

ROCK

A film strip graphic is positioned horizontally across the middle of the cover. It contains several frames: a close-up of a microphone, a white coffee cup on a saucer, a guitar, and a bell. The film strip is set against a red background with white speckles.

CHICK

RECKONING

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK SIX

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTEN ASHLEY

ROCK CHICK RECKONING

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ROCK CHICK
P R E S S

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Rock Chick Reckoning

By Kristen Ashley

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to Rick Chew and Jim Gonzalez

I love you. I miss you.

I wish you were still right next door.

Yahtzee!

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A shout out to my Sir Will, William Womack, my uncle, my friend premier Rock Guru. Stella's set lists would be nowhere near as cool didn't feed the burn in my soul for kickass music. Love you, Will.

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A shout out to my Sir Will, William Womack, my uncle, my friend and the premier Rock Guru. Stella's set lists would be nowhere near as cool if Will didn't feed the burn in my soul for kickass music. Love you, Will.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would guess my readers understand, considering you're reading a book entitled *Rock Chick*, that music means a great deal to me. Frequently while writing I will use music to explain feelings, define characters or add color to the narrative. And if I had a wish, I would wish to be able to make music one way or another, but alas, I do not play an instrument (though have tried to learn) and my singing leaves something to be desired.

So it was a thrill for Stella Gunn to inhabit my headspace and, through Stella, to be able to play a guitar, sing super sexy, entrance a crowd, perform a one-woman private concert to a hot guy and write set lists.

Stella chose her music with great care. Therefore, if you haven't been to a concert or have only done it in passing, I encourage you to experience fully the music Stella chose to explain her emotions by looking up the lyrics and listening to the songs mentioned in this book. Indeed, if you can, listening to the music while reading the scenes may enhance the experience (it does for me). Specifically Pearl Jam's "Black," Billy Joel's "And So It Goes," Jonny D's "Open Arms" and Blink-182's "All the Small Things." They're all fantastic songs but the lyrics expose Stella's soul. Unfortunately, without permission from the artists, I cannot include the lyrics in the narrative and being a self-published author without a great deal of resources, I'm not in a place to

could request that permission (alas).

Further, if you wish to know how Stella sounded singing in my head, the Cowboy Junkies' version of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" and McLachlan's version of "Blackbird" from the *I Am Sam* soundtrack.

Or don't and experience her just how she is in your head.

Enjoy listening *and* reading.

And always remember to *rock on!*

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And always remember to *rock on!*

ONE



NO ONE GOT IN THE WAY OF ME AND MY BAND

STELLA

The phone rang.

My eyes opened and I looked at the clock.

Three thirty-seven.

In the morning.

I reached for the phone. “Hello?”

I sounded awake and alert. This was because it wasn’t unusual for me to be up at an ungodly hour in the morning. Not only did I have to practice taking frantic phone calls in the hours before dawn, but I was also the lead singer and guitarist of a rock band. Most of the time I was just stumbling through the door after a gig at an ungodly hour in the morning.

“Stella?” It was Buzz, my bass player. He sounded messed up. When I answered the phone at an ungodly hour in the morning he always sounded messed up.

“Hey, Buzz, what’s up?” I asked.

His answer could be anything. He needed me to bail him out of jail, he needed me to give him a ride home because he was somewhere drunk with his skull and thankfully responsible enough to call someone. Unlike that someone was always me. He was stuck on a billboard on 8th pro

Earth, Wind & Fire's upcoming concert with no way to get down (don't

But I was guessing it had to do with Lindsey.

"It's Linnie," Buzz said.

I was right.

"Buzz, I don't—"

"She's in bed, she ain't movin'. Something's weird. It just ain't right. I'm
scared to even touch her. Stella Bella, fuck..." he whispered. "I think she
overdosed."

I shot upright in my huge, super king-sized bed and my Saint Bernard, Juno, who was lying full out (thus explaining my need for a huge, super king-sized bed), sat up too and gave a woof.

"Have you called nine one one?" I asked Buzz.

"No, I called you."

Bring me to Yep, that's about right.

roads of Of course he'd call me. I was Stella Michelle Gunn, lead singer and
I was guitarist of the Blue Moon Gypsies. I posted bond (mostly for Pong and
drumming, but for all of them on occasion). I soothed drunken anger and

(again predominately Pong, but they all were good at getting drunk and
On the angry). I counseled relationships on the brink of collapse (this was
a strong suit—for your information, the parties concerned always broke up.

listened when the world just *did not* understand (and the world didn't
understand much according to Leo, who played rhythm guitar and reharmonized
jail. He got stoned and reflective). I extricated not-so-horny-anymore saxophonist
& out of named Hugo from mini-orgies with gonzo groupies gone bad.

awkwardly,

promoting And apparently I was an emergency paramedic.

't ask). "Call nine one one," I ordered.

"But—"

"*Now!*" I snapped.

I hung up and swung out of bed. Juno woofed again and lumbered
bed behind me.

ght. I'm My first thought was Mace.

ink she In these situations (and there were a lot of them, although not
involving overdosed junkies who used to be sweet girls that we
bernard, addicted to smack) my first thought was always Kai "Mace" Mas
er king-tallest, hottest, coolest, most amazing guy I'd ever met. Mace with th
green eyes. Mace with the thick, dark hair. Mace with the fantastic boc
with the strong, masculine, long-fingered hands that could run so light
your skin you could almost hear them whisper.

Mace would know what to do. Mace would take care of Bu
Lindsey, at the same time shielding me and Juno.

nd lead "Sleep," Mace's ultra-deep voice would say in my ear after hang
ng, my the phone, which he *always* answered, and kissing my shoulder or my
ry men the spot behind my ear, his lips making me tremble. "I'll take care of it
nk *and*

not my Then he'd go and take care of it and I would sleep.

e up). I But Mace was gone. He'd broken up with me a year before.

didn't Now it was just me.

regularly As always.

honists My second thought was to shove thoughts of Mace aside.

My third thought was to find my jeans.

I yanked off my nightgown and tugged on a pair of old Levi's :

bra. I grabbed a capped-sleeved white blouse with red stitching at the
dangling tassels that you would expect a girl named Heidi to wear
yodeling in the mountains of Germany.

Just for your information, I loved that effing top.

Also, for your information, I had no idea how to yodel and didn't
know how.

I sat on the bed and pulled on my brown cowboy boots, dusty from
riding the range but from standing on dirty stages in dark bars.

Then I grabbed my keys, shoved my cell phone in my back pocket
snatched Juno's leash off a hook by the door.

"Let's go, Juno," I called, slapping my hand against my thigh.

Juno thumped over to me, not with great excitement, wagging her
lolling tongue, ready for adventure. Instead Juno was resigned to
buzz and which consisted of yet another interruption to her beauty sleep, of which
she needed a lot.

"Buzz thinks Linnie's overdosed. Probably just passed out," I told
her. "We headed out of my room and into the hall. "We'll be back home soon."
t."



I DROVE MY OLD, beat-up, dirty, fading red Ford van by Buzz's place
one was home. That meant they were at Lindsey's.

By the time I got there so had the ambulance and the police.
flashing, the front yard of Lindsey's broken-down house held
straggling tufts of grass, weeds and patches of dirt, but also uniformed
officers and pajamaed neighbors.

Worse, parked on the street was a shiny black Ford Explorer.
and my

top and I knew what that meant.

r while One of the Nightingale Boys was there.

“What the eff?” I whispered, a chill sliding over my skin for reasons.

want to I parked in front of the squad car that was parked in front of the Ex

ot from The Nightingale Boys were famous in certain circles of Denver circles occupied by cops, felons and others in need of their unique s

ket and They were on the Nightingale Private Investigations Team, all of them qualified, intensely skilled, morally dubious, but totally super cool.

Mace was one of them.

I clipped the leash on Juno and swung out my door, Juno following a huge, big dog sigh.

er fate, *Please don't let Mace be here, please don't let Mace be here,* m
ich she chanted.

Then I switched topics.

Juno as *Please let Linnie be okay, please let Linnie be okay.*
n.”

I rounded the back of my van. The door to Lindsey's house opened but no Luke Stark, Hot Guy and Nightingale Man, walked out. Black, super hair, killer, trimmed mustache that ran down the sides of his mouth, watering handsome and body designed by the gods.

Lights I knew Luke. I'd met him when I dated Mace. I knew him now l
ot just he was living with my friend, Ava Barlow.
l police

His eyes scanned the yard and stalled on me.

Okay, cool. No worries. All was well. I could deal with Luke. Lu
good. Luke was great.

I smiled at Luke.

The door opened again and Mace walked out.

several *Fuck!* my brain shouted and my smile vanished.

My eyes did a sweep of all that was Mace.

plorer. I wanted to find fault in him, I really did. I wanted him to be greener—the paunch. I wanted him to be developing a bald spot. I wanted him to lose services. He was wasting away, pining for me. Something, anything but what I highly Tall at six foot four, flat, tight abs, square jaw and, last but not least, a green eyes and great skin that showed the Hawaiian ancestry that he got from his mom's side.

g me on He didn't scan the yard. His eyes came direct to me like he sensed me there.

y brain When his eyes caught my eyes I worked hard to keep my face blank. Mace didn't appear to have to work hard at all. His expression didn't change. Not in the slightest.

ied and I felt it like I always felt it when I remembered him, when I remembered us or when, on the odd occasion, I'd see him. That sharp kick in the gut and the sharper desire to flee.

mouth- I held my ground. I was ashamed to admit holding my ground to Mace even after a year.

because Luke hesitated.

Mace approached.

Bad luck. I would have preferred Luke to approach.

like was Effing hell, but my luck sucked.

Juno went wild. Finally happy with our ungodly hour adventure.

was straining at the leash, wanting more than anything, even hair covered in melted bacon grease, to get at Mace. Juno loved Mace. She missed Mace's defection almost harder than me. She'd pouted and waited at the door for him for months after he broke it off. She hadn't seen him in ages.

I held on tight to the lead, but struggled to keep my big dog still.

owing a
ook like
he was.

"Juno, sit," Mace commanded, five feet away.

rresting
ot from

Juno sat, as always, obeying Mace without hesitation, but she was happy about it. Her tail swept the dirt, her tongue lolled, her life bright and stretched to the max, but keeping her doggie-heiny to the ground.

sed me

I watched as Mace's long fingers slid through the fur on top of her head and the gut-kick feeling came back.

k.

Jealous of my own damn dog.

i didn't

How far had I sunk?

I straightened my spine and tipped my head back to look at him.

mbered

"Go home, Stella," Mace said when my eyes caught his.

gut and

ok a lot,

Not "hey," not "how are you," not "you look good," not "I made the worst mistake in my life breaking up with you. Please forgive me and let me and live with me until we both die at the same exact time, holding hands when we're one hundred and seven."

To hide my disappointment at his non-greeting, my eyes went to the door of the house then they scanned the area. Luke had moved to talk to Moses, another friend of mine and a police sergeant for the Denver Police Department. The ambulance was still there, but I saw no paramedics.

e, Juno

Something was not right.

rd food I looked back at Mace.

he took “Is Linnie okay?” I asked.

he door “Go home.”

Yep, something was not right.

“Is Linnie okay?” I repeated.

wasn’t “Stella, nothin’ you can do here. Go home.”

ened. Oh hell.

g, neck Something was *definitely* not right.

“Buzz called me. Said Linnie overdosed. Did she overdose? Is I
Juno’s there?” I asked.

“I’ll talk to Buzz. He’ll call you in the morning,” Mace res
unhelpfully.

I felt fear begin to tear at my insides and I started to move aroun
pulling Juno with me.

“I need to see Buzz,” I declared.

ade the His fingers wrapped around my upper arm in a way that coul
l marry ignored. I stopped on a lurch. Juno stopped with me and I stared at h
g hands for two beats, then up at him.

“Take your hand off me, Mace,” I demanded, my voice soft and l
meaning clear.

he door He gave up the right to touch me a year ago. He gave up the righ
Willie me to go home. He even gave up the right to pet my damn dog. May
Police last was pushing it, but I felt like pushing it at that moment.

He didn’t move his hand. In fact his fingers tightened. It didn’t hu

certainly made his meaning clear too.

“Either you go to the van or I carry you there. Your choice, Stella.”

He meant it.

This pissed me off.

I didn't get pissed off very often. I didn't have the time. My life was music and my life was the band. When we weren't playing, we were loading or unloading our gear. When we weren't loading or unloading, we were rehearsing. When we weren't rehearsing, I was finding us gigs. When I wasn't finding us gigs, I was practicing guitar. When I wasn't practicing guitar, I was getting my bandmates out of trouble. When I wasn't getting my bandmates out of trouble, I was hanging out with Juno and cooking for her. Juno was a gourmet meals-for-one, because Juno was a big dog with not a lot of time to cook, thus she didn't do much so I had to find some way to amuse myself, and I liked the scraps. When I wasn't hanging out with Juno and cooking for her, I was shooting the shit with my girlfriends on the phone or meeting them somewhere.

The rest of the time, of which there wasn't much, I was sleeping.

As you could see, I didn't have time to be pissed off.

But really, who the hell did he think he was? He couldn't break in one day and then get in the way of me and a member of my band the next day.

Nunh-unh.

No way.

No one got in the way of me and my band.

I leaned into him.

“Tell me what's going on,” I demanded on a quiet hiss.

“Buzz’ll call in the morning.” He kept attempting to blow me off.

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded on a not-at-all quiet shout. I felt, rather than saw, the eyes that turned to us.

“Stella, lower your voice,” Mace ordered.

That pissed me off more.

“I’m goin’ in there,” I told him.

“You aren’t goin’ in there,” he told me, and his hand stayed where it was. Effing hell.

I changed tactics. “Why are you doing this?”

This caught him off guard, I saw it. His usually blank-but-brooding energy disappeared, and I saw his eyes flash in the dim illumination of Linda Junoporch light.

“I’m protecting you,” he answered, his voice low. The words seemed to come from him as if he didn’t want to say them.

There was the gut-kick feeling again and more fear started through my insides.

“It isn’t your job to protect me anymore, Mace,” I reminded him. My heart watched the flash in his eyes again.

Erm, excuse me? What in the heck was that all about?

“You’re right. It’s not,” he replied and dropped my arm.

Big time gut kick.

Sheesh. He gave up easily.

Oh well, so be it.

I started to move away.

“Lindsey’s dead. Executed,” Mace said to my back.

it. I stopped moving and turned to stare, unable to process what he just

“What?” I whispered.

Mace got close again. “She was executed. Somewhere else, brought here,” Mace answered.

“But...” I started then stopped then started again, “But, Buzz thought she overdosed. How could—?”
it was.

“Bullet to the forehead. No blood because she was moved from where they whacked her. She was put in bed, covers pulled up, fuck know Her face, except for the bullet hole in her forehead, looks normal, ly look back of her head is gone.”

ndsey’s I turned my eyes away from Mace, bile sliding up the back of my at the vision he created. I swallowed it down.

ied torn I saw Luke standing across the yard still talking to Willie, but Mace was elsewhere.

tearing It was on Lindsey, the sweet girl who came to one of our gigs two ago and fell in love with Buzz on sight. She was plump and pretty and im and loved rock ‘n’ roll. And because she was plump and pretty and sweet—we all loved her.

How she got caught up with heroin and that life no one knew, not Buzz. Everyone tried to pull her out of it—the entire band, mostly Buzz, me and, for a short time, Mace. But she slid down into that world no how hard we tried to stop her. Buzz didn’t give up, nor did I, but I was patience. She was hanging with bad dudes, doing stuff that was not good to get her fix. She’d started to bring these bad dudes to gigs. That was I drew the line.

Now she was dead.

st said. “Linnie,” I whispered.

Juno felt my mood and pushed my hand with her nose. I absentm
ht backstroked her head as I heard Luke’s phone ring and watched, unfocus
not knowing what to feel (sad, definitely; angry, heck yeah), as Luke
said he his phone out of his black cargo pants.

“Kitten.” I heard as if from far away, so far away it was like a drea
herever It was Mace’s voice calling me “Kitten,” his nickname for
/S why, nickname I earned because he said I “purred” when I was content. No
but thethis purring happened post-orgasm, but there were other times too
content a lot when I’d been with Mace.

y throat It was something I hadn’t heard in a year. It was one of the seven h
and twenty-five thousand things I missed most about Mace.

y mind A touch, whisper-soft, slid across the small of my back and I shive
“Linnie,” I whispered again.

o years Then I watched in distracted fascination as whatever Luke heard c
and shephone changed his entire body. I was fascinated because I could swea
as-hell, looked scared.

Men like Luke didn’t get scared.

ot even I shook my head and jerked out of my daze.

uzz and “I have to get to Buzz,” I announced.

o matter “Stella.”

s losing I took off, walking swiftly across the yard.

ood, all As I marched, I heard Luke shout, “*Mace!*” and Mace’s name can
s where Luke’s lips like a bark, sharp and ferocious.

I didn't let that register. My mind was centered on Buzz.

Then gunshots rang out.

Indeedly Yes.

sed and *Gunshots.*

re pulled There were shouts of surprise, rapid movement, and I saw the dirt
me explode as the bullets pounded into it around my cowboy boots, o
m. the other after the other.

me, a For a second I stood frozen, not comprehending this drastic
ormally events. Then I felt a stinging burn in my hip and cried out, but fo
. I was reason my hands went to my head, and unfortunately belatedly, I sta
run for my effing life.

undred I ran two steps before I was picked up at the waist, shifted, thro
Mace's shoulder, and he ran in a half crouch as the bullets whizzed
red. us.

He stopped, wrenched open the back door to the Explorer and tos
ver the in. He made a quick whistling noise through his teeth and Juno jum
ar Luke with me, jarring me. Pain sliced through my hip and I cried out again.

Mace slammed the door almost before Juno's hind end cleared it.
in the passenger seat, Luke was already in at the driver's side. My do
barely settled before we rocketed from the curb.

I hadn't even noticed Luke starting the truck. It was like he
ignition through a mind meld, one with the vehicle. None of that norm
the key and go business for Super Cool Luke.

re from Mace hit a button on the dash and the cab was filled with ringing.

Juno woofed just to be part of the action. Not wanting to do n

anything, just not wanting anyone to forget she was around. This v
way.

I put my hand to my hip. I felt something wet there and pulled n
away.

around
ne after
turn of
r some
arted to
vn over
around
sed me
ped up
He got
g and I
hit the
nal turn
uch of

The wet on my hand was dark. Blood.
I'd been shot.
Effing hell, I'd been *shot*.
With a bullet. An honest-to-goodness bullet.
Jesus!
“Um, Mace—” I started, trying not to sound panicky.
“This is Jack.” A voice filled the cab.
“One second,” Mace said to me in an undertone.
“Ava just called in, said someone opened fire on her, Daisy, Ally
Tod and Stevie. They were outside a gay club on Broadway. I lost
with her in the middle of the call,” Luke informed Jack, who I als
from my days as Mace’s girlfriend. He was another Nightingale Ma
strong, tough, solid and scary.
I gasped at this news.
Ava and the girls had been shot at? What was going on?
“Copy that. I’m on it,” Jack’s voice replied.
“Someone just shot at Stella at the scene,” Mace added.
They weren’t shooting at me, were they? my brain asked.
Since I didn’t actually utter the words, no one answered.
“Fuck,” Jack snapped.

was her “Call Lee and check Roxie, Jules and Jet,” Luke ordered.

“Copy,” Jack said.

ly hand “Out,” Luke clipped, and hit a button on the console while Jack r
the same word. “I don’t fuckin’ like this,” Luke finished on a mutter.

You could sense his fear, clear and edgy, filling the cab. He wasn’t
hiding it. His woman had been shot at, and not only did he not like it,
terrified that she was in danger. Mingled with the out-and-out panic of
the general situation, not to mention the fact I was bleeding from a g
wound, was a sense of beauty that Super Cool Luke cared about Ava
to let his tough guy image take that kind of direct hit.

Mace was silent, but he leaned forward and pulled his cell out of his
pocket.

“Um, Mace—” I started again, thinking now the time was ripe to
y, Indy, the fact I was bleeding.

contact “Two seconds,” Mace replied.

o knew Apparently the time wasn’t ripe.
n, built

I looked around the back seat for something to press against my waist
was probably bleeding all over the seat. I saw a blanket on the floor of
me, leaned over and grabbed it. I lifted a butt cheek, shoved it under, s
and pressed its edge to my hip. Why I cared about bloodstains on the
the Explorer, don’t ask me, but it was something to worry about that
involve me and my friends getting shot at, at four o’clock early
Wednesday morning. So I went with it.

Mace hit some buttons on his cell, but the phone rang in the cab be
connected.

Luke hit a button on the console.

“Stark,” he answered.

repeated “Luke, get to Jules. Now. She called in. Drive-by, AK-47. They s
Nick and Jules’s windows,” Jack told us.

it’s even “Goddamn it!” Luke clipped.

he was “Sid,” Mace replied what I thought was nonsensically.

I felt at “Call Vance. Call Lee. We need a rendezvous point,” Luke dema
gunshot Jack. “Call Louie and find out what the fuck is goin’ on with Ava.”
enough

“Copy. Out,” Jack said.

his back Disconnect.

Luke took a turn without slowing so I went flying, and so did Ju
big dog and I became a tangle of furry limbs and not-furry-limbs. O
o share were on the straight and narrow and my ass cheek was back on the
again, I thought it best to buckle in.

Mace was looking around the seat at me. His eyes watched me c
buckle, then without a word he turned back to the front.

round. I “Hang tight, Juno,” I whispered after I buckled in, and I reached
pposite myself with the hand that wasn’t bloody and stroked Juno’s head.

sat on it Juno woofed a calm woof.
seat of

t didn’t Good to know my dog was cool in a crisis, though it would hav
y on a better if I’d never needed that knowledge.

Mace was on the phone. “Ike,” he said. “Yeah. Call Matt and
before he Sid’s made a move. We need confirmation on Ava and the girls. Ava r
to Luke they were under fire and he lost contact. Louie’s with them
were outside that gay club on Broadway.” Pause. “Yeah, out.”

He flipped his phone shut as Luke took another turn without slow
we all leaned with it.

shot out “Um, Mace—” I began yet again.

“There.” Mace ignored me and pointed at a cherry-condition, re
1980-something Camaro illuminated by the streetlights and headed out

ended to Luke hit the brakes, executed a swift, tight, three-point turn in the
of the road (scaring the effing beejeezus out of me, by the way) and re
behind the Camaro. Once there, he flashed his lights.

Leaning to my side and looking between the seats, I saw the driver
wave. The Camaro slowed and Luke shot round it. I looked behind us
Camaro followed as I heard the bleeping sound of the phone being di
no. My the dash. I turned back around to the front, one ring and connect.

nce we “I’m okay,” a woman’s voice said.
blanket

“Nick?” Mace asked.

lick the “He’s okay too.”

“Have you contacted Vance?” Mace went on.

l across “Yeah, he’s heading back from Albuquerque now,” the woman sai
knew this was Jules, a more recent friend of mine. I’d met her a few
ago when she’d come with some of my friends to a gig. She was ma
one of the Nightingale Men, Vance Crowe. In fact, they were just bac
re been their honeymoon.

Bobby. For your information, it was just my bad luck that after one
eported the Nightingale Men broke up with me, one of my closest friends hooked
1. They the Nightingale Man, Lee Nightingale. Her name was India “Indy”
I’d known her for years. Now she and her best friend Ally (a Nigh

ing and herself, Lee's sister), both close friends of mine, were mixed up with the Nightingale posse.

This meant for almost a year I hadn't had a lot to do with my friends, circa 2012. They knew about me and Mace because they guessed, but they also didn't know because I didn't share details, not during our five-month relationship and not after it ended. It was too precious to share, not even with Ally, my middle brother was my now-ex-boyfriend's employer, and it had never gotten to a point where it wasn't. When it was over I just got busy. But then again, we were all busy too. As the months passed, Indy and Ally added Rock Club to their hands, the club and all of them were claimed by Nightingale Men along the way and the club moved on to Luke. As I said, it was bad luck. What I didn't say was it was super shitty luck.

Also, for your information, I was the Queen of Super Shitty Backups and getting shot was only the most recent example of that fact.

"Follow us," Luke told Jules.

"Gotcha," Jules replied.

Disconnect.

and I The dash phone started ringing immediately and Luke pressed a button. Without a greeting, Jack informed the cab, "Ava's fine." I expelled a breath I didn't know I was holding. Luke's fear disappeared. "Louie returned fire, got the girls and boys in Daisy's limo. Everyone safe, no one was hit. They're headed to The Castle. Lee says they're up with rendezvous."

Savage. "Copy that. The others?" Luke asked.

Nightingale "Soon to be in transit but not good. Both Eddie and Hank got caught."

with the Both houses were hit by drive-bys after they were gone. AK-47s again and Jet were sleeping. They're okay. Lee's just been in to get a vehicle friends, picking them up and heading toward The Castle."

o didn't To keep you up to date, Eddie was Lee's best friend, Jet was his relationship Hank was Lee's brother, Roxie was living with him.

, whose See how this all came around and went around? Sucks for me be n to the lost Mace. Though the girls were happy as clams, getting married, in, they babies (Jules was pregnant), living the good life of being a Hot ricks to Woman. The life I tasted and loved but lost and would never have again ay.

itty bad "Fuckin' Sid," Luke clipped, breaking into my thoughts.

l Luck, Ava. Now he needs an alternate assignment."

"Copy that. I'll call him," Jack responded.

"Out," Luke said and hit a button.

Silence.

utton. "War," Mace declared.

"Fuck yeah," Luke replied.

eared. I didn't know what they meant, but I didn't like the sound of it.

ryone's Effing hell.

at's the

allouts.

Both houses were hit by drive-bys after they were gone. AK-47s again. Roxie and Jet were sleeping. They're okay. Lee's just been in to get a vehicle. He's picking them up and heading toward The Castle."

To keep you up to date, Eddie was Lee's best friend, Jet was his fiancée. Hank was Lee's brother, Roxie was living with him.

See how this all came around and went around? Sucks for me because I lost Mace. Though the girls were happy as clams, getting married, having babies (Jules was pregnant), living the good life of being a Hot Guy's Woman. The life I tasted and loved but lost and would never have again.

"Fuckin' Sid," Luke clipped, breaking into my thoughts.

"Fuckin' Sid," Jack agreed.

"Ike's mobilizing Matt and Bobby," Mace put in. "He was looking for Ava. Now he needs an alternate assignment."

"Copy that. I'll call him," Jack responded.

"Out," Luke said and hit a button.

Silence.

"War," Mace declared.

"Fuck yeah," Luke replied.

I didn't know what they meant, but I didn't like the sound of it.

Effing hell.

TWO



HUNKY DORY

STELLA

When they referred to “The Castle,” they meant an actual castle. I know Denver *had* a castle, but there it was, right in front of us.

We’d driven to the ritzy part of Englewood, down a winding lane through a heavily wooded area, and all lit up with a shitload of lights that would even your average environmentalist shudder was a stone castle, complete with turrets and a moat.

During the drive I decided that it was evident that I was not going to heal any of my wound.

I also decided I did not want Mace to know I was injured. If he knew I was injured, it might mean I’d have to spend more time in his presence. The last time I’d spent more than a few minutes in his presence was when I came to a gig with the Rock Chicks. I ended up singing Hank Williams’ “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” directly to him. I had no control over what just happened. Even the band was taken aback. I did not want a repeat moment of weakness.

Unh-unh.

No effing way.

I had a plan. I’d slip into a bathroom, clean up, maybe confi

washcloth, then I'd call Floyd to come get me.

This was a totally stupid plan, but I wasn't thinking clearly.

Floyd was my pianist, older than anyone else in the band by a decade and a half. Floyd was married to Emily. He had a steady day job, two cars, a college and could play and sing Billy Joel's "And So It Goes" so beautifully that if you didn't at least tear up, you had to be made of stone.

His lead on our rendition of "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant" was perfect. I didn't suck either.

Floyd and Emily would take care of me, I knew it. Especially considering there was a bleeding bullet wound involved.

They were the only ones in my whole life who took care of me, or at least the only ones who did it for any length of time. I didn't call on them because I didn't want that to end like it had with Mace that night when he was going to die. Mace stood, shoulder leaned against my doorway, and told me I needed help much.

That wasn't going to happen to me again. Not if I could help it.

Two men wearing dark suits, white shirts, slim ties and carrying briefcases materialized and approached the Explorer as we swung into the parking garage. Williams sucked in breath, thinking this was not exactly a welcome party, but he never it. It spied Luke and Mace and disappeared in the shadows again.

I had no time to dwell on castles with moats and men with guns before Luke's lights flashed on a limousine that was parked in front of the Explorer. We could see the bullet holes along the side. At the sight, the car went electric and this electricity was emanating from Luke.

"He should have gone down like a man," Mace said softly.

“Now he’ll pay,” Luke replied.

“Now he’ll pay,” Mace agreed.

ade and “Who?” I asked.

kids in Mace turned around to look at me as Luke parked and I got the g
utifully feeling that he forgot I was there.

’ didn’t “You okay?” he asked belatedly, but not, I noticed, answeri
question.

sidering *No, I’ve been shot, which could be the definition of “not okay,” m*
replied sarcastically.

at least “Hunky dory,” my mouth said.

n often Luke had turned off the truck and was now twisted to look at me
hen he heard my reply and I saw his half-grin. I grinned back.

him too “Out,” Mace snapped, sounding, for some reason, impatient,
jerked open his door.

I opened my door too. Juno trundled over me and hopped down. I
my teeth against the pain and hopped down behind her. It took a l
ig guns walked normally, and to hide it, kept my bloody hand pressed agai
drive. I belly like a pregnant woman.
ut they

because Luke had forged ahead, probably keen to get to Ava. Mace walke
right side, opposite the wounded left side. He walked beside me, but
distance between us.
house.

b went When we’d been together he didn’t like distance anytime, any
Mace was not a man who shied away from public displays of affect
walked with his thumb hooked in the side belt loop of my jeans so
plastered against him. In restaurant booths he sat next to me, not oppo

He lounged in front of the TV with my head or feet in his lap or me against his side. In bed he was a spooner, the front of his long, hair curved and pressed into the length of the back of mine. When we standing up, sitting down, lying in bed, he sought maximum physical contact. He didn't seek it, he demanded it. It was another one of the seven hundred and twenty-five thousand things about Mace that I missed the most.

Juno loped beside us, alternately trotting and sniffing the ground.

After we crossed the little stone bridge over the moat and Mace the door Luke was holding open for us, I said, "I'll call Floyd to come."

Luke was again moving ahead. Mace fell back in step beside me too. He staring in awe at my surroundings. A long, stone-walled hall, a brick carpet runner punctuated by shiny brass rods holding it down, and his words, wrought iron torches with electrical lights and full suits of armor decorating it down either side. It was unbelievable. It was indescribable. It was like I stepped into a different world.

"You need to wait until we debrief. Then I'll tell you what you can do," Mace replied.

I lost my awe. I forgot about the pain in my hip and my head throbbed at my temple. I was pretty certain I was pissed off again.

"What did you just say?" I asked.

"You heard me," he answered, but didn't look at me.

Either in an attempt not to argue or because he was raring to go, whatever the hell that meant, he forged ahead too, his long legs taking me well ahead of me. I scrambled to catch up.

He, and then I, entered a big room with a beamed cathedral ceiling.

anners impression that he wasn't going to let me go anywhere.

ons and "I'm okay," I told this man I didn't know.

ned my Different hands came to the top of my hip. My gaze swung down
saw strong, long-fingered hands I knew really well. I looked up fr
dn't do hands and Mace was in my space.

"Mace, let me go. I'm fine," I said as he bent slightly to the side
my hip gently toward his gaze, and he looked at the wound.

e. Luke I looked too. There was a lot more blood than I expected.
ouple I everywhere.

k in the When I looked back up, everyone had gathered around.

her too, "I'm totally fine," I repeated.

re even Mace straightened and his eyes came to mine.

hey all "Hunky dory?" he asked, his voice low and sounding a bit cheased

"Hunky dory." I nodded.

Without warning, I was lifted up. I found myself cradled in Mace
hest. and he started striding back into the big room.

"What the—?" I began to yell.

me, his "Privacy," Mace clipped at Daisy, interrupting me.

"Through here. I'll get a first-aid kit," Daisy replied, racing along
us.

edging "First aid? Girlie, she needs a doctor." Tod was racing alongside us

es. Tall, "She doesn't need a doctor, she needs a hospital." Stevie was or
ing myheels.

got the "I don't fucking believe this shit. Someone shot Stella," Ally si

trailing along as well.

Juno woofed, trotting with the pack, obviously agreeing with Ally.
n and I “We need to boil water. We need clean towels,” Ava announced
om the following too.

“She ain’t birthin’ no baby! She’s got a gunshot wound!” Indy shouted,
, tilting “I know that!” Ava shouted back. “But we need a sterile environment.
Lord save me from well-intentioned Rock Chicks.

It was Daisy took us to another, smaller room, which had also been decorated
with a heavy medieval hand, and Mace stopped and turned.

I saw Luke cut off our followers and declare, “Private,” right before
shut the door in their faces leaving Daisy, Mace, Luke and me in the room.

“This is no big deal,” I announced.
off. Mace set me on my feet, but his hands went back firmly to my hips
below my waist, making it clear I was not to move away.

’s arms “Should we cut off the jeans?” Mace asked.

“No! These are my lucky Levi’s!” I yelled, trying to jerk my hips away from
his hands (this didn’t work).

Okay, so, maybe the jeans weren’t so lucky since I’d been shot in the hip
; beside Still, I didn’t want them cut up.

“Would be optimal, but we’ll peel ’em off, see how it goes.” Mace
s too. ignored my outburst.

1 Tod’s “I’ll get the first aid. I know a doctor who’ll come here,” Daisy put

“Get it and call him,” Mace ordered.

napped, “You betcha,” Daisy replied, and her eyes found mine. “We’ll get

taken care of, sugar bunch, not to worry.” Then she was off.

Mace’s hands were at my fly.

ounced, “Hey! What’re you doing?” I snapped and slapped at his hands. He caught my wrists and gave them a light jerk so I stopped struggling.

uted. “Stella, we have to get the jeans off and see the wound,” Mace exclaimed calmly.

Nope. That was *not* gonna happen.

corated “No you don’t. Let me call Floyd. He and Emily will—”

“You aren’t calling Floyd,” Mace stated.

fore he “I am,” I retorted and shook my hair angrily for good measure.

om. “You aren’t,” Mace repeated.

“I am!” I shouted.

ips just I started struggling, got my wrists free and started slapping his hands again.

This went on for half a second before he caught my wrists again. He pulled them around my back. The front of my body hit the front of his. I stilled at the shock of it.

n them. “Cuff her,” Mace said to Luke.

I unstilled.

” Luke “*What?*” I screamed, back to struggling in earnest.

There was a clink and my hands were cuffed behind my back. Luke gripped my waist, holding me still, and Mace worked on my jeans.

Please tell me this is not happening, my brain begged.

get you Mace unbuttoned the button and I heard and felt the zip going down.

This was happening.

“I’m not wearing any underwear,” I lied.

ids. He “I’ll close my eyes,” Mace lied back.

“I won’t,” Luke put in.

plained Shitsofuckit!

I decided to stop talking and stop struggling. I also decided this was No, this was great. No. This was *absolutely fantastic*. The longer this went the more I hated Mace, and since I’d spent a year loving him and not him, hating was a much, *much* better emotion to hold on to.

Mace went into a crouch, and carefully and slowly he peeled down his jeans. Down, down, just over the wound at the very bottom of the hip before my leg started. I sucked in breath between my teeth when he touched it. He stopped and his hands closed around it, one on my hip, one on my thigh.

I could swear I was blushing. Since his hands and his mouth had been there (and everywhere) and he’d seen me in much less than just minutes, I rolled down (exposing a pair of plain, white, shorts-style panties with a pink bow), well, I shouldn’t be blushing.

But I was.

“Flesh wound,” he muttered.

“Told you,” I hissed, powering through the blush.

κ. Luke Mace came up from the crouch, but still close, right in my space.

“We’ll clean it and Daisy’s doctor can stitch it,” he told me.

“Then can I call Floyd?” I asked.

n. “I told you, not until we debrief.”

“I didn’t agree to that.”

“I wasn’t giving you an option.”

My eyes bugged out, beyond pissed off, rocketing straight to a hell.

Before I could blow, Luke asked from behind me, “Do you want to uncuff her?”

“No,” Mace answered.

“Yes,” I said at the same time.

Not surprisingly, Luke didn’t uncuff me.

“Sit down. I’ll take off your boots so we can get the jeans off,” Mace demanded.

“Stop bossing me around and I’ll take off my own boots, thank you very much,” I shot back.

“That’ll be hard to do with your hands cuffed behind you,” Mace returned.

“Uncuff me then,” I retorted.

“Stella,” Mace said warningly.

“Mace,” I returned the gesture.

Mace sighed and looked over my head. I knew he was looking at me, but I also knew from the expression on his face that he was also looking at Stella with patience.

I heard Luke chuckle.

It hit me then that I was standing in a strange house, I had a gash on my forehead, my hands cuffed behind my back and my jeans pulled down to my ankles.

my thighs.

Worse than that, Linnie'd had the back of her head blown off and angry as was out there somewhere without my hand to hold on to.

I looked down at my boots and felt the tears come to my eyes.

t me to "This is humiliating," I whispered, blinking back the tears.

Immediately after I uttered the words, I felt Luke's presence retreat. Mace got deeper in my space. His hands came to either side of my neck and I sucked in breath at the feel of their warm strength.

God, I missed it when he touched me.

"Kitten," he murmured, and my eyes flew to his.

His eyes had grown soft. I hadn't seen that look in a long time.

I missed that too.

"Don't call me that," I whispered.

' Mace His eyes flashed yet again with something I couldn't decipher, and a voice that was deep, low and sweet, he said, "Stella."

"Take your hands off me." I kept at it, ignoring the flash, ignoring the look, at a place in my life where I could deal knowing there was no Mace and not about to slide back. "Uncuff me and go away. Send in the cops. They'll help me get my jeans and boots off and clean me up."

ing for "I'm not leaving you," Mace told me.

"Go," I replied.

"No."

gunshot I closed my eyes tight and sucked in a breath. Then I straightened up and opened them again.

In a strong, steady, no-nonsense voice, I stated, "Please. Go."

id Buzz Mace stared at me a beat. It became two. It slid to three. Then he flicked over my head.

"Uncuff her."

Luke uncuffed me. The door opened and Daisy shot in.

t just as "I called the doctor. He lives around the corner and he's on his way
k and I the first-aid kit and some cotton balls and some alcohol and some hydro-
peroxide and some clean towels and a whole load of other stuff. I
know what you'd need," she announced, bustling into the room, her
loaded so high you could barely see her head. She peeked around the
smiled at me. "And I got you some of my track bottoms so you've
something to wear." She tossed the whole lot on the couch.

Mace and Luke went to the door.

l still in "She wants you," Luke told the congregation outside, and they saw
all the Rock Chicks with new arrivals Jules, Jet and Roxie, gay guys
dog, forcing Mace and Luke to push through the crowd.

the soft Mace kept walking and I watched his departing back.

Mace in Luke turned at the door, his eyes hit mine and his chin lifted. I
ie girls. chin lift was an indication of respect. Respect that I didn't freak out
got shot, or at all. Respect that I let them get on with what they had to
maybe a bit of respect that I held my own, even though I didn't win
Mace. This made me feel funny. A funny I'd never felt in my life,
when I was onstage.

red my Luke stepped out and closed the door behind him.

"Oh girlie, look at that. That's nothing. Just a flesh wound

declared, head cocked, finger to his cheek, eyes staring at my hip.

his eyes “He left,” I whispered, my gaze still on the door.

“What’s that, sugar?” Daisy was pushing me toward some towels
were now spread on the couch.

“Nothing,” I replied and let myself be pushed.

y. I got

drogen “YOU OKAY?” Indy asked.

I didn’t She and Ally were making up the pull-out bed in the room where
her arms endured the humiliation of Mace pulling down my jeans. I was
pile and pillowcases on pillows.

ll have Under strict Lee edict, the Rock Chicks and Hot Bunch were staying
night at The Castle. Apparently they were at war with some guy named
and The Castle was out of the way. It had a security system that included
merged in, camera surveillance outside and was “covered” by an army of men
and my by Marcus, Daisy’s husband (Daisy and Marcus lived in The Castle, for
information). It had the added benefit of not having its windows shot at
recent drive-by.

felt the Daisy was in seventh heaven. She was treating this like a co-ed
when I party, not like her big mansion had become a scary-as-shit impromptu
do, and house. She issued orders to the dark-suited members of her husband’s
n, with to go out and buy toothbrushes, contact lens supplies and food so she
except serve a “Big Ole Stick-To-Your-Ribs Southern Breakfast” (her word
handed out nightgowns and toiletries and she assigned bedrooms. She
goodly number of rooms, but Ally was forced to take a couch, and
deference to my injury, I got a pull-out bed. I didn’t know where Mace
,” Today sleeping, or if he was even staying there, and didn’t care. Well, I care

tried not to.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied to Indy.

els that “You are so not fine,” Ally muttered.

“I’m fine. It hardly hurts at all,” I told Ally.

I was talking about my hip. The doctor came and cleaned it, shot with something to numb it and then stitched it. After he was done, he it, gave me some pain killers and took off again, maybe to do here I’d clandestine stitch up somewhere in the early morning dark of Denver putting whole thing took less than an hour.

“I’m not talking about your leg,” Indy said.

ing the I threw the pillow at the head of the pull-out and grabbed the other

ned Sid “What are you talking about?” I asked.

cluded “She’s talking about Mace,” Ally told me.

mployed “What about Mace?” I played dumb.

or your “Chickie, you aren’t fooling anyone,” Ally replied.

out in a “I’m not trying to fool anyone.” This was another lie.

slumber “Yeah you are, most especially yourself,” Indy said softly.

tu safe Effing hell.

’s army “It was over a long time ago,” I explained.

e could “If it was over, then when the Hot Bunch’s women got targeted criminal overlord, you wouldn’t have been called out, exposed and s

ls). She Ally pointed out logically.

and in This was true. This was also something to mull over later, pr
ice was d, but I perhaps over some risotto and a nice, chilled glass of pinot grigio.

“Can we talk about this later?” I asked, all of a sudden exhausted. I pushed the other pillow at the head of the bed.

Ally opened her mouth. Indy shot her a look. Ally closed her mouth. They smoothed the covers and made to move out.

“Just as long as we *do* talk about it later,” Ally said on her way out. I came up dressed about to be silenced for long by Indy.

“Goodnight,” I called, giving no assurances.

“Later,” Indy replied, and she closed the door.

I carefully took off Daisy’s cream, velour, Juicy Couture track pants but left on the snug, white T-shirt she’d given me.

“It’s new, haven’t worn it yet so I haven’t broken in the chest.” Daisy informed me, circling her extraordinary bosoms with a pointed, white-polished, ultra-long finger-nailed finger to make her point. Ally seized my Heidi shirt, which had a bit of blood on it and disappeared muttering something about stain removal.

I took the pain killers using a glass of water Daisy brought me, got up and stared at the ceiling.

My first thoughts were of Linnie and Buzz. Then, for peace of mind because thoughts of Linnie were too difficult to bear (and because I no longer had my phone so I could call Buzz and see how he was doing because he had confiscated it) my thoughts went to the final chapter of the week. “hot at,” wild evening.

After getting stitched up and changing clothes, the Rock Chick privately, called into a Tribe Meeting by Lee.

We all sat in Daisy’s big room. The gathering had grown bigger.

I threw fiancé, Eddie Chavez was there. Roxie's boyfriend, Hank Nightingale, was well. There was a handsome man who I found out was Marcus Sloan, Eddie's husband. Bobby, Matt and Ike, all Nightingale Men, had also arrived. Matt was a barrel-chested, sandy-blond behemoth. Matt was a fit, also blond guy. Ike was a light-skinned black man, shaved bald with a cool-as-shit tattoo you could see slithering up his neck and down his arm around the sleeve collar of his T-shirt. The man who stopped my retreat earlier was Jules's uncle.

There was also a guy I didn't know. He looked a lot like Eddie, definitely as-yet-untamed-by-domesticity, and by the looks of it, he was untamable. His eyes came to me when I walked in, I thought because he was the only one injured in the night's proceedings. His eyes didn't look frosty-though. They felt hot on me. So hot, they made me feel hot, but in a good way. A way I hadn't felt under the gaze of a man in a very long time. Eventually, it made me feel so hot I had to look away.

Lee "briefed" us about the situation. Some guy named Sid was under investigation by the police (for your information, when he said "police" he didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he meant Hank and Eddie). The police had partnered with the Nightingale Team to hasten the act of bringing Sid down. Mace was overseeing the Take Sid Down Project for the time being. Other entities were recruited, and my guess was those "other entities" were Marcus Sloan and his be-suited, big-gun-toting army.

They were close to something. Sid didn't like it, so Sid declared war. Sid was going after the girls. Lee knew this not only because it was obvious, but because he'd had a phone call five minutes after the precisely timed shootings and drive-bys. The caller informed him that he should take the warning. Either they backed off or Sid's boys were going to pick off the

gale, as Chicks one by one.

Daisy's Me getting shot was not planned. I was only supposed to get s
Bobby Again, I would take this opportunity to remind you I was the Queen o
id, cute Shitty Bad Luck.

it tattoo This information of certain death to the Rock Chicks was met v
eve and vague murmur here and there. For myself, I was totally flipped out, as
s Nick, of one-by-one killings of myself and my friends—hell, of *anyone*—wa
to do. Everyone else acted like this was a small bother, like getting a s
lie, but Irritating but not much more.

f him, Effing hell.

e I was Lee told The Tribe that Daisy and Marcus would be our hosts
ive me, evening and we'd get our orders the next day.

t a nice It was then my phone, which I was holding in my hand, rang.
g time.

“Sorry,” I muttered to the assemblage when all eyes swung to me.

s under I looked at the display. It said, BUZZ CALLING. I flipped it op
lice,” it before I could put it to my ear it was pulled out of my hand.

e). The My head shot up and I saw Mace, my phone to his ear, his back
ringing walking away.

e team. “Erm, excuse me?” I called, getting up from my perch on the ar
s” were couch and following him.

war by “Buzz, she'll talk to you tomorrow,” Mace told the phone. “Yeah
out also all right.” Then he flipped my phone shut.

· timed *Do something!* my brain ordered me.

his as a I did something. I poked him in the back. The Tribe had melte
ie Rock existence (not really, as people can't melt, except in movies like *Rai*

the *Lost Ark*—they just melted from my mind) and my pissed-off vib
shot at. back with a vengeance.

f Super “Excuse *me*?” I repeated to his back.

Mace turned. I put my hand out for my phone.

with the Mace shoved my phone in his back pocket. My eyes followed this
threats then narrowed and shot back to Mace’s face.

as wont “Give me my phone,” I demanded.

plinter. “No,” Mace replied.

“Give it to me.”

for the “No.”

“Mace, give me my goddamned phone!” My voice was rising.

Mace leaned into me and responded calmly, “No.”

en, but “I need to talk to Buzz,” I explained with rapidly waning patience
gonna need me. His girlfriend had her head blown off tonight, for
sake!”

to me, “Lindsey’s head was blown off by Sid’s men. She’s the reason they
able to get close to you, watch you, figure you out, find a way to get
She’s the reason they knew Buzz would call you and knew you’d
m of a running when he did. Lindsey got herself killed so you could be
practice as a warning to me.”

l. She’s My mouth snapped shut and I took a step back. I had not put this t
but it made sense, and the idea that I had anything to do with Lindsey’
felt like the gut kick to end all gut kicks.

d from Mace took a step forward and his steps were longer than mine.

iders of “Stella, I’m not gonna let any of the members of that fuckin’ l

They came yours put you in harm's way. No phone. No communication. Not until you know the lay of the land. Your band wants to talk to you, they do it through me."

Oh no. He did *not* just say what it seemed like he just said.

"Don't call them 'that fuckin' band,'" I snapped.

Mace was silent.

"And you can't take my phone!"

Mace remained silent.

"And you aren't going to order me around and stand between me and my boys!" I went on.

"Wanna bet?" Mace asked.

I stared at him. He stared at me.

He didn't look blank and broody, and that emotional flash didn't go through his eyes. He looked determined and angry and I got the impression that it didn't have to do simply with Linnie being dead and us getting shot and us being sequestered at The Castle.

I changed tactics. "God! Were you this overbearing when we were together?"

"I should have been." Mace fired his shot without hesitation.

My head jerked and my hands balled into fists. I couldn't believe he said that. I didn't even know what he meant by that.

What *did* he mean by that?

"Girlie, hate to break this up, it's great for entertainment value also, you *do* know you two have an audience," Tod called from somewhere behind me.

until we I sucked in breath through my nose, too angry to be embarrassed.
through “Thank God we’re over,” I threw at Mace as my parting shot.

That was when I saw the flash dart through his eyes again. It was then gone before I could read it.

“I’m keeping your phone,” Mace informed me.

“Have at it.” I gave up and walked away.

That was it. Daisy got busy getting everyone settled and we dispersed. Juno put her front paws on the pull-out bed, taking my mind from me and my thoughts.

“You can’t get up here. Momma’s got a gunshot wound and there’s not enough room.”

Juno woofed.

It didn’t cut “I know, baby. The floor is cold and hard, but it’s all you’ve got to do. We’ll be home soon.”

And, me Juno woofed again.

“Quiet, girl. It’s six o’clock in the morning and there’s a house full of people trying to sleep.”

A soft woof then Juno plopped down. I heard her big dog groan as she stretched out on the floor. Then another big dog groan-slash-sigh as she plopped to her side.

“You’re such a good dog,” I whispered, and I meant it.

I heard an even softer woof and I felt my lips form a small smile.

I punched my pillows, rolled to rest on my unwounded side and a smack behind in the middle of the bed.

The doctor said the painkillers might make me drowsy. He was wrong.

As there Within minutes, I was asleep.



IT WAS AN AWAKE/ASLEEP dream. I knew it because I had a lot of Always morning, my favorite time of the day when I was with Mace.

For your information, I would have welcomed asleep/asleep dream. Mace, but I normally dreamed of weird shit like mutant snakes terrorizing Denver or being on a road trip with Charo, her shouting, “Coochie coo” at passing truckers. I didn’t know what these dreams said about me or the state of my unconscious mind and I didn’t want to know.

The awake/asleep dreams were always like this, part conscious/unconscious, right when I woke up but before I was really awake. It was tonight. I would feel Mace’s imaginary heat behind me, his hard body pressing against mine, his arm tucked tight around my belly, his breath against my neck.

I went with it as I always did, liking the memory. It was one of the hundred, twenty-five thousand things about him I missed most: walking with him holding me. Feeling safe, feeling wanted, feeling loved. All those feelings I’d never really felt in my whole life.

I as she she fell I snuggled into his imaginary heat and hit something very solid and real.

I froze.

“You’re awake,” Mace said.

and laid Oh my God.

What was going on?

was not “Mace?” I asked just to make sure.

“We need to talk.”

Yep, he was there all right.

Effing hell.

f them.

I tried to move away. The tight arm got tighter.

“Let me go.”

ams of

“No.”

orizing

ochie,”

Erm, excuse me?

or the

“Let me go,” I repeated.

“We’re gonna talk.”

is, part

“Fine, great, wonderful. We can talk not lying in bed.” Then it

as then

ssed to

κ.

“What are you doing in my bed?”

“I told you I wasn’t leavin’ you.”

e seven

Erm, excuse *me*?

king up

“Yeah, you said that right before you left me,” I reminded him.

three of

“I didn’t leave you.”

“You walked out of the room!”

nd very

“I walked out of the room but I didn’t leave you.”

“You didn’t stay.”

“You were embarrassed. Luke was there. You needed the girls. You did it yourself.”

“You still left.”

“Stella, I didn’t leave.”

“You did.”

“For fuck’s sake,” he clipped. “End of topic. We’re talkin’ something else now.”

Nunh-unh. No we bloody well were not. We weren’t talking *anything*.

I pushed against his arm again. He didn’t let go.

“Move your arm,” I demanded.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d been shot?”

“Move your effing arm.”

The arm tightened and shook gently, shaking me gently with it.

hit me. “Answer my question,” Mace demanded.

“If you remember, you were a little busy. I was okay. No big deal.”

“Not fond of the idea of you calmly bleedin’ in the back seat of a car that I’m also in, Kitten. In fact, not fond of the idea of you bleedin’ at all.”

What he said shook me.

I had to ask again, what on *earth* was going on?

Nope, no, I didn’t care. Couldn’t care. I was over him. Over. Him.

I shifted my focus. “Stop calling me Kitten.”

He ignored me. “No tellin’ the way this is gonna go down. You’re gonna have to get over your attitude and communicate with me.”
ou said

Erm, excuse me again?

“Get over my attitude?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Let me get this straight,” I started. My voice showing my

controlled patience, no longer pushing against his arm, I rolled toward
about He shifted. I fell to my back and he got up on his elbow. I glared up
and tried to ignore how fucking gorgeous he was in the morning. His
alone were enough to make you want to wake up and face a new day. ‘
; about ago...’—it wasn’t a year ago, it was one year, three weeks and three
(not that I was counting)—“you broke up with me, walked out of my
Now someone is shooting at me, using my band to get to you, killing
because of shit you’re involved in and you want me to ‘get over my
attitude?’”

“Yeah,” he replied, unaffected by the damning statement I just made.

I got up on both my elbows, which brought me closer to him.

He didn’t move.

Then I shouted, “You’ve lost your mind!”

in SUV “Calm down,” he ordered.

all.” “Calm? Calm? I was shot last night!”

His jaw got tight. “I haven’t forgotten that, Kitten. In fact, that’s
we’re fuckin’ talkin’ about.”

Something else hit me. Something important, something I wanted an
answer to right away.

gonna “Why was I shot last night? Why am I involved at all? We’re
together. I’m not your woman. I’m not Indy to your Lee, Jet to your
Roxie to your—”

“Yeah, you are.”

My elbows went out from under me and I fell back to the bed. A
hit my chest. It felt like it weighed a ton and it took my breath away.
barely

rd him. *Move!* my brain demanded.

at him I rolled and tried to escape. I had no idea where I was going, but
his eyes going there.

‘A year
ee days
ny life.
people
ver my

Mace’s arm grabbed me around the waist. He threw me back to
flat on my back. Before I could do a thing about it, he shifted. Both hi
came to either side of me, he did a semi-push up and landed on top of
his weight was slightly skewed to my healthy side.

Okay, so maybe I wasn’t going “there.”

le. *“Get off me!”* I screamed, shoving at his shoulders.

“Stella, listen.”

“No! Get off!”

“Listen to me, Goddamn it!” he yelled.

For your information, Mace had a short fuse. We argued when w
together, quite a lot. He was a passionate guy, but also, like I said, h
short fuse. It wasn’t always happiness and light. Then again, the make
’s what was magnificent.

“Piss off!” I yelled back.

nted an *“Sid’s boys were there that night you sang Hank Williams to me.”*

Oh no.

! aren’t
Eddie,

I just *knew* that’d come back to haunt me.

I thought back and remembered Linnie was there that night too, v
bad dudes. Now I knew they were Sid’s bad dudes.

weight *Shitsofuckit!*

“I didn’t sing Hank to you,” I lied.

“You did.”

it I was “I did not.”

“You did. Everyone knew it. Everyone saw it. Even Sid’s boys.”

the bed “You’re a big guy. The bar was dark. You were just a shadow
s hands focused on. And anyway, I was lost in the song.”

me, but “Bullshit.”

“Get over yourself, Mace. You broke up with me, I’ve moved on,
him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You got another man?”

Oh dear.

we were Well, there we were.

e had a “Yes,” I told him, and this was not a lie. I was semi-dating a guy
-up sex Eric. He was very good-looking. He was into me and he was clear he
to be *more* into me, if you catch my drift. I was holding back because
off, he wasn’t Mace and second, I wasn’t sure about him. The
something about him that I thought wasn’t quite right.

I saw Mace’s eyes flash again. This was a different kind of fl
unhappy flash.

with her “Don’t lie to me, Stella.”

“I’m not lying. His name is Eric. We’ve been dating for about a
We’re considering taking it to the next level.”

Eric was considering it. I wasn’t so sure, but Mace didn’t need to

this.

Mace stared at me as if trying to assess the validity of my statement.

Then he spoke. “Your relationship progression with Eric just stalled.”

“That I felt my eyes get wide. “Erm, excuse me?”

“He’s out of the picture.”

At that, I felt my eyes narrow. “He is not.”

” I told “He is.”

“Who do you think you are?”

“In our current scenario, I’m the guy who’s gonna keep you safe. I’m the guy who’s gonna keep you alive. And I’m gonna do it however I need to do it, and while I’m doin’ it I don’t need to have to deal with any of those groupies.”

My groupies?

named Okay, I had groupies. I was in a band. A somewhat successful band. I wanted at least locally. Groupies came with the territory.

use first However, I wasn’t a collector of groupies. I had enough to do with considering Pong and Hugo were both in my band, because they were dedicating their life to perfecting the art of collecting groupies.

ash, an And anyway, when did Mace turn into such an asshole?

“He’s not a groupie!” I yelled.

month. “Discussion about *Eric* just ended.” He said Eric’s name like it was bad. If I was smart, I would have read something into that. Instead of seeing that he was being so bossy. “Now you and I are gonna get to know straight—”

“No, we aren’t,” I interrupted him.

t. He ignored me. “You and Juno are movin’ in with me.”

d.” Uh...*what?*

“No, we aren’t!” I shouted

“Okay,” Mace said amicably. “Then I’m movin’ in with you and Ju

“*No, you aren’t!*” I screeched.

He kept ignoring my outbursts. “You don’t go anywhere unless I’
you or I know where you’re goin’ and I got a man on you. Got me?”

I’m the I decided to extricate myself from the current conversation and s
d to do own.

of your “You’re a jerk.”

“I’ll tell Pong, Leo, Buzz and Hugo that you’re out of commis
their twenty-four seven babysitter.”

and, at What he said pissed me off, but I ignored it in order to stay with r
theme. “You’re not a jerk, you’re an asshole.”

al with “I’ll call Floyd and tell him what’s goin’ down and he’ll back me v
y wereband.”

Effing hell, he was pulling out the big guns.

My eyes narrowed again and I hissed, “Don’t you dare.”

“Floyd knows I can keep you safe and Floyd won’t take any shit fi
t tastedband.”

, I was “Don’t you dare!” I shouted.

t things “And when this is all over, you and me gotta talk.”

I did *not* like the sound of that.

“This is over. I’m not your woman. Just let it be known to Sid’s be
you don’t give a fuck about me and I can go about my life—”

“You and I both know that’s bullshit and obviously so does Sid.”

“It isn’t bullshit.”

ino.” “We’re over, but that doesn’t mean you weren’t once my woman.”

“I’m not now.”

’m with “No, you aren’t, but that doesn’t stop the fact that I’d care...
fuckin’ deal...if you got filled with bullets.”

tart my I had nothing to say to that. Nothing at all. I was trying not even t
of that.

sion as “You fight me, Kitten, I’ll take you and them on at the same time.
give a fuck and I always win. Always.”

ny own He wasn’t wrong. He always won. He’d once been a professional
the best. He’d moved on to become a professional snowboarder and
the best at that too. Now he was a PI, and from what I could tell
with the respect he got from the tough guys around him, he was pretty damn
that too.

I decided it was high time to give up and battle on when Mace and
not in bed and Mace’s body was not on mine.

My eyes slid away from his face.

rom the “Please get off me,” I asked, softly, quietly, politely.

“Kitten,” he called, and my eyes slid back. “Something else you
know.”

“What?”

“This is a serious situation. You gettin’ soft and sweet isn’t gonn

ays that on me, not like it used to.”

I decided it was the perfect time to battle on. “Thanks for sharing
get off!”

I bucked. Mace slid off.

I rolled off the bed then rounded it, Juno at my heels ready
morning bathroom break. I grabbed Daisy’s track bottoms and tugged
on. I chanced a glance at Mace and he was on his side, elbow in the p
a great head in hand, watching me.

to think I felt the gut kick.

He’d done that before, lots, when we were together. Lying in bed
side, head in hand, watching me put on clothes, watching me feel
I don’t watching me play guitar, the way he looked at me making me feel
pretty and interesting.

surfer, What I did for a living meant people were always watching me
he was onstage in front of a crowd a lot, singing and playing. I loved it, feel
by the especially when the crowd found the groove and came along for the ride
good at

But not even our best groove felt as good as Mace watching me, h
lazy, his face soft, his thoughts, I knew, all about me.
I I were

Inexplicably, even though we were over, even though I was
woman, even though he admitted that, I knew the way he was looking
now was no different than all the times before.

should What was going on?

“I don’t like this,” I told him.

He moved, fast, lithe, graceful, and he was out of bed, standing in
me wearing nothing but a pair of white boxers. I hated to admit it,
a work

body was even more delicious than I remembered, and I'd touched it
Now, it, almost every inch of it, and I thought I'd never forget how
looked...or tasted.

But I forgot.

for her Effing hell.

and them His hand came to my hip and his long fingers bit in gently.

pillows, "First up for you, this Eric guy gets a call."

I clenched my teeth.

Mace must have seen the clench or just knew it was there. Whatever
some reason, it made him smile.

and Juno,

warm,

. I was

and off it,

le.

his eyes

not his

g at me

front of

but his

body was even more delicious than I remembered, and I'd touched it, tasted it, almost every inch of it, and I thought I'd never forget how good it looked...or tasted.

But I forgot.

Effing hell.

His hand came to my hip and his long fingers bit in gently.

“First up for you, this Eric guy gets a call.”

I clenched my teeth.

Mace must have seen the clench or just knew it was there. Whatever, for some reason, it made him smile.

THREE



SPILL

Stella

“Spill,” Ally said to me.

“Maybe she doesn’t want to spill,” Stevie put in. “You ever spill of that? You know, keeping things to yourself, as in *private*?”

“Listen, Stella and me have been friends for ages,” Ally said to me. “She dated one of my brother’s boys for months and didn’t say a word because she’s getting shot at like the rest of us. You aren’t getting shot at because you’re not a member of the Hot Bunch boys, you can have your privacy. You *are*, you *are* a member of the club. Therefore, it’s time to spill.”

“The logic is a bit loco, but I have to admit, it makes sense,” Stella muttered.

“I think she should spill when she feels like spilling,” Jules said, sitting across from me. Her hand was on her small pregnant belly but her black hair gleaming, her violet eyes on me. They were warm and their contentedness behind them that was both beautiful and made me jealous as hell.

“Fuck that. We’re not a secret keeping group. It all hangs out with us,” Ally stated.

“Except for when Jules kept her pregnancy secret.” Daisy narrowed on Jules.

“Well, you can understand that,” Jet noted.

“And when you kept your engagement secret,” Roxie said to Jet.

“I only kept it a secret for a few days!” Jet exclaimed.

“Yeah, but you didn’t share. We had to call you out, girlie.” Tod s pouty.

My eyes wandered around the big round table in Daisy’s huge, f kitchen, and for your information, I would *love* the chance to cook thought kitchen. Top of the line appliances, plenty of counter space, expensive and shining pots on display. It was an amateur cook’s nirvana.

Stevie. Seeing the girls all together, talking about secrets instead of freak d. Now about getting shot at by fully automatic weapons, it hit me w ause of Nightingale Men claimed these women.

fficially They didn’t seem at all flipped out that they’d been the vict violence last night. They were just hanging out, doing girl talk over co ,” Indy Honest to God, it was bizarre.

Indy, redheaded, blue-eyed and built. Ally, dark-haired, brown-ey rew in, slim. Jet, honey-blonde, green-eyed and pretty. Roxie, also blonde but mp, her blue-eyed and seriously stylish. Ava, another blonde, totally kn e was a bombshell gorgeous with light-brown eyes. I’d already described lous a movie star glamour. These weren’t exactly your average women.

But I suspected their attraction for the Hot Bunch had nothing (o ith us,” nothing, then not everything) to do with the fact that their looks range classically beautiful (Jules), to sultry (Indy), to girl-next-door hot (

's eyes sassy-girl-next-door luscious (Ally), to sophisticated elegance (Rose), to downright sexy (Ava), to in your face stunning (Daisy). I suspected more to do with the fact that this crazy, scary life didn't faze them. Not a little bit.

And if it did, they didn't let it show.

ounded They kept bickering and I looked out the window, letting them amongst themselves and letting my thoughts move elsewhere. My wounds beginning to ache and my mind was filling with thoughts of Linnie. The antastic such as wondering if her parents had been told yet or if we'd need in that fundraising gig to pay for her funeral.

knives Then I decided not to think about Linnie because it might make and thus ruin girl talk, and instead I decided to think about the current ing out affairs.

hy the It was early afternoon after a wild-night-late-to-bed sleep in. We finished the Big Ole Stick to Your Ribs Southern Breakfast o tims of homemade biscuits, sausage gravy, sausage patties and grits. ffee.

For your information, I'd never seen so much white food on one my life and never wanted to again.

ved and Now, waiting for our "orders" from Lee (whenever they were g darker, come), we were finishing up yet another pot of coffee.

ockout, Earlier, after letting Juno out, brushing my teeth and washing m Jules's Mace found me and handed me my phone.

r if not "Eric," was all he said.

ed from "Later," was all I said.

Jet), to "Now," he finished.

ie), to I figured he might leave me alone if I did as I was told, so I called it had and told him I'd be unavailable for a while. Eric asked why. I told not even wasn't at liberty to say. Eric asked if I was okay. I told him that I was Eric told me I didn't sound fine. I told him not to worry, I was. Eric told he couldn't help it, he was worried. I told him *please* not to worry, n fight okay and I'd call him in a few days. Eric said he didn't like it, could ind was me now? I opened my mouth to speak and Mace yanked the phone out of my hand.

to do a Then he said into it, "She's done talkin'. She said she'd call you. conversation."

me cry Then he flipped my phone shut.

state of I stared at my phone in his hand because I was relatively certain I'd just looked in his eyes, I'd scream in his face.

He tucked it in his back pocket, and without a word he turned and left away.

I stared daggers into his back, and when daggers didn't actually pierce from the lethal energy emanating from my eyes I gave up and Juno went in to breakfast.

The boys were gone. We had an in-house bodyguard standing in the kitchen, wearing a suit, a gun in a holster at one side of his belt and a friendly face, talkie at the other side.

Roxie, an animal lover, claimed Juno's attention by lavishing my pets with pets, kisses and surreptitious scraps of leftover sausage patties.

I ate and then got put on the hot seat.

"Hello? Stella? You in the room?" Ava asked.

ed Eric “Sorry, my mind wandered,” I replied.

l him I “I’ll bet.” Stevie smiled kindly at me. “After last night there are
as fine places for it to wander.”

told me I smiled back at him for his quiet understanding.

I’d be “Are you gonna spill or what?” Ally was getting impatient, inter
l he see our moment and not having the time for quiet understanding.

t of my “Ally—” Jules started softly.

End of “I’ll spill,” I suddenly announced.

Everyone’s eyes turned to me, and deciding to get it over with
and get them off my back, I started talking.

ain if I “It isn’t that interesting. Mace and I met, he asked me out. I went
connected. It went fast, got intense quickly. It was good. No, it wa
walked Then he broke up with me. The end.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to everyone else.

ly form Then Ally said, “Give me a break.”

o and I “No, really. That’s it, in a nutshell,” I told her and it was.

“Why did he break up with you if it was great?” Roxie asked.

in the “I used him up,” I explained.

walkie- “What?” Jet asked.

big dog “I used him up. I needed him too much. Took too much and didn’t
enough.”

“These boys have got a lot to give,” Daisy replied, sounding confu:

“Yes, I know, and he did give a lot and I took all he gave. Th
always calling and me...” I stopped, looked back out the window and

again, “He had a job. He was always working something for Lee, the
lots of come to me, someone would call and he’d be out again, doing something
Pong or Buzz or Linnie or whoever. I’d stay home while Mace took
my business. I was so tired of it.”

rupting My gaze swung back to the gang and I continued.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love my band, but sometimes, well, let’s just
needed a break. Mace gave it to me. We were together for five months
always took the calls, dealt with the crises. I slept. I never said, ‘You
I’ll deal with it.’”

quickly “Or, better yet, tell your band to sort it out their damn self,” Daisy

“They can’t,” I told Daisy.

and we “They won’t if someone keeps doing it for them,” Indy told me, m
s great. sound simple.

I closed my mouth and looked out the window again.

She didn’t get it. I was the leader of a moderately successful local
The leader of the band did what they could to keep the band together
an Unwritten Rock Band Law. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it
But if a band was good, especially as good as The Gypsies, you did
could to make it work before you ever considered calling it quits.

“Seems to me that was something you could talk about, work on
1’t give suggested.

“It wasn’t just that. It was more,” I told Ava.

sed. “More?” Roxie asked.

ie band “Me,” I replied then sighed and went on, “It was me. Effing *me*.”

started “What about you?” Stevie asked.

en he'd I saw Jet's back go straight. She'd caught sight of something, but I
ing for paying attention. I'd started and now I couldn't stop and I was noticin
care of kind of good to get it out, let it go. I was thinking maybe I should hav
this ages ago.

Therefore, I kept right on talking.

ist say I "My mom had trouble getting pregnant. When she did, my dad w
ths. He the moon. Totally psyched. He wanted a boy so bad. I know this bec
1 sleep, told me, like, every day of my life. Mom never got pregnant again a
never got over not having a son. No matter what I did, how hard I wc
cut in. gain his approval, his respect, to earn anything, even a little thing tl
good from him, I'd never be a boy. Dad was disappointed in me fr
aking it minute I opened my mouth, took my first breath and screamed."

"Stella—" Jet broke in, but I ignored her.

I was on a roll.

il band. "It wasn't abuse. He didn't hit me. He just said shit to me. Made
. It was like dirt. Made me know I wasn't wanted. I don't know how to descri
didn't. just wasn't nice. What it was was *constant*."

all you I pulled my hands through the sides of my long hair, held it's heav
the back of my head and looked back out the window.

1," Ava "Mom left me to him. Made it easier for her, kept her out of his
He'd turn it on her, make no mistake, and she didn't want it. So she
take it."

"That's awful," Ava whispered.

I dropped my hands, but kept my gaze at the window. "Maybe, ye
I didn't blame her. Still don't. It could get rough. Who'd want that?"

wasn't "A mother should protect her child!" Daisy burst out.

g it felt I turned my face from the window and smiled at Daisy. "Well, m
ve done didn't. I'm not whining. I used to get pissed off about it, but there's no
back, no changing anything. Not who he is, she is or I am. We are v
are, we did what we did."

as over "How did you cope?" Jules asked softly.

ause he "I left, soon as I graduated high school. Took off my graduation
nd Dad threw them on the bed, grabbed my guitar and left. I came to Denver, I
rked to band. You all know Floyd?" My eyes did a mini-scan and everyone r
hat was "Well, Floyd was the pianist. He told me I was good, better than most
om the he'd heard. Until then, no one had ever said anything like that to me
whole effing life. Definitely not my dad and also not my mom. I kne
If she did, she'd court the Wrath of Dad. So she didn't."

"Oh, sugar," Daisy whispered, and I saw her eyes had tears in them

me feel "Don't cry for me Daisy," I said softly. "I'm not broken, just scarred

be it, it "Well, I'd think Mace wouldn't ever leave if he knew all this shit.
this part of why he broke up with you?" Ally snapped.

iness at "Oh, I never told him any of this." I waved my hand in front of
noticed, in a vague way, Jet's head snapping around and her attention
sights.to me.

let me "You didn't?" Jet's eyes were wide. Her face was pale and I saw h
slide to the side after she stopped speaking.

"No, and I'm glad I didn't. If he left me because he thought I was
ah. Butheck, if he knew this crap, well, that would have made him leave soon

"Stella—" Jet started again, her voice now sounding more urgent.

“Anyway,” I kept going, talking over Jet, “after a few years, Floyd started another band. Then that band broke up and we started another band, The Gypsies. Then I met Mace. He made me feel good about myself, when I was onstage, not only when I had a guitar in my hands and a microphone in front of my mouth, but all the time. He made me feel good about just being me. Even when he wasn’t with me, just knowing he’d be with me eventually made me feel good. A man like that, a good man...I ate it up. I sucked it out of me. I needed it. No one had ever made me feel that way, not even Floyd. I needed that I could get too.”

“Stella, girl—” Now Indy had gone pale and she was looking in the same direction as Jet.

“I don’t blame him—” I ignored Indy too.

“Stella, honey bunches of oats—” Daisy tried to cut in. She was leaning over her shoulder.

I ignored her too and went on, “Not for leaving me. I get it. But how about my mom. My dad too. I don’t blame them either. But I’ll never forgive them. Not ever.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Jet breathed, and the way she did it made me focus. I saw that now everyone was looking in the same direction.

My head turned to see what they were all staring at and it was a man standing in the doorway. He had his shoulder leaned against the jail door, his arms crossed on his chest, his feet crossed at the ankles and his eyes on me.

He’d been there awhile.

“Effing hell.”

All air evacuated my body and I stared at him.

d and I *Do you think he heard?* my brain asked me.

er one. “Come here,” Mace said to me.

not just Yep, he heard.

. mic in Queen of Super Shitty Luck strikes again!

st being I shook my head at Mace.

ntually “Kitten, come here.” His voice was ultra-deep, low, soft, and
f him. I took all looking at me in a way...in a way...

I closed my eyes tight and shook my head again.

ie same When I opened my eyes again, I saw him uncross his arms and ank
pushed away from the door and my body went tense.

“You can come here or I can come get you,” he stated.

looking “I—” I started to say, but didn’t move. Apparently my non-mo
was answer enough for Mace. His long legs took him across the roo
e’s liketime. He got close, leaned in and his hand grabbed mine. His hold f
e them.yanked me out of my seat to my feet and pulled me out of the room.

“Oh lordy,” I heard Stevie say from behind me.

“Sugar, that ain’t the *half* of it,” Daisy added, and she sounded exc
Shitsofuckit!

s Mace Mace took me through the house and back to the room we’d sle
mb, his didn’t protest or struggle. So, he heard. Maybe a little, maybe a lot. So
1 me. Nothing had changed.

Right?

He hauled me in the room, stopped, closed the door and turned
me. His hand holding mine drew me near, nearer, *nearer*. He drop

hand and both of his came to my waist. They slid around to my back started to pull me close.

Okay, it was safe to say something definitely had changed.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice breathy, my brain reeling from my decision not to protest or struggle. I had my head tipped back and was staring at his face.

he was

His eyes weren't blank but broody. They were intense and active.

I put my hands on his chest and he stopped pulling me close. I realized this was mainly because he couldn't get me closer without me moving my hands. Our bodies were pressed together, Mace looking down at me from a height, six inches taller than me. This, for your information, was another one of those seven hundred, twenty-five thousand things I missed most about him being so tall. Since I was also tall, it made me feel petite and protective.

n in no

I was beginning to find it hard to breathe.

firm, he

“You remember I told you after all of this was over, we gotta talk.” I asked.

I nodded. For some reason (okay, it was that look in his eyes, he'd looked at me like that, not even when we were together), I was afraid to speak.

pt in. I

“We're not gonna wait 'til this is over. We're gonna talk now.”

o what?

Okay, not good. All of a sudden, I didn't want to get this over with.

I found my voice. “I'm not sure I want to talk.”

“That's fine. I'll do the talking.”

back to

Effing hell.

ped my

“I'm not sure I want that, either,” I tried.

and he He dipped his head and his face got closer. “Sorry, Kitten. Enough
has been wasted.”

Oh dear.

hinking I didn’t like the sound of *that*.

nd was I couldn’t stop him. That much I knew. When Mace wanted something
Mace got it. I learned that early in our relationship. Like, the first date
he ended up spending the night, being the first and only guy I’d ever
figured who I’d slept with on the first date.

ing my However, thinking positively, maybe I could stall for long enough
rom hismy head together.

other of “Before you start, tell me how much you heard,” I demanded.

ut him: He didn’t even try to screw with me. He just told me flat out, “All
ected.

Shit!

lk?” he “What’s the first thing you heard?” I didn’t know why I asked. Not
form of self-punishment for being such an effing idiot and giving in
making me spill.

d never “The first thing I heard was, ‘Hello? Stella? Are you in the room?’”
fraid to

Yep, he heard all of it.

I must remind you, my luck was not just shitty luck. It was *super*
luck.

“It doesn’t change anything,” I told him.

“It changes everything, but then, everything changed when you
Hank Williams to me.”

Not this again!

gh time “Mace, I’m not going to say it again. I didn’t sing Hank to you.”

“Kitten, the place was packed, and still, you and I were the only that room.”

Sheesh.

omething, “Please, let me go,” I asked, trying a different tactic.

e when “I didn’t leave you because you needed me.” Mace saw through r
r dated tactic and didn’t think much of it.

I blinked. It felt like it took two days for me to blink. I did it in sl
1 to get When my eyes were back to open they were a whole lot wider.

“Excuse me?”

“It wasn’t about you.”

of it.”

Ah, so it was this game now.

My lips made a soft noise that sounded like, “poof.”

aybe a
to Ally

Then I said, “That’s what they all say.”

“It wasn’t.”

„

“So it wasn’t me, it was you?”

“No. It was the men who watched you onstage, the ones I’d see
gig. Drinkin’ beer and adjusting their crotches and likely goin’ ho
r shitty jackin’ off, thinking of you singing ‘Black Velvet.’”

“Right.” I sounded sarcastic because I meant to.

His face got closer. “Yeah. That’s right. Listen to me, Stella. It
u sang about you. I’m not the kind of man who wants other men jackin’ of
woman. I’m also not the kind of man who wants to share her with fou
guys.”

My body went solid and my hands pressed against his chest. “ones in cheated on you!”

“Yeah you did. Every time you let me take a call from Buzz or Pong or Leo.”

Okay. Shit. Well.

ny new Um.

I had nothing to say to that because in a weird way he wasn't wrong-mo. He felt my body relax. He knew he scored a point and he took advantage pressing closer, his face dipping lower, coming to a stop an inch from me.

“I knew when I got into it with you that I wouldn't be the center of the universe. I was fine with that. I just didn't know I'd be a satellite.”

At his words, my body did an involuntary jerk.

I hated it that he thought that. I shouldn't hate it since I was over here and he was there. I did.

“You weren't a satellite,” I whispered.

“I know that now, after hearin' what you said in the kitchen. I know it then.” His arms came from around me and his hands went to the side of my neck, his thumbs pressing into the undersides of my jaw to my head further back to look at him. “Kitten,” he said softly, “you should have told me.”

Hang on a second here.

wasn't Was this happening?

f to his And if it was, how was this happening? Why was this happening?

or other He broke up with me!

I never “You said I was needy,” I accused on a toss of my hair, which, f
information, did nothing to dislodge his hands.

Hugo or “I said your band was needy,” he contradicted.

“You did not,” I contradicted right back.

g. “I did. You heard it the way you wanted to hear it. I hate to break
you, but Stella Gunn is *not* the Blue Moon Gypsies. There’s you and
the band. Babe, you gotta find where one ends and the other begins.”

antage, He was right. I knew he was right. I’d been worried about that for
mine. time.

of your But I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“You have no right to speak to me this way,” I snapped.

“I do.”

him, but “And just how do you figure that?”

“Because the minute you sang the word ‘whippoorwill’ a coupla
ago, your eyes locked on mine, you became my woman again.”

I didn’t I jerked my neck away and took a step back.

o either Erm, *excuse me*?

tilt my “I did not!” I flashed.

ld have “I didn’t know it at the time. Maybe didn’t want to know it. I de
fought it. But I gotta say, lookin’ back, you did.”

“I most certainly *did not!*” I yelled.

He grinned. “Yeah, Kitten, you did.”

I could not believe this was happening. I could also not believe
grinning about it.

or your He kept talking. "It hit me last night after I told you Lindsey murdered. Your face...fuck." I watched his eyes grow soft, a look I knew well, but this look was magnified, like, by a million, and I experienced a different kind of gut kick. "I knew then we weren't done, definitely not." Then the bullets were flying around you and in that instant I became sure of this to
there's "Shut up!" I yelled, not being nice nor meaning to be nice, and I wish I could put my hands over my ears, but thinking maybe that was a juvenile.

a long He didn't shut up. "I thought I'd wait until the Sid business was over, but after what I heard in the kitchen I'm not waiting."

"I have a boyfriend!" I was still yelling.

I was getting panicky, somewhat desperate and now kind of lying. I never describe Eric as my boyfriend. I didn't know what he was, he wasn't my boyfriend. I hadn't even slept with him. It had been a long monthsspell. I hadn't slept with anyone since Mace.

Mace kept grinning. "You'll have to find a way to let him down eventually." Was he for real?

"Oh my God! You didn't just say that."

"Yeah, I did." He reached forward, grabbed my hips and pulled me against him again. I pushed back. He ignored this and kept talking. "I've been thinkin' and I decided we should stay at your place. Juno's used to miss your big bed."

Wait a second, what was going on here?

he was "Do you think...?" For some reason my voice was raspy, so I cleared my throat. "Do you think we're getting back together?"

'd been "Getting? No," Mace answered, then continued, "Back together? Y
new too Nope, he was definitely not for real.

enced a This was a dream, but I couldn't tell yet if it was a good dream c
ot over. dream. I was going with bad dream since I knew how it was likely to e
ire."

ishing I "You jerk!" I shouted.

tad too He grinned.

ver, but "Stop grinning at me. We are *not* back together!"

For your information, yes, I was still shouting.

"Give me one good reason why we shouldn't get back together,"
demanded.

ing. I'd I looked at the ceiling and replied, really bitchy, "Oh, I don't
but he Then I looked back at him and continued, "You broke up with me, br
ong dry heart, left me alone to put my life back together without you in it.
have. My life was just fine until you got me shot at. I'm not goin
sy." Mace. Nunh-unh. No way."

His grin died when I mentioned the "getting shot at" bit.

Then he asked me, "If your life was just fine, why were you singin
about how lonesome you were?"

l me to "It's just a song, Mace."

re been "Bullshit," he clipped, impatient with my lying. "Stella, you t
it and I yourself, none of the songs you sing are just songs."

Okay, he had me there. I couldn't keep fighting that point. I'd de
lose.
ired my

"What about when you can't take my groupies anymore? When
fed up with the band? What then, Mace? You leave again? Or you ask

es.” leave the band? Which one would work for you? Because neither those options works for me. Either way, I lose something important to

r a bad “So I’m important to you?”

nd. Effing hell. I walked right into that one. Hell, I’d set *myself* up into that one.

I yanked hard and pulled away from him again.

“You were,” I told him. “I’m over it now. My point was—”

I stopped talking because his hand shot out, his fingers cupped the of my head and he pulled me forward. He leaned into me so close I could his breath on my lips and I could see nothing but his eyes.

know.” “This conversation is finished,” he announced, and my eyes got oke my another demonstration of his sheer arrogance. “I fucked up and hurt Now I won’t happen again.” His fingers tensed around my head and his de dropped low. “I promise you, Kitten, it won’t happen again. You don’t g back, me now, but I’ll make it so you will. You say you can’t forgive me, find a way to change your mind.”

I was beginning to get scared. If I was being honest, I was a shooting straight toward terrified.

“Mace—”

He talked through me saying his name. “But you didn’t open up to old me I didn’t know how you felt, what I had and what I’d leave behind. That happen again either.”

definitely “Okay, my new point is, regardless of all that, you *did* leave me b

I snapped, pulling my ragged desperation close and pushing against his

you get “It won’t happen again,” he repeated, and he sounded sure.

k me to

one of me.” I was *not* sure. “You’re right, because we aren’t getting back together.”

“Yeah, we are.”

“Mace, we are *not*.”

to walk “Kitten, it’s done.” Now he sounded even *more* sure!

“It isn’t!” I shouted.

His eyes went even more intense, more alert and he looked...

Oh effing hell, he looked like he looked right before he’d make his way back to kiss me with the intent of bedding me—energized, aroused and definitely hot.

I held my breath.

“You challenging me?” he murmured.

I had the distinct feeling I’d painted myself into a corner.

Okay, screw the paint job, Stella Gunn, just exit the effing room! I advised.

“No. I’m not challenging you. I’m just saying—”

He cut me off, “Challenge accepted.”

Shitsofuckit!

“Mace—”

His fingers tensed, bringing my face even closer, so close, his mouth nearly on mine.

I stopped breathing.

“Remember, Kitten...” he started.

Effing hell, I could feel his lips moving against mine.

And I liked it.

her.”

“What?” I bit off.

I watched his eyes smile. “I always win.”

s move

finitely,

ly brain

uth was

“What?” I bit off.

I watched his eyes smile. “I always win.”

FOUR



IT'S DECIDED

Mace

“So, it’s decided,” Lee said.

It was late.

The Nightingale Men were in the down room at the Night Investigations offices with Eddie, Hank, Marcus Sloan, Sergeant Moses, Lieutenant Malcolm Nightingale (Lee’s dad) and Lieutenant Savage (Indy’s dad).

“It’s decided,” Eddie agreed.

Kai “Mace” Mason was sitting on a chair pulled in from the control room. Mace leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, linked his fingers, and looked at his boots.

Hector was pissed. Mace didn’t even have to look at him to know he was pissed.

Then again, Hector didn’t have a woman who was targeted for her blood and only Mace had a woman whose blood had already been spilled.

Mace closed his eyes on that thought and the only thing he could see was Stella’s thigh, her smooth, soft skin gaping open, wet and bloody.

He opened his eyes again.

“Mace,” Lee called.

Mace’s head came up. When his attention had been captured, it was Lee who spoke but Lee’s father.

“You worked hard on this, son. You ’n’ Hank ’n’ Eddie got close now the girls are on the line. There’s no shame in what we’re doing,” Malcolm told Mace.

Mace nodded. He knew that. He didn’t feel shame.

He felt relief.

He hadn’t slept the night before. If he closed his eyes his brain gave him three options. The first, seeing Stella’s wound. The second, watch her cover her head when bullets were flying around her. The third, the realization that she was bleeding in the back seat and tried to tell him, but he couldn’t listen.

It would seem he hadn’t paid much attention to Stella and her father when they were together he’d paid a great deal.

Last night, instead of sleeping, he just lay behind her, listening to her breathe and thinking that sound was sweeter than any song he’d ever heard her sing. And his Stella had a beautiful voice. He’d never heard better.

“You got something on your mind?” Lee asked.

“Yeah,” Mace replied.

“Now’s the time to talk about it,” Lee told him.

Mace didn’t speak. He wasn’t big on talking through his feelings.

“She’s tough,” Luke threw in, going direct to the heart of the matter.

Mace’s eyes moved to Luke and he went to the heart of the matter. “Last night, she got shot and a friend of hers got her brains blown out.”

All the men in the room were silent. All the men in the room knew Mace knew better than anyone what it felt like to have someone you thought was about to be murdered. Not just murdered, but their brains splattered by a bullet.

The difference between Stella and Mace was that Mace had actually been there to see his sister's head explode.

"You're gonna have to stick to her," Tom advised.

Mace nodded.

"You two solid?" Vance asked.

"I'm workin' on it," Mace told Vance.

Vance grinned. "By my count, it takes about two weeks to really get 'em down."

Mace shook his head in amusement. Vance was referring to Lee's, Eddie's, Hank's and Luke's wild, dangerous and intense conversations with Jules, Indy, Jet, Roxie and Ava.

"I been noticin' that," Mace replied.

"We're agreed here, Mace." Hank cut into the lightening atmosphere. Hank knew Mace, and Hank didn't feel like joking.

Mace's eyes sliced to Hank. "I'm aware of that."

"You go maverick, seeking retribution for what they did to Stella Lindsey—" Hank went on.

"Going maverick means she's on the line," Mace interrupted Hank.

"Yeah," Hank answered.

"That's not gonna happen," Mace finished, and everyone could hear the words meant every word.

ew that Lee's voice cut through the tension. "We got three unsecure hon
u cared Vance and Monty haven't finished with the surveillance equipment an
let. systems yet. You got a Rock Chick, tonight you stay at The Castle."

ly been After Lee issued his order, Luke lifted his chin. Hank nodded
sighed. Vance smiled at his feet. Mace looked down at his boots.

"Get good rest. This isn't over until the sit down with Sid," Tom ac
Hector, Ike, Bobby, Darius, Monty and Matt took off. Bobby ar
had girlfriends, Monty, a wife and five kids. All of them for some
hadn't been targeted the night before, but all were now sleeping whil
watched by Brody in the control room.

ly wear Lee approached Mace.

his and "You got something else you wanna talk about?" Lee asked.

irtships "Nope," Mace answered.

"After your sister, this is cutting close to the bone," Eddie put in,
up on one side.

sphere. "That bone's exposed, has been for a long time. Nothing cuts clo
anymore," Mace responded.

"It's different when she gets under your skin." Hank joined the

lla and "She's under your skin, isn't she?"

"Has been awhile," Mace replied.

"Fuck, you're screwed." Vance came around the other side.

"Have been that way awhile too. Around about the minute she tur
tell he brown eyes on me," Mace explained.

"The eyes? I thought you'd go for—" Luke came up to the me
behind.

nes and “Luke,” Lee cut him off in a warning tone.

d alarm Luke half-grinned. “I was gonna say the voice. That sexy, throaty
Shit.”

. Eddie “Gotta admit to likin’ the voice,” Eddie muttered in agreement.

lded. “I fucked it up with her,” Mace told them, indulging an ex
unusual moment of sharing.

id Matt Luke’s hand came to Mace, his fingers tightening around Mace
reason where it met his shoulder. The two men’s eyes locked.

e being “You’ll sort it,” Luke said.

Luke was right, he would.



THEY ALL DROVE company Explorers to The Castle, Hank and Eddie
with Lee. The Ford Explorers in Nightingale Investigations garage v
comingkitted with tracking devices, communication equipment and bull
windows.

se to it Lee’s overhead was a bitch.

Marcus was already there when they arrived.

group. Mace grabbed the workout bag he’d packed with his clothes and a
of shit he took from Stella’s place when he’d let Vance in to start in
the cameras (he’d never given back her key; she’d never asked for its
and he went straight to Stella.

ned her She was asleep on her side just like last night. Smack in the middle
bed, her long, dark-brown hair all over the pillows and falling in her fa
head was tilted forward, her face resting on one of her hands. The ot
n from was thrown out in front of her, palm up.

She was out, didn't even move when he came in. Likely she'd take voice killers. She wasn't a particularly light sleeper, but when they were together she'd always woken up when he got home.

Juno rushed him. Mace dropped the bag, sat on the side of the bed and tremulously rubbed the big dog down from ears to rump.

"Lie down," he murmured when he was done.

Juno licked his hand, trotted back to the other side of the bed and his neck with a groan.

Mace pulled off his boots and clothes and slid in bed behind Stella. He fitted his body to hers, wrapped his arm around her middle and pulled her tight against him.

Then he listened to her breathe until he finally fell asleep.

They were all
leakproof



Stella

MACE WAS THERE AGAIN when I woke up in the morning, his hand pressed the length of my back. I was mostly on my side and belly, my head cocked deep, and even Mace's leg was cocked the length of mine.

Yep, that was Mace. Maximum physical contact.

Effing hell.

I didn't move. I needed a battle plan to get out of bed that didn't involve me turning around and kneeing him in a place which would make it possible for him to sire children. I was pissed at him, but not enough to forget that the world would be a poorer place without Mini-Maces roaming it one day.

For your information, the day before had been hectic, even though I didn't leave the house.

en pain First, a lady named Shirleen showed up. She was black, had beauti
ogethera shade darker than mocha and the wildest Afro I'd ever seen. Sl
shouting "oowee" and yelling at different Rock Chicks, for some reas
ed andas all hell that no one had called her to be a part of the action.

Then a guy named Tex arrived. He was enormous, had blond h
turning to gray and a thick russet beard. He was louder than Shirle
even angrier that no one called when bullets were flying. He kept b
settled "Jesus Jones," and for some bizarre reason he referred to Jet as "Loopy

Then Duke showed. I knew Duke. He worked for Indy at th
lla. He bookstore-slash-coffee house she owned called Fortnum's. I hadn
led her there in ages. Tex apparently worked there now too, and by all accour
there were many of them) he was the best barista in the Rocky Mounta

Duke was a Harley guy. Long gray hair in a braid, thick gray
always wearing a black leather vest over a Harley shirt and a roll
bandana around his forehead. He was gruff with a velvet-and-stor
d body Elliott voice, but he was a good guy. He walked in, counted heads, m
top leg "Shee-it, we're all fucked," and walked out again, not to return.

Then a big black man strolled in. He scanned the room and his e
me.

He looked at Shirleen and stated, "You owe me fifty bucks. I tol
includewould be the Hawaiian."

lifficult My eyes went to Ava.

that the "They had a bet to see which Hot Bunch Boy would get picked c
7. by a Rock Chick," Ava explained.

ugh we A bet?

These people *bet* on this shit?

ful skin Effing hell.

he kept “His name is Mace, you jackass,” Shirleen shot back.

on mad “I try not to learn their names. If I know their names, means I know
and if I know them, I gotta go to their funerals when they get their
air just blown to shit,” Smithie returned.

en and I stopped breathing.

ooming “That’s Smithie,” Jet whispered to me. “He seems tough, but
/ Loo.” actually a very caring person.”

ie used Right.

’t been “Smithie! A little sensitivity, if you don’t mind,” Roxie warned, h
its (and sliding to me.

beard, Smithie’s eyes came back to me. “Yeah, heard you got shot
ed, redwound. Big deal. These bitches seen worse.”

ie Sam Oh my God!

uttered, Were these people insane?

“Stop calling us bitches!” Ally snapped.

eyes hit “Crazy white bitches, the lot of you. ’Cept you.” He nodded at S

“You’re a crazy black bitch. Fuck,” Smithie finished. He walked out
l you it Shirleen could lose her mind, like she looked like she was about to do.

“He was just here to see if we were all right,” Indy assured me.

I was beginning to think the whole bunch of them were beyond
off next They were certifiable.

Then Annette showed. She was Roxie’s best friend, just moved to
from Chicago and about to open her new head shop called “Head West
already had one in Chicago, now re-christened “Head East.”

“Yo bitches!” she shouted when she arrived.

Yep, these people were certifiable.

“Okay, let me get this straight.” Annette stood in the doorway staring at them, “First, you all meet Roxie...now that’s *after* Indy got kidnapped a couple of times, shot at and car bombs were exploding. And *after* Jet got kidnapped a couple of times and almost raped. Then came Roxie, and she got kidnapped around when Roxie was assaulted at a haunted house and held hostage at a society party after, of course, she got kidnapped. I leave and new girl starts a vigilante war against drug dealers and ends up in ICU with two holes in her. Then new *new* girl Ava survives a drive-by, gets kidnapped repeatedly and ends up on a wild ride, exiting a wrecked car right before it explodes. Now *all of you* are getting shot at...at the same time?”

“That about sums it up,” Ally told her.

“Denver is cah-ray-zee,” Annette announced. “I love this fuckin’ place. Totally certifiable.”

“Oh my God!” Annette screamed making me jump and scaring the hell out of me. Her eyes were locked on something across the street. “You got a PlayStation 3? I’m going out right now and getting Guitar Hero.”

Off she went to get Guitar Hero, and when she came back we all went around playing Guitar Hero, sometimes two of us at a time.

Now I could stand in front of a heaving crowd of hundreds of people playing Ram Jam’s “Black Betty.” What I could *not* do was stand in front of a living room with a toy guitar in my hands and get through the level in Denver Boston’s “More Than a Feeling” on beginner level, which meant I had to master three buttons, without getting “booed off the stage.”

What was up with *that*?

Later, Daisy sent one of the be-suited members of the big gun-totin' crew out to get the items on a grocery list I wrote. Jules's uncle Nick came over after he finished work and he helped me as I made herb-buttered potatoes wrapped in puff pastry, potatoes dauphenois with cheese and asparagus. None of the Rock Chicks offered culinary assistance, which was cool because it meant Nick and I could get to know each other and he'd be a certified cook too.

"They may all be kooks," Nick said, "but they're lovable."

Sheesh.

Most everyone loved the food. (Annette: "You might be shit at Guitar Hero, but your cooking is *phat*.") Tex declared our meal "fantastic" and went out and got himself takeout chicken burritos (smothered with lettuce and cheese) from El Tejado.

When Tex got back we all played more Guitar Hero.

By that time my hip hurt, like, a lot.

Indy saw the pain pinching at my mouth and leaned into me. "Let me see!" and said if I didn't hear from him, we'd be staying here tonight."

This was not good news. I really wanted to go home. However, I wanted my heart to be beating, my lungs to be working, my blood flowing through my veins and my brain to be functioning a lot more than it was. Daisy wanted to go home. Therefore I decided against throwing a hissy fit and going home and likely getting murdered on my way there.

I took the last two pain killers the doctor gave me and Juno and I came home.

For your information, none of the Rock Chicks asked me about my

tête with Mace, mainly because they heard my side of it (as I'd been sleeping and they'd been eavesdropping).

This brought me up to now.

In bed. Again. With Mace.

I moved cautiously forward hoping he wouldn't notice.

His arm got tight.

Yep, he noticed.

"Mace, let me go."

He didn't let me go.

He buried his face in my hair and murmured in a rough, tired, deep voice, "Christ, I feel like I've had ten minutes of sleep."

This was a toughie. Back in the day (as in, the day before yesterday), I would have barred the door and taken down anyone who tried to disturb Mace's rest unless, of course, they were a member of my band.

But that was the day before yesterday.

"Mace, let me go," I repeated.

His chin moved my hair.

"You still use the same shampoo," he said against the skin at the back of my neck.

"Mace—"

"Smells like mint."

Oh lordy be.

"Mace, I need to get up and see to Juno."

"I wanna see your wound."

houting Why on earth would he want to do that?

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “Daisy gave me some ointment supposed to make it heal and help the scarring. She cleaned it, treated it, then she redressed it. It’s fine.”

“I wanna see it.”

“It’s fine.”

His arm got a fraction tighter. “I’m the reason it’s there, Kitten. I wanna see it.”

What could I say to that?

o voice, Except nothing.

So I said nothing.

ay), if I I lay there awhile, my new plan being if Mace was exhausted, if I s
o dared yapping, he’d probably fall back to sleep. When he did, I’d get up and
nd. hell out of there.

This plan was shit, therefore it failed.

Once I thought he was asleep I tried moving away again and his arm got
even tighter.

back of “Mace—”

“Stella—”

Effing, effing, hell.

“I want to talk to Buzz,” I said. I didn’t know why (well, I knew because I wanted to talk to Buzz).

His body went still for a beat then he rolled away.

I took that opportunity to attempt an escape. I was sitting on the

ready to push myself up, when one of Mace's arms went around my
: that's stalling my progress. His other hand came up in front of me. It was
d it and my phone.

I pulled in a breath and I took the phone.

"Thanks," I whispered.

He moved as I flipped it open and scrolled down to Buzz. I could
l, and I up because he kept his arm around me. He straddled me on a diagonal
one long thigh the length of mine, foot on the floor, his other leg stretched
beside me on the bed.

Juno was up and nuzzling the both of us, in a tizzy of excitement
knowing who to allow to lavish affection on her. I hit the go button
Buzz, put the phone to my ear and scratched Juno's head. Mace mo
stopped hair off my shoulder and rested his chin there.

get the I closed my eyes trying not to feel how good that felt.

"Stella Bella," I heard in my ear.

arm got "Hey, Buzz," I said gently. "How you doin'?"

"Not good, Stell." The words were an understatement, which for
was a miracle. Let's just say Buzz could be dramatic.

"I figured that," I replied, still using my gentle voice.

Mace pressed closer to my back.

I went on, trying to ignore Mace and how good it felt, his strong p
w why, surrounding me (another one of the seven hundred, twenty-five thousand
things I missed about him most of all, FYI), "I wish there was someone
could do."

re side, "Nothin' to do. You got your own worries anyway. Mace told u

7 waist, band meeting yesterday.”

holding Erm, excuse me?

My back went straight and I didn't have to ignore how good M
anymore.

“The band meeting?” I asked, my gentle voice not so gentle anymo
In't get Mace's arm tensed.

al with “Floyd called an emergency meeting. Mace came with him, told t
hed out was goin' on,” Buzz answered.

I turned narrowed eyes to Mace. His head came up from my shoul
ent, not took one look at me and his eyebrows went up.

to call Buzz kept talking in my ear. “At least it's good you two ar
ved the together.”

My mouth dropped open and my eyes popped out.

Mace did a heavy sigh.

I looked away.

or Buzz “Who told you we were back together?” I asked.

“Mace did, yesterday,” Buzz answered.

Okay, I was going to *kill* Mace. I just hoped my jury was made up
of jilted women, but at that moment I was happy to do my time.

resence The bastard!

ousand “We are not—” I started to tell Buzz, but he interrupted me.

ething I “Linnie would have been beside herself with fuckin' glee. She lov
two together. Think she was more upset when you two broke it off th
s at the were.”

I doubted that.

I again had no way to respond. It was better to think of Linnie Mace felt herself with glee than lying in a bed with half her head blown off.

Buzz finished up. “Keep safe. Don’t worry about me or the band here. We’ll be okay.”

I doubted that too.

“Buzz, I...um...” I didn’t know what to say. What *could* you say if you need anything?” I finished lamely.

“Linnie’s parents are coming in this morning. They’re packing up everything. I’ll let Mace know what’s goin’ on.”

“You’ll let Mace know?” I asked. My eyes went back to narrow, but this was a different kind of narrowed. A *dangerous* kind of narrowed.

Juno caught my look, read my look, knew my look, sat on her haunches and woofed a “What now?” doggie woof.

“Yeah, he told us you were incommunicado and we should talk to you about it. We’re cool.”

Erm, ex-kah-use *me*?

mostly “Buzz—”

“Later, Stella Bella.”

Disconnect.

I flipped the phone shut. I took a deep breath. Then I wondered what it would be like to be mellow, laidback, I-don’t-have-time-to-be-pissed-off Stella Bella disappeared to.

can you

I tossed the phone aside, shot from the bed breaking free from my arm and turned on him.

“You held a band meeting,” I accused.

beside Mace’s leg on the bed came down so he was in a full sitting position. His elbows went to his knees, his hands dangling between them, and he tilted his head back to look up at me.

In keeping the information flowing, Mace often sat like this. That was Mace’s way. For some weird reason, I always found it sexy. Now it was irritating.

“Stella—”

planning “With *my* band,” I went on.

“Stella—”

red and “Without *me*,” I kept at it.

Mace decided to keep silent.

doggie You should also know Mace often fell silent when I was in rant mode. Juno decided to woof then pant, unsure what this turn of events meant through her imminent bathroom break.

“Who happens to be the leader of the band,” I reminded him.

Mace kept his silence.

“You told them to communicate with me through you.” I was on a mission.

Mace still didn’t speak.

I waited. Mace did too.

here the I was wearing nothing but a white tank top Daisy gave me and my
Gunn panties. Mace was wearing nothing but light-blue boxer shorts. I ignored the state of our undress and his utterly fantastic body and put my hands on Mace’s hips.

Mace didn't move.

on. His I lost patience.

lted his “*How dare you come between me and my band!*” I shouted.

He started to push off the bed and I don't know what came o
his was (maybe temporary certifiable insanity seeping into my pores after a d
I found the Rock Chicks). I launched myself at him.

Full body.

