"Like what?"

"Seems to me blood runs deep between her and Rachel. She's like a lioness protecting her cub and her mouth is her weapon. Problem is, she doesn't know when to shut it."

"You think she's that way with everybody?"

“Can’t be. Bitchiness doesn’t usually breed success.”

Hawke folded his arms across his chest and propped himself against the sterile wall with one hip. “Ever wonder what she’s like under all that mouth?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Do you?”

“Hell no. She’s definitely not my type.”

“What makes you think she’s mine?”

Hawke raised an eyebrow. Max’s quick retort confirmed what he suspected all along. But he knew better than to point that out. “Didn’t say she was.”

“Let it go, Hawke,” Max growled.

Hawke pushed off the wall and looked over Max’s shoulder. “We have company.”

“Tall, curvy redhead?”

Hawke nodded.

Max smirked. “Hospital administrator.”

Max turned and leaned back against the wall as she stopped in front of them, gave a big smile, and handed Hawke a surgical shirt. “Nice to meet you, gentlemen, I’m Kimberly Scott.”

Hawke eased the shirt over his head and shoulders then stuffed his arms through the sleeves. “When can I see her?”

“The doctor is with her now.” She handed Max a white, plastic card. “We thought you’d be more comfortable in our VIP lounge. If you’ll follow me, the card opens the elevator at the end of the hall.”

Hawke frowned when they stopped in front of the elevator, irritated that she hadn’t answered his question. “Ms. Scott, we appreciate your assistance, but I’d like to see Rachel.”

That same, professional smile never wavered from her lips. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hawke, it is hospital policy to limit visitors in the Emergency Room. As soon as the doctor completes her exam, he will visit you in the lounge.”

Undefinable rage began to consume him. “Either you take me to her or I’ll find someone who will.”

Kim raised both eyebrows and her face paled. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hawke, I didn’t realize \_\_\_”

“Just show us the lounge,” Max interrupted. He shoved Hawke inside the elevator. “Can it, Hawke.” He gestured for her to follow. Once all three of them were on board, she pushed the button to close the doors. The elevator gave a slight jolt and then climbed the floors.

Hawke swallowed hard as a wave of nausea rolled through his gut. Suddenly the walls closed in and the numbers just wouldn’t flash quickly enough. He wanted to be downstairs with Rachel, not tucked away behind closed doors. Finally, the car stopped and the doors opened. Kim stepped off first into an elaborate suite. Two oversized recliners rested on each side of a full-sized leather sofa. All three sat directly in front of a flat screen TV stretched the length of the wall. Nothing close to a simple waiting area.

“We ask that you refrain from cell phone use while in the hospital. We provide a telephone for your convenience. Is there anyone else expected to arrive?”

“Devil in the miniskirt,” Max mumbled.

Kim frowned, obviously confused by Max’s remark.

Hawke smirked. “Cameron Tremaine.”

“Of course.” The smile was back. “Cameron is in the exam room with her. Shall I send her up?”

“Yes,” Hawke answered.

“No,” Max said at the same time.

Kim cleared her throat. “Which is it gentlemen, yes or no?”

Hawke shot Max an irritated glare. “Yes, please, Ms. Scott.”

She tossed Hawke a remote control. “No one up or down without a key or an escort.” She turned to offer Max a square white card. “Make yourselves comfortable and call me if you need anything further.”

She boarded the elevator and Max tucked the card in his pocket.

Hawke waited until the doors closed before he threw the remote on the sofa. “This is ridiculous. I need to be downstairs. Make it happen, Max.”

“No way in hell.”

Anger bubbled Hawke’s blood. “You’ll just have to beat my ass to a bloody pulp then. I’m going.”

Max curled his upper lip. “Your call.”

Hawke squeezed the back of a chair until his knuckles were white. Words refused to come.

Max lowered himself to the sofa, palmed the remote, and clicked channels. “You know as well as I do, you’d only make things worse, Hawke.”

“How?”

“You’re a chick magnet. I’m good but even I can’t take on a whole Emergency Room full of women.”

Despite his anger, Hawke had to agree with Max. But still ... “In my current state of mind, I’d be willing to help.”

Max snickered and settled on ESPN. “I realize you have a plan but I’m not convinced it’s going to play out the way you want.”

I don’t have a choice, Max. I have to tell her about the mission.”

Max’s eyes didn’t waver from the screen. “Agreed. I’m now convinced she’s an unwilling participant.”

“You think Diego knows we have the evidence?”

“Positive. The decoy was delivered this morning. Shadow found a flash drive hidden in the layers of the cardboard of the original one.”

“Weapons?”

Max nodded. “The tube Rachel was after is probably packaged the same way.”

“You think the sorry bastard is here?”

“Hard to say, but someone wants her extinguished. You’re going to have to step up your game.”

“I’ve got her hooked. It won’t take long.”

“No way can we keep this quiet. My suggestion is the two of you stay in for awhile.”

“We’ll have more privacy at her house.”

Max nodded. “That’s probably doable. The neighborhood is exclusive. I’ll have to beef up the alarm system. You gonna move in?”

“Hell yeah.” He gave Max a twisted grin. “We were interrupted.”

“No details, Hawke. I get it. But now she really can’t be alone.”

“You told Cameron I wouldn’t leave her alone, remember?”

“I’ll put Steele on her.”

“Hell no.”

Max ran a hand across the surface of his head. “What did you just say?”

“No freaking way. Steele’s twice the smooth talker I am. I’ll ask Cameron.”

“We need a Rottweiler, not a Chihuahua.”

“Gee-zus, Max! What is it with the two of you? Can’t you just ignore each other?”

Max’s expression didn’t change. “Okay, here’s what’s gonna happen. We put everyone in Rachel’s house, Motor Mouth included. Twenty four hour security is the only option we have.”

Even with desperation kicking him in the ass, Hawke knew Captain Sterling was right. Diego was pissed and out for blood. None of them were safe.

“I suggest you tell Rachel immediately. This whole thing will get ugly fast.”

“What about Cameron?”

“What about her?”

“Some prick shot her best friend. We have to tell her something and she won’t accept some half-assed explanation.”

“There’s media crawling all over the place. We’ll just play it off as an ongoing investigation for now.”

Hawke glanced at the elevator, the red light above the double doors shining like a beacon. “Well Captain, here’s your chance.”

Hawke took a deep breath and prepared to face the firing squad. The chrome doors slid open and Cameron stepped from the elevator, barefoot with her hooker heels hung on two fingers. Hawke’s eyes widened and he clenched his jaw to keep it from falling open. Her normal, bright glittering eyes appeared dull. Her shoulders slumped.

She eased herself into a vacant chair. “They’re keeping her.”

Hawke frowned. “Why?”

“Apparently, there’s quite a bit of muscle damage.”

“Can I see her?”

Cameron gave a half smile. “She put up quite an argument. The doctor finally sedated her. She’s out like a light. I’ll stay the night.”

Max smirked. “Don’t they have a no pets policy?”

Hawke squeezed his eyes closed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and waited for Cameron’s wrath. Instead, the sound of the television was the only conversation in the room. He opened his eyes in time to catch Cameron’s small, weak shrug. He glanced at Max and glared.

Max cleared his throat. “You need anything, short stuff?”

Cameron shook her now-flattened curls. “No, thank you. Have you heard anything from the police?”

Tension built in Hawk’s shoulders. He hoped like hell she accepted Max’s answer.

Max spit out the lie as planned. “Not yet. Maybe tomorrow.”

Cameron stood. “They won’t let us in the building.” She glanced at Max. “Rachel’s tube is downstairs in my car. Would you mind dropping it by her house? She’ll want it when she gets home.”

Max nodded. “Keys?”

“It’s unlocked.”

“You left your car unlocked with her package inside?”

Hawke raised an eyebrow at Max's question, not quite sure how he would cover up that slip.

Cameron rolled her eyes. "What's the big deal? They're sketches, not diamonds."

"Safety 101. If someone has access to your car, they have access to you."

"You've been Hawke's bodyguard way too long. This is Diablo, Arizona, not Hollywood."

"Doesn't matter."

Cameron stood and headed to the elevator. "I'm too tired to argue. Just get the tube and we'll see you tomorrow."

Hawke waited for the elevator doors to close before he spoke. "Somebody has to stay and watch the room."

Max nodded and dialed his cell. Hawke shook his head. So much for hospital policy.

"Shadow's on his way."

"Think he can dodge Cameron?"

"Shouldn't be too hard. He got lucky. Looks like she's dead on her feet."

Hawke agreed. In fact, this side of Cameron was almost tolerable.

Max snickered as they stepped inside the elevator. "Don't worry, she'll be back in true form tomorrow."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hawke stood in the middle of Rachel's living room watching the activity around him. Someone, most likely him, would have hell to pay when Rachel saw this. He scrubbed a hand across his jaw. Damn it to hell. Since when had he become such a pantywaist? He knew going in his life would never be the same. Hell, super stardom had a way of doing that to people. It had been perfectly clear that there was no escape from Jaydon Hawke. And since that persona provided pretty much everything he wanted, there hadn't been a problem. Until Rachel.

He'd be a lying fool if he said he hadn't wanted her from the minute he saw her. Her beauty alone reeled him in, but that he could work around. Her calm, peaceful, reasonable, compassionate nature, though, well, that sucker punched him right in the gut. And now he would have to throw a few punches of his own. Right to her heart.

"You gonna stand there all day or help us catch this prick?"

Hawke glanced at Captain Sterling. "Thought I'd check her e-mail." He forced guilt to the back of his mind and reminded himself this was all for her safety. Without it, she'd die at the hands of Manuel Diego.

He sat down in front of the laptop computer and punched keys to hack into Rachel's e-mail account. Within seconds, he broke her password and messages lined up on the screen.

"Sonuvabitch," he muttered.

"Find something?" Max twisted two wires together then shoved them back into a panel in the wall.

"He sent another package, this time by private courier."

"When?"

Hawke glanced at the date again, just to be sure. He looked back at Max. "Yesterday."

Activity stopped around him as all four soldiers digested the meaning of what he'd just said.

"He was there." Steele's eyes darkened and Hawke felt the sniper go on full alert. "In the parking lot."

"Whoever took that shot was either lucky or a skilled marksman." Hawke dropped his gaze back to the screen. "I had her covered yet they managed to hit her."

Steele asked the one question no one could answer for sure. "Diego?"

Hawke nodded. "Most likely one of his men. He doesn't like to get his hands dirty."

Steele propped himself against the back of the sofa. "Maybe we should move her."

Max punched numbers on the alarm pad. "That might be possible if Hawke had let her in on the secret."

Steele raised both eyebrows. "You didn't tell her?"

"Timing wasn't right," Hawke mumbled.

"She's lying in the hospital with a gunshot wound and the timing wasn't right?"

Steele shook his head. "Damn Hawke, you have it bad."

Max snickered. "Understatement of the year."

"I'm going to tell her as soon as she gets home."

Steele released a heavy breath. "Oh shit."

Max grunted. "What now?"

"If we tell Rachel, then you-know-who gets in on the action."

Although he felt Steele's pain, Hawke responded with ease. "We don't have a choice. She's in as much danger as Rachel. He could focus on her just to torture Rachel."

Steele wouldn't give up. "I vote Sterling tells her."

Max stopped poking buttons and glanced over his shoulder.

"Hey," Steele continued, "you're the one who calls the shots. It's all about rank, Captain."

Max released a heavy sigh. "Why the hell are you nervous, Steele? You have five sisters. She's a woman. A tiny, loud-mouthed female, full of hot air."

Hawke, for one, refused to answer. No way in hell would he challenge Cameron. He wasn't surprised when Steele didn't respond either.

Max shook his head. "I'll take care of it."

"What about the package Cameron grabbed from the office?"

"I put it upstairs in the master bedroom. Figured you could use it for show and tell."

"Any suspicious activity around the mail room?"

"None. Surveillance hasn't revealed the courier either. The clerk says all packages received for shipping are accounted for. Other than yesterday, Rachel's tubes are delivered by U.S. Mail. No one other than the usual contracted couriers have picked up or delivered packages to the building."

"How the hell is the son-of-a-bitch slipping by us?"

"Easy. An inside job."

"No."

"We've already eliminated Rachel, Hawke."

"Then who? We've checked everyone in the building. Other than a few extramarital affairs and a couple serious bondage fetishes, everything appears normal."

"We know the tubes never leave this building by U.S. Mail."

"So how is Diego's courier getting them?"

"That's the million dollar question."

"Security is amazingly tight. Rachel's clientele makes that non-negotiable. Someone inside works for Diego."

"I don't know, Captain. Shadow slid in and out pretty easily. You didn't see him anywhere on the tapes. It's probable that Diego's guy could be just as good."

"Either that or sheer damn luck."

Max nodded as his cell phone rang. Hawke glanced at Steele who smirked and loaded equipment back into a black bag.

"Rachel's ready to come home," Max told them as he disconnected.

"Shadow's alive?"

"And well. He's waiting in the nurses' lounge."

"You guys head to the hospital. I'll finish up here and head to the suite."

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Just as Max suspected, reporters and news vans waited like a pack of vultures waiting for their next meal outside Rachel's front gate. He released a heavy sigh and stopped the Suburban a few feet from the house. As usual, news traveled at the speed of light. Although irritated as hell, he was semi-relieved to remember the gates opened by electronic code. Now the only problem was how to prevent uninvited guests before the gates closed.

He glanced at Hawke in the rear view mirror, thankful that notoriety allowed a few advantages. Namely, an agent to do the dirty work. "Not a problem." Max punched a button on his cell phone. "Huntington, send Diablo PD to Rachel's house."

Exactly ninety seconds after his call, patterns of red and blue flashed in the early evening light and ear-piercing sirens filled the silence when several squad cars arrived to work crowd control. Max exited the vehicle and spoke to each officer before he returned and drove to the gate.

