

# ROCK

A film strip is draped across the middle of the cover. It features four distinct frames: the first shows a hand holding a martini glass with olives; the second shows a couple in a car; the third shows a snowy, winter landscape; and the fourth shows a cityscape at night with purple and blue lights.

# CHICK

## REGRET

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK SEVEN

A black silhouette of a city skyline with various skyscrapers of different heights and shapes.

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# KRISTEN ASHLEY

# ROCK CHICK REGRET

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# CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [Peace](#)
2. [Stretch My Legs A Bit](#)
3. [I Waited](#)
4. [Hash Marks](#)
5. [Screaming Orgasm](#)
6. [It's My Lip Gloss](#)
7. [Okay](#)
8. [Man of the Month](#)
9. [You Sleep Here Don't You?](#)
10. [Powder Room](#)
11. [Hector's Rose](#)
12. [I Think I Made Hector Mad](#)
13. [Agent Chavez, oo, Agent Chavez](#)
14. [Sadie's Gift](#)
15. [Severed Edges](#)
16. [Uglier and Uglier](#)
17. [It Was Organic](#)
18. [Eighties Rock Video Bimbo](#)



19. [Ibuprofen and Midol](#)
20. [Bon Bons](#)
21. [A Cooler and a Picnic Basket](#)
22. [He Taught Me How to Make S'Mores](#)
23. [Fred and Wilma](#)
24. [Next!](#)
25. [Code One](#)
26. [Christmas Dinner at the Big House](#)
27. [Mr. Edge](#)
28. [I'm Sadie](#)
29. [Gardenias](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

[Learn More About Rock Chick Revolution](#)

[Rock Chick Revolution](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kristen Ashley](#)

19. [Ibuprofen and Midol](#)
20. [Bon Bons](#)
21. [A Cooler and a Picnic Basket](#)
22. [He Taught Me How to Make S'Mores](#)
23. [Fred and Wilma](#)
24. [Next!](#)
25. [Code One](#)
26. [Christmas Dinner at the Big House](#)
27. [Mr. Edge](#)
28. [I'm Sadie](#)
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[Epilogue](#)

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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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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

A long time ago, at a scary time in my life, when I was alone, I tried alone, and after having surgery to remove a benign lump from my breast, I attempted to redress my wound and shower by myself.

I nearly passed out. Crawling to the phone, I called my friend, Chris. He was a nurse. He dropped everything and came to my house. He helped me shower and redress my wound. I was mortified and told him so.

“I’m gay and a nurse. I wipe people’s asses for a living. Do you think that fazes me?” he’d said to me. Then he lectured me on going it alone when you have friends.

I never did it again.

And this, my loyal readers, is exactly what the entire series of *Rock* is about, as Sadie learns in the story you are about to read. You are never alone, not when you have friends. Learn from my stories and, through them, and then, remember, if you have friends you are never alone.

Rock on.

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A long time ago, at a scary time in my life, when I was alone, I tried to go it alone, and after having surgery to remove a benign lump from my breast, I attempted to redress my wound and shower by myself.

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Rock on.







# 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 se  
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  
romance had played out in the papers and on local news, and I'd wa  
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  
of the room.

Luke Stark was leaning against the desk and his head came u  
studying a manila folder. When he saw me, his face went blank and h  
went cold.

od foot

ounted) I stopped myself from swallowing and, as per normal as I'd had /  
practice, I walked—back ramrod straight, chin up, one foot in front  
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 S  
eaming did and coming to one of three conclusions.

nsity of

First, I was a spoiled rotten, rich daddy's girl and not worth the tim

d-wood

Or second, I was the daughter of a dangerous drug lord, a  
association, scum of the earth.

Or third, I was the daughter of a dangerous yet powerful and wealt  
and there might be some way to use me to get what they wanted.

more, I

entence. 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.

is. 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 t 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

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  
fit like it was made for me. My sling-backs were to die for with a slir  
inch heel. They were uber elegant.

I set my pale-pink clutch on my knee and moved my eyes to a  
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

I'd seen India Savage and Liam Nightingale's picture in the w  
column. She was a gorgeous redhead. He was an extremely handsome  
haired man. They were a beautiful couple, and if their photo was anyt  
go by, very happy.

I knew Ally from my not so happy run-in with Daisy a few months  
Daisy Sloan was friends with the Nightingale clan, and she had b  
friend once.

Well, she'd almost been one.

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.

That was it. Not a run-in, but not pleasant either.

Now Indy and Ally were laughing at something, but when the  
moved in the direction of Shirleen they saw something in her exp

ars. Theirs moved to me and their laughter died.

I had a “Shit, I forgot. Is it Wednesday?” Indy asked Ally.

p, 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 g  
n, four- Kai and Stella (although I hadn’t looked to be certain) hated me  
studied suspected it was either because Daisy hated me or because they susp  
hated Hector Chavez. Rumor had it they were a close-knit group. The  
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 a  
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  
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 aro  
they used me. I learned a long time ago to shut them down before the  
rip out my heart, tear it to shreds, stamp on it, kick it around a bit a  
turned spit on it.

y’s ear, When that happened, trust me, it was no fun. It hurt, *loads*, so I sto  
before it could start and didn’t let anyone get close.

air eyes No one.

ression. Ever.

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 an old acquaintance. She looked like Dolly Parton. She dressed like Dolly Parton. She had a voice with a country twang. She had a tremendously cool voice that sounded like jingling Christmas bells.

She was real.

And she liked me too.

But Nanette Hardy was ripping her to shreds at Monica Herlihy's garden party a couple of years ago, really laying into Daisy like only a catty 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.

Daisy was there.

I caught the pain in her eyes before she looked—*at me*—like I was the one who had done it.

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 twice.

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 didn't have liked to have the chance to explain. Even though I didn't blame  
vicious, hurt all the same.  
ting for

I never spoke to Nanette or Monica again. Well, that was, I never  
husband 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 e her, it move his operation to New York or Los Angeles and corner the ma investigations, security and bounty hunting. He was that good.

r 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.

m. She was pretty, middle-aged and hitting it well. She had beautiful 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 war. *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

It was a mistake.

What we didn't know was that Hector was also an undercover 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 money, 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 thought-out honestly. For months, I was what I knew all my father's men and I thick, society boys and all my father's colleagues called me. The "Ice Prince":

mazing No, it was not original, but it was effective.

fidence 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, least the women my father wanted me to hang out with, which was to ck right women who enhanced his reputation—what could I say, everyone around ave me father had a job, and that was one of mine—I'd been drunk.

ted file I heard noise coming from my father's study. It was late and the ight on was dark, but this was not strange. My father worked odd hours, so I supposed it was my father in the study.

ven left I went to say goodnight like any good, dutiful daughter would do. I s gone, dutiful daughter was another one of my jobs and I did it both publicly, 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 y father 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.

ly 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."

.. We'd  
it in my It was like someone had shoved me in a bath filled with ice.

He thought I was nothing but a society slut out for a quick, drunk fuck  
with the hired help.

walking I didn't know what I was expecting. But for some reason, some insane  
insane reason, I expected more from him. The fact he didn't give it to me  
through me like a blade.

: mouth I put my hands to his shoulders and pushed him away.

I stared at him, eyes at Chill Factor Sub-Zero, as I calmly pulled myself  
down.

gain, it Then I put all my effort into walking away without falling on my face.

und 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.

mind 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 father, all and 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 for me.

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 that 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. I had a fleeting thought that I might say something 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.

Make her see *me*.

She started packing up, dumping fingernail polish, her cell phone, 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."

Without looking at me, she instructed, "Through the door, I'll be 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.

I walked across the room to the inner door. She buzzed as I took a deep breath, opened it and walked through.



"WHAT CAN I do for you Ms. Townsend?" Liam Nightingale asked me.

I was trying not to hyperventilate.

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.

One sight of him and I nearly swooned. I'm not kidding. That's how many loads of practice stopped me from doing *that*.

I walked into the office and tried to think of some lesson my father

now me  
me about people's motivations. My only conclusion was that Nighting  
nice to  
telling me where his loyalties lie. If I had some wild plan of ver  
sn't the  
against Hector to put into motion, Nightingale was having no part in it  
were going to be no secrets and nothing behind closed doors. Hec  
going to be involved and would hear what I had to say, and I had no cl  
the matter.

me and  
d never  
oing 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 curlec  
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  
me 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  
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  
owboy-  
I hated being called "Ms. Townsend" mainly because my fathe  
name was "Tuttle." It wasn't a great name, but it was real and didn'  
like some stupid, made up name of a romance hero. But also because  
felt like "Ms. Townsend." People had been calling me that since I v  
mostly servants, lackeys and henchmen.

me 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* about 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.

"Lee," 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.

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 truly, not kidding, the Balducci brothers were scaring me out of my wits. I knew something was going to happen.

I knew it.

I leaned forward just a bit and couldn't stop myself from whispering "Please."

Something flickered in Lee's eyes. He looked over my shoulder at me for an instant, then back to me.

"Call Dick," he said with finality, but his voice, which had been professional and cordial but slightly cold, had become a bit warmer, 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

ecause,  
mind. I

spering,

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.

ONE



PEACE

*Sadie*

I turned my black convertible Mercedes SLK into the parking garage, the Nightingale Investigations offices and swiped again at my eyes, swerving again and barely missing the wall before I righted the car.

I had no idea how I got there, maybe a mixture of luck and adrenaline.

I had no idea why I even *went* there, except it was close to my apartment. Not to mention I was together enough to know I couldn't go to the store. Also not to mention, it was in my mind since I'd been there there the afternoon.

But really, who cared? I was there. It was as good a place as any.

My car was a mess. I'd hit a couple of things on the way, I didn't know what. I felt the bumps, heard the crunching and scrapes but I just kept going.

I didn't park. I stopped on a screech of tires when I saw the door to the stairs. I couldn't wait for the elevator. Ricky could be right behind me. Not to mention I wasn't sure I could stand.

I threw open my car door, and just that took a lot out of me. So much so that when I tried to get out, I fell forward on all fours (or all threes, as that was the extremities I had working for me at that moment) to the concrete floor.



This took a lot out of me too. So much that I threw up right I couldn't see much. The sweat and blood were stinging my swelling eyes. I could see there was blood mixed with the bile on the pavement. I could see my manicure was ruined, which pretty much stunk, but at that moment was the least of my worries.

I pulled myself up using the car door and my one good hand. My other hand and arm were useless to me. Actually, my body was pretty good considering that every inch of it screamed out in pain, but I tried to ignore that. I wasn't really certain that continuing to breathe was a good goal. I was under my body for some reason wasn't letting me give up.

es, thus I got to my feet and lurched forward.

I was in my nightgown, or what was left of it. I knew I had no underwear. I had no idea if the remains of my nightgown were covering me, in a decent way.

police. I'd deal with that new humiliation later (if I got the chance).

at very I staggered to the door with the stenciled sign that read STAIRS. It took me two tries, but I got it open and I pushed myself through.



## **Jack**

't know

going.

JACK TATUM STARED at the screens in the Nightingale Investigation leading surveillance room.

ind me.

Jack took night duty four or five times a week. The men thought it was crazy, but he liked it.

ich that

was all

oor.

Since he was a kid, he had a weird sleeping pattern. It drove his parents nuts. He slept in the late afternoon and evening, was up all night in the morning. His mom couldn't break him of it, the doctors couldn't,

there. I could.

yes, but Throughout his adulthood, to fit his life around it, he'd taken a number of night jobs (mostly security), but they sucked.

ment it This job was the perfect fit.

y other It was boring a lot of time, but when it wasn't boring, it was really boring.

useless Jack liked the anticipation, he fed off it. Because when something happened, he had to be on his game.

ignore goal, but Days, weeks, months of nothing happening could weaken most instincts.

lerwear if I was But Jack was born to be sharp and alert at three o'clock in the morning. If something happened, he'd never let the team down.

That was why when he saw on the monitors the Merc screeching tires in the garage, Jack was ready.

ook me He reached out to the phone, hit the speaker button then number two listened to it ring.

Luke and Hector had called in five minutes ago saying they'd be here in five. The car phone in their Ford Explorer was number two on speed dial.

gations Then Jack watched the woman fall out of the car. Her head fell down, she couldn't hold it up. One arm was dangling uselessly on the ground. She was wearing a silky, lacy nightgown, but it was ripped and torn.

he was He was rising out of his chair when he heard Luke's voice answer the phone.

is mom "Stark."

ght and "Fuck," Jack swore.

no one

“Jack?”

number of “Get here, now. There’s a woman—” Jack stopped as he watched her pull herself up using the car door.

For a second, he froze. She had clearly been beaten badly and was completely covered in blood.

“Jack. Status,” Luke barked into the phone.

nothing “Call an ambulance. I’m leaving the room,” Jack responded.

“Jack—” Stark said, but Jack didn’t reply. He didn’t even disconnect. He was gone.



### **Sadie**

ning. If

I MADE it up three stairs then fell. My bloody hand slipped on the step and I couldn’t break my fall, so I banged my head.

It hurt.

wo and

Since I hurt, like, loads, like, *everywhere*, I thought that was a good reason to give up.

back in

ial.

So Ricky found me. So he finished what he started. I’d be unconscious during the rest of it. Then I’d be dead.

wn like

nd. She

Dead seemed a good option at that point. It meant no more pain and she was good. I was hoping for doves and angels and fluffy clouds, but I wasn’t there being no more pain.

wer the

I heard footsteps and panicked.

Ricky.

Maybe I wasn’t ready for Ricky to find me just in case I died.

unconscious, which didn't, unfortunately, seem to be happening for me  
her pull I pulled myself up to try and escape, lost my footing and threw myself  
out. Luckily, it caught on the handrail. My arm slid around it, holding  
nd was torso fell over because I couldn't hold it up. My head hung down because  
couldn't hold that up either.

The rapid footsteps stopped and I felt hands on me.

“No!” I screamed and jerked away from the hands.

ect. “It’s okay. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

The voice was a man’s. Not Ricky’s. I couldn’t see him. I couldn’t  
my head up, but he scared me all the same.

The hands came back.

ir and I “No!” I screamed again, leaned over and hanging on to the handrail  
my life depended on it (which in that instant I had convinced myself  
and pressing myself against the wall. “Don’t touch me. Don’t—”

od time “You’re safe. An ambulance is coming,” the man said, his hands  
and trying to pull me away from the handrail.

nscious “No. No ambulance. Nothing. Go away. Just leave me here.”

I wasn’t making any sense and I didn’t care. I just wanted to be alone  
nd that been alone my whole life, alone *and* lonely. It was a place I understood  
’d take was a place I could be safe.

I heard a door open and I tensed.

“Fuck,” another man’s voice said as the strength in my arm  
handrail gave out.

dn’t go I let go and slid down, my knees banged against a concrete stair  
before my face smashed into another one. My useless arm again didn’t

... my fall.

... my arm That hurt too.

... on. My I didn't try to get up. I had nothing left in me.

... cause I "Pull the Explorer around," I heard a new voice say right before  
turned gently then lifted.

"Hector—" another voice said.

"Do it!" This was sharp and loud, but I didn't have the energy to w  
I was being moved quickly, being held against something imm  
I't hold warm.

"Sadie, you with me?" I heard a weirdly familiar voice say.

"I think so," I answered.

... tail like "Stay with me," the weirdly familiar voice ordered.

... if it did) "I'll try," I replied, but felt myself slipping away.

... gentle Before the darkness could overwhelm me, I was jostled. The pa  
through me with renewed vigor. My eyes opened and I made a lov  
noise filled with agony that sounded scary, even to my own ears.

... one. I'd Then I could swear I saw Hector. He was contorting, going in and  
focus.

... tood. It I was settled in his lap, but I felt his arm slide up my back and h  
positioned my head on his shoulder, my face in his neck.

It was then I closed my eyes again.

... at the "Mamita, staying with me means talking to me." Now I was thi  
was Hector who was the weirdly familiar voice.

... air right Now, how bizarre was *that*?  
... 't break

We were still moving, but not like before. It was smoother and i whole lot less.

“I need to go to sleep,” I told him.

e I was “Hang on for a while, don’t go to sleep.”

“I think, if I go to sleep, it’ll stop hurting. I need it to stop hurting.’

After I said that, it felt like the knuckles of a hand came to my ince. They rested there lightly for a second. Then it felt like fingers were nensely gently through the hair at the side of my head, pulling it way from my

Now that was even more bizarre because it felt nice. Nice and sw lovely, even though everywhere else there was pain.

“I know, *mamita*, but you need to stay awake.”

“Why can’t I sleep?” I asked.

“Because when you go to sleep, I want you to be somewhere with in shot so we can make sure you wake up,” Hector told me.

n, feral I shook my head in his neck. “That’s okay.”

“What’s okay?”

l out of “It’s okay if I don’t wake up.”

“Sadie, don’t say that.”

is hand I snuggled closer to his heat and felt fuzzier. It wasn’t a bad fuzzi, good fuzzier.

There was an edging sense of peace sliding over me and I wa king itPeace was good. Peace was *great*. I liked peace. Who didn’t like peace

“No, really,” I whispered, letting the sweet, peaceful feeling ste me. “It only matters if there’s someone to care if you don’t wake up. It

It hurt as if I don't wake up because there's no one to care."

After I said that, with tremendous gratitude, I welcomed the peace.



### *Lee*

LEE HELD the phone to his ear listening to it ring, but kept his eyes on and Luke's cheek.

"Yeah?" he heard Eddie say in his ear.

Eddie Chavez was Lee Nightingale's best friend. He was feet and brother. Lastly, he was a cop.

"I'm at Denver Health. Hector and Luke just brought in Townsend," Lee told Eddie.

"Fuck. What happened?" Eddie asked, and Lee could tell by his doctors that Eddie was up and on the move.

"Don't know. Jack called me in. She drove into the parking garage the offices. Jack showed me her tape. He recorded her driving into the and getting out of her car. Maybe five minutes he got before he surveillance room to get to her so he didn't switch to the camera on the She was in bad shape, covered in blood."

"Luke and Hector brought her in?"

"Luke says Hector wouldn't wait for an ambulance."

They both knew what that meant. They also both knew what Sadie nted it. They'd been through this a number of times before.

So far they'd been lucky, but luck had a way of running out. It had al overpast, gotten pretty fucking ugly.

's okay But never this ugly.

“I’ll be there in ten,” Eddie said.

Lee moved several steps away from Luke and Hector.

“Something else,” he said to Eddie.

Silence then, “Shit.”

Hector “Jack says she was in her nightgown and wasn’t wearing any und  
She was bleeding between her legs.”

More silence then some cursing in Spanish then, “You called the b  
Hector’s “Jack’s on it.”

“You better call Shirleen. There’s the chance Vance, Mace and  
Sadie lose it too.”

Lee thought there was a chance, if this woman meant what Lee  
s voice she meant to Hector, that Eddie might lose it too.

“Jack’s on it,” was all Lee said.

e under “You got any idea who did it to her?”  
garage

Lee closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. It took an effort but  
left the control.  
e stairs.

“She came in this afternoon, asking for protection. There’s rumor  
having troubles with the Balduccis, but she didn’t confirm and she  
explain. I sent her to Dick Anderson.”

meant. “Anderson is in Alaska, visiting his son.”

“*Fuck!*” Lee exploded, and Luke and Hector’s eyes sliced to him.

Hector didn’t look good. Hector looked about ready to blow.  
l, in the

Lee watched as Luke closed in on Hector, not enough to be predat  
enough to offer containment, then Lee turned his back and walked



more feet away.

Lee did not have a good feeling about this, and Lee's feeling normally right on target.

“Eddie, it had to take everything she had to come to us with there.”  
erwear.

“You're blaming yourself, *amigo*. You didn't beat her up and rape oys?”  
“She asked me for protection. I sent her away. Told her we had caseload.”

“Do you have a full caseload?”  
Luke'll

“Yeah. But my caseload lightens when a five-foot-five, one hundred pound woman needs protection from someone who'd beat her close to and rape her.”  
thought

“Lee, you need to keep your shit together. This is Sadie Townsend know—”

“We know,” Lee interrupted.  
he got

“Then you gotta keep cool because Hector is gonna lose it.”

Lee glanced at Hector. He was surprised Hector hadn't thrown through the window by now. Hector was a very edgy guy.  
rs she's  
! didn't

Lee pulled in a breath. “Hector's gonna lose it.”

“I'll be there in ten.”



**Eddie**

EDDIE TURNED TO JET.  
ory but

His fiancée was already out of bed and getting dressed.  
several

“Lee needs Indy,” he said.

Jet nodded then pulled a T-shirt over her head.

“Sadie’s gonna need—”

Hector Jet yanked the T-shirt down and walked to Eddie. She leaned in, hand on his stomach, got up on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly her.” mouth.

“I’ll take care of it. Get to Hector,” she said.

When she moved away, Eddie grabbed her by the neck and pulled him.

His kiss wasn’t light.

Then he was gone.



nd. We

### *Lee*

BY THE TIME the doctor came to the waiting room, Luke, Hector and I been joined by Eddie, Lee’s brother, Hank (also a cop), and four men worked for Lee—Vance, Darius, Mace and Bobby.

Lee had pulled in the boys because if Hector (or Luke for that went gonzo at whatever news they were going to get, they were going manpower to lock them down.

Lee had recruited men who, it turned out, had a strong ethic about and how to treat them, and an even stronger ethic about how they felt men who didn’t treat them right. This wasn’t on the job application bottom line, it was the only kind of man Lee would have in his employ

So this was a situation that could blow his men apart. It had happened before and they knew the drill, but it had never been this bad.

What he wasn't prepared to see was Jet walking in with Indy, Rox and Stella. He wasn't prepared for it, but when Jet smiled at Eddie realized Eddie had arranged it, he was glad for it. Nothing soothed the beast like a woman's touch. His wife Indy's crew (known as the Chicks) would likely be busy that night.

Indy walked straight to him, put her arms around his waist and kissed the underside of his jaw. Usually this worked like magic, but Lee didn't seem soothed.

She tipped her head back to look up at him and whispered. "Okay."

"Yeah," he said, but he didn't agree. She hadn't seen the tape. For Lee, he'd never forget what he saw on that tape.

"It's always okay," she said, breaking into his thoughts.

"You don't know who this is," Lee replied.

"Yes I do, but Lee..." She hesitated because she didn't want to say what she was going to say next. Then she continued, "You have to know that I don't think much of—"

Lee looked down at Indy. "Hector does."

Indy's head jerked at the shortness in Lee's tone.

Then she got closer. "Is there something I don't know?"

"There's something no one knows. No one knows why he pulled out of the DEA after that job. At least no one knew until today, until she came into my office."

"Do you think he had a thing with her?" Indy whispered.

Lee turned to her. "Did you see her?"

ie, Ava     Indy scrunched her nose, looking uncomfortable. “I saw her and hereception area. She’s gorgeous, but she was cold as ice. Do you know savagecall her the Ice Princess?”

e Rock     Lee shook his head and ignored her last comment. “I saw her too saw Hector watching her the entire time I spoke to her.”

ised the     “Was it intense?”

n’t feel     Was it intense?

It’ll be     Hector never gave anything away, anything that was personal.

He gave it away that afternoon. He couldn’t take his eyes off Sadie

ick, but     “It was intense. Tonight when he got to her, Hector wouldn’t wait ambulance. He picked her up and made Luke drive them here.”

Indy’s eyes grew wide. “Was that smart?”

“No.”

ay what     “Holy crap,” she whispered as her eyes slid to Hector.

, Daisy     “Doctor,” they heard Stella say, and everyone turned as the doctor in wearing scrubs, a white lab coat and an unhappy expression.

“Anyone here for Sadie Townsend?”

Everyone looked at everyone else except Hector, who said a “Yes.”

l out of     The doctor looked at Hector as Stella moved close to him. “Are you partner?”  
walked

“Yes,” Hector lied, bold, bald-faced and without hesitation.

The doctor’s face changed and it wasn’t a good change. “We need somewhere and talk.”

in the “Say it,” Hector snapped.

ow they The doctor’s face scanned the crowd then his eyes went back to  
and said, “Sir, I think—”

. I also “*Fuckin’ say it!*” Hector barked, his body rigid, his face filled wi  
and the doctor took a step back as Stella took another step in, getting  
putting her hand on Hector’s arm and keeping it there.

“I don’t think you under—” the doctor began.

. Lee got close to Hector. So did Eddie and Darius. Hank, Vance  
and Bobby closed ranks. Luke was already close. The doctor took this  
his body relaxed.  
t for an

“Just say it,” Shirleen appeared by the doctor, and she was sp  
quietly.

Lee hadn’t even noticed she arrived. This was unusual f  
Nightingale. There wasn’t a lot he didn’t notice, but that night his mi  
on other things.

walked “You’re amongst Sadie’s friends,” Shirleen went on, also bal  
lying and also without hesitation.

The doctor looked at Shirleen.

sharp, She smiled encouragingly, but he said, “We have a policy—”

you her “Ain’t no policy when there’s friends,” Shirleen interrupted. “We a  
know. We’ll all eventually know. Just tell it like it is.”

The doctor sighed, pulled his hand through his hair and looked at F

d to go “She’s been beaten badly.”

“I guessed that.” Hector’s voice was sharp and impatient.

The doctor nodded and went on, “Five broken ribs, a broker

dislocated shoulder, severe concussion and multiple cuts and contusions. She's had to have a deep cut on her cheek stitched. She's been admitted to the hospital.

The doctor stopped. His back went straight and everyone held their breath.

"I really think—" the doctor hesitated, eyes on Hector.

"She's been raped," Hector said for him.

The doctor did another group scan, then nodded and took a step back. "I'm sorry but yes, Sadie's been raped."

"Fucking hell," Hank muttered from behind Eddie, and the atmosphere in the room changed to a strange, uneasy hopelessness. It wasn't a feeling they were used to and it didn't sit well with a single one of them.

"We've done a rape kit and called the police. She's sleeping now. You can—"

"Take me to her," Hector cut in.

"You have to understand what you'll—" the doctor started.

"I found her, I brought her in, I know what I'll see," Hector said. "Fucking...take...me...to...her."

The doctor nodded. "Follow me."

Eddie's eyes cut to Lee, then to Darius. Then Eddie followed Hector and the doctor walked away. Darius followed Eddie.

Luke turned on his boot and without a word left the room.

Lee turned to Bobby and said simply, "Follow him. He has a car everywhere he goes."

Bobby nodded and followed Luke.

on his wrist,

tusions. Lee's eyes stopped on Ava. Ava was Luke's woman. She was w  
d." the door Luke just walked out of, and her face was pale.

ld their Finally Lee turned to Indy. "Phone Daisy."

"But—" Indy began.

"Do it, gorgeous. Now."

Indy dug in her purse for her cell.

toward



### *Marcus*

where inTHE PHONE RANG and Marcus Sloan slid away from Daisy's body, rol  
ng they grabbed it from its cradle.

With his eyes on the clock, he said, his voice curt, "It's bare  
: Sir, if o'clock in the morning."

"Marcus? I'm sorry, it's Indy. Is Daisy there?"

Marcus felt an unaccustomed chill slide up his spine as Daisy  
rolled, and he felt her eyes on him in the dark.

bit out. "Is everything okay?" he asked Indy, as always wanting to make :  
his wife was going to take a softer one. She'd already had more than  
share of the hard ones. These days she only experienced some bump  
ector as with the Rock Chicks, though some were bumpier than others.

So far, they'd been lucky.

"No. Everything isn't okay. Lee wanted me to call her. I'm not su  
m alibi but..." She hesitated, and he could tell she was seeking privacy bef  
started talking again. Daisy was up on an elbow now and he could f  
body getting tense. "The thing is, Sadie Townsend was beaten up reall  
tonight."

atching Marcus felt it like a punch in the stomach.  
Ricky fucking Balducci. Or one of his fucking brothers.  
“Fuck,” he whispered.  
“What?” Daisy was sitting up and Marcus sat up too.  
Marcus turned and snapped on the light. Twisting back to his v  
shook his head.  
“Is she going to be all right?” Marcus asked.  
“I...there’s more,” Indy replied.  
led and Marcus waited and Daisy slid closer.  
ly five “What is it?” Marcus prompted.  
“She was raped.”  
Marcus threw the covers back on the bed and knifed out.  
moved, “Where is she?” he snapped.  
“Denver Health,” Indy answered.  
any fall “We’ll be there in thirty minutes.”  
her fair He didn’t say good-bye. He put down the phone then walked to the  
y rides “Marcus, honey bunch, you’re scarin’ me,” Daisy said from the be  
“Get up, darling. Get dressed. Sadie Townsend is at Denver Health  
been beaten up and raped.”  
re why, Daisy’s gasp was sharp and Marcus heard rather than saw her jum  
ore she the bed.  
feel her That was his wife. She still thought Sadie had shoved a knife in h  
y badly and yet she was out of the bed like a shot.  
He didn’t look forward to telling her what he was going to have



her.

He got dressed.

Daisy got dressed and he stood over her while she pulled on her boots.

“I have to tell you something,” he said to her bent head, and it snapped, so she was looking at him.

“Tell me later. We have to—”

Marcus shook his head then crouched in front of her. Daisy took a step back at his unusual actions and he knew she was preparing.

“First, you must know I did what I did because Seth Townsends a very dangerous man. I didn’t want you anywhere near him. Not even if it meant being around Sadie.”

Daisy’s eyes narrowed. “What did you do?”

“It’s what I didn’t do.”

She stood and put her hands on her hips.

Marcus knew this was a very dangerous pose for Daisy to assume.

“Okay then, what *didn’t* you do?” she asked, looking down her dress at him.

Marcus stood too then pulled his fingers through his hair. “I didn’t tell you about Sadie.”

Daisy jutted out a hip.

This was an even more dangerous pose.

“What didn’t you tell me about Sadie?”

He ignored her and continued, “And, I didn’t tell you about Nancy and Monica.”

to tell

“Marcus, honey bunches of love—” Daisy started warningly, patience when Marcus hesitated.

ots. Marcus went on, “I didn’t tell you that I’ve known Sadie for ten ye  
oped up I’ve known what kind of woman she was since I first saw her. I dic  
you that she would no more talk about you behind your back than I wo

Marcus watched his wife’s face grow pale.

i breath He continued, “I also didn’t tell you that after you thought she c  
called the house and came by and tried to explain, and I didn’t let her.”

l was a That was when Marcus watched his wife’s face go red.

ear him He carried on, “Then I forced her father to warn her off.” When  
face looked in danger of turning purple, Marcus kept explaining (quic  
did it to protect you.”

Daisy’s brows were drawn and her eyes were narrowed when she  
“Is that it?”

“No.”

nose at “Well then, finish it.”

ln’t tell Marcus blew out a sigh. “Lastly, I didn’t tell you that she was the  
Nanette’s husband left her for the pool boy. Which, if I read Sadie’s  
right, considering she outed Charles Hardy in front of a room full of  
and he was so relieved he didn’t give a damn, but Nanette was so hur  
she hasn’t shown her face in society since, was Sadie’s retribut  
Nanette being mean to you.”

Daisy glared at him.

ette and Marcus waited.

Then Daisy spoke.

losing “Let’s get to the goddamned hospital.”

ars and  
ln’t tell  
uld.”

lid, she  
,

Daisy’s  
kly). “I

e asked,

e reason  
actions  
people  
niliated  
ion for

“Let’s get to the goddamned hospital.”

## TWO



# STRETCH MY LEGS A BIT

*Sadie*

I knew I was in the hospital before I opened my eyes.

Hospitals had a certain feel and a certain smell, and before I opened my eyes, I experienced both.

The first thing I saw was the ceiling. Then I decided if they had a suggestion box, before I left I'd suggest they should get a ceiling cleaner. Sick people were on their backs a lot and the ceiling looked filthy. It was gross. Sick people didn't need to see *that*.

Then I realized I had to go to the bathroom, like, bad.

This kind of stunk considering, when I looked down at my arm where there were tubes and stuff sticking in it. Not easy to get to the bathroom with that stuff stuck in you.

I also saw my wrist was in a cast, but I blanked that out as quickly as I could. I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to see it.

I was kind of hoping some of those things sticking in my arm were just taking the pain away.

I remembered the pain. I would never forget the pain. But I had that strength of mind borne of *loads* of practice to set the pain—and what

it—aside.

For now.

As I looked down at my arm, on the floor I saw something weird.

It looked for all the world like a pair of cowboy boots. Not just cowboy boots, but jeans and cowboy boots. Not just jeans and cowboy boots, but legs in jeans and feet in cowboy boots. The legs were crossed at the ankles and stretched straight out.

I followed the legs up, up, up until I saw Hector “Oh my God” sleeping in a chair by my hospital bed.

Maybe I wasn't awake. Maybe I was dreaming.

I stared at him. His hair was a mess, his clothes were wrinkled (and his pants had a wrinkled than normal) and he needed a shave.

What was *he* doing there?

Oh my.

I remembered.

Oh no.

I remembered.

He'd been there. Last night, he'd *been* there.

He'd carried me from the stairs to the car then I passed out.

I woke up again when there was a commotion. A commotion when Luke Stark and a security guard were trying to pull Hector out of the emergency bay. Hector didn't want to go, as in, *really* didn't want to go.

How bizarre was *that*?

Maybe I dreamed that too.

I closed my eyes. Then I remembered I had to go to the bathroom.

Well, I knew one thing. I sure as certain wasn't going to call the  
just in case Hector wasn't a dream. I didn't want him around  
cowboy explained what I needed.

out legs Therefore I knew what I had to do. There was really only one choice

kle and It took some effort, but I managed to twist and look at the bottom  
IV stand thingie. In the TV shows, they had wheels.

Chavez I sighed in relief. My IV stand thingie had wheels. I reached out, grabbed  
it and rolled it a bit down the bed and then stopped.

Hector's legs in jeans and feet in cowboy boots were in the way.

or more Darn.

What to do now?

“What are you doing?”

My head jerked up and I saw Hector was no longer asleep. He sat  
his head against the high back of the chair. His forearms were still resting  
the arms, hands dangling, and his long legs were still stretched out in front  
him, crossed at the ankles.

But his black eyes were open and they were on me.

caused “What are you doing?” he repeated his question, then got up and  
approached the bed, coming to a stop at the side, towering over me.

t of my My eyes followed him, my head tilting back as he got up and closed

o. I didn't answer.

“Sadie, talk to me. What are you doing?”

I didn't even try to be Ice Princess. In the circumstances I forgot about

being Ice Princess. I forgot that “Ms. Townsend, Ice Princess” even ex

nurse, “I thought I’d take a walk,” I answered.

when I His eyebrows went up. “You thought you’d take a walk?”

He sounded like this was more bizarre than the fact that he wa  
ce. there, which *I* thought was mega bizarre in the extreme.

1 of my “Yes, I thought I’d stretch my legs a bit,” I told him.

“You thought you’d stretch your legs a bit,” he repeated, still so  
grabbedlike he thought I was a touch crazy.

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?” I asked.

“Are you going to start making sense?” he returned.

I let go of the IV stand thingie and leaned back. “What’s wrong  
taking a walk?”

He stared at me hard for a second then looked away and lifted his a  
till hadtore his fingers through his hair, dropped his arm and looked back at m

ing on “We’ll call the nurse, see if you can take a walk.”

front of “I’m sure I can walk.”

“We’ll call the nurse.”

“I don’t want to call the nurse.”

up and “Why not?”

That was a good question.

r. I didn’t have a good answer (or at least one I would tell him), so  
“Because.”

Then my eyes searched my room, fell on the bathroom (just check  
ll aboutwhen my time came) and they went back to him.



isted. But when they went back to Hector, he was looking over his shoulder at the bathroom.

Before I knew what was happening, he moved my IV stand thingie as even threw back the covers, put an arm behind my knees and one at my waist. He lifted me up, one hand shoving the IV stand thingie in front of me and the other carried me to the bathroom.

ounding At first, I was frozen in horror.

Then I said, or more like whispered (also in horror), “What are you doing?”

He didn’t answer. He walked to the bathroom and gently set me down on my feet inside it. He turned on his boot, walked out and closed the door behind him.

Someone, please tell me that did *not* just happen.

arm. He  
ie.

All right. All right.

Taking just enough time to set that aside too (for now), I went about my business. This was unpleasant. It hurt.

I set that aside too.

When I was done, I stood in the bathroom, looked down and studied myself.

I was in a hospital gown, luckily not one of those that had the back open all the way down. Just a big opening at the upper back tied shut. I had blood on my wrist, two bags dripping into my arm from the IVs, and a completely ruined manicure.

ing, for I saw bruises and cuts on my arms, more bruises around my groin and, pulling up the gown, I saw some on my legs, loads of bruising

oulder at knees.

My midriff hurt, like loads. In fact, I hurt all over and I had a headache. Other, more specific parts of me ached too, but I was setting aside.

As he I went to the mirror and looked at myself.

Then I reached out and grabbed the sink with my good hand at last. I saw.

Are you I dropped my head forward, closed my eyes and leaned into my hair.

My own visage was burned into the backs of my eyelids. Two black marks on my very swollen—not shut, but not pretty either. My nose was also swollen behind, but didn't look broken (but what did I know). And a huge bandage was taped to my cheekbone and I knew what that hid. I'd seen a skin opening there.

And I'd felt the blood.

Out my Monstrous.

The door opened behind me and I heard the sound of boots. The heat at my back. Just that—no touch, just his heat.

I've eyed "Sadie," Hector said softly.

"Go away," I replied, even more softly.

Click open He didn't go away. He picked me up again and did the whole cast-me-pushing-my-IV-stand-back-into-the-room-thing, laid me on the table and completely threw the covers back on me.

I laid back and pulled the covers high up with my good hand, and my wrist, luckily, as I was right-handed, was my right one. I held on to the covers and closed my eyes and turned my face in the opposite direction of Hector.

"Mamita, look at me." His voice was still soft.

a dull "Go away," I repeated, my voice was still soft too.  
ing that "We need to talk."

"Go away."

"Sadie," he murmured gently.

what I That was when I found her. She wasn't very far. She slid into r  
easily, because normally she lived there.

nd. I opened my eyes, turned my head and looked at Hector. Regard  
k eyes, what had happened to me last night, what he had seen, what he'd do  
eriously night and just now and the way I looked, I was calm, assured and ice c  
e white

felt the "Go...away." I enunciated it very clearly so there was plenty of t  
the icicles to form on both words.

It was then, to my shock (because no one penetrated the ice fortre  
one, not even my father), Hector leaned forward so close he was b  
couple of inches away. He put one hand on my pillow and the other  
n I felt the bed low, by my waist.

I drew in breath.

Still with a soft voice he said, "She's in there. Now I've seen her  
Three times, if you count when you lost it in Lee's office and nearly  
irrying-open your palms with your own fuckin' fingernails."

ed and Oh my.

He didn't give me a chance to respond. He kept talking. "I know s  
which there and I'm warnin' you, Sadie, I'm gonna pull her out."

covers, The Ice Princess, as ever, stayed calm.

"Do I have to call security?" I asked like it was all the same to me.

He didn't answer.

I started to stare him down and I waited for him to look away.

He didn't look away.

Instead he said, "I know about you."

"You don't know a thing about me," I retorted acidly.

ny skin He just smiled, and I'd never really seen him smile, not full on. I  
him grin. I'd heard him chuckle at something my father said. But not a

lless of It was lazy, it was slow and it was glamorous.

one last Then he said, "I'll give you time. You've been through hell, but w  
old. time is right, I'm gonna pull her out."

ime for At his words, The Ice Princess (who never let go), started slipping  
on to her by my mental fingernails and pulled her back.

ss—no "Maybe you need to get some sleep," I suggested.

arely a Hector didn't respond. He stared at me and I stared at him.

one hit

Again, I waited for him to back down, to look away.

He didn't.

r twice. So for the first time since I could remember, I did.

r ripped My eyes slid to the side and then something even weirder happened.

While I was looking away, he leaned in deeper. I felt his hand  
back of my head. He lifted it gently and he kissed the top of my head.

she's in I froze.

No one but no one, but *no one* had touched me like that. No one, not  
my mom left. No one.

Did I say *no one*?

He left his hand there with his lips pressed against my head. No second, but for a long time.

It felt like eternity. It felt like a sweet, wonderful, lovely eternity.

Now, seriously, no kidding, how bizarre was *that*?

Before I could get myself together and jerk my head away, the door opened and I heard said in a country twang, “Oh, damn! Sorry.”

It was then I jerked my head away. I got up on my elbows, looked into the room and saw Daisy and Marcus Sloan standing inside the door.



“RALPHIE, IT’S ME, SADIE,” I said into the phone.

“Sadie? Where are you?” Ralphie asked, sounding concerned, “I would do. I was never late for work, much less a no-show.”

I sat in the bed with the phone to my ear, my eyes on the door. I didn’t know what to say.



I’D HAD a small stroke of luck.

The minute Marcus and Daisy appeared was only a moment before the doctor appeared. For privacy, Marcus and Daisy quietly left, but Hector did not.

Hector grabbed the control thingamabob on the side of my bed and pushed the whole lifting-the-back-of-the-hospital-bed-thing for me. I sat up, and Hector stood beside my bed (for all the world like he was my boyfriend or something), the doctor told me (or more accurately, *us*) that for all the world like Hector was my loving boyfriend or something was wrong with me (like I didn’t know), and said I would be released in the afternoon. But, even so, someone needed to be around to keep an eye on

ot for a     Then he turned to Hector and asked for, “A word?”

Hector nodded to the doctor then (no kidding), leaned down and the top of my head (again!) and they both walked out.

I stared at the door, trying to figure out what was going on.

ie door     Then I realized I might only have moments, so I twisted, grabbed the phone and put it on the bed.

l across     I dialed Ralphie.



RALPHIE WAS the closest thing I had to a friend.

He probably wouldn't describe me as a friend, more an employer as he was what I was.

Three years ago I opened an art gallery. The Feds didn't get that ei; and I'd opened it with my trust fund and my father didn't launder money t it, though they looked and looked to find some nefarious purpose gallery so they could seize it, like they did everything else. But they find anything because there was nothing to find. I made certain sure of

ore the     I opened it because I needed more to do with my time than veirdly, Daddy's Little Princess—which was getting old—and I had an art from Denver University.

and did     So why not?

and as     It turned out I was good at it. I had an eye for art and I could p loving really good opening. I'd had years of practice at being a good hostess, , acting standing next to my father's side. So you could imagine how pleased g) what me that something he taught me eventually came in handy.

sed that     I hired Ralphie, and in my gallery (which I named “Art,” because on me.

don't have much of an imagination and it kind of said it all) Ralphie  
had fun. He knew he was my employee and everything, but he was  
be around. He was a bit crazy in a nice way and we'd have a laugh.

Ralphie was a tall, slim, blond-haired, blue-eyed, ultra-  
unbelievably beautiful gay man. Swear to God, he could be a male mo  
Not kidding.

We didn't socialize outside of work.

Of course, every year, I did take him and his partner, Buddy, on  
fancy dinner at Christmas, during which I gave Ralphie his Christmas  
I also took him and Buddy out for a fancy dinner for Ralphie's bi  
during which I gave him his birthday present (a beautiful, pink Armani  
shirt with matching pink and maroon tie (year one), a Royal Doulton t  
(year two) and the glass paperweight he had his eye on for ages at  
couldn't afford (year three)). I also took them both out for drinks to ce  
after we made that sale of the beautiful, bronze sculpture of the femal  
We'd had that sculpture for months. It cost a fortune and it was our  
sale ever.

Oh, and Ralphie and I would always do his performance evaluatio  
French martinis at the Oxford Hotel Cruise Room. The evaluations las  
minutes so Buddy always joined us because, well, why not?

Buddy was yin to Ralphie's yang.

Buddy was black, bald (shaved), had a thick goatee and a  
maintained, very muscular body. He was Butch with a capital "B"  
dressed like Freddie Mercury (white wife beater tank top, super-tigh  
black motorcycle boots and studded black belts) when he wasn't dre  
scrubs (he was a nurse on the Neurosciences Ward at Swedish M

e and I Center) or dressed to go out with us to fancy dinners at the Cruise  
good to (Buddy looked good in his Queen Front Man getup, but you didn't  
wife beater to the Cruise Room, no way).

elegant, Buddy was funny too, and really sweet. Kind of a gentle, butch, F  
del. Mercury-on-steroids-look-alike except black and, well...bald.

Although Ralphie wasn't my friend, technically, nor Buddy f  
matter, he was all I had.

it for a And I needed someone.

. bonus.



irthday, "I'M AT DENVER HEALTH," I answered Ralphie.

ni dress "What?" Ralphie screeched, and in my mind I could see his  
figurine eyebrows hitting his hairline.

Art but "It's okay. I just had a little accident," I lied.

celebrate "An accident that puts you in the hospital? Oh my *God*."

e torso. "It's nothing," I assured him. "Just observation. They're letting  
biggest today."

ns over Ralphie instantly responded, "I'll be right over."

sted ten "No!" My voice was sharp and my eyes were glued to the door.

Hector or Daisy and Marcus could walk back in at any moment.

I had enough to deal with. I didn't need Ralphie showing up. I  
a well-could be a bit...dramatic.

and he "What do you mean, no?" Ralphie asked.

t jeans, "I mean, actually, I'm calling because I need you to do me a fav  
ressed in sorry to ask but—"

Medical Ralphie interrupted by saying, "Anything."



Room I blinked in my tense surveillance of the door at Ralphie's quick wear assistance.

What could I say? I hadn't had a load of times in my life where Reddie offered me assistance. Heck, I hadn't had a load of times in my life where anyone offered me anything.

For that I shook off my surprise and said, "There are spare keys to my apartment in the drawer at the gallery."

"I know where they are."

"Could you go to my place, get me some clothes, shoes...um, underwear and bring them to the hospital?"

Blond "I'll do it right now."

For some reason, his words made tears sting my eyes.

"I'm going to be in testing," I lied again. Also blinking again, though for a different reason. "So, could you just leave them at the nurse's station?"

Me go "Sure, but I can—"

"No, no, I don't want to waste any more of your time."

"Sadie, it isn't—"

I interrupted again. "No really, it's okay. The testing could go on for a while."

Ralphie Ralphie was quiet then he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, fine, just a small accident. Banged my head a little. I might be out of work for a couple of days though."

Or. I'm Or weeks, but I'd come up with other excuses later.

"Okay," Ralphie agreed, but he didn't sound like he bought it.

offer of I drew in a silent breath, then on the exhale I thought of something  
“Just so you know, my place is a bit of a mess—”

anyone “Now, Sadie, *that* I don’t believe. You are Queen Clean.”

where That sounded more like the Ralphie I knew.

artment “No, it’s just that—” I started but Ralphie cut in.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch because I’ll see a speck of  
promise, I won’t report you to the Tidy Patrol if you left a bowl in the

erwear, “Ralphie—”

“I’ll be there soon.”

“Ralphie—”

“Toodles.”

his time Disconnect.

tion?” Oh my.

Oh well, I’d figure out some excuse for why my apartment looked

I stopped thinking about what my apartment looked like—an  
importantly, why—and set it aside. I’d deal with that later too.

on for a I put the phone back, pulled the cover up and laid back, thinking  
to do next so I wouldn’t think of all the things I was trying not to think

The door opened. I immediately closed my eyes. I heard foot  
Footfalls that stopped by my bed.

be out “Sadie, sugar, you asleep?” Daisy’s country twang whispered.

I pretended to be asleep.

Now, Hector being there was bizarre beyond bizarre, but Daisy  
Marcus being there was bizarre *on top* of bizarre.

else. They hated me.

Why were they there?

“I think she’s asleep.” Daisy was still whispering.

“Sleep is good,” I heard Marcus’s deep voice say.

Silence.

dust. I I waited for them to leave.

sink.” Then I heard a feminine crying hiccough, which was followed by a masculine, “Shh.”

It took all the Powers of the Ice Princess not to open my eyes. I knew Daisy I was okay, which I was not, but some lies were good. I’d learned from loads of practice too.

I listened to Daisy cry and Marcus soothe her for a while, then I heard “You’ve been here all night. Let’s get you home.”

Thank God.

like...

Finally.

d more

“No,” Daisy’s voice was clogged with tears, I could tell even on the next word. She kept talking. “I’ll just go down to the gift shop, get a magazine, and stay with her. Hector said he won’t be back for a while.”

of what

about.

At least *that* was something.

footfalls.

“You sure, darling?” Marcus asked.

Daisy didn’t answer, but I heard footfalls again. The door opened and closed.

I opened my eyes. I was alone. That was until whenever Daisy got up with her magazine.

I thought about how much energy it would take for me to understand what on earth was going on.

Then I realized, just before I fell asleep (for real this time) that I didn't have enough energy to figure it out.



I OPENED my eyes and saw Daisy sitting in the chair where Hector slept.

She was wearing shoulder-to-toe dark denim, fawn-colored fringe overalls, and a blazer with fringe on the shoulder pads. More fringe down the sides of her skirt. She had on fawn-colored, spike-heeled, platform, round-toed boots, her jeans tucked into the boots. There was more than a handful of rhinestones and rivets sprinkling her outfit *everywhere*.

She looked like she was going to get up and start singing, “Just like a bird.” Instead, she sat, legs crossed and read *National Enquirer*.

Darn.

Now what?

I couldn't feign sleep and avoid her forever.

Or could I?

“Sadie?”

My eyes moved to Daisy's and she was looking at me.

There was the answer. I couldn't feign sleep and avoid her forever.

I didn't respond. Instead, I sat up and lifted my good hand to pull my hair away from my face. When I dropped my hand, my hair tumbled back to my face again.

I sighed.

“Let me get that,” Daisy said softly, and I looked at her again.

Herstand Her *Enquirer* was on the chair. She was up and digging through her purse. She yanked something out and dumped her purse on the night table.

I didn't She showed me a big, pale pink clip.

“*Voilà!*” she said as if she'd pulled a rabbit from a hat, not a hair from a handbag.

t. “Turn your back to me,” she ordered, and even I wasn't Ice Cream falling enough to tell her to go jump in a lake.

of her I turned my back. Her hands went through my hair, her long fingernails-toed gently scraping my scalp.

hint of It felt nice. It reminded me of when I was little and my mom would brush my hair at night before I went to bed. Sometimes when my mom brushed my hair, she would tell me stories. Sometimes they were funny, sometimes romantic, sometimes adventurous. I used to love when my mom brushed my hair and told me stories.

Daisy carefully pulled and scraped my hair for longer than was necessary, then she twisted it and I felt the clip go in.

Her hands went to my shoulders and she gently turned me around to face her. When I did, her eyes were on my hair. Then her gaze dropped to my face.

“All better,” she said.

“Not even close,” I replied.

my hair There she was, bitchy Ms. Townsend rearing her ugly head.

< in my Daisy's teeth bit her lip and her eyes sparkled with tears.

“Sadie, sugar—” she started, but before she could say more, the door opened and Hector walked in.

Really, no more.

igh her I got it.

ible. I was the daughter of a Drug King, a bad man who probably de  
many lives. But seriously, how much penance could a daughter do  
air clipfather's sins? I mean, *I* didn't sell heroin to school kids for goodness s  
I'd had enough.

'rincess I picked up the call button thingamabob and stared at it, found the  
for the nurse and pressed it.

gernails Then I saw Hector's belt buckle and abs by the bed.

Darn.

used to "Sadie," Hector called.

i would I kept my head down and hit the nurse call button again.

stories, "Sadie," Hector repeated.

y mom My head came up and I looked at him.

needed "Why are you here?" I snapped.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could I turned my he  
to face looked at Daisy.

nine. "And why are *you* here?" I asked her.

"I thought I'd—" Daisy started.

"No, actually, I don't want to know," I interrupted.

I reached out and grabbed my IV stand thingie. Then I threw b  
covers and scooted to the side of the bed, rolling my IV with me. It hu  
did it anyway, and I didn't even wince.

ie door "Sadie, get back in bed," Hector ordered, but I had my legs over t  
and I stood up.

I walked two steps, wheeling my IV stand thingie with me (the I destroyed thingie kind of bit into my bid for Queen Ice, but I'd just have to work

for her I turned to them, hand on my IV stand and stood my ground.

akes! "Both of you, leave," I demanded.

Daisy's eyes slid to the opposite side of the bed where Hector buttonstanding. My eyes went there too.

He didn't look happy.

"I'll ask you again, *mamita*, get back in bed," he said.

"That isn't asking, that's telling," I retorted.

"Then I'll *tell* you again, back in bed," he shot back.

"No," I replied.

He started walking around the bed...toward me.

I wondered, in the nanosecond before I started retreating, why he completely unaffected by my Chill Factor. Everyone else went into dead and freeze.

Not Hector.

I had, of course, noticed that his body was preternaturally hot. Maybe that was it.

"Hector," Daisy said softly as Hector advanced.

ack the Something in her tone must have reached him because all of a sudden I stopped.

So I stopped too.

he side Hector and I squared off and went into stare-down mode. While we doing this, Daisy came forward cautiously but didn't get too close to

stand or to me.

it). “Sadie, we’re here—” Daisy started.

Again I didn’t let her finish. My eyes broke from Hector’s dark or  
cut to her.

or was “I know why you’re here.” I motioned to Hector. “And I know w  
here. You wanted to get a good look at how the mighty have fallen.”

Daisy’s body jerked like I hit her, at the same time I saw her flinch  
Hector didn’t flinch. His eyes narrowed, his face went dark, and  
just say, it was scary.

Nevertheless, I was on a roll. I was beyond Ice Princess. I was Sc  
of the Antarctic, and a bitchy one at that.

It hurt me to do it. It hurt more than my body hurt.

seemed  
But I had to.

o deep I didn’t know why they were there and I didn’t care. It started li  
people being nice, doing nice things, maybe trying to be kind.

It never ended like that.

be that  
Never.

I went on, “Well, you had your look. Now you can go.”

Totally ignoring my order to go, Hector took a step forward. I tool  
lden he<sup>back</sup>.

He stopped. So did I.

We went into staredown again.

ve were Finally he said, “The police are here.”

Hector That surprised me, but I covered before it could show.



“Why?” I asked.

Then Hector answered, “So you can swear out a warrant so they  
nes andafter—”

At his words, Sorceress of the Antarctic disintegrated, melted  
hy he’s instant, and I lost it.

Utterly.

“No!” I shrieked so loud and shrill I was surprised the TV screen  
let me burst.

He couldn’t say it. Not out loud. Not to *me*.

Sorceress I retreated again.

“Oh, sugar,” I heard Daisy say, her voice trembling, but Hector  
coming at me and I kept my eyes on him.

His face wasn’t dark anymore. There was something else  
ke this, something I didn’t want to see.

I closed my eyes to block it out, lifted my hand to ward him off,  
while wheeling my IV stand thingie and walking backwards.

My back hit the wall.

“*Mamita*,” Hector murmured gently when I stopped.

He didn’t touch me, but he was close enough I could feel his heat.

With nowhere else to go, I turned my head away.

“Sadie?” another voice called.

I opened my eyes and peered around Hector’s body. I could see  
Ralphie and Buddy standing just inside the door.

Hector stepped to the side and I saw them fully.

Ralphie was carrying an overnight bag. Buddy was carrying a huge bouquet of exquisite white calla lilies, my favorites.

They were staring at me and they looked pale (yes, even Buddy— I know black people could go pale, but he did).

“Sweetie?” Ralphie said hesitantly.

Even though he called me “sweetie” (and he’d never called me “sweetie”), Ice Princess clicked into place.

“I’m okay,” I said immediately.

One second Ralphie was across the room. The next second I was on the floor with my arms.

“Oh Sadie, sweet’ums. You didn’t have an accident, did you?” he asked in his voice whisper soft, one arm around my waist, the other hand stroking my back.

“Ralphie, I’m fine.” I held my body rigid and spoke to his throat.

He leaned back and looked down at me. “Sweetie, you are *not* fine. I can’t see, can’t I? I didn’t go blind in the night like a bad Jodie Foster movie. I just got back from your apartment. It’s a disaster. What on earth happened? Who did this to you?”

This was not working well for me. It was all coming at me. Everyone was *talking* about it. How could I set it aside to deal with it later when we were *talking* about it?

“I’m gonna break his fuckin’ neck.” Buddy was now at our side.

I turned my head and looked up at Buddy. He got a close look at my face and I saw his teeth clench.

Then he repeated between his teeth, “I’m gonna break his *fuckin*

ge vase Who did it?"

"I'm fine," I said again.

I didn't "You have a cast on your wrist," Ralphie pointed out, and I looked at Ralphie.

"I'm fine," I repeated.

led me "You have a bandage on your face," Ralphie went on.

I could take no more and really, could you blame me?

So I screamed, "*I'm fine!*"

s in his Ralphie had never seen me lose my cool, never. Therefore at my he winced. Then for some reason, *he* ignored my Chill Factor. His asked, tight and he pulled me close.

ing my And no one had held me like that for as long as I could remember.

And I couldn't bear it anymore.

e. I can I shoved my face in his ultra-elegant shirt and clenched his uber suit jacket in my good hand and I cried.

. And I I didn't care who saw me. Not even Hector.

opened?

Fuck it. I could take no more.

me was It was not wracking, sobbing, loud crying. It was silent, body-j people soul-wrenching crying.

Through it all, and it seemed to last a long time, Ralphie held on.

"Get it out, sweet'ums, give it to Ralphie," he muttered finally.

ny face "I have to go home," I said into his shirt.

"You can't go home," Ralphie replied.

t' neck. "I have to go home. I have to get out of here," I said back, but

take my face from Ralphie's shirt.

"You'll go home," Buddy said from close to our side, and I felt  
ed backhand slide around my waist as Buddy got closer and affected a group h

"Thank you," I whispered, not looking up, not looking at Ralphie,  
Buddy, and definitely not Hector or Daisy.

"You'll go home, Sadie," Buddy said. "You'll go home with us."

scream

arms got

-stylish

jerking,

I didn't

take my face from Ralphie's shirt.

"You'll go home," Buddy said from close to our side, and I felt another hand slide around my waist as Buddy got closer and affected a group hug.

"Thank you," I whispered, not looking up, not looking at Ralphie or Buddy, and definitely not Hector or Daisy.

"You'll go home, Sadie," Buddy said. "You'll go home with us."

THREE



I WAITED

*Hector*

**H**ector sat, leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his left hand dangling, right hand holding a Jack and Coke.

Actually, he'd started out the night adding Coke but he hadn't been with it for the last two drinks.

*"Hermano, you gotta talk,"* Eddie said to him.

Hector looked at his older brother. Eddie was sitting across from Hector's living room.

The living room was a pit. He'd been working steadily on the house for months, but there was a lot of work to do. He'd barely scratched the surface. The living room was a jumble of unpacked boxes and furniture, most of it covered in heavy, plastic sheets. Hector was refinishing the floor in the study and dining room. He should have started with the living room.

Hector looked back to the floor and said, "I fucked up. I know it, I'll fix it."

Then at the thought of "fixing" Sadie, unwanted and discomfiting memories flashed through his brain.

Her standing at the sink in the bathroom at the hospital.

Her crying silently into her friend's chest.

Her saying she wanted to take a walk instead of admitting she had used the bathroom.

Her bloody face, bloody legs and the limp body he held as she told him there was no one to care if she woke up.

He lifted his glass to his mouth and threw back the Jack, draining it. He leaned forward and tagged the mostly empty bottle, which was on the floor by his boot. He poured another heavy measure and set the bourbon down.

He was drunk. He knew he was drunk and he didn't give a fuck.

“Tell me how you fucked up,” Eddie prompted.

Without hesitation, Hector replied, “I waited.”

That was it. He'd waited. He'd waited for Sadie to come to him.

After that night in her father's office, he should have taken what he wanted. It was his.

And he shouldn't have fucking waited.

He had the



AT FIRST, when Hector Chavez started to get close to Seth Townsend, he thought Townsend's daughter was a useless rich bitch—a beautiful creature, most of all, but still useless.

Then, because it was his job, he watched her and her father. And he realized that Townsend didn't hide anything from Sadie. He wasn't concealing anything. He was able to give her a very good life. She knew all about it. She seemed to have no problems with that, which made Hector wonder if she was so involved in the operation.