I hit him in the chest. This surprised him and he took my weight
grunt. My head connected with his chin, which was kind of painful,
arms went around me. We fell back onto the bed, me landing on Mace

Why I decided to wrestle with Mace, both of us barely clothed at
pull-out bed, would forever remain a mystery for the ages.

ode. But wrestle with Mace I did.

neant to We rolled, we tussled. The bed creaked loudly and frightening
rolled back. We tussled some more. The bed creaked louder and
frighteningly and Juno woofed, now thoroughly confused about the
state of affairs.

roll. I tried to gain the upper hand, an impossible feat. Mace's long
wrapped around my wrists and mostly we tested each other's streng
me losing.

Mace got on top, his face in my face.

y white His was angry and he clipped, “Damn it, Stella, stop. You're gor
red the your stitches.”

on my “Piss off,” I shot back, not caring about my stitches in the th
undeniable temporary insanity.

I pushed off with my foot and rolled him again.

He rolled me back. We tussled some more.

Looking back, it wasn't about the band (not totally). It was about
I was pissed at him for leaving me. Then being pissed at the way he came
my life. And taking out on him (even though it wasn't his fault) the fact
was pissed because Linnie was dead and I was shot. Not to mention
wanting me back and me knowing that couldn't happen because I couldn't
live through him walking out on me again.

He somehow got on top with his hips between my legs and my
pinned above my head.

I was defeated. I knew it and so did he.

We stared at each other, both breathing heavily. Mace, I would
later, from attempting to hold back, knowing if he used his full strength
hurt me. Me, I knew at the time, because I gave it everything I had.

Eyes locked, we just panted in each other's faces.

Face still angry, that anger warring with something a whole lot different
Mace gritted through his teeth, "Christ, I forgot how fucking good your
fingers when you're beneath me."

At his words, something shot through me—an electrical current vibrating
through every nerve and ending with a sizzle.

Then, do not ask me why, still deep in my insanity, I lifted my
pressed my lips against his and kissed him.

Without hesitation, his head slanted and he kissed me back,
mouthed, wet and deep.

Oh dear.

I forgot how good a kisser Mace was.

We then tussled a different way. He let go of my wrists and our bodies started bumping into each other's as they moved, mine over the mus-
back in his back, his sides, his chest, my fingers sliding up his neck and into his
ct that I His up my sides, in the tank. He tilted up his abs and ran his hand along
on him belly up to cup my breast, sliding his thumb across my nipple.

couldn't Lordy be.

I moaned into his mouth.

7 hands It didn't take long for it to get out of control, mainly because it had
out of control since I threw myself bodily at him—a weird, wild form of
was so turned on I was ready. Beyond ready. I'd been waiting a year to
realize The feel of his mouth on mine, his sleek skin and hard muscle under
with he'd fingers, the taste of him, the smell of him, his touch, his weight.

I started to tug down my own panties. Mace rolled to the side. I lifted
knees and he took over, yanking my underwear down my calves, over my
ankles and tossing them away. He rolled to his back, bucked his hips, and
fferent, off his boxers, and tossed them in the direction of my panties. Then he
rou feel back to me, sliding between my opened legs. His hands came behind
knees, he pulled them high and in one smooth, long, hard stroke, he
ibrating into me.

It felt *great*.

y head,

“Harder,” I demanded, my voice low, my arms wrapping around his

open-

“No, Kitten, I'll hurt you,” he replied, his voice rough, up on his chest
his fingers sifting into my hair at the sides of my head, his thrusts firm
fantastic but controlled.

I kissed him. He took over the kiss, but I got what I wanted. His

slipped and he slammed into me harder.

“Yes,” I breathed when our mouths disengaged.

One of his hands went between us, and right where I needed it, his fingers honed in. He pressed deep, circled, pressed deeper, circled more.

I felt it. It was coming.

My mouth against his, I caught my breath, holding back, and whispered, “Mace, I’m—”

“Kitten, let it go.”

I let it go.

I came, hard and overpowering, my arms tightened around his thighs pressed into his sides, his mouth absorbed my moans under my overwhelmed me.

No other way to describe it. It was beautiful. It had always been beautiful.

Always.

I took his final strokes, my orgasm still tingling, my head turned to the side. His face was in my neck, his breathing was ragged. I turned my head to look at him. His head came up and his eyes caught mine. They were hot and aroused and intense, and I felt like I was the center of the fucking universe.

Man, he had great eyes.

I slid my fingers into the back of his hair, lifted my head and pressed my open mouth against his, my other hand going to his jaw. The moment I touched his face, he lost control and groaned against my lips.

For some reason, that was even more beautiful.

We were still both breathing heavily, coming down, but he

immediately after he was done, taking me with him, resting me on my unwounded side, my leg curved around his waist.

My finger I pressed my face in his throat and held on to him tightly while his hand moved lightly across my back and I made intermittent post-Mace orgasm “mms” in the back of my throat. I never did “the purr” for anyone else, but then no one had given me an earth-shattering orgasm like Mace then I

We caught our breath and I tried to catch a thought, but found I couldn't. All I wanted was for time to stop and me and Mace to be there, on that pull-out couch, locked together forever.

Before I had a chance to recover, a chance to remember this was why, and more importantly why, his hand slid down my side to my waist, curled around my hip and then gently pulled my leg from around him. He moved away, down the bed and coming up on his forearm.

Beautiful. I lay there, head on the bed, arms cocked and resting in front of me, staring unseeing as I felt his fingers carefully pull the dressing away from the wound. I kept my head to the bed, but I tilted my chin down to watch his face. My eyes focused on Mace and I watched as he looked at the wound, his lips getting tight.

The entire Then...

No joke.

He gently replaced the dressing, pressing down the tape at its edges.

His head bent to it.

And light as a whisper, he kissed me there.

I stopped breathing.

Effing, effing, hell, hell, *hell*.

I rolled

on my He came back to me, his arms moving around me, one hand sliding
my bottom, the other arm wrapping around my waist.

s hands He looked me in the eyes and said softly, "I'm guessin' this doesn't
made-I've won."

anyone My sanity instantly returned, just as quickly as it fled.
ce did.

I retorted, all bitchy (seriously, in my defense, I mean, *hello*, he brought
couldn't heart once already, temporary insanity was one thing, but taking his
Daisy's was just plain loco), "This doesn't mean anything. As far as I'm concerned
this didn't even *happen*."

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over my fortunate turn of events.

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from my thought." He touched my lips with his, pulled his head back a fraction
ch him. still smiling, he finished, "Good to know you're not gonna take the full
his jaw it, babe."

Now what the hell did *that* mean?

No, no. I didn't want to know.

.

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His mouth came to mine, lips still turned up in a sexy smile. His eyes open, his gaze soft as it locked on mine.

I found I was holding my breath when he murmured, "That's what I thought." He touched my lips with his, pulled his head back a fraction, and still smiling, he finished, "Good to know you're not gonna take the fun out of it, babe."

Now what the hell did *that* mean?

No, no. I didn't want to know.

FIVE



I GET IT

Indy

“Come back to bed,” Lee said.

I looked away from the window to see Lee on his side, hand, in bed, the sheet down to his waist. I knew he was naked under the sheet and I knew what that naked looked like.

At the thought of it, I started to feel warm all over.

Hmm.

I walked to the bed and sat on the side.

“I don’t like it,” I told him.

“I don’t care. It’s decided,” he replied.

Boy, he was bossy. After all our time together, nearly a year, I had been able to get the bossy out of him. It was likely I never would. It was likely I would never stop trying.

I made another attempt. “Maybe we should talk—”

He moved. Quickly.

Hands at my waist, he twisted, taking me over his body, rolling us to the other side and I ended up on my back, Lee mostly on top of me.

“It’s decided,” he repeated.

“You didn’t ask—” I started.

“Listen to me, honey,” he said softly, but his voice was determined. “The choice of puttin’ on a fuckin’ suit in a coupla weeks in order to m at the end of an aisle or maybe puttin’ on a suit to stand by your coffin the first.”

Okay, he had a point there. I picked the first too.

“How do the other boys feel about this decision?” I asked.

“Ecstatic. None of us particularly enjoyed the shot at, kidnapped, head inportions of the Rock Chick Experience the first time around. We’re n der theup for a repeat performance.”

Okay, he had a point there too.

“All right,” I said.

At my unusually easy capitulation, he smiled at me.

I stared.

He had a *great* smile. After a lifetime of witnessing that smile (I hadn’t had—his parents were best friends with my parents, I’d known him was born) I was still ready for another lifetime.

His mouth went to my neck. A shiver ran across my skin.

“I still can’t believe you’re gonna give up,” I whispered, and I c believe it because it was unbelievable. Lee Nightingale was not a m gave up.

both to “It’s not givin’ up,” he murmured against my neck, his mouth mo to my jaw. “What it is is assessing priorities and not takin’ any chance:

I had to admit, it was nice to know I was “a priority.”

Still.

“But—”

l. “I got His mouth came to mine. “Shut up.”
eet you My eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me to shut up.”
l. I pick His chocolate-brown eyes got melty and I saw smile crinkles form
sides.

“All right,” he agreed.

Then he kissed me and I shut up.

beat up



ot fired LEE and I walked into Daisy’s big room. There were several boxes of
LaMar’s donuts open and waiting. Smithie was sitting in a chair, eating a
jelly donut and talking to Jules, who was drinking coffee and looking at me.

“Morning sickness?” I asked Jules.

“I’m in my fourth month and it’s sticking with me,” she replied with a
grimace. “Can’t keep anything down until at least noon. Daisy’s brat
which I yesterday...not fun re-experiencing *that*.”

since I “Fuck! Don’t talk about pukin’ while I’m eatin’ a jelly donut,” Jules
snapped.

“Sorry, Smithie,” Jules returned on a small smile.

ouldn’t “Where is everyone? We’re supposed to have a morning meeting,
an who selected a chocolate-covered donut while I poured coffee.

I looked at Lee. He was ready to get this done. He had other things on his
ing unpleasant things on his agenda that day, like sitting down and giving
s.” threats of a very, *very* bad guy.

“Well, I heard Roxie and Hank fighting on my way down. Then

Eddie and Jet fighting. Didn't hear anything from Luke and Ava. V taking a shower. Daisy's pouting because Smithie brought donuts, answered. "She made coffee, put out the cups, cream and sugar and s off."

"Fighting?" Lee asked on an eyebrow raise, completely unconcerned at their about Daisy pouting, which, given my vast experience with Daisy, I took precedence.

I decided not to share this nugget of information. Lee had enough to worry about.

"The girls are not fond of you boys fuckin' throwin' in the mix of Smithie replied. "They like their action. Crazy bitches."

Lee shook his head, clearly agreeing with Smithie.

I glared at him. He stared at me calmly. I gave up the glare and closed my mouth. I ate an old-fashioned donut.

"I don't want to talk about it. In fact, I don't want to talk to you." I snapped as she entered the room. She was angry, but this didn't stop her from having her in what Jet called an "Eddie's Woman Hold:" arm wrapped tight around her neck, Jet tucked deep into his side.

Eddie seemed oblivious to Jet's rant. Then again, Eddie always seemed oblivious to Jet's rants, which were not frequent but not unheard of.

"Who brought the donuts?" Eddie asked.

Jet rolled her eyes at me. I smiled at her in understanding and took a bite of my donut, which I chased with coffee.

Eddie disengaged and grabbed a glazed cinnamon roll.

"What's up?" I asked as Jet got close. "You pissed that the Hot Bunch I heard

ance is giving up?”

” Jules “Yes,” she snapped. “Eddie’s been working that case for a year before he knew me. He’s never given up on anything. But we had a Chat while in bed and you know what that means.”

I knew what that meant. Eddie talked her around. Then Eddie n thought her head by giving her an orgasm. Or vice versa.

It had to be said, the Hot Bunch liked their morning piece of ass, a ough to weren’t afraid to capitalize on the time-saving measure of using s weapon in a disagreement.

towel,” “Honestly, I understand he doesn’t want to go through this b again. Who does?” Jet continued. “We got over that, but now we’re f about the wedding. I want something small, in a park or something li hose an Blanca wants a full Mass. A full Mass! I’m not even Catholic! And refuses to referee between me and his mom,” she shared.

ou,” Jet “Men don’t do weddings,” I advised, full of knowledge on *that*) Eddie since mine was just under two weeks away. Lee hadn’t lifted a finger rapped to have Shirleen, his now-receptionist, call a travel agent and arrar honeymoon. A honeymoon Shirleen wouldn’t tell me word one about seemed threat of retribution from Lee, which even Shirleen took serious. Shirleen wasn’t afraid of anyone.

Vance walked in wearing a shit-eating grin, which he had trai Jules. He preceded Luke and Ava, who were holding hands. If you t k a bite two months ago I’d see Luke Stark holding hands with *anyone*, I wou laughed in your face. But with Ava, anyone could see it came natural looked a bit dreamy, which meant Ava got herself some.

nch are I smiled to myself. This gave new meaning to the words “Love Sh

this went on any longer, The Castle was going to have to be re-christen

r, even They were followed by Daisy carrying a fresh pot of coffee.

1 Eddie “I made coffee,” Daisy announced. “Anyone need coffee?”

“Actually, I could use a Diet Coke,” Ava answered.

uddled “I need coffee,” Jules threw in quickly when Daisy’s face darkened

nd they “Smithie brought donuts. I was going to make pancakes, but I
ex as a brought donuts. I could still make pancakes. You want pancakes?”
asked Luke hopefully.

business He shook his head and grabbed a bear claw, missing Jules nodd
ighting head at him frantically in silent communication.

ke that. “Stella makes fancy-ass salmon and potatoes and everyone’s in
1 Eddie delight. What? I can’t even make pancakes in my own damn house?”
burst out.

subject Uh-oh.

except “What kind of salmon did she make?” Vance asked the *wrong* qu
1ge our grabbing a Bavarian cream and sitting on the arm of Jules’s chair.

it under “It was buttered and herbed and in this light as air pastry
ly, andrhapsodized, even though Jules was now frantically shaking her head

(who also didn’t notice) and Daisy’s face was getting pink. Ava w
ned on “And the potatoes were creamy and cheesy. Sliced so thin, it was *amaz*

old me Daisy glared at Ava, plonked down the coffee and stormed out.

ld have “What’d I say?” Ava asked, glancing around in confusion, an
ly. Ava smiled at her and mouthed, “Later.”

ack.” If “Let me get this straight. Mace gets the girl who can cook?” Vance
Jules turned from Ava and punched Vance in the arm. Then she c

ied. her mouth, made a gagging noise, shot out of her chair and ran fr
room.

“Fuck,” Smithie had been reaching for another donut, but after
gag-and-run he sat back instead.

l. “I’ll go home to Brownsburg. Stay with Mom and Dad,” Roxie
Hank, both of them walking into the room.

Smithie

’ Daisy “No,” Hank replied.

“I’ll go to Mexico,” Roxie continued.

ing her “Roxanne, I said no,” Hank returned.

“I’ll go to Siberia!” Roxie snapped.

tears of Hank looked at Lee and shook his head.

” Daisy “Do not shake your head at your brother, Hank Nightingale,” Ro
off.

“Fucking great. Donuts. Finally, my day has brightened,” Hank
uestion, Roxie.

One side of Luke’s lips curled up in a sexy half-grin. Vance’s shi
,” Avagrinn made a reappearance. Eddie bit his lip to stop from grinnin
at Avachuckled straight out.

ent on, I was guessing Hank and Roxie hadn’t participated in the nookie
zing.” like the rest of us. Then again, maybe they did and the extreme circum
took the glow off early.

d Jules “Do you believe they’re giving up?” Roxie asked me on a huff.

“Nope,” I replied then took another bite of my donut.

put in. “I don’t either.” She flopped down on a couch, gave a good glare t
covered then pulled out a chocolate-covered, custard-filled and bit into it so h

om thecustard splodged out the side.

“Babe, pour me a cup of coffee,” Luke said to Ava.

Jules’s “Please?” Ava said back.

“Beautiful Ava, please pour me a cup of coffee,” Luke replied in said to voice, with a soft look on his face, and absolutely no embarrassment whatsoever.

I stared at him. He looked so hot, his voice so sweet, his face ung my heart stopped beating. I quit breathing and I felt a quiver somewhere Lee was allowed to make quiver.

My eyes flitted to Roxie, who was staring at Luke mouth open, the who was staring at Luke mouth open, then to Ava who was pouring cup of coffee.

Roxie bit “Indy, honey,” Lee called.

My head snapped around to see he was standing close to my side ignored head dipped in and I saw his eyes were amused.

“Quit drooling,” he whispered.

I snapped my mouth shut, gave him a look and shoved in the last t-eating g. Lee my donut.

Jules came back and sat down in her chair again.

“Princess?” Vance asked so quietly you could almost not hear him.

“I’m okay,” she murmured.

His hand went to her face, fingers trailing down her hairline tucked her hair behind her ear.

Something hit me, sliding all over me like relaxing in a bath of hot o Hank ard thethat smelled really good.

I turned back to Lee.

“I get it,” I whispered.

“What?” Lee asked, his eyes coming to me.

1 a soft My gaze did a sweep of the room and came back to him.

assment “I get it,” I repeated and his eyes warmed. He knew what I was say

“Good,” he replied softly.

uarded, “I love you.” I kept whispering.

re only “That’s good too,” he said on a grin.

n to Jet I was about to lean up and kiss him when I heard Ally call ou
Luke a gonna have pancakes. I can’t *wait* to have pancakes.”

I turned around and saw Ally was walking into the room, her eye
She was looking at me with what could only be described as a “Hel
look, Daisy by her side.

de. His “I bet most everyone has room for pancakes. Nobody really likes
anyway, they aren’t very filling,” Ally declared, going a little over t
but the determined look on Daisy’s face spoke volumes.

bite of Daisy marched right up to Smithie and planted her hands on h
hips.

“See there, Smithie. *Ally* wants pancakes. Let that be a lesson to y
not *ever* bring donuts into a Southern woman’s home. Southern wom
their guests, and *not* with *donuts*. *Comprende?*” she snapped.

and he “Fuck, woman. You got a screw loose or what?” was Smithie’s
response.

it water Before Daisy could retort, we all heard shouted from the other
“*How dare you come between me and my band!*”

Everyone went completely silent.

Then we heard the creaking of a pull-out bed. Not the telltale creak of a morning Hot-Boy-on-Rock-Chick action, but creaking like World War II had just started in Daisy's Den.

ing. "Uh-oh," Roxie breathed.

"Sounds like the Hawaiian has his hands full," Smithie muttered.

"Everyone out," Lee ordered, his voice low, but there was no mistaking he meant to be obeyed, and now.

it, "I'm When the women hesitated, Hank grabbed Roxie's hand, pulling the couch saying, "Out."

s huge. The bed kept creaking, louder and scarier.

p me!" "Let's go," Eddie was guiding Jet out.

donuts "I'll get the coffeepot," Daisy whispered, grabbing both nearly empty pots of coffee.

he top, As quietly as we could, we exited the room and went to the hallway leaving the donuts behind.

er slim Upon entering the kitchen, Luke closed the door.

you. Do "No one leaves this room until one of those two leaves theirs," Lee announced.

en feed Denied our donuts, Daisy was forced to make pancakes.



unwise "WHAT?" Shirleen shouted.

Lee had just announced that they were giving up, why they were in the room, up, and that he was going to have a sit down with Sid and it was pretty obvious Shirleen wasn't happy about it.

We were all sitting in Daisy's big room.

king of Shirleen, Hector, Darius (Lee's other best friend, his now-employ
War III Shirleen's nephew) and Ike had arrived in time for pancakes, makin
strides in improving Daisy's mood. Bobby and Matt were taking
business. Lee was bleeding money on this venture and someone had
pay for the wedding.

istaking About half an hour into our kitchen incarceration, Jules had to
Luke's rule because she had to run to the bathroom to hurl.

her off When she came back to the room, she announced, "Um, they're
saw Stella in the hall. Mace too."

"Thank Christ," Lee muttered.

Jules gathered a Rock Chick huddle.

empty "Whatever you do, do *not* compliment Stella on her outfit," she ad

"Why?" Ava asked.

kitchen, "Because it's cute," Jules replied.

"And why wouldn't we tell her it's cute?" Roxie asked.

"Because Mace packed it for her," Jules explained.

" Luke "Ah," Jet nodded.

"And he packed her underwear," Jules went on.

"I see," Daisy muttered.

"And it's very sexy. She told me it's the only sexy set she owns
continued.

giving "Welp, there you go," Ally remarked with complete understanding

ty clear "And he kind of bought it for her when they were together," Jules s

Oh my.

see and *That* was interesting.

g great Daisy giggled and it sounded like tinkling bells.

care of I loved Daisy's giggle.

to help "And he also kind of bought her outfit for her too, when the
together." Jules's tale of Mace's Wardrobe Decisions Destruction see
o break never cease.

done. I Jet clapped her hands on her mouth, her eyes wide and dancin
Shirleen snorted.

"And it's cute?" Roxie asked with obvious disbelief.

"Super cute, in a Hawaiian surfer kind of way," Jules answered.

vised. "I can't wait to see this," I whispered.

"I can't believe Mace could buy a cute outfit," Roxie responded.

"Is she okay?" Ava asked Jules.

Jules shook her head.

"The stitches?" Shirleen's voice was sharp. She'd been brought up
with The Battle of Daisy's Den.

"No, I think it's something else. Something that made Stella look
pissed and pretty confused at the same time. However, Mace look
pleased with himself when I saw him come into the hall with Juno a
, " Jules went into the bathroom."

"Broody Mace looked *pleased*?" I asked.

. We all knew what that meant. Been there, done that, had the T-shir
said. Stella had been laid.

“Dear Lord,” Jet breathed.

“This soon?” Ava asked.

“That beats Hank’s record, I think,” Ally told Roxie.

“Yep,” Roxie replied, a small reminiscent smile playing about her

y were “Holy crap,” I said.

med to “Shit, I haven’t even had time to sort the pool. How am I gonna v
money back at this rate?” Shirleen looked to Ally. “It’s gonna have
ng, and until you get nailed.”

Ally opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted.

“You women mind finishing whatever the fuck you’re talkin’
later?” Lee asked in a not very polite voice.

My head shot up and I glared at him. “This is important,” I snapped.

“Yeah?” he asked on an eyebrow raise.

Oopsie.

Okay, well, maybe his plans that day were a tad bit more importa
to date gossip.

We gave Stella and Mace time to shower and have pancakes, then
κ pretty wandered into the big room.

ed very Throughout all this I watched Stella. Her outfit was cute. I want
s Stella loved it. It was a black OP tank with a circle of dusky-blue hibiscus
in a band around the boobs and a pair of dusky-gray OP corduro
shorts. She looked like super-cool, rock-surfer-chick. I was a little su
at Mace’s heretofore unknown shopping abilities and wondered w
t. underwear looked like.

Stella was being quiet and avoiding all things Mace. Mace wasn’t

straight out pleased, but he certainly wasn't broody or pissed off, which mostly what I knew about Mace's inventory of emotions. He didn't look quite happy. Instead he looked energized and alert at the same time he mellow, the last new to me in Mace's emotional arsenal.

mouth.

The Rock Chicks gathered around Stella, acting as buffers in case we needed us, but Mace (breaking Hot Guy Courtship Tradition) wasn't joining in any way and he stayed out of her space.

to wait

By the time we walked into Daisy's big room, we'd backed off.

That was a mistake.

Stella sat on the arm of the couch next to Ally, Juno sitting on the floor about her side.

Mace walked right in and I watched, mouth dropping open, as he put his hands to her waist, shoved her clean off the couch to her feet, kept his hands on her. She made an angry, surprised noise and her head whirled around to look at Mace, but I couldn't see her expression.

He sat down where she'd been sitting, slid back, put one foot on the couch and brought her down in front of him, straddling her and doing it all while his hand sliding from her hip to come to rest on the top of her thigh.

Holy shit!

Juno, by the way, took this in stride, clearly used to this type of maneuver from days of yore.

Mace never struck me as an affectionate type of guy. Like Luke told me Mace would be affectionately demonstrative in a touchy-feel way that the public, I would have laughed. But there it was, proof positive.

My gaze shot to Ally. Ally was staring at Mace's long leg by her side, looking

ich washer wide-eyed gaze shot to me. The Rock Chicks darted knowing I
i't lookeach other, and then our eyes swung to Stella.

looked Her back was ramrod straight, her face pissed way the hell off, but
tell she was damned if she was going to blow. Not now. He'd get it la
ase sheboy was he going to get it.

pushing I wanted to shout, "Atta girl!" but I kept my mouth shut.

Lee launched into his announcement, which most everyone
anyway.

Except Shirleen.

loor by "It's decided," Lee said to Shirleen.

"I don't believe this," Shirleen said back.

put his Lee had no response.

ing his My eyes moved from Shirleen to Stella. Stella didn't look pis
hipped anymore. She looked pale. It would appear that Mace hadn't told
either.

nto the "Erm, excuse me," Stella said, her sexy, rough voice was soft.
it close,

Stella's voice, by the way, was something I'd always loved about
not only when she was singing. Her voice was, quite simply, the shit.

f Mace "You never give up," Shirleen said to Lee, not having heard Stella.

"Too much at stake," Lee replied.

, if you "Excuse me," Stella repeated, and Ally's eyes moved to her.

way in "I don't fuckin' believe this shit!" Shirleen exploded. "You boy
close to takin' that jackass down!"

ide and "Erm—" Stella started again.

looks at “Yo!” Ally shouted and everyone turned to her. “Stella has something to say.”

I could All eyes moved to Stella.

ter, and “I just...” She stopped and looked back at Mace. She still looked p
not angry anymore. She turned around and I saw her back go straight
Then she tossed her dark, glossy hair and said, her throaty voice a lot
I knew “I was on a jury once.”

Stella quit talking and we all kept watching her.

“Is she goin’ anywhere with this?” Smithie, sitting beside me
opposite couch to Stella, muttered to me.

“Shh,” I shushed Smithie.

“Yeah?” Luke prompted Stella.

sed off “A murder trial,” Stella went on. “They had pictures of the victim
Stella, showed them to us. It was awful, shot in the chest and the head.
everywhere. Effing hell, but it was awful.”

Everyone was quiet.

her and Stella went on, “The prosecution had one witness, this old black
She’d seen the whole thing. She came in and she looked at the guy
and I knew she was terrified. Her fear filled the room. Everyone could
You could almost...I swear to God, you could almost *taste* it. She lived
this guy’s neighborhood. She knew him. She knew he was a bad guy
knew he could hurt her even if he was in jail. She knew it and we knew

7S were Everyone kept staring at Stella. Everyone knew now where she was
with this. Everyone kept quiet.

Stella kept talking.

hing to “The defendant was leaned back in his chair, completely relaxed,
at her. It was creepy. They asked her what she saw. She kept clutching
hands, jumpy as a cat, but she answered. They asked her if she saw v
ale, but it. She still kept clutching at her hands, but she answered. They asked
t again. person was in the room. She said yes. They asked her to point him c
louder, hands were shaking. Effing hell, I’ll never forget it, they were totally s
But she looked him right in the eye and pointed at him.”

“Good God,” Jet whispered.

on the Stella continued, “We found him guilty. They polled the jury. We
to share our vote out loud, right in front of him as he looked at each
us. I knew a little of her fear then, but not the half of it. When we
trial, the victim’s family descended on us, crying and carrying on. The
us do a prayer circle. They were so happy it was over. They were ha
n. Theyman that killed their son or brother or whatever was going to be put aw

Blood “Stella,” Lee said softly.

“I want a vote,” Stella said.

Mace’s arm wrapped around her waist and his head dipped so his
k lady. was at her ear.

on trial “Kitten,” he murmured but we all heard it.

l feel it. Um...wow.
ived in

ay. She I’d heard it yesterday, Mace calling Stella “Kitten.” Still, it shocke
v it.” mean, how sweet was *that*?

s going “I want a vote.” Stella’s voice was louder. “This man killed *my frie*
shot *me*. He shot at a bunch of my other friends.”

She stood and Mace stood with her, his arm moving up to lock ac

staring chest. I didn't know what he was trying to do, stop her from talking, or get moral support, but it didn't matter. He wasn't going to succeed at the first who didn't need any of the second.

l if that "I want a vote." Her voice was definitely loud this time.

ut. Her "It's decided," Luke repeated Lee's earlier words.

haking. "Okay, but I want a vote," Stella said to Luke then her eyes scanned the tribe. "If that old lady can put her ass on the line to do the right thing, we can effing well do it too! If you bunch of badass mothers don't agree, we all had better be ready. I'm not stupid enough to think I can do anything about this, take it down. I know you guys have to do it, but at least I want a fucking vote left the

y made "I want one too." Roxie stood up.

ppy the Oh shit.

ay." My eyes went to Lee. A muscle in his cheek was working.

Bad sign.

"Roxie—" Hank was walking across the room towards Roxie, but she was backing away.

"No, Hank," Roxie said, her hand coming up to ward him off.

"Stella's right, you know," Ally put in.

"Ally," Lee said in a warning tone.

nd me. I "You know she's right," Ally said back to Lee, quietly, softly, so it was unreal.

nd. He Oh crap.

"I do and I don't give a fuck," Lee shot back at Ally, losing patience. "Indy and I are getting married in two weeks and Jules is pregnant—"

give her “She’s right,” Jules cut in, standing too. “Stella’s right.”

irst and “Oh fuck,” Luke muttered and looked at his boots.

“Quiet, Jules,” Vance murmured.

Jules’s eyes turned to Vance. “I’ll go somewhere.”

“No,” Vance replied.

ned the “I’ll go somewhere safe,” Jules went on.

g then I Vance got close to Jules and put his hand on her belly. “You th
e, okay. missin’ a minute of this, Princess, think again.”

his guy
!” I swallowed, hard.

“Then keep me safe,” Jules whispered.

I felt the tears hit my eyes.

Shit!

Shit, shit, shit!

but she I didn’t *do* crying.

I looked at Lee. He was looking at me, the muscle in cheek still w
I got up and went to him. His arm went around my shoulders and he
me into him. I wrapped mine around his waist.

I put my face into his neck and right at his ear I whispered, “Yo
Stella’s right.”
un-Ally

Lee’s body went solid.

Then he muttered, “Shit.”

atience. “We can’t give up,” I went on.

Lee didn’t answer.

“We do this, he wins,” I told him.

Lee still didn't answer.

"This isn't who we are, Lee," I finished.

"Somethin' happens to you—" Lee started.

I pulled my head back and looked at him.

"Nothing's gonna happen to me," I promised.

He stared me in the eyes. His weren't hard to read. He was angry, but I could tell he was also relieved.

Like I said, Lee was not a man who gave up.

Then he bent his head and touched his lips to mine.

When he was done kissing me, he said, "Damn straight."

I felt something unknot in me. I hadn't even noticed it was there had been tying me up all day.

Lee moved me to his side.

All the Rock Chicks and their Hot Bunch Boys were in conversations.

"Do we need a vote?" Lee asked the group, cutting the conversation short.

Silence.

"I got things to do," Lee reminded them.

"I'm in," Hector said immediately, his eyes on Stella.

"Me too," Darius put in.

"In," Ike added.

"Goddamn it," Luke clipped.

"Luke?" Lee asked.

Luke looked at Lee then turned his head and tilted it down to look at her. She licked her lips and shrugged. He touched his forehead to hers, closed his eyes for a brief second then pulled back.

“In,” he said.

“Vance?” Lee prompted.

Vance turned his eyes to Jules. She wrapped her arms around him from the side.

“Fuck,” Vance muttered. “Yeah.”

“Hank?”

Hank looked down at Roxie. “You’ll go to Brownsburg?” he asked.

“If you want me to,” she replied.

Hank did a slow blink and an intake of breath.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he murmured to Roxie, and in a loud voice he said, “In.”

“Eddie?” Lee asked.

“In,” Eddie said instantly, and Jet smiled and leaned into him.

“Mace?” Lee asked.

“Out,” Mace replied.

The air in the room went still and Stella went rock solid. They were standing together, but Stella’s fingers were wrapped around Mace’s hand and he was leaned over, his chin on her shoulder.

“Sorry?” Lee asked.

“Out,” Mace repeated.

“Out?” Hector exploded, obviously not happy, and everyone

at Ava, turned to him in surprise. Then all eyes went back to Stella and Mace. Mace used his tennis match.

This was because Stella whipped around. Mace jerked back his head but he didn't move his arm so it was wrapped around her shoulders and she was pressed tight against his front. She put her hands to his waist and her fingers went into the material of his T-shirt.

is waist "He killed Linnie," she said, her head tilted back to look at him.

"Yeah, and he's not gonna kill you," Mace replied.

That was when Stella lost it.

l. "He murdered my friend!" Stella shouted.

"Yeah, and he shot you!" Mace shouted back right in her face, and the room went still again at his raising his voice to Stella. Clearly angry, super-tall-muscled-hot-guy angry, but Stella didn't even react. Furthermore, Juno didn't move except to roll to her side and stretch, oblivious to the tension in the room.

"So?" she fired back, completely unfazed by his anger.

"That's not gonna happen again."

"Okay, I'm happy not to get shot again. What I'm not happy about is letting Linnie's murderer get off scot free."

ere still "The cops'll assign someone else, Sid'll fuck up somewhere along the line and someone will take him down," Mace told Stella.

"You sure about that?" Stella asked.

"Not as sure as I am about the fact that you're not gonna be hurt through machine-gun fire again."

's eyes Even though she was still plastered front to front with Mace, Stella

like at her head to look at Lee.

“Do I get a vote?” she asked.

head, but “We know your vote, honey,” Lee said softly.

he was “Do I get special dispensation, being shot and all, to cast Mace’s
; curled him?” Stella asked Lee.

Mace’s jaw went tight. He closed his eyes, and when he opened
they were also on Lee, and it didn’t take a mind reader to see he was
for patience *and* fellow Hot Guy understanding.

I very nearly laughed. Poor Mace.

And if you told me two days ago that I’d be thinking *that*, I would
and the laughed in your face about that too.

7, super Lee shook his head and answered, though I could tell he liked
flinch-style, “Sorry, Stella, it doesn’t work that way.”

ch out, “In,” Mace ground out, but every single person in the room knew
him.

Stella’s head whipped back around to look at him.

“Really?” she asked.

about is “Really,” he said to Stella, his deep voice scary.

ong the But it was when his eyes sliced back to Lee and he said what he said
that the vibe in the room changed. And if we thought things were
before, we didn’t know the meaning of tense.

“She gets hurt, any of them gets hurt, I go maverick. You understand
running me?” Mace said to Lee.

Stella froze. Hell, everyone froze. We understood him. He did it
turned disappeared and made it his mission to take down the man who was

Jet's life a living hell. Luckily, Eddie, Lee, Hank and Darius had been there when Mace caught up with him.

Bottom line, if Bad Guy Sid hurt Stella or any of the Rock Chicks, I would not vote for him. I'm not known for being a mellow guy (at all, even at the best of times), but I'm going to hunt him down and kill him.

Damn, we'd been there, done that and had the T-shirt for that too. I'd been looking at them only with Mace, but Luke had gone gonzo when Ava got violated too. Shit.

I looked at Stella and she'd gone pale again.

"Mace," Stella whispered.

"Mace," Hank said louder, his voice full of meaning.

Mace moved Stella to his side. His arm went around her waist, his hand hooking into the side belt loop of her OP shorts and he held her close.

"Fair warning, Hank," Mace said.

Hank stared at Mace and seconds ticked by.

Finally Hank repeated, "Fair warning."

Not good.

Then again, if something happened to Roxie or Ally or me, or like I said next of the Rock Chicks, we all knew Hank would be maverick right alongside Mace.

Shit.

"War," Luke muttered.

"War," Eddie agreed.

"Fuck," Vance bit off.

in there Hector smiled.

 Darius shook his head.

, Mace, “I’ll talk to Bobby, Matt and Monty. It has to be unanimous), was announced.

 I looked up at Lee. Lee looked down at me.

oo. Not “I love you,” I whispered for the second time that day.

 Lee’s eyes didn’t go melty nor did their sides crinkle. He looked serious.

 Yikes.

 “Good,” was Lee’s response.

; thumb

ely any

ongside

Hector smiled.

Darius shook his head.

“I’ll talk to Bobby, Matt and Monty. It has to be unanimous,” Lee announced.

I looked up at Lee. Lee looked down at me.

“I love you,” I whispered for the second time that day.

Lee’s eyes didn’t go melty nor did their sides crinkle. He looked very serious.

Yikes.

“Good,” was Lee’s response.

SIX



FALLING FOR YOU WASN'T EITHER

Stella

I 'd fucked up.

Big time.

In my bid to save humanity from whoever this Sid guy was, I put Rock Chicks on the line.

I didn't think.

I just acted.

That was happening to me a lot lately and I was going to have to find a way to stop doing it or I'd get laid again, which I had to admit (on the inside) wouldn't suck. Or I'd get killed, which would totally suck.

The Rock Chicks didn't mind. All day they'd been promising not to, but they'd agreed with me, more than agreed with me, even went so far as telling me they'd saved the day. Their men didn't give up. It was one of the reasons they'd stayed with them. Literally, they'd all been kind of hard to win over.

I forced myself to believe them and we'd had a good day. The boys went off to take care of business and the women gossiped, drank coffee, Daisy cleaned out her closets (yes, plural) and played Guitar Hero.

But I was worried. Not that something would happen to me, but

something would happen to one of them and it would be my fault.

Now it was late evening and Mace was taking me home in one of the Nightingale Explorers.

I wasn't talking to him. This, for your information, was my new plan. It started naturally.

When the Big Meeting was over, I had no chance to talk to him. He put his hands to my neck, tilted my face up to his with thumbs at my jaw, and he touched his lips to mine lightly in a brief kiss.

I was too freaked out about what his "going maverick" meant, and I didn't mention the dawning knowledge that I'd put the whole gang on trial. I'd further not to mention a light kiss from Mace was nice, to protest.

Before I could find my voice, he was gone.

Fifteen minutes ago, he walked in while Ally and Indy were playing through Guns N' Roses's "Paradise City," both on advanced, which I was using all five toy guitar buttons, which I found utterly impossible.

He looked at me and asked, "Ready to go home?"

I was ready to go home. I was more than ready to go home. Not with Ally, but I was so ready to go home I wasn't going to quibble. Not because I didn't like spending time with the Rock Chicks, but because I *did*, very much so. Every second with the girls made me feel a little bit guiltier and a whole lot shittier.

Mace drove in silence.

This, for your information, was his way. Mace wasn't much of a talker. In fact, we talked a lot more in the last two days than we would in a week if we were together. It was something else I liked about him, that I didn't

to entertain him, and he felt no driving need to dazzle me with his bri
of the It felt comfortable from day one.

As he drove, I watched Denver slide by and my mind wandered to
an. I lived in a huge room in a big, old, gold-boom mansion that ha
chopped up into apartments decades ago. The current owners, Ulri
Swen, were restoring it to its former glory. To pay for this, they first r
He just the mother-in-law house and rented it out. Then they restored my ro
aw and rented it to me.

To get to my room, you entered the mansion at a side door off the
, not to tiled veranda and walked up two semi-private (as in, only Swen, Ulrik
he line, Swen and Ulrika's three cats and I used them) flights of stairs.

My room was big, airy and painted white (but not harsh white
dueling eggshell). It had hardwood floors with bright-colored rugs
everywhere. My décor came from TJ Maxx and Target. On my bu
I meant money from gigs and intermittent guitar lessons for kids of fans
Gypsies who wanted their children to live their dream (thus, these
didn't progress very far because the kids were never really into it, on
ith him, parents were, but the kids and I'd have fun anyway), I couldn't aff
I didn't good stuff.

ch, and It wasn't luxurious but I loved my space.

hole lot You walked in the door and to the left there were three steps
platform that held my big bed covered in a creamy, eyelet cover w
yellow sheets. It was shoved in a huge, round turret, windows all
lker. Infilmy-white curtains and views of Ulrika and Swen's quadruple-lot
k when that Ulrika kept full of flowers and Swen kept tidy as a pin. There w
i't need unadulterated panoramas of the Front Range.

lliance. From my front door, to the right and down two steps, was my kitchen, tiny and U-shaped.

home. In front of the kitchen, up five steps, was a platform holding a moss-green couch, my TV and another big window.

ka and Across from that, up two more steps, was another platform. My restored space. Three guitars on stands (two electric, one acoustic), piles of two music stands, stacked amps and a big, mauve, overstuffed armchair had seen better days, but was comfortable as hell.

Italian- Behind the partition wall of the kitchen was a stacked washer-dryer, a Juno, walk-in closet and the door to the bathroom, which was as big as the kitchen and had a claw-footed tub, a pedestal sink and mosaic tile floors. I kept a soft wicker laundry hamper in there and a big, glass-front apothecary cabinet that looked like it came from an antique drug store. I found it at a yard sale and Floyd fixed it up for me. Emily and I painted it white and it held my bottles of Thebobs and towels and stuff.

lessons My space was not rock 'n' roll stereotype with rich colors, lots of velvet and tasseled scarves over the lamps. It was tidy and clean, uncluttered and devoid of the junk, which was how my space needed to be because my head was a mess.

I remembered the first time Mace walked into it when he picked up to a for our date. He looked around and couldn't hide his reaction.

ith soft "You're full of surprises," he murmured, and I had the feeling he was around, mean to say that out loud, so to be polite I didn't respond.

garden I always wondered what he meant. I didn't find myself surprising a garden. There were also

After that date, he spent nearly every night with me. We only stayed in his place a few times. He said we needed my bed because of Juno (Ma

sunken had a queen-size), but I suspected it was because he liked my space. me, I liked him *in* my space. In the end, too much.

1 worn, Daisy lived in Englewood and I lived in the Highlands, at least a minute drive if traffic was good (which, it wasn't). My mind move ultimate going home to its more usual pastime of worrying about my band. Or music, juncture, them worrying about me.

air that Especially Floyd.

I sighed and rested my head against the window. Behind me, Junc lryer, aher chops and snuffled the wind coming through the crack where M kitchen rolled her window down.

cept my I really needed to call Floyd.

net that Floyd was talented. He could have done something with his mu ale and could have gone somewhere if he'd gone after it and moved to NYC oits and He could have been at least a sessions player, but likely more. A lot m

He didn't want it. He wanted to live a quiet life with his wife and clutter girls grow up happy. So that's what he did. That was Floyd and that's ed with the reason why I loved him.

lways a At first, he pushed me to be more than I wanted to be, saying not c I have the talent for it, but I had a stage presence that "knocks your soc l me up (his words).

I didn't want fame and fortune, stadium gigs and my picture on th e didn't of *Rolling Stone*. I didn't write music, I played it. I didn't play music money. I did it for my sanity. The only way to escape my shit life grow it all. was by entering the hundreds of little, dizzyingly cool worlds of no ayed at lyrics of the songs I played.

ce only Don't get me wrong. I was happy The Gypsies had local succe

As for demanded top dollar, free drinks, a percentage of the door and our charge was nothing to sneeze at. It paid the bills and let me live the twenty The whole band knew we weren't going any further because I had from intention of taking us further. I'd been approached by some scouts, me, at this once, but for me, it was about the band. For the scouts, it was about me

It was unspoken, but Hugo, Pong, Leo and Buzz all knew the heart of the band was my guitar and my voice, and the soul was Floyd's piano. The band members were good, but they weren't ever going to be great.

They *looked* great, all handsome guys up there with Floyd and me. They were better players with the band than they'd ever be on their own. I needed The Gypsies to stay together for them to be anything at all, and I knew that was the only reason The Gypsies *did* stay together. We were always fighting and in danger of one of the hot-headed ones (Hugo and Leo) or the dramatic ones (Buzz and Leo) losing it and walking out the door.

I needed us to stay together and I needed them. At first it had been about the music, but then they became the only family I had since I'd lost mine. When that happened, it became all about the band.

Mace pulled up the gravel drive at the side of the house and I pulled myself out of my thoughts.

My van was parked by Swen and Ulrika's Volvo.

I didn't have to ask how it got there.

Mace.

I didn't say anything. I was glad I didn't have to go back to Linda and get it. I was also glad I wasn't talking to him or I'd have to say thanks.

He parked and my hand went to the door handle.

... We

r cover “Don’t get out until I open your door for you,” Mace ordered, boss
music.hell.

had no I sighed but didn’t answer. He got out, skirted the hood, eyes sc
ore than and he came around and opened the back door. Juno bounded out
2. grabbed the workout bag in the back, slammed the door and opened
t of the exited the vehicle with a lot less enthusiasm.

ie other Mace crowded me in a protective way and didn’t waste any time
Juno and me in the house.

ne, and This played havoc with my already tattered guilt. I may not have
n. They to be back together with Mace, but it didn’t go unnoticed that he was
nd part care of me and he was being very serious about that task. It also di
/e were unnoticed that this was not because I was someone to protect, but be
d Pong) was *his* someone to protect.

3. Effing hell.

een just We walked silently together up the stairs and Mace made me stan
l turned hall after he unlocked my door. I’d never asked for my key back. This
d. have necessitated me calling him, which might have descended i
pulled begging him to come back, which was not something I wanted to do
unh, no way. Therefore I let him keep the key.

He walked in my place. I heard some weird beeping then I hea
doing a walkthrough of the house, and finally he called Juno and me ir

We walked in, Juno turning left, probably to hit the bed in order
sey’s to the all-important Big Dog Nap Number Fifteen for the day.

She skidded to a halt on the stairs, stumbled a bit and stared ahead
in confusion.

I stared too.

ly as all The room was dark. Blinds I hadn't owned when I left two nig
were pulled low. The bed was moved over to where my guitars we
anning, guitars were now in the middle, the couch where my bed was.

. Mace "What the—?" I started.

mine. I Mace closed the door and tossed the bag on the platform where the
now resided.

getting I stood staring as Mace went up the platform and turned on a lig
came back to me. His hand in his pocket, he pulled out somethi
wantedclinked.

s taking He got close to me but pointed at the door.

dn't go "New deadbolt, chain, peephole. Use the last two when you're
cause I house. Always use the first one. Not just during this situation, all the
Mace ordered, handing me a key.

I took the key but stared at my door, which now had three lock
d in the new peephole.

s would Effing, bloody hell.

nto me Mace grabbed my hand and pulled me two steps to the side of the c
, nunh-

"Alarm panel," he announced, dropping my hand, pointing at a n
rd him on the wall and flipping it open. "This is your combination. Memorize
handed me a slip of paper.

to take I looked at the paper, read the numbers, read them again, repeated
my head and made a wonky, only-understood-by-me mathe
formulation of them (something I did when I had to memorize number
l of her

"Got it memorized?" Mace asked.

I looked at him and nodded, not speaking because I couldn't f

his ago voice, *not* because I wasn't talking to him. At that juncture, I kind of
re. My about my latest plan.

He took the slip of paper from me, balled it in his fist and shoved it
pocket.

e couch "You come in, you got thirty seconds to punch in the code then
button." He pointed at a button. "You go out, always set the alarm. You
ght then minute to get you and Juno out the door. You set it the same way, same
ng that same end button. Yeah?" he asked.

I nodded again.

"See this button?" He pointed to a red button.

in the Again, I just nodded.

e time," "Panic button. You hit that, a signal gets sent to the police dispatch
know it, they don't fuck around. They send a car with sirens. Then a
s and a goes to the control room at the Nightingale offices and we know you're
compromised. Don't hit that button unless you know you got a signal.
Hear me?"

door. What was going on?

ew box "Mace—" I started.

it." He "Do you hear me?" he repeated patiently.

He seemed pretty intense so I decided to nod yet again.

them in "Both of your phones have the Nightingale control room on speed
mational Hit button one then pound. That way, you can't get to the panic button
s). can grab one of your phones. Yeah?"

"Yes," I said.

ind my "The door is alarmed, so are the windows. You hit that code then

f forgot button..." he pointed at another button, "while you're in the house means the peripheral sensors are activated, but the motion sensors are not. He pointed at sensors with red lights that were in the corners just where the ceilings hit the walls. I looked around and noticed there were a lot of them. Mace kept talking.

"That means the alarm is set, but if the door or windows are breached, a signal goes to the police, a car goes out and the control room gets the same drill as the other. Got me?"

Oh my God.

This was too much. Simply too much.

It was insane.

I didn't share these thoughts. My only ability, it seemed, was to nod.

Mace went on, "The room is full of cameras. You won't see them. You'll see 'em. The bathroom has a small window, two stories up. Unless it's breached, but it has an alarm sensor. Therefore no camera in the bathroom. The cameras are gonna be on and monitored at the office, twenty-four hours. You need to change, you do it in the bathroom. You still with me?"

I kept nodding.

"There are exterior cameras, the front, back and side doors and the parking area. They're monitored twenty-four seven too. I talked with the boss. He knows what's goin' on and he's happy with the work we've done. Ulrika are set to go on vacation on Saturday. Good timing."

I started to tremble. It was beginning to hit me just how serious this was. Losing Linnie, being shot, knowing the threat, none of that did it.

e. That *This was freaking me out.*

re not.” “Mace—” I started again.

ere the His hand came to my neck, he got in my space and his head bent to
em.

“I’ll answer all your questions in a minute, Kitten,” he said quietly
me finish explaining the setup and then you can ask me anything you w
ched, a

He wasn’t finished explaining the setup?

signal,
This wasn’t already the entirety of the setup?

He kept talking.

“You know Indy’s dad, Tom? He’s a detective for the
department?” Mace asked.

to keep I nodded.

So did Mace, once.

em, no “Tom’s arranging regular but random drive-bys by squad cars. I
likely to watching the house waiting for a chance might either be seen by a
hroom. they’ll notice the frequency of squads in the area and they’ll be a fuck
: seven. more careful or bag the chance to get at you here at all. Every once in
a uniform is gonna buzz your door. They’re gonna wanna see your
person, so you’re gonna have to show it to them. This could happen
night. There’s video surveillance here.”

nd the He pointed to another box with a screen that was situated just ab
i Swen. alarm box.

He and Then he kept going.

is was. “You hit this button, you see them and can talk to them but they do
you. No plainclothes officers will call up, only uniform, and they’ll sh
a badge. You only go down if you see the uniform and the bad

whatever small chance they got, anyone breaches the security and is
house and on you, they tail you to the door but stay hidden, you got
word. When you get to him, you tell the officer you're hunky dory
mine. know you're not, but he'll proceed with caution. You got that?"

ly. "Let
vant."

I was beyond trembling. I was beginning to shiver.

"Babe, you got that?" Mace asked softly.

I nodded.

"Blinds always pulled. The bed was moved away from the window
they have no shot when we're asleep. Avoid the couch, it's exposed
police walls are brick, you're safe at a wall. Windows aren't safe, don't go
'em."

"Okay," I whispered.

Mace fell silent.

Anyone
car or
cruva lot
a while
face, in
day or

"Is there more?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied.

Effing hell.

He kept talking.

"You got safe zones. Fortnum's is covered. The Castle. The office
and Lee's, Ava and Luke's. And here. That's it. You don't hang around
else unless me or one of the boys is covering you. To get to a safe zone
go with an escort. No exceptions. You go nowhere unless you're in a
car or a company car. Okay?"

on't see
ow you
lge. By

I nodded.

He fell silent again.

"Is that it?" I asked.

s in the It was Mace's turn to nod.

a code "Isn't this all a bit much?"

7. He'll He shook his head.

"It had to cost a fortune, who paid for it?" I went on.

"Most of the equipment is kept in stock. Any extras were put according to the Rock Chick they were meant to protect."

Oh dear.

lows so "What does that mean?" I was afraid I knew the answer before I as
ed. The question.

jet near "I paid for it."

I closed my eyes. That was the answer I was afraid I knew.

Juno woofed in approval.

I opened my eyes.

Juno located the bed. She trotted up and down stairs, made it to t
jumped up to it, settled on her belly, put her head on her front pa
watched us.

s. Indy "How did you get it done so quickly?" I asked, not knowing a
ywhere extensive setup to put in place in two days.

me you "Vance is good and he's fast, lots of practice. Monty too
a squad prioritized. Hank, Eddie, Nick and Vance all need windows installed. I
staying at The Castle until the windows are replaced and the cleanu
That meant Vance and Monty could focus on Lee and Indy's duplex, a
put in a sophisticated alarm system a few months ago so they just had
work. Same with Luke and Ava's loft. It already has high security

just needed the cameras re-installed. The bulk of the work was needed

I wasn't sure how much more guilty I could feel, but I figured I was about at my guilt limit before my body spontaneously combusted with

“How did you arrange so much cover with the cops?”

“Indy and Ally are cops' daughters. Lee's a cop's son. Hank and I are cops. To them, this is a family affair. You've been adopted. And you're responsible for a lot of shit in this town. Everyone wants to see him brought down, but no one wants collateral damage, especially if it's in the family.”

Sheesh.

Well, lucky I'd been “adopted.”

Okay, one last thing.

“I've got gigs this weekend, Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoon.”

“I know. We've talked to the club owners. We do a sweep before we open. We got men assigned on the inside and no one gets in without their bags checked and they're wanded, including employees.”

Wanded?

Nothing
a pretty

They were gonna wand people coming to my gigs?

Shit.

. They
They're
p done.
and Lee
camera
so they

After he was done talking, he waited a beat then got closer.

“Any more questions?”

Yes, like, a million! my brain screamed.

I shook my head.

“Now I got one,” he told me.

here.” “Okay,” I said softly.

was just “Why’re you shakin’?”

it. I blinked.

“I don’t know,” I lied. I knew. I totally knew.

I Eddie I was scared shitless.

I Sid is He got even closer, his other hand came to rest at my waist ;
brought fingers of his hand at my neck gave me a squeeze. For some reason
ly.” made me quit shaking.

“I’m gonna take care of you,” he promised, his deep voice low.

“I don’t want that,” I lied again. I so wanted that. I just couldn’t
myself to have it.

Sunday Another neck squeeze.

re they “You should have thought about that before your ‘I want a vote’
getting this morning.”

He was not wrong about that. I should have thought about a lot of
before my speech that morning.

“No, what I mean is, I know I need protection, I just don’t want you
it. Assign someone else to me.” I thought for a second about my choice
picked the baddest-ass-looking one of the bunch. “I’ll take Hector.”

There was an eye flash, but this was not unreadable like the other
This one screamed “Anger!” from start to finish.

“Two reasons you aren’t gonna get Hector.” Mace’s voice had an edge
I ignored Mace’s edge and put a hand to one of my hips.

“They are?”

“One, because in about twenty-four hours he’d have you flat on your back, him on top and both of you would be naked.”

At his words, my body froze. My eyes bugged out, my hands clenched into fists, but either oblivious or uncaring about the shocking insult dealt me, Mace kept right on talking.

and the
on, this
“He’s itching for it. I can see it in him the way he looks at you. He and the
are gonna have words, but bottom line, when it comes to you, that
gonna happen.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” I breathed.

t allow
discussion.”
Mace ignored me. “Reason two is because you’re *mine*. I
t allow
discussion.”

Not end of discussion.

speech
I decided to start my battle on the first annoying thing he said
advance right on through the rest of it until he got it into his macho, str
effing head!

f things
“I would not sleep with Hector in twenty-four hours!” I snapped.

ou to do
es and I
“Yeah, you would. He’s good. He’s better than Eddie was. Better
than Vance and Vance was a Denver legend.”

I’d lived in Denver a long time. I knew a lot of people, half c
women.

er ones.
Had to admit, I’d heard of Vance. Hell, I’d heard of Eddie (and Le

idge.
Pre-Rock Chicks, they were all legends.

Focus! my brain shouted at me.

I focused.

“I’m not that type of girl!”

on your “Kitten, I fucked you on our first date.”

He had me there.

lenched “That never happened before. It only happened because it was
he just retorted, too swiftly, thus not thinking my words through, as in not t
that maybe I shouldn’t have said them at all.

le and I He got closer. His hand at my waist slid around my back, his hand
at’s not neck went up and around so his fingers went into my hair and his pa
warm against the base of my neck. The front of his body was touching

All of that felt really, *really* good.

End of Oh lordy be.

“Yeah?” he asked, eyes warm and smiling.

My heart began to beat a bit faster.

aid and Shitsofuckit!

ubborn,

I really had to start thinking before I spoke. Or just thinking *at all*.

“Whatever.” I blew it off as if it was nothing and the smile in h
reached his mouth.

er even

Bastard!

of them “I’m not yours!” I shouted, advancing on to battle number two.

“You are.”

e). “Am not.”

“Kitten, you are.”

“Nope. Nunh-unh. No way. Never again!” I ended on another shou

His head dipped. His smile deepened and his eyes got that I’m-
kiss-you look I liked so fucking much.

“God, I missed you,” he muttered, and he said it in a way that, I didn’t think he meant to say it out loud.

you,” I My breath ran away. I didn’t know where, maybe to a different station
hinking knew was it was gone.

Then there was a pounding on the door.

d at my We both froze.

lm was So much for the fabulous security system. There was someone right
mine. freaking door!

“Stella!”

Shit! Eric!

The door handle rattled.

“Open the door! Are you okay?”

Oh, this couldn’t be happening.

Of all the super shitty luck!

his eyes Mace’s eyes narrowed on the door and stayed narrowed when the
back to me.

“Who the fuck is that?” he asked.

“Eric,” I answered.

Another angry flash then he swore, “Fuck.”

He let me go and moved to the door.

There was more pounding as Mace looked out the peephole. I saw
it. body register something. His jaw got tight and he looked at me.

-gonna- “You have got to be shitting me,” he said.

Okay, now I was confused.

again, I “What?” I asked.

Mace shook his head and opened the door.

te. All I Eric stood outside and I noted somewhat dazedly that he looked go

He was tall. About three inches shorter than Mace, but still tall. black hair with a fantastic wave to it that if he let it grow long, it w curly. Not girlie-curly, but man-curly and hot. Instead, he wore it l and it always looked just-out-of-bed messy and, well...hot. He had i black eyes and a lean, muscled body. As I mentioned, he was hot, del but in my eyes, no one was hotter than Mace, even hotter than hot Eric

Eric saw me first, his concerned face registering relief that I was s and breathing. He started to take a step toward me but stopped an when his eyes hit Mace.

Juno lifted her head and woofed her greeting to Eric from the b clearly was too tuckered out from hanging out with the Rock Chicks Castle to give it in doggie person. She put her head back down on he y came but her body shook with her tail just to let Eric know she was totally w to him coming to her and saying hello.

Eric didn't have time for Juno just now. His gaze swung back to r to Mace. Then he walked in. Mace threw the door to and when it cau frame, Eric exploded, “*What the fuck is going on?*”

Juno woofed again, not entirely sure what to think about this i greeting.

saw his “Eric,” I said quietly.

“Who’s this fuckin’ guy?” Eric asked, jerking his head to Mace.

“You know who I am.” Mace confused me further by saying.

“I do?” Eric’s tone was belligerent.

“He does?” My tone was bewildered.

od. “You do,” Mace answered, his eyes never leaving Eric.

He had Eric turned to him and something changed in the room. Something
ould besingers in rock bands wouldn’t get. Only hot guys who deal in the w
ong-ishcrime and punishment would get it. So I didn’t get it.

intense, “Yeah, I do,” Eric replied, his tone now dangerous, and I felt sor
finitely,not happy crawling along my skin at this admission. “What I wanna k
what the fuck are you doin’ here?”

tanding “I could ask you the same fuckin’ thing,” Mace returned.

d froze This did not give me a warm fuzzy feeling. Most especially becau
both looked like they were about to rip each other’s head’s off, and
ed, butthe obvious, there was more to it. I just didn’t know what it was.

at The “Erm...boys?” I called.

r paws, Eric tore his gaze from Mace and did a head to toe of me, h
elcome snapping back to the bandage peeking from under my shorts.

ne then Then his gaze cut back to Mace.

ight the “So she did get hit,” Eric said to Mace.

What?

unusual He knew I was shot?

What was going on?

“She got hit,” Mace replied.

“And you were there,” Eric went on.

Mace’s jaw got tight. “Yeah.”

“*Fuck!*” Eric exploded again. “Back off, Mason. I’ve got this covered.”

I watched, still totally confused as Mace zoomed straight from controlling his anger to holding on to his anger by a thread and I knew

ng lead was *not* a good thing.

world of “You got *what* covered, exactly?” Mace asked.

“Stella,” Eric responded.

nething “Why don’t you explain that to me?” Mace’s thread was unraveling;

now is, “How ’bout you explain to me why you think you deserve
explanation?” Eric shot back.

This could go on all night.

se they “Excuse me!” I yelled. “I *am* in the room.”

outside “Quiet, Stella,” Mace said to me without looking away from Eric.

Oh no.

He was not getting bossy on me again.

is eyes

“Don’t tell me to be quiet. What’s going on?” I shouted.

“He’s a Fed,” Mace answered.

My breath, which had come back, decided to go on vacation again.
guess, Las Vegas.

My eyes slid to Eric.

“A Fed?” I breathed with the last remnants of breath I had.

I *knew* something was not right about him. He told me he was
construction.

Eric’s teeth were in a clench.

“That’s right,” he said between them, his eyes reluctantly leaving

red.” and coming to me.

barely “You work for—?” I started.

ew this “Yeah,” Eric cut me off.

“He’s on assignment,” Mace shared.

A muscle in Eric’s jaw leaped.

g. be. “Assignment?” Now I was sounding stupid, but there was no other

rve an “Sidney Carter,” Eric bit off.

Oh my God.

Eric was after Bad Guy Sid too.

Then it hit me. If Eric was after Sid, then he was with me because.

Effing hell.

I started to back up.

“Stella.” Eric turned away from Mace and started toward me.

“Don’t fuckin’ get near her,” Mace warned.

uin. My Eric stopped and turned back to Mace. “Do we gotta take this outsi
“Works for me,” Mace replied immediately.

“No!” I shouted, and Juno woofed sensing the degradation atmosphere and not pleased that Eric had decided against a more th welcome. Juno wasn’t used to being ignored. “You two aren’t workedanything outside. You’re going to tell me what’s going on. Startir you.” I nodded at Eric.

Eric turned back to me. He took a step, caught my look, clenc
g Mace teeth again and stopped.

“I can’t say much,” he started. Then I reckon he got a load of r
look and went on, “Stella, sweetheart, I’m sorry. I can’t say much.”

“Okay, just tell me what it has to do with me.”

Eric glanced back at Mace then to me. “I’m guessin’ you know.”

“Lindsey,” I said.

way to “And Mason,” Eric went on.

What?

“Mace?” I asked.

Eric continued, “We got a guy on the inside. They knew Sid was
the heat and was gonna retaliate. We knew who the targets were. W
you were one of them. We knew why and we knew about the operat
other night.”

I went back a few more steps, too stunned by this news to let the
anger sweltering off Mace to register on my brain. The backs of my
the edge of one of the platforms and I sat down with no grace whatsoe

Eric started toward me again, but quick as lightning Mace moved
de?” in his way.

Eric stopped and glared at him.

of the I looked around Mace to Eric. “You knew?”

orough “Fuck,” Eric muttered.

taking Then, not thinking (yes, again), I jumped up, stormed forwa
ig with rounded Mace, shouting, “I got shot!”

hed his Mace’s arm tagged me around the middle and pulled me, hard, i
body.

ny new “I know!” Eric shouted back, deciding to ignore Mace’s arm, which
mind crazily veering in wild directions, I thought was wise.

“You didn’t do anything about it!” I kept shouting.

“You were supposed to be with me,” Eric reminded me.

He was kind of right, I was. He’d put the pressure on, big time, for
to spend the night with him that night, but I told him no.

Mace’s hard body felt somehow harder after Eric spoke.

“This is what *I* wanna talk about,” Mace said.

feeling “It’s none of your fuckin’ business,” Eric bit out.

e knew “I’m of a different opinion,” Mace bit back.

ion the “And why’s that?” Eric returned.

“Stella and I are back together,” Mace informed him.

heat of Again, not thinking, I twisted my head to look at Mace and cried, “
legs hit not!”

ver.

“Stella—” Mace started.

and got

My eyes moved back to Eric. “I want to know why you let me get :

“I didn’t *let* you get shot. I sat outside. I saw you leave. I followed
Lindsey’s. I saw that Stark and Mason were there, not to mention the
and I expected Sid wouldn’t be crazy enough to make a move with the
of coverage. That’s when I got a call. Jet McAlister was supposed to
rd and India Savage and her gang. She wasn’t and Chavez had been called out
sent to her house. The drive-by happened before I got there and you
into his shot while I was in transit.”

Well, that made me feel a *little* bit better.

ich, my “Now,” Eric’s eyes narrowed on Mace, “you wanna take your ha
her?”

“No,” Mace answered instantly.

“I’m thinkin’ that’s not the right answer. She was yelling at you e
r me to heard her through the door and she says you aren’t back together
returned.

“Yeah, she says that. Then again, I’m pretty sure it was Stella
fuckin’ this morning, it was me she asked to fuck her harder and it
she was holdin’ on to while she purred into my throat after I made he
That’s contradictory information from her and me, but considerin’ I ir
be in her bed for the foreseeable future, I figure you understand wh
fuck I’m comin’ from just about now,” Mace shared, his voice utterly l

I stilled and Eric’s eyes hit me.

‘We are *Oh my God, did Mace really just say that?* my brain asked me.

“You fucked him?” Eric asked me.

Yep, Mace really just said that.

shot.” Oh man, I was gonna *kill* Mace.

l you to “Eric,” I whispered.

ie cops, I didn’t know why I found this upsetting, outside of what Ma
at kind shared and how he shared it. First, I’d been holding back from Eri
be with second, I wasn’t his girlfriend, I was his assignment (I didn’t know th
t. I was went *that* far, but there you go).

u were But I did find this upsetting, mainly because he looked like I slapp
across the face.

Eric closed his eyes and looked to the side, the teeth clench was

ends off again.

“You need to find another assignment.” Mace wasn’t in the mood with the vibe, which would warn just about anyone (except Mace) earlier. I right the fuck off.

,” Eric Eric opened his eyes and they were scorching hot with anger. Not Mace, but at me.

I I was “Eric, this is complicated,” I told him quietly.

was me “I know it is. I know a lot about you, Stella. I know you fell for him. He fell for you. I know he walked out on you. I also know that there’s no one since him. No one but me. Lastly, I know you were holding back here, but I didn’t think it was because you’d fuck him the minute you got a lethal chance. I thought it was because you figured you’d get fucked over if you opened up to anyone,” Eric explained, not nicely, but it was an explanation.

“Careful with your words.” Mace decided to focus on the “not nice

“You didn’t open up to me!” I defended myself, ignoring Mace and focusing on the “explanation” part.

“I got a job to do. Opening up to you wasn’t part of my direction,” I lashed out.

ice just A different kind of imaginary gut kick, this delivered by Eric.

ic. And “Thanks a lot,” I snapped.

re Feds “Falling for you wasn’t either,” Eric returned.

ed him There it went again, my breath taking off, this time to Wyoming.

Mace’s body tensed.

evident Shitsofuckit!

I opened my mouth to speak, but it was too late. Eric turned, opened the door and started to walk out.

He stopped and looked back at Mace. "Take better fuckin' care of time."

Then he slammed the door and was gone.

him and
seen no
back from
got your
again if
was an

!" part.

ice and

ve," he

I opened my mouth to speak, but it was too late. Eric turned, opened the door and started to walk out.

He stopped and looked back at Mace. “Take better fuckin’ care of her this time.”

Then he slammed the door and was gone.

SEVEN



BLACKBIRD

Stella

I stared at the door, not sure how I felt about what just happened. Or it was unhappy and unpleasant and maybe a little sad.

Mace held on to me.

“Get out,” I said quietly, still staring at the door.

“Tell me you didn’t fuck him,” Mace replied.

I closed my eyes hard and swallowed. This was to obtain a measure of control in order not to scream at the top of my lungs.

Then, again quietly, I repeated, “Mace, get out.”

Mace didn’t let go. Mace didn’t move. Mace didn’t speak.

We stood that way, his arm still around me, me still pressed back against him, both of us staring at the door, both silent, for what seemed like an eternity.

Then his head came to my shoulder and he moved my hair away from my face.

At my ear, he said (now *his* voice was quiet), “First night I was with you, you came hard and you came fast. The night I got back from Hawaii, it was the same. This morning, the same. Every time in between, it took a little longer.”

effort to get you to purr for me, Kitten.”

I held my breath. His words shook me. Simply what he said, but all much he remembered. I didn’t even think guys remembered shit like that.

“You didn’t let him fuck you,” he finished softly and he seemed relieved.

“Keep going, Mace, this is great. Pretty soon, I might hate you.”

Entirely unaffected by my words, he kissed my neck, let me whistle between his teeth for Juno. I heard Juno trundle off the bed. I was pretty sure claws on the wood floors as she approached us.

I watched him take the leash from the workout bag.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Juno needs out. We’re goin’ for a walk. We’ll be back.”

“No you won’t. I just kicked you out,” I reminded him.

Mace stopped a foot in front of me. Juno was there so he bent, clicked Juno’s leash and straightened. He leaned into me, kissed my disbelievingly mouth lightly, then he and Juno were gone.

I found myself staring at the door again.

Then I found myself wanting to cry.

My boyfriend I didn’t want just broke up with me (I was pretty sure it was what just happened) and I was thinking maybe now I was wrong about not wanting him. My ex-boyfriend that I wanted back thought we were together and now I was thinking I was wrong about wanting him (I wasn’t sure at all about that). And someone I didn’t even know was dead.

Totally Queen of Super Shitty Luck.

I shook my thoughts clear and cleaned Juno's water bowl. I gave her water, refreshed her food bowl and unpacked *my* stuff from the work bag, leaving Mace's stuff in as a statement. Then I retreated to the bathroom to go and give myself a pedicure, going to take a long, hot, lavender-scented bath and give myself a pedicure.

I was soaking in the bath, a wet washcloth over my eyes, when Juno came in. Mace got back.

I heard them moving around.

I heard the bathroom door open.

I prayed to all that was holy that the bubbles were holding up.

"You didn't lock the deadbolt," I heard Mace say.

I was silent.

"You didn't set the alarm," Mace continued, sounding closer, indeed closer.

"Sorry, I get an 'F' for the day in security," I replied sarcastically.

The washcloth was taken from my eyes. My hair was up in a knot on top of my head and I had a wide, pale-yellow headband holding it back from my face for good measure.

I turned my head, which was resting on a bath pillow on the back of the tub, and looked at Mace. He was crouched down and close. He didn't look angry, but he didn't look happy either.

"Babe, those particular grades end in 'D', which means 'dead,'" Mace said quietly and in all seriousness.

Shit.

He handed the washcloth back. I took it and put it back over my eyes.

Then I heard his voice come at me.

er new “By the way, babe, not a good idea to soak with that wound.”

ut bag, Great.

n. I was He was right.

cure.

Obviously, considering he was right, I made no response.

ino and

When I heard the door click behind him, I pulled the washcloth eyes again and checked the bubbles.

Total body coverage.

Well, thank God for one small stroke of luck.

Hastily exiting the bath, trying not to sound through the door lik
hastily exiting the bath, I toweled off, put on my robe and decided or
spa evening. After my pedicure (I went for a deep, violet purple), a
ed *a lot* and buff and a mini-facial I threw in just because, I was no more clear-
or relaxed. I was just as confused and just as scared and, additiona
wound hurt.

t on top I needed my music.

om my I’d been in the bathroom a long time. By the time I got out, e
summer evening light outside was dimming. I could see it around the b

k of the There was a faint light glowing by my mauve chair. Mace was
i’t look surprising me by looking asleep. He didn’t move as I walked into the

Juno gave a soft woof confirming this. Juno was good at being carefu
he said her humans needed rest. It was weird for a dog to do, but it was true.

Mace must have meant it that morning when he said he felt he o
ten minutes of sleep. I’d never seen him go to bed this early. He was
out to all hours, doing whatever crazy shit he did, then doing crazy
es.
my band, and then up in the morning, early, usually starting the day g

a run.

I walked to my dresser, pulled out some underwear and put it on my short robe, careful of the new dressing I'd taped on. Then I pulled a pair of loose-fitting, peach jersey drawstring shorts and a soft yellow t-shirt with peachy flowers printed in a strip up the sides. I turned my back to the bed, shrugged off my robe and got dressed.

Then I walked to my acoustic guitar, grabbed it and sat on the edge of the mauve chair, settling the guitar on my thigh, close to my knee, deciding to play quietly maybe I wouldn't wake Mace.

But I had to play. It had been two days and too much happened. I was a self-it.

And Guitar Hero didn't cut it.

My fingers moved up the neck, feeling the strings, snagging the strings. I strummed a few chords. Then put a few more together.

After a while, I forgot everything. Eric, the way he looked at me, what he said to me and that entire scene. My new alarm system. Police checking on me. The Rock Chicks in danger. Someone wanting to murder me. The blinds. Someone already murdering Lindsey. I even forgot Mace and Juno, who were in bed in the same room with me.

My long-since callused fingers moved along the frets, strumming until they plucked at the strings, and softly I closed my eyes and began to sing.

Beatles' "Blackbird."

And I kept my eyes closed, softly singing and strumming, picking up movement. I opened my eyes and slid until I plucked the last two notes. I opened my eyes and slid until I plucked the last two notes. I opened my eyes and slid until I plucked the last two notes.

I looked to the bed.

Mace was awake, elbow in the pillow, head in his hand, eyes, I could even in the mostly dark, on me.

Just like he used to do. Just like always.

“Kitten, come to bed,” he said softly.

Just like he used to say. Just like always.

Out of habit, having sunk into living the memory of what we once didn't hesitate.

I put the guitar in its stand, turned out the light and walked to the rounded it. Mace rolled. Juno moved to accommodate me (such a good needed I shimmied out of my shorts and I slid under the covers.

Mace's arm wound around my middle and he pulled me deep into l
“Feel better?” he murmured into my hair, knowing how I need
frets. I music.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

He kissed the back of my neck.

“I missed that too,” he told me, talking about me playing and singing him watching, and I felt a shiver slide across my skin.

I knew not only did he mean to say that out loud, he meant to say I said earlier out loud too.

And I didn't know what to make of that at all.



I WOKE up with Mace's hand under my tank top, not just under it but saw in on my breast.

“Mace—” I said, sounding sleepy.

His hand cupped my breast. The rough pad of his thumb slid across

ould tell nipple then back.

“Mace—” I said again, still sounding sleepy, but my voice had lower.

His thumb was joined by a finger, there was a gentle squeeze then

Pleasant happy tingles shot everywhere and a goodly number c were, I directed themselves straight between my legs.

Oh lordy be.

e bed. I I twisted my head to him, my intent to say something, to protest, d dog). pulled up, leaned in and kissed my open mouth. The kiss was deep, h he pressed his hips into my bottom at the same time he did another s him. then swipe of this thumb. I felt his hardness against my behind an led my pleasant tingles, far more intense, scored a path through every nerve.

I kissed him back. I couldn't help it. I didn't try.

We kept kissing then his mouth moved along my cheek, to my ear tongue traced its curve. His hand left my breast and trailed down, o belly, between my legs then he cupped me there.

ing and “Tell me what you want,” he murmured in my ear, his deep voice rough.

what he “Touch me,” I whispered.

He touched me, his fingers pressing in, finding me immedi moaned and started to breathe heavily, my mouth open, Mace's l tongue at my neck.

honing I pressed my hips into his lap and nuzzled. He made a noise tha deep from his throat and vibrated against my neck.

ross my I twisted my head again and we kissed, hotter, deeper, his fingers

me over my undies. I quit kissing and started panting.

dipped His fingers moved away.

“What do you want?” he asked against my mouth.

a roll. I didn’t delay. I couldn’t and I didn’t try.

of them “I want you inside me.”

His thumb went into the side of my panties, pulling them up over
bandage and yanking them down to just above my knees. He positioned
but he entered me.

not, and God, it was beautiful.

squeeze My neck twisted the whole time so I was facing him. His hand came
d more to my breast, his thumb and finger teasing my nipple, our mouths touching
alternately kissing and breathing, my hips pressed into his as he thrust
me.

and his I got close but held back.

over my “Kitten,” he muttered.

He felt it, he knew it, he didn’t like it.

already He never did. He always wanted me to let go.

I always wanted to wait for him.

ately. I “Are you close?” I breathed.

lips and He didn’t answer, instead he demanded, “Stop holding back.”

“I want it to happen with you,” I told him.

it came His hand left my breast, went between my legs, his fingers pressed
circled.

playing I gasped his name. His mouth ground down on mine and he drove

deep right before I came.

I was dazed and still coming down when, mouth still on mine, his going deeper, faster, I knew he was close.

His voice now hoarse, he said, “Christ, you feel sweet. No one sweeter.”

ver my
ied and
It was again something I suspected he didn’t mean to say out loud
was beginning to think Mace didn’t do anything he didn’t mean to
different kind of warmth spread over me in a thick layer on top of my
post-orgasm-Mace-still-inside-me feel.

ne back
ogether,
ust into
Then his breath caught. He shoved his face in my neck, he slammed
deep and I heard and felt him let out a heavy sigh.

When he was done he settled behind me, his arm wrapped around
belly and he didn’t pull out.

I blinked slowly.

Then I realized it had happened again.

Shitsofuckit!

What was I thinking?

When was I going to *start* thinking?

“You okay?” he asked softly.

I nodded my head.

sed and
edges.
His hand drifted to my bandage, his fingers running whisper-soft against

“I hurt you?”

into me
I shook my head.

His arm wrapped around my middle again.

My mind was racing to form a plan to get me out of my newest man, I was angry at him. He told my now ex-boyfriend he'd fuckin' doing it with a frankness that was just not nice, for Eric or for me. He listening to me when I told him we weren't together and he didn't leave, but I kicked him out.

This couldn't go on.

Of course, I was lying with him in my bed. A bed I joined him night without a peep. A bed where I was lying, my panties at my knees, still inside me.

Perhaps I was giving him mixed signals.

Ya think? my brain asked.

"Babe?" he called.

"What?" I replied, having still not formed a plan.

"What's with black?" he asked.

This question confused me and I forgot all about forming a plan.

"Excuse me?"

"Your songs. 'Blackbird,' 'Black Water,' 'Black Velvet,' 'Black Eyes' a lot of the songs you sing have the word 'black.'"

His question surprised me. He'd never asked me anything personal, he'd definitely never asked about my music, the most personal thing of

I knew he enjoyed it. He came to a lot of my gigs. I saw him stand in the dark, fingers around the neck of a beer bottle, his eyes on me all the time. And just like last night, when we were at my place, even if he was doing something, on a phone call, reading a book, if I started to play he'd

stop and watch and I knew he'd listen, and I knew further he liked it.

After he came to a gig we had the best sex ever (which put our s
ed me, the-charts) because I was high from the gig and, I suspected, so was he

Any time I played when we were alone, after I'd finish, he'd make
e when me. I knew it was that because it was sweeter, slower, less energetic, a
giving, always about Mace giving to me.

"I don't know," I answered.

His arm tightened. "Tell me."

I sighed and tilted my chin forward. His head came with me. I cou
his breath on my neck.

I didn't want to get into this with him. It was none of his business.

Even on that thought, I answered. I couldn't help myself, and
didn't try.

"My life was black. My dad didn't love me. My mom used me as a
against his abuse. I didn't have any brothers or sisters and I didn't
anything with friends. I was too young, I didn't know how. I needed
black, my life, into something beautiful or good or cool. Those songs
good, some of them beautiful, some of them just cool."

I felt a change in his body, which translated into a change in the
made no sense to me except that I felt different somehow, warmer.

"Does that make sense?" I whispered, for some reason wanting t
certain he understood.

He didn't answer.

I tried again. I didn't know why, but I did.

"In Pearl Jam's 'Black,' Eddie Vedder sings..." Then I sang the fi

important verses of perhaps the greatest rock ballad in history
sex off-whispered, "Well..." I hesitated then in a low, soft whisper, "That's m

. He moved, disconnected from me, but stayed close, and someh
love to closer.

ll about "You aren't black."

"My world is."

He was silent for a beat then he asked, "You ever see any light?"

When I was with you, my brain answered.

uld feel "When I met Floyd," I said. "When The Gypsies came together."

"Me?" He went direct to the point I was hiding from him.

"You," I replied honestly.

l again,
"Now?"

a shield "We're black," I replied dishonestly. We were as black as the sun a
conversation proved it.

t share "You really believe that?"

to turn
; are all "Yes," I lied.

"You want me to go?"

e air. It "Yes," I lied again, and it was hard. My heart was beating and my
was packing up, enjoying its travels, it was ready to explore Texas.

o make "You're under my skin," he shared.

There it went, my breath, sitting in first class drinking chan
straight flight to Texas.

Kai Mason was not a sharing type of guy.

ve most Kai Mason had never shared anything with me, except his presen

then Ibody and his ability to post bond for Pong on occasion.

e.” Who was this guy?

ow got No, no, I didn’t want to know. I didn’t even care.

“Eventually I’ll work my way out,” I assured him, but I didn’t even
that to happen. I knew it. I just wasn’t going to admit it, especially not

“I like you there.”

Oh lordy be.

“Mace.”

“I’m keepin’ you there.”

“I don’t want to be there.”

“You wanna be there.”

“I don’t.”

and this “You’re lyin’ to yourself and you’re lyin’ to me.”

“I’m not.”

He kissed the side of my neck.

“You are,” he said against my neck. “And, Kitten, you should know
good with that. I’ll be here when you stop.”

7 breath Effing hell.

“I’ll walk Juno,” he offered, clearly done with the conversation.

“Fine.” I was done with the conversation too, and I couldn’t wait
1page, without a Kevlar vest and a crash helmet and possibly total body armor

“Make room for my shit in your closet.”

I carefully pulled up my panties as I twisted to look at him.

1ce, his “Not fine.”

His eyes were warm, soft and smiling, which made me feel war and smiley. Luckily, I kept this on the inside.

Damn his fucking eyes.

er want “Make lotsa room, babe. Even after this is over, I’m stayin’ awhile
to him. “Piss off,” I mumbled and turned back around.

His hand came to the side of my face that was on the pillow. He me to face him again. His head descended and he touched my lips with his.

“I’ll be back,” he whispered.

Effing, *bloody* hell.

ow, I’m

lk Juno

r.

His eyes were warm, soft and smiling, which made me feel warm, soft and smiley. Luckily, I kept this on the inside.

Damn his fucking eyes.

“Make lotsa room, babe. Even after this is over, I’m stayin’ awhile.”

“Piss off,” I mumbled and turned back around.

His hand came to the side of my face that was on the pillow. He twisted me to face him again. His head descended and he touched my lips lightly with his.

“I’ll be back,” he whispered.

Effing, *bloody* hell.

EIGHT



THIS ONE'S FOR LINNIE

Stella

“This is, like, ‘Beam me up, Scottie.’ Fuckin’ cool!” Leo shouted.

Leo was staring at my alarm panel and video monitor as the concept of home security had been invented twelve seconds ago and I was on the cutting edge.

“Gee-zus, but Mace sure don’t mess around,” Pong added, flipping the door down on the panel and starting to press buttons randomly.

Visions of a dozen police cars and shiny black Explorers screeching to halt in the driveway, spraying gravel, officers and hot Night Investigation Team members alighting with guns drawn and slaying everything that moved flashed through my head.

I leaped forward and slapped Pong’s hand.

“Pong, don’t do that!” I snapped.

“What?” Pong asked, looking innocent (or trying and failing).

“No pressing buttons on the state-of-the-art alarm system that costs the moon and the stars and the promised enslavement of his first children,” I answered. “Clue in, Pong, this is serious business.”

“Jeez, take a chill pill, Stella Bella,” Leo said, laidback even in the

imminent danger (likely because he'd just smoked a doobie), which th
had its share of even before Linnie was murdered and I was scratched
hit list. We could just say that we'd seen more than our quota of bar
we'd broken up way too many possible statutory rape scenarios b
Pong and/or Hugo and underage groupies and Leo had been fo
possession of illegal substances on more than one occasion.

I looked at the ceiling briefly. When I noted that instructions on
deal with idiot band members were not written by the hand of God i
gold script on my ceiling (as they never were), my gaze shifted to Floy

Floyd grinned, knowing my thoughts instantly (as was his wa
; if the shook his head. "Whatever the time, you don't want to do it."

was on Floyd was probably right. Perhaps I shouldn't kill Pong and Leo.

Still, maybe I wouldn't get into too much trouble if I roughed the
ing the bit. Anyone would understand. I was under a lot of pressure and my
attorney could make the jury sit in a room with Pong and Leo for a
ing to a After that, they'd let me off, no doubt.

tingale The entire band was over to pick up the equipment for the gig tha
hooting Swen and Ulrika let us keep it in an unused room on the second
Usually I helped with the lugging and lifting, but seeing as I was o
faceless crazy criminal's hit list, for once I was going to be saved this

"All right, boys. Let's get loaded up so we can set up." Floyd, tha
decided it was time to get down to business.

st Mace "They really gonna pat down everyone that comes to the gig?"
irstbornasked me, ignoring Floyd.

"They're going to wand them," I explained.

face of Hugo nodded then said, "They go for the pat down, I'm in."

the band New visions crowded my head. They were visions of Hugo patting
down every female who came close to the door. Visions of Hugo's brand
brawls, down made me shiver and not in a good way, but in the kind of
between shivered every time I had to phone the bail bondsman, whose number,
found in your information, was on my speed dial.

"I think they're gonna stick with the wands. They're more accurate
how to detecting...stuff."

in fancy I was making this up. I had no idea which was more accurate.

'd.

"I could be pretty accurate with a pat down," Hugo offered.

ly) and

Sheesh.

"Me too," Pong put in.

Good grief!

them up a

defense

in an hour.

Hugo turned to Pong. "We could lose the sax. Half the time I'm
the fuckin' tambourine and workin' the crowd. If anyone's gonna get
the pat downs, it's me."

that night.

1 floor.

in some

chore.

unkfully,

"Drums aren't that important. They do that MTV Unplugged all the
with just guitars," Pong told Hugo then turned to me. "You can
unplugged tonight. Shake it up a bit."

Unplugged?

Shake it up a bit?

Okay, enough.

' Hugo

I put my hands on my hips, narrowed my eyes and leaned in. "We
gonna go unplugged and you two are not gonna do *any* patting down
anyone. Do I make myself understood?"

"Shit, mama. Be cool," Hugo said, putting his hands up, palms out.

g down “Man, I thought you gettin’ back together with Mace would mean
l of patbe gettin’ it regular again and you’d go back to bein’ Sweet Stella Be
: way IStella-on-the-rag,” Pong added.

just for I turned to Floyd but kept my hands on my hips. “Floyd, hit the red
on the alarm panel,” I ordered.

irate at “Now, why would I do that?” Floyd asked, still grinning.

“Because it’s a panic button and the police will come immedi
figure they’d appreciate the novelty of being called *before* a crime occ
I answered.

Floyd just kept grinning. What he did not do was hit the panic butt
Whatever.

“I think that’s our cue to go.” Buzz, for the first time since they
playin’ spoke.

st to do “Man, Stella being targeted for murder puts her in a bad mood,
muttered, and fast as a snake, Floyd’s hand moved and he slappe
he timeupside the back of his head.

uld go “Don’t be stupid,” Floyd hissed under his breath.

Hugo, Leo and I were staring at Buzz. Pong’s gaze swung to him
Buzz was white as a sheet.

Okay, maybe I’d rough up Hugo and Leo but I was going to kill Po

“Shit, sorry, Buzz,” Pong murmured.

are not Buzz looked at Pong a beat, did a little shrug and looked at me.

own of “You gonna be safe up there tonight?” he asked.

I bit my bottom lip. That was the sixty-four thousand dollar questio

1 you'd Then I nodded and said, "Mace has it covered." And I prayed to
lla, notwas holy that I wasn't blowing sunshine up my own ass.

Buzz shook his head. "Ain't gonna lie, I need the money. We m
l buttonweekend's gigs, I'm up shit creek. I need the music too. After Linnie..

We all held our breath.

We knew what he meant. We needed the music just as much as
ately. IWe all loved Linnie and music was what brought her to us.

urred," Buzz continued, "Anyway, it ain't no good if you're not safe."

I walked up to Buzz and put my hand on his neck.

on. "Mace has it covered," I repeated, this time softly.

Buzz stared at me, then he nodded and the band took off. All but F
arrived,

I watched them go, assessing my motley crew. Okay, maybe m
memorizing them in case I was shot or poisoned or some such befor
" Pongthem again.

d Pong Pong was tall and skinny with a mass of thick, dark hair that he kep
past his shoulders and teased out in a wild mess for our performan
also put on eyeliner, which Hugo gave him shit about, but even I had t
as well.it worked for him, mainly because it made him kind of look like
Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow. He had dark eyes, thick eyelashes, a
ng. brow and a personality wilder than his hair, which said a lot.

Hugo was a huge black man with skin like midnight, perfect and s
He had broad shoulders and muscular thighs the size of tree trun
shaved his Afro close to his skull, dressed to the nines even though the
the band usually wore jeans and had an easy, wide, white smile that
n. reached his lazy, dark-brown eyes. He had a deep, velvet voice tha

all that Barry White sound like a pansy.

Leo was slight of build, about an inch shorter than me, and
his aversion to shampoo. He had messy, light-brown hair, blue eyes
.” mellow attitude that was induced through copious amounts of pot
His clothes hung on him and had more than the illusion of being dirty.

This was something for which he took a good deal of shit from both
he did. and Hugo.

Pong dressed rock 'n' roll: tight, low-slung jeans, ripped T-shirts,
occasion when the spirit of Steven Tyler flowed through him, Pong wore
thin scarves around his neck.

Hugo, as I already mentioned, dressed like he was torn from the pages
loyd. GQ magazine.

Leo had no fashion direction and couldn't care less. His grungy
orbidly worked for him. The girls dug it, mostly because girls would dig
e I saw onstage wielding a guitar. Leo, however, was more interested in
pt long, stoned than girls, which was another thing Pong and Hugo gave him sh

ces. He Then again, Hugo and Pong didn't really look for excuses to give
o admit. They dished it out regularly.

Johnny Buzz was blond, blue-eyed and had a trailer trash Brad Pitt thing
i heavy Tall and lean, mainly because he didn't have enough money to eat, had
great body, molded not by working in a gym, but by the hand of a benevolent
smooth. God.

ks. He Buzz appearing onstage in a tight T-shirt and faded jeans caused
rest of electric ripple of groupie girl desire to sweep through the crowd every
always time.

it made It helped that he gave off the vibe of a sensitive soul who'd worn

ground his woman walked on. He gave off that vibe because that was had an was, committed and monogamous. He'd given more devotion and en and a Linnie than, in the end, even though now the reminder of it made i noking. guilt, many of us thought she deserved.

When the door closed behind them, I turned to Floyd.

th Pong Floyd had a thick head of gray hair he kept fashioned in a grease '50s pompadour. He was mostly thin, but sported a slight beer belly. F and on glasses rimmed in black like Buddy Holly's, had a quick grin, a rapped chuckle and long-fingered hands that were magic on a piano keyboa sense of contentment for life, family and music glittered around him ages of aura. He drew people because he was kind. That kindness was etch him physically, in the wrinkles around his bright, dancing, hazel eyes grooves around his mouth. Floyd was just the kind of person you wa ge look know.

anyone "Let's talk about you," Floyd said to me.

getting Oh dear, here we go.

it for. Okay, I decided in that moment that Floyd was not the kind of p ve shit. wanted to know.

; going. I turned away and walked to the platform where my guitar: e had a "Nothin' to talk about."

evolent "Bullshit, Stella Bella. You aren't pullin' any wool here, girl,"

I stopped on the platform, opened up a guitar case and grabbed one used anelectric guitars.

y single I'd known Floyd a long time and I'd never, not once, been able any wool with him. And believe me, I tried.

ship the

who he “I don’t want to talk about it.” I tried an evasion tactic.

energy to “Well, I do,” Floyd returned. “Not to mention, Emily is scared shit

me feel My tactic failed.

Shit.

ed back Floyd had two grown daughters. Therefore Floyd was the Master
le wore Guilt Maneuver and was not afraid to use it.

a sweet “Let’s start with Mace,” Floyd pushed.

ard. His “Let’s not,” I replied, placing the guitar in the case carefully, as
like an closing and locking the lid.

ed into I heard Floyd’s boots on my floor then I felt Floyd’s fingers curl
and the my upper arm. With no choice, I stopped what I was doing and turned

nted to “Girl...” he said low, his voice both steely and sweet, something
was sure worked for him with Emily and his daughters. I was sure be
always worked on me.

erson I “He thinks we’re back together,” I told Floyd, and his hand droppe
as his eyebrows went up.

“He thinks?” Floyd asked.

s were. “We’re not,” I answered.

This wasn’t altogether true as I’d been sleeping with Mace for da
to mention, I’d had sex with Mace twice. Good sex. Sex some wou
e of my define as “getting back together sex,” though if I was honest, sex of a
could be defined as that. And further, not two hours ago, Mace had c
to pull off two big, stuffed-full gym bags and two boxes of crap at my apa
Then he grabbed me, kissed me hard and took off saying he’d see n
that night at the gig.

“Why not?” Floyd prodded, cutting into my thoughts.

less.” “How many reasons do you want?”

“How many you got?”

“Seven thousand, two hundred and eleven,” I retorted sarcastically

r of the “Well, I got seven thousand, two hundred and twelve why you sh
him back in.”

I felt my eyes go round. “Are you loco? Were you *not* around w
nd then broke up with me? Were you *not* there when I went through two b
Kleenex in your and Emily’s living room? Hello? Mace came into r
settled in a way I thought was forever and I liked it. I liked it a lot. I
around too much. Then he ripped us apart and walked away. I’m not going t
to him. that again.” I shook my head. “Unh-unh. No way.”

which I “Emily left me,” was Floyd’s reply.
cause it

This time, my eyes bugged out and I felt my mouth drop open. I
d away my mouth dropped open in an effort to give my body oxygen, but it
impossible feat. My lungs had turned to stone.

Emily and Floyd were solid. Emily and Floyd were strong. Em
Floyd were everything. This was impossible.

ys. Not “Not recently, seventeen years ago,” Floyd went on, and I f
ld even trembling world under my feet grow steady again. Floyd kept talkin
ny kind left me, took the girls, moved in with her parents back in Michigan a
ropped gone for ten months.”

rtment. “Oh my God,” I whispered, thankfully breathing again.

ne later “Don’t know why, even to this day, even though she explai
Whatever it was, we weren’t working. Not for her. It didn’t matte

thing I cared about was she came back.”

I staggered back and sat on the arm of my mauve chair, feeling the weight of this news settling on me like a boulder. I’d always thought that Emma and Floyd were the end-all-be-all of relationships. I couldn’t wrap my mind around this information.

ould let

Juno trundled over to me and butted my hand with her nose until I stopped scratching behind her ears.

hen he

oxes of

ny life,

liked it

through

Floyd crouched in front of me.

“What I’m sayin’ is shit happens to couples. In any relationship, there’s ebbs and there’s flows. You want that relationship to work, you put on your life jacket and ride it out.”

I shook my head, not feeling much like going in the conversation direction he felt like taking me, but Floyd kept talking.

figured

was an

ily and

“You gotta learn to give, Stella. I’m not sayin’ this to be ugly, but you’re bound up tight. That boy walked into your life and you didn’t give a fuckin’ thing, ’cept your music. I watched...hell, we all watched... I knew he was ready to lay the world at your feet. All you had to do was let him in. You never let him in.”

felt the

g, “She

nd was

I felt a queer sensation, like someone had reached a hand in and squeezed my heart.

“I let him in,” I said softly, but I knew that wasn’t altogether true either. Floyd put his hand on my knee and looked into my eyes.

“You got more to give than your music, girl.”

ined it.

r. Only

Direct shot, right to the gut.

But he was wrong.

“I don’t.”

weight “You do,” Floyd said firmly.

ily and Okay, wait just one damned minute.

y mind I wasn’t going to take the fall for Mace giving up on me. That v
going to happen.

started “He wanted it, he should have asked,” I said to Floyd. “He never ta
me. Looking back, we didn’t know each other at all.”

there’s “You ever ask him? Did you ever talk to him? Did you ever try to
whatever demons that boy has trapped in his mind?” Floyd asked.

on your This threw me. It threw me so much, to hide it I gave a sharp l
laugh that didn’t even sound like it came from me, and I shot up fr
sational chair. Floyd came up from his crouch.

“Mace? Demons?” I asked.

you’re Hardly.

him a Mace was...

and we Well, just Mace. Supercool, superhot, super job, super good at eve
was let he did, just all around *super*.

started Floyd was staring at me, doing it so intensely it made me uncomfo

My body prepared for another blow because something wei
ither. happening here.

Super weird.

And I didn’t get it.

And furthermore, I didn’t want to get it.

“You don’t see it?” Floyd asked.

“See what?”

Floyd’s face shifted and I could swear for a moment he disappointed right before he hid it.

was not Then Floyd got close.

“Stella, I wouldn’t...” He stopped, shook his head, and I could tell I talked to warring with something. Then his hands came to my upper arms, his fingers curling around them and he squeezed. “I wouldn’t have expected from you. But here it is, right in front of me. So I’m gonna say it straight out of your fuckin’ head and look around you. First thing, look in your eyes. That boy’s got pain there, plain as day and deeper than anything I’ve experienced in your whole fuckin’ life.”

ugh, a All of a sudden, saliva filled my mouth and I feared I might vomit.

om the Quickly, I swallowed it down.

“What?” I asked, but that one word sounded shaky.

“You’re so busy wrapping yourself in cotton wool so no one will hear that you don’t see the world around you. You got a reason, I know. You’re a schmuck, your mother...worse. Ain’t nothin’ worse than a woman who uses her own child as a shield.”

rything rtable. My body got tight.

rd was “You don’t know how it was, Floyd,” I said somewhat sharply.

“I don’t *care* how it was. You blame your dad. You make excuses for your mom. They’re both guilty as sin for doin’ what they did to you now, *you’re* guilty for letting them control your life years after you let them behind, built something good and became a decent person. Not ever like them, Stella Bella. Not even close. You know that. You gotta real

in the battle of your early life, you won. But you aren't lettin' yourself
looked the victory. You just keep preparin' for the next battle, a battle that mi
come."

I pulled away and put distance between us, to get away from Flo
he was also to get away from his words.

his long "Floyd, you're telling this to a woman who got dumped *for n*
ted this *reason*. Okay, I didn't let him in, but he didn't let me in either. And he
ght. Get talk to me about it. And he left because of all the things I *am*."

Mace's "Goddamn it, girl, you're not the band," Floyd shot back, losing pa
you've "I *am* the band," I shouted.

Because, let's face it, it might not be right and it might not be goo
was true.

I went on, "And, let's not forget, if people are so loving and car
deep and giving, why is Linnie dead? Hunh? Why? Why do I have to
hurt you fear of being murdered even though I didn't do a damn thing but
our dad Mace, like, ages ago? Why do I have to worry about more of my
an who getting murdered? A battle that might not come? It's not only going to
it's here Floyd! This is my life. It's always been my life. Battle after
Time after time. Day after day."

I threw my hand up when Floyd opened his mouth to interrupt me.

ises for "No. No, don't say it. I see where you're coming from, but you are
ou. But You don't know. You don't have to live in my head. I have to take
'ft them myself, you, the band, the music. It's all I've got. It's all I ever had. A
yone is good came in, like Mace, it went away. I can't reach for more. I tr
ize that couldn't keep hold. I learned my lesson. I can live with what I've got
happy."

lf enjoy For a second Floyd looked like he was going to say something
ight not Then his face went soft. He closed the distance between us and lea
putting his forehead to mine.

yd, but “I’m happy,” I repeated quietly, putting my hands on Floyd’s sh
and giving him a squeeze to make my point.

o good Floyd lifted his head.

e didn’t “I want to believe that,” he said, his voice had lost the steel and w
just sweet. “But, Stella, you break my heart.”

tience. That hand wrapped around my heart squeezed tighter so my finger
shoulders gripped harder.

d, but it “I don’t want to break your heart,” I whispered. “Please, just let
what I have to do.” Then, even softer, I said, “I need you, especially
ing and support me.”

o live in A smile played about Floyd’s mouth, but he shook his head.

fall for “Love you, girl. Love you like you were my own.”

friends I felt another heart squeeze, another gut kick, both at the sam
o come, Somehow, though, these didn’t hurt.

o battle. “But, I’m rooting for Mace this time. I ain’t standin’ by lettin’ h
through your fingers again.”

n’t me. I reared back, but Floyd leaned in close.

care of “I’m gonna do what I have to do to help him break you.”

nything Oh my God!

ied but “Floyd!” I shouted.

and be He put his hand on my cheek, grinned then said, “It’s for yo
good.”

g more. I'd heard him say that to his daughters, dozens of times.
ned in, I stared at him, speechless and shocked, as he moved away. He g
my guitar case and walked out without another word.

oulders Juno and I watched him go then Juno looked at me and woofed.

“You got that right, girl,” I said to my dog, feeling distinctly lik
sinking. “My luck *sucks*.”

as now Juno woofed in agreement.

I stared back at the door.

s on his Then I asked my dog, “What do you think he meant by pain in
eyes?”

me do I looked to Juno and a big string of drool plopped from her lip
you, to floor. This I decided to take as a Juno shrug. Then I decided to do a
shrug and not think about pain and Mace and, most especially, not his



THE PALLADIUM WAS an old movie theater on Colfax that had been
e time. into a huge club fifteen years ago. The bloom had long since gone
rose. It was filthy and smelled of beer with hints of smoke and the occ
im slip waft of vomit.

But the acoustics were perfect.

You could get five hundred people in there without the fire dep
getting antsy, but the owner, a man strangely named Monk (w
anything but), pushed the fire code limits every time The Gypsies c
play. We were pure gold to him. We could pack the place at top dollar
door with lines down the sidewalks waiting to get in, and tonight
ur own exception.

We loved playing there. The stage was big and gave us room to move. All of us preferred the big crowds. We were happy doing the more gigs at Herman's or The Little Bear, but we were on fire when we had our house at The Palladium.

And tonight was no different. The place was shoulder to shoulder. I was

Seeing as it was an outside possibility that this would be my last performance, I wasn't holding back. I'd even dressed beyond the pale in case I was going to die. I didn't want my corpse to be anything but rock 'n' roll.

I'd scrunched out my hair to maximum, wavy volume. I'd done just short of slut-o-rama, makeup. I'd pulled on faded jeans, a black t-shirt with silver sequins and rivets stitched on the front in the shape of a coiled, mental snake and a racer back so you could see my black bra straps. I'd thrown on a black, tooled-leather belt with a huge, intricately filigreed silver buckle through my belt loops.

Completing my ensemble were black cowboy boots with a high off the normal heel and kickass designs etched into the leather, huge, wide, occasional hooped earrings, silver rings on every finger (sometimes more than one), and a kickass, wide, battered silver band was shoved up my arm, hugging my bicep.

We were at the end of our second of four forty-five minute sets and the crowd was beginning to loosen up.

I was loosening up because I knew four Nightingale men, wearing windbreakers with the word SECURITY in huge yellow letters on the back, were manning the four sets of double doors. Ike, Jack, Bobby and Ma were paired with one of Monk's bouncers, all of them wandering everyone through

ove and in and searching backpacks and purses.

ntimate Luke was floating between the doors, not wearing a windbreak
d a full being generally badass, thus not inviting killer intentions.