"After I open the gates, the black and white will keep anyone from entering behind us."

The gates buzzed and squeaked open to allow the Suburban inside. Max stopped at the end of the drive and entered another code into an additional keypad. The gates squeaked closed. Assured the policemen would clear the area, he parked in front of the house.

He tilted his head to look out the front windshield. "Too many damn trees."

Rachel sighed. "Cameron wouldn't let me thin them out. She's big on not disturbing the environment."

Max bit his tongue, tempted to chase the feisty little tomcat up one of them. He glanced back into the rear view mirror. "Doesn't appear to be anyone in the branches. Are we going inside?"

He waited for Hawke's argument, relieved when he nodded in agreement. Max exited the vehicle and opened Rachel's door, offering an arm for support.

"Turn off the alarm, then let me go inside first."

Rachel's ice-cold fingers burnt his skin as she grasped his arm and eased herself to the pavement. He motioned for Hawke to get out while Rachel limped to the front door.

Piercing sirens echoed in the early evening stillness until Rachel entered the code to quiet them. Max took a cursory look around, now convinced no one else was inside. His eardrums throbbed and threatened to bleed. At least now she had a decent deterrent in place.

"Coast is clear."

Hawke and Rachel headed for the living room while he shut the door and re-armed the system.

"Guess you figured out we re-vamped the system," he told Rachel once he entered the room. She gave a small smile and sat on the sofa. "We need to review the plan," he told them.

Hawke gave him an irritated go-to-hell look. "Now? She needs to rest."

"Won't take long, there's not much to it."

Rachel grasped Hawke's hand. "Go on, Max."

"Until we figure out what exactly happened, nobody goes anywhere alone." He gave Hawke a guarded glance. "I may have to call for backup."

Rachel gave him what he figured out to be a genuine, honest smile. "Whatever you

think, Max. I don't want either of us hurt again."

Max raised an eyebrow. That was easy. Maybe she could teach Hawke a thing or two.

"I'd like to go lie down now." She stood from the sofa and Hawke took her by the elbow. "The master bedroom is at the top of the stairs."

Max watched, almost envious, as Hawke followed her upstairs. Envious? He shook his head. No, he just needed a roll in the sack.

Max eased himself to the sofa, stretched his legs in front of him, leaned back against the sofa cushions, and dialed his cell phone. "Steele, you and Shadow head over here in the morning."

"Did he tell her?"

"Doesn't matter. If he hasn't, he has until you two get here to do so."

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As soon as they were behind a locked door, Hawke finally allowed himself to relax.

He drew Rachel into his arms and squeezed. "I think we're finally alone."

She rested her head against his chest. "Don't you ever get tired of all the attention?"

He considered her question carefully. At one time he would've said no. He'd played his current role so long it became second nature. But now, he wasn't so sure.

"I guess I don't really think about it." He smoothed her hair with his hand. "I've always been a show-off."

She tickled his skin with her lips as she planted small butterfly kisses across the smooth surface of his chest. "You're still a show-off."

He groaned and pressed her body flush to his, running his hands down her back until they rested on her slender waist. She had him strung tight. Painfully tight. But he was bound and determined to wait and let her come to him, free of any insecurity.

"Rachel," he whispered, "are you sure about this?"

"You're not?"

"Your thigh—"

"I'm not in any pain. But if you want to wait ..."

He put a stop to that thought. "Hell, no! I just want to be sure you're up for this."

Her eyes sparkled a very clear invitation. "Without a doubt."

His heart rolled over at her admission and he gave her a cocky grin. "Good thing, because I don't think I can take much more hesitation."

"No hesitation this time, Hawke," she promised, stepping out of his embrace.

Fire sizzled his insides. They were truly alone, behind a locked door, away from prying eyes. Oh, and a sick lunatic terrorist. And, despite his deception, Hawke would claim her. Growling low in his throat, he reached for her to quench his unbearable need to feel her against him.

With a gentleness he certainly didn't feel, he molded each of her curves to the indentions in his body. "You're so soft," he murmured.

Her fingers worked to peel his shirt over his abs until it hung around his neck. "You're not."

Hawke stood literally stiff as a board when she ran her hands across the smooth, defined muscles of his chest, down the steep stairway of his abs, and finally across the span of his hips. His conscience cleared its throat several times to con him into

questioning his motives. Again.

For half a second he allowed himself to listen. He knew damn well he was headed for a trainwreck, but her touch intoxicated him and he was too far gone to rationalize. He even considered yanking the emergency brake until she squeezed the now very noticeable bulge between his legs. His hips jerked and he swallowed hard. Screw morality.

Oxygen left his brain as he yanked his shirt over his head, threw it to the floor, and fought to steady his breathing. He traced her jaw with his knuckles then lowered his head. Just a taste. A sweet, gentle nip of her full, pouty lips.

When their lips finally met, her breathy sigh filled his senses and sweet and gentle went straight to hell. He devoured her like a last meal. In a lust filled frenzy, he tangled his fingers through her hair and angled her mouth to fit firmly to his. Once he locked her in position, he coaxed her mouth open and dipped his tongue inside to meet hers.

With iron restraint, he forced himself to slow down. Savor her sweetness. Show her how good he could make her feel. Convinced he was now in control, he slid his tongue along the length of hers. Her soft moan escaped the heated kiss just before she wrapped his tongue with hers and sucked. Hard.

*Sweet Jesus.*

Hawke lifted his lips from hers and eased his hands under her top to massage the hollow of her stomach. "You have on way too many clothes."

Rachel took a step back, unbuttoned her top, then shrugged it off each shoulder until it fell to the floor. She gave her head a slight shake and the auburn strands of her hair fell easily back into place. She shimmied her hips and the skirt dropped to the floor.

Hawke stood hypnotized as he took in the sight of her plump creamy breasts squeezed by a lacy white bra that lifted them until they threatened to spill over the top. His touch had excited her. Her nipples, now peaked, fought the restraint of their barrier.

He forced his eyes lower to the scrap of fabric she called underwear. The white material, most likely silk, hung by a string from each hip and covered her just enough to tease him with what was beneath. His dick demanded he shove the obstacle to the side and penetrate her. Hawke looked up into her soft, hooded eyes and reached for her.

Rachel dragged her tongue across her bottom lip as she stepped further away until she bent to sit on the edge of the bed. She leaned back, propped on her elbows, and crooked her index finger. He didn't need further encouragement, he stood in front of her in less than a heartbeat.

He bent to place his lips to the top of her collarbone while he released the catch of her bra with one finger and moved a hand to cup her left breast. Her breath quickened when his thumb found the rigid nipple and rolled it between his fingers.

Hawke covered her tender skin with tiny kisses while his mind flashed back to his first encounter with her breasts. The force of her unexpected orgasm had nearly knocked him on his ass. His heart pounded, pumping a mix of blood, adrenaline and pure unadulterated sexual need through his veins. Intent on giving her a repeat performance, he moved his lips lower until they finally circled one, heated, pebbled nipple. Hot, white lightening burnt his body when she thrust further into his mouth.

"Hawke," she gasped.

Her response fueled his desire, his need to claim her pushed to the point of no return. He released her nipple and moved to the other, this time swirling his tongue around the point, gently suckling as he played. Breathly whimpers left Rachel's throat and she lifted

her hips to grind against his denim-covered crotch.

Guided by her reaction, Hawke released her nipple and eased her hips away from his body. He planted a kiss on each breast, knelt on the floor in front of her, then stopped short. Even incredibly aroused, he was severely pissed off by the freshly stitched wound.

Rachel sat up. "Hawke?"

He hesitated. This was his prime opportunity to call a time out and spill his bloody guts. But when he looked back up into her deep brown eyes, the devil danced in the depths and he knew he couldn't.

"I don't want to hurt you," he murmured. And, God help him, he meant every word.

A sly smile split her lips, just as cunning as the look in her eyes. "Then be careful."

His hand actually shook as he ran his thumb across the top of her panties and down the sides until he tickled the sweetness between her legs. Her hips thrust again, this time completely off the bed and into his hand.

"Patience, honey."

Her stomach muscles quivered against his lips as Hawke placed a kiss just above her belly button. He hooked his fingers through the straps of the panties and slowly slid them down her hips.

"Lift up, Sweetheart."

She raised her body and allowed him to pull them completely off. The scrap of silk soon lay pooled with his t-shirt next to the bed.

Hawke released a slow, heavy breath. The bare, pink flesh before him had his name written all over it. He trailed a finger across the honeyed treasure. Soft, smooth, and very, very wet.

His heart skipped a beat. This was what he wanted. Rachel. Naked. Lying in wait. For him. His zipper bit his erection. He knew as soon as he released the savage beast, neither one of them was safe. All the more reason to make her wait.

He leaned forward and gave her clit a very quick flick of his tongue before looking back into her eyes.

Her smirk greeted him. "Surely you can do better than that."

He lifted both eyebrows at her challenge and gave her what he knew to be his just you wait smile. He placed a hand on the inside of her thigh, eased her legs further apart, and once again lowered his head.

Hawke didn't waste any more time with slow and easy. With his face now buried between her legs, he latched his lips around her now swollen clit and tongued the slippery flesh until he found just the magic spot. She moved her hips beneath him.

"Oh yes," she gasped, "right there."

Hawke moved his mouth enough to allow one finger to penetrate her. Heat, raging and iron-hot, met his intrusion. Her inner muscles clamped down hard and sucked him further inside.

She wound her fingers through his hair and pressed his mouth closer. "Don't stop," she moaned.

Hawke resumed the attack on the flesh squeezed between his lips while his finger caressed the greedy muscles inside her body. Sweat coated the back of his neck as he worked to push her over the top. Tiny, desperate whimpers filled the air until finally, she screamed his name and locked down on his finger in a tight vise. Moisture seeped from her body.

He breathed one last kiss against her, removed his finger and then glanced up at her. Her breasts bounced with her labored breathing. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes opened wide.

Hawke tilted his head to the side. "Surprise?"

Her cheeks darkened. "Do you think Max heard me?"

He snickered and stood. "Hell, I hope so." He lowered his zipper to give his cock some much-needed space.

Rachel buckled her legs around his and pulled him closer until she had an up-close-and-personal view of his now very determined soldier. She bit her lower lip and reached to widen the opening of his jeans. Then, with a sultry gaze, she lowered her head, placed her mouth against his boxers, and released a long, hot breath.

His cock screamed and jumped. His vision clouded. He locked his knees to keep from falling to the floor.

She gave a soft giggle and then tugged at his waist to remove his pants.

He moved his hands to cover hers. "Rachel, wait."

She gazed up at him and that damn *fuck-me* smile sucker-punched him right in the gut. "Change your mind?"

He widened his eyes. "What? Hell, no! I'm just cocked and loaded and—"

She leaned forward and blew on him again, this time molding her lips around his dick.

"Aw shit," he groaned.

"And what?" she prompted.

He shoved his jeans and boxers to the floor, kicked them to the side, then fisted his hands in her hair. "I forgot."

She winked and wrapped her slender fingers around his shaft. "That's what I thought."

He groaned again and pushed into her fist. Rachel tightened her hold and allowed him to slide easily in and out of her grip. He set a slow pace, hoping to hell she wouldn't get any bright ideas about pushing him any further. This rhythm was manageable but only without her further participation.

Hawke continued to thrust, confident her own need would spiral out of control before he would have to stop. And then things went totally haywire. Somehow in mid-thrust she managed to free her hands and replaced them with her lips. Very intelligent, this woman.

Hawke stood motionless in her grip, totally in unfamiliar territory. Sweat droplets popped from the pores on his forehead as her tongue circled his head and then flicked the skin beneath. Short, electric pulses climbed his vertebrae one at a time. His libido begged for surrender.

Rachel fisted the base of his cock and stroked, the motion pulling him further between her lips and deeper into the recess of her mouth. His hips followed along.

"Ohbabyplease ..."

Rachel tightened her hold and seemed to ignore his desperate plea. Probably because he couldn't speak a complete sentence.

A wave of panic rolled through him, giving him at least three seconds of sanity.

"Rachel." He gave her hair a tight yank.

She frowned and released him.

He stepped to the side, well out of her reach. "I can't take much more."

Her eyes sparkled as she lifted her legs and turned to recline on her back in the middle of the bed. "I can."

Hawke groaned as he grabbed his pants from the floor and fumbled for the condom he'd put there earlier. She raised an eyebrow when he tossed it next to her.

"Don't ask," he growled.

He crawled on the bed then knelt beside her and ripped open the package. Her soft, light giggle made him clumsy as he wrestled the protection from the foil.

She sat up and held out her palm. "Let me."

His dick quivered. Something told him not to. And something else told him he was making a deal with the devil himself, but he placed the disc in her hand anyway.

He narrowed his eyes. "Just roll it on."

She gave a slight nod and placed the latex over his engorged head. Hawke sucked in a quick breath. All systems go, so far. And then the all-too-familiar twinkle shone in her eyes. Very slowly, she stretched the condom over his length, her fingers wrapping and pulling with her progress. Once the protection was firmly in place, she threw in a few extra, long, extremely tight strokes.

He hissed and captured her hand in his.

She shrugged and grinned. "No wrinkles."

Hawke eased her to lie on her back, positioned himself between her legs, and kissed the tip of her nose. "You are a very naughty little tease."

"I think you like to be teased." She draped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. Her peaked nipples drew tiny patterns on his chest with each one of her breaths. *Hell, yeah.* She could tease him to her heart's content.

"Can you bend your legs, baby?"

She nodded and he reached beside them to help her plant her feet next to his thighs. He came down over her and braced himself on his elbows. "Okay?"

She touched her lips to his. "Perfect."

"No," he said as he pushed inside her warm, silken heat, "this is perfect."