Hector looked into it and found she wasn't involved.

l to use She was clean.

Squeaky clean.

old him In Hector's experience, no one was squeaky clean.

This made Hector suspicious. So he watched her closer.

; it dry. And watching her and her father (but mostly her) made him uneasy

on the Being from a big, loud, loving and in your business Mexican Ar  
on back family, he'd never seen anything like it.

There was no affection, no teasing, no loving displays.

There was also no visible abuse.

There was nothing.

Mostly that nothing came from Sadie. She was like a robot. N  
around her father, but all the time.

e knew She did everything right, everything exact, everything perfect. T  
she dressed, ran her father's home, organized his parties, everything.

She seemed to be able to do it with minimal effort. She ne  
stressed, frustrated, on edge. She was never anything but completely t  
end, he and in control.

me, but Further, she didn't invite closeness or affection, not only from he  
he saw but from anyone. She didn't laugh or joke or lose her temper or disp  
ng how barest hint of a personality.

emed to She just did her job. All the time. Twenty-four seven.

mehow All that nothing made Hector want to make her feel something,  
didn't invite that either. She was ice cold.



This had the perverse effect of *really* making Hector want to m  
feel something.

Then she started helping him, feeding him information.

He couldn't fucking believe it. Not just because she was doing  
because she was really not good at it.

7.  
merican. He'd even walked up to her father's office door and seen her plac  
in the drawer where she put information for him. The house had been  
before he entered it. He knew, and undoubtedly she knew, that Se  
away, but it was still risky as hell, especially leaving the fucking door o

He'd stepped to the side so she couldn't see him, guarding the  
case someone showed, and disappeared when he heard her preparing t  
the room.

Not just Anyone could have walked up and seen her do that. If anyone e  
him had seen it, she'd have been dead.

he way Like her mother.

In the end, he had to spend his time trailing her in order to protec  
ver gotshe wouldn't do something immensely stupid and get caught helpin  
ogetherthus blowing his cover and getting him, and more than likely herself, k

And she was taking the risk for nothing. Most of it wasn't eve  
r fatherinformation. Drug lords didn't tend to keep sensitive shit in the safe  
lay thehome. However, he couldn't tell her that.

She never let on to anyone, not even a hint, that she knew who he  
that she was trying to help destroy her father.

but she She was always the Dutiful Stepford Daughter.

When she'd walked in that night, smiling a sweet but highly ine

make her smile and telling him to kiss her, he didn't hesitate. He had already in his mind that when it was over, when he'd brought Townsend down, she would be his. He couldn't move in on her early. It could have fucked his case, and he'd been working it for over a year.

it, but

But when she'd put her hands on him, pressed her body into his, he could smell her expensive perfume close up for the first time instead of the hints he caught when she drifted by him, he lost control and couldn't help himself from accepting her invitation.

th was

This did not make sense. She was not his type.

open.

He liked his women to have long legs, pronounced curves and a confident attitude. She had the curves but she was petite. And what personal style she displayed was frigid, nowhere near the hotheaded, in-your-face attitude he liked in his women.

else but

He didn't give a fuck about this. Bottom line, he wanted her. When she gave him his shot, he took it.

He'd been furious when, close to the point of no return, she'd walked away, leaving him hard and aching for more of her.

t her so

ing him,

illed.

n good

in their

was or

That was much better than dead, like her mother was assumed to be.

Eighteen years ago, Elizabeth Townsend approached Indy's father, John Savage, a cop and the widower of Elizabeth's close friend, Katherine.

ebriated

Elizabeth Townsend had wanted to be free of her husband, her li

made up wanted it for her daughter too. She didn't want Sadie to grow up the d  
i, Sadie of a drug dealer. Therefore, she started to inform on Seth, who had  
l up them make the big time, giving Tom information.

Until one day, she just disappeared.

and he



l of the ALTHOUGH HECTOR HAD BEEN furious when Sadie had walked awa  
n't stop him, he'd waited and not approached her, even though he wanted  
knew he was close to closing the operation.

It was just over a week later when the DEA moved in.

lots of He kept firmly detached from the process after. He demanded tha  
lity she agents interrogate her, and he didn't get involved when they investiga  
tude he assets. He wasn't surprised when she'd walked away and didn't loc  
when the Agency froze the accounts and seized all property.

hen she She'd done her job and she was moving on.

When they told him they were going to transfer him to DC, he qui  
walked had enough. Although he got off on the hunt, he'd never been big c  
and policy.

time to Furthermore, Sadie couldn't get to him in DC.

oo. But He bought a house, went to work for Lee, who also was not big c  
nes she and policy, and waited for her to come to him.

own her He didn't think it'd take long. He'd never had a sweet piece go t  
for him that quickly, nor had he ever lost that much control. He had n  
e. that when their lives were no longer on the line she'd make her approa  
r, Tom was a trust fund princess who walked away leaving him aching—it wa  
to have to be her that made the next move.

ife, and Sadie and he had unfinished business. He knew it, and he knew sh

daughterit, and Hector intended to finish it.

l yet to However, by the time she made an appointment with Lee, he was  
patience.



HE'D HEARD about Ricky Balducci and his brothers. Word on the street  
y from Sadie was marked. The Balducci Boys had an unspoken deal: win Sadie  
to. Her throne.

It was insanity and it was talk. The Balducci brothers were known  
being both insane and entirely full of bullshit.

at other He was surprised that Sadie had come to Lee, and he knew what  
asked for protection that she'd been getting pressure from the Balducci  
back Why she didn't share this information with Lee he didn't know, but he  
care either.

He didn't want Lee involved. He could take care of it on his own  
it. He'd Sadie left he told Lee he'd look into it. By this he meant deal with  
on rules Balduccis and deal with Sadie.

Her time was up.

He was done waiting.

on rules That night, he followed her from her gallery to her apartment and  
outside in case she went out.

hat hot She stayed in.

o doubt He left her, thinking she'd be safe in a high rise with security. He  
ch. She assignment with Luke that night and he decided he'd come back  
s going morning. He'd planned to return, make sure she got to work, then he

Luke, Mace, Darius or Vance and go have a word with the Balducci Boys.  
ie knew

After that, he'd go to Sadie.

He didn't have that chance.



“YOU WAITED?” Eddie asked.

Hector sat back, took another drink and leveled his eyes on his brother.  
“She handed me her father.”

He heard and saw Eddie suck in breath.

Hector nodded. “Fed me info. Not good info, but she fed it to me the same. You remember that situation out in Stapleton? I gave you the details.” Hector asked.

Eddie’s eyes flared and Hector knew he remembered. It had been a bust and the Denver Police Department had been fully informed at the time who would be there, when, and what they would find. It was that piece of decent intel that Sadie had passed him.

“Sadie?” Eddie asked.

“She wrote me a fuckin’ note,” Hector told him.

“Jesus Christ,” Eddie muttered. “She wrote you a note?”

This time Hector shook his head. Not to Eddie’s question, but in disbelief at the memory.

“She’s the worst fuckin’ informant I ever saw. Broad daylight, doc she’s rifling through the safe. Christ, you wouldn’t believe it. Spent half the time building the case against Townsend, the other half keeping an eye on her.”

At this Eddie started laughing, and although Hector wouldn’t have thought it possible, he smiled.

Eddie quit laughing and said, “Word was she stood beside her through the trial.”

Hector replied on a dying smile, “She played her part. She was good. She’d been doing it a long time. It was her final show. I pulled in a checked the logs. She hasn’t visited him once.”

Eddie let this sink in then he started, “You know her mother—”

“I know,” Hector cut him off.

They stared at each other. They both knew the risks Sadie took and both knew the guts she displayed by taking them, even if she didn’t well.

“Does she know about her mother?” Eddie asked.

“Doubtful.”

Eddie stared at Hector a beat and then said on a sigh, “Townsend piece of shit.”

Hector took another shot of Jack and didn’t reply. There was not be said.

Seth Townsend was definitely a piece of shit.

The silence stretched.

Then Hector said quietly, “Heard about Zano’s visit to Balducci.”

The air in the room went on alert.

“What’d you hear?” Eddie asked, but he knew the answer.

He’d heard about it too.

“I heard that Marcus called in a favor. Ren Zano went for a visit. But tried to avoid him. Zano was persistent. Zano reported to Marcus that

father had a black eye, a broken nose and what looked like fingernail scratch  
his brow down his cheek,” Hector answered.

od at it. Eddie waited.

a favor, Hector didn’t make him wait long. “Balducci told Zano he got i  
fight.”

Eddie leaned forward. “Hector, you have to stay cool.”

Hector drained the glass again, bent forward and tagged the bott  
nd they refill. He emptied the bottle in his glass and returned it to the floor. He  
’t do it back and trained his eyes on his brother.

“This is not a situation where you stay cool,” he said it calmly,  
his words, but there was no hidden meaning to what he’d said, and  
clear just how much he meant it.

end’s a “What’s this woman to you?” Eddie asked.

“She’s mine,” Hector replied.

hing to Eddie leaned back and tore his fingers through his hair, then drop  
arm.

He knew what that meant. He’d felt it too, about five minutes a  
decided he’d stop at nothing to get Jet in his bed. Now he and Je  
getting married.

Eddie went on, “When you were there, did she give you mo  
information on her father?”

“Yes and no. She let the mask slip once. She let it slip again to  
now I know who’s hidin’ behind it.”

alducci “And this means?”

t Ricky “This means she’s mine. No one touches what’s mine. And they

es fromfuck don't beat her, rape her and leave her broken. Did you see her house?"

Eddie shook his head, but he knew what Hector meant. "Lee n a barwalkthrough with Matt. They took pictures. He told me about it."

"I went there this afternoon. It looked like—" Hector started.

Eddie interrupted, "It looked like she fought him, used everyth le for a had. They've got the rape kit. They've got Jack, Luke and your test : leanedThe doctors and nurses at the hospital. Zano'll testify, he told Ma would. And they've got the photos of the apartment looking like a wa belying She walks into a courtroom and the jury gets a look at her and B it was they'll make up their mind before the evidence is presented. Accor Indy, she looks like a fuckin' fairy princess. Ricky Balducci resem ape. She presses charges, he's fucked."

"She refuses to talk to the police. Didn't see them at the hospital a she was discharged and went to stay with friends. The cops followe ped his were turned away at the door."

"She has to press charges."

after he "You don't know Sadie."  
at were

It was then Eddie asked the six million dollar question, "Do you re than Sadie?"

"I know that whatever she has in her mind is gonna stay ther woman has a will of steel. She had to, livin' with Townsend. When sh day, so up this morning, she asked to take a fuckin' walk." Hector leaned f and shared, "You should have seen her Eddie. Covered in blood, c hold herself up, arm hangin' useless, wearin' nothin' but a t sure asnightgown. She wakes up from that and she asks to take a walk, s



fuckin' wants to stretch her legs a bit. *Dios mio.*" Hector sat back again and m  
"Will of fuckin' steel."

did the Eddie let this sink in too, but he looked pleased about it.

Finally he said, "Then we take Balducci down another way."

Hector responded immediately, "I know what way Balducci is go  
ing shedown."

imony. Eddie shook his head. "Lee's on it."

rcus he "There's only one way a man pays for doin' that to a woman."  
r zone.

Eddie leaned forward at the tone of his brother's voice. "Hector, l  
alducci, me. Lee's going to dismantle his operation. He's already workin'  
ding to Marcus is on board. Zano knows Sadie and he's pissed. He's going  
bles an Uncle Vito to bring the Zanos on board. Doesn't matter. Lee and  
have already made it their fuckin' mission."

nd then Hector knocked back the rest of the Jack, kept his eyes on his brot  
l. They didn't reply.

Eddie kept trying. "Sadie's covered. The car was towed for repairs  
has already been in it, planted a tracking device. Tonight he's wir  
store. When she settles, he'll do the same to wherever she stays. Sl  
u know protected."

Hector stayed silent.

e. That "Mi hermano, you gotta be smart," Eddie advised.

ie woke "How smart would you be if you came home to your house a c  
forward finding out Jet fought for her life before having her wrist brok  
ouldn't shoulder dislocated, her ribs broken, her cheek ripped open, he  
orn up blackened, her nose bloodied and she'd been violated?"  
ays she

uttered, Eddie pressed his lips together.

“That’s what I thought,” Hector finished.

Eddie didn’t give up.

“Let Lee do his work. Concentrate on Sadie.”

onna go “Sadie’s lost to me for now. She needs time.”

Eddie’s brows went up. “You’re backin’ off?”

“Yeah, I am. I waited before, I’ll wait again. This time she has a de  
I’m givin’ her a month.”

isten to At that, Eddie smiled.

’ on it. Then he said, “Okay, then. Promise me you’ll work with Lee.”

g to his “I’m not working with Lee, but I’ll talk to him. He’s not headi  
Marcus operation, I am. Lee, Marcus and Zano want in, I’m good with that. Bu  
her, but Ricky Balducci goes down, I want him to know I brought him down.  
him to know why. And I want to make the fuck sure he *stays* down.”

. Vance Eddie sat back and nodded.

in’ her Then he said, “You know I’ll do—”

ie’ll be Hector broke in with a warning. “I don’t intend to play clean.”

Eddie’s black eyes turned glittery. “Like I was sayin’, you know  
what you need me to do.”

It was Hector’s turn to smile.

lisaster,

en, her

er eyes

Eddie pressed his lips together.

“That’s what I thought,” Hector finished.

Eddie didn’t give up.

“Let Lee do his work. Concentrate on Sadie.”

“Sadie’s lost to me for now. She needs time.”

Eddie’s brows went up. “You’re backin’ off?”

“Yeah, I am. I waited before, I’ll wait again. This time she has a deadline. I’m givin’ her a month.”

At that, Eddie smiled.

Then he said, “Okay, then. Promise me you’ll work with Lee.”

“I’m not working with Lee, but I’ll talk to him. He’s not heading this operation, I am. Lee, Marcus and Zano want in, I’m good with that. But when Ricky Balducci goes down, I want him to know I brought him down. I want him to know why. And I want to make the fuck sure he *stays* down.”

Eddie sat back and nodded.

Then he said, “You know I’ll do—”

Hector broke in with a warning. “I don’t intend to play clean.”

Eddie’s black eyes turned glittery. “Like I was sayin’, you know I’ll do what you need me to do.”

It was Hector’s turn to smile.

FOUR



## HASH MARKS

*Sadie*

**O**ne month later...

“RALPHIE, GET AWAY FROM THE WINDOW,” Buddy ordered.

I lifted my head to see Ralphie holding the curtain wide and standing as you please, staring out the window.

“It’s Hispanic Hottie this time,” Ralphie informed us, and then Buddy I watched him wave.

Oh my.

“Hispanic Hottie” meant Hector was sitting outside in a brown old Ford Bronco, probably drinking coffee. I could visualize Hector lifting chin at Ralphie’s wave. I could visualize it because I’d seen it before, times.

Sometimes Ralphie would even make a pot of coffee and walk Hector’s Bronco to give him a warm up, carrying milk and sugar. I informed me Hector took a splash of milk and one sugar, like the information which I could impart on Saint Peter and he would lead straight through the Pearly Gates to the right hand of God. I’d only v

Ralphie's "Alice the Waitress" impersonation once, doing it while I peered through the curtains. I saw Hector get out of the Bronco, close the door, lean against it while Ralphie poured him coffee and chattered away.

I also saw Hector's amused yet glamorous smile (yes, I could see his face as day, from all the way across the road, it was hard to miss).

I'd never looked again.

My eyes moved to the blackboard that was on the wall by the window. Ralphie put it there weeks ago. On it was a list of names and next to each name there were hash marks. Once I started getting visitors on a regular basis, visitors that came in the evenings when I was home, stayed from a few minutes to over a couple of hours and never came to the door, I decided it would be fun to keep track.

The list included "Hawaiian Hottie" (that was Kai Mason), "Just Old Hot Hottie" (that was Luke Stark), "Alaskan Hottie" (that was some blond guy, named thus because Ralphie said he looked like he could cut a tree by blowing on it and only men from Alaska could do that kind of thing), "Surfer Dude Hottie" (that was a smaller guy with real sun-streaked hair), "African American Hottie" (that was a black man with twists in his hair), "Native American Hottie" (that was, well, a Native American who was another one of Lee's men whose romance had been reported in the newspaper several times (Vance Crowe)).

By far and away, Hector had the most hash marks.

I twisted my head to look up at Buddy. He looked down at me and grinned. I shook my head.

Then I gave up on Ralphie and settled back in. I was snuggled up against Buddy on the couch, lying curled in a fetal position, my head on his thigh.

peeking It was Saturday evening and we were in the throes of a *Veronica  
Door and* marathon (season two DVD). I decided that when I left “Ms. Townse  
Princess” behind, the New Sadie was going to be like Veronica Ma  
it, clear was plucky, cute as a button and she had a smart mouth.

I figured, given some practice, I could be plucky and cute and  
smart mouth.

indow. In life, I learned, given enough practice, I could do anything.

t to the



regular IT HAD BEEN one month and two days since I’d been raped by  
n thirty Balducci.

Ralphie Never in my life had so much happened in one month and two day:

Never in my life had most of it been so good.

st Plain First of all, Ralphie and Buddy installed me in the guest bedroom  
me big brownstone.

d fell a

thing), When I got there, Buddy made me do three days of complete b  
d hair), They brought me food and fawned over me like I was a true-life p  
air) and Buddy even helped me shower, and when I got embarrassed he said, “I  
ttie, or and a nurse, I wipe people’s asses for a living. Do you think this fazes

papers,

I got over being embarrassed after he said that.

I didn’t go back to work for two and a half weeks. By the time I  
bruises and swelling had gone and most of the cuts were disappearing.

ne and In that time Buddy and Ralphie went to my apartment. They clean  
and packed me up. Everything I could want or need was brought

l up to brownstone and moved in, making the guestroom less of a guestro  
igh. more my room. They also arranged some of my stuff around the

*a Mars* making the house less Ralphie and Buddy's house and more *our* house  
and, Ice Everything else I owned was put in storage.

rs. She Then Buddy called a real estate agent friend of his and put my p  
the market. Without asking me and without me telling them what had  
have a they decided the memories there were too bad for me to go back. I was  
a new place in what they referred to as an indefinite, "Later, when  
ready," and I would stay with them in the meantime.

I didn't quibble.

Ricky For starters, I didn't particularly want to go back to my apartme  
also, it felt nice having someone take care of me. No one had taken  
s. me since I was eleven years old, and I liked it. I liked it enough just  
happen.

of their So I did.



ed rest. ABOUT A WEEK after I moved in with them, the doorbell rang.  
rincess. answered it and came back with a short, heavyset lady with spiky, s  
I'm gay pepper hair and clear blue eyes.

me?" Buddy introduced her as his lesbian friend, Bex. After I shook her  
Buddy informed me Bex was a counselor at a rape crisis center.

did, the Then Buddy and Ralphie left me with Bex, going, they said,  
Chinese takeout.

ed it up At first I was angry. Then I was scared. But Bex talked to me ab  
to the gallery, about Buddy and Ralphie, about my shoes, about season tick  
om and the Colorado Shakespeare Festival in Boulder, about loads of things.  
house, about me getting raped.

An hour slid by before Buddy and Ralphie returned, and I realize

at the end right before she left when she handed me her card and told me to call her anytime, that I liked her.

It took me another week to call her. She's come to visit me twice since she moved here. It was lovely.

By the time Bex came around, we'd already had the parade of people sitting outside the brownstone guarding the door, keeping me safe. Ralphie had put up the blackboard.

I was ignoring the parade of hotties and what that might mean.

Ralphie and Buddy didn't ignore it. They thought it was very interesting and would talk about it all the time.

I didn't participate in their discussions. That would defeat my effort of ignoring it, which come hell or high water, was exactly what I was going to do.

Eventually, they'd go away.

Buddy Right?

and



BY THE TIME I went back to work, Ralphie and Buddy had showed me how to check the Ice Princess at the door.

I'd never been in a house filled with love.

In the beginning it made me uncomfortable because I felt like I was being watched. They were so at ease with each other, affectionate, relaxed, and they called each other nicknames, doing things that showed they cared.

It was bizarre.

They also did it with me.

There was no personal space in Buddy and Ralphie's house. You could only



and me on the couch. You kissed cheeks when you walked in the door from  
You left notes when you were going out, making sure you gave detail  
s. She's when you'd be home.

Ralphie brought up my coffee in the morning. He pushed me aside  
hotties sat in it with long legs stretched out, back to the headboard and gabbe  
fe, and everything while I sipped my coffee and slowly came awake.

While I watched TV, Buddy forced me to sit on the floor between  
spread legs and gave me head massages (he said he loved my hair).

resting They bickered about who was going to make dinner (why, I didn't  
considering Buddy did all the cooking), and they nagged about whose  
forts at was to take out the garbage. I'd always thought "bickering" and "nagging"  
going to were ugly words, but the way Ralphie and Buddy did them they were so

I tried to give the cold shoulder, indicate I needed my personal space  
(especially then), but they wore me down.

It took about five days.



how to MY SECOND DAY back at work, the door opened and the Rock Chick  
in.

All of them except Daisy, but including Shirleen Jackson.

I was I stared in horror.

calling With no sign of an arctic glare, Ally smiled, waved and said,  
Sadie."

Like I was actually A Sadie, not A Ms. Townsend.

I tell you, it was bizarre.

cuddled They all introduced themselves to me and Ralphie while Ralphie s

1 work.them like they were from another planet. He did this mainly becau  
s aboutwere all gorgeous and they were so damned friendly it was unreal.

There was Indy, Ally and Stella, but also ladies named Jet, Roxi  
in bed,Annette and of course, Shirleen.

d about After a while, Ralphie started staring at *me* like I was from anothe  
because I went Queen Ice.

een his I didn't know what was going on, but I didn't like it and I didn't w  
part of it.

t know, But there was no way I could ignore it when it was in my own  
e turn it gallery.

agging” Therefore, the Ice Princess clicked into place.

sweet.

l space The Rock Chicks were oblivious to my wintry demeanor, chattin  
with Ralphie and me like we did it every day.

Eventually Shirleen broke off and wandered the gallery shouti  
“Oowee,” this and “Oowee,” that and finally stopped in front of a p  
Ralphie and I'd had hanging for three months without a single ni  
s came interest.

“I gotta have me *that!*” Shirleen called across the gallery. She tu  
Jet who was closest to her. “Wouldn't that look good in my rec room?”

I looked at the painting. It was a canvas painted entirely in purp  
“Hey,purple. Most people thought it was just canvas painted purple, there  
nibbles. It was a beautiful purple though, and I loved it.

I wasn't certain sure it was “rec room” material, however.

“It's perfect,” Jet agreed.

tared at Shirleen looked in my direction. “I'll take it.”

se they     Ralphie swooped down on Shirleen in an instant and snatched her card out of her hand before she'd cleared it from her purse.

e, Ava,     "I'll get my boys, Roam and Sniff, to come and get it," she t leaning against my counter.

r planet     "We have a delivery service," Ralphie informed her while wondering who in their right mind would name their children Roam and any Sniff.

              "No, Roam's drivin' now. He needs practice negotiating downtown fucking give him the Navigator. He'll do just about anything to drive the Nav. Shirleen replied.

              "They're street names," Indy muttered to me under her breath.

g away     I turned my eyes to her. "Sorry?"

              "Roam and Sniff. They're street names. Shirleen is their foster ng out, They were runaways," Indy explained.

ainting     Something about this hit me somewhere deep. I tried to entertain t bble of of my father seeing the error of his ways, giving up the drug world, g work for a private investigator and taking in runaways like Shirleen.

rned to     It almost made me want to laugh.

'             I did not, of course, laugh.

le. Just     Instead, my eyes went glacial like she'd imparted information fore no which I found highly uninteresting and I said, "Oh." Then I turned to l and announced, "I'm going to The Market, getting us coffees."

              Ralphie's eyes were startled when he looked at me, and I could was shocked at how rude I was being.

              He glanced around the girls and then said hesitantly, "Okay, sweet

r credit Without a backward glance, I left.

When I returned with the coffees, the Rock Chicks were go  
old us, Ralphie gave me the third degree. I deflected the third degree un  
evening, when Ralphie enlisted Buddy and they ganged up on me. T  
I was this with the addition of lemon drops, which we drank sitting on  
am and around their kitchen island (they had a fabulous kitchen, all chro  
gleaming black cabinets and granite countertops; it was Buddy's don  
wn. I'll cooked like a dream).

igator," I held out, for a while.

But lemon drops always did me in, eventually.

After around lemon drop three, I told them about my dad. A few s  
lemon drop four, I told them about my mom. Sucking back lemon drop  
told them about Hector and added on what I knew about the Rock Chi  
r career. Nightingale Men, and the cherry on top was my history with Daisy.  
lemon drop six, I shared what happened when Ricky Balducci broke i  
he idea apartment. We were all crying by this time, me uncontrollably, so  
going to uncertain how much they understood because I didn't figure I was  
much sense.

Ralphie slept with me in my bed that night, holding me close all th  
through, and the next three days he didn't leave my side.

on me, It was somewhere at the end of day three when I was sitting in b  
Ralphie them on the couch, and Ralphie had pulled up my feet and was ma  
them and Buddy had pulled my head onto his shoulder, and I wa  
tell hecomfy that I realized I had my first, genuine friends.

They liked me. *Me*, Sadie—whoever she was. But whoever they  
'ums." she was, they liked her.

They didn't take. They just gave and expected nothing back.

That night they'd introduced me to plucky, cute, smart-mouthed Veronica and Mars.

Veronica was in the middle of some elaborate scheme involving a wunderkind schoolmate who knew everything about computers, and were going to blow the lid off some big mystery involving most school students when I whispered, "Thank you, guys."

Neither Buddy nor Ralphie responded, but Ralphie gave my feet a squeeze and Buddy sighed.

The next day, Indy, Ally and Roxie came back without the rest of the Rock Chicks, and they brought coffee. They told me the coffees at Market were nothing compared to what Indy's barista, the guy who works at the espresso machine at her bookstore (they referred to him as "Tex" during make. They told me Ralphie and I could come to the bookstore anytime into my Tex would make us the special on the house.

This time they didn't chat or buy three hundred dollar purple packages. They just left the coffees for me and Ralphie, smiled and left.

"I think—" Ralphie started, eyes still on the door after they left.

"Don't start," I interrupted him.

Ralphie snapped his mouth shut. He looked peeved, took a sip of coffee and then his eyes bugged out.

"My *God*. This is fab-you-las," he exclaimed, staring at his white super cup.

I took a sip of mine and my eyes bugged out too.

He was absolutely right.



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Marcus Sloan walked into Art.

Ralphie was installing a painting at someone's house so I was, living a first time since The Ricky Incident, alone.

This stunk. I didn't want to be alone and Ralphie *really* didn't want to be alone, but I had to get on with my life eventually, so I encouraged go.

I was doing okay until Marcus came in.

Being alone was one thing but I didn't want to be alone with Sloan.



I KNEW that I couldn't lean on Buddy and Ralphie forever. Eventually I could pick up the threads of my life, find my own place and learn to take care of myself again.

I'd heard nothing from Ricky or any of his crazy brothers. I didn't want to press charges because I was my father's daughter. When you were down and found an advantage, you didn't squander it. You waited and used it when the time was right.

Rape was a felony. If found guilty Ricky would go to prison. I could press charges and I knew I'd win. And I had time. There was a lot of limitations, but by then I was hoping the Balduccis would have moved on to new prey. In the meantime, they knew I could go to the police anytime I wanted to cause Ricky, and all the Balduccis, a world of hurt.

I had one card to play and I wasn't going to play it too soon. If I let down Ricky, I had three more brothers who could come after me. Right now he was Top Dog. I didn't need another Balducci dog after me, putting

bid to make me his prize.

If I kept my card, they all had to sit back and wait for me to play it for the meantime, they could concentrate on tearing each other apart.

At least, this was what I told myself.

However, telling Ralphie and Buddy about it and talking with B  
him to one thing. Facing Ricky Balducci again was another. I wasn't ready fo

I knew it made me look like a wimp, but I could live with that holding it together. Seeing Ricky might make it come flying apart.

Marcus I'd put it together once, with the help of Ralphie and Buddy, but I couldn't do it again.



My I had MARCHUS WALKED UP TO me at the counter and smiled.

care of "Sadie," he greeted me softly.

I just stopped myself from putting my hand to the bandage that, point Buddy still put on my face in the mornings to hide the healing cu  
't press  
nd you

I didn't need the bandage anymore, but I wasn't ready to go out ir  
hen the  
with my scar on display. That would take another few days and another  
of lemon drops for Buddy and Ralphie to get me to give up what they  
knew I  
"The Bandage Crutch."

statute  
oved on  
me and  
"Sweetheart, you're gorgeous. You'll always *be* gorgeous. Trust  
Buddy had said.

It took a while, but I trusted him. People looked but they did  
brought anything, and I knew I'd get used to it with enough practice.

ght now  
g in his  
Instead, I looked coolly at Marcus Sloan, who I'd always thought  
handsome. Daisy chose well. Marcus was a colleague of my father'

knew he wasn't clean, but I also knew he was nowhere near as dirty  
t. In the father.

"Marcus," I replied.

"You're..." he hesitated. "Well?"

ex was "Never better," I informed him, and I saw his eyes flash in respons  
r that. He didn't hide it and he didn't let my flippant answer put him off.

. I was "How's business?" he asked.

"Excellent," I replied in a tone that didn't invite further discourse.

knew I Marcus watched me for several seconds, his eyes giving  
impression that he missed nothing, and furthermore, I wasn't foolin  
Then he nodded and started to wander the gallery as if he had all  
peruse my wares.

I watched him.

at that "Are you here alone?" Marcus asked from across the gallery, his  
it. a display of exquisite glass paperweights.

1 public "Yes," I answered and kept my eyes on him.

er night He picked up a paperweight.

7 called "Is that wise?" Marcus asked quietly, studying the paperweight.

st me," The reminder that he knew about what happened to me and the inc  
that he cared that I might not be safe made my heart lurch.

ln't say I ignored it.

ght was "Ralphie will be back in ten minutes," I told him. I didn't know  
was forthcoming with that information but I was.

s and I "Good," Marcus responded. He put the paperweight down and co



as myto wander the store.

He didn't speak again until he went back to the paperweight. He picked it up and brought it to the counter.

"Can you gift wrap that for Daisy?" he requested.

e. "Certainly," I replied and then busied myself with the invoice, his card and the gift wrap.

He was silent until I started to put the finishing touches on the box. The gift wrap was a matte pistachio-green, ultra-thick paper. The inside was sumptuous, opalescent cream. And the bow was powder-blue organdy like the Art's signature wrap and I thought it was lush.

ig him. "You should know, I never told Daisy you came to see her or call me the day to after Nanette's party," Marcus said.

My head came up and I almost (but still managed it) couldn't help but be surprised. My eyes on surprise.

His eyes locked with mine. "She knows now," he went on.

"Is that so?" I asked with sham fascination, but my heart was beating wildly in my chest.

"She's not happy I kept it from her," Marcus explained.

I just stared at him.

lication "She had a tough time in that social circle. You were the only one she liked. When you were gone, she missed you."

My stomach clutched.

7 why I Painfully.

ntinued I didn't let it show. Instead, I put his wrapped box in a powder-blue bag with the word "Art" in fancy pistachio script on the side, the handles r

pistachio satin ribbon, and I handed it to him.

The door opened and Ralphie walked in. Marcus looked at F  
nodded then took the bag.

His eyes came back to mine. "She still misses you," he finished.

Then he was gone.

It wasn't until a few days later I realized that even though I knew  
My watching hundreds of customers make hundreds of decisions about hu  
was a lot of purchases, Marcus had decided what he wanted the minute he pic  
. It was the paperweight, but he still stayed until Ralphie returned.

Now, how bizarre was *that*?

lled her



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Buddy asked Ralphie as I watched Veronic  
side my mouth off to her father (but in a plucky, cute-as-a-button kind of way).

I lifted my head again and looked at Ralphie, who was still  
window.

"Nothing," Ralphie replied.

I put my head back on Buddy's thigh as Buddy muttered under his  
"Jesus."

My mind was occupied with Veronica's episode-to-episode dilemn

one she See, Veronica was torn between Duncan, the high school class pr  
good boy, and Logan, the high school ne'er-do-well bad boy. Perso  
was kind of rooting for the bad boy because he was great at delivering  
liner. However, the good boy was so sweet. The wildcard was Wee  
leader of a high school, car-stealing, Hispanic biker gang. I thought V  
lue bag had good chemistry with Weevil, and Weevil had great eyelash  
nade of

fantastic tattoos.

Ralphie, Therefore, my mind on Duncan, Logan and especially Weevil, I have time for Ralphie's antics.

I heard, but didn't pay much attention to, Ralphie leaving the room

I heard, but didn't pay much attention to, Ralphie opening the front

door, after Lastly, I heard, but didn't pay much attention to the murmur of hundreds of voices. Ralphie and Buddy had a big gay posse, and this gay posse looked up loads. Usually this degenerated into copious French martinis or drops or cosmos and impromptu viewings of *Auntie Mame* (the Russell version, *not* the Lucille Ball version) or *Steel Magnolias*.

Alternately, this could degenerate into a round of arm wrestling.

It was anything goes at Ralphie and Buddy's house.

"Look who finally came in from the cold," Ralphie announced, and at the head came up when Buddy muttered, a lot louder this time, "Jesus."

I stared, mouth open and everything, at Hector "Oh my God" standing in Buddy and Ralphie's living room.

He was wearing jeans, black boots, a flannel shirt (untucked), and I could see his white T-shirt at the open collar. His thick, black hair was cutting and he needed a shave.

He'd never looked better.

I kept staring as Buddy gently pulled me up to a seated position; I stood up slowly as Ralphie started the introductions.

"I'm Ralphie, and this is my lover, Buddy, and I think you know her name," Ralphie said as I reluctantly got to my feet.

Hector had a small grin playing at his mouth. He shook a

Ralphie's hand. Then he shook a frowning Buddy's hand. Then his e  
I didn't to me.

I'd checked the Ice Princess at the door. She wasn't allowed in,  
Buddy and Ralphie's house.

What did I do now?

I didn't have a chance to figure it out.

Hector moved, came right to me, right in my space. One of his ar  
lemonaround my waist. He pulled me to his warm body, gave me a gentle s  
osalindand he kissed my temple.

That's right. *He kissed my temple.*

"Sadie," he said against my temple.

I tilted my head back and stared at him.

I couldn't speak. At least my mouth was no longer hanging open,  
I could be grateful.

While Hector looked down at me and I stared up at him silent, I  
decided to speak.

"Sadie, what's the matter with you? Hispanic Hottie has been out v  
posse of cute boys, warning off the bad guys for *weeks*, and now he's  
and you have your chance to say thank you and you're silent as a  
Ralphie snapped.

"Ralphie—" Buddy said warningly.

Hector moved to my side, close to my side, and he looked down at  
Sadie," "Hispanic Hottie?" he asked, brows raised and lips still struggling  
back a grin.

Oh my God.

eyes cut I wanted to die. Go live with the doves and the angels and leave this world forever.

, not to Instead, my eyes sliced to Ralphie and they narrowed.

Ralphie ignored my narrowed eyes.

ms slid “I know!” Ralphie exclaimed. “We’ll have a drink and all watch Veronica Mars. I think in the next episode she gets roughed up in a pool hall. I would need a drink while watching *that*.”

squeeze I didn’t want to have a drink while watching Veronica Mars with “Oh my God” Chavez. I wanted Hector to disappear in a puff of smoke then I wanted to give Ralphie what for.

Hector didn’t disappear in a puff of smoke.

Instead, he said, “That’d be good.”

for that My heart sank. Ralphie clapped in delight and grabbed Buddy, who was still frowning, and dragged him from the room.

Ralphie “What should we do? Martinis? Margaritas? I know! Beer!” I heard Ralphie say as he and Buddy disappeared into the kitchen.

with his I stood frozen to the spot, staring in the direction of the kitchen wondering what the heck to do.

ghost,” Hector’s flannel shirt filled my eyesight and I began to panic.

I wasn’t me. I was kind of Sadie-in-the-making when I was in Buddy’s room at Ralphie’s house. Therefore, I didn’t have my armor.

me. I wasn’t wearing head to toe designer. I was wearing faded jeans and flip-flops of Buddy’s hooded sweatshirts and it was huge on me. I didn’t have Manolos or Jimmy Choos, giving me four-inch heels and a little height. I was barefoot, French pedicured toes on full display. My hair wasn’t a

ive this perfectly. It was pulled up in a messy knot at the crown of my head.

At least I still had on my makeup from working at the gallery ; thank God.

“Sadie,” Hector called, breaking into my frenzied thoughts about Veronica’s appearance and further, what *he’d* think about my appearance.

Anyone My eyes traveled up his shirt, the column of his brown throat, his strong chin and his full lips to his black eyes. My heart skipped when Hector what was in his dark eyes.

ke, and Oh darn.

“How you doin’?” he asked softly.

“I’m fine,” I answered immediately.

His eyes flared with annoyance, and without hesitation he got who was space.

And *then* (no kidding) his hand came to my jaw, and his thumb I heard across the cut on my cheek (it was fading, very, very slowly, but it was there and would be there until I made an appointment with the men and surgeon).

I held my breath while he watched his thumb trace the scar, then he moved along my cheek. His fingers slid into the hair at the side of my head and his hand cupped me behind my ear.

His eyes came back to mine.

and one “*Mamita*, I asked, how are you doing?” Hector repeated, his voice calm, but he was enunciating his words clearly, indicating he cared about my response. And further, I better not try to blow him off again because I wasn’t going to like it.

I hesitated then, do not ask me why, I whispered, "Better."

all day, It was then, close up, I saw his eyes get warm, and my stomach pit the sight.

out my Right after that, still standing frozen, Hector close, totally in my hand still in my hair, I watched his head start to tilt down.

past his "I've got *the best* idea!" Ralphie shouted from the door. Then I n I saw "Oh no. Sorry."

Hector's eyes closed with what appeared to be frustration (I sv *God*). He dropped his hand and stepped to my side again.

"Do you, um...want me to come back?" Ralphie asked.

"No!" I cried instantly, sharply, and maybe a little loudly.

in my Ralphie looked at me, eyes narrowed. After a second though, they and he smiled like he was really happy about something.

trailed "Well, Buddy's in the kitchen, grating cheese like a grating fool. was still decided to do nachos." Ralphie's gaze moved to Hector and he inform plastic "It's the food of your people."

I closed my eyes.

is palm Someone, please tell me that Ralphie did *not* just tell Hector that my head were the food of his people.

While I was devising the lecture on cultural awareness I was g deliver to Ralphie the minute Hector left, I heard Hector's soft laughter

ice was My eyes opened again and I saw Ralphie forge into the room.

out my "I have to go get sour cream. You," Ralphie pointed to me, "nee use he smush up avocado for the guacamole. And you," Ralphie's pointe moved to Hector, "need to get yourself a beer. It's stressful doing stak

should know. I've stalked my fair share of lying, cheating, n  
ched at boyfriends. The bastards."

Then, after sharing this morsel, Ralphie hurried out in search  
r space, cream.

We heard the door slam behind Ralphie and I stood there, unsure  
ie said, to do and wondering how rude it would seem if I ran upstairs, lock  
bedroom door and barricaded myself in the closet.

wear to "Sadie—" Hector started.

"Am I going to get help with this guac or what?" Buddy shouted fr  
kitchen.

I took a deep breath and looked up at Hector.

cleared "I need to go smush avocado," I told him, feeling like an idiot.

At my words he smiled at me, slow, amused and glamorous, and  
We've feel like an idiot anymore.

ed him,



IT HAPPENED after nachos and beer. After Veronica got roughed up by  
Fitzpatrick clan at the pool hall. After I took the nacho platter and plat  
to the kitchen and came back with more beer for everyone. After,  
nachos came back, I saw that Ralphie had affected a seating jumble, which  
Buddy was in the armchair where I'd been sitting and the only place  
oing to settle was between Ralphie and Hector on the couch. After Buddy g  
r. an "I'm sorry but life will be hell if Ralphie doesn't get his way" look.

It was in the middle of Veronica instigating an ingenious plan to f  
d to gobaddies when Ralphie leaned forward, shoved his arm under my kn  
l fingeryanked up my calves, pulling my feet into his lap.

outs. I This meant my body twisted and my shoulder collided with Hector



Hector had, for the sake of comfort on the smallish couch (this was told myself for my peace of mind) put his arm along the back of the of sour (an arm I felt there like it was a snake coiled to strike).

I put my still casted wrist into the cushion by Hector's hip and tu of what glare at Ralphie.

ked my "What are you doing?" I snapped.

"Foot massage," Ralphie replied, eyes on the TV screen, his hands feet starting to massage.

rom the I pulled my feet away. "I don't want a foot massage."

Ralphie grabbed my ankles in a firm hold and tugged them back lap, a move that made me collide with Hector's side again.

I leaned away from Hector as Ralphie said, "Everyone wants I didn't massage."

"Well, I don't," I returned.

"You do," Ralphie shot back.

the evil "I don't," I snapped.

es back Ralphie's eyes swung from Veronica to me. "You *do*."

when I Ralphie and I went into a staredown, a staredown I was going to v  
i meant killed me.  
for me

gave me I could snuggle up to Buddy on one side of the couch while I  
massaged my feet on the other side. I was never, no way, going to le  
oil new Hector (which was my only choice) while Ralphie massaged my feet.

ees and Never.

The staredown lasted until (seriously, no kidding) Hector's arm  
's side, my shoulders. He put pressure there, my elbow buckled and he pulled

what this side.

on couch I tilted my head back.

“Now, what are *you* doing?” I asked.

turned to Hector looked down at me and said, “Relax.”

“I’m uncomfortable,” I replied.

He smiled at me. I stared at him. Not a staredown stare, but a fast on my one.

I thought about it for a nanosecond and then I gave in. I’d look like if I kept fighting.

into his I could deal with this. I’d dealt with worse, *loads* worse. After Hector I’d give Ralphie a piece of my mind so he understood *exactly* where a foot on the issue of Hector.

I glanced over at Buddy to see if I might have some support, but was watching Hector. Finally his eyes slid to me. He gave me a wink and went back to Veronica.

No support from Buddy then.

I sat there, Ralphie massaging my feet, and I glared at the TV screen if it willing Veronica to take me away.

After a while, Hector’s fingers started to make lazy circles on Ralphie’s shoulder.

ran into That felt nice, sweet and lovely.

Darn it all to hell.

Fine. I could deal with that too.

circled I focused on Veronica. Veronica and me, we could make it through me into

always got away unscathed or, well...if not unscathed, at least still breathing.

I settled into Hector, and Ralphie kept massaging my feet.

Veronica Mars, plucky, high school girl detective only had three seasons.

It might last a while, but eventually, it would be over.



I OPENED my eyes and saw nothing but flannel shirt.

My senses came to and I realized that I didn't hear Veronica's mouth. I heard a sports commentator talking about a game. I didn't feel feet in Ralphie's lap. I didn't feel Ralphie at all. Someone had switched all the lights in the room except one, which meant that only a soft glow from a beautiful Restoration Hardware floor lamp across the room. I stood

I was no longer curled into Hector's side, and Hector was no longer sitting on the couch. Buddy

Instead, my torso was mostly pressed into Hector. My head was on his chest, my arm was wrapped around his middle and Hector reclined back on a diagonal, his feet up on the coffee table.

Oh my.

I tilted my head to look at the armchair. Buddy was gone.

I slid my cheek against Hector's soft shirt and looked up at him.

He was lounging, asleep, head resting on the back of the couch around me curled at my waist, hand resting gently on my hip.

My sleepy mind whirled and I realized I knew how it happened.

No one could get a foot massage from Ralphie (he gave good massages) while leaning into Hector's immense, comforting heat and asleep. Even when Veronica Mars was solving the mystery of the

anything. proceeds for the Senior Trip that were stolen from the school's Carnival.

asons. No one.

Now, how did I get out of *this* predicament?

I decided I would scoot away and leave him there. He looked comfortable enough. I'd escape upstairs and sleep in the next morning, sleep in s smart knew for certain sure Hector was gone.

feel my Though, before I left, I'd put a blanket over him, just in case he got hed off I took my eyes from him and cautiously edged away, lifting my w came and pulling my arm from around his abs.

longer His hand went from relaxed and resting to tight and firm on my hip I angled my head to look at him and found, in my movement brought my face closer to his.

resting I noticed immediately he wasn't asleep anymore. His eyes were open or was he was looking at me.

Darn.

Before I could think (and thus stop myself from speaking), I whispered "I didn't mean to wake you."

Then I watched close up as his face warmed. It warmed in a way I th, arm it warm before. The way it warmed that night in my father's study was sliding my hands up his chest and around his neck right before him to kiss me.

od foot I stopped breathing.

not fall He kept looking at me and I felt a weird sensation that I knew he lost complete and utter fear, mingled bizarrely with the barest hint of antici

Winter His gaze dropped to my mouth.

My mouth went dry.

The anticipation fled, the fear took hold and I started to panic.

I was about to push away, run away, get out of there as fast as my  
portablepedicure toe-nailed feet would take me when his fingers at my hip flex  
until I fought through the fear and focused on him again.

“I need to get home,” he said softly.

It cold. At his words, the panic disappeared and relief filled me.

Myself up I nodded.

He did an ab curl, pulling up, taking me with him until he was on his  
knees and he planted me on mine right in front of him.

Then, I'd Then before I could move away he grabbed my hand, and I had no  
choice but to walk him to the door.

My pen and He stopped there, hand still in mine, body so close I could feel his  
breath and he looked down at me.

“I go out, I wait until I hear you lock the door,” he informed me.

Whispered, I nodded again.

Then he went on, “Tomorrow night, I’ll be back. Seven o’clock  
I’d seen taking you to dinner.”

When I The panic came back and my mouth dropped open.

I asked Hector “Oh my God” Chavez wanted to take me out to dinner?

How bizarre was *that*?

My jaw was My mind scrambled for an excuse, and thankfully I had one.

My explanation. “I can’t. Buddy and Ralphie and I have plans,” I told him and it was

lie. We were going out to dinner and they were taking me to a dra afterwards. They'd decided, after all that was my life, it was high time to start having fun.

French  
ed, and  
mine (still!) and put his finger to my upper lip.

“Then Monday. I’ll be here at seven,” Hector replied immediately opened my mouth to speak but he lifted the other hand, the one not mine (still!) and put his finger to my upper lip.

I stopped breathing again.

He took his finger away. “It’ll be casual. There’ll be no reason to your designer armor.”

Oh my God!  
his feet,  
He knew about my armor! He even said it, straight out!

choice  
How did he know?

Oh...my...*God!*  
his heat,  
Before I could figure it out or ask, or get over my panic attack, murmured, “Monday. Seven.”

Then he squeezed my hand and he was gone.

I stared at the door for what seemed like forever, and finally from  
ck. I’m  
I heard Hector’s voice say sharply, “Lock.”

I jumped to the door and threw the lock.

I put my ear to it and heard his boots on the steps outside and I there even when I could hear them no more. After a while, I turned the stairs and came to a jarring halt when I saw Ralphie sitting on them looking at me.

wasn’t a  
“How long have you been sitting there?” I breathed.

“Was up on the landing, listening to him ask you out. Came down .

g showleft,” Ralphie replied.

for me “Ralphie, we need to talk about—”

“If you think we need to talk about how you don’t want anything, and I with Hispanic Hottie, then you need to think again, sweet’ums.”

holding “Ralphie—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

put on “Ralphie!”

He stood and looked down at me. “You deserve your little s happiness. You’ve waited long enough for it and worked hard enough it and I’m gonna see you get it.”

Before I could protest, he turned and walked up the stairs.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Darn.

ack, he

outside

stayed

toward

one of

after he

left,” Ralphie replied.

“Ralphie, we need to talk about—”

“If you think we need to talk about how you don’t want anything to do with Hispanic Hottie, then you need to think again, sweet’ums.”

“Ralphie—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Ralphie!”

He stood and looked down at me. “You deserve your little slice of happiness. You’ve waited long enough for it and worked hard enough to earn it and I’m gonna see you get it.”

Before I could protest, he turned and walked up the stairs.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Darn.



FIVE



## SCREAMING ORGASM

*Sadie*

“We are not watching YoYo,” Buddy snapped at Ralphie as he opened the door to the gay bar on Colfax and stepped back to let me pass him.

“We are so watching YoYo,” Ralphie snapped back, getting up close to me, putting his hands to my waist and crowding in behind me, showing me through the door.

“No YoYo,” Buddy returned.

“Oh so YoYo,” Ralphie shot back.

I started giggling.

They were arguing about watching Bex’s black pug, YoYo. Sadie was going on vacation and needed someone to look after her dog. Buddy brought her around that day so we could meet her.

Buddy didn’t like dogs, but on sight Ralphie and I fell in love with the snorting, wheezing, teeny-tiny, squirming, adorable pug.

“We watch YoYo, you’re gonna start in on me about getting a dog again and I’ve made myself clear on this subject about a million times,” Buddy replied.

“Excuse me, but *I* can’t wear the cute doggie sweaters I bought. We *have* to get a dog so I can dress her up in those sweaters,” Ralphie in.

“I told you not to buy those sweaters. Why would anyone buy sweaters when they don’t have a dog?” Buddy was losing patience.

“I *love* dogs. I’m always telling you a house isn’t a home without. And anyway, I’m Queen Accoutrement, Expert at All Things Accessory. You *need* a dog. Dogs are the end-all, be-all, new, hip accessory.” Ralphie care that Buddy was losing patience (he never did).

opened

precede

They were now both behind me, propelling me forward, and laughing straight out.

close to

ing me

That was until my eyes adjusted to the dark light of the bar and front and center at a bunch of tables pushed together, all the Rock Chicks. Every one of them. Including a black-haired lady I hadn’t met.

And also including Daisy.

I stopped dead and the smile disappeared from my face.

he was

ex had

Ralphie ran into me and said, “Sadie, sweets, get a move on. I cocktail.”

I didn’t get a move on. I stood rooted to the spot, staring at the Chicks.

with the

mn dog

times,”

Then it hit me. They hadn’t seen me yet so I still had a chance to escape.

I was about to whirl when my eyes caught on something all the way across the bar.

Lounging, shoulders against the wall, was Lee Nightingale. Next at first horrified glance, I thought was Hector. Staring in shock, I realized

online, wasn't. It was someone who looked like Hector but was just a shadow thrown rough around the edges. By the look of him, he had to be related to however. There was no way they weren't blood.

doggie The Rock Chicks hadn't seen me, but Lee and his companion definitely had. Both of their eyes were locked on me, and after a second, they started to push away from the wall.

ssory. I I decided it was time to go.

e didn't I whirled.

"We have to go," I said to Buddy and Ralphie.

I was They were both stopped just inside the door, looking down at me. I saw the surprise hit their faces.

l I saw, "Go? Why? We just got here," Ralphie said.

Chicks.

I put my hand to his chest and leaned in. "We have to go. Now. Just

Ralphie resisted the lean, his eyes scanning the bar as Buddy asked

"Are you okay?"

No, I wasn't okay. But I wasn't going to explain it, not now. I need a do it later, like tomorrow or, say, when I *could* explain it (which means never).

e Rock I knew the moment Ralphie saw the Rock Chicks. His face registered recognition. He smiled over my shoulder and waved.

scape! I grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand down. "Don't do that the way around and go!"

"What's goin' on?" Buddy asked.

to him, "We are *not* going," Ralphie said to me, his voice telling me I utilized it digging deep into his battle trenches. And when Ralphie dug in

ide less Townsend, Ice Princess or even Sorceress of the Antarctic would never  
Hector, the battle.

“What’s goin’ on?” Buddy repeated.

n most I didn’t give up.

nd Lee No, actually, I couldn’t give up. Too much was at stake.

“We’re going,” I said to Ralphie.

“Are not,” Ralphie returned.

“Are so.”

“Are not.”

e, and I “We’re going!” I yelled.

“What’s goin’ on!” Buddy shouted.

st go.” “Sadie,” Lee Nightingale said.

ked me, I looked to my left, then up, and saw Lee standing there.

Someone please tell me Lee was not standing there.

ybe I’d Someone else, please tell me that Had-to-Be-Hector’s-Relative v  
ight be standing beside him.

This *stunk*.

gistered I dropped Ralphie’s wrist and turned to Lee.

Luckily, I wasn’t casual, barefoot and in a huge sweatshirt. I had  
t! Turnarmor. A bone-colored pencil skirt, a matching fitted, silk-knit turtleneck  
a pair of lush, beige, spike-heeled Jimmy Choo boots. My hair was  
severely away from my face, but burst in a riot of waves and curls fi  
clip at my neck. I had a thick, heavy, pure gold bangle at my wrist ar  
he was wide, gold hoops at my ears.  
n, Ms.

ver win     Barring the cast on my wrist it was *the* Ice Princess Outfit to end Princess Outfits.

Therefore, as I was unsuccessful at avoiding it, when the time ar was ready.

“Lee,” I said, assuming Chill Factor Sub-Zero.

Lee ignored the Chill Factor Sub-Zero. Something, by the way, was happening all the time these days, and it was beginning to get nerves.

“How are you?” Lee asked, his voice not professional or cord warm and genuine.

“I’d be a lot better if people would stop asking me how I was,” I immediately and icily. “I got raped. Unfortunately, it happens every da

“Sadie!” Ralphie hissed angrily from beside me as I watched Lee f

He actually flinched, like I’d slapped him across the face. Which, v I had.

was not     I was *such* a bitch.

My stomach clutched and if I didn’t get away I was going to start And *that* could *not* happen.

I turned to Ralphie and announced, “I need a drink.”

on my     Ralphie was having none of it.

eck and     He switched on the attitude, complete with hand on hip and c  
pulled. “What you need to do is apologize to Mr. Hot Guy here.”

rom the     I glared ice daggers at Ralphie, but he didn’t back down.

id long,     “Fine,” I declared, giving up in order to get away. “I’ll get n  
fucking drink.”

all Ice Then, without looking at Lee or Hector-Relative-Guy, with back and head held high, I walked to the bar.

rived, I I stopped at the bar telling myself I could do this. This was a walk in the park for me. I'd survive this and whatever next torture life had to offer. I could survive it all.

, which The bartender asked me what I wanted and I told him, "Three on my drops. No wait! Four."

I was going to double up. I'd need serious vodka flowing through my veins to get through this night. And get through the night I would.

Fuck them. Fuck them all.

replied Fuck the world!

y." "What was *that* all about?" Buddy asked from beside me, and I looked at him then over my shoulder toward the door.

verbally Ralphie was talking to Lee and Hector-Relative-Guy, and now Irina and Daisy were with them.

Darn.

crying. I turned back to the bar.

"That was Lee Nightingale," I informed Buddy.

"I know. After you played the screaming-bitch-from-hell and fled away, he introduced himself," Buddy replied.

clipped, I looked at Buddy. "*The* Lee Nightingale. The one I asked to help me before I got attacked."

Buddy's face went gentle and he said, "I know who Lee Nightingale is. I'll remember your story, every word of it, sweetheart."

I nodded once, and holding close to the bitch in me I said, "Well,

straight you go then.”

Buddy stayed silent for a second then he told me, “The man with  
k in the Eddie Chavez, Hector’s brother.”

er me. I Oh, well, that was *just great*. He couldn’t be a far removed cousin,  
He had to be Hector’s fucking brother.

lemon “And?” I clipped, looking back to the bartender as he started  
glasses in front of me.

ugh my “Sadie, it’s Buddy you’re talking to. Set the bitch aside.”

At his words, I swallowed. Then I took a deep breath and turned  
him.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

oked at “You want to go, we’ll go,” Buddy offered.

I picked up a lemon drop and took a sip. Then I sighed.

idy and “We’ll stay for a drink.” *Or two*, I thought. “Then we’ll go.”

“Whatever you want. But Sadie?” I looked back to him and he  
talking again. “He regrets not helping you. It’s written all over him.  
him think he deserves to feel that regret, then you aren’t who I thought  
were.”

ounced He was right. I knew he was. Furthermore, if I let Lee think  
somehow to blame for what happened to me, I wasn’t only *not* who  
help me thought I was, I wasn’t who I *wanted* to be.

I couldn’t meet Buddy’s eyes.

ale is. I Then, because I had to, because this was Buddy, I whispered, ‘  
help myself sometimes. You know, being a bitch. It’s a defense mecha  
l, there needed her. Since my mom went away, I needed her, the Ice Princess

through—”

him is Buddy’s hand slid along my shoulders and he got in close before he interrupted, “I know.”

noooo. I leaned into him while the bartender finished our lemon drops then for the drinks. When I was done, Buddy turned us to face the room.

putting I chanced a glance at the Rock Chick table and I knew they knew I was there. Only Shirleen’s eyes were on me, but my presence was no longer on the radar.

back to My eyes moved to Ralphie, and he, Lee, Eddie, Indy and Daisy were standing further in from the door and they had been joined by a man I had noticed before. He was huge. No, enormous, with wild, blond hair and a thick, russet beard. His eyes were on me as the others around him were talking. And, I could swear, as they all talked, I could see in the dim light of the bar his face was getting red.

Then it got redder. Then it got even redder.

started Then abruptly he detached from the group and stomped over to me. You let were people in his way but they scattered upon seeing his big bulk I thought you their way, and he cut a swath through the crowd straight to me. He stood in front of me and looked down at my face.

he was “You look like a fairy princess,” he boomed. Yes, *boomed*. His voice was so loud it filled the noisy bar.

People turned our way. I stared up at him, not knowing what to say in response to that strange opening remark and way too shocked to even consider pulling out my ‘I can’t Ice Princess.’

in my mind. I decided “thank you” would be appropriate, so that’s what I said. I wanted to get



“I’m Tex,” he announced.

I guessed (and was surprised by the fact) that this was Indy’s barist

“I’m Sadie,” I told him.

“I know who the fuck you are. I also know, given the chance, I’ll snap that motherfucker’s neck,” Tex returned.

This time I guessed he was talking about Ricky.

If someone told me that I would be having this conversation, I have expected that at his comment I would be embarrassed. Somehow, Tex, I wasn’t embarrassed.

Now, how bizarre was *that*?

For some reason, I smiled. And then I tried on New Sadie just to see if she fit.

“You make good coffee,” I told him.

I held my breath and waited for his response.

“Anyone can make coffee,” Tex replied.

I pushed New Sadie, though from his reply I wasn’t sure she was v  
pped infor me. “Not like you. You’re a master.”

“Well, darlin’, you think I make good coffee, why the fuck haven’  
ice wasyou at the store?” he asked.

“I—”

“Bullshit,” he interrupted me before I even got started.

Before I could think, my eyes narrowed. “What do you mean ‘bu  
You didn’t even hear what I had to say.”

“Whatever it was, it was gonna be bullshit,” Tex shot back.

It was then I heard Buddy laughing from beside me and I decided silent. Really, what else could I do? This guy was crazy.

Tex turned to Buddy.

“Who’re you?” he demanded to know.

“I’m Buddy, Sadie’s friend.” Buddy put out his hand.

Tex took it. They shook, then Tex’s blue eyes turned to me. He le then down, grabbed my hand and started dragging me across the bar.

Yes, *dragging me across the bar*.

“Excuse me!” I said to his back, trying to pull my hand from his succeeding.

He looked back at me but kept walking as people jumped out of h “Tonight, you sit by me.”

“But—”

“No lip!” he boomed as he led us to the Rock Chick table.

Oh blooming *heck*.

working



THERE WERE some good things about the evening.

One, Tex positioned me in a chair at the end of the tables by him t slightly away from the table (for better viewing of the stage) and t easily reached by the Rock Chicks.

Two, Ralphie was having a blast. It was clear he was becoming o the Rock Chicks, and I liked it that he was having a good time. illshit?’

Three, although they all smiled at me when given the chance, non Rock Chicks engaged me in conversation. They couldn’t, I was too fa Not to mention within five minutes of sitting, and after Buddy and

to stay delivered the lemon drops, the show started.