Eddie, Hank and Willie Moses were all drifting through the
badges and guns on full display on their belts, further dampeni
y final nefarious mood.

just in I knew Hector was outside because I saw him briefly when Luke l
full-on Ava and me to the gig. Hector emerged from the shadows, gave Luke
me a once over with his black eyes, and then he slid back into shadows

smoky, Vance was stationed at the door that led backstage.

nk with Lee was *on* the stage, at the back, in the dark, watching the crowd.

striking If this wasn't enough, I noticed that Indy's coffee man, Tex, had
eaded a himself at a stool, back to the bar, and I could see when my glance str
buckle him that the big man's eyes were rarely on the stage.

er than Duke, on the other hand, had planted himself in front of me, mo
silver- and down the front of the stage whenever I moved. Even though his ba
ne) and mostly to me, I suspected from the looks on the faces of the crowd cl
ing my him that he was glaring them down, squashing the happy vibe. All exc
Rock Chicks, all of whom (except Jules) were front and center. Happ
secure, Indy, Ally, Jet, Roxie, Daisy, Shirleen, Ava and Annette were
d I was along with me at the top of their lungs and screaming like freaks afte
song.

g black As far as I could tell, Mace had not yet arrived.

e back, I figured even Madonna didn't have this caliber of security so
tt, each unlikely tonight was my night to die.
at came

And that made the gig all the more sweet.

er, but My glance slid to Floyd and I gave him the nod.

It was time.

crowd, We were going to deviate from the set list. Everyone in the band
ng any about it.

Everyone, that was, but Buzz.

brought Floyd caught Leo's eye and Leo lifted his chin just as Hugo caught
a nod, and grinned, stepping toward a microphone.
s again.

Buzz was looking at his boots.

The band might be on fire, but Buzz was only swept up in the flame
wasn't participating much in building it higher. His mind was on other
planted I took my eyes off Buzz, looked at the crowd and wrapped my
ayed to around the microphone with a toss of my hair.

This was Pong and Leo's cue.

ving up Pong's sticks clicked on the drums, Leo started the first chords
ick was knew without looking that Buzz had clued in. He couldn't help but
osest to We all knew what those clicks and strums meant.
cept the

py vibe "This one's for Linnie," I told the crowd.

singing Everyone screamed. The wave of sound hit the band, firing us up
r every more even though most people probably had no idea who Linnie was
didn't care. Any song that was for someone was going to be *something*
this song, a song we rarely ever played, they knew would rock the
it was fucking house.

I glanced at Buzz and found his face was pale, but his eyes were
and they were shining. I looked away, knowing if I kept looking at

lose it, just as Hugo's deep voice started smoothly delivering the lyrics

And the lyrics were to ZZ Top's killer, kickass "La Grange."

Hugo sang.

d knew A few more strums, a few more clicks.

I felt it in my belly like I always felt it in my belly, just like I knew
always felt it in her belly.

ight on *Wait for it...* my brain breathed in anticipation.

Pong's drums went wild and Leo's soft guitar went solid. The
surged in and my stomach plunged.

ame; he *This is what it's all about. This is what Linnie lived for,* my brain
things. what I already knew, because I understood Linnie. I lived for it too.

y hand Hugo's velvet voice slid back in, "Have mercy..." then he sm
through the "haw haws" and delivered the lyrics.

When it was time, Pong rounded out the beat and I went front str
, and I started to blow the lid off.

clue in. "Have mercy," Hugo finished.

He stepped back with a big white smile at me and I rolled.

I walked the stage, eyes on the crowd, Leo and Pong setting the rh
, all the watched the crowd throb, the heads bob, the bodies sway, the hands ir
s. They jacking out the beat. I smiled wide at them. They were asking for it,
ig. And usual I gave it to them. It was the only good thing I had to give
: whole generous with the gift and they sucked it right up.

Leo stopped. Pong and I took turns. Leo cut in and I cut out, leavi
: on me Leo and Pong.

him I'd Then Pong exploded, Leo came back, and finally, so did I.

Floyd joined the fun, scooting across the stage, crouched low, jaw back and forth, playing air guitar like he was a white Chuck Berry.

I watched Floyd's antics and only I could hear my laughter over the music. My eyes moved to Hugo who was doing a weird, super fly black and white dancing to rock 'n' roll dance, shoulders moving up and down, hands tight to his chest, head bobbing, feet moving around in a wide square.

The crowd was there, feeding us, but they'd also somehow melted away.

The band was all on its own. We were the only ones in the club whose eyes were tight, most ev'ry night, and there was no mistake about it.

Buzz, his bass not needed in this part of the song, was jumping up and down, a wide smile on his lips, tears streaming down his face, he flipped around so it was at a slant along his back.

I was working the stage, working the band, following alongside Floyd. He made another crazy crouch-walk back across the stage.

I tossed my hair, throwing my head back to do it and just kept playing.

I stopped, leaned forward at the hips and laughed open-mouthed in the direction of Leo, who was moving his hips and shaking his head, his hair in his eyes, grinning like a loon. I looked to Pong who was banging the drums, swinging his wild hair around so much it was like a living thing in the air.

Linnie would love this, my brain told me.

and as *Linnie always loved this*, I told my brain, and she did. Linnie's favorite song was always ZZ Top's "La Grange." She begged us to do it, every gig.

Here's to Linnie, my brain whispered.

ng it to "Here's to Linnie," I whispered back.

I smiled at Buzz. He smiled at me and went to the microphone.

utting notes started to fade.

“*Long live rock ‘n’ roll!*” he screamed.

ver the The crowd roared.

ck man I nodded at the lighting guy.

tucked The stage went black.



away. A BOTTLE of Fat Tire beer was shoved into my hand by Duke when
and we down the steps at the side of the stage.

“We got trouble,” Duke growled, but I’d already felt it. The high
up and “La Grange” disappeared in a flash and my eyes moved to the source
is bass trouble just as Duke plastered himself to my side and the band
clattering down behind me.

loyd as “What’s goin’ on?” Floyd asked.

I moved toward the back wall where Lee, Vance and a newly-
ing. Mace had Monk pinned to the wall, using nothing but their collective
l in the presence to hold him there.

is dirty “And lighten the fuckin’ crowd,” I heard Mace finish on a snarl
ging on stopped several feet behind his back.

hing. I didn’t have to see his face to know Mace was *not* in a good mood
had to look at the straight line of his back and the tight way he was
favorite his powerful body.

“*Have you lost your fuckin’ mind?*” Monk screeched, eyes hu
riveted on Mace.

“You don’t close down the door and lighten the crowd, I’m gon
as the my fuckin’ mind, make no mistake,” Mace returned, and honest to Go

was no mistake to be made in the tone of Mace's voice.

Lordy be.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Four sets of male eyes moved to me, but it was Monk who spoke.

"Stella, beautiful, call off your man."

I felt the band settle in behind me and Duke was still close to my side.

I came "What's happening?" I repeated.

"You don't call off your man, we got problems," Monk threatened.

I never liked Monk. I suspected he skimmed from our take on the bar. I knew he watered down drinks. I also knew he didn't card pretty young girls. He nor did he serve them the watered down booze. He also got too close and talked to me and he had bad breath. All this was not conducive to me liking him, so I never did.

I arrived I shoved in between Mace and Vance.

badass "What...is...happening?" I asked, speaking slowly and sounding pissed off as I was.

when I I mean, no one messed with a ZZ Top vibe.

No one.

d. I just Especially not someone like Monk.

holding Monk had dark, thick, bushy hair around the sides of his head, but bald and shiny at the top. He was shorter than me, rounder than any I knew and had weasel eyes. He looked like a weird, scary clown with makeup.

na lose "He's over code for maximum capacity," Lee answered for Monk.

d, there

his boys aren't doing thorough searches."

This was not good.

Monk often went over code. This wasn't a surprise. But the searches were kind of important if I wanted to be breathing in the m And equally important for all the Rock Chicks to be safe.

ide. "You know how long it takes to wand someone and look through shit? It'd take hours to get people in here," Monk flashed at Lee then bravado and visibly quailed when Lee's angry eyes sliced to him.

door. I "Monk, do you have any idea what's at stake here?" Floyd had sh between Lee and Mace, and he looked even angrier than Lee (but no ig girls, than Mace). One glance at Mace said very bad things for Monk's imr when he future.

e liking Before Monk could answer, Lee cut in and said to Monk, "You ag the procedure."

ling as "I agreed but I had no idea it'd be this tight, take that long at th The Gypsies are a solid act, but there were people leaving the line an home. That's me losin' money. I don't like losin' money." Monk, si wasn't backing down.

"You still got a line outside and you're over capacity. You aren' shit," Vance threw in.

he was "Turn 'em away, close the door and thin the fuckin' crowd. I wa anyone I people ejected before the next set," Mace demanded.

out the I watched Monk and it was like in the cartoons when dollar signs r character's eyes. You could see Monk calculating the loss at the bar c. "And mention the cover charge he'd have to return if he ejected fifty people.

“That’s not gonna happen,” Monk told Mace.

Mace leaned in and it was not a friendly, shiny-happy-people lean.

roughly
morning. Definitely not good.

Okay then, time for me to intervene.

I pushed in front of Mace and pressed my back into his front in a
gh their to hold him back.

lost his “You don’t do it, we don’t go back onstage,” I said to Monk.

oved in “You don’t go back onstage, you don’t get paid,” Monk said to me

ot more “You don’t pay, I break your legs,” Mace joined the exchange.

mediate “Awesome,” Pong muttered from behind us.

Pong had always liked the idea of us employing muscle so we w
reed to get cheated by club owners, which happened a lot. Unfortunately, we’
been able to afford it, and even though Hugo had volunteered to kic
e door. ass, I was worried he’d break a finger or something doing it. We nee
d goin’ fingers—fingers were kind of important for a saxophone player—so I
tupidly, it.

Lee got closer to Monk.

t losin’ “You eject fifty people and you shut down the door. We got five
the club and they’ll call in the code violation if you don’t. Then they
nt fifty feel inclined to call the TTB, just for shits and grins.”

At this, Monk paled.

olled in “What’s the TTB?” I heard Leo whisper from behind us.

, not to “Fuck knows,” Pong muttered.

“Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau,” Hugo answered.

“Oh jeez,” Leo breathed with more than a hint of panic.

“Relax, it ain’t the DEA,” Buzz threw in.

“Thank God for that,” Leo said with relief.

“And anyway, that bag of grass you got in your guitar case ain’t
n effort the DEA,” Pong declared.

“Yeah, they got bigger fish to fry,” Hugo pointed out sagely.

I made a quick prayer for deliverance from a band who would talk
about one of their members in possession of a bag of marijuana after
just heard five cops were in the crowd.

When no deliverance was forthcoming, I twisted and looked
Mace’s body to the boys in my band.

ouldn’t
d never “Would you guys *shut up*?” I snapped.

k some They all just stared at me with expressions that said, “What?”

ded his My effing band.

forbade I turned back around to Monk.

“So?” I prompted when Monk didn’t speak.

Monk’s expression twisted into one that made him look like he
cops in sucked on a lemon. It was not attractive. At the best of times Monk v
y might attractive, so one could say this was more like *really not attractive*.

“I’ll close down the door and thin the crowd,” Monk gave in.

I looked at the ceiling. “Thank you, God.”

My eyes came back to Monk when he started speaking again.

“Stella, you continue to be this big of a pain in the ass and this
stays connected to the band,” Monk jerked a thumb at Mace, “I’ll

rethink my schedule.”

Okay, there it was again.

Proof that my luck sucked.

shit to We had three gigs scheduled in the next two months at The Pal
Even with him skimming off the top, we got our biggest take from
Hell, Leo and Buzz could live for weeks off one night’s take
Palladium. We couldn’t lose The Palladium.

openly

having

around

Before I could retort, Mace moved. One second, I was between h
Monk. The next second, *nothing* was between him and Monk and Mo
miraculously grown six inches. This was because Mace had him off h
pressed to the wall partly with Mace’s body, partly with Mace’s han
throat.

“Do I have to explain my point?” Mace asked from between his tee

Monk’s eyes were bugged out and he was staring down at Ma
shook his head as best he could with Mace’s hand wrapped around h
just under his jaw.

Mace dropped Monk but stayed close.

e’d just “You give the band’s take of the door and pay to me tonight. I c
was not and I don’t like what I see, we’re gonna continue that conversation,
told Monk.

Effing *hell*.

Did Mace just say that?

Monk glared at Mace, but he nodded. Then he scooted out a
asshole himself in the crowd.

have to I watched Monk go.

Yep, Mace just said that.

Mace just took care of me and the band.

Again.

adium. Effing, blinding hell.

Monk. "I fuckin' love that guy," Pong said. His eyes were on Mace.

at The Effing, effing, blinding, blinding, hell, hell, *hell.*

um and "Don't you have groupies to tag for post-gig festivities?" I asked P
onk had Pong's body jerked at the realization that he was standing around v
his feet, and a bunch of men when he could be working the girls in the crowd,
d at his up that night's action.

eth. "Oh shit, yeah." Pong turned and punched Hugo's arm. "Tir
wastin', black man."

ace. He Hugo looked down his nose at Pong. "Don't call me 'black man.'"

his neck "Why not?" Pong was on the move. He didn't actually care why
always called Hugo "black man" and Hugo always told him not to.

count it "A black man can call me 'black man.' An eyeliner wearin', hai
" Mace move too.

"Don't call me 'skinny white cracker,'" I heard Pong say
disappeared into the throng.

nd lost "You *are* a skinny white cracker," I heard Hugo respond
disappeared too.

"I need a beer," Floyd said to no one and he headed toward the bar

"I need my weed." Leo headed backstage.

Buzz came up, eyes avoiding mine, and he gave me a brief hug. But often affectionate, but after all the drama, this still took me off guard.

Before I could respond, he disappeared in the crowd too.

I watched the space where I'd last seen Buzz.

I knew what the hug was for—Linnie and “La Grange.”

I pressed my lips together so I wouldn't cry.

ong. Duke, Vance and Lee melted into the shadows, leaving me with M

with me I took a swig of my beer. I was too emotionally charged to de
setting Mace at that moment.

No, strike that, I was too emotionally charged to deal with Mace
ne's a-ever.

“I need some alone time,” I told him, even though I should have
thanking him. Yet again, he was taking care of me *and* my band.

not. He To avoid looking at Mace, I was looking at the crowd. Duke, Lee
noticed now Hank and Willie, were holding back some people who wa
ir-spray get to me. They were creating a little pocket of solitude in the crowded

on the I could have kissed them.

“You had a year of alone time. That time's up,” Mace replied, :
as he eyes shifted to his, then they narrowed.

Erm, *pardonnez moi*?

as he “Excuse me?” I asked.

He got close.

I retreated.

My back slammed against the wall. His hand came up to rest on t

IZZ was by the side of my head and his body curled around, fencing me in.

“Mace, please...” I asked softly, hoping he’d give in as he often did. I went soft.

“You’re magic up there.” Mace clearly wasn’t in the mood to give. I knew then that he wasn’t newly arrived either. He’d likely been there all night, in the shadows, watching.

Mace. This made me shiver.

In the dim light of the club, I saw he’d gone soft too, and his softness was a heckuva lot more powerful than mine.

Oh dear.

“Stop it,” I said.

“You think you’re good, but you’re not good. You’re fuckin’ magic.”

“Stop.”

“You could light up arenas.”

I closed my eyes tight.

“Stop,” I whispered.

I felt him get even closer, the heat from his body hitting mine.

It felt good. It felt safe. It felt right.

“What you’re not is black.”

My eyes flew open, but even so, there was only time to see him in the crowd.

Effing, bloody, fucking *hell*.



I KNEW I was going to do it, right after our never-say-die, always:

always, burning-down-the-house, gig-ending, band-defining version when “Ghostriders in the Sky.”

I knew I was going to do it, break precedent, maybe even shift the center of the band, maybe even pound a crack in our foundation just in here all to do it.

Because I had to do it.

Mace had to get it.

It was a If he didn't get it, I was lost. I already felt myself veering off the path.

And I'd just found my way again.

I wasn't going back.

I couldn't.

retic.” Nunh-unh.

No way.

It was the end of the night, the crowd was screaming for an encore the regulars knew they were never going to get. They knew this because they never got it.

Never.

No matter how much they screamed and clapped and stomped the floor after we sang “Ghostriders,” The Gypsies were, without fail, done.

felt into Until tonight.

The band had had their fill of applause, saying “thank you” in their mics, raising their hands to the crowd and feeling the love. They were getting away and getting ready to pack it in. The house lights were already up and the crowd was just beginning to come to the realization that they'd have to be taken down from the high where we'd taken them. I felt the desperate urge

ion of out of the applause as it downshifted to appreciation.

That was when I started strumming my guitar.

entire Buzz's head jerked toward me and I felt Floyd's eyes on me. I
n order Leo glancing around in confusion. Hugo froze to the spot, his eyes
strumming fingers of my right hand, the contorted fingers of my left p
the frets.

I didn't even look at Pong.

ath. I ignored them all as I strummed.

Then I stepped up to the mic.

I gave a soft, "oh yeah," into it, letting it snake into the quieting
listening to the hum die as I played the chords.

As if rehearsed, Buzz, Leo and Pong came in right on time, which
definitely was not rehearsed. It was a song I played at home, alone, but
allowed myself to sing, never allowed the band to play. A song so deep
ore that soul, I *couldn't* sing it. I was afraid I wouldn't do it justice.
ise they

By that time, the crowd was totally still, deathly silent and sta
fascination toward the stage.

air feet, I was known for never changing lyrics, never changing the wor
song sung by a man to fit it to myself as a woman. This gave me a
edge because lesbians thought I was one of them when I sang about
and that was my code to tell them I was a member of the club. This
to their affect me. I was happy for the additional fans and lesbians always
turned good vibe at a gig.

up. The They didn't know that I didn't change lyrics because they were
o climb lyrics to change. In my head, a song was a solid thing, rendered from
ncy sift

by its maker and it wasn't up to me, Stella Gunn, to take my unique chisel to it for my own purposes.

noticed But tonight, I was going to make another unprecedented exception.

on the I was going to change Vedder's lyrics, fit them to myself and Mace

pressing My eyes found him. He wasn't hard to find. Throughout the last two years, I always knew where he was.

Just like before we broke up, when I always but always knew where he was at a gig.

He was standing head and shoulders above the crowd, five feet from the bar, his eyes on me.

Our gazes locked.

it most That was when I sang to Mace.

it never Yes, again.

p in my And I felt it as the crowd pulled in their breath.

ring in And then, through giving it to Mace, I gave them Pearl Jam's incredible beautiful ballad, "Black."

As Mace came unstuck from my spell and started to push through the crowd, making his way toward the stage.

The band played behind me with a power and certainty that made it as if we'd played the song millions of times rather than just this once. The chords I played sounded angry, as if sliced from my guitar. Floyd's chords were pounding out the notes on the piano, notes to a song I didn't even know he knew.

The crowd was still silent, stunned, watching, enthralled.

qualified I let the final words to the song rush out of me, hoarse and filled with
scratching despair, just like it rushed out of Eddie Vedder on Pearl Jam's
world-rocking, genre-defining album "Ten."

As I sang, Mace was nearly at the stage when I closed my eyes
shut him out as if closing my eyes could shut him out of my life forever.

Still playing, my head dropped and I rested my forehead on the mic.
vision of Mace, eyes never leaving me, pushing through the crowd
me, burned on the backs of my eyelids.

I played lead, Floyd's piano thundering around me, matching the
notes that came from my guitar. The band began singing their "da-do
do-do-dos" and before my fingers could strum the angry riff and
shout my anguish like Vedder, I was pulled roughly from the mic.

My eyes came open and I stared, frozen to the spot in disbelief.

Mace was there, onstage, right in front of me, right in front of
hundred people.

I stayed frozen as his hand wrapped around the neck of my guitar,
yanked it over my head and then jerked me forward so that my
back slammed against his.

His free arm sliced at a slant around my back, crushing me to his chest.
head came down, his mouth finding mine, and he kissed me, right
Right onstage. Right in front of five hundred people. Open-mouthed
ce. The wet and full of *everything*.

His body bent forward, pushing mine back so I was arched over his
my torso and hips pressed deep into him.

He kissed me and kept kissing me as the band played around us, playing
the song longer, longer...

ed with I heard the cheers, the shouts, the stamping feet, the applause. The
l Jam's was wild, my subtle edge as a possible lesbian was forever obliterated.

And through it all, Mace kept kissing me.

to shut When he finally tore his mouth from mine, he didn't move away. I
me bent over his arm, his face less than an inch from mine, our eyes
nic, the and we were both breathing heavily. My heart was beating like a hammer
toward could feel it in my chest, in my throat, and dear God, I could feel his touch

"You didn't get it," I whispered.

e same I could taste the acid of tears in my throat, the sting of them at the
-do-do, of my eyes.

I could I really, *really* needed him to get it.

But he didn't understand that he turned my world to black and he
get it that I couldn't go through that again.

of five "No, Kitten, you don't get it," he whispered back.

tar. He My hands were clutching his shoulders. I started to try to push
y body realized I couldn't. I couldn't push and keep control of my tears and
terror and my shaky belief in the fact that what I was doing was right.
at the same time.

im. His So I just held on.

t there. "Let me go, Mace."

l, hard, He didn't let me go.

his arm, Instead he spoke.

And what he said, with the background soundtrack of the repeating
pushing notes of a soul-destroying rock song, changed my fucking life.

"I can't be the star in your sky when you're the only star left shining."

the crowd mine.”

This time, my breath took the Concord out of retirement and shot t

That was right before the gunshots rang out.

He kept And the gunshots rang out just seconds before Mace and I went
locked Mace’s big, hard body landing on mine like a dead weight to the sic
nmer. I discordant sound of the strings of a crashing guitar.

io.

e backs

e didn’t

h but I

and my

Not all

ing end

ning in

mine.”

This time, my breath took the Concord out of retirement and shot to Paris.

That was right before the gunshots rang out.

And the gunshots rang out just seconds before Mace and I went down, Mace’s big, hard body landing on mine like a dead weight to the sickening, discordant sound of the strings of a crashing guitar.

NINE



SEX WAX

Jet

I was smiling at Daisy, still high from Stella and The G “Ghostriders,” which always lasted at least ten minutes (if not more) no matter how many times we heard it, which was every time we saw them play, they made it fresh and full of energy and it always brought the crowd down.

But tonight it was more. The band was on fire and that fire blazed through the crowd, white-hot. It was enough to make us forget our troubles and danger again confronting us, and just enjoy some good ol’ rock ’n’ roll.

Daisy grinned back at me and shouted, “Yippee kay yay!”

So, of course, I shouted it right back at her.

Over Daisy’s shoulder, I saw Annette and Roxie doing a high five and they bumped hips, and seeing that, I giggled.

It was great being a Rock Chick.

Only thing better was being Eddie’s Woman.

Lucky for me, I was both.

My eyes slid through the crowd, looking for Eddie (not finding him) and coming to stop on Tex.

Like he had been all night, Tex was sitting at a stool, his back to me. But now, his narrowed eyes were locked on something as if that something was something he did *not* like.

Since there were a lot of things Tex didn't like, I didn't think much of this.

Then, to my surprise, I heard the first notes of Pearl Jam's "Grypsies" coming from Stella's guitar.

Good God.

I felt, as well as heard, the tremor of surprise go through the crowd (my stunned body slowly turned. On my way around I saw that Indy, Roxie, Daisy, Ava and Annette were no longer post-"Ghostriders" high schoolers, they were all staring, mouths wide open, at the stage.

The Gypsies never did an encore.

As in...never.

When my eyes hit Stella, I instantly became transfixed. She was on the mic and singing a slow, "Oh yeah."

Her eyes moved then locked on someone in the crowd and I knew she was looking where her gaze was directed. I knew without looking that she was going to sing to Mace.

Like she did a few months ago when she sang Hank Williams.

And, just like then, after she started singing, it hurt to listen.

But it was a beautiful pain.

I knew it hurt her to sing it just as it hurt me to hear it. She poured her soul into every song she sang, but that song...that song, she poured her soul into it and the entire club felt it. And, in a club-wide moment of shared, silent

the bar. reverence, we were all dead silent while we watched her communicate nothing pain.

It was arresting. As the song wove through the crowd, the lyrics a much of assault, we all stood frozen and watched.

Then, as if from nowhere, Mace was onstage, his long legs eating 'Black' distance as he came at her. We watched as he pulled her away from the tore her guitar from her hands, and then he was kissing her.

I sucked in breath at the sight of it.

It was a hungry kiss, a hard kiss, a kiss meant to be private, but in y, Ally, was very, very public. I felt the kiss stirring in my belly even though I h. They should look away.

I didn't look away.

I couldn't.

The crowd started to cheer, to scream, to stomp their feet.

I didn't want to cheer. I wanted to cry, but bizarrely I also wanted to laugh.

Before I could give in to either of these emotions, I saw the little he was dancing between Stella and Mace's bodies.

Someone had a laser light.

Through the music-induced stupor I felt annoyance claw at me.

Who could witness this passionate emotional display and jack with a laser light?

Then I heard Duke's gravelly voice shout, "Gun!"

Um...gun?

stunned

ate her It came to me that wasn't a laser light and my body jerked. As if I
in control of my own actions, instead of running or throwing myself
a gentle ground, both of which would have been smarter, I turned to look behind
and saw Tex throwing people out of his way as he lumbered through
ing the crowd toward a target.

he mic, "Down!" Shirleen yelled.

I whirled back to face the stage and saw the laser light go up sharply
point several feet over Pong's head. Then I was on the floor, Shirleen
stead it on top of mine.

knew I Gunshots rang out.

I heard screams, shouts, running feet. It was pandemonium
Palladium.

The gunshots stopped. Shirleen's weight left me and she got up,
down, her fingers wrapped around my wrist and she pulled me to my feet
nted to "Rendezvous!" I heard Eddie shout, and my eyes flew in the direction
his voice. I saw him, gun out, other hand pointing to me. I also saw a
red dot the floor, Tex over him with a knee in his back. Tex had the marker
twisted behind him, the crowd giving them a wide berth. Further, I saw
had a rifle. He tossed it to Willie, then his eyes sliced to the Rock Chick
focused on Ava.

That was all I saw. Hector's arm was around my waist and he was
around me away. Vance was there, so were Duke, Ike and Bobby. All of them
had their guns in their hands and they were herding the Rock Chicks
the back of the club.

This was not easy. There were still tons of people fighting, pushing
running, trying to force their way out but in the opposite direction. I

wasn't Bunch, big, strong and carrying guns cleared a path, often resorting to force to get the people out of the way to do it.

"Stella and Mace!" Indy shouted and my eyes flew to the stage.

Mace was up, Stella flung over his shoulder, and he was striding up the stairs, the band on his heels.

We hit the stairs as Mace made it to the bottom. He bent and put Stella's body over her feet.

Stella looked pale and shocked, but luckily alive and not covered in blood. Her wild eyes took a sweep of Mace as if searching for bullets. She looked up at him, opened her mouth to speak, but Mace got there first at the her.

"Rendezvous," he barked at Hector, and without hesitation, he turned and leaned in the direction of Tex, Luke and Willie.

"Mace!" Vance clipped, his tone urgent, but Mace didn't stop.

"Fuck," Hector snarled. His head turned and he shouted, "Lee!"

I looked to where Hector's eyes were aimed and saw Lee jump over the man on stage and push through the crowd on a trajectory that would take him straight to Mace.

"Let's go," Duke said, shoving us toward the back.

"What's he gonna do?" Ally asked, her eyes on Mace.

"Move! Now!" Duke shouted and started shoving harder.

We moved. We didn't want to, but we moved.

We knew the drill and we'd wasted enough time.

They herded us into Explorers and we went to The Castle.

The Hot



tossing “*CHIQUITA*, GET AWAY FROM THE WINDOW,” Eddie ordered.

I turned from watching Stella and Mace drive away in an Explorer and looked at Eddie.

His feet were bare, his chest was bare, his belt was undone, and only two buttons of his faded jeans.

As usual, Eddie looked fucking hot. Definitely worth the F-word.

And also, Eddie was obviously ready to go to bed.

Even after our adventurous night, including rock ‘n’ roll in the t holes, certain danger, that danger coming at one of us in the form of gunfire before Rock Chicks’ fast getaway in bulletproof SUVs, Eddie was already down.

This was because Eddie was a cop. Eddie’s job was dangerous, mention he’d survived five Rock Chick/Hot Bunch Courtships, including his own. This was just another night for Eddie.

“Is Mace okay?” I asked, dropping the curtain I had pulled back from off the window.

I asked because Mace could be a little intense and we hadn’t had a debrief downstairs. Eddie came in before Mace and took me directly up. He looked exhausted so I didn’t argue, even though I wanted to know what happened. As in *really* wanted to know.

If Mace made it to the man who shot at Stella before someone talked him down from going berserk, Stella and the rest of us would be visiting the local penitentiary for as long as they put people away for manslaughter.

I was taking it as a good sign that he was driving off with Stella in the Explorer.

Though they could be driving to Mexico as fugitives from the law
rer and knew.

“Yeah. Lee controlled it before we had to lock him down,” Eddie
so were finishing with the buttons on his jeans.

Well, that was a relief.

I walked toward him and picked up the T-shirt he’d discarded. I t
on the bed and started to undress.

face of “I can’t believe they opened fire in a crowded club,” I said, pull
and the my tee.

wound “Sid’s crazy,” Eddie replied, his voice like a verbal shrug, but th
an edge to it.

, not to No doubt about that. Sidney Carter was definitely crazy.

ing our And maybe Eddie wasn’t wound down. Maybe Eddie just wanted
about this later, as in, while telling crazy stories to our grandchildre
rom the we were retired and living in Arizona.

I sat on the bed and yanked off my boots.

time to “You okay?” Eddie asked, and I looked up at him.

pstairs. Then I quit breathing.

w what He was standing there totally naked, arms crossed on his chest, c
me.

ed him Eddie had no problem with nudity.

face at Also, it should be said, I had no problem with Eddie’s nudity.

ghter. I shrugged off thoughts of how little problem I had with Eddie’s
a in an and nodded.

for all I I was okay.

I'd learned a long time ago that if you were still walking and breath
replied, was best just to get on with it.

I got up, pulling off my jeans then taking off my bra as Eddie g
bed. I grabbed his T-shirt and was about to tug it on when Eddie stop
ossed it by saying, "Don't think so."

My arms through the sleeves of his tee but not yet having pulled
ling off my head, my eyes moved to him.

"What?" I asked.

ere was "Drop the shirt, *mi amor*," Eddie demanded in a soft voice. His
could see from the length of the bed, were liquid.

My belly melted.

to think I dropped the shirt.

n when Then I put hands and knees to the bed and crawled toward him, h
between my limbs. I watched his face as he watched my progress, h
playing about his mouth as I made my way up his length. When w
face-to-face, I stopped and lowered myself full on him.

His arms wrapped around me, one hand going into my panties
eyes on behind.

"You okay with staying here?" I asked, and watched Eddie's liqui
eyes start glittering.

Eddie hated Marcus. Marcus hated Eddie. Our current arrangeme
not an optimal situation. Both men put up with each other for the sake
n nudity friendship between Daisy and me. This was a tentative truce. *Very tent*

Before he met me, and before I met Daisy, Eddie had spent son

trying to bring Marcus down. Marcus was not clean, not by a long way. Somewhere along the line, Eddie had pulled back from his pursuit of Marcus, and Marcus, Eddie told me, had pulled out of some of his more vile ventures. But Marcus wasn't ready to go clean and Eddie wasn't ready to give up.

If Marcus slipped up, Eddie would nail him.

Eddie and I being houseguests of the Sloans went against Eddie's grain in a big way.

Not to mention Eddie told me last night that the Denver Police Department told him they also frowned on our current arrangement. It meant Eddie wasn't going to win Detective of the Year. Since Eddie frequently went his own way, he'd likely never even be nominated (if they actually had a Detective of the Year award). I knew Eddie was not going to win with that. He wasn't big on politics and working the system. He preferred to focus on the job, or at least his way of doing it.

Eyes still glittering, Eddie answered, "Willin' to do just about anything to see you safe."

I knew what he said was true. He'd proved it more than once.

This earned him a smile, and when he saw my smile, as always, his face went soft. This was because Eddie liked my smile, like, a lot.

I felt warmth spread in my belly. This time it was a different kind of warmth. I dropped my head and nuzzled my face into his throat.

Eddie did an abdominal crunch, lifting us both. He yanked the coverlet between our bodies and I swung my legs around to help him. Then he rolled back, me still full on top of him, and he flicked the covers over us.

One time

ing shot. His hand went back into my panties, this time with intent, and his arm wrapped tight around me.

lainous My face still in his throat, I whispered, "Tell me about Mace."

eady to His hand stopped.

"Not a good idea, *cariño*."

grain. He sounded serious so I snuggled in closer and kissed his neck to him up. And I liked to kiss his neck. He smelled good everywhere especially his neck.

Police I had to soften him up because, for whatever reason, all the Rock it. This had an alternate Hot Bunch guy. Indy's was Eddie. Roxie's was Eddie Jules's was Luke. Ava's was Lee.

not that Mine was Mace.

as okay Mace and I had a connection. A connection Eddie didn't like, but erred to longer tried to stand in the way. I knew that Mace had witnessed his murder. Our connection started when Mace saved me from getting m thing to in the same way.

At first, Eddie thought Mace wanted to move in on his action, but proved not to be the case. After my trauma was over, Mace and I his eyes connected. This meant, every once in a while, Mace came over to our for dinner, sometimes when Eddie was there, other times when he was

d and I Mace didn't talk much and he never shared, but I knew he liked li to me and he definitely liked my chili and my meatloaf. But his favor s from my roasted chicken and cheesy-garlic mashed potatoes.

he laid Mace and I were a weird kind of friends. Because of what we shared (saving my life, me being alive), he obviously meant a lot to me, and for

is otherreason, I knew I meant a lot to him.

When you knew those kinds of things, you didn't have to talk about

Eddie had told me about Mace's sister, but he didn't go into detail.

Now, seeing as Mace was my alternate Hot Bunch Guy *and* nex
Rock Chick Firing Line, I needed to know and I knew I could ne
Mace.
soften

ere but So I asked Eddie.

"I'd like to know," I pushed.

Chicks "No, you wouldn't."

Vance. I lifted up on a forearm and looked down at him.

"Yeah, I would."

"Jet—"

t he no "His sister got murdered, Eddie. I know the story doesn't have a
sister's ending."
urdered

He watched me a beat then two then he sighed and I knew he was
in.

out this I didn't smile. Since my drama was over, living with Eddie, m
stayed back in Denver after spending years in LA, my mother happy and
ir place again after her stroke and dating Tex, I had lots of smiling momen
n't. counting, of course, being the target of a killer.
stening

ite was But this wasn't one of them.

Eddie rolled, forcing my arm out from under me, until we were
ed (him sides, face-to-face.

or some His hand came out of my panties, but his arm stayed tight arou

waist.

it it. Then he started talking.

“Mace comes from money. Lots of it. His mom and dad divorced when he was young. His dad had the money, kept it, didn’t share and never asked to acquire a string of trophy wives. Mace stayed with his mom. They moved from LA to her native Hawaii and their standard of living changed in a serious way. His dad had another child, Mace’s half-sister, with wife number three of five. He moved on to wife after wife, leavin’ the women abandoned behind with less than they were used to havin’. Mace was close to his mother and established a long-distance bond with his sister, but he didn’t have much to do with his father.”

I wasn’t surprised. By the sounds of Mace’s dad, I wouldn’t have been able to do with him, either.

I happy Eddie had stopped and I watched his face, knowing from his looks what he had to share was unpleasant. My hand moved up his belly to his chest. Giving on his chest. When I did this, he started talking again.

“The dad was loaded. We’re talkin’ *loaded*. Not millions, billions. My sister so, when he moved on to a different woman, he left the life he had which meant he didn’t have much to do with his kids. This meant that healthy which meant he didn’t have much to do with his kids. This meant that although it wasn’t a significant threat, with that kind of money, there was always a threat, and he left his kids unprotected. Because of that, they got kidnapped, held for ransom.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed, stunned by this, even though I too had been kidnapped. So had Indy. And Roxie. And Ava. None of our kidnappings had been enjoyable, but most of them didn’t last very long. We’d all gotten out and my or been rescued and none of us had been held for ransom.

“Mace’s dad’s a jackass. Strong man. Wouldn’t pay the ransom, wouldn’t get the police involved. He hired his own team of commandos. They didn’t clue who they were dealin’ with. They fucked it up, botched the mission. After, Mace’s dad got his sister’s hand delivered to him in a box.”

I felt bile rise up my throat, but I swallowed it down and closed my eyes. I needed to get out of there.

Okay, so maybe Eddie was right. Maybe I didn’t want to know.

It was too late.

Eddie kept talking.

“At that point, Mace was done. He went against his father, got the police involved. They cornered the kidnappers and started negotiating. For fuckin’ reason the kidnappers asked for Mace to be the go-between. He demanded he make the approach. The police refused until they heard him screamin’. Mace lost it, demanded to be sent in. Without much choice, they still screamin’, they suited him up with vest and helmet and sent him in. The SWAT team was ready to go in right after him and put an end to the mission. Even the kidnappers knew they were fucked. They had no intention of negotiating behind his back. Minute Mace hit the room, before SWAT could make their move, they cut his head off and pumped eleven rounds into Mace’s vest. One through his shoulder, one through his thigh, two into his helmet before they turned their guns on themselves. It was a bloodbath. Mace was the only one to come out alive.”

This knowledge settled in my brain then entered my bloodstream and burned like acid.

I opened my eyes and felt the wetness leaking out the sides.

“Mace was twenty-five when it happened,” Eddie continued. “Hi

couldn't was sixteen."

I had no I tilted my chin down and pressed my forehead against the wall, on, and collarbone, unable to process the idea of a sixteen-year-old girl enduring before her life was cut short. Further unable to process the idea of her living with that knowledge for the rest of his life.

Mainly because it was utterly un-processable.

"I got this from Lee. Mace doesn't talk about it. And this is where the story gets fuzzy," Eddie went on.

My head tilted back, the tears still in my eyes, and I looked at him.

"It isn't done?" I whispered.

Eddie shook his head.

"There's more?" I asked.

Eddie nodded his head.

"What?" I prompted, not wanting to know, but needing to know the same.

"Don't know who they worked for, the kidnappers, but it was a deep operation. The dad was involved. Could be guns. Could be drugs. Could be deeper, uglier. It may be just because he's an asshole that the dad did it in the police or the FBI. It could be he was hidin' somethin'. The kidnappers could have been after the ransom, but them callin' Mace in with the idea to kill him smacks of retribution. Odds are the dad did something that required a payoff. That's my guess, but I don't have a clue and Lee won't give me one."

"What are you talking about?"

"Lee doesn't want me lookin' into it. Not that I would."

“Looking into what?”

Eddie’s “How Mace learned his skills.”

ing that “What skills?”

brother “The skills he uses for Lee.”

I blinked at him in confusion and my silent tears cleared. “What?”

ere the Eddie sighed then he stated, “He was a snowboarder, Jet. A good o
of the best. If you go back seven years, look at boarder magazines, yo
his photos in ads. He had endorsement contracts. He was in comm
aired on ESPN. Go back before that, same thing with his surfing. I
famous. He still is in that crowd.”

“I knew he—” I started, but Eddie interrupted me.

“Now he’s a PI.”

“Yes, I know but—”

all the “A good one.”

“I know, but—”

s a big Eddie interrupted me again, “One of the best. Lee was trained
ould be Army. Monty was trained by the Navy. Luke, I don’t know, but it
ln’t call official operation and he’s definitely had training. Specialized training
nappers is an ex-con. He’d lived a life of crime since he was thirteen years old,
ntent to likely still be in that life, he was so good at it. He only got caught beca
equired buddy was shot while they were stealin’ a car and Vance didn’t lea
give me behind. Lee channeled his natural abilities, trainin’ him in other shit,
took to it. Mace is self-taught. Lee didn’t have to do any training with

“Self-taught?”

“Self-taught.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means between his sister gettin’ murdered and Lee recruitin’ he’d gone from a surfer and snowboarder to acquirin’ skills that had to do with sex wax.”

I blinked again. “Sex wax?”

“Yeah, you use it on your surfboard for foot traction, on the bottom of a snowboard to reduce friction.”

My brows drew together. “How do you know that?”

He grinned. “Been boardin’ with Mace.”

I blinked (yes, again), mainly because this was insane. Eddie and I had been together for over nine months. We were getting married in a little over five and this was news to me.

“You board?”

His grin deepened to a smile. “I live in Colorado, *chiquita*.”

So did I, but I didn’t snowboard. Or ski, for that matter. That took me by the surprise of something I’d never had.

“You didn’t board last winter,” I commented.

“I had somethin’ to keep me at home last winter.”

This time I didn’t blink, but my stomach did a happy curl.

I ignored it and got back to the subject.

“So, these skills—”

He rolled into me so he was mostly on me. “What I’m sayin’ is so-and-so went down after the bloodbath. Mace disappeared off radar. No longer competitive boardin’, reneged on his endorsements. The kidnappin’

murder made the news, big story. It happened in LA. Mace was famous, his dad well known. But after it was over there was nothin' from Mace, nothin' vanished. He didn't resurface until Lee recruited him and he recruited a reason. All Lee's boys have a specialty. Mace's is one you don't know."

"But—"

His hand came to the side of my face and his eyes got serious.

"You don't need to know," he repeated in a way I knew he wasn't to tell me. And I knew, no matter what I tried, he wouldn't tell me.

His hands started roaming and his head moved so his mouth was near my neck. I knew he was looking for a way to turn my mind to different, more pleasant things, but I pulled my neck away and wrapped my fingers around one of his wrists to stop his hands from roaming.

"Eddie."

"Shit, I know *that* 'Eddie,'" he muttered into my neck with more frustration.

Eddie, by the way, had quickly become an expert in all the ways to communicate by just saying his name. Therefore, this time, he knew it was my turn to be serious. His head came up and he looked into my eyes.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"No," Eddie answered bluntly. "But he will be, soon as this shit and Stella gives in."

"Pardon?"

Eddie sighed then touched my mouth with his and dropped his fingers from mine, his thumb stroking my jaw.

ous, his When he spoke, he did it softly.

ice. He “Lotta wounds don’t heal, Jet. Seein’ your sister’s head get blow
him for suspect, is one of ’em. Havin’ a dad, and not havin’ one, I’m think
need to understand, is another. You got a good woman in your life, even tho
wounds stay open, you move on, live life. The pain doesn’t go away,
has a different focus. A better one.”

He was right. I had a dad, but didn’t have one most of my lif
t going wound had never healed. My dad was an inveterate gambler. He was
a lot more now, getting his life sorted, but he could fall off the wagon
s at my time. My sister and I lived with that knowledge and the fear that went
ar more and it was no fun.

around Finding Eddie and believing in us had given my life a different foc
A better one.

However, with the recent, newly acquired knowledge that my
e than a Detective Eddie Badass Chavez, snowboarded and his innate unders
of Mace’s wounds, worried me.

I could My hands slid up the sleek, muscled skin of his back, one stoppin
r it was shoulder blade, the other one sliding up his neck, my fingers sifting
hair.

“Do you have a wound that won’t heal?” I asked quietly, and
’s over myself for his answer.

He lifted his forehead from mine and his eyes dropped to my mout

“Lived a lucky life, *mi pequeña*,” he muttered. His eyes came l
orehead mine and they were again liquid, but this time also filled with tendern
affection, and I felt my heart skip a beat. “And, *alabado sea Dios*, i
gettin’ luckier.”

Then he was done talking and he kissed me, deep and wet, and I went
n off, I talking too.

in' you His mouth slid down my neck to my chest where he murmured, “
ugh theabout to get lucky too.”

but life His mouth slid down further, then further, then he spread my legs
mouth was *right there*, and he was very right. I got lucky too.

e. That After Eddie made me lucky with his talented mouth, he came up o
around He slid inside me, pounded deep and he got even luckier (and so did I)

1 at any When we were done, he turned out the light, rolled me so my back
with it his front and he wrapped both arms around me. One went tight arou
midriff. The other one went low, to cup me between my legs.

us. This was a new thing of Eddie's, holding me this way after we'
love. It started a few weeks ago after I agreed to marry him. It was ir
fiancé, possessive and somehow claiming, even though I was already his.

tanding I had to admit, I liked it.

g at his “*Chiquita?*” Eddie called when I was just about ready to fall asleep

into his “Hmm?”

“It's likely Stella doesn't know any of this shit.”

braced My eyes opened.

h. Eddie went on, his voice holding a gentle warning, “It's Mace's
her.”

back to I didn't say anything.

ess and Eddie kept going. “You women talk. I'm askin' you not to tall
t keeps this.”

“She should know,” I replied.

as done “She should, but when he’s ready to tell her.”

“Eddie—”

‘You’re He interrupted me, his voice firm, his arm and hand both tense
sucked in breath. “No, Jet.”

and his I bit my lip.

Then I nodded.

ver me. I wouldn’t tell Stella.

Unless I had to.

was to

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rtimate,

).

s to tell

k about

“She should, but when he’s ready to tell her.”

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Then I nodded.

I wouldn’t tell Stella.

Unless I had to.

TEN



DEMONS

Stella

“F uck,” Mace swore under his breath as we drove down the gravel next to Swen and Ulrika’s mansion.

I knew why he was cursing. It was four o’clock in the morning I had been shot at (again!). Mace had just spent the last hours of his life being back from murdering the guy who shot at me (this made him unhappy and relieved) and talking to police. Now, upon arrival home, we both could see Eric, his arms crossed on his chest and his feet planted wide, silhouetted and illuminated in the outside light that hung over the side door to the house.

I sighed.

Loudly.

Eric watched our approach and I saw that his hair was even messier than normal, probably from running his fingers through it. Even though that wasn’t great, you could still tell he was pissed.

I figured he knew what went down that night.

Effing hell.

This was not a good situation. I knew Mace was not in a chipper mood. He was wired and he was angry and Mace’s brand of angry was pretty

scary.

I didn't have the energy to deal with Mace's scary brand of ar Eric's for that matter. I had a lot going on in my head. I hadn't had a to process what happened onstage, considering the fact someone near me (again!). I also hadn't had the chance to avoid Mace in order to head together because I was too busy making calls to check on the bar by the way, were all freaked way *the hell* out, but they were breathing in my crazy-ass life at the moment I took as a boon.

Further, when Mace came to The Castle, I took one look at him and I'd knew it would be beyond stupid to pour oil on *that* fire. So when he me (without a greeting, just walked into Daisy's big room and said it) and I'd out to get to the car, instead of mouthing off, which I really wanted ng held went to the car.

py, me Now this.

uld see Just in case you forgot, I'll remind you. My luck sucked.

tanding Eric was approaching my side of the Explorer before Mace came t e. stop. Once the car halted, he yanked my door open, reached in, relea belt and pulled me out of the cab.

ier than And now this!

he light As my boots hit the gravel, I started to say something. What, I know, but I didn't get the chance to get anything out.

"Hands off," Mace growled, rounding the hood of the SUV.

"Fuck you," Eric replied, clearly and insanely not reading Mace's unhappy body language.

: mood. Lordy be.
y effing

“Eric,” I said softly, trying to pull my arm free (and failing), and then I should defuse the already-heated situation.

Again, I didn’t get the chance. Mace spoke before I could.

“I’ll say it one more time, Turner. Hands off.”

“And I’ll say it one more time, Mason. Fuck you,” Eric returned, yanking me toward his metallic-granite-colored Chevy Trailblazer.

Shitsofuckit!

Before I knew what was happening or I could utter a word, both moved.

Fast.

I was thrown free of Eric. There was a scuffle and Mace and Eric were the scuffle face-to-face, fingers curled into each other’s tees.

“Stop it!” I shouted, rushing forward and shoving between their bodies to separate them (this failed too, for your information). Still, my intervention kind of worked. They both pushed off with their hands, each taking a full step back, but they continued the staredown.

Effing men.

I opened my mouth to speak, but to my increasing frustration, I did not see her there before me.

“I’m taking her into protective custody,” he announced.

Oh dear.

“The hell you are,” Mace shot back.

“You aren’t keepin’ her safe,” Eric returned.

“Yeah, and it’s safe standin’ out here fuckin’ dealin’ with you,”

hinking clipped, throwing his arm out to the night to make his point.

Eric switched subjects. “She got shot at.”

“I know that,” Mace retorted.

“Again,” Eric pushed.

anking “I know that,” Mace repeated, visibly losing what was left of his pa

“Pong nearly got his head blown off.” Eric kept at it, and I wonder
he knew that, but didn’t have a chance to process that either, because
th men lost his patience.

Leaning toward Eric, he roared, “*I fucking know that!*”

“I can keep her safe!” Eric shouted back.

ended “Yeah, like you kept Skinny Blackburn safe?” Mace returned, h
shifting smoothly to quiet and dripping with sarcasm.

odies to I blinked in confusion.

vention Skinny Blackburn? Who the eff was Skinny Blackburn?

; a step I watched Eric wince and knew Mace scored a point.

Before I could butt in, Eric recovered and informed Mace, “I’ll
Stella personally.”

Eric got Uh-oh.

I was thinking that wasn’t the right thing to say.

Mace, already tense, went solid, and his voice was now dangerous
he said softly, “I bet you will.”

“Stop thinkin’ with your dick, Mason, and be fuckin’ smart
warned.

” Mace *That*, I suspected, wasn’t the right thing to say either.

“You got a minute to get the fuck out of here before I rip your goddamned head off,” Mace snarled.

Yep, I was right. Not the right thing to say.

Eric ignored Mace, turned to me and ordered, “Get in the Blazer, Stella. Oh shit.

I didn’t have a chance to speak or move before Mace, not taking his time. Mace off Eric, said to me, “Stella, don’t go near that fuckin’ Blazer.”

“For fuck’s sake, get in the goddamned Blazer!” Eric yelled, still talking to me while glaring at Mace and also losing patience.

Hmm.

Conundrum.

See, Eric was a Fed and I figured the federal government had the resources to make it unlikely that I would be riddled with bullets. And that was something which was looking uncomfortably more and more likely to happen in my near future.

But Eric also had a thing for me that I didn’t have the emotional capacity to explore at the present moment, considering my life was in danger and I didn’t mention a complete mess.

One thing I knew, I didn’t need to owe him.

Unh-unh.

No way.

On the other hand, Mace was a badass, hot guy. He and the Night Team knew what they were doing. What happened tonight wasn’t his fault, it was Monk’s and it was mine. First, the boys wanted to give in and I didn’t let them with what I now considered my immensely idiotic “I want . . .” Eric

p your speech. Second, we played the gig knowing the danger and the s
challenge it represented. I knew Mace felt it was his fault, which I
upsetting. I didn't want to find it upsetting, but I couldn't help myself
tella.” over Mace (kind of, or at least I was still going with that thought)
wasn't *that* over Mace.

However, I was trying to steer clear of Mace and Eric was givin
his eyes golden opportunity.

Shit.

so now

What to do?

When I hesitated, Mace, his eyes still locked on Eric, spoke low. “t

“My luck sucks,” I declared, because I hadn't made a decision an
stalling for time, and, of course, it was the truth.

rad the

“Stella, sweetheart, get in the Blazer,” Eric coaxed, eyes still on M

nd this

“You call her ‘sweetheart’ one more fuckin’ time, I’ll shove you
down your throat,” Mace growled.

like it

Oh no. It appeared the impossible was happening and thing
degenerating.
, not to

Eric grinned a humorless grin and jerked his chin at Mace.

“Let's go,” he invited.

Yikes!

Mace took a step forward. Eric stood his ground but brought up his

“Oh for goodness sake, stop it!” I shouted, getting between their
fault. It and putting a palm on each of their chests.

tingale

I made a split-second, scary-as-shit decision and turned to Eric.
a vote”

dn't let

a vote”

security “What happened tonight wasn’t his fault, Eric. They had tons
I found there. Monk’s an asshole, you know that. He was worried about the
f. I was He didn’t do thorough searches so he could get people in the door.”

), but I Eric looked down at me. “You shouldn’t have been up there in t
fuckin’ place.”

g me a He had a point.

“No, maybe not,” I allowed. “But we don’t play, Buzz and Leo do
We had no choice.”

“You’re dead, so are The Gypsies, then they *really* don’t eat
Stella.” returned.

d I was Another excellent point.

I pressed on.

ace. “Eric, I have people who count on me. The band...my dog.” I pete
ir teeth because that was kind of it and it sounded lame. Still, I kept going.

responsibilities. I can’t disappear. The other Rock Chicks are on the l
s were I’m the one who put them there.”

Eric took a step back. I felt a moment of relief that he was backin
and I dropped my hands. Mace took a step forward so we were close
eyes narrowed on us and my relief was swept away, but unusually
Eric let it pass.

; fists. “How in the fuck did *you* put them there?” Eric asked me.

n again “Don’t answer that, Stella,” Mace broke into our conversation, and
brows snapped together in annoyance. But before he could say ar
Mace continued. “You need to get inside.”

Mace was right. I’d been shot at twice in less than a week and hit

of men was a graze, but still. I felt exposed and I didn't like it.

money. I moved away from Mace and got in Eric's space, attempting some of damage control.

he first "Thank you for coming tonight and wanting to help, but I'll be c told him quietly.

He looked down at me and his face went soft, his eyes went warm. I realized, unfortunately belatedly in our relationship, that he wasn't just looking. He was *really* good-looking.

," Eric And maybe he was a nice guy.

Sheesh.

My fucking luck.

"Yeah, you will, because I'll be keepin' an eye on you," Eric replied, voice as soft and warm as his eyes. Then he leaned toward me and whispered, "I have you need anything, Stella, you know how to get me. Anytime, you can come and see me." "Thank you for that too," I whispered.

"We're done," Mace announced on a growl, and my mini-moment ended when Eric's eyes sliced angrily toward Mace. "Inside," Eric continued.

luckily, "I'll be keepin' an eye on you too," Eric warned Mace, all soft warmth out of his voice.

Mace put his hand in the small of my back and pushed me toward Eric's door.

anything, What he didn't do was respond.



once. It I WOKE up to Mace's mouth at my neck, his hand trailing whisper-soft

my belly.

Against my sleepy volition, my body shivered.

Effing hell.

“Mace,” I breathed, my voice throatier than normal with sleep and things besides.

He didn’t respond. Instead, his other hand slid under my body, got to cup my breast, the trailing fingers of his hand at my belly starting to downward.

Both felt nice.

Really nice.

Shitsofuckit!

Last night, after the Eric Fiasco, Mace had taken Juno out for a break while I got ready for bed. When he returned, he got on the phone. Juno and I hit the hay. To my surprise, even after all the drama, I almost immediately, falling asleep listening to what I suspected was debriefing with who I assumed was Lee.

Now, I was laying partially on my belly, partially on my side, crooked deep, Mace’s body pressed tight to me, his leg crooked into me

“Mace,” I repeated, my sleepy-weak resistance already flagging.

We needed to talk about a lot of things and I needed *not* to have heard him again. I was beginning to think I was giving him the wrong impression.

Hell, who was I kidding? How could he *not* have the wrong impression?

“Quiet, Kitten, I wanna listen to you come,” Mace murmured in my neck as his hand pushed into my panties.

His words made my body shiver again.

“We need to talk,” I told him, holding on to my failing resistance, finger honed in on the target and pressed deep.

Oh lordy be.

My hips jerked and involuntarily I started purring. I couldn’t help it felt nice.

What was the matter with me?

Did I have *no* willpower?

“We’ll talk later,” Mace declared, his deep voice smooth as velvet.

“We need to talk now,” my mouth protested even as my hips pressed his hand.

“Later,” Mace returned, and I wanted to say something, honest I knew there was some lovely circling at the target. Then his hand moved lower and his finger slid slowly, *deliciously* inside.

“Oh my,” I whispered, my eyes closing and my head tilting back as Mace hit his shoulder.

All of a sudden, I didn’t care what impression I was giving. I just let my legs his finger never to stop what it was doing.

I turned to face him and he didn’t hesitate. His mouth was on mine and he was kissing me, hard and deep, as his finger moved slowly in and out and my hips moved with it.

It felt effing *great*.

“Sweet, wet, silk,” Mace whispered against my mouth. His hands trembled through me and I purred against his lips.

It was then the sound of a buzzer I never heard tore through the room. Erm, what was *that*?

but his Mace's finger stopped.

My eyes opened slowly and he muttered, "Fuck."

"What's that?" I asked just as the buzzer went again, this time for I
myself, "Fuck," Mace repeated, his finger sliding gently out of me. I felt I
leave me as his body moved away.

"Sorry, babe, door," he said as explanation.

He kissed my shoulder, threw the covers back and knifed out of bed.

Juno, who was standing by the door staring up at the alarm panel, was
sed into doggie confusion. She'd never heard the buzzer either.

I watched Mace stalk naked to the door and tried to get my body
did, but under my control.

never and This was difficult, mostly because I was seriously turned on, but
watching Mace's naked body doing anything only managed to make me
until it turned on.

Okay, this was ridiculous. Somehow, I was going to have to get control
wanted my Inner Mace Slut.

Mace hit a button and bit out, "What?"

and he I saw Hector's face fill the video screen. "We got a problem."

and my My body went tense as I watched Mace's do the same.

"Everybody okay?" Mace asked.

words "Yeah, this is a different problem," Hector answered.

Beautiful.

om. Just what we needed.

A different problem.

“Shit,” Mace cursed, obviously agreeing with me. “Come up.” I hit a button and turned to me. I watched, my breath catching as his hair grew soft and his voice dipped low. “Kitten, you need to get dressed.”

The soft face/sweet low voice thing was another one of those hundred, twenty-five thousand things I missed about him most of all.

I ignored how that made me feel and kept my eyes on him while the covers back.

Juno woofed again, just to remind us of her presence, her need for a bathroom break and probably her desire to have breakfast. I got out of the bedroom. Mace ruffled the fur on Juno’s head then walked to the edge of the plywood back and grabbed his jeans and pulled them on commando.

There was something very sexy about Mace going commando.

Very sexy.

Down, Mace Slut! my brain commanded.

I shook thoughts of Mace going commando out of my head and went to the closet. I yanked on a pair of jeans, a bra and a purple T-shirt that said OLDE TOWN PICKIN’ PARLOR over the headstock and neck of a guitar. While I was dressing, I heard Mace open the door and greet Hector.

By the time I came out of the walk-in closet, Mace and Hector were in my small kitchen and both were standing, hips against the counter. Mace pulled on a white tee, had a copy of the *Denver Post* in his hands and was reading the front page.

“Hey, Hector,” I said, speaking to him directly for the first time in my life.

His hot black eyes came to me and I felt their scorch like a physical

Then he on my skin.

ard face “Stella,” he replied.

Wow.

seven It must be said, Hector had great eyes.

Mace’s head came up from the paper and he looked between Hec
I threw me. Hector didn’t take his eyes off me nor did those eyes cool.

My body did another involuntary shiver.

d for a Mace’s mouth got tight right before he said, “Could you make
bed as babe?”
atform,

At that moment, I thought coffee was an excellent idea, even better
normally thought of the idea coffee, and let’s just say I liked my coffee.
Making it would give me something to do other than think of Mace
Hector.

I nodded, mumbled, “Sure,” and scooted toward the coffee pot
went to what small kitchen space was left with two tall, muscled men in it.

I started to prepare coffee and heard the paper rustling.

While I “What’s going on?” I asked.

“Front page news,” Hector answered what I thought was nonsense.

I turned to him, empty coffee pot in my hand, my mind on how to
the sink Hector was leaning against without coming into contact with
and I asked, “What?”

He jerked his head to the paper Mace now had opened and I saw the
page.

I looked at it and my eyes widened in shock when I saw *me* on the

It was a half-body shot from the hips up, guitar in my hands, the front of me, my head tilted down and to the side to look at my guitar, smile on my face. The photo was taken at a gig that, I suspected from shirt I had on (which I hadn't worn in ages), was at least a year ago.

Next to my photo was the same size picture of a younger-looking I the bottom of a snowy mountain in full-snowboarder gear, hair tousled wet with sweat, board under his arm. Other photographers surrounding him he was ignoring them and caught on the move by the cameras.

The headline read, *Local Celebrities under Fire*.

"Effing hell," I breathed right when the phone rang.

"Dammit," Mace muttered, tossing the paper on the counter and running up to the ledge where I kept my phone. He put it to his ear and said "What?"

I was too much in a dither to mind Mace being rude while answering phone. I was focused on being front page news *and* being referred to as "celebrity."

I knew Mace had been famous, but when did *I* become a celebrity?

"She has no comment," Mace said into the phone. He hesitated and continued, "I have no comment either." Then he beeped it off and put it down to get to the counter.

I stared at him a beat, letting the words "no comment" permeate my stunned brain, and with effort came unstuck, handed the empty pot to the front and snatched the paper off the counter.

I was beginning to feel weird. Way weird. Panic weird. I didn't know why, but it didn't feel good.

mic in “Stella...” Mace started to say but I wasn’t listening.
a small I wandered out of the kitchen area. Juno got close and gave a little
1 the T- “In a minute, Juno,” I mumbled, my eyes scanning the page.
Mace at “I’ll take the dog out,” I heard Hector say, but I didn’t pay attention
led and I arrived at the end of the bed platform and sat. I no sooner got my
ng him, the platform when the paper was snatched from my hands before I
able to read a single word.

My head snapped up.

“Hey! I was reading that,” I semi-lied to Mace who was standing
me.

reaching The door closed behind Hector and Juno.
barked,

“Fuck it, Stella. We need to stay focused,” Mace replied.

ing my I stood. “Focused on what?”

to as a When I stood, it brought me close to Mace. He didn’t move out
space, just kept looking down at me.

“Focused on what’s important,” he answered calmly.

ed then “Being front page news isn’t important?” I retorted, not calm at all

ut it on I’d never been front page news. I didn’t know how it made me feel
both weirdly thrilling and scary-as-shit. But also, that strange panic w
ate my encroaching. I still didn’t get it and I didn’t want to. I had enough t
o Mace about as it was.

“No,” Mace broke into my thoughts.

t know “Then what’s important?”

“Keepin’ you alive. Workin’ out our shit. Movin’ on together.

what's important."

whine. I shook my head at his words, not awake enough or together enough after last night's drama and this morning's position on page one to go there.

n. I changed subjects. "Who was on the phone?"

7 ass on "Doesn't matter."

'd been "Who was on the phone, Mace?" I asked again.

He opened his mouth to speak and the phone rang again. My eyes were drawn to it. Mace's upper body twisted and he looked over his shoulder to look at me too.

It rang a second time and Mace turned back to me just as I laid my hand on myself, moving quickly around him, toward the phone.

I was almost there when Mace hooked an arm around my waist, pulling me into his body and reached around me. I was reaching too, but his arms were longer and he tagged the phone.

t of my He beeped it on and put it to his ear.

"Yeah?" he clipped just as I shouted, "Mace!"

He listened for two seconds then said, "We have nothing to say." The phone beeped it off again.

. It was "I cannot believe you just did that! It's *my* phone!" I yelled, straining against his arm, which was still tight at my waist.

o panic He shook me. "Stella, calm down and listen to me."

"Let go!"

He did but only so I could take a step forward. Once I did, he grabbed my hand, twirled me and brought me back to him, front to front. That's

He placed the phone on the counter, put both arms around my shoulders and tilted his head down to look at me.

“Listen,” he ordered.

I stopped pulling away from him and looked at his face.

“This is unreal,” I stated the obvious.

“Reporters are fuckwads. We don’t talk to them. Ignore it. Don’t say anything. Don’t pay any fuckin’ attention. This’ll be over and done with. Move on to new meat.”

“I can’t ignore it!” I snapped.

“Why the fuck not?”

I didn’t know why not. My life was so out of control, it didn’t feel like I knew anything anymore.

“I know you have experience with this, Mace, but I don’t,” I told him.

“That’s why you need to listen to me,” Mace returned.

Then it came out. It came from someplace buried deep. Some part of me that was locked away for good, never to be opened again.

The panic overwhelmed me and my body started trembling. It was like I quit fighting and melted into Mace. My head tilting back further, my hands to his chest and my shaking fingers curled into his white tee.

I heard the tremor in my voice when I asked, “What if my mother was that?”

Mace’s face had been hard with determination, but at my words I could see his green eyes went soft.

“Kitten,” he murmured.

uggling “I’m not big news, but maybe you still are,” I told him. “What if it
the news where she is? I need to talk to the reporters, tell them I’m ok
them you and Lee and the boys know what you’re doing. Tell them the
are involved. The Feds too. Tell them that Sid’s a prick and he killed
and we’re doing the right thing.”

read it. “Stella, we can’t tell them any of that shit.”

they’ll My fists grew tighter on Mace’s shirt.

“She has to know we’re doing the right thing.”

Mace studied my face a beat and his head dipped closer to mine.

Then, quietly, he asked, “Your mom does or your dad does?”

el like I I blinked.

“What?”

im. “You want your mom to know you’re doin’ the right thing? Or yo
your dad to know?”

place I I shook my head. “I don’t care about Dad.”

“Kitten—”

was so My body went still and I shouted, “I don’t!” right in his face.

er, I put I didn’t know why I shouted, I just did.

I also didn’t know why I was trembling and feeling panicked, I just

ier sees Big time.

his face I started to pull away again, thinking only of escape. Where to, I
idea, but I had to get there, right...effing...now.

Unfortunately, Mace was ready for me.

He turned us, picked me up with his hands at my waist and plan

t makesass on the counter. Then he moved in with so much determination I
say, tellforced my legs open at the knees and he kept coming until he was ultr
e policeWe were chest to chest, privates to privates, nose to nose. He put his
. Linnieon the counter on either side of me.

“Talk to me, babe,” he demanded softly.

I turned my face to the side and stared at the counter.

Something was happening to me, something very frightening, and
was only one thing I knew—I couldn’t deal.

I needed to lock it down.

Mace didn’t feel like letting me lock it down. His hands came to rest
and he moved my head to face him. His thumbs at my jaw, he forced
look up at him.

ou want “Talk to me,” he repeated, and his eyes looked strange. He was looking
me in a way he’d never looked at me before. It was a warm look, but
reading it right, it was filled with concern. So much concern it looked
like worry. And all that was mingled with such tenderness, at the sight
my breath didn’t take a flight, it beamed to another galaxy.

“I can’t,” I whispered.

The phone rang again and we let it, staring at each other.

t was. Mace didn’t move. Neither did I.

The phone stopped ringing and Mace’s face came closer, his forehead
had no resting on mine.

“They don’t know where you are,” he said, and it wasn’t a question.

I didn’t answer, but my non-answer was an answer.

ited my “You don’t want them to know where you are.” Mace made

his hips statement and I kept quiet. "You don't want them to know," he re
a close. "You don't want them to know so much that you'd sabotage your ca
s hand turning down the scouts. Keepin' yourself secluded here, doin' sm
gigs rather than lettin' yourself be what you're supposed to be."

I swallowed.

He was digging deep into a place he wasn't allowed to be. A
id there didn't let anyone visit, not even myself, and my trembling body
shaking.

I put my hands to his chest and pushed.

ly neck He didn't budge.

d me to "Move away, Mace," I whispered.

"You lied to Daisy. You aren't just scarred. You're broken."

king at I was beginning to breathe heavily.

if I was "Move away."

ed a lot Mace changed tactics. "They can't hurt you anymore."
ht of it,

I felt them then, the tears sliding up the back of my throat, my
tingling.

I swallowed again. This time it hurt.

"Please, move away."

orehead "I won't let them. Floyd won't let them. Fuck, if Hugo heard th
one nasty thing against you, he'd tear them apart. You have people w
about you now, Kitten. They can't get at you. You can let it go. Y
1. shine."

another For some reason, I said, "They can get at me."

peated. “Kitten.”

reer by At his soft, deep voice uttering his sweet, special name for me v
all-time face so close, his eyes all I could see, I exposed myself in a way I’
exposed myself to anyone. Not friends, not bandmates, not even Floyd

“*He* can get at me,” I said so softly I could barely hear myself.

place I Mace closed his eyes and his hands moved from my neck, down n
started and he wrapped his arms around me, but he didn’t take his forehea
mine.

I hated to admit it, but his arms around me like that felt good.

No, if I was honest, they felt *great*.

I couldn’t deal with that, either.

His eyes opened again and they drilled into mine. “He can’t.”

I nodded my head.

Mace shook his.

I put my hands on either side of his neck and squeezed gently.

sinuses “You don’t get it,” I whispered.

“I get it.”

“You can’t.”

em say He pressed even closer. His voice got lower and I watched in h
fascination as something tremendously frightening happened.

ho care Earth-shatteringly frightening.

ou can World-rockingly frightening.

I watched, my breath held, as the guard I never knew Mace kept fi
place faded clean away.

“Babe,” he murmured fiercely. “I *can*.”

with his That was when I slid out of my pain, out of my panic, and I saved neverclear as day, dancing malevolently behind his beautiful eyes.

· Demons.

Mace had demons.

ly back And they were far worse than anything I could even imagine.

id from Sinister tingles slithered down my back as a savage, steel-toed boot me straight in the gut. It was so savage, my body jerked with it and I in breath, staring speechless at the open torment in Mace’s eyes.

Before I could say anything (not that I knew what to say), the phone and the buzzer went on the door.

The moment was lost.

The guard slammed down over his features and he stepped Snatching the phone off the counter, he stalked to the door.

What was THAT? my brain asked me.

I was still trembling, now for a different reason.

I have no idea, I told my brain.

Juno bounded in before Hector, and Mace muttered, “No commer the phone again while I watched.
orrified

What are we gonna do? my brain asked.

I swallowed, more scared now than when bullets were pounding dirt all around me. More scared than I’d ever been in my whole fuckin

rmly in *I have no effing idea*, I answered.

v them,

oot hit
sucked

ne rang

away.

it," into

g in the
g life.

ELEVEN



FIRST WORLD TOUR

Stella

I had no time to figure it out.

Juno butted my calf with her nose with such strength my whole body shifted to the side, telling me in no uncertain terms it was breakfast time.

I'd already left her in the clutches of an unknown, but hot (not that I factored in Juno's choice for companions, but still, it must be said) Hectore was the guy for her morning bathroom break. I was heading for Worst Doggie of the Year if I didn't at least take care of the bare necessities.

"All right, baby," I murmured, jumping down from the counter.

Juno knew what my motion meant. She wagged her tail in response and her whole body went with it.

"We gotta roll," I heard Hector say as I nabbed Juno's bowl from the floor.

"Yeah," Mace replied. "Give me a second."

I looked up to see him coming my way.

I straightened and backed up two steps, still in the throes of a jumble of strong emotions, none of which I could process at the moment considering my dog was starving.

“I got things to do,” Mace told me, stopping close, and I tilted my head back to look up at him.

“Okay.”

Mace going was good. No, it was *great*. It meant I could nap. It meant I could play my guitar. It meant I could call Ally and process everything from the last twelve hours. Or, better yet, pull together a clever disguise for a town.

Mace took the bowl from my hand and put it on the counter.

Juno whined, unhappy with this turn of events.

“I have to feed Juno,” I informed Mace.

“In a second.”

“My poor Juno.”

Mace continued speaking. “You answer the phone, it’s a reporter, no comment’ and hang up. Got me?”

“Mace—”

“Stella, no comment. I don’t want that shit in my life. Not again.”

My head jerked a bit to the side and I felt a mini-gut kick at his words, the harsh undercurrent with which he said them.

I wondered what he meant, but I didn’t ask because I was telling myself I didn’t want to know (when in reality I did).

Do you see how messed up my head was?

“Stella, tell me you got me,” Mace pressed.

“I got you,” I muttered, giving in so I could feed my dog and be done. I didn’t want that in Mace’s life either (and, unfortunately for Juno, not

ly headorder).

It seemed my luck was going to be even shittier than normal that night because we weren't done.

meant I Mace got closer and shifted. He did this so his back was to Hector and I was hidden from him. Mace put his hand to my neck and dipped his head toward mine.

His eyes were back to guarded, but they were still warm when he looked deep into mine.

“We good?” he asked softly.

I didn't know if he was asking if we were good about what happened on stage last night. Or if we were good about what happened with Eric when we were good about the interrupted bed action that morning. Or if we were good about the crazy-scary shit that happened in the kitchen five minutes ago. You say

Since the answer was the same for all of them, I said, “No.”

This made him smile.

Which made my toes curl.

rds and He bent in, touched his lips to mine, giving me a neck squeeze at the same time. Then, lips still on mine, he promised, “We will be.”

myself I That gave the toe curl the addition of a full body tremble.

He gave me another neck squeeze then walked away and I stood motionless in the kitchen watching him move toward one of his bedrooms. For some reason my skin started to feel hot, so my eyes shifted toward the door who was standing, arms crossed on his chest, gaze on me, mouth curled into a sexy grin.

in that Sheesh.

I came unstuck and did the only thing I could do (legally) at that morning I got down to the business of feeding my dog.

Mace was sitting on the edge of the bed platform tugging on his face and I when the buzzer went.

“Jesus Christ,” Mace muttered, and Hector moved toward the pane

I bent to put the bowl of food on the floor and Juno shoved her face in front of me before it was settled. I was rubbing down her body when I heard the disembodied voice of Hugo in the room.

“We gotta know a secret password or what?”

“It’s the band,” Hector told Mace.

I will note he told Mace, not me.

“Let them in,” I said.

“I’ll talk to them,” Mace said at the same time, getting up and walking toward the door.

Erm, what?

Now wait just one effing minute.

“You can just let them in,” I told Mace as I followed him.

“Stay here with Stella. I’ll be back with the band.” Mace ignored me and spoke to Hector.

“Mace!” I snapped. “Just let them in.”

Mace turned to face me. “We’ll be right up.”

My eyes narrowed on him. “What’s going on?”

“I just want to get a few things straight with the band.”

I did not *think* so.

oment. “About what?” I pushed.

“About ‘no comment.’”

s boots Oh.

Okay.

l. I could see that.

ice in it Mace and I both knew everyone, including the grieving Buzz, w
ard the happily loose-lipped with reporters unless warned. Especially if they
they could get The Blue Moon Gypsies and any of our gig dates in pri

“You can talk to them up here,” I told him.

“I’m talkin’ to them downstairs.”

“Mace.”

“Stella.”

walking “Jesus, is someone gonna let us in or what?” Pong’s disembodie
didn’t come through the panel. We could hear him shouting from outsi

“Two seconds,” Hector said into the speaker, and before I cou
another word, Mace was gone.

I looked at the door then at Hector and remarked angrily,
me and annoying.”

“He’s probably got his reasons,” Hector replied.

“And I should care about those reasons because...?” I prompted.

Hector didn’t hesitate. “You don’t have to care about ’em, you ju
understand he has ’em.”

I glared at Hector for a beat.

Whatever.

It was then I realized I was alone with Hector, and it was remembered to feel uncomfortable.

I stared at him.

He grinned at me.

All of a sudden I didn't know what to do or say. All I could think of was Mace telling me that in twenty-four hours, Hector would have me on my back, him on top and both of us would be naked.

And this didn't seem like a bad idea.

Oh my God, you are SUCH a slut, my brain remarked.

This was all communicated to Hector on some Hot Guy Wavelength and his grin turned to a wolfish but highly effective smile.

Effing hell.

Thankfully, he threw me a bone.

“You were makin’ coffee?” he reminded me.

“Oh yeah, right,” I muttered, and then scooted into the kitchen.

I grabbed the pot, filled it with water and turned to the coffeemaker. Hector joined me in the kitchen. I would have preferred him to stay away (say, Alaska) but I didn't have a choice and I didn't want to admit because he'd think I was a slutty wuss.

I poured the water into the coffeemaker and tucked some hair behind my ear.

“So...” I searched desperately for conversation, wondering how long it would take to tell the band they had two words they could say to me and other than that they had to keep their mouths shut. And I figured for my band, it would take approximately eighty-two hours.

then I I was going to have to make a lot of conversation.

I glanced at Hector. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Now why did I ask that?

Why, why, why?

k about "Nope," Hector replied.

: flat on "No one special?" I went on.

Shut up! my brain screamed.

"Didn't say that," Hector answered.

Interesting. My brain was no longer screaming.

Secret

I shoved the pot under the spout, flipped the switch and looked fully.

"There's someone special?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"But she's not your girlfriend?"

He crossed his arms on his chest, leaned a hip against the counter while again didn't answer.

further

ask him "Who is she?"

"She's not a Rock Chick," he told me. "She's rich. She's unbelievably fuckin' beautiful. She made the first move and then shut me down so I'm gonna have to make the second move too."

long it I blinked.

reporters This seemed a lot of sharing for a badass tough guy. A badass tough guy I barely knew.

d, with

I was curious to know what shutting Hector down entailed and what

woman in her right mind would do such a ridiculous thing, but I was
much of a scaredy-cat to ask.

“And what do you do until she makes the second move?” I
because she would make the second move, no doubt about it. She’d be
not to.

He was back to grinning and he answered, “I have fun.”

Oh lordy be.

I knew what Hot Guy Fun consisted of. I’d had a dose of it that night
with Mace’s hand in my panties.

Whoever-she-was, she better hurry up.

at him

All of a sudden, Hector said, “You’re good.”

I stared at him. My mind still on whoever she was and hot guys’ hands
my panties, I wasn’t following.

“What?”

“I’ve seen you play, at The Little Bear, Herman’s, The Gothic
center and good.”

I had compliments before, even compliments from hot guys:
compliments from hot guys who wanted to get in my panties. Likely
inevitably were complimenting me *because* they wanted to get in my panties.

So she’s But something about the simple way Hector shared his opinion
different, more honest. I knew innately that he wasn’t the type of guy
who threw meaningless compliments around for the hell of it.

That guy I I felt my cheeks getting warm, turned away to look at the filling cabinet
and muttered, “Thanks,” hoping he’d move on to a different subject. That
why any was even more uncomfortable than the last.

was too I felt his body heat and it was both immense and close.

I looked up to see he'd closed the distance and was inches away.

asked, Yikes!

he crazy Before I could say anything, he spoke.

“What I wanna know is,” he started softly, “what the fuck you doin’ in Denver?”

I was finding it hard to breathe, seeing as he was close. His he
morning hitting me, he was seriously good-looking and I had nowhere to retreat

I persevered, “I live here.”

“No, I mean you and the band. Anybody who sees you play know
got a bargain. They should be payin’ top arena prices to watch the
ands in you.”

I was no longer finding it hard to breathe. I was just not breathing c

Did he really say that?

You’re He kept going. “You need a decent manager. You should be on th
You should go to LA. You should get under the nose of some scouts.”

s, even “I’ve talked to scouts,” I broke in.

ly, they “And?”

on felt “I like where I am.”

uy who I watched as surprise crossed his features and he muttered, “
shittin’ me.”

ffeepot “No, really, this is good.”

his one He shook his head. “You’re better.”

I felt that weird panic edging into me, but it was connected with th

thrill of being on the front page of *The Denver Post*.

“This is good,” I repeated, ignoring the panic and the thrill.

“You’re better,” he repeated too.

“You don’t understand.” I sighed and pressed myself against the wall to get a little space, but this didn’t work because he leaned in. I stared at him with fascination as his face grew hard.

“No, I don’t. I don’t have a gift. Been watchin’ yours for a while now wonderin’ why you don’t share it with more people.” He paused and got closer before he asked, “You wanna tell me why?”

“Not really,” I answered, and it was the truth.

Not only was it the truth, it was none of his business.

I barely knew this guy!

Granted, he told me about whoever-she-was, but this wasn’t shared alike.

Unh-unh.

No way.

He stared at me.

I stared back.

He stared at me some more.

I stared back some more.

Then he moved away an inch and said, “I fuckin’ hope Mace can put some sense into you.”

“Once this is done, so are Mace and I,” I informed him bitchily.

I watched his brows go up right before he burst out laughing, then

his head back and everything.

I crossed my arms on my chest.

“What’s so damn funny?” I snapped.

counter When he stopped laughing, his face was still warm with it, a
ared in thought he was good-looking before, I was wrong. Now, he was just
beautiful.

ow and “You are, *mamita*. You’re fuckin’ hilarious.”

ot even “Am not,” I returned, sounding like a six-year-old and also not car
was freaking me out!

Hector leaned in again. “You are, and I’ll want fuckin’ backstage
when you’re on your first world tour.”

are and “Right,” I muttered dismissively, but feeling the panic and thri
through me again.

“Right,” Hector replied firmly.

The door opened and I was saved from further discourse with Hot
by my loud band storming in, led by Mace.

It took Mace a millisecond to notice Hector and me in a close squ
the kitchen and it took another millisecond for his temper to flare.

“What the fuck?” he asked.

“I was making coffee,” I explained immediately, sounding stupid.

an talk “Thank God. Coffee!” Leo exclaimed, making a beeline tow
kitchen.

rowing “Be cool, *hombre*. We were just havin’ a chat,” Hector put in, exi
kitchen as Leo entered.

“I hope that fuckin’ coffee’s strong,” Hugo grumbled.

“A chat?” Mace asked.

“Yeah, nothin’ to get excited about,” Hector replied, but I watched if Mace didn’t look like he believed Hector.

“Is there gonna be enough coffee for everyone?” Buzz asked.

“It’s not even finished brewing yet!” Pong shouted like the coffee going to take three years to brew and that was the only sustenance allowed.

Juno shifted her big dog body out of the small space as the male, Blue Moon Gypsy bodies pressed toward the coffee pot. I took opportunity and followed her.

I was done.

D-o-n-e, done.

I stomped straight to the bed, Juno leading the way, and when we got there, she jumped up on the bed and I looked at her.

“Why me?” I asked my dog.

Juno woofed.

“Why can’t I be a lesbian?” I continued.

Juno sat down, her tail sweeping the bedclothes in a wide arc, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth, her inability to speak English hindered the counseling session.

“Why couldn’t I form an all-girl band like The Go-Gos?” I went on.

“The Go-Gos! Surfer-girl music? Shee-it. You crazy?” Hugo called behind me.

I turned so my back was to the bed and flopped down. I threw my hand over my eyes and tried to pretend I was on a beach. A deserted beach thousands of miles away from civilization.

Juno got down on her belly and snuffled my neck with her big, wet tongue.

Well, okay, a deserted beach thousands of miles away from civilization, but with Juno with me.

I dug my fingers in the fur of her head, scratching behind her ears.

Juno licked my face.

I felt something on either side of my knees, which were bent at the angle of the bed. Then the bed depressed and I took my hand from Juno's face and lifted my arm from my face.

Mace was in push up position, his body looming over mine, bent at the waist, his hands in the bed on either side of my body.

I could see the bunched-up muscles in his upper arms and I felt a rush between my legs.

Down, Mace Slut! my brain cautioned.

What was the matter with me?

"Babe, I gotta go," Mace said softly.

"Okay," I replied.

"Remember, no comment."

I sighed, then said, "I remember."

"When I get home tonight, we'll have dinner and talk."

Mace referring to my place as "home" caused that panicky feeling to emerge again, right along with the thrill.

ny arm “Fine,” I said.

each. A “Use the alarm,” he went on.

“Gotcha.”

ose. “I’ll call sometime today.”

ization, “Mace, are you gonna go or what?” I was losing patience and my
to hold back the panic, thrill and the warm rush at his proximity.

He grinned and bent his elbows until his chest was brushing mine.
kissed me hard but closed-mouthed, then did a push-up and he was gone.

ne edge I closed my eyes and wondered what to do next.

fur and I didn’t get a chance to form a plan. Something big hit the bed and
Juno and I bounced with it.

t at the I opened my eyes as I heard the door open. Pong had jumped on the
of the bed, flat on his back. I looked toward the door and saw Mace
a warm Hector were leaving.

“Later, Hector,” I called and watched him casually lift a hand in re-
total cool.

“Is the coffee ready yet?” Pong yelled to Leo, who was standing
kitchen staring at the nearly full pot.

“We’re close,” Leo answered.

There was more movement on the bed when Floyd sat down.

I looked at him.

He looked concerned.

ling to He also looked something else. Something frightening. Some-
sensed had to do with Mace’s demons. Something that was somewhe

not want to go.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

“No,” I replied honestly.

“Is anyone gonna ask *me* if I’m okay? It was my fuckin’ head that
ability got blown off,” Pong demanded.

“They were aimin’ at Stella Bella,” Buzz commented, throwing
ine. He on his side lengthwise at the foot of the bed.

ie. “So?” Pong snapped.

My eyes moved to Pong. “Are you okay?”

nd both Pong looked at me, lost his annoyance and grinned. “Sure. Bitch
all over me last night. Bein’ in mortal danger appears to be an aphrodis

he head I rolled my eyes back in my head.

ace and “You’re a fuckin’ idiot,” Buzz said to Pong.

“A fuckin’ idiot who had a foursome last night,” Pong shot back.

sponse, Oh lordy.

“I’m too old for this shit,” Floyd muttered.

; in my The phone rang and I got up on my elbows and watched Hugo
toward it.

“No comment, Hugo,” I reminded him.

“I speak English not Swahili, mama. I heard Mace. I hear you. Jes
paused, beeped on the phone and greeted, “Yeah?”

I flopped back down on the bed, rethinking my career path
thing I rethinking my romantic path. Then my careening thoughts conjure
re I *did* sketch of a woman who would be silly enough to shut Hector down. T

look in Mace's unguarded eyes flashed before mine and I got a full-body shiver.

I heard Hugo say from above me, "Stella, it's Monk."

I opened my eyes to see Hugo standing at the side of the bed. Effing hell.

I did an ab curl and reached a hand out for the phone. I wasn't looking forward to this conversation.

Monk had had someone with a rifle in his club last night. Worst of all, someone fired the rifle. Even worse, Monk had missed out on post-call due to a frenzied stampede. Even worse, Monk would have no entertainment tonight. We were set to play there again and there was no way in hell we were going to do that.

"Monk," I said into the phone.

"Stella, beautiful," Monk gushed exuberantly, not sounding angry. "Erm, what?"

"Monk, I'm sorry about—" I started.

"Did you see *The Denver Post*?" Monk interrupted me.

"Um, no," I told him. "Not exactly."

He didn't care if I saw it or not and I knew this when he announced that the Palladium was mentioned five times in *The Post*. Best advertising yet, fuckin' free! This is shit-hot." Monk continued speaking happily in my ear. "We're gonna double the cover charge tonight. We'll make a killing out of this."

Then he said, "He wasn't serious."

"Monk, we can't play tonight," I said.

ll body Silence then, “Why the fuck not?”

I looked around at my band. They were all watching me.

“Well, because we got shot at last night,” I explained.

“So?” Monk asked.

“With a rifle,” I went on.

“And?” Monk pressed.

“Pong nearly got his head blown off,” I continued.

se, that “Last night, Pong had women drippin’ off him,” Monk returned
gig last boy hasn’t been that lucky since the University of Colorado w
ave no volleyball team came to see your show.”

no way I remembered the night the volleyball team came to see the show
hadn’t been a good night, at least not for me, and definitely not for M
had ended in a five o’clock in the morning phone call that saw
at all. extricating Pong from a situation where Pong lost all his clothes (black bikini briefs) in a game of strip poker. When he tried to get them, he’d learned how strong a gaggle of college-aged female athletes could be. And let’s just say that Mace hadn’t been all that thrilled to have Pong in the front seat of his silver Chevy Avalanche wearing only his black briefs.

d, “The “Even so—” I continued to try to convince Monk of the seriousness
ou can situation, which kind of pissed me off, considering there should
7 in my convincing to do.

ig.” “Stella, you’re playin’,” Monk broke in.

“Monk, you can’t think—”

“I can and I do. You don’t play tonight you never play the Pa

again,” Monk threatened.

My body got tight.

“Monk!”

“Not only that, Stella, you don’t play tonight, I start talkin’ to the club owners. Talkin’ about shit like wandin’, searches and that fuckin’ guy gettin’ in my face and puttin’ his hands on me.”

Effing hell.

“Monk, listen to me, we can’t play tonight. It’s too dangerous.”

l. “That
omen’s

“No, Stella, you listen to me. You play tonight or you don’t Denver. Anywhere in Denver. Ever again.”

w. That
face. It

“Are you threatening me?” I snapped.

“It’s not a threat. Trust me.”

7 Mace
but his

My luck sucked!

n back,
ould be.

Before I could retort, the phone was ripped from my hand and I was back, Hugo put it to his ear.

g sitting
x bikini

“Monk, you got Hugo,” he said into the phone, his deep, velvet voice angry purr. “Yeah,” he went on. “No, you listen to me, you circus cracker. We play tonight, you double the cover and we get the take.”

s of the
be no

I stared in shock at Hugo’s words as Hugo paused for a few beats before he kept talking.

“Quiet, you’re listenin’ to me now, motherfucker.”

The angry purr got angrier and I held my breath.

lladium

“You open the doors an hour early to get folks in. You follow the standard protocol to the letter. The...fuckin’...letter. You understand?” Hugo

again, nodded his head once then went on, “We play thirty minute s
forty-five. You put signs up that say no bags, purses or backpacks allo
heard yelling come from the phone, but Hugo forged ahead. “No one
bulky clothes either. No jackets, no sweatshirts, nothin’. The minute
code maximum, you close the doors. No one gets in unless someone g
le other
i’ Mace
We clear, motherfucker?”

There was more yelling coming from the phone and I glanced ar
the band. Leo was in the kitchen, three empty coffee cups dangling fo
from his fingers. Floyd had angry eyes narrowed on the phone. Po
play ingrinning. Buzz was biting his lip.

I looked back at Hugo when he started speaking again.

“You try to fuck The Gypsies, we got problems. You don’
problems with me, motherfucker. I know you like toot, I know who
your toot from and I know you’re tappin’ his piece. He’s a serious guy
vatched don’t like sharin’, ’specially with a circus freak cracker. You want
stay in the dark and you to stay supplied with blow, not to mention you
of ass, you keep your fuckin’ mouth shut. Now, are we clear?”

oice an
is freak
Silence from Hugo and the phone.

Then Hugo said, “Damn straight, motherfucker,” he beeped off the
its then and tossed it to me. “We’re good,” he told me calmly.

I blinked.

“We’re...good?” I asked hesitantly.

“Monk’s on board,” Hugo replied.

security I threw out my arms. “Hugo, are you nuts? We can’t play tonig
paused can’t play until this shit is over.”

ets, not “Be cool, mama, we’ll be all right,” Hugo responded.
wed.” I I stared at him, mouth open.
wearin’ Everyone was nuts. Everyone, that was, but me.
you hit “You’re nuts,” I told Hugo.
oes out. “Anyone want eggs? I’m cooking,” Leo called from the kitchen.
ound at “I’d kill for some eggs. You got bacon?” Pong asked me, unaffected by all the scariness happening around him.
rgotten
ng was “You’re nuts too,” I said to Pong, who just grinned at me and pushed the bed.
the bed.
“Toast. I need toast. With grape jelly. And loads of butter,” Buzz exited the bed as well.
’t want
you get “There’s bread. There’s bacon too,” Leo announced, head in the fridge.
and he I looked at Floyd.
him to Floyd didn’t look happy.
ir piece Finally, one sane person!
He stared at me and shook his head.
e phone I waited for him to intervene, to bring sanity into our crazy world.
Then he shrugged.
“Is the coffee done?” Floyd asked as he got up and walked to the kitchen.
Shitsofuckit!
I flopped back on the bed.
ht! We Beautiful.
This was just beautiful.

“You better call Mace, get him to set up the security detail,” Hu from his place leaning against the kitchen ledge.

Even more beautiful.

Mace was going to have a shit fit.

And here I was, pulling him in to help me and my band.

entirely Again!

“Stella Bella, you want eggs?” Leo asked.

hed off I looked at Juno.

She blinked at me then panted a bit. I watched as she gave up tl zz said, against consciousness, rolled to her side and groaned as she stretch preparing for her doggie nap.

idge. Eyes still on Juno, I answered, “Yeah, I want eggs.”

itchen.

“You better call Mace, get him to set up the security detail,” Hugo said from his place leaning against the kitchen ledge.

Even more beautiful.

Mace was going to have a shit fit.

And here I was, pulling him in to help me and my band.

Again!

“Stella Bella, you want eggs?” Leo asked.

I looked at Juno.

She blinked at me then panted a bit. I watched as she gave up the fight against consciousness, rolled to her side and groaned as she stretched out, preparing for her doggie nap.

Eyes still on Juno, I answered, “Yeah, I want eggs.”

TWELVE



SET LIST

Stella

“Denver, let me hear you make some noise!” I shouted into the mic while playing my guitar, the music roaring from the amplifiers.

At my demand, the crowd went nuts.

I looked to Buzz and smiled. He smiled back while jacking his head up and down. My gaze moved beyond Buzz to see Floyd’s head swinging and forth, his shoulders bunched up, his fingers crashing on the piano keys. Leo stepped back and looked behind me to see Pong’s hair was flying out. Leo then he shook his head and banged the drums. My gaze moved to Leo, who had his head bent, staring at the stage, but his feet were hopping up and down to the beat.

Hugo was playing the keyboards, something he rarely did. He seldom played keyboards because it gave him bad flashbacks of the organ lessons he’d taken at church, lessons forced on him by his ball-buster of a grandmother.

I felt badly about giving Hugo flashbacks of his ball-buster grandmother because I’d met her and she *was* a ball-buster.

But we needed the keyboards.

We were ending our third set on our fourth encore of Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band’s “Night Moves.”

Silver Bullet Band's "Get Out of Denver." Keyboards were paramount. I didn't do "Get Out of Denver" without keyboards.

Hugo had had to suck it up.

He hated it, but he did it for the band.

I executed the finishing riff with the drums, keyboards and piano coming all around me. Then, as the keyboards and drums kept the excitement going, I put my arm up in the air, finger pointed to the ceiling, bounced my head on my shoulders with my finger slashing the air, one, two, three, four, and then all jumped high one last time as I brought my arm down in a wide sweep. The music stopped.

I turned to the mic, wrapped my hand around it and smiled to the crowd.

"That's rock 'n' roll!" I yelled, and a wall of sound hit us. The crowd screamed back.

"We need a beer. Give us fifteen minutes and we'll be back," I told them, and they screamed again.

I grabbed the neck of my guitar and swung it in an arc, moving it out of the way with a shake of my head and disengaging the black strap (that had killer tiny, daisy flower silver rivets running up each side) from around my shoulder. I placed my guitar in its stand and walked between Buzz and Leo to the stage that would lead offstage.

The crowd had moved from fanatic screams to clapping and singing rhythmically, chanting the word "Gypsies" over and over again. They were hoping for encore number five, and I had to admit, I was high enough to let them have it.

But seriously, as high as I was, as much as the music and the crowd

nt. Youfeeding me, I needed a fucking beer.



MY DAY HAD STARTED out shit and didn't get better.

Let's just say Mace hadn't been happy that our evening plarashing changed from a quiet dinner and a talk about our future to his having going, I together a security detail for a death-defying rock gig.

After the band left, I called Mace and managed to talk him around ead and so it could more appropriately be described as yelling him around. B hen we he gave in, to my shock, Lee phoned and started yelling at me too. The ipe and he phoned. Then Hector. Then Eddie. I hung up on Hank, and then had rowd. phoning me, yelling at me for hanging up on Hank.

The Hot Bunch weren't all that excited about me getting shot at ag as they more, if I was putting myself out there, the Rock Chicks were com ld them moral support. And that they *really* didn't like.

As for Roxie, she just didn't like me hanging up on Hank.

I was in a pickle. I couldn't make the Rock Chicks stay home. I c my hair leather let down the band.

Either way, I was screwed.

So, I stuck with the program.

These calls were intermingled with calls from reporters and friend irs that wanting to know what was going on. Since I wasn't allowed to omping reporters and since I didn't really know what was going on, these cal y were short and annoying.

So I decided to quit answering the phone and Juno and I clear to give house, top to bottom. Well, Juno didn't clean. Juno watched me clean rd were the time and snoozed the other part.

Then I worked on the set list. This took a while, considering it was the last gig I'd ever play. I told myself I wasn't being morbid, just practical, but I knew whatever it was, it had to be special.

What I didn't do was nap, play my guitar to soothe my troubled mind, or try to pull out any conclusions about my effed-up life.

I should have done all of those, or at least some of them, or, at the very least, the last one. But I didn't have it in me.

But once



in Luke I HARBORED hope that people would stay away from the show considering the cover was doubled, the security was fierce and bullets were flying.

This hope was dashed.

ain, but

ing for

By the time Vance took me to The Palladium, the doors were closed because the club was already at maximum capacity. I could see there was a line straggling all the way down the sidewalk (half a block!) and around the corner. All of this and the show didn't start for thirty minutes, as it turned out, fifty, as the band gave me trouble (because they always give me trouble).

Crazy Rock 'n' Roll Denverites.

The good news was there were also a couple of squad cars and uniforms out front, providing what Vance called "presence," which did double duty helping to control the crowd and making bad guys think twice.

My being "adopted" by the Denver Police Department definitely counts as a perk.

ed my



part of THE OTHER GOOD news was that, once we started playing, the band was on fire. We were on fire the night before, but we were an inferno tonight.

might be We'd never played this good.
prepared, Never.



soul or I GOT to the side of the stage and Mace shoved a Fat Tire in my hand.

“Tomorrow, we’ll talk about your set list,” he growled.

he very I looked at him, noticed right off he was ticked and had an insta
kill.

I’d been creative with the set list. We were playing songs we’d re
ring the for the hell of it but rarely, if ever, played. These included Son I
“Death Letter,” Blue Oyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper,” Billy
“Only the Good Die Young,” Benatar’s “Hit Me with Your Best
closed AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck,” and Warren Zevon’s “Lawyers, Gu
was still Money.”

curling Furthermore, we played two songs that we’d never played at a sh
utes, or no one had ever heard outside of rehearsal.

ys gave The songs were written by Buzz and Leo. I wasn’t a songwriter b
were, and they were pretty good at it. We’d never played them. Not be
didn’t let us but because Buzz and Leo weren’t comfortable with it.

niforms I decided that, seeing as all of our asses were on the line, it was
duty of never.

Buzz and Leo disagreed.

had its Floyd, Hugo and Pong thought it was a great idea.

The band fought.

was hot. My side won, but this meant we were twenty minutes late tak
stage.

And so it goes with rock 'n' roll.

The crowd loved the new songs. They loved all of it. They were eating it up.

Mace, however, clearly did not appreciate the irony.

"It's my band," I told Mace. "I write the set lists and I don't take a
nt buzz This was a lie. I took lip all the time.

Mace glared at me and he was so good at it I felt it prudent to s
hearsed mouth shut. So I did.

House's As with each break, Mace put a hand in my back and stee
7 Joel's backstage.

Shot," They were taking no chances tonight. All the Hot Bunch, Tex an
ns and were there again. The same drill as the night before. The differen
ow and while the boys of the band worked the groupies or the bar, I spent my
sequestered in the dressing room with the Rock Chicks.

"Holy crap! That was great!" Indy shouted when I entered the room
ut they I saw that this time around Vance was playing bodyguard. Last b
:cause I was Luke.

Vance gave Mace a nod, Mace accepted it with a return chin lift, g
now or me one last time and shut the door behind him as he left.

"I loved your version of 'Don't Fear the Reaper.' That was fan
Roxie yelled, not holding any grudges from our earlier throw down.

I smiled, took a pull from my beer and threw myself on the ratty
Monk should have replaced twelve years ago.

ing the "They ain't wrong. You are *hot to-night*," Shirleen hooted. "Shirle
her some hip-hop and every once in a while, the blues, but the way y

it, girl, I'm thinkin' of claimin' back rock 'n' roll."

fucking "You can't have it, Shirleen." I smiled at her. "Tonight, I think it's

"Damn tootin'," Daisy put in on a tinkly-bell, girly-giggle and knocked her beer bottle against mine.

ny lip." "So, how are things with you and Mace?" Ally asked, bored with Stella Accolades and wanting to get to a juicier subject.

nap my "Ally," Ava said and then rolled her eyes at Jet.

"I'm just asking," Ally retorted.

red me "Non-starter," I answered Ally after taking another swig of my beer about to share about Mace's demons, not yet. I hadn't even dealt with Duke yet. I didn't even know if I *could* deal with them. "I don't have time with Mace and the band and my dog and the front page of *The Post* and gigs and the idiot Monk and getting shot at and Eric—" breaks

"Eric?" Jet asked.

n. "My boyfriend," I answered.

reak, it There were some gasps. Unfortunately, Ally was taking a sip from Tire when I answered and thus spewed it across the room, forcing Alared at Roxie to jump wide of the beer spray.

"Your *what*?" Ally semi-yelled, still spluttering.

tastic!" "Well, he wasn't my boyfriend, but he was, kind of. We were seeing other," I explained.

7 couch "Were?" Indy asked.

"After Mace and I, erm," I bit my lip and my eyes slid to Vance when he was studying his boots then I looked back to Indy. "*Did it*," I whispered to my girlfriends and then went on talking in my normal voice. "We all had a show

Mace, Eric and me. During the showdown, Mace told Eric he fuck mine.” *Bluntly*. Eric didn’t appreciate that.”

nd she “I bet he didn’t,” Shirleen muttered, making eyes at Daisy.

“Why didn’t you tell *us* about Eric?” Ally demanded to know.

with the I shrugged. “Well, Eric and I were together, but we weren’t. It’s explain. Then I found out he was a Fed—”

“*What?*” It was Daisy’s turn to splutter through a defunct swa beer.

eer, not “Yeah, a Fed. He’s investigating Sid too, and got close to me to dc
th them he said he fell for me. Told me straight out, right in front of Mace, rig
to deal Mace told him he fucked me.” I paused, not wishing to share further l
and my sharing meant reliving. I was still nursing a mini buzz and I needed to
going for the last set, and reliving that particular memory would kill tl
dead. “It’s complicated,” I finished.

“It ain’t complicated, it’s fucked up. That’s what it is,” S commented, and she was not wrong.

her Fat “I can’t believe Mace told him he fucked you. Did he use those v
ava and Ava asked, and at my nod, she went on. “That’s just rude.”

“That’s just the Hot Bunch. They’re all straight-talkers,” Indy re her.

ng each “Still, this Eric guy has a thing for Stella. He could at least *tr*
sensitive,” Ava continued.

This made Shirleen, Ally and Indy burst into gales of laughter and who was Roxie and Jet started giggling.

l to the Shirleen wiped an eye. “Mace? Sensitive? Ava, girl, you are too m
vdown,

ed me. Ava gave Shirleen a look.

I gave Vance a look, wondering what he thought of all this.

Jules, again, had passed on the night out with the Rock Chicks, pre-
to stay home and keep herself and her unborn baby safe.

hard to This, I thought, was a good decision.

Vance had given up on his study of his boots and was now wearing
flow of eating grin and watching me.

Apparently what Vance thought about all of this was that it was
o it. But amusing.

ht after I rolled my eyes.

ecause His grin got wide.

keep it
he buzz Whatever!

There came a knock at the door and Vance went tense.

Shirleen “Scout,” Hector’s voice said from the other side of the door and it
turn to go tense.

words?” “Scout?” Roxie breathed, her huge eyes swinging to me, and all the
Chicks swayed with the excitement filling the room.

minded “I’m unavailable,” I said to Vance quickly, but he ignored me and
the door.

y to be Damn it!

Monk walked in with Hector and a balding, middle-aged man w
l Daisy, managed, even thin on the top, to look cool wearing jeans, a lig
collared shirt and black boots.

uch.” “Stella, beautiful, you’re on fire tonight,” Monk raved, clench

hands together like a greedy, maniacal banker in a bad movie.

I stood and murmured my thanks, my eyes on the scout. My eye referring on the scout had the added benefit of allowing me to avoid Hector, Monk and the Rock Chicks.

I took a pull from my beer, swallowed and asked, "And you are?"

g a shit- "Dixon Jones. A&R. Black Fat Records," he answered.

Oh.

highly Wow.

I'd heard of Black Fat Records, even though they hadn't been very long. They were small and they were choosy. They found good they took good care of them and they had a killer marketing department.

If I'd ever wanted The Gypsies to be signed, it would be with a like Black Fat Records.

was my "Enjoying the show?" I asked like I didn't care, which I didn't really.

ie Rock But then again, I did.