Her eyes shone bright as he moved in and out of her body, slowly at first, desperate to mark her as his own. Screw the plan. Filling her so completely shocked every nerve in his body, a feeling he wouldn't trade for anything in the world at this point in time. Even if he'd have to spoil it later.

Rachel grasped the tops of his shoulders and arched into his hips. "Hawke, harder."

He increased his pace and reached between them to rub her clit. Her fingernails bit his skin as she met him thrust for thrust until her hungry muscles clamped down on his aching cock and pulsed.

Another scream left her lips and he leaned forward to catch it with his mouth. He allowed his lips to linger on hers until she quieted and then lifted his mouth to smile.

"Oh yeah, baby, just like that."

She returned his smile while she rested one arm on his shoulder and slid the other between them. His cock jumped inside her when she squeezed his balls. "Do it again," she whispered.

Hawke began to move again, this time skipping slow and going straight to fast. His restraint was gone. Her body was too warm and too wet and there was a reason his codename wasn't Superman. He lifted his body to balance on his hands and drove into her. Two more strokes and her muscles surrounded him in a tight fist and he couldn't

fight release any longer. With a growl, he pushed deep inside her one last time. Fireworks exploded behind his eyelids as he filled her full of his seed in a hot rush. She released a soft moan and pulsed around him again. His limp body covered her completely, sobbing thank you over and over again.

Once he could get a full breath of air, he braced himself on his elbows and smoothed the hair from her forehead. "You're amazing."

Rachel's heart danced. Amazing wasn't the word she would use to describe what just happened. Life-altering was more like it.

Hawke kissed her lips then rolled to one side to ease off the bed.

Rachel stared at the tight muscles of his backside. No wonder women swooned. Then she left her gaze travel further upward to the middle of his shoulder blade. She smiled at the hawk tattooed there in simple black ink. With its wings spread wide and its beak opened, the bird graced Hawke's bronzed skin with its incredible beauty. A small glint of jealousy bit her. She wouldn't share him. She couldn't.

He slipped between the sheets and pulled her back against his chest. He very carefully ran a hand over the surface of her thigh. "Are you okay?"

She smiled at his concern. "Do you need a high five?"

"Don't you think we were better than that?"

She nodded. "Oh, we were."

"What about tomorrow?" He pushed her hair to the side and nipped the top of her shoulder.

She smiled at the hidden meaning skillfully disguised in his question.

"We'll spend it together," she assured him. "We need to check on the house and then there's the photo shoot."

"Photo shoot?"

She rolled over to face him. "At the fire station. Remember Mr. August?"

"Oh yeah. A naked fireman calendar?"

She giggled. "No."

"Then you won't make much money," he teased.

She lifted her right eyebrow. "You want me to take pictures of naked firemen?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Not necessarily."

She grinned. "Only from the waist up."

Hawke cleared his throat. "Maybe you should reschedule."

"Why?"

"You have to ask?"

"I refuse to hide like a coward, Hawke."

"I just don't want a repeat of this afternoon." He reached to tuck a wayward piece of hair behind her ear. "Besides, we could have just as much fun here."

She couldn't stop the smile that split her lips when his erection poked her hip. "No doubt."

"Ignore it," he groaned across her ear, "no more condoms."

Her pulse leapt. Just the thought of Hawke taking her without a condom made her achy all over again. Maybe Max would make a run to the drugstore. Rachel bit her lip to keep her wicked thoughts to herself and closed her eyes. Within minutes, his even breathing told her they would have to wait until morning.

As she lay in his arms and listened to him sleep, she felt a slight sinking feeling in her stomach. She was in big trouble. Despite her intention to take time to analyze her feelings, she'd gone and fallen deeply in love. She'd fought the absurdity of that thought for days now, but after their lovemaking, she realized the true strength of her feelings. There would be no going back.

She sighed. What about Hawke? Could he possibly be in love with her? And then there was that stupid crazed maniac that wouldn't leave them alone. Although highly unlikely, what if that bullet really was meant for her? The torn skin on her thigh began to throb, a reminder of how serious the situation had become.

Rachel snuggled further into the warmth of Hawke's body and refused to think anymore. Soon, his steady breathing and heartbeat lulled her to sleep.

The sunlight peeking through the curtains woke Hawke. Used to waking in a different bed most days, he wasn't too surprised, until he felt the warm body beside him. His brow furrowed. He'd broken his own cardinal rule; he never spent the whole night with a woman. But this wasn't just a woman, this was Rachel.

His frown faded as he replayed their lovemaking. After last night he couldn't let her go. They'd gone from sweet and slow to the most explosive sexual experience he'd ever had. And he wanted her again. And again. And again.

His dick saluted as he turned to his side and watched her sleep. Her natural beauty radiated in the morning light, warmed his heart, and spoke to his soul. Very gently he trailed his fingers down her temple, contemplating whether he should let her sleep longer.

Her eyes fluttered open and she stretched her arms above her head. "That tickles."

He smirked. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Her eyes twinkled as she reached between them and closed her fist around his eager soldier. "Yes you did."

He sucked in a quick breath and thrust as he wallowed in the intense pleasure of being confined in the heat of her hand. "Okay." He squeezed his eyes closed. "I did."

"And you woke me because..." She stroked him from top to bottom and then walked her fingertips over his velvet smooth tip.

Although his cock obviously had a plan, Hawke took control. He reached down between them, unwrapped her hand, and placed it flat against his chest. "We need to have that talk."

Rachel nodded, her bedroom eyes sparkling in the early morning sunlight.

He took a deep breath and prepared to break her heart. The mere thought of it wilted his erection. "I'm not who you think, Rachel."

She gave a soft smile. "I've been pleasantly surprised."

Hawke laid a hand over hers and squeezed. "I work for the United States government."

Her fingers pressed into his skin and her brow furrowed. "I don't understand. You're a major rock star."

"I'm undercover."

Her lips quirked. "As a rock star?"

Hawke groaned and rolled away from her to stand beside the bed, the bitter taste of disgust on his tongue. "Believe it or not, yes. It sounds ridiculous but it's the God-honest truth." When she didn't offer argument or laughter, he continued. "Max, Steele, Shadow



and I are Navy SEALs hired by Uncle Sam to track terrorist activity. Jaydon Hawke allows me freedom to travel the world without suspicion. The wealth and notoriety allows me to infiltrate suspicious cells at will.”

“The government trained you to be a rock star?”

He had to smile, hoping to God she would accept his explanation. “No, I just happened to have hidden talent.”

She didn’t return his smile and pushed herself to her knees. “I see. And, how exactly do I fit into all of this?”

“We suspected you to be a courier for Manuel Diego.”

She sat stoic, her usual control holding her captive. He wanted her to scream, hit him, throw something, cry even.

Instead, she folded her arms across her breasts. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

Hawke pulled on his jeans. “He has probably a thousand aliases, but he’s the brain behind building nuclear weapons.”

Her eyes never left his. “Assuming I believe you, I still don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“Diego has posed as one of your overseas clients. Plans for building the weapons are shipped to you in a tube of architectural sketches. Someone else retrieves them from your office.”

She left the bed to throw open a bureau drawer and pull on a tank top and shorts. “I never exchange the tubes. They come and go through the mail room on the lower floor of the building.”

“Diego doesn’t expect you to be there, baby. In fact, they prefer you’re not.”

“How on Earth does he smuggle plans like that into my office without my knowledge?”

Jade grabbed the cardboard tube Max had planted there and handed it to her. “He’s a terrorist, honey. This is the one you were supposed to get the day you were shot.”

She accepted his offering. “So, you’re telling me there are plans for a nuclear weapon in here?”

Against his will, he nodded.

Rachel wiggled the plug in the end of the cardboard loose, pulled out the blueprints inside, and unrolled them. “These are my sketches.”

Hawke worked his pocketknife from his jeans pocket and slid the blade down the side of the tube. As soon as he separated the cut, a tiny blue flash drive fell to the floor.

Rachel’s eyes widened. “Oh my God.” Her face paled.

Hawke lowered her to the bed, pushed her head between her legs, and sat beside her. “Deep breaths.”

After a few deep breaths, she lifted her head. “I swear I didn’t know anything about this, Hawke.”

“We know that now.”

“You really thought I was part of a terrorist cell?”

“Afraid so.”

“So this whole charade was a game?”

Although she deserved more, he could only offer short sentences. “Most of it.”

She paused for a brief moment, as if trying to read his mind. “And you and I, that was just part of the plan?”

Acid churned his stomach. "At first."

"It wasn't a game to me," she whispered.

Desperate to make the whole damn mess disappear, he offered the best explanation he could. "I know and I'm sorry. I didn't plan for things to turn out like this."

"You used me."

"I admit I tried, but you haven't been a very chatty or cooperative informant."

She didn't see the humor. "So, who are you? Jaydon Hawke, rock star, or Hawke, undercover Navy SEAL?"

"Both. I'll always be Jaydon Hawke. I mean, I just can't quit being a rock star. But I am first and foremost a Navy SEAL, determined to keep this maniac from hurting you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I planned on it. Then you got shot."

"Yeah, sorry about that," she mumbled.

He bit his lip to keep from grinning at her ability to see humor in the situation. "Look, Rachel, you have to believe me when I say I didn't make love to you just to get information."

He took a deep breath and prepared himself for the words he knew she would say. "I don't know what to believe."

"I know this is hard for you." *It's killing me.* "But, you've got to trust me."

"Not so sure about that."

Aggravated to hell at himself, he reached to grasp her shoulder. "Damn it, Rachel. Your life is in danger. Trust me or not, I won't let Diego have you."

She tilted her head to the side, heart-wrenching pain evident in her eyes. Hawke fought himself hard and fast to keep from reaching for her.

"Fine," she said finally.

"You should cancel the photo shoot."

"Absolutely not."

"Diego is a cold-hearted son of a bitch, sweetheart. He won't think twice about killing you."

"Use me as bait."

"What?" Hawke shook his head from side to side to make sure he'd heard correctly. "Hell no."

"Yes." Rachel knocked his hand from her shoulder and stood from the bed. "You listen to me, Hawke or whoever the hell you are, and you listen well. I'm sick and tired of being used. If luring this jerk out of hiding is what I have to do to get rid of him, then so be it." Hawke opened his mouth to speak but she barreled right over him. "Then I can go back to being brainy and boring and all of you can go straight to hell."

Hawke stood deathly still for seconds after Rachel's outburst. *Holy hell.*

"Put your shirt on," she demanded, "I can't think straight as it is."

Without argument, Hawke pulled his shirt over his head and took advantage of her silence. "I need to know you understand why I used you."

"I understand your motives, but I'm madder than hell. Any discussion about our relationship is now off limits. Anything else?"

He shook his head. "I think we've covered it."

"Good." She threw open the bedroom door. "Let's go catch a terrorist."

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A chill climbed Max's spine as the doorbell chimed. How in the hell had Rachel managed to talk him into this?

As he stepped to open the front door, he sensed her immediately. The sweet, sexy smell of cotton candy and sunshine. Cameron. Completely Cameron. A smell so sweet that if he inhaled too deeply, his teeth would rot. Still, he couldn't resist. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

"About time," she chided.

With a sway of her curvy hips, she slipped past him and made her way to the living room.

Max closed the door, set the alarm, and followed behind. "How did you get in the gate?"

She frowned while she tossed her bag to the sofa then sat down next to it. "How do you think?"

He crossed his arms and opted for silence.

She looked up and rolled her baby blues. "I know the code, Einstein." She pulled out a sketchbook and then patted the cushion beside her. "C'mon, Scaredy Cat, I promise it won't hurt."

He eased himself down next to her, shamefully aroused. Curse words swam across his brain. Something about fighting this white-hot attraction was just wrong.

"You could see better if you take off your glasses."

And expose his reaction to her? "No."

"Suit yourself, Joe Cool." She shrugged and pushed the book his direction. "Since you'll be Hawke's roomie, Rachel wanted you to see the sketches for your bedroom."

His eyes widened when he looked at her drawings. Palm trees, coconuts, and wild, loud animal prints screamed at him. Hell, there was even a monkey swinging from the palm tree and an alligator at the foot of the bed.

He took a deep breath and shoved the paper back at her. "You've never been in the jungle, have you?"

"No, why?"

"If you aimed for a jungle with that drawing, you missed."

"You don't like it?"

"No." Although, he would play Tarzan and Jane with her. Any time. Any place. "I've spent enough time in the jungle."

"It suits your personality."

He sat quietly behind his glasses and worked hard to keep his face expressionless.

She giggled and handed him another drawing. "Relax, Rambo, this is what I really had in mind."

Max glanced cautiously at the second sketch and a sense of relief seeped through his skin. This room had more of a techno feel to it, showcasing shiny chrome fixtures and electronic gadgets strategically placed throughout. The colors were bold and reeked of raw masculinity. She'd even covered the furniture in his trademark black leather.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much," he agreed.

"See?" she chided. "You got your panties in a wad for nothing."

There was slight movement between his legs. *Oh, hell, no.* He refused to sit there and discuss panties with her. Especially since he wondered if she wore any.

“I don’t wear panties, Hot Shot,” he tossed back at her.

The sexy little smirk she gave him before she spoke actually made him second guess his admission. “What do you wear?”

“Nothing.”

When her mouth fell open for a split second, he thought he might have actually shut her up. Except when her pouty lips curled into a vampy blood-sucking smile, he knew better.

“Me either.”

Every single ounce of his military training came into play as he demanded discipline from his body.

*Un-freaking-believable.*

Only the buzzer from the intercom spurred him to action. He reached to press the button. “Yeah?”

“Steele and Shadow,” the voice on the other end answered. “5842.”

Cameron tilted her head to one side. “That’s not the code I used.”

“I know.”

“Why?”

“I know everything.”

She snorted. “Sure you do. Why does the gate open with two codes?”

“Five.”

“Five security codes?”