Four, Daisy was at the opposite end of the table from me, and though I caught her watching me once, she looked away the minute I : (this wasn't good, exactly, it made my heart hurt a little, but it was safe

aned in Five, drag shows were *great*. I *loved* them. All the glitz, glamor, makeup, fancy dresses with feathers and beads, accessories and big hair was fantastic. The minute the first Drag Queen came out (her name was Burgundy Rose and she was also the hilarious, sharp-tongued MC) and she synced Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" with more diva gravitas and not even Queen Diva Dion could, I was transfixed.



is way. BUT THERE WERE ALSO some bad things about the evening too.

First, Tex leaned into me when the second song began and boom my ear, "If there's a shootout or somethin', you stick with me."

After he said this, I blinked at him, not certain sure whether I laugh, and then I realized he wasn't kidding. I didn't laugh, but surreptitiously scoot my chair closer to his.

Second, Hector showed up during the third Drag Queen, who was hat was "I Will Survive."

hus not Like a sixth sense, I looked to the door and caught him walking in.

He looked good, wearing a close-fitting burgundy long-sleeved ne with jeans and boots. He still needed a haircut, but somewhere along the had shaved, and if possible, he looked better than ever.

e of the I looked away before he saw me, but with quick glances I watched r away. to the bar, get a beer and then station himself next to Lee and Eddie l Eddie wall.

“Work it, woman!” Tex boomed at the Drag Queen, and I jumped. I looked away from Hector, luckily before he caught me watching her. And I couldn’t help myself, I smiled at Tex. His big head was bouncing. Gloria Gaynor, and, well, this big, crazy guy getting into a Drag Queen lamour, syncing to Gloria Gaynor was just plain old funny. I suspected Eddie had called his brother, but I could deal with that. I watched the show, drank my lemon drops and when it was over, got Budweiser and lip-Ralphie to get me *the heck* out of there. Simple.



AT LEMON DROP NUMBER FIVE, I realized it was high time I bought a round. The Sadie-I-Wanted-to-Be would buy a round. Wouldn’t she? I leaned into Tex. “I’m going to go get a round,” I told him to gauge his reaction to my friendly gesture. “Budweiser,” he boomed in response without taking his eyes off the Queen who was singing Natalie Cole’s “This Will Be Our Everlasting Love).” My eyes scanned the table and there were different-sized glasses with different-colored liquid scattered around. How was I to know what everyone wanted unless I asked them? Impossible! Then I had an idea and I leaned back into Tex. “What about everyone else?” He tore his eyes from the stage, spared a glance at the table, looked at the stage and boomed, “Shots.”

I looked at the Rock Chicks. They were all singing out loud (and i  
ng him. *very loud* out loud) and dancing in their chairs with their arms ov  
icing to heads (except Ally and Ava, who were both standing by the stage s  
een lip dancing and waving dollar bills at the Queen).

Obviously, they didn't mind anymore what they drank.

too. I'd Shots it was.

ldy and I got up and went to the bar and when the bartender asked for my  
turned to the table and counted then back to the bartender and said, ‘  
shots and a bottle of Budweiser.’”

“What kind of shots?” the bartender asked.

und. Oh no.

What kind of shots?

uge his I didn't know what kind of shots. I'd never been out with girls wh  
shots. What kinds were there?

ie stage “Shots of liquor,” I answered.

3e (An The bartender blinked at me then said impatiently, “I didn't thi  
wanted shots of orange juice.”

es with Well, he didn't have to be mean about it.

everyone This New Sadie thing was hard. The Ice Princess would have had  
cryo-freeze by now.

everyone I shook off my desire to zap him with The Ice.

“What are my choices?” I asked.

ed back He blinked again then started listing them off fast, “Tequila, Sa  
Kahlua, Jägermeister, anything like that. Then there are the mixed st  
52, fuzzy navel, sex on the beach, blowjob, screaming orgasm, quick f

it was a “Stop!” I yelled, putting a hand up to emphasize my need for him  
er theirtalking just in case he missed it from my yell. Then I pointed to ou  
singing, “It’s for them.”

The bartender’s eyes went beyond me to the Rock Chicks and I  
“Eleven screaming orgasms, comin’ right up.”

Phew.

order, I All right, fine. That wasn’t so hard.

‘Eleven I could do this. I could buy shots for the girls. Maybe, when I got  
the table, I might talk to one of them. Even introduce myself to the  
haired lady.

It was then another bartender came up to me and handed me a p  
paper.

o drank “This came from that lady down at the end of the bar.” He pointe  
end of the bar. I looked in that direction but I didn’t see any lady. The  
just a bunch of gay guys hanging around.

nk you When I looked back, the new bartender was gone and my o  
Impatient Snappy Bartender, put Tex’s Budweiser in front of me and  
to line up empty shot glasses.

him in I opened the paper and nearly fainted at what I read.

*Sadie,*

*I’ve been looking all over for you, baby. Then once I found you, w  
get close.*

*It’s your mother.*

mbuca,

lots, B- *Don’t make a scene. Go to the back like you’re heading tow  
uck—” bathroom and then leave out the back door.*

to stop     *It isn't safe for me to approach you. It isn't safe for anyone to see me*  
at the table.     *But I can't wait to hold you.*

She said,     *Come alone and make sure you aren't followed.*  
                  *-Mama*

After I finished reading the note, my heart beating a mile a minute, I  
scanned the bar looking for anyone that might be my mom.

*My mom!*

back to     In a gay bar!

black-

I didn't care where I saw her. I just wanted to see her.

                  There were women here and there, but most of them were sitting  
at a piece of     Rock Chick table.

                  Then, I thought, why on earth was I hanging around?

                  I dropped the note, and without delay I headed toward the bathroom.

                  I didn't even bother acting like I was going to use the facilities. I  
went     straight to the end of the hall, pushed open the back exit door and  
went     outside.  
I     started

                  The door closed behind me and I looked around. There was a  
streetlamp that illuminated the dank back alley. There were  
dumpsters, some stacked boxes, some old kegs, but no Mom.

                  I stepped out further away from the door.

                  I     waited to

                  "Mom?" I called.

                  Then I felt movement behind me. I started to turn but he had me.

                  I began to scream, but a hand went over my mouth and I was yanked  
                  back. His body, hand at my mouth, other arm rough around my waist.

ne. "Sweet, sweet Sadie," I heard crooned in my ear, and at his v started to tremble.

I knew that voice. It wasn't Ricky Balducci.

It was his brother, Harvey.

minute, I He was walking forward, taking me with him, talking in his Balducci Croon the whole time. "Sweet Sadie, bein' stupid, bein' stupid."

I tried to pull free, twist my head away, and I made noises under h as loud as I could.

g at the "Got herself protection, got herself some boys who think they c with the Balduccis. Didn't Ricky teach you nothin'?" Harvey said in still walking, pushing me forward.

m. But the same time struggling against his other arm.

walked I was no match. He had six inches and at least a hundred pounds o l I was

Someone, please tell me this was not happening. Not again.

muted "I won't make the same mistake as Ricky. When I'm through wi several you're still alive, you'll call off the boys and you'll keep your fuckin' shut about Ricky."

No, it seemed like it was going to happen again.

Unless I could stop it.

red into I opened my mouth and bit into the flesh of his hand so hard I blood fill my mouth. At the same time I lifted a Jimmy Choo b slammed the spiked heel down on his foot and immediately r mammoth effort to twist free.



words I Harvey yelled out in pain and released me. I took off, spitting hi  
out to the side as I did.

“You fuckin’ *bitch!*” he screamed in rage, and in a flash he cau  
with me, arm around my waist.

Crazy He swung me up and around and then planted me on my feet all th  
1’ very I tore at his arm with my fingernails.

I no sooner was set on the ground when something strong w  
his hand around my wrist.

Before I could lift my head, I was pulled free from Harvey wi  
an fuck force I went sailing and only stopped when I collided with something e  
my ear, I looked up to see what I collided with, ready to flee, and saw Eddi

I didn’t flee mainly because it was Eddie, but also because his ar  
rply, at around my waist—not in a Harvey way but in a hold-her-before-she-fa  
—and he pulled me back a few steps then stopped. When he stopp  
1 me. other arm came around me and he pulled me close to his body.

I kept looking at him, partially still panicked, partially so relieved  
ith you, cry that this episode with a Balducci had a different ending than the l  
, mouth Then I saw Eddie’s face was scary stony and his eyes were loc  
something beyond us.

I looked at that something.

Hector had Harvey Balducci pinned against the brick wall with  
but his hand at Harvey’s throat. Lee was standing two feet behind and  
felt his him. Harvey was gagging and trying to tear at Hector’s hand, kick  
not and uselessly with his feet.  
nade a

It was not just gagging. It was eyes-bugging-out, face-getting-purp

s blood flashing-before-your-eyes gagging.

I stood, my heart thundering, and tried to get my thoughts in order.  
ight up Then my thoughts came into order and I realized that Hector  
strangling Harvey. Not only that, but Eddie and Lee weren't doing a thing  
e while stop him.

Visions of Hector wearing prison blues filled my head, and he didn't  
rapped half as good in prison blues as he did in those jeans and that skintight shirt.

The visions spurred me into action and I pulled against Eddie's arm  
th such they went solid.

else. "Stop!" I shouted.

e. Neither Hector nor Lee looked at me. I struggled against Eddie's  
m went but he held on tight.

ills way "Stop! Stop it! *Stop!*" I screeched.

ed, his Then I heard more people arrive, female exclamations and gasps  
running feet.

I could "Lee, do something!" Indy was beside me and she was shouting at  
ast one.

ked on Lee didn't move. He just watched Hector like it was some kind of  
new-fangled, in-the-alley-behind-a-gay-bar outdoor play.

I tell you, *bizarre*.

nothing Then I saw a whirl of motion and Daisy was there. She charged  
full on, head down, moving with such velocity she knocked him to the  
l beside

ing out Thank God. Little Daisy to the rescue, and no prison blues for Hector.

I sagged against Eddie.

le, life- The relieved sag lasted two seconds. Then I straightened and went

because Daisy wasn't trying to save Hector from a murder charge. She was trying to get to Harvey.

or was And got to him she did.

thing to I watched frozen as she went at him, nails scratching, boots kicking, fists punching.

it look Harvey was bent over, sucking in air at the same time trying to get his T-shirt. Daisy off.

ms, but He failed.

No one tried to stop Daisy, either. No one.

Somehow she got him on his back and jumped him, beating him at her arms and legs, face and chest, completely out of control. So out of control, I could hear him grunting and crying hysterically, all at the same time.

"You..." Punch. "Let..." Another punch. "Sadie..." Claw to the back of his head. "Alone." Then she leaned into his face and she finished on a high-pitched screech, "*You let her alone!*"

Lee. Finally I yanked free of Eddie and ran to Daisy, grabbing her from behind by her raised wrist, my other arm going around her waist. She fought back, but we struggled as I pulled her up.

"Daisy, it's me," I whispered in her ear, holding on tight. "Sadie's fine. I'm okay."

Hector side. Daisy whirled on me, breaking from my hold as I noticed Eddie and Hector around us and I felt movement behind us as Hector, Lee and Eddie, joined by an advancing Tex and Buddy, started to deal with Harvey.

"You *ain't* fine!" Daisy screamed in my face. "And you *ain't* okay either."

it tense "Daisy—" I started.

he was “You can’t do this alone!” She was still screaming, tears streamin  
her face. “I know it, I *know* it. You can’t do this alone.” She put he  
over her face and cried behind them, mumbling a repeated, “You car  
ing and alone.”

Cautiously, I got close and then, feeling strange, I slid my arms  
o ward Daisy like Buddy or Ralphie would slide their arms around me.

“I’m not alone,” I whispered to her bent head.

She raised wet eyes to me. They were bright and they were flashin

“Damn straight,” she snapped.

out the I couldn’t help it. Her snapping a full of attitude “damn straigh  
ear her tears streaming down her face for some reason struck me as funny.

“You need a screaming orgasm,” I told her authoritatively, like  
ie face. knew what one was.

pitched She blinked.

“What?” she asked.

behind “The shots I was buying everyone before I came out here. They sh  
me and done by now.”

lie. I’m She stared at me like I might just be touched then nodded slowly.  
sugar, I gotta admit, you’re right. I could use a screaming orgasm  
now.”

e move “Let’s get you inside,” I said, moving my arm to around her sh  
soon to and leading her toward the back door.

!” I looked and saw all the Rock Chicks and Ralphie standing by th  
and all of them were watching me.

Maybe one day I could deal with them all at once, but right then I

g down attacked (again) by a Balducci, and Daisy was in no shape for anyth  
r hands whatever a screaming orgasm was.

i't do it So I looked away from them and kept going in a beeline toward th  
door while I went on, "Maybe we'll order one of those sex on the l  
around too."



WE ALL (THAT WAS, every last one of the Rock Chicks, Ralphie and r  
our screaming orgasms. Then we had our sex on the beaches. We th  
g. fuzzy navels.

Hector, Lee and Eddie didn't join us for our Festival of Shots, but  
it" with and Tex came back, faces tight and set, and they looked like the  
standing guard.

I even No kidding, standing guard.

I looked around, tried to find the bartender who gave me the note,  
was nowhere to be seen.

Indy disappeared, then for some reason Diva Drag Queen of the E  
ould be Burgundy Rose, came out (Indy at her side), walked right up to i  
pulled me into a deep hug.

"Well, I stood there rigid with shock at this new unexpected turn of eve  
1 about she didn't seem to mind. In fact, after she was done hugging me, she g  
a huge, loud kiss on the cheek, then leaned back and started swiping  
oulderslipstick with her thumb.

"I'm Tod," she said in a male voice, still swiping my cheek w  
ie door, thumb.

"Hi, Tod," I said without anything else to say like "What in *the h*  
'd been you doing?" or an Ice Princess "How *dare* you touch me?"

ing but “I’m a Rock Chick by default,” Burgundy Rose/Tod said.

“Oh,” I replied, sounding stupid.

he back Well, that explained it.

oreaches “I’m Indy’s neighbor,” he went on, and stopped swiping my  
Thankfully, it was my good cheek, but still.

ne) had “Okay.” I still didn’t know what to say.

en tried “What size shoe are you?” he asked, apropos of nothing.

I stared at him then thought it best to answer. “Six and a half.”

Buddy “Damn,” he muttered, “I could *work* those boots.” I kept staring  
y werekept explaining, giving a flick of his hand to the Rock Chicks. “All t  
share shoes. We’re all the same size.”

“Oh,” I repeated, a little stunned that he might want to borrow my l  
, but he Not that I minded, of course. Just that I’d never had a girlfriend (c  
boyfriend for that matter) who wanted to borrow my boots.

vening, For some reason, the idea of him wanting to borrow my boots m  
ne andweird cold I’d felt since Harvey got hold of me melt clean away.

“Oh well, I can admire them from afar. Not like I haven’t had  
nts, butexperience with *that*,” Tod shared. Then his head snapped around tow  
ave mestage and he muttered, “Shit, gotta go, song’s about over.” He g  
g at theanother cheek kiss, another thumb swipe at the lipstick he planted the  
then he was off.

with her I stared at his beaded-gowned back.

Now, seriously, how bizarre was *that*?

neck are I was still staring when Hector and Lee appeared.

I hadn't yet recovered from my encounter with the Drag Queen Hector took my hand in his, firmly in his, and without a word to anyone, he walked me out the front door, through the parking lot, str his Bronco.  
cheek.

I didn't struggle. My night was way too weird to struggle. I didn't in me. I was just going to let the rest of my night ride out to its concl figured that was best.

Veronica Mars would have a wisecrack to deliver, but I hadn't ye it to the Wisecracking Sadie version of my new self. I couldn't eve and heshots competently. I was in no position to offer a smart-mouthed rema he girls  
He stopped me at the side of his Bronco with a tug on my hand a got close. I did a quick scan of the parking lot, but there was no sign o boots. or Harvey.

or a gay "Where's Harvey?" I asked, looking anywhere but at Hector.

"*Mamita*, look at me."

ade the I kept avoiding his eyes and started to say, "I should probably—"

tons of When he spoke again, his voice was edging away from gentle.  
goddamn it, look at me."

ard the I looked at him. He lifted the hand he still held, got closer and pres  
ave me clasped hands against the heat of his hard chest, mine on the inside.  
re, and

Oh my.

"You want your friends with you, okay, but right now, we're goin station and you're gonna press charges against Ricky and Harvey Bald

Oh no I was *not*.

I tried to step back, but Hector's hand tightened. It didn't hurt but i

n when message, a message I read and listened to for reasons completely un  
me or or maybe reasons I didn't want to know.

aight to “Marty and Donny Balducci won't get near you. You have my v  
that,” Hector went on.

have it Without a way to retreat, I just shook my head. Hector's other a  
usion. I along my waist and he brought me closer to his body. So close our  
were grazing from hips to waist to belly.

et made My entire mind focused on the body grazing.

n order “Sadie, I'm askin' you to be smart.”

rk.

nd then “I *am* being smart,” I replied, still thinking about nothing but h  
and my body and his body grazing my body.

f Eddie

“Tell me what's in your head,” he encouraged softly.

What was in my head was that I was *still* thinking about hi  
touching my body, how I liked it and I feared it. Both of those f  
swirled and agitated and were making me a crazy mixture of scared, c  
and excited.

“Sadie, “I need you to let me go,” I whispered, my mind getting muddl  
panic, my eyes on his throat.

sed our “Sorry?” he asked.

I tilted my head back to look at him. “Please,” I said so softly  
could barely hear it. “Let me go.”

' to the Without hesitation his hand released mine. His arm went from aro  
ucci.” waist and I took a step back, but he wasn't ready to let me go complete

His hand came to the side of my neck to stop further retreat, but h  
it sent a wasn't close anymore and my fuzzy brain became sharper.



known, I looked up at him and said in all honesty, “I can’t deal with this now.”  
Hector stared at me a second and I had no idea what he said. I  
word onthankfully whatever it was made him nod.

His hand squeezed me affectionately at my neck.

rm slid Yes, that’s right, *affectionately*.

bodies “We’ll get the other’s statements,” he told me. “Eddie called a squad  
They took Harvey in. You can come in and press charges in the morning.

I nodded, even though I wasn’t going to press charges, not in the near  
or any time.

is body Clearly, the Balducci brothers weren’t going to leave me alone when  
waited for me to play my card, but I couldn’t think about what that meant  
right now. I’d think about it later when Hector’s hand wasn’t at my  
s bodyhadn’t survived the latest Balducci Brother Attack and I didn’t have  
feelingslemon drops and three shots coursing through my system.

onfused I felt his hand loosening like he was going to let go, and quickly, I  
lost the courage, I asked, “Are you going to get into trouble?” I paused  
ed withwent on, “For choking him?”

Hector’s head jerked ever so slightly at my question like it surprised  
and his eyes narrowed.

even I He stared at me again for what seemed like a long time, then he  
cleared, and I could swear he was fighting back a grin.

und my “So that’s what’s in your head,” he murmured as if he was talking  
ly. himself, and as if whatever he thought was in my head pleased him  
is bodydeal. I wasn’t going to think about a pleased Hector until later either.

“Well?” I prompted less quickly and a bit more annoyed this time.

ow.” I watched him continue to fight the grin as he replied, “I think I managed to get away with getting physical when I caught Harvey Balducci in the middle of a kidnap attempt.”

I sighed quietly but with relief.

Well, at least *that* was good news.

Then I asked, “Will Daisy get into trouble for attacking him?”

He shook his head. “As far as any of the witnesses were concerned, Sloan was simply in on the rescue, and maybe her nails slipped a bit.”

My eyes got round as I repeated, disbelief dripping from my words, “Daisy was in on the rescue and her nails...slipped a bit?”

It was at that, Hector stopped fighting back the grin and let it happen. I stared.

His grin was nearly as good as his smile. Who thought that could be possible?

Then, before I could answer my own question, his head dipped.

Then, seriously, no kidding, his lips touched mine in a barely-there

After that, while I was blinking rapidly and trying to remember to breathe, his head came up and he said, “Time for you to go home.”

All I could think was, he was so right. It was time for me to go home.

Tomorrow I’d think about all of this. Tonight, I was done.

So done.

“Time for me to go home,” I agreed.

His grin turned into a blinding, white smile. He leaned in again, but

ight get to kiss the top of my head this time.

dle of a     He took my hand in his and he walked me back into the bar.

l, Daisy

ls at his

*ipped a*

en.

even be

: kiss.

how to

ne.

ut only

to kiss the top of my head this time.

He took my hand in his and he walked me back into the bar.

SIX



## IT'S MY LIP GLOSS

*Sadie*

“**H**e’s here, he’s here. *Oh my God*, he’s here...and he looks  
Ralphie chanted, dancing around by the window.

Oh my God.

Hector was here. It was seven o’clock and Hector was here.

I looked at the display on the DVD player.

No, it was seven oh two.

But Hector was still here.

To take me out to dinner.

And he looked *good!*

And we were going to “talk.” I knew we were going to “talk” l  
Hector called Art in the early afternoon and told me so.

I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t even want to go to dinner!

How did this happen?

Oh...my...*God.*



THAT AFTERNOON AT ART, I unwittingly answered the phone (as you do

say, you run a business), and without even a hello Hector said in my ear  
standin' in the station, Eddie's with me and he says you haven't come

Oh my.

"Well—" I started.

He interrupted me, "You don't come in, they gotta let Harvey go."

I tried again, "I just—"

"They let Harvey go and you don't tell them what Ricky did to you  
got four Balducci brothers to deal with rather than bein' down to two."

*good!"* My body went tight, and I stared unseeing at the counter un-  
process his words.

"What?" I asked.

"I think you heard me," he answered.

I heard him all right.

"I heard you. I just don't know what you mean."

"I mean," he explained, but I could tell he was losing patience, "i  
and Harvey are out of commission, I just gotta go after Marty and Don

I kept staring at the counter. "Why are you after the Balducci Broth  
because Silence then a soft, "*Mamita*, are you shittin' me?"

Quietly I answered, "No."

More silence then, still soft, "Tonight, after dinner, we're gonna tal

He gave me an opening. My back went straight and I took it.

"Hector, about dinner—"

"Seven o'clock. You aren't there, I'll find you."

o when,  
Disconnect.

ar, “I’m I kept staring at the counter and tried to decide if Hector could find  
in yet.” Then I decided Hector could very likely find me.

Then I spent the next six hours alternately having panic attacks  
letting Ralphie talk me into things. Things like closing down the shop.  
like going to Cherry Creek Mall. Things like buying a new outfit  
dinner with Hector. Things like buying that new Coach handbag I  
*need*. Things like agreeing it was a good idea that Ralphie bought t  
u, I still doggie food and water bowls, even though I knew Buddy would I  
mind. Things like trying on everything Ralphie threw at me in  
able to different stores without losing my patience or calling on the Ice Prince  
even *once*).



“RALPHIE, CALM DOWN,” Buddy said to the still-dancing Ralphie.

Ralphie was in no mood to calm down. He rushed to me and grab  
arms.

f Ricky “Sweet’ums, your outfit is *perfection*. He’s wearing jeans, a shirt  
ny.” leather jacket. Thank *God* we didn’t go OTT with that slutty top from  
iers?”

There was no way on earth I was ever going to buy that slutty top  
that Ralphie forced me to try on. Of course I didn’t tell him that in E  
now.

The doorbell rang. Thoughts of slutty tops flew out of my head and  
lk.” breath went out of my lungs in a whoosh.

Then, without looking at Ralphie or Buddy, I turned on my stilet  
rushed to the powder room and slammed the door.

I looked at myself in the mirror.

Ralphie talked me into keeping my hair loose and giving it what he

me. “just a wee bit more volume,” so there was tons of it falling in wavy ringlets around my face, on my shoulders and down my back.

I went light on the makeup, mainly because heavy looked, well.. Things The scar on my cheek was still too angry to hide without looking like I was trying to hide something. Anyway, my hair did the work a heavy make *did not* would do (as I mentioned, there was *loads* of it) and I also had my signature cute MAC lip gloss on—a soft pink with a gentle shine.

I loved that lip gloss.

I had on a silvery-purple blouse with a mandarin collar—rows of generous ruffles floating down in a V at the bodice and little ruffles up the short sleeves. I paired this with my new Lucky jeans, a thin silver belt, and silver strappy sandals. Finally, I was wearing my diamonds-in-powder tennis bracelet and my diamond stud earrings.

I stared in the mirror thinking maybe I was still OTT.

Did one wear diamonds and platinum when one went out with a DEA agent that put one’s father in prison?

Did one wear a silver belt *and* silver strappy sandals *ever*?

Was one absolutely *mad* that one was not climbing out the window now?

A sharp knock came at the door and I jumped.

“Sadie! Hector’s here,” Ralphie called unnecessarily as I *knew* he was there. Just two seconds ago, Ralphie was chanting it.

“Coming!” I shouted back and then realized Hector would know I was in the powder room. If I stayed in there very long, Hector would wonder what I was doing. I didn’t want to go out there to have dinner with Hector, but I

called



ves and didn't want Hector to wonder why I needed a long bathroom break.

"Blooming heck," I said into the mirror. Then I pulled in a deep, heavy breath and whispered, "You can do this Sadie. It's just dinner, a talk. You can do it. I was Hector. You've had boyfriends, you've had lovers. Okay, they didn't last very long because your father warned them off, but you are a grown woman. An experienced, grown woman. An experienced, grown woman who can take care of herself. You can talk to him, tell him you aren't interested. Get him to understand that. Back off. You can do it. Right?" I leaned in closer and repeated, "Right?"

Another sharp rap at the door.

"Sadie!" Ralphie snapped.

"Coming!" I shouted and whirled, yanked open the door in full stride, stomped out, glaring at Ralphie. "For goodness sake, Ralphie, can a woman have her lip gloss without her crazy, gay roommate banging down the door?"

"No," Ralphie shot back. "Not when Hispanic Hottie is waiting for her out to dinner."

"Stop calling him Hispanic Hottie, his name is Hector," I returned.

"I call 'em as I see 'em. He's Hispanic..." Ralphie lifted one hand then continued, "and he's hot." He lifted the other hand then he shoved his hands together like he was squeezing an accordion. "Hence, Hispanic Hottie."

"You could argue about this all night," Buddy called from downstairs. Our heads swung in that direction and we could see both Buddy and Chavez standing there, by the way, both of them watching The Ralphie and Sadie Show. "But Hector's not here and Ralphie, we've got a reservation," Buddy finished.

I didn't hear the last part of what Buddy said. I was staring at Hector.

was looking like he was trying not to laugh and not succeeding very  
breath was a full-on, light up the room, beyond amused, glamorous smile.

Couple that with him being clean shaven, his hair still an unruly m  
t stick know a slightly less unruly still sexy-as-ever mess, wearing a black t  
ren't ashirt, a pair of jeans, a black leather jacket, black cowboy boots  
grownfantastic, wide black belt with a heavy matte-silver square buckle..  
lf. You not only could no longer hear, I couldn't speak or move.

nd and I could only see.

t?" Oh my.

The answer was yes. One could wear diamonds and platinum with  
DEA agent that put one's father in prison.

nit and I wasn't OTT. I needed a lot more sparkle and glitter to go out with  
girl fix that was just plain beautiful.

"You ready?" Hector asked, and I jolted out of my stupefaction.

to take No. I was definitely not ready.

"Yes," I lied and walked toward him.

nd and He watched me walk, and the way he did it made me acutely av  
ed them everything about me. Every tiny movement. Every last hair on my head

"Okay, kids," Ralphie said, trailing me. "Don't be too late. Don't  
drugs, drive smart, and even if *all* the other kids are doing it, think t  
he hall. you're going to be over your curfew then make sure you call your dad  
Hector we'll get worried."

ie door, I stopped in front of Hector but turned to Ralphie.

waiting I leaned up to kiss his cheek and whispered, "Shut up."

or, who He grinned at me.

well. It I turned to Buddy. He helped me on with my to-the-hip black trench  
handed me my deep-green patent leather Lanvin bag with the ch  
ess, butstrap, and then I kissed his cheek too.

tailored “Seriously, Sadie, you’re gonna be late, you phone,” Buddy said  
and abut his eyes were on Hector.

.well, I “I’ll phone,” I promised.

With that, Hector took my hand and we were out the door.

Darn.

Here we go.

the ex- Hector walked me to the Bronco so fast I nearly had to run to k  
Once there, he opened the passenger door, helped me in, then slan  
1 a man when I settled. He rounded the front and got in the driver’s side, but  
of turning on the truck, he twisted toward me.

“Give me your cell,” he demanded.

I blinked because everything was happening really fast.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

ware of “Your cell,” he repeated.

d. Confused at this strange start to a date, I pulled out my cell pho  
do any handed it to him. He took it, flipped it open, punched numbers into  
wice. If then hit the green button.

ldies or In a second, I heard his cell phone ringing. He pulled it out of the  
pocket of his jacket and flipped my phone shut. Then, with me still sil  
watching him, he hit buttons on his phone, *loads* of buttons. My phor  
He flipped his shut, mine open and returned his to his jacket pocket. T  
started to hit buttons on my phone, *loads* of those too, even more tha

ch coat, he did on his phone.

ain-link “Do you,” I tried to be polite after he kept on hitting buttons, telling me what you’re doing?”

to me, He flipped my phone shut and handed it to me, his eyes coming to

“You’re programmed into my phone, I’m programmed into you told me. “You got my cell, my house, the office and the control room office. The control room is set as the top choice in your phonebook. You have a situation, *any* situation, you call there. Someone is there 24 they’ll take care of you. Got that?”

Slowly, not certain sure how to react to Hector giving me his cell eep up. and home phone and office phone, and offering me 24/7 access to sc rmed it who would “take care of me,” I nodded. instead

“Now,” he went on, his voice softer, he was leaning closer and I keeping up. “I’m gonna kiss you, because, *mamita*, the way you look now, I gotta fuckin’ kiss you.”

Oh *my*.

I guessed Ralphie was right.

My outfit *was* perfection.

He got way closer, his fingers slid into my hair at the side and me and cupped my head. ) it and

“You all right with that?” he asked quietly, eyes looking into mine. e inside

Again, slowly, I nodded, though I also wasn’t certain sure I was “o ent and with that.” ie rang.

“Thank Christ,” he muttered. Then he

Then he kissed me. in what

It started soft, sweet, and then I put my hand to his shoulder and  
“mindheat there. I liked it and moved in closer so I could feel the heat fr  
body.

mine. His arm slid around my waist, bringing me even closer right bel  
irs,” he tongue touched my lips. I opened my mouth at the touch and that was i  
n at the It was rewind to my father’s study.

ou ever I curled my arms around his neck, pressed my body to his, and t  
/7, andwent from soft and sweet to hot and wild.

Within minutes he pulled me out of my seat, twisting me so I lai  
l phonehis lap and both his arms went around me, one locked at my waist, th  
omeoneone sliding up my neck and into my hair.

I kissed him back like I couldn’t exist without my lips on his, his  
wasn’tin my mouth. I was out of control and didn’t even care.

ok right Then he tore his mouth from mine and buried his face in my neck  
second, we both just sat there, breathing heavily.

“You taste better than I remembered,” he said into my neck and hi  
sounded deeper than normal.

I swallowed and closed my eyes tight. My heart was beating wildl  
nd theysafe and snug in his lap with his arms around me. I was excited in  
way. And his heat was seeping into me everywhere and I liked it.

I liked all of it.

all right His head came out of my neck and he looked at me. “And the  
remembered it, you tasted fuckin’ great.”

My rapidly beating heart tripped.

“It’s my lip gloss,” I said stupidly.

felt the A slow smile spread on his face. “*Mamita*, trust me. It isn’t y  
om hisgloss.”

I didn’t answer, mainly because I was in his lap, I had just made c  
fore hishim (again) and he was smiling at me close up.

it. Where was my Ice Princess now, I ask you? There *were* moments  
still use her. What was she? On vacation?

he kiss “Time to feed you,” he told me.

Thank God.

nded in Relief from full-on Hector, his mouth, tongue and heat. I could u  
ie otherquite desperately. I needed to get my head together. This was not goir  
mainly because it *was* going well.

tongue It wasn’t supposed to go well. It was supposed to be a disaster.

“Okay,” I agreed, but didn’t move.

κ. For a He kept smiling as he leaned in and gave me a brief kiss, then twis  
back in my seat. He started the Bronco. I put on my seatbelt, he put  
is voiceand we took off.

Considering how the first ten minutes of our date went, I was  
y. I feltworried about the rest of the night.

a good



HECTOR PARKED on a residential street in the Highlands.

I looked around thinking maybe there was a corner restau  
: way Isomething. He got out. I threw open my door but he was there before  
alight. He took my hand, helped me out and kept hold of my hand.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he walked me up to what looke  
house.

our lip “Dinner,” Hector replied.

I stared at the house. It was a nice house—small, neat yard, cozy.

ut with Then, because it was a house, I began to panic.

“Is this your house?” I breathed as we made it to the front door.

I could Hector pulled open the heavy security door, stepped in, turned the  
the front door and looked down at me.

“No. *Es mi mamá’s.*”

Blooming heck!

ise that *His mother’s?*

ig well,

Someone, please tell me Hector didn’t live with his mother.

He pulled me to him, put his hand to the small of my back and guided me  
into the house. Once in, he shut the door, took my hand and we walked  
the living room.

sted me I came to a dead halt at what I saw.

on his

Eddie was there with Jet. Indy was there with Lee. Big crazy guy Tom  
there with some pretty, older, blonde lady. Lastly, a short, round, Mexican  
a little American woman was laughing with the pretty, older, blonde lady.

They all turned to me.

I prepared to turn and run.

rant or Hector felt it. He dropped my hand, his arm went around my shoulder  
I could and he pulled me tight to his side.

Now would someone please tell me that, on our very first date,  
d like a didn’t bring me to a dinner party at his mother’s house?

“This is Sadie,” Hector told the room.

Yes, Hector brought me to a dinner party at his mother's house.

Then the night, already bizarre in the extreme, got more bizarre.

The short, round, Mexican American woman (who I was assuming was Hector's mother), walked up to me. She stopped right in front of me, her hand sharp on my face. I felt the Ice Princess arrive back from vacation and slide in place, but something made me push her out and send her packing again.

"Hello," I said softly.

Then, no kidding, I watched in fascination as tears filled the woman's eyes.

Yes, actual tears.

Her hand came up and started toward my scarred cheek. I pulled my breath. The hand halted then dropped.

She sucked in her lips and I saw her biting them, tears still shining in her eyes. She reached out and wrapped her little hand around my casted arm. She held it in front of her, her head tilted down. I couldn't see, but I could tell she was looking at my wrist.

I leaned a bit forward and asked softly, "Excuse me, but are you right?"

Her head came up and she dropped my arm.

"You look like a fairy princess," she whispered in a croaky voice.

I'd heard that before and I still didn't know what to say.

I didn't get the chance to say anything.

"Who would hurt a fairy princess?" she asked me as one tear slid down her cheek.



My body jerked then went solid, and, belatedly cluing in after being fuzzy by the beginning of my crazy date with Hector, I realized she had been raped.

Instead of this making me panicked or embarrassed or angry at Hector (or Lee or Indy or Tex or Jet or whoever) for telling her, I leaned even closer, nodding my head in agreement.

"Mrs. Chavez," I said gently, but she wasn't looking at me anymore. Her eyes sliced to Hector and she started yelling at him in rapid-fire Spanish.

Yes, yelling. And yes, in Spanish.

I tried to take a step back, because, well, she kind of scared me. Hector still had a tight hold on me.

Then she started waving her arms around and she spun, stalked Eddie, got in his face and started yelling at *him*, still in Spanish.

Then she turned to Lee, wagging her finger at him and then she yelled at *him* (in Spanish).

"*Mamá*," Hector said low, cutting into her tirade.

She spun around from wagging her finger at Lee and glared at Hector.

"*Cómo?*" she snapped.

"Sadie's hungry," Hector told his mother, throwing *me* right under the bus.

"No!" I cried instantly. "No, really, carry on, um...yelling at people in your house. Do whatever you want. I'm good. I'm not hungry at all."

She pointed at me and I could tell just by looking at her I was in trouble.

"You! Too skinny!" she declared, jabbing her finger at me. "We need a *hijo* likes curves. Any real man likes curves. We gotta work on your curves."

g made Then she stomped out of the room, and within moments we heard new I'd crashing and other various extremely loud kitchen noises.

I scanned the room and everyone was smiling at me; Indy and Jctor (or both even giggling a little.

loser to I didn't think there was anything to giggle about.

I looked up at Hector and glared. He was looking down at me. Her grinning.

h. He dipped his face close to mine and whispered, "She likes you."

Blooming *heck*.

ne, but



I GOT through the dinner at Hector's mother's house (her name, by the way, was Blanca, and the pretty, older, blonde lady was Nancy, Tex's girl and Jet's mom) with only a few uncomfortable incidents.

elled at



FIRST, after we all sat down and passed around Blanca's delicious food everyone had started eating, Blanca threw her napkin down, stomped and snatched my plate right out from under my raised fork. She then strolled around the table, stopping at each platter full of food and mounding more on my plate.

der the Then she stalked back to me and dropped my plate in front of me and said, "Too skinny!"

ple. It's I looked down in horror at the virtual mountain of food on my plate.

ouble. Blanca went back to her seat at the foot of the table (Eddie was on the other head, Jet to one side of him, me on the other side), and she started gorging happily like she hadn't just made a huge Food Scene. *My* "Curves!"

rd pans When I thought it was safe, I turned to Hector and whispered, “I c  
this much food.”

et were His eyes cut to me and they were dancing. “Relax, *mi cielo*, I’ll ta  
of you.”

Then, if you could believe it, he *did* take care of me. Throughout  
ne and he alternately ate off his plate *and* (when Blanca wasn’t looking) n  
until both were empty.

How bizarre was *that*?



I DID OKAY THROUGH DINNER, though it made me feel weird, like I felt  
ne way, first moved in with Buddy and Ralphie.

rlfriend See, these people were friends. In fact, it was clear they’d know  
other for years, so they were beyond friends. It was hard to descri  
since (except for Hector, Eddie and Blanca, and of course Jet and  
rod and there were no blood ties to bind them, and yet they still chose to spe  
l to me lives together, it was more like a close-knit, happy, relaxed family-c  
stormed own-devising. They laughed, talked, gossiped, smiled and teased eac  
ore and with fond affection.

Outside of Ralphie and Buddy’s friends, I’d never been around a  
e with a like it and I didn’t know how to act, what to say. I only knew that  
Princess was *really* not welcome here. I couldn’t click her into place  
me cope even if I wanted to.

s at the I also knew that New Sadie was not ready for this experience, n  
gabbings close.

So I stayed quiet, smiling a little when someone looked at me c  
was a joke that I should have laughed at, but was too stressed out to re

can't eat be real, like them.

I felt like an outsider looking in, removed, not unwelcome just like carewell...

I didn't belong.

dinner



THE SECOND INCIDENT happened while everyone was chatting and stragglers were finishing up their meals.

Hector had pushed his chair a bit away from the table, and to my surprise he pulled my casted wrist onto his thigh. Then the tips of his fingers touched when I tips of my fingers that were exposed by the cast.

His touch made me go warm.

I turned to him and he was looking down at our hands.

"When do you get this removed?" he asked quietly.

"Wednesday," I replied, wanting to pull my hand away, if only for sanity's sake, but thinking it might not be a good move at Blanca's scene and I also knew I'd do just about anything to avoid it, including

Hector touch my hand.

"Good," he murmured.

I swallowed.

His black eyes came to mine and there was something burning too strong, I felt my heart start to beat faster.

"She's pulling away," he whispered.

"Excuse me?"

He didn't explain himself, instead he said, "Sadie, you're safe here"

can be the girl I've seen the last few days."

st that, Oh my.

My body tensed and Ice Princess slid into my skin before I could s

"I don't know what you mean," I replied coldly, even though  
*exactly* what he meant.

nd the He lifted my casted hand to his mouth and (no kidding, right in t  
everyone!) kissed the exposed fingers there.

hock he Ice Princess melted in a steaming, hot puddle.

hed the Then he murmured, "You know what I mean."

Darn.

My eyes flitted to the table. Indy was watching me, and when my c  
hers, hers slid quickly away, but I could still see her smile. I saw T  
also watching me, but he didn't look away. He was grinning at me b  
nly forso it was my eyes that slid away. Unfortunately, they caught Blanc  
table. Hers were shining with tears (again!).

another Blooming heck.

; letting I looked back at Hector.

"Please let me go," I whispered.

He let me go and I took in a relieved breath, but it stuck in my  
when his hand went to the seat of my chair. He gave a firm tug, which  
here so my chair right next to his chair so our thighs were pressed together. T  
sat back and draped his arm around the back of my chair.

There was no way I could scoot away or put him in deep freeze  
would have been my premier choice), so I just sat there, tense  
re. Youeveryone tried to pretend they weren't grinning at each other bec

Hector and me.

So I tried to pretend they weren't trying to pretend and told her I could get through the night.

I knew How much worse could it get?



front of THE NEXT INCIDENT happened when Blanca started to clear the table.

Jet and Indy got up to help her.

I threw my chair back and took that golden opportunity to get away from Hector. I decided I should help clear the table too. Even though I'd never lived in a house with help who cooked for us and cleared our table, I had helped Ralphie and Buddy at their house.

eyes hit

I could do this.

'ex was

broadly,

a's and

Problem was, I had a cast on my arm. Not so easy to stack platters and carry platters still heavy with food, even though everyone had finished eating (one thing was certain sure, Blanca was generous with her hospitality).

Still, it was either help or sit close to Hector's side, everyone thought we were something we were *not*, or we were not going to be after Hector had our talk.

throat

I pulled

Then he

I decided plates were my best bet, so balancing some plates and precariously I followed Jet and Indy to the kitchen.

Disaster nearly struck when I hit Blanca's kitchen. The plates teetered and some forks and knives fell to the floor.

(which

, while

ause of

Before it could get worse and I had to buy Blanca a new set of storage bins, Indy turned from depositing her load on the counter and deftly grabbed plates in my hands as Blanca bent down and picked up the cutlery.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Chavez,” I said to her, feeling like an idiot.

Myself I She straightened and ordered, “Blanca, *mi hija*. You call me B  
Then she put the cutlery in the sink and swept out.

But Jet was at the sink, rinsing dishes, and for some bizarre reason  
was giggling.

I didn’t want to know but I *did* want to know, and not having  
willpower to stop myself, I asked, “What’s funny?”

My friend She threw me a dazzling smile (Jet was Eddie’s fiancée—she was  
always green-eyed and very pretty, but when she smiled, she was a heart-stopper).

“Do you speak Spanish?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“*Mi hija* means, ‘my daughter.’”

Oh my.

Blanca just called me her daughter.

*Her daughter.*

That could not be good.

I moved closer to Jet. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Indy giggled a little as Jet handed her a rinsed plate to put  
in the dishwasher.

I started to organize the plates and cutlery on the counter so Jet  
could more easily rinse them.

“Do, um, Mexican American women call people that for—?” I started.

“Nope,” Jet interrupted me. “I didn’t get an *hija* until...” She looked

the ceiling then finished, “I think it was the third time I saw her.”

Blanca.” “You win!” Indy cried, and then burst out laughing.

Without hesitation Jet laughed with her.

And at that moment, I couldn’t help it. They were so engaging though it seriously weirded me out, *all* of it), I laughed with them.

Blanca came in, depositing more stuff, and then started banging the kitchen again preparing to serve dessert.

“Can I do something?” I asked her.

“Sí, you can make the coffee,” Blanca answered, and I was relieved

I could definitely make coffee *and* do it one-handed. I’d had lots of practice at that at Buddy and Ralphie’s place.

She showed me where to find the coffee stuff then swept out carrying dessert plates.

Immediately, when Blanca left, on a whisper I asked Jet, “Do you speak Spanish?”

“A little,” Jet replied, squirting dishwashing liquid into a dirty pan then turning the tap into it.

“What does *mamita* mean?”

She looked at me, eyes knowing, and grinned big. “It means ‘mama.’ It’s an endearment, like a guy calling his girl ‘babe.’”

Oh my.

Hector called me “babe.”

Blooming heck.

I kept going. “What about *mi cielo*?”



Jet blinked. "Hector called you *mi cielo*?"

I nodded.

Her big grin went even bigger. "It means, literally, 'my sky,' but it's (even an endearment, a little, um..." She looked for a word. "Strong *mamita*," she finished.

I didn't know what to make of that, but I wasn't sure it was good. it was good if I was a normal, Veronica Mars type person, but it wasn't as I wasn't a normal, Veronica Mars type person (which I wasn't).

"He calls you *mi amor*, you're really in trouble," Jet went on but could run screaming from the house.

"Why?"

"That means 'my love,' and that means he's serious," Jet replied again, went on with a big smile. "Or, I should say, *more serious*."

I couldn't stop myself from leaning into her and whispering, "I'm in trouble."

"Sister, you are *definitely* in trouble," Indy said, and she was smiling at me too, like this was a good thing.

I didn't think this was a good thing. In fact, I was more than worried it was a very, very bad thing.

I shook off my feelings of foreboding, and lastly, because I had to ask, I asked Jet, "What was Blanca saying in the living room when Hector arrived?"

Jet shook her head. "She was talking too fast and I'm not following anything, but I think the gist of it was that if Hector, Eddie and Lee wreak vengeance on, um..." She stopped.

“It’s okay, I get it,” I said softly, because I saw she was uncomfortable. She gave me a different smile, this one less dazzling but far more sweeter than before. Somehow Blanca (who didn’t know me from Eve) having a tizzy on my behalf made me feel strange, but it wasn’t a bad strange. It was a happy strange.

I mean It wasn’t *that* strange. I used to feel that way around my mom.  
It wasn’t good But it *was* a strange I hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Jet’s eyes slid to Indy, but I had exhausted New Sadie’s reserves before I turned away and finished up the coffee.

Surprisingly, and thankfully, they didn’t push it.



ed then THE LAST INCIDENT happened after dinner was over.

We were all heading back to the living room for more coffee, and I think I’d had claimed Hector. They walked in front of me, her arm around his shoulder, his arm around her shoulders, head tilted low as she talked to him in Spanish. Everyone but Indy and Lee were in front of them. I walked behind them, Indy and Lee behind me.

a little A few steps from the living room door I decided it was time. I had a little opportunity so I stopped and turned to Lee.

know, I “Can I talk to you a second?” I asked.

or and I Lee and Indy stopped. Lee’s eyes came to me and he nodded.

Indy said, “I’ll just—”

urgent or My gaze swung to her and I interrupted, “No, it’s okay. You can’t do this.”  
didn’t This won’t take long.”

Indy nodded, but she took Lee’s hand and it looked like she was trying to

comfortable. Lee just kept watching me.

It. Throughout dessert I practiced what I was going to say, so I was ready on my feet. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, looked at Lee and said, “I spent my life around bad people. Bad people that did things to hurt people and they had no regrets.”

“Sadie—” Lee started.

“Please, hear me out.”

And so I Lee stopped talking.

“It was hard, living in that world,” I told him.

He was silent.

Indy was silent.

I went on.

Blanca “It would be harder living in a world where a good person blamed  
s waist, for what a bad person did.” I paused then delivered my grand finale,  
Spanish. thought was rather decisively (if I did say so myself), “You should  
d them, responsibility for what happened to me.”

had my Immediately Lee said, “I appreciate that, but it doesn’t change that I—”

I interrupted, “You hold on to this regret, it’s going to...”

Now what did I say?

I didn’t expect Lee to do anything but feel off the hook. He was right up my grand finale! I didn’t think to practice different responses in my possible responses! Why couldn’t he just agree and let it go so we could have coffee?

prancing.

This being nice to people was *hard*.

Oh well, I just had to make it up. “It’s going to be...” I searched, “I’ve word. “Very um...” come on Sadie! “*Upsetting*,” I finished.

Both Indy and Lee were staring at me.

I was spent. I had no more, but I didn’t feel it was appropriate to walk away.

Finally Lee grinned and said, “I wouldn’t want to upset you.”

His tone was bizarre. Then it hit me that he was teasing me.

Yes, *teasing me*.

The Ice Princess reared her head. “Well. Yes. See that it doesn’t happen

For some reason what I said made Lee burst out laughing. It made me do the same.

They laughed right in the face of the Ice Princess!

How bizarre was *that*?

Lee moved in (shattering my Ice Fortress by the way), threw his arms around my shoulders and walked me into the living room, Indy following.

“I’ll see it doesn’t happen again,” he said, still sounding like he was teasing. Then he said, “I promise.”

Startled at the change in tone, I looked up at him. He was no longer teasing. He was very serious.

Before I could react, he deposited me at Hector’s side.

Hector lifted his brows at me.

I pulled my lips between my teeth. Hector saw I wasn’t going to say anything and he sighed.

Thirty minutes later, we left.

ed for a It was finally over.

And I survived.

*Thank goodness.*

to walk

ppen.”

de Indy

his arm

ing.

he was

longer

o share

Thirty minutes later, we left.

It was finally over.

And I survived.

*Thank goodness.*

SEVEN



OKAY

*Sadie*

**A**fter Blanca's dinner, when Hector and I arrived back at the brow my mind was on other things. *Loads* of other things.

Therefore, I didn't protest when he walked me up to the door, took the keys from my hands, unlocked and opened the door for me, and with his hand on the small of my back again, guided me inside.

Automatically, I turned to the alarm panel and hit the code, flipped the hall light switch then turned back to Hector.

For some bizarre reason, he was looking up the stairs.

Then he looked at me. "Stay here, by the door, until I come back."

I only had time to blink at him before he was gone, taking the stairs one at a time.

What on earth was he doing?

I did what I was told, standing by the door, feeling like an idiot, until he came back.

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I uttered a noise, he walked by me, through the hall, his hand raised, index finger pointed skyward. He muttered, "One more minute."

I stared at his departing back then heard as he walked around down the hallway. A light came on in the living room and Hector reappeared. He walked to the end of the hall, opened the door to the powder room. I saw the light go on, then off, then he came out, closed the door and came back to me.

“Okay,” he said.

He reached around me, locked the front door then grabbed my hand. He pulled me in the living room.

“What was that?” I asked his back.

He stopped and turned to me. Shrugging off his jacket, he threw it on the armchair.

“Walkthrough. Making sure no one was here.”

My head did a surprised little shake as I threw my bag on the chair. I took off my trench and tossed it on the chair with my bag.

“But,” I reminded him, “the alarm was on.”

He got in close, lifted a hand, and while he shifted my hair off my shoulder, he explained, “Can’t be too careful.”

“Oh,” I said, because there was nothing else to say, and anyway I was recovering from the shifting-the-hair-off-my-shoulder move.

Hector kept looking at me.

What now? What did nice girls do after dinner with their date’s and select close friends?

I wracked my brain.

Finally, ever the good hostess, it came to me.

“Do you want a drink?” I offered.



nstairs. “How much time do we have before your friends get back?” he asked to their return.

to go on I, personally, thought this was a weird question, but I didn’t tell that.

Instead I shrugged. “I don’t know. Since I moved here, they’ve gone out without me.”

Then I realized Ralphie and Buddy never *had* gone out and left me alone. Not for over a month. I was probably putting a major crimp in my social life.

And I didn’t even notice.

Now what kind of genuine friend wouldn’t even notice she was putting a crimp in her friends’ social life?

Oh my, it was high time to call the real estate agent lady and get their hair. If I didn’t, they might not like me anymore. And I couldn’t see them this soon.

Hector broke into my thoughts about real estate and Buddy and Ralphie, I was social life and said, “Then, no, I don’t want a drink.”

His answer confused me. I didn’t understand why the timing of Ralphie and Buddy’s return had anything to do with anything, but I didn’t have a chance to ask.

mother Hector’s hands came to my hips and slowly he pulled me close. He slid around me loosely and his chin tipped down so he could look at me.

“We have to talk.”

Oh my.

With all that happened, I forgot about our talk.

sked in All right, that was okay. I could do this. I could do anything. I s  
dinner at his mother's house, didn't I?

Hector "Okay," I said, mentally girding for our talk.

He didn't speak. Instead, his head bent and he touched my lips w  
e neverMy heart stuttered and I instantly ungirded.

All right, maybe I couldn't do this. I couldn't even stay mentally  
e homefor a whole second!

in their "You just kissed me," I accused him.

His mouth moved like he was fighting a grin (again).

"Yeah," he answered.

utting a "Kissing isn't talking," I informed him helpfully, like he didn't  
know this fact.

t out of More fighting the grin.

n't lose

"No," he agreed.

alphie's He pulled me closer so my body was lightly pressed to his.

"Well, are we going to talk?" I asked.

Ralphie He was watching me closely and for some reason there was  
have a fighting anymore.

Then he answered, "Yeah."

is arms I waited.

e. He pulled me closer so my body was not so lightly pressed to his.  
I was so close I had to lift my hands and put them on his chest, righ  
his shoulders.

"Do you want me to start?" I asked, again trying to be helpful as I

urvived nice people would want to be.

“You have something to say?” he asked.

I thought about it.

with his. I supposed I had a million things to say. I hadn’t practiced any ( yet because I was too busy practicing what I was going to say to Lee. ’ girded to Lee took precedence, but I sure as certain wished I’d practiced so to say to Hector.

“Give a fuckin’ mint to know what’s goin’ on in that head of Hector muttered, breaking into my thoughts.

I ignored him and said, “Right now, I don’t have anything to reserve the right to say something later though.” already

At this, Hector started laughing. It was silent but I could feel h moving with it. This confused me even more.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“You,” he answered.

Me? *I* was funny? I’d never been funny.

no grin Ever.

I tried to think of the last time I was funny.

No, there was no last time.

I was just not funny.

In fact, “What’s funny about me?” I asked with curiosity.

t below He shook his head and brought me even closer so my body was his. His arms were around me tight and my hands had to slide up thought shoulders.

“It’d take too long to explain and we got more important shit about.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed because I still kind of wanted to know if they were funny about me. “Okay.”

Talking All of a sudden he switched the subject. “What made you go out to nothing last night?”

I shrugged again. “Some bartender came up to me, handed me a yours,” said it was from my mom, she’d been looking for me, finally found she was out back and I should meet her. I figure Harvey paid someone to say. I said it to me.”

Instantly and inexplicably, the air in the room changed. A current ran through it, strong and dangerous, and Hector’s arms tightened further. My body tensed.

“Are you *fucking* shitting me?” he asked, enunciating every word from between his teeth.

“No,” I whispered, because the change in him was kind of scary.

All of a sudden, he let go. I felt the loss of his heat like a blow. I watched him walk away, tearing his hand through his hair. He stopped at the window, yanked the curtain back and looked at the street.

I stared at him, unsure what to do. One second he seemed to be mellow but amused. The next he seemed anything but mellow and a warning and his body language was saying to stay well away. Because of the deep inhead was telling me to run away.

Instead I called hesitantly, “Hector?”

“Give me a minute, Sadie,” he said to the window.

to talk I felt it prudent to give him a minute seeing as, for some bizarre  
he seemed a tad bit upset (which was an understatement). Then after w  
w what like about a hundred minutes, he spoke.

“I’m losin’ patience with this.”

he back “With what?” I asked.

He kept looking out the window. “Usin’ your fuckin’ mother to  
note. It you. How fuckin’ low. *Fuck!*” he exploded.

me and Again, I was confused. In my experience people could do thing  
to give lower than that.

“This is Harvey Balducci we’re talking about,” I told Hector as  
ent ran explained everything, which to me it did.

Hector’s eyes turned to me.

“I mean, he’s a jerk,” I went on. “And he’s crazy. And, well..  
clearly jerk.”

“People don’t do that shit,” Hector told me.

me. That was when I laughed. I mean, seriously, people did that “shit”  
ow and time.

d at the “Oh, yes they do,” I replied sagely.

Hector dropped the curtain, turned fully to me, his face hard and I  
kind of “Sadie, no. They don’t.”  
mused,

Instantly, my laughter died. “You know they do, Hector. You  
at, my amongst us. My kind of people sell drugs and guns and kill people  
kidnap them and rape them—” I stopped because Hector started toward

I lifted my hand to stop him, finally realizing what I had to say  
came to me in a flash.

reason, I was going to tell him we were different, this would never work.  
that felt belong in his world.

Simple as that.

But it was like Hector didn't see my hand. He kept coming at me  
was right there.

My hand hit his chest. He pulled me into his arms again and said,  
aren't your kind of people."

"Yes, they are. Don't you remember—?"

"I remember you feeding me information on your father."

My body went rigid and I gasped (*not*, I belatedly realized, the  
response to have when I was trying to keep my clandestine informant  
secret).

I tried to cover. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sadie, I saw you do it."

I blinked at him.

Oh my God.

Did he see me do it? How could he see me do it? That was just c  
was also impossible.

I kept lying. "You must have been mistaken."

He shook his head. "*Mamita*, I walked right up to the door and v  
you do your thing, and for some crazy reason you did it while you ke  
father's office door wide open."

"That was so I could hear if someone was coming!"

Oh no!

I didn't How stupid could I be? I'd given it away.

Blooming heck!

He pulled me closer. The dangerous current slid out of the room until he looked like he was fighting a grin again.

I stared at him. I mean, really, it was hard to keep up with his  
"Those swings.

"Your plan didn't work. You didn't hear *me* coming."

Oh darn.

I watched his face and realized, indeed, he *did* see me do it.

kind of Now what did I do?

status a I put my other hand to his shoulder, this time to try to push away.

It didn't work.

I gave up and my eyes slid to the side. "Oh well, then, you knew."

I tried to act like it was nothing.

"Helluva risk you took," he said.

I shrugged.

razy. It "Anyone could have seen you do it. You were lucky it was me."

He certainly wasn't wrong about *that*.

atched He went on, "You could have got yourself killed."

pt your I bit my lip because he wasn't wrong about that either.

"Why *did* you do it?" he asked softly.

I pulled in both my lips, bit them, let them go and answered simply  
"was not a nice man."

“No,” Hector agreed, and my heart lurched.

I ignored the lurch and looked at him.

and he With his easy agreement, he’d given me my opening. My father said you should never waste an opportunity.

s mood So I didn’t.

“There you go. That’s why this, you and me and everyone else, a mom and all of it, everything, isn’t going to work,” I told him.

His chin jerked back after I finished talking, then his face went another mercurial mood swing. “You wanna explain how you came conclusion?”

“Yes,” I told him truthfully, my back going straight. “I’m not li and your people. I’m Sadie Townsend. My father is Seth Townsend. belong with your people. I never will.”

His arms got tight again. The scary current came back into the ro his face got close.

“*Mamita*, I think you’re a little crazy.”

I shook my head. “Not crazy. I just know who I am, what I am and I belong. All your family and friends are very sweet and nice and ever but you know, they know as well as I know, I don’t belong. I think i for all concerned if this just ended here.”

There. I did it. It was hard, but I kept my cool. I made sense. I dic emotional.

ly, “He I wanted to get emotional. Actually, truth be told, I wanted him to again. I wanted him to hold me in his lap and feel snug and secure a his heat hit me. I wanted to have dinner at his mother’s house again. I



to do the dishes and laugh in the kitchen with Jet and Indy again. I  
Lee to tease me again.

always But I knew I couldn't have those things.

I could accept genuine friendship from Buddy and Ralphie b  
well...I didn't know why. Maybe because, when something happened  
nd your would) and I lost them, I would just lose two people, and I'd lost me  
that in my life. I'd come to love them enough and feel strong enough  
that wave...until it ended.

dark in If I accepted whatever it was that Hector was offering me, there  
to that whole gaggle of people I would lose.

like you Really, there was only so much a girl could take.

I don't And my father always told me to play to your strengths, bu  
importantly, know your limitations. And I knew my limitations.

om and "Is that what you reserved the right to say?" Hector asked, breaki  
my thoughts.

I nodded and pulled away.

I where However, it must be noted, I didn't actually *get* away. He leaned  
rything, and one of his arms wrapped around my waist, the other hand slid  
t's best back, along my neck and went into my hair.