What the eff was wrong with me?

opened Dixon Jones smiled at me. It was genuine and it threw me.

"You write the new material?" he asked, and this threw me too.

ho still I shook my head. "That's Buzz, my bass player. He writes the music. Leo, my rhythm guitar. He writes the lyrics."

ght-blue "Those songs were tight. It's good to see you branching out of c
Dixon commented, and this threw me most of all.

ing his "You catch a gig before?" I asked, doing my damndest to stay out

calm.

“Anytime I’m in Denver, The Gypsies are playing, I come,”
Vance, replied.

Oh my Lord!

“So why haven’t you ever met my girl here?” Monk pushed
clapped Dixon on the back. It gave me the creepy-crawlies to be refer
as Monk’s girl, so much so, even though I tried to stop it, my lip curle

Dixon looked down his nose at Monk and replied, “Except when
around playing The Palladium. I usually avoid The Palladium.”

Monk got a little pale and stepped back.

I couldn’t help myself. I smirked at Dixon Jones. All of a sudden,
n outfit him.

“Couldn’t miss tonight,” he said, lifting a copy of *USA Today* I
it. Not noticed he was carrying. “Rock ‘n’ roll in the face of certain danger. I
it’d be good but shit. Gotta tell you, Stella, you and your boys de
beyond expectation. Your set list is inspired.”

Then Dixon snapped the paper open and turned a page to face me.

On the page was a grainy photo of me and Mace making out la
onstage. I didn’t look at the caption. I was too busy staring at the pho
course, had never seen myself kissing Mace (or anyone) and I was
ic. And fascinated.

The photo was probably taken by a cell phone camera. It didn
overs,” great, but it didn’t look bad either. In fact, the way I was bent over
arm, the drums in the background, Mace’s fist wrapped around the
twardly my guitar, my hands clutching his broad shoulders, our lips locked, it

hot.

Dixon *Smokin' hot.*

Shitsofuckit!

“Holy crap,” Indy whispered.

in and “*USA Today?*” Jet breathed.

erred to “I didn’t see that one,” Daisy muttered.

l. “Great fuckin’ picture,” Ally observed.

they’re I took a step forward, my hand coming out to take the paper, but I
make it. Vance got there before me, tagged the paper and took a step b

I liked “You need to focus on the show,” Vance said to me, folding the
and tucking it under his arm.

hadn’t I stared at him, shocked. So did Dixon Jones. The Rock Chicks all
at each other and they did it knowingly.

figured Not good.

delivered Something was up.

I turned to Vance. “What are you? My manager?”

st night Vance looked at his watch then back to me. “For the next two n
to. I, of yeah.”

weirdly “Are not,” I snapped.

“Focus, Stella,” Vance shot back.

it’s look “We need to talk,” Hector said to Dixon, and I turned angry, c
Mace’s eyes to Hector.

neck of Dixon was also looking confused.

looked I looked back at Hector and read his intent.

Oh no.

This was *not* going to happen!

“Don’t talk to him,” I said to Dixon.

Now Dixon was looking at me and he still appeared confused.

The Rock Chicks huddled closer except Shirleen. She approached me.

“Yeah, Hector and me and you, we *all* got to talk,” Shirleen
Dixon.

I didn’t Oh dear.

ack. This was getting worse.

e paper “And me!” Daisy pressed forward.

Oh no!

looked Even worse!

“No!” I shouted, trying to move, but for some reason Ally and A
me in a death grip.

Dixon swung his gaze from me to Daisy to Shirleen.

“Who’re you?” he asked Shirleen.

ninutes, He asked Shirleen, but Daisy answered.

“Managers. We *all* manage The Gypsies. Just like any real good, s
hot rock band, they’re a handful, *comprende?*”

“They’re not my managers,” I told Dixon.

onfused Shirleen had her fingers curled around Dixon’s upper arm and
leading him to the door. She leaned in toward his ear and lied, “She says
three times a day.”

I looked to the ceiling and silently said a short, pointed prayer.

My prayer went ignored, and with a bemused glance over his shoulder, Dixon Jones disappeared behind the door.

I turned woodenly and looked at Ally. “What just happened?”

“Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies,” Ally replied.

Dixon. My eyes narrowed and I could actually feel my pulse beating said to throat.

Then I shouted, “What the eff does that mean?”

“That means,” Jet materialized in front of me, “you have to trust us

This was not good.

Not good at all.

They were up to something.

And I was pretty certain I knew what it was *and* I didn’t like it.

ava had I shook my head at Jet. “Not with a scout I don’t.”

“Trust us,” Indy said, coming to stand by Jet.

Eff that!

“You all are fucking nuts. Everyone is fucking nuts! The world is : nuts!” I yelled just as the door opened and Mace walked in.

omokin’ Completely oblivious to my tantrum, Mace looked at me with still eyes and announced, “Time for your last set. And Stella, if there fuckin’ song about death or guns, *I’m* gonna shoot you.”

nd was Effing...bloody...hell.

ays that



WE WERE scorching through our gig-ending “Ghostriders” when it hap

I’d managed to put everything to the back of my head and the las

older at possible, was better than the first three. We'd started the set easing the into the vibe by doing America's "Ventura Highway." We could b house down with chest-thumping rock 'n' roll, but between Floyd, Bu and me, we could also sing a powerful harmony, and even if I said so our "Ventura Highway" was sweet.

in my

We followed that with two more of Buzz and Leo's new songs. introduced the songs, the crowd shouted their approval so loud, they the first thirty seconds of the first song because their cheers were dr out the music.

I got a warm fuzzy feeling watching the crowd's approval was Buzz and Leo. My two boys glanced at each other, their faces an mixture of the panic and thrill I'd been feeling all day. But, with could see the thrill part was definitely winning.

Then we were done messing around. It was time to rock and we sl into the theme of the night (Mace was just going to have to shoot m REO Speedwagon's "Ridin' the Storm Out," Molly Hatchett's "Flirti Disaster," The Doobie Brothers' "Dangerous" and finally "Ghostriders fucking We were closing out the song. The crowd knew it and they were fr hands up in the air, bodies swaying, catcalls piercing the air.

l angry

And it was then, riding the high of a great show, heart racing e's one pumping (thankfully), skin tingling, lips in a permanent happy grin him.

A scruffy man wearing a beat-up army jacket over a T-shirt, hair hands in the pockets of his jacket, he was making his way with determ pened. toward Jet.

it set, if

Through my buzz, two things hit me.

crowd It was a warm end of May evening and jackets weren't allowed.

turn the Effing Monk!

zz, Leo Duke was again working the front of the stage, but he didn't see
myself, and he had his back to me so I couldn't catch his eye.

When I There were Hot Bunch men in range. In fact, the guy pushed r
missed Vance, who was looking in the opposite direction.

owning Like last night, Lee was on the stage with the band. I kept play
twisted my torso to look at Lee. I tried to catch his eye but he was c
not paying attention to me, his eyes were scanning the crowd.

sh over Getting desperate, I twisted back around and tried to get \
obvious attention, but for some reason, he turned and pushed in the other di
them, I away from the Rock Chicks.

id back Eff it, there was nothing for it.

e) with My eyes glued on the guy, I went to the mic and tried to offer a v
n' withby saying "Jet..." but just as I uttered her name, I watched in horr
;" pocket of people opened behind Jet.

enzied, The guy had easy access.

Effing, holy hell!

, blood He made it to Jet in a couple of steps, his hand started to come ou
, I sawpocket and it was then I freaked.

"Jet!" I screamed into the mic.

a mess, Her eyes were already on me, but there was no time to warn her, t
inationwas right behind her.

I whipped the guitar off, dropped it to the stage with a loud crash
strings, ran to the edge and executed a stage dive, jumping off and aim

body at the bad guy.

I vaguely heard the crowd give a shout of approval at my stage d
the guy as I hit the guy, full body.

“What the—?” he shouted, caught unaware, with one hand out, or
ight by still in his jacket. His free arm went around me. He staggered w
weight hit him, one, two, three steps, and then we both went down,
ing but his back, me on top.

Unfortunately, we careened into others and they went down with u
n alert,

It was all arms and legs and bodies and what seemed like a milli
Vance’s most of them kicking, as we rolled into others and took them all down.

I stayed focused and struggled with the guy, trying to get a firm l
his wrists. He was strong and he was wiry, and even though not
young, he still was a guy so I found this a difficult task.

I heard Floyd’s voice asking for calm but I ignored it, too busy g
or as a and wrestling with the bad guy.

“Jesus, girl, what the fuck’s the matter with you?” he asked,
defense, wrestling back and also grunting.

For some reason I shouted, “You’re wearing a jacket!”

“So?” he shouted back.

“Jackets...are...not...allowed!” I yelled right before an arm sliced
my waist and lifted me clean off him.

I struggled, twisting around to see Vance had hold of me. He set
my feet in front of his body, but he kept me close with the arm aro
waist.
1 of the

Since he was a member of the Hot Bunch, I quit struggling, pointe
ing my

guy still on the floor and shouted, “*Get him!*”

ive just Vance’s eyebrows went up and he asked, “Get who?”

“The guy with the jacket,” I yelled.

ie hand Vance’s gaze shifted to the guy on the floor and mine went with i
ien my Luke was now there. Hand extended to the guy, Luke pulled him to his

him on “You okay, Ray?” Luke asked, and my body froze.

S. “She’s fuckin’ loco,” Ray answered, brushing off his jean
straightening his jacket, his eyes on me.

on feet, I stared, noting distractedly the Rock Chicks had arrived, and with
goodly number of the crowd. All were pressing in and watching.

hold on “You know him?” I asked Luke.

exactly “He’s my dad,” Jet answered.

,runting Oh dear.

“Oh,” I mumbled, feeling stupid.

on the “You okay, Dad?” Jet asked, moving toward him.

“Yeah, but it’s a miracle,” he replied to Jet and then glared

“What’s the matter with you? You jumped on me! From the stage!”

I felt the need to defend myself. “You’re wearing a jacket!”

around “What’s the fuckin’ deal with the jacket?” Ray snapped at Luke, w
his eyes on Vance behind me and his mouth cocked in a sexy half-grin

me on Then Luke’s eyes dropped to mine. “Since Ray’s not likely to mu
and my own daughter, or any of her friends, we figured it was okay to let him
his jacket.”

d at the “Oh,” I repeated and looked at Ray. “Um, sorry about that,” I mutt

“You’re loco,” Ray told me.

I bit my lip and sliced an apologetic look to Jet who, thankfully, appeared to be fighting a grin.

“Can’t be too safe,” Vance said from behind me, but I could swear I saw his feet. It sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

I twisted in his arm and watched his mouth twitch.

“Shitsofuckit!”

My eyes caught on Shirleen and Daisy, who were sandwiching them against Jones, all of them on the edge of the crowd, all of them looking at Shirleen and Daisy. Shirleen and Daisy were smiling. Dixon Jones again looked confused.

My effing stupid shitty luck!

“I’m not usually like this,” I told Dixon.

Dixon’s body lurched like he was in a trance and my words snapped out of it.

I noticed the band pushing in close, Vance’s arm dropped from my waist and I took a step away.

“Holy shit, Stella Bella. We’re calling you Ramba from now on! Wo-man!” Pong yelled.

“Guess we don’t need Mace as muscle anymore,” Leo noted. “Stella.”

“Next time, pick a girl to jump on,” Hugo advised.

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

“One thing you can say, Stella Gunn,” Dixon remarked, now his eyes were twitching. “You’re pure fuckin’ rock ’n’ roll.”

I didn't know if that was good or bad.

appeared Since pure rock 'n' roll, to me, was a positive thing, I decided to treat it as good.

near he I tossed my hair and smiled at him.

His eyes shifted to my hair and watched it move then they came to mine and he lost the fight with his smile and it went wide.

"Show's over," Mace, all of a sudden there, announced.

Dixon "Fuckin' A, but *what* a show!" Tex boomed, also all of a sudden at me. He got close to me and dropped a huge hand to the top of my head. "God are *the shit!* You can burn through Molly Hatchett *and* take care of business. Fuckin' A!" he repeated, taking his hand from my head and, no longer boomed, "God *damn!*" Then, obviously in the throes of a Rock Moment, he turned to the crowd and shouted, "Do we love The Gypsies?"

ed him The crowd, mostly watching in bewilderment (I'd never done a stage to end a show so they were uncertain at the state of affairs), gave a cheer around.

You the "Fuck that!" Tex roared, throwing his arm up to punch the air. "Do we love *The Gypsies?*"

We got Catching on, the crowd cheered back, stronger now. There was scattered applause that started to grow, then grow some more. A few seconds "Yippee kay yay," and then the chants of "Gypsies" began.

Oh dear.

mouth "Awesome," Pong breathed from beside me, his eyes moving over the chanting crowd.

Mace's hand tagged mine. I looked up at him and knew in an instant

was done.

ake that “We’re outta here,” he declared, proving me right, and started showing way through the crowd, pulling me along with him.

As we went, people pressed in. Wound up by the show, its bizarre and Tex, they were in a tizzy. So much so, I felt hands on me. People grabbing at my T-shirt, trying to tag my belt loops. I felt fingers slide through my hair and I watched the same thing happening to Mace.

They were closing in, caught in the moment, making it hard for Mace to shove his way through.

I felt fear begin to seize me, scared silly at a new threat. My fans, by the show, reading the papers, knowing the danger, wound up by the thought of that pushing them to the brink. I feared they’d tear us to shreds.

Mace stopped. He turned, bent, put his shoulder in my belly and was going up. I ended bent double over his shoulder, his arm wrapped around the backs of my thighs. Using his other arm and shoulder to push through the crowd, people went flying as I saw the flash of cameras one right after the other.

“Do we
Beautiful.

I wondered if those pictures would make front page too.

shouted Luke, Lee, Vance, Hector, Eddie and Duke all moved in to flank Mace didn’t stop until we hit the backstage door. With my head I watched the Hot Bunch close ranks behind us, stopping the crowd before the door closed behind Mace and me.

That was how we made our dramatic exit.

stant he Mace put me down in front of the back door to the club and showed

open. Darius materialized from the shadows, did a chin lift, a scan of the
room, and vaporized into the shadows again.

Mace pushed me in the passenger seat of one of the four black Ex
ending parked in the alley. He got in the driver's side and we took off.
I held myself stiff, wondering at his mood, which, figuring that
Mace, was probably not happy.

I glanced to the side and saw he was smiling full on, white teeth and
"Why are you smiling?" I asked.

He looked at me then back at the road, his smile not wavering.
Then he answered, "I've decided I like your set list, Kitten."
"You do?"

"Yeah," he said then expanded on his answer. "Not one fuckin' sc
played tonight had anything to do with the word 'black.'"
"Shitsofuckit!"
"I totally forgot!"

us, and
lifted, I
d, right

loved it

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Shitsofuckit!

I totally forgot!

THIRTEEN



YOU WANT IN HERE?

Stella

The minute we got back to my place, Mace took Juno out for a bathroom break.

I took the fastest shower in history.

I did *not* need to be naked with Mace in the house.

Further, Mace and I needed to talk.

It was time. No more effing around.

It was three o'clock in the morning and I was exhausted, coasting from the high of the gig, not to mention my ridiculous gig-stage dive, a memory which I knew would be cringe-worthy for the rest of my effing life.

But Mace and I still needed to talk and we were going to do it.

I jumped out of the shower and toweled down. I wrapped the towel around my hair, put on my robe and hightailed it out of the bathroom just as I heard Juno and Mace return.

Mace was activating the alarm when I left the bathroom. I ignored it and moved quickly toward my dresser, seeing to my priorities, as in my dressing. I had a pair of sky-blue lace hipsters in my hand when I heard

approach. I was about to bend over and put them on when I saw h
come around me. He snatched the panties from my fingers and tosse
on my chair.

I whirled around. “What are you doing?”

I didn’t need to ask. I knew what he was doing.

He grinned, his hand coming up to yank the towel from my hair.

I planted my hands on my hips and tossed my head to get my hai
my face as he threw the towel in the direction of my panties.

throom “Mace, what are you doing?” I repeated.

“Gonna fuck you, babe.”

Oh dear.

He had that look about him. That look I liked. That look that tur
on.

That look that said he was, indeed, gonna fuck me.

ting on Nope.

-ending Unh-unh.

rest of No way.

I stood my ground, hands on hips.

“No, you’re not. We have to talk. We have a lot of talking to
e towel we’re going to do it. Now.”

ust as I Mace moved around me and I had to pivot to stay facing him.

ed him Suddenly, he stopped, and then started walking forward. As I was
getting of him, I had no choice but to walk back.

ard him I put a hand to his chest. “Stop. Listen to me—”

is hand He didn't stop and he was clearly not listening to me.

id them His hands came to my waist right before I would have fallen down stairs. He lifted me and I was forced to throw my arms around his shoulders.

“Seriously, Mace. This isn't gonna happen. I'm too tired and we have a lot to talk about. We need to talk about it.”

“Seriously, Kitten. This is gonna happen. We can talk later,” he replied and put me on my feet beside the bed.

I did the hands on hips thing again.

“You're beginning to piss me off,” I informed him.

He put a hand in my belly and gave me a shove, gentle enough not to hurt, rough enough to send me flying.

ned me I bounced on the bed and tried to whirl, but he got hold of my ankles and twisted me back. Then he pulled my legs wide and came down on top of me, his hips sliding between my legs, his jeans rubbing against the inside of my thighs.

I had to admit, I liked that.

Like, a lot.

“Mace!” I shouted.

do and His mouth came to my neck as his hands started moving on my shoulders. They felt nice, warm and strong.

Effing hell!

in front “You gonna yell through this or what?” he asked my neck.

“Yes,” I snapped.

“That'll be new,” he muttered, and then I felt his tongue behind my neck.

That felt nice too.

own the *Hello? Inner Mace Slut? Take a hike! We have talking to do. We*
lders. *get our head together. We have to get our life back into our control, m*
have a reminded me.

I turned my head to disengage Mace's mouth from my neck.

eturned "Honestly, Mace—" I started to say, but he lifted his head and lo
my eyes as his fingers slid into the wet hair on either side of my face.

I saw his eyes were alert, energized, aroused.

It was then I knew he was gonna fuck me.

ot to be I knew this because I wanted him to fuck me.

Like, a lot.

des and Oh screw it.

of me,

s of my JUST FOR YOUR INFORMATION, I will mention that I could swear he lool
he was about ready to laugh right before I lifted my head to kiss him.

"BABE."

When I heard Mace's voice, I opened my eyes and stared at the
y body. was light outside, and I suspected it was late morning.

I felt delicious, cozy and relaxed. I could feel Mace's hard body
me, his arm around my waist, his face in my hair.

I loved waking up to a bed warm with Mace. It was one of the
hundred, twenty-five thousand things I missed about him.

7 ear. Shitsofuckit!

I'd done it again. I'd had sex with Mace. I'd let him spend the nig

me. I'd even let him (mostly) move in with me!

have to What was I doing?

ly brain Mace's arm tightened and his body got closer.

"Stella, wake up." I felt his deep voice rumble against the back neck making goose bumps rise along my skin.

oked in "I'm awake," I told him.

His arm tightened further, wrapping around my belly, and he kissed my neck.

"It's late. Sorry to wake you, but I got shit to do."

I thought this was good. Mace having shit to do meant I'd have time to think, to plan, to get my head together.

"Okay," I replied.

ked like He nuzzled my hair with his nose, but other than that, he didn't move. When his not moving lasted more than a few seconds, I called, "Mace?"

"Yeah?"

wall. It "You have shit to do," I reminded him.

"Yeah," he answered, but still didn't move.

behind "Well, are you gonna do it?" I asked.

"I thought you wanted to talk."

e seven Oh, right.

I wanted to talk.

This was true, I wanted to talk.

ght with And something about him reminding me I wanted to talk and give

that opportunity, even though he had “shit to do,” made me feel ever and more relaxed.

However, in the cold light of day and waking up in bed with warmth of my I forgot what I wanted to talk about.

I was searching my foggy brain for clues as to what I wanted to talk when Mace’s arm moved, his hand splayed on my midriff, his body slid and he pushed me to my back.

He leaned in, the front of his body pressed against my side. He grabbed his elbow and looked down at me. His green eyes were warm and alert, remembered again how much I liked the look of Mace first thing time to morning.

As I looked into his eyes, my brain still foggy, still feeling comfortable relaxed, my thoughts on Mace’s eyes (then they careened off in the direction of about seven thousand of the seven hundred, twenty-five thousand), “Erm, things about Mace I liked), he looked into mine. This lasted for a brief turned into two then three, then his mouth moved and he looked like he was fighting a smile.

“Kitten, I don’t have all day,” he told me, and my head jerked, pulled out of my Mace Happy Thoughts Reverie.

Shit!

Okay.

Concentrate.

The Talk with Mace...

It came to me.

“You’re screwing with my head,” I informed him.

1 cozier There was no doubt about it and I had the last five minutes as ev
He was definitely screwing with my head.

1 Mace, His reply was instantaneous. “Yeah. And?”

I blinked with surprise at his ready answer.

k about Then I stared.

id away He didn’t even try to deny it.

ot up on All fogginess left me and my mind became clear. I did an ab
rt and I sitting position, dislodging his body and twisted to face him.

; in the “Well, stop doing it!” I demanded.

azy and He did an ab curl too. His hands came to my waist and he lifted r
irection his body. Then he yanked my knees to bent so I was straddling him
knees came up, caging me in as his arms wrapped around me.

d other I pushed against his bare chest and pressed into the bed with my kr

eat that This didn’t work.

he was “Mace, let me up.”

He didn’t let me up.

ling me “Stella, I got about ten minutes then I gotta get going. You got m
want to say?”

I quit trying to get away, stunned at his arrogance and annoyed
was ignoring my wishes (yet again) and snapped, “Hell yes!”

“Then say it.”

“All right. I’ll say it. Or, I should say, I’ll *repeat* it. I want you t
out. I want this to be over, whatever this is, right effing now. I want
quit screwing with my head. And I want you to stop interfering w

idence.band.”

“No.”

I waited for him to say more, but apparently that was it.

“No?” I asked.

“No,” he repeated, like that was that, then he went on. “That all yo

I was back to my stunned, annoyed staring.

curl to I just could *not* believe him.

He waited then leaned up to touch his mouth to mine and made a r
shift me off his body as if our talk was over, all was hunky dory. I
ne overgoing to exit the bed and get on with the rest of his day.

and his Erm...no.

We were not done.

ees. I put my hands to his shoulders and pressed down, locking my th
his hips.

“Hang on a second,” I said.

Mace stilled and started to look impatient.

ore you Amused, but impatient.

“Stella, in case you forgot, I got a bad guy to catch.”

that he “I know that, but we aren’t done talking.”

“If that’s what you want to talk about then we are.”

“We aren’t!”

o move “We are.”

you to “Dammit, Mace!”

with my His hands on my waist got tighter and his face came closer and th

had lost its amusement and was now very serious.

“This is how it’s gonna go down,” Mace stated, his voice firm.

Effing hell.

I don’t think I want to know how it’s gonna go down, my brain says you got?” kind of scared.

I don’t either, I told my brain.

“You’re obviously gonna fight it and that’s fine, I already told you I’m happy to take you on. We both know where we stand with this. We’re not moving over old ground. You gotta know, though, that this kind of fight, there are no rules. If it means I gotta fuck with your head then I’m gonna fuck your head. You don’t like it, tough.”

Did I say he was unbelievable?

In case I didn’t, he was just *unbelievable!*

“I don’t like it,” I returned. “As I already told you, I’m not going back again. Not with you.”

“You’re already there,” he informed me.

“I am not!” I snapped back.

The amusement returned. “Babe, you’re sitting naked in my lap this morning after a night where you begged to suck my—”

I put a hand over his mouth to stop his words and drowned out his muffled noise with a sharp, angry scream that came from the back of my throat.

I thought back and I *had* begged, and then he’d let me and it was not the fault of both of us.

That face Shit, I was so weak!

I took my hand from his mouth, shut my eyes tight, lifted my arms and grabbed my hair in both of my fists.

This, I decided, was not going my way.

ounded At all.

And it was all my fault.

Then it hit me, something else we had to talk about.

ou I'm I dropped my arms, opened my eyes and looked right into his.

e goin' He was full on amused now.

e aren't I ignored his amusement.

ck with “Tell me about yesterday morning in the kitchen,” I said quietly.

The amusement disappeared instantly.

Oh dear.

ig there “What about it?” he asked, his voice was guarded.

“You know,” I answered, my voice still soft.

His hands still at my waist, he made to move again, but I did the pressing-on-shoulders, thighs-locking-on-hips move again and he stilled.

on the His eyes came back to mine and now *they* were guarded. No amusement, no determination, no impatience, nothing.

out the Blank.

of my Hidden.

He didn't say a word.

ice, for And that's when I knew.

Mace was going to do whatever he had to do to win me.

ms and Except what would actually work.

“I get it,” I whispered.

I watched his eyes flash with anger.

“I don’t think you do,” he replied.

“No, you’re right. I don’t. And you aren’t gonna give it to me,” I remember knowing he wasn’t going to share. Knowing he was willing to take, wasn’t willing to give. This hurt. It shouldn’t hurt. I didn’t want it to hurt, but it was a kick to the gut all the same.

Then I said softly, “Same shit, Mace. Just a year later.”

It was my turn to try to get away, but he twisted and we ended with my back. He was on top of me and we were face-to-face.

“You think you got it figured out, Kitten, but you don’t. Bottom lip aren’t ready for it,” he told me.

I probably wasn’t ready for it, if the look in his eyes yesterday morning was anything to go by.

hands- But I had to know. I knew I shouldn’t want to, shouldn’t need to
ed. had to.

o warm “And you get to decide when I’m ready?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“And when’s that gonna be?”

“I’ll tell you when it’s not gonna be. It’s not gonna be when you’re trying to push me away because you still don’t trust me,” he returned.

“So you get to screw with my head, fuck with my life, take what I want and you give me nothing?”

“You got it,” he answered, totally calm.

He could not be serious.

“I don’t *believe* you. You’re just...*unbelievable*,” I spat my thought out loud.

His hand traveled down my arm, locked around my wrist and pulled me forward. When he had it between us, his hand shifted, pressing mine flat against his chest. I felt his beating heart.

“You want in here?” he murmured, his eyes intense, so intense I felt my gut clench with fear.

This was a fear I didn’t understand. It wasn’t even logical, but it felt like I’d been there before. It was the same fear as yesterday morning, when I’d been alone and uncontrollable.

“No,” I lied. Except for the ability to play my music, being in his arms was the only thing I’d ever wanted in my whole effing life.

He shook his head. “Until that answer changes, babe, you get what you want. I’ll be willin’ to give you. My protection, my attention and my cock.”

I gasped at his frankness and my body went solid with fury.

“Unbelievable,” I hissed.

“When the time comes where you give me somethin’ without me, where you give me a piece of you without me having to take it, then I’ll give you a piece of me.”

“That time’s never going to come,” I snapped back, though I wanted a piece of him. I wanted more than a piece of him. I wanted all of him. I wanted a chance to help him battle those demons. In fact, I wanted the chance to take them on all on my own if it meant Mace wouldn’t have to.

anymore.

I knew it, I hated myself for my weakness, but it was the truth.

earlier I might not be able to be honest with him, but I had to be honest with myself, or at least this once.

and it up. “It’ll come,” he promised, breaking me out of my thoughts.

inst his I glared at him to hide the emotional tumult in my head.

He calmly returned my glare.

felt my “Don’t you have shit to do?” I reminded him, my voice sharp.

I was done.

scared Done, done, *done!*

ge and He kept watching me for a few beats then his gaze went soft. Inside his heart moving away from me, his head came down and his face disappeared from my neck.

hat I’m I pushed at his shoulders. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t wanna leave it this way.”

“There’s no other way to leave it,” I informed him, and his face came back to my neck.

avin’ He rolled off me to his side, taking me with him, his arms around me. Both hands slid up my back, he pressed the area between my shoulder blades so my torso was tight against his and he threw a thigh over mine, pinning me.

anted a I didn’t fight this. I was beginning to learn (belatedly) that fighting physically was detrimental to my abilities to fight him emotionally.

. I even One of his hands tangled in my hair, giving it a gentle tug so my head tilted back. He dipped his chin down to look at me.

chance
e them

Then he said, "All right, Stella, I'll give you one."

Uh-oh.

st with *One? One what?* my brain asked.

"One what?" I said out loud.

"A piece of me."

Oh dear.

He kept talking. "The worst part of breaking up with you was you
me walk away."

My breath packed up and took a shuttle flight to the moon.

"What?" I whispered.

stead of "It was so good between us, I didn't think in a million fuckin' year
l in my let me walk away," Mace went on.

"What?" I asked. Yes, again!

His arms got tighter, his hand fisted gently in my hair, right be
said, "It was a test."

me out His words hit me like blows.

My body froze rigid then I shouted, "*What?*"

nd me. "You failed," he continued.

: blades Effing hell. Effing hell. Effing bloody *hell*.

ng me. "You...are...joking," I breathed, carefully enunciating each word.

ng him "Babe, I hope you get that I'm prepared to fight for you, but I gott
y head you'll fight for me too. This shit goes both ways. This doesn't end
know you won't walk away, but also you won't let me walk away.
again."

What he was saying wasn't quite penetrating my brain.

"What you're telling me," my voice was both quiet and weirdly soft
"is that if I'd asked you back, you would have come?"

The fingers of his hand not in my hair started to stroke my spine.

"I needed you to make a statement, Kitten," he said softly. "You did
All of a sudden, I felt like crying.

I fought it and persevered at trying to understand what he was telling
1 lettin'

"What you're saying is you didn't break up with me because you
to break up with me. What you're saying is you broke up with me
me?"

"Yeah," he replied.
s you'd

Simple as that.

Yeah.

A year of heartache and a simple "yeah."
fore he

It all boiled down to that.

Tears filled my eyes. I didn't want them to, but I didn't fight them.
I was way beyond fighting. I wasn't sure what I was feeling. I just knew
of it was good.

"Okay," I started, my voice now croaky and his hand left my hair
other hand stopped stroking my spine and his arms got tight. "I just
be sure I have this straight. You came into my life, gave me the
a know something good I had outside of music and took it away as a test?"

"Kitten—"
until I

. Never

What he said and what it meant finally penetrated my brain.

“You jerk,” I whispered.

cratchy, His arms grew tighter. “Stella, listen to me—”

“You jerk,” I repeated, my voice breaking, the tears sliding out of my eyes. I didn’t even try to control them because I knew I couldn’t
dn’t.” “I didn’t know how you felt. You didn’t tell me—” he started.

“You didn’t ask,” I reminded him.

ng me. “Babe, if I’d have asked, would you have told me?”

wanted “Yes,” I said immediately and watched his head jerk back in surpr
to test I ignored it and went on, “I would have told you. Back then I wou
given you anything.”

He watched my face as if assessing my honesty then his hand w
His fingers sifting into my hair, he tilted his head back and shoved r
into his throat.

“Christ, Stella,” he said, but it sounded more like a groan.

“Mace, next time you feel like ‘giving me one,’ you should recons
advised. My voice had turned cold, my eyes had dried and I knew, sor
either, my heart had gone hard. “Now, let me go.”
w none

I meant the words with a double meaning.

air, his Of course, he didn’t let me go.

want to Instead, he muttered, “I fucked up.”

he first He was right about that.

“Yes, you did. Now let me go.”

“I fucked up,” he repeated, then used my hair to pull my face ou
throat and his head tilted down to look at me. “Kitten, I’m sor

whispered.

I knew it took a lot for him to say that.

the sides I knew it.

But it hurt so much I didn't care.

"I'm sure you are. And I'm just as sure that I don't give a fuck," I

But it sounded good, it sounded real, and I watched him wince as I
the point. I knew that seeing his wince should register somewhere
ise, but didn't.

ld have "Now let me go."

He still didn't let me go. Instead, he said, "You need to get it."

rent up. "Oh, I get it," I told him, even though I didn't and I never would.

ny face "No, babe, you don't. Yesterday morning—"

I shook my head.

"Oh no you don't," I snapped.

sider," I He was *not* going to fuck with my head anymore. He didn't want t
nehow, until he got his piece of me, so be it. I was keeping all my piece
myself.

Fuck that!

His arms got so tight they made it hard for me to breathe and I wat
his face morphed from soft remorse to the beginnings of hard anger.

"Listen to me," he growled.

"We're done talking," I interrupted him. "I don't want to talk ar
t of hisGo find the bad guy, Mace, so this can be over."

ry," he "You need to understand where I'm coming from," he told me.

“I don’t care where you’re coming from,” I shot back.

Morph complete, Mace was straight out angry. “Stella, I’m warni you got one shot at this. You throw it back in my face, you won’t get one.”

lied. Hard-hearted or not, that scared the snot out of me.

[scored Regardless of the fear, self-preservation took firm hold and answe
, but it me. “I’ll take that chance.”

His face stayed angry, but I could swear I saw pain flash in hi sharp and fierce. The sight of it made bile climb up my throat, but I chance to take back my words.

He let me go.

Then he exited the bed.

The loss of his body felt like a cold slap.

I sat up and pulled the sheets around me as he walked to his jea body was taut, his movements jerky. It didn’t take a body language ex
o share know he was pissed.

s all to And what was even scarier, maybe even hurt.

Shitsofuckit!

ched as Now what had I done?

I felt my heart start racing and swallowed the bile in my throat.

I opened my mouth to call to him when the buzzer went.

ymore. “Jesus,” he muttered.

He yanked on his jeans and walked to the alarm panel.

“Mace,” I called, but it came out more quiet than a whisper and he

hear me.

n' you, Mace hit the button on the alarm panel.

another Ally's face filled the video screen and Mace said, "Yeah?"

"Open up!" Ally demanded. "Rock Chicks!"

He took his finger from the button, muttered, "Jesus," again and pressed for another button, buzzing them up.

He unlocked the doors, turned to me and said, "I'll take the dog out of his eyes, Then he went to his bag, pulled out a navy-blue Henley, yanked it had no was sitting on the platform, pulling on his boots when the Rock stormed the door. Ally, Indy, Jet, Roxie, Ava, Daisy, Shirleen, Anne even Jules was there.

"We hit the news!" Ally shouted, holding up a copy of the paper time all of us." Then she snapped her mouth shut and her eyes swung me, to Mace, back to me.

expert to I sat, still frozen, still naked, still in bed, staring at my friends as stood, silent, realizing from the heavy air that they'd interrupted some

"Um, is this a bad time?" Jules finally asked.

In answer, Mace got up, stalked to the leash hanging by the side door and whistled for the strangely-attuned-to-her-human's-emotional-turmoil-thus-silent Juno.

As he did all of this, the Rock Chicks and my eyes followed him.

Mace did one more (very weird) thing before he left.

He yanked the paper out of Ally's hand, ignoring her surprised, and he shoved it under his armpit.

he didn't Then he was gone.

I stared at the closed door.

The Rock Chicks stared at it too.

Slowly, Shirleen turned to me.

“Shirleen’s not thinkin’ good thoughts,” she announced.

then hit “You got *that* right, sister,” Jet muttered.

Effing hell.

t.”

on and

Chicks

ette and

is. “This

ing from

they all

hing.

re of the

optional-

“Hey!”

I stared at the closed door.

The Rock Chicks stared at it too.

Slowly, Shirleen turned to me.

“Shirleen’s not thinkin’ good thoughts,” she announced.

“You got *that* right, sister,” Jet muttered.

Effing hell.

FOURTEEN



MAYBE IN A TOWEL

Stella

I wrapped the sheet around my body and then shuffled on my bottom edge of the bed.

“You okay?” Ally asked.

“I’ll make coffee,” Ava muttered and headed into the kitchen.

My feet hit the floor and I headed toward my robe.

“I think something bad just happened,” I said softly, not certain I to share, but too scared at what I was feeling to keep it inside.

“You think?” Shirleen asked. “Air was so heavy you could cut it knife.”

I looked at her as I struggled to put the robe on over the sheet. Her eyes were sharp but her face was soft and that combo eloquently showed concern.

I felt the tears hit the backs of my eyes again. I pulled breath in through my nose and decided maybe I shouldn’t share.

“What was in the paper?” I asked, changing the subject and dropping the sheet.

“Unh-unh, girl, what just happened?” Daisy was standing, hands

slim, faded denim-covered hips.

I took a moment to peruse Daisy's ensemble, which was faded from head to toe, literally. She was wearing a billed, slouchy, denim hat over her platinum blonde head, pigtails peeking out from under it at the wispy bangs at her forehead. She had on a tight, faded, buttoned up vest, so much cleavage bulging forth from the V-neck that she was forced to leave one button undone, taking the vest from indecent to pornographic. Completing her look, she wore jeans, skintight all the way down to her ankles, and denim-covered, pointed-toe, spike-heeled mules.

I allowed myself another moment to marvel at her ability to pull off this ridiculous outfit as if it was the height of couture before she said, "Well?"

I grabbed my sky-blue lace undies and pulled them on while saying, "I think I just did something stupid."

"More stupid than not just lettin' Mace back into your life with that idiotic rigmarole? Bullets flyin'. Hot Bunch boys puttin' their asses on a line. Threats against all you all..." Shirleen whirled her finger around in all the Rock Chicks. "Still, you all act like getting a booty call from the Hot Bunch was like being tortured. I just don't get it."

"It's hardly a booty call, Shirleen. They get in your head, move in your house, push you around, tell you what to do, so damn bossy." Indy spoke my defense heatedly as I walked toward the kitchen. In fact, Indy's words were so heated it seemed she was having a flashback.

Shirleen put a hand to her chest and reared back. "Oh, is that it? Excuse me! You poor child!" Then she made a snorting sound. "Sheeesh, if one of those boys wanted to push me around, I'd say bring it on. Hell, I'd love it."

for one of 'em to move into my house. They don't even have to do n
denim walk around so I can watch. Maybe in a towel."

cap on Jules looked at me and rolled her eyes.

e back, "You don't understand," Roxie put in.

, denim "Nope. That's right, girl, Shirleen *does not* understand. So what
rced to are we up against now?" Shirleen's eyes moved to me. "You havin' to
mildly orgasms or what?"

he way "Is there such a thing as too many orgasms?" Annette asked b
es. could answer. Even though I barely knew her and she'd never beer
off this house in her life, she was opening and closing my cupboard doors, se
rapped, for I didn't know what.

ying, "I "No, child, that's the point," Shirleen replied with barely res
patience.

out this "For what it's worth," Annette went on, giving up on her sear
on the turning to the group. "I'm with Shirleen on this one. Jason ain't no sl
to take the orgasm department but we got a deal, him and me. It's like those li
one of make with movie stars. If, say, you got a chance at The Rock, you cou
it without getting in trouble with your partner. Me and Jason got a l
the Hot Bunch, Jason, the Rock Chicks."

to your Everyone went silent and stared at Annette.

rang to All except Shirleen.

; words She said, "Mm, girl, you got good taste. That Dwayne Johnson
t? Well shit-hot black man."

-it, any "He's Samoan," Annette informed Shirleen.

I'd pay "That boy is black," Shirleen shot back.

ne. Just “Half and half,” Annette, clearly a bevy of The Rock Information.
on.

“I want the black half,” Shirleen returned.

“Oh my God, can we stop talking about The Rock?” Jet yelled.

trauma “I don’t mind a short conversational switch to The Rock,” Daisy
o many “Have you seen *Walking Tall*?”

“Yeah, about seven thousand times,” Annette replied.

efore I “I prefer *Faster*.” Shirleen shared her opinion. “There was no sex
to my which was a minus. But the role required two hours of him bein’ l
arching Him bein’ broody for two hours is a definite plus.”

strained “I made a DVD of half an hour continuous loop of him fighti
Diesel over and over and over again in *Fast Five*,” Annette shared
wanna come over and watch it? I’ll make popcorn.”

ch and “Oowee, Vin Diesel,” Shirleen breathed.

ouch in “I am *so there*,” Daisy stated.

ists you “Count me in,” Shirleen said after recovering from visions of half
ld take continuous loop Johnson vs. Diesel action.
ist, me,

I sat on the edge of a platform, fell to my back and stared at the ceiling.

Were we really talking about The Rock?

He was, of course, hot, but I had other, slightly more important things
is one my mind.

Ally’s face filled my vision.

“You with us, Stella?” she asked.

“No,” I replied.

n, went “Okay, maybe we should quit talking about The Rock,” I heard S
give in.

My eyes moved to Ally. She was on her hands, leaning over me.

“What was in the paper?” I asked.

sy said. Her head came up and she looked over her shoulder. There was
noise made by one of the Rock Chicks. Which one I didn’t know.

Ally moved out of my eyesight but sat down beside me as I lifte
scene, sitting position.

broody. Everyone was again silent.

Oh dear.

ng Vin Finally, Daisy answered, “Well, the whole thing is out. Indy and I
l. “You and Eddie, Roxie and Hank, Jules and Vance, Luke and Ava. So
talked. I don’t know how they flew under the radar this long, but it’s o
The whole thing. There’s a three-piece exposé about the whole Rock
on Hot Bunch experience. Today’s piece was the first one. They did Ir
Lee, Jet and Eddie. They’re gonna follow you and Mace as it goes alor
an hour

I stared at her.

ling. She caught my stare and went on, trying to make me feel bett
failing). “If it’s any comfort, sugar, they got a great picture of Mace c
you out of the club last night. You can’t see much of you but your a
ings on Mace sure looks good.”

That was when I said, “You...are...fucking...*shitting*...me.”

“I still wanna know who spilled,” Ava noted, clearly not recogniz
immense freakout.

“I’m guessing Tex,” Ally said.

Shirleen “Uncle Tex wouldn’t talk. I’m thinking Duke. Duke can have a mouth,” Roxie replied.

“No way it’s Duke,” Indy put in.

“Tod?” Jet asked hesitantly.

a weird “Tod’s a definite possibility,” Indy said, crossing her arms.

I was looking from one to the other, thinking that they were focused up to the wrong thing.

“How about May, do you think May might say something?” Ally Jules.

Jules sighed then nodded.

Lee, Jet I’d had enough. “Who cares who did it? We have enough to worry about. Someone wants us all dead. And Mace and I just had a very uncomfortable conversation, very unhappy, where he was about to let me in and instead of getting a piece of him, I threw it in his face. And he told me that was the only chance I was going to get. And, I repeat, I threw it in his face! I don’t care, but I do! I don’t want to care that I might have hurt him by not listening to what he had to say, but I think I did, and furthermore, I don’t care. Effing bloody hell, my life’s a shambles. I don’t know what to do now. What the hell do I do now?”

“He was going to let you in?” Jet asked softly, her eyes on me, intense and they scared me a little bit.

I nodded.

“And you didn’t let him?” Roxie went on.

I tore my eyes away from Jet’s scary-intense ones and nodded at Roxie.

“Sugar, why’d you do a fool thing like that?” Daisy demanded to
hands back to hips.

“I don’t know! People are shooting at me. Mace is effing with m
Linnie’s dead. I’m on the front page of the paper. A journalist I don
know, because I still haven’t seen a paper, is going to follow this fuc
shit between Mace and me. And a scout from a very good label told r
sing on
been coming to my shows. I’m not thinking straight,” I replied.

“Oh, speakin’ of that scout, Dixon Jones is comin’ to the g
y asked
afternoon,” Shirleen put in.

I felt my heart seize as my eyes cut to her.

“What?” I asked.

r about.

“Yeah. He’s into you. *Way* into you. We’re talking deal,” Daisy in
nhappy
stead of me.

he only Deal?

want a Daisy and Shirleen were talking *deal*?

by not With *my* band?

think I They couldn’t talk deal.

o think! Only I could talk deal.

ie were Effing hell.

My eyes moved to Daisy and my breath moved to Idaho.

“What?” I repeated, a word that I was beginning to hate.

“Deal,” Shirleen took over. “Hector knows someone who knows sc
gain at who knows what he’s talkin’ about in the music business. Hector ta
him and he’s got the lingo. This Dixon Jones guy thinks Hector’s i
because, well, he *is* the shit. You shoulda seen him. It was like he did

o know, living.”

I opened my mouth then closed it, then opened it again and said,
y head. Hector a few days ago.”

It’s even “Well, Dixon Jones thinks we’re your managers with Hector bei
ked-up Dog,” Daisy explained.

ne he’s My brain thought about the idea that an A&R man from Bl
Records would think The Blue Moon Gypsies needed *three* manager
gig this two of them being Shirleen and Daisy, and swiftly rejected that
seriously unpalatable and spit it right back out.

“Hector’s a private detective,” I said stupidly, going for denial.

“We know that and you know that, but Dixon Jones thinks he’s a
formed music biz type. We’re lookin’ at studio time,” Shirleen replied.

Oh.

My.

God.

“Studio?” I whispered.

“Yeah, recordin’ studio,” Shirleen told me, like I didn’t know.

“That is fuckin’ *phat!*” Annette shouted.

I turned to Ally. “Do you think, if I walk outside, someone wil
me?”

“It’s a possibility,” Ally told me.

omeone “Then that’s my next move,” I replied and stood up.

lked to “*You can’t get shot!* Dixon is meeting with you and the band aft
the shitgig at The Little Bear,” Daisy screeched.

it for a

It was then my brain thought about the idea of any scout having a r
“I met with my band, who were likely to do something immensely stupid
regurgitated that thought too. Fast.

ng Top “He’s not meeting the band,” I said.

“He is, and you are too,” Shirleen returned.

ack Fat “Okay, you think maybe I can have a moment to process all
rs, withfucked-up with my life before it gets fucked-up even more?” I snaj
idea asShirleen.

“Ain’t no time to process, girl. This is life. Roll with the ch
Shirleen retorted.

shit-hot “Don’t quote REO Speedwagon at me!” I yelled.

“This page is done, sugar, you got to turn the page,” Daisy got clos

“Okay, now you’re quoting Bob Seger,” I clipped. “And you
allowed to do that, either.”

Daisy turned confused eyes to Indy. “I thought I was still quoting I

“Maybe we should stop talking in Rock Speak and help Stella
with this issue with Mace,” Jet cut in.

“Ain’t no time for that, we got a gig to get to,” Shirleen said, as i
l shoot been going to gigs with me for years rather than a few days. “And a
Vance and Matt are waitin’ outside, and Vance ain’t gonna be happ
hang out forever. He was doin’ Jules a favor, bringing us over here. I
he’s got shit to do.”

“No, Shirleen, really, we should deal with—” Jet pushed, but I inte
er your her.

I did this by shouting, so loudly I didn’t hear the door opening an

meeting coming in. “Oh shit! The gig! The equipment’s still at the Palladium and it has to set up the security detail. Effing hell!”

“It’s covered,” Mace’s deep voice announced.

I jumped in surprise and everyone turned their eyes to him.

He unhooked the leash from Juno’s collar and Juno moved to me that is giving head butts and sniffs to Rock Chicks as she passed.

I looked at Mace and knew with a glance he was still pissed.

“What’s covered?” I asked cautiously.

His eyes came to mine. “Everything. Shirleen’s got Roam and helpin’ the band move the equipment. Luke’s in charge of the security and he’s already arranged it with The Little Bear. You’re good,” he took a moment to wonder who the eff Roam and Sniff were, then he finished.

“Now, I’m takin’ a shower.”

Shirleen got a huge grin on her face at the idea of Mace taking a shower. The rest of The Rock Chicks shuffled uncomfortably because they knew shouldn’t be there, but in a one room apartment, there was nowhere to deal with it.

I moved toward Mace as he came at me to get to the bathroom.

I put out my hand, caught his forearm and said, “Mace, we need to

He stopped, looked at my hand then at me, face hard, voice like He said vibrating with anger. “Done talkin’, babe.”

Sharp, hard gut kick.

Effing hell.

My hand dropped. He kept moving, entered the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

1. Mace I stared at the door.
The Rock Chicks stared at the door.
We heard the shower go on.
“Oowee,” Shirleen whispered reverently.
slowly, “Time to go,” Jules announced.
“Stella—” Jet said.
“Time to go.” Indy was staring pointedly at Jet.
Jet stared back.
d Sniff
y detail Indy jerked her head once toward the door.
ld me. I Jet jerked hers back, but this looked like it was to commun
inished, negative.
I got the feeling they were having a conversation without word
shower. didn’t want to know what they were saying.
ew they What I wanted to know was what Mace was thinking.
else to Shitsofuckit!
He was screwing with my head without even *trying* to screw w
head.
talk.” Or maybe I was screwing with my own head.
ow and Juno shoved her nose in my belly, a hard-to-miss doggie
breakfast.
“Okay, baby, breakfast,” I told her, giving her a behind the ears scr
Her tongue lolled out happily.
hut the On that, Ally gave me an arm squeeze. “Later, Stella.”
“See you at the gig,” Ava called on a wave.

“We didn’t get any coffee,” Annette noted. Then, at a look from she gave up on coffee, smiled at me and gave me a peace sign.

“We’ll talk later,” Jet promised on her own wave.

“Knock ’em dead,” Jules said.

“Don’t forget the meeting,” Shirleen warned.

“Bring the band,” Daisy reminded me.

“Hang in there,” Roxie called before blowing me a kiss.

Only Indy got close and gave me a hug.

“You’ll be all right and he’ll be all right. I promise. No t
icate a Everything will be all right,” she whispered in my ear then pulled aw
looked in my eyes. “Yeah?” she finished softly.

s, but I “Yeah,” I replied. Even though I didn’t believe her, I wanted to.

She touched her cheek to mine and whispered, “Later, girl.”

Then all the Rock Chicks were gone.

I made my dog breakfast and poured myself a coffee, but all the
with my did it, my head was in the shower.

Therefore, when Mace got out of the shower, I was standing
kitchen, a half-drunk cup of coffee in my hand, Juno’s heavy body l
my feet and my eyes were on the door.

cry for I watched as he moved toward his bags, pulled out some fresh clot
then yanked off the towel. I held my breath at the sight of him, but
atch. get a very long look. He dressed in record time and walked back
bathroom.

I stayed where I was, a feeling of dread stealing over me.

Roxie, Something was not right and it was more than its usual under-th
being-murdered not right.

 Mace came back out, tossed his boots by the platform, shoved his
in his bag, pulled out a pair of socks and then zipped the bag closed.

 Oh yes.

 Something was not right.

 That feeling of dread grew.

 He sat on the platform again to put on his socks and boots.

ullshit. “Mace—” I started. What I was going to say I didn’t know, but I
ay andget the chance.

 “The boys’ll cover you today,” he told me, not looking up from wh
was doing.

 “Mace—”

 “I’ll have my shit outta here by the time you get back.”

while I I felt my mouth fill with saliva, that feeling of dread buildi
spreading so fast I was paralyzed.

in the I fought the paralysis and whispered, “Mace—” yet again.

ying on “I’ll call Turner and tell him he’s up.”

 My hand not holding the coffee cup came down and gripped the co

hes and “Eric?” I asked.

I didn’t Mace stood and looked at me. “You know another Turner?”

to the I shook my head, even though I probably did. I knew a lot of peopl

 Mace put his tongue to his teeth and gave a sharp whistle.

 Juno shot up and trotted to him. Mace bent over and gave he

reat-of-doggie rubdown.

A final, *farewell* full doggie rubdown.

clothes *This isn't right*, my brain sounded panicked and confused.

“Mace—” I started again.

Mace stopped rubbing Juno down and headed toward his bag.

“Stay well, Stella,” he said, not looking at me.

He bent to his bag and lifted up, throwing the strap over his shoulder, turning to the door.

I didn't *Oh my God, this isn't right!* my brain screamed.

I had to do something. Anything. And I had to do it quick.

what he “I broke my arm when I was twelve. Fell off my bike,” I blurted.

Mace stopped on his way to the door. His side to me, he only turned his head when he looked at me.

I swallowed. “When I got home, my mom was gone. I don't know what happened and My dad was the only one there.”

Mace didn't move and didn't speak.

My breath wasn't taking a hike, it was coming fast and scary. My thoughts of wanting Mace out of my life were gone.

ounter. Poof.

Vanished.

“Dad didn't—” I began, but Mace interrupted me by shaking his head.

e. “Too late,” he told me, and my stomach clenched.

“Let me finish,” I whispered. Mace shook his head, but I kept talking.

r a full “My arm was hanging funny. It hurt so much I thought I'd pass out for a moment.”

pain. You'd think that's all I would remember—”

“Too late,” Mace said again.

“But it wasn't what I remembered.” I pressed on. “He was so pissed. He was watching some golf tournament on TV and he was pissed because he had to take me to the hospital instead of—”

Mace interrupted me again. His body turned toward me and his voice went back to low and vibrating in that scary way. “Too fuckin' late.”

“Don't go,” I whispered, changing tactics, my head coming together and thoughts for the first time in days finally clear and focused.

I knew what I was doing, letting him have sex with me, sleep with me, move in with me. I knew I was doing it because I wanted it. I wanted to. Actions speak louder than words, but I'd so wrapped myself in that need his wool Floyd told me about, I didn't hear the muffled communication.

I held my breath.

where. Mace stared at me.

I stared back.

“Please, don't go,” I said again.

ed. All Part of me expected him to grin in triumph, come forward, pull my arms and kiss me.

I decided I'd have to act pissed off for a while, and then once I gave a load of shit, I'd let it go.

ead. Instead, his mouth got tight, he turned on his boot, and he muttered “fuck's sake, arm the alarm.”

talking. Then he was gone.

rom the My body was twisted in order to look over my shoulder at the

door.

What just happened? my shocked brain asked.

ed. Dad I didn't answer.

d at me I knew what just happened.

I slid down the cupboard, put my coffee cup beside me on the
ice was closed my eyes and pressed my forehead into my knees.

I felt Juno pushing her nose into my neck, giving doggie comfort
her, my she could, but I didn't turn to her.

Instead, I slid straight into the place that knew me well.

ith me, I slid directly into black.

ed him.

: cotton

THE GIG WAS ALMOST OVER.



The Rock Chicks were sitting at tables up front and center, all c
looking subdued and a little worried.

The Hot Bunch, Tex and Duke were all on duty, guarding the do
stage, wandering the crowd. I'd seen them all.

All of them.

e in his But Mace.

Even though the show was shit (all my fault and I knew it), the
ive him was preparing for "Ghostriders."

Instead, I pulled my arm in a sweep in front of me, disengaging my
d, "For strap from my shoulders. I set my guitar in its stand and walked ac
dusty, faded rugs that covered The Little Bear's stage. I sat next to Fl
the piano bench. He was staring at me, his eyes startled.

closed For the past four hours, the entire band and The Rock Chicks had :

to get through to me. I was so deep in black I just went through the r
like an automaton. I didn't know what they asked. I didn't know wh
said. I didn't even know my own replies.

I leaned into Floyd and whispered in his ear.

e floor, He put his hand over the microphone. "Stella, girl—"

I closed my eyes tight then opened them and looked into his.

as best "Just do it," I begged.

He gave me a long look, nodded to the band then started playing.

The room went silent in shock.

I looked at the rafters, blindly taking in the trademark Little Be
nailed to them, then I pulled Floyd's microphone my way, closed n
and started singing.

of them And what I sang was Billy Joel's "And So It Goes."

I sang it for Mace, who wasn't even there, but I did it anyway, l
ors, the nothing said what I needed to say better than those beautiful, hear
lyrics.

Floyd played the final notes to the song and I kept my eyes
waiting.

crowd Waiting and hoping.

I opened my eyes and looked at the crowd.

y guitar The minute I did, they roared with applause.

ross the But it didn't hit me the way it normally did.

loyd on Because Mace wasn't there.

all tried He didn't charge up to the stage, taking me in his arms and tell

notions beautiful things.

at they “Stella, girl—” Floyd whispered, but that was it. I was done. I’d do myself this time. I had no one else to blame.

For some insane reason, I got up and ran across the small stage, down and started pushing through the crowd. I felt nothing. I knew no just knew I had to go. Where, I had no idea. I just had *to go*.

I could feel hands on me, tugging at me. I heard my name call familiar voices. I knew one was Hector’s, the other was Duke’s.

But I was gone. Through the crowd to the doors. I felt freedom, but far from sweet. Then I was caught, my momentum halted, meaning my eyes lifted up, swung around and put down. I looked behind me and up to been caught and was now held by Bobby, one of Lee’s men.

“Shit, woman, what’re you thinkin’?” Bobby’s voice was annoyed.

I didn’t answer.

because I struggled to get away, kicking and grunting, and then something broken happened.

closed, Bobby was no longer struggling with me. He let me go and struggling with someone else, a big bulky man, bigger and bulkier even Bobby, and Bobby was enormous.

Then Luke was there and he barreled into another man. With a slam to the other man’s belly, Luke lifted him clean off his feet and slammed against the wooden railing outside The Little Bear. The man flipped over-head over the railing, landing on his back and cracking his skull sickening thud against the pavement. Luke turned toward me, but there were more men. One came at him, then more people were there, including Lee and more suited men, and all of them were engaged in hand-

combat.

Before I could get my wits about me, I felt hard, firm fingers at my upper arm. I gave a surprised cry right before I was yanked down wooden plank steps, and before I knew what was happening, I was thrown into the back seat of a waiting, long, sleek, black limousine.

The door closed behind me and the limousine shot away.

I realized I was holding my breath and I turned to see there was someone in the back seat with me.

He was very tall, lean, well-built, on the other side of middle-aged and his hair peppered with silver and wearing an expensive suit, expensive car, and an expensive watch.

Oh, and last but not least, he had clear, sharp, achingly familiar green eyes.

I stared at him with my mouth open while he spoke.

“Hello, Stella. I’m Preston Mason, Kai’s father.”

Oh dear.

he was
en than

houlder
ied him
ed feet-
l with a
re were
Hector,
to-hand

combat.

Before I could get my wits about me, I felt hard, firm fingers attach on my upper arm. I gave a surprised cry right before I was yanked down the wooden plank steps, and before I knew what was happening, I was thrown into the back seat of a waiting, long, sleek, black limousine.

The door closed behind me and the limousine shot away.

I realized I was holding my breath and I turned to see there was someone in the back seat with me.

He was very tall, lean, well-built, on the other side of middle-aged. Black hair peppered with silver and wearing an expensive suit, expensive cufflinks and an expensive watch.

Oh, and last but not least, he had clear, sharp, achingly familiar jade-green eyes.

I stared at him with my mouth open while he spoke.

“Hello, Stella. I’m Preston Mason, Kai’s father.”

Oh dear.



I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR HIM

Stella

“I’m supposed to be in a meeting,” I told Preston Mason because I can’t think of anything else to say.

I had actually been half-assedly planning to get out of the meeting with Dixon Jones by feigning a migraine or a heart attack or something, but I had kind of wished I’d made the meeting with Jones. I figured he’d be a lot easier to deal with than a surprise kidnapping by Mace’s apparently super-villain dad.

“You’ll need to reschedule,” he replied.

I decided to push. “It’s kind of important.”

He calmly adjusted the cuff of his impeccable light-blue shirt under the sleeve of his equally impeccable dark-blue suit jacket.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to reschedule.”

I sat back as the limousine took a curve on the mountain road.

The Little Bear was in Evergreen, a mountain town that manages to be hip, cool, exclusive and a Harley boy hangout all at the same time. It’s just a smidge shy of being the type of place where gunslingers would have showdowns at high noon.

I effing loved Evergreen. It was as rock 'n' roll as you could get (according to me).

“Erm,” I ventured carefully. “Did you just kidnap me?”

His jade eyes came to me. “Yes.”

Wow.

Well one thing was certain, even if I didn't have the eyes as blue as Preston Mason was as straight talking arrogant as his son.

“Why?” I asked.

“We need to talk about Kai.”

“I don't want to talk about Kai.”

And I didn't.

Furthermore, I didn't want to call him “Kai.” It felt weird. I felt weird enough as it was. I didn't want to feel weirder. If I felt any more weird my mind might spin off into an alternate reality and live there the rest of my life. My body still in real reality, lying in a coma, confounding doctors who eventually turn off life support, and then where would I be?

“How well do you know Kai?” Preston Mason took me out of my thoughts and my eyes focused on him again.

“Um...” I hedged, because this was a good question.

Biblically, one could say I was a Kai Expert. All other ways it was a debate.

“I feel I should warn you, my son is not a good man.”

I sat and stared at him in complete and total shock.

Then I said the hated word, “What?”

uld get “He’s responsible for his sister’s murder, amongst other things.”

Gut kick.

So huge and savage my body jerked with it.

Mace’s sister was murdered?

Visions of Mace’s face swam in my head, the demons dancing
proof, eyes. Mace telling me he could understand what I meant about my fath

And meaning it.

Holy effing hell.

Mace’s sister was murdered.

“Mace’s sister, your daughter, was murdered?” I whispered.

He studied me and it made me uncomfortable. The eyes were famili
t weird they were also completely different. There was nothing behind th
ird, my emotion, even when he was talking about his daughter’s murder.

ny life, For your information, this creeped me way the hell out.

o would “Don’t you read the papers?” he asked me.

· crazed “I haven’t had the chance,” I replied.

“It’s all lies,” he said.

“What’s lies?”

s up for “All of it.”

“What, exactly?”

He changed the subject. “I want you out of his life.”

This threw me because I hadn’t come to terms with the last ment
he’d dealt.

“Out of whose life?” I asked stupidly.

Preston Mason's eyes narrowed. "Kai's."

"Why?"

"Do you know who I am?"

I shook my head but said, "You're Mace's father."

I watched his lip curl right before he asked, "How stupid are you?"

Now I was getting angry.

What was with this guy?

He kidnaps me and then he's mean to me?

What was up with that?

"What's with you?" I snapped.

"I know how stupid you are. Two point five grade point average, no skipped just enough school so you could graduate too much to learn anything. You didn't go to college. Your father's a welder. Your mother's a waitress for twenty-five years. Neither of them went to college either."

"So?"

"So, Kai graduated with honors from the University of Hawaii with a bachelor's in civil engineering."

Yowza.

Civil engineering?

That sounded hard.

I shook off thoughts of Mace beavering away at his studies with a protractor (or whatever they needed for civil engineering), forged ahead and clipped, "So?"

"So, the last girl Kai got serious about was the daughter of a senator."

Yikes.

Really?

A senator?

I hid my surprise and repeated, "So?"

"My God," he muttered. "You really are stupid."

Now totally pissed off, I leaned forward and hissed, "Stop saying that."

"You don't get it, Stella. What I'm saying is that you aren't good for my son."

He was not for real!

I sat back, crossed my arms on my chest and threw one leg over the other, bouncing my brown, dusty cowboy-booted foot.

"Let me get this straight, big man. First you tell me you've been responsible for your daughter's murder and he's not a good man. Then you act like a poorly-written character out of a formulaic romantic comedy and tell me I'm not good enough for him. I gotta tell you, it's not me being with a man that's not making any sense."

"Maybe I should have had a picture book drawn up so you could read along," he returned.

"Yeah, too bad you didn't do that so I could take it away from you and beat you with it, you crazy loon," I snapped back, leaned forward and pounded on the smoky partition that separated us from the driver. "Turn me back to the bar!" I demanded.

"Sit back, Stella, I'm not done with you yet."

I looked over my shoulder at him. "You might not be done with me, but I'm done with you." I turned around, banged on the partition again.

shouted, "Take me back to the bar!"

"Sit back!" Preston Mason's voice had risen and he sounded pissed

I again looked over my shoulder. "All right, Mr. Mason. I'm havin' a bad day. And I mean *bad*. You do *not* want to mess with me. Not seriously." I turned back around and banged on the partition and said

"Take me back to the goddamned bar!"

hat."

enough" Mason said and I stopped banging.

This, I knew without a doubt, was not a fortunate turn in the conversation

Slowly, I turned around and looked at him.

e other,

"How do you know that?"

"Because I own his mortgage."

son is

Shitsofuckit.

ien you

dy and

"Mr. Mason, you know a lot about me, so I'm guessing you haven't spoken to my father in years. So I have to ask, this would be something to me because...?" I prompted.

stupid.

follow

"Because your father has a lot of debt. Your mother's been ill. He doesn't have insurance and she certainly didn't. Chemotherapy costs a great deal when you're too proud and too stupid to take Medicaid."

ou and

rd and

Oh no.

ake me

No.

I didn't just find out my mother had cancer and my father was too stupid to help her out with government funded healthcare (which the stupid me, but would be) from Mace's asshole father.

ain and

Did I?

I stared at him.

l off. And, for some reason, I knew he wasn't lying.

g a *bad* Okay, it was safe to say my bad day just got worse.

today. My...fucking...shitty...luck.

houted, I tilted my head back and looked at the ceiling of the limo.

Then I closed my eyes.

Preston Then I sat back, crossed my arms and legs and looked out the wind

rsation. "Take me back to the bar," I said quietly.

"I'll foreclose," Preston Mason warned.

"No you won't," I told the window.

"Oh yes, Stella, I will."

My head turned slowly and I looked at him. "No. You won't
know I morning Mace broke up with me." I flicked out my hand. "Your whol
d mean was a waste of time. It's over between us."

He watched me closely, likely assessing my honesty.

e didn't I stared him straight in the eye.

at deal I watched his face relax.

"Well, that's good news," he said softly, the tips of his lips going
humorless smile.

How on this earth did Mace come from this man's loins?

o proud "Promise you won't foreclose," I demanded.

id jerk It was his turn to sit back, but he looked relaxed and at ease.

"Money's money. They don't pay, eventually, they'll be—"

“You foreclose, I go after Mace.”

His brows drew together. “You just told me Kai broke up with you

“*Mace* broke up with me, yes. We had an argument. It was bad. I under his skin. He told me so his damn self. You leave my parents alone just be a scar. You turn them out of their home, I’ll start itching.” I un my arms and leaned toward him. “And, Mr. Mason, I’m an itch he scratch.”

low.

Mace’s father’s eyes moved over my face, my hair and down my took a lot out of me not to squirm, but I held my body and gaze steady

Finally, he said, “As long as I own the loan, I won’t foreclose.”

I wasn’t *that* stupid.

“You keep the loan for as long as my mother’s alive,” I returned.

t. This

“Stella.”

e scene

“Something happens to them while she’s still alive, you’ll be sta me during Thanksgiving dinner.”

He muttered under his breath and I was pretty certain it was a curse

He hit a button and said into the car, “Jon, we’re taking Ms. Gunn the bar.”

up in a

It was my turn to smile a humorless smile.



WE HIT the outskirts of Evergreen before either of us spoke again.

And it was me who broke the silence.

“You’re wrong,” I said, again staring out the window and not facin

“Yes? And how’s that?”

“Mace is a good man.”

.” I heard him laugh. It was as humorless as his smile.

But I’m I watched Evergreen slip by and saw The Little Bear. There were one, I’ll Explorers everywhere and my heart hurt a little to see Mace standing crossed at his hips on the wood walk outside the bar with Tex, Lee, Hank, likes to Eddie and my entire band standing with him.

Lee saw us first and jerked his chin at the limousine. I watched Mace corso. It and I noted two things immediately. The first, he was the most handsome man I’d ever seen in my life. The second, he was furious.

“You’re also right,” I went on quietly.

“And how’s that?” Preston Mason’s voice was also quiet, and as he turned away from him, I didn’t notice his eyes were also locked on Mace.

The limousine slid to a stop, but before it did, Mace was already opening the door.

“I’m not good enough for him,” I whispered.

The door opened and Mace leaned in, his hand wrapped around my waist. He yanked me out. My hand held firmly in his, he kept me at his side. I leaned back into the limo.

He pointed at his father and he said in a tone that sent chills up my spine. “We’re not done.”

“Kai—” Preston Mason started, but he didn’t get any further.

Mace slammed the door and pulled me toward an Explorer.

I yanked at my hand. “Mace.”

He kept going.

I yanked again. “Mace.”

He stopped us at the passenger side door and pulled it open. “Get in

I looked up at him then I noticed movement and saw that the line
black was still there. Preston Mason had alighted and was watching us.

My hands I felt my heart skip, squeeze then stop.

Hector, It wasn't a good thing for your heart to stop. It hurt your whole body.

“Get in the car, Stella,” Mace ordered.

My face turned
I looked at him again and his voice rumbled in my brain.

*This shit goes both ways. This doesn't end until I know you won
away, but also you won't let me walk away. Never again.*

I could get him back.

As I was
ice.

I needed you to make a statement, Kitten. You didn't.

My face
at my If I made a statement, I knew, I just knew, I could get him back.

Then his father's voice came to me.

He's responsible for his sister's murder.

My mind and I didn't believe that for a second.

As he What I did believe was that whatever happened with his sister
believed it.

My spine, At that moment all I needed to do was make a statement.

And making a statement put my mom and dad on the line. I sure
didn't have the money to help them out.

And I wasn't about to make Mace take care of yet another
problems.

Which would only be another in a long line of problems of the past
undoubtedly well into the future.

n.” Yep, Kai Mason was too good for me.

ousine Mace got closer to me.

“Babe,” he said softly. “Get in the car.”

His voice washed over me like soothing elixir.

ly. I knew I had my opening. His father gave it to me. Mace didn’t
when I was in danger. He didn’t like it at all. He didn’t like it enough
over being mad at me for being stupid.

it walk I allowed myself to feel it for only a beat then I asked. “Are you
me to Eric?”

Mace’s eyes narrowed. “No, I’m not fuckin’ takin’ you to Turner
shook my head. He let go of my hand, his fingers wrapped around my
arm and he leaned in. “We’ll talk at your place. Now get in the car.”

“Take me to Eric,” I said softly.

I felt his fingers tense spasmodically on my arm, but that was the
reaction he allowed me.

I could take no more.

; Mace “Goddammit, Mace, take me to Eric!” I shouted.

He stared at me.

as hell I held my breath, kept my outward calm as my insides were shivering
stared back.

of my The pain slashed in his eyes again.

This time, it also slashed through my heart.

ast and He let go of my arm, turned and walked back to the doors of the bar

“She wants to go to Turner,” he told Lee as he tossed Lee the key

hand. Lee caught them, but in turn Hector lobbed some keys at Mace nabbed them and went straight to another Explorer. I watched as he started up the SUV and drove away.

“Get in the car, *mamita*.” Hector’s heat all of a sudden was close, into my side, and he was talking to me softly.

t like it

h to get

“You’ll take me to Eric?” I whispered, and with Mace gone I fucking care that Hector could see plain as day the tears in my eyes.

t taking

“I’ll take you wherever you want to go,” he replied.

Without further hesitation, I got in the car.



mer.” I

y upper

I FELT THE BED DEPRESS.

Then I felt the weight of my hair being lifted away from my neck.

“You all right, sweetheart?” Eric’s voice came at me in the dark.

he only

No.

No, I was definitely not all right.

I didn’t know what time it was, but it had to be late. I’d been lying bed for hours. It was coming on summer and the days were longer, light had faded and night was pitch black.

ing and

“Yeah,” I lied.

“You need to eat something,” Eric told me.

The very thought made me want to hurl.

“I’m not hungry.”

ir.

s in his

“Stella, that tells me you aren’t all right,” Eric said. He waited response that didn’t come then he went on, “What the fuck happened Mason’s father?”

2. Mace “He’s a jerk,” I told Eric.

lung in, Eric laughed, but it was short and I got the feeling he didn’t
anything was funny.

beating “Preston Mason is definitely a jerk.”

I tried to focus on him in the dark, but he was just a shadow so I
didn’t on where I thought his head was.

“Do you know him?”

Eric was silent a second then his voice came at me and it was hear
surprise. “Everyone knows Preston Mason, Stella. The man’s famous.”

I got up on an elbow.

Just so you know, I knew I was doing wrong. I wasn’t only playing
I was now playing Eric.

Earlier, I had thought for a brief moment to ask Hector to take m
place, but Hector had to work with Mace. If Hector took me in Mace
freak out. Their working relationship would deteriorate and I’d be to
; in that for that too.

but the No, the only way to make a surgically clean, never to be healed
with Mace without dragging anyone into it that mattered was to be
was right at that moment.

In Eric Turner’s bed.

Mace wouldn’t ever forgive that.

Ever.

for my “Famous for what?” I asked.

ed with Eric moved. Leaning forward, he turned on a lamp that lit the room
soft light.

It was a decent room. An impersonal room. The room of a man I probably didn't live there, but was staying there for an assignment.

Eric had wanted to put me into protective custody, but I wouldn't let him. I had a life to lead. I would go back to my ultra-safe apartment, but I focused when I knew Mace couldn't get in anymore.

That was a phone call I was *not* looking forward to.

My mind went from the phone call to Eric, who was watching me.

His hand came to my jaw and he murmured correctly, "He's controlling your mind."

I closed my eyes and bit my lips.

Then I opened my eyes and whispered, "I'm sorry."

Eric got up and grabbed my hand. "Come to the living room."

Not letting go of my hand, he led me to the equally impersonal living room. He sat on the couch then he pulled me down on his lap.

I should have resisted, but I didn't. I also didn't resist when he pushed me so my back was to the couch, my head was on the padded arm rest and my hand was on his elbow at my side. My ass was still in his lap, my legs crossed over my thighs, his other arm lying loose across my belly.

Somehow this intimate position felt more comfortable and reassuring than it should have. I figured it had a lot to do with the worried, genuine expression on Eric's face.

"I'm tryin' to figure out how you spent so much time with Mace. You're deep for the guy, and don't know who his fuckin' father is," Eric said to me.

I was trying to figure that out too.

Though, if I was honest, I knew the answer.

an who Because I was a big, screaming loser.

 When I didn't say anything, Eric went on, "Preston Mason is
let him. Stinking rich. He's got shitloads of money."

ut only "I kinda guessed that with the limo and the suit."

 Eric smiled. It was a good smile and some girl someday would b
lucky when he smiled at her like that. Unfortunately, that girl was no
to be me.

on your "As rich as you think anyone can be, sweetheart, he's richer."

 That was a little surprising considering I could think of being filthy

 "Yeah?" I asked.

 "Yeah. And he didn't get where he is because he's a nice man, eith

 I pulled in breath, and before I could reconsider or even think of
I living bitch it made me that I was laying on Eric's couch with Eric and pla
his feelings for me in this whole fiasco, I said, "He told me Ma
hed me responsible for his sister's murder."

and he Something in Eric's eyes flashed and I didn't like it, mainly beca
ver his face got tight along with the flash and he looked supremely pissed off.

 "What?" I used the hated word again, but Eric stayed silent. T
ng than humiliating as it was in outing how shallow my relationship with M
tle look been, I shared, "I didn't even know Mace had a sister, much less that s
murdered."

on, fell I knew this too surprised Eric. The anger went out of his face
:o me. shook his head. Then his face went soft again.

 "Figure I had you, warm and willing in my bed, I wouldn't talk ab
sister's kidnapping and murder either."

My breath felt like exploring the coast of Maine and I felt my e
loaded. huge.

“Kidnapping?” I breathed.

“Oh fuck,” Eric muttered before he looked at my knees.

e super My hand went to his face and I turned him to look at me.

it going “What the fuck happened to Mace’s sister?”

Eric watched me, then he did it some more, then he sighed and
heavy.

rich. “I’m gonna let Mason tell you this story.”

“Mace and I are done,” I replied quickly.

er.” His mouth formed a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

what a When he spoke, his voice was sweet but weirdly sad. “Sweet
ying at much as it kills me to admit it, you aren’t done. And it’s his story to
ce was opened my mouth to speak but he shook his head. “It’s his to tell, S
isn’t pretty and if he didn’t share it with you, he didn’t for a reason. B
use his no doubt he’d planned to get around to it eventually. The time’s go
right for that kind of shit. The time isn’t right when you find a good v
hen, as You don’t want to lay your shit on her up front and freak her out.”

ace had This made sense.

she was And any story that involved a jerky asshole of a father and a kid
and murdered sister was *definitely* shit you didn’t want to lay on a
and he good woman or not.

I was already freaked out and I didn’t know what the eff happened

out my What I did know was that I would have known because Mace wa
to tell me that morning.

eyes go I closed my eyes and turned my head away from Eric.

“I’m such an idiot,” I whispered.

Eric moved, stretching to lie by me full out on the couch. His arms around me to pull me full frontal, his legs tangled with mine and I pressed face into his chest.

After a few minutes of holding me, Eric asked, “You want me to take it back to him?”

I did.

I definitely did.

And I definitely knew that I’d been wrong about Eric.

He was a good guy.

A good guy I was using and another good guy I’d never have been able to tell.” I was thinking I was exactly as stupid as Preston Mason thought I was.

I answered, “Mace and I are over.”

Eric’s arms got tighter and his voice got lower and I could swear I heard a hint of anger when he asked, “What did Preston Mason do to you woman. car?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

I tipped my head back to look at him. “Seriously, Eric,” I lied through my teeth. “Nothing. We just talked.” At least that last part wasn’t a lie.

He wasn’t buying it. “Preston Mason doesn’t make a move without an ulterior motive. He didn’t kidnap you from a gig to have a chat.”

“I’m not saying it was a pleasant chat. I’m just saying he didn’t

anything to me.”

Eric’s brows drew together. “Stella, you’re keepin’ something from
moved “No, I’m not. You know I didn’t want to be back together with I
sed myjust decided to make it clear,” I lied.

Yes, I lied.

ake you Yes, again.

And no, I didn’t mind going to hell. It couldn’t be much worse t
life was at that very moment.

Eric watched me again. It did, of course, occur to me that he was a
agent and likely could read the body language and facial expressions c
more accomplished liars than myself, but at that moment I was too
care.
:cause I

“I need to sleep,” I told him.

“You need to eat then you need to sleep,” Eric returned.

heard a “I’m not hungry.”

in that He pushed up, rolled over me, got to his feet and then pulled me to

“Then you get a bowl of cereal,” he decided.

“Eric.”

“No argument.” His voice was firm, so was his grip on my hand
ugh myled me straight to the kitchen.



Eric

hout an

ERIC FORCED a bowl of cereal on Stella.

dn’t do Then he sat on the couch and watched a movie with her, which

asleep halfway through.

1 me.” He carried her to his bed, pulled a blanket over her still-clothed body.
Mace. I the room, closed the door and walked into the living room.

He made a couple of calls and got the number he needed.

He dialed Lee Nightingale’s cell.

“Yeah?” Nightingale answered.

han my “It’s Special Agent Turner.”

Lee’s voice went on alert. “Stella?”

federal “She’s fine,” Eric responded. “You still got that boy wonder
of much computers?”

tired to Lee didn’t reply.

“You do, you get him to work on Preston Mason and whatever the
he’s holding over Stella. Something happened in that car. She’s not
There’s gotta be a link.”

“We’re already on it,” Lee responded.

mine. “She doesn’t know about Caitlin Mason,” Eric went on.

“I know,” Lee replied. “You said ‘doesn’t.’ You didn’t share?”

“Not my place.”

, which Silence. Then, realizing from Eric’s words the lay of the land, Lee
on, “Mace wants the papers kept from her.”

Eric thought about the papers the last two days, rehashing every
juicy, devastating detail of Caitlin Mason’s kidnapping and murder and
Mason’s involvement as part martyr, part hero. Worse, his now very
she fell relationship (making out onstage with a local rock star, for fuck’s sake)

quickly becoming legend.

dy, left Stella was cast in the dual role as balm to soothe the wound alongside damsel in distress. A dual role that would only be intensify her version of “And So It Goes” (Eric didn’t see it; the agent he’d assign watch her had reported to him about it, in detail) and her post-gig kidnapping complete with the Nightingale Men publicly (and therefore open phone cameras) engaged in pretty fucking brutal physical skirmishes effort at her protection.

“I don’t blame him,” was all Eric said, but his point was made. When at your was with him, Eric wouldn’t let Stella see the papers.

“You get more—” Lee started, and as much as Eric hated interrupted.

he fuck “I’ll call.”

talkin’. He beeped off his phone, set it on the end table. He went to check house alarm, looked out the window in the door to check for the car on street, two houses down, two agents sitting inside. Spotting the car, he grabbed gun and put that on the end table too. He grabbed a blanket, yanked boots, lay down on the couch and finished watching the movie.

he went

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and Kai

r public

ke) was

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“I don’t blame him,” was all Eric said, but his point was made. While she was with him, Eric wouldn’t let Stella see the papers.

“You get more—” Lee started, and as much as Eric hated it, he interrupted.

“I’ll call.”

He beeped off his phone, set it on the end table. He went to check the house alarm, looked out the window in the door to check for the car on the street, two houses down, two agents sitting inside. Spotting the car, he got his gun and put that on the end table too. He grabbed a blanket, yanked off his boots, lay down on the couch and finished watching the movie.



SQUIRTABLE CHEESE

Hank

The next morning, Hank and Mace walked into Lee's office. Lee was sitting on the front edge of his desk, his head bent toward a file folder in his hand. It came up when they entered. He closed the folder and dropped it on his desk.

"What did George say?" Lee asked.

George Riverside was a prosecuting attorney. Hank, Eddie and Mace had a meeting with him that morning to discuss the Sidney Carter case. Prior to the discussion centered around if it was strong enough to arrest him.

"He says we don't have enough," Hank replied, and Lee's eyes narrowed.

"You are fuckin' shittin' me," Lee muttered.

Hank shook his head.

George Riverside was a good attorney. He was also ambitious. He knew the Sidney Carter case would make headlines. It could even make George like headlines and he had big ideas about his career. He wanted people to remember his name, especially come election day.

He also liked to win cases.

What he didn't like was headlines about cases he didn't win. Even

Hank, Eddie and Mace had a tight case, George was being cautious with Carter. He wanted the case locked down, a sure thing, which was impossible. That kind of sure thing didn't exist. It was not only impossible, it was frustrating.

"Eddie get anything out of the shooter?" Lee asked as Hank stood by the side of the desk.

Lee was referring to the man who shot at Stella and Mace Saturday night.

Mace moved to a chair in front of the desk and sat down, putting his right ankle on his opposite knee.

"Nope, shooter's closed tight," Mace replied.

Hank watched as Lee shook his head in surprise and he knew why.

Eddie was known to be particularly good in the interrogation room.

Hank had watched, though, and Eddie got nothing.

Hank also knew why that was.

The shooter was on a semi-suicide mission. He didn't expect to get away with shooting Stella in a crowded club. He expected to get the job done, get caught and then get rewarded. Likely, Carter made a deal and was paid well for good deeds for the shooter's family. It was Carter's MO. He was loyal, his allegiance, one way or another, and paid well for it. So well, the character was buried under money so deep, no one along the line was willing to break the careers.

On this thought, Hank took in Mace. Even after yesterday and the news from George this morning, Mace looked calm and relaxed. Hank had known Mace long enough to know Mace was neither calm nor relaxed. His body, even at rest, was alert, his eyes stone-cold.

Hank knew why this was too. Hank knew about Mace's sister. I

us withtold him about it in detail, including the fact that Mace was inc possible.shouldering the responsibility for what happened in the end game. Ha fuckingknew that Stella didn't know about it. Mace had told the team he want remain that way until he was ready to share. Finally, Hank knew t pped at conversation Stella had with Preston Mason was likely to reve information. Following this thread, Hank could only assume that actions after her conversation with Mace's father were an indictment 7 night. least, Mace thought they were. ing his

"I've lost patience with this shit," Lee said, cutting into Hank's th "We're gonna have to dismantle Carter's army."

It was Hank's turn to shake his head.

"Lee—" he started.

Lee turned to his brother. "I'm gettin' married on Saturday, Hank. think Indy'll like walkin' down the aisle wearin' a flak jacket and a he

No, Lee was right. Indy wouldn't like that. She'd have a shit fit.

et away
me, but
s doing
bought

"Maybe you can postpone the wedding," Hank suggested.

Lee's eyes went hard. "I'm not postponing my fucking wedding."

Hank watched his brother.

ain was
k it.

Strike that idea, he thought.

k it.

"Maybe you shouldn't be here for the rest of this conversation," M

ieir badin, gaze on Hank.

unk had
ed. His

Hank's body went tight and his eyes cut to Mace. "I didn't give a my life to this investigation to have you guys fuck it up when we close." Both Lee and Mace tensed, but Hank ignored it and went or

Lee hadboys aren't goin' commando and screwin' the pooch. It's not gonna ha

orrectly “Hank—” Lee started, and Hank moved his gaze to Lee.

nk also “It’s not gonna happen,” Hank repeated. “We play it by the book.”

ted it to Hank knew his brother didn’t like playing by the book. In fact, it v
hat any a miracle Hank had managed to keep them clean this long. Mainly l
al that not only did Lee not play by the book, Kai Mason had made an art of
Stella’s all over the fucking book.

. Or, at “We’re close,” Hank reminded them. “And we’ve been clean
oughts. Don’t fuck it up.”

“The girls—” Lee began, but Hank interrupted him again.

“I know what’s at stake, Lee,” he said quietly. “But Carter goes
he’s gotta stay down. This isn’t under radar. We got reporters watch
every move now. You know it and I know it. We gotta play it by the b

I don’t Lee looked at Hank.
lmet.”

Hank returned his stare.

Lee’s eyes flashed angrily and Hank knew he had him. He also kn
didn’t like it. Lastly, he knew he’d only bought some time. They didn
Carter down soon, Lee, Mace and Lee’s men were going to toss the b
the window.

“Fuck,” Lee muttered, giving in as Mace’s phone rang.

ace put Hank watched Mace fish his phone out his pocket and look at the c
Whatever it said, Mace didn’t like reading it.

year of He flipped open his phone and clipped, “Yeah?” as a knock cam
’re thisdoor.

l, “You Lee called out a terse invitation to enter as Mace said, “Fortnum’
ppen.” hour,” then flipped his phone shut and shoved it back in his pocket,

tight, body tense.

Hank didn't have a chance to question Mace. Brody, Lee's computer
came in and shouted, "I found the link!"

All the men turned to look at Brody.

Brody's pale face under his dark-rimmed glasses was full of exci

He bounced in, probably wired on copious intake of energy drinks an
so far, processed food, and threw his doughy body in the other chair in f
Lee's desk as he shoved the glasses more firmly up his nose.

Brody was a computer genius and looked the part. He could do a
with computers—hardware, software, wiring, programming, troublesh
searching and, most important to Lee, hacking.

He was dark-haired and goofy as all hell. He was in his early thirt
he acted like he was twelve. Still, you couldn't help but like the guy.

"Did you guys see it? We made front page again today.
awesome!" Brody was still shouting. "Fuckin' great picture of Luke
some guy over a railing. Man, I wish I was there."

Hank moved to the side of Lee's desk, crossed his arms on his ch
rested his thigh against it, his body turned mostly to Brody.

"What'd you find, Brody?" Mace asked, but either Brody didn't h
or he chose to ignore him and his eyes swung to Hank.

"They did you today. You and Roxie. All about your thing, which
knew about, kind of, as it made the news after Vance blew off Roxie
hand at Daisy's party," Brody informed Hank unnecessarily as, ea
morning, Hank, sharing coffee with a sleepy, seriously grumpy (but st
s. In an
mouth, Roxie, had read the whole thing. "Got a great picture of her fron
beauty pageant when she was in high school. Dude, she was hot eve

then,” Brody proclaimed.

ter guy, Hank took a deep breath and settled in. Brody was on a roll and just have to ride it out.

“And they did Jules and Vance too. It was killer. They made her tement. like a superhero. I forgot how good she was at kicking ass. Too bad she d over- this mom-to-be shit, she was awesome!” Brody went on.

ront of “Brody, did you find the link?” Lee cut in, and Hank could tell by voice he was losing patience.

nything “I wonder who’s feedin’ them this shit. They got *everything*,” ooting, ignored Lee and kept at his theme.

“The link,” Lee repeated, voice firm.

ies, but “What link?” Mace asked.

“They’re doin’ Ava and Luke tomorrow,” Brody continue Totally excitement.

tossin’ “Brody, shut the fuck up about the paper and focus. The link.” I lost his patience and now his voice was not only firm, but low and v est and threatening.

Brody clamped his mouth shut and stared at Lee in confusion for a ear him

Then he said, “Oh, yeah. Right. Sure, I found it. I got the link.”

Brody stopped talking and all three men stared at him.

people “Well?” Lee asked, now crossing his arms on his chest.

’s ex’s rly that “It wasn’t that deep, but I had to call Kim in on it,” Brody started.

ill cute) Kim was another employee of Lee’s who worked the computers. n some searches mostly, but also did some phone investigation.

en back

Brody kept going. “See, The People’s Bank is owned by Canault Limited. Canault Limited is owned by SunPower. SunPower is owned by—”

“Cut to it,” Lee interrupted Brody, having from experience learned to deal with Brody’s exuberance, but never having learned to have people’s intentions into it.

“APM Holdings!” Brody finished on a shout, the room went hostile. Lee’s that hostility was coming entirely from Mace.

Everyone in the room knew that Preston Mason was the man behind Brody’s multi-national, multi-billion-dollar APM Holdings.

“What the fuck?” Mace asked, his voice low and unhappy, his eyes on Lee.

Hank knew that after Stella was kidnapped by Mace’s dad, Lee had ordered both Brody and Vance to look into it. Brody could find a cell trail, amongst other things. Vance could find everything else. Lee had protective of his team, and seeing as Preston Mason could pose a significant threat and had made a move, Lee wasn’t taking any chances.

What Hank hadn’t known, until now, was that Lee hadn’t shared that with Mace.

Lee ignored Mace, eyes still on Brody.

He prompted, “Let’s go back, Brody, this all means...”

Brody blinked then said, “Oh yeah. The People’s Bank owns Tracy Sherry Gunn’s mortgage.”

“Stella’s parents,” Lee guessed, and the hostility in the room increased. She ran. Mace’s calm and relaxed posture started to disintegrate. He moved, but his entire body had become visibly tight.

limited. “Yeah,” Brody confirmed.

“Explain,” Mace growled at Brody, and Brody’s eyes moved to
ed how With one look at Mace, Brody’s face lost even more color.

patience “Well, they’re behind on their mortgage. Like, seven months behind
bank has already sent foreclosure notices.”

tile and Any trace of calm and relaxed was history. Mace unhooked his
from his knee, sat forward and put his elbows to his knees, body
mind the toward Brody.

Brody took this in and swallowed but pressed on, “It gets weirder.”

eyes on “Yeah?” Mace’s voice was deceptively light.

“Yeah,” Brody replied. “See, Stella’s folks’ve been having problems
had some time now. That’s what Kim looked into. Stella’s mom’s got cancer
computer they don’t have insurance. They’re in debt out the ying yang, drowning
ee was They were already behind on payments when The People’s Bank bought
significant mortgage. It was a bad purchase, but that shit happens all the time.

weird is that even though they weren’t current on their payments and
is with behind on their other bills...their credit rating is in the shitter, by the
they went to the bank and borrowed more money against the house
bank gave it to them.”

“Goddammit,” Lee muttered.

vis and “It gets weirder,” Brody went on, and Hank watched Mace close his
for a second, sit back in his chair again, then train his gaze on Brody.

Brody carried on. “This isn’t new. This all started to go down a year
ised.

Brody turned back to Mace. “I wasn’t here then, but Kim said it was
hadn’t you first started to see Stella.”

Hank watched as Mace traced his teeth with his tongue behind

tight lips. Hank knew this wasn't a good sign.

Mace. "Mace—" Lee started, but Brody was still talking.

"It gets weirder."

The Mace's jaw got tight.

"Brody, just finish it," Hank put it quickly.

ankle "Well, I found out all this shit about Stella's folks in, like, an hour
leaning good at asking questions, and friends and neighbors talk, especially
someone's sick, so we had the story real quick." Brody stopped, swa
' turned to Mace and said, "Ovarian cancer. That's where it started
thought they caught it but it spread." He paused again and shared
ems for "It's not looking good."

cer and Mace sucked breath into his nose, but nodded at Brody to go on
ing in it. did.

ight the "Well, I don't know why I did it." Brody shrugged and fidgeted. 'What's
detective like you guys, but it was weird. I mean, why would anyone
fallin' with a sick woman? Kidnap her daughter?" More hostility from M
way... Brody soldiered on, "So, I started to look deeper and this is where
and thereally weird."

"Fucking hell, Brody, just—" Lee cut in.

"I'll finish, I'll finish," Brody said, putting a hand up to Le
his eyes dropping it. "You know that guy who came around a while ago? Ou
rody as blue, makes a meeting with you, wants to invest in Nigh
ir ago." Investigations, tryin' to talk you into expanding?"

s when "Yeah," Lee answered, but Hank was watching Mace and he did
what he was seeing.

closed,

“You shut him down, but I got a hunch. I looked into him. That took me deeper, harder to track, but I got it eventually, and that guy, and his mother, were linked to Mace’s dad too.”

Lee’s eyes sliced to Mace, and he muttered, “Power play.”

“What?” Brody asked.

Lee’s gaze moved back to Brody. “Anything else?”

Brody shook his head. “That’s it so far.”

“You feed this to Vance?” Lee pressed.

“Yeah,” Brody answered.

“Keep diggin’,” Mace ordered, and Brody’s head turned to Mace and he kept talking. “Everything. Look into Stella, me, Lee, Night Investigations—”

“Luke,” Lee said.

“Fuck,” Mace mumbled.

Hank closed his eyes. He knew about Luke too. It would be a long time before Luke’s past associations were buried in a lot of folders where black was undoubtedly used heavily. Still, you had enough money, you could dig out anything. And Preston Mason had more than enough money.

Hank opened his eyes again when Lee started talking.

“Anything, Brody. Anyone, any member of the team, any one of the Chicks. This is your mission. You sleep it, you eat it, you fuckin’ breathe it. Find out if Preston Mason has uncovered anything or tied himself to us. Even you,” Lee demanded.

“Me?” Brody asked.

“You,” Lee replied. “And while you’re diggin’, you’re buryin’. A

ail was you can find, they can find. They haven't found it yet, you bury it s
oney, is it'll *never* be found."

"Seven years," Mace put in, and Brody turned wide eyes to him
back seven years."

Hank tensed and so did Lee.

"Mace," Lee's voice held a warning.

"Got nothin' to hide," Mace replied.

"You do," Lee returned bluntly.

"Not from him," Mace went on.

s Mace Lee was silent.

tingale "He knows I know," Mace said, his voice filled with soft menace
Lee didn't reply, Mace went on, "I got the upper hand, Lee. He know
wants it back. Or, at least, he wants my silence."

"What are we talkin' about here?" Hank asked.

ig shot. "Caitlin," Lee replied, and both Hank and Brody pulled in breath.

marker Mace never talked about his sister.

ild find "I know who took her. I know why," Mace told them both, straiq
"My fuckin' father was involved in some bad shit, fucked over the
people and Caitlin paid the price. He doesn't want that out and he does
ie Rock that I got it to hold over him. He's playin' me and he's usin' Stella t
eathe it. He's demonstratin' his power, his reach. He wants to ensure my silen
any of wants me to know he can control me. He wants me to know, I talk,
make it hurt."

Lee looked at Brody. "Find Preston Mason's weakness."

nything "I got his weakness," Mace reminded Lee.

so deep Lee's gaze cut to Mace. "I want more."

Mace and Lee locked eyes. Mace nodded and turned to Brody. "W
m. "Gotake to bring the mortgage current?"

"Around six K," Brody replied.

"I'll get you my bank details, you do the transfer to bring it currei
want details on their other debt," Mace demanded.

Brody's eyes bugged out. "I have the details and you can't have th
of money. Nobody has that kind of money."

Hank hitched a leg and settled on the desk, one foot on the floor, c
swinging.

. When "Collection," Hank said.

s it. He "No fuckin' way." Mace's voice was terse.

"I'm in. I'll talk to the boys," Lee added.

"This is my problem," Mace clipped.

"It's not your problem. It's Stella's problem," Lee returned.

"Like I said, it's my problem," Mace shot back.

ght out. Lee, nor Hank, nor even Brody could answer that. It was just the
wrongtruth.

in't like "Dudes, even if everyone puts in, it isn't gonna touch it. When I s
o do it, got debt, I mean *they got debt*," Brody informed them.

nce. He "Get Kim on the phone again, talkin' to friends and neighbors, th
he can church," Hank ordered Brody.

"Holy crap," Brody said.

Mace did not like the turn of the conversation.

“Don’t piss me off,” Mace warned.

hat’ll it “We’re not tryin’ to piss you off, Mace,” Lee bit out, his voice har
guessin’ Stella sat, alone and unprotected, in the back of that lir
Preston Mason threatened her, and that pisses *me* off. She’s yours, and
nt and I a member of my team, which makes her mine. Anyone messes with
her, they mess with me. No one fuckin’ messes with me. We got enc
at kind our plates with Carter. We don’t need your dad havin’ a way in. I’m
off all his routes. That costs money, fuck it. Bottom line, a woman’
and that woman is Stella’s mother and your father is leanin’ on them.
ne foot up, we’re all steppin’ in.”

Without waiting for a response, Lee turned to Brody.

“Find me something on Preston Mason and if he’s got in anyw
want to know.” When Brody sat staring at Lee and not moving, Lee
forward. “Do it, Brody. Now.”

Brody nodded. He jumped up and actually ran out of the room.

“I don’t like this.” Mace was back to sitting, apparently relaxed a
anything but. His eyes were sharp and angry and they were trained on

flat-out “I know you don’t. I was in your spot, I wouldn’t either. I’m sorry
but you got no choice,” Lee replied.

ay they “Don’t like that either,” Mace told Lee.

“We gonna have a problem about this?” Lee asked.

ie local “Yeah,” Mace responded instantly.

Hank intervened. “Mace, you know Luke took a bullet for Roxie.”

Mace knew immediately where Hank was heading and shot back,
wound.”

“Lucky chance. It could have been worse,” Hank returned, and pressed his lips together because he knew Hank was right. Hank was no and “You know what Eddie and Darius did for Indy. You know that girl you’re Eddie’s fucked. His career in the toilet. Eddie’s also pulled back on you, or Marcus. He hates it but he’s done it, for Jet. And you watched Jet get rough on and we all know what that meant.”

cuttin’ “Hank—” Mace broke in, but Hank kept going.

s dyin’ “We all know what Darius had to do to disentangle himself from Suck it swirling around Jules too. We know what Hector’s livin’ with because he fucked up and nearly got Jules killed, tryin’ to protect Roam’s street and all fuckin’ things.”

where, I “I get it,” Mace snapped.

leaned “You don’t,” Hank replied. “You’re new to this so I’ll tell you what getting tangled up with a Rock Chick means makin’ certain sacrifices and livin’ by your decisions. The time to make yours is now.”

lthough The vibe in the room stayed hot as the three men stared at each other. Lee. Finally, Mace muttered, “Fuckin’ hell.”

, Mace, Hank glanced at Lee. Lee returned his look, took in a breath and his gaze moved back to Mace.

“Turner called last night.”

As Mace’s head snapped toward Lee, the vibe in the room shot up to hot. So hot it was combustible.

“He’s on side,” Lee finished.

“Flesh “What the fuck does that mean?” Mace asked.

“That means he quizzed Stella. He didn’t find out dick and ence

l Mace me to look into your dad. He told me she didn't know about your sis
ent on, I'm guessin', since they obviously had the conversation, she knows the
ets out, now and she's curious. He's on board with keepin' her in the dark.
k from you don't like it, but you got an ally in that guy. He'll take care of her.
get shot "I'm gettin' her back," Mace returned.

"Hold off," Lee advised.

"No fuckin' way," Mace responded.

the shit "You get her back, you'll force your father's hand. We don't ne
ause he right now."
cred, of

Mace hesitated a beat then he shot out of his chair and ex
"Goddammit!"

Hank winced then he went tense. Mace, angry, could be pra
l, bein' uncontrollable, even double-teamed by himself and Lee.

n' with "Calm down, Mace," Hank said low.

er. "Fuck that. I don't play by his rules," Mace growled, his entire
visibly tight, such was the hold he had on himself.

"That isn't smart," Lee warned.

d Lee's Mace stood there, straight, taut and furious. Then, out of nowh
body relaxed. He took another breath in through his nose and a sl
spread on his face.

back to His voice was quiet when he said, "I'll be smart."

Without another word, Mace moved to leave and Lee glanced a
before calling, "Where the fuck you goin'?"

Mace didn't turn when he replied, "Gotta get some keys cut."

uraged Then he was gone.



Roxie

ter, but

e basics

I know” I WAS SITTING on the couch in the television room, my monogrammed stationery on my lap, a half-written letter to a friend in Charleston lyrically forgotten. Shamus, Hank’s and my chocolate lab, was curled into his huge, denim doggie bed in front of the wood-burning stove.

ed that It was the first evening I’d been home in days. The front window had been replaced. There were cameras everywhere and the new alarm system showed me how to do.

ploded,

I was sitting there staring out the window, or, more accurately, staring at the drawn curtains over the window. Vance told me to do that too. ctically wasn’t thinking about my letter.

I was thinking about Hank.

Or, more to the point, about what Hank said to me earlier that day. e body

Then, because if I thought about it any longer, my patience at waiting for Hank to come home would run out, I let my mind wander to Mace.

Or, more to the point, Mace walking into Fortnum’s late that night, under the direct gaze of all the Rock Chicks (except Shirleen, who was fielding calls at the office and Jules, who was at work at the shelter), and Duke. Stella was there too, with her new hot guy, Eric, and I had to admit, as much as I didn’t want to, Eric was definitely hot.

it Hank I was thinking about how Mace, without a word, handed Stella the keys to her apartment.

Or, even more to the point, Stella’s face when Mace turned around and walked away.

Or, even *more* to the point, Ally losing it and following Mace in a scream at him on the sidewalk outside of Fortnum's in clear view and unimpeded hearing of everyone inside, who stood watching the show.

Ally went on about Mace being a "fucking macho idiot" and quoted lyrics of Billy Joel's "And So It Goes," informing Mace that Stella saw him the day before, even though he wasn't there to see it. Then taking it into her hands by going so far as to shove his shoulder and asking him to calm down, she let out a near shriek, "*What the fuck's the matter with you?*"

At that, clearly done, Mace put a shoulder to her belly, picked her up, carried her back into the bookstore, set her on her feet, and again warning her, turned on his boot and walked away.

Stella, frozen through all of this, had gone pale as a ghost when he returned and then left without glancing in her direction.

Ally stared angrily at the door and then declared, "Electric treatment. That'll bring him around."

At Ally's words, Stella came unstuck, turned to Eric and murmured "sorry," and she bolted into the back of the store.

Daisy and Indy took off after Stella.

Ava and Jet laid into Ally.

I watched Eric, who was staring into the bookshelves after Stella.

I walked to him and explained, "We're kind of a nutty bunch."

Eric's dark eyes tilted down to mine and that was when I realized I should admit he was definitely hot.

"I know," he replied and his mouth formed a small grin, "I read your papers." Then he went on, "Miss Hendrick's County?"

order to Jesus.

nd easy I was going to *kill* whoever was talking to the reporters.

“That was a long time ago,” I told him.

ting the “They have a swimsuit competition?” he asked.

ng it to My eyes narrowed and my hand went to my hip.

her life “It was a teen pageant. They didn’t do swimsuits, just fitness.”

m, in a His eyes got a pleasant, warm look about them, which made hi
her up, hotter and he muttered, “Shorts then.”

ithout a Good grief.

“Um, don’t you have a thing for Stella?” I rudely reminded him.

n Mace “No shot,” he returned, without hesitation or apparent bad feeling.

“So, you’re feeling like branching out?” I asked, cocking my head
shock to the side.

“Nope. Just lookin’ for happy thoughts. You in a teen pageant
d, “I’m routine, wearin’ shorts, is a happy thought,” he returned.

Holy cow.

I decided right then and there that he might not be a member of
Bunch, but he could join the team in a shot.

His eyes lost their flirty warmth and went hard and serious
definitely could be a member of the Hot Bunch). “Call one of your boy
I had to things to do and I gotta go. They need to know Stella’s lost her bodyg
nodded, he turned to leave then twisted back to look at me. “Keep he
ead the from the papers.”