He nodded. “I reprogrammed the system. Each code is assigned to a different individual.”

“You are a major overachiever.”

He shrugged and headed back to the front door.

Steele ambled inside with his usual carefree smirk. “Captain.”

Max closed the door and turned. “Living room’s this way.”

Max led Steele and Shadow to the living area. “Have a seat. As soon as Hawke gets down here, we’ll talk strategy.”

Steele’s eyes widened.

“Watch yourself.” Max gestured for him to sit in a vacant chair. “She’ll chew you up and spit you out.”

Cameron narrowed her eyes on him. “You’re such a sweet talker.”

He let his lips curl into a mocking grin. “Am I wrong?”

Max prepared himself for a full frontal attack when she simply shrugged and sat back down on the sofa. *Hell.* The silence wasn’t good.

She finally folded her arms across her chest. “Nice to see you again, Brett.”

“Holy shit,” Shadow mumbled.

Max turned and pinned Steel with an icy stare. “You know her? How the hell do you know her?”

“We met at the coffee shop,” Cameron said.

“She made him, Captain,” Shadow chimed.

“Leave him alone, Terminator.”

Steele’s jaw dropped.

Shadow snickered. "Well I'll be damned."

Steele cleared his throat. "I expected more of a crowd when we came in."

"Diablo PD cleared everybody out last night. We haven't been out yet today. My vote is we stay in."

Cameron snorted. "Like that's gonna happen."

Max turned and raised an eyebrow in question.

"The calendar," she answered.

He frowned. "Calendar?"

"You know, the thing that keeps track of months and days?"

"What about it?"

"Your brain must be the size of a peanut. The photo shoot at the fire station is scheduled today."

"Re-schedule."

Cameron folded her arms across her chest and both eyebrows met over her eyes.

"No."

Max heard Steele suck in a hard breath. Shadow sat frozen. The tick of a clock somewhere near counted the seconds it took to keep him from turning her across his knee and paddling her until her ass was a bright, cherry red. His cock ached just thinking about it. And then just when he was ready to react, Hawke and Rachel saved him from total humiliation.

Max took one look at Hawke and knew the earth was about to shake. "You told her."

Hawke nodded as he and Rachel walked down the stairs. "She knows."

As expected, Cameron spoke next. "Knows what?"

Max turned his attention to Rachel. "You want to tell her?"

Rachel limped to the sofa and sat next to Cameron. "No, you can explain. I'm not sure I really believe it myself."

Max raised an eyebrow at Hawke.

"I did the best I could," Hawke mumbled.

Max folded his arms across his chest and briefly summarized the mission. When he finished, it took him two full seconds to realize the room was bathed in silence. He stole a glance at the two women, amazed that one in particular hadn't initiated a full frontal attack.

Hawke broke the momentary peace. "Captain, she wants us to use her as bait."

"Are you crazy?" Cameron squealed. "He's a terrorist."

"We haven't confirmed he's in Diablo," Shadow said.

"Wait an everloving minute." Cameron cocked her head to the side. "You guys are SEALs? And Sean Pirelli and the band? And Greg?"

Shadow snickered. "Hell, no."

"Just us," Steele explained. "Hawke's cover has really given us one helluva wild ride. The band is really a band. And just like a real diva, Hawke has a manager and people. The only difference is they don't know anything about us or that Hawke is a SEAL."

"And it needs to stay that way. The mission is top secret and now a matter of life and death."

Max braced himself for the next round.

"And you are in charge?"

Max stood his ground. "Yeah."

“So, you’re responsible if anything happens to Rachel?”

He knew better than to avoid an answer. Besides, that wasn’t a question, rather a full-fledged threat. “Something like that.” Max ran a hand across the top of his head. “There is no doubt in my mind that Diego is in Diablo. I hate to break up the party, but I think it would be best to reschedule your fundraiser.”

“No.” Rachel and Cameron answered in unison.

Max’s palm itched and he rubbed it against his thigh.

“Hawke and I discussed this, Max.” Although Rachel spoke softly, her determination barreled through. “I won’t hide.”

Max glanced at the wound on her thigh, now circled with ugly shades of red and purple. “What if it’s worse next time?”

Rachel’s face paled and just when he prepared to drive his point home, the mouth beside her jumped in.

“If you’re half the bodyguard you claim, there won’t be a problem.”

Steele’s eyes resembled saucers. Shadow inhaled a slow breath. Hawke just shook his head. And Max knew she’d managed to push him to his limit. All that sass was too much for one man. Except there were now four witnesses. Four witnesses who wouldn’t hesitate to give him hell if he caved.

Very slowly, he forced his angry retort into hibernation and then injected calm into his voice. “If I agree to this, and I did say *if*, we do things my way.”

And of course someone had something else to say.

The blond lioness shot him the evil eye. “If you let her get hurt one more time, I’ll have your head on a platter.”

Max swallowed hard. Normally, he’d write that off as dramatic overreaction. Except one look into those incredibly sexy, narrowed eyes told him she wasn’t issuing an idle threat. And, it probably wasn’t his head she’d go after.

*Shit.*

He glanced at Steele and Shadow, fidgeting like school boys on their first date. His balls started to shrivel.

Max straightened his shoulders. “Here’s how this is going to go down. Re-schedule the event in a couple of days. We’ll use the time to review strategy and make absolutely sure Diego knows the specifics.” He glanced at the hellcat on the sofa. “No one, and I mean no one, leaves this house without an escort.”

He fully expected the next challenge. “Excuse me, Sergeant Slaughter, but I have clients to see.”

“Uh, Captain.” Steele finally spoke. ““I could go with her.””

Max clenched down on his back teeth so hard he almost bit his tongue. *Damn, damn, damn, just ... damn.* Whether it was desperation to shut her up or pure stupidity, Max issued his final ultimatum. “I’ll go with you.”

He glanced back at Rachel. “Does anyone know about this?”

“Just the fire department and the fundraising committee as far as I know. We agreed to keep it as quiet as we could. No one expects Hawke to be there.”

Max ignored the sinking feeling in his gut. Hopefully Hawke knew what the hell he was getting them all into. “I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the corner of the Diablo firehouse garage, Hawke stood braced against a fire pole surrounded by Shadow, Max, and Steele, watching the action behind tinted lenses and wondering why the hell he'd been so agreeable. The area appeared to be perfectly safe for the event. The two largest fire engines, both ladder trucks, had been parked side by side directly in front of the garage. This kept wandering eyes, or cameras, out and provided a discreet photography back drop. Diablo Police Department officers stood guard outside the area. Swat team snipers lined the tops of adjacent buildings. Though the whole operation reeked of military genius, Hawke knew that if Diego wanted Rachel bad enough, he would find a way to test the barriers.

Inside the perimeter however, things were a whole lot different.

Rachel's rich auburn hair tumbled carelessly down her back as she tossed her head and positioned the first fireman against a freshly-waxed fire engine. He watched through narrow eyes as her dancing fingertips filled the ridges of the man's sculpted muscles with oil. Hawke released a long sigh. He had no other choice but to size up the competition with pained tolerance. The whole place was thick with testosterone and it was directed at his woman. Even if she was totally pissed off at him right now, she was still his.

Hawke peeled his eyes off Rachel long enough to glance at Max. "Thanks, Captain."

"Don't thank me yet, Hawke, we can't keep the media out for long. I give it an hour tops."

"Maybe it won't take that long."

Max rubbed the back of his neck. "Tell me why we're here again."

"Moral support," Hawke mumbled.

"Damn." Shadow whistled low under his breath. "How much oil does he need?"

Hawke lifted his sunglasses and tossed Shadow a menacing stare.

"At least she's safe," Steele added.

"Steele," Max growled, "you're not helping."

Hawke stiffened as Rachel ran her hands over her victim's body for the umpteenth time.

"Mr. August," Max reminded him.

"I remember," Hawke spat through gritted teeth.

Shadow chuckled. "Cameron looks happy herself."

"Screw you," Max muttered.

"Okay, Rick." Rachel lifted her hands from Rick's glistening skin. "Any more oil and you'll shine brighter than the truck."

She positioned Rick against the steps leading to the top of the fire truck and looped a hose around one of his biceps. "What do you think, Cameron?"

Cameron aimed her camera at Rick. "More abs."

Rachel braced her hand on her hip, twisted her lips, then pointed to his abdomen with her free hand. "Are you tan down there?"

Rick cast an uneasy glance at Hawke. "Most of the way." Hawke returned a brutal

and unfriendly stare.

Rachel shrugged, unsnapped Rick's pants, and wiggled them low on his hips.

Hawke growled low in his throat and turned his attention to Max, who stood morbidly quiet. With his arms crossed across his massive chest, Captain Sterling appeared deadly, ready and willing to snap someone's neck.

When Hawke glanced back at the truck, he fully understood Max's unspoken discomfort. With her signature high heels planted six inches apart on the cement slab and slightly bent at the waist, Cameron swiveled her hips to capture each side of Rick's physique and clicked several more pictures. The hem of her short skirt bounced against the back of her thighs.

Shadow snickered beside them.

"You have something to say, Shadow?" Max challenged.

Hawke watched Shadow's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "No."

"Come here, Rick." Cameron waltzed toward the half-naked civil servant. "I'll hold your hose while you climb the ladder."

Hawke's eyes widened. Did she mean that like it sounded? Or was he so damn turned on by this whole thing he heard wrong? He held his breath and looked at Max. Not a clue.

"Next victim," Cameron sang, handing Rachel the camera while she picked up the bottle of oil.

Rachel set down the camera and glanced at Hawke. One look into her eyes told him exactly what he wanted to know. She still felt the brunt of his betrayal and he was helpless to change her mind.

Hawke released a heavy breath as she turned her attention back to the bronzed muscle next to her. What the hell did he hope to accomplish by this? He checked his watch, nervous as a whore in church about how this mission would play out.

Cameron tilted her head to one side and glanced at Max. "We're short a month."

Max shifted his weight. "In your dreams."

"Too hot out here for you?"

Max gave his head a slight nod. "Something like that."

She shrugged and glanced at Steele. "What about you, Brett?"

Hawke expected Steele to oblige but one sideways look from Max changed that. "No thanks, Cameron."

Cameron headed back to the fire trucks and then stopped to cast a catty smile over her shoulder at Max. "Wuss."

Before Hawke or anyone else could react to Cameron's challenge, tires screeched against the heated pavement and doors slammed in the quiet afternoon. Flashes of light bounced off the fire trucks. Policemen barked orders through bullhorns.

"Cat's out of the bag," Max drawled.

Shadow frowned. "Did Huntington call in a press release?"

Hawke shook his head. "No. Are you sure it's media?"

Shadow left the area and crawled the ladder of one of the trucks. After hesitating only a few seconds at the top, he climbed down and returned. "A whole shitload of news vans out there."

"Rachel." Max signaled for her to come closer. She handed the camera to Cameron and stepped next to Hawke. "You and Hawke talk to them out front. Keep it brief. If Diego makes a move, he only needs a few seconds."



Rachel paled and Hawke prepared to scoop her from the pavement. Instead, she cleared her throat and nodded.

Max looked back at Hawke. “Snipers at ten and two,” he continued. “He’ll have to dance to get a clear shot. I’ll be on your ass. If he wants in, he’ll have to come through the blockade.”

Hawke glanced at Rachel. Her fingers shook as she tucked her hair behind her ears. “You sure you’re still mad enough to do this?”

Daggers flew from her emerald gaze as she answered. “Of course.”

Hawke balled his fists until the muscles in his fingers protested. “Let’s get this over, Max.”

All action in front of the camera stilled. Fireman lounged against the trucks almost if they appreciated the interruption. Even Cameron stood quiet. Hawke grasped Rachel’s elbow and lead her around the safety of the barriers until they stood in front of the crowd.

Hawke painted on an undercover smile as he glanced around the area. Reporters thrust microphones in his face and fired questions as cameramen shouldered their equipment and rolled tape.

*Where are you, you son-of-a-bitch?*

Hawke took a calming breath and wrapped a hand low on Rachel’s waist. “Rachel is responsible for this event, ladies and gentlemen. She can answer your questions much better than I.”

Rachel gave him a small smile then turned to address a reporter in front. Hawke listened to Rachel’s soft, silky voice in one ear and kept his other one trained on the activity around them. Considering the media circus, no one seemed out of place. And true to Captain Sterling’s word, snipers waited on rooftops, scopes trained on the area.

And then someone had to screw the plan.

Hawke smelled her before he caught a glimpse of her ducking under the yellow tape in front of the crowd. Perfume, strong and sickening sweet, assaulted his nostrils until his eyes watered. He glanced at Max. Max raised a hand to one ear and spoke in a low, almost inaudible tone. “Stand down.”

Max took two steps to the left and snatched Monica Kensington by the elbow. Her eyes widened when Max whispered something in her ear.

Hawke turned back to Rachel and waited for her to finish speaking before he squeezed her to his side. “And now we have to get back to the shoot. Thank you.”

He hustled Rachel back behind the fire trucks before he finally breathed a sigh of relief. Three seconds later, Cameron sunk her claws into Monica before either he or Max could get a word in.

“Care to explain why you slithered in here, Monica?”

“No reason.” Monica tossed her head. “I was driving by and wanted to see what all the fuss was about.”

Cameron narrowed her eyes. “More like you wanted to see if you could take credit for this.”

“Now, now Cameron dear, you mustn’t be so suspicious. I thought I might be able to help with the media.”

“So helpful you ducked right under the tape,” Cameron drawled.

Hawke raised his eyebrows. Pretty smart chick. Obviously, Cameron knew Monica’s m.o.

Rachel released a sigh and placed a hand on Cameron's forearm. "We appreciate your concern, Monica, but as you can see, Cameron and I have everything under control."

Monica sneered. "Are you sure? You know the wealth of my influence."