I was getting the distinct impression that I should start girding agai

dn't get "All right, now I'll say what I gotta say," Hector announced.

Oh my.

kiss me I should have girded.

nd feel Again, I didn't expect him to have a response. I thought he'd jus  
wanted leave and then, well...that would be that.

wanted He didn't agree. And before I could stop him, he started talking about what he said robbed me of the ability to do anything but stand pressed against him and stare.

because, "You got cameras in your gallery, the front and back entrances, your office (and the store). You got more cameras on this brownstone, front and back entrances. Your car has a tracking device. So does your purse. The ride alarm has been rewired to send a simultaneous alert to the control room if someone breaches the system. All that shit is monitored in the control room at Nightingale Investigations offices."

See what I mean?

Nothing to do but stare.

it more Hector kept talking.

"I know you know we've been watching the house. We mean it's invisible and didn't try to hide. Point of that was to show the Balduccis that it's not a safe place for them to get at you, and to show them, straight out, that you're protected. The minute Ralphie took off and left you alone in your room, Monty, who manages surveillance, saw you alone and put the call on. No one was close enough to get to you quickly, but Lee knew Marcus was coming. He called Marcus. Marcus dropped everything, walked out of a meeting, went to the gallery and stayed until Ralphie came back."

n.

Oh...my...*God*.

I knew there was something weird about Marcus being there!

"Ally planted the tracking device in your purse when they visited the gallery. Lee heard that the girls had planned to go there to meet you and he didn't agree, you were okay. He took Ally aside, gave her the device, told her what Shirleen's assignment was to divert your attention. While you were w

g. And Shirleen, Ally grabbed one of your lipsticks and planted the device against cap.”

I could not believe this.

ur back Mainly because it was unbelievable.

ont and And Ally sounded like she was a little bit like Veronica Mars!

e. Your “We’ve been tracking you, watching you and protecting you since you left the fuckin’ hospital,” Hector said. “As for me, obviously you cottoned on to the situation, but bottom line, I’m gonna do whatever I gotta do to make you safe. Which means something has to give with the Balduccis. They don’t get to pick how it’s gonna give, I’ve already decided. They fuck up along the way, like Harvey did last night, then I take advantage. We’re working with Marcus and the Zanos—”

t to be “The Zanos?” I breathed, interrupting him for the first time, too shocked by this news to stay silent.

, you’re Vito Zano was a friend of my father’s. I didn’t know if he was in the gallery, not, but he was funny and I liked him. Ren Zano, his nephew, was very outgoing and very nice (and I didn’t know if he was dirty or not either). Lee always had a bit of a crush on Ren, but, per usual, I didn’t let it show.

went to That was, of course, I had a bit of a crush on Ren until Hector came along.

“The Zanos,” Hector affirmed then went on, “You press charges against Ricky and Harvey, after what Ricky did to you, he goes away a long time. This would be strike three for Harvey since he isn’t the smartest of the bunch and has been caught before. He goes in again, no one would see him do it while Marty and Donny aren’t so dumb as Harvey. They’re just crazy. If anything goes down, my guess, Marty assumes the throne, but Donny’ll give it to me.”

in the trouble. The Ricky-Marty-Donny rivalry is lore and you're caught up so they have to go down too. I'm workin' on it. So are Lee, Marcus, V Ren. It'd help if Ricky and Harvey were out of commission, which me

Finally I stopped him. "It means I'd have to see Ricky again."

He kept silent.

ice you I closed my eyes.

haven't Then I clenched my teeth.

r it is I Then I opened my eyes, and do not ask me why, I shared.

with the "I can't, Hector." It came out as a whisper. "I want to press charge  
decided. can't."

'll take He let me go. His heat left me and a burst of cold hit me, shaking  
hocked of the stupor induced by all he'd said, all he'd done, all that *everyc*  
done.

But he didn't go to the window again. He took my hand and walke  
dirty or the couch.

y good- Then (no kidding) before I knew what he was up to, he sat dov  
ther). I hands went to my waist. He pulled me into his lap and his arms went  
me.

r came Then he said softly, "You can do it Sadie, I know you can."

against He was wrong.

g time. I shook my head. "I can't."

e bunch "You fed me information on your father."

n for a "I know."

. Ricky "You risked your life to help that investigation."

ve him

in that, “I know.”

‘ito and “How can you do that and not do this?”

ans—”

I shook my head again. “I don’t know.” And I didn’t.

Hector stared at me and I looked at him.

Then I had to say something just so he wouldn’t think I was a coward.

“I’m not a total wimp,” I assured him, trying to shake the uneasy feeling beginning to crawl along my skin that I was talking about this with Hector but I told all people. “I have a plan. See, if I don’t press charges—”

Hector broke in, didn’t even try to listen to my plan. “You can’t please me out these guys.”

me had “But—”

“Sadie, *mi cielo*, you know it far better than I do. You play with me to guys, you’ll lose.”

I felt the telltale lump hit my throat. I swallowed. It didn’t work.

vn. His I swallowed again. It still didn’t work.

around

Then before I could stop it, to my horror, I started crying.

Really! Where was my Ice Princess? Why did she come along when I wasn’t wanted and disappeared when I needed her? She was beginning to *really* annoy me.

When the Ice Princess didn’t show, with no other choice so he would see me cry, I shoved my face in his neck.

He dropped to the side on his back, taking me with him. He rolled over then we were lying on the couch, me snug between the heat of his soft back of the couch.

One of his arms held me close at the waist. The other hand cupped back of my head and held my face to his throat.

“Let me take care of you,” he whispered through my sobs.

“Okay,” I whispered through my sobs too, too tired to fight it any

in utter “I’ll come get you tomorrow, take you to the station.”

I took a ragged breath.

feelings Then, even though it scared me, I agreed.

ector of “Okay,” I repeated.

“Eddie’ll be there. You want Ralphie there or anyone else—”

ay with “Bex,” I said immediately.

“Bex?”

h these “She’s B-Buddy’s f-f-friend. He introduced me to her,” I said, but a long time because my voice kept hitching. “She works at a rape center.”

Hector’s arms went tighter. “Okay, we’ll call Bex.”

“And Daisy,” I went on.

His arms tightened further and I snuggled in closer.

hen she “And Shirleen,” I said, though I had no idea why.

ning to “Shirleen?”

ouldn’t “She seems like a nice lady,” I explained to him, but also to myself

“She is,” Hector said quietly.

l us and We laid there and Hector held me. This went on for a long time.

and the I knew I should put a stop to it. All of it.

ped the But I didn't.

How bizarre was *that*?

Finally, once the tears were subsiding, I called, "Hector?"

ore. "Yeah?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to take care of me?"

His body went still for a few seconds then he kissed the top of my head. "We'll save that for another talk."

I didn't think I wanted to have another talk with Hector. This one went so well for me.

it took I found out he knew I was his informant (which was kind of embarrassing). I found out he'd been tracking me and doing more to me than he and his buddies sitting in cars outside the house. He *totally* listened when I explained why we wouldn't work. And he got me to drop press charges against two of the Balducci Boys, blowing my plan out of the water and playing my ace in the hole way faster than I intended.

No, this talk didn't go well for me.

Still, I was getting kind of sleepy. Tears always exhausted me, and I was old crying fit like that did me in.

Furthermore, I was full of Blanca's food.

Lastly, but most importantly, Hector's heat and closeness made me feel warm, snug and safe, and I hadn't felt warm, snug and safe in *forever*.

So, instead of protesting the very idea of another talk that also came out very badly for me, I said, "Okay."

Then I snuggled even closer, not even caring what I was doing, and it because I liked to feel Hector's arms go tighter and tighter until holding me super close.

And once I was super close, snug, warm and safe in his arms asleep.

y head.

e didn't

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id a big

me feel

ould go



Then I snuggled even closer, not even caring what I was doing, and doing it because I liked to feel Hector's arms go tighter and tighter until he was holding me super close.

And once I was super close, snug, warm and safe in his arms, I fell asleep.

EIGHT



## MAN OF THE MONTH

*Sadie*

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was the muscular color man's throat.

As this didn't happen to me every day, I thought it best to take s my surroundings.

I was in the living room on the couch and I was wrapped up i appeared to be Hector. Although I kept my eyes trained on his th couldn't really be anyone else.

By wrapped up, I meant that his arm was draped around my wa arm was draped around his waist, my top leg was thrown over his th leg was cocked between my legs. My other hand was flattened aga chest and the rest of me was pressed up close to the rest of him.

Oh my.

Somewhere along the line someone had thrown a blanket over body was warm, the blanket was keeping in his warmth and I felt ultra

Memories of the night before flooded my brain and my coziness my body like a shot.

I needed to get the heck out of there, pronto. I tilted my head l

assess his consciousness. The minute I did, his chin dipped down  
looked at me.

Well, that answered that question. He was awake.

“Hi,” I said for lack of another opening.

His face warmed and it dawned on my somnolent brain that he  
good when he woke up, especially his warm, sleepy, black eyes.

Oh my again.

Before I could think of anything else to say or do, his face started  
nn of atoward me and, all of a sudden, he was kissing me.

Yes, *kissing me*.

stock of In the morning. On the couch. Tangled up with me.

For a nanosecond, I thought I’d pull away, but then I realized how  
in what liked his lips on my lips. Then the kiss deepened and I realized  
roat, it *seriously* liked his lips on my lips, but I liked his tongue in my mou  
better.

ist, my So I kissed him back.

igh, his This time it wasn’t filled with urgency and fire. This time he was t  
inst his slow, making it sweet, building the burn.

I liked it.

I liked it so much, I pressed closer to him and his hands started  
us. His on me.

cozy. They weren’t urgent either, not invading, not demanding. His tou  
s excited light, soft, and it felt really, super *good*.

That made me press closer. My hand dipped under his shirt and I  
back to skin at his back. His heat was immense, his skin was smooth and I

and he heard muscle under it.

I liked that too. I liked it so much I wanted more of it. I liked it so much I would give my entire trust fund to get more of it.

“Mornin’ kids,” we heard Ralphie say.

My body froze.

Hector’s mouth broke from mine and he looked in my eyes.

“Who’s for coffee?” Ralphie went on and didn’t stop. “Buddy’s been coming tied one on last night, so you’ll have to make do with Breakfast for two, Ralphie.”

I lifted my head to look over Hector’s shoulder and saw him disappear toward the kitchen, wearing his robe and scratching his behind.

I settled down and stared at Hector, torn between laughing, crying, and panicking.

“We just got caught making out on the couch,” I informed him in a whisper, as if he hadn’t been present at the event.

“Yeah,” Hector agreed, his lips doing that fighting-a-grin thing again.

Then it happened. I kind of exhaled sharply through my nose, and to control it, I pressed my face in his throat and started to giggle. A few seconds later I was beyond giggling, straight to laughter, my body shaking and moving.

Hector rolled to his back, taking me with him so I was on top. The next time, I kept laughing.

Later, when I was kind of laugh-hiccoughing, I lifted up, my forehead resting on his chest, my other hand coming up to wipe my eyes.

“That was funny,” I told him, eyes rolled to the ceiling, and I felt his hand underneath my right one.

“I can see,” Hector said.

much I I looked at him.

He was grinning, but I realized belatedly he hadn’t been laughing.

“Didn’t you think it was funny?”

“*Mamita*, it was funny, but I’ve never seen you laugh like that before. Way in hell I was missin’ the chance to watch that.”

hangin’. My stomach pitched at what he said and I was left speechless, the stomach slapping on my face.

“And there it goes,” he mumbled, watching my mouth.

Ralphie “Do you laugh a lot?” I asked, but for some reason I didn’t expect an answer. Maybe because it was kind of a personal question.

ing and His arms were around my waist and he gave me a small, affectionate squeeze.

m on a Then to my surprise, he answered, “On a scale of one to ten, with one being Sadie and ten being Indy, I’d say I’m at about a five.”

lin. “Does Indy laugh a lot?”

unable “All the time.”

Within My body, which had gone tense, relaxed, and I smiled at him.

with it. “That’s good. I like her,” I told him. “She’s nice. She deserves a little whole laughter.”

arm on Mr. Mood Swing’s face grew dark and his voice sounded angry when he asked, “And you don’t?”

swiping “I didn’t say that.”

“It was implied.”

I thought about what I said then my eyes narrowed in confusion. “imply that either.”

“Wasn’t it you who stood in this room last night tellin’ me you belong with ‘my people,’ sayin’ you were Seth Townsend’s daughter. No that’s the reason you didn’t belong?”

“Well, I am Seth Townsend’s daughter.”

And I was!

“*Tu padre* was a drug dealer, *you* were a drug dealer’s daughter. You can’t pick your father. No one blames you for the choices he made. You do the best you could with the hand you were dealt.”

I tried to rewind our morning from kiss to now to see where we went awry, but Hector gave me another squeeze and the rewind hit pause. His squeeze was affectionate, but it was an *annoyed* affectionate.

“Your lot in life is not payin’ for what your father did. You got a different lot in life. You chose your path the minute you started feedin’ information me through that drawer.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means a lot of girls livin’ your life wouldn’t make that decision. It meant they couldn’t live in big houses, wear designer clothes and drive expensive cars.”

I blinked at him. “Hector, I don’t know if you know this, but I do have a trust fund.”

“You got three million dollars in a trust fund. That is not gonna get you the kind of life you lived with your father.”

He was right, of course. Three million dollars was a lot of money,

I didn't father was worth loads more (before the Feds seized it, of course).

This was all making me a bit uncomfortable, so before I could  
I didn't better of it, I blurted, "Can we go back to the jovial, fun-loving portion  
ter and morning?"

He stared at me, still angry for a minute, then his face cleared and I  
out a sigh.

"Wish you'd picked the tongue in my mouth, hand up my shirt po  
er. You the morning."

You did I kind of wished I'd picked that too.

He gave me another squeeze. I caught his grin and I realized that  
e went was teasing me.

e. This My stomach did another pitch.

"Sweet'ums, I know you're going for the world record for longest  
fferent the history of man, but we have paintings to sell so we can pay or  
ation to Gallerie credit card," Ralphie said from the door to the kitchen.

Hector and I turned our heads and looked at Ralphie.

"I don't have a Z Gallerie credit card," I told Ralphie.

ion if it "Yes, but *I* do. Come on you two, up and at 'em." Ralphie clap  
d drive hands. "Chop chop."

This time, *I* blew out a sigh.

have a Hector did an ab curl. I came up with him and ended up on his  
stood and set me on my feet. I realized then I was shoeless and Hec  
ive you bootless.

"How did my shoes get taken off?" I asked, staring at my feet.

but my "Buddy and I woke up Hispanic Hottie when we got home," Ralph

“Well, Buddy did. He was being really loud. Anyway, I got Hector a l  
d think he took off your shoes and that’s all I saw. I had a hunk a burnin’ lov  
n of the to bed before he hurled on the hall carpet.”

I looked at Hector. “I slept through that?”

ne blew Even though I asked Hector, Ralphie answered, “Like a baby.”

I was a light sleeper. I’d wake up at a kitten’s mew. How could  
rtion of through *that?*

“Come on, I made coffee and I’m thinking toasted brioche  
marmalade. Yum-a-*licious!*” Ralphie went on.

now he “Thanks, but I have to go,” Hector said, and Ralphie’s eyebrows w

“Have you *had* brioche?” Ralphie asked.

“No,” Hector answered.

date in “You don’t want to miss brioche,” Ralphie advised him.

1 our Z Hector threw Ralphie a smile and then turned to me. His arm went  
my waist and he pulled me gently to him so our sides and parts of ou  
were touching.

His head bent to mine, he gave me a quick kiss and he looked i  
ped his eyes.

“I’ll go home, shower, change. I’ll call Eddie and Shirleen. Shi  
call Daisy. You call your friend Bex. I’ll come back and take you  
lap. He station. Tell Bex to meet you there in two hours,” Hector told me.

tor was Oh no.

In all the goings-on, I forgot I promised him I’d go to the station.

I opened my mouth to say something but Ralphie got there before I  
ie said.



blanket, “The station?” he asked.

to get Hector’s eyes swung to Ralphie. “Sadie and I talked last night and agreed to press charges against Ricky and Harvey Balducci this morning.

I watched as Ralphie’s face went pale and his hand came up to hold the doorjamb. His reaction alarmed me and my body went tight in preparation to go to him.

Before I could move, Ralphie breathed, “He’s going to pay?”

I felt the tears hit the backs of my eyes just as I saw them shimmer on Ralphie’s and heard the tremor of feeling in his voice.

“He’s gonna pay,” Hector said.

Ralphie blinked, got himself together and took his hand from the doorjamb.

“You...are...a...miracle worker!” he announced to Hector. “You’re officially Ralphie’s Man of the Week. No! Man of the Month! I’m giving you a certificate!”

I felt Hector’s body start to shake with laughter as Ralphie charged into the room.

“Go! Do your business. We’ll get Sadie ready,” Ralphie said, grabbing my hand, yanking me out of Hector’s arm and pulling me toward the hallway.

I looked behind me as Ralphie pulled me away and saw Hector sitting down to pick up his boots.

When he straightened, his eyes came to me, and still grinning, he said, “I’ll be back in an hour.”

My heart was beating and I was scared out of my mind. In the course of the day I was *not* sure about this pressing charges business.

But the only thing I could get in before Ralphie dragged me into  
id she's was, "Okay."

ing."



ld on to HECTOR, Buddy and I walked into the station.

variation Ralphie had gone to Art to open up.

After Hector left, Ralphie woke up Buddy and shared the news that  
going to the station. Buddy (according to Ralphie) jumped out of bed  
ering in split."

Buddy spent the morning gulping down copious amounts of ibuprofen  
mixed with acetaminophen with the addition of caffeine in his coffee. I  
looked like hell, but Buddy didn't have a shift that day (thus, him and  
om the himself to tie one on last night) and Ralphie informed me there was  
"on God's green earth" I was going to the station without one of the  
ou are me.

making While I showered, drank coffee, ate toasted brioche with  
marmalade and did my hair and makeup, Ralphie picked out my outfit  
ged into as Queen Ice as you could get.

Winter white, plain front, light wool trousers with wide legs and a  
rabbing hem. This was paired with a winter-white silk, tailored blouse. For c  
all. Ralphie added a slim, ice-blue belt and ice-blue fifties-style, ultra-p  
leaningtoed, pencil-heeled, sling-backed pumps. My ensemble was completed  
winter-white Italian leather, tailored blazer, my diamond studs and dia  
re said,in-platinum tennis bracelet.

Pure ice.

ld light Hector held my hand as we walked into the station, Buddy (still  
peaked), on my other side.

the hall In the lobby were Daisy, Shirleen, Luke Stark and a big man with brown hair and a muscle-bound frame. In fact, one look at him and I was certain sure that God had seen fit to give this man *twice* as many muscles as other men were granted.

Daisy rushed to me the moment she saw me.

at I was “You okay?” she asked.

“lickity “I’m scared to death,” I answered.

Hector squeezed my hand.

uprofen Daisy grabbed my casted wrist and held on. “Ain’t no one gonna Still, he you, not here, not again. *Comprende?*”

llowing I nodded.

no way “We’re gonna be right here. You won’t be alone,” she went on.

m with I nodded again.

orange We advanced to where Luke, Shirleen and the other man were standing.

. It was When I got within a few feet of her, Shirleen crowded in, pulled me from Hector and Daisy and gave me a fierce hug.

and cuffed “Child,” she said softly into my hair.

contrast, Then she let me go.

pointed- That was it. But that was all there needed to be.

l with a Shirleen Jackson gave good hugs.

monds- “Sadie, this is Luke Stark and Jack Tatum,” Hector said when Sadie moved away. “They work for Lee and they’re here to give their status.”

looking They were there the night you drove into the garage.”

At that, my body froze solid.

h light- Bex told me a lot of people blocked out what happened to them. I  
l I wasNo, I remembered every last second. Including scrambling in the stair  
scles asnothing but a nightgown.

I instantly decided I couldn't do this.

Right before I could turn on my heel and run, Jack spoke.

“I’m just gonna say, I like Hector’s plan for takin’ Ricky dow  
better than this shit. I don’t like the idea of him gettin’ a cushy jail cell  
next fifteen years. No man makes a woman end her night slippin’ in h  
na hurt blood on some stairs—”

“Jack,” Luke growled (yes, he *growled*).

I felt, rather than saw, Hector’s body grow tight, and that dai  
current was snapping all around the lobby.

“Thank you,” I said quickly in an effort to fight back the current.

ding.  
Jack stared at me.

ie away Then he said, “What?”

I pushed back the panic, tamped down the fear and sallied forth so  
didn’t come to blows with his colleague because he’d been an *eensy*  
honest at an inappropriate moment.

I explained, “You got to me first. You were nice. Thank you.”

Jack stared at me again.

shirleen Then he muttered, “Jesus.”

ements. I decided to take that as a muscle-bound man’s way of saying,  
*welcome*.

I took a deep breath, straightened my spine, looked up to Hec  
asked quietly, “Can we go and do this now?”

Not me. His arm slid along my shoulders, he pulled me into his side and well indown at me.

“Yeah, *mamita*, we can go do this now.”



WE WALKED into a big room that was full of people, phones ringing a n a lot of desks.

for the It didn't go silent when we walked in, but the noise definitely mute

ier own My eyes caught Eddie, who was standing at a desk in the middle room. Beside him was a middle-aged man, shorter than Eddie by inches, definitely rounder, and he had dark, thinning hair.

ngerous Their eyes came to us immediately upon entering the room. I sav look at his brother before his eyes moved to me. Then he smiled.

His smile was nearly as nice as Hector's.

“Willie, Brian, Tony, Jorge, she's here. Round 'em up,” the man Eddie said, pointing to some uniformed officers that were standing feet away, and then he twirled his finger and pointed to the door.

Hector

bit too The officers didn't waste time. They took off.

Eddie and the man walked to us.

The man stopped, Eddie didn't. His arm went around my waist leaned in and kissed the side of my head. While I was recovering fro he stepped back.

you're “This is Detective Jimmy Marker. He's gonna take care of yo Cusack called and said she'd be here in twenty minutes. We'll start a arrives,” Eddie told me.

tor and

I nodded.

looked “They weren’t jokin’, you do look like a fairy princess,” Detective Marker remarked.

I nodded again, now completely unfazed by this remark, then I sighed.

“I get that a lot.”

and lots Detective Marker stared at me for a second then he spoke again, ‘Brian, Jorge and Tony just went out to pick up Ricky and Harold. I’ve already called the hospital and made appointments to get statements from the staff who took care of you. Got officers jumpin’ at the chance to nab several two jackasses, so Luke, Jack, you’re up now. Luke, you’re with Melvin, you’re with Danny. Hector, I wanna talk to you.’

Without delay, Luke and Jack moved into the room, separated and went to different desks.

I didn’t even have a chance to take this in before Detective Marker started talking.

“Lee sent the photos of your apartment over this morning. I would’ve loved to have had a chance to send the lab boys over after the incident, but since someone will let us in now, we’ll comb the place, see if we can find a place that places Ricky there.”

“I can let you in,” Buddy volunteered.

Detective Marker looked over his shoulder and called, “Adam, get me access to Sadie’s apartment. Call the boys.”

A man across the room immediately picked up a phone.

I blinked.

Boy, these guys didn’t mess around.

Detective Marker’s eyes were on me again and he caught the

etective “We’re police. We don’t like crime,” he informed me.

“I don’t like it either,” I assured him, just in case he was wondering  
ned. “I wasn’t finished,” Detective Marker said.

“Oh,” I murmured.

“Willie, “I got a wife, three daughters. Rape’s on the top of the list of c  
ey. We don’t like,” Detective Marker declared.

rom the I swallowed then moved closer to Hector. When my hand found  
il those his strong fingers closed around mine, I nodded.

n. Jack, “I know who you are,” Detective Marker said, and I held my breath  
suppose, the way you grew up, you don’t get this so I’ll explain it  
id went now. You’re standin’ there holdin’ Hector Chavez’s hand. Hector’s  
brother. Eddie’s one of us. We don’t like crime, but we *really* do  
er kept crime when it happens to one of us. You’re one of us now. Ricky Bal  
goin’ down. I don’t care how it happens, but me and every man in thi  
la liked is gonna do whatever the fuck we gotta do to make it happen. You with  
, but if “I’m with you,” I whispered.

nything “All right then,” he nodded. Then he smiled (which made him a  
scary) and he reached out and squeezed my arm. “Badass Cop Speech  
let’s get this done.”

we got Without anything else to say, I said, “Okay.”



“V...I...FUCKIN’...P!” Tex boomed the minute Shirleen, Daisy, Hect  
walked into Fortnum’s Used Bookstore (Buddy was at my apartment v  
“lab boys”).

blink. We stopped several feet in front of the door and I took in the scene

There was a large open space at the front of the store, a counter in rows of bookshelves, an espresso counter against the back side wall. Comfortable-looking chairs, couches, armchairs and tables littered the floor. It smelled musty, dusty, but looked really cool in a lived-in, sit-back-for-a-while kind of way.

Even though it was well beyond coffee hour, there were people everywhere. Most of the seats were taken. There were three customers waiting in line to order, two standing at the end of the espresso counter waiting for their coffees.

Indy and a big, gray-bearded, long-gray-hair-in-a-ponytailed man wearing a black T-shirt that demanded you RIDE THE RANGE and a black leather jacket with a rolled red bandana on his forehead were standing behind the counter. Tex and Jet were behind the espresso counter. Ally was clearing coffee tables from the seating area.

“You!” Tex boomed, pointing at the people innocently sitting on the couch in front of the big, glass window at the front of the store. “They’re taking up seating. Up! *Move!*”

Without a word, as if this had happened before and they had learned from practice, the people grabbed their mugs and laptops and scurried to the tables.

“You!” Tex pointed to me. “Sit!”

“You better sit,” Shirleen whispered sideways to me. “Indy’s getting’ red. She hates it when Tex bosses around the customers. She looks like she’s gonna blow.”

I didn’t want Indy to blow so I nodded to Shirleen and hurried to the couch.



front of “I’m makin’ you a special,” Tex shouted to me.

Tons of “Okay, Tex,” I thought it best to shout back. Then I sat down.

middle. “You’re gonna hafta wait. That’s Sadie. She’s a VIP,” Tex infor  
k, stay- next person in line, like they didn’t already know this fact really, *really*

people Daisy sat down on one side of me, Shirleen on the other side. T  
close, like sentries.

stomers I looked helplessly up at Hector. He was doing that fighting-a-gri  
counter again.

wearing I narrowed my eyes at him. The grin grew into a glamorous white s

er vest My eyes un-narrowed and I stared at him. He shook his head and  
counter. the counter where Indy was.

the mugs Ally bustled up precariously balancing used coffee mugs.

“You okay?” she asked.

on the I nodded.

t’s VIP “It wasn’t that bad. Detective Marker is nice,” I told her.

oads of She smiled and her eyes danced in a mischievous Veronica Mars  
: corner way. “I wasn’t talking about that. I was talking about Hector taking  
Blanca’s for dinner last night. What *is* it with the Chavez men takin  
women home to meet their mama? They know better. Blanca’s a nu  
time Eddie took Jet home, Blanca had the whole family over, plus l  
face is neighborhood.”

e looks I gasped, sorry for Jet but also thankful that I didn’t have to deal w  
the neighborhood last night. What I had was enough!

l to the All of a sudden Jet was there.

“It’s true,” she told me. “I got snocked on margaritas.”

“And Eddie threw your cell across the yard and shattered a m. pitcher,” a newly arrived Indy shared.

ned the “I still wish I hadn’t missed that,” Daisy muttered.

✓ well. “Boy’s got good aim,” Shirleen put in. “Damn waste of ma hey sat though.”

“Why’d he throw your cell phone?” I asked Jet.

in thing “Well, I kind of had some bad men after me. One called me. Edd the phone away from me and heard what he had to say. It made smile. little...” she hesitated, “miffed.”

went to “Miffed! Eddie Chavez *miffed!* I love it,” Ally hooted.

“He wasn’t miffed, the man was *pissed!*” Indy put in, a huge smile face.

Boy, he would have to be beyond miffed to throw a cell phone.

I looked at Hector, who was talking to the guy with the bandana.

“I just bought a new cell phone. I like it,” I told them.

type of “Keep it away from Hector,” Ally advised then burst out laughing.

you to So did everyone else.

ig their I looked around at them, not sure what was funny.

it. First I mean I *did* like my cell phone. It was fancy and you could ever half the mail on it.

ith half Tex shouldered in and handed me a big mug.

“Butterscotch sandie latte. That’s butterscotch and pecan syrup. don’t trip your trigger, woman, nothin’ will,” he announced. T shouldered back through and returned to the espresso counter.

argarita I turned to Daisy. “I don’t mean to be mean or anything but, is  
bit...*odd?*”

Daisy started giggling and it sounded like Christmas bells. I couldn’t  
but giggle with her.

She put her arm around me and gave me a squeeze. “Sugar, that a  
*half* of it.”

I took a sip of my latte. My eyes bugged out.

Trigger tripped.



HECTOR and I spent about an hour at Fortnum’s. Hector spent most  
time talking on his phone. I spent my time talking to the girls, Duke (with the bandana, who had a very deep, gravelly voice and was so intense in a scary but not overly-scary, way) and Tex.

Tex made me go behind the counter so he could teach me how to make an espresso. Since I had an espresso maker and so did Ralphie and Bronco showed him my stuff.

He was impressed.

Then I told Hector I had to get back to the gallery. We had an opening next week and Ralphie was having to do all the work. Even if I was probably get e-charges against one brother for rape and another brother for attempted kidnapping, which for normal people would mean they probably take the day off, I couldn’t sit back and let Ralphie do all the

If that I said good-bye to the girls, Tex and Duke. Hector walked me out when he Bronco, helped me in and we took off.



HECTOR DOUBLE-PARKED in LoDo (what they call lower downtown)

it he a Denver) right outside Art.

Like this was perfectly legal and he had all the right in the world, he didn't help double-park, he casually flipped on his hazards and walked me into the

We walked in, Ralphie looked up and called, "Hey, Double H, didn't the called. Said he's making his famous seared tuna in citrus and flatbread noodles tonight. You missed the brioche. You *cannot* miss the tuna would be a crime against gastronomy."

I stared at Ralphie.

Someone please tell me that Ralphie didn't just invite Hector over to dinner.

Someone else please tell me that Ralphie hadn't given Hector his new nickname "Double H."

"What time?" Hector asked.

"Six-ish," Ralphie replied.

"I'll be there," Hector said.

Yes, Ralphie just invited Hector over to dinner. *And* Hector accepted.

I took stock of my life and asked myself if it was in my control.

In a nanosecond, I came to the conclusion it wasn't in my control.

Before I could speak to either of them to tell them I needed to get my head together—to deal with the day, to cope with my decisions, to understand my feelings, to figure out what I was going to do next—Hector's arms wrapped around my shoulders and he curled me into his heat.

All thoughts of mind-organization and future-planning swept out of my brain and I looked up at him.

"See you at six," he said.

I nodded.

world to His other hand came up and his fingers sifted into the hair at the  
e store. my head.

Buddy “You did good today,” he said quietly.

sh-fried “Thank you,” I replied.

a. That “I’ll call if I hear they picked up Ricky or Harvey before I con  
tonight.”

“That would be nice.”

over to “Sadie?”

“What?”

tor the “You with me?”

I blinked in confusion and said, “Yes.”

And I was, wasn’t I? I was standing in his arms for goodness sake.

“This is Sadie?” Hector went on.

ed. I blinked again. “Yes.”

“My Sadie?” he kept at it.

This time I blinked for a different reason.

get my *His Sadie? Was there a Hector’s Sadie? Was I Hector’s Sadi*  
lerstand Hector think I was his Sadie?

n came Oh...my...*God*.

Before I could process what he said or get close to processing w  
: of my meant, I watched him smile, then he bent his head and kissed my lips.

“Yeah,” he said, his face an inch away. “It’s my Sadie.”

“What are you talking about?” I breathed.

“I thought she slipped away. You were acting like Stepford Sadie.”

side of “Stepford Sadie?”

He kept smiling. “Yeah.”

My back went straight and my confused stare turned into an *a* stare.

ne over I mean, really!

Stepford Sadie?

“I’m not Stepford Sadie. I’m Ice Princess Sadie,” I informed because, well, he should get it right!

“Whatever. Just as long as she’s gone,” he muttered.

He touched his mouth to mine again then *he* was gone.

I stared at the door as it swished closed behind him.

In a flash Ralphie was by my side.

“He...is...*lush*,” Ralphie breathed. “I wanna take a bite outta his *licious*.”

I decided immediately I didn’t want to talk about Hector being *lush* *definitely* didn’t want to talk about taking a bite out of him.

e? Did “My life is out of control,” I told the door.

Without hesitation, Ralphie did the same move Hector had that m except different, less possessive and protective, just as sweet. His ar around my shoulders and he pulled me into his side and partially to his hat that

“Sweets? My advice?” he asked.

I put my head to his shoulder, my arms around his waist and I nodd

“What I can see with that man, the safety bar is locked tight. P

' hands straight up and enjoy the ride."

Oh my.

*nnoyed*

d him,

n. Dee-

sh and I

orning,

m went

front.

led.

ut your

hands straight up and enjoy the ride.”

Oh my.





## YOU SLEEP HERE DON'T YOU?

*Sadie*

“**A** aahhooow,” Ralphie yawned with an exaggerated stretch tucked out. Time for beddie bye. Buddy, baby, you comin’ wit

I looked from Hector’s shoulder (where my head was resting) to of the couch (where Ralphie was stretching) to the armchair (where was sitting).

Then I rolled my eyes and went back to staring at the credits rol the TV.

Seriously, how obvious could you be?



DINNER WENT okay if you didn’t count one minor incident.



BUDDY HADN’T JUST MADE his famous tuna and noodles. He’d set the room table and even lit candles. He also served his spinach sala pumpkin oil balsamic vinaigrette before the tuna, and chocolate almo with vanilla essence whipped cream for dessert.

I changed out of my Queen Ice outfit, and in the two seconds betw arrival home at six oh five, and Hector’s arrival at the house at six oh f

two seconds, I stared at the contents of my closet trying to find a dinner-at-home-with-Hector-and-my-two-gay-roommates outfit.

Impossible!

In a dither, I opted for a pair of jeans and a black camisole, over which I wore a gray cardigan (well, it wasn't just a gray cardigan, it was a cardigan from Anthropologie—it had a hood and wide sleeves with tiny lace ruffles at the sleeves and around the hem). I decided, since the cardigan said more than “casual-dinner-at-home-with-Hector,” I'd go barefoot.

“I'm  
help me?” Barefoot was as casual as you could get.

I put my hair in a big ponytail and headed down.

the end Since Ralphie talked a mile a minute and Buddy wanted the lowdown  
Buddy The Search for Harvey and Ricky (the lowdown was that Harvey had  
snagged, Ricky was still “at large,” and I kind of wished it was the other  
around), I didn't have to say much.

ling on This continued at dinner, mostly Ralphie talking enough for everyone  
and, when he could get a word in edgewise, Buddy demanding details  
from Hector on how things would go once Ricky and Harvey were both caught.

This took a turn when, somehow, we got on the subject of doing  
YoYo, and Ralphie shoved me, kicking and screaming, right in middle

dining “Sadie wants to watch YoYo,” Ralphie told Buddy when it was be-  
clear he was losing the fight.

nd torte My head snapped up and I saw from across the table Hector's eye  
to mine and one side of his mouth twitched.

een our “Sadie, is that true?” Buddy asked.

ive and I widened my eyes at Hector in a non-verbal, *Help me!*

casual- Hector remained silent but his mouth kept twitching.  
"Sadie, tell him. You loved YoYo, didn't you?" Ralphie prompted.  
I decided to be Hector and remain silent.

which I "Sadie?" Now it was Buddy's turn to prompt.  
a gray I made the new decision to extricate myself pronto.  
y black "I don't get a say. It isn't my house."  
ardigan This was a bad decision.  
"What do you *mean* it isn't your house?" Ralphie snapped.  
I looked at Ralphie.

own on Ralphie looked angry.  
id been "Well, what I mean is—" I started.  
ier way "You sleep here, don't you?" Ralphie asked.  
"Yes, but—" I tried again.

eryone, "Your clothes are here," Ralphie pushed.  
ls from "Yes, but, what I mean—" I kept trying.  
ght.

gsitting "You shower here, put your makeup on here, watch Veronica Ma  
come home after work to, um...I don't know? *Here!* Don't you?" I  
pressed.  
coming "Yes, I guess so, but—"

is come "You *guess* so?" Ralphie's eyes had narrowed.  
"Ralphie, you wanna let her talk?" Buddy cut in.  
Ralphie sat back, crossed his arms on his chest and glared at me.  
"All I'm saying is that I'm a guest, and as a guest I don't have any

these kinds of decisions,” I explained.

Ralphie looked at Buddy and snapped, “She thinks she’s a guest.”

“Sadie—” Buddy started.

Ralphie interrupted, “What? Are you moving out?”

My gaze slid to Hector, who was now smiling at the remains of chocolate almond torte. I wanted to throw my plate at him.

I, of course, did not.

Because, even though he deserved it, that would be rude.

I answered Ralphie, “Well, yes.”

Hector’s head came up and his smile vanished.

“What? When?” Buddy asked sharply.

I looked at Buddy. “I realized last night that you guys have been staying out for me for a while now so it’s probably time to get out of your hair.”

“Buddy doesn’t have hair,” Ralphie clipped.

“You know what I mean,” I said quietly to Ralphie.

“No, Ms. Sadie Marie Townsend, I do not know what you are saying here,” Ralphie didn’t take a hint from my quiet tone.

“Maybe we should talk about this later.” Buddy was eyeing the completely unamused Hector.

“That would be good,” I said with relief.

“You better believe we’ll talk about it later,” Ralphie threatened as he swung his glare toward Buddy. “So what’s the verdict on the fucking situation,” he demanded.

I held my breath wondering what Hector might think of all this.

shenanigans. I bet Blanca didn't say "fucking" at *her* table.

Buddy's eyes came to me.

Then he sighed.

"We'll watch YoYo."

of his



AFTER DINNER we settled into the living room and watched *Walking Tall* (The Rock version, which Buddy declared was the only version that was not a piece of shit due to The Rock being a whole lot easier on the eyes than Jim Belushi (aka Baker)).

This was not normal Ralphie and Buddy viewing fodder, but I figured they were being good hosts to macho man Hector. I didn't really see them sitting through *Auntie Mame* or *Steel Magnolias*.

looking .” Of course, they finagled me into the middle of the couch position. Ralphie didn't have to try the massaging my feet move. Hector pulled me into his side right away.

I'd had a rough day and decided not to fight it.

mean.” Anyway, he was comfy and warm.



ie now NOW THE MOVIE was over and Buddy and Ralphie were off to bed.

“Night, sweets,” Ralphie said, kissing my cheek.

“Goodnight,” I replied.

ed. He Buddy leaned in after Ralphie. “See you in the morning, Sadie.” Then Hector kissed my cheek too.

I smiled at him. “See you.”

I these “Hector, later.” Buddy lifted his chin to Hector.

“Double H, you the man,” was Ralphie’s bizarre goodnight.

Then they were gone.

Now what did I do?

I twisted to look at Hector.

“You want to watch another movie?” I asked.

ill (The  
worth a  
oe Don

He shook his head.

“An episode of Veronica Mars?” I tried.

More head shaking.

figured  
Hector

“A game?”

Still more head shaking.

Oh no.

on, but  
lled me

I was out of options.

Hector wasn’t.

His arm around my waist curled and his other hand came to my shoulder. He  
turned me and pulled me into his lap.

His eyes warm on my face, his arms around me loosely, he asked  
doin’ okay?”

“Yes,” I answered.

He gave me a mini-squeeze. “Tough day for you,” he said softly.

Something about that question hit me somewhere deep.

Then he

It wasn’t fun, reliving what Ricky did to me in front of a camera in an  
interrogation room, even if Bex was with me, Detective Marker was  
nice and I knew Daisy and Shirleen were out in the hall. It also was  
reliving what Harvey did to me.

The fact that Hector would realize this would take its toll—even if I was trying to set it aside and not make a big deal of it—meant a lot.

I pulled in my lips and bit them.

I could have gone all Ice Princess on him, but when he was being nice and I had nothing to keep myself shielded from that would just mean I was a bitch.

So I whispered, “I’ll be okay.”

At my whisper, he grinned. “I knew you could do it.”

The warmth in his tone and the approval in his eyes made my stomach flip-flop.

It was then I decided I needed my Ice Shields up.

“Nobody likes a know-it-all,” I said coldly.

His grin got bigger. He shook his head and I got the impression he thought my Ice Shields were lame and scrawny.

hip. He got to his feet, taking me with him then setting me on mine.

With his head tilted down to look at me, his hand slid around to touch my neck and up into my hair. I just barely controlled a delicious shiver (but I did it).

“I gotta get home. Get some sleep,” he told me.

I felt a wave of disappointment hit me.

I’d spent all but about five hours in the last twenty-seven with him (I’d counted). It would be weird for him just to go.

s really I didn’t tell him that. Instead, I nodded.

sn’t fun He dropped his hand but caught mine and took me with him as he

if I was to the door.

Once there, he stopped, turned to me, his fingers wrapped around my hand and he looked down at it.

ng nice “Who’s takin’ you to get this removed?”

I was a “Bex.”

His gaze lifted to mine. “She can’t do it, you call me.”

It wasn’t really a request, but I still said, “Okay.”

He dropped my cast and tugged on my other hand. I leaned forward and my head came down and he kissed me, slow and sweet.

He lifted his head an inch and murmured, “I wanna hear the locks.”

I wasn’t breathing really well so I decided not to try to talk and just nodded again.

He left. I went to the door, turned the locks and put my ear to it so I could hear his boots walking away.

When I couldn’t hear them anymore, I said to the door, “Blooming

he back I walked up the stairs, into my room and went to my nightwear drawer.

I used to wear nothing but silky, lacy nighties to bed. On Day Sixteen at Ralphie and Buddy’s house, after they moved my stuff in, I took every one of them and threw them in the kitchen garbage.

I don’t know why. I just did.

m (yes, From that point, I wore T-shirts and yoga pants to bed.

On about Day Seventeen at Ralphie and Buddy’s, Ralphie and I came home from the gallery and there were two big pink and white Victoria’s Secret bags on my bed. In them were two pairs of silk



pajama bottoms with matching camisoles, two pairs of soft cotton a  
my cast pajama bottoms and matching camisoles, two pairs of soft knit  
bottoms and matching camisoles and two pairs of silk, tailored w  
pajamas.

Buddy'd had the day off and he'd obviously gone shopping.

They must have seen my nighties in the garbage.

I didn't say anything. Neither did they. But I mentally added a pe  
Ralphie's merit increase at his next performance evaluation.  
ird. His

I pulled off my clothes, pulled on my jade green pajama botto  
matching camisole with smoky-gray lace at the bodice and hem  
,  
camisole and pajama pants (they were very pretty, Buddy had good  
simply women's nightwear), went to the bathroom off my bedroom, brusl  
teeth and washed my face.

I could Then I went to bed.

I tried to settle in but I couldn't.  
heck."

I tossed and turned, thinking of Harvey in jail and Ricky still "at  
wer. Thinking Ricky was likely pretty angry at me while he was still "at  
Nine atThinking that Hector had taken me to his mom's house on our first d  
ery lasthow weird and scary that was. Thinking that Daisy was again my frier  
intrigued me, Indy and Jet were sweet and Shirleen gave good hugs.

I tried to clear my mind and tossed and turned some more.

But I couldn't settle.

I came It was all going to get worse. I knew it. If either Harvey or Ricky  
-stripedit, I'd have to testify. I'd have to tell a room full of people what happ  
y, lacyme and I'd have to see both of them again, and I didn't want to do that

nd lacy Not ever again.

pajama And I didn't know what was happening with Hector. I was getting  
omen's and it seemed I couldn't stop myself. Not that he was giving me the ch

If I was honest with myself I liked to be around him. He made  
things, things I hadn't felt since Mom left. It was more than safe.  
comfy, snug and content, like I didn't have to be looking over my sh  
rcent to all the time, wondering what his true intentions were, guarding myse  
the sharks circling. He was real. He wasn't hiding anything. He was  
ms and for anything.

of the He was just Hector.

taste in And in the very, very back of my mind where I let my true feelin  
red my had to admit that it was more than just liking being with him. I lik  
kissing me, touching me. I liked it loads. So much, when it was happ  
didn't even occur to me to push him away.

I should be pushing him away.

large." I couldn't get used to this, I knew. I knew better than to let anyone

large." I was going to have to get rid of him and to do it I was going to  
ate and bring back the Ice Princess.

id, Ally It was on that thought my cell rang.

I threw my covers back, jumped out of bed and ran to the fluffy  
armchair in my bedroom, snatching my cell off the top of my purse b  
woke Ralphie and Buddy.

fought Before I could think twice, I flipped it open and put it to my ear.

ened to "Hello?"

"Sadie, you stupid cunt!"

My back went straight at the C-word, but the vicious voice kept talking in deep<sup>my</sup> ear.

ance. “You shoulda let me deal with Ricky and Harvey. Shit, you stupid

me feel He said it again!

It was “Who is this?” I asked.

houlder “You dumb bitch. Settin’ Chavez and Nightingale on us. What the

elf from

sn’t out I knew this voice. I wasn’t sure which, but it was either Donny or Balducci.

Blooming heck.

gs lie, I Those crazy Balducci Brothers!

ed him Why?

ening it Why, why, why, why, *why*?

Someone please tell me, what did *I* do?

He kept talking. “You’re gonna pay, you bitch, you’re gonna in. pay.”

have to Disconnect.

I stood there in the dark, cell to my ear, and I could feel my heart in my throat.

, chintz Then I flipped my phone shut and ran out of my room, across the before itright to Ralphie and Buddy’s closed door.

I lifted my hand to knock and stopped.

It had to be after midnight. I couldn’t wake them. They both had to the next day. They had jobs, lives. They’d already seen me through and an attempted kidnapping. What kind of friend would lay a middle-

lking in night threatening phone call on their door, even if the call did include  
word (twice!)?

cunt.” If I kept dragging them into my mess, I was going to use them  
couldn’t use them up.

I already owed them...

fuck?” I closed my eyes and shook my head.

r Marty I owed them too much to ever repay. I couldn’t use more.

I stepped away from the door and kept backing up until I hit the o  
wall. I slid down, my knees coming up until my bottom hit the floor.  
wrapped my arms around my legs, pressed my cheek against my kn  
took in deep breaths.

I could do this. I could get through this all by myself. I’d just calm  
and go to sleep. I’d be okay. I was always okay.

Well, if not okay-okay than at least okay...ish.

fuckin’ My phone rang in my hand. I jerked back and my phone went sa  
the air.

I scrambled to catch it but it dropped to my side. My hands wen  
beating floor and searched blindly in the dark until my fingers hit the phone.

I snatched it up, flipped it open and put it to my ear. “Leave me al  
all and hissed.

“Sadie.”

It was Hector.

to work I closed my eyes tight and swallowed my heart, which was lodged  
a rape throat.

-of-the-

“Hang tight, *mamita*,” he told me. “I’ll be there in ten.”

the C- I blinked into the darkness. “What?”

But he’d already disconnected.

n up. I I stared at my illuminated phone for what could have been seconds. Then I flipped it shut.

My eyes moved to Buddy and Ralphie’s door and I willed it closed.

Then I thought about how my life was such a *fucking* mess and it was all down to my *fucking* father and the *fucking* Balduccis.

Then I Then I wondered why Hector was coming over. I mean, I get a phone call in the middle of the night and five minutes later he calls and says he’s coming over?

n down How bizarre was *that*?

All of this must have taken ten minutes because I heard a knock on the door.

iling in I ran down the stairs, and with my ear to the door I called, “Who is that?”  
“Me,” Hector said.

t to the I unlocked and opened the door.

He put a hand to my belly, shoved me back, stepped in, closed the door behind him, twisted and locked it. After locking it, he turned to me and his mouth opened to say something and he pulled me roughly into his arms and held me tight.

The panic crawling through my system slid away instantly and I fell into him.

I took a shaky breath then tilted my head back to look at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Brody, our computer guy, patched into your cell. We monitor you and we can listen to them. Jack heard Marty Balducci. He called me. I

conds or Oh my.

Simple as that.

to stay *He called me. I came.*

I dropped my head and rested my forehead against his chest. His arms got tighter.

“He’s not gonna hurt you.”

a nasty I wanted to laugh.

nd says I did not.

“They’ve already hurt me. One of them raped me. Another one raped me in an alley and tried to kidnap me in order that he could rape me.” He whispered on a hiss directly to his chest.

“*Mamita*, look at me.” His tone was gentle.

it?” I shook my head.

“Sadie, look at me.” This time, his tone was firm.

I sighed and looked at him.

he door “He’s not gonna hurt you.”

ne, my I shook my head again.

ms and “I’m tellin’ you, *mi corazón*, he’s not gonna hurt you.”

sagged Instead of fighting him, I shoved my face in his chest. I did this because I figured I wouldn’t win.

What are I also knew what “*mi corazón*” meant. It meant, “my heart,” and I even have to ask Jet if that was a step up in endearments.

ur calls I realized that my arms were around him, and I brought my cold hands  
came.” to the heat of his chest. I was still carrying my cell phone and now I  
to throw it into a margarita pitcher. He stroked my back for a while  
couldn't fight it (it felt too nice) and I started to relax into him.

He must have felt the tension leave me, but he held my relaxed body  
even longer until it seemed kind of weird that we were standing there  
talking, just him holding me.

Finally, he said, “If you're gonna be all right, I'll go home.”

Instantly the panic started crawling again, and before I could think  
head snapped back and I cried, “No!”

Blooming heck.

Someone, please tell me I didn't just do that.

To cover, I jerked out of his arms, all the while shaking my head and  
hand holding my cell phone up in the air.

“No, no. Go home. It's okay. Don't listen to me. I'm just—” I started  
he reached out, pulled the cell out of my hand then his fingers wrapped  
around my wrist.

He tugged me into the living room straight to the decorative chair  
held the extra toss pillows and blankets (Z Gallerie, of course). He opened  
pulled out a blanket, handed it to me and walked us to the couch. I was  
stunned silence as he threw my cell on the coffee table.

He sat, yanked off his boots then reached out and pulled the blanket  
my arms. He tossed it to the end of the couch. His hands came to rest  
and with a gentle tug he brought me off my feet. His hands went tight  
hips as he leaned back and I fell with him, Hector controlling my fall  
landing right on top of him (yes, right on top of him!).

ands up He rolled me to the side so I was stuck between him and the coucl  
wantedhe did an ab curl, nabbed the blanket, shook it out and placed it over us

until I When he settled on his back, his arm around me, me tucked to h  
my cheek on his shoulder, I belatedly found my voice and asked, “W  
ody foryou doing?”

ere, not “Go to sleep, Sadie.”

“I—”

“Sadie, go to sleep.”

nk, my “But—”

“Please, *mamita*, I’m wiped.”

I snapped my mouth shut.

with the Well, so much for siccing the Ice Princess on him to get rid of him.

That was my last thought before I gave up the struggle, and  
minutes, I fell asleep.

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ly hips,

: on my

and me



He rolled me to the side so I was stuck between him and the couch. Then he did an ab curl, nabbed the blanket, shook it out and placed it over us.

When he settled on his back, his arm around me, me tucked to his side, my cheek on his shoulder, I belatedly found my voice and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Go to sleep, Sadie.”

“I—”

“Sadie, go to sleep.”

“But—”

“Please, *mamita*, I’m wiped.”

I snapped my mouth shut.

Well, so much for siccing the Ice Princess on him to get rid of him.

That was my last thought before I gave up the struggle, and within minutes, I fell asleep.

TEN



## POWDER ROOM

*Sadie*

“**W**akey wakey, kids. Time for coffee,” Ralphie said, and I opened my eyes.

I could see the coffee table and Ralphie’s legs in his robe walking across the living room. Again, since this wasn’t my normal upon-waking starting point, I assessed my situation.

I was on the couch, my legs bent. Something heavy was resting on my waist and there was immense heat coming at me all down the back of my body.

It would seem Hector and I were spooning on the couch. So during the night I’d moved from having my back pressed to the couch with my front tucked into Hector’s side, to being in front of Hector at the other end of the couch.

How I slept through that I had no idea.

The arm around my waist curled around more, slanting across my back, and I was pulled up to sitting. Then two hands came to my waist and pushed me to a standing position in front of Hector. Hands to my shoulders turned me to face him, and before I could say “boo,” his head descended

brushed my mouth with his giving me a soft, sweet, morning kiss. He lifted, he turned and left the room.

Frozen to the spot, breathing nowhere near normal, I heard the room door open and close.

My body jerked out of its stupor and I ran upstairs to my bathroom

I forced my mind to still as unbidden thoughts of last night rushed Thoughts of crazy Marty, incarcerated Harvey and still-at-large Ricky.

And also thoughts of Hector coming to my rescue.

Instead, I forced myself to think about my most recent predicament decided to take it one step at a time. Each step taken would get me through for now.

I'd think of all the rest of it...later.

First, brush teeth then floss teeth and then wash face. After that make on my I didn't look like a fright. Then put on something so I was wearing me of my just silky, lacy pajama bottoms and a camisole. But not something that make me look like I was embarrassed or a prude because that would weakness and my father told me (time and again), even if you weakness, you should never, *never* expose it.

Finally find my Ice Princess, click her into place and...proceed.

I took a deep breath, forced all other thoughts out of my head and through my mental morning to-do list.

By the time I walked into the kitchen I was fresh faced and I was breathed. I'd put on my full-length, cream cotton waffle-weave robe, he didn't close the front because that might show I lacked confidence) and led. He certain sure I could handle whatever came at me.

is head Hector was sitting on a stool at the island, so was Buddy. Both of them had a steaming mug of coffee resting in front of them. In the air I could smell the brioche toasting and Ralphie was at the counter manning the toaster.

“Hey there, sweets. Coffee?” Ralphie asked me, twirling a knife in his hand.  
“I’ll get it,” I replied and moved into the room not looking at Hector.  
Hector, by the way, was one of those things I was going to think about later.

I made my coffee (dash of milk, one sugar, just like Hector).  
“Double H is staying for brioche this morning,” Ralphie informed me happily, like this was akin to William Shakespeare rising from the dead for the sole purpose of eating brioche with us while reciting a couple sonnets.

“That’s nice,” I said, but it didn’t sound like I meant it. It sounded more than a little uninterested.

Ralphie’s head snapped around so he could look at me closely.  
I gave him a look that said, *What?*  
He gave me a look that said, *You know what!*

“A few things we need to go over,” Hector said into Ralphie and my ears without a verbal exchange, apparently oblivious to my cold shoulder.

Unable to do anything else, I turned Ice Princess eyes to Hector.

He wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at Ralphie.

“From here on in, Sadie goes to and from work with you. She isn’t at the store and she doesn’t go anywhere unless she’s with one of you guys or the men. She needs to go somewhere and she doesn’t have someone to go with her, you call me and I’ll take her or arrange an escort.”

of them Well, maybe it should be said at this juncture that I *wasn't* certain  
d smell could handle whatever came at me.

r. I stared at Hector.

the air. What was he on about?

or. “Why?” Buddy asked, also wondering what Hector was on about.

k about “Sadie got a threatening phone call last night from Marty Bal  
Hector replied.

“*What?*” Ralphie screeched.

ned me Buddy stood up, body tense, eyes swinging to me.

ead for My Ice Princess took a hike and now I was staring *in horror* at Hector

of his What was he doing?

ed cold I wasn't going to tell them about the call! Telling them about that  
would take me one step closer to using them up.

I didn't want them worried.

Or, *more* worried.

If he told them this, he would use them up. He couldn't use them up

ny non- “She got a—” Hector started to repeat, but I came to and frantically  
to put a stop to his words.

“No!” I shouted, interrupting him and quickly advanced across  
kitchen.

't alone Hector's black eyes came to me and he stood as I approached.

or one “I need to talk to you a second,” I told him.

ne with “Sadie, they need to know—” Hector started, but I'd made it to him

I reached up, put my healthy hand over his mouth and put my cast

sure I into his chest. Then I pushed him toward the door, Hector walking back  
me moving forward, my hand still over his mouth.

He wrapped his fingers around my wrist, pulled it from his mouth  
halted at the door, making it clear he wasn't going anywhere.

I changed tactics, immediately twisted my hand so it was holding  
I walked around him, tugging him behind me and praying he'd change  
ducci," mind and come with me instead of resisting. I didn't want to engage  
kitchen tussle with Hector in front of Buddy and Ralphie. Firstly because  
would be embarrassing. Secondly because I'd lose.

He came with me (thank goodness) and I pulled him into the living  
room. My step stuttered and I had to make a quick decision.

I knew Ralphie and Buddy could hear if we stopped there. So I carried  
Hector through the living room, down the hall and into the powder room.  
I flipped on the light and closed the door.

Hector looked around us with obvious surprise that we were in a  
room, and who could blame him. A powder room wasn't exactly the  
choice for this particular *tête-à-tête* (or any *tête-à-tête*) but it was the  
option open to me. I wasn't going to take him to my room. The very  
y acted of Hector in my bedroom made my toes curl.

When his eyes came to me, the surprise was gone and he was smiling  
close-to-laughter, white glamorous smile.

"Don't you smile at me, Hector Chavez," I snapped, not sounding  
myself. Not sounding like Any Sadie That Ever Existed. Sounding  
like Attitude Sadie, and if you asked me if I could even be Attitude  
Sadie I would have told you, *heck no*.

"We're in the bathroom," Hector told me, still smiling.

awkward, “We are. I don’t want Ralphie and Buddy listening in,” I told him.

“Why not?”

with and “Because I don’t want them to hear what I have to say.”

He started laughing softly (yes, laughing!) and said, “I got that, r  
his and But why not?”

ange his “I didn’t want them to know about the phone call. You’ve got to  
ge in a there, say something that’ll make them not so worried and then...  
cause it know...” I stopped because I *didn’t* know. My mind was racing  
couldn’t catch a thought.

g room. Hector was still laughing softly. “Say something to make them  
worried about one of the Balducci brothers threatening you over the p  
lragged the middle of the night? Tell me how I’m gonna manage that.”

room. I “I don’t know!” I cried, losing it in my panic. “Make someth  
You’re a private investigator. Veronica Mars is a private investigat  
powder person too, and she lies all the time!”

e primo “Veronica Mars is a character on a TV show,” Hector informed me

he only “So?”

thought Hector’s stared at me a beat, read my panic, his smile faded and l  
ling his got serious. “Sadie, I’m not gonna lie.”

“But—”

ng like He came in close (or *closer*—we couldn’t *not* be close as we we  
weirdly powder room).

Sadie, I “What I wanna know is why do you want me to lie?”

Oh darn.

This was a sharing situation, as in, me sharing my private thou

couldn't do that. I couldn't tell Hector that I'd never had any friends grown to love Ralphie and Buddy and I was terrified of losing them.

People were, well...people. In my experience they had only so much to give before they expected something in return.

I didn't have much to give in return.

Heck, I didn't have *anything* to give in return.

But I couldn't tell Hector that. He'd think I was pathetic.

When I didn't answer, I watched in alarm as Hector's face grew serious and he closed the minute gap that was still between us. He put his hand to the side of my neck, sliding it up so his fingers went into my hair, his thumb resting along my hairline. His other arm curled around my waist and he pulled me into the heat of him.

"I don't wanna say this, *mamita*, but I have no choice. It's understandable, you not thinkin' clearly with all that's goin' down here. I have to remind you what's at stake here," Hector said.

"I'm thinking clearly," I informed him, and I certainly knew what was at stake.

He shook his head. "You aren't."

"I am!"

And I thought I was.

His face dipped closer and I watched his eyes go a weird mixture of soft and intense. I'd never seen anything like that before and I had a feeling it did not bode well for me.

I was right.