With that, he was gone.

The door had barely closed on Eric when Uncle Tex boomed at
“Well?”

Duke growled back, “Well what?”

Uncle Tex threw his meaty paws up in the air and boomed (again),
it’s time to lay the truth on Stella!”

Duke nodded his head and his eyes went to the door. “Damn straight
it ain’t me that’s gotta lay the truth on her.”
m even

“I’ll agree with that,” Jet put in firmly, and everyone looked at her.

Jet had shared with all of us the crazy, intense and heartbreakin
about Mace and his sister. We’d all been told to keep quiet. Direct
from Mace, who told Lee, who told Indy, who told the Rock Chicks.
didn’t like it, not one bit. She looked like she’d just lost patience
angrily keeping Mace’s secret.

“You don’t say shit, Loopy Loo,” Tex warned Jet.

fitness “Someone has to—” Jet started.

“Ain’t gonna be you,” Tex went on.

“But—” Jet pushed.

the Hot “No lip. Get to work,” Tex ordered, even though, freakishly, cons
the crush of people Fortnum’s had seen the last several days due to
s (yep, newspaper coverage the Rock Chicks and Hot Bunch were getting, the
7s. I got in a lull and only had a few people hanging out at tables.

uard.” I Jet glared at Uncle Tex.

er away Uncle Tex glared back.

Jet had a quiet attitude that usually worked really well.

But no one had enough attitude to out-attitude Uncle Tex. He was

t Duke, man.

“Oh, all right. But he’s got one more day,” Jet gave in.

“Jet, darlin’—” Duke started his soft warning.

“Well, “One. Day,” Jet finished and flounced behind the espresso counter.

I caught Duke giving Uncle Tex a look and I figured Mace was g
ght. But get a heads up call, but I was worried Mace wouldn’t care.

I went to my bag to get my phone. I flipped it open, hit the side
put it to my ear and said Hank’s name. It rang once before he answered
g story “How’s it goin’, Sunshine?” His deep voice said in my ear, a
: orders always, I got a full body shiver.

But Jet I set the shiver aside and answered, “Not good. We just had a
ce with Stella got to Fortnum’s a little while ago, telling us she called Ma
asked for her keys back, and he told her to meet him here. Mace c
gave Stella her keys, barely looked at her, didn’t say word one and to
Ally went nuts, caught him before he left and started yelling at him
didn’t even blink. Stella got upset and ran into the books. That Eric g
left. Told me to let you know he went.”

sidering I paused and then went on, my voice dropping to a whisper.

all the “I can’t believe it Whisky, but it looks like it’s over. Mace isn’t
ey were her anything. I don’t know what’s happened and she’s slid back to w
she was yesterday during the gig. It isn’t a good place for her to be a
worried.”

“He gave her keys back?” Hank asked.

“Yes, without a word. He’s not a demonstrative guy, but he’s pr
on PDA with her. He didn’t touch her. He didn’t even get near her. It’s
a crazy

Hot-Bunch-like, it's unreal," I replied.

"Don't worry about it," Hank told me, sounding supremely unconcerned.

I tried to get through to him. Why, I didn't know. Probably he thought he could get through to Mace. I thought Hank could do just about anything.

"You don't get it, Whisky. Something bad happened. Stella told me about it."

"Don't worry about it."

"Hank!"

"Sunshine, don't worry about it and don't tell anyone, especially Mace. Ally, what I'm gonna tell you right now."

I went silent.

Hank correctly assessed this as my agreement and went on, "I spoke with Mace this morning. He's got the full picture about Stella. When he left his office this morning he told Lee and me that he was going to get some guy just cut. Everything's fine."

I let out a relieved breath.

Mace didn't give her back her keys.

He gave her back *a set* of her keys.

I smiled at the phone.

Hank kept talking.

"I'm gonna be late, but I want you to wait up for me. Boys are busy, they're doin' drive-bys. I still want you checkin' in occasionally."

"Okay."

“Don’t let Shamus out. I’ll see to him when I get in.”

erned. “Okay.”

cause I His voice went soft and I got another shiver when he said,
it aboutsweetheart.”

“Later,” I replied.

us that “I love you,” he finished.

My body went solid, but before I could make a noise I he
disconnect.

I stood still with the phone to my ear, eyes staring unseeing at the
fuckin’ front of me.

“Roxie, you okay?” I heard Ava ask.

I didn’t answer.

ent the Hank had never told me he loved me. I knew. Or at least I th
ft Lee’s knew. But he’d never said it.

1e keys And, because he never had, I hadn’t either.

Good God.

“Roxie? Are you okay?” Ava repeated and she was now close.

I lifted my eyes and focused on Ava.

“Hank just told me he loved me,” I whispered.

“Yeah? So?” Ally asked and she got close too.

1sy, but “He’s never said that before,” I told Ally.

Both Ava and Ally reared back in shock and looked at each other.

“Jeez, he’s not a very fast mover, is he?” Ally asked no one.

“He didn’t give me a chance to say it back.” I kept sharing.

“Have you ever said it to him?” Ava asked.

I shook my head.

“Later, “You don’t move very fast either,” Ally informed me.

My eyes went to her and I felt them narrow. “I’m sorry Ally. The l
I said ‘I love you’ to took a sledgehammer to the door and eventually l
shit out of me, kidnapped me and stalked me. Maybe I’m a bit gun-sh
ard the this love business.”

“Hank’d never do that to you,” Ally returned.

floor in “I know that,” I shot back.

“Then what’s your problem?” Ally inquired.

My body got tight. “What’s *your* problem?” I asked back. “You’ve
in a bad mood all day. You upset Stella!”

ought I “Well, excuse me. But I’m beginning to understand where Shi
coming from with all this shit. My brothers and my friends got a load
on their plate on a regular basis, mind you. They don’t need Rock Ch
thrown at them all the time. It’s getting ridiculous.”

“Just you wait until it’s your turn, Ally Nightingale,” Ava, being
Chick, went on the defensive.

“It isn’t going to happen to me. No fuckin’ way,” Ally retorted.

“What makes you so sure?” I asked.

“Because there’s only one left, not including Darius. And Darius
fuck white women and is like a brother to me,” Ally answered. “And
is gonna happen between me and Hector, ’cause I’ve known him si
were kids. He’s like a cousin or something.”

“So, what you’re really saying is,” Jet came up to our huddle and

the conversation, “that you’re pissed off you *aren’t* gonna get your sl
Hot Bunch guy.”

I smiled at Ava and Ava smiled back.

ast guy
beat the
y about
Ally turned angry eyes to Jet. “No, what I’m saying is I would
myself into a shitload of trouble. And if I did, I’d take care of m
business. I wouldn’t let some guy stick his nose into said business. I w
put up with that shit for a second. Some fuckin’ macho badass tell
what to do and fucking with my life and my head. I wouldn’t pla
games. Some guy tried to do that to me, I’d put an end to it, pronto.”

I couldn’t help myself, I laughed. So did Jet. So did Ava.

ve been
words,”
Ava told Ally.
“Seriously, chickies, not gonna happen,” Ally said into our laughte
“I *cannot wait* for some guy to rip into your life and make you ea

rleen is
l of shit
“Not gonna happen,” Ally repeated.

ick shit
“You are so going down,” I said to Ally.

Ally turned to me and snapped, “Can we stop talking about this?”

a Rock
“Sure,” I replied breezily.

“Who do you think it’ll be?” Jet asked Ava.

“We’re not talking about this anymore,” Ally reminded Jet.

“That Eric guy is hot,” Ava remarked to Jet.

doesn’t
nothing
nce we
“Fuck you,” Ally said to Ava and stomped toward the espresso c
We watched as she stopped halfway there, saw Uncle Tex grinning at
a loon, then she turned on her heel and stomped into the books.

We all looked at each other and burst into laughter.

entered

hot at a We didn't have time to enjoy our hilarity. The bell over the door w
Tod stormed in, eyes wild.

I didn't have to guess why Tod looked wild. He was Indy's of
ln't getunofficial wedding planner and it was T-minus five and a half days to
ly ownntakeoff. Because of this, Tod was clearly in a state.

ouldn't "Do you think because you're all the possible targets for murc
ing memayhem that you can get out of this wedding business?" he screeche
y thoseentry just as Stella, Daisy and Indy came back up front. Tod's eyes na
on Indy and he went on screeching, "Girlie, there's shit *to do!*"

"I know, Tod. Calm down," Indy replied.

r. Tod threw up his hands. "Calm down? I will not calm down! We
at thoseconfirm numbers with the catering company. We need to finalize
arrangements. We need to box and bow the handmade truffles for w
gifts. Somebody needs to learn calligraphy in, like, an hour so
handwrite the place cards."

"I thought we decided I was going to do them on my computer:
unwisely, put in.

"*You* decided. I *did not* decide. Place cards need to be hand
Everyone knows that!" Tod shrieked.

The door opened again, the bell ringing over it, Annette came
shouted, "Yo bitches! Anyone get kidnapped or shot at today?"

ounter. Before anyone could answer, Tod turned to Annette and si
her like"What're you wearing to the wedding?"

Annette's head jerked in response to his attitude slapping her in t
upon entry and replied, "Don't know, Toddie Hottie. I figure I'll si
doobie and it'll come to me."

ent and Tod's face got red and I feared his entire head would explode.

fficially "You come to Indy's wedding stoned, I'll shoot you," Tod threater
nuptial "Dude, I only do weddings stoned. It's the only way to go. Weddi
boring. Snooze-a-rama," Annette shot back then turned to Indy
offense."

ler and "None taken," Indy smiled.

rd upon Tod gave up on Annette and turned his glare back to Indy.
rrowed

"We need a Full Wedding Briefing. Now," Tod declared. "Somebo
a Hot Bunch escort. We're all convening at Indy and Lee's in half an h

need to "Excuse me, but Jet, Ally and Indy are working. We got a breatl
seating any second we could get a crowd," Tex threw in.

wedding "Who cares?" Tod shouted back. "Weddings take precedence over

we can "Not when sellin' boatloads of coffee pays for 'em, motherfucke
boomed in return.

}" Ava, "Don't call me motherfucker," Tod threw down.

"Motherfucker," Uncle Tex boomed.

written! "Oh lordy," Daisy muttered.

"Okay, before there's bloodshed, I just wanna make sure you
in andcomin' to my store opening tomorrow night," Annette put in. "Yo
come. We're gonna have crackers and that squirttable cheese stu
napped, everything."

Unimpressed by squirttable cheese, Tod informed Annette, "No
he facegoing to your opening. Not unless every single response card ha
moke a counted, the caterers have been called, we know where every ass is se
the reception and those places have *handwritten* place cards and box

bowed truffles on their goddamned plates,” Tod snapped then pointed. “Thirty minutes. Your house.”

Then he was gone.

“Oh dear,” Stella breathed.

“Divide and conquer,” Daisy charged in. “Indy, call Lee. Tell I need an escort. Jet and Ava, stay here, see to business. I’ll call Jules, to bring May as soon as they’re done at work. Indy, Ally, Roxie, Annette and me’ll go to Indy’s place and get Tod sorted out.” Daisy turned to Annette. “And we wouldn’t miss your opening for the world, sugar.”

“Phat.” Annette smiled.

Daisy’s gaze moved to Stella. “We’ll talk about rescheduling with Jones at Indy’s. He was cool about you missin’ the meetin’ seein’ were kidnapped and all, but we don’t want that lead to go cold.”

Stella’s eyes slid sideways to Indy who reached out and gave hand a squeeze.

“Let’s get crackin’!” Daisy finished.

I’d spent the afternoon boxing and bowing truffles and arguing with over seating arrangements.

Stella spent the afternoon alternately arguing with Daisy and Shirleen (the phone) about Dixon Jones.

A little after five, Jules and May arrived to help.

Around six, Roam and Sniff (two of Jules’s runaways from the who’d moved in with Shirleen after Jules’s drama was over) showed up with three big Famous pizza boxes.

At about seven, Shirleen arrived with a guitar case in each hand

nted atannounced that Roam and Sniff were now officially getting guitar from Stella.

Until around eight, Stella and the boys were upstairs in Indy's T and we heard them plunking away at the guitars.

him we At eight thirty, Vance showed up to escort us home.

tell her We had, however, managed to get all the wedding work done and Stella, Wedding Briefing, going over every last detail, before Vance showed

urned to Throughout the evening, I'd checked in with Hank a couple of times then, restless and hoping writing a few letters would settle my mind (heart), I'd tried it.

1 Dixon It didn't work.

as you Now it was after eleven o'clock and I was wired.

I heard the front door open and my body jerked at the noise. I grab Stella's stationery, tossed it and my pen on the coffee table and headed toward front of the house as I heard Hank give a whistle.

He had Shamus's lead in his hand when I rounded the door to the porch with Tod and his gaze came to me.

Upon seeing me, his eyes warmed with a smile.

een (via "Hey, sweetheart," he said like he normally said every day if I was when he got home.

"Hey, Whisky," I replied like I normally replied every day if I was when he got home.

up with When I moved in with him, I thought I might have trouble falling anything normal. I thought my ex, the crazy Billy, would have ruined my life and normal. A normal routine. A normal relationship. A normal life with a

lessons (but hot) guy, in a normal neighborhood with a normal dog. I thought
kind of normal would be lost to me forever.

V room But normal with Hank wasn't your average kind of normal.

It was the extraordinary kind.

And I took to it, no problems.

. have a He came to me, curled an arm around my waist, leaned down and
up. my temple. But when he was done with his kiss, he left his lips where
ies, and were.

and my "How was your day?" I asked softly, my face tilted up, my eyes open
looking at his dark hair curling into the back of his strong neck.

I decided I should remind him he needed to make an appointment
haircut, especially right before his brother's wedding, but I wasn't going
bed my Hank had great hair, soft, thick and wavy, and I liked it a shade too
ard the liked it a lot.

"Over," he replied and gave my waist a squeeze. "Takin' Shamus (
kitchen murmured against my temple before giving me another kiss. "I'll meet
bed."

I nodded, feeling my stomach melt, my head sliding against his jaw
; awake stepped away, hooked the leash on the quivering-with-pre-walk-
Shamus, and they were gone.

; awake I washed and moisturized my face and put my hair up in a messy
top of my head. I put on a stretchy, pale-pink lace nightie, got in bed
waited.

ng into Incidentally, I was still wired.
me for

normal I heard the door open again and then Shamus's nails on the wood

ght that in the front room then through to the kitchen. There was silence for
beats as Shamus hit the carpet in the television room before he rounded
door to the bedroom. He burst through, galloping toward the bed. He
up and came at me, licking my face while he got an ear rub.

This too (if I wasn't in on the walk), was normal.

I kissed Hank followed much more slowly.

re they "Shamus," Hank said low and Shamus backed off. He started to round
bed, even though he had to know the lay of the land by heart since he
pen and it nightly. He lay down at the foot facing Hank and he panted.

"Hank..." I started then stopped.

to get a For the first time in months with Hank, I didn't know what to do.

ing to. You didn't just blurt out you loved someone for no reason.

long. I Well, you did, but you didn't.

Good God.

out," he "Yeah?" Hank asked, yanking off his tee.

t you in "Um..." I hedged then asked, "You wanted me to be up?"

aw. He He dropped the tee to the floor and sat at the edge of the bed to
ecstasy his boots.

"Yeah," he replied.

knot on "Why?"

ed and He dropped one boot and went after the other, back still to
answered, "Felt like fucking you."

All the breath went out of my lungs.

l floors Over the months of living together, Hank and I'd had a lot of se

r a few had never been normal. It had always been extraordinary and that had changed.

jumped What wasn't normal was Hank making me stay awake in order to c

“You don't normally have any problem waking me up if you're in a bad mood,” I reminded him.

He'd already taken off his other boot and socks and now he stood, leaning toward me and went after his belt. This gave me a full-on view of his bare chest, which was my favorite part of his body. If you didn't count his eyes and his lips. And, um, other parts.

“Want you awake and alert tonight, Sunshine,” he said before he got up.

“Why?”

He didn't answer. Instead he said softly, “Take off your nightie, Roxanne.” I felt my body tremble, but other than that I didn't move.

I was feeling weird. It was a good weird, a scary weird, an exciting weird.

“Why do you want me awake and alert tonight?” I repeated.

pull off “Roxanne. Take off your nightie.”

“Hank—”

“Do it,” he ordered then he dropped his jeans.

I got a good look at some of the other parts of his body that were my favorite, one in particular, and I took off my nightie.

Hank watched me do this.

Then he moved.

x. That



I WAS STRADDLING HANK, knees in the bed, my head thrown back. Ha
deep inside me, his face pressed in my throat, his hands moving up my
lo it. I slid up, then down, and I tilted my chin to look at him.

His head went back. I put my mouth on his and kissed him.

He kissed me back, tongues tangling. His hands went to my hips
, turned moved me up. My mouth disengaged then his fingers dug in and he sl
Hank's me back down.

It felt so damned good, with my lips against his, I gave a soft moan

Now was definitely the time.

I ground my hips into his, flexed certain, secret muscles and felt
groan.

"I love you," I whispered.

His fingers tensed at my hips and his eyes caught mine.

"Glad to hear you say that, Sunshine," he whispered back.

I smiled.

He fell to his back, arms around me, taking me with him.

Keeping us connected, he twisted us to the side. He opened the dra
his nightstand and pulled out a dark-blue velvet box.

I stared at the box, my body going tight, as his thumb flicked it ope
ere my caught sight of the diamond before he shoved his index finger in, pul
ring out of the blue silk.

He tossed the box to the nightstand, sat back up, still keep
connected. His right hand skimmed down my left arm, captured my
positioned it and he slid the ring on my finger.

ink was I sat frozen, staring at the diamond solitaire on my finger.

back. It wasn't huge, it wasn't small.

It was a normal, diamond engagement ring.

It was *just right*.

and he "If you let Tod plan our wedding, I'm takin' that back," Hank ta
ammed and my eyes flashed to his.

I stared at him, one beat, two, then three, and whispered, feeling th
l. sting the backs of my eyes, "You're never getting this back."

I watched him smile right before he kissed me.

his soft Then he rolled me to my back and he finished what we started.

When we were done and recovered, he slid off to my side, but w
an arm around my belly, threw a thigh over mine and nuzzled his fa
the side of my head.

Shamus, who'd exited the bed when the fun began, returned. H
little roaming and settled where he always settled, down my leng
opposite side to Hank.

ower on Both the canine and human Nightingale boys, like they norma
pinned me down.

en and I I flicked my thumb against the base of my ring finger, making
ling the didn't imagine it.

I felt cold, solid, honest-to-goodness gold.

ing us I didn't imagine it.

y hand, I turned my head to the side, found Hank's mouth with mine and si
"Happy?" Hank muttered against my lips.

I didn't answer verbally, I nodded.

He gave me a light kiss.

I felt the tears I hadn't shed earlier slide out of my eyes.

So did Hank.

old me, "Jesus, you're a nut," Hank mumbled, his arm going tighter.

"Don't call me a nut," I whispered, my voice sounding scratchy.

he tears "Sorry, Sunshine, you're a nut," he replied. "But that's a good thin

I decided to ignore that. Hank called me a nut nearly every day.

And for some insane reason, he *did* think it was a good thing.

"I need to call my mom," I told him.

rapped "It's two o'clock in the morning in Indiana," he reminded me.

ice into

"Trust me, Hank, she won't care."

e did a And she wouldn't.

gth, the Trish Logan would be over the moon.

Trish Logan would call an emergency church meeting so the
lly did, congregation could praise the Lord that her daughter, Roxanne Gise
finally landed herself a good, decent, honest man.

; sure I "Call her in the morning," Hank demanded.

"Whisky—"

His arm got super tight. "Roxanne, call her in the morning," he re

"Tonight is yours and mine."

miled. I sucked in breath.

Then I said, "Okay."

He turned my body to face his, lifted his head and buried it in my r

I wrapped my arms around him and held on tight.

Shamus got the hint and exited the bed.

g.”

whole
lle, had

peated.

He turned my body to face his, lifted his head and buried it in my neck.

I wrapped my arms around him and held on tight.

Shamus got the hint and exited the bed.

SEVENTEEN



WE'RE GOOD

Stella

I was drifting back and forth between awake and asleep.

In my waking moments I was visualizing my bank balance wondering how much I could afford to send home to Mom and Dad (the answer I came up with...not much).

In my sleeping moments, I was dreaming of flying truffles, exploding confetti, Dixon Jones laughing maniacally, Preston Mason showing a picture book with gruesome caricatures of murders in it and Mace filled with pain.

I came fully awake when I heard the scrape of a key in the door.

Juno's body jerked, confirming I wasn't hearing things. I felt her crawl to her belly. As she was at the foot of the bed I couldn't see her, but I knew her head was up, facing the door, ears perked.

I assessed my situation, which was pretty much effed. I'd fallen into a fitful sleep without the phone close by. I had no weapon and wouldn't know how to use one anyway. The house was on a huge plot with other houses close by, and Swen and Ulrika were on vacation.

No one would hear me scream.

The alarm beeped when the door was opened. Juno moved again, shaking with her bulk and she jumped down.

My body was rigid with fear as I listened in terrified confusion to being pressed and the beeping stopped.

I was so panicked I didn't realize after the beeping stopped that I hear anything else except soft movement and Juno's tags jangling collar.

In other words, my dog didn't bark.

This should have told me something.

Instead, I was visualizing myself lying in bed, one of the Night Men, maybe Mace, finding me there looking like I was sleeping, but the back of my head would be blown away.

On that thought, I heard rustling like someone was taking off my clothes. I knew this to be true when I heard the clank of a heavy belt hit the floorboards.

Lordy be.

They were going to rape me before shooting me.

Okay, so I'd die. My luck was shitty enough that was a possibility.

But I was *not* going to be violated first.

Unh-unh.

No way.

Eff *that*.

I felt the presence approach the bed. I lay still, waiting for my n
The covers moved, drifting slowly off my shoulder. I felt the bed de
weight hit it and I twisted and whirled.

the bed I got to my back, perpendicular to the bed, lifted my knees and a the huge shadow that looked like it had a knee to the bed. I kicked o buttons both legs, hitting him right in the gut.

I heard his pained grunt. His body went back and I rolled the oth I didn't off the bed, and started to run toward the alarm panel with its panic bu on her "Help! Help! Somebody, help!" I screamed even though I knew would hear.

But maybe my luck would change.

Maybe an ex-Marine sergeant with super good hearing who rtinale extensive collection of medals was taking a middle of the night run t instead away the battle nightmares. He'd hear me, charge in and save the day.

On this thought, I leaped off the platform toward the door, my l ff their mid-air when an arm sliced around my middle. I emitted a loud, "Oof buckle went flying the other way.

I landed on the bed with a bounce, but before I could twist, a heav landed on me.

"Get off!" I screamed in the shadowed face of my attacker as I t bucked and pushed.

"Jesus, Stella, cool it," Mace growled back, his voice sounding guttural.

My body went still and I stared at his shadowy head.

"You cool?" Mace asked.

I didn't answer. I was too surprised.

moment. Instead, I nodded.

press as He must have seen it or heard it because he rolled off me and li

imed at knees so the soles of his feet were on the bed.

ut with “Fuck, but you’ve got lower body strength,” he grunted.

I turned to my side and got up on an elbow. My eyes be
er way, accustomed to the dim light, I saw he had both hands to his belly.

ttion. “I thought you were going to rape me,” I told him.

no one His head twisted to the side and the air in the room went funny and
a good way. I felt his eyes on me in the dark.

“Why the fuck would you think that?” he clipped, voice still lo
had an residual pain.

o chase “I thought you were a bad guy coming to kill me. Rape me then kil

The air in the room went back to normal.

obody in “The bad guys don’t have your alarm code, babe.”

!” and I

Hmm.

ry body He was right about that (I hoped).

He continued, “You got cameras everywhere. We’d know he w
wisted, before he got the outside door open. You’d have had a call to warn you

Hmm again.

weirdly In my freakout, I forgot about the cameras.

“And he wouldn’t have a fuckin’ key,” Mace went on.

“You don’t have a key, either,” I reminded him.

“Kitten.” His voice was back to normal, now soft and gentle but i

“You think I’d give you back your key?”

My breath went on a road trip down Route 66.

fted his What was he saying?

“You handed them to me today in Fortnum’s,” I told him.

“I handed you a set. I had another set cut.”

coming My breath checked into a motel with a pool.

So when I asked, “Why’d you do that?” it came out all wispy.

d not in “So I could get in when it was time to come home at the end of the
I lay there on my elbow, on my side, looking down at his big shade

My mind was awlirl, multiple thoughts twirling through it all at or
w with Then it settled on just one.

l me.” Mace was back.

That was when I pounced.

At first he wasn’t recovered, or he was surprised that one second
lying there, the next second I was all over him, so he didn’t move muc

This had the benefit of me getting my hands, lips and tongue on hi
had the added benefit that, when I discovered he was still wearing b
as herecould rip them off him.

l.” Then he recovered and it got heated. It became the tangling of ar
legs, the sliding of lips, the tasting of tongues, the gliding of fingert
the dragging of nails.

He tore my panties down my legs and whipped my tank over my h

I got my mouth between his legs then he got his between mine.

normal. Then I rolled him over, got on top, wrapped my fingers around h
guided him inside.

I was in control for three glorious strokes before he rolled r
pounded deep.

I wrapped my calves around his thighs and begged him to do it hard.
Mace complied.

He was kissing me when I came, moaning into his mouth.

It took him longer and my eyes were on the shadowy column of his
day.” when his head reared back, he drove into me one last time and let out
long sigh.

His weight settled into me after he finished, and I liked it, the heat
of him, even though I couldn't breathe.

I took it as long as possible. When I made an audible gulp for air
heard it and immediately rolled to his back, taking me with him so I
top.

We were both still breathing hard, me alternately purring. I tucked
face into the space between his shoulder and neck and cradled the back
m. This head in my hand.

As my breathing slowed, the purring breaths stopping, I realized
something was happening to me. Something thrilling and frightening
ms and something like being on the front page of the paper and referred
ips and “celebrity.”

But bigger.

And better.

Something that made me think, for the first time in my life, that my
life was about to change.

I didn't want to test it but I had to.

“Mace?”

“Yeah?”

der. I didn't know what to say.

Then I did.

"You walked away."

s throat His arms had been loose around me but they got tighter.

a deep, "I was pissed, Kitten," he said softly.

aviness He was pissed. And Mace pissed was like a natural phenomenon
tornado or a hurricane or a volcano exploding or something.

"I was a bitch," I whispered.

r, Mace One of his hands came up and tangled in my hair.

was on "You got reason. Lots of shit happening to you. You can't keep it
it'll fuck you up. So you gotta be able to take it out on someone
ked my someone is me." He twisted his head and kissed my shoulder be
k of his finished quietly, "I gotta learn to handle you with more care."

realized My throat made a noise I couldn't control, soft and low, like a n
stening. pain. But it wasn't that I felt the pain. It was that I was letting it go.

to as a His head settled back, his hand twisted softly in my hair and his ot
wrapped tighter around my waist.

"Why'd you give me back my keys?" I asked.

"You told me to."

ny luck "Yeah, but—"

My body tensed when Mace interrupted me by saying, "Fo
whatever my father told you to do, he's gotta see you doin' it."

Oh my God.

How did he know?

“How did you know?” I breathed.

Mace didn't answer me, instead he went on, “What we're not going to play by his rules. He won't know I'm coming home to you.”

“Do you think he's watching?”

“Yeah.”

anon, a Effing hell!

How creepy!

“Why?” I asked.

“Because he's an asshole.”

inside, It occurred to me that Mace was talking about his dad but I didn't know. That there, mainly because I agreed with him. His dad was The Supreme Lord of All Time.

“If he's watching, he'll see you come in,” I pointed out.

noan of “No, he won't.”

“Yeah, he will. Swen and Ulrika have motion sensor lights outside their arm__”

“He won't see me.”

“Mace—”

His arm gave me a squeeze. “Babe. Trust me. He won't see me.”

The way he said it, I trusted him. I decided not to go there later. I want to know how Mace learned how to get into houses without being

He moved us into the bed, flicking the covers over us. We settled down, he pulled me so our fronts were touching, my hands against his chest, resting at my waist. His fingers started to move whisper-soft on my

na do is decided this felt really nice when Juno joined us and the bed rocked v movements before she collapsed at our feet.

“You know about your mom bein’ sick and the mortgage, don’t you? That’s what he got you with, isn’t it?” he asked quietly.

I didn’t ask how he knew that. He was a private investigator and asking that question would be stupid, and whatever Preston Mason thought of me as a high school grade point average, I wasn’t stupid.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“How much did he share? About your mom?”

dn’t go Asshole “Not much. Just that she had cancer and they were behind on the mortgage, which he owns, by the way.”

Mace sighed then he said, “They were. Today they became current.”

My body froze. I had a mind to protest, to scream and yell, not at him but at the world and maybe his effing asshole father.

ide and Instead, I burst into tears, loud and obnoxious.

But I had reason. The tears were triple-fold. I was sad about my mother, I was grateful to Mace for taking care of yet another one of my problems, and I was pissed as hell at his father.

Mace gathered me in his arms and held me tight.

I cried for a long time and he held me the whole way through.

I didn’t see. When I started to recover, I lifted my head and yelled, “I’m sorry but your father is a *dick!*”

l in and his arm Then, for some stupid reason, I burst out crying again.

back. I As my second crying jag commenced, Mace pulled away and knelt by the bed. I sat up and watched his shadow move, still gulping with tears.

with her jumped off the platform, went into the bathroom and came back, getting bed again and stuffing Kleenex in my fist.

't you? I took a few deep breaths to control my emotion, an effort that luckily successful. When I was done wiping my face and blowing my nose. The Mace took the Kleenex from me and tossed it on the nightstand.

and my Juno had come to her belly to watch all of this. After Mace tossed my Kleenex, she made the doggie assessment that the most recent drawing over and settled on her side with a groan. Mace stretched out in the bed back, pulling me into his side. I rested my head on his chest and draped arm across his abs.

in their "After that, I hate to tell you, but you gotta know," Mace started sighed into his chest, heavy and huge and nodded so he went on, "It's cancer, Kitten. It's spread. We got info that it's not lookin' good."

him, but I bit my lip for a beat then whispered, "I'll call her tomorrow."

His arm, curled low around my back, gave me another squeeze.

mom. I "There's more to talk about, but we'll do it in the morning. You're good enough for tonight. Yeah?"
as. And

I nodded again.

Then I instantly reneged and said in a voice so low you could barely hear it, "I know about your sister getting kidnapped and murdered."

I felt his body go solid.

7 Mace, It was my turn to give Mace a squeeze.

"Please don't go away, please." I was still speaking super softly.

ified off "I'm right here," he replied.

ars. He "You were going to tell me."

ing into Hesitation then, “Yeah.”

“I’m *such* a bitch.” My voice was louder now and harsh even to r
at was ears.

y nose, “Kitten.”

I got up on an elbow and looked at his face. “Did I miss my ch
d away don’t want to miss my chance. You said you’re supposed to be there
ma was but I also have to be there for you,” I explained before whispering, ‘
l on his Mace, give me another chance.”

ped my His hand came to my neck, his thumb sliding along my jaw, the
follow the bottom edge of my lower lip.

l, and I “Tomorrow.”

ovarian “Mace—”

“Tomorrow.”

“I want to—”

’ve had What he said next, or more importantly, admitted, rocked my work

“I can’t talk about it in the dark, Kitten. It’ll fuck with my head al
It’s gotta be talked about in the light.”

ly hear I understood that.

Effing hell, but I understood that.

I would have never guessed Mace had a weakness but there it was.

And without hesitation he gave it to me, a piece of him.

That piece was the fact that he lived in black too.

It was right then I knew I loved him.

And that my luck had finally changed.

And that come hell or high water I was going to pull him out of
my own This made me happy, but I kept my smile to myself. My head we
to his chest and my body relaxed into his. I felt his relax under mi
listened to his breathing go even.

ance? I When I thought he was asleep, that was when I allowed myself to s
for me, Therefore, my body gave a start when he asked, his voice husk
'Please,finally good?'

I pressed my body further into him and whispered, "We're good."
n up to I noticed his chest moving, shaking in a strange way. It took
moments to realize he was silently laughing.

I came up to an elbow and looked down at him again.

"Are you laughing?" I asked, thinking maybe he'd gone temp
insane with lack of sleep or something.

"Yeah," he answered.

d. "Why?"

l night. He did a mini-ab-crunch and twisted so he was on his elbow too, l
in my face. So close, it was the only thing I could see.

"I win," he murmured and his words were full of triumph and arro

For a millisecond, I considered giving his shin a good kick.

Instead, I rolled my eyes and muttered, "Whatever."

At that, his arms shot around me, he dropped to his back taking r
him, me mostly on top, and he burst out laughing.



IT WAS a long time later when I knew definitely without a doubt tha

ick. was asleep that I thought he was wrong.

nt back It was me who won.

ine and



IT WAS AFTER UNGODLY-HOUR-IN-THE-MORNING SEX. After Mace toc
smile. out. After a slightly-later-but-still-ungodly-hour-in-the-morning c
y. “We shower that I was making eggs benedict from scratch.

Mace was hindering these efforts because he was in the tiny kitch
me, sipping a mug of coffee, his big body leaning against the coun
getting in my way.

a few

He was wearing faded jeans, no belt, no shoes, hair still slightly da
was also wearing a bit greener than olive-green short-sleeved Henley
a sweet Henley mainly because it had been made for a normal man,
porarily without large, defined, muscular biceps. Therefore, the sleeves fi
drawing your attention to Mace’s large, defined, muscular biceps.

My attention on Mace’s biceps was also hindering my cooking
Hollandaise sauce required concentration or it would split and when
his face you had to throw it out and start all over, which sucked (I knew this l
it happened to me a lot).

I was wearing a pair of cutoff jeans shorts and a black racer-ba
with a skull entwined with vines emblazoned on the back in charco
Like Mace, my hair was wet and my feet were bare.

“The boys’ll know I’m comin’ to you at night,” Mace told me.

ne with

“How?”

“Babe, the cameras,” he reminded me.

it Mace Effing hell. How was I always forgetting about the cameras?

Mace went on, “The Rock Chicks need to be kept in the dark.”

I was whisking the sauce like my life depended on it, which was true with hollandaise sauce, and I looked over my shoulder at Mace in confusion.

“Why?” I asked.

“They got big mouths, that’s why.”

He was not wrong about that. The Rock Chicks definitely had big mouths.

“Okay,” I repeated. Then something about the cameras hit me. I realized the sauce had thickened and I pulled it from the burner, trying to keep my composure.

I began to feel uncomfortable. “Mace, those cameras—”

“Yeah?”

I set the sauce aside, fished the poached eggs out of the water and placed them on the waiting toasted English muffins and grilled Canadian bacon while I said, “They don’t watch when we, um...you know. Like, this morning?”

“Internal cameras are shut down when the men are home.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

Thank God for *that*.

I poured the sauce over the eggs and set the pan aside. I handed a plate (three eggs, three thick pieces of bacon, three muffins. It was a lot of food but he was a big guy) with a fork and knife and turned my attention to my own plate (one egg, I wasn’t a big breakfast type of person).

We stood in the kitchen, plates on the counter, bodies sideways, standing up.

I really needed to consider investing in a dining room table. How

going to do that and send money home I had no idea, but I figured it was the way to start pushing the guitar lessons gig.

fusion. I was busy eating and my mind was busy thinking. Instead of relaxed and happy that Mace was there and we were “good,” not to mention we’d had great sex (twice), I was tense and slightly freaked out. I could shift from what had gone down the last week, my despair of the last year, and big straight into back together with Mace all is hunky dory.

First, I was worried about our conversation this morning, not only did I see the “more” Mace told me we had to talk about, but also I was worried about how cool as and whatever he was going to tell me about his sister.

And second, my life was still a shambles.

With my head filled with these things, it took a while for me to feel that pleasant warmth sweeping up the back of my neck.

I lifted my gaze to see Mace’s eyes were on me. They were warm and sweet and his lips were turned up at the ends.

“What?” I asked.

“Missed your cooking, Kitten,” came his soft answer. “Don’t worry about anyone who can whip up eggs benedict like she was makin’ toast.”

I was guessing he liked his eggs.

Mace and I had a lot of conversation to get to, eating, and I was

There it went, freakout obliterated.

I smiled at him.

He smiled back.

He had a great smile.

Why did we spend a week fighting with him? my brain asked me.

Oh, shut up, I told my brain.

as time Mace's attention went back to his plate and he forked into another.
"Hank's started a collection."

feeling I was chewing so I swallowed, chased the eggs with some coffee.
I asked, "A collection?"

couldn't He didn't answer my question, instead he said, "Everyone's in, in
first year, Marcus, Malcolm and Tom. Hank'll go after Tod and Stevie and Sam
when you and I come out. They got about fifteen large so far."

only the I was confused and not following. "Fifteen large what?"
for him "Fifteen large dollars."

I stared at him.

feel the "Sorry, Mace," I explained. "I'm not following."

His eyes went from his plate to me. "For your folks."

arm and Gut kick. It wasn't unpleasant, but for a moment it was paralyzing.

I jerked out of my temporary paralysis and asked, "Hank did a collection
for my mom and dad, and in one day they've got fifteen thousand dollars?"

to know Mace nodded.

Eyes back to his plate, he kept talking. "Luke's loaded, so is Lee. Lee
has got money put away. Before Vance met Jules, he kept his overhead
lived tight, didn't spend much. Even though they're lookin' to put
down on a house, Jules has got some huge account that's supposed to be
Uncle Nick's, but he's demandin' she put it down when they find a way to
don't get that, don't care. Bottom line, Vance was generous. Marcus said
once Daisy found out about it, she'd want to be top the heap so he'd
the highest kick in."

My mouth had dropped open.

ier egg. Finally, I said, “Fifteen thousand dollars?”

Mace went back to eating after he said, “Yep.”

fee and “And you?” I asked. “How much did it take to bring them current (mortgage?”

cluding “Six K. Marcus doesn’t know about that,” Mace replied calmly, fo
shirleen the last of his eggs, grabbed his plate and walked it to the sink.

I was not calm.

The freakout had returned with a vengeance.

He was running hot water on his plate when I told his profile, twenty-one thousand dollars.”

“Yep,” Mace repeated.

“Twenty-one thousand dollars in...one...day,” I went on.

Mace turned off the water and shifted to face me. His eyes were a
llectionhe watched me closely.

ars?” “Yep,” he said again.

“That’s...” I started then stopped then started again, “That’s *insane*

Darius “Their debt tops a hundred K, or it did. I looked over your parer
ad low, last night. Your mom’s not workin’. Your dad barely makes enough t
money the mortgage and household bills. They doubled up on the mortgage
) be her care of the first round of treatments. This round is bringin’ them low.”

place. I Another gut kick. This one *was* unpleasant.

aid that “One hundred thousand dollars?” I whispered.

doubled “Yeah,” Mace replied softly.

I looked at him.

He returned my stare.

Then I shouted, “Oh my God! That’s...I can’t...oh my God! I can’t turn my head around that!”

“Stella—”

I shook my head, dropped my fork in my plate, put the plate on the counter and raised my hands then dropped them.

“Not counting the money from the last three gigs...which, by the way, Monk hasn’t paid yet, though The Little Bear paid Floyd I just don’t have to take...I’ve got seven hundred and fifty dollars in savings, just over a thousand in checking and maybe a thousand in the savings bonds Mom bought to buy me for Christmas,” I told Mace then walked out of the kitchen, whipped around on one foot and walked back to see Mace had to watch me. “Oh my God. I can’t help them. I can’t...even fifteen thousand dollars can’t...and we can’t take that money!”

“Kitten—”

“It’s too much!” I yelled.

He smiled, which for your information I thought was totally insane in his world that was *completely* insane.

“You try talkin’ Hank and Lee out of givin’ your folks that money.

I considered this.

I didn’t know Hank all that well. He seemed really nice. A little more intense and more laidback than the other Hot Bunch boys, but not *that* less intense and laidback.

Lee, on the other hand, sometimes just plain scared me. He was a little more intense and, you could tell, used to getting his way.

Shitsofuckit!

’t wrap When I was about to come to terms with all this, Mace spoke again. “My father’s gonna pay off the rest and give them a nest egg. Whatever happens with your mom, it’ll happen with her feelin’ comfortable.”

on the My mouth had dropped open again and I was staring at him like he had announced his intention to spend the next six years traveling to Mars. He could set up a colony of super-Mace-humans.

ie way, “What?” I breathed.

ave my “My father is gonna make your family comfortable. He’s gonna use them a million dollars. That’ll pay off their bills, pay off the house and the kitchen, for whatever lies ahead.”

rned to I still hadn’t stopped staring at him.

ousand “You’re crazy,” I breathed.

He shook his head.

I put my hands to my hips and leaned toward Mace before I spoke. “I don’t want his money. I know he’s your dad, Mace, but he’s a jerk. He’s mean. He’s not going to give my parents one million dollars. I don’t want his money!”

” I ended this on a shout, my body so tense I could feel the muscles in my neck pulsating.

tle less Mace, however, was calm. “It isn’t his money.”

it much “What do you mean, it isn’t his money?”

“I mean it’s mine and it’s my mom’s. It’s also Caitlin’s and Caitlin’s bossy mom’s. He owes us all and the time for him to pay has come.”

I blinked and asked, “Caitlin?”

“My sister.”

n. “My My tense body froze solid.

happens It was time.

Effing hell, it was time.

e’d just I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to go to him, but I didn’t thi
s so he was right. It also wasn’t right to hold my ground. I was at least thi
away from him. It seemed a mile. He still seemed calm, but he coul
There was no way.

na give I made a decision, stayed where I was and forced my body to relax

and pay Then I asked softly, “Her name was Caitlin?”

Mace stayed where he was too and replied, “Yeah.”

I took in a breath then let it go. I tried to find something innocuous
with, settled on an idea and continued, “Did she look like you?”

Mace watched me a beat, shook his head once and answered, “T
. “First, was blonde. Blue eyes. Tiny.”

Second, I kept my silence and my distance, only my eyes were on him. I
Third, I brain was emanating comfort vibes as hard as it could and I hoped lik
he was receiving them.

s in my He put a hand to the counter and leaned into it.

Then he repeated on a tortured murmur, “Tiny.”

I knew in an instant the conversation had changed.

Something about the way he said that word made my heart squeeze

Caitlin’s I waited, eyes on him. He kept his eyes on me.

When he didn’t say anything, I whispered, “Tiny?”

When I said the word, his eyes closed. When they opened the
were there. I saw them, clear as day.

Effing bloody hell.

I held my breath but kept my distance and I hoped to all that was
ink that was doing the right thing.

ree feet He spoke again. "She was a dancer. Ballet. Good at it. So petite,
dn't be. so fuckin' small. But graceful. Just the way she moved was like a dan
stopped and started again, "She was pure elegance. All she had to mc
her hands. She had exquisite hands." He stopped again then went
voice quiet, "Jesus, I'll never forget the way she moved her hands."

He stopped again and I thought there was something important abo
but somehow I knew it wasn't the time to push it.

to start "You were proud of her." My voice was soft.

No. She affirmative.
Mace didn't answer. He didn't have to. I knew the answer

But my Instead he said, "She wanted to move to New York."

ie crazy I nodded.

He kept talking and his voice was getting low and rough and m
squeezed again at the sound of it. "I took her there when she was fc
She fell in love with the place."

I pressed my lips together and nodded again. This was hard. I wa
go to him. It hurt to hold my ground, but I stayed away.

2. "You guys didn't have the same mom?" I asked.

Mace shook his head.

"Half-sister," I went on.

demons Mace just looked at me.

“You were close,” I guessed on a whisper.

“I called her Tiny,” Mace shared.

s holy I Understanding the importance of that word, I felt the tears hit n
and thought about having a cool, tall, handsome, surfer dude broth
Christ, took me to New York, loved the way I moved my hands and called me

ce.” He It was an immensely happy thought at the same time it was devast
ive was sad.

on, his Softly I said, “I bet you were a good brother.”

out this, “Not good enough,” he returned, his voice now unbearably rough
low it was barely a mumble.

And his eyes were haunted.

I couldn’t help it. It hurt too much to keep looking at him. I clo
was an eyes.

I felt a streak of wetness roll down my left cheek, opened my eye
and whispered, “Tell me.”

I held his gaze for a beat, two, then he muttered, “Fuck, Kitten...”

y heart He stopped speaking. His head dropped, he stared at the floor a
urteen. was when I moved.

anted to I went right to him, fit myself into his body, the top of my head ur
face, my arms tight around him. All the while I did this, he didn’t mov
muscle. Didn’t even put his arms around me, just kept leaning agai
counter.

I pressed my cheek into his chest.

“Tell me,” I whispered again.

I heard his cell ring and his taut body went tighter.

“Ignore it,” I said.

He didn’t.

My eyes His head came up, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and I
er whoback to look at him.

Tiny. It was over.

tatingly The guard had slid down over his eyes.

I lost him.

Shitsofuckit.

and so Even so, he wrapped an arm loosely about my waist as he flipped
his phone with his thumb, put it to his ear and muttered, “Yeah?”

I turned to face his chest and put my forehead there so I felt his bo
sed my a small jerk as his fingers flexed into my hip with such strength, it c
little bit of pain.

is again My head snapped back. I saw his jaw was clenched and I felt a c
start seeping through my veins.

“I’ll be there in ten,” he clipped into the phone.

nd that He flipped it shut, and without hesitation let me go, on the n
something urgent.

nder his I turned to watch him nab his belt and boots, the oxygen burning
e, not a lungs.

inst the “What’s going on?” I asked, scared shitless whatever it was was at
Rock Chicks.

He dumped his boots on the edge of the platform and started to s

belt through the loops.

Then his eyes came to me.

“Carter branched out,” Mace’s voice was hard. “With the Rock
leaned protected, this morning he went after Shirleen.”

I took a step back as if he’d dealt me a physical blow.

Effing hell.

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out the

lide his

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Effing hell.

EIGHTEEN



LA LA LA

Stella

Mace took off after he put a gentle fist under my chin, tilted my face and brushed his mouth on mine, muttering a promise that he'd know as soon as he knew anything.

He called twenty minutes later (a *long* twenty minutes) to tell me a car with two uniformed officers would be at my house to pick me up in five." He also told me I was not to let the cops in unless they said those words. As he was talking, I heard angry, male shouting in the background but Mace disconnected without giving me an update.

When my buzzer went, I saw a uniform on the video display who showed his badge and said, "Hunky dory."

At that, Juno and I headed out.

The officers balked at Juno taking a ride in the squad car but I held my ground, and since that ground was outside and exposed, Juno went with Nightingale Investigations.

No way in hell I was leaving my dog behind.

If Sidney Carter was branching out, how soon would it be before I was after pets?

Even if my luck had started to turn, I was taking no chances.

The not-very-informative officers didn't update me about Shirleer except to say they were still sorting things out "at the scene."

The only scenes that involved my friends that I liked were the ones we created ourselves, and for your information, I didn't like those much either.

The officers escorted me to the outer office door of Night Investigations. We were greeted by a silent, tight-faced, angry-looking officer and an angry Jack scared me enough to stay silent too. Jack took me to his room, walking Juno and me to the down room.

The down room was where the boys had meetings and hung out. There were vending machines and a few chairs. It also had a variety of fitness and weight lifting equipment. There was a couch, but in the few times Mace had taken me to the office last time we were together, I'd never seen anyone sitting on it. The boys were usually on the treadmill or the weight bench.

In other words, if you hadn't already figured this out, the Night Men didn't really know the meaning of "down time."

As Juno and I entered the room, I saw Jules, Ava and Jet had the chairs planted on the couch and they were sipping coffee. Daisy was sitting in a chair, leaned back, filing her nails. Ally had lifted up the back of the weight bench and she was lounging on it, legs straddling the bench. Indy and I were seated at a table, playing double solitaire, mugs of coffee beside us and cards.

In case this had not been proved irrefutably, their mellow demeanor was verification they were all effing nuts.

"Is Shirleen okay?" I asked upon entry, Juno loping toward Rox. Rox had leaned to the side and was snapping her fingers at my dog.

“She’s fine, but she’s pissed. She has to buy a new couch,” Ally re-
either, I stared at Ally.

This answer both relieved and confused me.

“Thank God. Looking at that old one gave me a migraine,” Jet mut-
ther.

I turned to stare at Jet.

“I liked it. All those big swirls, black against white. Drama. It w-
g Jack, Shirleen,” Indy commented.

k over, My gaze swung to Indy.

“Maybe Luke and I should get a new couch,” Ava put in thoug-
if they “I’m not sure I’m into all that leather.”
ipment.

I looked to Ava.

“I like Eddie’s couch,” Jet was still muttering.

When my eyes moved to her, I saw she had a small smile on her f-
tingaleit didn’t take a mind reader to know why she liked Eddie’s couch.

“Sugar, how you doin’?” Daisy asked, and my gaze went to her
ir assessers was sharp on me.

I was pretty happy we weren’t talking about couches anymore, t-
ng in a weight how I was doing.

I opened my mouth to speak then clamped it shut.

Mace told me the Rock Chicks needed to be kept in the dark.

Effing hell.

So instead of sharing, I said, “Hanging in there,” and it wasn’t a tot-
neanors

Things were good with Mace and me, which I couldn’t tell them
ie, who shit everywhere else, but that wasn’t news. However, I had a feelin-

plied. had one more trial to get through when Mace finally told me the who about Caitlin. And after what happened that morning, I preferred so shooting at me to whatever Mace had to say.

tered. I walked deeper into the room, and in order to get off the subject c asked (against my will, taking the conversation back to couches), “ this about Shirleen’s couch?”

as pure Daisy waved a hand in the air. “Oh, she just shot the guy who b this mornin’. Used her .44, which means mess, *comprende?*”

It was Daisy I was staring at now.

htfully. Shirleen *just* shot the guy who broke in?

With a .44?

Why did Shirleen have a .44?

Strike that, I didn’t want to know.

ace and When it appeared Daisy was waiting for me to confirm this info had sunk in, I nodded and Daisy continued, “He reeled back, landed : to see couch, blood everywhere. She’s pissed. She loved that couch.”

“Did he shoot at her?” I asked.

hat was “Yeah, she ain’t stupid,” Daisy kept talking, but her attention we to her nails. “With her history, no way she’d shoot someone, e intruder, without him shootin’ first. Got three bullet holes in her w that’s okay, just needs a little spackle.”

Her history?

tal lie. A little spackle?

, it was Effing hell.

g that I “He dropped the gun when she nailed him,” Daisy went on. “Prof

le truth she'd disarmed him, but she was so pissed about him bleedin' on her
omeone she coldcocked him with her gun butt anyway. She's gonna have a
problem explainin' that."

of me, I Oh my Lord.

'What's "Anyway, they'll be here soon," Daisy said, her eyes moving fr
nails back to me. "And you and me got to talk about Dixon Jones."

roke in Nope.

No way.

Not gonna happen.

I pulled a chair toward the couch and sat down. Juno decided to m
rounds and began doing person-to-person greetings. That was to say :
everyone.

"Maybe we can talk about Dixon Jones when people aren't breaki
rmation houses and bleeding on couches," I said to Daisy.

on her "Life goes on, sugar," Daisy returned on a shrug. "I called him las
He had to leave town after your last gig. He's comin' back to Denver
be at your gig on Thursday. He wants a meet then. I suggested w
nt back beforehand, seein' as most of the times you get kidnapped or shot at c
ven an audience members are after the gig. When I explained this to him, he a

all, but I decided to ignore Daisy reminding Dixon Jones about the may
my life, considering he'd witnessed most of it, and even if it wasn't
forget, it'd been in the papers.

I was saved from having to retort when the door opened and S
stormed in.

blem is, The girls weren't wrong. She was fine, but she was pissed.

couch, “Who’s gonna pay for my couch, hunh?”
bit of a She was yelling at a man who was walking behind her. He had
brown hair, the cut expensive, and he was wearing a suit, which also
expensive. He was tall-ish and slight but still fit, maybe late thirties
om herforties. His face was tight, and if anything, he looked even angrier
Shirleen.

“Who’s gonna pay for therapy for Roam and Sniff?” she demanded
Roam and Sniff, her teenage foster kids, followed her in. Roam
handsome, tall, gangly black kid, the gangly part beginning to fill out
Sniff was a small, skinny white kid whose acne was healing and was
ake the hilarious, something I’d learned during their first guitar lesson ye
sniffing evening.

Neither of them looked like they were in need of therapy.
ing into “Hey, Stella,” Sniff called, his face forming a goofy grin as he w
me.
it night. Roam gave me a chin lift, his eyes shifted to Jules and he muttered
, gonna “Law.”
e do it

Jules got up to greet the boys as the room filled with the Hot Bui
greed.”of them, every last one), Tex and Duke.

Body language, incidentally, screamed unhappy.
hard to I looked at Mace, but he didn’t look at me. I knew this was an act
benefit of the Rock Chicks, but it still sucked.

The brown-headed man stopped and his eyes pinned Shirleen.
“I’m glad you reminded me. Why don’t we talk about those boys
Jackson? Tell me again how *you*, of all people, became a foster parent.”

I didn't even know the guy and I knew that not only was he angry, but he'd just asked was not so vaguely threatening. I knew this because the room went heavy.

"The boys were in my caseload at the shelter," Jules said to the man. "I did the background checks on Shirleen."

The man turned to Jules. "Your dedication is impressive, Mrs. Jackson. Considering you were in Intensive Care when these two were placed with you."

Uh-oh.

My eyes moved back to Mace. He had his arms crossed on his chest, his feet planted wide. He also had a look on his face that said if I didn't stop being such a jerk, Mace was going to rip his head off.

"That's enough, George," Hank said quietly.

"Yeah, Nightingale, it's enough," George replied, voice still angry. "I had nothing but shit from you and your men all fuckin' morning."

Hank's eyes narrowed and I took back my earlier thought that he was intense and more laidback than the rest of the men. At that moment, I felt even scarier than his brother.

"We went through three boxes yesterday morning, George," Hank clipped. "Not to mention six days ago there were four drive-bys and one of the fuckin' got shot."

"That wasn't reported," George shot back.

When Hank spoke again, his voice was vibrating he was so angry. "That's as fuck was. Mace and Luke made statements and we had three squads on scene while the incident took place. Furthermore, we got five I

y, what witnesses to rifle fire at a fuckin' club on Friday night."

ie air in "None of that was linked to Carter," George returned.

"For fuck's sake, George," Eddie exploded. "Lee got the call bef
man. "I drive-bys!"

"Hearsay," George replied.

Crowe, "You've got to be shittin' me," Vance snapped.

ith Miz

George's gaze swung to Lee. "You get the call on tape?"

Lee's eyes were on George and I changed my mind again. Perhaps
scare me more than Hank.

est and

his guy

Not taking his eyes off George, Lee said low, "Hank..." and
immediately that if Hank did not handle this George guy, Lee would
might get messy.

But Hank was already talking and he wasn't paying attention to L
y. "I've eyes were also on George.

"We're done," he said.

vas less

he was

George turned back to Hank. "I'm tellin' you Nightingale—"

Hank interrupted him.

, Hank

d Stella

"A week ago, the windows of my house were blown out by an
my fiancée in the house at the time," Hank snapped. "And I've
Shirleen since I was ten fuckin' years old. She's family. And someone
into her house this morning and drilled three rounds into the wall of her
room, but they were aimin' *at her*."

"It sure

s on the

undred

George had the grace to look a might uncomfortable but still han
to stubborn and angry as he glared at Hank.

Thus began a tense staring contest that went on until Hank broke it

“Done,” he repeated then, without another word, he walked out room.

fore the All the men and women stared at George.

George stared at the door.

Then he looked at Eddie. “He wouldn’t be that stupid.”

It was Eddie’s turn to cross his arms on his chest, and with one him he went to the top of the list of Hot Bunch Boys Who Scared Me I

as he *did* “We played your game, you fucked us, and this mornin’ Shirleer got her head blown off,” Eddie said, his voice tight. “Now, *hombre* I got it gonna fuck you.”

l and it George looked around the room and his lip curled before he hissed think you’re untouchable.”

ee. His Luke’s body moved slightly right before he said, “Don’t play the George.”

“You’re messing with the wrong man,” George replied to Luke.

Lee’s eyebrows went up and he entered the exchange. “You think?”

George, in my opinion, took his life in his hands and pointed at Lee AK-47, days where the Nightingale men have *carte blanche* to waltz through known are over.”

e broke “You don’t back down, your dream of sittin’ behind the Governor or livin’ is over,” Lee returned.

“Fuck you,” George spat at Lee.

ging on Oh dear.

. Lee leaned forward, maybe an inch, but it was a scary inch. “Now who’s bein’ stupid.”

of the George glared at Lee.

Lee calmly returned his glare.

Then George made a weird, angry, scrunchy face. His glare traveled through the room, taking us all in before he stomped out.

Everyone stared at the door.

look at Beautiful.

Most. I didn't even know what was happening, but it was pretty obvious that it was a nearly new problem.

we're My eyes went back to Mace and saw his were on me. He moved his head in a short, nearly imperceptible jerk, then he walked out too.

l, "You "You boys okay?" Jules quietly asked Roam and Sniff.

"Fuck yeah, it was great. Shirleen's the shit," Sniff replied, then he sat himself in a chair. "It was like the movies."

"Black bitch can move fast," Roam muttered.

"Don't call Shirleen a 'black bitch,'" Jules snapped, her voice noticeably quiet.

e. "The "Be cool, Law. She don't care," Roam returned.

Denver "I *do* care, boy, and you just lost this week's allowance," Shirleen said, hands on hips, narrowed eyes on Roam, who kept his head averted. "Shirleen. She, apparently, didn't like his belligerent eyes so she cornered him at his desk." "And you bought yourself bathroom duty."

"Shee-it," Roam mumbled, his gaze sweeping the room, his shoulders hunching as if he wanted to disappear.

it's you "I got three and a half bathrooms," Shirleen informed me. "Boys turn each week cleanin' 'em." She turned to Sniff. "You got the week

“Killer,” Sniff’s goofy grin returned.

Roam was saved any further embarrassment when the door flew open. Smithie stormed in, a pretty black woman in tow.

His eyes moved through the room and he was mumbling under his

“Hey, Smithie. Hey, LaTeesha,” Jet greeted, but Smithie waved with impatience and his eyes went back through the room, his mouth moving silently.

Then he yelled, “Where’s the fuckin’ Hawaiian?”

“Mace is fine,” Roxie told Smithie, and I caught Indy rolling her eyes.

Smithie’s gaze sliced back through the room and stopped on Roxie. “Where’s your man?”

“Hank’s fine too,” Roxie smiled.

“Oo, *girl!*” LaTeesha suddenly screamed, making me jump before she surged toward Roxie. “When’d you get that ring?”

My body went still as my eyes moved to Roxie’s hand, which I now sported a sparkling diamond engagement ring.

My stomach pitched in a happy way when Roxie’s gaze found me. She smiled at me.

I smiled back.

“She and Hank got engaged last night,” Ava shared, and I looked at her who was also smiling huge.

LaTeesha’s happy face turned back to Roxie, who had her hand on LaTeesha’s, ring pointed skyward.

“Was he sweet?” LaTeesha asked.

“Oh yes,” Roxie said softly.

pen and “It wasn’t sweet. It was *hot*,” Daisy put in.

Ally placed her hands over her ears and chanted, “La-la-la, not-lis
breath. to-the-story-of-my-brother-proposing-while-doing-the-nasty-one-more
l at her la-la-la.”

ith still Wow.

That sounded like a helluva proposal.

“Wicked,” Sniff breathed, his eyes on the blushing Roxie.

eyes at Indy bit her lip, but her body was shaking with laughter.

Jet giggled.

Roxie. My gaze moved over the Hot Bunch and they were all avoidin
shifting on their feet and trying to control grins.

“Um, excuse me, but didn’t one of ya’ll get shot at this mo
ore she Smithie barked at the Hot Bunch, jerking us out of our happy moment.

I’m not one to tell anyone how to go about their business...” he went
noticed Jet made a noise that sounded like a snort and LaTeesha’s eyes go

“But it’s one thing to shoot at your girls while they got *your* b
ine and covering *their* tight asses, and I’ll admit, that’s some crazy shit, bu
whole other thing to break into a house and shoot at a woman with kid
her roof. Now, I’m thinkin’ you boys have things to do.”

at Ava, “Smithie, sweetie—” LaTeesha said softly.

“It’s covered, Smithie,” Shirleen put in.

and in “Yeah, it’ll *be* covered,” Smithie snapped at Shirleen. “You’re
your ass in with me tonight and you’re bringin’ the boys. LaTeesha, th
with you?”

“Just fine. I’ll make chicken and dumplin’s,” LaTeesha replied on grin at Roam and Sniff.

stening- “Can we have pizza?” Sniff asked.

-time, Shirleen cuffed him gently up the side of his head. “What’s the with you, boy? You heard the woman. LaTeesha’s makin’ chick dumplin’s. You’re eatin’ chicken and dumplin’s.”

“I like chicken and dumplin’s,” Roam put in.

“See? We’ll be fine,” LaTeesha finished.

“Yeah, we’ll be fine ’cause I got myself a shotgun and I bought y .38 last year for Christmas,” Smithie told LaTeesha. “That’ll make fine.”

g eyes, “I’m not hearing this,” Eddie muttered and walked out the door.

rning?” “Smithie, I want your address. You just got put on the drive-by

“Now, Lee said to Smithie and he walked out, Smithie following him, m on and what I thought was, “Damn straight.”

it huge. After that, the Hot Bunch filed out, Luke and Vance after giving / adasses Jules some PDA, Hector after asking me if I knew about the mee it it’s a Thursday with Dixon Jones. LaTeesha followed Matt, who was going s under her to Lee and Smithie. Roam and Sniff followed Bobby, who was g take them to the TV in the safe room.

This left the room filled with Rock Chicks, Tex and Duke.

And for some reason, everyone had eyes on me.

movin’ I didn’t think this was a good thing.

at okay Therefore, to deflect attention off me, I turned to Roxie an “Congratulations, Roxie. That’s cool.”

a wide She smiled and replied, “Yeah.”

“Ava, sugar, go get Stella a cup of coffee,” Daisy said softly, and ran up my spine as Ava nodded and took off on her errand.

matter “What’s up?” I asked as I realized I’d failed at deflecting attention and me.

“You hear from Mace, darlin’?” Tex asked, and I stared at him.

Shitsofuckit.

I had to lie.

you that “Erm...” I mumbled instead of flat out lying.

us just “I’m not sure I agree with this,” Ally put in, her voice far softer than normal and that chill that went up my spine chased its way back down.

“I don’t wanna talk about Mace.” I tried to waylay whatever the route,” planned, but Daisy got up, walked to my chair and pulled me out of it.

uttering “I think you need to be on the couch for this one,” she said to me and walked me to the couch.

Ava and Not good.

ting on “Listen, guys, seriously, Mace and I are over and—” I started again.

to take Daisy ignored me and pushed me down onto the couch.

going to While Daisy was doing this, Jet pulled Daisy’s chair close to me and sat on it. It wasn’t her actions that made me stop talking. It was the look on her face.

“Sometimes a Rock Chick needs a little help from her friends,” Daisy said quietly.

d said, “And sometimes her friends need to know when to back off,” I said just as quietly.

Not being a bitch or anything, but whatever this was, it was unnecessary. Of course, they didn't know that, but still.

"Yeah, and now isn't one of those times," Duke put in, sitting off to the side beside me, his arm coming to rest on the back of the couch behind me, his body turned to mine.

"Duke—" I started.

"Would've preferred Mace share this with you in his own time. I know his time's a-wastin' and bullets are flyin'. It took the girls a while to talk to him about this shit last night but they did."

"Really, Duke—" I protested.

"Quiet, girl, and listen," Duke halted my protest then he asked, "How much do you know about Mace, his daddy and his sister?"

Oh.

That was it.

"Everything," I semi-lied.

I *would* know everything, eventually.

Duke's brows went up. "Everything?"

I nodded.

"You know Mace's sister was kidnapped?" Jet asked softly.

I nodded, this time to Jet.

"You know her dad hired some commandos to try to rescue her when she went bad?" Jet went on.

Uh-oh.

I didn't know that.

essary. That didn't sound too good.

My heart started beating a mile a minute and I tried to cover.

g down Nodding again, I lied, "I know everything." Then as proof I offered
his big know she was murdered and Mace holds himself responsible."

"So why're you and Mace estranged, sugar? I can't believe you
what happened and you'd let that man go on alone," Daisy asked.

out that I didn't have a response to that, so I said, "It's complicated."

me into "Just knowing about her hand would make it so I never left his side
muttered, my mile-a-minute beating heart skipped to a halt and I stared

She looked a little bit angry and that anger was directed at me.

, "How I didn't have time for Ally's anger.

"Her hand?" I breathed, finding I was fighting for air.

They all looked at each other.

"You don't know everything," Tex's boom was low and he was
pale.

"What about Caitlin's hand?" I went on.

"Stella—" Duke started.

I twisted to Duke and grabbed his forearm, my voice sounding
and desperate (exactly how I felt) when I said, "Tell me about her
hand."

r and it Duke's eyes lifted to Tex. My fingers squeezed his arm, he looked
to me and sighed.

Then he said quietly, "After the commandos botched the rescue
retaliation her kidnapers cut off her hand and sent it to her father in a-

He didn't finish.

I jumped from the couch, eyes on Indy, and whispered, "Bathroom
ered, "I I didn't wait for her to answer, I ran from the room. I got into the b
Indy was there, hands on me, guiding me. I was making gagging noise
I know over my mouth. I barely made it into and through Lee's office
bathroom when I hit my knees, tagged the bowl with my arms and
eggs benedict into the toilet.

Indy held back my hair as my body lurched through vomiting and
the dry heaves.
," Ally
l at her.

When I'd finished, I sat on my ass, back to the wall. Indy gave me
washcloth to wipe my mouth as she flushed the toilet.

Then she sat down, close by my side.

I put my hands over my face, the washcloth clenched in one of the
stomach hurt. I tasted the sour vomit in my mouth, but all I could thin
looking was how Mace was that morning.

"Honey," Indy whispered.

"He loved her hands," I whispered back. "He told me they
exquisite."

All of a sudden, I was in Indy's arms and her voice broke with
strained
: effing
muttered, "Oh, honey."

My chest was moving. I felt it, like it was working for air and not
ed back any. I was breathing through my nose, the breath coming hard. I cou
the exhalations against my lips, but all that work and nothing was ge
job, in my lungs. My eyeballs felt like they'd grown ten times their normal s
—" wanted to force their way out of my head.

Mace's words sounded in my brain.

.” *Jesus, I'll never forget the way she moved her hands.*

all and “Oh my God,” I whispered.

s, hand “Shh, honey, quiet,” Indy mumbled.

to his I reared back, looked in her face, which was blurry with my tear
hurled could see she was shedding her own. I'd never known Indy to cry. She
a crying type of girl. Even if this surprised and touched me, I needed t
nd then on, and fast.

“Get Duke,” I demanded.

e a wet “I'm here, darlin'.” Duke was standing in the door, all the Rock
and Tex behind him. Ava was holding my cup of coffee.

“Let's go, everyone out.” Tex herded the Rock Chicks away as I
m. My me and Duke came in.

k about He sat down next to me, one leg bent, one straight out, his wrist
on his bent knee.

Tex shut the door and we were alone.

y were I turned to Duke, and since he wasn't a Rock Chick, I figured
wouldn't get mad at me when I blurted, “We're back together. Mace a
ien she He came home to me last night and we worked it out.” I watched the
surprise hit Duke's face and continued, “We have to pretend we're n
gettingtogether because his dad is playing some kind of game. So we have to
uld feela secret.”

ting to “All right, love,” he replied, his gravelly voice deeper, and I knew
ize and with emotion, which I had to ignore because I was holding on by a thre

“He started to tell me about his sister, but it's hard on him. I hav

him tell me his own way,” I said.

Duke reached out and slid his fingers through my hair at my forehead, pulling it back away from my face. “You’re bein’ smart.”

“The Rock Chicks can’t know about us being back together. And I can’t tell me anymore about what happened to Caitlin.”

“I’ll talk to the girls.”

“But you have to tell me.”

Silence then a gentle, “Stella, I’m not sure—”

I leaned into him. “Duke, I just hurred because I couldn’t take it. I know it’s worse, I can’t let him see that. I have to be strong for him. He’s being good for me. You have to tell me. I have to be prepared.”

“You’re allowed to have an honest reaction—” Duke began, but I cut him off with my head.

“No, you don’t understand. He loved her. They were close. This is what happened at him. I have to be strong. I have to let him give this to me. I’ve got to be able to take it from him.”

Duke’s eyes searched mine for a few beats. I watched him come to a conclusion and he nodded. He got closer and his arm moved around my head, a big hand coming to the side of my head, pressing against it so my head rested on his shoulder.

“Okay, darlin’. Hate to say it, but it gets worse,” he said softly, sucking breath in through my nose, not at all certain what could be worse than a girl being kidnapped and having her hand cut off. But since it ended in murder, I figured it definitely got worse.

Duke went on, “You need me to stop so you can get yourself to

you just say so.”

I nodded my head against his shoulder.

After I did that, he told me.

I didn’t make him stop. I listened to the whole thing without making a sound except for my breathing going heavy.

When he was done, we both just sat on the floor, my head against his shoulder, his arm around my waist.

We sat there silent a long time, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

Finally, I said, “I’ve seen the scars.”

“Sorry?”

“From the bullets, Mace getting shot. On his thigh and his shoulder. I didn’t think anything of them. He was an athlete, athletes have injuries. I thought...” I stopped because there was nothing else to say.

Duke didn’t reply.

“He thinks he did the wrong thing, calling in the police,” I told Duke.

“Far’s I can tell, she was dead the minute they took her. Only wrong done was her dad makin’ it worse by not doin’ everything he could to make it easier for her while they had her. Her dad knew what he was dealing with. Mace didn’t. He just wanted his sister back. Nothin’ wrong about that.”

I nodded my head in agreement and pulled in more breath.

Then I whispered. “I’m not going to be able to take them away.”

“Take what away?”

“His demons,” I explained, feeling hopeless, lost, maybe a little better, and definitely like I was wrong about my luck changing. “They’re

going to go away.”

Duke’s hand gave me a squeeze at my waist then he got up and left the floor. He closed the bathroom door behind him and I stared wondering what to do.

I wanted to go to Mace and put my arms around him, absorb his presence. I was an emotional sponge. I wanted magical powers so I could erase memories. I wanted to be able to time travel so I could warn him, Caitlin. I wanted to give her the life she was supposed to have. Allow me to move to New York and become a ballerina. I wanted Mace to be able to go to the theater, sit in the audience and watch his sister dance.

Most of all, I wanted to kick his dad’s ass.

On that thought, the bathroom door opened and Duke came in with a toothbrush in its packaging in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other. He set the coffee cup on the back of the toilet and held out a hand to me. He picked me up and rooted through the medicine cabinet, closed the mirrored door, and handed me some toothpaste and the brush. I brushed my teeth, scoured my tongue and rinsed my mouth.

When I was done, Duke put down the toilet seat, guided me to it and sat down. He handed me my coffee and I took a sip as he crouched in front of me and looked into my eyes.

Then he spoke, “Don’t know Caitlin Mason. But I suspect, she’s a lot like her brother, you go back in time eight years, sit her down, tell her what was gonna happen, I know what she’d say to you.”

“What would she say?” I whispered.

“She’d say ‘be happy.’”

I knew what he was trying to do.

I also knew it wasn't going to work.

It wasn't that simple.

Nothing about this was simple.

I shook my head and the second wave of tears that hadn't yet come down my eyes.

Duke continued, "You're right, Stella. This is eating him. You see, we were close and that's proved true by the way he's torn apart by this. I know a sixteen-year-old ballerina who loves her brother wouldn't want her to go to haunt him. She'd want him to let go of those demons and be happy. You have to make him understand that's what she'd want."

"How do I do that?" I asked, feeling the wetness start to roll silently down my cheeks.

"By making him happy. You do that, it'll come. He'll let it go."

I shook my head again.

This was not something you let go.

I could make Mace breakfasts of eggs benedict and Belgian waffles topped with strawberries and whipped cream and homemade blintzes or pancakes smothered in warm maple syrup and apple coffee cake with a crust of brown sugar crumble (or whatever) every morning for the rest of my effing life, and it would never make him happy enough to let this shit go.

Duke grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Trust me, girl. I know what I'm talkin' about. I been watchin' the way he is with you. Don't know what happened to him after it went down. What I do know is he hasn't let anyone in. Not until you. You work at makin' him happy, he'll let you go."

For some reason, that was when I remembered what Mace said onstage after I sang “Black.”

*I can't be the star in your sky when you're the only star left shi
e stung mine.*

I wondered what he meant by that.

ay they The only star?

But any How could I be the only star?

spirit to Mace was a good guy. Understandably intense and maybe he had
our job fuse, but all the Hot Bunch respected him. More than respected him
liked him. They weren't colleagues, they were friends.

y down He had to have a life back then, before that happened to Caitlin.

He had to have people he cared about who cared about him.

He had to have other family.

Friends.

His mom.

waffles He never talked about his friends, his past, his mom.

ueberry Ever.

a thick And it hit me then.

it of his I knew.

go. I knew because he was like me.

hat I'm He was black.

v it all. He left his career as an athlete and became a private investigator.

w is he He left his life behind, shut it out, moved on. Everything before
'll let it was gone. He'd pushed it away.

I to me I knew this because I'd done the same thing.

That was when the idea came to me and my back went straight, I
*ning in*my hand from Duke's, wiped my eyes and asked, "Duke, can you d
big favor?"

"Anything, love."

"I need Mace's mom's name and her phone number. But I don
Mace to know you gave it to me."

a short Duke stared at me a second.

n, they Then he smiled and said, "You got it."

Caitlin

I knew this because I'd done the same thing.

That was when the idea came to me and my back went straight, I pulled my hand from Duke's, wiped my eyes and asked, "Duke, can you do me a big favor?"

"Anything, love."

"I need Mace's mom's name and her phone number. But I don't want Mace to know you gave it to me."

Duke stared at me a second.

Then he smiled and said, "You got it."

NINETEEN



CRAZY HONKIES

Stella

“I saw it first!” Leo shouted.

“I don’t care, this tee is *mine!*” Pong shouted back.

I was standing with Indy and Ally, and at the shouts the three of us looked across Head West to see Pong and Leo standing by a round cart rack filled with T-shirts. They looked like they were playing tug of war with a rainbow, tie-dyed tee stretched tight between them.

Beautiful.

My effing band.

From the look of it, Annette’s store opening was a smash hit.

There were people shoulder to shoulder, all of them consuming coffee, olives and Ritz crackers spread with squirtable cheese and drinking IPAs like beer like these were the finest of delicacies. A lot of those people were carrying brown paper bags with HEAD WEST stamped on the side of them in old-fashioned West style lettering. Bags that held T-shirts, bongos and posters, and other things.

It had been fun, thus far, and it was taking our mind off things, what we all needed. That day, Shirleen had been shot at (and lost her couch) .

When if it The boys were there for security purposes and made this plain by
ugh the holstered guns at their belts alongside walkie-talkies. Not to mention v
identical “Don’t fuck with me” expressions on their faces, and fo
g kick-information, these expressions were Hot Bunch Universal. And with tl
g hemp berth they were all getting from the customers-slash-partiers, effective.

of the The girls didn’t go the way of hemp, but at Annette’s demand, w
und her all displaying Annette’s wares, wearing jeans and most of us wearing c
ne of it boots, except Ava, who had on flip-flops. Indy had on a Grateful De

Ally was wearing a peach and yellow tie-dyed tee with a yellow pea
he 60s. on the front. Jules had on a violet tee that said, GIVE PEACE A CHANCE
lorrison the front in psychedelic scrawl. Ava was sporting a vintage Je

Airplane tee. Upon arrival, Annette had given me a pink tee with I
ngs and POWER written across the boobs in cartoon daisies, and like all the oth
sters of I’d changed in one of the dressing rooms. Roxie had on a killer India
1 rolled tunic that was also sold in the shop.

e were Daisy appeared to have missed the dress-code communiqué. S
tenance wearing a white denim miniskirt, a backless halter top made of what
display like tiny silver beads and had a drape at the cleavage that was so low
f bong enormous bosoms it was vaguely threatening. She’d completed her en
d color, with a pair of silver, platform go-go boots and her hair was teased
own to there.

ment of When I’d looked her from head to toe, Daisy told me. “I don’t do
comprende?”

: Mace, I just nodded. There was nothing else to do.

Chicks I watched as a scruffy-looking guy, who I knew was a friend of th
Chicks because I’d met him at a gig some time ago (he went by the n

having “The Kevster,” FYI), shuffled up to Leo and Pong and said one word.

wearing “Dudes.”

or your Then he lifted up both his hands in peace signs like this was g
ne wide work.

I closed my eyes in despair, mainly because I knew this wasn’t g
re were work.

cowboy “Fuck off, hippie,” I heard Pong snap, and I knew it was time to ac
ead tee. an apologetic glance at Indy and Ally, I pushed forward to take care
ce sign band.

across As I made my way through the crowd, I watched The Kevster rear
fferson offense. “I’m not a hippie. I’m a pothead. World of difference, man.”
FLOWER

er girls, Leo ignored The Kevster and yanked on the tee. “Let go, Pong.”

an-style Pong turned back to Leo. “You let go!”

Leo yanked again and shouted, “No! *You* let go!”

he was “Dudes, you gotta respect the vibe of a head shop,” The Kevster
looked informatively. “It’s like walkin’ into a Kabbalah Center and starting
on her slapping fight. You don’t do that shit. You’re killin’ the vibe.”

semble “Fuck the vibe,” Pong yelled just as I made it up to them.

I had bad timing. Pong lost hold on the shirt. He went flying back
and since I was behind him, he slammed into me and we both went
hippie, Our arms reeled out to find purchase and we took down two clothin
with us. They fell to their sides and crashed around us with loud bar
then started rolling, T-shirts and hemp clothes flying everywhere.

ie Rock “Chaos!” The Kevster shouted, arms waving over his head. “Chao
noniker head shop!”

Ally arrived and pulled The Kevster back, ordering, “Calm Kevin.”

Kevin didn’t feel like calming down. He pointed at Pong then at Lee.
“Eject. Eject, eject, eject!”

“If there’s no chaos at the head shop, there ain’t no eject either,”
said from the floor, but The Kevster was having none of it.

“It’s about respect, man,” The Kevster decreed. “No one brings chaos
of my head shop. Everyone knows that!”

Indy was behind me and she pulled me up by my armpits as Hugo
back into our clutch.

He looked down his nose at Pong.

“Crazy honkies,” Hugo muttered, making it clear he wasn’t there to
Shirleen was all of a sudden close and looking at Pong too.

“Brother, you got *that* right,” she said to Hugo.

I’d let this all wash over me without much thought.

This was not unusual. Chaos, in my life (even before the bullet
flying) was not unusual. My band caused chaos everywhere they went.

But at that moment, I was over it.

Effing *over it*.

I’d spent an hour after my time in the bathroom with Duke that morning
sitting in Lee’s office while the Rock Chicks guarded the door. I read through
the papers that the Rock Chicks, Duke and Tex finally shared with me.

The story about Caitlin was all there, with pictures. Picture
beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, smiling, *tiny* teenage girl. The

down, even a picture of her with Mace during his surfing days, maybe competition. He was standing on a beach in a wetsuit, his hair and suit with water, his board planted in the sand behind him. Caitlin, tiny and maybe ten years old, was pressed into his side, hugging him around his smiling brightly, her head tilted back to look up at him as his was tilted to look at her. His arm was around her shoulders, his long, strong fingers curled in, holding her tight. You could see she didn't care, not even a bit, that she was dry and Mace was soaking wet.

Mace was smiling at Caitlin too. He was a lot younger in the picture than he had no idea how old, maybe in his early twenties. He smiled at her in a way I'd never seen him before. His face relaxed, open, unguarded, and it felt like a heart to look at it.

I didn't know how much of himself he'd lost after that situation, not until I saw that photo.

When I saw it, I knew he lost everything.

And it was my job to get it back.

I was just damned if I knew how.

I'd learned about Preston Mason too. A lot about him. Mostly I learned that I wasn't wrong. He was the Supreme Asshole of All Time.

I'd read about it all. About her hand. The commandos. And how he had watched his sister get her head blown off right before his beautiful face had nearly been riddled with bullets.

This meant Mace had a dickhead father, a dead sister, and a girlfriend under fire.

That was worth being pissed off about.

after a *That* was earth shattering.

hit slick *That* could fuck you up for the rest of your life.

young, I found I no longer had patience with Leo and Pong fighting over
s waist, dyed T-shirt of all effing things.

d down And seriously, could you blame me?

fingers

a little When Pong got to his feet, I moved forward, my cowboy-boot
treading on T-shirts. I put my hands in his chest and shoved. This su
cture. I him. I'd never done this before and he went back on a foot.

1 a way "What's the matter with you?" I snapped.

hurt my Pong's eyes got wide as they stared at me and my uncharacteristic
control, and he muttered, "Stella Bella."

ot until "No, really. What's the matter with you?" I repeated. "I wanna kno
Pong blinked then he explained, "That T-shirt is the shit."

I leaned to the side, my fingers curled into the T-shirt Leo w
holding and I viciously tugged it free.

I shook it out in front of Pong and shouted, "This? This is worth ca
learned scene over? This is worth getting in the face of your friend over?
never wear this shirt!" I shouted, and I was right. Pong would never
v Mace tie-dyed T-shirt. Ever.

ul body Then I turned to Leo.

now agoing. "And you!" Leo took a step back when he saw my face, but I ju
"You've got, what? Fifteen shirts just like this!"

And I was right about that too. He had to have fifteen. Hell, he cou
have twenty. Hell, he was wearing one at that very moment!

Leo shrugged and I threw the T-shirt at him. It hit him in the face

lifted up his hands to catch it as it fell down.

“I’m up to *here* with you two!” I yelled, raising my hand, fingers spread palm down, up to my chin. “Linnie’s dead! *Dead!* Floyd and Buzz their way to Oklahoma for her funeral right now and you two are f over a T-shirt.” Both looked uncomfortable, but I kept shouting. “D bullets are flying! We’re in the papers, like, every day. We’re c something big with a record label, which could change all our liv rised Mace...” I trailed off when I saw all the Rock Chicks and the Hot Bun incidentally, most of the partygoers were standing around, staring at m

I clamped my mouth shut, shook my head and forged on, hoping to loss of “Forget Mace. You two, work this out like the men you are, not s olds. I’m done with your shit. Done. No more.” I swung my eyes to w.” “You either.”

Hugo’s eyebrows went up as did his hands, palms out.

“Shit, mama, what’d I do?” Hugo asked.

“Nothing,” I returned. “Nothing to help. You’re smarter than that. using a it. You know it. But it’s always me that’s gotta keep the peace in the t You’d threw my hand out. “You’re all smarter than this. If we don’t keep c wear a together, we’re gonna fall apart and I’m gonna let it happen becau done. Done! Got me?”

They didn’t answer, they just stared.

I decided to take that as a “yes” and I pointed to the floor. “Now ist kept this up, and if you’ve caused any damage you’re paying Annette, even ld even have to work it off. Do you hear me?”

They again didn’t answer so I leaned forward threateningly and re and he “I said, *do you hear me?*”

“Shit, Stella Bella, chill,” Pong mumbled.

straight, “I’ll chill when this is all cleaned up,” I snapped back.

are on fighting T-shirts. “We got it, Stella. No problem,” Leo said softly, bending over to

amn it, Hugo was still staring at me and he was doing it closely.

lose to “Nothing’s going to happen to the band,” Hugo told me.

res and “You’re right,” I agreed. “Nothing’s going to happen to the
ch, and Nothing bad and nothing good either, if you all don’t get your shit to
e.

Do you want to be playing clubs in Denver and Boulder and effing Co
cover. effing Springs for the rest of your lives?”

six year Pong, Hugo and Leo looked at each other and then back at me.
Hugo. never considered going further, mainly because I never wanted to
further.

“We gonna be more?” Pong asked, his voice edged in surprise.

I know “We could be, if you’d start taking care of your damn selves. We
band.” I be a lot more,” I answered. “Do you want that?”

our shit More silence, more staring, more obvious surprise.

ise I’m Finally, Leo whispered, “Shit, yeah.”

“Good. Then you have to help me and you can do that by growin
fuck...up.” On that, I turned to Indy and announced, “I need a beer.”

w clean “You’re holding one, honey,” Indy replied softly.

1 if you I looked down at my hand to see I miraculously still had hold of m
but it had mostly leaked onto the floor.

peated, “I need a new one,” I informed her.

Shirleen's hands came to my shoulders and she started pushing forward, demanding, "Outta the way. Emergency beer needed!"

"I'm thinking beer isn't gonna be strong enough," Ava muttered as they shoved in behind us, and all the Rock Chicks followed.

Shirleen pushed me to the back where there was a pocket of space and serenity. Ally came forward and pressed a new, cold, open beer bottle into my hand. Ava took away the old one and put it on a display case.

I took a healthy swig.

"That was righteous," Ally told me.

"Shoulda done that a long time ago, sugar," Daisy said then she gave me a wink.

Before I could reply to Daisy, Annette shoved in.

"Jumpin' Jehosephats, that was fuckin' phat!" she shouted. "I was worried that nothing was gonna happen. I'd be, like, totally bummed if we couldn't have a party and the Rock Chicks didn't deliver." She shoved my shoulder. "You are sofa-king awesome!"

Then she whirled around and shoved away.

All the Rock Chicks' eyes followed her.

"I take it she's not mad," I said to Roxie, and Roxie grinned at me.

"Nettie's a little weird," Roxie shared.

"You got that right, sister," Jet muttered.

I took another swig and watched Hector enter the store. His eyes scanned the crowd, found me, and he started pushing through the crowd in our direction.

"I hate to bring this up right now, but we need to talk about Ma," Hector said quietly.

ing us My eyes, and my thoughts, moved from Hector to Jet.

The Rock Chicks hadn't discussed what happened that morning. I to JulesTex loaded me up in his bronze El Camino and took me home af morning's heartbreaking activities. In his Camino, I'd shared with l ace and about Mace and I being together as he too was not a Rock Chi e in my response to this was walking me to my apartment and spending the af with me and Juno, eating popcorn and watching action movies.

"Nothin' clears the head like popcorn and Bruce Willis," he'd in me, shoving a huge fistful of popcorn in his mouth.

ave me This was true-ish. Watching Bruce Willis essentially blow skyscraper did take my mind off Mace and all our troubles.

For a while.

getting "I can't talk about Mace right now," I said to the girls.

if I had "She's got a lot to process," Jules told Jet.

"Bitch, "Process, my ass. She's gotta call that boy home, give him the b and get on with it," Shirleen put in.

"They need to talk, not do the nasty," Roxie replied.

"Doin' the nasty *does* the talkin', girl," Shirleen shot back. "Yo that more than anyone. Shee-it, just last night, your man gave you *while* givin' you the business. That says it all."

Ally put her hands over her ears and chanted, "La la la, I'm not lis la la la."

s did a "Sex isn't the answer to everything, Shirleen," Ava talked over All ion.

ce," Jet Shirleen's gaze snapped to Ava. "When's the last time you and Lu sex?"

“I don’t understand—” Ava started but Shirleen cut her off.

Instead, “When?” she clipped.

ter that Ava glanced around then shared, “Before coming tonight.”

him too Daisy giggled and the rest of us exchanged grins.

ck. His “You two share heart to hearts? Does Luke fuckin’ Stark *proc* feelings with you? Or when he’s got somethin’ to say, somet
ternoon communicate, somethin’ to *process*, does he throw you up against t
formed and give you the business?” Shirleen asked, making what I thought
valid point.

up a I myself had given Mace the business last night as my way of s
him I was glad he was back. He heard my message loud and clear. S
talked, but only after my message had been delivered.

“We didn’t have wall sex. We had dining room table sex,” Ava co
stubbornly not giving Shirleen her point.

usiness “Oowee, dining room table sex. I like dining room table sex,” Dais
out. “You two need to get a desk. Marcus and I had desk sex last nigh
sex is *fine*.”

u know “We have a desk. It kind of...fell over when we tried desk sex,” A

a ring “Luke’s a big guy. Your desk is small. You need a bigger desk,’
advised.

stening, “Kitchen counter sex is the best,” Indy put in her thoughts.
creative, but when we do it in the kitchen...” she trailed off and
y. looking dreamy.

ike had “La la la, not listening about Lee being creative, la la la.” Ally w
to chanting.

“I’m not sure it’s the where, it’s more the position,” Jules entered conversation.

“I don’t think it’s the position, it’s all about the intensity,” Jet joined in. “Eddie and I like it hard, rough. That’s the best. You know what I mean?”

“Fuck.” We heard Hector muttered, and everyone turned to see Hector standing behind Jet and looking at her like he wished he could rip off his own skin after hearing that his brother liked sex hard and rough.

“Whoops,” Jules whispered, and everyone started giggling, except for Hector who started blushing.

“Sorry, Hector,” Jet mumbled.

“Welcome to my world. Now you know my pain,” Ally informed Hector. Hector wasn’t about to be dragged into this conversation. His eyes were directed at Ally, and he held up his hand, his index and middle fingers holding a small piece of paper.

“You wanted a number?” he said to me.

Oh my *God*.

Mace’s mom’s phone number.

My breath caught. I felt my eyes grow wide and I nodded.

“Let’s go. You got a call to make,” Hector finished, and without a word he put my beer on the display case and moved forward.

“What call?” Ally asked.

“What’s going on?” Daisy said at the same time.

“Whose number is that?” Indy put in.

red the “Leave her be,” Jules said softly.

It was at that moment Tod and Stevie pushed into our clutch.

ined as “Oh my *God*. I’ve been browsing and there is *nothing* here I want
what I’ve never been to a store where there was nothing I wanted to buy
announced, sounding horrified. “Someone check my forehead. See if I
tanding fever.”

wn ears “It’s a head shop, Tod. You don’t smoke pot and you aren’t a hip
course there’s nothing you’ll want to buy,” Stevie explained.

ept Jet, “I’ve seen *Hair*, like, five million times,” Tod snapped back, put
hands to his hips. “Burgundy Rose could kick the shit out of ‘The
Aquarius.’ I’ve looked everywhere and there’s no macramé halt
Hector. *anywhere*.”

s sliced At Tod’s announcement, Hector had had enough. He grabbed or
i folded bicep and pulled me to him.

Unfortunately, Daisy noticed.

“Hang on. You haven’t answered our questions,” Daisy called aft
Hector started leading me away.

“I’ll explain later,” I said over my shoulder.

“You better!” Daisy shouted, and Hector kept going.

delay I Without a word, Hector led me out to an old-model brown Bron
were both buckled up and heading to my place when he spoke.

“Do you women always talk like that?” he asked, referring, I knew
sex chat.

“Um...” I hedged, because, well, we did.

“I don’t wanna know,” he cut in.

“Good choice,” I whispered.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

to buy.



,” TodTHE APARTMENT WAS DARK. It was late and Juno and I were in bed w
I have aheard the key in the lock.

Juno was sleeping. I was not.

pie. Of I was planning.

I rolled when I heard the door open and the alarm start beepin
ting hislifted up and jumped off the bed. I heard the code being entered and
Age oftags jingled as she walked across the room.

er tops I got up on an elbow, pulled my hair out of my face and called, “M

“Yeah, babe,” Mace called back quietly.

1 to my I felt my heart flutter then settle. Not that I thought anyone was b
in, just that I was glad he was home. I was glad to hear his voice say
babe,” like he came home and said that to me every night. I was glad t
er us asI thought there was a possibility that he could be coming home and
that to me every night.

“Just checking,” I told him. “Everything okay?”

“As okay as it can be.”

co. We That wasn’t a great answer, but at least no one had been shot at.

“Are you coming to bed?” I asked.

7, to the “In a minute,” he replied.

I listened to Juno’s tags jingle louder than normal, knowing Ma
giving her a rubdown. Then I listened to Mace move around in th
taking off his clothes and the soft rustle as they hit furniture. He walk

the bathroom and the light went on a second before he shut the door.

I lay back in bed. Juno jumped up and started to settle at the foot.

I took a deep breath, quit planning my upcoming War with the Demons Strategy and thought about my night.

Hector had walked me up to my apartment and he'd given me a phone to use, saying my cell and landline might be being monitored by Mace's dad.

I found this creepy as all get out, but then again Mace's dad was so that wasn't a surprise.

Then, to my shock, Hector stayed. I thought this was a nice thing wasn't a person who couldn't be alone, but at that moment I didn't want to be alone. Normally, I would choose a Rock Chick to be with me during the first important maneuver in my War with the Demons, but since I didn't want that luxury, Hector would work.

"yeah, because saying I looked at the piece of paper Hector had given me and saw that mom's name was Lana. I thought that was a beautiful name. She'd kept her last name Mason so I was guessing she never remarried. I supposed if you were screwed over by the Supreme Asshole of All Time, you would be keen to jump back into the game.

I dialed her number, got cold feet and hoped she wasn't home.

I had absolutely no idea what to say.

Then I got worried she *wouldn't* be home and I had absolutely no idea how to leave a message.

"Hello?" I heard in my ear.

Oh shit.

Too late.

My eyes flew to Hector. He was standing beside me as I sat in Mace's armchair.

He gave me a nod.

"Um, Ms. Mason?" I said back, dipping my chin to look at my knees. I heard Hector's boots on the floorboards as he walked away.

"Yes?" she answered.

"This is Stella. Stella Gunn. You don't know me. I'm a friend of Mace's. I'm a friend of, um...Kai's."

Sheesh but it was weird calling Mace "Kai."

Silence.

Or, I should say, loaded silence.

"Hello?" I called.

"Kai?" she asked, and the way she said his name made it sound beautiful. She had a gorgeous voice—soft, feminine, melodic. I liked her just for the sound of her voice. But I really liked her by the way she said her son's name. It didn't feel like it was magic.

"Yes, Kai," I told her.

"Is he all right?" I heard a tremor of fear sift through her voice.

"Yes," I said quickly, then I went back on that word. "No. I mean no idea. Fine but he's not fine."

Effing hell, this was hard.

Get on with it! my brain shouted at me.

I don't know how! I shouted back.

Well, think of something! my brain wasn't having any of it.

in my "I don't understand," Lana said in my ear. "You're the girl in the right?"

Oh hell, she'd seen the papers.

es, and I wondered what she knew.

"Yes," I told her. "We're kind of...erm, *special* friends."

Special friends?

of your I was such an idiot!

"I was getting that from the papers," she said softly. Then she in me, "You're very pretty."

That was a nice thing to say so I smiled at the phone. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

What now?

autiful. Bloody, effing hell.

by the "He doesn't know I'm calling you," I told her.

s name, Silence again.

I took a deep breath and forged ahead. "I know about Caitlin. I just out."

More silence. Again it was loaded.
in, he's

"Ms. Mason?"

"Call me Lana."

That was nice too.

"Lana, do you talk to Mace?" I asked.

“Mace?” she sounded confused.

papers, “Erm, it’s what his friends call Kai here. Mace.”

There was a pause before I heard her say quietly, “That doesn’t like my son. He’s not a Mace.”

This made me sad. In the picture I saw that day when Mace was his sister, he didn’t look like a Mace. He looked like a Kai.

He was definitely a Mace now.

“Do you speak with him?” I asked.

formed “I haven’t heard from him in nearly seven years.”

Gut kick, sure and true. In fact, it was *the* gut kick to end *all* gut ki

’ It made me hurt, for Mace and for Lana.

“Oh, Lana,” I breathed when I found my voice.

“Why are you calling?” she asked, her voice getting stronger.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say. Then I did. “I need your help.”

I told her about what was happening. Everything. Sidney Carter. Preston Mason. Even my parents. And also Mace’s and my history.

it found I figured she had a right to know. Mace was her son. I took a chair didn’t sugarcoat it either. I figured since Mace was her son, she had to him who he was at least partly, and I was guessing she gave him the parts since Preston Mason didn’t have anything good to give. Mace had of good parts, so I was thinking her genes had to be stronger so she hack it.

When I was done talking, Lana immediately asked, “What do you me to do?”

I looked at Hector. He'd moved away and was sitting on the pl watching me and scratching Juno's head.

t sound "I need you to come to Denver," I told Lana, taking my eyes from

"Then what do you want me to do?" Lana went on.

holding "Nothing. Just come to Denver. I'll do the rest."

"What's the rest?"

I had no effing idea.

I decided not to sugarcoat that either.

"I don't know. I'm making this up as I go along."

cks. She laughed quietly and it sounded like a pretty song. "That sound like a very good plan."

I smiled at the phone again.

Linnie. "It isn't." I leaned back in the chair, put my heels up on its ec shared, "But I have to do something. He takes good care of me. It someone took care of him. And this, all of this...with his dad, Caitlin, has to stop."

nce and Silence again, but I felt her warmth coming at me from the phone l

o make Finally, she said, "Stella, you should know, he loved Caitlin mo ie good anything else in this world. She didn't have a dad. Neither of them c ad a lot really. Kai did everything he could so she wouldn't feel that loss, not t e could he felt it. When she was taken—"

"Lana—" I cut in.

ou want "No, sweetie, let me finish."

I shut up, mainly because her calling me "sweetie" felt nice. My

atform, or father never called me anything like that. It was one of the reasons I liked Mace calling me “Kitten” so much.

Hector. I wondered if she called Mace “sweetie.”

Lana went on, “When she was taken, I watched my son die.”

I sucked in breath. My body got tight, I felt my throat close and I flew to Hector as she continued.

“Kai disappeared. This Mace person has taken his place. You don’t understand that he might not want me there. Kai, Caitlin and her mom, and I used to do holidays together. We even did vacations together. We were a family out of what Preston left behind. We all got along great, even if it doesn’t first, Chloe and I...” She stopped then started again, “Kai did that. Kai wanted that for Caitlin and for Chloe and for me.”

“And for himself,” I cut in.

“And for himself,” she agreed softly. “But that’s gone now. He’s time gone. And he might not want it back. Not without Caitlin.”

well, it “You’re his mother,” I told her.

“I am, but—”

ine.

“And Chloe is all that’s left of Caitlin.”

re than

“Stella, sweetie—”

did, not

“I need to call her too,” I said, a half-baked plan forming in my head.

he way

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Lana replied quickly.

“He can’t go on like this.”

“My son’s a pretty strong guy. He always was. He can do what he wants. He’s always done that too,” Lana told me, and she sounded nervous to that.

s why I I wasn't resigned.

"That's true. But now he has to do whatever Caitlin wants. And I know Caitlin, but I can't imagine that she would want this. Not for me, not for you and not for Chloe. You need to be a family again."

ny eyes Lana was silent.

"Can you give me Chloe's number?" I asked into the silence.

need to There was a pause. I heard a deep breath and then, hesitantly, "I'll give you Chloe's number, her."

e made My eyes came up and I smiled at Hector.

en if at "That'd be good," I said into the phone.

ai built "I hope you know what you're doing," I heard Lana say.

"I don't," I admitted. Then, since I was admitting things, I went into the kitchen. "But I love him and I have to try."

wants it Another pause then with warmth, "I'm looking forward to meeting Stella Gunn."

I smiled again. "Me too."

I asked Hector for the cell number and gave it to Lana. We said our goodbyes and then we disconnected.

My eyes found Hector's were still on me.

ad. "Am I doing the right thing?" I asked him.

"Absolutely," he replied immediately, sounding certain.

"You're sure?" I wasn't so certain.

ever he He got up and walked to me. I sat in silent surprise as he bent over and wrapped his hand around the back of my head and kissed the top of it.

I tilted my face to look at him, his gaze locked on mine.

I don't "I'm sure," he whispered.

ace, not "I hope you're right," I whispered back.

He let me go and straightened. "Mace is a lucky guy."

I felt a weird, happy warmth flow through me at his approval.

I smiled up at Hector. "Thanks."

I phone Hector smiled back and my breath took a hike through the trails
Rocky Mountain National Forest.

Hector Chavez had a fucking great smile.

Shortly after, Hector took off, leaving me the cell. I used it to
Floyd and make sure he and Buzz were okay. Linnie's funeral was t
for themorning and I was cheesed off I couldn't go, but for obvious re
couldn't. They were coming right back so they could make the
ng you, Thursday.

I shared a few things with Floyd while we talked. He strangely s
both worried and relieved.

r good- Then he passed the phone to Buzz and I shared a few things with h
"Linnie would be so happy," Buzz told me.

I knew she would and that made me happy, but it also made m
wished that she could be around to see it all unfold, believe in it and
believe in herself again.

But my luck hadn't changed that much.

: down, Once I hung up, I made the set list for Thursday's gig and it was g
. When be a humdinger, designed both for Dixon Jones and Kai Mason, and
played guitar. After that, Juno and I went to bed and I planned.

The bathroom door opened and I heard Mace moving through the
saw his shadow at the side of the bed, the covers went back and then
in, stretching out beside me and pulling the covers up to his waist.

For some reason I stayed where I was, waiting for him to reach out

He didn't. He was on his back. He put his hands behind his head
saw his profile facing the ceiling. I was on my side, facing him.

s of the "Lee told me about the fight in the head shop," he said.

Oh dear.

"Pong and Leo got a little out of control," I replied.

phone Mace didn't respond. There was nothing to say. Pong and Leo had
he next of getting out of control on a routine basis.

asons I "Daisy and Hector have set a meeting on Thursday with the A&
gig on from Black Fat Records," I told him.

"You gonna take the meet?"

ounded I took in a breath then said, "Yeah."

He took his hands from behind his head, turned to his side to face
im. murmured, "Good."

"I'm scared," I shared.

e sad. I "I know," he returned.

maybe Well, there you go. Nothing else to say on that subject.

"I swung by to see Monk today," Mace told me. "Got your money.
the kitchen counter. I'll give Floyd, Hugo, Pong and Leo the
going tomorrow."

l then I "You didn't have to do that."

room. I “I know that too.”
he was Well, there you go again. Nothing else to say on that either.
“I didn’t call my mom today,” I told him.
to me. “Good,” he surprised me by replying. “I want to be there when you
d and I My heart skipped a beat.
God, I loved him.
“Thank you,” I whispered.
Again, he didn’t respond.
“How was your day?” I asked, feeling weird.
a habit We’d never done this, lying in bed, talking, sharing, even, one cou
guy *processing*.
It was kind of freaking me out. But in a good way.
“There’s been progress. George, the guy from the offices today
assistant DA. He’s giving us trouble with Sid’s case. Hank wei
George’s head. Presented the evidence to his boss. The boss disagree
me and George. He told Hank and Eddie to bring Sid in. The warrant for hi
went out tonight.”
“That’s good news, isn’t it?”
“Yeah, on the face of it. Sid’s gonna be hard to find. He’s also
retaliate, mobilize his army.”
It’s on “I thought his army was already mobilized.”
ir take “Defensive tactics. He’ll go offensive now.”
That didn’t sound good. In fact, that sounded way not good.
“George is pissed,” Mace went on. “Hank made him look like a fo

“Is that gonna be bad?”

“We don’t know yet. George doesn’t like looking like a fool. He’ll go after Hank, but there’s nothing to get on Hank. Instead, he’ll likely go after Lee and Shirleen as retribution.”

“How?”

“Lee’ll be okay. He doesn’t play by the rules, but he covers his tracks. But Shirleen used to deal drugs.” I gasped at this news, but Mace went through it. “Now she’s fostering two runaways and Jules and another worker at the shelter pulled some strings to place Roam and Sniff with Roam and Sniff might be moved out. Jules might lose her job.”