Although Rachel didn't advertise it, Hawke didn't miss the sarcasm laced in her response. "I'm well aware of your professional recognition but we're doing just fine."

"I—"

"Monica, give it a rest already." Cameron snorted. "We don't need you."

Hawke bit his lip and glanced at Max.

"C'mon." Max dragged Monica by the elbow to the back door of the garage. "Out."

Monica's shrill voice echoed off the walls until the door slammed.

"Good riddance," Rachel mumbled.

Hawke smirked. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Did you see him?"

"Nobody looked suspicious."

"You were supposed to catch him," Cameron hissed.

Max slipped in behind her. "It's not that easy, short stuff."

Cameron squealed and spun to face him. "Good grief! You're awfully quiet for such a big guy."

Max just smirked.

"We need to finish." Rachel grinned. "Before the oil dries."

While Rachel and Cameron returned to the action, Hawke and Max took positions near the back door with Steele and Shadow.

"Leaving will be a bitch," Max muttered.

"I'll sign autographs while you get her in the truck."

Max nodded and threw a suspicious glance at Rachel and Cameron. The two women chattered and giggled as they continued to massage chests, abs and muscles. "If we can ever get them out of here."

"They don't act like they're in a hurry to leave," Shadow said under his breath.

"Damn, Shadow," Max bellowed, "do you have a death wish?"

Activity stilled at Max's outburst, all eyes focused on him. Hawke bit his bottom lip, unable to speak.

"No problem," Shadow said smoothly, "we're just discussing a sore subject over here."

Cameron rolled her eyes and shrugged. Rachel gave a serene smile and lifted the camera back to her eye.

Hawke cleared his throat. "Need a break, Max?"

Max wiped the sweat from his brow, the mask of control securely back in place. "No."

Steele cleared his throat. "Captain, ask Shadow what he read last night."

"Steele," Shadow growled.

Max cocked his head to the side. "Good book?"

Shadow didn't speak.

"Apparently," Steele answered, "Shadow has a collection of romance novels."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Steele gave a smug smile. "Nope. Serious as a heart attack."

As the sun began to set, Rachel and Cameron photographed the last fireman and Max began recovery mode. After a short meeting with the fire chief and police chief, Max followed Rachel and Cameron back inside the garage.

“Steele will load Rachel into the Suburban first,” Max told them. “As soon as the fire trucks roll out, you’re on, Hawke. The crowd is pretty thick. The snipers will remain until you’re finished.”

Max turned to Cameron. “Walk straight to your car. Shadow will go with you.”

Cameron lifted her sunglasses. “Are you going to tie me to the top if I don’t?”

Hawke’s body tensed, not sure how much more Max could take. Max’s chest slowly rose and then fell. He ran his palm over the smooth surface of his head. “Just get in the damn car.”

As if she sensed the impending danger, Cameron set her glasses back on her nose. “Fine, but I’m going to the spa first, Max.”

Hawke glanced from Max to Steele to Shadow. *No nickname? What the hell?*

“It’s Wednesday,” Rachel murmured.

Hawke frowned. “So?”

“Wednesday is spa day.” She gave him a cursory glance. “I’ll be in the truck.”

Hawke nodded and watched Steele follow her to the safety of the Suburban.

Max turned to Shadow. “Do not leave the perimeter. Escort her in and then back out.”

Shadow nodded and then laid a hand to the small of Cameron’s back. “C’mon, tiger.”

Max motioned for the fire trucks to move and then the crowd went wild. With Max beside him, Hawke stepped outside the garage to accept offers of autographs and photographs.

Rachel sat in the quiet interior of the Suburban with Brett, content with the afternoon’s events. Hawke had once again surprised her. When the crowd gathered behind the fire trucks, she fully expected him to greet his public. After all, why not? Hawke’s presence didn’t have much to do with the calendar anyway. But instead, he remained in the depths of the garage, hidden from view. Impressive.

Rachel gazed out the window at Hawke and her heart pounded. Even in a swarm of females, she wanted him. No doubt about it, even though he betrayed and lied to her, she couldn’t resist him. And what warmed her already heated body even more, he wanted her.

“Hazard of undercover,” Brett mumbled.

Rachel lifted an eyebrow. “According to Max, you’re quite the ladies’ man.”

Brett lowered his head. “Sterling has a big mouth.”

“Actually, I’ve found Max to be very insightful.”

Brett gave her a cocky grin in response just as the passenger door opened and Hawke stepped inside. Max entered and slid behind the steering wheel.

Hawke scooted close to her. “I’d say the afternoon was a success.”

“It was,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

He lifted her hand and kissed the back of her knuckles. “Anything for you, angel.”

She pulled her hand from his grasp and cleared her throat. “Are you still serious about your house?”

Hawke scrubbed a hand down the side of his jaw. “Rachel, I’ll admit I wasn’t entirely truthful with you but, I was dead serious when I said I was ready to settle down and

concentrate on other things.”

Careful to keep her emotions hidden, she asked the one question she wasn't sure she really wanted him to answer. “Will you live there?”

He reached to grasp her hand again. “Yes. Jaydon Hawke will not allow me to be the SEAL I once was.”

She gave his hand a slight squeeze. “Then, I need to check the progress.”

“Sure.” He lifted her hand, turned it over and placed a kiss to the underside of her wrist. “You heard the lady, Max.”

Max nodded and steered the vehicle away from the chaos and toward the building site.

Rachel glanced out the back window to see if anyone followed. Although security gates had now been installed around the entry to the new house, the house itself wasn't completely wired and it would be difficult to keep a determined groupie out.

“Not a problem, Rachel,” Max said from the front seat. “The police department's got it all under control.”

Rachel grinned. More like Max had it all under control. She leaned back against the seat, relieved the afternoon was almost over.

Max stopped in front of two iron, black gates, lowered the car window, and entered the code. He parked the Suburban across the driveway near the front door.

“We'll wait out here,” Max told Hawke when he opened the back door.

Hawke nodded and headed inside with Rachel. As soon as they entered the foyer, Hawke's body bumped hers and he grasped her shoulders to steady them both. A tiny gasp left her lips.

Hawke peered over her head and suddenly her behavior made sense. “Sonuvabitch.”

The place looked like a wrecking ball had a field day. The windows were broken, the sheetrock literally hung off the frame, and the gargantuan chandelier in the entryway hung from three wires.

Hawke pushed Rachel the opposite direction. “We probably better steer clear,” he mumbled.

Rachel stepped toward a mountain of rock in the corner. “So much for the fountain.” She turned back toward him and fire blazed in the depths of her eyes. “This is insane.”

“Vandals?” Hawke suggested, although he knew better.

“There are no vandals in this area,” Rachel answered with icy calmness. “Should I call the police?”

Hawke stepped into the kitchen and almost fell out. “No.”

He turned, blocking her entrance to the kitchen as she stepped toward him.

She frowned and pushed one hand against his chest. “Let me see. It can't be any worse than the rest.”

“Rachel, wait until I get Max and Steele.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Why?” Then her eyes widened. “Oh my God! There's not a body inside is there?”

“Damn.” Hawke ran a hand through his hair. “No. Just trust me, you don't want to go in.”

Her eyes held his for a moment and then somehow she managed to slip past him. Hawke released a heavy breath and then braced himself in the doorway.

Rachel stood in the middle of the kitchen, turning a semicircle as she scanned glossy

photographs of herself in the arms of a much older man plastered to every free inch of space. Some in vivid Technicolor, some in black and white. Some innocent and some very, very graphic. But those paled in comparison to the newspaper articles that labeled her harlot and homewrecker.

Hawke waited patiently for her to scream. Cry. Or even speak. Instead, she looked at each and every picture, some even twice, until she finally took a deep breath and turned her gaze to him. “And you thought the tabloids loved you.”

Hawke took a hesitant step toward her, fueled by the overwhelming urge to hold her. She held up a hand to stop him and then reached to pluck a newspaper clipping from the wall. “I owe you an explanation.”

Hawke shifted. So this is what it felt like to be on the other end. Acid burnt his gut. “Rachel—”

“Please.” He caught a slight quiver of her bottom lip. “I need to do this.”

Hawke nodded and propped himself against a wall.

She pointed to the man in the newspaper clipping she held. “William Bridgewater was my boss in New York City. He gave me my dream job and I respected him.”

Rachel turned back to the pictures. “Little did I know things would end up like this.”

“People have affairs all the time,” Hawke said quietly. Himself included.

Rachel turned to face him, fire in her eyes. “That’s just it, Hawke, I didn’t think it was an affair. He told me he was divorced and no one bothered to tell me any different. I had absolutely no idea there was a Mrs. Bridgewater until I opened a Sunday paper.”

“What an ass.”

She gave him a half smile. “Thank you.” She gestured to the photographs. “She hired a private investigator and the rest is pretty well self explanatory.”

The color returned to her cheeks and she appeared her usual composed self.

“I already knew.”

He braced himself for her reaction, wondering too late if he should’ve confessed.

Rachel studied him for a moment and then shrugged. “Max.”

Hawke pushed himself off the wall, still wary. “You’re not angry?”

“Not with you. I thought this was all behind me. I don’t even know how these got here. When the Bridgewaters finally divorced for real, the judge issued a gag order.”

“Believe me, things like this always get out somehow.” He stepped closer and hugged her. “This makes absolutely no difference to me.”

She untangled herself from his embrace, plucked pictures from the walls, and handed them to him.

He gestured at the countertop. “You missed one.”

Rachel reached for a wayward photo turned over on the counter. “Um, Hawke, this one’s not mine.”

Hawke frowned and took the card.

MINE AND ONLY MINE.

He smeared his thumb over the familiar red lipstick signature and then lifted his thumb to his mouth. *Wild cherry.*

Hawke glanced at Rachel who lifted her eyebrow in question.

“I don’t think any of this has anything to do with you.”

She waved a photo at him. “Hello? I believe this is me in this sordid position.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had several of these cards lately.”

“And you’ve tasted them all?”

“They’re all signed with wild cherry flavored lipstick.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Wow. You are talented. But did you know most lipstick contains fish scales?”

Hawke laughed, relieved at her humor, but still pissed off at the whole thing. “No.” He brushed a wayward piece of hair from her forehead. “I’m going to have to bring Max and Steele in here.”

Rachel shrugged. “Go ahead. I’ve been drugged, shot, used, lied to, and now exposed as some sort of femme fatal. It can’t get any worse.”

Hawke squeezed the top of her shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

The thump of heavy boots announced Max and Brett’s arrival several seconds later. Hawke followed behind.

“Hell.” Brett gave a low whistle as he thumbed through the pictures on the counter. “Somebody’s pissed.”

Hawke handed Max the lipstick card. “Another one.”

Max scraped the edge of his jaw with the card. “This is directed at you, Hawke. Somebody objects to your partnership with Rachel.”

Hawke ran a hand through his hair. “So what now?”

“Now we go back to the house. He’s hot on her trail. I’ll take you and Shadow back to the hotel suite and Steele and Rachel back to the house. We’ll keep Steele there until I get to the bottom of this mess just in case I’m wrong.”

Hawke released a heavy sigh. Max was never wrong. He turned and took Rachel’s hand. “You okay with that?”

Rather than release his hold, she squeezed and nodded. “But I’d rather go to the spa first, if you don’t mind, Max.”

Max led them to the door and back into the Suburban. “I’ll drop you off then come back for you and Mighty Mouse after I get Hawke and Steele situated.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cameron released a soft sigh while cool cucumber slices soothed her eyes and eucalyptus oil soaked her skin in comfort. Nothing compared to spa day. Reclining on the amply padded chaise lounge, wrapped in the oversized, warm terry cloth robe, she basked in her makeshift paradise.

Reaching down beside her lounger, she passed her hand along the floor and fumbled for the bottle of lotion she left there.

Strange, it was just here.

She gasped when hand brushed something solid. Curious, she walked her fingers across the top of the object, content it was stationary. Until it wiggled.

She swung her feet over the edge of her cocoon, jumped straight into the air, and sent cucumbers flying. As soon as she wiped the oil from her eyes, she looked up to see that Max stood in front of her. Looking utterly humiliated. Dressed in a robe at least four sizes too small and opened to reveal his massive, smooth, bare chest, he stood barefoot at the side of her chair. And the wayward cucumber slice stuck to the top of his shiny head made matters worse. Laughter bubbled from her lips as he peeled the cucumber away from his skin and flicked it back onto the lounge.

“Are you finished?” He folded his arms across his corded chest muscles.

“Sorry.” She bit her lip and attempted to quell her giggles. “You look adorable but why on Earth are you dressed like that?”

“They wouldn’t let me back in my street clothes.”

“I see. And what are you doing here anyway?”

“I told Rachel I’d be back.”

“Already? Geez, you obviously don’t understand the meaning of spa, do you?”

“Come on.” He grasped her arm. “Where’s Rachel?”

“Now hold on there, Repo Man,” she hissed, jerking free of his hold, “I’m not repossessed collateral here. She’s getting a massage and I’m not finished exfoliating.”

She flung herself back onto the lounge and reclined with her feet crossed.

“Why didn’t you just call anyway?”

“You’re not answering your phone.”

“Of course not,” she scoffed, “it’s spa day. But you could’ve called the front desk.”

“You should always keep your phone close, for safety.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and prepared for another argument. A brief moment of silence passed, each attempting to stare the other down, before she spoke.

“Not on spa day.”

“Fine,” he answered abruptly, “I’ll wait outside for one hour.”

She studied her freshly manicured nails. “I might not be done in an hour.”

He grinned, stepped forward and tipped her chin. “One hour, Sassafrass.”

Cameron watched behind hooded eyes and waited for Max to amble out of sight before she left her cocoon. *Big bully*. She wiggled the robe from her shoulders, pulled her blouse over her head, and shook her curls back into place. She was supposed to be

relaxed, calm, in touch with her inner beauty. She snorted. *Sure*. The mad bull barging into her china shop changed all that. Now she was tense and her aura was all wrong. She sighed. *Oh well*. She'd just have to schedule another spa day this week. Darn the bad luck.