"Sadie, a month ago I got back to the office after finishing a job."



and I'd Luke and walked into a stairwell to see you, literally, fall on yo  
because you didn't have the strength to hold yourself up."

nuch to I pulled in my breath so sharply, my lungs started to burn.

He kept talking.

"You were wearin' nothin' but a torn nightgown and you were cov  
blood. I carried you to the Explorer and you couldn't even hold your h  
You passed out in my lap after you told me there was no one to care  
woke up. I live to be a hundred, *mamita*, I'll never forget it. Not one  
t more second of it."  
a hand

air, his I closed my eyes and tried to turn my face away, hateful hum  
mist and memories charging through my brain and making my blood run cold.

I didn't want these memories. But more, it was unthinkable that  
e. It's shared them with me.

. But I His hand at the side of my head put gentle pressure there to k  
facing him, foiling my mini-escape-Hector plan. I opened my eyes ag  
was at he was still looking at me with that warm intensity.

"The next day, the two men in your kitchen walked into your l  
room. They took one look at the state of you and it rocked their world.

The burning in my lungs intensified.

"Stop talking," I whispered.

of warm He didn't stop talking.

g it did "Then they did everything in their power to take care of you and h  
heal. And, from what I can see, they did a damn fine job of it."

"Please stop talking." I was still whispering.

ob with Hector still didn't stop talking.

ur face     “A few nights ago I watched you walk away from a bartender who finished your order. You went down the hall, past the bathroom and then disappeared out the back door. I followed you only to find you’d walk into the hands of Harvey Balducci. He had you clean off the ground were fightin’ him and you were losin’. Daisy didn’t stop me, I would’ve squeezed the life out of him. And you didn’t stop Daisy, she would have been on beatin’ him.”

vered in  
lead up.  
e if you  
fuckin’     “Hector—”

He shook his head to stop my interruption and kept talking.

humiliating     “You don’t have a lot of experience with this kind of thing, so I’ll explain it to you. Sadie, these are the actions of people who care about you. Hector happens to you happens to you, but in a way it also happens to the people around you that care about you.”

keep me  
ain and     I felt tears start to sting my eyes and I clenched my teeth to stop them. Hector saw it and his face dipped even closer. “If you’re in danger, you got a right to know. You keep it from them, somethin’ happens to you. In hospital you end up—”

”             “Enough!” I snapped.

My finely honed defense mechanism clicked into place and Sorceress the Antarctic made an appearance precisely when I needed her.

Finally!

help you     My back straightened, my chin lifted, and even though I could see them, I knew my eyes weren’t warm and they were no longer filled with tears. They were shards of ice.

“Fine,” I clipped, my voice cold.

I hadn't Hector's eyes went even more intense as they scanned my face.

Then you Then he murmured as if to himself, "Fuckin' hell, I lost her."

and right I ignored his words because there was no point in responding.

id. You He had, indeed, lost *her*.

ld have New Sadie was a memory. She had to be. This was no place for her

ve kept "I'll talk to Buddy and Ralphie. You do," I hesitated, "whatever you  
to do."

"Sadie—" he started, giving me a gentle squeeze.

explain "No," I interrupted him and pulled away. Yanking out of his a  
i. What jerking my head from his hand, I took a step back. "It's fine. You'r  
people perfectly right. Thank you for the lesson in kindness and morality.  
right about that too. I don't know much about that either."

em. His eyes flashed and he clipped out a, "Goddamn it," but I was  
er, they out the door.

you and I marched back to the kitchen so fast my robe flew out behind me.

I halted inside the kitchen and looked at Buddy and Ralphie wh  
both sitting close together at the island. Buddy's arm was around Ra  
shoulders. When their faces turned to me, I noticed they looked worrie  
press of

Blooming heck!

I felt Hector enter the kitchen but I ignored him. I prepared to make  
Princess Speech. Something I'd never really had to do before, but I fi  
ln't see could pull it off.  
ed with

It was time to be mistress of my own destiny or I'd lose everything  
sick of losing and I was going to put a stop to it, right *fucking* now.

I took a deep breath and charged in. "Last night, a couple of hou

Hector left, Marty Balducci called me. He was angry about me p charges against his brothers. He said he was going to take care of Harv Ricky and I'd been a stupid bitch," I announced.

Buddy's arm dropped from around Ralphie's shoulders. The straightened and I kept talking.

r.

"He told me I was going to pay."

ou have

Ralphie's eyes closed slowly. Buddy's face went tight.

I went right on talking.

rm and

"He called me the C-word."

e right,

Ralphie's eyes flew open and he gasped.

You're

"Twice," I went on.

"The C-word?" Ralphie breathed, his face getting red.

already

"Yes," I clipped then continued, "Hector's people are monitoring calls. One of them heard it, told Hector and he came back around."

io were

"Why didn't you come to us last night? We're just across the Buddy asked me.

alphie's

"I didn't want to wake you," I answered.

d.

"You..." Buddy's eyes were wide then he shook his head in di

"You didn't want to *wake* us?"

e an Ice

"That's right," I told him, my voice pure ice.

gured I

But I watched with a sinking heart as Buddy started to look mac knew he was mad at me.

3. I was

I hated it that he was mad at me, but I kept going. This time my gaze slid across the whole room, including in its frosty path, Hector, w

rs after

ressingnow standing by the island, leaned against it, taking in my performan  
vey anda blank face and his arms crossed on his chest.

“Now, what you all don’t understand, but I’ll explain to you is t  
y bothisn’t unusual for me. Dealing with these kinds of people, this l  
behavior, it doesn’t faze me. It’s been my life for twenty-nine years  
admit that I’ve never been the target. But I also know how these peopl  
These are my people, this is my world and you have my sincere apolo  
dragging you all into it with me.”

“Sadie, sweetie—” Ralphie was getting up, but I lifted my ha  
shook my head.

He took one look at my face, blinked slowly and settled, wordle  
miracle!) back on his stool.

“I don’t know what to do, but I’ll figure something out and I’ll  
my cellyou of my plans when I’ve come to some conclusions. In the near  
know that the situation is grave and I appreciate all your help in keep  
e hall,”safe.” I was barreling toward my grand finale. I swept across the  
snatched my coffee cup from the counter and started toward the door.  
I’m getting ready for work.” My eyes went to Hector. “Enjoy the brio  
have a nice day,” I finished.  
sbelief.

Then on that, I made the best exit I could on bare feet, with no n  
my heart in my throat, my stomach in a knot and wearing silky, lacy p  
and a robe that, I realized belatedly, I should have tied closed.

I, and I  
I got to the foot of the stairs, thinking I’d made a clean getaway  
one would hear me if I cried in the shower, when an arm sliced arou  
glacial  
waist, laying waste to any hope of a successful exit.

who was  
In a smooth move that had to be in contention for the Smoothest M

ce with the History of Man, Hector curled me around to face him. He took my cup out of my hand, leaned to the side, placed it on a stair (without sp hat this drop!), came back to me and locked his other arm around me, both kind of going tight.

. I will When he was done with this, my heart was hammering. I looked u e work. blank face, Sorceress of the Antarctic thankfully still firmly in place. gies for “Let me go,” I demanded.

nd and “Not a chance,” Hector returned instantly, the blank look disappea his eyes flashed with annoyance. Then he said what I personally thoug bizarrely, “Spent a year hopin’ you’d give me the opportunity to t essly (a Now that you have, I’m gonna take it and we’ll see how it plays out.”

Before I could ask what he was talking about or demand him to le inform again or, better still, tear out of his arms and make a run for it, one time, I hands slid up my back into my hair. His head lowered, I opened my m ing me protest, and his mouth was on mine.

room, I put my hands to his shoulders to push him away at the same I pu “Now, head back. But his head came with mine, his tongue slid inside my mo che and (damn and blast!) my Sorceress of the Antarctic disintegrated right spot.

akeup, His heat hit me (and another kind of heat hit me in other places) . a jama s hands stopped pushing at his shoulders. I went up on tiptoe, my caste curled around his neck, the fingers of my other hand slid into his thick and no Apparently unable to control myself, I pressed into him and kiss nd my back.

This was one of his urgent, fiery kisses. The ones that tore thro love in taking all reason and rational thought with it, and leaving me with

coffee but the heat and the desire to lose myself completely in the kiss and unwillingly a Right when it was getting good, and later when I thought about it, of them knew that he knew that he had me right where he wanted me, his broke from mine. He lifted his head barely an inch, but he kept me looking at him.

His eyes were as fiery as the kiss and back to intense.

They scanned my face quickly before he said, "Now that my Saring as back, I'll tell *her* that I'll be at the gallery to pick her up and take her right washospital to have the cast removed. I don't give a fuck if Bex is there, *try* this. you aren't fuckin' goin' without me and I won't be pleased if you don't look for you. I'll also tell you that tonight we're goin' out to dinner, *two* of us. We're gonna enjoy the goddamned meal, and after, we're *of his* have another talk. If I'm not at the gallery to pick you up at closing time, *mouth to* be here at the house at seven."

I was breathing heavily and trying to sort out my thoughts while he continued.

"You do somethin' stupid, Sadie, Buddy, Ralphie and I'll be on the conversation. We might have to rethink your situation and you may not like what we come up with. But I'm tellin' you this, I'm keepin' you safe and my agreed to let me take care of you. And that's what I'm fuckin' goin' for, *and hand* whether you like it or not."

Without another word, he let me go.

I teetered a bit without his arms around me and his body to lean on. Before I got myself sorted, he'd walked around me without looking back at me. When I turned and stared into the living room doorway, he was nowhere to be seen.

him. After a couple of seconds I heard Ralphie ask from the kitchen, when I okay?"

mouth "She will be," was Hector's very firm and also very annoyed answer.  
I closed my eyes.

This was not going well for me.

Not at all.

Sadie is



I STARED at my exposed wrist and felt a weird sense of calmness settle  
namita,

My wrist looked kind of strange but the cast was gone.

I only thought about the cut on my face when I saw myself in a mirror.  
I noticed someone's gaze on it. I could forget it, sometimes lately for hours.

But for the last five weeks, the cast was a second-by-second reminder  
what Ricky Balducci did to me.

And now it was gone.

I pulled in a deep breath as I let the calm settle. One more step  
toward healing. One more step toward the time when I might go whole days  
without remembering.

"Sadie, girl," Bex called, and I looked up at her.

I couldn't help it. I smiled.

Bex and I were alone in an exam room. They'd taken the cast off.  
The physical therapist had shown me some exercises to strengthen my wrist.  
He gave me a squeeze ball and some leaflets filled with instructional  
diagrams. He left and the nurse had gone off to get the paperwork for  
my signature. Then we could go.

Hector was there but outside the room talking on his cell.



“Is she As Hector told me, he showed up at Art at ten to two (double- again) just in time to take me to the hospital. In preparation (because I er. Hector would do as he said, and I was not wrong), I called Bex and as to meet us there.

On the way over, I’d given Hector a blast of The Ice. But he acted was “His Sadie” (whoever the heck *that* was) and not a wintry-cold thus he totally ignored The Ice.

This, I had to admit, both irritated me and kind of scared me. in me. started practicing The Ice Treatment when I was eleven. Eighteen ye I’d perfected the art of The Ice Treatment. I knew if I stuck with it, mirror or and would deep freeze Hector.

urs. Eventually.

nder of I mentally shook my thoughts clear and said to Bex, “Yes?”

Her eyes moved to the door and back to me.

“What’s going on with Hector?” she asked. “You two seeing each toward Even though I wanted to explain it to her, I didn’t. or even

Firstly, she might not get it. Secondly, she might feel like givin lecture and I could *not* deal with another lecture right now. Hec delivered the powder room *and* hallway lectures. And after I came from getting ready, both Buddy *and* Ralphie had lectured me in f then roommate tag-team talking to. I had to say I was up to *there* wi rist. He meaning lectures. Lastly, I was feeling a calm I hadn’t felt in a long ti ns and I didn’t want anything to shatter that.

r me to So I responded, “Kind of.”

“You been intimate?” she asked.

parking By the way, Bex was a pretty straightforward woman. She c  
figured softly-softly, but most of the time she cut to the chase.

ked her I pulled my lips in, feeling the calm slip away, and then replied  
making out a couple of times.”

d like I It was her turn to smile. “That’s good.”

l bitch, She didn’t know the half of it.

But I’d She watched my face and her smile got bigger.

ars and “It’s not going anywhere,” I said quickly before she got the wrong

I could At my words her smile disappeared.

“Why not?” she asked.

I shrugged and my eyes slid away.

She pulled her chair closer, but she didn’t touch me. Still, her  
closer made my gaze come back to her.

other?” Her face was gentle. “Sadie, you know, what Ricky Balducci did  
was not an act of intimacy. It was an act of violence.”

g me a I inhaled sharply through my nose, but nodded fervently in the  
tor had she’d think I understood and she’d move off this particular subject.

e down My hopes were quickly dashed.

a gay “What you do with someone who cares about you is an entirely d  
th wellthing. It’s a good thing, giving and, hopefully, getting.” She gave me  
me andgrin.

I nodded again and squirmed a little bit.

I did not want to be talking about this.

Ever.

ould be My mom had disappeared way before it was time to have The S  
and my father never bothered. I'd had a couple of lovers—one in colle  
d, "Just after, both of whom I liked as much as I would allow myself to like  
Also, both of whom my father frowned upon and sent packing.

I knew what sex was. I'd even had good sex.

I knew what Ricky did to me wasn't *that*.

Bex, unfortunately, did not have clairvoyant powers so she couldn't  
my mind, and therefore she kept talking.  
idea.

"It's going to be difficult. You can get it confused, but try to remember  
that letting someone close to you like that, letting them show you  
good, having that togetherness. It's part of healing."

"Okay," I responded immediately.

getting She scooted even closer and I got the impression she wasn't buying  
what Tex would call my "bullshit."

to you She kept at it. "I'm not saying you should go faster than you're ready  
just saying your mind can shut down to that part of life and it's important  
to shut it off, twist it so you're convinced it's wrong or dirty. It's important  
to remember it's right, it's natural and it can be very, very good."

I blinked and my gaze slid away. Then I sighed and set aside the book.

ifferent "Okay," I whispered.

a small Bex wasn't quite done.

"If you've got worries, talk to him. I think Hector's the kind of person  
who'll listen and wait until the time is right for you. But keep him in the loop  
and let him know where your head is at."

There was no way I was going to keep Hector in *that* loop (or any

ex Talk for that matter).

ge, one I didn't tell Bex that.

anyone. Instead, I said again, "Okay."

"You need to talk to me, you know where to find me," she finished

I nodded then looked at her, and in an effort to change the su  
informed her, "We're going to watch YoYo for you."

n't read She gave me a gentle smile that I understood, with a gratitude so s  
felt like hugging her (however, I did not), meant she was finally lett  
number off the hook.

why it's "I know," she said.

Luckily the door opened, the nurse walked in and the latest trau  
life full of traumas was thankfully over.

ng into And I'd survived, yet again.



dy. I'm AFTER I SIGNED THE PAPERWORK, Bex went back to the rape crisis cer  
tant not Hector took me to Art.

rtant to During the ride I didn't speak. Hector didn't either. I four  
uncomfortable. Hector acted like this was perfectly normal. This m  
illshit. want to throw my squeeze ball at him.

Of course, I did not.

Hector parallel parked in a very unusual prime spot, a door dow  
of guy Art.

he loop Before he had the Bronco's ignition shut down, my door was ope  
was out, around the front of the Bronco and hoofing it on my Manolo  
y loop, the sidewalk toward the gallery.

I was feet away from the door when an arm tagged me around my shoulders. I came to a rocking halt and he turned me into him.

My body went rigid and I lifted my chin to grant him with a playful Chill Factor Sub Zero glare.

“I have to get to work,” I informed him.

“You’re welcome,” he said in return, looking down at me, unaffected Chill Factor Sub Zero, his fantastic mouth fighting a grin.

Seriously a squeezy-ball-throwing-moment if there ever was one. However, I was not at a distance which would allow for it, and further action such as that would not befit The Ice Princess.

“For what?” I asked instead of throwing my squeezy ball at him.

“For the ride,” he replied.

Chill Factor Sub Zero descended sharply to Chill Factor Dry. “I suppose I shouldn’t have to remind you that I didn’t *ask* for a ride.”

He lost the fight and grinned casually in the face of Chill Factor Dry.

“True enough,” he said calmly.

I waited for more, but apparently that was it.

“Are we through here?” I asked, cocking my head and deciding to go into saccharin-sweetness.

His face dipped to mine. “Not even close,” he whispered, and his eyes went warm and started dancing like he was enjoying this (even this!).

Blooming heck!

I was using all my good stuff on him! And none of it was working!

nd my All right, fine. He was going to challenge the Ice Princess then tl  
*just fine.*

atented Beware Hector Chavez! The next Ice Age cometh—as Ralphie wo  
—à la Sadie.

I zapped him with a mental ice ray and pulled out of his arm. I  
cted by opened the door and walked into Art.

I was confronted with Ralphie entertaining a full bevy of Rock  
is one. sans Shirleen, but with a new person I'd never met before. He was a  
her, an aged man, tall, built solid (but with a teensy beer belly), dark hair wit  
gray in it and Indy Nightingale's blue eyes.

Everyone was drinking coffee.

“What’s going on?” I asked, walking toward the counter.

Ice. “I “Tex sent over coffees to celebrate your cast being removed,” Da  
me on a grin. “Yours is probably cold though. We been here awhile.”

y Ice. “I’ll nuke it,” Ralphie said, snatching a white cup off the counter.

“I’ll do it,” Ava offered.

Ralphie handed her the cup with a grateful smile. She took it and  
to shift to the back of the gallery where our little kitchenette was.

I saw Ralphie’s eyes come back to me and I didn’t like the look in

s black I looked around the room. Then I *felt* the room.

njoying Something was not right.

My eyes went to the man I didn’t know.

“What’s going on?” I asked again to everyone, but my eyes didn  
the man.

hat was I realized, belatedly, his eyes had been on me since I walked in.

An unhappy, “oh no what now?” chill slid across my skin and I bra  
uld say Hector materialized close to my side (furthering my sense of forel  
and I heard him say, “Tom.”

turned, I looked to Hector then back to the man. The man got closer and li  
chin to Hector, showing me they knew each other. His gaze slid back t

Chicks Indy came with him. She was looking at me too. Looking at me  
middle-Looking at me in a way that made me a little scared.

h some All of a sudden I had the insane urge to reach out for Hector’s han  
would have done yesterday or the day before (or probably the day l  
but I wouldn’t allow myself to do it now.

Those days were over.

isy told Whatever life had to dish out to me next, I was going to handle it  
own. No more leaning on anyone else. It was time for a new New S  
Take Charge Sadie.

“I’m Sadie Townsend,” I told him.

headed “I know who you are,” he said gently.

I watched with alarm as his gaze moved to the scar on my cheek.  
them. soft and then (no kidding), it grew moist.

“This is my dad, Tom Savage,” Indy introduced, and my eyes went

Oh no.

Were we going to have another Blanca Type Incident?

’t leave I mentally prepared for another demonstration of why these peop  
so darn nice, but my preparation wasn’t enough.

Nowhere near.

iced. “You look just like your mother,” Tom Savage said.

oding) His six words hit me like six sharp blows and my body jerked with the power of them.

fted his I swallowed, wondering if I heard him right, then whispered, “I’m

o me. The Rock Chicks and Ralphie were closing in and I felt Hector’s stare at me as he drew nearer.

But I only had eyes for Tom Savage.

id like I “You know my mother?” I asked when he didn’t repeat himself.

efore), “Knew her, yes,” he answered.

I put my newly exposed hand to the counter and held on. It would have collapsed to collapse in a dead faint. That wouldn’t exactly say Take Charge Sad

on my “It seems, when we were little, we knew each other too,” Indy put her hand on my shoulder. A my eyes moved to her.

She was fishing in the back pocket of her jeans and she pulled out a picture, stepped toward me and handed it to me.

I took it and looked down.

It grew In the picture was a little redheaded, blue-eyed girl—maybe two years old—and a baby. The little girl was sitting on a couch with the swaddled baby in her arms. You could tell she was giggling into the camera, pleased as if to be holding her living doll.

The baby’s head had a shock of ultra-light, golden-cream straw blonde hair.

The little girl was obviously Indy.



The baby...me.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, not taking my eyes from the picture. I took a step back, then two, and ran into something solid. Hector’s hands set my shoulders as I stopped retreating and stared at the picture.

“Sorry?” Finally, I looked up at Tom. “How...?”

Tom took a step toward me. His eyes moved to Hector and he stopped.

He looked back at me. “Lizzie, your mother, was a friend of my mother’s, Katherine.”

I blinked, unable to process this, because frankly, it was unprocessable.

My mom and Indy’s mom were friends?

How could that be?

“She was?” I asked.

Tom nodded. “Katherine and Kitty Sue, Lee’s mom, were thick as thieves all their lives. They met Lizzie in high school and she became part of the tribe. They were both bridesmaids at your mom’s wedding.”

Instantly I felt saliva fill my mouth and I swallowed it down.

This couldn’t be true. It simply couldn’t be true.

Could it?

I didn’t know anything about my mother. I had nothing of hers—no memories. My father had removed all traces of her after she left: no photos, no trinkets, no letters, not a stitch of her clothing. Nothing. Not a wheelbarrow-spoke of her after she left. Not once.

“Mom and Dad are on vacation in Hawaii. They’re coming home on Sunday,” Ally piped in.

I came out of my thoughts and I looked at her. She was staring at me and she didn't look like feisty Veronica Mars at all. Her look was both titled on and concerned.

It was too much to take in, so confused, I asked, "What?"

"My mom, Kitty Sue, your mom's friend, she's in Hawaii. We've ped. her and she told us to tell you she's looking forward to seeing you y wife, when she gets back."

I was shaking my head, still not understanding, but Ally kept on.

sable. "I guess me, Lee and Hank, my other brother, knew you too."

"No," I whispered.

"Yes," Ally replied, and she gave me a hesitant not-at-all-the-Ally-of-knew grin.

thieves I pulled in my lips, and before I could pull together my thought of their came closer and put his hand on my arm.

"Sadie, you were a part of our lives for a while. Then we lost Katherine —" Tom said and my gaze snapped to him.

"You lost Katherine?" I repeated.

her but "She died. Cancer. When Indy was five. A few years after that us. No sudden my body started trembling.

e never Indy's mom died. Tom's wife died. My mom's friend died.

I shook my head, wanting to escape, wanting to run, to hide, to me on heck out of there, but I didn't.

Instead, I looked back to Tom.

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

me too His fingers squeezed my arm.

1 gentle “It was a long time ago,” he responded, but I could tell by the loo  
eyes that time hadn’t healed this particular wound.

“I’m still sorry,” I told him.

e called “Thank you,” he replied and dropped his hand. “What I was sayin  
u again once Katherine died, things with your dad...” He stopped then went on  
I’m a cop. So is Malcolm, Ally’s father. It wasn’t...your mom...wi  
father bein’...she didn’t feel...” He stopped again. I could tell th  
difficult for him because I saw his teeth clench. Then he kept going.  
Katherine was gone, she didn’t bring you around anymore.”

-I-kind- That was when it finally hit me.

All of it.

s, Tom Sometime, a long time ago, my mom had friends. Good friends.  
that probably loved her, *loads*. Made her laugh. Made her giggle. M  
atherine feel special. Made her feel safe.

Which meant...

Sometime, a long time ago, I’d been one of them.

picture Sometime, a long time ago, I’d been the baby o  
all of a Nightingale/Savage/Townsend Clan.

Sometime, a long time ago, my mom lost her friends and I lost my  
to be a good, normal, nice person surrounded by genuine friends. Peo  
get *the* truly cared about me.

I lost all that had been their life. All that made them laugh wi  
other, tease each other, take care of each other.

Heck, Indy had just gotten married! I could have been one

bridesmaids!

I tried to hold on, but I couldn't help it. I could feel the tears welling in his eyes.

I thought I was used to the loss, but apparently, I wasn't.

And that *stunk*.

"See, "I hate my father," I told Tom Savage quietly. Before I could stop your breath hitched (repeatedly) and I hissed, "*I hate him!*"

Hector's hands disappeared from my shoulders. His arms slid around "Once chest, his body got closer and I felt his jaw against the side of my head

Still I tried to gain control (this, by the way, didn't work, and I tears slide down my cheeks).

"Sadie, sugar—" Daisy whispered gently, and at her words the PeopleChicks and Ralphie pulled in ever closer.

"I want you to come over for dinner tomorrow," Tom invited. "Ir Ally'll be there. So will Lee, Hank and Roxie. Hector too. The family."

The whole family.

He said, "The whole family."

I'd never had a "whole family." Not their kind of family.

Well, I guess I did, once. But I lost it before I knew I even had it.

I pulled in my lips. Hector's jaw left my head and his arms gave squeeze.

There was no way I was going to dinner at Tom Savage's house with each my babyhood friends reunited. There was no way I was going to set of her up for that kind of loss. There was no way I was going to let *any* of thi

any longer than it had to.

ling in The only thing I knew was that I had to devise a plan to get myself safe from the Crazy Balducci Brothers *and* safe from any further en- turmoil.

Tom must have read my intent on my face because he added, ' pictures. Of your mother. You could—'  
o it, my

I immediately changed my mind. "I'll be there."

und my Hector gave me another squeeze.

. Tom gave me a smile.

felt the Indy threw her hands up and yelled, "Party!"

Ally laughed with obvious relief on the word, "Righteous."

e Rock I relaxed into Hector's warmth, looked down at the photo and m decision.

idy and I'd let myself have this one small gift. A gift, I told myself, that w whole  
my mom.

Then, as soon as I could finagle it, just like my mom, I was g disappear.

'e me a

with all

myself

s go on

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The only thing I knew was that I had to devise a plan to get myself safe—safe from the Crazy Balducci Brothers *and* safe from any further emotional turmoil.

Tom must have read my intent on my face because he added, “I have pictures. Of your mother. You could—”

I immediately changed my mind. “I’ll be there.”

Hector gave me another squeeze.

Tom gave me a smile.

Indy threw her hands up and yelled, “Party!”

Ally laughed with obvious relief on the word, “Righteous.”

I relaxed into Hector’s warmth, looked down at the photo and made my decision.

I’d let myself have this one small gift. A gift, I told myself, that was from my mom.

Then, as soon as I could finagle it, just like my mom, I was going to disappear.

ELEVEN



## HECTOR'S ROSE

*Sadie*

“Sadie, maybe you should come in and talk. I’m not sure this is a good idea,” my dead grandmother’s financial manager, Aaron Lockhart, said in a low, gravelly voice. “Please Aaron, just do it,” I interrupted him.

It was after work. I was in my bedroom on the landline, not delirious, but a minute in putting my newly formed plans in place.

One thing my mom left me was Aaron Lockhart. He was old as dirt, stooped, had wispy white hairs across his liver-spotted scalp and worked full time because, he told me, when he tried retirement he nearly drove him to murder.

Since he liked his work, and his freedom, he got in his car every night at eight thirty and his driver drove him to his office in the Denver Tech Center (known as DTC). He left work at five thirty, which gave him plenty of time to have a couple of martinis and mellow out a bit before home (he told me this too).

Aaron and I had never been close. My father didn’t like him and wouldn’t allow it. But in an ironclad agreement devised by my dead (but clearly she was alive, shrewd) grandmother when she set up my trust, I

appointed to manage my trust fund, which had not been touchable until I was twenty-one. He also managed the income derived from the flat in London I inherited, which had been rented out since around the time of the Bliedon old lady named Mrs. Burnsley. He further managed a small villa on Crete which was hired out to tourists.

I'd never been to either of these properties. My father also wouldn't go there. But I'd seen pictures. The flat was close to Covent Garden. The villa was in a small fishing village by the sea.

When I opened Art, I asked Aaron to help me to keep it clean, away from my father and entirely law-abiding. And he did. I'd never said a word to my ear.

Aaron was one of the few people I knew who, regardless of his age, was not frightened of going head to head with my father. I admired him, and I trusted him and I'd always liked him. But, as ever, I'd never let it show.

I'd just asked him to find out Mrs. Burnsley's plans for her future in London, the hills, flat as well as the schedule of occupancy on the villa in Crete. One of the other of them might well be my next destination or a future one, as it may be.

As I didn't want to put old lady Burnsley out of her home or disturb the morning excited tourists who were looking forward to their time in the sun on a technical Island, I'd also charged Aaron to find other properties. I didn't care just as long as they were manageable on a fixed income and there was an ocean between me and the Crazy Balducci Brothers. I also asked him to set up an auction of my belongings that were in storage.

Finally, I asked him to find a way to sign over Art to Ralphie and his wife, while without a dime needing to change hands. It would be my thank you for the care of me. It wasn't much, but it was the only good thing I had to give.



il I was I wanted no memory of my old life. I was going to pack up my suitcase and board a plane and set up a new life far away where no one had heard of me. I was going to go to a small town in Greece, to a place called Townsend. Where no one knew who I was, what I was or what had happened to me. And where I could find some peace to decide who was the new person I was. I could get used to her, and if I was lucky and I could forget Ralphie, Buddy, Hector and all that came with them, maybe, I could be content.

he villa I heard the doorbell ring and pulled in my breath. Hector was there to take me out to dinner.

ay from "I'd prefer to have a chat about this," Aaron said to me as I listened to the voices away, muted male voices.

ge, was "My mind's made up," I told Aaron.

totally "Please, Sadie, as a friend of your family, a particular friend of your grandmother's, afford me this one courtesy," Aaron pushed it.

e in my "Sadie!" Buddy called up the stairs. "Hector's here."

or the Darn it!

he case I had to get off the phone before someone came up to get me and I had no idea how I was going to get away alone to talk to Aaron. In my current circumstances with Hector's edict being followed to the letter by Ralphie, Buddy (and, by the way he was acting, Ralphie had appointed him his personal, very well-dressed, completely unskilled, gay bodyguard), it was impossible.

him to Why did everything have to be so *difficult*? It was my money and my property, for goodness sake!

Buddy "Sadie!" Buddy called.

r taking I put my hand over the mouthpiece and yelled, "Coming!"

itcases, “Sadie?” Aaron said in my ear.

of Seth I took my hand off the mouthpiece.

ppened “Either you do it or I hire someone else to do it,” the Ice Prince  
ew me, Aaron. “Your choice, but I want it done and I want it done as  
Daisy, possible.”

I heard Aaron sigh. I knew he was going to give in and I felt  
to take charge of relief.

“I’ll see to it,” he assured me.

d to far Thank God.

One thing checked off the to-do list.

of your “Thank you. I’d be grateful for that.”

“Sadie!” Now it was Ralphie yelling from closer to the door and  
he was climbing the stairs. “Double H is here.”

I covered the mouthpiece again and shouted, “I know! I’ll b  
down!”

had no “Seems you’re busy. I’ll let you go,” Aaron said. “Stay well.”  
current

hie and “Thank you,” I replied.

self my Then I heard the disconnect.

it was I had the phone in the receiver and I was snatching up my purs  
Ralphie burst in.

and my “Ralphie!” I whirled to the door. “I said I was coming.”

“I thought you were climbing out the window,” Ralphie retorted.

I wished I’d thought of that and made a mental note to rememb  
case I needed it in the future.

“Get a move on, sweet’ums. I think I already taught you this all in lesson, but I’ll repeat as necessary. We don’t keep hot guys waiting door. Skanky guys, yes. Slimy guys, definitely. Hot guys, um...no.”

I gave Ralphie a glare. My glare deflected off Ralphie’s grin and around the room until it disintegrated.

I squared my shoulders, found my Ice and headed out my bedroom



IT WAS debatable whether one could call Hector and my “just the two date “enjoyable.”

Firstly, I dressed in my armor, head to foot (but not toe) silvery-gray

I had on a shimmery, boat-necked, long-sleeved, tight-fitting kirt with a small, delicate pendant of diamonds shaped in the form of a hanging from a platinum chain at my neck and matching drop earring was paired with a slim-fitting, just-above-the-knee, somewhat-shimmery silvery-gray skirt with four precise kick pleats, one at the front and one at each of my knees. Elegant, gray, patent leather pumps with a spike heel and black toe. A couple of scent-refreshing sprays of my signature perfume. A quick shake of my fingers coated in my favorite pomade (to definitely separate the curls and waves) through my otherwise unencumbered hair. A black trench coat completed my ensemble.

When I walked downstairs and Hector, wearing jeans, boots, a silvery-gray white, long-sleeved T-shirt and black leather jacket (what a pair we saw I changed out of my nice but somewhat casual day wear into Ice F Gear, he gave me a little amused grin and shake of his head.

I ignored him, bestowed goodnight kisses to my roommates and my head held high, out the door.

importantly at the police the keys to my storage facility. The “lab boys” found nothing t

Ricky at my apartment such was the immaculate cleaning job Ralph pinged Buddy did. However, they did find traces of blood and hairs on my cot mattress. Some of it, he explained, they figured was mine. Some of . door. hoped, would belong to Ricky.

I hoped so too, but I didn’t share.

of us” However, I did wonder how this was going to affect the auction “estate.”

I didn’t share that either.

nit shirt Lastly, Hector took me to a Mexican restaurant off Broadway flower south in Englewood. It was called El Tejado and it was *not* the kind c gs. This where you wore a shimmery, silvery-gray outfit and little diamonds sh mmery, flowers.

back of I ignored my discomfort, walked into the casual, worn-in restaura eel and went there every day and sat down in the booth. I planted my behir ume. A center so Hector would get *no* ideas that he was sharing my seat with r

ne and He slid in opposite me, still grinning, and I got the impression air. My didn’t convince him. Further, he found it highly amusing.

I ignored this too.

kintight Dinner, luckily, didn’t last long. They didn’t mess around with tak were!) serving your order and I figured that had something to do with the lin Princess door. A line, incidentally, that we circumvented by Hector smiling at t behind the cash register, her face lighting up in recognition, the two swept, exchanging rapid-fire Spanish and her elbowing her way through the and seating us at a booth that was getting its finishing wipe dow

ven the busboy. This, I noted with a glance at the door, was not greeted with  
o place by the waiting customers. But I ignored that too.

hie and There was barely any conversation due to my avid fascination of,  
ich and my menu, then the restaurant's décor, then every person in line waitin  
it, they in, then my fellow patrons, and finally, my newfound wonder at wat  
no-sound Mexican soap opera on the television above the bar.

No matter how tasty the food was (and it was tasty), I hardly at  
i of my (thank goodness Blanca wasn't there or she would have had a conn  
Hector paid. We slid out of the booth. He walked me to the Bronco v  
hand on my elbow. Then it was over.

, down Dinner down, I just had to survive "the talk."

of place If in one day I could survive three lectures, a sex talk, a reunion v  
aped as husband of my long lost mother's best friend, the revealing of the kno  
that Indy, Ally and Lee were babydom playmates and a "just the two  
at like I dinner with Hector then I could survive "the talk."

id dead No problem.

ne. I stared out the window of the Bronco wondering if I might be i  
my act next week or next month. Then I wondered if I would like Crete.  
wondered if they spoke any English on Crete. I was mentally plan  
downloading English to Greek lessons on my iPod when Hector park  
ing and street.

e at the I came out of my thoughts, looked around and immediately reali  
he lady mistake at letting my mind wander.

of them We weren't outside Capitol Hill where the brownstone was locat  
: crowd were somewhere else. A clean, tidy, well-established family neighb  
n by a with clean, tidy, well-kept houses with clean, tidy, well-kept law

delightmoderately priced vehicles lining the street.

“Where are...?” I started, my head turning toward Hector, but he  
at first, of the Bronco and rounding the hood.

g to get Blooming *heck!*  
ching a He opened my door.

“Where are we?” I asked the minute he did.  
e a bite He grabbed my hand, and with a firm tug he pulled me out of the  
ption). dropped my hand and I fell into his waiting ones. He swung me around  
with his me on my feet on the sidewalk and twisted to slam my door. Then he t  
hand again and charged up the sidewalk.

I walked double-time to keep up with him, all the while pulling  
with the hold. “Hector, where are we?”

nowledge He didn’t look back when he answered, “My place.”  
of us” Blooming, *blooming* heck!

“Why are we at your place?” I asked when he stopped at the front c  
n Crete “Privacy,” he replied.

Then I He unlocked the door, shoving it open, and before I could make a  
ring onit, he had a hand in the small of my back and was pushing me in.

ed on a I entered and stopped.

I was standing on a two-step-up, dark wood platform. Half walls t  
zed myside made of the same wood and columns at the end of each. Straight  
down the two steps and about five feet away was a wall. Along its sic  
ed. Weof dark wood stairs and matching banister.

orhood On the left side of us was a room that held a jumble of furnitu  
ns andboxes, but also a beautiful, tiled fireplace that looked like it ha

scrubbed, the wood of the mantel sanded and refinished to a warm she  
was out walls looked freshly painted in a dusky gray-blue and the floor  
obviously refinished. There were closed French doors I couldn't see t  
at the other end of that room, well down from the wall that separa  
room from the stairs.

On the right side of us was another room filled with paint cans, |  
and tools (hand tools as well as big, heavy power tools with lots of  
car. He The fireplace in that room looked grimy and as yet untouched, but refi  
ind, set it'd be gorgeous. Beyond that room was an open doorway, which I  
ook my kitchen.

Hector's hand at my back guided me down the steps and we stop  
; at his headed left. I heard the rustle of plastic and I turned to watch him.

He was uncovering a big, overstuffed armchair covered in midnig  
twill. Once uncovered, he dragged it into the empty-but-renc  
implements room and positioned it in the center.

door. On the way back, he shrugged off his jacket and threw it on the b  
Then he came to me, walked around me and pulled off my trench. He  
run for my purse, threw my coat on his and hooked my purse straps around the  
post.

After doing all of this, he grabbed my hand. We strode to the ch  
sat. Then he tugged my hand again sharply until I went off-balan  
o either hands went to my waist and he guided my body until I was seated in hi  
: ahead,

le, a set I didn't protest any of this, not because I didn't want to. But be  
was coming to terms with the fact that, obviously, Hector was fixing  
own house.

ire and This affected me deeply, for two reasons.  
d been

en. The First, for as long as I could remember, my father had a personal g  
s were who came to the house every two weeks. She trimmed my father's ha  
through him a clean shave and finished off with a manicure. My father's fing  
ted the were perfectly clipped and shone so brightly it was almost like  
wearing a coat of clear polish. As far as I knew, he never picked up a  
brushes but a fork, a pen, a book or a golf club in his life. Never a hammer or  
cords). brush. *Never*. He'd also never operated anything with a cord except, p  
inished, his razor (though, I must admit, I'd not familiarized myself with his p  
ed to a hygiene).

In fact, most every man of my acquaintance was much the same.

ped. He Second, because of the above, when I was seventeen or eightee  
this stupid, silly, girlish, in the very, very back of my mind daydream t  
ght blue day I'd find a *real* man. A man so unlike my father as to be his antith  
vation-man who was strong enough to take me away from my horrible life, li  
my beautiful but cold ivory tower with bad people swarming around  
anister. killer bees. We'd fall in love and he'd whisk me away. We'd buy  
tagged junker bungalow that we'd fix up, intermingling our renovation effort  
e newel having and raising a plethora of children who we would spoil rotten a  
to distraction. Often we'd cease our duties, laughing at each other, pai  
air and on our cheeks and dust in our hair, while our children frolicked amor  
ce. His jumble of restoration paraphernalia.

is lap. A jumble that looked an awful lot in my head like the house I was  
in at that very moment.

cause I That dream died ages ago. In fact, until just then I'd forgotten I  
; up his had it.

"Sadie?" Hector called.



roomer I gave my head a little shake and looked at him.

ir, gave “What?”

gnails “You looked miles away.”

he was I wasn’t miles away. I was right there.

nything In fact, my whole life I never felt as *right there* as I did at that moment.

a paint “Are you fixing up your house?” I couldn’t help but ask.

erhaps, He looked around at the abundance of evidence of this ve  
n I had me. obviously scattered around us. His mouth twitched and his eyes came

hat one “Yeah,” he answered.

esis. A “Oh,” I said softly, not knowing what else to say, but for some r  
iving in could feel my heart beating in my throat.

me like One of his hands slid slowly up my back. The other arm came  
y some across my lap.

rts with “You okay?” he asked, his eyes doing a scan of my face.

nd love No.

nt dabs No, I was *not* okay.

igst our It hit me that I didn’t even know what “okay” felt like. I’d never a  
s sitting felt “okay.”

At that precise moment, however, what I felt like was asking He  
’d even could paint his living room. And that, I figured, was probably seriou  
okay.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Sadie,” he said softly.

I focused on him, noticed he was watching me closely and I wondered what he saw.

“What did you think of me when you first met me?” I asked but I couldn't think better of it.

His fingers were warm on my neck and he gave me a gentle squeeze.

He didn't hesitate with his answer. “I thought you were beautiful but I thought you were cold.”

This didn't offend me. A lot of people thought that way because I wanted them to think that way. So I nodded.

“Do you want to know what I think of you now?” he asked.

I really didn't. I wasn't sure I could take it, but for some bizarre reason I nodded again anyway.

“I think you're even more beautiful and I think you're totally lost.”

My brows went up. “And you think you can help me find my way?”

He shook his head. His eyes went warm and I got another neck squeeze coupled with a tightening of his arm around my waist.

“*Mamita*, only you can find your way. I just wanna be along for the ride.”

My belly went warm and I decided in that instant, in that hour, that I would give Hector, after he said those words, that before I left this life behind forever, I would give myself one more gift.

And on that decision, I leaned forward and kissed him.

It wasn't a peck on the lips. It was *a kiss*, and just like the first time I threw myself at him, he caught me.

Instantly.

ordered He leaned in, pulling my body across his lap as he took over the  
went from Sadie Hot to Hector *White* Hot. I wrapped my arms around  
before I feeling myself melt with the fire he shot through me from his bo  
locked lips and his talented tongue.

ze. His mouth trailed to my ear. My hands yanked at his shirt until  
il and I out of his jeans and I could get my fingers under it, inside it and  
smooth skin and hard muscle of his back.

wanted I turned my head and whispered in his ear, “I like the way you kiss  
His tongue touched my neck.

I shivered, felt his lips smile there, and then his mouth came I  
reason I mine.

Our mouths touching, his eyes looking deep into mine, he m  
“Good.”

Then his head slanted and he kissed me again. This time hotter,  
longer, making me feel things I hadn’t felt in a long time. Good  
squeeze Delicious things. Tingles along my skin, wetness between my legs  
belly tied up in glorious knots.

e ride.” It felt so good I squirmed in his lap and gently scored a path do  
se with back with my fingernails, showing him (I hoped) that I wanted more.

ver, I’d He groaned into my mouth. That felt good too.

His arm moved from my waist to behind my knees and he st  
taking me with him, carrying me while kissing me to the stairs, up the  
: time I down a hall and into his bedroom.

I guessed that meant he knew I wanted more.

He set me on my feet by the bed and leaned over. He turned  
kiss. It bedside lamp, sat on the bed and tugged off his boots.

and him, I watched him. Coming out of my desire-fuelled stupor, my  
dy, our coming back to me and my mind asking me what in *the heck* did I think  
doing.

I had it Then he leaned forward and down. He grabbed my ankle, lifted r  
up the between his legs, slid off my shoe and threw it to the side. His head ca  
eyes on mine as one hand held my ankle firmly. His other hand trailec  
.” back of my calf, moving only to his fingertips as they swept behind m  
then kept going partially up the back of my thigh before his touch fell :

back to Oh...my.

He put my foot down and repeated this move with my other leg.

uttered, Before I could do a thing (like, say, tear off my clothes and throw  
at him), he stood in front of me so close our bodies brushed. The ting  
deeper, started to spread again, this time far more frantic as he pulled off his  
things. At our proximity, this maneuver meant his T-shirt caught under my  
; and a and slid over them. I sucked in breath and reached out quickly to g  
waist and hold on because I was pretty certain sure my legs were a  
give out.

own his He tossed his T-shirt toward my shoes and my hands tensed at hi  
when I saw his chest. It was smooth, well-defined and he had a small,  
heart inked in blood red, outlined in barbed wire black, tattooed on his  
nod up, left pectoral.

e stairs, Like someone else (an even *newer* New Sadie) had taken over my  
leaned forward and put my mouth to his incredibly cool tattoo. Then I  
tongue there too.

on the nipple and that was that.

senses His hands went to my shirt. He whipped it over my head, dislodged my mouth from his chest, and tossed the shirt aside. His arms locked around my head. My head went back, his head bent and he kissed me.

ny foot This kiss, I could feel right away, was not under his control. It warmed up, hotter, deeper and so urgent I felt it stirring in me. My body responded wildly, I shoved my hands under his arms and wrapped them around my knees as tight as I could.

away. Still kissing me, his hands slid down my bottom, pressing me deeper into him so I could feel his hardness against my belly. At the feel of it, I raced through my entire system.

myself When his hands moved back up, his fingers found the skirt's zipper. He had tugged it down. Then he shoved my skirt over my hips until it fell to my T-shirt. His arms went around me and he fell back to the bed, me on top. He rolled me to the side so I was on my back, his mouth on me everywhere. He grabbed his neck, behind my ears, down my throat, across my chest. It felt good. It felt *tremendous*. I thought there was nothing better in the whole world. His lips closed over the dove-gray satin of my bra right where my nipple was.

is waist I felt his tongue through the satin then he sucked deep.

broken Waves of pure goodness shot from my nipple to between my legs. His hands slid in his hair.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “Do that again.”

body, I He did as I asked. It felt even better than before and I arched in wanting more. His hand slid down my belly, into my panties, between my legs. I felt his fingers on me, sliding through the wetness...

to his And I froze.

Unbidden, unwanted ice water filled my veins. I clamped my legs and my fingers fisted in his hair.

The desire knotting in my belly vanished. It was panic in my belly, sheer and mad, and my only crazed thought was *escape*.

His hand froze, his body stilled and his head came up, but I didn't respond to him.

I let him go and rolled, dislodging him and his hand, and put a knee on the bed to launch myself away. I got about a foot before he tagged me and dragged me backward into the heat of his body.

"*Let go!*" I screamed in a voice so shrill, so full of terror, it hurt my ears.

"Sadie, calm down," he whispered into the back of my neck as he wrapped tight around me, one at my stomach, one at my chest, pulling me into his hard body. "You're safe. We'll stop."

"I have to go," I demanded.

I felt his gentle "Shh" at my neck and I saw his hand reach out to the blanket at the end of the bed and pull it over my body.

I was trembling head to foot regardless of his heat and the bed. Trembling so violently I could swear I felt the bed shaking with it.

The humiliation was excruciating, crippling, and I felt tears coming out of my throat.

"I have to go," I repeated, my voice sounding funny.

"Quiet, *mi corazón*," he said gently.

I stayed quiet but I went on trembling, staring unseeing across his

his wall. He went on holding me tightly, his face in my hair, his warm  
gs shut on my neck. After long moments, his heat penetrated the cold in m  
and the tremors stopped.

ly now, It was then I realized I did it to him again. I came on to him and to  
somewhere I didn't intend to go. I didn't know I didn't intend to go th  
that was the way it ended all the same.

look at "I'm sorry," I whispered.

e to the He gave me a squeeze. "Why?" he asked.

me and "I did it to you again," I told him honestly. It cost me, but he d  
honesty and not the cold bitch I treated him to the last time I walke  
ny own from him.

He rolled me to face him, arranged the blanket so it was cover  
is arms again and slid his hand through the side of my hair, pulling it away fr  
ling me face. His hand went down my back until his arm was locked arou  
again.

I looked into his eyes. They were warm and gentle, not hard and ar

; nab a Well, thank God for *that*.

Finally, he said, "Don't worry about it."

blanket. "I didn't intend—"

"I know you didn't."

log my "I feel like an idiot."

"Don't," he said firmly.

I pulled in my lips, nodded (even though I still felt like an idiot; I  
this *was* embarrassing) then dropped my gaze to his throat.

; bed to "Put your arms around me, *mamita*," he ordered.

my breath I didn't want to but I did, and for some reason this made me feel better  
my veins "Can I ask a favor?"

I nodded again.  
I looked at him "Stay here tonight."  
I was here, but My body went tight.

"No, Sadie." His fingers came to my chin and lifted my face to  
him. When my eyes were on his, he leaned in and touched his mouth to  
mine. He pulled away a couple of inches and said, "I just want you beside  
me. That's it."

I walked away "Buddy and Ralphie—" I began, using my one and only easy (but  
not really) excuse.

I was bringing me "I'll call Buddy and Ralphie."  
I was coming from my "Darn."  
I was sending me

If Hector called Ralphie and Buddy, and Ralphie answered he'd probably  
take a leap for joy. I figured Buddy's reaction would be far less dramatic but  
in the same vein.

I chewed my lip.

Oh heck, what could I say?

First off, I'd already slept with him twice. It was on a couch, but  
Secondly, I could hardly say no after this latest episode. Lastly, I was  
staying with him. He made me feel snug, warm and safe.

Boy, my plans never really worked out, did they?

I mean, "Okay," I agreed.

He didn't grin, look amused or glory in his triumph. He pushed up



etter. the top of my head then slid away.

I sat up holding the blanket to my front and watched as he walked to a dresser, pulled open a drawer and yanked something out.

I stared in fascination at his brown-skinned muscled back. It had a tattoo too. This one on his right shoulder blade, bigger than the other one. I saw a skull wearing an elaborate crown, its grinning teeth clenching a blue rose. The skull and crown were all in black, the petals and stem of the rose, though, were in full, striking color. Although I was no tattoo expert, I had an art degree so I felt safe in saying the rose was exquisite. You could tell an artist had taken their time and they were skilled at their craft. It wasn't good) simply, stunning.

It was way cooler than the broken heart.

He slammed the drawer, turned and walked back to me. He gave me a white T-shirt then wrapped his hand around the back of my head, leaned in and kissed the top again. Then he walked away and went to another drawer. He got something else and headed to the door.

He stopped, put his hand to the knob and looked at me. "Get cleaned up, *mamita*. I'll call the boys and I'll be back."

I nodded again.

He closed the door and I heard the floorboards creak as he walked away. I stared at the door and rewound the evening, wondering how I got myself in this latest predicament. Without lemon drops to blame (I had one with my spicy beef burrito), I could only blame the power tools.

Now what normal girl got turned on by power tools? I was so weird. Then I realized he could be back any second. It didn't take a year

Ralphie and Buddy.

I across I threw the blanket back, tugged on the T-shirt (which was huge or the way), undid my bra underneath it and squirmed and contorted a tattoo pulled it off. I snatched up my clothes, folding them, my bra between it was a shirt and skirt. I put them on the dresser and dashed back to the bed, beautiful noticed belatedly was unmade. I rearranged the pillows that were the rose, scattered but partially stacked so that they were evenly placed. I saw had an legged in the middle of the bed and pulled the covers up around my see the tucked them tightly around me and stared at the door.

s, quite When it didn't open immediately, I looked around the room.

I noticed a dresser, a closet (one door open, one Hispanic Hot clearly hadn't been taught how to properly hang clothes), boots and shoes scattered against one wall and a laundry hamper overflowing in corner.

drawer. Incongruous to the room, an expensive flat screen TV sat on a hand dark wood, heavy, masculine TV stand that rested at the wall opposite, bed. It had electronic equipment and stacks of DVDs on display on underneath it.

Boy, gay or straight, rich or poor, men really liked their TVs.

away. The room hadn't been refinished. The once utilitarian cream of the was grubby. The white skirting boards chipped. The wood floors notched I got needing sanding and refinishing.

Did a man bring a woman to such a room? Such a *house*?

d! If that man was Hector, a *real* man who didn't give a damn what thought of him, the answer was yes.

to call My stomach pitched and it hit me for the first time just how prof

was what Ricky took from me.

me by Because a normal, free New Sadie, fresh from a life under her  
until Ithumb, should have had a different end to a “just the two of us” da  
een myHector.

which I On that dismal thought, the door opened and Hector was there.

slightly He was carrying his clothes and boots and wearing a pair of pajama  
t cross- a thick, navy elastic band at the waist, plaid flannel legs. The thing wa  
waist. I cut them off at mid-thigh (and to be honest, had not done a great job)  
hems were ragged. They looked like they’d been worn about five  
times and the waist hung low so I could see his defined abs and hip bo

tie that Oh my blooming *my*.

running His head came up. He saw me sitting in his bed and his body jolt  
ig in a halt like he’d hit a wall and he froze.

I blinked.

idsome, Now, really, how bizarre was *that*?

site the I stared at him.

He stared at me.

The way he was looking at me made me feel funny, really  
ie walls *seriously* funny (but in a good way), so I blurted, “Is everything ok  
ied and Ralphie and Buddy?”

His chin jerked back and he came unstuck.

He walked to the laundry hamper and answered my question  
anyone “Yeah.”

I watched him move. He moved well.

found it I tried to stop thinking about how well he moved.

“Um...” I muttered. “Isn’t it kind of early to go to bed?”

father’s And it was early, at the latest nine.

ite with “Yeah,” he said and dumped some clothes on the hamper immediately tumbled off the top and fell on the floor. He apparently notice this. He twisted and tossed his boots into the pile by the a pants, watched them sail and land with a thump.

as, he’d Then my eyes went back to him. I caught the crowned skull again ) so the he turned and came to the side of the bed.

million “Should we watch TV or something?” I suggested.

nes. He was carrying his jeans. His eyes came to me as he dropped his the bedside table and then emptied his pockets.

ted to a There was something immensely weird but very lovely, snugly, warm about sitting in his bed and watching Hector empty the pocket jeans. Before I could plumb the depths of this weird, lovely, snugly, warm feeling, Hector spoke.

“Yeah,” he said again, his eyes lazy on me, and that made me feel lovely, comfy warm too!

funny, “Do you have to move furniture around?” I asked him. “Because ay with do, I can help.”

A glamorous smile hit his mouth and my breath caught. “Move fi around?”

with a, “You know, downstairs.”

He laughed softly, shook his head and juttet his chin to the wall. M moved to where he was indicating.

Oh boy.

We were going to watch TV in Hector's bed.

This was not good. In fact, how was I here at all? Why did I agree

. They I rewound the night frantically even though I'd done the same thing  
7 didn't moments before. It came back to me in a humiliating rush and I swallowed.  
wall. I I was there for a reason and there I had agreed to stay.

Blooming heck.

before "What if we want popcorn? We can't eat popcorn in your bed,"  
him, sounding maybe an *eensy* bit desperate.

He twisted. I got a look at the King of Skulls on his back shoulder  
cell on and he tossed his jeans in the general direction of the hamper (they  
target but also rolled off and fell to the floor, and he didn't care about  
comfy, either). Then before I knew what he was about, he'd turned around, c  
s of his at the waist and put his fists into the bed, close to my thighs.

comfy, This meant his face was close to mine.

"First of all, *mamita*, I don't have any popcorn. Second, you  
l weird, touched your dinner. Now you wanna eat?"

I thought fast (this, by the way, was *not* easy).

if you "My mind was occupied at dinner. Now I'm feeling peckish," I  
would probably throw up if I ate anything, I was so nervous.

urniture He shook his head laughing low again then lifted up, pulled back  
covers and slid in.

My heart stopped.

4y eyes He arranged the pillows behind his back (I will note, he completely  
devastated my efforts at equal pillow disbursement of not ten minutes  
before). His arm curled around my waist and he pulled me backwards

back hit his side, my legs uncrossed and my shoulder and head were p  
to this? on his chest.

ng only Oh, I *got* it. I didn't *need* pillows. I was using his chest as a pill  
wed. *that* was why he could hog them all.

I felt him move, saw his hand holding the remote in my periphera  
and the TV snapped on. A ballgame appeared and the hand disappeare

' I told As if he hadn't just settled us comfortably in his bed like we'd be  
our golden wedding anniversary the next evening and not doing this  
*very first time ever*, he continued the conversation.

r again,  
hit the "Your mind at dinner was occupied with an attempted freeze out,  
ut that, *mi cielo*, is cute, I gotta admit. But it's only fair to let you know,  
doubled gonna work."

My body went still.

He thought the Ice Princess was cute?

barely *Cute?*

The Ice Princess was *not* cute! I knew grown men that feared her!

Well, maybe not feared. Perhaps they just disliked her and gav  
I lied. I wide berth.

It was good I was moving to Crete because if he thought my Ice P  
ack the was *cute* then I was in a mess of trouble.

"We'll order a pizza if you're hungry," he told me.

I crossed my arms on my chest, stared at the TV and contradic  
pletely earlier lie, "I'm not hungry."

minutes His arm came around me. His forearm resting on my chest, his  
s so my curled around my opposite shoulder.

illowed “You want something, let me know,” he said and he sounded distracted.  
Obviously the game had called his attention.

low. So So I thought it might be safe to ask an eensy, teensy, tiny, little p  
question just because I was dying to know, and since I didn’t get th  
l vision intended to give myself that evening, I was going to go for sor  
d. different.

sharing “What’s the tattoo on your chest mean?” I asked casually, like w  
for the answer to a brokenhearted tattoo question would mean nothing  
whatsoever to me.

which, “Belinda,” he replied, still sounding distracted.

it’s not I was not distracted. My body went still again.

“Belinda?” I asked.

“My ex,” he answered.

Oh...my...*God*.

He had a tattoo of a broken heart on his chest.

No, he had a tattoo of a broken heart over his heart on his chest! /  
e her a he got for Belinda!

“Was it a bad break?” I was still going for casual, but my voice s  
’rincess breathy.

Now, why did I ask that? Why? What was wrong with me? Now  
punishing *myself* and getting *myself* into stupid, terrifying situations.

ted my “You could say that, since she broke it off three months bef  
wedding.”

fingers Before I could think better of it (or say, think *at all*), I shot up to a  
position and twisted to look at him, my mouth open.

acted. Then I snapped it closed.

Then I spoke. “She broke up with you three months before  
personal wedding?”

ie gift I *Oh my God!*

nothing Hector had been engaged. He’d nearly been married!

*Oh my GOD!*

hatever He didn’t move. His body still reclined on the pillows, the sheet  
at all waist, his chest displayed. Only his eyes came to me.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Why?” I asked.

“She wanted a nine-to-five guy who mowed the lawn on the week-  
I’m not a nine-to-five guy who mows the lawn on the weekend. She c  
handle me being on assignment, away for days or weeks or even mon  
being able to contact her. She tried to talk me into a desk job. I told  
man who put the ring on her finger was a field agent for the DEA an  
A tattoo who she’d have to marry. She saw I was serious, pawned the ring,  
mom to call the church, hall and guests and took a vacation at an all-in-  
in Acapulco.”

ounded My eyes narrowed.

v I was “She *pawned your ring?*” I spat, sounding frighteningly like Ralph

But seriously. Who would pawn Hector “Oh my God” Chavez’  
Who would try to make Hector something he was not? Who would  
ore the Acapulco alone when they could go to Acapulco *with Hector?* O  
honeymoon even!

i seated Was she nuts?



I realized belatedly that Hector was smiling a huge, blinding white smile at me.

Oh no.

What had I given away?

He did an ab crunch. His hands came to my shoulders, twisted me back to him, his arm went around my chest and he pulled me into his earlier position. But this time his arm was wrapped tighter.

“Calm down, *mamita*. My sister Gloria went to her house and brought her up when she got back from Mexico. It was a couple of years ago she can stand down.”

There was the answer.

I’d given it *all* away.

Darn it!

I decided to move attention off me “standing down.” “Your sister brought that roughed her up?”

“Catfight. Not pretty. Word is, Gloria won.”

I wanted to laugh and clap my hands for an absent sister I would probably never meet.

Of course, I did not.

“She broke your heart,” I said to the TV.

His fingers did a squeeze on my shoulder. “I’m over it.”

“It hurt enough for you to tattoo it on your chest,” I pointed out.

“I didn’t get the tat because she marked me. I got the tat to remind me of the lesson I learned. She was beautiful. Great body, fantastic in bed.”

she could be sweet when she wanted, but most of the time she was a real bitch. Every time I see the tat, it reminds me not to be led around by a dick.”