I said, “Fuck,” I whispered.

“It’ll be okay,” Mace told me.

“It doesn’t sound okay.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kitten.” And he didn’t sound worried. Not at all. I trusted him to be right so I let it go.

“Shirleen used to deal drugs?” I asked.

“Yeah. She was never busted and she’s been clean awhile.”

“I can’t believe that of Shirleen.” And I couldn’t.

“Even good people do bad things, Stella. Shirleen’s good people. She did bad things. Now, she doesn’t. She’s a good foster carer, she loves kids. Would lay down her life for them, proved it this morning. She’s a good friend. That’s all you need to know. End of story.”

It was my turn to fall silent because I trusted him to be right about too. And with what I experienced of Shirleen, I knew he was right.

“Then I shared, “This is weird.”

“What?”

ie’d go “You. Me. Talking.”

go after I heard the smile in his voice when he said, “I like it.”

You could hear my smile in my voice when I said, “Me too.”

I decided it was time to start beating back those demons. I had tracks. right away because I didn’t like him living with them and I wasn’t g
: talked let him do it one second longer than he had to.

r social “I like you coming home to me,” I told him softly.

ith her. The minute I stopped talking the air in the room changed. It felt
became heavy, close but warmer.

Mace didn’t respond, but he did move. Finally touching me, his
whisper soft, at my waist.

I went on, “I like making breakfast for you. I like you in my kit
it all. like that Henley you wore today. It looks great on you.”

“Kitten,” he murmured, and his fingers shifted down the small
back.

He leaned his body into me and pulled me closer.

My hands hit his hard chest. One slid up and my fingers curled aro
she just neck.

is those “I like to hear Juno’s tags jingle when you give her a rubdown
s also a hearing your clothes hitting the furniture.”

After I said that, his lips hit my neck and slid up to behind my ear.

out that I turned my head so my lips were at his ear and I wrapped my arr
around his middle.

“I’m sorry I fought you, Mace,” I whispered. “But now that you’re again, I’m never going to let you go.”

He turned his head and I could swear he was looking at me in the felt my face grow warm under his gaze, my soft body already warming his hard one pressing into mine.

to start

going to

Then he kissed me.

Then we used our mouths, tongues, fingers and other parts of our process everything else that needed processing.

it like it

fingers,

When we were done processing, when I’d finished purring and was breathing steady again, when Mace had rolled me and pressed my back to his front, when Juno had come back to bed and settled at our feet, I whispered, “Thank you.”

to his

“What’re you thankin’ me for, Kitten?” Mace asked into the back of my neck, and he sounded amused.

of my

“I’m the Queen of Super Shitty Bad Luck. All my life, my luck has been bad. Not just bad, super shitty bad,” I shared. “But not anymore. No more bad. It’s always good when you’re around. So I’m thanking you for my good luck charm.”

and his

For a beat, I felt his body go solid as a rock.

to I like

Then his arm around my waist got super tight. So tight, it squeezed the breath out of me, and again to the back of my neck, he muttered, “Jesus.”

The way he said it, the way he held me close, made me hope that in the first battle, I’d kicked some demon ass.

was tight

I considered telling him I loved him, but I didn’t want to push to get too tight too fast.

re mine My war against his demons was going to take a while. I neede
patient and strong and not fuck it up.

dark. I I could wait.
ig from

body to

re were
ick into
feet, I

c of my

as been
ow it's
r being

zed the
s.”

t in my

io hard,

My war against his demons was going to take a while. I needed to be patient and strong and not fuck it up.

I could wait.

TWENTY



DEMON SCUM

Stella

The next morning I made Mace apple streusel coffee cake, unfortunately, as I was under house arrest (in a way), this necessitated Mace making an early morning trip to the grocery store to buy ingredients but he didn't seem to mind, as he never did. And anyway, my apple streusel coffee cake was one of his favorites.

While it was baking in the oven, I tried not to make a big deal out of putting Mace's clothes in the closet and the stuff in his boxes around the house.

I wanted him to notice me doing it, but I wanted to make it seem as if it was perfectly natural—like a daily chore, rinsing dishes or feeding Juniper.

It was another battle in my War with the Demons, making him feel as if he was welcome, settled and at home at my place.

Okay, so maybe it was more like a minor skirmish, but it was still something.

At first, it didn't seem he noticed anything since he was sitting on the couch talking on his cell, leaned forward and writing notes on a tablet on the coffee table.

Considering, even for a normal couple, this would be a huge deal moving his stuff into my space, the fact that he treated it like it was so natural, like a daily chore, began to piss me off. So instead of doing what I didn't want him to notice it, I started banging around while I did it, and I could bloody well get up and help me.

I got down to the bottom of the last box, which was filled with thirty CDs. When Mace flipped his phone closed, I picked up the box, and I took it to the coffee table and dumped it on his writing tablet.

His head came up immediately.

which,
assisted

He looked at me and said, "Babe."

edients,
streusel

I put my hands to my hips and told him, "You need to mark your CDs."

His eyes went to my hips as his brows snapped together.

out of
and the

Then he looked back at me and asked, "Why?"

"Because if you don't mark your CDs, they'll get all mixed up in mine."

I reached in and pulled one out. It was Journey's "Evolution," which I like it the way featured one of my favorite Journey songs, "Lovin', Touchin', Squeezin'." I wondered, briefly, if I could fit that song in the next night's playlist and decided quickly to do so.

For your information, I had that same CD.

was still

Everyone knew what that meant.

"Who cares?" Mace asked, interrupting my mental set list restructuring.

on the
t on the

He lifted up the box and set it aside so he could see the tablet.

Obviously he didn't know what doubled CDs meant.

"I care," I told him. "I have this same CD. How will we know

deal, me one's yours and which one's mine?"

perfectly Mace sat back and put the sole of his foot against the edge of my
it like I table.

like he "Who cares which one's yours and which one's mine?"

My eyes bugged out right before I said, "I care."

n about "Why?"

lugged

"Because I do. Because it's a CD. Because CDs are sacred."

"It's the same CD," he pointed out.

"Yes, but I bought mine at Twist and Shout during my Journey phase
CDs." Twist and Shout is gone now. I was with my old band when I bought
my demand, we played 'Wheel in the Sky,' like, every night. I
everything Journey. Even their power ballads. I hate power ballads.
Journey's power ballads kick...fucking...ass. 'Faithfully,' 'Open
up with Those ballads rock."

"So, if we find we're doubled up on CDs, we'll sell mine on eBay.

hich by I made a choking noise then spluttered, "What?"

uchin', Mace was watching me closely, perhaps wondering if I need
ht's set: intervention.

Then he repeated, saying the words slowly this time, "We've got
the same CDs, we'll sell mine on eBay."

I threw my hands up in the air. "You can't just *sell* your CDs on
ring. especially if we've doubled up. If we're doubled up then they serve
purpose. First, they're backup CDs in case something goes wrong with
and second, they're material evidence that we should be together because
like the same music. Everyone knows that!"

r which

He shook his head, the expression on his face looking like he didn't know whether to smile or to scowl.

Then he suggested, "If you want to mark the CDs, mark your CDs."

I gasped then said, "I'm not marking *my* CDs. I don't want marks on my CDs. The covers, either." I put in the last as an important afterthought.

He took in a deep breath and I could tell this was an effort at persuasion before he tried, "Then mark mine."

"You mark yours."

"Kitten, I don't have time to mark my CDs and I don't have any desire to fight with you about this."

Uh-oh.

Were we fighting?

Fighting didn't factor in with my War against Mace's Demons. Fighting would be highly detrimental to my overall Strategy.

"We're not fighting. We're discussing," I told him.

"Discussions between a man and a woman don't include the act of putting her hands on her hips. The minute that happens, it's a fight. A fight started this with your hands on your hips," Mace told me.

"I did not," I snapped, but I was worried that I did.

"You did," he returned.

I glared at him. "Well, I was putting your shit away. You *could* help me."

"Brody was briefing me on what he's finding on my father. He's coming on the fumes of seventeen six-packs of Red Bull and no sleep for forty-eight hours. He's doin' deep hacks, all of them highly illegal, and some of them he's finding is pretty fuckin' useful. Sorry I couldn't interrupt the lecture."

't know help you hang clothes.”

Oh dear.

” This wasn't going very well.

; on my I decided it was time I gave in before I left the Demon Skirmish an
bloodied and beaten.

patience Therefore, I muttered, “Okay, whatever. I'll mark your CDs.”

I threw the Journey CD in and put my hands to the box, but Ma
there too. He pulled the box out of my hands, twisted to the side and c
fuckin' it on the floor.

I started to straighten on the word “Hey!” when he lifted in a
gripped me at the waist and yanked me to him.

In fact, I grabbed on to his shoulders and hiked up my heels so the fronts
calves wouldn't slam into the coffee table. He had me on my back
couch, him on top of me, before I could say a word.

woman His face in my face, he said, “Kitten, you gotta know, that coffi
didn't smell so fuckin' good and I didn't enjoy watchin' you wan
apartment, puttin' away my shit while you're wearin' those cutoffs I
nd you goddamned much, you'd be a pain in the fuckin' ass.”

Okay, so his telling me he watched me walking around the ap
meant that maybe I was wrong about losing the skirmish. Maybe I w
didn't even realize it.

P.” I didn't know what to say that wouldn't give anything away, so
oasting “I'm so sure.”

erty-two “Leave the CDs in the box,” he ordered. “Once this shit is dor
of what decided you're movin' to my place.”
brief to

My eyes grew round.

I forgot about skirmishes and wars and demons and I breathed, “A

“Yep, you are. I like your space, but it’s too fuckin’ girlie and the
y more enough room. I got a yard for Juno. I got a dining room table so w
have to eat standing up in the kitchen. We’ll move your bed, get rid
other shit and you can mark the CDs all in one go.”

ice was Get rid of “my other shit?”

ropped I did not *think* so!

I crossed my arms on my chest. This took some effort since I
squat, shove them between our bodies but I did it.

“You seem to have everything figured out.”

s of my He grinned, completely ignoring the arm-crossing move, whic
on the “fight” far, *far* more than hands at your hips, and said, “Damn straight.

“Your house is modern,” I told him.

ee cake “Yeah. And?”

der the “I don’t mean to sound funny, but modern’s not my gig.”

like so And it wasn’t.

artment His house was, like, three years old, situated in a modern develo
ron and No personality. All the houses one of three styles, all of them one c
colors.

I said, Boring.

This hadn’t bothered me before since we spent most of our time
re, I’ve place, but it bothered me now. It bothered me because I knew that hi
wasn’t his home. It was just a house. After this was over, I didn’t war
ever to live in a house. I wanted to make Mace’s house a home.

“Then we’ll find another place,” he said, like it was all the same
n not.” and it probably was.

re isn’t The fight went out of me.

e don’t “Really?” I asked.

of your He watched me a beat and then went back to grinning.

“Really.” His head bent and he touched his mouth to mine. “But it
rooms.”

“I could do rooms,” I whispered.

had to His face got soft and so did his eyes. “You set your music up
bedroom though.”

My body melted under his, I pulled my arms out from between
ch said wrapped them around his back.

.” “I could do that too.” I was still whispering.

His hand went to the side of my face, the tips of his fingers slid i
hair at the temple and went back. This made me do a happy shiv
watched his hand move and his eyes came back to mine. I held my b
the intensity behind them then something flashed in them. The demor
out, my breath hitched and the guard slammed down.
pment.

of three Even though I thought I lost the moment, he proved me wrong by
“When I’m with you, sometimes I forget.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about.

e at my I wanted to get up, punch the air and shout with joy, *take THAT*
s house *scum!*

it Mace Instead, I put my hands on either side of his face, lifted up my he
kissed him.

to him, He kissed me back.

It got heated.

Some time later, the timer on the oven went off, and against my had to roll him to the side and push away. I got to my feet and he got sitting position. Before I went to the kitchen, standing between his front of the couch, I leaned down and put my hands to his thighs. I l
'll have my lips against his, kept my mouth there and whispered, "Every ti with you, I forget."

I saw another flash in his eyes before I quickly straightened and
in the away.

I just stopped myself from licking my finger, pointing it high and s
us and my score in the air.



MID-MORNING, after Mace had been gone for an hour, the cell phone
into my gave me rang.

ver. He I went to it, flipped it open and said, "Hello."

reath at "Kitten."

is came I felt another happy shiver.

saying, "Hey," I said softly.

"Hector told me he gave you a clean phone."

"Yeah."

demon "When'd that happen?"

Oh dear.

ead and "Erm, last night. When he took me home from Head West." It was unless it was lying by omission as to why he gave me the phone and

stayed while I used the phone for the secret reason he gave it to me.

“Not all fired up about this newfound closeness you got with C
r will, I Mace said in a low, unhappy voice.

up to a “Hector’s my manager.”

legs in Silence.

rushed “So are Daisy and Shirleen. I think the Rock Chicks on the wh
me I’m mini-managers too.”

walked “Jesus,” Mace muttered.

“It’s all good,” I said breezily, even though that was definitely a lie

blasting Mace decided to move on.

“You wanna come to the offices? Have lunch with me?”

Fuck yes! my brain shouted.

Hector “Sure,” I said out loud.

“We’ll call your mom after lunch.”

Shitsofuckit.

“Erm...” I muttered.

“Kitten, you gotta call her.” This was said softly.

“I know,” I whispered, squeezed my eyes shut hard before I said, “

“I’ll be there. You’ll be fine.”

At least that made me feel better. “Okay.”

“One of the guys’ll pick you up.”

“Okay.”

n’t a lie “Around one.”

that he

“Sure.”

havez,” “You got a list for the grocery store, bring it. I’ll swing by King S
on the way home.”

Another happy shiver.

“You want Belgian waffles tomorrow or leftover coffee cake?”
ole are him.

“Coffee cake.”

“You gonna be home for dinner?”

“I want to say yes, but we’ll see.”

“Okay, I’ll plan flexible.”

“Later, Kitten.” I heard the smile in his voice.

“Later.” I hoped he heard the smile in mine.

Disconnect.

God, I loved him.



THE CELL PHONE Hector gave me rang at a quarter to noon.

I went to it, thinking it would be Mace again and hoping he didn’t
Fuck.” back out on lunch or dinner, when I flipped it open and said, “Hello?”

“Stella?”

It was Lana.

“Hey, Lana. How’re you?”

“I’m packing and freaking out. That’s how I am. Chloe and I’ll
Denver tomorrow.”

Oh my God!

“That’s great!” I said to Lana.

Soopers “I hope you’re right, sweetie. Chloe’s freaking out even more than Kai and her...Kai was bad after...he thought Chloe blamed him and he convinced himself of it. No matter what she said...” She trailed off and I asked
I asked breathed, “Oh *God*.”

“It’s all gonna be okay,” I said like I knew it was true, but I knew nothing.

“She looks like Caitlin,” Lana told me.

Oh man.

Oh shit.

Oh man.

That was it.

No matter what Mace said, I needed the Rock Chicks.

No way *in hell* I was going to be able to pull this off without the Rock Chicks.

“You’re gonna be good,” I promised. “Mace, I mean Kai has a lot of friends. Good friends. Good people. We’ll take care of you and we have to care of him.”

“If you say so.”

Last night, during my planning, I realized that I had to keep Lana and now Chloe, protected. Not only did we have Sidney Carter to worry about, we had Preston Mason and maybe that jerky George guy too.

I be in “Don’t book a hotel. You have to stay with friends,” I told Lana.

“Oh, we couldn’t impose.”

“You have to,” I said quickly. “Kai would never forgive me if I can't take steps to keep you safe.”

im. He Silence, then, “Oh.”

ff then “That’s okay too. Safe is these people’s middle name.”

I was thinking about the Hot Bunch. They had other middle names such as “Bossy” and “Scary” and “Badass” and “Hot,” but I decided not to use those middle names with Lana. She was already freaking out.

“Okay,” Lana said.

“Let me know your flight numbers. I’ll send someone out to get you. Okay?”

She gave me the flight numbers and I wrote them down on Mace’s card. Then I ripped the top sheet off, folded it up and put it in the back pocket of my cutoffs.

While I was doing this, Lana called, “Stella?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

I did another happy shiver, a different kind that didn’t involve Mace’s voice, eyes, hands or mouth. But it was happy all the same.

“No, Lana, thank you,” I said back.

na, and



I PROGRAMMED Lana’s number into the phone under “Bogey One” just in case Mace saw it. I wanted a warning if she phoned again.

I sat on the couch and thought about my options.

Then, because I couldn’t decide, I called Fortnum’s. I’d talk to whoever answered the phone.

I didn't "Hello, Fortnum's Used Books," a woman said, and I knew it was the super-thin, kind of weird, pathologically shy woman of indeterminate age that had worked there since before Indy inherited the store from her grandmother.

ies like "Jane?" I asked anyway, just to be sure.

o share "Who's this?" she sounded guarded.

"It's Stella."

Effing hell, now I had to pick someone.

you at It hit me.

Duke.

s tablet. Perfect.

cket of "Is Duke there?" I asked.

"No," Jane answered.

Beautiful.

Maybe my luck hadn't changed.

Plan B.

ace, his "Okay, then can I talk to Tex?" I blurted.

"Sure," I heard the muffled noises of a hand covering a mouthpiece.

"Tex?"

in case I also heard Tex's muted, impatient boom. "What?"

"Phone," Jane told him.

"I figured that, woman. I got, like, five hundred customers.

whoever message."

"It's Stella Gunn," Jane informed him.

as Jane, “Shit. She’s not riddled with bullets, is she?”

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

om her “Are you injured in some way?” Jane asked me in all seriousness.

“No,” I answered, but Tex would be if he didn’t fall in line with n
pronto. “Just tell him it’s important.”

More phone muffling then, “She says it’s important.”

I heard incoherent grumbling then Tex came on the phone, and ins
saying hello he said, “I’m gonna fuckin’ kill whoever’s talkin’ to the
It’s a fuckin’ madhouse in here. And most of ’em are new, which mea
don’t know the drill, like, what I say fuckin’ *goes*. They expect me to
or somethin’. One told me I needed a customer service trainin’ course
the fuck is *that*?”

“Tex—” I tried to cut in but it didn’t work.

“Trainin’ courses! Yeah, we need trainin’ all right. These fuckers
learn that I make coffee and they drink it. It doesn’t come with a ‘hi
you doin’” or ‘have a nice fuckin’ day.’ They order, they move to the
the counter, they get their coffee and they cease to exist for me. *Fu*
finished on a boom.

ce then, “Tex, stop saying ‘fuck’ so loud!” I heard Indy shout in the backgr

“Fuck!” Tex shouted back. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*”

Oh dear.

“Would it kill you to be a little nice?” I asked when he’d quit sayin

Take a “Yes,” he answered immediately.

Okay, I didn’t have time for this. We needed to move on.

“Tex, I need a favor,” I told him.

“Does it involve me kickin’ someone’s ass?” he asked.

“No.”

“Great. Fuckin’ great. I need to kick someone’s ass. But do you n
y plan, to do that? *No!* You fuckin’ do not. Jesus Jones, what is it?”

I told him about my strategy, Mace’s mom and stepmom’s in
arrival, and I needed the Rock Chicks in on it but sworn to secrecy
threat of certain death if they breathed a word.

“I get to kill ’em if they let the cat out of the bag?” Tex asked.

“Knock yourself out,” I replied.

“Leave it to me.”

Disconnect without even a good-bye.

I ticked that off my mental list.

Onward.

need to

,’ ‘how

end of

ck!” he

MACE and I were sitting in Lee’s office. I was behind the desk in Lee’
Mace was on the desk, sitting close. Next to his thigh were the wrappe
our spicy chicken tortilla wraps.

ound.

I sucked on the straw, procrastinating by consuming the watery dru
long since dead Diet Coke. I was staring at the phone Mace placed in :
me next to the wrappers.

“Kitten,” Mace said softly.

I didn’t take my eyes from the phone.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“Do it fast. Get it over with,” Mace encouraged.

I looked up at him. I set down my dead Diet Coke. Then I tossed it.
“Right. Fast. Over with. Here I go.”

I picked up the receiver, dialed the number to my childhood home,
even after years I hadn’t forgotten, and sat and listened to it ring.

“Hello,” my mom said.

She sounded seven hundred years old.

My eyes flew to Mace. He leaned forward, put his hand on my neck
where it met my shoulder and he squeezed.

Strength flowed through me.

That may sound stupid, but it was true.

“Mom?” I called.

Silence.

“Mom? You there?”

“Stella?”

“Yeah, Mom. It’s Stella.”

“Stella,” she breathed.

“Hey. How’re you doin’?”

Silence.

Then I heard a hitch, like she was crying.

Stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

How’re you doin’? What kind of question is that? my brain asked.

I ignored my brain.

my hair. “Mom, I know what’s going on,” I told her.

“You do? How do you know?” Mom asked.

me that “I have a friend who...well, he’s more than a friend. He’s kind of a boyfriend.”

I looked up at Mace. He wasn’t looking concerned anymore, his eyes were twitching.

ck right Effing hell.

I kept going. “Well, we’re actually kind of living together. His name is Kai Mason. I call him Mace. Though, not just me. Everyone does. In fact, everyone calls him Mace.”

Why was I babbling?

“Anyway, he’s nice and he’s cute. You’d like him.”

Cute?

I was still babbling!

“How do you know what’s going on?” Mom got back to the subject.

“Well, he’s also a private investigator.”

Mom gasped.

“No! No, he didn’t investigate you or anything. I mean, well, after we found out from his dad, who’s kind of a jerk...”

My eyes skidded toward Mace’s face again, but I couldn’t see his face. His head was tilted down. His shoulders were shaking, however, and I was laughing with laughter.

I forged ahead, “Anyway, it’s a long story. His dad told me you were in trouble so Mace checked up on you and he told me you were in trouble. So—”

“Did you pay the mortgage?”

My hand went to Mace’s thigh. I squeezed and his head came up
of my right, he was smiling.

The smile faded when I said, “No, I didn’t pay the mortgage. Mace
mouth “Your dad’s real mad about the mortgage. Went to the bank a
them to return the money, but they won’t do it because we’re behind.”

“He’s going to have to get over it,” I told her. “We’re sendin
name is money, Mom. Our friends did a collection.”

That is, “Don’t do that Stella.”

“Mom—”

“Don’t you do it, girl,” she snapped.

All of a sudden her voice had changed and I felt the blood run ou
face.

She could be harsh, but it was unusual. Mostly she was quiet, tir
t. did everything she could to be invisible.

Mace saw me pale and his eyes narrowed on my face. He drop
hand from my neck, sat straight and hit the button for the speakerphon

he did. I still talked into the handset.

“Mom, you have to take the money.”

t as his “My life’s been a livin’ hell since you left, girl,” I heard Mom o
knew it speakerphone and her voice was sharp and ugly. “You left me to him.

think for a second about me, what I might go through with you gor
ere sick were always so damned selfish. Then I got the cancer. We don’t hea
, one from you for years. Now you think you can swoop in, big time ro
in the papers, datin’ a famous athlete, make it *all* better.” She dragged

“all” with acid sarcasm.

o. I was I felt my heart lurch and my stomach clench as my mother delivered a gut kick.

he did.” She sounded like Dad.

and told And she’d seen the papers.

Which meant she knew I was the target of a killer.

g more And she didn’t care.

“Mom.”

“He’s on a tear about this money. You ain’t helpin’ things. I don’t do this. I need to rest.”

“Mom, let me help.”

t of my “You can help by keepin’ your nose outta our business. You want to go, Stella, you’re gone. Let me die in peace.”

nid and “Mom.”

“Don’t call back. And I ain’t tellin’ him that money was from my hotshot boyfriend, neither. I got enough to deal with.”

e. “Please, Mom, listen to me.”

But the phone was dead.

I stared at it, silent.

ver the Mace was not silent.

. Didn’t He muttered, voice low, “You have got to be fuckin’ shittin’ me.”

ie. You I didn’t look at him. I kept staring at the phone. I was a mixture of mortified and...I didn’t know what.

ar word I didn’t look at him. I kept staring at the phone. I was a mixture of mortified and...I didn’t know what.

ck star, mortified and...I didn’t know what.

out the Finally, I put the handset back in the receiver.

“You...have gotta be...fuckin’ *shittin’* me,” Mace repeated, and forehead her looked at him.

Uh-oh.

He was pissed.

“Mace—”

His hands went to the phone. He twisted his torso violently, ripping of its socket, the cord flying. He got to his feet and, using the entirety upper body for momentum, he threw it across the room.

It exploded against the wall.

Erm.

Wow.

My eyes moved from the phone back to him. “Mace.”

His gaze sliced to mine.

“Those ties have been severed,” Mace said, his voice trembling with

“Mace.”

“You’re not phonin’ that bitch again. I don’t care if she’s dyin’.”

“Mace.”

He exploded, “You’re their fucking *daughter!* Do they *not* know fucking *precious* you are?”

Oh dear.

I wasn’t sure this was about me.

Well, maybe it was mostly about me, but it wasn’t all about me.

I got close to his tense body and put my hands to his neck.

“Mace, look at me.”

inally I His eyes tilted down, but his head didn't. His chest was moving out rapidly like he was breathing heavily.

"She called you selfish," he told me.

"Forget it."

"Said you didn't think about her when you left."

g it out "I heard her," I whispered.

y of his "She ever think of you when he was abusin' you?"

"Mace."

"Answer me, Stella."

"No," I said quickly.

"She ever protect you?"

"No."

"She used you to protect herself."

th fury. I got closer. "Mace, don't—"

"She did, didn't she?"

"Yes," I said quietly.

"She's worse than your dad."

w how "She's not. She's just weak."

"Don't fuckin' defend her. She's worse."

I squeezed his neck.

"Okay. She's worse." My hands slid up to the sides of his head i hair behind his ears and I pressed with my fingers until his head tilted

"Don't be angry. They're not worth it."

in and “I gave them six thousand dollars.”

I closed my eyes.

“You know what I’d give to have my fuckin’ phone ring and C voice comin’ at me from the other end?” he asked.

I opened my eyes and saw the demons in his.

Shit.

“What would you give?” I whispered.

“Everything,” he whispered back.

“I love you,” I said softly, jumping the gun, saying it far faster planned.

But I couldn’t help it. It just slipped out. I couldn’t have stopped it I tried.

Mace stared at me.

Even though it scared the effing hell out of me, since I’d throw there, I might as well go with it.

So I did.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me in my whole li hands could be crushed so I couldn’t play guitar ever again and I w care as long as I had you.”

Mace continued to stare at me.

I pressed my body to his, got close to his face, looked into his b into theeyes and made a big mistake.

l down. “It’s not my place to say, but I’m guessing, I was Caitlin, I had a like you I wouldn’t have gone through what I went through. I wou

known a good life, a happy life, a lucky life. I bet you protected her
your father. I bet you kept her safe. She was lucky, until the end, until
you.”
Jaitlin’s

“Quiet, Stella.”

“It’s true.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talkin’ about.”

“I bet I do,” I whispered.

His hands came to my biceps, his fingers curled around and they clamped
tightly, they hurt.
than I

“Quiet,” he growled.

I nodded, but I didn’t wince and I didn’t move away, even as his hands
bit deep into my flesh.
even if

We stared at each other, his face tight. I hoped mine was open.

But he didn’t give me anything.
n it out

Not even a little thing.

He was closed.

He was gone.
ife. My

Shit!
ouldn’t

The door opened.

I looked around Mace as he twisted toward the door.

We saw Vance swing in. His eyes took in the destroyed phone
skimmed across us both, but locked on Mace.
autiful

Then Vance said, “We got trouble.”
brother

ld have

er from
to have

lid it so

fingers

re then



SOCIAL CALL

Stella

I followed Mace and Vance into the reception area. I nearly ran into back because he stopped dead the minute he hit the room. I stepped him and stared.

Preston Mason was sitting, legs crossed, calm as you please, couch.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Jerky George, the DA, was standing inside the door next to a somewhat unattractive older woman with a p face and bags around the ankles of her hose.

Vance had spirited me into the offices for my lunch with Mace. S hadn't been around when I arrived, but now she was there. She wasn't behind the reception desk. She was standing and she was looking pisse

"You're jokin'," Shirleen snapped in the direction of the older woman.

"What the fuck are you doin' here?" Mace asked, and with a quick I saw he was talking to his father.

"Mace," Vance said low.

Preston Mason was staring at me.

"I thought we had an arrangement," Preston asked me.

“Erm...” I mumbled.

Effing hell!

Caught!

“I asked you what you’re doin’ here,” Mace repeated.

Preston’s eyes moved from me to his son. His hands came from where they were resting in his lap and he flicked them out to his sides, calm.

“I came to talk to you. But I’ve been delighted to have the opportunity to watch this drama unfold.” Preston motioned between Shirleen, George, and the pinch-faced lady.

That’s when, belatedly, I felt a chill crawl up my spine.

“Shirleen, you okay?” I asked hesitantly.

“No...I...am...not,” Shirleen answered.

Oh dear.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Perhaps, Miz Jackson, we can go somewhere private,” the pinch-faced lady suggested.

“Ain’t nothin’ you can’t say in front of my boys.” Shirleen gestured toward Mace and Vance.

“You have more people in your audience,” George told Shirleen. Shirleen’s narrowed gaze swung to him.

“Stella’s my girl. And that one’s a jackass, so he don’t count,” Stella replied, giving a nod toward Preston Mason.

I nearly laughed but I didn’t.

“Shirleen, take it to Lee’s office. We’ll wait until Jules gets here,”
put in.

“I’m afraid Mrs. Crowe is likely busy,” George told Vance. “Y
King’s Shelter is having a surprise inspection today.”

Oh hell.

That was where Jules worked.

Mace was right about Jerky George and he wasn’t wasting any
unity to seeking retribution.

“First thing they’ll be looking into is your wife’s files on the place
two street kids with a known felon,” George continued.

“Interesting,” Preston Mason said slowly. “Is she the felon?” he
curiously, jerking his head toward Shirleen, then his eyes locked on
“Or is he talking about you, Crowe? I know *you’re* a felon.” When the
faced lady gasped, Preston nodded to her and went on informatively,
theft auto.”

Oh no.

This was not happening.

Pinch-faced lady stared at Vance for a few seconds before she br
ured to “Juliet Crowe is married to a felon?”

“No,” I snapped. “She’s married to a hot guy.”

It was my turn to have pinch-faced lady stare at me then she
rapidly and finally turned to Shirleen.

Shirleen “Miz Jackson, we need to do an immediate intervention,” she exp
“Those boys will be placed elsewhere while we look into this matte
should have expected this as you had your home invaded and fire

' Vance caliber weapon during said invasion while both boys were in residence

“I have a right to protect my home and my boys,” Shirleen retorted
ou see, “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure it’s policy to allow firearms in the ho
foster carers,” pinch-faced lady shot back with saccharine sweetness.

“He shot three times into the livin’ room. The night before, Ro
fallen asleep on the couch watchin’ movies. He could have bee
time in Shirleen clipped.

“You can explain that while we take your report,” pinch-faced lac
ment of “But those boys are going to need to be moved today.”

“Those boys aren’t goin’ *anywhere*,” Shirleen fired back.
e asked I looked across the room and Preston Mason was grinning.

Vance. Erm.

pinch- No.

“Grand Someone had to do something and that someone was going to be n

“Are you saying Shirleen has to give up her constitutional rights
foster carer?” I asked pinch-faced lady.

Pinch-faced lady swung her pinched-face to me. “Who are you?”
eathed, “I’m Shirleen Jackson’s friend,” I answered.

Pinch-faced lady’s eyes went to Jerky George and she asked, “D
deal drugs too?”

blinked Shirleen growled. Preston Mason laughed. I felt both Mace and V
still. My head prepared to explode.

blained. “What did you say?” I hissed, taking a step forward, but Mace mo
er. You arm came around my waist and he halted my progress by hauling me
d a .44

his body.

“Everyone knows what she is.” Pinch-faced lady pointed at Shirlee
I leaned toward her, straining at Mace’s arm. “I want you to say
loud. So everyone in this room can bear witness to your slander.”

“Stella,” Mace spoke low behind me.

“No,” I twisted to look at Mace. “They wanna dig their hole deep
should let them. Hell, we should encourage it!” I ended up yelling.

“Be quiet,” Mace ordered.

I was not going to be quiet.

My mother was just mean to me and Mace heard it and it ma
destroy a phone.

My father had been mean to me all my life.

In fact, all my life I’d been rolling over and letting people deliver g
after gut kick.

I was done rolling over.

I turned around and glared at George.

“How stupid are you?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed. “I’m sorry?”

“Have you *not* been reading the paper? Don’t you know that ev
who works in this office is famous? We’re the darlings of Denver. Sc
ance godon’t get your,” I pointed to both of them, “asses outta here, I’m calli
Denver Post and I’m telling them *all* about you. You won’t have to v
ved, his Lee to wipe the floor with you. *I’ll* do it.”

George’s eyes moved to Mace and he demanded, “Mason, contr

woman.”

n. “Oh no. Not gonna happen,” I cut in shaking my head. “Lee said it. Outwanted the Governor’s mansion. So when folks go to vote do you people to remember you as the guy who brought low a good woman who not only opens her home to runaways, but puts herself path of bullets to keep them safe? Oh, I bet the people of Colorado v er? We love that. Coloradans, by the way, don’t care about their Second Amendment rights. Don’t let that worry you one bit!” I snapped sarcastically and went on, “And Jules, a social worker who’s pregnant for God’s sake spends her days doing good deeds and you’re making her life miserable de him let’s not forget the rest of the Rock Chicks, living behind alarms and not to go anywhere without bodyguards. We were just going about our business and then we all got shot at! I got hit!”

gut kick I was now yelling, but I kept right on going.

“Two of those Rock Chicks are fiancées of cops. Cops who keep streets safe. I’m sure that’ll make you *real* popular. And you could stop you didn’t. All of this as retribution because you didn’t get your way because you were fighting for right, for justice, but because you’re standing in the way of it while people’s asses were on the line. How’s it gonna sound? That’s gonna make juicy headlines, George. I’m sure I’ll have everyone reporter who’ll eat this up. You’re gonna be fucked. People will hate you if you I’d run out of steam so I stopped and watched as George’s eyes were ing *The* working. He didn’t get a chance to say anything because that was wait for Preston Mason stood and he did so while clapping.

“Bravo, Stella,” he said to me when he stopped his one man crowd. “You’re good. I liked the touch with the Second Amendment. I guess

didn't skip that class while you were in school."

aid you "Go to hell," I hissed.

u want "You have your daughter kidnapped and murdered then you'll kr
man, a meaning of hell," he shot back, and I felt the air grow thick as Mac
f in the tight behind me and I felt waves of hostility coming from Van
vill just Shirleen.

ndment As for me, well, what could I say?

nd then I was on a roll.

ke. She

le. And "You sure that hell has to do with Caitlin being kidnapped and mu
not able Or is it something else, Preston?" I asked. "Maybe that hell is knowi
business had a beautiful daughter and an accomplished son and you spent yo
making money and screwing people over and not getting to know yo
fucking children."

eeep the I scored a point. I knew this because his face twisted.

p it, but "Shut your mouth." It was his turn to hiss.

ay, not "Not a chance," I fired back. "You had your say in the limousine, r
u were have mine. You make me sick. I can barely look at you without vo
v's that You think I'm stupid? I'm not stupid enough to throw away someth
I find a good." I jerked my thumb toward Mace. "Not like you did, yo
ou." Foreclose on my parents' house while my mother's dying of canc
as were ahead. That'll just be one more black mark on your soul, but you
s when have enough to shoot straight to hell when your time's up. Don't you?"

Preston glared at me.

vation. I strained against Mace's arm to lean forward and scream, "*Don't y*

ess you I felt Mace lean into me and his mouth was right by my ear right

he said softly, "Enough, Kitten."

At his words, I straightened and sagged into him, spent. He took the weight by wrapping his other arm around me.

Preston Mason's gaze moved between the two of us and stopped on Mace. "I came by to talk deal."

"There'll be no deals," Mace returned in a firm voice.

"Be smart, son," Preston replied softly.

"Maybe I should offer that same advice," Mace suggested.

Preston stared at Mace then he shook his head. "Her parents will be on the street tomorrow."

"That'll be difficult, considering the mortgage has been made on our own," Mace retorted.

Surprise flashed across Preston's face before he hid it.

He tried a different tack and nodded at me. "You can do better."

"That's fuckin' hilarious, you givin' me advice on women since I threw away two good ones without battin' a fuckin' eye," Mace shot back.

I looked at Shirleen. Shirleen was grinning at Mace. Then she looked at me and pressed her lips together like she was trying hard not to laugh.

"We going head-to-head?" Preston asked his son.

"Looks that way," Mace answered.

"I always win," Preston told Mace.

"This'll be interestin', since the same holds true for me," Mace returned.

"May the best man win!" Shirleen shouted. "New pool! I got fifty dollars before on Mace."

“Don’t think anyone’s gonna bet against you, Shirleen,” Vance put
ook my At that, for some reason, Shirleen burst out laughing. I couldn’t
The situation was just too freaky and scary. I started laughing righ
ped onwith her.

The door opened and Lee walked in with, of all people, Smithie.

“Well, fuck me,” Lee said, looking at George. “Is this a social call?”

I felt the tension ebb out of the room as it moved out of Mace
hostile vibes stopped emanating from Vance.

be out “Nightingale,” George replied, but he was looking pale and his ey
weirdly on Smithie. It was weird because they were on Smithie with
urrent,”actually focusing on Smithie, then he said, “Mrs. Armstrong, perh
should go.”

“But—” pinch-faced lady, or apparently, Mrs. Armstrong, sta
protest, but she didn’t finish.

ice you “Is that...?” Smithie was looking closely at George. “It is!
ack. Riverside. Well, damn, man. You don’t come around much anymore.
you been, motherfucker?”

oked at I stared between George and Smithie as George’s face started getti

“Sorry, do I know you?” George asked.

“Sure. It’s been a while but you used to come to my club all the
Smithie leaned toward Mrs. Armstrong. “I own a strip club and Georg
likes lap dances. Dirty ones. Pays extra to get a little touch here an
rned. from the girls. Usually blondes with big tits. I mean *big*.”

y bucks Smithie put his hands out in front of him and pinch-face lady reare

“Now he goes outta town for his action,” Smithie continued.

Pinch-faced lady turned to stare in horror at George as Smith help it. talking.

“Not far to Wyoming, is it George? Still, got a friend up there, you’re a regular. Damn, ain’t cool to take your business out of state. V local guys gonna do?”

Pinch-faced lady stepped away from George and swung her and the Shirleen.

“I’ll call you Miz Jackson.”

“You do that,” Shirleen replied, settling in her seat at the same time was sorting through her pencil holder. She yanked out a nail file and back, crossed her legs and started to file her nails.

On that, pinch-faced lady took off.

“Nightingale—” George started.

“We got pictures, George,” Lee cut him off. “And that’s scratch Georgesurface. It took me half an hour to find that on you. You want more, yo Where this shit up.”

George’s mouth got tight. Then he looked to his shoes and he left t ng red. Preston Mason’s cool eyes swung through the room. Everyone back. Shirleen even did it while filing her nails.

“Pleasure,” Preston murmured, and he too left.

The minute the door closed, Lee’s eyes went immediately to Shirle d there “You okay?” he asked.

“Will be, once Georgie Porgie gets his ass back to his office and c d back. dogs off Jules, Roam and Sniff,” she answered.

Clearly, that was good enough for Lee and his eyes cut to Mace. “Y

ie kept “Yeah,” Mace replied.

Lee’s eyes moved to me. “Stella?”

he says “You guys know a lot of dicks,” I told him.

What us Lee’s eyes crinkled in a smile that didn’t quite make it to his mo
he said softly. “That’s the sorry truth.”

gaze to “Am I done here?” Smithie asked impatiently.

Lee clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, Smithie.”

Smithie threw up one hand and then he was gone.

me she
leaned Shirleen hit a button on the phone and we heard the speaker click
the phone ringing.

“Yeah?” Jack’s voice could be heard throughout the room.

“You get Stella on tape doin’ her ‘You won’t have to wait for Lee
the floor with you, *I’ll* do it’ speech?” Shirleen asked Jack.

ing the
ou keep My body went solid.

“Got it,” Jack replied, and you could hear him chuckle.

oo. “Get me a copy, I wanna transcribe that fucker,” Shirleen den

stared “Luke, Eddie and Hank’ve gotta hear this shit. Hell, I might get
Malcolm to send out a network-wide email to all the po-lice. Give the
blue a good old fuckin’ giggle.”

I turned and looked up at Mace.

en.
Apparently he was none the worse for wear after our episode in
office and the showdown with his dad. I knew this because, when he
alls the down at me, his gaze was warm and he was grinning.

He took one arm away, pointed to the corner of the room and n
“You?”

went in the direction he was indicating. His arms went back around
leaned down and said one scary word softly in my ear.

“Cameras.”

uth and I stared at the camera.

Effing hell.

I looked back to Mace.

“Is she serious?”

His grin broadened to a smile. “Probably.”

on and “Shit,” I whispered.

His arms got tight. “You okay?”

“Your dad is the Supreme Asshole of All Time.”

to wipe His smile died and his arms went from around me to my bice
fingers curled around, his thumbs stroking the inside skin gently.

“I hurt you?” he asked in a soft voice.

“I’ll live,” I replied in a softer one.

anded. His eyes flashed, but he let it go.

Tom or “Vance’ll take you home. We’ll talk more later.”

boys in I nodded.

From across the room, Shirleen entered our conversation, “Can I j
what in *the* fuck is goin’ on with you two?”

n Lee’s Mace and I twisted to face Shirleen.

looked “It’s a long story,” I explained.

ly eyes “Well, get your ass over here and start tellin’ it,” Shirleen shot back

I looked back at Mace. He smiled, bent low and kissed my forehea

me, he “Got things to do. You got a grocery list?”

I pulled the grocery list out of my back pocket and handed it to him.

Then I stared at the piece of paper in his hand, wondering if it was a grocery list or the flight numbers. I snatched it back and whipped it open, flipping it open.

It was the grocery list.

I let out a big sigh, turned back and handed it to Mace again.

His eyes were narrowed. “What the fuck?”

“Nothin’, just, erm...”

My mind raced for some reason to explain why I was such an idiot and I came up with something.

ps. His “Thought that was the set list for tomorrow. You know I’m weird about those.” I wasn’t, that was a total lie, which had to be why his narrow eyes got narrower. “Anyway, it’s not the set list. It’s the grocery list.” I leaned in and brushed his mouth with mine and said, “Now, go forth and conquer the world, starting with your dad.”

He stared at me a beat and decided to let it go. He lifted a hand to my neck and gave me a squeeze.

Then he was gone.

just ask For your information, it wasn’t lost on me that he didn’t say a word about the fact that I told him I loved him.



k. d. “IT’S COVERED,” Ally said in my ear. “Indy’s dad, Tom, is picking up mom and Chloe. They arrive an hour apart. You’ll need to call Lana and ask her to tell Chloe that Tom’ll meet her at the fountains and keep her close.”

while they wait for Lana.”

1. “Okay, I’ll call Lana,” I told Ally.

was the Ally went on, “They’re gonna stay with Daisy ’cause they’ll p
around, want to be together and she’s got plenty of room. Marcus’s boys can
Tom says he’ll take them to your gig tomorrow night. Then you can c
thing.”

“That sounds good,” I replied. “Can you tell Tom that Chloe loc
Caitlin, except older?”

“Sure.” Ally hesitated a beat and said, “It doesn’t sound like yo
this sounds good.”

it then I “No, it’s all good. It’s just...” I stopped then asked, “Do you thi
doing the right thing?”

d about “Shit yeah,” Ally answered. “If family’s good, family’s everything
ed eyes can’t move on unless he sorts this shit out. You’re definitely doing th
aned up thing.”
uer bad

I looked down at one of my arms. On the inside, four small, sl
brown bruises had formed, three fingers and a thumb.

l to my I sucked in a breath and shared, “Mace and I had an episode today.

“What kind of episode?”

d about “I called my mom. Mace heard her being mean to me. He freak
went ballistic, threw Lee’s phone against the wall. It exploded into,
million pieces.”

Mace’s “Holy shit,” Ally breathed.

and tell “After that, I told him I loved him.”

ompany “Holy *shit!*” Ally shouted. “That is so cool!”

“He didn’t say it back, he just stared at me.”

Silence.

robably I pressed on. “Then, I said I thought he was probably a good brot
't do it,he lost it again. He grabbed on to my arms and hurt me.”

do your “Stella—”

“I don’t care about that,” I cut in quickly. “I get it, all this stuff cor
oks like for him again. It can’t be good to see it in the papers. Move around
knowing people know. Having pictures of Caitlin in his face.”

u think “No, it can’t be good,” Ally agreed.

ink I’m “He’s gonna react. I’ve gotta be able to take it.”

“Yeah. Though, chickie, he should be able to control it without
you.”

}. Mace “He watched his sister’s head explode,” I reminded her.

ne right Silence then she repeated, “Yeah.”

adowy “I’m not sure I’m getting anywhere with him,” I confided.

„ time.”
“Girl, three days ago you were pushing him away. You got to

She was right, so it was my turn to say, “Yeah.”

ted out, “You gonna be okay?”

like, a “Sure.”

“You call if you’re not. We’ll talk,” she told me. “I’m here, I hc
know that.”

That was her way, and since I knew her, always had been. Ally wa
on the outside but sweet deep down, and you couldn’t ask for a better f

“Thanks, Ally.”

“Later,” she said.

her and “Later.”

We disconnected and I called Lana immediately. She wasn't home, so I left a message about Tom and Chloe and warned her that if she came home, she might not be able to talk if Mace came home.

Denver I flipped the phone shut and stared at Juno. I was sitting in my armchair. She was lying on my feet snoozing.

It was late. Mace had come home earlier to drop off the groceries, but he couldn't stay and I didn't know when he'd get back.

hurting I'd made myself dinner for one, homemade chicken and rice pilaf, and made a round of calls to the Rock Chicks to get them up to date and make sure they were keeping their mouths shut. Then I made the round of calls to my friends, including Floyd and Buzz who were driving home from Oklahoma. I put them the heads up and put them under threat of death if they didn't keep their mouths shut too.

give it But now I was sitting there going over my strategy in my head and feeling worried.

Even though both Hector and Ally said I was doing the right thing, I was thinking maybe I was going too fast. Maybe I should wait until all the stuff was finished. Maybe I should wait until Mace was used to us being together, until I'd been able to work on him a bit longer. Maybe Mace needed to deal with his mom and stepmom when bullets were flying and I was being an asshole.

s tough I heard the key in the door and Juno jolted up.
friend.

The door opened, the alarm started beeping and Mace walked in, I coming directly to me.

“Hey, babe,” he called.

My heart did that settling thing again and I replied, “Hey.”

He turned to the alarm, deactivated it, reactivated it then relocked the door as I walked across the room to him. Juno had already made it bent low to give her a rubdown while I stopped a few steps away and at him.

He looked good—faded jeans, black belt, black boots. Today’s sleeved Henley was dark gray, the sleeves again tight around his biceps with the way he was bent and rubbing Juno, the material had also stretched against his back, defining his lats. He was in a partial squat. The jeans had stretched tight against the muscles of his knee and thigh. His dad needed a trim. So much so, it had started to have a bit of curl on the ends. I could still see some skin at the back of his neck. The skin was tight on his shoulders under the tee were broad.

Standing there petting my dog, he was, put simply, beautiful.

I thought for a minute that he had to know it, how beautiful he was. It didn’t matter to him, not even a little bit.

For the first time in my life I found myself wondering how I got so fat.

He kept bent low, his long fingers sifting through Juno’s fur. Juno didn’t wagged her tail and panted, but his head tilted up to me when he looked at me. “You’re up late.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “You hungry?”

“No, boys had a meet at Lincoln’s. Ate there.”

his eyes “They pick up Sid?” I asked.

He straightened and shook his head. “Gone to ground. Eddie and I had a meet with Turner. They’ve made a deal with the Feds, workin’ tight now. They’re bringing in Sid’s soldiers. The ones they got shit on, they’re lockin’ up. The rest of ’em, they’re shakin’ down.”

and he “Progress then.”

looked “Yeah.”

“What about George?”

“George has backed down. Lee sent him the photos Smithie got last week. He *does* like his women chesty and I won’t explain how I know that. I grimaced and Mace kept talking. “George is no longer a problem.”

I nodded. We stopped talking and stood there, about three feet apart. Mace had sat down between us and was looking from one to the other, still pouting.

Finally, Mace spoke. “You okay?”

I blinked. “Yeah, why do you ask?”

“‘Cause your body’s wound up tight.”

“No it isn’t,” I lied.

“Babe, it is.”

“I just have a lot on my mind.”

“You been playin’?” He meant guitar.

I shook my head.

“You should play,” he told me.

“I know,” I replied.

We stopped talking and started staring at each other again.

Why was this weird?

d Hank But it was weird, way weird, scary weird.

ogether I worried that it was because I told him I loved him and he didn't
they're what to do with that.

Things had always been intense between us, when we were together before and getting back to it. He'd told me we were moving in together, really moving in together, even though we were somewhat moved in together now.

old of. With all he was doing, I knew he had to care about me, a lot.

that." I I didn't know if he loved me, but I didn't think he'd think it was a thing that I loved him.

rt. Juno So why was he so far away? Why didn't he approach? Why was he just standing there, staring at me with his face blank like that? Why didn't he even come into the house?

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"Fuck no," he answered immediately.

"What's wrong?"

He took a step forward, just one, but reached out the rest of the way and grabbed a wrist and gently twisted my arm. You could see the bruise on my wrist weren't angry, but they were there.

"Fucking hell," he muttered, eyes locked on my arm.

His other hand came out and grabbed my other wrist, twisted it, and his eyes moved to stare at the identical bruising there.

"Mace—"

His gaze came to mine and it wasn't blank anymore. It was tortured.

they were new demons now.

Beautiful.

't know Just what I needed, *new* demons.

“Never touched a woman like that,” he told me.

ogether “Things are intense for you right about now,” I said, giving him
ogether, thought was a logical explanation.

ogether “Don’t make excuses for me, Kitten.”

“I shouldn’t have said what I said about Caitlin. I didn’t know what
talking about.”

s a bad “You were tryin’ to be nice.”

“Yeah, but I went about it the wrong way.”

was he “Stella—” he started, but I pulled my wrists from his fingers and
re fully the last two feet so I was close.

Juno backed off and trotted to the couch.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and tilted my head back to
him. “You said you needed to learn to handle me with care. Well, I
learn the same thing. You’re a pretty intense guy, Kai Mason.”

way. He He dipped his head so his forehead was against mine.

s. They “I’ll never hurt you again, Kitten,” he promised, his voice soft,
beautiful.

“I believe you.” And I did.

and his His arms came around me. “We should talk about some of the other
you said today.”

Oh hell.

red, but

“Like what?” I asked, as if I didn’t know.

“Like what you said to my father.”

“Erm—”

“And you tellin’ me you loved me.”

what I Oh effing bloody *hell*.

“Erm, no. Let’s just forget about that,” I suggested.

His arms went tight. “No fuckin’ way.”

at I was “It was the heat of the moment,” I explained.

His face got soft, his voice went low and it was, as ever, a killer c combination. “Best time to say it.”

“Mace—” I started, but he was walking me backwards and h stepped moved, his mouth going to my neck.

His lips against my skin, he kept walking me back while saying, see if we can create more heat. That way maybe you’ll say it again.”

look at My stomach melted.

need to Oh dear.

I was both glad he wanted me to say it again and scared totally shit

“I need my guitar.” I tried to delay.

gentle, He stopped walking, his mouth slid to mine and he muttered, “ right before he kissed me.

My arms went around his neck and I kissed him back.

her shit Okay, so maybe I wasn’t pushing too hard, too fast. Maybe I jumped the gun. Maybe I’d done the right thing.

His mouth moved from mine and he bent low, picked me up in h

and carried me to the bed.

Once there, he took his time with me, building it so the fire burned and he created another heated moment.

He was on top, deep inside me. My legs were wrapped around his, my hands sliding up and down his back and our mouths were touching. His hands came to either side of my face and he demanded, "Say it again."

My eyes focused on his and I whispered, "Please, Mace, harder."

He grinned and touched his lips to mine then said, "Not that, babe."

Oh.

one-two

Hell.

is head

All right. Whatever.

, "Let's
you."

Both my hands slid into his hair to cup his head before I breathed,

I watched as his eyes closed, like they were moving in slow motion. Then he shoved his face in my neck and started moving again.

This time harder.



less.

AFTER, I left Mace face down in bed, eyes shut, but I knew he wasn't asleep. I got up, pulled on my underwear, cutoffs and a tank and went to my room.

'Later,'

I sat in the armchair, rested the guitar on my knee and started to play.

Then I started to sing to Mace, and what I sang to Mace was another song that said it all between us, a kickass power ballad, Journey's "Open Arms."

hadn't

After the first verse, I lifted my head and saw Mace was up, still on his belly, but now twisted slightly and up on an elbow.

is arms

His eyes were on me.

I kept on singing and this time, I sang the chorus directly to him.
and deep Then, with effort, I tore my eyes from him, looked back down
guitar and kept singing.

is hips, My head lifted again when the song became about the lover coming
g when I caught Mace's eyes and I sang that part and the chorus to him as I
in." stayed locked with mine.

I finished singing, dipped my face down to stare at my hands again
" mindlessly kept strumming some of the chords to the song.

Mace kept watching me. I knew it. I felt it and I had to admit I loved
"What kind of music did Caitlin like?" I asked softly, still watching
hands moving.

"I love "Tchaikovsky," Mace answered immediately.

I lifted my head and smiled at him.

on, then "I don't know any Tchaikovsky," I told him.

He shook his head. His lips turned up in a small grin and I watched
opening all my sensors to see where his head was at and sensing he was
(and hoping I was right).

asleep. "Do you think she would have liked me?" I asked.

uitar. "Definitely," Mace answered, again immediately.

ly. My heart did what was becoming a familiar settle.

er song "Do you think she'd like me with you?" I went on.

ms." "Yeah," he replied.

mostly "I know it's hard for you to talk about her."

"It's gettin' easier."

I smiled at him. "Good."

at my *Take that demon scum!*

"Come to bed, Kitten," Mace muttered.

g back, I quit strumming.

his eyes I put the guitar in its stand, took off my clothes, walked to the bed and slid in beside him. I turned to him, wrapping an arm around his waist and cocking a knee, resting it on his hard thigh and putting my cheek against his shoulder. His hand pressed under me, his arm coming up and curling around my waist.

ing my "I love you, Kai Mason," I whispered into his chest, and I found that getting easier too.

His fingers dug into my flesh.

"Sleep," he replied.

I snuggled closer. Juno lifted her head and rested it on our ankles.

ed him, I fell asleep.

as okay

I smiled at him. “Good.”

Take that demon scum!

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I quit strumming.

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“Sleep,” he replied.

I snuggled closer. Juno lifted her head and rested it on our ankles.

I fell asleep.



EVEN IF I DIE DOIN' IT

Stella

“**S**top scratching,” Mace’s sleepy-gruff voice demanded.

“It itches,” my sleepy-grouchy voice returned.

His arm went across his body. His fingers wrapped around my hand, taking my fingers away from where they were scratching around the waistband at my hip. He pulled my hand up and pressed it against his chest.

“It’s healin’. You need to keep your fuckin’ nails clear,” he told me.

“Were you this damn bossy a year ago?” I grumbled.

“A year ago I was too busy thinkin’ about how lucky I was that someone as beautiful and talented as you let me into her bed to be bossy. Now you love me, I can be as bossy as I want.”

At his words, my head shot up and I stared at him.

It was morning, early morning, the sun just peeping around the now closed blinds.

Mace was on his back, I was tucked into his side. It appeared we had stayed the whole night without moving. His face was still soft with sleep, but his green eyes were alert and on me.

“You thought you were lucky?” I asked.

“Babe, I need to video you onstage. You could be butt-ugly, but if you move onstage and that fuckin’ voice of yours would still make me singin’ or talkin’, it doesn’t matter. Your voice is the sexiest thing I’ve heard.”

Uh...wow.

Did he just say that?

“Seriously?” I breathed.

He grinned and rolled into me. “Seriously,” he said and went on, “for me, you also got great hair, great eyes, great legs and an unbelievable heart-shaped ass.”

As if to prove his point, his hand slid over my ass and his face was pressed against my neck as he pressed me to my back.

Then he muttered, “Still, I’m inside you and I hear that throaty voice of yours beggin’ me to fuck you harder, I swear it takes everything I got to keep control and not come.”

I wasn’t sure, but I thought I had a small orgasm just listening to him. I decided to switch topics before I lost what little control I had because I love you doesn’t mean you can boss me around.”

His head came up and he looked at me just as his hand slid from my side to cup my breast.

“Yeah it does,” he said.

“No, it doesn’t,” I shot back.

He grinned. “It does.”

I frowned. “It doesn’t.”

His thumb slid across my nipple.

he way It felt so good, my teeth sunk into my lower lip to stop myself from moaning.

He never His eyes dropped to my mouth.

“Oh yeah it does,” he muttered, and he sounded pretty effing pleased.

“I take it back. I don’t love you. I think *you’re* a pain in *my* ass.”

His body started shaking like he was laughing. “You can’t take it back.”

“I can.”

“Lucky His mouth touched mine before he said, “Jesus, you’re cute, Kitten.”

He never I’m not cute. I’m sultry and sexy,” I returned.

He never His mouth came back to my mouth, his eyes open and staring into mine. His were both soft and amused, and I figured somewhere in his head there was kicking demon ass.

“You’re that too,” he said and did another nipple swipe.

My back arched and my arms wrapped around him. “Okay, maybe I’m not a pain in my ass.”

His head slanted and his lips hit mine. No touch now, he was serious. “Just I knew it when his tongue slid inside.

My body melted under his.

The phone rang.

“Effing hell,” I muttered against his mouth.

He kissed me quickly, did a push up and he was away. I watched him walk naked across the room and I was so lost in my fascination watching his body move that it didn’t penetrate that it was Hector’s phone that was ringing.

If from Then it penetrated.

I shot to sitting on the bed and cried, "Mace!"

He had the phone in his hand and was looking at the display
ed. wrapped the sheet around me and whipped my legs over the side, tak
sheet with me.

ack." Juno woofed in surprise at my swift movements, but I didn't spar
glance. I was heading toward Mace.

l." His head came up, his eyes narrow.

I stopped in front of him and he turned the phone to face me.

o mine, "Missed call from Bogey One. Who's Bogey One?" he asked.

at look *Think fast Stella!* my brain screeched.

I came up with an answer. "How should I know? It's not my phone

That was when the phone beeped in his hand indicating a voicemail
: you're been left.

I stared at the phone. Mace stared at the phone.

ous and Then he flipped it open and started hitting buttons.

Shitsofuckit!

"Mace, give me the phone." I reached out to snatch it from him,
yanked it away and his eyes came back to me, still narrow, brows draw

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

d as he "Nothing," I lied.

tion of He watched me a beat then repeated, "Who the fuck is Bogey One?"

"clean" "Erm..."

"Start talkin', Stella," he demanded, and his voice had gone scary

Turner?”

I blinked at him, taken aback that he thought I'd hide a call from E

when I Then I cried, “No! Of course not.”

ing the “Then you do know who it is.”

Damn it!

re her a Why was I such an idiot?

“Mace—”

“Is it Chavez?” Mace went on.

“No! Mace, I can't tell you. You have to trust me. Just give phone.” I held out my hand to him, palm up, hoping that would work.

It didn't.

.” “Last night you sat there singing to me ‘nothing to hide, believe rail had say’ and not ten hours later you're standin' in front of me lyin'.”

I closed my eyes then opened them again. “Please Mace, you just trust me.”

“Trust you with what?” he asked, voice impatient.

“Mace—”

but he “Trust you with what?” Now his voice was short and pissed off.

7n. “Your heart!” I shouted.

His body went tight and he blinked.

I ignored all that and went on, “You have to trust me with you dammit. A couple of days ago, you asked me if I wanted into you Well, I'm guessing by now you know that I do. So I'm trying to w way in there, but you have to trust me. Now give me the *effing* phone!”

He just stood there, frozen, staring at me. This was weird and uncharacteristic of Mace, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I took my opportunity, reached in and snatched the phone out of his hand.

I walked (okay, more like *stomped*) away while flipping it open to find my way to voicemail. By the time I made it to the kitchen and turned to face him, Mace was tugging on his jeans and Lana's voice was telling me she was on a plane and just about to take off. Red-eye to LA. She'd turn off her phone soon, but she wanted me to know she'd called Chloe.

She finished, "See you soon, sweetie."

Even though I wanted to keep a message that had Lana's soft, intimate voice calling me sweetie, I deleted it immediately.

Mace had his jeans buttoned and was pulling on the Henley he did what I last night by the time I was done.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he got there before me, his hand coming at me like a whiplash. "They cut off her hand."

My breath packed up, and on a direct trajectory, shot straight toward the sun, disintegrating in the heat.

I tried to suck in air but it wasn't coming, mainly because the guys were down. The demons were out, nothing to hide them. Even across the room, I could see they were cavorting malevolently in Mace's eyes and having fun with the times of their lives. Looking at that kind of pain in the eyes of the man I loved, I couldn't breathe.

"Caitlin was kidnapped. My father didn't involve the cops. Instead, he hired some fuckin' guys..." He paused then continued, "You won't believe these guys. Knowin' what I know now, fuck, they were the K commandos."

highly I started toward him, but he put his hand up and clipped, “Don’t get your mouth on me.”

and. Effing.

men and *Bloody.*

he turned Hell.

ling me I stopped.

have to Juno, feeling the vibe, whined.

e. Mace kept talking.

musical “They fucked it up, botched the job. They left a man behind. Kidnappers sent him back in pieces. No fuckin’ joke. In pieces.”

scared No gut kick this time. This time my stomach turned and I was worried I might get sick right there.

his voice Duke hadn’t told me that part.

“As retribution for that stunt, they cut off Caitlin’s hand, sent it to her father. After she died and they examined her, I found out they did it so precise. These guys knew what they were fuckin’ doin’. They had to have. They had resources. They weren’t guys you messed with. My father knew that. He knew it the whole fuckin’ time.”

I chanced a question. “What did they want?”

“They wanted my father. Even exchange. Caitlin for him.”

Duke hadn’t told me that either.

“I take it he wasn’t willing to make that deal?” I asked.

Mace laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. “No fuckin’ way. Preston Mason sacrifice himself for his daughter? Not a chance.”

get near Mace stopped talking.

It cost me, but I stood still and waited.

After a while, he went on, "I lost patience with my father fuckin' . I got the police involved, the FBI. Offered myself instead."

I felt my heart squeeze and closed my eyes, but opened them w continued talking.

"I had no idea who they were, what they wanted. I was relatively f I had money. I thought I could bargain with them. I didn't know they my father dead or they wanted him to pay. Not with money, they id. The revenge. It was about revenge. They had no clue our father didn't give about us, and I had no idea what I was doin', but I was desperate so orried I anyway."

He paused and stared at me.

I waited then asked carefully, "What happened then?"

t to my He kept staring at me a beat then he continued, "I got cocky, and urgical, cocky means bein' stupid, but I was desperate *and* cocky so that's a raining. other scale of stupid. I fed the media stories. I thought to put pres: r knew them. A sixteen-year-old girl losin' a hand, didn't read well in the They didn't give a shit about their reputations. They didn't even care came out alive. They were kamikazes, workin' for a larger organ doin' a job for the greater whole. Makin' a statement in a world tha see the light of day. It wouldn't matter how much the papers tried to they wouldn't find anything. These guys were underground. And whe that I mean *underground*."

n' way.

He paused, his intense eyes burning into me and I nodded, thinl wanted to know that I understood.

Once I nodded, Mace kept speaking.

“The FBI knew what they were up against, but they didn’t share that around me. I put pressure on them too. Fed what I thought was their bullshit media to get them to move. It worked. They moved. They had to. It was a nightmare for them, Caitlin’s pictures in the paper and on the news even the way she looked. They had to make it go away. They knew I wouldn’t survive. What I didn’t know was they were tryin’ to keep me famous.”

He stopped. I nodded again and he kept going.

“I made it hard on them. I struck a deal with the kidnapers. Me and a shit They sent me in, vest, helmet. I got in there and saw her. They’d lost I did it three weeks by then, but she’d lost so much fuckin’ weight, weight, couldn’t afford to lose. Her hair was...”

He stopped, closed his eyes. My heart slid up into my throat and he opened his eyes again and kept right on going.

“I didn’t take much in. I was only there seconds. They had a gun in my head, blew it off right in front of me then turned the guns on me. I got a whole number of hits and went down. They turned the guns on themselves. I was sure on papers. They were all dead by the time SWAT and the Feds got there.”

He stopped talking and I stayed where I was. My heart was still in my throat. I could feel it beating there.

Finally, when he didn’t start again, I asked, “Mace, can I come dig up now?”

He answered immediately, “No. I’m not done.”

What else can there be? my brain asked.

Quiet! I snapped back.

“After that, I gave up everything, went to ground, disappeared. I joined an organization. I can’t tell you who and I never will. They trained me. I went through specialized training and I needed that training. I did what I had to do as a professional the job I had to get done, done. Then, for years, I did what I did for every day. At the same time I did what I had to do for Caitlin. I found out my father was involved and how. I can’t tell you about any of this shit. If you know anyone worse people than Sidney Carter would want you dead and they’d be glad to do it. All you gotta know is that by the time I left, I did what I had to do for Caitlin. The person who gave the order to take her isn’t breathing anymore. Stella, and I’m the reason he’s not. He died like she did, exactly like she did. I made sure of that.”

I swallowed. It was hard, considering I had a huge organ in my throat. I pushed the saliva down.

He kept right on talking and I thought that it was strange and almost that his voice didn’t change. It was strong and sharp and completely devoid of emotion.

“I did shit I’m not proud of and lived in a world you wouldn’t be able to imagine and I don’t give a fuck. I did what I had to do for Caitlin and I don’t have a problem with that. I can live with it.” He paused, his arms crossed over his chest then he asked, “The question is, can you?”

Oh hell.

I didn’t know what to say. I needed some processing time and a different kind that involved sex.

When I hesitated, Mace kept at me and he was relentless.

“You told my father he had enough black marks on his soul to send him straight to hell. You gotta know the heart you want into has its own

ined an against it. No way to wash off the shit I did. It's marked deep. That t
. It was of man you want sleepin' in your bed?"

o to get "Well, you haven't given me much choice up to now," I replied.

them at "Now you got that choice."

ner was "You've never asked me these kinds of questions before," I told hi

ow, far "I never expected you to learn this shit before."

able to I blinked. "You were going to keep it from me?"

o do for "Until the day I fuckin' died."

ymore, I couldn't believe that, didn't even want to, and my mouth droppe
she did. before I snapped it shut and asked, "Why?"

oat, but "Because I never wanted you to look at me the way you're lookin
right now."

larming Shitsofuckit.

devoid I didn't know how I was looking at him and tried to rearrange r
and shift us into safer waters. "How did you get involved with Lee?"

able to "Luke knew me, we worked together. He found out I was out. I
I got no Lee to recruit me and now I'm here."

on his "Luke? He—?"

"Yeah."

not the "Does Ava know?" I asked.

"As much as she can know," he answered. "Which I figure is a
much as you know."

nd him We stared at each other a few beats then I dropped my head and
strikes the sheet tighter around me, thoughts tumbling around in my brain.

he kind I wasn't really sure, but all my thoughts seemed to be about the thing.

Mainly that I knew, without a doubt, that my luck had changed.

m. After having a life of no love for so long, finding a guy who could deep that he'd sacrifice everything to avenge someone he cared about effing *great*.

That might make me a freak, but I didn't care.

I wasn't going to say it out loud (not again), but for as long as I had known him, Caitlin Mason was one lucky girl.

And now, so was I.

l' at me "I'll take that as your answer," I heard Mace say, and my head shot up to see he was moving to his boots.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

ny face He didn't look at me when he answered, "Leavin'."

He told "Why?" His head shot up and I kept talking. "Okay, so, I can't tell you this doesn't freak me out, because, erm...it's freaky and intense, but, that was then and this is now. At least I know why you're so effing mad the time and why you have such a short fuse. I mean, the whole throw phone against the wall gig was freaky too, but now I get it and—"

I stopped talking because he switched directions and was walking away from me.

bout as "What're you doing now?" I asked.

shifted He didn't answer, and right before he made it to me, he dipped his shoulder like the football players do when they're going to make a tackle. It went into my belly and then I was going up.

ie same “Mace!” I shouted. “What are you doing?”

He stalked (yes, stalked!) toward the bed, did a bump with his s
and I was flying through the air. I landed on my back on the bed with
love so bounce and Mace was on me.

out felt I pushed against him. “Mace, we aren’t done talking.”

His face was in my throat and his hands were tugging at the sheet.

“We fuckin’ well are,” he growled.

she had “There’s more to say.”

His head came up and he looked at me just as I heard the sheet tear

“You still love me?” he asked.

napped My eyes narrowed. “What kind of question is that?” I snapped.

“Answer it.”

“I will not, it’s—”

“*Answer it!*” he barked, and I went still at the ferocity in his voice.

pretend
well... Then I whispered, “Of course I do.”

ody all “Then we’re done talkin’. I’m gonna fuck you until I’ve
ring the everything I’ve said. Until the only thing you can think of is my cock
you and my hands and mouth on you. Until I hear that fuckin’ voice c
toward telling me you love me. I’m gonna fuck you until I know it’s me yo
despite all this shit, and I don’t care if it takes a fuckin’ week.”

“That’ll take, like, two seconds,” I told him and watched somethin
his face, something that looked a lot like surprise. Then I announced,
ped his There it is! Done! And you didn’t even have to fuck me.”

ickle. It He stared at me.

“But you can still fuck me if you want to,” I went on.

houlder He kept staring at me.

h a soft “Like now. Fucking me now would be good,” I prompted.

He kept staring at me.

“Hello? Kai Mason? Are you in the room?” I called, and when I was still staring at me, I kept talking. “Calling Kai Mason, girlfriend needs fucking, right...about...now.”

That was when he spoke.

And this is what he said.

“God, I love you.”

Then he fucked me.



EVEN THOUGH HE didn't have to, Mace fucked me until he erased everything from my head but what he wanted there.

Then he did it again.

Then he did it again.

erased
inside
of yours
u want,
Then he left me face down in bed. He pulled the torn sheet up to my waist, took Juno out, came back, took a shower, ate a piece of coffee, and came back to the bed.

I hadn't moved a muscle. I snoozed a bit, but mostly I listened to the noises in my house.

“Well! When he sat on the bed and shifted the hair out of my face and shoulder so he could lean in and kiss my neck, I asked, my voice me because my face was scrunched in the pillow, “How can you move around”

“Kitten, you need to get in better shape.”

“I’m going to have to cancel tonight’s gig.”

“You’ll recover by then.”

“You tore my sheet.”

he kept “I’ll buy you a new one.”

a good “I don’t want a new one. I think I’m going to have this one bronze

Then he said weirdly, “I understand it now.”

My eyes had been closed, but I opened them and shifted them to
him.

“Understand what?” I asked.

“Why the men put up with the Rock Chicks.”

Uh-oh.

rything I had a feeling we were going to get heavy again.

I came up on my elbows and said softly, “And why’s that?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he said, “Couldn’t believe it, but
couldn’t come up with an explanation, I always thought they were whi

to my I grinned. “And they’re not?”

ee cake He grinned back. “Men like us don’t get whipped, babe.”

l to his “Bullshit,” I said under my breath, still grinning.

“That isn’t it.”

off my “Admit it. It’s a part of it,” I teased.

ssed up “It’s easy to find a piece.”

und?” As shocking as this statement was, and as much as I should be o:

for all womankind, I was guessing he wasn't wrong about that. Not Hot Bunch.

“So? What is it?”

He leaned in again and kissed my mouth. “Can't tell you. You you'll get cocky.”

1.” “It's because we're sultry and sexy, isn't it?”

His eyes went soft and his voice went low. “Not even close.” I kissed me again and said, “Gotta go.”

look at He got up and moved toward the door.

He'd deactivated the alarm and unlocked the locks when I called keeping me alive tonight?”

He'd opened and was out the door, but he turned, his eyes locked mine.

“Even if I die doin' it.”

Then he was gone.

since I I laid in bed, up on my elbows, eyes on the door, my heart pumped.” settled because I knew, without doubt, that he meant every word he jus

ffended

for all womankind, I was guessing he wasn't wrong about that. Not for the Hot Bunch.

“So? What is it?”

He leaned in again and kissed my mouth. “Can't tell you. You know, you'll get cocky.”

“It's because we're sultry and sexy, isn't it?”

His eyes went soft and his voice went low. “Not even close.” Then he kissed me again and said, “Gotta go.”

He got up and moved toward the door.

He'd deactivated the alarm and unlocked the locks when I called, “You keeping me alive tonight?”

He'd opened and was out the door, but he turned, his eyes locking on mine.

“Even if I die doin' it.”

Then he was gone.

I laid in bed, up on my elbows, eyes on the door, my heart permanently settled because I knew, without doubt, that he meant every word he just said.

TWENTY-THREE



FAMILY

Stella

“I can’t do this,” I said into the Explorer.

Jules was sitting up front. Jet was in back, sitting next to me. Vance was driving.

I was freaking out.

Jules twisted around in her seat. Jet reached out and grabbed my hand. Vance’s eyes shifted to the rearview mirror to look at me.

“It’s going to be fine,” Jet said on a reassuring hand squeeze.

“No. No, it isn’t going to be fine,” I replied and looked at Jules. “are you even doing here? Bad guys are out there and you’re pregnant.”

“I’ll be all right,” Jules told me.

I stared at her then announced, “I need a drink.”

“We’ll get you a beer when we get there,” Jet said.

I looked at Jet.

“I don’t need beer, I need tequila,” I explained.

“Then we’ll get you tequila,” Jet promised.

We were on our way to the gig.

Chloe and Lana had both arrived safely and had been whisked to the house. Reporting in (regularly, as in every half an hour), Daisy told me they got them settled in rooms filled with flowers and “big old” boxes of chocolates.

“Sugar, I said those were from you. Hope you don’t mind,” Daisy said to me. And I didn’t.

How could I?

She gave them food and drink and let them rest.

Lee dropped Indy and Ally at The Castle and the five of them went to see Vance Guitar Hero.

I didn’t know how I felt about Lana and Chloe playing Guitar Hero. Daisy, Indy and Ally, but I had bigger things to worry about.

Like what I’d say to Dixon Jones.

Like what Lana and Chloe would think about me when they noticed Preston Mason didn’t think I was good enough for Mace. Maybe they wouldn’t either.

“What like if Mace would still love me after I meddled in his life.

Like what I was going to wear to the gig, considering Mace’s mom and stepmom were going to be there. I felt I should wear something nice like a pair of slacks or a skirt, but I was a rock ’n’ roll singer.

Slacks didn’t exactly say rock ’n’ roll.

I settled on jeans, a black belt and black cowboy boots. Usually, I wore a T-shirt or a tank, but to dress it up a bit I wore a black button-up vest with a shiny, satin black panel at the back. I added dozens of thin silver bangles to my left wrist, a wide hammered-silver band that sat tight on my right

Daisy's vintage, three-tier chandelier Navajo earrings made of silver and turquoise she'd worn with dangling, bent spikes of silver at the bottom tier and a black Godiva thong in choker position around my neck from which hung several silver discs. I left my hair long and wild, did full-on, smoky-eyed makeup, and I hoped I didn't look like a rock 'n' roll freak.

I lifted the hand Jet wasn't holding and glanced at it.

It was trembling.

"Look at my hand!" I demanded. "I won't even be able to hold a guitar!"

"Stella, still your mind," Vance said softly.

"You still your mind. I'm freaking out!" I screeched.

All of a sudden, Vance pulled over and stopped.

The air in the cab of the Explorer went funny and Jet and Jules exchanged glances.

Vance turned to me.

"You called these women two days ago. They dropped everything here. That says they want this to work and they'll do everything in their power to make it work. You did your job. You opened the door. Now, like a gotta leave it to them to get through it," he said.

"What if he gets angry at me?" I asked, and my voice was low and filled with fear.

"He probably will," Vance replied, and I audibly sucked in breath.

"Crowe!" Jules protested loudly.

"Quiet, Princess," Vance muttered, and to me he said, "It was me who pissed as hell. Then I'd realize why you did what you did and I'd get

quoise Mace'll do the same. You just gotta have the courage to ride it out."

leather "You're sure?" I asked.

l small "Yeah," he answered.

nakeup "This is serious shit he's dealing with," I shared like he didn't know

"Yeah," Vance repeated, because he knew it.

"I'm scared," I went on sharing, with Vance of all people. But, it
will remind you, I was *freaking out*.

old my "Means you care. Says a lot. Mace'll know that too," Vance said.

"You think so?" I asked.

"Don't think it, know it," he replied with certainty. "Now, concentrate
something else. Still your mind. You got a big night ahead of you."

hanged He was not wrong about *that*.

Vance turned back around and moved the Explorer onto the road.

Jet gave me another reassuring hand squeeze.

g to be I smiled at her, and as my eyes moved forward, I caught sight of
in their hand going in the direction of Vance's thigh. I watched her fingers
ow you around his thigh and I saw his hand come to hers. Then I watched
croaky twisted his wrist and his fingers linked with hers. He rested the back
hand on his thigh and kept driving.

I found I had something to concentrate on.

It was the dawning revelation that I knew what Mace was talking
when he said he figured out why the Hot Bunch put up with the Rock (

, I'd be a private investigator married to a movie-star-beautiful social worker
over it.

were having a baby and riding in an SUV to a rock gig, holding hands.

My mind went still, my hands quit trembling and my heart settled.

It was the heart settle Mace was talking about.

w that. He felt it too.

That was what the Rock Chicks did for the Hot Bunch. That was
again, I they put up with us.

I felt like crying, knowing I'd done that to Mace's heart.

Then I wondered if they knew we felt it too.

"Oh shit, I think I'm gonna cry," I announced.

trate on Vance's eyes went back to the rearview mirror and Jet did another
squeeze.

"Why on earth are you gonna cry?" Jet asked.

I looked at her. "Because I think Vance is right. It's gonna be fine."

"Of course it's going to be fine," Jules told me.

Jules's I sucked in breath to control the tears. Luckily, since I didn't
ers curlmakeup repair kit with me, this worked.

d as he We fell silent. I saw Vance's eyes come back to the mirror and I
k of her he looked like he was smiling.

I smiled back.

Vance's gaze went back to the road and he drove us to the club.

g about



Chicks. WE WERE PLAYING THE ROSE, a new club in Lowry that could hold
he washundred and fifty people.

r. They The Gypsies liked it because it had a great dressing room backsta

the staff usually left us a tin tub filled with ice and Fat Tire beer.

Tex met us at the back door and told me, “Fuck, I’m nervous as a jackrabbit.”

I looked up at him with surprise. Tex wasn’t the kind of guy w
as why nervous.

“Why?” I asked.

“Family reunions. They freak me out,” he answered.

I stopped dead. “You think I’m doing the wrong thing?”

His hand settled on top of my head. “No fuckin’ way.”

er hand I let out the breath I was holding.

“Still,” he went on, “Mace is a big guy and fuckin’ moody as all h
loses it, be a bitch to lock him down.”

” Beautiful.

“Shut up, Tex,” Jet snapped.

have a “Be cool, Loopy Loo,” Tex shot back.

“Tequila,” I blurted.

noticed Tex’s gaze came to me.

“Tequila. Right. I’m on it,” he said and peeled off, going toward th

That afternoon, when Roam and Sniff got out of school, Pong, I
Hugo picked them up and came to get the equipment. The stage was s
had one thing to thank Sidney Carter for—I didn’t have to lug an
old two around town.

I knew because Daisy called and told me that Lee and Tom had pic
age and Daisy, Ally, Indy, Lana and Chloe and they were already backstage.

We made it to the dressing room door. I stopped dead again and s fuckin' the closed door.

"It's gonna be okay," Jet said.

who got I turned to her. "I don't look like a rock 'n' roll freak, do I?"

She smiled and shook her head, then whispered, "No, Stella, yo rock 'n' roll *amazing*."

I nodded because she sounded like she meant it. I took in a bre opened the door.

Daisy, Ally and Indy had been joined by Floyd, Duke, Roxie and A

Two women were with them.

hell. He One was petite, blonde and blue-eyed with a pretty face and sun skin. She was wearing a pair of designer boot-cut jeans, black strappy on dainty French-pedicured feet, a complicated woven black leather b a white tuxedo blouse. Her hair was pulled back in a soft ponytail.

The other was older. Tall, slim, had long, shining black hair lef fantastic skin, warm brown eyes and she was stunning. She was ob one of those older women who never lost their cool, was sexy as h always would be until the day she died. She was wearing faded jeans e bar. flip-flops and a black Stella and The Blue Moon Gypsies tee, the "O: .eo and little blue moons.

et and I I didn't know who gave her the tee, but if I had to put money dow plifiers I would guess it was Ally.

When they saw me, both of their mouths dropped open.

cked up I did a stupid little wave and said, "Hi, you must be Lana and Chl Stella."

tared at When I spoke, the blonde, who I was guessing was Chloe, but
tears.

This alarmed me.

I took a step forward. She lifted her hand as if to ward me off.

ou look Erm, not good.

I stopped and my heart started slamming in my chest.

ath and “Chloe, sweetie,” Lana’s soft, melodic voice called.

Chloe’s eyes were locked on me.

ava. Then she whispered, “She’s perfect.”

Lana’s eyes came to me.

i-kissed She smiled and said, “Yeah, she is.”

sandals Wow.

elt and This was good.

t loose, Way good.

viously Happy shiver good.

ell and I smiled back at Lana.

s, black “Oh crap. I’m gonna cry,” Indy blurted, her hands coming up a
s” were started fanning her face.

 Duke slid his arm along Indy’s shoulders and I moved toward Lana
n on it, did, she stepped toward me, her hands coming up in front of her. I toc
and she held on tight.

“I’m scared to death,” she told me.

oe. I’m I squeezed her hands and admitted, “Me too.”

She started laughing. It was just as melodic as her voice and it

rst intover me like soothing water.

Chloe approached and I smelled her perfume. It was a sophisticated scent that was like smelling heaven.

One of Lana's and my hands unlocked, both of us reached out to and she grabbed on tight.

Holding their hands and taking them in, I thought that maybe Mason wasn't the Supreme Asshole of All Time. Instead, he had to be the Stupidest Man on the Face of This Earth.

"Thank you for asking me to come," Chloe said, her face still with tears.

"Thank you for coming," I said back.

"I'd do anything for Kai," she told me softly.

I swallowed the tears that climbed up my throat and squeezed her hand too.

The door flew open. Our hands detached and we all jerked toward the door. Pong was pushing in, behind him was Leo, and I could see Bruno and Hugo pulling up the rear.

and she "Oh shit. Double, double, toil and trouble. Mace is fucked," Pong announced, eyes on Lana, Chloe and I.

1a. As I Hugo pushed in and slapped Pong up the back of his head. "Stop looking at them Pong."

"Dude, you totally agree with me," Pong replied.

"We're here to give you moral support," Leo said, eyes on me.

Moral support from The Gypsies.

washed That I did not need.

“Why don’t you give me moral support in the form of finding out
d floral taking Tex so long with that tequila?” I suggested.

“Don’t need tequila. I got a doobie in my guitar case,” Leo replied.

o Chloe “Leo!” Buzz snapped. “Maybe these fine ladies don’t smoke dope.

“Ever a time to start, this is it,” Hugo muttered.

Preston I looked at the ceiling then I looked at Lana and Chloe.

o be the “This is my band, The Blue Moon Gypsies, Buzz, Leo, Pong and I
think you’ve already met Floyd.” I indicated each as I said their
et with “Except for Floyd, they’re lunatics. Take no notice of them.”

“Bitch, your tee is the shit,” Pong informed Lana, proving me right

“Thank you. I like it,” Lana replied, her lips forming her son’s b
smile, which she directed at Pong.

er hand “Don’t call Mace’s mom a bitch,” Buzz snapped and came forward
up, smiling the smile that made a thousand groupies cream their
ard the “Ladies, nice to meet you.”

uzz and Pong, Hugo and Leo learned to mind their manners for just long
to greet Mace’s moms.

” Pong While they did so, Floyd got close to me.

“You okay, Stella Bella?” he asked softly in my ear.

hut up, “No,” I replied.

His arm slid around my waist and he said, “Proud of you.”

I closed my eyes.

When they opened again, I was a lot more okay than I’d been for d

I leaned into him, put my arm around his waist and my head

what's shoulder.

My eyes moved to Buzz and I whispered, "How's Buzz?"

"We had a talk on the drive home. This may sound funny, but I thought the funeral was good. Closure. Her folks are good people and they knew they tried to take care of her. You could tell they were grateful." I nodded and sighed and Floyd went on, "Still, he's a little lost without Linnie, but he's gonna be okay."

Hugo. I

I gave his waist a squeeze right before the door opened again and everyone in the room jumped and turned toward it.

Hector and Shirleen were walking in with Dixon Jones.

Beautiful

Shitsofuckit.

This is just your life, your career, your world, my brain said to me. No reason for you to be nervous.

d, hand

pants. *Why are you such a pain in the ass?* I asked.

It's the job of every neurotic artist to have a brain that tortures them enough. brain answered.

Well, fuck off, I demanded.

Then to Dixon I said, "Hey."

I moved forward, my eyes going from Dixon to Hector, who gave a nod, then to Shirleen, who was watching me closely, and back to Dixon. "Glad you could make it," I finished.

We shook hands.

ays. "Would you like to meet the band?" I asked.

on his Shirleen shouldered close. "No time for that. Who knows what's gonna happen? Could be snipers. Could be time bombs. We gotta get d

business.” She turned to Dixon. “Let’s go, times wastin’. What you go to my girl?”

Dixon looked at Shirleen, then me. From what he said it appeared he didn’t want to waste any time.

“Feel like headin’ to the studio?”

I got that freaky thrill that was half terror, half elation, bit my lip and looked at Floyd. Then I looked at Hugo then Pong then Leo and finally

My eyes went back to Dixon and I said, “Yeah.”

Dixon looked at Leo and Buzz. “You boys got enough new material for a CD?”

“Sure,” Buzz said. “But we’re The Gypsies. We gotta do a couple of covers.”

“No covers. We do new shit,” Hugo put in.

“Dude, we so have to lay down ‘Ghostriders,’ at least. I’m thinkin’ about ‘Golden Hair,’ too,” Pong decided.

“Not ‘Sister Golden Hair,’ ‘La Grange,’ we kick ‘La Grange’ in the ass,” Leo demanded.

“‘La Grange!’ We do covers, we ain’t recordin’ ‘La Grange’ before we record ‘Ain’t No Easy Way,’” Hugo snapped.

Maybe I should have intervened, but I didn’t. Dixon Jones had to do what he was getting himself into.

He did.

Pong, Buzz and Leo had all opened their mouths to speak, but Dixon was already there before them.

“‘Ghostriders,’” he said decisively and his eyes cut to me. “And we

t to say to Joel's people, get permission for Stella to do 'And So It Goes.'"

"Righteous," Ally breathed.

l he too "You bring papers?" Hector asked Dixon, and he nodded.

"In the car. I'll give them to you, but you get someone who know they're doin' to look at them."

lip and For a second, I felt relief. It wasn't unusual for hungry new artist
/ Buzz. fucked in the signing process, but it didn't seem that was Dixon's gig.

My relief disintegrated when I got a look at the scorching hc
al to fill Hector was directing at Dixon. His glare said he wasn't used to anyone
him for a fool and he didn't like it much.

couple Dixon caught it too, took a small step back. He decided (wis
change the subject.

"How soon can you get them into the studio?" he asked Hector.

'Sister "What studio we talkin' 'bout?" Shirleen asked Dixon.

"Our set up in LA," Dixon answered. "Black Fat'll pick up all ex
ne ass," They'll have rooms at the Chateau Marmont while they're workin'."

Effing hell but he wasn't messing around.

fore we All-expense paid trip to LA staying at the Chateau Effing Marmon

Jim Morrison stayed at the Chateau Marmont, dangled from a dra
o know there, hurt his back.

And Led Zeppelin rode their motorcycles through the effing lobby.

My heart skipped a beat at the thought of Pong, Hugo and Lec
xon got Chateau Marmont. The only thing that made me feel better was that

somewhere the hotel was supposed to be earthquake proof, which me
e'll talk Gypsies couldn't destroy it.

And if Zeppelin could ride their motorcycles through the lobby, it probably wouldn't blink at the shenanigans of The Gypsies.

"Kick fuckin' ass!" Pong shouted, hands up in the air in a devil's rock on" gesture.

Hector delivered the buzz kill. "Stella doesn't step foot out of the door until she's safe."

"Dude, you guys could provide security for Springsteen and the fuckin' E Street Band," Leo whined. "You could get us to LA."

"You're not goin' anywhere until Stella's safe," Hector said in a tone that made Leo snap his mouth shut.

"Agreed," Dixon put in readily.

Hector nodded to Dixon, turned and pointed to me. "Backstage passes." He looked back to Dixon and said, "Let's go to your car."

Then they were gone.

Everyone stared at the door.

"What just happened?" Chloe asked Lana quietly.

"I'm not sure," Lana replied.

"Nothin' much," Daisy declared nonchalantly. She then turned to Lana and Lana and screeched. "*Just that our girl and her band are about to be signed by a red-hot record label!*" She threw her hands in the air and screamed, "Yee ha!"

"Holy crap, now I really think I'm gonna cry. God dammit!" Indy turned back to fanning her face.

"I'm already crying!" Roxie wailed, and it was true.

Lana smiled at me. "Oh sweetie, that's great!"

he staff “It’s not great, it’s *righteous!*” Ally screamed.

s horns “Rock ’n’ roll!” Ava shouted, hands up, doing her own devil’s horns
Everybody started jumping up and down, screaming, shouting
hugging.

Denver “Champagne, we need champagne!” Daisy squealed right before the
opened.

entire Mace and Lee stood there.

The room went still.

one that Effing *hell*.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it),
standing next to Lana, my arm around her shoulders, hers was around
fuckin’ waist.

The minute she saw Mace, her body went solid and her fingers dug

Everyone was silent.

Mace’s eyes were locked on his mom.

I held my breath.

His gaze unlocked and sliced to Chloe.

Chloe I heard Chloe suck in breath.

t to get His eyes cut to me.
houted,

Oh dear.

yelled, I gave Lana a squeeze.

“Babe?” I called to Mace. “We got some special guests tonight, one
known as Bogey One.”

I saw his jaw grow tight and I watched as his tongue traced his

behind closed lips.

ns. For your information, I did not take this as a good sign.

ng and I saw Vance and Luke behind Lee. Luke entered the room. Vance
in, grabbed the doorknob and shut the door, him behind it. Lee and
he door positioned themselves in front of it.

My eyes moved back to Mace and he'd twisted his torso to watch
Lee put his hands to his hips. Luke crossed his arms on his chest. Both
eyes were leveled on Mace.

Well, one thing was certain, the Rock Chicks took their assignments
seriously. They'd done everything I asked to the letter.

), I was
and my Mace turned back toward me.

"Kai? Sweetie?" Lana called in her soft voice.

; in. Mace closed his eyes, but even so, you could see the pain slash through
his face at hearing his mother's voice.

"Maybe we should give them privacy," Jules whispered.

Mace's eyes opened and cut to her, pain gone, fury in its place.

Shit!

"Don't you fuckin' move," he growled.

Jules went still and so did everyone else.

"Mace," Lee spoke low behind him.

Mace looked over his shoulder at Lee.

herwise His voice was dangerous when he said, "You wanted a show? You
a show."

is teeth Lana tried to take a step back, but my arm went tight around her.

“Mace, look at me,” I demanded.

He didn’t delay. His eyes cut to me and I thought I might melt under the heat of his glare.

“You arrange this?” he clipped.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

I looked toward Duke.

He pressed his lips together and nodded his head.

My gaze returned to Mace. “Because Caitlin would have wanted it.”

The air in the room went so thick it was like we were breathing chunky soup, with bits of carrot and celery in it, enough to make you choke.

It took everything I had, but I ignored the chunky air.

“You did what you had to do for her,” I said quickly. “Now I’m doing what she’d do if she was here. She wouldn’t want you tortured by demons in your head. She’d want to chase them away. She’s not around here that, so I figure, since you said she’d like me with you, then she’d give the job to me. I took it. I’m going to chase them away.”

I let go of Lana and moved toward Mace. He stood frozen, scary. Not like he was in shock, like he was holding his body still so he wouldn’t hurt someone.

I didn’t let that faze me as I moved toward him until we were toe-to-toe.

I tilted my head back to look at him and rested my hands lightly on his chest. I felt his heart beating hard and fast under my hand.

This frightened me, but I pushed on.

“And don’t tell me I don’t know what I’m talking about. I know you didn’t want me to but I’ve seen the papers, Mace. I saw the photos of her. I saw the photo of her with you. She loved her brother. She’d want you to be happy. You need your family. Everyone in this room is your family. Everyone’s here because they care about you.” I hesitated, smiled and said, “Well, except maybe Pong and Hugo. They’re here because they usually free beer in The Rose’s dressing room.”

I was trying to be funny, cut the tension.

It didn’t work.

.” Mace stared at me. I stared back.

g soup. Mace’s stare got scarier. So much scarier it scared me, but I took a
choke. stared back.

There was movement at our side. Mace and my heads turned and
1 doing was there.

y those She lifted her hand as if she was going to touch Mace. His eyes met
id to do her hand and they narrowed so she dropped it.

ive that She took in a breath and held it.

frozen. On the exhale she said, “She’s right, honey. Tiny would want that.”

ouldn’t Mace’s body jerked when he heard his sister’s nickname, but he
say a word. He just stared at her.

o-toe. *This isn’t going very well*, my brain informed me.

r on his *Shut up!* I returned.

Chloe lifted her hand and touched my arm. She put pressure there and
moved to the side. Now Lana was there, standing next to Mace, across from
me. But my eyes were on Chloe. She had her hand in her jeans pocket.

when she pulled it out, a chain was dangling from her fingers.

I watched in stunned, frightened silence as Chloe pulled in a breath deep her chest visibly expanded with it. She let the breath go and leaned her head back. Mace. She got up on tiptoe, put her arms around his neck, the chain bled from her hands, a tiny ring dangling from it. She clasped the chain around his still frozen neck.

Chloe settled back on her feet, but lifted a hand to touch one finger to the ring that was now resting at his throat.

“She loved that ring. Never took it off. I’ve been wanting to give it to you since...” She stopped and shook her head slowly then went on, “You remember that, remember? On her fourteenth—”

She didn’t finish. Mace’s arms shot out and he yanked her to his chest. I heard her head jerked back and she let out a small cry. His back arched and he buried his face in her neck.

My throat closed and I felt the tears immediately fill my eyes and spill over.

She hesitated, likely still recovering from all of a sudden being held in his arms. Then Chloe wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tight.

“Out, now,” I heard Lee say, and there was movement all around us.

Lana threw her arms around the two of them and I took a step back as the others were leaving and I was going too. This family needed space.

I didn’t get a second step. Mace’s hand darted out and closed around my wrist. His head came up, his eyes locked on mine and pinned me to the wall.

He didn’t have to say a word.

I settled in.

He let me go and turned to his mother.
She slid into his arms as if she'd been there only yesterday.
As Mace hugged his mom, I looked to the door.
Floyd was there.
So was Lee.
Floyd winked at me.
So did Lee.
Floyd went out first.
Lee closed the door behind him.



“AND IT’S YOUR TURN, girl, to cry,” I sang into the mic.

I started the “na-nas” of Journey’s “Lovin’, Touchin’, Squeezin’” and the band kicked in the second time through, and the entire crowd shouted and spillback at us, hands up in the air, jacking out the beat. The crowd included Lana and Chloe, who were front and center with the Rock Chicks.

Lana, I noticed right off, was super comfortable up front at a rock show. She watched as she sung out loud, knowing every song we played, except for three new songs of Buzz and Leo’s, of course. She danced and swayed. Let’s just say that Mace’s mom could *move*. She was sexy as all get out. You could tell she loved rock ‘n’ roll.

For Lana, an afternoon of Guitar Hero was definitely the way to go.

On the other hand, it took Chloe a while to get into it (her favorite was probably Tchaikovsky too). Still, The Gypsies were on a tear and didn’t take very long for her to feel the vibe and let it take her where she needed to go.

The security detail was the same as the other gigs, except Hank and Lee weren't there because they were dismantling Sidney Carter's operation. Their place was Indy's dad, Tom, and Hank, Lee and Ally's dad, Mace. Tom and Duke both were close to the stage guarding me and the Rock Chicks.

I'd had just enough time after the reunion to tell Mace about Dixie and the Chateau Marmont and to let his smile of approval and his light give me a happy shiver. Then Chloe and I let him alone with Lana.

In order to give them privacy, instead of hanging backstage with the band as normal, I sat at the bar drinking beer with the Rock Chicks and Chloe. Lana didn't drink beer. She drank martinis. Chloe was one classy lady. At the gig, I talked to some of my fans with Duke plastered to my side until it was time to take the stage.

I was smiling as I sang the "na-nas," my arm up in the air, moving back and forth. The crowd caught my rhythm, and, as one, their arms moved in unison and they chanted the "na-nas" with the band.

My eyes slid through the crowd and I saw Luke at the doors, backstage, arms crossed on his chest, talking to one of the club's bouncers.

I kept singing, my eyes kept moving and I saw Mace standing behind the bar with his shoulders above the crowd. His eyes were scanning.

I waited, and just as I knew it would, his gaze came to me. I didn't know what it was, but the minute his eyes hit me my smile grew brighter. I also didn't know that Lana and Chloe caught my smile and turned around to see what I was smiling at. Further, I didn't know when they saw it was Mace, Chloe started crying into tears again and Lana hugged her.

Mace's eyes left me to scan the crowd again and my eyes kept r

d Eddie still singing the “na-nas,” still living in my happy place, my *lucky* place. In place where my band was heading to LA to record an album. The place where I’d chased Mace’s demons away and gave him back his family.

Rock The place where I lived now.

The place where Mace loved me.

n Jones My eyes traveled the length of the bar and something shifted
p touch happy place. I couldn’t put my finger on it but something was wrong.

Still chanting with the crowd, my hand in the air, my eyes went to
the band the bar.

he, who Then down it.

the bar, I Then back up.
time to

Then it dawned on me that Tex wasn’t sitting at the bar.

ing back And Tex never brought the tequila.

ed with Automatically, the band and I finished the “na-nas” as my eyes
through the crowd, searching for but not finding Tex.

k to the The band stopped playing and I said into the mic, “We’re gonna
break, be back!”

ead and The crowd roared and I gave them a wave and a smile, keeping
appearances, but as fast as I could, I moved offstage.

’t know Duke was there with a beer and he shoved it in my hand.

’t know “Girl, normally you kick ass, but tonight, I gotta tell you darlin’,
it I was the *shit!*” Duke said to me, and normally I would be stunned, maybe
he burst moved by his compliment. Duke didn’t hand out compliments very oft

Instead I looked up at him and asked, “Where’s Tex?”
moving,

ce. The Duke's body went still then his head jerked around to scan the bar.
e place My band had come down behind me and the Rock Chicks were on
the stage, but I didn't look at them.

I moved.

I shoved through the crowd. People were trying to get my attention,
in that me, to talk to me. I heard their words as I moved, shoving through until
Mace coming my way.

back up I stopped in front of him, put my hands on his chest and tilted my
back.

He was looking down at me smiling, face soft, voice low.

"Babe—" he started.

I cut him off, "Where's Tex?"

His head jerked then shot up. He too scanned the bar.

as flew My fingers curled into his T-shirt. "When I arrived he met me at the
door. He went to get me tequila. I haven't seen him since. With every
I take at that happened, I didn't think—"

I didn't finish. Mace's hand wrapped around mine and he started pushing
ing up through the crowd. By the time we got to the side of the stage, the
Chicks were looking pale and the Hot Bunch was in a huddle. Lee slung
unhappy look at Mace and got on his phone.

you are "Has anyone seen him?" Roxie asked.

he even "When we arrived, but I haven't seen him since," Jet answered.

en. "Fuck," Duke muttered.

"What's happening?" Lana asked, getting close to Mace and me.

“One of our people is missing,” I told her and looked up at Mac
ounding need to make an announcement. Stop the show,” I said.

Lee flipped the phone shut and addressed the group, “The girls ar
home. Then I want everyone in the field. Bobby, Matt, Duke, Tom a
will stay on Stella and the band. Matt, you’re responsible for getting
to stop home. Dad, arrange police escorts for every band member when th
il I saw over. Yeah?”

Malcolm nodded.
ly head

“*Fuck!*” Duke exploded. “How did we miss this?”

“It’s my fault,” I whispered.

Lee’s eyes sliced to me.

“Get that out of your head. Finish the gig,” he ordered, then h
moved through his men as Hector and Darius arrived at the huddl
wherever they’d been. “Luke, you got Ava and Ally. Darius, y
he back Shirleen, Daisy, Lana and Chloe. Hector, you got Jet and Roxie. Van
rything got Jules and Indy. Mace, you’re with me. Let’s go.”

They went, except Mace, who looked at Matt.
pushing

“I gotta know you got this.”
e Rock

Matt nodded. “I got it.”
iced an

Mace’s eyes went to Tom and he skewered Tom with what could
described as *a look*.

Tom said, “We got it. Go.”

Mace looked at me and I started babbling, “It’s my fault. We didn’
We didn’t catch it. Everyone was caught up in my shit, your shit, Dixc
mom, Chloe. I knew I should have waited until all this was over. If sor

le. “What happens to Tex—”

His finger went to my lips, effectively quieting me, then down
e going hand curled around my neck. He stared at me as he gave me a neck squ
nd Dad Then he was gone.

3 Stella Fear streaming through my system, my eyes were locked
le gig’s backstage door Mace went through following Lee.

“It’s all my fault,” I whispered.

is gaze
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nething

happens to Tex—”

His finger went to my lips, effectively quieting me, then down and his hand curled around my neck. He stared at me as he gave me a neck squeeze.

Then he was gone.

Fear streaming through my system, my eyes were locked on the backstage door Mace went through following Lee.

“It’s all my fault,” I whispered.



NO MORE FUCKING HUGGING

Jules

My cat Boo and I didn't sleep well, tossing and turning all night, for Vance to come home or phone to say everything was okay.

He didn't.

The alarm went off and I got out of bed, fed Boo and did my n business. I was standing, hips against the counter, eating slightly toast.

I was trying, with limited success, to learn how to cook. I'd tr never got the hang of making toast, and since the morning sickne sticking with me, slightly toasted was a lot better than fully burnt.

I was slightly toasting toast when Vance walked in the back door.

His eyes cut to me and he said, "Hey, Princess," before he tu deactivate and reactivate the alarm.

I waited and he came to me, put an arm around my waist, brough him and touched his lips to mine.

I knew this wasn't good. If the news was good, he wouldn't have put his arm around me before giving it to me.

After he'd lifted his head, he said softly, "We got nothin'."

I closed my eyes and opened them when Vance's arm went tighter my waist.

"I gotta shower and get to the office. We're havin' a briefing and all goin' back out."

I nodded and asked, "Do you know what this means?"

He shook his head. "Sid's usually communicative, lets people know he wants or what he's done and why. No word."

"Do you think Tex is all right?"

His face went tight and I had my answer before he said, "Sid mess around. It's not lookin' good, Jules."