She flung her purse over her shoulder and smashed her sunglasses on her face as she stalked down the hall to find Rachel already waiting in the lounge.

"Did you see him?"

Rachel grinned. "Yeah, I saw him when I came out of the locker room. Cute, huh?"

"Yeah, cute," Cameron mumbled.

Cameron's high heels clicked loudly as they kissed the scalding pavement, counting the steps to her car.

"Marching double time, aren't you?"

She swung her head to see Max propped against her car. An exasperated sigh left her freshly-glossed lips. "Good grief, Goliath. I don't need an escort."

He grinned. "I need a ride."

"Where's the Suburban?"

"Shadow and Hawke took it back to the hotel." He snatched her keys from her grasp, and unlocked the door. "Get in."

Cameron stood dumbfounded as he pushed her into the driver's seat and walked around to the passenger side where Rachel waited. For a split second, she considered leaving the other door locked, but he'd probably crawl on the roof or something.

"Unlock the door," he ordered, his voice full of cool authority.

"Fine." She pressed the button on her remote.

Max waved Rachel into the tiny backseat then he entered the car legs first and folded his large frame into the small, cramped interior with his knees nearly touching his chin.

"This is such a girly car," he mumbled as his biceps bumped the side window.

"Duh," Cameron threw at him impatiently, "below your right hand is the seat control." She turned to Rachel. "Sorry, he won't fit back there unless we hogtie him and I don't think that's possible."

Rachel grinned. "It's not far."

Cameron watched Max ease back the seat and heard him release a heavy breath when his groin wasn't quite so squeezed.

"Put the key in the ignition."

She smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes. "Buckle up, Safety Man."

Max stretched the seatbelt across his body and snapped it together. She started the car, lowered the top, and giggled as the rays of sunshine bounced off her diamond-studded sunglasses.

"This won't mess up your hair, will it?"

"Just drive," Max grumbled.

Cameron swung her sports car down the expressway and finally into Rachel's drive.

"Straight inside," Max ordered.

Cameron frowned. "I need to run home for a minute."

"No."

"Yes," she insisted. "If you intend to hold me hostage, I need to get something."

"What?"

"Something."



“What do you possibly need that you would risk being killed by a terrorist?”

“My cat.”

“Your cat?”

“Yes. I won’t stay here without him.”

“Hawke has people. He can arrange for your cat to be cared for.”

“No. He doesn’t like strangers.”

“Oh for the love of – I’ll get the cat.”

“I don’t think so. He definitely won’t come to you.”

“Your choice, Princess. Either I get him or he stays home alone.”

“Fine. Need to borrow my car?”

Steele ambled outside.

“No,” Max told her, “I’ll take Steele’s truck.”

“Good thing.” She whacked his biceps with her bag as she pulled it from behind the seat. “You couldn’t handle this much power.”

Max exited the car, helped Rachel out, then he and Steele met at the truck. He watched the ten-gallon drum of gunpowder bounce to the front door then disappear inside the house. He blew out a rough breath. Wouldn’t take much to light that fuse.

Steele cleared his throat. “The perimeter’s clear, Captain.”

Max nodded. “Shouldn’t be long before we can wrap this up. I need your keys.”

“You have new Intel?”

“No. She won’t stay without her cat.”

Steele grinned and handed him the keys. “And you volunteered.”

“Don’t start.” Max climbed in the truck and started the engine. “Besides, she’s all yours until I get back.”

Steele’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “What am I supposed to do with her?”

“If I were you, I’d steer clear. Just secure the house and fade into the background. Any engagement you choose with the enemy is at your own risk.”

Rachel wiped a hand across her forehead and closed the door. “Want some ice cream?”

“You go girl!” Cameron squealed. “What flavor?”

Rachel grinned. “Whatever you want. I stocked up for a few days.”

Rachel led the way into the kitchen. She pulled out several gallons of ice cream from the freezer, set them on the table and pulled off the lids.

Cameron grabbed two spoons and handed one to Rachel. “You are prepared!”

“There’s nothing better than ice cream right out of the carton.” Rachel filled her spoon with a full, rounded scoop of the dessert. “Do you know it takes an average of fifty licks to polish off a single scoop of ice cream?”

Cameron attempted to wipe the strawberry ice cream off her white tank top and giggled. “Guess I’ve never counted.” She scrubbed harder on the stain. “How are you doing with the Build a Block party?”

“I’ve got a few people lined up, but several of our usual volunteers are having trouble committing.”

“Just like men.” Cameron switched tubs and waved her spoon wildly, sending a river of chocolate ice cream spiraling down her arm.

Rachel giggled and tossed her a towel. "You're going to be sticky by the time you're through."

"No doubt." Cameron dabbed the chocolate mess. "I've got a few more calls to make. Surely there's someone I can intimidate. Do we need more donations?"

"Always." Rachel replaced the lids on the ice cream cartons. "We really need more muscle. Maybe you can get Max to help."

Cameron froze with her spoon in her mouth. "Now, why would I want to do that? Godzilla and I get along much better away from each other."

Rachel bit her bottom lip and gave Cameron a desperate look. "It's for a good cause," she continued, knowing Cameron's big heart would get the best of her.

"Don't look at me like that." Cameron tossed her spoon in the sink. "You know I can't say no to you when you look like that."

"I know," she said smugly. "That's why I'm doing it. Is it working?"

"Okay," Cameron huffed, "I'll see what I can do. But only for you, Rachel. Only for you."

"Thanks, Cameron." Rachel gave her a quick squeeze. "You're the best friend a girl could ever have."

Cameron giggled as they left the kitchen and returned to the living room. "Enough with the syrupy stuff."

"It shouldn't take long then." Rachel paused at the thud near the front of the house. She looked at Cameron and frowned. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah."

Cameron walked to the front door and eased it open just a crack.

"Open it further. I can't see." Rachel attempted to widen her view, but Cameron held tight.

"Um, Rachel, I think we have a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

Cameron opened the door and Rachel gasped. Parked in front of the door instead of in the garage, her Mercedes sported five huge scratches down the passenger side, from the front bumper to the rear. Something was written in red lipstick across the front windshield.

"What does it say?" she asked, trying to get around Cameron.

"I can't tell from here." Cameron blocked her path. "What are you doing? Whoever did that could still be out there!"

Rachel closed her eyes and felt the hair stand on the back of her neck. "Cameron, Max closed the gate when we came in."

Cameron bit her bottom lip. "Where's the blonde Adonis?"

Rachel stuck her head out the door. "Brett?"

When he didn't answer, Rachel stepped onto the porch to look around the area.

"Oh God, Cameron."

Brett's limp body lay in a heap near the side of the house, a baseball bat next to him.

Cameron grabbed her cell phone and started frantically pushing buttons. "I'm calling Hawke."

"Hawke?! No! Call the police!"

Cameron held up her other hand to silence Rachel's hysteria. "He'll bring King Kong. We'll get better results if we call him." She tapped her toe in impatience, ready to scream

when Hawke finally answered. "Hawke! Where are you?"

"On my way back to Rachel's. What's wrong?"

"Max just dropped us off. Brett's passed out on the lawn and somebody vandalized Rachel's car. There's a message on her window written in red lipstick."

"What does the message say?"

"We didn't get close enough to read it."

"Are you still inside?"

"Yes."

"Shut the door and arm the house." Hawke released a loud breath. "Shit, Max is on my other line. Do not hang up, Cameron."

"Bossy." Cameron huffed and headed back out the door.

"What are you doing?" Rachel pulled on Cameron's arm. "You can't go out there."

Cameron grabbed Rachel's hand. "We'll just take a peek and see what the message says, then run back inside."

"Did Hawke send us out here?" Rachel asked as they inched closer to the car.

"Um, not exactly," Cameron hedged. "Sometimes it's necessary to take things into your own hands."

Rachel took a step further down the driveway toward the area where Brett lay. "Get back over here," Cameron hissed at her.

"We can't leave him out here. Help me drag him inside."

Cameron lifted the cell phone back to her ear. "Hold on a sec, Hawke."

A colorful string of curse words flew from the handset as Cameron slid her phone inside her bra. She followed Rachel past the car and onto the front lawn where Brett lay face down.

Rachel bent beside him and placed two fingers to Brett's neck. "Oh thank Heaven. He's still breathing."

Cameron sucked in a quick breath. "That's an ugly lump on the back of his head."

"How should we do this?"

Cameron twisted her lips. "Maybe we shouldn't move him. What if he's hurt somewhere else?"

Rachel frowned. "You're right. I hadn't thought about that." She tucked a wayward piece of hair behind her ear then reached to push Brett's hair back from his face. "I'm ninety-nine percent sure he's just knocked out."

Cameron threw her hands into the air. "Let's just do it."

Rachel nodded. "I'll roll him over, then I'll take his hands and you take his feet."

As soon as Brett lay on his back, Rachel and Cameron lifted him.

"Good grief," Cameron grunted, "he's solid, that's for sure."

Within the next few minutes, Brett rested on one side in the living room behind the sofa.

Cameron plucked her phone from her bra, still sucking air from carrying Brett.

"Hawke?"

"I'm still here."

"The message says: He's mine. You're dead."

The line went silent for a split second and panic began to creep up her spine.

"Hawke?"

"I'm here. You went outside?"

“Duh.” Cameron rolled her eyes. “We carried Brett inside with us.”

“Is his earpiece still in his ear?”

Cameron bent and pushed Brett’s hair back from the side of his face. “Yes, wires and all.”

“Okay good. What flavor was the lipstick?”

Cameron frowned. “What?”

“The lipstick on the window, Cameron. What flavor was it?”

“How should I know?” Cameron turned to Rachel and widened her eyes. “You won’t believe this. He wants me to taste the lipstick.”

“He’s got an unusual talent,” Rachel mumbled.

Cameron stuck one hand on her hip. “I’m drawing the line, Hawke. You can do it yourself.”

Hawke lowered his voice. “Max is on the way.”

“Oh great!” Cameron gave a weak laugh as her tightly strung nerves began to unwind. “I can’t wait until he gets here.”

“Who?” Rachel pushed her hair back from her forehead.

Cameron raised both eyebrows. “Superman.”

“Even Superman can’t help you now,” a voice said behind them.

Rachel grabbed Cameron’s arm and they both spun around to see who addressed them. Cameron had to blink twice to focus.

Monica Kensington stood in Rachel’s front entry with a gun centered right at Rachel’s forehead.

“By the time anyone gets here, you’ll be dead.” Monica glanced at Cameron. “Hang up the phone and throw it across the room.”

“I gotta go,” Cameron said into the phone before she snapped it closed and threw it at Monica.

Monica dodged the flying object and cocked the trigger. “You really want to start something with me?” She moved the gun to aim at Cameron.

Cameron folded her arms across her chest. “Not really.”

Rachel took her hand and squeezed. “Cameron,” she whispered, “don’t aggravate her.”

Monica waved the gun in circles. “Shut up! This is all your fault. If you hadn’t found the flash drive, I wouldn’t have to kill you.”

“You don’t have to kill us.” Rachel inserted herself between the crazed woman and Cameron.

Monica gave an evil smile. “Oh yes, I do. I’ve waited years for this opportunity.” She used the gun to point. “In the living room.”

Rachel took Cameron’s hand and headed into the living room. “I don’t understand,” she said when she stopped near the sofa. “I haven’t known you that long.”

“You see, Rachel, Kensington is my maiden name. Bridgewater was my married name.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. “You’re not the woman in the papers.”

“A little hair dye, colored contacts, and no one ever suspected.”

Rachel’s mind spun, thoroughly confused by the whole turn of events. Monica was the terrorist? Or did Hawke have it all wrong? “Monica, just put down the gun and we’ll talk about this.”

Monica snorted. "Sure, and then we'll go shopping together on Saturday."

"There's a shoe sale on Saturday," Cameron suggested weakly.

"Stop!" Monica shrieked. "Everything was on track until you intercepted the flash drives. But I can fix this. I'll take you out and everything will be fine."

Rachel swallowed hard, now convinced they were on borrowed time. "Diego will kill you, Monica."

Monica's face reddened and she cocked the gun. "You know nothing about my relationship with Manuel Diego."

"I know enough to figure out he's using you." Like Hawke used me. Rachel ignored the pain in her heart. "You're a pawn. Once he gets those flash drives, you become unnecessary."

Monica laughed. "You underestimate my influence, Rachel. Without me Diego would have a hard time getting the drives."

Rachel resisted the urge to shake her head at Monica's unbelievable insanity. Did she not realize Diego most likely employed an unlimited army of peons under him? "I don't understand."

"Diego's cronies can't get in and out of the building as easily as I can. The security manager of our building and I are very close. I erase myself from the surveillance tapes every time I visit the mail room."

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Brett awoke to the sound of a persistent voice in his left ear.

"Steele, damn it, wake up!"

He lay still for a few seconds and took stock of his body parts while he tried to locate the source of his pain. He lifted his hand to the pulsing area of pain on the back of his head, cursing under his breath at the mountain-sized knot.

"Steele! If you can hear me, don't speak, just tap the earpiece twice."

Brett frowned at the sound of Shadow's voice. That didn't make a whole helluva lot of sense, but he tapped the microphone.

He opened his eyes and finally managed to figure out he was behind the sofa in Rachel's living room. With the mother of all headaches, he crawled on all fours to the kitchen.

"Welcome back." Shadow released a heavy sigh. "Long story short, the perp took a baseball bat to your head. We need Intel. Sterling should be entering the house now."

Distracted by the pounding in his temples, Brett swallowed a wave of apprehension when his left leg was suddenly yanked out from under him. Years of military training kicked in as he spun around, his fists primed to pummel his attacker. Sterling grabbed one fist in mid-air, squeezed, and pointed back at the living room. Brett nodded a silent understanding and inched closer to their target.