All right then, more proof that Hector was as real as you could get.

It was clear at this juncture it was time for me to steer us into my own waters.

“So, what’s the skull with the crown and the rose mean?”

Hector’s body tensed and the air in the room immediately felt heavy.

My body tensed at his reaction and the feel of the air.

Eyes on the TV, I didn’t even try to be casual when I whispered, “Hector?”

He sighed. His body relaxed, but his arm around me got tighter.

“I got it to celebrate nailing your father.”

Gloria Of course.

He got it to celebrate, forever and ever, putting King Drug Money to Death to many (probably), better known as my *fucking* father, in prison.

That was *just great*.

Well, if I didn’t already have my proof that we were ill-suited, I was tattooed on Hector’s *fucking* back.

“And the rose clamped in his teeth?” I asked, wanting to know what it meant. Perversely looking for more reasons to buy my tickets to Crete and pack my luggage with beach towels, even as I was wearing Hector’s T-shirt and lying in his bed with his arm around me.

“The rose is you.”

ragging Plans of buying beach towels flew out of my head. My stomach d  
by mymy heart seized and I could feel a tremor shiver through my body.

“Me?” I whispered.

He did another ab crunch. His arm moved to around my waist. He  
o saferme so I was facing him and reclined, me pressed mostly to his front v  
face close to his.

I put my hand on his chest and pressed up, but his arm went solid  
y. waist and I stilled.

“You,” he said firmly, his eyes back to that warm intensity. “In tir  
ispered, arm...” He squeezed me with his right arm but lifted his left. “Right l  
His right arm left me and he pointed to the inside of his forearm. M  
moved there then back to his as his arm came around me again. “Is  
have the same rose. Because you belong on my arm. Do you understan  
I’m sayin’ to you?”

I understood what he was saying. I understood what he meant w  
an, Mr.said “My Sadie” now too.

1. The tremor shivered through my body again.

“Sadie, do you understand what I’m sayin’ to you?” he asked ag  
it was tone no less firm, but it had grown slightly soft.

I was staring at him, but I forced myself to nod. I couldn’t trust m  
hat that speak.

and fill His arm went tight around me, sliding partly up my back, hand c  
nirt and under my shoulder blade, bringing me to him. He kissed me, slow,  
mouths open, tongues tangling, toes (or at least *my* toes) curling.

His mouth broke from mine and he murmured, “Now, we’ve had c

ropped, "You know where I stand. Can we watch the game?"

I nodded again. His arm loosened. I turned, rested against him and unfocused, on the game.

twisted Blooming heck.

with my I wasn't in a mess of trouble. I was beyond trouble. I was in so was over my head. And the water felt so warm, snugly, comfy, lovely. I was beginning to wonder if I minded drowning.

ne, this  
ere..."

ly eyes  
s gonna  
nd what

hen he

ain, his

yself to

atching  
sweet,

our talk.

You know where I stand. Can we watch the game?"

I nodded again. His arm loosened. I turned, rested against him and stared, unfocused, on the game.

Blooming heck.

I wasn't in a mess of trouble. I was beyond trouble. I was in so deep, I was over my head. And the water felt so warm, snugly, comfy, lovely that I was beginning to wonder if I minded drowning.

## TWELVE



# I THINK I MADE HECTOR MAD

*Sadie*

**M**y sleeping body jerked awake when I heard the loud noise somewhere too close for comfort.

Then it froze when I heard the crash.

I had nearly a nanosecond to assess my position tucked tight against Hector's warm body, his arm around my waist, my cheek on his left shoulder, my hand resting dead center on his chest. But before that nanosecond was over, his heat vanished and a blast of cold hit me.

I lifted up on one arm, my heart racing, pulling back my hair with my other hand and seeing Hector's shadowy body moving beside the bed.

He had the bedside drawer open. I heard a soft thump as he put something on the nightstand and then his hand immediately came out, his fingers closing around my wrist. He lifted up my arm and I felt him press something into my hand.

"Stay here. You feel a bad vibe, hear something you don't like, you call 911," he whispered. Then he tagged whatever was on the bedside table and it disappeared from the room.

I stared at the door and heard noise, voices, and visions of Marty on

blowing Hector's beautiful head off danced sickeningly through my head.

I threw back the covers in a flurry and tiptoed across the room to the door. If someone was going to come and get me, I wasn't going to be sitting in bed waiting for them.

I pressed my shoulder against the wall by the door and assessed my options.

I had Hector's cell phone in my hand.

This was lame.

I could get one of his boots. I could seriously clobber someone with one of Hector's boots.

Or I could get one of my spiked heels. I could poke someone in the back with the spiked heel. That would sting.

On that thought, I heard raised voices. Hector's and a female's. They were yelling at each other in Spanish. Although this was yelling, it wasn't the bad vibe yelling. It was irritated yelling.

I took a deep breath and crept out the door, down the hall, and then kept going, mostly the female.

I made it to the top of the stairs and looked down.

There was a light on and Hector was standing at the foot of the stairs, his back to me, the King Skull on display, a gun held loosely in his hand.

In front of him were three Hispanic women. One of them (the one who was also gesticulating wildly with her arms) was short and goatee. She looked like a younger, less round but no less fiery version of Blanca.

A relative.

I let out a breath and put my hand holding the cell phone to my cheek.

ad. The minute I did her eyes lifted to the stairs. She stopped yelling  
the side mouth dropped open.

ig to be I wanted to turn and run back to the bed, pull the covers over m  
and wait until Hector got back.

sed my Instead, New Sadie clicked into place, took her hand from her  
waved the cell phone at the woman and called, “Hi.”

Hector twisted and looked up at me. I watched him bite his bott  
and as I’d never seen him do that before, I didn’t know whether he wa  
with one back a smile or annoyance.

I took in a deep breath and walked down the stairs.

the eye All three women watched me descend. All of them had their  
hanging open.

s. They I thought this was bizarre. Hector was Hispanic Hottie. He’d near  
was not married to *Belinda*. It wasn’t like he’d never had a woman at his house

Hector stepped to the side when I got to the bottom and I stopped  
yelling him.

“Sadie, this is my sister Gloria. Gloria, Sadie,” Hector introdu  
when I came to a halt.

airs, his So this was Catfight-Rough-Up-*Belinda* Gloria.

I couldn’t help it. I smiled at her.

yelling, Her eyes bugged out.

rgeous. Now, this was bizarre too.

ca. Hector rapped out something in terse Spanish and Gloria blinked.

st. Then she said to me, “It’s just like *Mamá* said, you *do* look like  
princess.”



and her Oh.

That again.

my head I shrugged.

Eyes still on me, she breathed, “*Dios mio*, please tell me it’s just  
r chest, hard to be that beautiful.”

I stared at her not knowing how to react.

om lip, On the one hand, what she said was really sweet and that made  
s biting nice.

On the other hand, it was more than “just a little hard” to look  
because looking like me made me a Balducci Brothers Target of Terror  
mouths

On this thought, of their own accord, my fingers started toward t  
on my cheek. For some reason when I did this, Hector’s body gave  
ly been angry electric current and it began snapping around the room.

His arm slid around my shoulders and he tucked my front into h  
next to His other hand came up, his fingers wrapped around my raised wrist  
pulled my hand to his chest. While he did this, he barked low, angry  
iced us words at his sister.

She shook her head then nodded, and her face going a bit pale, sl  
“I’m sorry, Sadie. I didn’t think.”

So, Gloria knew what happened to me too.

This time, I mentally shrugged. It was way harder than the fairy p  
thing, but I was getting used to it too.

“Please, don’t worry about it,” I said softly.

a fairy Finally, she gave me a small, hesitant grin, turned and gestured to  
girls behind her. “These are my girls, Inés and Tia.”

I looked at them.

They were smiling at me and both were nearly as pretty as Gloria (quite), and finally I said, “Hi.”

a little They said, “Hi,” back.

I was feeling weird. Then I realized this was because I was standing in Hector’s T-shirt, tucked in Hector’s side, in the middle of the night in Hector’s sister and her two friends in Hector’s living room.

I wondered briefly why Hector’s sister would break into her brother’s house in the middle of the night, but I decided it was none of my business. I didn’t have siblings. Who knew how they acted? Maybe this was normal.

I put my hand holding the cell phone around Hector’s waist and looked for someone to say something.

No one did.

So I tried to figure out what was the nice thing to do in this situation and he settled on asking, “Should I make coffee?”

Spanish “Fuck no,” Hector said immediately.

This jerked Gloria out of her Sadie Daze and she started snapping at Hector.

Hector listened for about half a second then interrupted (thankfully in English), “Gloria, no fuckin’ way are you and the girls sittin’ in my house fuckin’ one o’clock in the fuckin’ morning.”

Hector had a hot tub?

“We’ll be quiet,” Gloria assured him.

the two “I don’t give a fuck. What’s in your head, breakin’ into my house in the middle of the night? I could have shot you, for fuck’s sake,” Hector

sharply.

“*Mamá* said you’ve been spendin’ the night at Sadie’s. We didn’t  
you’d be here,” Gloria responded.

Blanca knew Hector was spending the night at my house?

How?

Why?

Again, *how*?

“That makes it okay?” Hector shot back, breaking into my  
thoughts.

“You aren’t using it!” Gloria snapped back.

“Jesus,” Hector muttered, obviously at a loss to come up with  
against his sister’s (I had to admit) bizarre logic.

“Maybe I *should* make coffee,” I broke in, trying to be peacemaker

“Maybe Gloria, Inés and Tia should get their Mexican asses out  
fuckin’ house.” Hector didn’t feel like allowing me to make peace.

Thus began a hot-blooded, Mexican American sibling staredown that  
so scorching, I felt even the latent Ice Princess shy away.

New Sadie, however, felt like marching straight into the fire.

I looked up at Hector. “Hector, let them sit in the hot tub.”

Hector looked down at me, face still angry, but for some reason I knew  
was not angry at me, and he started, “Sadie—”

“What’s it going to hurt?” I broke in.

I watched Hector’s teeth clench and a muscle leap in his cheek.

“That’s okay,” Gloria said, and Hector’s and my eyes moved

“We’d have to use the bathroom to change and we’d have to come back dry off afterward. We’d probably be noisy,” she explained, now smiling at me with her Glamorous Chavez Smile (hers had a dimple, like Eddie’s). “We know you were here, Sadie, or we wouldn’t have woken you up.”

“No problem,” I told her, wanting to laugh at her implication that if it had been just Hector at home they wouldn’t have hesitated waking *him* up.

“We’ll come back when you’re here some other time. We’ll *all* sit in the hot tub,” Gloria invited herself over.

crazed Hector’s body went tight.

I was thinking I’d likely be in Crete by that time, licking my wounds and obsessively sketching versions of Hector’s celebration tattoo, my skull, my beautiful rose, even though I didn’t sketch. I’d have all the time in the world to teach myself.

Instead, I said, “I’ll look forward to that.”

“Jesus,” Hector for some reason muttered again.

Gloria was close to laughing when her gaze swung to her brother. He had said something to him in Spanish. His body grew tighter and Inés started giggling.

“You do that,” Hector said, his voice as tight as his body, “the retribution.”

“Bring it on,” Gloria returned, still smiling and not at all scared. Hector’s threatened “retribution.”

Then they hitched their bags over their shoulders, waved at me, and said, “*Hasta luego*,” and they were gone.

Hector let me go and I watched him lock the door behind the

ck in to flipped the light switch and came back to me. Throwing his arm around my shoulders again, he turned me and guided me up the stairs.

e didn't "What did she say at the end, before she left?" I asked as we went up the stairs.

if it had I felt weird with his arm around me like that so I put mine around my waist and immediately didn't feel weird anymore.

t in the "She told me she was gonna tell *Mamá* you're here."

Since, apparently, Blanca knew he was spending the night at my house, I didn't know why this was a big deal.

nds and "Why is that a big deal?" I asked.

father's "She tells her, you'll find out," Hector said ominously.

time in Oh no.

We went back to his room. I crawled into bed while he put his gun on the nightstand and then he joined me. He moved into me, turning me so my back was to the front and his arms were around me.

er. She His heat seeped through me and I started to relax, feeling safe and Tia comfy, lovely when he called, "Sadie?"

re'll be "Yes?" I replied in a sleepy voice.

ared of "Gloria gets you in the hot tub with her posse, they have any bright ideas? You ignore them and go your own way."

"What does that mean?"

calling, "That means Gloria, Inés and Tia make Indy and Ally look like amateurs."

em. He I blinked in the darkness. "Now, what does *that* mean?"

und my “Indy has her own police code,” Hector informed me.

Oh my.

lked up



I WOKE TO A COLD, thus I knew, empty bed.

und his I rolled, looked at Hector’s side, but sure enough, he was gone. I pulled my hair out of my face and looked around the room.

No Hector.

ouse, I Then I realized I had to use the bathroom.

I slid out from under the covers, walked out of the room and down the hall, looking into empty rooms. Two more bedrooms (neither one finished, one unused save to store more stacked boxes and furniture, the smallest one being utilized as an office), one bath.

n away When I got in the bathroom, I noticed Hector had already renovated his handsome, what looked like top-of-the-line (but what did I know, I plumber) bathroom suite and lots of warm, Mexican tile up the walls.

, snug, mustard yellow and terracotta designs against a buttery-cream background.

I did my business and walked down the stairs in search of Hector. I found him in the kitchen.

it ideas, At the sight of him, I stopped in the doorway.

ok like He was still wearing his cutoff pajama bottoms but he’d added a touch of gray, long-sleeved, skintight thermal. He was standing by the sink on the opposite side of the room. His side was partially turned to the counter, resting against it, eyes looking out the window over the sink, coffee cup aloft but forgotten in front of him.

His mind was on something.

I stared at him and thought for the millionth time that he never better.

The kitchen had not been renovated and it looked like an extension restoration efforts. Paint brushes and drying rollers lying out on rags sat up, countertops, buckets on the floor, bags filled with I didn't know what in the corner.

I must have moved because Hector's eyes sliced to me.

His thoughtful face warmed and he demanded softly, "Come here."

As if guided by their own personal brain, my feet moved me toward them as I watched him put his mug on the counter. When I got within reach, the distance, one of his arms came around my shoulders, the other one around waist and he curled me into his heat.

His head came down and he gave me a soft, sweet kiss (with tongue) lasted until my arms slid around his waist and my body melted into his. Cobalt, he lifted his head.

"You want coffee?" he asked quietly.

Robbed of speech by the kiss, I nodded.

Before he could move, there was a clamor from the other room. clamor.

Our bodies grew tight in unison before we heard Blanca call, "Hijo! *Dónde estás?*"

"Fuck," Hector muttered.

I stared in horror at Hector's set face.

"Hector!" Blanca shouted.

"Kitchen!" Hector shouted back.

looked Oh no.

Someone, please tell me Hector didn't just tell his mother of the whereabouts.

I was standing, in Hector's T-shirt, in Hector's arms, in Hector's kitchen and Blanca (from what I could hear, carrying rustling bags) was heading away.

My body prepared to flee. Hector's arms went tight. Blanca filled the kitchen doorway.

She stared at us a second, then shouted as if we were across a beach and not across a room, "*Hola!*"

I was robbed of speech again, now for a different reason.

"*Mamá*, Sadie and I want a quiet morning."

"Bah!" Blanca exploded, bustling in and dropping six (yes, six) King Soopers bags on the counter. "Sadie needs breakfast. Do you cook? No, you do not cook. *Hola* Sadie." She smiled at me and then started pulling food out of the bags.

I watched as the food was revealed and I noted no breakfast-type ingredients. A loud look more like she was planning to stock the cupboards before the government announced rationing.

I found my voice. "Um, *hola* Blanca."

I felt Hector's eyes on me and I looked up at him. He was smiling.

Yes, *smiling!*

I shot him a glare. His body moved with laughter. I did *not* think that funny. Instead, I found it mortifying.

I pulled out of his arms and put some distance between us.



I'd never been caught in the morning by someone's mother. If I had  
er our to bring my boyfriends to my father's house and they wandered around  
their pajama bottoms, my father would have had them executed (this  
kitchen, be a bit over the top, but my father *really* didn't like to share me and  
ded our loads of suffocating ways to make that terrible fact perfectly clear).

Therefore, awake for approximately ten minutes, I found myself caught  
led the a new predicament and I had no idea what to do.

New Sadie, however, surprisingly knew *exactly* what to do.

football "Can I help?" New Sadie chirped to Blanca.

"Coffee. Black," Blanca answered.

Still annoyed at him, I shot another glare at Hector and then  
opening and closing cupboards to find the mugs. His hand slid around  
bulging waist and pulled me into his side before he reached well beyond  
ook, mi opened the cupboard over the coffeemaker. It was filled with mismatched  
arted to mugs. I turned my head to give him another glare, but this effort failed  
his mouth hit mine for a touch on the lips. Then he let me go.

I shrugged off his kiss and got down to the business of coffee. I was  
tems. It middle of finishing mugs for Blanca and me (*and* Hector, who slid  
ore the beside mine when I was pouring) and wondering how on earth I was going to  
get through this latest trauma (in a T-shirt no less!) when I heard a  
voice call out, "Chavez?"

"Christ, is there a sign on my door that says come the fuck in?"  
muttered.

his was I noticed at our latest visitor Hector instantly lost his good morning  
and it was Blanca's turn to shoot him a glare.

But my eyes flew to the kitchen doorway, wondering who this was

d dared (and also wondering why my life couldn't be the *eeniest* bit easier  
ound in Hector moved across the room and out of the kitchen.

s might "Café, mi hija," Blanca reminded me, and I stopped staring at F  
he had departing back and brought her coffee to her.

ught in "What else can I do?" I asked as I heard male voices in the other ro  
They were getting closer and my eyes went back to the door.

"Do you cook?" Blanca asked.

"Not really," I answered somewhat dishonestly.

I'd never had to cook much, but I did know how to make coffee an  
which was something.

started "I'll teach you," Blanca assured me, moving around the room,  
ind my away food and pulling out cooking implements.

me and I was feeling a weird, happy glow at Blanca offering to teach me  
atched when Hector walked in. He was followed, to my horror, by th  
d when handsome, dark-haired Ren Zano wearing a tailored suit (and we  
really well, by the way). This making me *acutely* aware that I was v  
s in the nothing but Hector's T-shirt and a pair of dove-gray satin panties,  
his cup luckily, you couldn't see as the shirt hung to mid-thigh.

going to Please, someone tell me, just...plain...*no*.

man's Ren's eyes scanned the room, coasting across Blanca with a  
Hector "Mornin'," and then coming to a halt on me. His face gentled and  
hesitation he walked to me, smiling.

g mood "Sadie," he said softly.

"Ren," I replied.

as now To my shock (because he'd never done it before, not once), his a

) when around my waist and he pulled me to his body in a hug. After he was  
with the hug, his arm loosened but didn't let go. I arched back over it  
Hector's on his chest, and looked up at him.

Eyes on my face, he murmured, "Beautiful as ever."

om. Oh my God.

He'd never done that before either! What was *that* about?

I searched for the Ice Princess.

The Ice Princess never much liked coming out around Ren (altho  
d toast, course she did). But this time she flatly refused.

That was why New Sadie asked, "Are you well?"

putting "Yeah," he returned.

I smiled at him. "Good."

to cook His gaze dropped to my mouth then his lips formed a grin.

he tall, "Jesus, Sadie, never seen you smile," he remarked.

aring it I cocked my head in confusion.

wearing "I'm sure you have," I replied.

which, His eyes moved back to mine. "Trust me, I would have remembere

It was then I felt the electric current snapping through the room  
quick, before I heard Hector, his voice not happy, saying in the form of a q  
without but meaning it in the form of a demand, "Zano, you wanna step back?"

I realized Ren still had an arm around me right before he droppe  
stepped back.

Both Ren and I looked across the room.

rm slid Hector was standing, feet planted, arms crossed, eyes dark and .

as done beyond unhappy. So beyond unhappy, he looked downright angry.

; hands No, one could say he'd gone right past downright unhappy to extreme fury.

Blanca had a similar expression *and* she was holding a wooden spoon I thought she had a mind to use for something other than cooking.

“Chavez, you know Sadie’s a friend,” Ren told Hector in a low, polite tone.

“Yeah, but now she’s a friend you don’t put your hands on,” Hector replied.

Oh my.

Why was he being so *rude*? This was Ren Zano we were talking about. Ren was a very nice man. There was no reason to be rude.

“Hector—” I started, and Hector’s eyes cut to me.

The minute I saw the look in them, for self-preservation’s sake, I shut my mouth.

“Coffee and we finish our talk in the other room,” Hector told Ren.

“I’ll get the coffee,” I offered quickly and jumped to get Ren’s coffee, needing something to do to keep my mind off the look in Hector’s eyes.

I asked Ren’s coffee preference, hurried through the preparations, handed him his mug. He smiled his thanks, nodded to a still frowning, watching Blanca and walked from the room.

Then I gave Hector his mug, got scorched by a Hector glare that made my lungs burn and he walked from the room too.

looking I picked up my own mug and tried to stop my hands from shaking.

heart from racing. I took a sip and realized I also had to stop breathing pretty heavily. I was panting like I'd just run a race.

That was when I noticed Blanca's eyes were on me.

soon. A "I think I made Hector mad," I blurted before I thought better of it.  
er than Something flashed across her face.

It looked like anger, warring with confusion, warring with com-  
placating then she asked, "You *think*?"

"I..." I started, stopped, and walked the five steps to Blanca. "Wh-  
Hector do?" I finished on a whisper.

I watched her face soften as compassion won and she put a hand  
arm. "My Hector, he's a little hotheaded. You have to handle that by  
about! care. *Queridita*, first lesson, you don't let a man touch you, ever. If he  
there to see it or he's not. But *especiall*y if he's there to see it. *Sí*?"

The light dawned.

napped I might be fledgling New Sadie in my head. But in *his* head, I was  
Sadie. Period, dot, the end.

I nodded to Blanca.

coffee, She patted my arm and went back to cooking. I grabbed my mug  
s. went back to sipping, finding I was so uncomfortable with the idea of  
on and Hector angry at me that it made my heart hurt.

closely Ren materialized at the door and jutted his chin at me. "Sadie  
leaving."

ade my I decided my safest bet was to stay all the way across the room from  
and this was exactly what I did.

and my "Bye, Ren," I said on a wave.

hing so Ren grinned at me like he thought I was funny. His eyes moved to and he said his good-byes. Then he was gone and Hector was doorframe, his gaze was still scorching and it was on me.

“*Mamita*, a word.”

It was not a request and he didn't wait for my response. He turned passion moved away as I heard the front door open and close behind Ren.

I stood frozen to the spot. Then my eyes flew to Blanca.

at did I She gave me a reassuring wink (which didn't reassure me) and g to the door with her spoon.

on my I pulled in my lips, put down my mug, took a deep breath and s joy with for Hector who was not in the living room, not in the cluttered other Hector's but upstairs in his bedroom. He was waiting at the door, and the n cleared it, he threw it to.

Blooming heck!

was His He opened his mouth, but before he could say a word, I launched in

“He's never touched me before. I swear it. It weirded me out!”

“Honest to God, I wouldn't even call him a friend. More an acquainta The Ice Princess always protected me from people getting near. W hugged me, I tried to call her up but she was just *gone*. She disappearing these days. Even when I need her. I'm used to hav around. I know you cannot imagine, but Hector, believe me, it's making ie, I'm annoying.”

I stopped talking when I noticed that he'd stopped looking angry. I om him his eyes had warmed and his mouth was doing the fighting-a-grin thing

I replayed what I said, my hands clenched into fists, my eyes clos

Blanca as my body went stock still and waves of embarrassment flowed over me  
in the I'd done it. Now he knew everything.

How did I let *that* happen?

He was going to think I was absolutely, certifiably *insane*.

red and Then I found myself snatched into strong arms, my soft body c  
with his hard one, and his face went into my neck. I opened my eye  
turned me and started walking me backward toward the bed, his ar  
gestured locked around me.

Well, maybe he didn't think I was certifiably insane. But I was be  
eached to think he was.

rooms, His mood swings were just *bizarre*.

minute I The backs of my legs hit the bed. He stopped us and his mouth m  
my ear.

"*Mamita*," his voice was rough with what sounded like laugh  
n. something else altogether, "you think you could handle my mouth b  
I cried. your legs without freakin' out?"

ntance. The legs he wanted to put his mouth between turned to water.

hen he "What?" I whispered.

keeps His head came up. His eyes were burning into mine (now in a d  
ing her way), and my breath caught at the sight.  
*beyond*

"I gotta have a taste of you and I gotta watch you come. I don't..."

Instead, My fingers at his waist dug in, and at that second if he let me  
collapse in a puddle at his feet.

ed tight "Your mother is downstairs," I breathed.

me. Hector's mouth came to mine. "The walls are thick."

"She'll wonder what we're doing!"

"No she won't," he returned.

"I won't be able to concentrate." I kept trying.

colliding I felt his mouth smile against mine. "*Mi corazón*, you won't concentrate."

ms still Oh my.

*That* got a stomach pitch.

ginning Even so, I kept at it. "I can't. Not now. Maybe later."

His mouth moved away an inch. "Yeah?"

oved to Oh my God!

What had I done now?

ter and I had to keep at it. My hands went to his shoulders and my heart skipped between beat. I ignored my heart and nodded.

Before I could go back on my promise, he kissed me quickly and muttered, "Pack a bag, you're spendin' the night again. We'll try to go, but we can't deal, we'll stop and watch a movie."

ifferent "Okay," I said, but my stomach was twisting, my heart was in my chest, and I was having difficulty breathing. This was partially panic, but it was also partially anticipation and I wondered which one would win that night.

go I'd Hector watched my face and his arms got tight. "Sadie, serious, we can't deal, you tell me, we stop," he repeated in a way I knew he meant.

The partial panic disappeared, and before I thought better of it, I leaned into him, tilted my head back further and smiled.



His face warmed and his mouth descended.

He gave me one of his slow, sweet kisses (with tongues) and r started curling when we heard a muted, “*Hola! Anyone home?*” and groaned his frustration in my mouth.

need to His head came up briefly, but he leaned back in, gave me a quick k told me, “Get dressed, *mamita*. That’s my sister Rosa. Gloria’s been b

I did not think this was a good thing and the look on Hector confirmed it.

He let me go and I watched as he grabbed some clothes and left the

I dressed, but while I did so I heard two more “*holas*” (one m other female) and I searched for my Ice Princess, thinking maybe jus of her would get me through breakfast with the Chavez Family.

My Ice Princess was feeling lazy, so by the time I was dressed (all ipped ashoes—barefoot was the only way to go or I’d look like a snooty Ric

Freak), I knew it was just me, Sadie, who was going to face Hector’s f

dy and And she was just going to have to do.  
it. You

y throat  
was also

ly, you  
t it.

leaned

His face warmed and his mouth descended.

He gave me one of his slow, sweet kisses (with tongues) and my toes started curling when we heard a muted, “*Hola!* Anyone home?” and Hector groaned his frustration in my mouth.

His head came up briefly, but he leaned back in, gave me a quick kiss and told me, “Get dressed, *mamita*. That’s my sister Rosa. Gloria’s been busy.”

I did not think this was a good thing and the look on Hector’s face confirmed it.

He let me go and I watched as he grabbed some clothes and left the room.

I dressed, but while I did so I heard two more “*holas*” (one male, the other female) and I searched for my Ice Princess, thinking maybe just a hint of her would get me through breakfast with the Chavez Family.

My Ice Princess was feeling lazy, so by the time I was dressed (all but my shoes—barefoot was the only way to go or I’d look like a snooty Rich Bitch Freak), I knew it was just me, Sadie, who was going to face Hector’s family.

And she was just going to have to do.

## THIRTEEN



# AGENT CHAVEZ, OO, AGENT CHAVEZ

### *Sadie*

**I**t was mid-afternoon and I was in Art.

Sitting on the edge of my counter was Daisy, legs crossed and shouting her ideas (or more honestly, her orders) at Ralphie and Roxi were both arranging paintings on the floor in the positions they would the walls when Ralphie and I installed them on Monday for the opening evening.

I was behind the counter with Shirleen and Ava. The three of us leaned forward on our forearms poring over the final catering menu I sign off and fax by three o'clock.



THAT MORNING I had breakfast with Hector's very loud but very sweet —all three younger sisters, Gloria, Rosa and Elena, and his older brother Carlos. Carlos brought his girlfriend, Maria, and Eddie did a flyby movie show his face and pour warm coffee into his travel mug. He also gave me a one-armed hug and a kiss on the side of the head like he'd known me years, not days (no kidding!).

During breakfast, I found out that Hector's dad had died a few years ago. That Blanca was not happy at the snail's pace of Carlos and I

relationship (this somewhat alarmed me as they'd only been together a few months and Maria was moving in with Carlos that weekend). And that and Jet's mother Nancy had made some decisions about Eddie and the wedding that needed a *Reunión de la Familia*. Hector explained to me, whispering in my ear, which by the way felt nice) that this was a family meeting and Blanca called them often.

After they left, Hector took me home and Ralphie was waiting to take me to the gallery. We were going to open late, but I didn't mind. The night with Hector's loud, loving family in Hector's crazy, jumbled house was something I'd never experienced before in my life.

And I liked it. I liked it enough to take the time to memorize it so I could take it out of my head and savor it.

Before he left, Hector told me he needed to give me something. I waited in the hall while he jogged back out to his Bronco.

I found I was nervous as to what he might give me. He hadn't had time to shop. It wasn't like he was going to produce a bouquet of red roses or anything.

He came back in, stopped in front of me and held up a device. My face grew round with excitement.

"This is a—" he started but stopped when my hand whipped out and snatched it from him.

"It's a stun gun!" I cried, so excited I was being nearly as loud as my family. "Veronica Mars has one of these!"

I lifted happy eyes to him and saw he was grinning. "Yeah, *mami*, be careful with that."

"Is it for me?" I trilled happily.

er two     His hand went to the side of my neck and slid up, fingers in n  
Blancathumb at my hairline.

id Jet's     " Yeah. Keep it in your purse where you can get to it. It's ge  
ed (by batteries. You turn it on and touch the prongs to your target. A one  
family touch causes an incapacitating jolt. Three seconds, it'll take someone c

I lifted the stun gun between us, stared at it in awe and mu  
ake me "Aces."

orning     I came out of my stun gun euphoria when I heard his soft laughter  
se was     eyes went to him.

one day     " What's funny?" I asked.

His fingers wrapped around my wrist, pulled the stun gun from b  
us and he closed in, his other hand sliding to the back of my head.  
g and I

" You don't know, *mamita*, it'll be more fun to watch you figure it

Then he kissed me, another slow, sweet one (with tongues) tha  
ad any     lasted until I wrapped my arms tight around his waist and melted into l  
oses or

Then he was gone.

ly eyes



RALPHIE and I went into Art, and at eleven thirty Ralphie picked up the  
and dialed.  
it and I

" Jet, you pretty girl, I'm callin' in a delivery," Ralphie said into the  
as I watched in stunned surprise. " Sadie and I will simply *expire* if w  
l as his     have two of Tex's specials. Can you send someone over with them? I'  
get them, but see, Double H says I'm in charge of Sadie's safety du  
*ita*, but     day. We opened late. We can't close down just to get coffee and I can  
her alone."

my hair, I stood beside Ralphie, still staring at him, wondering when Hector  
Ralphie “in charge” of my “safety” while Ralphie nodded and said  
at fresh phone, “Un-hunh, un-hunh,” then, “Oh, ‘Double H’ is Hector, sta  
second Hispanic Hottie.” I heard laughter through the receiver and he finishe  
lown.” “Toodles,” and put the phone down.

mured, Then he turned to me calmly and said, “Daisy’ll be over in ten w  
specials.”

and my At this point, I rewound my life back six weeks.

Six weeks ago, my father was in prison, my days were spent with l  
in Art and my nights were spent either at yoga class, a movie (by my  
between curled up with a book in my living room.

I had no excitement except a scary call or a buzz up from one  
out.” Balducci Brothers. But that wasn’t good excitement. That w  
excitement.

it again I was alone, and albeit frightened, my life was my own and my  
rim. was decided by me. Except for the Balduccis, I was in complete an  
control.

Now I was never alone and I made no decisions for myself. Whe  
e phone they were circumvented. Ralphie thought he was my bodyguard. Blar  
going to teach me how to cook. Tom thought I was the reunited mer  
e phone “the whole family.” And Hector was going to put his mouth between i  
e don’t that night (and by the way, the very thought made me shiver).

d come And then there was the imminent arrival of YoYo the pug, who wa  
ing the delivered tomorrow night.  
’t leave

Instead of reveling in this, which I should be doing, I was plan  
disappear.

or made For a second, I wondered if I was crazy.

l in the Then it hit me that I wasn't.

nds for First, a lot of people were going out of their way to make me sad with, that wasn't right or fair. They had better things to do, and furthermore barely knew me.

ith two Second, even though they all appeared to like me no matter who sit I'd never forget and I'd always know I was the odd girl out.

Last, because Hector was a good guy (maybe even the best guy Ralphie born), when he found someone, she should not be a *Belinda*, but she self) or also not be a drug dealer's daughter.

And she certainly shouldn't be the tawdry, broken, throw-around of the the Crazy Balducci Brothers.

as bad I knew I had to ride this out, keep my plans to myself, and when were all ready, I'd sit down with Ralphie and Buddy and explain. Then destiny down with Hector and explain. Then I'd go and let them get back and total normal lives being good people and having nothing more to worry about their Z Gallerie credit cards (not that Hector had a Z Gallerie credit card I did, more like Home Depot).

ica was Daisy and Ava showed with the coffees, taking me out of my number of thoughts.

ny legs They stayed and gabbed.

is being When I said they "gabbed," I meant they filled in the gaps as told reporters and they shared with Ralphie and I the stories of how I'd together with Lee.

ning to Indy was somehow mixed up with why Terry Wilcox disappeared.

Terry. He was a contemporary of my father's. He was creepy and I wish he was gone (and my father had been *super* happy when he disappeared).

I was sorry he made Indy's life a misery before he left.

Then they told me how Eddie and Jet got together (Jet had nearly raped too, but luckily she was saved at the last minute).

Roxie "popped" around (said she was shopping at 16<sup>th</sup> Street Market she had about a dozen bags to prove her story correct). She found out

we were gabbing about and then *she* shared how she and Hank got together

She'd been stalked by an ex-boyfriend. He found her at Hank's beat her up and took her for a wild ride across three states before Vance

Native American Hottie, found her. Eventually her ex got his hands mostly off (again by Vance) at one of Daisy's society parties (I'd heard it, but obviously hadn't been invited).

Then they shared how Vance and Jules (the black-haired lady from the drag show) got together.

Jules had gone on a vigilante mission to take down drug dealers (meant I might not be her most favorite person) and she ended up getting

twice (something, the girls told me, Hector blamed himself for, though he didn't get it, it seemed an honest, though heart-wrenching, mistake).

and Jules were the only other "Hot Bunch" (as Daisy called the Night Men) and Rock Chick couple who were married and they had a newborn baby.

Finally, Ava shared how she and Luke got together.

I found out she knew Ren too, and I also found out that Ren's Dom (who I knew too, but not as well as Ren—Dom used to be kind of

jerk, but I'd heard that he'd turned into a rather keen family man).



was glad Ava's story was kind of confusing, had to do with con me  
(ed), but somewhere along the line she'd been violated too. Though not as bad  
still, did one put degrees on these things? Violation was violation, sin  
ly been that.

I already knew about Stella and Mace.

fall and After they were done talking, I was seriously weirded out.

ut what But I also had food for thought.

ether.

Mainly because it would seem I wasn't the first girl to catch the  
house, one of the Hot Bunch who caused some significant worry, out-and-ou  
ince, or and visits to the hospital.

nd shot

d about While I was thinking this, Daisy, Ava and Roxie took off to The  
to get us sandwiches.

om the They came back with Shirleen, who was taking her lunch "hour" (

that lasted two), and they chipped in to help with the final touches

opening. I asked Roxie for Jet's number and called her to warn her at

(which *Reunión de la Familia* (because that was the nice thing to do). She m

ng shot some choice words, thanked me in a way that seemed very genuine (a

ough I relieved). We hung up after agreeing to meet up sometime and then I

Vance

tingale

ewborn

“YOU NEED SOME PIGS IN A BLANKET,” Shirleen advised, casting a criti  
over the menu.

“You don't have pigs in a blanket at an art opening,” Daisy  
cousin, Shirleen.

nd of a

Shirleen's head popped up. “Sure you do. You just make 'em wit  
little baby sausages.”



n, and “It’s an *art opening*. You need *vol au vents* or shit like that,” Daisy  
as me, Shirleen turned back to me. “Ask ’em if they have pigs in a blanket  
mple aswanna make it fancy they can wrap ’em up in Pilsbury crescent roll  
rather than biscuit dough. Trust me, people full of champagne and pi  
blanket’ll buy *a lot* of paintings.”

“How do you know?” Ava asked.

“Because *I’d* buy a painting if someone gave me a glass of char  
eye ofand a non-stop supply of pigs in a blanket, especially if it was wrappe  
t scares that crescent dough. Have you tasted a Pilsbury crescent roll?”

Ava nodded and smiled. “Yeah, there was a day when I’d bake ar  
Market whole tray of crescent rolls all by myself.”

“Not hard to do,” Shirleen muttered with the voice of experience.

an hour The gallery’s phone rang, and I was so wrapped up in thou  
for thePilsbury crescent rolls and wondering how hard it was to make them,  
out theeven think when the operator asked me if I’d accept the collect charges

uttered I just said, “Yes.”

nd even “Sadie?” my father said in my ear.

turned My torso snapped up and my mind shut down.

He’d been calling for months, the gallery and my apartment. He  
ical eye call collect and I never accepted the charges. A few months ago, I  
received a call, put his hand over the mouthpiece and asked if he  
accept, but I’d shaken my head “no.”

said to At the time Ralphie didn’t ask questions. Now, obviously, he knew

h those “Sadie?” my father repeated.

Shirleen and Ava had come up with me. I felt their eyes on me as

er said. Daisy's. I couldn't do anything. My mind was still shut down.

st. They "Sadie! Jesus! Are you there? I don't have all fucking day."

l dough "Daddy," I whispered.

igs in a I hated calling him "Daddy." I always hated it, but it was the only  
he allowed.

At my word, the room electrified.

mpagne Shirleen's arm shot toward Daisy and I saw her fingers snap repeatedly  
d up in, but Daisy was already digging through her purse. I watched as she pulled  
her cell.

id eat a "There's talk," my father said in my ear.

"Talk?" I repeated.

"Talk. We'll get to that in a minute. Where have you been and why  
ghts of you refused my calls?"

I didn't I blinked.

s. Was he nuts?

Did I play my role *that* well that for twenty-nine years he actually believed  
I was the dutiful daughter? I'd always thought my father was smart (he  
told me he was smart; he told me this *loads*), but it seemed apparent  
I had to pretty fucking dumb.

Ralphie Daisy jumped off the counter, phone to her ear, and as she stepped  
should Ralphie and Roxie got close.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

r. "Visiting days, Sadie. Christ, I have things to go over with you. I've  
here for months. There's business to attend to. Where the fuck have  
well as been?"

“Working,” I replied.

Wheels had begun to turn in my head as I heard Daisy talking quietly in her cell.

“Working,” his voice was terse, angry and disbelieving. “Your father is in prison and you don’t...”

My back started to go straight, and as my eyes focused on Raymond’s concerned face, my father’s voice kept on in my ear, but I didn’t hear what he said.

Something strange was happening in my chest. Something hard and cold was forming there and I realized it was anger.

In a flash, my mind reactivated. I lifted my chin and a New Ice Phone, one I’d never met before, one that had a whole different way of dealing with things, slid with a decisive snap into place.

“Excuse me,” I cut into my father talking, my voice dripping icicles.

“What?” he asked.

“I said excuse me. You were talking, but I didn’t have any intention of listening to what you were saying so I wanted you to stop speaking so I could do my own thing. I have an opening in a few days and work to do.”

My father was silent.

“Hello?” I called.

“Sadie, now’s not the time to be funny,” he warned.

“I’m not being funny. I’m being perfectly serious. Now tell me, what do you need something you need or is this a social call?”

“*Have you lost your mind?*” my father exploded.

“No,” I replied shortly.

A brief pause, then with soft menace, “It’s true. You’re fucking him  
quietly on I blinked in confusion.

“Pardon me?” I asked.

“Chavez. You’re fucking Hector Chavez.”

I wasn’t “fucking” Hector, but it was close enough for my body  
Alphonse’s shaking.

a word How could he know?

Obviously word got round, even in prison.  
and hot

New Ice Princess replied for me, “I can’t imagine why that would  
of your business.”

Princess,  
talking with “You’re joking.”

“May I ask, *father*, why you’re phoning when you hear I’m  
Hector and you *didn’t* phone when I’m sure you probably heard that  
Balducci beat me senseless, broke multiple bones and *raped* me?”

My father displayed a one-track mind and his response made me  
crest in squeeze painfully.

ask you “Hector? You call him *Hector*?”

“Well, I can hardly call out, ‘Agent Chavez, oo Agent Chavez,’ which  
makes me climax, now can I?” I snapped, New Ice Princess gone, /  
Sadie in her place, and I heard Roxie let out a surprised giggle.

“Sadie, you little—”  
is there

I broke in before he could finish.

“We’re done,” I bit out. “And I mean that. We’re done. Don’t call  
don’t write and don’t come looking for me on that sorry day when I

n.” you out.”

With that, I took the phone from my ear (even while he was still talking) and pressed the off button and slammed it down on the counter.

My gaze swung around my audience. Uncertain faces watched me as I walked back amongst the crowd and all their eyes were on me.

I wanted one of my Ice Princesses, new or old, to come to me.

Instead, Shirleen’s hand touched the small of my back. At her touch, she lifted my hands, put them over my face and burst into tears.

Shirleen turned me into her arms and pulled me into her body. “Get it out of your head. Get it out of your mind. Get it out of your body. Get it out of your soul. Get it out of your life. Get it out of your child. Get it out.”

I pressed my face into her shoulder and cried, hard, fierce, body-wrecking sobs.

I wanted a “dad.” Someone like Tom. Hell, someone like Tex would have been fine by me. Both of them cared more that I was raped than my own father did.

And I wanted my mom back.

“I want my mom back,” I said into Shirleen’s shoulder, and realized I was somewhere between her pulling me in her arms and that moment, when he joined by the others in a group hug.

“Shh, child,” Shirleen said, and someone’s hand stroked my hair.

“I really hate him,” I whispered.

“Shh,” Shirleen responded.

The air changed and the change was so strong my head came up.

The door had opened and Hector was there. He looked about ten times more angry than he did that morning when I’d been stupid and let Rick

me a *shade* too long. Not that I could have even thought that was possible (I was talking), but there it was, written all over him.

Alaskan Hottie was with him.

Oh, Daisy     Hector stalked toward me and the girls and Ralphie dispersed. I  
and wiped my eyes as he crossed the room in long, angry strides.

“What did I do now?” I cried when he was close.

ouch, I     I put my hand up. He walked right into it and his arms went around

“I heard the call,” he said, looking down at me, face still full of rage.

It it out,     I blinked (yes, *again!*). “You did?”

“We bugged your phone.”

racking     Of course.

They bugged my phone.

ould be     “Your father’s slime,” he continued, his voice vibrating with anger  
*fucking*

I couldn’t refute him. He spoke fact.

“You okay?” he asked.

zed that     “No,” I answered.

re were     His arms got tighter, and my hand slid up his chest to his shoulder.  
other hand joined it on the opposite side and I tilted my head back furiously.  
watched me a second. That second turned to two, then to three.

Then his face lost some of its rage (though not all), and he pronounced  
“You will be.”

My stomach pitched.

n times     His arms got tighter and I watched, fascinated, as the rage disappeared  
en hold     from Mr. Mood Swing’s face. Warmth replaced it and his head dipped

ossible, “Agent Chavez, oo Agent Chavez?” he teased, grinning.

I closed my eyes.

Please, somebody, kill me.

I stared He gave me a gentle shake.

I opened my eyes.

I me. His mouth went to my ear and he murmured, “I’ll look forward to that.”

ie. Before I could retort, his head came around. He touched my lips w let me go, then he was gone.

I stared at the door.

Shirleen appeared at my side. “I tell you, six weeks ago, you aske take my pick, I woulda picked Luke. Now I’m thinkin’ I’d like me piece of *that* boy.”

“Shirleen!” Ava exclaimed on a giggle.

Shirleen looked at Ava.

“Your boy’s still hot,” she assured her.

ler. My I looked at Ralphie.

her. He He was smiling at me. I smiled back.

Then I couldn’t help it. I burst out laughing.

omised,



“So, have you gotten a *mi amor* yet?” Indy asked, her hip up agai father’s kitchen counter, a cup of coffee halfway to her mouth, a dis slung over her shoulder, a grin playing at her lips.

appeared

closer. “No,” I replied and put the last dried glass away. “But I’ve ha



*corazón.*”

“Oo, a *mi corazón*,” Indy smiled.

“What’s this?” Ally asked, putting her palms on the counter on either side of her and pulling herself up to sit by Indy.

“Spanish endearments. Sadie’s graduated from *mamita* to *mi corazón*,”  
Indy told Ally.

“What’s that mean?” Roxie asked, coming to the group after putting  
leftovers away and closing the fridge with her foot.

“She’s gone from ‘babe’ to ‘my heart,’” Indy answered.

I saw Ally’s dancing eyes moved to me. “Chickie, you are *in trouble*.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered.

They all laughed.



WE’D HAD dinner at Tom’s.

By “we” I meant Lee and Indy, Hank (Lee and Ally’s older brother) who was very nice and they all looked alike—tall, dark and gorgeous) and Ally, Tom, Hector and me.

After dessert, Tom pulled out the photos.

There were *loads* of them.

I knew he went out of his way. Some of the photos were really old—  
back in the days when my mom was in high school. He must have been  
in his attic for hours.

I wanted to try to pretend the pictures didn’t fascinate me, but I couldn’t.

I remembered my mom as sweet and loving, but also quiet and serious.  
The photos showed a different mom, laughing and smiling and full of life.

couldn't help but pore over them and even laughed when the other stories.

er side Lee, Indy, Hank and Ally didn't remember my mom, but they had (and slightly crazy) stories to tell about their lives while they sifted through other photos.

ig some Tom, however, *did* remember my mom and he had funny (and crazy) stories to share about her, Katherine and Kitty Sue.

le." There was one photo I stared at for longer than the rest. It was "whole family" (as Tom called them), but for some reason my grandmother was in it too.

My grandfather had died before Mom married my father. My parents were, as he described for as long as I could remember, "dead." However I knew when they both died within a year of each other when I was a freshman at Denver University. My mom's mom died when I was three.

I had no memory of my grandmother, but the photo showed her sitting on the floor; her arm around my mom's arm around her. Kitty Sue and Katherine close to them, Roxie, and Malcolm close to their wives, kids scattered around their legs.

My grandmother and Mom had their foreheads together, face down, smiles huge as they looked at me.

When Tom noticed my attention to the picture, he leaned toward me and whispered, "You can keep that one."

in up in I should have said no. It wasn't polite to take it. But I didn't say no. I looked at him, knowing my eyes were moist, and nodded. Then I slipped my purse the first chance I got.

abduced. Not much later, the women went to the kitchen to do the dishes and I heard male laughter in the dining room as I heard female laughter all

ers told me in the kitchen.

Dinner, the trips down memory lane, the laughter...it was nice.

l funny But it was scary.

through It was scary because I could get used to it.



slightly “So, how are things going with you two?” Ally asked, eyes on me.

“Who?” I asked back.

; of the “Who?” Ally repeated on a grin. “You and Hector, you idiot.”

l mother Me and Hector.

father’s Oh my.

to me.” How to explain?

n I was Impossible!

ree. So, I shrugged.

holding “Come on, give,” Ally pressed.

n, Tom “I’d give,” Roxie whispered to me. “She’s relentless.”

s tilted I put my hip to the counter on the other side of Ally and sighed.

“They’re...good,” I tried.

me and “Good?” Indy asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

ly no. I “That’s boring,” Ally muttered.

ed it in “Maybe Sadie needs boring,” Roxie said to Ally.

“No one *needs* boring,” Ally retorted.

s, and I “Maybe Sadie does,” Roxie defended my need for boring.

around

Ally's eyes came back to me. "Do you need boring?"

I looked at her a second then shared, "I have to admit, I could use boring. But when I say things are good, I didn't mean they were boring."

"What *did* you mean?" Indy asked, and they all leaned forward.

I briefly debated my options.

I could go Ice Princess and tell them nothing (which they were probably not going to accept—nobody was paying the least attention to Ice Princess anymore). I could tell them everything (which would take all night). I could tell them what was going to happen when Hector and I got back to the place (which might be embarrassing). Or I could tell them about the tattoo.

I told them about the tattoo.

When I was done, they all stared at me.

Then Roxie breathed, "Oh...my...*God*."

"I've just decided Lee needs a tattoo," Indy declared.

"No!" I burst out. "If you say something to Lee then it might get back to Hector."

Ally jumped down from the counter, put her arm around my waist, and started to guide me to the dining room while Indy and Roxie followed.

"Learn fast, sister," Ally said. "Nothing stays a secret in this club for long. And that tat is *way too good* to stay a secret."

Well, wasn't that *just great*.

We entered the dining room and I went back to my seat by Hector.

After dinner, during the photo orgy, he'd done the scooting-my-shoulder-close-to-his move. Now he was lounging with his arm along the back of the empty chair. I had no choice but to sit in it with his arm still there.

The minute I did, it curled around my shoulders and he got in close  
e some “Ready to go?” he asked softly in my ear.

”  
}.” No.

No, I was not ready to go. No, I was not ready to go to his house and  
him put his mouth between my legs.

robably Well, maybe I *was* ready to go and do that since it was almost  
my I cethought about all day (except, of course, my *fucking* father, and a  
night), photos, but it was *mostly* all I thought about).

k to his I didn’t think about it in an “Oh my God no way I can do *that*”  
ttoo. thought about it in an “Oh my God I can’t wait and I hope I don’t mess  
up again” way.

However, I did have one matter of business I still needed to attend  
before I went on to what would likely be the next trauma of my life.

I’d had an idea and I had to get the wheels in motion before I headed  
back to Crete because I wasn’t going to be going alone. So I put my latest plan  
action.

I turned to Hector and said, “I need to talk to Lee.”

Hector’s brows went up.

lan for “Why do you need to talk to Lee?” Ally asked from across the room,  
being nosy again, and also loud.

Lee heard his sister, his head turned and his eyes came to me.

“You need something, Sadie?” he asked.

y-chair- Oh boy.

κ of my It was now or never.

3. "Do you have some time to talk at your office, maybe tomorrow?"

At this point, Lee's body turned to me, but his eyes flicked to me before coming back to me.

and have "I'm right here. We don't need to be at the office," he replied on a handsome) smile.

st all I "Well, it's kind of business," I told him.

also the "Business?"

"Yes."

way. I "What do you need?" he asked.

s things "I need you to find my mother."

tend to The air in the room instantly changed. It went supercharge something I didn't understand.

ded off The women were all looking at each other in confusion. The men looking at each other with closed, set faces.

lan into This I did not take as good.

I forged into the crackling silence.

"You find people, don't you?" I asked Lee.

e table, His eyes had locked on Hector, but they came back to me and he n

"Well, my mom disappeared and I thought, maybe, you could find

"Sadie—" Hector said from beside me.

"I'll pay," I threw in, just in case Lee thought I was asking for a fre

"It's not the money, Sadie. It's—" Lee started, but Tom interrupted

"Tomorrow, we'll meet," Tom surprised me by announcing (and i himself to come along) and everyone's eyes swung to him. "Four c

Lee's office." Tom looked at Lee. "Be sure Vance is there."

Hector I looked at Tom, confused as to why he'd want Vance there when said in a weird, low voice, "Tom."

a (very I turned to Hector. His face was blank but his eyes were active and sensing something unsettled in him.

This I did not take as good, either.

"We'll talk," Tom went on, and I looked back to him. "I'll be there with Vance, Hank, Eddie and you," Tom said to Hector.

"And me," I put in, and Tom looked at me.

"And you, Sadie," he agreed.

and with "Thank you," I said to Tom.

My expression of gratitude made every man in the room uncomfortable and every woman in the room look at me with concern.

This alarmed me. Like, *loads*.

"Is there something I should know?" I asked Tom.

"Tomorrow, four o'clock," Tom replied.

"Yes, but—" I started.

added. "Four," Tom said firmly but gently.

her." I pulled my lips in, wanting to push it. But he'd gone out of his way for dinner, photos, giving me the picture.

bebie. So instead of pushing it, I said, "Okay."

and him. Hector shoved his chair back.

inviting "Time for us to go," he announced.

o'clock, Oh my.

All thoughts of the weird conversation flew out of my head as Hector pulled me out of my chair.

I tried to give Tom a handshake, but he refused it and instead gave me a hug. The hug exchange continued throughout the rest of the group, including Hank (who I barely even knew!).

Then Hector led me out to the Bronco. He helped me in, got me into the driver's seat, turned the ignition and we were away.

My overnight bag was in his backseat.

My knees were shaking.

My skin was tingling.

My stomach was in not entirely unpleasant knots.

I couldn't look  
at my feet.

I was  
struggling with



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Blooming heck!



## SADIE'S GIFT

### *Sadie*

**H**ector dropped my overnight bag by the door in his bedroom, wa the side of the bed and turned on the light.

His eyes came to me. "You need anything?"

I tried to think of something I needed.

Courage? A single personality that knew who she was and what s about rather than multiple ones who had no idea what they were doir true ability to rewind my life and go back to the minute my fath shipped off to prison and move, right then and there, to Crete rath waiting for my life to unravel and bring me to this scary pass?

"No," I answered.

He started to empty his pockets, dropping stuff on the nightstand.

In a nervous panic, I leaned over and unzipped my overnight bag.

I grabbed my pajamas (white camisole, multiple pastels in plaid o background drawstring bottoms, more of Buddy's trip to Victoria's and my toiletries case.

"I'm just going to use the bathroom," I muttered to my bag and to out of the room, down the hall, to the bathroom.

Keeping my mind purposefully blank, I changed. Then I pulled my messy ponytail on top of my head, brushed my teeth, washed my face, put on moisturizer, though makeup-free was likely not the way to go for an evening's festivities. But as I mentioned, I was keeping my mind purposefully blank, thus, obviously, not thinking clearly as I was not thinking *at all* and instead acting on autopilot.

Then I looked in the mirror and allowed myself a moment to think about it.

In other words, I gave myself a pep talk.

"You can do this, Sadie," I whispered in a barely-there voice so softly I couldn't hear me talking to myself.

He probably already thought I was totally crazy after my Ice Cream Diatribe that morning. I didn't need him to hear me talking to myself. I didn't want to have me committed.

I took a deep breath and continued my pep talk. "This is what all girls do. They sleep with men. They enjoy it. Well, sometimes they enjoy it more than if it's good and the guy knows what he's doing."

I was getting off track so I blinked at myself in the mirror, shook my head, and got back to the matter at hand. "Anyway, it's natural, it's right. As far as Hector and you've wanted this since the minute you saw him, a pretty certain sure he knows what he's doing. At least I hope so."

I stared at my image until I semi-believed myself. Then I pulled a deep breath, straightened my spine, lifted my chin, turned out the light and went back to the bedroom.

Hector was stretched out on the bed on top of the covers, back up against the pillows, legs out, ankles crossed. He was wearing his dark-gray

hair in and plaid, cutoff pajama bottoms. The TV was on and a game was playing on the screen. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him relaxed on the bed. I forced myself not to think about it (again!) and took a shower in the room.

The clothes hamper was now devoid of clothes. The bed was made and looked like there were fresh sheets on it. Hector's boots and shoes disappeared. The closet door was closed.

He'd cleaned the room!

"You cleaned the room," I blurted before I could stop myself.

Hector's eyes moved from the TV to me.

"No," he replied. "This morning, when you and I left, we left my room clean in the house."

My eyes went wide. "Blanca cleaned your room?"

Hector's gaze went back to the TV.

"She meddles," was all he said.

"But..." I started, stopped, then finished, "you're a grown man."

He looked back to me and his mouth was doing that fighting-a-grin thing. "You wanna tell *Mamá* what to do? Tell her to mind her own business and this," he asked.

I thought about telling Blanca what to do.

Then I thought about telling Blanca to mind her own business.

Then I shook my head fervently.

He let the grin loose then said softly, "Come here, Sadie."

With nothing for it, regardless of my knotted belly, skipping heaving and shaking legs, I went to the end of the bed and crawled up it toward him.

ing. When I got to within reaching distance, his hands were on me  
decided rolled me so my shoulder and head were resting on his chest again. He  
arm around my midriff this time and...

e and it And...

oes had And *nothing*.

I lay there. Hector lay there.

Still, nothing.

What was going on?

“Hector?” I called.

mother “Yeah?”

What did I say now?

Oh, blooming heck.

“I thought we were going to, um...” I couldn’t finish.

“We *were* going to. Until I asked you at Tom’s if you were ready  
your body got rock solid and I knew you weren’t ready. So, we’ll wa  
n thing. arm did a squeeze and his voice got softer. “I’m thinkin’ you need mc  
ss?” he to get used to me. I’m okay with that, *mamita*. Take all the time you ne

Someone, please tell me that he did, actually, just say that.

Again, before I could stop myself, I lifted up, dislodging his ar  
twisted toward him. He had the remote in his right hand resting on hi  
slid it out, found the off button, twisted to the TV and flicked it off.  
turned toward him again, reached across him and put the remote  
nightstand.

art and

1. I pulled breath in through my nose, put my hand on his chest and  
in his eyes.

and he They were staring at me with that warm intensity.

put his I bit my lips, let them go and whispered, “I think I’m pretty used to

I watched the warm intensity in his eyes turn fiery hot, and with a moment’s hesitation he did an ab curl. Both of his arms went around me and he t me landing on my back and him landing mostly on me.

His head was up and he was still staring at me.

“You sure?” he asked quietly.

No, I was *not* sure.

Still, I nodded.

That was when he kissed me.

The kiss was hot, hard, wet and urgent.

His hands were not.

They were on me, over my camisole, non-invasive, light and sweet  
y to go, The two put together were nice. My belly unknotted and happy  
it.” His started to slide across my skin.

re time His mouth broke from mine and slid down to my chin, along my jaw  
eared.” he touched his tongue to the skin just below my ear.

Then he whispered some stuff to me in Spanish. I didn’t understand  
m, and of it except maybe one word, “*preciosa*” (which could only mean one  
s abs. I couldn’t it?).

Then I At his whispering in my ear, his hands still light on me, the  
on the graduated to shivers.

I turned my head and tasted the underside of his jaw. I felt his  
looked rough against my tongue.

I liked that too.

you.” Apparently so did Hector. His mouth came back to mine for  
without urgent, wet kiss. His hand slid over my bottom and he pulled me to him  
twisted, he was already hard and I liked that I could make him that way. I  
enough to tug at his shirt and pull it up.

His mouth broke from mine. He arched his back and lifted his ar  
could yank the shirt off and toss it away.

He came back to me immediately, his body heat hitting me, his  
and tongue all over my neck, throat, chest, everywhere. The tingly  
graduated to tremors, then (shortly thereafter) panting and finally (a  
after that) squirming.

This didn't feel normal and natural.

This felt extraordinary and supernatural.

His hand came up my midriff, its heat hitting my breast as his  
tingles curled around and held me. I pressed into his hold, and the minute I  
fingers uncurled but his palm stayed where it was. Then it did slow  
aw, and against my nipple through the fabric.

Oh my.

and any I gasped into his mouth.

e thing, “That’s nice,” I breathed against his lips.

I felt him smile against mine.

tingles Then his fingers snagged the edge of my camisole and they p  
down over my nipple, and all of a sudden his mouth was there. T  
stubble tongue was there. Then he sucked deep.