I bit my lip and tried not to cry.

"Hank says Roxie's a mess," Vance told me. "Can you take some time today, get to her?"

I swallowed back my tears and nodded.

Tex was Roxie's uncle. He'd been estranged from his family for decades but through letters, since she was a kid, they'd been close. Eight months ago she'd done for Tex what Stella had done for Mace last night. She'd brought him back into the family fold.

Vance kept talking. "I'm gonna be busy, Princess, so you need to find a real estate agent. Put in an offer on that house."

"It can wait," I replied.

His arm got tight again and his hand came to the side of my face. "This is the only place we've seen we both like. It's right. You'll still be close to the office and I'll be close to the office. I don't want to lose it. Make the offer."

"I can't think of anything but Tex right now. There'll be another

around—”

“Let us worry about Tex. You take care of our family.”

d we’re “Crowe—”

His body shifted back a few inches and his hand went to my belly. I liked to put his hand there. These days he slept with his hand there.

w what It should probably be said I liked it when he put his hand there. even more than he liked to have it there.

“I want to be settled before he comes, Princess,” Vance said. “I doesn’t “Make the offer.”

My eyes narrowed at what he’d slipped in, thinking he could get away with it.

ne time We’d been having an ongoing argument about the baby’s sex since my second trimester. Neither of us wanted to know so we hadn’t asked a doctor.

ecades, For some reason, probably hormones, this argument honestly annoyed me. Vance (and now Nick was in on the act) thought it was hilarious. years ago, they both brought it up regularly and it had advanced. Now we were frustrated about names.

call the “It’s not a he. It’s a she. And her name is going to be Rebecca A. Auntie Reba.”

His lips formed a small smile. His hand left my belly, he got close to me, and both his arms went tight around me.

‘It’s the “As much as I’d like you to have a girl to name after your aunt, it’s not to Nick be a boy. And we’re namin’ him Max,” Vance returned.

r house See what I mean?

“It’s a girl, but *if* it should be a boy, we’re naming him Harry,”
back.

“I’m not namin’ a kid Harry.”

lly. He “Yes you are. Harry’s a good name.”

“Harry’s a name for someone else’s kid, not *my* kid.”

Maybe “Crowe—”

His face came close. “You know I enjoy fightin’ about this wi
quietly. Jules, but I got shit to do.”

My body got still and I nodded. His mouth came to mine and he g
t away a brief kiss. Then he walked away, hands at his belt.

“You want toast?” I yelled to his departing back.

ce I hit “I’ll make it,” he yelled back, disappeared into the bathroom and s
ked the door.

“I’m thinking that’s a good choice,” I told Boo, who was sitting
nnoyed kitchen floor, his big, black, bushy tail sweeping widely, giving me
In fact, pouty face, not at all pleased that Vance had come in and given me
ighting attention.

“Meow,” Boo agreed.

ann, for



I HIT KING’S SHELTER, getting there by police escort, something
e again hormones or not, I found annoying, since in my day (as in, a few
ago), I could kick some serious ass. I no sooner got through the doc
s gonna May was bearing down.

May was a volunteer at the shelter and even though she was thirt
older than me, she was my closest friend. She had a tough hide, a sof

' I shot(literally and figuratively) and a heart of gold.

“We got a problem,” she announced.

I opened my mouth to ask, but I saw what the problem was immed

Roam was in the room.

“I’ll take care of this,” I told May and stalked to Roam.

The minute I made it to him, I demanded, “What are you doing her
th you,should be in school.”

Roam was with Clarice, who was a runaway too, but now she spe
ave meof time with the tutors, a lot of time with Daisy, and even though she v
seventeen, was more like a volunteer than one of the kids. She kept t
in line, helped to get them off the streets, quietly fed info to the
workers and sometimes talked the kids into sessions with the tutors.
shut the

Roam and Clarice were talking with a couple of other kids, both o
were new around the shelter so I didn’t know them very well.
on the

Roam’s eyes came to me and he got up from where he was sitting
a kitty
all theback of the couch.

“Law,” he said and that was it.

He walked several steps away and I assumed he expected me to fol

When he stopped and gave me a look, I realized I was not wrong.

which,
monthsnow, living with Shirleen and growing up fast, he still was one.

r when
A special one.

Seven months ago, he took a bullet to save my life. In turn, I took
y years
t center
save his and killed a man. We didn’t talk about this, but obviously w
close. With May and Sniff, he’d stood up with me at my wedding.

Vance had taken both Roam and Sniff under his wing, and when they weren't at school, out on dates with girls, doing homework or being tough love by Shirleen, they worked the surveillance room at Nightingale Investigations. It was unusual, but sometimes they went on ride-alongs with Vance, and lately, Luke had been taking them out too.

However, Roam calling me by my street name and then arranging for me to expect me to follow him smacked way too much of the Crowe Effect. You know, the fact, it was so Hot Bunch-like that I was thinking maybe he should have kept me out a lot of time at Nightingale Investigations curtailed.

Even though I wanted to say something, I followed him. The kid who was just shelter respected him. He'd been out on the street a long time and he kids social through. He'd lost his best friend to bad drugs and he'd taken a bullet.

Now he was in a good home, getting an education, and there was no way to say it, he was a Nightingale Investigations Apprentice. Nightingale Men had badass reputations. Roam hanging with them was

When I made it to him, in a low voice, I snapped, "Why aren't you in school?"

"May have a line on Tex," he replied.

I blinked, but the rest of my body froze. I came unstuck, grabbed him, and pulled him further away.

May came up to us and got close. "What's goin' on?"

I ignored May, my eyes glued on Roam. "Talk."

"Some kids saw somethin'. They know who Tex is, gave me a call, and I snuck out last night, took Shirleen's Navigator and started checking things out. Sniff's watchin' the building the kids said they took him from. He's been makin' the rounds, askin' questions. I think it might be true,"

en they answered.

g given “Have you told Vance this?” I asked.

ntingale “Didn’t want to look the fool if it wasn’t gonna—” Roam started
gs with, interrupted.

ogantly “Call him. Right now. Tell him everything you know.”

fect. In “I still haven’t made certain—” Roam began again.

ave his I leaned in. “You know better than that. It doesn’t matter. Any lea
to be followed.”

s at the He looked at me a beat, nodded and yanked out his phone, took tw
made it away and hit a button. I watched him put the phone to his ear and he
for me. mumbling into it.

o other “That boy,” May said, and she sounded both proud and exasperated

e. The “Yeah,” I agreed, and both May and I kept our eyes on Roam.

s huge. I felt my ass vibrate just as I felt my stomach churn.

you at I was looking forward to having Vance’s baby, *really* looking for
it. Because once I had our baby then I wouldn’t be sick all the fuckin’
(amongst other reasons).

his arm I pulled the phone out of my back pocket and swallowed my nausea

The display said, SNIFF CALLING.

My eyes flew to May. I flipped open the phone and put it to my ear

ll. Sniff “Talk to me,” I demanded and I heard panting but no words. “S
called sharply.

heckin’ I saw May’s eyes go narrow and felt Roam’s slice to me.

l into. I “Law?” Sniff said through the panting.
, Roam

I started moving to the door. “Keys,” I snapped at May, and he jerked then she started running toward the kitchen where she kept her j

d, but I Into the phone I asked, “Where are you?”

“Runnin’ from the building. Tex is with me. It...fuck, Law, he up,” Sniff told me.

I stopped moving. “What?”

d needs More panting, but he talked. Sniff talked a lot. It would take mo running from an exploded building to get him to shut up.

70 steps “Tex blew up the fucking building. It was *insane*.”

started “Give me that fuckin’ thing,” I heard Tex boom through his own p and then I heard him in my ear. “Jules?”

d. At the sound of his voice, my hand went to my throat, tears hit th of my eyes and I shifted my body until it was close to a chair. I was into the chair when I asked, “Are you okay?”

ward to “Fuckers conked me a good one. I got a splittin’ fuckin’ headac ng time answered. “We need a ride,” he said this last like he’d been at a pa designated driver ditched him and he was partially annoyed but still e the party.

a. In other words, Tex was all right.

1. May was running up to me.

niff?” I I turned to her and shook my head.

“Where are you?” I asked Tex.

I heard scraping on the mouthpiece then, “Where are we, kid?”

“Commerce City,” Sniff replied, and I heard him giving some stre cross streets.

er body My eyes moved to Roam who'd come close and I snapped my fingers
purse. his phone.

"Hang on, Tex," I said, snatched Roam's phone out of his hand and
blew it to my other ear. "Vance?"

"You got me, Princess," he replied.

"I've got Tex on my phone. He's fine. He's with Sniff." I gave him
more than info I had.

Vance repeated the streets in my ear. Likely he did this for the benefit
of whoever he was with. Then he clipped, "Roger that, Jules. You still
wanting, on the line?"

"Yeah. He's on Sniff's phone."

e backs "Get off. Darius is closest. He'll call Sniff."

sinking "Okay."

"You said he blew up a building?"

he," he "That's what Sniff said."

erty, the Silence for several beats then, "Christ, we got it on police band now
njoying

Then he started laughing.

"Crowe! There isn't anything fucking funny about this!" I yelled
everyone turned to listen.

"You're right." He was still laughing then he said, "Out."

Disconnect.

I flipped Roam's phone shut and went back to mine. "Tex, you the

rets and "Where the fuck else would I be?" Tex boomed, and even though
was rude, it was Tex and he was alive and well enough to be rude so

gers for have shouted with joy.

“Vance knows where you are. Darius is in the area. You’ll have a
id put it soon. Keep the line open for Darius’s call.”

“Gotcha.”

Disconnect.

1 all the I looked at May, but it was Roam who said, “Law, you should
fuck.”

nefit of I growled.

got him Then I felt it coming.

I ran to the bathroom and puked.



ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Bobby came to get me and Roam. Stella and
were already in his Explorer.

We all went to Fortnum’s.

Tex was behind the espresso counter when we got there. Roxie was
N.” by his side. Jet, Indy and Ally were all behind the counter with their
Eddie, Hank, Sniff and Darius were all standing in front of the counter
and Jane were standing at the end. There were no customers. Fortnum
led and officially closed.

Tex swung a portafilter at us the minute we entered the store. It was
full of used coffee grounds. The grounds flew across the room and sp
next to a table.

re?” “If you girls get near me, I swear to God I’m gonna rip someone
ugh this off!” he boomed. “I’m all right. No more *fucking hugging!*”

I could We all reared back and Ava even put her hands up.

“All right, all right. No hugging,” Ava said and we cautiously moved to pick up the store.

Roam went to Sniff. They didn’t hug either, just did some comports handshake and moved away from the adults.

“Tex, I’m happy you’re alive and all, but I kid you not, you ain’t sayin’ portafilter filled with grounds around one more time, *I’m gonna rip you off*,” Indy snapped.

This made Tex lose his scowl and grin at Indy.

“What happened?” I asked when I got close to the counter.

“He hasn’t said,” Ally informed me.

“I’m gonna tell the story once. Daisy and Shirleen ain’t here. If I told Ava and Jet when I got here, I would have had to tell Ally when she got here and then Roxie when she got here. Now you. Then Daisy and then Stella. You’re gonna have to fuckin’ wait,” Tex boomed.

“He blew up a building!” Sniff shouted, deciding he liked this conversation better than the teenage one.

Ava and Stella both gasped. Obviously, they hadn’t had the full briefing.

“You blew up a building?” Stella stared wide-eyed at Tex.

“Morons took me to a building with chemicals,” Tex explained.

“He built a bomb!” Sniff shouted, coming to the group at the front counter.

Everyone’s eyes moved to Tex and he shrugged then said, “I got my head locked me in. I had to get out somehow.”

“So you blew up the building?” Stella asked.

“I just meant to blow open the door. But, like I said, the place was

red into with chemicals,” Tex replied.

“So, once you blew open the door, the entire building blew up,”
plicated said, clearly not able to take it in.

Tex shrugged again. “Shit happens.”

toss a ur head The bell over the door went and Ally shouted, “We’re closed!”

Everyone turned to the door as the unwitting male customer m
“But, it’s Friday. Everyone’s open on Friday.” He pointed at Tex. ‘
says in the papers his coffee is the best in Denver. Maybe even Americ

“He just blew up a building,” Ally told the customer. “He might
contaminated with chemicals. Like the sign on the door says, we’re clc

old it to ot here, of us. At Ally’s words, the customer’s eyes grew round and moved thro

hirleen. Finally, he breathed, “It’s true. Everything they say about all of
true.” His eyes focused on Stella. “Oh my *God*. You’re Stella Gunn.”

e adult “Dude. Do you *not* know what ‘closed’ means?” Ally snapped.

Lee walked toward the customer and his eyes skittered to Lee.

ef yet. “Wow, I know you. Saw your picture in the paper. You sco
redhead and you own Nightingale Investigations,” the customer sai
eyes on Lee, and I couldn’t help it, I had to laugh a little because
t of the looking at Lee like he was an honest to goodness movie star. “Are you
like, throw me out?” he asked Lee as if he wanted him to do it.

They’d “No, you’re gonna walk out, like, right now.” Lee answered.

The customer’s mouth dropped open at Lee’s deep voice and thre
tone then he whispered, “Have you ever killed anyone?”

is filled Lee leaned in threateningly. “Do you mean today?”

At that, the customer took the hint, did another store swipe with his card, and Stella and he took off.

Lee locked the door behind him.

“It’s like that all the fuckin’ time,” Tex boomed. “I’m gonna be whoever’s talkin’ to the papers. Either they act star struck, like I’ve never uttered, Fuckin’ Newman, or they expect me to be nice to them, like I fuckin’ “And it they’re breathin’. Only good thing about it is the tip jar needs to be checked out three times a day. I’m thinkin’ about getting one of those kitty water dispensers that refill with fresh water all the time, like a kitty fountain.”

Stella was still staring at Tex, who had not five minutes ago talked about blowing up a building, and now he was talking about kitty water fountains.

Nobody else thought this was unusual.

Mainly because it wasn’t.

There came knocking at the door and Daisy, Lana and Chloe were with Mace. Lee opened the door and they rushed in.

“Any of you hug me, I’m gonna snap your neck,” Tex boomed.

Lana skidded to a halt. Chloe went pale. Daisy ignored Tex totally and powered through the store, shouldered through the people behind the counter, and threw her short arms as far as she could get them around his wide shoulders. “Woman!” Tex shouted, aggrieved.

“Shut up,” Daisy whispered, but her voice broke in the middle and she heard a muted sob.

The room went still. Everyone looked at everyone else and I saw people’s eyes fill with tears.

Tex relaxed and his arms moved around Daisy.

his eyes “I’m okay, darlin’,” he muttered.

That was when Daisy reared back and started hitting him with her fists.

“Don’t you scare me like that again, Tex MacMillan, or I’ll kick your ass!” she yelled.

For a second Tex looked surprised.

Then he let out a bark of laughter.

“Shit woman, like you could kick my ass,” Tex hooted.

Roxie pulled Daisy away and suggested, “Why don’t you let Uncle make you a latte?”

“Damn straight,” Daisy snapped. “Mocha, double chocolate,” and she swiped at her running mascara.

“Maybe you should go to the bathroom and do that,” Jet suggested.

Daisy whirled on Tex and pointed in his face. “Now you’ve ruined your mascara!”

On that, she stomped off to the back of the store where there was a slash-Rock Chicks and Hot Bunch-Only bathroom.

“It’s okay. We’re not normally this crazy,” Jet told Lana and Chloe.

“Yes we are,” Ally muttered.

“What am I standin’ here for, my health?” Tex boomed, already taking out Daisy’s mocha. “Anyone need a fuckin’ coffee?”

Duke moved forward to take Lana and Chloe to the counter.

I turned and saw Mace had claimed Stella. She was tucked to his chest with her head under his chin, her arms around his waist, his arms around her

of his hands lifted and he curled his fingers around her neck. Her head tilted back and he smiled down at her.

I'd only seen Mace smile a few times in our acquaintance, but I'd never seen him smile like that. You could actually see her body melt into his as he returned his smile.

I turned my eyes away because I found something about this too intimate to watch.

I'd known Mace for months, but he was the only Nightingale I didn't know well. Now, knowing his story, I knew why.

Everyone thought Vance's and my story was heartbreaking, but it made ours look like we'd grown up with Ozzie and Harriet.

Stella was a flat out miracle worker.

"Never thought I'd see *that*," Ava whispered to me, a jerk of her head indicating Mace and Stella, but her eyes weren't on them either.

"Nope," I agreed.

"It's good to see," she went on, and I grinned at her.

"Yep," I agreed.



VANCE CAME HOME LATE that night, climbing up to the platform where my bed was and waking me. I usually slept hard and deep, but I always woke up when Vance got home, even if it was for a few moments.

"Hey," I whispered.

"Go back to sleep," he muttered, fitting himself to my back, his shoulders to heels and putting his hand to my belly.

One I rolled, and Boo, who was tucked into the crook of my lap, got up

id tilted disgruntled, “Meow!” and stalked off the end of the bed.

Vance shifted so I could press us together front to front.

d never I put my hands on his chest and asked softly, “You angry at Roam?”

s as she “I was workin’ my way to that. But seein’ as it worked out in the

didn’t see any reason to get in his face about it. We had a talk the

ntimate there’s a next time, he knows to call me,” Vance answered. “Anyway,

me what he did. They’d checked out the building. No cars, no noi

Man I people they could see. Tex was in a windowless room, and for c

reasons, not makin’ a lot of noise. They thought the place was empty.

Mace’s orders were to phone if anyone approached the building. Roam was

call if they had company. There were some errors in judgment, but

good work. He’s learnin’.”

er head I relaxed into him.

Vance was a patient teacher.

He was going to make an excellent father.

“You get anything you could use out of Tex?” I asked.

“A little. He was unconscious most of the time. The rest of the t

was alone and makin’ a homemade bomb,” Vance answered.

ere our “I thought you said Carter didn’t mess around.”

s woke “Usually, he doesn’t. It’s likely they wanted to play with him and

him conscious when they did it. They left Tex tied to a chair. He sco

some metal shelves, used the sharp edge of the shelves to cut thro

k from plastic. They probably didn’t expect him to get loose. They definitely

expecting him to know how to build a bomb. We’re guessin’ they wer

back, but they got lots of other shit keepin’ them occupied these days.’

up on a

That was a lucky break. A scary one in *many* ways, but lucky same.

” “Do you think he’ll give up?” I asked.

end, I “Carter?” he asked back.

ugh. If “Yeah,” I answered. “First Shirleen guns down one of his assassin he told living room then Tex blows up one of his buildings,” I explained. “A ses, no person would give up.”

obvious “Sidney Carter is a lot of things. I’m not sure sane is one of them.”

Sniff’s This was not good news.

gonna “Eddie and Hank getting anywhere?” I continued my mini interrog it was

“Yeah, Carter’s operation is in disarray. Some of his men are makin’ deals. More warrants are goin’ out. It’s takin’ time, but it’s good.”

“So, it’ll be over soon?”

“Maybe. They don’t find him, Carter’s gonna start gettin’ de That’s what I’m worried about.”

time he I snuggled closer. “It’ll all be okay.”

Vance sighed then shared, “I don’t know if you noticed this, Princ we started with Indy getting kidnapped repeatedly. Jet nearly got wanted Roxie got the shit beat out of her. You were shot, twice. Ava was v oted to and nearly exploded in a car. Now everyone’s a target and there’s a r igh the there who’s desperate. I don’t like it. It does not give me a good feelin; weren’t

“We’ll survive,” I whispered.

“Yeah, let’s just hope Hector and Ally get somethin’ on. That way kill two birds with one fuckin’ stone and be done with this shit.”

all the At his words, I burst out laughing.

“I wasn’t bein’ funny,” he told me.

I wrapped my arms tight around him. “I hate to disappoint you, but Jet told me that Ally told her that Hector’s like a cousin or somethi

s in her “Fuckin’ great,” he muttered, and I let out a small giggle.

ny sane It was his turn for his arms to grow tight.

“Love to hear you laugh,” he muttered, and my belly did a swoop.

We fell into a comfortable silence for several long minutes.

Then I told him, “They accepted the offer on the house.”

ation.

His arms went even tighter. So did mine.

talkin’,

lookin’

It was a great house, just a few blocks away, only a couple door from where Lee and Indy lived. It had a nice, tidy yard with ex landscaping, beautiful plants and mature trees. It had character, wann even a white picket fence.

sperate.

It made me want to laugh.

I used to be a vigilante, head-crackin’ mamma jamma who carried patrolled the streets, and one time took down a bail-jumping pimp and ess, but his working girls, one after the other.

raped.

Vance still was a badass mother.

iolated

And we were moving into a house with a white picket fence.

nan out

I couldn’t wait.

g.”

“I’ll call the agent tomorrow, get him to fast-track it,” he told me.

we can

“What are we gonna do with three bedrooms and two and a half ba asked.

“Fill them with babies,” he answered, and the belly swoop dipped

Still, just to be annoying, I said, “This is the only child I’m
honey, Morning sickness sucks.”

ng.” I heard him give a low, soft laugh before he informed me, “We’re
four kids.”

“Four!” I cried, my head tilting back to look at him in the moonlight

I loved looking at Vance any time, but the best time was in the moonlight
when the planes and angles of his face were shadowed, both hard and soft,
all beautiful, like he was to me.

His chin tipped down and he looked at me. “Yeah, four.”

s down “No way am I gonna have four kids.”

xcellent “Four’s a good number.”

nth and “You carry four children in your body, puking every five minutes
morning until noon.”

He grinned then his mouth touched mine. “Okay, then three.”

l a gun, I thought about it, pressing my lips together, then I said, “All
l two of Three.”

I saw, even in the moonlight, the looks of satisfaction and amusement
passed on his face and I realized he’d only ever wanted three kids.

He’d just played me.

“You’re annoying,” I told him.

“You’ve mentioned that before,” he said back.

aths?” I His hand went up my back and into my hair, tipping my head down
pressing my face into his throat. It moved away from my head but

deeper. tangled in my hair and I felt his fingers start to play with a tendril.

having. We kept our silence and lay still and comfortable in each other's arms.

Finally, I asked, "You tired?"

Not havin' "Wiped," he answered.

I pressed deeper and kissed his throat.

It. "Any chance of nighttime sex?" I asked there.

onlight, He waited a beat then dropped to his back, taking me with him. In
soft but his hands were on my nightie, going up, and the nightie was gone.

"You want it, you gotta do all the work," he answered.

I smiled.

I wanted it, so I was willing to do all the work.

In fact, I didn't often get a chance to do all the work, so I was
es from forward to it.



IT WAS SOME TIME LATER. I was on top, Vance inside me. I was moving
I right.pace and enjoying every stroke. One of his hands was at my hip, the
one between my legs, creating magic.

ent that "Closer, Princess," he muttered, and I leaned toward him.

The fingers on his Magic Hand moved and I had to stop my desire
throw back my head and moan.

"Closer," he repeated when I'd stopped moaning, but I had
panting, and I got closer.

wn and My face was in his face. The hand not between my legs went from
stayed into my hair.

ms. It fisted right before he said, his voice husky, his breath short, “I watch you ride me. Do you know how fuckin’ beautiful you are?”

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” I returned on a pant, because I was seriously causing some sensations between my legs and I was ready to explode.

He didn’t answer my question.

a flash, Instead, against my mouth, he noted, “You’re close.”
I nodded.

“I wanna hear it,” he told me. His voice had moved from husky to and I knew what he meant.

“Vance,” I whispered, like I always whispered, *always*, right before he made me come.
looking



“JULES,” Vance said sharply in my ear, his arm, tight around my midriff shaking me.

g at my I jolted awake, sweating and breathing heavily. When I opened my eyes, the other the shocking, bloody images from my subconscious were still vivid.

“I’m awake,” I whispered, but I was trembling and I felt Vance’s arm against my neck and his arm stayed tight. “I’m okay,” I told him.

cent to “I want you to see someone about these fuckin’ nightmares,” he whispered against my skin.

started I had nightmares about what happened. Mainly that I shot someone in the head and killed them. Sometimes I’d dream about me getting shot, but my hip: it was about me taking another person’s life.

“After this current drama is over,” I told him.

love to “Promise me, Jules,” he demanded.

I scooted backwards and nestled my bottom into his groin. “I promise he We fell silent and I waited for him to fall asleep, like he normally s about after he woke me from a nightmare.

He didn’t fall asleep.

Instead, he said, “You did what you did because you are who you wouldn’t change one piece of you. You did it for Roam. You did survival.”

hoarse “I know,” I replied quietly.

Vance pressed closer. If you’d asked me if he could get closer, I fore he have said no, but he did.

“He was scum, Princess,” he murmured to the back of my head. “ had two minutes to get to him, if Luke and I made it to him before she iff, was fired, either one of us would have taken him down. And doin’ it w give either of us nightmares.”

my eyes, “I know,” I repeated.

“He’d already killed Cordova. He’d beat the shit out of Roam and e’s lipshave killed him too. You did what you had to do.”

I closed my eyes tight and said, “I was the reason he was on a ramp growled “You blow his sister’s head off while he watched?” Vance asked.

My body went still as his point penetrated deep.

e in the “Of course not,” I whispered.
mostly

He put a hand to my midriff and pushed me to my back then he v on an elbow and looked down at me.

“You poured vegetable oil on dealers’ cars. You threw smoke
ise.” Retaliation for that isn’t murder.”

ally did He was right.

“You’re right,” I told him. “Except it was canola oil,” I corre
lighten the mood.

u are. I Vance didn’t feel like lightening the mood.

l it for “What are the alternatives for that night?” he asked me and I blink
“What?”

“You’re a good shot. You could have kept him alive even though
l wouldaimin’ to kill. You kept aimin’ to maim, what would have happened?”

“He probably would have shot me in the head,” I told him, and t
If we’dtrue.

ts were “Roam too,” Vance pushed, and I shivered.

ouldn’t “Roam too,” I whispered.

“Which means Sniff would be alone. No you, no Roam.”

l would That didn’t bear thinking about so I shoved it aside immediately.

Vance went on, “And I wouldn’t have you and you wouldn’t be p
with our son.”

page.” “Daughter,” I corrected quietly.

“I don’t give a fuck what it is. It exists. It’s yours and mine and it’
be here because of the split second decision you made to put a bulle
brain.”

vent up “Crowe—”

“Part of the reason I love you is because, despite the kind of pe

bombs. was, you're the kind of person who'd let this haunt you." His mouth closed.
mine. "But, Jules, now you gotta let it go."

He was right about that too.

ected to I hated it when he was right.

But I loved it when he told me he loved me.

"I love you," I said against his lips.

ed. I felt his mouth grin. "That's good, since you're married to me and
my baby."

he was He gave me a swift kiss, pushed me back to my side and fitted
against my body from shoulders to heels.

his was His hand came to my belly.

I was almost asleep again when I heard him say softly, "As
happened to you, I'd be Nick."

I knew what he meant. My Uncle Nick had never recovered from
Reba's death. He existed, and on some level, he enjoyed life. He loved
and he respected and cared for Vance. We had a nice little family. The
light had gone when Auntie Reba died and it was never coming back.

regnant I knew this about Vance. I knew this was how much he loved me.
known it for ages.

"I know," I said.

s gonna "I experienced that feeling for six hours while you were in surgery.
t in his never want it back."

"Vance—"

rson he "I never want it back, Jules."

came to "Okay."

"You made the right decision when you aimed to kill."

I linked my fingers with his and held on tight. "Okay."

"Go to sleep."

I sighed then snapped, even though my heart wasn't in it, "Stop telling me what to do."

I havin' His fingers tightened on mine, but he didn't answer.

We fell asleep.

himself And, for some reason, I never had another nightmare about that night. Never.

nything

Auntie
ved me
But the

me. I'd

urgery. I

“Okay.”

“You made the right decision when you aimed to kill.”

I linked my fingers with his and held on tight. “Okay.”

“Go to sleep.”

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His fingers tightened on mine, but he didn't answer.

We fell asleep.

And, for some reason, I never had another nightmare about that night.

Never.

TWENTY-FIVE



GONNA PICK A FIGHT WITH YOU EVERY DAY

Stella

I woke when Mace and Juno's weight hit the bed. I was so deeply asleep I hadn't even felt Juno leave the bed when Mace arrived at the door, I hear his key in the lock or him moving around the apartment.

I was dead asleep, because the night before, with Tex gone and seeing it was all my fault, I hadn't had a wink of sleep. It didn't help that I hadn't hear one word from Mace all night until he phoned mid-morning to say he was all right and that Bobby would be picking me up and taking me to Fortnum's.

"Mace?" My voice was husky with sleep.

"Yeah, babe." He was on his back and he rolled me into his side.

His arm curled around my waist as I rested my head on his shoulder.

"What time is it?"

"Quarter after midnight."

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"As far as I know," he answered.

"You would know?"

His fingers gave my waist a squeeze as he said, “Yeah, I would know.”
I rested my arm on his abs and my body relaxed into his.

“Do you wanna talk?” I mumbled into his shoulder, already half in dreamland.

“If I had any energy, kitten, I’d use it to fuck, not talk.”

Well, one thing you could say for that, it proved Shirleen right.

I was almost in dreamland when I muttered, not even knowing what I was saying, “Love you, Kai.”

And, being so close to dreamland, I didn’t feel his body get tight
sleep, I nor did I called him for the first time by his given name.



“KITTEEN,” Mace said in my ear, and I felt his arm tight around my waist
being as I didn’t me a gentle shake.

I opened my eyes. It was morning.

We’d shifted in the night. I was turned away from him. Mace was
me to to my back.

“Stella,” Mace said, giving me a less-gentle-but-still-gentle shake
blinked.

“I’m awake,” I told him.

“It’s a big day, shit to do. But before we get to it, we gotta talk.”

It was a big day.

It was Lee and Indy’s wedding day.

Luckily, since I’d been invited to the wedding and the bachelorette
that was supposed to be last night, I hadn’t scheduled any gigs

ow.” weekend.

Unfortunately, since we were all in danger of being kidnapped
murdered, Lee had cancelled his bachelor party and at the same
cancelled Indy’s bachelorette party.

Incidentally, just as an FYI, Lee’s party was meant to be at Li
Road House, and in a bizarre Rock Chick/Hot Bunch twist, Indy
scheduled to be at Smithie’s Strip Club.

The cancellation of the bachelorette party had not gone down we
went berserk when Lee had cancelled the party that she’d spent
planning. He’d made his announcement after everyone had checked in
with their own eyes that Tex was still breathing, so everyone was able
get the news firsthand *and* witness the knock-down, drag-out fight
ensued.

I didn’t have any siblings but always wanted one, until seeing I
Ally fight.

After it went on awhile, Hank got involved, trying to be the diplomat
(failing), and then it escalated.

Then Eddie and Indy got involved and it exploded.

We all watched as the five of them shouted at each other about stuff
was so historical no one knew what they were on about.

They were yelling about some kegger Indy and Ally had masterminded
high school, which for some reason ended with Hank, Lee, Darius and
being picked up by the cops, and we learned that Hank, who had been at
University of Colorado, was nearly suspended and he wasn’t happy
this, even years later.

“You haven’t changed one fuckin’ bit, either of you!” Eddie said

pointing at them both.

and/or “Good!” Ally shouted back.

ie time She planted her hands on her hips and I immediately saw where
was coming from with the hands-to-hips business.

ncoln’s “Gotta tell you, beautiful, never liked the idea of you ha
7’s was bachelorette party. You and Ally plus the Rock Chicks equals disaste
best of times, and these are far from the best of times. I’m fuckin’ th
ll. Ally got a reason to cancel it,” Lee said to Indy.

months Indy let out a gust of air between pursed lips and turned to me. “
1 to see he did *not* just say that.”

ound to Instantly, Mace was at my ear. “For fuck’s sake, don’t speak.”

ght that Tex boomed, “Jesus Jones, but I’m glad I wasn’t whacked last ni
was dead, I’d’ve missed *this!*”

Lee and “We’ll have a party after ya’ll get back from your honeymoon,
tried to play peacemaker.

iat (and “If you do, Jet’s not goin’,” Eddie announced.

Uh-oh.

uff that “What?” Jet, who had been keeping herself removed, asked.

“Roxie either,” Hank threw down.

nded in Uh-oh again!

d Eddie “Sorry?” Roxie’s eyes narrowed.

n at the “Oh my,” Lana, standing beside me, breathed.

y about “You’re not goin’,” Eddie repeated to Jet.

houted, “You heard me,” Hank said to Roxie.

“They scare me,” Chloe, who was on the other side of Lana, who
“But still, I think those boys might want to quit while they’re ahead.”

e Mace They didn’t hear Chloe and were on such a tear, without remorse
and Hank dragged Jet and Roxie into the fight and it degenerated to the
win’ a where I feared the roof would blow off Fortnum’s.

r at the “Quiet!” Darius all of a sudden shouted. Everyone went quiet and
rilled I at him. “Jesus, you never learn do you?” he asked the warriors.

Then he turned and pointed at Mace. “He knows.” He turned to
Tell me and pointed. “He knows.” Then he turned to Jules and said, “She know
And you all know I fuckin’ know. You gotta learn life’s too damn slow
this shit.”

ght. If I He got up close to Indy and Lee and clipped, “You two’ve been
since you were kids. Tomorrow, you’re gettin’ married, and today
fightin’ about what? What’re you fightin’ about?”
, Daisy

Lee’s face got tight and Indy looked at her feet while Darius went on

“Eddie’s right and he’s wrong, it ain’t just Indy and Ally who’ve
changed. It’s all you all.” His finger circled the lot of them as he cor
“How fuckin’ lucky are you, even with all the shit that’s gone down, t
haven’t learned what we’ve learned?” he asked, throwing his arm aro
room and ending with his fist thumping his chest. “Rejoice, for fuck’s
After that, Darius turned to Tex and said, “Good to see you’re ali
man.”

Then he turned on his boot and he was gone.

“He scares me too,” Chloe mumbled.

I stifled a giggle.

spered. Indy bit her lip and turned to Lee. “Can we chat, um...privately?”

Lee’s face went soft, his arm went around her shoulders and, Eddie disappeared into the books.

ie point So did Hank and Roxie, Eddie and Jet.

Ally looked at everyone else.

looked “So I’m an idiot. This isn’t news,” she announced.

Vance “Well! Thus ends another white people fight,” Shirleen declared.

ws too. “You!” Tex boomed and he was pointing at Lana. “And you!” He moved to Chloe. “Learn quick, it ain’t ever borin’ around here.”

hort for “I’m getting that,” Lana replied, and luckily her mouth was twitchi

in love Things calmed down after that. The men went off to do whatever you’re they did and the women, along with Tod and Stevie, Duke and Tex around Fortnum’s chatting, gossiping and doing the minor changes th to do so that Lana and Chloe could come to the wedding.

on. “Oh, we couldn’t,” Chloe protested. “We barely know you.”

e never To which Indy replied with a smile, “Family’s family, and like it tinued, hat you the minute you got on that plane, you became family.”

und the This was sweet as all get out and Lana and Chloe thought so too.

s sake,” Instead of a bachelorette party, we had pizza delivered and T ve, big Stevie ran out and got beer. We ate pizza and drank beer at Fortnum

chatting and gossip degenerated to sex talk, but since Mace’s mom there, I kept silent on that particular subject. They were not used to d beer at altitude and did not. Chloe, I learned, had been married to named Ben for five years. It was clear he was a good guy (in *a lot* of d ways). Lana was single and apparently enjoyed her status.

After a while, the sex talk downshifted to game after game of Yahtzee and they We sipped beer, shared and played Yahtzee until, at around ten, the escorts arrived to take us home.

I snuggled back into Mace's body and mumbled, "I have to get to the Castle. I'm not a bridesmaid, but I'm invited to the pre-wedding festivities."

"You'll get there after we talk and after we fuck. First, the talk," Mace replied, and I noticed two things right off the bat.

One was that he was being bossy.

The other was that he sounded serious.

Very serious.

Instead of getting angry at him for being bossy, this made me grin, and I turned to face at him.

I tilted my head back to look at him and saw he was definitely serious. My breath, feeling adventurous, headed up the Inca Trail.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"You said you'd seen the papers."

"What?"

"You said, the other night, backstage, that you'd seen the papers."

I blinked. "Yeah? And?"

"If you saw the papers, when I told you about Tiny, you already knew everything."

I was confused. "Are you angry about that?"

"Yes and no."

"What's the 'yes' part?" I asked hesitantly.

zee. “You stood there as I told the story, actin’ like you didn’t know.”

en, our “Well, I didn’t know all of it.”

“I know the part you didn’t know. No one knows but the men. I
to Theacted like you didn’t know any of it.”

ities.” “There were other parts I didn’t know,” I tried.

” Mace “You acted like you didn’t know any of it,” he repeated.

“Mace—”

His arm went around me, he pulled me close and tipped his chin
further so his face was in mine. “Kitten, this is gonna work, you don
me. Ever. Got me?”

at tense I blinked again.

Now hang on a second.

ous. “These are pretty extreme circumstances,” I defended myself.

“Yeah, that’s the ‘no’ part and why I’m lettin’ you get away with t
Mom and Chloe here without talkin’ to me about it.”

I blinked.

Yes, again!

Letting me get away with...

“Mace—”

y knew He interrupted me. “We’re done talkin’ about this. I said what I
say. I think you get me.”

Oh, I got him all right.

He made to move into me, but I scooted away and got out of bed.
at the side in my panties and tank, put my hands to my hips and glared

I was pissed way the hell off.

I'd gone through emotional hell to do what I did.

But you And he...

He...

"I never thought I'd say this in my whole effing life but *how dare* screeched.

Juno got to her belly and woofed.

n down Mace got up on an elbow and his eyes narrowed.

't lie to "Get back in bed," Mace growled.

"Fuck off!" I snapped.

"Get back in the fuckin' bed," Mace clipped back.

"Don't tell me what to do, Kai Mason."

"That's another thing," his voice rumbled with anger, "you don't bringin' Kai."

"In about three seconds, you don't back down, I'm never gonna c
anything," I retorted, then I moved to flounce away, and I must ad
embarrassing as it was, I was definitely going to flounce.

Before I got even a step his fingers wrapped around my wrist. He
sharp tug and I was back in bed, Mace on top of me. Juno woofed ag
quickly exited the bed.
had to

"Don't you walk away from me," he rumbled.

"I'll do what I want."

I stood "We got a disagreement, we talk and work it out. You don't fucki
at him. away."

“For your information, *Kai*, we’re not disagreeing, we’re *fighting*.”

“Okay, Stella, we get in a fight, we talk and work it out. I repeat, not fuckin’ walk away.”

“And I repeat, I’ll do what I effing well want!”

you!” I He looked furious, furious enough to explode, but instead, his head tilted and he kissed me.

It was a hot kiss. Fueled by the fight and such an intense kiss, we rolled over each other. Hands and mouths everywhere, the anger turned into something else entirely and I liked it a lot.

He tore down my underwear as I pulled off my tank.

Luckily, he was already naked.

Then his lips were on my belly, his hands spreading my legs. His mouth was right where I needed it.

call me He was good at this. If I had to rank his talents, oral sex was arguably at the top of the list. Therefore, he had me squirming and panting under him in no time.

all you Then he came up over me. I thought he’d enter me but he didn’t. He moved to cup me between my legs but that was it. No finger action, just holding me there. His mouth was at my throat.

gave a “What do you want?” he asked there.

ain and I didn’t hesitate, couldn’t. I was in a state.

“I want you to fuck me,” I breathed.

“Beg,” he ordered, and my eyes, which had been closed, flew open.

n’ walk “No.”

His head came up. His eyes captured mine and his fingers, finally

swirl.

you do One slid inside, out then back in.

While he was doing this, he repeated, "Beg me, Kitten."

"No," I repeated, but it was still breathy.

is head His hand kept moving.

His lips came to mine and he whispered, "Beg me, babe."

were all I was no match for his hand, which I was thinking was as talented
ned to mouth.

Therefore, I whispered back, "Please, Mace, fuck me."

His hand stilled and my mind went blank.

"Say it again."

and his I said it again.

I no sooner finished the words than his body disappeared.

ibly top Before I could figure out where he went, he whipped me to my
o time. looked at him over my shoulder and he was on his knees between n
is hand The minute his eyes caught mine, he lifted up my hips and slammed in
ion, no

Effing hell.

It was heaven.

My head jerked back and I moaned, "Yes."

His hands at my hips, he drove in again and again. Just as I was a
explode he pulled out and I groaned in protest.

He fell to his back and moved me over him.

y, did a "Mace..." I breathed against his mouth, but he was jerking my leg
knees so I was straddling him. He pushed me up, entering me at th

time.

I looked down at him.

Lordy, but he was beautiful.

“Now, Kitten, you fuck me,” he demanded, his voice thick.

Without hesitation, I did.

As hard as I could, as rough as I could and as fast as I could.

As his I threw my head back with my climax and he whipped me on my back and finished by driving in deep, making my second orgasm ride the wave of the first.

When he was done, I took his weight and he kept moving insistently pressing his hips between my legs while I purred.

Finally, he stopped and he did something with his body, his weight on me, but I wasn't taking all of it. One of his hands was stroking my back from hip nearly to armpit.

belly. I
my legs.
to me.

His face was in my neck.

“I like fightin' with you, babe,” he told my neck.

Oh dear.

He was going to piss me off.

“Don't piss me off,” I told the ceiling.

about to

His head came up. My eyes shifted to him and he was grinning.
“We should have fought a lot more a year ago. Would've never left you

Now, I was getting pissed off so I decided to share.

is at the
the same

“Erm...you're pissing me off,” I warned him.

“Gonna pick a fight with you every day,” he informed me.

“Mace—”

His face came closer and my head pushed back into the bed, but I got very far and his mouth touched mine.

“Forgot how much I like you on your knees,” he muttered against my mouth. “Your heart-shaped ass right there for me.”

“Mace—” I tried again.

“I’m beginning to change my mind,” he told me conversationally, his mouth moving from mine to my jaw. “Pretty soon, you’ll be finding out. Everyone’ll want what I got right here.” His hips moved again, as he moved inside me and I was tender, I let out an involuntary short, rough puff. His hand moved up my side from my hip and in cupping my breast. “I want you,” he whispered against my cheek and then his mouth moved to my neck. “All...fuckin’...mine.”

Even though I liked what he was saying, like, a lot, I still felt it impossible to stay on target.

Therefore, I informed him, “I’m not done being mad at you.”

His head came up and he was still grinning. “I’m all right with that.”

It was safe to say I wasn’t getting pissed anymore. I was there.

I gave him a hearty shove. We disengaged and he rolled to his back. I got the distinct feeling (and that pissed me off too) that he let me go with this. I was rolling the other way when he caught me at the hip. “I whipped me around so I was on top of him.”

I pushed up, but he kept me pinned with both arms tight around my neck and his long legs tangling with mine.

“Talk to me,” he demanded, but he said this with his face soft.

voice low, and I'd never been a match for that combo, so I did.

It didn't "The Rock Chicks intervened. That morning when Shirleen shot the
They were worried that we were over and they decided to tell me
inst my happened to Caitlin. I tried to stop them, but before I could do that, they
me about her hand."

Mace's arms got tighter, but I kept talking.

lly, his "When I heard that, I got sick, as in, literally. Straight to the toilet
amous. then no more eggs benedict."

was still I watched him flinch, and when he was done I saw his eyes had
irr. His warm.

But it's "Kitten," he mumbled, but I shook my head to let him know I
my ear. done.

"I knew you'd tell me, but I had to be strong for you. When you told
important I couldn't lose it, make something that needed to be about you about now
talked Duke into telling me the whole story. He didn't want to, but
After he told me, they gave me the papers."

." He rolled me to my back and was half on me, half off, up on one
his other arm across my midriff.

ok, but I "All you had to do was tell me this," he said softly.

et away I shook my head. "I never wanted you to know. Not about me losing
ips and just wanted to be there for you."

The tips of his fingers went to my temple and whisper soft they sifted
y waist, the hair there.

"I appreciate that," he muttered. His head bent to kiss me, but I
and his mine back and to the side. His brows drew together and he asked, "Y

pissed?”

That guy. “Um...yeah.” I answered in a tone that stated, *isn't it obvious?*

He what “Why?” he asked.

They told “I don't make you explain your every movement. I don't bc around. I trust you.”

His head jerked. “Didn't I just spend a week workin' at winnin' yoilet and because you *didn't* trust me?”

Effing hell.

I grown I forgot about that.

Cover! my brain screamed.

wasn't “That was then, this is now,” I returned.

He stared at me then he sighed. “All right, Kitten. You wanna stay old me, stay pissed. I'll be here when you're over it.”

ne. So I he did. That, for Mace, apparently was that.

He did a push up and exited the bed, got dressed, grabbed the le elbow, whistled for Juno. As he was doing this, I pulled up the sheets, lay in l watched. When he was gone, I got up and stomped to the bathroom. I of the shower and standing at the sink wearing my robe, my wet hair c back, brushing my teeth when Mace walked into the bathroom. He c ing it. I behind me, put an arm around my waist and kissed my neck where it shoulder.

ted into His eyes came to mine in the mirror. “Done bein' pissed at me?”

I wasn't.

I jerked But as I stared into his beautiful green eyes, I noticed they were a ou still mixture of wary and amused, as if he was preparing for a negative re

but any response he was going to get would make him laugh.

I kept brushing and looking at him in the mirror noticing something missing.

For a second, it escaped me.

Then I realized it was the guard. The guard was not down over his back

And there were no demons.

It was just Mace and me in the bathroom.

My eyes moved to his throat and I saw his sister's tiny ring resting on his back. I wanted to take a moment and mentally do a triumphant war dance and glee at my trouncing of the demons.

Instead I took the toothbrush out of my mouth and answered the pissed, mouthful of foaming toothpaste, "Yeah. I'm done."

Just like I thought, what I said made him laugh.

I watched that too. Then I leaned forward and, while I spit and read and allowed myself a mini-mental war dance of glee.

Ha!

Die demons die!

He was still behind me when I straightened and his other arm joined me up first around me.

"That didn't take very long," he told me.

"You're infuriating and bossy, but you're hot. You're lucky you're not a demon, you weren't, I wouldn't put up with you," I said it but I didn't mean it (at least not all of it) and it didn't sound like I meant it either.

His mouth went back to my neck.

“Bullshit,” he muttered there.

I ignored that and asked, “Is your suit for the wedding here?”

“Nope, tux is at the office. We’ll drive by there on the way to Da
pick it up.”

“You’re wearing a tux?” I asked, surprised.

It was an evening wedding, but still.

“I’m in the wedding,” he informed me and my eyes grew round.

“You are?”

“Yeah, standin’ up with Lee.”

I blinked.

“You are?” I repeated.

“You didn’t know that?” he asked.

“No. I didn’t know that. You didn’t tell me.”

“Indy didn’t tell you?”

“I’m not *sleeping* with Indy,” I reminded him.

“I thought you women talked wedding shit all the time.” He s
surprised.

“We talk about sex and we talk about rock music and sometimes
clothes. Tod talks about the wedding.”

He grinned. “You talk about sex?”

“Yeah, Eddie likes it rough and hard and Luke and Ava fell off wh
n it, (at
tried desk sex.”

He winced and muttered, “Too much information.”

I was intrigued at his reaction and turned in his arms to face him.

you guys talk about sex?”

“Fuck no,” he said immediately.

isy’s to “No locker room talk?”

“No.”

“While you’re sitting surveillance?”

“Again, Kitten, no. We don’t talk, probably because we don’t know.”

“But the Rock Chicks are sultry and sexy. I thought you all would brag.”

“Don’t need to brag.”

“Why not?”

Mace gave me a look that said it all, his arms got tight and he
“Babe.”

I grinned and decided to tease. “Indy says Lee’s great at kitchen sex.”

He frowned. “Stop talking.”

ounded

I didn’t stop talking. “And I think Vance is creative with positions that interesting. Maybe you two can chat, get some ideas.”

we talk

“Stella—”

“Hank proposed to Roxie while he was giving her the busir informed him.

en they

“Be quiet,” he growled.

“And Daisy and Marcus—” I didn’t finish.

“Don’t I squealed because he bent, put a shoulder to my belly and carried

of the bathroom. He threw me on the bed and stalked back to the bathroom and slammed the door and I heard it lock.

I giggled to myself.

Juno loped over to me and nudged my calf with her nose.

“That was fun,” I told Juno.

wanna Juno woofed.

I gave her a head scratch and looked at her bowl.

want to Then I shouted, “Mace, you didn’t feed Juno!”

He shouted back, “I walked her, you feed her!”

I heard the shower go on.

Still smiling, I fed my dog, made coffee then I made Belgian waffles. Mace replied, Mace.

counter

3. I find

ness,” I

me out

of the bathroom. He threw me on the bed and stalked back to the bathroom, slammed the door and I heard it lock.

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SOMETHING BORROWED

Stella

We were sitting around Daisy's dining room table, which was littered with every beauty implement known to womankind, from moisturizers to makeup to false eyelashes to bronzing powder to shimmer powder to curling irons plus brushes, combs, teasing combs, bobby pins, spray, gel, mousse, pomade, finishing wax and shine elixir.

Indy was sitting drinking a latte Tex brought her from Fortnum's was closed for the day. Then he hightailed it out of there, saying he was meeting "the boys" for lunch.

She was calm and chatting with Lee's mom Kitty Sue, Roxie's mom who was in from Indiana for the wedding, Trish, Eddie's mom, Blanca's mom, Nancy, Duke's wife, Dolores, Lana and Chloe.

She was wearing a beautiful, pale-pink, kimono-style silk robe with huge, intricate flower embroidery on the back, a bridal gift from Rose. Ava and Jules, her hair up in a towel, her legs crossed, leaned back in ease.

In fact, everyone was calm and chatting.

Daisy had put on a huge, gourmet, catered buffet for our lunch,

was sitting on the sideboard. She'd had a half dozen bouquets delivered were the same as Indy's wedding flowers, pale-pink and white daisies, white roses and pale-pink and white peonies, and these decorating the room. She'd not gone rock 'n' roll, but instead a Chopin was playing softly in the background.

Daisy was floating around in her own robe, her hair back in a wide bun, her face devoid of makeup, offering refills to those who wished to top up early from a champagne bottle she was holding.

Out of nowhere, Tod rushed in wearing a beautifully tailored navy blue suit, pink shirt, monochromatic tie and a harried expression. His shiny, black leather shoes clattered on Daisy's floorboards with his frenzied approach.

His dramatic entrance shattered the peaceful, feminine serenity.

Stevie, also wearing a beautifully tailored suit, followed more sedately. Tod took in two breaths, his hands up, one clamped around a champagne glass and he pressed the air down.

"Okay, okay. Update. Just got back from the club. They're about to set up. They have the right colored linens and the florist has already arrived there. I called her to give her a piece of my mind since she wasn't supposed to deliver the flowers to the club for another hour and they might get cancelled."

She *promised* me she wouldn't be early with your bouquets. I told her she must go back to the club and *personally* check that not one *single* petal droops before we arrive at seven."

When he paused to take in a breath, Ally suggested, "Tod, calm down. You should have a glass of champagne."

Tod's head swiveled toward Ally.

"*Can't you see I'm in the middle of a briefing!*" he screeched, and

red that looked back to Indy, face composed and voice back to normal. “Who gerbera?”

Indy was looking a little concerned with the possibility that Tod might start revolving three hundred and sixty degrees, so she said “Petals drooping.”

“Right. Okay.”

He looked down at his clipboard and as he talked he made checkmarks whatever was on the board.

“The cake has been delivered and they’re putting it together now. Beautiful. Perfect. The Lana-slash-Chloe update has been noted caterers and staff.” He looked at them, pointed to them with the end of the pen and bounced it back and forth between them as he spoke. “You’re with the out-of-towner Rock Chick people. Trish and Herb’ll take the clipboard, you, but I moved Stella to your table just in case.”

Back to his clipboard, he checked something off and kept talking.

He gave updates on absolutely everything, including the state of the asphalt of the drive up to Cherry Hills Country Club, a location that posed a problem for Marcus, as members of the club, arranged for the reception, droopy. “They sealed that crack I noticed last week, thank *God*.”

“Tod, darlin’, did you just say they sealed a crack in the asphalt?” she called out.

“Yes, thank *God*,” Tod repeated.

Trish shook her head. “Son, as Roxie used to say to her dad when she was growing up, you need to take a chill pill.”

Tod’s eyes narrowed on Trish and everyone sucked in breath.

then he

ere was “I want this to be *perfect*,” Tod retorted.

“And it will be. You been working hard on it for months. Now er
’s headfruits of your labors.” She pointed at the buffet. “Have some of the
softly, sliced chicken. Kid you not. Melt in your mouth.”

“Trish, there’s a million things to do!” Tod shot back.

“Nothing you haven’t already checked and double-checked, I’m
arks on Trish returned.

“Yes, but—” Tod started, but Trish leaned forward.

It looks “Tod, won’t say it again. Sit yourself down, take a load off and c
by the your friend here really wants you to do.” She indicated Indy with a jerk
l of his head. “Which is enjoy her day *with* her, not running around like a c
e sitting with its head chopped off.” She looked at Nancy and said, “Yeesh,
care of people these days.”

Everyone stared at Tod and Trish, wondering what might happen n

Stevie sat at the table and called, “Daisy, I’ll take some
of the champagne.”

t Daisy “Sure thing, sugar,” Daisy scooted around toward Stevie.
saying,

“Get Tod some too,” Indy put in.

” Trish “You betcha,” Daisy said.

Indy put down her latte, got up and moved to Tod. When she arri
him, she put her arms around him and whispered in his ear. His f
flushed and his eyes started to fill with tears.
she was

Indy’s back was to me but I could see Tod’s face, though he wasn
enough to hear.

But it didn’t take a lip reader to see he said, “Love you too.”



The Hot Bunch

enjoy the

at cold, “NOTHER ROUND FOR YOU BOYS?” the waitress asked on a flyby.

Lee’s head came up and he did a chin lift indicating a positive response.

The waitress stopped, hitched a hip, smiled and said, “Lee, honey, I’m sure,” today you are officially off the market.”

“Been off for a while, Betty,” Lee replied.

“My heart’s breakin’,” she told him and looked around. “You know what’s droppin’ like flies.” Her eyes moved from Hector to Darius to Wally to Mace. “Least there’s four of you left.”

chicken “Three,” Mace said.

young “Oh, honey, now you just went and ruined my day.” She grinned and looked at the papers. ‘Bout time you got your head out of your ass about Stella.”

ext. The Nightingale Men, Hank, Eddie, Malcolm, Tom, Roxie’s dad, Jules’s Uncle Nick, Willie and Duke were at Lincoln’s Road House for their lunch to be served. Tex had not yet arrived.

At Betty’s comment, some heads dropped to look at the table, a few slid to the side and there were a couple of chuckles.

Mace made no reply. Betty had been serving Mace food and he’d been married years and didn’t expect one. She winked at Mace and went to get their drinks.

ace got “You comfortable with the arrangements?” Malcolm asked Lee.

Lee’s eyes moved to his father. “Yeah, Dad. I’m pretty comfortable with the personal security in the form of half the Denver fuckin’ Police Department off-duty, eatin’ Indy’s catering and carryin’ concealed.”

“Indy isn’t payin’ for that catering, I am,” Tom cut in. “And what about the

you boys better eat it and enjoy every scrap.”

“Please tell me it’s steak and potatoes,” Bobby muttered.

“Not even close,” Tom told him. “Don’t remember much
onse. something’s wrapped in filo pastry.”

; I hear “What in the Sam Hill is that?” Herb exploded.

Tom shrugged.

Herb looked at Lee. “You have a hand in the menu?”

boys’re Lee shook his head.

’illie to “You have a hand in *anything*?” Herb asked.

“I have to be in a tux and at Red Rocks at five and get Indy to
Hills Country Club by seven. Indy put her foot down that we have
l. “Saw until eleven before we can get the fuck out of there and we got a suit
Brown Palace,” Lee responded. “That’s all I know about today. That
d Herb, want to know about today.”

waiting Herb’s eyes moved to Hank. “Listen to me now, son, you be
involved. You asked Roxie to marry you, you gotta remember, she’s d
ow eyesus all along with her. I ain’t payin’ for no fuckin’ pastry. Good old ro:
carved right on the spot, potatoes, maybe some of them fancy green
eer for and fuckin’ weddin’ cake. Got me?”

beer. “Roxie told me Tod’s already started her wedding book,” Hank rep

“What’s a wedding book?” Eddie asked.

le with Hank shrugged. “Hell if I know, but Roxie says Tod’s got one
artment too,” Eddie closed his eyes and Hank’s gaze moved to Herb. “If
involved, I’m out. Roxie knows that and she’s good with it.”

it costs, “Sounds like you did the right thing,” Luke said to Vance.

“What’d you do?” Herb asked Vance.

“Justice of the Peace.” Vance replied.

h, but Herb nodded. “Problem is, you knocked up your girl. That’s the or women’ll allow you to get away with a Justice of the Peace.” Herb back to Hank as many of the men coughed to hide their laughter. “Th ticket, son, only way to save us all. Start workin’ on makin’ a baby.”

Hank was taking a drag off his beer. He choked on it and his eyes Herb.

Herb kept talking. “Don’t worry. You have my permission.”

Hank looked at Lee and muttered, “Fucking hell.”

Cherry Lee was too busy laughing to reply.

to stay So was everyone else.

e at the Tex arrived at the table and boomed, “What’d I miss?”

t’s all I



Stella

tter get THE ROCK CHICKS, Tod, Stevie and Kitty Sue were all in Daisy’s r
raggin’ master suite.
ast beef

1 beans The stylists and makeup artists had come and gone. Indy’s bride:
Ally, Roxie, Ava, Jet, Daisy, Jules and two of her other friends, Maria
lied. Andrea, were all done up in subtle rosy-cheeked makeup, shimmer
and beautiful, pale pink, wispy, chiffon dresses with short trains and g
for Jet drapes of material at their arms that looked like they’d slid down fro
: Tod’s shoulders, but actually were meant to be like that. Their hair was all
updos with tendrils hanging down. They all had brand-new pearl studs
single diamond at the bottom in their ears, bridesmaids’ gifts from Ind

Their dresses and hair made them look like they were drifting caught in a romantic modern-day fairytale.

Who would have thought India Savage, Rock Chick, would have looked like a bride at a romantic wedding?

Then again, Indy hooking up with Lee after loving him since he held her in his hand during her mother's memorial service when she was five years old. It all slid to a modern-day fairytale.

So there you go.

I'd done my hair and makeup at the dining room table while the bridesmaids were seeing to the wedding party and changed into my dress in the bathroom. Mace and I shared what seemed like years ago.

I'd bought my dress well before all the drama started and the day was a really good take at the Palladium. I'd curled my hair and left it long and loose, but pulled it away from my face in some soft twists secured by bobby pins at the top and sides. My dress was deep-burgundy satin, structured, and skintight with a slit up the front. I was wearing a pair of pointed-toe, black massive-heeled satin slingback pumps that had been dyed to match the dress.

I was wearing a long necklace of garnets, but I'd wrapped it around my wrist and I had diamond studs, teardrop, chandelier garnet earrings at my ears.

I was sitting on the bed between Jules and Jet when Indy's head fell back and powder through the top of the dress. Kitty Sue and Ally were putting on her. The bridesmaids gracefully slid down her body and settled.

Unlike the romantic visions her bridesmaids were, Indy's dress was in soft, wispy chiffon and romantic.

It was angelic.

Ivory satin, V-necked, another, deeper V in the back, the front

around dress and the back of the dress held together by loops of thin ivory c
her shoulders, which were stitched through gathered material. The c
be into her like a glove and had a wide skirt, a huge slit up the front and a lon
There was no diamante, stitched pearls, lace or sequins in sight. Th
ield her jewelry she wore was her engagement ring, a triple-tiered pearl brace
old was was Ally and Kitty Sue's present to her and her mother's pearls at her

The dress looked exactly like what an angel would wear.

If that angel were a sexy, sultry redhead.

stylists Her hair was down in curls and waves (the way she said Lee liked
e room her makeup was subtle but exquisite.

She wasn't going to wear a veil.

after a It was beautiful, but that beauty all came from Indy.

g at the Kitty Sue was standing back and staring at her.

hidden Then she said softly, "I just need to go check something," and
rapless, from the room.

pencil- Indy and Ally watched this. Everyone else in the room was silent.

I had a Then Indy turned to Ally, put her hands out to her sides and asked,
d some do you think?"

merged Ally gave her a once over, and when her eyes moved back to Indy
ie dress could see the tears.

"Righteous," Ally whispered.

wasn't She gathered Indy in her arms and gave her a hug.

"Old, new, borrowed, blue. Old, new...blue." Tod was surrept
studying his clipboard and muttering to himself. He leaned toward Ste
of the whispered, "Shit, I think we forgot the borrowed."

ords at “Man in the room,” Shirleen announced, walking in followed by
lress fit who’d changed and was now wearing a tux.

g train. I took one look at him and the sight of my gorgeous boyfriend i
he only sent my breath on a cruise of the Caribbean.

let that It was clear Indy wasn’t going the romantic route with Lee’s groo
ears. because it wasn’t your average, everyday tux. It was a *hot* tux. It wa
on black—black suit, black shirt, black silk tie, and not a bowtie e
could tell immediately it wasn’t rented. It was tailored to fit perfectly.

l it) and Shirleen kept talking. “He’s here for Stella, Lana and Chloe.”

She wasn’t wrong. He was our ride.

Though it was kind of weird she brought him up to the bedroom.

I watched and wasn’t insulted when his eyes caught on Indy and
move.

she ran “Shirleen! You don’t just bring a man into a bedroom filled with
dressin’!” Daisy snapped, even though everyone was already c
“Especially if one of those ladies is a soon-to-be bride!”

, “What “What? It’s Mace. He’s taken. It ain’t like he’s out on the
Shirleen snapped back.

r’s, you Indy looked at Mace through the mirror, smiled and greeted,
Mace.”

He gave her a chin lift.

“Indy, honey, I don’t mean to alarm you but we forgot the bor
itiously Tod called.

vie and “What?” Daisy asked.

“We got old, her mom’s earrings. New, Ally and Kitty Sue’s b

Mace, Blue, her garter, but nothing borrowed,” Tod explained.

“Oh shit,” Ally mumbled.

Shirleen looked at Tod. “Borrowed is easy. Anyone can get something borrowed. Shit, she could use a borrowed bobby pin.”

“Her hair isn’t up, Shirleen,” Ava told her.

Shirleen looked at Indy then muttered, “Oh yeah, right.”

“I’ll get my jewelry box, see what I have,” Daisy announced and left her dressing room.

“A hankie’s good. Anyone got a hankie?” Roxie called out.

Since I was watching everyone search for something borrowed, I didn’t catch Mace walking toward Indy. His arms were around his neck and then the chain with his sister’s ring on it was off and dangling between his fingers. He unclipped it on one side, the ring falling out into his palm. A lady shoved the chain in his trouser pocket, stopped in front of Indy, took his hand and slid the ring on her pinkie finger.

Only Jet and I caught this, and watching it we both were breathless, heavily trying to rescue our makeup, we sounded like we were hyperventilating.

“Hey,” Indy looked at the ring then up at Mace. She curled her fingers around her bicep, leaned into him until their faces were close and smiled.

The sun from the windows highlighted the tears glistening in her eyes. Jet and I looked at each other. She reached out, grabbed my hand and squeezed.

We looked back to Indy as she took her hand away from Mace’s face. She swiped under her eye, turned to the room and announced, “I’m

Borrowed needs a checkmark, Tod.”

“What? Where?” Tod asked, jerking his head around, looking at the
ive her as if he’d been told to capture an invisible rabbit in the room.

Mace came to me sitting on the bed.

He leaned in, grabbed my hand, pulled me up and said, “Let’s go.”

We got into the hall when he asked, “Where’s Mom and Chloe?”

I ran to “In the dining room, drinking champagne with Trish, Dolores, Nar
Blanca.”

“Oh fuck,” he muttered.

almost I looked up at him. “What?”

ack and “They’re with Trish. Roxie’s parents are nuts. They make Te
een his adjusted,” Mace told me.

lm. He I laughed. “I’ve been noticing that.”

er right We were down the stairs and nearly to the dining room when I p
his hand to stop him.

hing so He halted and tilted his head down to look at me, body still
: were forward.

und his “Babe, I’m a groomsman, I gotta—” he started but I interrupted.

“Kai, what you just did for Indy—”

yes. His face went hard and his body turned toward me.

nd and Then he leaned in and clipped, “I told you, don’t call me Kai.”

I blinked because I hadn’t even realized I’d done it, but even s
’s arm, stunned at his reaction to it.

i good. Then I felt my eyes narrow and my blood pressure skyrocket.

Mace, it just slipped out and the only reason I can think of as to
the floor because what you just did for Indy was something a good man nar
would do, not a badass called Mace.”

I yanked my hand out of his, muttering under my breath abo
moody he was and started to stomp away, but he caught me and whi
into his arms.

icy and look at him.
“Effing hell, are we gonna fight again?” I cried as I tilted my head

I no sooner got my eyes on him than his mouth was on mine.

He kissed me, deep, slow and sweet.

When he was done, he didn't move his mouth from mine when I
x look “You're gonna have to be patient with me, Kitten. This isn't fuckin' ea

At his admission, my blood pressure settled.

ulled at I put my hand to his face and whispered, “Okay.”

His eyes traveled my face and down, his arms gave me a squeeze
whispered, “Babe, you look great.”
facing

I eyed his tux. “Not as good as you.” I pulled out of his arms, grab
hand and went on, “Now, let's go get your moms.”

His brows went up and he didn't move, even though I was tuggin
hand. “My moms?”

I went back to him, lifted up on tiptoe, put a hand to his chest and t
my lips to his. “Don't ask, just go with it.”

o I was He shook his head, but he followed me to the dining room anyway

“Sorry,

why is
ied Kai

ut how
rled me

back to

re said,
isy.”

and he

bed his

g at his

ouched

.

TWENTY-SEVEN



CONFESSION

Stella

I was standing in a corner with Ava and Luke, listening with half an eye as Ava doing everything she could (and *seriously* failing) to get Luke to dance, but watching the dance floor with frightened eyes.

Tom and Lana were cutting a rug. Tom was flinging Lana around like a rag doll. Nick, who was Indy's DJ, played The Brian Setzer Orchestra's "Junie Man's Wail."

I already knew Lana could move, but Tom was something else. He couldn't just boogie, he could boogie *woogie*. He might be a bit older, but the man was *strong*. He flipped Lana around like she weighed as much as a towel.

They'd been nearly inseparable since the dancing started, after I did my first dance and the father-daughter/mother-son dance and the waltz party dance, of course, and I wondered how Mace would feel about his mother hooking up with Indy's dad.

"Stella." Luke's deep voice came at me.

"Uh..." I muttered, eyes still glued to Lana and Tom, mind still filled with images of Mace going berserk.

“Earth to Stella, come in Stella,” Ava called.

My body jerked and I turned to Luke and Ava. Luke was looking at the dance floor. Ava was looking at the dance floor.

“Do you think Mace will go ballistic if something happens between me and Lana?” I blurted.

Luke’s eyes moved to the dance floor. Ava’s came to me.

“Crap, I hadn’t thought of that,” Ava breathed.

Luke’s gaze came back and he asked, “They’re all adults, in a room full of teenagers. Why would it be a problem?”

Luke to “Mace can be unpredictable,” I told Luke.

At my words, Luke threw his head back and let out a bark of laughter like I was being funny.

“Up, Jive. I was, by the way, *not*.”

Ava and I stared at him.

When he was done laughing, his dark-blue eyes were dancing. He informed me, “Mace is one of the steadiest men I know.”

I stared at him a beat, wondering if he knew a different Mace than I knew. Then I mumbled, “Obviously you’ve never pissed him off.”

Luke started chuckling and said, “Nope. Try to avoid that.”

“Shit, what do you think *Indy* will think of Tom and Lana?” Ava asked, and we all looked back to the dance floor.

Indy was dancing with Malcolm, and as our eyes hit them, Malcolm disengaged himself from Indy and she collided with Lana. Both women’s bodies tumbled. Tom’s arms went around Lana and Malcolm jerked Indy into his befuddled arms. Indy’s and Lana’s gazes locked, Indy burst out laughing.

gestured to Lana. They pulled away from the men and started swinging
at me. other around.

“Don’t think she’ll mind,” Luke muttered.

en Tom I smiled at Ava.

The wedding had gone off without a hitch. This was mostly due to
impeccable planning. It was also partially due to a number of off-d
still-uniformed Denver Police checking everyone’s names against li:
cluding made for them and patrolling the Red Rocks Amphitheater and facil
no one was kidnapped or shot at, which would have ruined the vibe for

Indy and Lee had been married on the Upper Terrace at Red Roc
nothing but the panoramic views as decoration. There were no flow
daughter ribbons, no urns, just some chairs set up and only the romantically-cla
Chicks, the angelic Indy, the Denver skyline and the red rocks for
setting the scene.

It was perfect.

and he They could have had the reception there, but Indy and Tod decided
because they didn’t want folks getting snookered so far away from a ta

I knew, Indy had said that Lee wasn’t into “this wedding business,” but
myself thinking he changed his mind when Tom guided Indy onto the
You could hear all the air being sucked out of the night sky when h
put in, settled on her.

She was smiling at him and looked as calm and serene as she had a
falcolm Lee wasn’t smiling. He stood frozen and was, no other way to
imble, staring with slightly parted lips as if he’d never seen her before in his l
ore shehe still was going to carry her to a deserted island and ravish her the
ng and their toes touched the sand.

ing each Hank was best man and standing next to Lee, then it was Eddie, Luke, Monty, Mace, Vance and Willie. Ally was maid of honor, then Marianne, Ava, Jet, Roxie, Daisy then Jules.

Lee's eyes never left Indy, not when Tom was giving her away, not when Tom gave her the father's kiss.

But when Tom placed Indy's hand in Lee's, his fingers closed hers and you could see the sharp tug right before her body slammed into him. One of his arms went around her waist, the other hand bunched in her hair and he kissed her right then and there.

And it wasn't a chaste peck on the lips either.

He went whole hog. So whole hog it took Ally doing a catcall and Rockpreacher touching his shoulder to stop the make-out session.

Everyone in the congregation and wedding party chuckled except Lee and Indy. Lee took his time finishing the kiss. When he'd lifted his head and he whispered something to her that made her press her lips together, probably in order not to cry.

Then he turned to the preacher and said in a deep, authoritative voice, "Carry on," like he was officiating the ceremony.

Lana, who was sitting next to me, leaned in and whispered, "I think Kai's boss."

I grinned at her because I *knew* I did.

Other than that, the ceremony was simple and short. Neither bride nor groom were traditional. They didn't bother with the reception line, the dancing, the speeches, the first dance, the cake cutting, the bouquet toss, the rice, the confetti, the smiling at folks, embracing, talking and shaking hands while they lined up to take pictures. Indy wanted no posed pictures, only candid, and that's what she got. After that, they took off in

Darius, Crossfire.

Andrea, Indy had built in a goodly amount of time for them to get to Cherry Country Club, but Daisy confided in me, mostly it was so they had and not get home “to consummate the marriage, *comprende?*” and get to the C

They arrived half an hour late.

around No one cared.

nto his. The Brian Setzer Orchestra finished, Lana and Indy stopped sw
er hair, each other around and Nick’s voice came over the sound system.

“Got a request,” he told the crowd. “From a man named Kai.”

and the There was some general muttering, but my eyes flew to Nick. My
caught and before I could unhinge it, a hand was at the small of my
looked over my shoulder and Mace was standing behind me. He
Lee and pushing me toward the dance floor as Billy Joel’s “And So It Goes”
in inch, playing.

robably We were on the dance floor, one of his arms sliding around i
fingers of his other hand drifting down my forearm when I found my v
e voice, “Mace...”

His arm went tight around my waist bringing my body full fronta
k I like The fingers of his other hand laced with mine. He brought our ha
twisted his wrist and rested the back of mine against his heart.

“Dance with me, Kitten,” he whispered.

ide nor That was all he had to say.

y stood I melted into him.

et their Mace and I had never danced before, and he was good at it. Not
photos, was a ballroom dancer, just that his body fit perfectly into mine, sway
1 Lee’s

a natural grace, and he was so strong, mine went along for the ride.

ry Hills “Got a confession to make.” He’d tipped his head forward so his
time to cheek was against mine, his mouth at my ear.

lub. “What?” I whispered into his.

“Went to The Bear to watch you play. I don’t like missin’ your shc
I wanted to talk to you after the gig, work out our shit.” His hand gave
vinging squeeze. “I saw you singin’ this to me.”

My head jerked back, my face coming to the side to look at him. H
lifted an inch and his eyes locked on mine.

7 breath Before I could say a word, not that I had any words to say, I
back. I talking. “Watchin’ you sing that, hearin’ the words, knowin’ what it n
started was then I knew I loved you, Stella.”

started I wanted to find words but I couldn’t. So instead, I slid the hand he
holding from his shoulder to around his neck and I got on my toes and
ne, the him.

oice. He kissed me back. When he was done, he put his cheek back to m
we finished the song, bodies pressed together, cheek to cheek.

l to his. For your information, it was the single most beautiful moment of n

nds up, Outside of the first time he told me he loved me, of course.

When it was over, he touched his mouth to mine again. We dise
and he started to guide me off the dance floor, but our eyes hit Ch.
Lana, who were standing together at the edge of floor and watch
Chloe, definitely a crier, had tears in her eyes.

like he Lana smiled at me.

ed with I smiled back.

Mace caught the smile exchange. His hand slid from the small of my back to around my waist and he gave me a squeeze.

We arrived at Lana and Chloe and I was going to say something when I saw movement at the entryway. Roam and Sniff were standing there and Roam was bouncing on the balls of his feet and grinning ear to ear. Roam gave me a chin lift.

“Erm, excuse me,” I mumbled to Mace, Lana and Chloe.

I turned and raised my hand to motion to Nick. I’d primed him earlier and he gave me a nod, a grin and he grabbed the microphone.

“If everyone could go out onto the patio,” he announced.

A murmur went through the crowd and the guests all looked at each other in confusion. Then slowly, with more guidance from Nick, they did as they were told.

Mace’s fingers tightened at my waist. “What’s goin’ on?”

I smiled at him.

“Nothing, just...” I paused, “I’ll see you back there.”

I pulled free and went out the front door. Floyd, Pong, Hugo, Buzz and Leo were all waiting for me. Buzz and Leo were holding their guitars and Floyd was holding his drumsticks. Floyd had my guitar.

I took my guitar from Floyd and nodded to my band.

Then I said, “Let’s go, guys.”

We walked through the club, and by the time we got back to the stage where Roam, Sniff and the Gypsies had set up our amps, Pong’s keyboards, Hugo’s keyboards, a set of bongos and wheeled out the Club’s piano, the guests were gathered around. The band took their places and plugged in.

ny back I went to the mic.

I put the strap of my guitar around my shoulder as my eyes found Lee, but I and Lee.

e. Sniff Once I did, into the mic I said, “Don’t have a lot of money so we’ve made a few. We’d give you a memory.”

Indy pulled in her lips, Lee’s eyes crinkled and I nodded to Pong.

He started the beat.

Earlier so Then I started to speak the first words of Shania Twain’s “You’re So In Love.”

It was hokey, but for Lee and Indy it was just perfect.

With other as they Hugo started at the keyboards, and as I finished speaking, Floyd came in. Then I hummed a sweet, “Mm, yeah,” and I began to sing a hokey, perfect love song that said it all as my band played.

When I started singing about them taking the long way, I saw tears in Indy’s eyes. And when I was singing about them holding on, still together and strong, Indy was flat out crying.

With Pong and My band stepped up to their mics and sang the title of the song as they were singing.

As we played the crowd swayed, but I kept my eyes on Indy and Lee.

When I started singing about them beating the odds together, Indy looked at Lee. He had an arm wrapped around her, his other hand went to her arms were around his waist, her head tilted back and she sang the drums, the song with me, but to her husband.

With all the Hugo’s keyboards played as the band sang their “Oos” when I was singing. Lee’s head dip low so his forehead was resting against Indy’s and the

closed their eyes and held on to each other.

nd Indy I started singing again. Indy's eyes opened and so did Lee's. His hand
down to her neck, his thumb stroking her jaw as she kept singing right
thought with me.

The band went silent and I finished with just my guitar as I
singing to Lee, but my eyes moved to Mace. They locked with his and
the last two lines of the song direct to him.

Still the I stopped singing and the guests cheered. Ally and Daisy let out
and Tex gave a war whoop.

Mace just shook his head.

s piano Then he smiled.

l sweet, I smiled back.

Indy and Lee weren't cheering. They were making out, *again*.

s filling It was the best present I'd ever given in my life.

ogether The band didn't hesitate. Hugo moved to the bongos and started
rhythm, Floyd started to play piano and I took the microphone in my hand.

s I kept "Enough of that," I said to the guests. I looked back at the band
shouted, "Let's roll."

ee. That's when we played Joe Cocker's "Feelin' Alright."

r turned Everyone started dancing, and even Indy and Lee began to sway
er jaw, music. When it was time for the chorus, the entire crowd put their hands
rest of the air and sang it with us.

Floyd was laying it down when my eyes found Mace's. He was smiling
watched with Luke and Vance, but he was smiling at me in a way that was
ey both wrenchingly familiar.

It was the same, sweet, unguarded smile he wore in the photo of him and Caitlin I saw in the paper.

I was “onstage,” so unfortunately all I could do was smile back.

But in my head I gave one of the dying demons a last, vicious, kick to the gut.

Then I focused on rock ‘n’ roll.

We went from Cocker to Three Dog Night and played “Shambala” on to The Doobie’s “Jesus Is Just Alright.” After that, I let Buzz take over. He sang America’s “Sister Golden Hair.” We turned it up a couple notches, going straight into Boston’s “Peace of Mind.” Finally, I strapped on my mouth organ and we finished with one of our signature songs, the Rebel Motorcycle Club’s, stomping, twanging, kickass “Ain’t No Way.”

With our “thank yous” said into the mics we left the instruments, and the guests shouted and hooted until we were forced to go back and do another of “Ghostriders in the Sky.”

For your information, the vibe of the set list was the happiest we could play.

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For your information, the vibe of the set list was the happiest we’d ever played.



SWEN AND ULRIKA ARE GONNA BE
PISSSED

Stella

Mace and I were in an Explorer on the way to my apartment a reception, and I was riding a killer happy buzz.

I was with my man. I loved him. He loved me. He was holding me against his thigh. My band was going to head to the studio for recording on an impending recording contract. Two people I cared about just a kickass wedding. And no one had been shot at or kidnapped all day.

“Happy buzz,” I muttered to the window, grinning at it like a lunatic.

“What?” Mace asked as he turned onto my street.

I looked to him. “Happy buzz.”

He glanced at me briefly, his beautiful jade eyes smiling, then back on the road.

I tested the boundaries of my seatbelt to lean into him, pulling my arms from his hold only to curl them around his thigh. I kissed his strong jaw as I heard him engage the turn signal before pulling into my drive.

“Never been happier, babe,” I whispered, my lips moving against his.

Mace didn’t reply, but I felt his jaw get hard under my lips.

This surprised me so I pulled back a bit. I looked at his hard profile followed the direction of his angry gaze and saw a limousine at the end of the drive.

Shitsofuckit.

As we pulled up, the back door opened and Preston Mason folded down the back seat.

Just as I suspected.

Shitsofuckit!

“Great,” I muttered. “If anyone could kill this happy buzz, The S**t Asshole of All Time could do it.”

Mace ignored my comment and ordered, “Stay in the truck,” as he pulled to a halt then put the SUV in neutral and set the brake without turning off the ignition.

“Mace—” I started, thinking good advice would be to suggest he ignore his father, I ignore his father, we walk in, forget he existed, resume the buzz and get on with our night, which would consist of making our night buzz way happier.

He turned to me and gave me a look.

I shut up.

He threw open his door and angled out of the SUV.

I sat and watched him approach his father. Then I sat and watched as Mace’s eyes swept the area while his father jabbered, probably being a serious conversation before Mace’s hand came up abruptly, palm out. Preston clamped his

ile then shut and Mace turned and strode angrily to the truck.

d of the He yanked open the door and reached into the ignition, but his eye
on me.

“Inside, babe,” he ordered. I nodded then he went on, “Wait for me
l out of to your door.”

I undid my seatbelt and Mace switched off the ignition, pulled
keys and rounded the hood, his head turned to his father, his deep
sounding, though I couldn’t make out what he said. Mace made it
pulled open my door and put his hand to my arm to help me out. He n
upreme me to the side door where Preston was waiting.

ie came Fabulous.

off the Now we were going to have unwelcome company *in* my pad.

I tried to shoot daggers out of my eyes at Preston Mason as Mac
ignore approached, but unfortunately, this didn’t work (though that didn’t
e happy quit).

happy Eventually I had to give up when Mace got the side door op
propelled me inside with his hand now at the small of my back and I
start concentrating on walking up two flights of steps in high heels
falling on my face.

We made it to my apartment successfully, without me turning and
Preston what-for for ruining my happy buzz, but worse, pissing M
ed him when I knew he too was experiencing a happy buzz, Mace-style.
as his Mace-style happy buzz when I was in close proximity usually inclu
es did a getting laid, thoroughly, and very, very well, which made it even ha
is dick, me not to let loose on his dick of a dad.

mouth Mace dealt with the alarm and I saw Juno was lying on the bed,

tuckered out from a day of sleeping. She woofed at us in greeting but
es were no move. She did, however, train her doggie eyes on Preston in a con-
but alert way and it was good to know my dog could read a different
e to get vibe, one she'd never had to read before, and that was when her people
much like someone.

I moved around to turn on lights and as I did this, Preston muffled
out the "Charming."
p voice
around, I stopped turning on lights and looked to him to see he was studying
marched space and obviously didn't think much of it.

Seriously, Mace's dad was a dick. My apartment was small, sure
still rocked.

"Kitten, do me a favor," I heard Mace say, and my annoyed gaze
e and I him to see he was talking to me but his eyes were locked on his da-
mean I changed in the bathroom and hang there. Do your thing, give us some
Um.

en and *Hell* no.

I had not just been through two weeks of the emotional wringer to
without emotional wringers, letting Mace back in my heart, trusting him, find
what happened to Caitlin and taking our future in my hands to reunite
l giving with his family, only to have his dick of a dad give him shit with-
ace off taking his back.

And a Unh-unh.

ded me No way.

order for "No," I replied, and Mace's eyes sliced to me. I knew he was ticked
even if I just met him the look on his face would tell me he was ticked
clearly

it made quickly explained, “No one fucks with my man.”

confused Mace drew in a breath but some of the anger slid from his face.

kind of Then he started, “Stella—”

he didn't “No, Mace. Your dad is a dick and he's not gonna be a dick without me at your back.” Before Mace could reply, I turned to Preston, mured, stated, “We've had a really, *really* good day and those have been few between lately, so say what you have to say and then get out so we can bring my you exist and get on with making it a really, *really* good night.”

Juno woofed her agreement to my invitation and Preston's lip curled, but it my insinuation.

“Well?” I prompted when Preston didn't speak.

went to I walked to Mace and didn't give him a choice as I burrowed a side. “Get under his armpit so he had to wrap his arm around me. When he did time.” wrapped one arm around his back and rested my other hand on his abs

Preston studied us and his lip stayed curled.

Then he replied, “I assume you're not going to offer me a drink.”

end all Totally a dick.

ling out “Sure, I'll offer you a drink,” I told him. “If you're here to apologize to Mace for being The Supreme Asshole of All Time, beg his forgiveness and promise to dedicate all your energies to philanthropic work from today the day you die. No, if you're here to continue to be a dick.”

Preston looked at his son.

d. Hell, me. “Seriously, Kai, is this your choice?” he asked, throwing a hand

ed, so I Mace's body went rock solid.

Oh shit.

“Moving on!” I declared quickly. Then to Preston, “Say your piece and go.”

Preston looked back at me. “Fine, Stella, but I advise you not to talk when I say my piece, as you so eloquently put it.”

I opened my mouth to speak but didn’t get a word out.

“Your cracks at Stella end right fuckin’ now,” Mace growled.

Preston’s eyes went to his son and so did mine. I knew Mace pretended to love him and I hoped to spend the rest of my life with him, but that mean his look wasn’t really freaking scary.

That said, it was also hot and he was pissed on my behalf so it actually really freaking good.

I turned my eyes back to Preston, trying hard not to smirk, only to find I had entered a staring contest with Mace.

This went on awhile.

Considering father and son clearly had a life edict that included “say die” I lost patience and snapped, “Seriously! Let’s get on with this.”

Preston’s eyes slid to me. His jaw got hard and he looked back at Mace.

“I think you know you’re treading on thin ice,” he announced.

“I do?” Mace asked.

“Don’t be stupid, Kai,” Preston whispered. “You never were alone except once and it ended in tragedy. Don’t do it again.”

If Mace’s body was rock solid before, it was marble now, but I didn’t really notice since my vision exploded in sparks of red and I instantly knew I was done. I didn’t know why he was there. I didn’t know why

allowed him to come up.

ace and And at that moment, I also didn't effing care.

“Get out of my house,” I hissed, and Preston looked to me.

be here “You don't—” he began.

“Get...*the fuck...out...of my house!*” I bit out.

“The receptionist at his place of business dealt drugs,” Preston in
me.

ty well. “Get out of my house,” I kind of repeated.

t didn't “Her nephew, Kai's colleague, was in business with her,” Presto
on.

also felt Really?

Darius?

o see he Yikes.

Oh well. Past tense. If it didn't bother Mace, which obviously it d
didn't bother me.

“never
.” And anyway, Darius was cool.

face. “Get out of my house,” I repeated again.

Preston continued, “His organization was involved in a clar
operation which culminated in an officer employed by the Denver
Department discharging a weapon and wounding a man, something t
before, never been reported to the police.”

Oh dear.

I didn't That probably wasn't good and it was probably worse Preston knew
decided; it.

7 Mace

I powered through my worry and again demanded, “Get out house.”

“His employer is on retainer with Marcus Sloan. Shady dealings man who is not shady but entirely criminal, running guns and p flesh.”

formed Yikes again!

Marcus ran guns and peddled flesh?

Whoa.

in went Preston wasn’t done. “And the wife of one of his co-workers fraudulent reports with Child Protective Services in order to pla runaways with a known felon.”

Well, at least I knew about that one.

I quit repeating myself and just glared at him.

idn’t, it Preston held my glare and stated, “Routinely, a man in Nightingale’s employ performs illegal hacks, not only on private accou also on local, state and federal government sites.”

I wasn’t a computer person so I thought that was actually kind of c

Obviously I didn’t share that.

idestine Then, softly, he said, “The man you cling to so desperately ha
Police lives.”
hat has

My glare intensified.

I was hardly clinging to Mace *desperately*. Lovingly, del Supportively, sure. Desperately, *no*.
w about

“Many of them,” Preston whispered.

of my He fell silent so I asked, “Are you done?”

“No,” he replied and looked at Mace. “Your play, son, is to sit with a Nightingale, tell him to agree to my investment. I obtain controlling eddling in Nightingale Investigations. I clean up the cesspool that is your business. I take out the trash, including Darius Tucker, Vance Crowe, Lucas St. that hideous receptionist, all of whom, due to their past activities associations, leave much to be desired. You’ll keep your job but clearly,” he threw out a hand again, “your woman cannot provide for you should need to get back on your feet, which you will, considering you just gave six thousand dollars to her family, which significantly decreases your reserve. Nightingale steps aside and I call the shots.”

Uh-oh.

I felt my body get tight.

Mace spoke.

Liam
ints but
ool.
s taken
unemployed. Brody Dunne and Lee Nightingale will likely be questioned possibly arrested for their activities—”

“You’re saying you’ll leak this information if I don’t do as you say”

Preston nodded. “Chavez will lose his job and he’ll not find one payroll when I take over Nightingale Investigations. He might even face charges. Shirleen Jackson will lose custodial care and those boys will go back to the streets or into the system. Juliet Crowe will also find herself unemployed. Brody Dunne and Lee Nightingale will likely be questioned possibly arrested for their activities—”

Mace cut him off, “That all you got?”

initely. I felt my body jerk, seeing as I thought all this sounded pretty bad.

I looked up at Mace to see his face was bland, almost uninterested. This information wasn’t damning and more than a little scary. But in Preston was telling him that he knew Lee and his boys had trampled

flowers in a public garden for shits and giggles.

peak to “Kai—” Preston started, but Mace didn’t let him get any further.

interest “First, you should know that Stella’s place is wired, camera
business, microphones. Your blackmail attempt was caught on tape.”

ark and Preston’s body gave a small start, almost imperceptible, but I ca
ies and and I also held my breath.

ecause, “I—” Preston began again, but Mace’s head turned away from h
r you if movement so sudden, Preston stopped speaking.

the fact Mace looked at something across the room. What, I didn’t know,
epleted looked back at his father.

“Cameras are off now, Dad,” he said quietly and I again tensed.
it’s just you and me and this is what I got.”

Oh man.

.” I figured what Mace had was probably a lot so I settled in, but
while I braced.

on my “Brody’s good, you know that so you shoulda been a lot smarter.
en face was still talking quietly. I was thinking his quiet was not an indication
I either he had the situation under control, but instead an indication that he wa
herself to losing his mind at having to deal with this bullshit, or his father at al
red and bit my lip. “You know I know you fucked up. You know I know w
did that got Caitlin killed. You *fuckin’* know.”

“I didn’t do a thing to—”

Mace interrupted, “Oh yeah you did.”

ed, as if “Not one thing, Kai,” Preston clipped.

instead, “Arms, Dad,” Mace returned.
l a few

Oh man.

Arms?

is with As in weapons?

What the ef?

ought it “There’s not a shred of evidence to support that,” Preston retorted
now also talking quietly, but his face had shifted, gone more v
im, the surprisingly giving it all away.

“There isn’t?” Mace asked, and I watched Preston’s body straighten
then he Mace kept going.

“What you don’t know is that we know that you haven’t stopped
“Now, you were doin’ to get Caitlin killed.”

“Kai—”

“Government contracts you got for your munitions plants, Dad. P
I did it the Feds won’t be real thrilled to know your guns that are supposed to
the hands of our boys in uniform are also finding themselves in the h
” Mace not only enemy factions, but seven terrorist sects.”

he felt Oh my God!

is close “APM Holdings have absolutely no dealings in munitions,”
ll, and I replied.

hat you “You’re right,” Mace agreed then disagreed, “But *you* do.”

Oh. My. *God!*

“Nonsense,” Preston returned.

Mace studied his father. He did this for several long beats. I waited
consciously breathing because I knew something had changed, so

was not right, my man was struggling.

Then I knew why when he whispered, “They blew her head off.”

I pressed closer to Mace and held on harder.

Preston paled, but his eyes narrowed before he replied, “And who
swiftly, was that?”

At that, Mace leaned forward and exploded, “*They blew her fuckin’
off!*”

The hand I had at Mace’s abs slid around so I was holding him close
both arms.

Preston leaned forward too and hit back, “You never should have—

“Given a shit about Tiny?” Mace returned. “Is that what I should
done? Because, Dad, I was willin’ to go down for her and I almost did
didn’t do shit and you were the reason she endured that fuckin’ nig
before they blew her head off and you didn’t do *shit*. Except, of course
they ended her life, you gave in and started trading arms with them as
the next time it wouldn’t be you direct they played with.”

Things had degenerated to a place I did not want Mace to go, the
decided to intervene and I did this by declaring, “I think we’re at a sta
Preston boys. Why don’t you retreat to your corners—?”

“Mouth shut,” Preston ground out, eyes cutting to me. “This is not
your concern.”

That was when, no matter how hard I was holding on to him, I let
on Mace as he moved, swiftly and purposefully, tearing out of my arms
and while closing the distance between him and his father. He was three inches
nothing and several decades younger, but he got toe-to-toe and bent his head

nose-to-nose with him before he commenced in delivering the death bl

“I warned you, now I’m tellin’ you. Do not *ever* fuckin’ speak woman again. I don’t give a shit what comes out of your mouth, neve
I don’t even like you lookin’ at her. You never speak to her or my reti
se fault will be physical. Hear me and believe me, I am *not* joking.”

Preston drew in a swift breath, because even an arrogant, thinks-l
n’ head doesn’t-stink dick like Preston could see that Mace was definitely not
but Mace was far from done.

“You are dead to me. You treated me like shit, Mom like shit, Ch
se with shit and *Caitlin* like shit, and you got her dead. You know it. I’ve been
_” to let loose the shit I got on you, itchin’ to do it for...fuckin’...*years*.
i’t have new family now and you think you can fuck with them, piss i
id. You goddamned corner, prove you’re the man with the biggest dick by
ghtmare with them, think fuckin’ again. I will bring you down and I’ll smile dc
se, after know you found out where your guns were goin’, you found out your
gain, so was fuckin’ you, you put a stop to it and the men who were gettin’ tho
didn’t like it. They pushed, you pushed back, but you didn’t do it
refore IThought your fuckin’ money made you untouchable, but you...were...
lemate, You had no clue what you were dealin’ with and weren’t smart enc
learn. They pushed harder, took Caitlin and you let her swing in the w
none of your fuckup. There are so many reasons you’re a piece of shit, it’d tal
decade to count them down. But from this point on, your shit dc
ost hold encroach in my life. Not again. You took my sister, and every fuckir
ms and think of her and my mind bleeds for your fuckup. That’s *all* the shit ;
is taller to shove at me, but that’s fuckin’ more than enough.”

Preston had straightened his spine to face down his son, and whe
l to get was done talking he shot back, “You have no evidence to suppor

ow. accusations, Kai.”

to my “You wanna try me?” Mace returned.

r again. “That evidence doesn’t exist,” Preston replied.

tribution “The only proof I’ll give you that it does is to feed it to the medi

There is no show and tell with this shit. You do not back down an
his-shit-away, I’ll bring you down. You try to fuck with Eddie, Shirleen, Lee,
joking, them, I fuckin’ promise you, you’ll have an indeterminate stay a

government facility no one even fuckin’ knows exists, courtesy of n
loe liketrust me, post nine eleven, the people who’re gettin’ your guns, th
itchin’ don’t care how much money you got. That’s a good deal, Dad, ’ca

I got athinkin’ about you or thinkin’ about Tiny and what you did to her ma
n yourlose hold on the control that keeps me from exposing you for th
playin’ stinking piece of shit you are and always have been. And I think abo
in’ it. I all the time. Every day, every hour, every minute she’s in my head, b
partner and whole, then thin, broken and terrified, and finally very fuckin’ *dea*

se guns “You have no evidence,” Preston persisted, his face beginning to g

: smart. “You believe that, call my bluff,” Mace invited.

. *wrong*. “Your friends are on the line, Kai,” Preston reminded him.

ough to “You think you got us by the balls, call...my...*bluff*,” Mace bit off

ind for Preston glared at him.

ce me a Mace glared back.

oes not Personally, if you asked me, I thought Mace’s glare was a lot bette

r’ day I This went on a long time too, but I didn’t try to intervene, and eve
you get sensed she had to let this play out, so along with me she remained siler

n Mace Finally and suddenly, with some surprise, I watched Preston M

t those

face twist and he whispered so low it was nearly inaudible, “I had
Caitlin—”

But Mace didn’t let him finish.

a, Dad. “I know you didn’t, which makes your monumental fuckup a c
id slink fuckup because even after you fucked up, you fucked up again wit
any of goddamned commandos, then again when you didn’t come clean to t
t some and work with them to find a way to get her out of that fuckin’ mes
ie. And *again* when you let me walk in there and watch my sister die.”

ie Feds “Kai, I had no—” Preston started again.

ise just “You think I give a fuck?” Mace whispered and the tortured wa
kes me words came out made my stomach clench and even Preston flinched. “
e total, to God, you think I give a fuck about anything that has anything to
ut Tiny you? They tortured her, Dad. They cut off her fuckin’ hand then they t
eautiful fuckin’ life and all that is on *you*. This is not a fuckup like you groun
d.” for too long because she missed curfew and she’s pissed like any t
et red. would be pissed because their dad is an asshole, *for fuck’s sake.*”

Mace spit the last three words out and kept going.

“You fucked up and her life ended. Even after it was done, I clea
your goddamned mess and kept my mouth shut. Way I see it, you o
You owe me huge. You owe me a fuckin’ sister and there’s no way t
that so I’m tellin’ you now, you repay by getting the fuck *out* of my
staying out.”

r. Preston held his son’s eyes.

en Juno Then, because he was a dick, he kept trying.

it. “Every day, I think of her and—”

lason’s

no idea Mace took a step back, most likely to retain a shred of control even though he lost it and roared, “*Fuck! I do not give a fuck!*”

That was when Juno woofed, but her woof was not a woof of such colossal magnitude with Mace. It was a different kind of woof. It was the kind of woof that made those in the room react. Mace’s head whipped toward her, so my head whipped toward her and I saw the FBI was on all four paws on the bed, staring at the wall.

Then She woofed again as she jumped off the bed. Then she didn’t w bark, straight out, sharp, agitated.

A warning.

She immediately started dancing along the wall, sniffing, restless, more barking.

“Goddamn it,” Mace clipped, reaching into the jacket of his tuxedo to pull out his phone, but it started ringing before he got to it as did the phone in the house. “*Goddamn it!*” Mace barked then shouted. “Get down!” When Preston and I hesitated a millisecond, he roared, “*Down!*”

On his word, the windows exploded. I hit the deck and I hit the deck. Mace’s body on top of me.

“*Juno! Come!*” Mace shouted.

I tried to look, but he had an arm over my head, his body covering me. Gunfire sounded from what seemed like all around, piercing my eardrums. I couldn’t breathe.

“Talk,” I heard Mace growl, probably into his phone then, “No shouting. We’re under heavy fire. Units. Every available man. Now.”

I heard the flip of a phone closing just as the gunfire stopped and I felt the fur of Juno pressing to my arm.

Thank God, she was close.

as he I thought that then thought no more. Mace was up and he was hauling
up with him.

olidarity “Move,” he ordered when he had me on my feet, but he didn’t need
at made had my hand and he was dragging me to the door. “Come!” he commanded
saw she Juno, but he didn’t need to do that either, because she was right at our
crowding us.

oof but That was when I heard several very scary noises, noises the like
ever heard in movies. I stupidly stopped, turned my head and saw them
I saw them.

ss then Mace didn’t stop. He didn’t even hesitate. I knew he heard it to
knew he knew what they were without looking at them. I knew this led
to pull he went faster, as in *a lot* faster, as in *running* faster and my feet had to
e in my again or he would literally be dragging me.

en both But I saw them.

I saw them.

ck with Grenades.

Not one.

Three.

g me as *Three!*

ms.

it? You I realized then that they blew out my windows at an impossible distance
they were firing from the ground, or they did it from higher ground
distance, only so they could launch the grenades in and blow us to bits

felt the Shit.

Shit!

We were out the door on a run and sprinting down the stairs, Juno

ling me sides, Preston following close. When we hit the first landing, n explosions rocked my apartment and tossed us as they blew out th d to, he above our heads.

nanded We flew to the side. Mace slammed into the wall and I slammed in r sides, while plaster, wood splinters and probably bits and pieces of my poss shot over our heads and rained down on us.

! I only It took Mace a nanosecond to recover before he was dragging m the next flight of stairs, this time tucked close to him, his arms cross covering my head.

o and I We hit the second floor landing when he stopped us and shoved his because in my hand just as he reached into his jacket at his waist and around h o move where I knew he had a holster. I heard the click of him releasing the st he came out with a gun.

“Call back last call in my call history. That’s the control room. The have a status update. Give it,” he ordered, then his eyes slid to his fat he went on talking as I flipped open his phone and shakily found his screen. “Stay here with Stella. Do not move unless I tell you to.”

I looked up to see Preston getting close to me. I looked to Mace him moving cautiously toward the mouth of the flight of stairs that le first floor.

angle if He didn’t move cautiously back. He jerked back as gunshots went but at a stairs, bullets embedding in the ceiling. I swallowed a scream, and to s . instinct to throw myself at my man, I pressed into the wall. Preston into me. Juno pressed into me. Mace ran to a door, tried the handle. H it locked, took a step back and slammed forward using his shoulder door blew open.

o at our

multiple His eyes sliced to me. “Follow me, Kitten, at my back. Close. Now
he wall I moved, got close to his back feeling Juno’s fur brush my bare leg
did, as well as feeling Preston keeping close.

nto him Mace moved and we all moved into the second floor hall. Mace
essions and we all shifted. Mace pushed the broken door to, pulled a narrow
from the side wall until it was blocking the door and he shifted again, I
e down down the hall, quickly but stealthily, head up and sweeping side to side
sed and We all moved with him.

s phone I kept close to his back, my fingers shoving up under his jacket
his back into the waistband of his trousers and I looked back at the phone. I hit
the last call and put it to my ear.

rap and It didn’t even ring before it was answered.

ey gotta There was no greeting, just a barked, “*Status.*”

her and “Um...hi,” I said. “This is Stella.”

recepts “Right, Stella, status,” the man’s voice replied, not a bark this time
still sharp, urgent.

e to see I thought it was Monty, but I wasn’t sure and didn’t give it heads
d to the the time because Mace moved us toward a wall, stopped and was doing
motions to his father. I felt Preston’s fingers curl around my arm and
t up the Mace’s fingers curl around my wrist to detach my hand on his sleeve
stop my stared into my eyes a beat before he turned and moved back where we
pressed

Oh man.

e found I got down to business and said into the phone, “Okay, multiple guys
and the just blew up my apartment. We’re cut off at the backstairs. We’re in
on the second floor and Mace is going back toward the backstairs.”

.” “Stop him.”

egs as I Shitsofuckit!

“Mace, stop,” I called, quiet and quick. “Monty says stop.”

shifted Mace stopped, twisted and looked at me.

w table “More,” I said into the phone.

moving

2.

Monty didn’t hesitate. “You’re surrounded. All exits cut off. I disabled the outside cameras. We tried to turn on the inside cameras but they’re off-line. Before they got to the cameras, we saw at least six cops approach and breach the house. They’re inside. First unit to the scene in five minutes. Mace needs to hole you in until backup arrives. Out.”

Without delay I relayed this information to Mace. “Surrounded. No outside cameras disabled. Inside off-line. At least six men inside. In five minutes. Monty says we need to hole up.”

Mace started moving back just as more bullets tore through the door at me but just went through.

When this happened, I didn’t think. I’d been shot at a lot recently, space at been caught unaware and therefore didn’t respond appropriately.

ing hand Not this time.

is I felt This time I dashed to the next door off the hall, opened it and ran. He Juno came with me. So did Preston. Mace followed and slammed the door. He locked it and then turned to his father.

“Move this shit,” he ordered, circling his hand around in the air. Mace nodded and immediately father and son started moving jumbles of furniture in front of the door.

I slunk to the back of the room with Juno, crouched low, knees tucked

and went back to Monty.

“We’re in, I think, the third room down to the left coming down from the back. They’re on our floor.”

“Hang tight,” Monty advised.

Right. Hang tight. Great. Good advice.

They’ve Effing hell.

as, but “Roger that, hanging tight,” I whispered, deciding against doing them sarcasm as Mace shoved a huge, old rickety wardrobe in front of a door, ETA, father had shoved in front of the door.

I stared at the furniture noting that unfortunately none of it was made of steel.

Backup Effing, effing, hell, hell, *hell*.

“Stella, a squad is three minutes out. Another unit two minutes out. Luke one minute behind them. You’re good,” Monty assured.

Gunfire exploded, loud and terrifying, bullets thudding in and through furniture in front of the door. I went down to a hip and thigh, my arm and hand not holding the phone shot out, curled around my dog and I put my head both down so far my forehead was resting on the dusty floor.