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Rachel decided she and Cameron had a better chance of survival if she kept Monica talking. "How did you get in here?"

Monica shrugged. "It really wasn't that difficult. I climbed a tree and waited."

Rachel glanced at Cameron. Environmentalism probably had its advantages. Any other time.

“Brett saw you.”

Monica nodded. “Only for a second.”

“Monica, really.” Rachel worked to keep her voice calm. “This is so unnecessary. Don’t you think this will make matters worse?”

“Save it. This wouldn’t have gone so far if the gargantuan bodyguard wasn’t quite so skilled.”

“Yeah,” Cameron mumbled. “A major overachiever.”

“I would’ve taken you out long before now, Rachel. When the Rohypnol failed, I was sure the bullet would prove my point.”

“Perfect.” Rachel squeezed the bridge of her nose. “Only one in fifty groupies becomes a stalker and I found the one.” She lifted her head. “So you tried to kill me.”

“Not kill you, dear. Just scare you away. How does it feel to be denied something you treasure?”

Rachel lifted an eyebrow. “Just peachy.”

Monica shrugged. “I tried to warn Hawke about you but he just didn’t understand.”

“He was probably too interested in the lipstick,” Rachel mumbled.

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Brett walked his elbows across the cool, marble kitchen tile, his body slithering behind him, as he attempted to gain access to the action in the living room. As soon as he was close enough to tuck himself into the shadows behind the sofa, he glanced over his shoulder to secure Sterling’s location. Sterling gave a silent nod from behind the archway of the kitchen. The moment Brett eased to his knees his heart pounded. Things just officially got real complicated.

He motioned for Sterling to go back to the kitchen.

“New development,” Steele whispered. “Somebody invited Diego.”

“Take. Him. Out.” Hawke’s low voice shook the airwaves with his rage.

Steele’s eyes widened and he glanced at Sterling for clarification.

Sterling shook his head and spoke clearly into his headset. “Stand down, Hawke. Wait for my signal.”

Steele felt the hair stand on the back of his neck when he heard a short, high-pitched whistle from the other room. He glanced at Sterling. “Silencer, Captain. Someone’s down.”

Hawke’s voice was the next across the waves. “Somebody tell me who.”

Steele crawled to the doorway and stood up just inside the arch. “Relax, Hawke. It’s Monica.” He signaled Sterling to the side opposite him while he monitored the activity in the living room.

“Ladies, it looks like I have a small dilemma.” Diego casually waved the gun in the air and stepped over Monica’s body. “I could just kill both of you now and be done with it. Or, we could wait for your SEAL team and I could eliminate all of you at once.”

Rachel’s already pale face lost even more color. The barracuda next to her, however, cocked her head to one side and narrowed her baby blues on Diego. “What’s the catch? There’s always a catch.”

Steele pinched the bridge of his nose. Was there anyone she wouldn't challenge? He lifted his head and glanced at Sterling, now clenching his fists.

"Shadow, do you have the target?"

"Negative, Captain. Blondie's in my crosshairs."

Sterling glanced at Steele. "We need a diversion."

"Want me to go in?"

Sterling shook his head. "Too risky."

Steele moved his gaze back to the living room and shook his head. Once again, the pint-sized loudmouth seemed oblivious to the fact she was held at gunpoint by a maniac.

"You don't look like a terrorist."

"Cameron!" Rachel groaned and grabbed her arm.

"Well, he doesn't."

Diego laughed. "You amuse me, little one. I prefer to think of myself as an international businessman who specializes in political strategies."

Rachel snorted. "That's one way to put it." She slowly inched away from him and dragged Cameron along with her.

"Target acquired." Steele shoved himself into battle mode when Shadow finally spoke.

"Hold up," Sterling cautioned. "We don't want collateral damage."

"Affirmative."

Sterling stood bone still in the doorway, watching and waiting for the opportune moment. Brett's nerves tingled as he awaited direction. Then he heard Sterling's muffled curse. Brett glanced into the living room as all hell broke loose.

Diego's gun discharged. The sound of breaking glass brought Hawke through the front window and racing toward Rachel. Sterling's gun fired and then Diego fell to the floor, blood seeping from a hole in the center of his forehead. Cameron stood in the middle of the chaos, shell-shocked and oblivious to the danger. With only one option remaining, Brett went airborne, knocked Cameron off her feet, and glued her to the floor.

"Max," she whispered just before her eyes fluttered closed.

Brett lifted his head in shock. *Max?* A mischievous grin creased his lips. *Sweet.*

He looked over his shoulder to see Shadow step through the broken window and nudge Diego with his boot. "One less arms dealer to worry about."

"Hawke!" Max bellowed as he dialed his cell phone.

Shadow pried Hawke's arms from around Rachel and rolled him to his back. "He's down, Captain."

"I'm fine," Hawke mumbled from the floor, "it's just a scratch."

Max glanced around the room and strained to hear something from the peanut gallery. Finally, his gaze rested on two snakeskin pumps pinned beneath Steele's iron body. Hell, maybe they really were in Oz.

"Steele, what's your status?"

Steele rolled to one side. "We're good. I think she's got the wind knocked out of her."

"Either that or she's hurt," Max said, amazed something had actually shut her up.

Max squatted next to Hawke and rubbed away the blood from Hawke's biceps. He squeezed the edges of skin together to stop the bleeding.

"Gee-zus, Max," Hawke hissed.

"Don't be such a baby, Hawke," he drawled. "Your woman is here."

Hawke responded with a menacing stare.

“Just a flesh wound. Barely grazed him.”

“You’ll have a helluva scar though,” Steele said.

Rachel gave Steele a heated glare, obviously unimpressed by his enthusiasm.

Max squatted next to Steele and placed two fingers against Sleeping Beauty’s wrist.

Steele raised an eyebrow. “Smelling salts?”

Max smirked. “Ice water.”

Her eyes suddenly flew open and shot a bolt of pale blue lightning at Max. “I’m right here, Neanderthal.” She shook his fingers from her arm as she stood. “What took you so long? That crazy terrorist was about to kill us!”

Max’s lip twitched as he glanced at Steele. “She’s fine.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Which one of you accosted me?”

Max gestured with his head at Steele.

“You were standing in the path of a flying bullet.” Steele shrugged. “I had to take you down.”

She turned to look at Diego’s body then back at Steele. “Well then, thank you, Brett.”

Max felt a pinch of annoyance. Since when did she decide to be so damn appreciative?

Steele flashed her another wasted lady killer smile. “You’re welcome.”

Max waited half a second for some sort of reprimand. Except, it didn’t come. In fact, she just stood beside them, silent and docile. So, he took advantage.

“What about my thank you? I took out the crazy terrorist.”

He knew damn well he shouldn’t have baited her. He really shouldn’t have.

She simply batted those long eyelashes and flipped her curls over her shoulder. “It’s your job, remember?”

Staring deeply into Rachel’s eyes, Hawke cupped her chin in his hand, imploring her to understand the depth of his feelings for her.

“I love you.”

She placed her hand over his, then turned her face to kiss the center of his palm. “I love you too. Thank you.”

Parting her lips, she leaned down to meet his kiss. Hawke moved his mouth over hers, devouring its softness, silently reassuring himself she was safe. Yet, as his lips caressed hers, he didn’t miss her slight hesitance.

Sirens echoed in the still of the afternoon.

“About time,” Max muttered. “Come on, Hawke. They’ll want to hear your story.”

Hawke lifted his lips. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Rachel nodded and gave a weak smile.

Once outside, Shadow handed Sterling a silver tube. “Found some evidence, Captain.”

Sterling paused halfway down the driveway next to Rachel’s Mercedes, twisted the tube open and then grinned. “Taste the lipstick on the windshield, Steele.”

“Say what?”

Sterling motioned to the car. “The lipstick. Taste it.”

Steele smeared the lipstick with his index finger and placed it to his mouth. “Cherry.”

“What kind of cherry?”



Steele frowned. "I don't know. Just cherry."

"Hell." Sterling wiped lipstick on his finger and tasted it. "Wild Cherry. That's what I thought."

Steele stared open-mouthed. "How do you –?"

Sterling shoved him further across the lawn. "Drop it."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Greg watched Hawke walk the length of the hotel suite and back again for the thousandth time.

“Hawke, you’re making me dizzy.”

“I’ve walked this room all morning, racking my brain for a way to help her forget this mess, and still nothing,” Hawke said as he stopped to grab the back of the sofa.

Greg’s brow creased as he noticed Hawke’s white knuckles. He shook his head in disbelief.

“I’ve never seen you like this. Are you going to make it?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Hawke said hoarsely as he moved to the window to look at the traffic below. “I’ve never been in love before.”

Greg didn’t know how to help him, having never been in love either. The best he could do was hang around for moral support. The situation was difficult for all of them. Rachel wasn’t an average groupie, and he and Max were both stumped. He picked up the newspaper and thumbed through the pages for distraction.

“Flowers? Chocolates? Jewelry? How about a private vacation?” He rattled off the usual forms of persuasion.

“No. None of those mean anything to her.”

Hawke turned around, his face blood red. “Why can’t I think of something?”

Greg glanced back down at the newspaper and felt his eyes widen as one of the headlines jumped out at him. Local Charity Works to Re-build Block.

“Look at this, Hawke.”

Hawke took the paper from him and browsed the article. “This is it!”

Greg stood and read the article over his shoulder. “How much should we pledge?”

“Nothing.” Hawke yanked open drawers until he found a notepad and pen. “I want you to start making phone calls. Call everyone you know. Anybody. We’re going to have a benefit concert and get the stars to build the houses.” Hawke scribbled furiously then handed a piece of paper to him.

“Here’s your list. I’ll make some calls, too. When we have commitments for the 15th and 16th of next month, get our PR people on advertising. I want this to be huge.”

Greg’s eyes rounded in amazement. “If we can get even half of these people it’s going to be huge.”

“Call in all my favors, Greg, I’m ready to collect.”

Greg swallowed, his lips almost numb in disbelief. Hawke had never asked for a return on a favor.

“We don’t have much time to pull something like this together,” he said hesitantly.

Hawke slapped him on the back and pushed him toward the desk. “Make it happen, Greg.” He grabbed his own cell phone.

Greg smirked when he read the list Hawke had given him. All male. Hawke had definitely decided to give the ladies a show. There wouldn’t be a problem raising the money needed to complete the project.

A sense of warmth enveloped him as he started dialing, impressed by Hawke's determination. Rachel had captured Hawke's heart, re-shaping it into the new, selfless individual he'd become. He grinned smugly. Wonders never cease.

Hawke rushed through the suite, plowing into Max as he came from the kitchen.

"C'mon, Max, we have to find Cameron."

"Come again?"

"Cameron."

Max studied Hawke's reaction, skeptical of his decision. Had he gone completely insane? Usual protocol dictated he proceed, no questions asked, but Hawke's current state of mind raised a red flag.

"You're sure?" He needed clarification. Just in case he'd heard wrong.

"Absolutely. Let's go."

Unsure of Hawke's motive, Max followed him back through the living area to the front door. Huntington waved while talking into the phone, his eyes flashing Max a caution signal. Max shook his head. He had a feeling Hawke was leading him right into the middle of a hungry lioness' den.

They rode in silence on the way to Newberry & Tremaine. He willed himself to remain calm but with Hawke leading him into battle blindfolded, his nerves were on edge. And Hawke's bouncing leg added even more tension. He exhaled a long, steady breath to regulate his heartbeat. All this drama for a damn female.

Max kept pace beside Hawke as he strode across the parking lot and into the building with sheer determination. Cursing the elevator for moving too slowly, Hawke finally took a breath to compose himself and they marched through the office door. Right into the serpent's den.

Medusa herself sat on the sofa with her legs crossed, poised and ready to strike.

"Well, if it isn't Rocky and Bullwinkle. I've been expecting you."

Max's head pounded. "How the hell - ?"

"It doesn't matter." Hawke planted himself next to her. "I've come to help."

"I think you've helped enough." She swung one bare leg.

"Cut it out, Cameron," Hawke hissed.

Max folded his arms and snickered. Hawke had taken on the incredible task of taming the shrew.

Obviously unimpressed by Hawke's attempt at aggressiveness, she pressed him further. "Help how?"

"I've arranged a benefit concert for the Build A Block project. So far there are ten bands committed to perform and help on the building site."

She nodded. "Impressive. But I don't think you can win Rachel over that easily."

"I realize that. I just want to show her I understand how much this means to her."

She swung her eyes to Max. "And what about you, Paul Bunyon? Are you going to swing your ax?"

His thoughts flashed back to the fireman fiasco. "With my shirt on."

She licked her lips. "It's scorching hot out there," she taunted.

"I can take it."

"Okay," she relented, "I'll expect you both. Do you want me to tell Rachel?"

Max smirked. "You will anyway, Short Stuff."

Hawke stood and walked to the door. “Greg’s working on PR. We’ll make sure she knows.”

“You might meet her in the hallway. She’s due here any minute.”

“Don’t tell her I was here, Cameron.”

“I won’t,” she assured him. “I wouldn’t want Mr. Big here to take me down.”

Max clenched his jaw tighter, both excited and aggravated. If he did take her down, she wouldn’t get up until they were both satisfied.

Rachel limped out of the freight elevator, carrying one piece of her broken shoe. The morning had not gone well. After stuffing herself with ice cream and oversleeping, she just didn’t have the time to put too much effort into her appearance. She’d just work barefoot today.

“Were you mugged?” Cameron squealed as she walked through the door.

Rachel frowned. “No, why?”

“You look like roadkill.”

Rachel rubbed a finger under her eye. “Thanks, Cameron.”

“What in the hell happened?” Cameron persisted, not bothering to apologize.