My neck arched, my back arched, my hips arched, *everything* ar

supernatural happy feelings shot from my nipple to between my legs.

another Hector's mouth disengaged. He pulled up the camisole, covering me. I felt again, but pulled down the other side to do the same exact thing.

liked it Heaven.

The squirming became writhing and my hands moved over the skin on his shoulders. Then I engaged my fingernails (I couldn't help it, it felt so good). My nails scraped up his skin, feeling his muscles tense, up... up... up... the way up, straight into his scalp.

shivers At the feel of my fingernails, he groaned against my nipple (that feeling was shortly too) and came back over me to kiss me, hotter, harder, deeper. His kisses were not light and sweet now, but urgent and hungry and all I could do was getting more of him.

My fingers left his hair and my hands pushed between our bodies. I pulled my own drawstring on my bottoms and started to wriggle them. Hector felt it, rolled off me, and *whoosh*, my pajama bottoms and circles were *gone*.

Before I could react to the cold of losing him *and* most of my clothing, his hands spread my legs and he rolled between them, tagged me between the knees, lifting them to bent, then wrapping my calves over his shoulders. Then (no kidding!) his mouth was *right there*.

No, his mouth, lips *and* tongue were (no kidding!) *right there*.

And he knew how to use them.

He pulled it down. Blooming *heck* but it felt good. My fingers slid into his hair to hold him in place. He kissed me as supernatural, extraordinary happy feelings scored a path through my body. It was what felt like every fiber of my being. They gathered, tightened and pulled as he came.



But in the very, very back of my mind, I knew I didn't want it that  
ing me And the very, very back of my mind, for once, didn't want to be ig  
"No," I whispered between moans.

I would have thought he wouldn't have heard me, but imme  
n of hisHector's mouth disappeared. His body came over mine and I felt his  
so darnme as his weight hit me.

up...all He shoved his face in my neck.

"All right, *mamita*, we'll stop," he muttered there, voice rough.  
l't good "No," I repeated, my hands reaching for the waistband of his pajan  
s hands head turning so my mouth was at his ear. "I want it to happen with  
d think breathed.

His head came up.

odies. I I didn't look at him. I was busy trying to push down his pajamas (  
1 down. —what could I say?—he was taller than me, my arms didn't reach).  
panties

"Sadie?"

lothing, Our eyes locked, and at the look in his I knew I *really* wanted it to  
iind thewith him. His gaze was hot, dark and hungry. My stomach pitched  
ers andsight and my body squirmed (but my hands were still trying to find p  
on his pajamas).

Finally, since he seemed frozen where he was, I said, perhaps v  
*eensiest* bit of desperation, "Hector please, I want you inside me."

old him "Sadie," he groaned, but still, he hesitated.

through My mouth went to his and I whispered, "Please."

I felt it Within seconds (I didn't know how he did it and I didn't care), h  
me.

way. Hector “Oh my God” Chavez was deep inside me.  
nored. And I’d never felt anything better in my whole *fucking* life.

Then he started moving.

mediately And that felt *even better*. In fact, it felt *amazing*.

heat on “That feels *amazing*,” I panted in his ear.

His head moved and I caught his grin right before he kissed me again.

Hector was a good kisser, but all the other kisses he’d given me were  
nothing compared to how it felt to be kissed by him while our bodies  
was, my connected and he was moving inside me.

you,” I None of them were even close.

Eventually, I found I couldn’t kiss him anymore. I was breathing  
hard, my hips moving against his, my hands on his skin, my fingers  
I failed digging in.

He lifted my legs at the knees and drove in deeper.

It was exquisite.

happen I shoved my face in his neck as I felt the beautiful anticipatory tingle  
l at the right before my mouth went to his ear.

urchase “Hector...” I started to say something. I didn’t know what, but I  
get to finish because right then it washed over me, fierce, fiery and *huge*  
with the Bliss.

When I was done, I opened my eyes slowly, coming down, feeling  
still moving inside me, driving deep, grinding hard, and I saw him  
watching me, his eyes as hot as his skin.

ie filled “So...fucking...beautiful,” he whispered.

Then it was my turn to watch.



AFTER HE WAS FINISHED, I took his whole weight and found I liked him on me, his heat beating into me, his weight pressing me into the bed, his hands still connected with mine.

He started to pull away.

ain.

My arms tightened around him and my thighs pressed into his hips

ie were

He stilled.

es were

“I’m too heavy,” he said into my neck.

“I like it,” I whispered. He didn’t say anything so I explained, “Your body’s warm. I always feel cold. You make me feel warm and I need you to be warm in my life.”

ing too  
gnails

I decided not to share the “snugly, lovely, comfy, safe” part with him.

A second passed then he muttered, “Jesus.”

Well, maybe he read in the “snugly, lovely, comfy, safe” part.

ghtness

Blooming heck.

More seconds ticked by, then his head came up. His fingers slid into the side of my hair and his eyes scanned my face.

I didn't

je.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded.

ng him

I didn’t share that I *did* feel okay. In fact, it might be the first time he was “okay” in my life. In that bed, in that room, in that house with Hector, that was where I was supposed to be.

Where I belonged.

The drowning sensation hit me, the warm water lapping at my threatening to cover me, and I had the strange desire to pull in my brea

1 heavy And sink.

is body Before this could weird me out (and I did anything stupid), he ro  
We disconnected and Hector ended up on his back, me on top, o  
tangled. His body bucked and he yanked the bedclothes from under  
whipped them on top.

I lifted my head and one of his hands came to my hair. He pulled  
ponytail holder and my hair fell down around us. He tossed the p  
holder on the nightstand and his fingers went inside my camisole ther  
“Your at my sides.  
ver felt

“I wanna take this off,” he murmured.

im. As an answer, before I chickened out, I did the same thing he did  
arching my back and lifting my arms. He tugged off the camisole and t  
to the floor at the side of the bed.

I settled, skin against skin, chest to chest, and his heat was overwh  
penetrating my body, warming me straight to the core.

into the He pulled the covers high over my back then his hands slid down  
bottom and cupped me there.

I tucked my face into his neck. His warmth and my sensation of ol  
settled in my belly, then in my chest, right by my heart.

ie I felt Softly, I whispered, “Thank you.”

, I felt I His hands moved from my bottom so his arms could wrap tight  
my waist.

This was nice, except his body was moving as if he was laughing.

My body, My body got stiff.

“What’s funny?” I asked his neck.

“*Mamita*, you just gave me the best gift anyone’s ever given me. I called us, *you’re* thankin’ *me*?” he replied.

Oh...my...*God!*

He didn’t just say that.

*Did* he just say that?

“Are you for real?” I breathed.

It came right out of my mouth and I knew I sounded like an idiot who really did want to know.

His arms got tighter and his body started shaking harder.

I lifted my head and looked at him. He was smiling, brilliant when he threw it glamorous.

“What’s funny now?” I demanded, my eyes narrowed.

His hilarity became vocal and he burst out laughing. I didn’t think anything was funny (at all) so I slapped his shoulder. He rolled us to our sides and shoved his (still laughing) face in my neck.

“Stop laughing,” I ordered.

He kept laughing.

“Seriously, Hector,” I warned him. “I’m getting annoyed.”

His face came out of my neck, and when I caught sight of it, he was smiling.

“Well then, *mi cielo*, we’ll have to do somethin’ about that,” he announced, rolling us again, him on top.

Then his hands started moving on me.

“What are you...?” I tried to pull away from him but one of his hands locked tight and held me close.

I looked at his grinning face, but read his intent loud and clear.

He couldn't be serious.

Could he?

“We can't have sex again,” I told him in the Voice of Authority. “I finished five minutes ago.”

His mouth went to my shoulder then trailed up. He added his hands when it got to my neck and I shivered.

At my ear, he muttered, “Is that a rule?”

“No, it's not a rule. It's physically impossible,” I informed him, sounding vaguely like Ice Princess, but Know-It-All Ice Princess this time.

His lips came to mine and he looked into my eyes.

His were warm and intense. *Really* warm and intense.

Oh my.

“We'll work up to it,” he murmured right before he kissed me.

Then we did.



I FELT the slap of cold that didn't go away even when the covers were still tight around me.

When the tucking stopped, I opened my eyes and slightly lifted my head. It was still dark and I could hear Hector moving in the room.

“What's going on?” I whispered, my voice scratchy with sleep.

I felt the bed move when Hector's weight hit it. He sat, pulled his arms away from my neck and leaned in.

"Doorbell. I'll take care of it. Go back to sleep," he answered, kissing my neck right where it met my shoulder, then the bed moved again as he got up. I watched his shadow walk across the room while tugging on the thermostat. He disappeared into the darkness.

We just I rearranged the pillows (Hector was a serious pillow hog), two behind my head, one I held tight to my belly. I settled in thinking that Gloria and her posse were back for another try at some hot tub action.

tongue Then I thought that it might be fun to sit in Hector's hot tub with Gloria and her posse.

ounding Then I thought it might be *more* fun to sit in Hector's hot tub with Gloria and her posse.

Then I fell back to sleep.



THE COVERS SLID off my shoulder and I could feel the heat and soft touch of Hector's hand taking them away.

"Sadie?" Hector called.

My eyes opened.

"What?" I muttered.

"Wake up, *mamita*. The Zanos are here."

tucked I blinked in the darkness. Then I got up on an elbow, holding the covers over my chest.

y head. I wasn't thinking clearly. I was still half-asleep. I could have sworn Gloria just told me the Zanos were there in the middle of the blooming, beautiful night.

ny hair “What?” I asked.

“Get dressed. The Zanos are here,” he repeated. “We gotta talk.”

sed my He *did* say the Zanos were there.

ot up. I I sat up fully. I held the covers against me with one hand and pul  
nal and hair out of my face with the other. Hector had moved from sitting on t  
He was bent over, gathering my clothes from the floor.

beneath “What are the Zanos doing here?” I asked.

and her Hector handed me my clothes. “Just get dressed, *preciosa*. We  
downstairs.”

l Gloria The serious tone of his voice meant I should probably not take  
happy news.

Hector. Though what middle of the night visits were *ever* happy news? Ex  
course Gloria and her girls’ bid for the hot tub. That wasn’t exactly  
(for Hector), but I found it humorous.

ich of a I decided to do as asked. First, he’d just called me “*preciosa*,” sor  
I liked (a lot). Even though I figured I knew what that meant, I still a  
call to Jet on my Mental To-Do List for the morning to see where that  
in Spanish endearments. Second, I wanted to find out what trauma wa  
to befall me now so I could deal with it and maybe get some sleep bei  
next one.

covers Hector moved across the room as I put on my camisole then fou  
sheets and comforter as I put on my panties while in bed. Semi-decer  
out of bed and pulled on my bottoms.

vorn he All of this effort was for nothing. Hector was rooting around in hi  
ooming and I’d rounded the bed by the time he found what he wanted.



He joined me at the foot of the bed and offered me a shadowy piece of clothing.

“Put that on,” he ordered.

I took it, saw it was a flannel shirt and shrugged it on. It was soft and warm and I hoped it wasn't Hector's favorite because I instantly knew it was going to find its way into my overnight bag.

We walked down the stairs. The lights were on and Ren was standing in the living room with his uncle, Vito Zano, and his cousin Dom.

What in *the heck* was going on?

I hesitated, not knowing what to do. Even my father's incessant training in social niceties hadn't prepared me for a middle of the night visit from the Zano Family. In fact, I was certain sure that kind of visit could not be found in *any* etiquette book.

Then, as I had loads of practice at dealing with whatever weird situations came my way, I made a decision and walked to Vito.

“Mr. Zano,” I greeted, putting out my hand.

He took my hand and used it to pull me into his arms for a warm hug. “None of that ‘Mr. Zano’ business now that Seth's out of the way. I'm your Uncle Vito now,” he told the top of my head.

Well, that was *just great*. Now I had an “Uncle Vito” to add to my growing list of friends I never knew I had.

Did *no one* remember my Ice Princess? Was *everyone* determined to make it harder for me to cut ties and disappear?

Darn it all to heck!

He let me go. I pushed aside my mental tantrum and I looked to F

piece of Dom.

Ren looked good (as usual), wearing jeans and a dark-brown turtle

Dom Vincetti, his cousin, was wearing a long-sleeved, thermal t and it and jeans, looking rough in a way that was a lot like Hector (but Hector decided better in my opinion).

Dom had always been the wild one. He was good-looking to iding in usually an outrageous flirt, sometimes not in a good way, in a way my said was crass. Now, he wasn't looking at me like he usually did (as if mentally undressing me), but in a different way—intense and bizarre, same time soft.

training  
rom the Just like Ren was looking at me.

e found This time, I let Blanca's lesson take hold, and instead of moving either of them (which might involve some form of touching, which ituation make Hector mad, something I wished to avoid at all costs), I mo Hector.

Hector's arm slid along my shoulders as I said to Ren and Dom  
guys."

y, little Dom blinked. Ren's eyes flicked to Hector then back to me  
grinned.

to my Hector tucked me in his side.

No one spoke.

ined to I waited.

Still, no one spoke.

Finally, when I could take it no more, I asked, "What's up?"

Ren and Hector answered, "The Zanos got Ricky."

My body went solid. Then relief dripped through me and I sagged my neck. Hector.

Henley *Thank you, God.*

or did it “Thank God,” I whispered.

“No, Sadie,” Hector said softly, and I looked up at him and saw I was carefully blank, but his eyes were glittery hard. He kept talking about my father don’t get it, *mamita*. They’ve got him, but now you need to decide what they’re gonna do with him.”

My relaxed body went solid again.

“What?” I asked Hector.

Uncle Vito spoke.

“You got two choices, little one,” he told me, and my eyes turned toward him. “The first, we take Balducci to the police.” He stopped talking. I nodded. “The second, Balducci disappears.”

My body jerked.

“Disappears?” I repeated, my voice breathy and disbelieving.

“Disappears,” Dom affirmed, and my gaze moved to him. “Gone. He never sees him again. Not you, not his brothers, no one.”

I just stared at Dom, not comprehending what he was saying, but I knew he was accurate, trying not to comprehend what he was saying.

Dom continued talking, “He fights the charges, you have to testify, or you have to go through it again. Or you can choose for him to disappear and we take care of it. No trial, no testifying. It’s over, he’s certain to pass up, you move on.”

Were they telling me they were going to *whack* Ricky Balducci for

ged into Blooming *heck!*

“I can’t ask you to—” I started.

“We wouldn’t do it,” Uncle Vito interrupted quickly, eyes on  
Then they came back to me. “You ain’t the only one who hates Ric  
his faceput the word out he’s available, they’ll come out of the woodwork. W  
}, “Youthe one who’ll do the job right, we hand him over and walk away. W  
le whatknow what happens from there. You don’t. Chavez doesn’t. Neither c  
brother or Nightingale. No one’s the wiser and it’ll be done.”

I realized my body was shaking.

“Sadie,” Hector called, and I looked up at him. For some rea  
changed the subject and informed me, “That blood and the hairs they  
on your furniture, some of it was Ricky’s.”

to him.

I didn’t know why he was telling me that, but I nodded anyway.

led and

He kept talking. “Harvey went before the judge yesterday, bail v  
Donny and Marty left him in jail. They didn’t post bond.”

I just kept staring at Hector, still not understanding why he was tel  
all this.

No one

Hector’s fingers squeezed my shoulder and he curled me closer to l

“*Mamita*, I’m givin’ you the information you need to make a d  
or more

What I’m sayin’ is, the remaining free Balduccis aren’t feelin’ any br  
love. They aren’t takin’ care of Harvey, and if Ricky gets locked  
ify andlikely they won’t bond him out either. That means neither of those tw  
ear andthe streets anytime soon. That also means, the other two are happy to  
ay, andfor position with Ricky and Harvey out of their way. And you got en  
get a guilty verdict if Ricky’s stupid enough to fight the rape charge.”

me?

Finally I got it, and I also had a good idea of which decision I wanted me to make.

Hector. So I said, "Okay."

ky. We He curled me closer. His other hand went to my hip and his face e choselow.

e don't "No, Sadie," he said softly, reading my thoughts. "It's your ch loes his make. I'm just givin' you the full picture. It isn't me who'll have to si witness stand and tell a room full of people what happened that night. isn't me who'll have to listen to whatever fucked-up version of ison he Ricky'll produce as his defense. You got the opportunity to avoid th y found not gonna take that away, and no one in this room, or out of it, will The Zanos are givin' you a chance to decide what form your retributi take. Only you can make it, but you gotta make it now."

was set. I didn't like this.

At all.

ling me On the one hand, I didn't want to see Ricky again, and even if evidence was stacked against him, he was crazy enough to fight i him. would stink.

ecision. It would also likely mean I couldn't move to Crete or I'd have t ootherly back.

up, it's On the other hand, everyone in that room knew what Vito me o'll hit "disappear." Which would mean, if I picked choice number two I was jockey than Ricky Balducci. It would mean I truly was my father's daug ough to wasn't New Sadie. I'd never be a New Sadie of any kind. I would l Townsend's daughter and that was who I'd stay, forever and ever.

I uncurled from Hector and my eyes turned to Vito.

Hector “Please take him to the police,” I said.

Hector’s arm got tight around my shoulders.

Dom muttered a frustrated, “Fuck.”

dipped Ren expelled a heavy breath.

Vito nodded.

oice to “I knew she’d pick that,” Dom muttered. “We should have—”

t on the Vito interrupted in a low, warning tone, saying, “Dominic.” Bu  
. It also surprised Dom knew my choice even before I did.  
events

at. I’m Dom fell silent and Vito turned to Ren. “Make the call, tell the boy  
l judge. Ren nodded to his uncle and walked to me. Regardless of Hector s  
on will there, he leaned in and kissed my cheek. He moved away, pulled his  
of his pocket and left the house.

Dom, Vito and I looked at each other.

No one spoke.

all the I decided it was time to move on to a happier subject that didn’t  
it. That the Balduccis, my rape or anyone getting whacked.

My gaze focused on Dom.

o come “I hear Sissy’s pregnant,” I told him.

Sissy was his wife. They’d had some hard times and were separate  
eant by while, but word was, they’d got back together and were starting a fami

s worse Dom stared at me, still angry at my decision, then his face went s  
ghter. I he muttered, “Yeah.”

be Seth “Congratulations,” I told him on a smile.

I’d met Sissy a few times. Though I didn’t know her well, she

struck me as being really nice.

“Life!” Vito exploded, making me jump. “Up and down, good a birth and death, celebration and devastation. If you got any balls at roll with the punches and get the fuck on with it, pardon my French.”

My eyes moved to Vito. He was watching me and I could sw kidding!) I saw admiration.

That was when I realized he thought I had “balls.”

t I was

I felt another warm, happy glow starting when Vito clapped and hands up in front of him.

s.”

“We’re through. I gotta get home. Angela worries.”

tanding

cell out

He made a move and came to me. Hector let me go and Vito g another hug.

When Vito moved away, he looked at me. “She told me to tell y wants you to come to dinner. She’ll call. Bring Chavez and a big appet wife, she cooks. It’s what she does,” he finished.

involve

Oh my.

Dinner with Vito and Angela Zano.

Before I could wrap my mind around that thought, Vito looked c shoulder and jerked his chin at Dom. He clapped Hector on the arm a ed for aoff.

ly.

Dom followed. He didn’t clap Hector on the arm but gave him a c oft and shot me a weird look (still clearly upset at not getting to help Ricky B disappear), but he put up a hand to squeeze my shoulder. Then he t too.

always

Hector locked the door behind them and turned to me.

“You okay?” he asked.

Without hesitation, I answered, “I’d give my trust fund to be living where every other second you aren’t asking me if I’m okay.”

He bit his bottom lip, and again I didn’t know what that meant, if trying to bite back a smile or hide his frustration. He walked to me, and his hand hit my neck, fingers sliding up into my hair, thumbing my hairline.

“That day will come,” he promised quietly.

My toes curled and my knees went weak at the look in his eyes. So I had to grab on to his waist to stay standing.

His head bent and his lips touched mine.

Then his head moved a hairbreadth away and he said, “Let’s go to the store.”

Over his shoulder, he took

him by the hand, and I took off



“You okay?” he asked.

Without hesitation, I answered, “I’d give my trust fund to be living a life where every other second you aren’t asking me if I’m okay.”

He bit his bottom lip, and again I didn’t know what that meant, if he was trying to bite back a smile or hide his frustration. He walked to me, *close* to me, and his hand hit my neck, fingers sliding up into my hair, thumb at my hairline.

“That day will come,” he promised quietly.

My toes curled and my knees went weak at the look in his eyes. So weak, I had to grab on to his waist to stay standing.

His head bent and his lips touched mine.

Then his head moved a hairbreadth away and he said, “Let’s go to bed.”



## SEVERED EDGES

*Sadie*

I woke again to a cold, empty bed.

I lay there (my head on one measly pillow) and allowed myself a lovely, snugly, warm moment at waking up in Hector's bed before pulling back the covers and replayed my actions of the morning before. This time I had to put my pajamas back on (so I did, with the addition of Hector's shirt). And, with my stuff there, I added brushing my teeth and washing my face.

By the time I hit the stairs, I heard men's voices coming from the kitchen.

I rounded the stairs and saw Hector through the kitchen door.

He wasn't in nightclothes. He had on jeans and a tight, black T-shirt with no belt. His feet were bare and his hair was wet, which meant he'd been in the shower long enough to shower.

Now, how did I sleep through *that*?

Seriously, this was getting weird. I never slept through anything.

Maybe it was all the sex.

I saw he had a coffee cup in his fist and his eyes were on someone who was talking. But they cut to me when they caught me rounding the stairs.

Even from the distance of across the living room and kitchen, I : eyes go lazy and his mouth form a small grin.

At his look, my knees went weak.

Last night, after the Zanos left, we didn't go to bed to sleep. We bed and he made love to me (yes, for the *third time!*).

The first time had been amazing.

The second time, "working up to it," meant slow and sweet ar more amazing.

The third time, mostly (but obviously not totally) sated, Hector ha yself a his time. It was clear he felt like exploring, and he did. What he did I threw like was allowing *me* to explore, so he didn't. His undivided and pro time, I attention produced an orgasm unlike any I'd ever experienced in my li

flannel Amazing didn't do it justice.

ing my The word to do it justice hadn't been invented yet.

On this thought, I walked into the kitchen but I did it on shaking le itchen.

Luke Stark was there, as was Native American Hottie or, who now was Vance.

hirt but I walked straight to Hector.

een up This might have been rude. Perhaps I should have gone to Lu Vance and offered my hand. Hector seemed in a mellow mood, b though these guys were pretty badass, the whole Hot Bunch/Rock Chic was a rather huggy lot. I didn't want Luke or Vance to hug me in t Hector. They were his friends, but who knew what Mr. Mood S response would be. And after what happened yesterday morning with ne who wasn't taking any chances. rs.

saw his “Sadie, you know Luke. This is Vance Crowe,” Hector introduced. His arm slid along my shoulders and he tucked me into his side.

I nodded and said, “Hi, Vance.” Then my eyes moved to Luke. “Hi, Luke.”

One side of Luke’s mouth went up in a sexy half-grin. Vance’s mouth formed a smile that was so confident it was breathtaking.

I stared at them and it struck me that they were seriously hot. Tall bodies, clothes that defined their well-toned muscles. Vance had black hair pulled back in a ponytail at his neck. Luke had short-clipped black hair and a mustache that was shaved precisely down the sides of his mouth.

I decided that Luke’s mustache was absolutely perfect. Normal mustache like that on a man (in my personal opinion) would look stupid. On him, it was fantastic.

“*Mamita*,” Hector muttered, and my body jerked as I realized, belatedly, I was staring at Luke Stark’s mouth.

Oh no.

I figured certain sure I was in trouble.

Slowly, I looked up at Hector, expecting to be scorched by a

Glare.

Instead, his lips were twitching and he looked like he was having

not laughing.

Since I’d been awake for about five minutes and hadn’t had a chance to

decide who I was going to be that morning (Ice Princess, New Sadie, After-A-  
Nights, Take Charge Sadie, or some other Sadie, perhaps After-A-Nights-  
Loads-of-Amazing-Sex-with-Hector Sadie), my personalities decided

d as his themselves.

Attitude Sadie clicked in and snapped, "What's funny now?"

e. "Hi, I watched as he began to lose the fight with his hilarity.

"You," he answered.

mouth "What's funny about me?" Attitude Sadie asked sharply.

"Everything, *mamita*," Hector informed me, his eyes still lazy, his  
ll, great blazing white, Attitude Sadie having no effect on him at all, what  
k shiny "You're hilarious," he added.

ick hair My eyes narrowed. "I am *not* hilarious. Especially not at six o'clock  
the morning before I've had my coffee," I retorted. Then for some  
ally, a reason, I ranted on, "No. Wait. Never. I'm *never* hilarious. So, for  
c pretty time, stop laughing at me."

I finished on a haughty demand.

tedly, I "Lover's spat," I heard Luke mutter, and *he* sounded amused to  
eyes moved to him upon the unwelcome reminder that we had an au  
and embarrassment edged Attitude Sadie into the background as  
continued, "Time to go."

Hector Both Luke and Vance were still smiling. Luke's half-smile had c  
to engage his whole mouth and I tried not to look, because at the g  
trouble caught I knew a good look would definitely get me into trouble.

I decided to attempt to switch to New Sadie because Attitude Sa  
time to making me the laughingstock of the Hot Bunch.

Attitude Apparently *everyone* thought I was hilarious (except me).

ight-of- "It's not a lover's spat. I just need coffee," I informed them, tr  
led for sound casual and like I often wandered around in pajamas in a kitchen

handsome men after a night of sex and a mini-attitude rant.

Still going for casual and confident, I pulled out of Hector's arm and went to the coffee.

I yanked out the pot, turned and held it up to the boys, asking s  
"Warm up? Luke? Vance?"

s smile This gesture, for some reason, produced more amused looks.

soever. Now, really, was it me?

What was so darned funny about offering coffee?

lock in Finally, putting his mug down, Vance said, "Thanks, Sadie. Got  
bizarredo."

the last Luke followed suit.

I wondered what "shit" they had to do at six o'clock in the morning

Did these guys ever sleep?

oo. My I thought about asking the Rock Chicks, obviously they would  
dience, Then I decided I didn't want to know because their answers might scar  
s Luke

They said their good-byes, so did I, and Hector followed them to the  
door.

hanged I made myself coffee and tried to get my thoughts in order so I  
;lance I make an even bigger fool of myself.

die was I had no practice with this kind of situation, waking up after a night  
and a nocturnal visit from the Zano Family only to find early morning  
company in the form of friends.

ying to Who, I wondered, did?

full of Except Hector of course. If the last couple of days were anything

by, this seemed normal for him.

My thoughts were nowhere near ordered (but my coffee was ready) and went  
Hector came back into the kitchen.

I'd turned and leaned against the counter. The mug was mostly sweetly,  
mouth, when, in another Smooth Hector Move, he got close, pulled it  
out of my hand and placed it on the counter beside me.

“Hey!” I said, looking at my coffee mug. “I was drinking that!”

My head moved around, and before I knew what was happening,  
kissed me.  
shit to

It wasn't a soft, sweet, morning kiss.

It was a fiery, hungry, urgent kiss, and apparently unable to  
(though, I had to admit I didn't try), I melted on the spot.  
3.

It went from kissing to kissing and groping. Then Hector pulled  
flannel shirt off my shoulders and it fell to the floor. His hands went i  
know.  
camisole at the sides then up my back, trailing heat everywhere they w  
e me.

I followed suit, putting my hands up his T-shirt at the back, my  
re front  
roving his hot skin.

All of a sudden, his mouth disengaged. He stepped back and grab  
I didn't  
hand, turning and dragging me behind him.

I should have said something, but I had to concentrate on running  
t of sex  
up with his long strides. At the stairs, he took them two at a time, pul  
; casual  
behind him.

Not surprisingly, I stumbled. He turned and caught me, lifting me  
arm at my waist, one at my knees, he spun and my legs went flyin  
g to go  
hitched me more safely in my arms.

He walked directly to his bedroom and tossed me on his bed.

7) when Yes, *tossed me on his bed!*

At this, I felt my nipples go hard and tingles flew through my body to my beeline between my legs where I felt an immediate, delicious wetness. I watched, my breath coming fast as he tore off his shirt.

I decided to follow suit and tugged off my camisole as he watched undoing the top buttons of his jeans.

Hector Once I tossed my camisole to the side, he leaned over, put one hand on the bed and the other arm slanted across my waist. He yanked me up and my back arched. His mouth came down on my nipple, and without leading me in a fight ithe sucked deep.

“Oh God,” I breathed, pretty certain sure I was going to climax. I led his spot.

Instead, my hands went to the drawstring of my pajama bottoms. I tugged. Hector’s mouth left me. He yanked down my bottoms, taking my fingersspanties with them and then shoved me back to the bed.

My behind hit the bed. I kicked off my clothes but leaned forward. My fingers coming up, I undid the rest of the buttons on his jeans and pushed them all the way down.

And I saw him, right there, in front of me.

I liked what I saw.

And I wanted it.

And it was fucking well *my* turn to explore.

So I scooted to the edge of the bed, head tilted back to look up at him. His eyes blazing into mine, I wrapped my hand around him and took him



mouth.

“*Dios mio,*” he groaned, then said more stuff in Spanish, his  
diving into my hair, pulling it away from my face and holding it beh  
dy on a head in his fists.  
invade.

He let me explore, let me taste him for what felt like a nanoseco  
was probably longer, it was just that I liked what I was doing and  
d while Hector did too, which made me like it all the more). Then his hand  
under my armpits, lifting me clean up into the air. My legs wrapped  
d to the his waist, my arms around his neck. He went forward, I went back, bo  
and my landing on the bed.

; into it, Before I had a chance to get used to our new position, he was ins  
and not like last night.

on the This was different.

Harder, rougher, not in either of our control and therefore shockin  
s and I intense beauty.  
ing my

He pulled my legs up at the knees until they were tucked against h  
and he kept slamming into me, one of my arms wrapped around his b  
ird. My other hand in his hair.  
pulled

We weren’t kissing and I heard our noises drifting around us, h  
deep grunts mingled with my softer whimpers.

His face was in my neck and he was groaning there, breathing hard

My face was in his neck and I was moaning there, breathing ha  
alternately tasting him and even (no kidding!) biting the flesh at his sh

Then, all of a sudden, he stopped moving, his body buried in mine.

im. His  
1 in my “Jesus, fuck, Sadie,” he muttered in my neck. “Fuck,” he repea

arms going tight. "Give me a second."

fingers I was blinking, rapidly, surprised that he stopped and wanted my movement, the pounding, even our noises back.

"For what?" I asked.

nd (but His mouth came to my ear and he whispered, "I don't want to hurt I knew I closed my eyes and my arms went tight.

ls went "You aren't hurting me," I promised. I squeezed him with my thigh around other parts of me besides) and I heard him make a noise low in his throat of us noise spurred me to coax, "Keep going."

ide me, "Hang on," Hector murmured, still fighting for control even as he deeper (which felt good, good enough for me to remember that I more).

ing in its It was my turn to make a low noise in my throat then I repeated, going."

is sides "Sadie—" he started, but my arm moved.

ack, the My hand went to his fantastic behind, the fingers of my other hand in his hair. My movements made his head come up and I pressed my his.

his low, "Hector, please," I whispered, my voice a mixture of begging demanding. "Please...fuck me."

l. I watched his eyes grow dark. Then his head slanted, his mouth toward and in another wet, hungry kiss and he did as I asked, wild and rough shoulder. minutes later, almost at the same time, we both exploded.

ted, his It was hard and hot and so overpowering, I moaned deep into his as my body convulsed beneath his.

It took what seemed like forever to come down, tremors coursing through me as I concentrated on Hector, his body still pressing into mine, breathing on my neck, going slowly from heavy to soft.

His weight bore down on me and I realized, to my surprise, that a part of you.” intensity of what we just shared, I felt even more snugly, warm, safe and comfy than I ever had before when I was with him (which was to say, my life).

And obviously, that was saying something.

That was, I felt more snugly, warm, safe and comfy until he spoke in a voice deep, husky and utterly satisfied.

“This is who I wanted to find. The girl from that night. I knew she was fuckin’ in there. I just didn’t know I’d have her this soon.”

“Keep it felt like he’d shoved an icicle in my heart.

No.

Please.

No.

That was not me.

There were loads of Sadies but that wasn’t one of them.

Was it?

A brazen hussy, throwing myself at him and begging him to fuck me.

The Society Slut who went slumming?

Did he think that was me?

Was that what he wanted?

I didn’t want him to want that.

through Then it hit me.  
ne, his The rose on his back which he wanted to put on his arm.  
He had the broken heart from *Belinda* to remind him not to let the  
after the of his body cloud his judgment.  
afe and He had the skull to celebrate taking down my father.  
ever in Neither of these things were good, loving, comfy, snugly, warm thi  
They represented a hard earned lesson and the victory of a hard  
dangerous battle.  
oke, his Maybe the rose didn't mean what I thought it meant.  
Or, more accurately, what I wanted to *believe* it to mean.  
she was Maybe the rose represented another challenge.  
Maybe I was right weeks ago when he was in my hospital room.  
Maybe he was with me to finish the job. The job he started that I  
my father's study and would have finished if I hadn't walked away from  
The job of conquering *me*.  
That night, I'd walked away from him, disdainful and bitchy, leaving  
hard and wanting, and he'd been furious. Furious enough to call me a  
cocktease.  
Maybe it was payback time.  
ne? Well, he just paid me back. He'd spent a night paying me back.  
And that was all he was going to get.  
He could have his rose now and he could remember, every time he  
at it, that he won.  
I knew he felt my change when his head came up.

He called softly, "Sadie?"

I looked at his throat and even I heard the change in my voice because of my desires (damn and blast!) my feelings.

"I need to shower," I told him, my voice soft but tight.

Hector's body went tense. "*Mamita*, look at me."

My eyes moved to his.

His were searching.

I had no idea what mine were.

Then he murmured, "She's gone."

Well, that told me what he saw in my eyes.

"I'm right here," I lied in order to cover.

I'd think about this later, maybe when YoYo was lying beside me and I'd have something else to keep me snugly, comfy, warm (if not from him. didn't think a pug could keep me safe).

Then again, I'd kidded myself when I thought Hector wanted to keep me safe.

He was just like everyone else. After something, using me to get what he wanted.

I watched as he shook his head and looked like he was getting annoyed.  
"You're gone."

I tried to soften my features, to make him believe he still had me.  
I was well away from him and somewhere safe.

"No, I'm not," I replied.

At my words, he no longer looked like he was getting annoyed.

looked like he was *definitely* annoyed and I guessed my efforts at sc  
traying my features didn't work.

“Don't lie to me, Sadie.”

Well, now he *sounded* like he was definitely annoyed too.

Then he clipped, “Why?”

Yes, definitely annoyed.

“Why what?”

“Where'd she go and why'd she go?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You know exactly what the fuck I'm talking about.”

I decided it was time to try a staredown.

in bed This failed.

safe, I Then I decided to try something new and pushed at his sh

“Hector, get off. I have to get to work.”

keep me This failed too.

“You have to fuckin' talk to me,” he returned.

what he “About what?” I asked, fear and desperation making my tone sh  
clipped.

noyed. Hector stared at me then muttered, “Goddamn it,” as he gave  
rolled to the side.

until I I lost his weight, his warmth and the connection of our bodies.

I felt this loss somewhere so deep, so important, it penetrated like a  
changing something. Something crucial to my world. Severing it in a  
red. He knew would never heal.

oftening “At least tell me you’re on the Pill,” Hector finished, and the intensified, the severed edges of it cauterizing because I knew then.

I knew.

He wanted no connection to me. Once this was done, whatever chance he’d set for himself was won, he wanted no connection. Once he had he’d be gone, and like my mom, like my father, like any friend I’d ever had and both my ex-boyfriends, I’d lose him too.

“I’m on the Pill.” I whispered then rolled, wondering if I could manage my clothes without dying of mortification.

I barely got to my side, definitely not up on an arm, before he tagged at the waist and yanked my back into his heat.

His mouth at my neck, he warned, his voice low and angry, “Well, Sadie I’m talkin’ to, all of ’em have to know, this isn’t done.”

oulders. My heart sank.

I was afraid of that.



“WAIT HERE A MINUTE,” Hector said, his still-annoyed gaze slicing forward to Shirleen. Then he walked to the door that led to the inner room, Nightingale Investigations.

I looked at Shirleen, who was sitting behind the reception desk. Her brows were resting on the door closing behind Hector. Then she looked at me and her brows went up.



a blade,  
a way I I’D SPENT the day keeping busy.

After the fantastic “fuck-me” sex, and the heartbreaking incident

wound afterward, getting ready for work at Hector's house was an *ee* uncomfortable.

This was because Hector was seriously angry (I didn't know what challenge to be angry about, I wasn't using *him* as a difficultly procured notch his fill bedpost after which I'd tattoo something on *my* arm—I didn't know whether had tattoo to remind me of Hector but I was thinking a black panther l that's the only thing that would do him justice).

I knew he had his anger in check because he wasn't throwing cell like it to into margarita pitchers (or the like). However, I also knew he *barely* h check, so I decided to stay well out of his way. ged me

This proved the wrong decision. The more I tried to avoid him, the hatever seemed in control of his anger. I didn't understand this reaction, obvious reasons I didn't ask.

He dropped me off at the brownstone and I thought consider temper still hadn't cooled that would be that.

However, that wasn't that because he kissed me at the door.

Yes!

*Kissed me!*

This was not like any other kiss he'd given me. His fingers drove i er gaze hair, cupping the back of my head, tilting it up and using it to p and her forward. I fell into him, my hand at his chest, and his mouth came d mine hard. It was an angry kiss, and because of that, so hot and int stole my breath and my ability to stand on my own two feet.

When my hand was clutching his shirt at his chest, my other a incident wrapped around his waist and my torso was plastered to his, his head up and he scorched me with a Hector Glare.



nsy bit “Ten to four, I’ll pick you up at the gallery. Don’t make any fuckin  
tonight,” he ordered, his voice deep, low and vibrating with u  
he had emotion.

on my Before I could remind him about YoYo’s arrival and my plan to t  
what I’d when we got the dog, he was gone, leaving me swaying unsteadily  
because wake.

“Holy Hot Blooded Latinos, sweets. What on *earth* was *that* all :  
phones Ralphie asked, wide eyes on the door.

ad it in My head was beginning to pound. Three nights of interrupted sle  
weeks of intense emotion were getting to me.

less he After all that fantastic sex (four times!), I should have been relax  
but for loose enough to do gymnastics.

Instead, I was wound up tight.

ing his “I don’t want to talk about it,” I told Ralphie.

And I really, *really* didn’t.

“But—” Ralphie started.

I shot him a pleading look. “Please, please, Ralphie. I need quiet.  
peace. And, above all, I need time to get my head together.”

into my Ralphie snapped his mouth shut, looking at me closely. I knew  
ull me dying to know what was going on. Instead, he nodded, and to my sh  
own on left me alone all day to get my head together.  
ense, it

And get it together I did.

rm was I formed several plans of action.

d came Depending on what Hector’s next move was, mine would be a mov  
one thing.

1' plans     Protect myself until I could disappear.

nhappy     And off to Crete I'd go. I'd tell Bex where to find me. She could tell Detective Marker how to get hold of me if the police needed me. But more than that, I was gone.

7 in his     As for finding my mom, well, Lee Nightingale wasn't the only investigator in the world. There were others. I'd hire one of them, find her, bring her to me, and she and I would eat souvlaki and pita bread (whatever) and I'd work my way through all the Greek men on Crete who took my fancy, but I wouldn't give a single one of them my heart.

No fucking way.

red and     My heart was for me and me alone. And, obviously, my mom (I'd find her). And Ralphie and Buddy, who I'd keep contact with of course. And, maybe Daisy and the Rock Chicks, if I could manage that with the involvement of Hector.

As for Hector, I knew the Ice Princess didn't work, so I settled on a different strategy. I knew it would cost me but I was willing to pay the price.

. I need     There was going to be a *New New Sadie*. I was calling her Pretend and she was going to protect me.

he was     It would make it easier in the long run, even though it would be fairly difficult for the short one.

rock he     But I could do it. I lived twenty-nine years with my father pretending to be someone I was not. I could live a few weeks guarding my head from Hector "Oh my God" Chavez.

And guard it I would.

re to do



AT TEN TO FOUR, Hector picked me up from the gallery.

I was kind of hoping that he'd cool off by the time he came, but other than that he told me this was absolutely not the case.

So be it.

I could work with that.

There was only one hitch on the way to the Nightingale Investment offices. They were just around the corner from Art, maybe two blocks. Still, Hector drove it, and as we approached the entrance to the garage I audibly sucked in breath.

I'd forgotten about the garage.

My last time in the garage had *not* been a happy memory.

I wasn't ready to go back there again.

Hector heard me, muttered, "Fuck," under his breath, pulled out another approach and rounded the block, parking on the street.

With effort, I forced my body to relax.

Before getting out, his hand wrapped around my neck and he turned to face him. He was leaning toward me but not as close as he normally noticed this and it made something ugly twist inside me. Something was firmly set aside.

"I didn't think. The garage—" he said to me, his eyes were masked. His voice was soft.

"That's okay," I replied quickly.

He didn't let me go and his eyes scanned my face.

"Who's with me now?" he asked.

“Me,” I answered immediately.

His eyes narrowed. “Which ‘me?’”

“Me, me,” I replied, as if there had always been only one (hardly!).

This answer didn’t make him happy and that was when he got as close as he normally did.

I held my breath and braced (it was a good thing too).

“If I didn’t know it was worth it. If I didn’t know from what happened last night, *and* whatever the fuck you thought it was, *mamita*, what happened this morning. And if I didn’t like your hands in my hair holding my mouth, the smell of your fuckin’ perfume when I’m buried inside you, the way you lose that tight-as-shit control over every fuckin’ move you make when you get excited and you use your nails and teeth on me, I’d give you a good sock in the gut. Because, *mamita*, you are one *serious* pain in the ass.”

I hadn’t planned for a speech like that (I ask you, who would?). Not planned for how it made my heart race (damn and blast!), my stomach ache (more damning and blasting!) or the area between my legs to tingle and blast it all to hell!). Or, contradictory to all this, how it made me want to give him a good sock in the gut. So I thought my best bet was to pull my lips and try to look ashamed of my pain in the ass behavior.

This didn’t work. He shook his head in an annoyed way and let us get out of the Bronco and walked up to the office.

However angry he was, he held my hand the whole way.

Now, how bizarre was *that*?



I TOOK in Shirleen’s raised brows but pretended I didn’t see them.

Shirleen saw my pretending and thought it was bullshit.

“All right, tell Shirleen, what in *the fuck* is goin’ on?” She lifted her hand and her thumb jerked to the door Hector just walked through. “That I’ve been in a *foul* mood all day. Now, foul moods aren’t unusual with Hector. He’s moody but he’s edgy. A boy’s edgy, you gotta give him room for his moods. It comes with the territory. If he’s good at his job, would you put his life for the boys and he ain’t difficult to look at, like Hector, you don’t want to happen like that. But this is different. Everyone’s been givin’ him a wide berth all day. Even Luke, Vance, Lee and Mace, and those boys ain’t scolding him about nothin’.”

I had to admit, I kind of felt better that badasses Luke, Vance, I and Mace also thought Hector’s “foul” mood was worthy of a wide berth. I wasn’t a *total wuss*.

I looked at Shirleen and realized she actually expected an answer.

“Um...” I hedged.

“Ain’t no ‘ums’ with Shirleen. He’s pissed way *the fuck* off and you don’t want to look like, like...I don’t know what you look like, but somethin’ ain’t right.”

“Well...” I started then I stopped.

She waited.

I stayed silent (really, what could I say?).

“That’s it,” she announced.

I watched as she stabbed a button on her phone with a frosted-fingernail and heard a dial tone coming from the speaker. Then another one. The speed dial engaged and a rapid succession of tones came out of the speaker. A ring, then two, then a voice came on the line.

“How’s it hangin’, sugar?” Daisy answered the phone.

er hand “Shit’s gone down with Hector and Sadie. Sadie’s standin’ here, c  
oy hasher tongue and Hector’s gone electric,” Shirleen declared, and I w  
Hector. quite pleased I wasn’t the only one to feel Hector’s angry electric cui  
for themade me feel less of a freak.

it down “Oh shit,” Daisy’s voice said.

o things Boy, she could say that again.

erth all “Gathering. Fortnum’s. Tomorrow at noon. We’re gonna get tl  
ared of *sorted*,” Shirleen decreed, and I felt panic seize me as I hadn’t plan  
*this* either.

ee and “But, I—” I started, and Shirleen’s hand whipped up, palm out  
h and I me, and since she was scaring me a little bit, my mouth snapped shut.

“Gotcha. I’ll get the phone tree activated,” Daisy’s voice said.

Phone tree?

ou look The Rock Chicks had a phone tree?

Battle stations!

“Really, I—” I started again, but stopped when Shirleen’s brows s  
together (so much for my puny battle stations) and Daisy’s voice car  
the phone.

“No back talk, *comprende?*” Daisy warned. “Be there or face Rock  
consequences.”

-apricot I had no idea what Rock Chick consequences were, but then  
she hit didn’t want to know.

ould be “Oh, all right,” I gave in.

How bad could a gathering be?

I'd survived worse.

at's got Heck, I *was* surviving worse at that very moment!

as also The door opened and Hector came through.

urrent. It "It's time, *mamita*," he announced.

See what I mean?

"Tomorrow, noon," Daisy's voice reminded me.

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ned for waiting for me holding open the door.

"Noon," Shirleen repeated to my back.

to face That back went straight, my head whipped around, and for the sake  
pride, I snapped, "All right!"

This, for some bizarre reason, made Shirleen grin.

"Well, all right," she muttered through her grin.

Blooming *heck!*

Why was my life so *difficult*?

napped

ne over

Chick

again I

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Blooming *heck!*

Why was my life so *difficult*?





## UGLIER AND UGLIER

### *Sadie*

“**H**ave a seat, Sadie,” Tom said on a welcoming smile when I entered Nightingale’s office for the second time in my life.

They were all there: Tom, Eddie, Lee, Hank and Vance. They were all standing and they were all looking at me with carefully closed faces.

Oh boy.

Time for Pretend Sadie.

I stopped by one of the chairs in front of Lee’s desk and I felt close behind me. I took a deep breath, did a group scan playing beginning the game and allowing myself a small, friendly smile.

Then I looked at Lee and announced, “I’ve changed my mind.”

Lee’s brows went up.

I continued, “See, I figure you won’t let me pay you and that is fine. You and Hector and everyone are doing so much for me, I can’t ask you any more.”

Lee smiled and I found myself momentarily taken out of my reverie staring (he really had a nice smile).

Then he started talking.

“Sadie, the Rock Chicks are a permanent red line item on my  
They have been for months. We’re used to takin’ this kind of hit.”

I had to admit, I hadn’t prepared for *that* either, especially his assu  
that I was a Rock Chick.

His assumption gave me one of those weird, happy glows. The  
couldn’t allow myself to feel or all would be lost.

Oh well, I had to power through.

“Even so, I think I’d prefer to hire someone else. This is mak  
red Lee uncomfortable,” I replied what I thought was nicely but firmly. “So,  
have a recommendation for another PI, I’ll give them a call.”

vere all Immediately I saw that my nice but firm didn’t work.

Instead, Lee shook his head (still smiling) and Hector’s hands cam  
shoulders.

“Sadie, sit down,” Hector said softly in my ear.

Hector I twisted to look at him. “No, really, I—”

it safe, “Sit,” he interrupted.

Sweet, Pretend, Guarding-Her-Heart Sadie slipped, and I glared at

My glare deflected off his Cool, Collected, Macho Man Shiel  
pinged around the room, unnoticed by anyone.

n’t fair. “Sadie, honey,” Tom said. I turned to him and saw he had his ha  
ou to do out to me. “Come and sit.”

Not wanting to be a bitch because Pretend Sadie was not a bit  
ole and anyway, he’d called me “honey” and that was so nice the weird, happy  
was trying to ignore came back against my will, I walked to him. I  
hand in his and we both sat, facing each other.

budget. “I need to tell you something,” Tom informed me, keeping hold  
hand.

umption The weird, happy glow vanished.

Oh no.

kind I I didn’t like the look on his face and I didn’t like that he felt he ne  
keep holding my hand.

Furthermore, Pretend Sadie didn’t like the vibe in the room *at all* :  
ing mewanted to run.

, if you However, Ice Princess Sadie *never* ran. Ice Princess locked firm ha  
Pretend Sadie’s arms and held her in place.

With Ice Princess in control, I felt it safe to say to Tom, “Okay.”

e to my He squeezed my hand then he took a deep breath and launched in.

“Eighteen years ago, your mom came to me,” Tom started.

I blinked and then stilled, knowing intuitively (from *years* of p  
that this innocuous statement was going to get worse.

Way worse.

him. I wasn’t wrong.

lds and Tom continued, “Lizzie knew what your father did and she didn’t

She didn’t want you growing up in that life. She also saw your future .  
nd helddidn’t like that either. She wanted to get you, and herself, out. She t

the only way to do that was to put your father in jail. She told me t  
ch, andcouldn’t run, taking you with her, because he’d never let either of y

er glow I She knew this because she tried on several occasions, but he always  
put myyou both and brought you back.”

I pulled in my lips and felt myself starting to breathe heavier, m

l of my beginning to hammer in my chest, something hot and hard forming the

My mom had tried to escape.

She'd tried to escape!

And she wanted to take me with her!

eded to Oh my God!

I couldn't believe it!

and she Tom went on, cutting into my fevered thoughts, "She wanted to  
on your dad, to give me what I needed to take him down. I tried to t  
ands on out of it. Your father wasn't as powerful then as he was when Hector g  
But he'd done well. He was top man for Luther Diggs and what she  
to do was dangerous."

I couldn't believe this either.

My sweet, quiet mom an informant?

ractice) Impossible!

And I remembered Luther. He'd been around a lot back then.  
remembered never liking Luther, as in *never*. Luther was my first le  
how to spot bad people, because in Luther's case, he was *very* bad peo  
reeked of it.

like it.  
and she Luther had always scared me.

old me I was glad when Luther went away about a year after my  
hat she disappeared. What I wasn't glad about was knowing, even at twelve, I  
you go, father had assumed Luther's elevated place in the crime world.

s found Tom kept talking, "She wouldn't be swayed. Even Kitty Sue tried  
her out of it, but Lizzie was determined. She said if she didn't work w  
y heart she'd go to someone else. I thought if she had to do it, it was bette

re. worked with me. I thought that I could keep her safe—”

He stopped talking, his eyes closed tight and he looked away, before I caught the pain that slashed through his gaze.

My heart was in my throat, clogging it. That hot, hard thing in me started burning.

I knew where this was going and I didn’t like it.

inform Not one bit.

talk her But, for some reason, I still squeezed his hand and kept squeezing  
got him. his eyes opened and came to me again.

wanted “Go on,” I encouraged softly.

He stared at me a second then took in another deep breath. “At first I couldn’t get me anything I could use. When she saw it wasn’t working she started taking risks.”

I felt the tears hit the backs of my eyes at the thought of my mother doing the same thing I did with Hector. I knew how scary it was and I knew the consequences. And knowing now that she took the same risks, felt the same fear, all of it for me, made the burning in my chest intensify.

I found I was still squeezing Tom’s hand, this time not to encourage him to go on, but because I had to.

my mom Tom reached out and took my other hand, holding both of our hands between us.  
that my

“She started to get some good stuff, found someone in Diggs’s room that didn’t like your father, didn’t like Diggs. They started to work together not just to take down your father, but also to take down Diggs. She never told me who it was. I asked but she wouldn’t give. Then, one day she told me if she

supposed to meet me. She said she had something for me, something but not thought was big, important, but she never showed.” He hesitated. I clenched my teeth, waiting for it, knowing it was coming then he went on, “I saw her again.”

There it was.

“Please, no,” I whispered before I could stop myself.

Tom gave me a hand squeeze.

“I looked for her. Malcolm and I did it together. We had to do it on our own time. Your father never filed a missing person report. He told everyone she left you. I knew she didn’t. I knew she’d never leave you. Never. Never.”

He shook my hands so I knew he meant what he said. I nodded, biting my lips, knowing he thought this might make me feel better, at the same time knowing it didn’t make me feel better. Not even a little bit.

He went on, “Malcolm knew that too, so we looked for her.”

“What did you find?” I asked, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Leads, lots of leads. All of them dead ends. We searched for over a year but, Sadie, we found nothing. The leads dried up and with nothing to go on I’m sorry, honey, so, so sorry. But we had no choice but to stop.”

I nodded.

I didn’t blame him, he tried. He tried to protect my mom and he tried to find her when she disappeared. He was a good person, I knew that. I had no doubt he did the best he could.

But what he was saying meant that someone made my mom “disappear” just like Uncle Vito wanted to make Ricky disappear. And that meant

ing shemom had been scared and alone. That meant my mom was never  
lenchedback. That meant that someone had taken her away from me.

I never And that someone might be my  *fucking, fucking* father.

On that thought, something in my brain exploded. Pain sliced thro  
temples, I tore my hands out of Tom's and shot out of my chair.

“Sadie—” Tom stood with me, but I whirled.

“I've got to go,” I muttered.

on our No friendly smiles now. No alternate Sadies to help me deal. It v  
everyone me, and I needed to get out of there, go somewhere. I didn't know v  
, Sadie. didn't care where. It could be anywhere, but I had to go there and  
at...the...top...of...my...lungs.

ting my If I didn't let out the hard, hot knot of pain that was in my chest, I  
ne time was going to burst. And it was so ugly, so huge, if it burst, it would kil

In my blind escape, I ran smack into Hector's solid body and h  
closed around me.

I looked up at him.

a year, “I've got to go,” I told him, sounding desperate and not caring.

go on, I was desperate.

At that point, I forgot about all my father's lessons never to  
weakness show. I didn't care that everyone in that room knew  
tried to desperate.

had no I didn't care about anything but getting out of there.

“Hang on, *preciosa*,” Hector murmured.

pppear,”  
ant my “*I've got to go!*” I screamed in his face, watched him wince and h  
jerked like the raw emotion in my voice was a physical thing—a hard

coming painful slap.

I struggled.

His arms went tight.

ugh my I pushed against his chest, putting my bodyweight into my hand  
staring at them, willing my efforts to work, fighting the pain in my  
feeling my heart beating in my throat, all the while begging, "Please.  
*Please.*"

was just "Sadie, listen to me." Hector's arms separated. One stayed tight  
where. I waist, pulling my lower body to his heat. One went up my back and i  
scream hair, giving it a gentle tug so my head tilted back to look at him. I  
caught sight of his face, I noted he was no longer annoyed and moo  
knew it face was soft, his eyes were warm and intense, but this didn't help  
I me. "Vance is a tracker. He's good. Tom and Malcolm kept notes on eve  
is arms they did. Vance is going to pick up the—"

I shook my head and started laughing.

He stopped talking because the sound of my laughter was fa  
amused. Instead it was harsh and bitter and so ugly it scratched my ow

"I'm not stupid, Hector. It was eighteen years ago. There's not  
pick up and if there is, I don't want to know what he's going to find."

let any "Mamita, you don't know. Give it a chance," Hector encouraged  
I was but I shook my head and twisted my neck to look at Tom.

"You knew her. You said she'd never leave me, right?" I asked To

Tom was watching me, looking pale and concerned, but he nodded

his head "So, if she felt she had to leave anyway, she'd have come back. C  
, sharp, have found a way to talk to me. She could have used you or Kitty



anyone,” I went on.

“Honey—” Tom started.

But I interrupted him, and with a forceful tug I yanked out of his arms and twirled to face Tom.

“And now he’s gone. He’s been in prison for ages and she hasn’t come back. If she *could* come back, she would. Wouldn’t she?” I demanded, repeated on a shout, “*Wouldn’t she?*”

“Sadie, come here,” Tom replied softly, his arms coming up and reaching toward me.

“He killed her,” I announced in a flat voice, ignoring Tom’s arms, his hands nothing but that hot, hard thing burning in my chest. My body went straight, my hands clenched in fists at my sides. “My father found out what she was doing and he *fucking killed her!*”

“Hector, get her,” Eddie warned, but I took off.

Not to escape, but pacing swiftly around the room, agitated and unable to stand still, thoughts thundering in my head, pain pounding in my temples, striking there like jackhammers.

“This is *unbelievable*,” I got out, taking a half a dozen steps before Hector caught me and pulled me to him again. I stopped, looked up at him and said softly, “*Unbelievable!*”

“*Mi corazón*, calm down,” Hector muttered.

“Calm down?” I snapped, eyes narrowing on him. “This is my father. Hector. His blood flows through *my* veins and he’s a killer! My grandmother died when I was practically a baby, did he kill her too? And his parents kept them from me, but I knew they died when I was nineteen, within

of each other. Did he kill them too?"

I was on a roll, ranting in front of an audience, unconcerned about what they might think, who they might see, what I exposed by the words that came out of my mouth. The only thing I knew was the more I talked, the more things in my chest hurt and I had to get it out before it destroyed me.

So I kept right on going.

"And my boyfriends. I knew he warned them off, but I've never seen them again, never ran into them at, say, a movie or the mall. How big is *that*? You always run into people, especially your exes, exactly what you don't want to see them. Did he whack them for daring to touch me?" I asked. Then my mind flew in another direction. "And Greg! The guy who was the ramrod for him who flirted with me, my *fucking* father saw it and I never saw him again. Did he off him too? Poor Greg, daring to flirt with Sadie Toombs. *That* was a mistake. King Death strikes again!" I shouted, totally hysterical now. Then I demanded to know, "When's it going to end? *When?* When's it next? Am I going to find out my *fucking* father ran over my cat, Cleopatra, when I was eight? He said it was a neighbor who did it. It was probably

"I'm sure your father didn't run over your cat," Hector told me gently. "You're sure? Well I'm not. He probably drove around neighborhoods in his spare time, aiming for cats just for kicks!" I snapped back.

Hector gave me a gentle shake. "*Mamita*, you got to calm down."

I looked up at him and all of a sudden I remembered where I was. I was with my father, what I was saying and I pulled in my breath.

He was right. He was so right.

I had to calm down.

So, I had filth running through my veins instead of blood.

ut what      So what?

at came      I knew that. I'd always known it.

ess that      This just proved it irrevocably.

It proved I had no business standing here with these good people.

er seen      It proved I was *exactly* the kind of girl Hector could conquer then  
zarre is      away without looking back.

en you      It proved that wasn't only true, but I *deserved* it.

[ asked.      I had to get out of there, pronto.

worked      "I need to go," I told Hector. "I need to get back to the gallery.  
w Gregwork to do."

vn send.      "I'm thinkin' that's not a good idea," Hector replied.

sterical      "What do you suggest I do instead? Sit in a dark room and reflect  
What's      pitiful life? My mother who probably died trying to protect me? My s  
opatra,      cat?"  
y him!"

itly.      "Sadie—"

oods in      I shook my head and lifted my hands to pull my hair away from th  
of my face, leaving them there. "No, I need to do something normal. I  
be around pretty things in my gallery. I need Ralphie. I need Buddy. I  
go back to the brownstone and play with YoYo. I need Veronica Mars  
, who I to do everything I can do to forget all that is my *fucking hideous* life."

Something flashed across his face. Something so strong it penetra  
hysteria. I wasn't certain sure, he hid it as quickly as it came, but  
swear it was disappointment.

I realized then that of all the things I told him I needed, he wasn't

them.

I'd inadvertently scored a direct hit and I should have been glad.

But I was absolutely not.

I sallied forth. There was nothing else I could do. In my life, s  
forth was my only option and it always had been.

1 throw I dropped my hair and put my hands on his biceps.

“Please, Hector, take me back to the gallery.”

Finally, his arms dropped. He stepped back and I lost his heat.

I have And I saw that I also lost him. I could see it in his face closing do  
his eyes going blank. And I knew it because he didn't touch me, he  
slide his hand in my hair and he didn't stay close.