The gunfire kept sounding, hideous, excruciatingly loud. I felt my chest seize, my breath evaporating. Not on a joyride, beaming to a different planet in order to get the eff out of Dodge even as I felt Mace crouch low beside

Preston We were good.

Furniture Right.

Not even close.

to chest More gunfire, but this was Mace returning fire, probably warning :

let them know he was armed. He only shot twice, but the gunfire
the hall ceased.

I sucked in breath.

“Two and a half minutes, Stella,” Monty said in my ear.

“I’m movin’,” Mace whispered to me.

My heart froze, my neck twisted, my eyes shifted to his hard, deter-
minis with face and my breath disintegrated again.

It came back in a fiery rush and I whispered frantically, “No. They
and a half minutes out.”

“Babe, these guys are not stupid, but they are desperate. They’ll a-
or kick in. They got no time, they know it, and they got six men. We
with one gun. We don’t have two and a half minutes.”

My hand went from Juno, shot out, and I grasped the material of t-
of his tux. “No,” I pleaded.

“Stay low,” he returned.

“No,” I whispered, not to his order but to his going.

He didn’t listen. He jerked his arm free and his eyes shifted to his f-
“She’s in your care,” he whispered.

The words held weight. They had meaning no one could miss.

Then he moved. Crouched low, he went to the side wall then around
furniture and I lost sight of him.

“Oh my God, Monty,” I whispered into the phone. “Mace is
move.”

“Fuckin’ fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Maverick. *Fuck!*” Monty clipped in my e-
shots to

outside I didn't feel particularly soothed by this reaction, and because of the tears well in my eyes. I felt Preston close and heard Juno whine. I looked at my dog to see her low on her belly but her eyes were aimed at where Mace disappeared.

My dog loved my man.

I determined I loved my man.

And he was going to keep me safe.

There were two Or die doing it.

Oh God.

My dog lim low "Monty," I breathed, my breath now coming fast, in pants got one adrenaline tearing through me. So much, I was tingling from head to toe. So much, I could feel it saturating my system. I was drowning in it.

the arm "He's good, Stella, he knows what he's doin' and he's been in worse spots than this," Monty told me.

This was not exactly welcome information. It was actually good information, but nowhere near scarier than my current scary situation. I was sliding down the slide.

Then I thought no more when the sound of more gunfire filled the room. Through this I heard furniture move (no joke!) and a door open (oh God!). A grunt, a shout, more gunfire, more gunfire, still more gunfire, another thud, a man's scream, more gunfire, another thud, another man's shout, a sickening sound of bone breaking, a man's strangled cry, more gunfire.

on the Then silence.

I held my breath, eyes on my dog, Juno's eyes not having moved from the spot where she last saw Mace.

at I felt “Stella?” Monty called in the phone.

oked to My head turned and my gaze shifted, catching Preston’s.

e Mace He was on his knees, bent forward, torso twisted my way, his
mostly shielding mine from the door. His eyes were on me and I saw
as day—fear was written all over his face and not the kind of fear a man
when his life was in imminent danger. The kind of fear a man feels w
mind is consumed with the possibility that another one of his child
been struck low.

Even considering the terror I felt, which took most of my attention
still difficult to witness.

, more
toe. So “Stella?” Monty’s voice was sharp in my ear.

“Monty,” I whispered back, having nothing else to say.

l worse Holding Preston’s gaze, reading his look, knowing I was wear
same terror with only a nuance of difference on my face.

r scary “Please, God, not again,” Preston breathed. My heart twisted. It h
so I let a mother, then we heard footfalls.

We both jerked our heads toward them. My neck went way back
air, but eyes filled with wet that instantly spilled over when I saw Mace c
d!) then striding toward us.

r grunt, His jacket was torn at the shoulder.

out, the That was it.

’... Just his jacket was torn at his shoulder.

Lordy be.

rom the I surged to my feet and rushed him. He took my full body impact
even going back on a foot as Juno woofed excitedly over and over aga

felt her body brushing ours as she circled us. Mace's arm wound around my waist, going tight, and his other hand slid the phone out of mine.

I shoved my face in his chest, pressing close, deep, hard, holding it tight and bawling like a baby as I heard him say into the phone, "The threat neutralized."

For some bizarre, insane reason, which likely had a lot to do with the fact that I was temporarily unhinged due to the extreme relief washing through my system, his words made me laugh through my tears, still burrowing my arm getting tighter as I did so.

That was when I heard the sirens.

Okay, now I believed we were good.

But only because my man made us that way.

On that thought, I stopped laughing, gulped back a sob and more tears flowed.

It hurt like



I stood outside at the edge of the activity, still wearing my heels. My legs were killing me, as was the gunshot graze at my hip, which I'd landed when I went down on it in that room. It hadn't really hurt for days, but it itched. Now it hurt.

I had a blanket wrapped around me, a blanket Mace had wrapped around me, and this was because even though it was summer and still warm late at night and I was trembling, and not because it was late at night.

Juno was sitting at my side, her big body leaning into my legs, her head riveted to Mace, who was standing fifteen feet away where he had walked thirty seconds ago to talk to Eddie and Hank.

My eyes were riveted anywhere but at the body that was on the ground.

under a sheet, next to Preston's limousine.

His driver had been taken out. One minute, innocently chauffeuring him (or whatever), the next minute, dead.

Current I couldn't deal with that so I was ignoring it.

The place was crawling with cops, squad cars, forensic paramedics, ambulances. Big lights had been set up and trained around the space so they could see what they were doing. And, lastly, there were Nightingale men.

In fact, the only Nightingale man not there was *the* Nightingale, Luke. I was told briefly by Mace was not let in on this fiasco seeing as it was his wedding night.

After Mace imparted this information on me, Luke had noted that Lee would likely be displeased about being kept in the dark.

I had noted, but silently, that Lee *and* Indy would likely be displeased at having their big, happy day and its culminating, happier festivities interrupted by mayhem.

If the guys took shit from Lee, they did. Luckily, they were badass, just even though Lee was also a badass, I doubted they'd have difficulty dealing with it.

There were bystanders and media at the edge of the property, completely surrounded by police tape holding them back.

I was counting as the stretchers came out of the building.

Two men fully covered.

Dead.

Four men still alive, but even from a distance seriously not in good shape.

Mace didn't fuck around.

This would probably fascinate anyone else. How he did it, how he got a rich that off. Holed in a room one second, one against six armed men the next besting the lot.

Not me. I didn't want to know and I was never, *ever* going to ask.

sonnel, Mace was breathing. I was breathing. My dog was breathing.

und the That was good enough for me.

e were The good news was this was the last hurrah. I knew this because I told Mace while he was holding me close, his hands running soothingly and down my back as Luke gave his briefing.

was his The six men Mace neutralized were the final six men in Sidney's army. Sidney was still unaccounted for, but his operation was what Lee dismantled. He had no more soldiers. They were still looking, but suspected once he heard that this last mission was not successful, he cut and run. They were covering trains, airports, bus depots and the Highway Patrol was on alert. They'd even contacted Border Control.

I was not really processing this information. I was concentrating on teeth not chattering.

aling. This was what I was concentrating on when I caught movement out of the side of my eye. My head turned and my mind was not switched on enough to react to seeing Preston Mason suddenly, for some reason, sprinting my way.

The only thing I thought was, he wasn't exactly young but the guy still move.

Then I heard him shout, "*Sniper!*"

l shape. At his shout, the air went thick and electric. My body twitched first and then instantly jerked to the side in preparation to run (again) and the second

heard the whiz and thud as a bullet slammed into the dirt just beyond
I was tackled from behind as I heard a second hiss split the air. I
soft, thick grass in Swen and Ulrika's side yard with a painful thud that
made more painful by the weight that landed on me and Juno barked.

I lay there, face down, and whoever was on me didn't move.

There was rushing all around me. I twisted my neck and saw men
and one of those men was Mace.

But he was running somewhere else.

I had no chance to react to this as I felt Juno's nose snuffling around
Carter's neck and hair and felt my body being crushed by the one on me. I
fully failed to heave the weight off and saw the hems of uniform pants and
policemen shoes and the weight on me was rolled off.

I rolled with it, to the other side, and instantly saw Preston lying
back beside me, a cop on his knees by him, carefully rolling him back
belly and shouting, "*Medic!*"

Medic.

Oh God.

Medic.

He'd been hit!

Someone tried to pull me up, but I yanked my arm away and got
my belly, flat, pressed to the ground. Even my cheek was in the grass
face super close to Preston's, my eyes locked to his pained ones.

"You with me?" I whispered.

Hands were at my back but I ignored them. Preston stared at me
heard more running feet and bodies landing on their knees around Preston

ne. My hand darted out and caught his, my fingers curling around.

hit the “Preston, stick with me,” I urged, my fingers squeezing.

hat was “*Gurney!*” I heard shouted.

Preston blinked.

I scooted closer and held his hand tighter.

running “Hang on,” I whispered.

I watched his eyelids lower a millimeter and his mouth went slack.

And I knew.

und my
ied but I knew.

d shiny I knew. I knew. *I knew.*

“*Hang on!*” I shrieked, then I was up, arms tight around me, one
; on his chest, one at my belly and I struggled against the hold as they lifted Pr
k to his lifeless body onto a gurney. “*Hang on!*” I screeched.

They strapped him in.

“*Hang on!*” I screamed.

They pulled the gurney up to its full height and wasted not a second
rushing it in a roll across the lawn, the drive and into the ambulance.

“Please hang on,” I whispered.

ack on The fight left me, oozing out, and my body went slack in th
ass, my surrounding me.

When it did, those arms turned me. I looked up at Willie Moses just
hand curled around the back of my head and he shoved my face in his

ne as I I again burst into tears, my legs collapsing from under me as the
ton. of knowing a man might have lost his life to save mine settled on

weight heavy, crushing, and Willie's arms got tighter.

"Find Mace," I felt as well as heard Willie order. "Now." Then, in the top of my hair, he whispered, "Hang on, honey."

I felt Juno's body press against the side of my legs and somehow I found the strength to lift up my hands, curl them in Willie's shirt and hang on.



Mace

MACE SLID THE DARK, heavy hair off Stella's neck, eyes locked on her sleeping profile.

He pulled in breath.

Then his hand moved from his woman to her dog. He slid his fingers through the fur on Juno's head and he whispered, "Stay with her."

Juno blinked up at him then shuffled on her belly closer to Stella.

Mace straightened from sitting on the side of the bed in one of the guest rooms. He switched out the light and walked out the door.

He was nearly to the stairs when Daisy made it up them.

She stopped, as did he.

Her blue eyes captured his, her head tipped to the side then her hand came up. She rested it gently on his jaw and pressed lightly as her eyes held his. She let them and her hand communicate for her.

Her hand and her eyes had a lot to say. They didn't waste time and it was beautiful.

She dropped her hand and whispered, "Your momma and Chloe are in the great room."

Without waiting for a response, she skirted him and walked down the stairs.

without looking back.

into the Mace watched her while he thought, not for the first time, that Sloan was a good woman.

found He walked down to Daisy and Marcus's great room where Chloe was sitting on a sofa staring vacantly into the dark, unlit fireplace and he was standing at a window staring vacantly into the dark night. They were thinking their own thoughts, not pleasant ones, as they wouldn't be. An attractive bad decision, giving their heart to the wrong man, and then no heartache.

Now, closure. But not the right kind.

fingers The instant he entered, Chloe's neck twisted, her eyes shot to him and she asked, "How is she?"

His mom turned from the window as Mace answered, "Out."

Daisy's "She take the pills?" Lana asked.

Mace nodded, stopped and sat on the armrest of the couch.

He was wiped, fucking shattered. He felt like he could sleep for a goddamned week. He not only felt like it, he wanted to do it.

id came But he wanted to do it somewhere where there was a beach right outside his room, Stella in his bed and no one around for miles.

Lana moved toward him saying, "She'll be okay, sweetie."

d all of Mace knew that. He knew it.

He knew it because if Stella didn't wake up that way, he'd make sure she was in the way even if it took a lifetime.

Lana stopped two feet in front of him and looked down at him.

the hall Softly, she asked, "Okay, now, are *you* okay?"

“He died for her,” Mace replied bluntly, and Lana drew in breath t
t Daisy her nose as he felt Chloe tense down the couch from him.

“Why the fuck would he throw himself in front of a bullet to sav
oe was and he wouldn’t—?” Mace started and Lana moved.

Closing the distance between him, her palm came to his cheek,
were incurled around his jaw forcing his face to look up at hers.

Jesus, he missed her touch.

end to Jesus.

He should have fucking remembered his mom could soothe a h
with her touch.

and she He didn’t remember.

Jesus.

“You’ll never find answers to your questions, Kai,” she said softly
hit him, not for the first time in the last few days, how fucking much
missed her voice. She could soothe with that too. Effortlessly. “So
o for asweetie, *please*, right now, with me and Chloe, let them go. He did v
did and it’s done. Your beautiful girl is upstairs sleeping. You caught
outside Carter man, and even if he wasn’t going down before, you caught hi
his rifle so he’ll go down for what he did to your father. It’s done
father is gone, but his death is avenged. Life goes on. Live it. Enjoy
minute of it and let this go.”

her that The minute his father shouted “sniper,” Mace knew just how de
Carter was, not for freedom, for vengeance.

Sidney Carter was a trained sniper. The first Iraq war. It
something they didn’t know. He’d just stopped doing his own dirty

through decade before.

Instead of going down like a man, he decided to do his own dirty work. Stella the stupid, sick, demented fucking *fuck*.

But what his mother said was true. Carter was already going down on his hands and knees. There was no way Carter wouldn't stay down.

Mace thought his thoughts, drew in breath. He stared into his mother's eyes and not for the first time in the last few days or in the last several weeks he realized how much he missed them. As he did this, he felt his hand brush against Chloe's.

Lana's hand dropped to his shoulder as he looked to Chloe.

"We love her," Chloe whispered, changing the subject to Stella. "She's perfect for you."

She was not wrong.

"Totally," Lana muttered, and Mace looked back up at his mom.

"She's beautiful. She's talented," Chloe went on, and Mace turned his gaze to her to see her face soft. "And she looks at you like you turn on the sun in the morning and switch it off at night."

"Totally," Lana repeated on another mutter, and Mace felt his lips twitch.

"Tiny would absolutely *adore* her," Chloe went on. Mace's lips twitched and Mace saw her turn to Lana. "Wouldn't she, honey?"

"Oh yeah, heck yeah," Lana answered, and Mace's eyes went back to his mom just in time to watch her say, "Tiny thought you turned on the sun in the morning and switched it off at night too. She'd definitely adore Stella. Two peas in a pod, the way they love you. Two peas in a pod."

Mace sucked in breath. He did this to fight the burn that threatened to

consume his chest.

He could control it, had been for years. It was only recently w
started to believe he could beat it, move past it and maybe find a life
wn, but his memories focused more on his sister's grace, her smile, her gigg
easy affection and less on watching her life end way too fucking soon.

That was because only recently he'd finally come to understand
mother's wouldn't be able to accomplish that alone.
1 years,

Luckily, he'd also recently come to understand he was far from alo
d taken
Mace stood and both women disengaged from him, Lana taking
back.

Then he muttered, "Wiped," and moved to his mother. He wrap
"She's hand around the back of her head and pulled her to him as he bent t
his lips to her forehead. There he whispered, "Missed your voice, you
your touch, even your smell."

Mace heard her draw in a sharp breath. Her hands went to his
ned his fingers digging in, but she didn't say a word and he said no more. I
on the didn't move. Not for a while. He breathed her in, felt her touch and let

He should have remembered.
twitch.

He didn't.
stopped

Now he did.

Thank Christ.
k to his

He kissed her forehead and pulled away. She let him go. Feel
n in the la. Twomother's gaze soft on him, he turned to Chloe. Ignoring the tears shim
in her eyes, he bent and did the same, but saying nothing, just touch
ened to lips to her forehead and pulling back.

She sniffled.

When he He looked between them and muttered, "See you in the morning
where all go out and have breakfast," he paused then finished, "If Daisy lets u

les, her "Right," Lana agreed, her voice husky.

"Oh...okay," Chloe stammered, her voice trembling.

that he Mace started to move from the room, but stopped at the door and
back. Then he smiled at his "moms."

ne. They smiled back.

; a step He walked out of the room and back up the stairs.

In the darkened room he was sharing with Stella, he silently a
ped his Juno's soft, welcome back woof. He took off his clothes, stood by the
o touch the bed and repeated the actions he'd done once that day. He lifted hi
ir eyes, undid the chain at his neck, brought it down, upended it and Tiny's ri

had returned to him with a kiss to his cheek before getting into
s waist, Crossfire at the end of her wedding night dropped into his hand. He
He also chain on the nightstand, pulled back the covers and slid in behind Stell
it heal.

His arms moved around her heavy, sleeping body. His fingers fo
right hand, and he lifted it and slid Tiny's ring on her pinkie.

When he did, she moved, nuzzling back into him and muttering gr
"Grenades. Jeez, babe. Swen and Ulrika are gonna be pissed."

Then her body settled and Mace knew she was again asleep.

ing his He lay in the dark listening to her breathe.

mering It was the most beautiful sound he ever heard.

ing his Then her words hit him.

And he couldn't help it. His arms closed tight around her. He bu

face in her hair, smelled mint, decided he seriously fucking loved that. We'll and he burst out laughing.
is.”



Stella

I WOKE and blinked at the tight hold of the arms around me and the sound of Mace laughing into the back of my hair.
looked

That's weird, has he cracked up? my brain asked me.

I listened to his laugh, felt his warm strength curled all around me. I considered this for a millisecond.

Then I decided if my man had gone insane and Mace's brand of insanity meant he was holding me close and laughing, I didn't give a fuck.

And on that thought, I went back to sleep.

ng Indy

o Lee's

set the

a.

und her

roggily,

ried his

face in her hair, smelled mint, decided he seriously fucking loved that smell, and he burst out laughing.



Stella

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TWENTY-NINE



ROCK CHICK

Jane

One week later...

JANE SLID through the shelves of Fortnum's unnoticed by customer; she slid behind the front counter unnoticed by Rock Chicks, unnoticed Bunch, unnoticed by Tex and by Duke.

"It has to be *somebody*," Ally stated, and Jane looked to the couch by two armchairs, all of which sat in front of the huge front window.

Mace was sitting on the arm of the couch, Stella held close in front between his legs. Daisy and Shirleen were in the sofa. Hector was on the other arm of the sofa. Unlike Mace, who had one foot in the sofa and one on the floor, Hector had both feet on the floor, his back slightly to the side, slightly removed.

His mind was somewhere else.

Jane briefly wondered where it was.

Then her eyes moved to Ally, who was in one of the armchairs from the couch. Stevie was in the other one, his dog Chowleena on his lap beside his chair taking a snooze.

Tod was on a flight. Seeing as he was a flight attendant, that fre happened, which meant he often missed the action. This annoyed him let this be known as only Tod could do. Then again, he had drag queer to buy and someone had to pay for them so off he went, grumbling throwing attitude all the way.

Jane found this amusing.

Then again, Jane found a lot that happened in Fortnum's amusing.

Her eyes moved again and she saw Roam and Sniff sitting at coffee cups in front of them. Roam was lounged back, one long leg be to floor, one long leg stretched out. He had his phone to his ear. Sn sitting across from him, shoving the contents of the bag of fast food s. Then brought with him into his mouth.

by Hot Three girls around Roam's age were at an arrangement of cha tables away from him. All of the girls had been in before. All c h faced frequently. All of them were now staring at Roam, which was what t if they were lucky enough to time their visit when he was hanging. An : of him them were doing it in a way that it was clear they wished it was the oth ated on around.

eat, one Jane knew why. When she first saw Roam some months ago, she t couch, you had to be blind not to see the promise of good looks. They were s on him. In just months, this had grown with his confidence. The bulk of his body along with his understanding of what it could do, his qu acute awareness of his surroundings, his alert eyes that held a we experience far beyond his age, and just simply the fact that he was m : across into his features.
er belly

It was plain to see he was going to be beautiful, mostly because

quently nearly there now.

and he It was also plain to see he was following close in the footsteps of
outfits Bunch mentors. Jane knew this because he was oblivious to the looks
and/or getting.

Completely.

The girl who caught Roam's eye and held it would not look. She
do the opposite and he would thrill to the chase.

a table, It was just the way of the Hot Bunch.

nt, foot They didn't do easy.

iff was Well, that wasn't true. They did a lot of easy. They just didn't inst
od he'd their bed for a lifetime.

Jane's eyes continued to move and she saw Tex and Duke beh
irs two espresso counter, bickering. About what, Jane couldn't hear at that m
f them but with practice, eyeing them for a moment, she knew everyone wou
hey did it in approximately two point seven five minutes.

Jane continued to scan and she saw Eddie standing at the end
er way espresso counter, Jet in his arms. Jane couldn't see Jet's face and onl

thought see Eddie's profile. His head was bent and he was whispering in her
tamped he did, Jane watched observantly and noted Jet pressed closer, then clc

ing out And Jane knew, for Eddie and Jet, the world had ceased to exist
ick and was Eddie and all there was for him was Jet. Then there was Jet and a
alth of was for her was Eddie.

Jane decided in that second that Eddie and Jet were going to
aturing favorites for the day. She changed them every day depending on w

he was witnessed. Sometimes it was Lee and Indy. Other times, Hank and

Others, Jules and Vance or Luke and Ava, and now Mace and Stella.

his Hot Today it was Jet and Eddie.

he was Jane's eyes moved from them back to the couch. They fell on Stella and Mace and she instantly changed her mind.

Stella was leaned into Mace, her arms wrapped around the one he wouldher stomach. Her head had fallen back on his shoulder, turned slightly temple was pressed to the side of his throat.

Jane studied them.

Mace looked content.

all it in Stella looked well beyond that.

This would be surprising for normal folk, considering a week ago and the apartment and most of her belongings had been blown to smithereens. Mace's dad lost his life to save Stella's.

ld hear Then again, the two things most important in her life, both of which she had breathed, weren't blown to bits, so with the Rock Chicks at her back and the Indy, who was still in Barbados on her honeymoon and would be for a few more weeks (y could week), Stella did what she could with what was left and was now living in Mace's house. As Mace at his house.

ser. That was to say, she was doing this in the short-term, considering the circumstances. There were already searching for a new place and had arrived at Fortnum's Road just minutes ago after spending the morning viewing three properties.

No matter what, life for the Rock Chicks and Hot Bunch always just had to be heron.

hat she As for Preston Mason dying, Jane had listened (as she always listened to Roxie avidly) and she knew, although it wasn't nice to think, his life ending with her.

a big loss to the world. And she knew from experience that whatever was enduring due to a man dying so she could live, and Mace was enduring because he lost his father, they'd make it through and they'd do it because they had each other.

Preston Mason bequeathed his vast holdings to his son.

His son had turned them over to his mother and stepmother. They were turn making enormous donations to a variety of charities.

Most of them having to do with the arts.

And most of those having to do with giving underprivileged children opportunities to learn to dance.

Jane, still unnoticed, always unnoticed and liking it that way, continued to study them.

She had watched Kai Mason now for months and months. Jane had most of her life being quiet and watching. Therefore, she saw things she didn't. On the rare occasion, she had noted Mace showing humor. But that was rare.

For months and months she saw only pain in Kai "Mace" Mason.

Today she saw no pain.

This made her smile a little, unnoticed smile.

Her eyes dropped to Stella's hand, and at her distance, she could barely make out the gold ring on Stella's pinkie finger.

Just the other day, she overheard Jet telling Jules that Stella never took that ring off.

Never.

Jane sighed.

r Stella So there it was. Stella and Mace were now her favorites for the day
nduring She wasn't fickle. No doubt Eddie or Jet would do something, an
because to regain the title.

"Mystery for the ages," Stevie replied with unconcern to Ally, and
eyes moved to him.

were in "I think not," Ally shot back. "It has to be part of the inner circle.
knows all that shit. Someone spilled. And that is way uncool."

Jane didn't think so, but she wouldn't, considering she was the o
children talked to the reporters, and Jane knew Ally was talking about whoever
to the reporters. She knew this because Ally had been talking about it a
nued to She felt no guilt. Jet and Tex's tips had quadrupled. Tex had a ne
but Nancy was moving in with him the next week and she wasn't
d spent work but part time, and not at a job that paid very much.

s others Further, Jet wanted a KitchenAid and she'd wanted one awhile.

But that So Jane got it for her, kind of.

Not to mention coffee sales had seen that increase too, and eve
sales.

Lee wasn't hurting for money.

Now Indy wasn't either.

uld just No, Jane felt no guilt.

None at all.

er took Anyway, it was a week ago and it had all already blown over.

All of it but the increase in customers.

So there.

7. “No one is copping to it, and in this crowd, someone did it, they’c
d soon, it or they’ll *never* cop to it,” Shirleen decreed, and Jane looked
thinking she was right.

l Jane’s Jane would *never* cop to it.

“We’ll never know,” Shirleen finished.

No one Hmm.

Jane didn’t know if she was right about *that*.

ne who “It’s still uncool,” Ally mumbled.

r talked *Whatever*, Jane thought.

a lot.

Without a word, but with a chin lift at Mace, Hector got up.

est egg,

Jane tensed.

able to

Then she watched as he moved toward the door, carrying his tal
coffee cup.

Jane’s hand darted to the drawer where they kept their purses. She
it and nabbed hers, shut the drawer and scurried after him.

n book

No one noticed her go.



HECTOR’S BRONCO pulled into a spot across from the art gallery in L
Lower Downtown Denver, and Jane pulled into a spot two car length
on the opposite side of the street.

Hector sat in his beat-up brown Bronco, head turned, eyes aimed i
art gallery.

He did this awhile.

Jane watched awhile.

l cop to Finally, Hector put his Bronco in gear, pulled out of the spot and
to her, away.

Jane switched off the ignition to her car, exited it, locked it, fed th
and walked into the gallery.

When she did, she smiled.

A petite, curvy, very well-dressed, strikingly beautiful woman
mass of golden-cream-strawberry blonde hair that was a riot of soft
mixed with full waves that floated down her back and all around her ex
face and shoulders was standing behind the counter.

She looked like a fairy princess.

Jane especially liked her hair. It was fabulous.

Jane suspected Hector Chavez liked her hair too.
keaway

But he probably liked her curves better.

“Hello.” Her soft voice sounded as her pretty eyes smiled.
opened

Mm-hmm.

This was good.

Jane approved.

oDo, or “Just looking,” Jane muttered.

s down The woman tilted her head welcomingly toward the gallery ar
spent the next fifteen minutes pretending to look as she surrept
into the watched the blonde doing whatever she was doing behind her counter.

Then Jane bought three postcards that had prints on the front
displayed in the gallery. Postcards she would never use.

After she did that, she left.

I drove



JANE WAITED for her computer to boot up as she turned on dim lights around the room and lit a scented candle.

Cotton flower.

Pretty and soothing.

She sat at her desk, moved her mouse and opened her word processing program.

Then she centered the cursor, turned on bold, set the font size at 14 and typed.

Rock Chick.

She hit control at the same time she hit return, starting a new line and changed the font size to fourteen and typed.

Chapter One

She hit return, turned off bold, turned on italics and changed the font size to twelve and typed.

The Great Liam Chase.

Then her eyes went fuzzy and her memory was swamped with the memory of Liam Nightingale embracing his very soon-to-be wife in her wedding dress prior to being declared man and wife.

and Jane

Jane smiled.

intentionally

She was a romantic and she felt the world needed to learn about this affair.

of art

She felt this because it was beautiful.

They all were.

So Jane refocused on her monitor and started typing.

lighting

cessing

ighteen

v page,

ont size

e image

angelic

his love

So Jane refocused on her monitor and started typing.





EPILOGUE

GET OUT HERE, BABE, I WANNA KISS YOU

Ava

Five years later...

I WAS SITTING, cross-legged, smack in the middle of Luke's and my big

I could hear Shirleen downstairs, talking to Gracie while Shirleen (Gracie) banged around the kitchen.

I told Shirleen that she should come with us tonight, but she wouldn't. She'd fashioned herself into the Rock Chick version of Auntie Mammy. Her clear favorite of the Rock Chick/Hot Bunch progeny was, by a long way, Gracie. If Luke and I came home to find Gracie and Shirleen away in the night with a note explaining that Shirleen had kidnapped Gracie and would never return, I wouldn't have been surprised. She loved Gracie nearly as much as Gracie's father and I did.

It was lucky for Gracie, Shirleen had a lot of love to give, and she was happy she wanted to give it to my daughter.

The shower turned off and my attention went to the door of the bathroom.

Within minutes, the door opened and Luke was there.

He was clean shaven and his hair, worn much longer now than the used to wear it when we first got together (that was to say it was thick and *lush*), was wet. He'd long since shaved off the killer mustache he have, much to my despair. But with the time he spent with me and Gra at Nightingale Investigations (not to mention spending time at our Crested Butte, where, if we were there very long, which we were a lot of days, he'd usually grow a beard) he said he didn't have time for maintenance.

He'd done his usual half-assed job at toweling off. There were droplets of water clinging to his beautiful shoulders and perfectly formed just enough-to-be-sexy-as-all-hell chest, and he had the towel wrapped around his waist.

I groaned. "Towel off much?" I teased and his dark-blue eyes sliced to me.

He stopped moving toward the dresser and one side of his mouth curved up in a half-grin.

"Babe, get dressed. We're gonna be late," he ordered.

"We won't be late. I'm totally ready."

I watched as one of his dark eyebrows went up.

"You're in a robe," Luke pointed out.

"I just have to put on clothes," I replied.

"And half a ton of silver."

He was right about my silver. I still wore a lot of silver jewelry, though Gracie was usually tugging at my necklaces. I was constantly in danger of her choking me to death. She was like he-baby, she was so strong. That she got from her father. Not to mention she kept showing

way herings, while they were on my fingers, in her mouth and biting hard a
s, wavychild had the jaws of death, kid you not.

used to I should know. I nursed her. She was teething and the silver m
cie and cool on her gums so I didn't mind, much. I was pretty sure one day
abin in the baby Gracie gum-mark grooves in my rings cute.

ot these I decided to change the subject to one I wanted to talk about.

'tache Luke had made it to the dresser and was rooting through a drawer.

I winced as he rooted. Our drawers were painstakingly tidy. I like
plets of like that and put a lot of effort into it. Everything folded neatly and org
t-hairy- by color or color combination or long-sleeved (then by color) and
und his sleeved (then by color), etc. I had a system. A *tidy* system.

Luke didn't do tidy and he wasn't all that hot on any of my s
either, no matter how often I explained them to him, which was a lot.

vent up I got over Luke's ruthless rooting and asked his naked, muscular,
dotted-with-droplets-of-water back, "What do you think of the
Maisie?"

Luke's body went completely still.

Then, very slowly, he turned to me and his eyes locked with mine.

"Repeat the question," he demanded.

"You heard me," I said softly.

Quick as a flash, Luke was across the room, I was flat on my b
y, even was on me and wrapping my legs around his hips.

ntly in "Luke!"

lanned "Quiet," he muttered as he yanked the towel away and the
ing my muttering, as if to himself, "Please God, don't be wearing any underwe

and that I slapped his shoulder, “Luke, Shirleen is—”

He kissed me to shut me up (he did this a lot).

ust feel When his mouth moved to my neck, I was breathing faster, but I st
I’d find. “We’re going to be late.”

“We’ll be quick.”

“Luke, seriously...”

His head came up. His eyes caught mine and I went quiet a
ed them. intensity.

ganized “You sayin’ you’re havin’ my baby?”

I short- I nodded.

systems His face went soft and, just as soft, he said, “Then we’re celebratin

I smiled at him. There was no denying Luke when he was in the n
sexily- celebrate. Not that I’d want to.

name “Okay,” I whispered.

He kissed me again.

I kissed him back.



SOMETIME LATER, we were both yanking on our clothes, way la
Shirleen was shouting up the stairs for us to get a move on.

ack, he “You never said what you thought about the name Maisie,” I
Luke.

“I don’t give a fuck what the name is, long as you come out of it al

in kept I felt my breath catch.

ear.” All the Nightingale Men got off facing all kinds of uncertain sit

and hair-raising danger, but they became a wee bit edgy when their
got pregnant.

ill said, This was because Indy had nearly died while having her and Lee
Callum.

I'd known Lee a long time and I'd never seen him the way he was
hospital that day when the doctor ejected him from the birthing room.
always cool and in control. Ultra cool and in control.

at their That day, he was not cool and in control.

He was so not cool and in control, I thought they'd have to train
him.

In the end, it was surprisingly me who calmed him down.
g.”

It was funny how life came around and then went around. Lee had
nood to the one to find me at my worst, my most humiliated, beaten up and taped
pole after my ex violated me. He had taken care of me, doing so gently
sweet.

Years later it would be my touch that stopped him from losing it.

I'd put my hand on his arm. He'd frozen at my touch right before
turned into me, slid an arm around my shoulders and yanked me
te, and shoving his face in my neck.

I remembered it like it happened two minutes before. Then again
said to something you never forgot.

“Fuck, Ava,” he had said into my neck as his other arm wrapped
ive.” around my waist.

I slid my arms around his waist, turned my head and whispered in
uations “I know, Lee.”

women “She was screaming.”

I shut my eyes tight and held on tighter.

’s first, “I won’t be able to...” he started and his voice was hoarse.

“You won’t have to,” I cut him off.

s in the He pulled me deeper into him and I thought he’d crush me, but I
He was make a peep.

“Fuck,” he murmured and said no more, just held on.

So I did the same thing.
quilize

Indy and Callum had made it, though the drama wasn’t over. A year
she announced she was pregnant again and Lee went berserk. I’d never
anything like it and I’d seen Luke go berserk once, and let me tell you
ad been one of these boys lost it, it wasn’t pretty.

It was Vance who cooled him off that time.
ped to a
tle and

Vance and Jules had been riding the wave of baby number three.
time, Jules was due any day. She’d had a difficult first pregnancy
throughout it and nearly two days of labor, a lot of it *hard* labor, well
fore he had Max.

Jules had glowed through her second pregnancy with Sam, though
breezed through the delivery. The pregnancy with what would become
to him, was like it was with Sam.
, it was

Vance explained that to Lee. Lee sorted himself out and settled in
ed tight long haul. Even though for him, and thus everyone around him, it was
long haul. Indy ignored this and carried on as always, which was to say
his ear, was her usual crazy self, which made Lee all the more tense.

Indy had been the same as Jules when she bore and delivered

(named after Ally, but to keep it all straight, everyone, for some called Indy and Lee's Alison "Suki"). No problems during the pregnancy or delivery. But Lee took matters into his own hands after that and had Ally described as "The Operation" in capital letters *with* the air quotes she always used when referring to it, as she would lift her hand and jerk her index and middle fingers up and down.

It was Indy's turn to go berserk. Lee had had "The Operation" without consulting her and Indy wanted three kids.

I had kept it between Lee and me, but when Indy looked like she was later going to hold a grudge for perhaps ever, I shared with Indy the episode I'd never seen waiting room while Indy was delivering Callum. Indy got over her anger pretty damn quick after hearing that.

I smoothed my tee down over my belly and left my hands there.

Soon, I wouldn't be able to wear my jeans, which would suck.

At that time, other than that, my pregnancy with Gracie had been pretty good, except for the crippling migraines I had in the first three months, which I had never had before when she was born.

After Gracie was born, I drove Luke straight to Lincoln's Road House. There he and Lee would get themselves to oblivion, talking drunkenly about how they should never let the Rock Chicks "fuck with their heads" and getting into incoherent conversations about the pros (there were many) and cons (there were none) for the adoption and Tex or Hank or Eddie would be called to drive them home.

As I stared at my belly, I smiled. I didn't mind being pregnant. I lost all my pregnancy weight after Gracie. Not because I didn't want to get back to about ten pounds to goal, Luke put a stop to all dieting by showing me a unique way how much he liked my curves.

reason, I looked at Luke, who was sitting on the side of our bed and pulling on a pair of boots.

id what “I’m going to get fat again,” I told him.

rotation His head came up and he looked at me.

ids and “You’re pregnant. Pregnant is not fat.”

without “Pregnant is fat,” I retorted.

he was Luke lost patience. “For fuck’s sake, are we seriously having this conversation?”

e in the “You know how I feel about being fat!” I snapped.

er tizzy I’d once been huge and I’d worked hard to lose the weight. I wanted to go back there.

Luke looked back at his boots. “I don’t care if you’re big as a house as long as you never cut your hair or lose your sense of humor.”

outside I stared at his bent head like it had split open and a dancing mirror image popped out wearing a top hat and tails singing “Thank Heaven for little boys born)Girls.”

d drink I mean, seriously, was he for real?

er have “Luke?”

n-depth His head came up then his eyes narrowed when he saw I was serious. (one) of ready.

ie. “What?” he asked impatiently.

hadn’t Crapity, crap, crap.

to, but He *was* for real.

“Nothing,” I muttered.

ng on a I turned away and started to pile on my silver.

I really love him, Good Ava, my sweet little angel, said in my ear.

You think we have enough time to jump him again before going to concert? Bad Ava, my not-so-sweet little devil, asked in my other ear.

Jeez, Bad Ava was such a slut.



ng this DAISY WAS STARING around Sports Authority Field at Mile High, which was packed to the gills.

“Do you believe this shit?” she breathed.

I never I looked around the stadium.

I believed it.

ise, just The Gypsies had started out in Denver. This was a hometown gig and there was no way the people of Denver were gonna let Stella and her boys do it.

ii Luke What I did find hard to believe was watching Stella on television.

r Little Now *that* was weird.

Though she looked good on the red carpet, dressed rock 'n' roll couture chic and hanging on to Mace's arm while walking up to some ceremony.

still not The Blue Moon Gypsies were huge. They were the new definition of cool. They were, as the magazines said, “Bringing rock back to its roots” and it was true.

They didn't do slick, produced, music videos. Most of their video clips from concerts or them playing a song, live, on a sidewalk in Venice, which they didn't get a permit so they got arrested. This was also to bring rock back to its roots, but it wasn't original. U2 had done m

same for their kickass “Where the Streets Have No Name” video. Or shoot the video while playing in a small, cool-as-shit but seriously di somewhere, thus making the club famous and jacking up their revenue

l to the

It didn’t hurt that Stella was gorgeous and the boys in the band n weren’t hard on the eyes, but they also drank a lot, screwed around a in trouble a lot and were generally just pure, old fashioned rock ’n’ rol

ich was

We had a roped off section, front and center. We also had ba passes hanging around our necks.

Stella took care of the Rock Chicks.

. There own.

The entire gang was there. Indy and Lee, Roxie and Hank, and F Ally (the Nightingale offspring’s parents, Kitty Sue and Malcolm watching Callum and Suki, Hank and Roxie’s kids, Leah and Tex, as Ren and Ally’s daughter, Katie); Jet and Eddie, and Hector and Sadie and Eddie’s mom, Blanca, was watching Jet and Eddie’s brood, Alex and Cesar, and Hector and Sadie’s daughter, Lola, and newborn sor Jules and Vance (Jules’s friend May was watching Max, Sam and Daisy and Marcus, Sissy and Dom, Tod and Stevie, Nick, The F Ralphie and Buddy, Tex and Nancy, Duke and Dolores, Annette and Smithie and LaTeesha, Tom and Lana, Chloe and her husband, Ben and one of his (many) girls (this one was new, I didn’t know her name (who was alone for once) and Floyd, his wife, Emily and his two daug

ool but awards

ition of ts,” and

Floyd was now The Blue Moon Gypsies’ Manager, though on o (or more often than “on occasion”) Stella coaxed him onstage. Floyd backstage during this gig. He was going to hang with the crew since i hometown show.

os were gas, for uted as

uch the

We all hadn’t seen Mace and Stella in a while, though they kept i

· they'd touch, or at least Stella did.

ve club At first, Mace stayed working for Lee while Stella and the band tr
· toured and promoted albums, but they kept their home base in Denver
ot only years ago, when her popularity moved outside The States and she
lot, got dates in Europe and Asia, Mace quit Nightingale Investigations an
l. with them.

ckstage This worried me. Mace was action man. I didn't see him as a mer
an entourage.

He wasn't one for long.

len and Some crazed fan had broken into Stella's dressing room before a
1, weredid things that were so freaky and gross, Luke wouldn't tell me wh
well as were.

(Hector Mace now oversaw the entire band's security detail.

, Dante There was never a repeat of The Dressing Room Incident (as it can
l, Gus); known), though none of the Rock Chicks, not even Indy knew what ha
Harry); (and Stella never spilled, no matter how hard Ally pushed it). But also
evster, so good at it and such a tough guy, badass, macho man that other ro
l Jason, and movie actors heard of him and now he was in high demand. He
; Roam Stella and his home base to Los Angeles, started his own security b
) , Sniff based in LA and had even more tough guy, badass, macho men in his
hters. than Lee did.

ccasion The crowd was getting restless, beginning to chant and stom
wasn't Gypsies were half an hour late taking the stage.

it was a They were probably fighting, as usual.

in close All of a sudden, Luke slid his arm around my shoulders and kis
side of my head. I looked at him and my heart jumped when I saw his :

One could say my husband was pretty damned happy I was having a baby.

A few days later, I said, “Don’t get all squishy on me. I married a tough guy, macho man. If you get all squishy, I’m gonna have to find someone else,” I told him.

He went, “This was a lie. I’d seen Luke (almost) squishy a lot with Gracie. He didn’t mind it in any way, shape or form. He didn’t do baby talk or number of that crap, but his soft, sweet looks for me were nothing on the way he looked at his daughter. I thought he’d be pissed he didn’t have a boy, but he cared at all.”

Luke wasn’t fazed by my lie.

Instead, he said, “If you get those fuckin’ headaches again, I’m kicking you out of the house for three months and livin’ in the cabin in CB. I don’t want to hear about them from Daisy or Shirleen.”

I just stopped myself from smiling. “Vance refuses to take assignments out of state when Jules is pregnant. He won’t even miss a single day of his pregnancy,” I informed Luke, pretending to sound hurt.

“I’m not Vance,” Luke informed me, not pretending anything.

This time, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. “No, you aren’t.”

He bent his head and kissed my neck. I felt the thrill of it from my nipples.

When he lifted his head and looked at me again, I asked, “Do you want a boy this time?”

He answered immediately, “I want a healthy family. Mom, Dad, whatever way they come.”

I also answered immediately, “God, I love you.”

ring his He tilted his head and rested his forehead against mine. “Don’t get
me. I married a bitchy woman. You get soft, I’m gonna have to f
You get another bitchy woman.”

I smiled at him and lied again, “Okay, I’ll try to be a bitchy womar
e and I He grinned at me, not halfway, but full on this time. I felt that
any of nipples too.

looked That was when the lights went low and the crowd went wild.
e didn’t I jumped out of my seat, and ran forward, and, per usual, joined th
Chicks at the edge of the stage.

Stella walked out and I held my breath at the sight of her.
movin’ She looked great. She didn’t even look like she’d had baby Tallul
i’t even six months ago. She was wearing jeans, cowboy boots, a killer bel
light-blue, teeny little T-shirt that said THE GYPSIES in cool, elect
nments glitter script across the boobs.

r of her “I want one of those shirts!” Roxie yelled to no one.

“Right on, sister,” Ally yelled back.

Stella strapped on her guitar, walked up to her mic and she was so
we could touch her boots.

neck to I’d seen Stella play a lot before she got famous and all the gi
caught every concert she did close to home after. Every time since sh
want a it big, just like tonight, she pointed down to us, wrapped her hand aro
mic and, first thing, told the crowd, “My girls are here tonight.”

d, kids, The crowd went wild. Indy, Ally, Jet, Roxie, Jules, Sadie, Daisy, A
Sissy and I jumped up and down and screamed like we were fifteen-y
groupies.

soft on “Rock Chicks, wouldn’t live without ’em,” Stella muttered into l
ind mewith a smile down to us and the crowd roared again. Stella looked awa
us to the arena. “Seeing as we’re home...”

1.” She didn’t finish. The crowd didn’t let her. They belted out a who
: in mywas deafening.

When they calmed, she went on, “As I was saying, seeing as
home...” Another deafening whoop, but Stella kept talking this time,
gonna do it like we did it before. None of this new shit we’ve been
ie Rock we’re going vintage.”

The crowd went absolutely nuts.

ah only “Holy fuck, they’re gonna tear the place down,” Vance shoute
t and a behind us, but the Rock Chicks ignored him, mainly because we’d li
ric-blue right in on any “tearing the place down.”

“Though, not that vintage,” Stella went on. “Just a little somethin
that says it all.”

Stella looked behind her to Pong at the drums then to her left at I
Hugo then to her right at Buzz and she nodded. Then Stella, Buzz, I
o close, Hugo all stepped up to their mics in a line at the front of the stage.

“This is for Kai,” she told the crowd, and since everyone knew
rls had being hot as he was, and being famous in his past, and being famous f
e made went down with Stella in Denver, and being famous because those
und the came out, and, well, again being hot, the crowd descended into bedlam

The minute she finished saying Mace’s name, the guitars and
Annette, started. They started *hard* and they started *loud* and I felt the thrill of
near-old my toes, straight up my body to the very ends of my hair.

Stella lifted her mouth to the microphone and started to sing Blin

her mic totally kickass, rockin' love song, "All the Small Things."

ay from The Rock Chicks banged our heads and jacked our hands in tandem to the beat, arms lifted high in the air and when the boys in the band took the top that their microphones and sang, *Na na, na na, na na, na na na-na, na na, na na, na na, na-na*, we sang it with them.

as we're Stella had stepped back from her mic to jam, her own head banging to the "na nas." Then she riffed, dancing gracefully and swaying her body to the music, cool it was unreal.

She stepped back to her mic to sing as everyone in the entire band sang with her.

and from Leo, Buzz, Hugo and Pong went into the "na-nas" again, and they danced and sang with them as Stella went off, working the stage, working the crowd, nodding and smiling to her fans.

g I like "Jesus," Luke muttered behind me.

I turned to him and his eyes were locked on Stella.

Leo and He'd never been to one of her gigs except the ones where Leo and I were protecting her and all the Rock Chicks, and he'd been kind of busy with those.

r Mace, "She's the shit," I shouted at him and his eyes moved to me.

or what Luke was about to speak when something caught his eye and he looked up again.

l. I turned back around and saw Stella at the mic. The music had slowed down for the drums order to own the crescendo and her eyes were looking to her right, then in Buzz, but offstage.

"Get out here, babe, I wanna kiss you," she said into the mic, 'k-182's

most definitely wasn't talking to the crowd.

She stepped back from the mic, once, twice, her body facing forward, head twisted to the side, all the while she played her guitar and then, *na na*, sudden, the smile on her mouth went radiant.

I looked to my left and saw Mace was walking out onstage. His eyes lit up with Stella, a small smile on his face, and he was shaking his head, nodding slowly, looking good (as usual).

All the Rock Chicks and Hot Bunch stopped dead and stared at Stella. She swung her guitar behind her back, ran the rest of the distance between Mace and launched herself at him.

He caught her, hands at her ass. Her arms wrapped themselves around his neck, her legs wrapped around his hips. He tilted his head back, she kissed him.

The crowd shouted, screamed, whistled. They were nearly louder than the music as Buzz, Pong and Hugo kept singing "na-nas" and Leo took care of the lyrics.

One of Mace's hands left Stella's ass, went up her back and into her hair to cup her head.

He broke the kiss, and with a huge smile on his face, he leaned over her waist like he was going to drop her. Stella held on tight, threw her head back and let out a piercing, laughing scream that we could hear, even over the crowd. Her hair swept the stage and her guitar hung off her back.

They stood there like that, both laughing into each other's faces, oblivious to the tens of thousands of people watching them, totally into each other.

My heart went into my throat. I leaned back against Luke, his arm wrapped around my chest and we watched two people we both cared

about.

ard, her They were in love, they were healed, and most of all, they were all of aoutrageously happy.

I thought, for the rest of my life, I'd never forget seeing them as they were around and laughing onstage in front of a hometown crowd.

walking I never *wanted* to forget.

I didn't have to worry.

s Stella Someone caught them with a camera. Mace bent over holding Stella and her and laughing. Stella wrapped around him, her magnificent hair fanned out on stage, her guitar hanging off her back, her head thrown back, he and his arched...

e tilted Her smile lighting up an arena.

han the The picture was on page fifty of the next edition of *Rolling Stone*.

over the

The End

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moved

ed a lot

about.

They were in love, they were healed, and most of all, they were outrageously happy.

I thought, for the rest of my life, I'd never forget seeing them horsing around and laughing onstage in front of a hometown crowd.

I never *wanted* to forget.

I didn't have to worry.

Someone caught them with a camera. Mace bent over holding Stella and laughing. Stella wrapped around him, her magnificent hair fanned on the stage, her guitar hanging off her back, her head thrown back, her neck arched...

Her smile lighting up an arena.

The picture was on page fifty of the next edition of *Rolling Stone*.

The End

Rock Chick

BONUS CHAPTER

ADDED
OCTOBER 1, 2023



BONUS CONTENT

JUST IN CASE

Mace

Mace returned from his run, wandering through the lush foliage to the bungalow he shared with Stella at the Chateau Marmont.

The band had a day off from the studio.

This was because they were on fire. Dixon Jones and the swingin' at Black Fat Records were beside themselves. The tracks were great. Stella and the boys were laying them down like pros.

Mace had to admit to feeling shock about this. He thought the antics. Tantrums. Fights. Groupies hanging out in the booth, distracting the process.

But there had been none of that shit.

He looked right, where the path opened up to head down to the pool. He stopped dead.

Pong, his body glistening with oil, a tiny neon-green Speedo covering his narrow ass, a thin gold chain winking in the sun around his waist, was flat out on his stomach on a lounge, arms dangling down the sides to the pool deck.

He looked passed out.

This could have something to do with the two women on the lounge either side of him, one laying on her back in a barely-there bikini, the other on her stomach, no top to speak of and a thong hiked up her ass, both looking passed out.

The Gypsies were a no-name band here in LA, and they'd only been in town for three weeks. Most of that time, they'd been working. They had even played a gig.

Still, Pong scored himself some groupies.

that led Mace felt his lips twitch as he continued moving toward the bungalow.

He let himself in and saw Stella and a mug of coffee at the table by the back window.

g dicks Her shining, thick, long, wild hair was sexy messy, her beautiful face held a residue of sleep.
at, and

Her gaze came direct to him. It took in his body slicked with sweat and a hungry look pushed out the sleep on her face.
re'd be

ing the He took that hungry as an invitation.

And he accepted.

“Get in our bed,” he growled.

ool, and Her eyes shot from the tee plastered to his chest, up to his face, then she got off her sweet ass and hightailed it to bed.

ring his

is lying

rest on



Sprawled across the white sheets, Mace watched Stella come out of the

bathroom after cleaning up.

gers on She stopped long enough to pull on some baby-blue panties and
ie otherwhite tank that didn't quite meet the waistband of the underwear bef
oth alsoput a knee to the bed and crawled into it to collapse half down his si
on the bed.

been in Mace shoved a hand under her, curled it up and rested it on her ass
hadn't She stacked her hands on his chest and took one of what had l
many surveys of his face during their time in Los Angeles.

"I'm fine," he murmured, giving her ass a squeeze.

low. He could answer her unspoken question because he knew what
by theher mind.

Tiny had lived in LA, and Mace had spent a lot of time in LA wh
ace stilldid.

She also died in LA.

t, and a Stella knew all this, and his woman was worried it was going to
him.

She was right to worry.

It was getting to him.

Then again, he'd never get over losing Tiny. He just needed to fi
hen sheway to understanding that it was natural, an honor to her memory, w
deserved, and maybe that would help him live with it.

Having his mom and Chloe back was a balm he didn't know he ne
But Stella did.

On that thought, he gave her ass another squeeze.

t of the

“You should go surfing while we’re here,” she suggested.

a tight “Babe,” he warned.

ore she “I’m assuming you got so good at it because you liked to do it. Do
de, half miss it?”

He did.

But that held memories of Caitlin too.

become He still snowboarded, and Caitlin loved her big brother, she’d be
him when he was on a mountain.

“I board,” he said, not meaning to do it, not used to sharing.

was on It just came out.

hen she “What?” she asked softly, her throaty voice wrapping around the
making it feel like a soothing touch.

And another invitation.

get to An invitation to share more in the safe space it seemed only Stell
give him.

“I snowboard. I don’t surf.” He shifted on the bed, discomfort ga
in his muscles. “She came to a lot of my surfing competitions. She als
to my boarding competitions. So why do I board and not surf?”

ight his “Do you board by yourself?”

hat she He shook his head. “No. Sometimes Eddie comes with me, or Lee
or Monty.”

eded. “So, you made it part of your new life, without her.”

He had. And he did it with men he respected, living a life doing v
was proud of after all he’d done when they lost Tiny.

He couldn't say he was proud of what he'd done for Tiny.

He could only say it was a job that needed to be done, so he did it.

n't you But what he did now with Lee and the men, he felt pride in that brotherhood. In the family they gave him.

He ran the knuckles of his free hand along her cheekbone, murmuring
"You're gorgeous *and* smart."

en with "There's a lot to me. I'm not just a wannabe Rock God," she joked
"Soon-to-be," he corrected.

Her brown eyes melted, and she whispered, "Soon-to-be."

"Glad we got that straight."

a word, She pushed up so she was closer to his face, and he had her tits
chest, not her hands. It was by a slim margin, he liked anything
touching him, but he preferred the tits.

a could "Is it just me, or is it a little freaky how good the boys are being
asked.

ithering "It's hella freaky," he concurred. "But when you're one album c
o came away from everything you ever wanted, you get your shit sharp."

She nodded.

3, Hank "Though, Pong's right now passed out, flanked by two women d
the pool."

She started laughing, the husky sound taking a firm grip on his dick.

So he rolled her.

vork he "What are we gonna do on your day off?" he asked when he had
her back and his hands were moving on her body.

“I have a feeling you have some ideas.”

Oh yeah.

In their He had ideas.

“Yeah,” he confirmed.

During, She arched into him, her fingers playing the skin on his back with the same talent she played her guitar. “Let’s roll with those.”

He put his mouth to hers, not releasing his hold on her gaze, and said, “Perfect.”



As to his

of her Stella was asleep.

Mace was awake.

“g?” she It was late, but LA was a lot like Vegas, with a hazier, more laidback atmosphere. It never shut down. You could feel the vibe of the city pulsing softly through the grounds of the Chateau into their room.

Denver was a city at the same time it was a town. It got quiet and quiet. Shit happened and people were out doing their thing, good or bad, on their own by hours.

But it wasn’t like LA.

k. And as he lay in bed on his back, Stella cuddled beside him, her head on his shoulder, her hand on his chest, it occurred to him that he’d forgotten how much he liked it.

her on

He missed it.

He put his hand on hers at his chest and immediately felt Tiny's
her pinkie.

He closed his eyes to concentrate on fighting the constricti
tightened his throat.

with the He needed a drink.

He lifted his head to kiss the top of hers, then carefully slid o
under her, making sure the covers stayed put around her body.
id said,

He pulled on some jeans, a tee, his running shoes, and headed out.

He went straight to the bar, and he was both surprised and unsurp
see Hugo sitting on a stool, a snifter of cognac in front of him, his
Mace like he was expecting him.

Mace took the stool next to him, ordered a bourbon neat and tu
Hugo.

ck feel. "Feels like you've been waiting on me, man," he noted.

over the "I have, and you took your time. Every night, been sitting here, ex
you to show," Hugo replied.

t night. Mace leveled his gaze on Hugo, who, like the rest of the band
l, at all Floyd), could do stupid shit, but even so, he was less prone to it.

If Mace had to call it, he'd say Hugo would give it five to seven y
get the wild out. Then he'd find a good woman, start making babi
become the band's new Floyd, working with Stella to keep their shit ti
read on their train—which had more than enough power, it never had to meet
en how destination—on the rails.

"You know what you gotta do," Hugo said.

The bartender put his glass in front of Mace. He picked it up and

ring onback a healthy shot before setting it back to the bar, his fingers still w
around.

on that He kept his gaze on the back of the bar.

“Take her with you,” Hugo encouraged. “First, she needs to g
needs to be there with you when you go. But she also needs that con
ut fromAnd second, it’s always gonna kill, but with her there, it’ll lessen the p

He knew exactly what Hugo was talking about. What he didn’t kn
how Hugo knew to talk about it.

rised to Maybe Stella had shared with him. Maybe Floyd had a conversati
gaze to him.

But Mace reckoned this was all Hugo.

med to “I don’t know if I can,” he admitted to the bottles of liquor behind

“You can. You need to. The concept of closure is bullshit. There ar
wounds that never heal. This is one of them.”

pecting Mace turned his head to Hugo.

Hugo kept talking.

d (save “But this is the journey, Mace. You can’t avoid stops on the journe
do, they’ll haunt you. You got enough haunting you, brother. Do
years tothink?”

es, and Mace lifted the glass and downed the rest of the bourbon.

ght and He then jerked up his chin to the bartender for a refill.

its final The bartender complied.

Through this, Mace nor Hugo said anything.

d threw Only after Mace took his next sip did Hugo speak.

rapped “She’s there all alone, brother.”

Mace felt those words twist in his gut, and that feeling made him murderous look to the man at his side.

go. She “She’s not there.”

rection. Hugo shook his head. “She’s there, Mace. And she’s wondering v
ain.” brother hasn’t visited her.”

ow was Mace dropped his head, clipping, “*Fuck.*”

on with Hugo downed his cognac, clapped him on the back and slid off his
“I’ll leave you with that, man, ’cause I know you’ll do the right th
His pause was meaningful, then he landed his last velvet blow, “Fo
sister.”

the bar. He felt Hugo’s hand on his shoulder. There was a firm squeeze, t
re some man was gone, leaving Mace with his bourbon and his memories.



ey. You When he got back to their bungalow, Stella was again at the tal
n’t you coffee this time and sitting in the dark.

“Did you talk to him?” he asked after he shut the door behind him.

“No,” she answered. “Which one was it?”

There it was.

She didn’t talk to Hugo. She didn’t talk to any of them.

“Floyd?” she went on, her tone knowing, love threading through it
being the only real dad she’d ever had.

“Hugo.”

send a He could sense her surprise.

Mace moved to the couch and folded into it.

She came to him and climbed on to sit astride his lap.

why her She said no words. She just rested her chest to his, shoved her forehead against his neck and pushed her hands in at his back so she was holding him.

Mace didn't touch her.

stool. “Do you believe in life after death?” he asked.

ing...” He felt her body tense, knowing she worried about giving him the answer, prodding that wound that would never heal, causing him pain.

Mace knew she forced herself to relax when she replied, “I landed on my decision on that, but I'd like to think yes.”

“I think it's no,” he shared. “I think once you quit breathing, the end. And when the last person who remembers you dies, that's when you cease to exist.”

Stella was on him, all around him, her scent, her weight.

ble. No But somehow, she made it more, wrapping him up, holding him with more than just the tightening of her arms.

Mace drew in breath, drawing her in, the strength of her love was all he ever needed.

Maybe that was it. Maybe that was why he fucked them up the first time.

Maybe he wasn't ready for Stella to give him the strength.

;, Floyd But now, he reminded himself, he was ready.

She'd given him the strength.

“But just in case,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “Just in case.”



head in

Mace held the huge bouquet of roses.

Stella held Mace.

When they arrived at the destination Mace had avoided until that r
: wrong with everything that was him, he saw Chloe had done well. The sto
perfect. Not huge and ostentatious, not small and unnoticeable.

haven't A pair of ballet shoes was etched in the top. Words and numl
refused to look at in the middle.

at's the And at the bottom, it said, LOVED BY HER MOTHER AND HER BROTH
ien you EVERYONE WHO KNEW HER.

Mace read those words.

Then he read them again.

closer, And again.

Stella squeezed his hand.

s all he He swallowed, let her go and crouched, putting the pink flower:
base of the marble gravestone.

t time. He wanted to say something, he just didn't know what to say.

Or how to say everything he had to say.

It was on this thought, he heard the guitar.

Startled, he looked over his shoulder.

He thought it was just him and Stella.

But under a tree a few rows away, stood Floyd, Hugo, Leo and Por
And a little nearer, Buzz and his guitar.

From the chords Buzz was playing, Mace knew what was coming,
turned back to the flowers when Buzz started singing “Good Riddance

Stella got to her knees behind him. He felt her hands on his l
forehead rest against the base of his neck.

And as Buzz sang, finally, he lifted his eyes to the words under th
ne was shoes.

CAITLIN TALLULAH MASON

bers he “TINY”

Buzz stopped singing.

ER AND The guitar stopped playing.

The song was over.

It took some time.

Then Mace knew what he had to say.

“For what it’s worth, it’s worth all the while.”

He heard his woman’s soft sob.

s at the And after hearing that, silently, Kai Mason finally said goodbye
baby sister.



After the gig was over, Mace moved into the dressing room, an

he'd had some practice, he clocked them immediately.

ing. He prowled right there.

"ID," he grunted to one of the three girls draped on Pong.

, but he "Dude," Pong started. "They been carded."

." "Ohmigod, are you Kai Mason?" the girl breathed.

ats, her He snapped his fingers. "ID."

She tore her gaze from him, looked to Pong, then looked to the s
e balletguard at the door.

"Not gonna ask again," Mace warned.

Hesitantly, she grabbed the little bag that was resting on her hip fi
straps that crossed her body, and she pulled out her ID.

He took it, barely glanced at it and knew it was fake.

He kept hold on it and asked, "How old are you?"

She'd practiced this, so she immediately told him the age from
"Twenty-two."

"How old are you?" he repeated.

She stared at him. Then said, "Okay, nineteen."

"How. Old. Are. *You*?" he said menacingly.

e to his She pushed away from Pong and threw up her hands. "Seventeen!
But I'm almost eighteen!"

"Fuck," Pong mumbled.

"Out," Mace said to the girl.

"But—" she started.

d since "Out. Now," Mace ordered. Then looked to the other two girls. "

with her.”

“But I’m actually eighteen,” one of them said.

“Take it up with her.” He jerked his head at the one he carded. “I’ve been ousted. Go.” When none of them moved, he warned, “I won’t be back again.”

The three of them studied him, wondering how far they could push their luck, considering they were all young, very pretty, and probably because of their security got their way a lot.

Thankfully, they were also smart because they got their asses in gear and took off.

But not before the first one requested, “Can I have my ID back?”

“Nope,” was Mace’s answer.

When they were gone, he went to the security guard at the door.

“I think I remember telling you to card every female that came in here, no matter what age they look,” he remarked.

“I did,” he returned, surly and combative.

Black Fat could put on a helluva tour.

But their choice in security sucked.

Okay? He held up the ID with two fingers a couple of inches from the face. “Can you not tell real from fake?”

“It’s a rock band, man. They don’t care real or fake, just as long as the date is right.”

“This band does.”

You go “No, *you* do,” he shot back. “Bet Pong won’t be happy you kicked

pussy he tagged as his for the night.”

Mace looked over his shoulder seeing what he knew he'd see.

She got Pong was still lounged in the armchair as he was before, but not
t say it other women were there, and they were all clearly of age.

He turned back to the guard and lifted a brow.

push it, The guy's lip curled. “Dude, I know you're a shit-hot PI. And
of both, you're bangin' Stella. But bottom line, you're just a rock star's boyfrie

Mace stood very still.

ear and “Fired,” Stella sing-songed as she walked in.

Stella was always late to the dressing room at the end of a gig,
because she gave time to young women who were studying music.
entered local competitions for the privilege.

Floyd gave that time with her.

ere, no The rest of the band, considering the girls were always minors,
straight to the dressing room.

She stopped to reach up and kiss Mace's jaw. She gave him a smile

Then she ignored the security guy and strutted into the dressing
right to the vat filled with bottles of Fat Tire.

e guy's “Think Stella stated the case,” Floyd, now standing close to Mace,
“You're fired, bud. Get outta here.”

g as the “Pain in the ass diva bullshit,” the guy groused, locking eyes with
“No skin off my nose.”

“Before I take the skin of your entire face, motherfucker, get the
out the out,” Hugo called. “Jesus, where do they find these guys?” he asked th
at large. “It's like amateur hour.”

The security guard's face got red.

Mace got close.

The man's head jerked, he finally took in Mace's vibe, and that was he also finally got smart.

He took off.

Mace caught the door before it closed on him and looked at the tv outside. "You let anyone in here who isn't legal again, you won't get assignment. Anywhere. Except maybe at a mall. Am I heard?"

"Right," one grunted.

"Yup," the other one also grunted.

Clearly, those two were less dumb, or maybe they were just less as He went back to the room, letting the door close behind him.

Stella was there, handing him an open beer.

"You were the shit out there tonight, baby," he told her.

"You always say that," she replied before she put the bottle to her lips. took a tug.

"I never lie."

She blasted him with a smile, it was lit with the afterglow of a grin added, which was also a promise of off-the-hook sex when they got back to the room. She did this before she strutted to the couch and threw herself on Mace. a much-needed rest. As always, she put everything into the show. So

Mace was wondering how she was still conscious, much less how she could fuck out even more when she did what he knew she was going to do in an hour, that being fucking him stupid.

She was beside Leo, who had a gurgling bong to his mouth, taking

He felt Floyd at his side.

“They’d demand people sort through the M&Ms for us if we
is when Floyd started. “They go all out. Red carpet. Five star. Top of the li
their security is for shit. Our rise has been stratospheric, as you know
think you and I both also know, it’s only just beginning. So the big
gets, *they* get, the worse that particular problem is gonna get. The
no guys tighten their safety procedures and the people who enforce them, I do
another good things.”

This was Mace’s same thought.

“You have a word?” Mace asked.

shoes.
Floyd nodded.

“Three times,” Floyd answered.

“Right, then I’ll have a word.”

Floyd smiled.

lips and
A knock came at the door and Mace twisted that way.

One of the guards had his head stuck in.

He looked right at Mace and said, “Guests.” Then he juttied his c
eat gig, indication the band would be okay with who was on the other side
re hotel door.

in it for
Mace returned the gesture.

o much,
e’d pull The door opened, and the hip-hop megastar Dee-Amond stroi
followed by a more than impressive entourage.

bout an “Damn, my motherfuckers,” he said by way of greeting. “I hea
were planting new roots in rock ’n’ roll, but hell if they didn’t get t
a hit. right.”

“Holy fuck,” Leo breathed, pot smoke still drifting out of his
asked,”bleary eyes glued to Dee-Amond.

ne. But Hugo smiled slow.

v, but I Buzz stared.

ger she Pong was buried in women and wasn’t paying attention to anything

y don’t

on’t see

It was Stella who stood from the couch and made the approach, hair

“Dee-Amond, wow. Honored,” she said as he took her hand.

“Couldn’t believe it’d be true, you being more beautiful up close
personal, but here it is. And that voice. Damn, sis, platinum-plated.”

Stella smiled at him, and the richest, most famous recording artist
day was instantly charmed for a lifetime.

Mace grinned.

Yeah.

That was his girl.



thin, an

of the

“Eventually, you gotta get outta the game, my brother,” Dee-Amond
through his phone into Mace’s ear. “Time to spend less of it on the
workin’ my ass off, and more of it enjoyin’ all the money I earned.”

lled in,

“I hear you,” Mace replied.

“Still gonna need you, Mace. Just because I’m slowing down
mean crazy motherfuckers don’t want a piece of my ass,” Amond went

hat shit

“You need my services, you got ’em. You don’t, you’re still invit

mouth, this weekend. I'm grilling. My mom is in town."

"Lana? Is Tom with her?"

"Course."

"Chloe and Ben coming?"

g else. "Absolutely."

nd out. "Count me in. Have your girl talk to my girl about times and shit."

His "girl" was the woman who ran MTS Security for him so he
ose and have to be behind a desk all the fucking time.

She was also sixty-seven years old and had been the executive se
t of the to two studio heads. Both of whom she hated. Both of whom she'd wr
salary out of, including "retirement" packages (even when she left one
forty-three) that meant she didn't have to work again, even in LA.

He suspected it was more about the dirt she knew about them, bu
endure torture before she'd ever tell.

Another reason why she worked for Mace.

After her second retirement, she realized she'd become used
excitement of the business and couldn't stay away.

nd said Now she kept Mace's ass in gear, and all his men...and women.

ne road "I'll get on that," he told Amond.

"Right. Later, brother."

"Later, Amond."

doesn't He'd barely put his phone down before the screen lit up with a pic
t on. him with his seven-year-old daughter wrapped around his back,
ed overpressed to his side, smiling up at Tallulah, who was smiling down

mom. His wife's hand was on his abs.

It was only Mace who was smiling at the camera.

For a second, the past came rushing back, and he didn't know who the man in that picture was.

But he grabbed the phone, took the call from his wife, and after a moment she said, "Hey, baby," and she replied, "Hey, Kai," he remembered.

He didn't know that man was him.

Son to Lana Mason.

Stepson to Chloe Mason.

Husband to Stella Gunn.

Father to Tallulah India Jet Mason.

And...yeah. Brother to Caitlin Mason.

It she'd said, "What's up?" he asked.

"First, Tex and Nancy are joining us this weekend. She mentioned she's never been to Universal Studios, so obviously Tex made it his mission to take her here. They arrive tomorrow."

"Not a problem. We got room."

And they did. They had a seven-bedroom, nine-thousand square foot house on a compound located on the north side of Malibu that included a detached studio, a casita, a pool house (so also obviously a pool) and extensive gardens.

"Second, you need to call the head of security at Universal Studios and warn them Tex is coming."

He chuckled and lied, "I'll get right on that."

He heard her husky laughter, felt it in his chest and parts south, then he said, “Tally been going on again about how she just *can’t live* without Sophia.”

Mace blew out a sigh.

He liked their house with its proximity to the beach, so he and Tally surf.

Tally liked that, and the pool.

Stella liked the studio.

But all of them were done with LA.

Tally’s best friend had moved to Phoenix. Now, Tally was in despair—near-tween-girl style—that her bestest bestie since *forever* because her dad got transferred, and they weren’t going to get to see each other at school every day.

He and Stella tried not to spoil their girl.

But seriously. Droughts. Mud slides. Earthquakes. Daily run-ins with fruits, nuts and flakes (no judgement, Mace was a fan of letting it all hang out and being who you were, but Mace couldn’t deny he missed the snow in Denver, there were fruits nuts and flakes there too, but not at every turn).

And living in a town where you could walk into any store, coffee shop, restaurant and see anyone from the A-list to the C-list (Stella being the exception) and have to deal with the fans who didn’t have a problem asking for a photo or who did and took pictures of you while you were eating eggs benedict and brunch, was getting really old.

Phoenix had zero natural disasters, three-hundred-sixty-five days of sunshine, and a plot of land they’d bought in Paradise Valley, which

When she already had the permits to build on.

without “Family meet tonight?” he asked.

“Family meet,” she agreed.

“Got some things to wrap up. Should be home in a couple of hours

you could “See you when you get here. I’m cooking.”

Of course she was. Rock star who’d repeatedly made the cover of *Stone*, cooked for her family every night when she was home.

“Look forward to it, whatever it is.”

“Okay. Later, babe.”

fits of “Later, Kitten.”

had left He ended the call and stared at the phone.

see each He then swiveled in his chair and looked left to right, taking overabundance of framed photos on his credenza his wife and daughter to regularly.

is with Mace in jeans and a white linen shirt, Stella in a white bikini that hung out
ang out applique around the hips and on the top, just under where the straps
identity of She was wearing a sheer duster with more lace dotted on it that fell
n). thighs in the back. A single strand of flowers crowned her loose hair, she
shop or had a long string of freshwater pearls hanging on her neck, the end of
A-list) was an oblong peridot.

a selfie, They were on a beach in Hawaii. It was their wedding.

edict at A shot of Mace and Stella and the whole crew in the back room
lays of Brother’s Bar. Everyone was smiling, though Tex looked like he
ch they completed a murder spree.

Mace leaning over Stella who was on her back in a hospital bed,

of her hair plastered to her face, her cheeks red with the effort she expended, a gunked-up bundle resting on her chest with a scrunched-up and dark hair on her head.

„ Chole and Ben, his mom and Tom, and Tally and Stella in front of the Christmas tree.

Rolling Tally and Mace at the foot of a run in Aspen, boards under their goggles up on their helmets, smiling at the camera because Stella was it.

Stella and the girls in their bridesmaid dresses at Luke and Jet's wedding, Jet's large baby bump proudly displayed.

Stella and her guitar onstage at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame where she did the tribute at the induction of the Pissed-Off Hippies.

in the Mace and Stella on the way into the Grammy's, Stella in a slim tuxedo with a shimmery pink top that dipped way low, Mace in a tuxedo, white shirt, collar open. Pong, wearing more makeup and more hairspray in his hair than Stella, was photobombing them.

started. Lee and Tally on the beach when Tally was five. She was pointing to something in the ocean, Lee was crouched by her, one hand to her back and she head turned, looking in that direction.

of which And in the middle, next to their wedding picture, not hidden, in place, was a photo of Caitlin on stage wearing a pink leotard and a sheer skirt tied at her waist and drifting to her knees. She was up on stage at My caught in motion.

she'd just Her arms were above her head, her beautiful hands held with grace and delicacy.

tendrils Mace looked from that picture to the one of Lee and Tally on the

e'd just to Stella's beaming smile in her bridesmaid dress, to the photo caught up in good times at Brother's. Good times that happened for a reason, just because they'd all found their family and they were smart enough to appreciate it.

Then he went back to Tiny.

Her arms, "Hope I did you proud, sweetheart," he whispered, drew in breath and turned back to his desk.

As he sorted shit to get ready to go home, it didn't take long for Ava's finish making up his mind about a thought he'd had a while ago.

So he re-engaged his phone, went to contacts and found Lee.

Lee answered. "Hey, brother," Lee answered.

"Yo, Lee. Got a second to talk something through?"

There was a beat of silence and then, before Mace could lay out the details, he knew Lee knew what he was about when he said, "Christ, man, I'm not having you'd never ask."

Mace felt a smile spread on his face.

Then he sat back in the chair in his office and hammered out a decision for his friend.

side of
atching
point,

natural

beach,

to Stella's beaming smile in her bridesmaid dress, to the photo of them caught up in good times at Brother's. Good times that happened for no reason, just because they'd all found their family and they were smart enough to appreciate it.

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KristenAshley.net
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Rock Chick ride continues with
Rock Chick Regret
the story of Hector and Sadie.



LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCK CHICK REGRET

Sadie Townsend is known by all as The Ice Princess and she's worked hard to earn her reputation. Her father, a now-incarcerated Drug Lord, has kept her under his thumb her whole life and she's learned enough from living in that world to give everyone the cold shoulder.

But one inebriated night, she shows Hector the Real Sadie and he realizes he'll stop at nothing to have her.

Hector Chavez makes one (huge) mistake: he waits for Sadie to come to him.

Tragedy strikes and Sadie's got a choice. She can retreat behind her Fortress or she can embrace the Rock Chick/Hot Bunch World.

Guided by Hector, the Rock Chicks, the Hot Bunch and her new roommates, Buddy and Ralphie, Sadie negotiates a life out from under her father's thumb. A life that includes poison, arson and learning how to survive s'mores.

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ROCK CHICK REGRET



ROCK CHICK REGRET

Prologue

Loads of Practice

Sadie

The elevator pinged and I looked out into the plushly carpeted hall.

I took a deep breath.

As I let it out, I stepped one perfectly high, sling-back stiletto-sh soundlessly on the carpet. I turned right and walked the ten steps (I c to the door.

There was a brass plaque on the door. It said, “Night Investigations.”

Before I could chicken out, I turned the sleek knob and pushed tl open.

I knew there would be no balloons falling or streamers str heralding my happily anticipated arrival, but I didn’t expect the inter the welcoming committee.

Or, one could say, *unwelcoming* committee.

Shirleen Jackson was sitting behind the gleaming, polished, blon reception desk. Standing in front of it was Stella Gunn and Kai Mason.

I knew Shirleen, and I knew she knew my father, and further suspected she did a happy dance when he was handed a fifteen-year sentence. Therefore, I expected her face to turn to stone when she saw me.

And it did.

I knew Stella Gunn and Kai Mason because they were famous romances that had played out in the papers and on local news, and I'd watched them with avid fascination along with the rest of Denver.

All of them looked at me. None of them smiled.

I walked through the door. It fell closed behind me so I could see the rest of the room.

Luke Stark was leaning against the desk and his head came up as he was studying a manila folder. When he saw me, his face went blank and his hands went cold.

od foot
ounted) I stopped myself from swallowing and, as per normal as I'd had in practice, I walked—back ramrod straight, chin up, one foot in front of the other, like I learned in deportment classes—to the desk.

tingale “Hello, I'm Sadie Townsend. I have an appointment with Nightingale,” I said to Shirleen.

he door Shirleen looked me from top to toe, her tawny eyes frozen, and her thoughts. I'd had twenty-nine years of people looking at me like I was a screaming did and coming to one of three conclusions.

nsity of First, I was a spoiled rotten, rich daddy's girl and not worth the time.

Or second, I was the daughter of a dangerous drug lord, a member of a dangerous association, scum of the earth.

d-wood Or third, I was the daughter of a dangerous yet powerful and wealthy man.

more, I and there might be some way to use me to get what they wanted.

ntence. I figured Shirleen was in the first category.

My eyes slid to Luke Stark, and I knew from his continued arct that he was a mixture of both one and two.

i. Their I didn't even look at Stella Gunn and Kai Mason.

tched it "Sit your fancy-ass down. Lee'll be with you in a minute," Shirleen and my eyes moved back to her.

I was a little surprised that she would be obviously rude, but the rest deflect off me like I was wearing armor. It hurt, like it always hurt, but damned if I'd let it show.

p from So I didn't.

his eyes I was good at this. I'd had loads of practice at this too.

I turned on my heel, back still straight, chin still up, giving the imp oads of that I was dismissing her and everyone in the room as beneath my noti

: of the This was another defense mechanism with which I had loads of pra

I sat down on a leather couch and crossed my legs, relayi i Liam appearance that I hadn't a care in the world. I magnified this by c

pulling my cream skirt up my knee and surveying my manicure like I knew utterly fascinating.

Shirleen I was wearing the palest of pale pink on my nails. The manicu perfect, as it should be. It had only been finished two hours ago.

ie. I was wearing designer from head to toe.

and by My hair was not dyed. It was naturally an ultra-light, golden-strawberry blonde and also had this weird mix of natural soft hy man combined liberally with waves. I wore it long and down my back. T

had the front pulled back in an expensive clip and it tumbled down shoulders and back. Although not dyed, the cut cost three hundred doll

ic stare I had on a cream, pencil-slim skirt that skimmed the knees and
pleated kick pleat in the back. I also had on a little short-sleeved to
pink (to match my nails) with dozens upon dozens of pink pleats
sleeves, capped with cream satin ribbon. The top had a square neckl
en said, fit like it was made for me. My sling-backs were to die for with a slir
inch heel. They were uber elegant.

I let it I set my pale-pink clutch on my knee and moved my eyes to a
it I was fascination of my shoe.

The door opened and I looked from my toe to the door.

Indy Nightingale and her sister-in-law, Ally Nightingale, walked in

ression I'd seen India Savage and Liam Nightingale's picture in the w
ce. column. She was a gorgeous redhead. He was an extremely handsome
ctice. haired man. They were a beautiful couple, and if their photo was anyt
go by, very happy.

ing the I knew Ally from my not so happy run-in with Daisy a few months
casually Daisy Sloan was friends with the Nightingale clan, and she had b
it was friend once.

Well, she'd almost been one.

ire was The run-in hadn't been a run-in, exactly. I saw Daisy. Daisy's eyes
to polar ice caps when she saw me. She whispered something in All
Ally's eyes cut to me and they went hard.

-cream- That was it. Not a run-in, but not pleasant either.

ringlets
'oday, I Now Indy and Ally were laughing at something, but when the

to my moved in the direction of Shirleen they saw something in her expression. Theirs moved to me and their laughter died.

I had a “Shit, I forgot. Is it Wednesday?” Indy asked Ally.

up, pale Ally’s eyes went glacial as they rested on me.

at the “Yeah,” she answered.

ine and I didn’t know exactly why Luke, Shirleen, Indy and Ally, and I & Kai and Stella (although I hadn’t looked to be certain) hated me n, four- suspected it was either because Daisy hated me or because they suspected I hated Hector Chavez. Rumor had it they were a close-knit group. The studied had talked about what had now become the semi-famous Rock Ch Fortnum’s Bookstore and the Nightingale Men of Nightingale Investi 1. in their articles about Stella and Kai. They were known to be crazy & wedding and willing to lay their lives on the line for each other.

e, dark- Even though a part of me was jealous as hell, I was glad Daisy h hing to Daisy was a good person. She deserved it.

As for me, I’d never had a friend. Not a true, genuine friend in t ago. nine years. I used to feel sorry for myself about this. But then I realized een my just my life, and as with everything else, I learned to live with it. people didn’t trust me, they didn’t trust my dad, they didn’t stick around they used me. I learned a long time ago to shut them down before they rip out my heart, tear it to shreds, stamp on it, kick it around a bit and spit on it.

turned y’s ear, When that happened, trust me, it was no fun. It hurt, *loads*, so I stopped before it could start and didn’t let anyone get close.

air eyes No one.

Ever.

ression. That was until Daisy. But that didn't work out.

When Daisy hit the Denver social scene, I thought she was aces. She was not brittle and fake like everyone else of my father's, and she was a genuine acquaintance. She looked like Dolly Parton. She dressed like Dolly Parton. She had a voice with a country twang. She had a tremendously cool personality that sounded like jingling Christmas bells.

I guessed

she was real.

And she liked me too.

But Nanette Hardy was ripping her to shreds at Monica Herd's garden party a couple of years ago, really laying into Daisy like only Nanette could do. Monica was giggling and I was quiet and waiting for my chance to get in a good shot. My chosen topic was Nanette's habit of getting rear-ended (literally) by the pool boy, which only Nanette and I know about. Everyone else knew all about it and they were laughing at her back.

Monica's face went pale and she was looking over my shoulder.

Nanette quit talking and I looked behind me.

Either Daisy was there.

I caught the pain in her eyes before she looked—*at me*—like I was

Then she walked away.

I knew why. I'd been nice to her. I'd been hoping she'd be my friend. I thought I was talking behind her back, which was worse than what I and Monica were doing. Everyone knew Nanette and Monica were bitter enemies. It was expected.

I called Daisy half a dozen times and went over to her house two

wouldn't see me, or at least that was what her husband said when he
he was me away from the door.

In the end, her husband, Marcus, had come to visit my father. My
Parton, had told me under no circumstances was I to try to communicate with
giggle Sloan again. He explained it was crucial, it was duty, it was business.

line, Marcus was a powerful man, nearly as powerful as my father, and
father couldn't have Marcus as an enemy, so I needed to back off.

Ever the dutiful daughter, I didn't try to contact Daisy again.

I didn't blame her for thinking what she thought of me, though I
I
vicious, have liked to have the chance to explain. Even though I didn't blame
ting for hurt all the same.

I never spoke to Nanette or Monica again. Well, that was, I never
didn't to them again after the "incident" a couple weeks later when I
behind Nanette's husband at a cocktail party at an art gallery. He took
opportunity to share he was gay. He divorced her and was now living in
Miami with his boyfriend, Pedro. But how would I know all *that*
happen?

Nanette and Monica had been "friends" for years. I didn't miss the

Daisy had been a semi-friend for a couple of months. I missed her.
slime.

"Is Hector here?" Ally asked Shirleen.

I just stopped myself from sucking in my lips. Instead, I stared at
nd. She plush carpet in the offices.
Nanette

"Ally." It was a male's deep voice. I was guessing Luke Stark's as
ches. It coming from his direction. His voice held a warning.

"I'm just asking," Ally said.
ce. She

turned I gave the impression that this exchange bounced right off my arm but my stomach clenched.

father God, I hoped Hector wasn't there. That would be awful.

Daisy I knew there was a chance I'd run into him as he worked for Night Bottom now, but I was hoping he was busy doing private eye stuff, galli and my around town bringing down perps, taking photos of cheating husband act and whatever else private eyes did.

Even though Hector worked for them, I chose Nightingale Investi because they were the best. Better than the best. My father said Le her, it move his operation to New York or Los Angeles and corner the ma investigations, security and bounty hunting. He was that good.

spoke One of the things my father taught me was always, but always, outed best.

ok that "He's here all right." Shirleen answered Ally's question, and even ving in I felt my heart beating faster I allowed myself to lift my chin and look would and coolly at Shirleen.

She was pretty, middle-aged and hitting it well. She had beautiful m. skin and the biggest Afro I'd ever seen, but it suited her perfectly. S magnificent eyes.

I knew she once was competition for my father in the drug sce l at the she'd pulled out and gone straight. I admired her for that. That mu taken a ton of courage and it said a lot about her.

s it was Still, it didn't stop me from staring her down. My cool, blue eyes with her arctic tawny ones. We had a staredown and even though s very scary, I won.

Then again, I always won. I was good at the staredown. I could

nor too cool, calm, unaffected stare for hours. It was something else I had practiced with.

Once she looked away, I aimed my composed glance at Ally then at the other two. They had attitude, the good kind. I could see it *and* sense it. Regardless, they were also no match for me and both looked away before I did.

I knew I was not making friends and winning allegiances. That was the point.

These people would never want me to be their friend.

I looked down at my toe again and thought about Hector.

When I knew Hector, he'd been a man in my father's army. My father liked him a great deal. My father told me Hector reminded him of a man from the past. *him*. Smart. Sharp. Good instincts. Loyal. Skilled. Hungry, but in a good way, an ambitious way.

My father had a high opinion of himself.

Hector was one of very few men my father trusted and respected, to the point of being a friend.

It was a mistake.

What we didn't know was that Hector was also an undercover DEA agent. In fact, *the* undercover DEA agent that brought my father's empire down.

What neither Hector nor my father knew was that I helped him.

The Feds took everything: my father's house, his cars, his condo in Miami, his furniture. They froze his bank accounts. They even tried to get my inheritance fund, but since it had been set up for me by my grandmother *before* my father was a Drug King, they couldn't touch it.

I was glad they took my father's stuff. It was tacky and ostentatious, but I held a

oads offather had been a nothing, a nobody, and married a rich girl. He'd c
from nothing the hard way, the dirty way, the vile way, and he'd
at Indy, himself to my mother's family and the world by becoming rich, power
ss, they very, very frightening. He'd driven my mother to leaving us that w
frightening he was. She left me behind. She left everything behind.
was the even take a suitcase.

She just disappeared. *Poof.*

Gone.

And she never looked back. Not once.

y father I'd been eleven.

...well, I didn't dwell. I'd lost a lot by then. A lot of friends, a lot of serv
od way, tried to make into friends (a mistake I learned early not to make agai
grandparents were all dead. Losing my mother was just another in
string of loss. I was used to that too, and it didn't faze me. Or, I should
otally. did faze me. Truth be told, it destroyed me. I just never let it show.

Hector was something else.

r DEA I knew right away he wasn't what he wanted us to think he was.

empire I'm not a super-sleuth or anything. It was just that, you spend
time around bad people, you know them when you see them.

You also know the good ones too.

n Boca, And there was something about him. Something about the way
y trust himself, the way he looked, the way he looked at me.

y father God, he was beautiful. Quite simply the most handsome man I
clapped eyes on in my whole, entire life.

us. My This was saying something. My father surrounded himself w

ome upathletic, good-looking men. His personal army was recruited specifically to reflect on him.

ful and Hector had flatly refused the makeover my father usually demanded as how the boys from the streets that he fashioned into gentlemen criminals.

Didn't My father respected that too.

Hector was Mexican American. He looked rough and was straitlaced. One look and you knew you did *not* mess with him. He had black, wavy hair, black eyes, long legs, broad shoulders and a lean, athletic body. He knew who he was and what he wanted. And he had a confidence that was unreal.

ants I'd It was hard to describe, but put simply, he was magnetic.

in). My He never gave a hint that he was who he was. Actually, I thought of him as a longhaired cop, not a DEA agent. Still, I did what I could.

I say, it It wasn't much. I would just, say, leave my father's keys lying around when I knew he was going to be out of the house for a while but that they would be around. Then I'd notice the keys gone for an hour then back where they were before. Then I'd get in my father's secret safe (he gave me the combo) and I'd take out files or books and I'd set them in locked cabinet drawers, drawers to which Hector had the keys. I'd lay them on top, a time saver. I'd wait, go back and put them where they were supposed to be.

he held Once, when I overheard something I thought would be useful, I hid a note in what I thought of as "Our Drawer." When I went back it wasn't there and I knew my father didn't take it. He was playing golf.

with fit, The note was kind of stupid, not to mention playing with fire. My father could have found the note. He wouldn't have suspected me (I typed it

cally to my computer). He knew I would never, *never* do anything like that

But he would have gone through his workforce and someone would have gotten the blame.

I never did that again, by the way.

In the meantime, I tried to show Hector the cold shoulder. I really tried to be honest. For months, I was what I knew all my father's men and society boys and all my father's colleagues called me. The "Ice Prince":

Amazing No, it was not original, but it was effective.

Confidence I was Pure Chill to Hector like I was to everyone else.

Then, one night, I melted.

I blamed lemon drops.

He was I'd gone out and had way too many lemon drops. They tasted like I forgot they had so much vodka in them.

Around When I got home after a night with "the girls"—my semi-friend Hector, at least the women my father wanted me to hang out with, which was to pick right women who enhanced his reputation—what could I say, everyone around me said my father had a job, and that was one of mine—I'd been drunk.

Right on I heard noise coming from my father's study. It was late and the room was dark, but this was not strange. My father worked odd hours, so I supposed it was my father in the study.

Even left I went to say goodnight like any good, dutiful daughter would do. I was gone, dutiful daughter was another one of my jobs and I did it both publicly and privately. I didn't have the courage to get on my father's bad side, not behind closed doors. I knew what he was capable of. My mother didn't trust me for no good reason, trust me.

Out on

to him. But it was Hector in my father's study. Looking back, he was probably there for reasons my father would frown on, frown on so much he ordered Hector's murder.

No kidding.

lly did, What did I say about my father's bad side? I was being very serious all the time. I was too drunk to think twice about what I was doing. Not to mention, "I fancied that I was half in love with Hector (in the very, very back of my mind, the only place I let my true thoughts free)."

Seeing as I was three sheets to the wind, the very, very back of my mind was at the forefront for one shining moment. This allowed me to do something I rarely did.

candy. I acted on impulse.

I threw myself at him.

s, or at And Hector caught me.

say the He didn't even hesitate. I was all over him, he was all over me and my exchanged nothing but civilized pleasantries for months, and that night in my father's study, we went at each other like animals in heat.

e house I think it went like this:

thought Me, with tilty head and stupid smile, all the while unsteadily walking toward him: "Hi."

Being a Hector, with cocked head and a small grin playing at his fantastic face as he watched me unsteadily walk toward him: "You okay?"

ot even Me: "I will be when you kiss me."

't leave Oh God, just thinking about it makes me cringe. But then again, it worked.

ably in That was it. I had made it to him and was sliding my arms around
'd haveneck as I told him to kiss me. I pressed my body to his and he kissed me

It was fantastic. It was so hot I couldn't believe I didn't melt on the floor.
He was good with his hands, his tongue, his mouth, even his teeth.

s. Almost as good, he seemed to think I was good with those things too.
Attention I After a while, he had me against the wall, my skirt up around my hips.
of my hand in my panties cupping my behind. His other arm was wrapped
around my waist. Both were pulling me in deep, pressing me close to his
y mind hips. His mouth was at my neck. Mine was at his, both my hands in
to do shirt, running up the hot skin of his back.

I didn't think that it was tacky (my father would have thought it was tacky).
I didn't think anything. I *couldn't* think anything. My entire mind was
centered on Hector and what he was doing to me and how much I *liked* it.

Then Hector said, his voice a low, hoarse rumble against my neck.
"I've been waitin' months for you to get in the mood to go slumming."
s. We'd

It was like someone had shoved me in a bath filled with ice.
it in my

He thought I was nothing but a society slut out for a quick, drunk fuck
with the hired help.

I didn't know what I was expecting. But for some reason, some insane
walking insane reason, I expected more from him. The fact he didn't give it to me
through me like a blade.

I put my hands to his shoulders and pushed him away.
: mouth

I stared at him, eyes at Chill Factor Sub-Zero, as I calmly pulled him
down.
gain, it

Then I put all my effort into walking away without falling on my face.

and his face. That would kill any chance at a brilliant exit, and at that moment, *really* needed to make a brilliant exit.

the spot. To my surprise, before I could make it three steps, I found strong arms wrapped around my upper arm and I was jerked around to face Hector.

so. “Where you goin’?” he asked, his hair sexy and messy, because of his lips, his hands made that way by my hands, his black eyes glittering dangerously and tight they were still hot on me.

his hand I looked at his hand then back in his eyes. My heart was beating hard in his T-but I ignored it. I had loads of practice at that too.

“Get your hand off me.” My voice was pure ice.

it was He let me go instantly.

and was I kept staring at him and I didn’t know why.

it. No, if I was honest, I did know why.

k, “I’ve I wanted to say something. I wanted to explain. I wanted him to know that who he saw was not *me*. I wanted him to know that it was all show and act, all because I was scared of my own fucking father. All because I was scared of letting anyone close so they wouldn’t get the chance to hurt me. That I was really someone else. I didn’t know who, but I thought maybe she was nice. Maybe she could be funny if given a chance. Maybe she could be interesting. Maybe she could laugh once in a while. Maybe, if she helped her to be free, maybe she could be someone *worth something*.

I wanted above anyone I’d ever met, outside Daisy, to say this to my skirt Chavez. I didn’t know why, I just did.

While I was trying to find a way to explain, he spoke.

drunken “Lotta things I thought you were. A fuckin’ cocktease wasn’t

ment them.”

The way he said it told me that the things he thought I was worth were slightly better than being a cocktease.

I turned and walked away.

Six months later, I sat behind my father’s defense table and watched Hector, cleaned up and wearing a suit (and looking *good*, by the way) testify against my father.

I didn’t just watch Hector testify. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

Hector didn’t even look at me.

He had no idea I was not there as the doting daughter providing support to her wayward father, which I pretended I was.

No, I was there to make certain sure my father went down.

I wanted to be certain sure so I could finally, *finally* be free.

I didn’t take my life in my hands feeding Hector information on my life for *nothing*.

I had no idea I wouldn’t be free.

I had no idea that the shark-infested waters into which I’d been paddled in happily and unwittingly as a child and treaded water in wading as an adult, were far more dangerous without my father running interference.

I had no idea.

“Lee’ll see you now,” Shirleen said, and my head snapped up.

I was so stuck in my memory of Hector, I hadn’t even noticed the room had cleared. The only ones left were me and Shirleen. The photo even rung. She was placing it back in the cradle and avoiding my eyes.

I stood and hesitated, waiting for her to come around the desk to see me just to Nightingale. I had a fleeting thought that I might say something to her. Tell her she had pretty eyes, or...something. Make her see I was the Ice Princess.

watched Make her see *me*.

), as he She started packing up, dumping fingernail polish, her cell phone, and other flotsam and jetsam into her big, really cool (I thought, but would not have the courage to say) Louis Vuitton bag. Therefore she wasn't going to escort me to "Lee."

g moral Without looking at me, she instructed, "Through the door, I'll be waiting in. His office is first on the right. Knock before goin' in."

There you go. I lost my chance to be nice.

So be it.

y father I walked across the room to the inner door. She buzzed as I took a deep breath, opened it and walked through.



n born, "What can I do for you Ms. Townsend?" Liam Nightingale asked me.

arily as I was trying not to hyperventilate.

nce. I was supposed to be meeting with Nightingale. Just Liam Nightingale.

I walked into the room and Hector was there, sitting on the side desk, one leg up, cowboy-booted foot dangling, one leg straight, cowboy-booted foot on the floor.

that the One sight of him and I nearly swooned. I'm not kidding. That's the one had loads of practice stopped me from doing *that*.

I walked into the office and tried to think of some lesson my father

now me about people's motivations. My only conclusion was that Nightingale was nice to telling me where his loyalties lie. If I had some wild plan of vengeance against Hector to put into motion, Nightingale was having no part in it. There were going to be no secrets and nothing behind closed doors. Hector was going to be involved and would hear what I had to say, and I had no choice in the matter.

me and
d never
going to It took a good deal out of me, but I just looked at Hector and lifted my chin. At this, his eyes grew dark, and if he could have curled his lip in disgust, I knew he would.

izz you I had loads of practice at ignoring that kind of response too.

I shook Nightingale's hand. He told me to call him Lee. I told him my name was Sadie. I sat in front of his desk and he sat behind it.

another Then he'd asked what he could do for me, "Ms. Townsend," even though I'd told him to call me Sadie.

My father would read a lot into that, and I did too.

Lee was telling me this was a formal arrangement. Very formal.

gale.
of the I hated being called "Ms. Townsend" mainly because my father's name was "Tuttle." It wasn't a great name, but it was real and didn't feel like some stupid, made up name of a romance hero. But also because I felt like "Ms. Townsend." People had been calling me that since I was mostly servants, lackeys and henchmen.

owboy- I felt like I was Sadie. I had no idea who Sadie was, but Sadie sounded like someone you'd want to know.

rk God Ms. Townsend sounded like someone you wanted to avoid.

r taught "I'd like to hire your agency," I told Lee, trying to blank out the f

ale was Hector was still sitting silent on the side of Lee's desk. He was looking
geance I saw him out of my peripheral vision, but I also *felt* his eyes on m
: There might sound stupid but it was true.

tor was "Why do you need the services of a detective agency?" Lee asked.

oice in "I don't need the services of a detective agency. I need security. I
bodyguard," I answered.

slightly The air in the room changed. From the minute I walked in it ha
l his lip even less welcoming than in the reception area, mainly because Hec
there.

Now it went weirdly...electric.

to call "Why do you need a bodyguard?" Lee asked.

"I'm not safe," I responded.

though "Why aren't you safe?" Lee persevered.

Oh damn.

If it had just been Lee, I still would have had trouble explaini

There was no way I could explain it with Hector there too. How did
r's real without sounding like I thought I was the end all be all of beauty, gra
t sound all things feminine?

I never I couldn't exactly say, "Well, Lee, you know...when a crime lo
was six, down, unfortunately the crime doesn't go away. Instead, there's a wa
who will be the new king. For now, Ricky Balducci won that war. And
nded to Balducci is a lunatic. Now he and his three brothers are intent on act
their version of a Shakespearean play by doing what they can to te
other down in order to obtain the throne. Somehow, being the dead
act that princess, I'm caught up in this mess because Ricky isn't the only B

g at me. brother who's a lunatic. They're *all* lunatics. And they've got it in the
ie. This that the one true king has me at his side. And they'll stop at nothing, r
to get me by their side. I have no family. I have no friends. I have no
me to protect me against four insane brothers, and I'm absolutely,
need a completely *terrified*."

Instead, I said, "I don't know how to explain it..." This was true.
could see, it was hard to explain. "I just don't feel safe."

"You'll have to give me something more to go on, Ms. Townsen
said to me.

My hands curled into fists in my lap. So tight my nails dug into my
rather painfully. This was the only reaction I showed to the possibil
this wasn't going very well. I knew Lee couldn't see my hands.

What I didn't know was that Hector could.

"I'll double your fee."

As my father would say, if you meet with resistance, try throwing
ng this. at it first.

I say it
ace and "Doubling my fee isn't going to lighten my caseload," Lee replied.

Oh my.

rd goes That was not good news.

r to see Lee was opening a drawer. He sorted through it and took out a card

l Ricky "I'm not taking on any new clients right now. If this was an
ing out situation, we'd consider it. Since it's just a feeling, I'm sorry but I'll
ar each refer you to Dick Anderson."

l king's He stood and rounded the desk. I stared at him again, concentra
alducci not hyperventilating.

air head He couldn't say no. He was the best in the business. *Everyone* knew *nothing*, him and the Nightingale Men. *They* could keep me safe.

one but I didn't know Dick Anderson. Dick Anderson sounded like the natural, TV private eye. I didn't want a wisecracking TV private eye who wore Hawaiian shirts or forgot to shave. I wanted scary-but-handsome Nightingale Men who'd put the fear of God into you by just cracking their knuckles.

I stood as Lee made it to my chair.

d," Lee "Lee, please, reconsider," I implored, looking up at him, using his name, trying to take the formality out of it, wondering how I could do it without sounding like a moron or a conceited daddy's little rich bitch.

ity that He was super tall. Then again, since I was five foot five, even in football shoes, most men were taller than me.

"I'm sorry Ms. Townsend," Lee replied.

That was when I lost it. Lost control for the briefest moment but moneytruly, not kidding, the Balducci brothers were scaring me out of my mind. I knew something was going to happen.

I knew it.

I leaned forward just a bit and couldn't stop myself from whispering, "Please."

l. Something flickered in Lee's eyes. He looked over my shoulder at me for an instant, then back to me.

have to "Call Dick," he said with finality, but his voice, which had been professional and cordial but slightly cold, had become a bit warning softer. However, a warmer and softer voice meant nothing to me in my current predicament. "He's a good man," Lee finished.

about I looked at him for one second, then two. Then I nodded and turned
I took two steps and stopped.

me of a Hector was standing and staring down on me. He'd lost the di
o wore look and his face was now just blank.

tingale He looked good. Still rough but more handsome than ever.

s. I'd never have the chance again, and even though I didn't know
came over me—maybe it was the specter of The Real Sadie bursting o
s given moment—I looked Hector in the eye and said with genuine feeling, '
explain you're well, Hector.'

I looked away, squared my shoulders and left.

ur-inch

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ecause,
mind. I

spring,

Hector

d been
ier and
in my

I looked at him for one second, then two. Then I nodded and turned.

I took two steps and stopped.

Hector was standing and staring down on me. He'd lost the disgusted look and his face was now just blank.

He looked good. Still rough but more handsome than ever.

I'd never have the chance again, and even though I didn't know what came over me—maybe it was the specter of The Real Sadie bursting out for a moment—I looked Hector in the eye and said with genuine feeling, “I hope you're well, Hector.”

I looked away, squared my shoulders and left.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Ashley is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over 100 romance novels including the *Rock Chick*, *Colorado Mountain*, *Dream Team*, *Chaos*, *Unfinished Heroes*, *The 'Burg*, *Magdalene*, *Fantasyland*, *The Ghost and Reincarnation*, *The Rising*, *Dream Team* and *Honey* series with several standalone novels. She's a hybrid author, publishing titles independently and traditionally, her books have been translated in five languages and she's sold over five million books.

Kristen's novel, *Law Man*, won the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewer's Award for best Romantic Suspense, her independently published title *On* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* best Independent Content Contemporary Romance and her traditionally published title *Breathe* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* Contemporary Romance. Kristen's titles *Motorcycle Man*, *The Will*, and *Steady* (which won the Reader's Choice award from *Romance Reviews*) made the final rounds for Goodreads Choice Awards in the Romance category.

Kristen, born in Gary and raised in Brownsburg, Indiana, was a first-generation graduate of Purdue University. Since then, she has lived in Denver, the West Country of England, and she now resides in Phoenix. She worked as a charity executive for eighteen years prior to beginning her independent

publishing career. She now writes full-time.

Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To thank her readers and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to yourself, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, talk to your sister's back whether they're at your side as friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are.

The programs of the RC Nation include Rock Chick Rendezvous, where Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisters together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards.

Rock Chick Rewards is an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations. Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity and this number continues to grow.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation on her website.

KristenAshley.net



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You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation at KristenAshley.net.



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