She sighed. “Nothing. I just overslept.”

Cameron snatched her shoe. “Your shoe is broken.”

Rachel shrugged. “No big deal. Nothing a little super glue won’t fix.”

“Nuh-huh,” Cameron babbled. “We’re going shoe shopping.”

“I really don’t have time for shopping today.”

“Yes, you do,” Cameron insisted. “Nothing is more soothing than shoe shopping and there’s a sale at the mall.”

Rachel knew Cameron wouldn’t give up until she agreed. “Okay,” she said quietly, “I’ll go. But we’ll have to run back by my house. I can’t go barefoot.”

Cameron grabbed her purse. “I have an extra pair of sandals in the car.”

“Cameron, I don’t know if I can walk in those stilts you call heels.”

“Relax, you’ll be fine. We’ll go slow.”

The blinding morning sunlight made her eyes water as Rachel stepped out of the office building and crossed the parking lot where Cameron was parked.

Once seated in the car, Cameron handed her a pair of sunglasses and a tissue. “I found some more volunteers for the project today.”

“Great,” she said half-heartedly, dabbing her eyes.

“Top up or down?” Cameron asked.

“Oh what the hell,” Rachel mumbled, running her hand through the rat’s nest she called hair, “down.”

“Relax, Rachel, shopping will make you feel so much better.”

Rachel managed to giggle at Cameron’s excitement. No sense in letting her bad morning ruin the day.

“Who volunteered?” she asked as Cameron drove to the mall.

“You know I can’t remember names.”

“Any help is good help.” Rachel strapped on the first borrowed sandal. “What about Max?”

Cameron bit her lip as she pulled into a parking place. “I haven’t asked him yet.”

“Why not?” Rachel fastened the second sandal to her foot and stepped out of the car.

“I thought I’d exhaust all my other efforts first.”

“I’m sure he’d help, Cameron.” Rachel paused a few seconds to get her balance then walked beside Cameron to the entrance.

“Rachel.” Cameron peered over the top of her sunglasses as they entered the store. “Do not tease me about Mr. Clean. Dealing with him is no teasing matter. Look! Dior is on sale!”

Cameron pulled a pale pink stiletto off the rack and handed it to Rachel. “Hawke didn’t keep you up all night, did he?”

Rachel wrinkled her nose and handed it back to Cameron. “He didn’t come back. By the time he gave his statement at the police department and had his arm examined, it was late. I told him to go back to his suite and rest.”

“Why?”

Rachel slipped her foot into a gold pump. “I needed time to think.”

“You ate all the ice cream, didn’t you?”

“Not all of it.” Just most.

“So, did you come to any conclusions in the depths of all that chocolate?”

Rachel sighed. “I feel terrible.”

Cameron’s eyes widened. “Those were gallon tubs, Rachel! How many did you eat?”

Rachel shoved the shoe back on the rack. “Not that many. Besides, that’s not what I meant.”

“What else could you possibly have to feel bad about?”

Rachel took Cameron by the elbow and forced her into a chair next to the rack of shoes. “I’ve held him at arm’s length all this time, using the excuse that there wasn’t room in his spotlight for me.” Rachel blew her bangs off her forehead. “I more or less accused him of playing at romance and tried to prove it several times.”

Cameron’s brow wrinkled. “And?”

Rachel plopped down in the chair next to Cameron. “And then he took a bullet for me.” She gave a half laugh. “The real kicker in this whole fiasco is that the lunatic was after me. I brought trouble to Hawke.”

“Actually, she was after both of you.”

“Really. If I hadn’t gone to that concert, flashed my bare chest, and unstuck his zipper, I would have never even met Hawke.”

Cameron folded her arms across her chest. “What makes you think Hawke knew who you were before he hired you?”

Rachel looked Cameron square in the eye. “He knew.”

“Okay, so you just happened to bring an insane maniac into the relationship. Now what?”

“I have no idea.”

“You’re seriously considering calling it quits?”

“That’s just it, Cameron, my life used to be routine and safe.”

“Boring.”

Rachel glared.

Cameron wasn’t intimidated. “Don’t shoot those daggers at me, you said it yourself.”

“It’s been anything but boring lately.”

“My life sure has been a whole lot more interesting,” Cameron mumbled.

“See? I’ve even managed to drag you along for the ride.”

“You know how much I love to admit I’m wrong.” Cameron paused to clear her throat. “I was wrong. He’s not playing at anything, Rachel, he’s crazy in love with you.” Rachel grinned. “I don’t think I like boring anymore.”

“Maybe you should take one more trip through the house. You might find your answer.”

“You really think so?”

“You’ll never know until you give yourself the opportunity.”

“Possibly.” Rachel glanced back over at the shoe rack. “I like those midnight blue ones.”

Cameron leaned forward. “Those aren’t your usual style.” She stood, plucked the shoe from its place, and then grinned. “These are really hot. You should try them out in the bedroom.”

Rachel felt the question marks leave her brain. Suddenly she knew exactly what she had to do. She returned Cameron’s grin. “I just might.”

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An hour later, Rachel stood in front of Hawke’s house, at the bottom of the steps, convincing herself she was doing the right thing. Counting each step, she finally climbed to the top and glided across the porch to the front door. She took a deep breath, eased the elegant oak door open, and stepped through with her heart pounding erratically.

The house was almost complete; only a few minor details were left to be done before Cameron waved her magic wand. How could she abandon all this now? She squeezed her eyes closed and savored the sense of fulfillment she felt. It wouldn’t take much more than a couple of weeks to finish. Surely her heart could hold on that long.

An easy smile broke through her mask of uncertainty when Rachel ran her fingers over the carved oak banister of the staircase. Hawke was such a sucker for detail. Together, the two of them spent hours searching for just the right design. She paused and connected the pieces of her scattered thoughts. Actually, she and Hawke made most of the decisions for the house together. She felt a warm glow flow through her as she remembered his excitement over planning this house. With dazzling determination, he made sure each decision included her opinion. Gazing around at the intricacy of the work, she realized pieces of her heart were embedded here. She would never be able to associate this house with anyone but him. She didn’t want to.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

She turned to see Hawke braced in the doorway, his muscles rippling under his white shirt. Her pulse quickened as her eyes traveled his long, lean frame and stroked him intimately before settling on his compelling, dark eyes.

“I just wanted to make sure the banister arrived,” she said, clasping her hands to keep from reaching for him.

His eyes sparkled. “So, what do you think?”

She stood silently, summoning courage to continue.

“I love this house,” she admitted faintly, drawing a step nearer to him.

He nodded.

“Everything about this house screams Jaydon Hawke,” she continued, “but I can’t help but feel a little attached.”

“I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“There are other architects in Diablo, Hawke.”

“True,” he agreed, “but they don’t know me like you.”

“They could.”

“I don’t sleep with anonymous architects, Rachel,” he teased, inching toward her.

She smiled warmly, closed the space between them, and draped her arms around his neck.

“Good thing,” she said, “because you’re sleeping with this architect.”

His lips touched hers like a whisper, sending currents of desire racing through her. She returned his kiss hungrily, desperate to imprint the feel of his love on her soul. Smothering a groan, she ended the gentle caress and rested her head on his chest.

“I love you, Hawke. I should have never doubted you,” she whispered breathlessly.

“Doesn’t matter, Baby.” His lips tickled the top of her head. “You’re totally worth convincing.”

“Your life might get quite a bit more exciting with me in it.”

“Think so? I’ll have to admit, this is the first time I’ve been shot.”

She lifted her head. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. I’m willing to take the chance.”

“Do you know anything about this?” She stepped out of his embrace, reached into her pocket, and handed him a bright blue piece of paper. “Apparently, someone organized an all-star concert to benefit the Build a Block project.”

“Really?”

“Really. But that’s not all.” She ran her finger down the length of the buttons on his shirt. “I’ve been told,” she continued, “that the male participants have also agreed to help on the construction site. All those hard, glistening bodies in should raise a hefty amount of money.”

Hawke chuckled under his breath and pulled her back against him.

“Why?” she whispered against his neck.

“The same reason you designed this house,” he responded softly. “I knew it was important to you.”

She tilted her head and gazed deeply into the depths of his eyes. “You always get what you want, don’t you?” she teased.

“There’s nothing else I want.”

Hawke placed his lips to hers and squeezed her, relishing the sense of happiness he felt. He’d finally come full circle in the journey of life with love and security embracing him and making him whole. After twenty years of fame and fortune, he’d learned he hadn’t really achieved true success. Rachel was responsible for his reincarnation, leading him down another path, making his life complete.

Leather, lace and rock-n-roll. What a combination.

## EPILOGUE

Rachel suppressed a giggle as she stuck her head out from behind the heavy stage curtain and heard the familiar chaos of screaming women echo off the auditorium walls. A sense of bottomless peace and satisfaction embraced her as she tucked the curtain back into place and headed for Hawke's dressing room.

"The natives are restless," she said as she squeezed past Max into the small room.

"They can wait a few more minutes." Hawke swung her into the circle of his arms.

Her body burned as he crushed her to him and covered her mouth with his. She moaned when his tongue traced a path around her lips and back again before he leaned back to look at her.

"Hawke," she whispered, "the girls are waiting."

"And I shouldn't keep the ladies in suspense," he agreed, amusement in his voice.

"Go," she persisted. "I'll be in my usual spot."

"I have a feeling I may not be so popular after tonight," he mumbled under his breath as he unwrapped himself from her embrace and shuffled her to the door.

Rachel turned to look at him over her shoulder. "What?"

"Nothing." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "See you from the catwalk."

She giggled as he opened the door and delivered her to Max.

"Where's Cameron, Max?" she asked as Max escorted her down the hall and out into the auditorium.

Max grimaced and parked her at the end of the middle runway attached to the stage. "I didn't draw the short straw tonight."

She squinted. "This isn't my normal hangout."

"Change of plans."

She shrugged. She'd learned things were so fast-paced in Hawke's business that sometimes last-minute changes were inevitable.

As the lights dimmed, three massive video screens lowered to the stage and the volume of the crowd escalated. When the room was enveloped in darkness, the music began to play and Hawke appeared on the stage. Her body tingled as she took in his appearance, the sexual magnetism that made him so self-confident taunting her. She stared with longing at him, secretly willing him to hurry through his performance.

Rachel watched Hawke mesmerize the crowd with his presence. The video screens flashed in time to the music as slinky pieces of multi-colored lingerie graced the stage. He stepped over each piece and never missed a beat. Hypnotized by the sway of his body, Rachel managed to catch a flash of something new on the screen as he moved across the stage. Not sure she had seen it correctly, she blinked twice and focused on the screen.

Marry Me Rachel.

She turned to look at Max, her eyes wide, demanding clarification. Max nodded in silent agreement.

She looked around the auditorium, wondering if anyone else had become curious. She noticed that several women standing next to her pointed at the screen and shrugged, but



became easily distracted by Hawke's continued enchantment.

Convinced the message hadn't caused an uproar, she began to relax and enjoy the show. When Hawke met her at the end of the runway, her calm was shattered by the hunger of his kiss. Fed by his fire, she returned his kiss recklessly, exposing her overwhelming need to be close to him. She gave him a sexy wink before Max led her backstage to tuck her safely into the dressing room.

Assigning a guard to the door, Max disappeared back down the hallway to prevent wayward women from slipping backstage. Rachel arranged herself in a chair, barely able to contain her excitement as she waited for Hawke.

He entered the dressing room not long after, grinning smugly.

"Did you learn anything tonight?" He leaned casually against the locked door.

She crossed her legs and swung one foot. "I sure did."

"What's that?"

"I learned it's breezy when I go to a concert bare-bottomed with my panties in my pocket."

His jaw fell open.

"And," she continued, standing and approaching him, her trembling hands smoothing the open flaps of his shirt away from his chest, "someone asked me a very important question."

"How did you respond?" His voice was hoarse as her fingers worked each remaining button of his shirt loose, one by one.

"I didn't. Yet."

"Why?"

She rolled her eyes. "There's more to a proposal than the question, Hawke."

He chuckled. "I know."

She bit the side of her cheek as he struggled to bend on one knee in front of her wearing the infamous red, leather pants.

"Rachel, I love you. Will you marry me?"

Tears spilled from her eyes. "Yes, Hawke, I'll marry you."

He stood and wiped her tears with his thumbs. "I have a ring, but you'll have to help me get it."

Her brow furrowed in confusion. Capturing her eyes with his own, he forced her to look down his sculpted chest, past his chiseled abs, finally resting on the zipper between his legs. Hanging from the zipper by a tiny string, a diamond solitaire radiated brightly in the fluorescent light.

He smirked. "I figured this is how it all began."

Her hands shook as she knelt between his legs and carefully untied the ring. "Do you want to put this on me now," she asked, licking her lips as he hardened, "or later?"

"Now," he answered quickly. "We're going to be busy later."

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Fabulous! Cameron smacked her palm against her forehead when she approached the backstage entrance and saw Max standing guard.

She smiled a sexy smile. "Hey, Maxie! I forgot my thingie."

"Your thingie?"

She illustrated with her hands. “You know, that contraption that hangs around my neck.”

“Your pass.”

“My pass hangs on it, yes, but you know me.”

“I can’t let you back without a pass,” he insisted.

“Stop playing! You know who I am.”

“Do I?”

“Then go get Sean. Or Hawke.”

“And let you sneak back while I’m gone? No can do, Sunshine.”

“I don’t have to sneak back, they’re expecting me.”

He pushed himself off the railing. “I’ll let you back, Wildcat, but you know what you have to do.”

She bobbed her head and her curls slapped her heated cheeks. “Absolutely not.”

“Then you’re not getting past me.”

“You really expect me to flash you?”

He grinned. “No, just rub my head.”

\* \* \*

*Coming soon: Outspoken Angel (Cameron's story)*

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