And this hurt.

on my It hurt so much I felt that hot, hard thing in my chest grow and spr  
quished my throat and down to my belly, until I found it difficult to breathe an  
certain sure it was going to suffocate me.

Even though I lost him, he still quietly replied, “All right, Sadie. I  
1e sides you back to the gallery.”

need to I let out a breath and found that didn't help at all.

need to

. I need



### **Eddie**

EDDIE CHAVEZ WATCHED the door close behind his brother and Sad  
ited my something about both of them made him feel unsettled.

I could Then Tom spoke and Eddie's eyes moved to him.

one of Lizzie. It was an obsessive, smothering love, but he loved her. He dic

her.”

Lee leaned against his desk.

“You sure about that?” he asked.

sallying Tom nodded. “None of the leads took us close to Seth. I don’t even  
he knew she was talking to me. Malcolm and I figured Diggs found out  
Lizzie was up to and ordered the hit.”

“Any chance she’s still alive?” Eddie asked, crossing his arms  
chest.

wn and This time, Tom shook his head.

didn’t “Sadie’s right. Lizzie would have found a way to keep in contact with  
or she would have come back. Furthermore, Lizzie was loaded. Still  
had a trust, she was an only child and she inherited everything when  
mother died, and they had a large estate. The money is still sitting  
ead. Up accounts. She never touched it. Seth never went after it either, didn’t  
d I was have her declared dead so he could get his hands on it, never  
desertion so he could get it for Sadie. Nothing. I’m not even certain  
’ll take knows it exists. If Lizzie found a safe place, she could have taken the  
and she and Sadie could have lived their lives without ever lifting a  
Eighteen years ago, Malc and I talked to Aaron Lockhart, Lizzie’s  
accountant, and we told him our suspicions. His loyalty was to Liz  
Sadie and he watched that money like a hawk, *and* he would have done  
lie, and he could to see Lizzie and Sadie safe. I called Aaron this morning to  
and not a penny of that money moved, not in eighteen years. If Lizzie  
alive, there would have been a time when she needed it. It never moved

loved “Any point pursuing this?” Vance asked. “Sadie’s got a new wound  
ln’t kill and by the look of her, she has no intention of letting it heal. She intends

keep it licked raw. After eighteen years that trail's cold. I manage something, what purpose would it serve?"

Eddie looked at Vance. "At least she'd know her father didn't  
mother."  
n think

ut what Everyone knew that was so thin it was practically useless.

But for Sadie, who had nothing but still managed to lose more, th  
on his better than nothing.

Because of that, Vance gave a jerk of his chin and muttered, "I  
into it."

Hank moved to Lee's desk and used his hands to pull himself up t  
with her is. She  
it.

"We got another problem," he announced when he'd settled.  
nen her

Eddie felt the air in the room get heavy and his body tensed.  
in her

"Play the tape," Hank said to Lee, and Lee reached out and hit a bu  
t try to claimed  
a recorder on his desk.

Sadie  
n Sadie  
money  
finger.  
Sadie and Seth's phone conversation from the day before filled th  
When it was over, Lee hit the stop button.

Hank's eyes went to Eddie. "He said there's business to attend to."  
family

Eddie clenched his teeth.  
zie and

Hector had said Sadie had a will of steel. He hoped to fuck his  
ie what  
o check was right, because if Seth Townsend was doing business from pris  
zie was wasn't free of him.

d."  
Not yet.

id now,  
Lee spoke.

ends to

to find “Hector heard the conversation. We played it back half a dozen  
yesterday. He didn’t look happy at what he heard. I figure it was for  
kill her than the obvious reason, but he didn’t share. We got somethin’ else  
with here?”

“No idea,” Eddie replied truthfully, and he saw Lee’s eyes cut to  
him was before he continued. “Hector told me she knew what her father did. I  
told me she slipped him information when he was on the inside.”

’ll look All eyes came to him at this surprising revelation.

“You’re fuckin’ kidding,” Vance murmured.

o sit on Eddie shook his head.

“Little Sadie?” Tom whispered.

This time, Eddie nodded.

“What are we talkin’ about here? What did she give him? Was  
itton on involved, in a position to know?” Hank asked.

“No. Hector said the information was worthless, but she didn’t know  
e room. He wasn’t in the place where he could tell her without putting them  
danger and it doesn’t matter. She did it all the same. Still, I’m not  
Townsend figures family ties bind and she could help him keep a hold  
he’s in prison. There was shit the Feds knew existed but they couldn’t  
We know he’s still got men loyal to him and he’s keepin’ himself in  
brother Now, he knows she’s strayed and he obviously isn’t happy about it.”

on, she

“Where’s the link?” Vance asked. “If she wasn’t involved while  
active, why the fuck would he involve her now?”

Eddie shook his head because it was beyond his comprehension  
father would want to drag his daughter into a life of crime.

n times Then he looked at Lee. “Brody needs to do a hack, find out what t  
or moregot and what they didn’t and if they’re still keepin’ an eye on him. I’ll  
to dealHector. We got more than the Balduccis to worry about. We need

Sadie clear of her father. By the sound of it, he’s lookin’ to suck her in  
o Hank “She hates him,” Tom put in. “She’s not getting involved.”

He also “That’s not what I mean,” Eddie told Tom. “His daughter has ta  
with the agent who brought him down. We all know Seth Townsend  
fuck isn’t going to stand for that, even if he’s behind bars.”

“I’ll get Brody on it, you talk to Hector,” Lee said immediately.

Eddie took in a breath. He didn’t like what he was going to have  
next. He didn’t like to owe markers to anyone who was dirty, but he k  
had to say it.

was she His eyes moved to Lee. “You need to go to Marcus and Vito. The  
to make their protection of Sadie official. Townsend and any of his cr  
are out there need to know what they’re up against if they’re t  
ow that. retribution against Hector or Sadie.”

both in Lee simply nodded.  
hinkin’

d while “This just keeps getting uglier and uglier,” Hank muttered.

find it. Hank was right, but Eddie, thinking about his brother’s wom  
formed.mother dead, taking her life in her own hands to be free of her father,  
up beaten and raped by one of his competitors and Sadie’s response  
he waslatest news, still hoped Hank was wrong.

As for the unsettled feeling he had about Hector and Sadie, the w  
why a behaved and the way he saw them looking at each other, Eddie knew  
time to talk to Jet.





he Feds

## **Buddy**

l talk to “DOUBLE H IS HERE,” Ralphie whispered from his position at the w  
to keep and Buddy looked to his lap.

.”  
Sadie’s head was there, her magnificent hair fanned out everywh  
she was asleep. YoYo was on her side and asleep too, tucked in the c  
ken up Sadie’s lap, Sadie’s hand on the dog’s belly.

sure as Sadie had come home from work with Ralphie, her face pale, h  
dead, a look that seriously alarmed Buddy. It didn’t help that Ralpl  
giving Buddy faces saying, nonverbally, all was even *more* unwell  
e to say World of Sadie.

new he She’d tried to make a go of it, pretend excitement for YoYo’s arr  
was her way).

ey need But Bex showed up with the dog, took one look at Sadie and  
ew that straight out, “Oh God, Sadie girl, what’s happened now?”

hinkin’ Sadie pulled in her lips, trying for control (this lasted about a s  
Then she snatched YoYo out of Bex’s arms, cuddled the dog against h  
and burst into tears.

Through her blubbering, she told them a crazy story about her  
an, her killing her mother, something about “amazing ‘fuck-me’ sex” with  
ending (she said they had sex four times, which had to be a crazy story—fou  
to this in one night and all of them “amazing” was impossible, and if it w  
Hector Chavez was legend material) and ended on some incompreh  
nonsense about her need to learn Greek.  
ay they

7 it was They calmed her down, made her eat, and then Buddy gave h  
Tylenol PMs and sent her to the couch with Veronica Mars.

When Bex left, Buddy and Ralphie followed and they all

impromptu conference on the front stoop about what to do.

Window, Ralphie had a plan.

It was a bad plan.

Here and Buddy and Bex didn't like it, but Ralphie was adamant and he took them both around (as was *his* way).

Then Ralphie called Hector and told him to hold off coming over. They knew Sadie was "visiting dreamland" (Ralphie's words) and they were talking.

But in the Hector didn't like it, but Ralphie was adamant and talked him around.

Now Hector was there, and Buddy *still* didn't like the plan. But he was watching Hector closely now for over a month.

Buddy didn't know Hector well but there were a few things he *did* ask,

He knew (because a friend of his at Denver Health told him) that she had spent the night in her room in a bedside vigil after she'd been in the hospital. Hospital gossip spread it around that this hot Hispanic guy had brought her face in, gone berserk when they'd tried to separate them and ended up having

be physically removed from her examination bay. He'd lied to them, telling them he was her partner. After that was over, he and his friend

Hector spent a month sitting outside the brownstone, making a statement to anyone who might want to come after Sadie. When he finally deemed it time to act, his move, he went against what Buddy was certain was his nature and was slow, showing patience, restraint and understanding. But also, Buddy noticed

a sense of humor, consideration and a gentleness that Buddy thought was almost unreal.

Ralphie adored him, and talking with Bex about it, she agreed with Buddy's assessment of Hector's behavior. She admitted she even trusted

and Bex didn't have a high opinion of men, what with working at crisis center that was a job hazard.

Even so, they were about to break Sadie's confidence and Buddy talked like doing it.

And he hoped to all hell that they weren't about to break her heart.

Buddy moved Sadie's head, slid out from under her and carefully a pillow in his place, hoping he wouldn't wake her. She moved, sucked in breath, but she just curled her knees up higher, pinning YoY didn't mind and simply snuggled closer. She tucked her hands under cheek in prayer position and stayed out.

Buddy let out a sigh.

At that point, Ralphie and Hector walked in the room.

Hector's eyes immediately went to Sadie.

"She's asleep," Buddy whispered then, "Kitchen."

Hector's gaze sliced to him and he didn't even try to hide his living totender concern.

At his look, Buddy knew.

*Thank Christ*, he thought.

They went into the kitchen and Ralphie closed the kitchen door as got three Fat Tire beers from the fridge.

He opened the beers while Hector asked, "How is she?"

"A fucking mess," Ralphie answered, and Buddy shot him a killing

"What?" Ralphie responded to the killing look. "She's been crying her eyes out and blathering on about learning to speak Greek. What's *that* all about?"

"Learning to speak Greek?" Hector asked, and Buddy slid him a beer

a rape They settled on stools at the island and Ralphie kept going, “Yep. She’s lost it. Says her father killed her mother and she’s got to learn to Greek. If that isn’t the hallmark of losing your mind, nothing is.”

Hector stared at Ralphie a beat and then put his elbow on the table and pressed his three middle fingers to the area between his brows and tucked hard.

Buddy Buddy watched Hector, his heart clenching, then asked, “Did he kill her mother?”

Ralphie’s head snapped around to look at Buddy, then he went p and his gaze swung to Hector.

Hector took his fingers from his brow and took a long swig of beer

Then he leveled his (fucking fantastic, Buddy had to admit, the color so intense and those *lashes*, Jesus Christ, divine) black eyes on Buddy and said, “She got bad news today. Her mother’s likely dead. It’s an opportunity, but her father could have done it. He had motive and opportunity.”

“No, please no,” Ralphie breathed then shut his eyes tight.

“I knew about it but didn’t want her to know,” Hector told him and the boys agreed with me. Lee, his brother Hank, my brother Eddie,” Buddy explained. “She forced my hand, asked Lee to find her mom right in front of Tom. Tom knew her mother. He’s a friend of her family she didn’t know she had. He wants her back in the fold. He wants to protect her like he should have been protecting her since her mom disappeared. To do that he needs her trust so he wanted nothing between them. I didn’t like it either.”

“Not much more she can take,” Buddy decided.

“Nope,” Hector agreed.

Greek. Buddy and Hector stared at each other unhappily.  
o speak Ralphie's eyes reopened.  
island, "What are we going to do?" he asked.  
rubbed "What you been doin'," Hector answered simply.  
r father "I'm not sure *Auntie Mame* and Veronica Mars are going to soc  
soul of a recently raped girl who just found out her father might hav  
her mother. That's beyond the powers of Tinseltown," Ralphie in  
Hector.  
ale and Hector stared at Ralphie, likely, Buddy thought, wondering how  
macho and heterosexual as they come, found himself sharing a beer  
kitchen of a gay man who just used the words "*Auntie Mame*," "soc  
lor was soul" and "Tinseltown" in two sentences.  
ldy and Buddy decided it was time to get down to business.  
outside "You need to know a few things about Sadie," Buddy said, and Ra  
ity." head snapped to him again, this time with the addition of narrowed eye  
1. "The "What are you doing? I'm going to tell him," Ralphie announced.  
Hector Buddy looked at his lover. "Ralphie, I'm tellin' him."  
front of "I'm telling him. It was my idea," Ralphie returned.  
ow she "Maybe so, but he needs it straight. No exaggeration," Buddy repli  
feels he "I wouldn't exaggerate!" Ralphie snapped.  
that, he Buddy gave him the look he deserved for uttering such a lie.  
t, but I Ralphie glared back.  
, "Would someone tell me? I don't give a fuck who," Hector cut in  
patience.

“What do you drink?” Buddy asked immediately, taking charge.

Hector looked at the beer in his hand then back to Buddy.

“No, stronger. Bourbon, vodka, gin...?” Buddy explained.

Hector’s eyes went intense and Buddy pulled in breath at the  
the the behind his look.

e killed Then Hector muttered, “Shit.”

formed “Shit is right,” Buddy muttered in return.

Hector sighed then said, “Bourbon. Jack, if you’ve got it.”

r he, as Ralphie went to get the Jack Daniels and three glasses.

r in the They had three more beers and made a major dent in the bottle of .  
the the the time they were done explaining what Ralphie called The Night  
Thousand Horrors Accompanied by Lemon Drops.

alphie’s A night neither of them thought that Sadie fully remembered.

es. A night where she explained about her mom, her father and her life

This, Hector didn’t seemed surprised about, so Buddy figured he k

A night where she talked about Daisy, the Rock Chicks, going to :  
Nightingale, Hector being there and how that made her feel.

ed. This, Hector also didn’t seem surprised about, but his mouth got ti  
his face went dark, likely, Buddy figured, with guilt.

A night where she talked about having no friends and living her li  
Ice Princess.

This, Hector took in without giving anything away. But still, the ai  
, losingroom changed, almost like it had gone electric.

A night where she described, in detail, what had happened with

Balducci.

After what little Buddy shared (but clearly it was enough), Hector's body got visibly tight. His face went scary dark and Ralphie calmly removed all bottles from his reach.

"Hold it together, Hector," Buddy warned. "She's in the next room

Hector jerked his head in what was supposed to be a nod while a jump started in his cheek. He looked away and threw back a shot of Jack, and himself another the minute he was done.

He threw that back too.

Buddy looked at Ralphie.

Ralphie bugged his eyes out at Buddy.

Buddy finished on the part of the night where Sadie shared about the part she shared at the end of the night. The part they both figured didn't remember sharing.

It was who she thought she was, who she wanted to be, how she knew how to be that and what she thought that Hector thought she would see Lee what happened "that night in my father's study."

Hector stared at him.

"She thinks I think she's a society slut out slumming?" he asked, looking angry.

"She says *you* said that," Buddy corrected him.

Hector looked away and threw back another shot of Jack.

"Jesus," he muttered after he swallowed. "I never called her a slut. I was *glad* she went slumming. She had to know I wanted her. Fuck her against the wall with her skirt around her waist, my hands in her

for fuck's sake."

This was way more information than they needed, but Buddy fightiously was Jack Daniels Magic. As good (if not better) than lemon drops.

Hector kept talking as if to himself.

"She knew who I was. She'd been feeding me information on her muscle for months. And I knew what kind of woman she was. She knew I pouring What's in her fuckin' head?"

"That episode didn't, um...end well, did it?" Ralphie asked carefully. Hector's eyes sliced to him.

"No," Hector replied tersely, then his teeth clenched. The muscle in his cheek again and he looked away. "*Fucking hell*," he hissed (at himself), sounding even angrier. "Fucking hell," he repeated, looking at Sadie. Buddy, something dawning on him. "She didn't know. We talked about red she other night. I told her I knew she was my informant and she didn't knew. Fucking hell, I've been so wrapped up in all her shit, I didn't e didn't together. I said something to her that night when she walked away as after wasn't nice. I was pissed as hell. I figured she'd get that, understand w get over it, like I did, because I thought she went cold on me, walked because she had to, to protect both of us. Jesus, if she didn't know—"

"She's confused," Ralphie said quietly. "She thinks she's marked looking father, less of a person because of who he is. She spent years enduring of fear, playing a role, hating every minute of it without a single pe turn to, to trust. She had a chance to become someone else, but inst was stalked by four crazy brothers and then interrupted in the ei t. I told finding herself when she was raped by one of them. She doesn't thi k, I had normal people. She's never had a normal life. But now she's on th r pants,



Hector. She's holding it together, but she's teetering. We can't let  
gured it off."

Buddy took over. "What's happening with you two, it isn't your  
boy meets girl, boy asks girl out—"

r father "I fuckin' know that," Hector clipped, interrupting Buddy, eyes na  
l knew, and angry and clearly having had his fill of sharing.

Buddy pushed it. "I know you do. What I wanted to say was, in a  
lly, and relationship it would be too early to ask this question, but we have to  
your intentions."

leaped "What are you sayin'?" Hector's voice was still clipped.

gain to Buddy kept at it. "I'm asking you your intentions. Far as we c  
g up at Ralphie and I are the only ones she trusts. We're taking that serious  
ut it the figure you're not in it for a casual—"

know I Hector leaned forward, and at his threatening posture and drawn  
t put it Buddy stopped talking.

r and it "I'm gonna say this once, out of respect for what you've done for l  
/hy and then we're done here. There's nothin' casual about this. Got me?"  
l away,

Okay, it was safe to say Hector Chavez was done sharing.

by her And Hector Chavez's feelings were far from casual when they c  
g a life Sadie.

rson to Buddy thought that was good to know.

ead she "Got you," Buddy assured him.

ffort of "I got you too." Ralphie smiled happily then turned to Buddy. "I to  
nk like I told Sadie too. Double H is—"

e edge, "Christ," Hector muttered, interrupting Ralphie, tossing back the

her fall his third beer and standing. "I'm takin' Sadie to bed. Which room is he

"Top of the stairs to the right. She has her own bathroom. A normal staying?" Ralphie answered and asked.

"Fuck yeah, I'm stayin'," Hector replied.

urrowed "You need to borrow some pajamas?" Ralphie offered.

"Ralphie," Buddy said in a low warning.

normal Hector stared at Ralphie a beat, then two.

o know Finally he said shortly, "No."

Ralphie flicked out his hand. "Our *casa* is your *casa*, or however Make yourself at home."

an see, Hector's glance cut across the both of them, which Buddy figured sly. We way of saying "goodnight," and he started to move from the room.

brows, He stopped when Ralphie called, "You know, some of that a 'fuck-me' sex Sadie was going on about while she was freaking c evening wouldn't be amiss in this situation. Stress relief."

ier, and Hector's eyes slashed to Ralphie and Buddy could swear he look he didn't know whether to throw something or laugh out loud.

"Ralphie, shut up," Buddy said.

ame to "I'm just saying," Ralphie replied.

"Shut up," Buddy repeated.

"*I'm just saying*," Ralphie repeated too.

ld you. Hector gave up and left the room closing the door behind him.

Ralphie gave Buddy a look and then tiptoed across the room to the

last of "Get back here," Buddy hissed, and Ralphie put his finger to h

ers?” carefully pulled open the door an inch and peeked out.

re you Buddy wanted to be the better person, but he couldn't help himself

He made it in time to peer out the crack in the door, bending Ralphie to do it. Then he saw Hector's back walking away, Sadie in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder, face tucked into his neck, her arms around his shoulders.

“Mm, that boy looks *good* from behind,” Ralphie whispered.

Buddy's eyes rolled to the ceiling then, since they were there, he said a little prayer.  
it goes.

was his

mazing  
out this

ed like

door.

his lips,

carefully pulled open the door an inch and peeked out.

Buddy wanted to be the better person, but he couldn't help himself.

He made it in time to peer out the crack in the door, bending under Ralphie to do it. Then he saw Hector's back walking away, Sadie in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder, face tucked into his neck, her arms linked around his shoulders.

"Mm, that boy looks *good* from behind," Ralphie whispered.

Buddy's eyes rolled to the ceiling then, since they were there, he said a little prayer.

## SEVENTEEN



# IT WAS ORGANIC

*Sadie*

I woke up in my bed in Ralphie and Buddy's guest room.

This was a strange sensation. Firstly, I hadn't slept there in... Secondly, I knew immediately Hector was with me. I could feel his... down my back and his arm was wrapped around my midriff, elbow... forearm tucked under me, hand at the side of my breast.

Oh my.

Now, how did I get in *this* predicament?

I didn't have time to rewind my night. It was too late to try to figure out how I ended up in my bed with Hector. It was time to extricate myself pronto.

I prayed he was asleep and started to slide forward so I could escape.

His arm went tight.

"You're awake," he said into the back of my neck.

Damn and blast!

"Yes," I replied, and wondered if I should have feigned sleep.

"Good," he muttered, his body pressing closer. Then his thumb

kidding!) started to stroke the side of my breast. “Before you get a chance to put your defenses up, *mamita*, we’re gonna talk.”

This was *not* good.

I’d been awake five seconds. I could barely think, much less talk to Hector, *with* Hector’s heat at my back *and* Hector’s thumb stroking my breast.

I definitely should have feigned sleep.

It was time to form an upon-waking escape plan so I could go somewhere and get my multiple personalities together where we could confer and decide who was going to take on this latest challenge.

in days.

heat all

cocked,

“I, um, need to use the bathroom,” I tried.

This failed.

“In a minute,” he responded firmly.

“I’m not sure I want to talk,” I told him, trying again.

This failed too.

figure out

myself,

Miserably.

“That’s good too, because you aren’t gonna be talking.”

Oh no.

me.

A talk without me talking.

That *definitely* was not good.

“Hector—” I started and tried to turn, but his arm got tight. His hand fitted itself close to my back and I couldn’t move.

“Sadie, quiet and listen,” he ordered.

nb (no

I could just *not* win.

ance to I hadn't even been awake for two minutes and I had another life  
on my hands!

Oh well, so be it.

lk with I willed my body to relax, but mentally braced for what was to come  
ing my Hector felt the tension leave me and his thumb went back to sleep  
(this, I had to admit, felt super nice, but I told myself to ignore it—this  
work, but at least I tried).

ewhere Then Hector started talking.

l decide "I grew up in a house full of family. Brothers, sisters, a mother, a  
My dad was a prosecuting attorney and he worked long hours. *Mama*  
part-time guidance counselor at our high school. We weren't rich, but  
managed to give us everything we needed, even if we didn't have most  
shit we wanted. They worked, but they were around. They were good j  
In our business, in our faces, providing guidance but letting us f  
enough so we could learn. Some of us took advantage, fucked around,  
them problems. They never gave up hoping we'd eventually do the  
thing and made sure we knew that."

Now, why was he telling me this?

In a perfect world, of course, I would want to know all about Hector's  
life.

But this was far from a perfect world.

is body And I wondered, was Hector one of the ones who "fucked around,  
them problems?"

I didn't get a chance to ask (not that I would), because he kept talking.

"I don't know how you grew up, but I watched you with your father."

trauma I was on the inside, *mamita*, and at first I didn't understand it. When  
turned my stomach."

I drew in breath and held it.

the next. I didn't know what I expected from this first thing in the morn  
stroking where I didn't get to talk, but *that* wasn't it.

s didn't I had forgotten, or chosen not to remember, how much he'd been  
My father kept him close. He liked him, trusted him. He even told me  
grooming Hector for "big things." In the end, Hector had been around

father. It didn't occur to me what he would see or even that he was watc  
I was a *really* didn't occur to me that he'd have any reaction to it. No one care  
out they me or what I was going through. Not only did I suspect they didn't  
it of the also I didn't tell anyone, and I hid behind The Ice just in case any  
parents. close.

uck up But, somehow, it appeared Hector had seen through all that.

caused And furthermore, what he said meant he cared.

ie right I didn't know how that made me feel except the weird, happy gl  
trying to push through.

Then I felt his mouth touch my neck. He kissed me there and it  
ector's immense effort of will to hold the glow back, because him kissing m  
could only mean one thing and I couldn't allow myself to believ  
Believing in it would set me up as the fool. Or worse, let him get cl  
caused that couldn't happen.

"That isn't family, Sadie," he told me softly, obviously unaware  
ing. inner turmoil. "I don't know what it is, but it sure as fuck isn't family."

er when With no choice (other than to suffocate), I let out my breath on th



I did, it“Okay.”

His arm gave me a squeeze. “I don’t know what you got inside y  
helps you deal. I don’t know, growin’ up with that, how you manag  
ng talk I’m thinkin’ your mother gave you some of it and the other part com  
you. Or at least the you I had yesterday morning.”

around. At his reminder of yesterday morning, my body went tight and so  
he was<sup>arm</sup>.

loads. “Don’t fuckin’ shut down on me,” he warned, and he sounded  
hing. It<sup>meant</sup> it.

d about Oh my.

care, I I forced my body to relax. It was difficult, but I did it so I could  
one got<sup>over</sup> with and fast.

When my body relaxed, so did his arm.

“Now, we got a situation. I don’t have many choices in this situat  
none of them are good. But I made a decision and you gotta know wha

ow was Oh my, oh my, *oh my*.

Hector’s made a decision.

took an This, I figured, did not bode well for me.

ny neck I wasn’t wrong.

e in it. “I want you,” he said into the back of my neck, his hand movin  
ose and curl around my breast in a way that was so possessive, I found  
of my holding my breath again while he went on, “I’ve wanted you a lon  
, longer than you know. Before you came into your father’s office tha  
e word, well before. I lost control that night, fucked up, let things lie the w  
were. I should have talked to you. I didn’t. I didn’t think it was safe

your father went down, I should have come to you. I didn't. It was the  
choice. Now, something shitty has happened to you and I felt I nee  
ed. But proceed with caution. I couldn't come on strong, not after what Ricky  
es from you. I couldn't push it. I didn't want you thinkin' you were movin'  
under your father's thumb to under mine. I could have stepped back, I  
did his would mean *I* wouldn't be where I wanted to be, which is right here."

His fingers at my breast squeezed and I felt my stomach perform a  
like he pitch. I tried to ignore that too (and failed).

He kept talking.

"I felt I was makin' progress until yesterday morning. Now, you gotta  
get this fucked-up idea in your head about what happened and you gotta get  
Sadie, so listen. It's important. Because I want *that* girl. That's who I'm  
all this for 'cause that girl is the real you. The one who loses control  
takes what she wants and gives back without racking up the debt. A  
ion and doesn't give a fuck about what her actions say and what people will think  
it is."

I was breathing heavily now, wanting to block out his words. But  
him there all around me, I couldn't.

He kept at me.

"So, I've made a decision. I'm not fuckin' around with this anymore.

He wasn't fucking around with this anymore?

g up to What did *that* mean?

myself Had he been fucking around before?

g time, He kept going.

t night, "I want the real you. To get that, I'm givin' you the real me. I  
ay they gonna hold anything back."  
2. After

e wrong      Oh my God!  
 eded to      He'd been holding back?  
 y did to      How could he be holding back?  
 r' from      He kept talking.  
 but that      "And I'm bettin' that the real you'll be able to deal. We'll ride t  
 a happy and get to the other side."  
                  Oh no.  
                  No we wouldn't.  
 ot some      No...we...would...not.  
 get this      Unfortunately, he wasn't finished.  
 n doin'      "You try to shut down, you try to hold back, you try to push me a  
 rol and      take off, fair warning, *mamita*, I won't like it and I won't allow it. Y  
 and she      that's me puttin' you under my thumb, I can live with that. You'll le  
 ink."      difference between how your father treated you and how I'm gonna tre  
 ut with      Do you understand what I'm sayin' to you?"  
                  What did I say to that?  
                  "Sadie, answer me. I gotta know you understand."  
 re."      "Yes," I replied.  
                  I understood and it scared me more than anything had scared me be  
                  "You got anything to say?" he asked.  
                  I thought about it then I made an effort at protection.  
                  In other words, I lied (badly).  
 I'm not      "I'm not sure there's something here. I don't think I feel about y  
                  way—"

He interrupted me. "You feel what you're wearin'?"

I didn't understand the question. Then I thought back to the night and all I could remember was falling asleep on the couch.

My hand went to my waist and I felt soft flannel bunched there.

this out Damn and blast him to perdition!

I'd stolen Hector's flannel shirt the day before, shoved it in my over-shoulder bag, all ready to take it with me to Crete as a reminder never to get me into another fool situation *ever again*.

Now, somehow, I was wearing it.

Which meant I was in another fool situation *right now!*

way, to "How...?" I started but stopped when his head moved. His mouth closed against my neck, lips sliding up to the back of my ear.

you feel "Carried you to bed last night. Went for your pajamas in your bag and your flannel shirt. You don't feel about me the way I feel about you, why'd you steal my shirt?"

Blooming *heck*.

With no other choice, I decided to go for attitude. "You shouldn't have rooted through my stuff."

efore. "You shouldn't have stolen my shirt," he returned.

This was true.

"You can have it back," I snapped.

you the I felt his body move. I lost his heat, but only so he could put his hands on my belly and press me to his back. He came up, elbow in the pillow, his hand and looked down at me, grinning.

I glared up at him.

before “I don’t want it back,” he said.

“I don’t want it anymore,” I lied.

The grin widened to a smile, his head bent and he kissed me softly.

“You want it,” he murmured against my lips.

ernight I did. I wanted it. I wanted it to remember not to be a fool. I also w  
yself in for those times when I would pretend I could be a normal girl with a  
boyfriend having a normal relationship. I wasn’t sure flannel was *de*  
on Crete, but I also didn’t care.

That was when I remembered Pretend Sadie and what she was g  
came to do for me.

And I realized I needed her even more than I thought I did.

, found Because she was going to get me free, with my heart guarded. I  
ou steal was also going to get me the memories I’d need in order to go on,  
without my mom, without anyone.

“Oh all right,” I gave in, blowing out a huff of air. “I want it.”

it have That was when Hector’s eyes grew dark, warm and intense and I s  
order to memorize that look so I could hold it with me for a long, long

While I was staring at his face, he pulled the covers down to my  
He watched me as his fingers moved to the buttons of the shirt and  
them (he’d only done up two) and he spread the shirt wide.

hand to I pulled in breath and started to cover myself when he mumbled, “I

head in It was hard, but I made my hands settle and his eyes went to my  
His hand followed, and slowly it trailed down my chest, between my  
over my ribcage and midriff to my belly. The whole time, his eyes v

his hand, and when his hand rested at my belly, that belly melted.

This was because his face got this expression, an expression I'd seen on him before. It was more intense and warm than normal. But also soft and bizarrely, at the same time, hard. I got the impression it was him cupping my breast. It signified possession.

At that realization, I couldn't help it. My bones went liquid.

anted it  
normal  
*rigueur*

"Hector—" I breathed.

His eyes came to mine. His fingertips moved across the top edge of my panties and his head descended.

going to

That was it. I gave in because it was Hector. I wanted him (he was obviously). I wanted the memories of "us."

And I wasn't disappointed.

But she

It was just as amazing as before.

, alone,

It was a mixture of hot and urgent but slow and sweet, and the difference was, when I tried to shrug off the shirt, he wouldn't let me. He made me keep it on, even when we were ready, breathing heavily, my chest hard, my nails scraping at his skin and he rolled to his back, taking me in his arms. He yanked up my knees so I was straddling him, guided himself between my thighs and pushed me up so he filled me.

tared in  
time.

thighs.

I undid

It felt *great*.

Don't."

y chest.

breasts,

watched

I started moving, our eyes locked. His hot on me. Mine had to be the same because my body felt hot. Everything felt hot. My eyes *had* to be as hot as his.

His hands moved on my body under the shirt. I put mine over his chest and kept going, taking mine with them. Then one of his hands went between my breasts and

legs, shifted, pressing my own fingers to me and manipulating them.

“My God,” I breathed, tingles shooting from between my legs down the wastops of my thighs as it started happening, the tingles gathering, getting like I bent forward slightly, resting my free hand on the bed, giving me leverage to move faster, grind down harder. His free hand went to my hip, his thumb trailed my bottom lip, and at his touch I parted my lips. To my tongue to his thumb then my teeth tagged it, biting softly before I put it inside my mouth.

The minute I did that, his face went darker, his eyes went hot, everything happened at once.

I came, hard and delicious. At the same time his hand left mine to my legs. His arm sliced around my waist and he threw me to my back, started pounding into me, prolonging and intensifying my orgasm as he took my moans in his mouth. Before I was finished, his groans mingled with mine.

When we were done, while my hips jerked softly under his hands, the aftermath, my hands moved along the skin and muscle of his back, I remembered the last fifteen minutes, burning it into my brain to carry with me forever.

“You still with me?” he asked, his voice gruff.

“Yes.”

“Don’t shut down on me,” he muttered, and I felt guilt slide through me that he’d even think that, but it was my fault. In a short time I’d convinced him to it.

My hands stopped roving and my arms got tight.

“Okay,” I said.

He rolled to the side, rolling me with him but keeping my leg around him.

hip with a hand behind my knee. Then his fingertips slid gently from the top of my knee to my bottom and back again and again and again.

I tucked my face in his throat and memorized the feel of what he was doing too.

“You wanna talk about yesterday?” he asked quietly.

“What about it?”

“In Lee’s office.”

My body went tight and I immediately shook my head.

He stopped stroking my leg and his arm went around me.

“That’s okay, *mamita*. You don’t need to talk about it.”

I relaxed.

Then Pretend Sadie asked, “Can you do me a favor?”

It was his turn for his body to grow tight.

“What?”

I tipped my head back to look at him and his chin dipped so he could lock with mine.

He looked great after we had sex. His eyes still intense, but his expression satisfied. It was his best look ever.

“The Rock Chicks have called a gathering,” I told him. “Do you know what that is?”

He shook his head, but I felt his body relax and his mouth twitched.

“I don’t either, but I’ve been ordered to attend. If Ralphie’s not here, can I call you? Will you take me there? It’s at noon.”

The intensity in his eyes faded and they went soft.



he back “I can do that.”

Pretend Sadie relaxed into him and she smiled.

is hand Real Hector smiled back.

Real Sadie’s heart clenched so hard it hurt.

Then she memorized his smile too.



“YOU AREN’T ALLOWED HERE. GO!” Daisy demanded, pointing at Hector. A minute later, YoYo and I walked into Fortnum’s.

“Daisy!” I snapped.

“What a cute dog!” Roxie cried.

Daisy ignored Roxie (and YoYo) and her glare settled on me. “This is a Rock Chick Gathering. The rules of a Rock Chick Gathering are, you get a girl, a gay, Duke or Tex. No one else is allowed.”

“Why are Duke and Tex allowed?” I asked, bending over to pick up YoYo and cuddle her to my chest.

his eyes This, unfortunately, gave her access to my throat and chin, which she licked exuberantly as her little, chubby body wiggled happily in my arms. My expression

Daisy, still ignoring YoYo, answered, “Who knows? Who cares? That’s what happened. It was organic. But now it’s Rock Chick Law.”

u know Rock Chick Law?

l. They had a phone tree and laws?

invited, Blooming heck!

“Can I get a coffee?” Hector asked in an amused voice.

The arm he had slung around my shoulders curled and he pulled

YoYo mostly into the front of his body (this gave YoYo the added to Hector's throat, something to which Hector seemed totally oblivious. Hector looked up at him and his face was blank, but his eyes were dancing. Daisy found Daisy hilarious but dared not laugh out loud.

"Can I play with your dog?" Roxie called, and my gaze slid to her smile before Daisy started speaking again.

"Coffee and leave," Daisy clipped at Hector then she turned to the couches where all of the Rock Chicks, plus Mace (who was sitting on the couch by Stella, her back turned to him and resting against his arm) were lounging.

"You too," Daisy ordered Mace. "Vamoose."

Mace's eyebrows went up, but other than that he didn't move a muscle. "I'm not kidding, Mace. These talks get deep. There's usually a lot of descriptions of Hot Bunch on Rock Chick sexual activity. Do you know how you compare to Hector? I don't *think* so," Daisy went on.

My eyes got huge. Not only because of what she said, but because she had an audience. And that audience not only included Indy, Ally, Jet, Jules, Ava, Stella and Shirleen, but also a bunch of customers I'd never seen before. It just before *in my life*.

Not to mention, she was telling Mace what to do. I knew Daisy was a little bit crazy and over the top, but I suspected that was taking her life in her hands.

"Fucking hell," Hector muttered over YoYo and my heads, thinking along the same vein.

"You can say that again," I whispered, staring at Daisy.

target of (and YoYo) a little squeeze. He caught my whisper, his eyes scanned my face and his arm g

like he Then Hector decided to intervene.

er for a “You’re not talkin’ to Sadie about our sex life,” he told Daisy.  
My body went tense and Daisy whirled.

to the Then her eyes narrowed.

the arm Oh no.

thigh), That might not have been the right thing to do.

YoYo yapped at Daisy or Hector, I didn’t know which she was w  
so much. She could be yapping at a random customer, how would I kn

scale. “Hector—” I started, trying to control YoYo and the fl  
detailed conversation.

wanna “I don’t care if you are a badass mother ex-DEA Agent hot guy;’  
snapped, interrupting my attempt to smooth over the situation. “Yo  
use she control the Rock Chick Gathering. The Gathering goes where it goes. ’  
Roxie, follow.”

er seen “Sadie’s had a rough few weeks,” Hector reminded Daisy.

“You think I don’t know that?” Daisy shot back.

7 was a “Whatever the fuck this is, you aren’t gonna fuck with her head. Sl  
e in herenough fucking with her head,” Hector warned.

Daisy’s eyes bugged out and her brows went to her hairline.

clearly “We’re not gonna *fuck with her head!*” Daisy screeched.

“Can we *not* say ‘fuck’ so loud in front of the customers?” Indy t  
a request.

ave me Jet and Ava looked at each other and let out small giggles.

“I get back and she’s shut down, I’m not gonna be fuckin’ happy,” clipped out, ignoring Indy’s request to avoid the F-bomb.

“The point of the Gathering, Hector, is not to shut her down but *her out*,” Daisy threw back.

It was time to step in before the Battle of the Badass and Souther escalated any further. I put YoYo down and she immediately ran to who was bent over, clapping and making kissy noises.

“I don’t think I need to be sorted out,” I put in.

giggling  
ow?  
low of

Daisy’s Mother-Hen-on-a-Rampage eyes focused on me, and snapped, “Shirleen said there were problems.”

Shirleen, sipping a latte, calm as could be, chimed in from an angle opposite Stella, “Looks to me like it sorted itself out. The girl’s been laid,” Daisy guess, fairly recently. Guessin’ again, good and proper. Next problem!

u can’t  
We just

I closed my eyes.

Someone, please tell me that Shirleen didn’t just announce to the store that I’d been laid “good and proper.”

I opened my eyes again, looked up at Hector and whispered, “Please me Shirleen didn’t just announce to the entire store that we’ve had sex”

ie’s got

Hector bit his bottom lip and again I didn’t know whether he was back a smile or anger.

If it was my choice, it would have been the latter.

“Hate to say it, *mamita*,” he said, eyes scanning the crowd, showing whom were surreptitiously watching us, others settled in and openly enjoying the show, “but it seems she did.”

hrew in

“Are they always like this?”

Hector I could tell now he was fighting back a grin.

“Far’s I can tell, yeah,” he replied.

to sort “Why is my life so *difficult*?” I blurted out before I could think b  
it.

rn Diva I watched as Hector’s eyes went gentle and he replied, “Th  
Roxie, difficult. And Sadie, it isn’t bad. They don’t mean you any harm. Th  
care.”

I knew he was right.

nd she But still.

Everyone in the entire store knew I’d been *laid*.

rmchair His hand went to my neck and slid into my hair, his thumb agai  
aid. My hairline.  
”

“Looks like the Gathering is a bust. You wanna go back or you  
coffee?”

e entire “Coffee,” I answered. “I should get one for Ralphie too.”

ase, tell “I’ll get ’em,” he told me, and his face dipped and his mouth l  
mine.  
.”

s biting Then he was off to the coffee counter, leaving me affected deep  
even by his brush on my lips!) and teetering without his body to suppo

“Sit down before you fall down, child.” Shirleen called.

ome of I decided to do as she suggested before I caused an even bigger  
njoying took a seat in a big, comfortable armchair amongst the crew.

“I cannot *believe* you have a small dog wearing a cute

accessory!” Ally exclaimed. “Chickie, you got it goin’ on.”

“YoYo’s not mine. Buddy, Ralphie and I are watching her for a fr  
told Ally.

etter of “It’s still a cute sweater,” Roxie said, rubbing YoYo’s body all o  
YoYo was loving it, wiggling in Roxie’s lap, showing her belly.

is isn’t “The sweater’s not YoYo’s, exactly. It’s Ralphie’s,” I explained.

ey just All eyes came to me.

“Don’t ask, it’s a long story,” I went on.

All lips formed grins.

“Everything all right?” Jules asked, her eyes on me, her arms hold  
new son Max.

inst my I surprised myself by saying, “No.”

Now why did I say that?

want a I didn’t *share*.

Ever!

“No?” Ally asked quietly.

crushed “I got bad news yesterday,” I shared again.

Yes, shared.

ly (yes,  
rt me. Yes, again!

What was happening to me?

stir and “Your mom,” Indy said softly, and I looked at her. “Lee told me.”

“Eddie told me,” Jet put in.

sweater “Hank told me too,” Roxie added.

“You should know, they told the rest of us,” Ava finished.

I feared I was about to hyperventilate.

friend,” I “You don’t have to talk about it,” Jules said immediately, watching closely for a second. Then her eyes sliced to Ally, but it was Stella that intervened with her super cool, throaty, sexy voice (no kidding, Stella’s voice was

“She doesn’t, Ally, so lay off.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Ally defended herself.

“We should let Sadie control what she wants to share,” Jules replied. I decided I liked Jules, *loads*.

“It just felt like I lost her all over again.”

ling her That was me too!

It just came out.

I could no longer control my own mouth. I was blurting out thoughts willy-nilly!

“That’s understandable,” Ava told me.

“She was trying to protect me,” I went on, still unable to stop myself. They all had their eyes on me.

Normally, I wouldn’t like that.

Normally, it would make me uncomfortable.

Normally, I would call my Ice Princess.

But their faces were open and their eyes were kind. Instead of uncomfortable, it felt like they were open because they wanted me to talk to them so they could take it away. Even though it was bad stuff, *really* bad stuff. But that way, I wouldn’t have to hold it inside anymore.

Now, how bizarre was *that*?

I put my hands in my hair, pulling it away from my head and looking me Mace's boots.

It spoke Then my hands dropped and I whispered, "I can't stop thinking a (places). Thinking that she died scared. I hate it that I'll never see her again, because I always thought..." I stopped, then took a deep breath and started again. "I hate it more that she probably died scared."

ed, and Then all of a sudden, that big, hard, burning thing came back into my chest and it started choking me. I even made a choking sound *out loud*.

"Oh blast! I'm going to fucking cry *again*," I announced, then my tears went over my face and I burst into tears.

Within moments, I felt fingers curl around my wrists and strongly pull me out of my chair. Then I was up against a rock-hard body that in a private second, I thought was Hector's. But it was bigger than Hector's body and the arms that wrapped around me were different.

I looked up and was shocked to see Mace through wet eyes.

elf, and "I'm sorry," I whispered.

His hand went to the top of my head and slid down my hair to my neck. He put pressure there until my cheek was against his chest.

"Don't be." His deep voice sounded over my head and rumbled in my chest.

My arms slid around his waist and I held on to him and he held on to me. I felt and I cried silently against the chest of a man I didn't know at all, except I gave it a name. And I did it in a bookstore full of people. Some I knew. Most I didn't.

illy bad And I didn't care, not even a little bit, because as I cried, I felt that hot ball in my chest start to shrink and fade until, after a while, it was gone.



oked at Then I was shifted, turned and Hector was there. His arm went around my shoulders and he tucked me in his side, curling me to face him. He went to my face, his thumb wiping at the wetness there.

ecause I “You okay?” he murmured.

n, “But “Stop asking me that,” I replied.

He grinned and his fingers formed a fist. His knuckles slid across my cheekbone gently before his hand fell away.

“You’re okay.”

I put my temple to his shoulder then saw a big mug with foamy milk on top thrust into my line of sight.

“Drink that, woman,” Tex ordered, and I looked up at him as I took the mug. “Shee-it. Someone get her a Kleenex, her makeup’s runnin’.”

My hand not holding the mug shot to my face to wipe away mascara.

“Don’t bother. It’s all over the place. You need a mirror,” Tex told me with brutal honesty.

Or I should say, Tex *boomed* at me with brutal honesty, so perhaps one person on the other side of the room who hadn’t witnessed my meanness could be in on the show.

I still wiped. Tex still stared. Hector still kept me tucked tight to his side.

Daisy handed me a Kleenex and then Tex spoke (or boomed) to me, “Don’t know your ma. Figure she was good people, she did what I didn’t.

she did. Do know, she was here, she’d be fuckin’ proud. You been through what you been through and you’re still standin’. Lotsa women would’ve bent, they’d break. But you didn’t do either and you’re still standin’ like you were my daughter, I’d be so fuckin’ proud, I’d shout it from the roof.

und my figure, so would your ma. And you can take *that* to the fuckin' bank."

is hand Then he was gone and I stared in the space where he was for :  
speechless, open-mouthed seconds, letting his words penetrate my brain

And then something else hit my chest. It was that weird, warm,  
glow, but it was so intense, so invasive, so overwhelming that it m  
oss my painful, burning, hot ball that had been there before seem puny.

Then I burst into fresh tears, these loud and wailing.

Smooth Move Hector divested me of my coffee cup, handed it  
milk on waiting Daisy and pulled me into his arms.

I shoved my face into his chest, wrapped my arms around his wa  
ook the bawled like a baby.

And I didn't care who saw that either.

ra. Finally, I said into his chest between sobs, "After this, if I cry  
ould me shoot me."

"No fuckin' way," was Hector's (unhelpful, in my personal o  
aps the response.

ltdown I looked up at him. "Seriously, Hector, shoot me! My mascara's  
It's going to take me hours to unpuff my eyes enough to put mak  
s side. again!"

again, Through my watery, mascara-clogged eyes, I watched his brow  
dy says together. "You want me to shoot you because your mascara's ruined?"

hrough "Yes!" I cried.

r't only He burst out laughing.

r'. You "I'm not being funny!" I wailed, smacking him on the shoulder.

ftops. I Hector's head descended and he gave me a light kiss on my qu

lips.

several, His mouth moved away half an inch and he said, “*Mi cielo*,  
in. hilarious.”

, happy “Holy crap, we need a party,” Ally announced behind my back b  
ade thecould retort.

I turned in Hector’s arms.

“You’re partying at my gig tonight. Bring Sadie,” Stella put in.

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“I’ll get Nick to babysit,” Jules threw in.

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livering

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Hector stopped laughing and murmured, “Fucking hell.”

I looked up at him, not crying anymore, and whispered (with a small tremor in my voice), “I think I’m in trouble.”

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EIGHTEEN



## EIGHTIES ROCK VIDEO BIMBO

### *Sadie*

“Yeah?” Luke’s voice sounded over the security speaker by the entrance to his and Ava’s loft.

“It’s Hector and Sadie,” Hector replied.

My heart clenched at those words.

He said, *Hector and Sadie*.

Hector and Sadie!

Oh my God.

We were Hector...*and*...Sadie!

“Elevator’s on its way,” Luke said through my freakout, clearly seeing anything wrong with a “Hector and Sadie.”

Then a different panic seized me, and without a word I turned and toward the door.

I got three steps when an arm sliced around my waist. Smoothly Hector caught me and turned me into his body.

“Where you goin’?” he asked, his brows drawn, his eyes scanning my face.

“I can’t do this,” I blurted.

Pretend Sadie gone. Ice Princess Sadie enjoying a cocktail imaginary pool. Take Charge Sadie getting a facial. It was just me I couldn’t do this.

No way.

I was no Rock Chick. I’d never been to a rock concert in my life.

My favorite recording artist was Madonna, for goodness sake!

“Why?” Hector asked.

elevator “I like Madonna,” I told him, unable to stop myself.

Hector stared at me like I’d just announced my devotion to Er Humperdinck.

“What?”

“Madonna!” I cried as the elevator doors opened. “Like a Confessions on a Dance Floor? You know, Madonna!”

His face cleared and he started grinning. “I know Madonna.”

“Well then, there you go. I’m not a Rock Chick. I’m a Pop Chick. rly not Chicks aren’t cool. They don’t go to *gigs*. They don’t rock out! The clubs and dance! And I didn’t ever do that either!”

started He ignored my rant, turned us, arm firm around my shoulders, and us toward the elevator.

1 Move I struggled.

With little effort, Hector controlled the struggle and got me ing my elevator.

“Hector!” I snapped. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“You’ll be fine,” he said as he leaned to the side, taking me with him by antagging the button.

and I “I won’t be fine.”

“You will.”

“I won’t!”

The doors closed and Hector curled my solid body into his arms.

He was still grinning.

“I see I gotta loosen you up,” he told me, his eyes dancing, but the warm and intense.

igelbert Oh no.

I knew *that* look.

“Hector—” I started, but he didn’t listen.

Virgin? Instead, he kissed me.

In about a nanosecond, he loosened me up all right. So much, w full-on necking when the elevator doors opened.

ck. Pop “Yowza, get a room!” I heard Ally call.

y go to I pulled free of Hector’s arms, looked into Luke and Ava’s cool loft and felt my face go flush as my eyes bugged out.

guided Everyone was there, including two guys I’d never seen before were margarita glasses scattered amongst bowls of chips and guacamole the bizarre addition of loads of tubes, tubs, brushes, combs, sprays, in the jars, mirrors and hair dryers.

The Rock Chicks were all in various stages of...I didn’t know what makeup was way over the top, their hair teased out to maximum volume

him and they were all dressed like, well, there was no nice way to put it...skank

“We’ve decided to go groupie!” Ava announced happily.

“Not groupie, Eighties Rock Video Bimbo,” Indy corrected her (lil was a difference).

Eighties Rock Video Bimbo?

Were they nuts?

Regardless of this alarming announcement, which would make any of their right mind turn and flee, Hector moved me into the loft and Luke was close to us.

“You got a choice, babe,” Luke said, and my eyes turned to him and I realized he was talking to me. “You can stay here and get skanked or you can go out tonight with Hector and me. We’ll probably get shot at but I’m thinkin’ it’s the better choice.”

My mouth dropped open and my heart started beating harder but I realized he was teasing me.

Still, teasing or not, I turned to Hector and said, “I don’t want you shot at.”

I LoDo Hector was grinning. “I’m not gonna get shot at.”

I was not deterred. “You get in a situation where you even *think* you’re going to get shot at, you exit said situation, pronto,” I demanded.

le with “Oowee, listen to Little Miss Bossy,” Shirleen called.

bottles, I cut my eyes to Shirleen and she laughed at the ice rays I sent down in her direction.

t. Their Yes, *laughed!*

me and Whatever.



cs. I had bigger fish to fry.

I looked back at Hector. "Promise me."

ce there "Sadie—"

"Promise!" I snapped.

"Shit, you're cute," Hector said rather than promising.

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm *not* cute and I'm *not* being funny  
yone inpromise."

uke got He curled me to his front and his mouth touched mine.

When he lifted his mouth from mine, he murmured, "Promise."

when I "Well," I breathed. "Thank you."

you can He smiled.

out I'm I stared.

efore I "I remember those happy days when it was all soft kisses and pro  
Ava said.

u to get I turned out of Hector's arms and caught Luke giving Ava a brows  
look that made his own unique promise and his look was nearly as ho  
ones Hector gave me. My eyes moved to Ava and I saw her face ha  
soft, but her teeth were biting her lip and I knew she knew she was in t

you're But the good kind.

"All right, enough of this. Hot Boys, out. Rock Chicks, T-minu  
minutes to Stella and The Gypsies. We got *work* to do," one of the  
rting in didn't know said, and I recognized his voice.

It was Tod. And out of Burgundy Rose drag he was tall, slim and  
crew cut.

“Hi, Tod,” I called.

I pulled away from Hector and walked a few steps into the loft.

“Hi, girlie.” Tod smiled. “This is my other half, Stevie.” He gestured to the handsome Hispanic man who was mixing a pitcher of margarita, smiling at me. “Stevie, this is Sadie.”

. Now, “Hey, Sadie. Welcome to the madhouse,” Stevie said, and I couldn’t help but smile. He was so right, I smiled at him and gave him a wave.

“Babe, we’re goin’,” Luke told Ava, and without hesitation she melted into his arms.

I watched as he took her in his arms and put his lips to hers, but he didn’t kiss her. I couldn’t hear, but he whispered something to her, his body moving against hers, and whatever he said made her smile and melt into him.

I felt jealousy, pure and acid burning through me before Hector spoke. “You’re missin’ my line of sight.”

“You come to me when you’re done,” Hector ordered as his hand raised the side of my neck and up, fingers sliding into my hair.

As the jealousy still burned but my stomach pitched and rolled, I looked up at him, the same.

trouble. “Okay.”

“I don’t know how long this thing will take Luke and me, but I probably won’t make it tonight. Lee, Eddie and Hank are designated drivers. I’m goin’ to the gig. Tex and Duke both said they were goin’ too. If Ma’s workin’, he’s always at Stella’s gigs and tonight is one of those nights he’d had a stay close to one of them, close enough to touch ’em. All night. Got me.”

I nodded.

His face dipped to mine and he murmured, voice so soft, I barely heard him, “Now, kiss me good-bye.”

I blinked.

The jealous acid drifted away and the stomach pitch turned to melt.

“What?” I whispered.

“Kiss me,” he repeated.

Regardless of my melted belly, the Ice Princess had finished her coffee and decided to take over. “I think we’ve already made enough of a splash didn’t of ourselves.”

His eyes went warm and intense. “All right, *mamita*. I’ll kiss you.”

Then he did, hot and hungry and just as quickly as it started, his lips cut off broke from mine and he was gone.

I stared, my body swaying without his close as the elevator doors went on him and Luke. Hector stared at me too, his face soft and knowing the doors shut him from sight.

“All righty then,” Ava called. “Sadie, get over here. We’ve got work to do.”

Slowly, I turned and everyone was smiling at me.

Oh my.

They’re



“I WANNA BE YOU!” I shouted, drunk on margaritas mixed with Fat Tits. You Stella and her band stood in a Rock Chick huddle during one of her breaks?”

Her eyes turned to me. “Funny, until you came in tonight, I looked like a groupie slut, I wanted to be you. I love the way you dress.” Her eyes

y heard full body sweep and she gave me a meaningful, but smiley look.

I knew what she was talking about.

Seconds after Hector and Luke left, Daisy informed me that she, a belly Tod and Stevie had gone shopping. Since I was shorter and smaller than the rest of the girls, I couldn't share clothes. So they'd bought me my I Rock Video Bimbo outfit. It came complete with a torn up black T-Shirt "Stella and The Blue Moon Gypsies" across the breasts (so torn, falling off one of my shoulders, exposing my thin black bra strap and cocktail "Os" in "moon" were blue moons), a shorter-than-short (or even spectacle denim miniskirt with a ragged hem, a wide black belt with a heavy buckle with a rose stamped on it (they'd heard about Hector's tattoo course) and a pair of black motorcycle boots.

mouth Yes, *motorcycle boots*.

Yes, Seth Townsend's perfect Ice Princess daughter was tramping closed Denver in *motorcycle boots*.

3. Then Replete with square toes and silver hoops connecting straps that v from the soles and around the ankle.

work to The boots were *aces*.

My hair was teased out to uber volume, all waves and ringlets go out and down, and my makeup was so beyond heavy, I felt it on my face it weighed a ton.

And I didn't care.

Fires as I didn't care that I looked like a bimbo groupie from hell.

peaks. Because *I loved rock 'n' roll!*

king all "I love rock 'n' roll!" I shouted at Stella.  
as did a

“Join the club, sister,” Ally shouted to me, laughing.

“Good Lord,” Shirleen muttered, and Daisy giggled.

Roxie, “Will you teach me to play guitar?” I asked Stella, knowing  
han the pushing it.

Eighties She was a big star. Well, in Denver anyway, if the crowd was any  
irt with go by. And she had a recording contract. They were going on the road  
it was promote their new album.

the two “Sure,” Stella replied on a smile.

decent) “I’ll pay,” I promised.

y, oval Her smile got bigger. “Friends and family discount,” she said then  
itoo, of in and whispered, “which means free.”

“Cut your teeth on Guitar Hero, it’s the only way to go,” Annette, v  
around met when the Rock Chicks came to my gallery weeks ago and who also  
head shop across the street from Fortnum’s, advised.

vent up “Guitar Hero!” Buzz, Stella’s bass guitarist snapped, soundin  
looking) affronted. “Fuck Guitar Hero!”

“Guitar Hero’s the shit,” Annette shot back.

ing up, “Guitar Hero’s for pussies,” Buzz returned then looked at me  
ace like smile. “I’ll teach you guitar,” he offered.

“I’ll teach you drums. Drums are where it’s *at*.” Pong, Stella’s dr  
moved in.

“Fuck the drums, I’ll teach you the sax. You blow a horn, you  
cool.” Hugo, Stella’s saxophonist, got close.

“Yay!” I shouted and clapped, too excited to turn any of them dow

An arm went around my waist and I found my body moved back

feet from the band. I looked up and saw Eddie had hold of me.

“Maybe you can decide to learn to be a rock star when you  
I was shitfaced,” Eddie suggested, eyes on the band.

“Okay,” I agreed readily, even though I’d already decided I was g  
thing to be a rock star.

soon to Forget Veronica Mars.

I wanted rock ‘n’ roll!

Eddie’s eyes moved to me. He looked at me a second and I s  
smile, dimple and everything.

I leaned “I like your dimple,” I told him.

His eyes flashed then they got all glittery (which was hot), and j  
who I’d his brother, his body started shaking with laughter.

so ran a Finally, his eyes moved to Jet.

“You wanna take over here?” he asked her.

ig (and Jet looked at Eddie then her gaze moved to Daisy, then Ava, then t

“Let’s go to the restroom,” she announced and didn’t wait for me t

She just took my hand and dragged me to the restroom.

with a When we got into the restroom, no one used the facilities. Just l  
girls on *Sex and the City*, they all turned to the mirrors and started fixi  
ummer, lip gloss.

I’d always wanted to go to the restroom with my girlfriends and  
I know lip gloss.

And here I was, *doing it!*

n. Wasn’t that *great?*

several

“I love Eddie. He’s my favorite of Hector’s siblings,” I informed them, and they weren’t magnanimously, turning to a mirror and digging my lip gloss out of my pocket (Indy had taught me how to go purse-less at a rock gig: lip gloss in back pocket, money and credit card in front pocket, cell phone in back).

“I’ll let him know.” Jet smiled at me.

“You have a beautiful smile,” I told her. “You’re really pretty. But when you smile, I swear to *God*, you’re so beautiful, you make my heart squawking.”

I saw Jet blink like this surprised her (and how bizarre was *that?* I mean, how did she know she had a beautiful smile, if she didn’t she was *blind*) but I was just happy to be putting on lip gloss in the restroom with my girlfriends and not drawing too much notice.

“Eddie likes you too,” Ava told me, and I saw through the mirror that she and Jet were on Jet.

“Aces!” I cried, excited that Eddie liked me.

Heck, excited that *anyone* would like me.

Daisy giggled her Christmas bells giggle.

Jet got closer to me. “He’s a little worried about you, though.”

I finished with my lip gloss and looked at her as I shoved it back into my pocket (this was hard, my skirt was *tight*).

“Worried?”

“Yeah,” she replied, and I realized with some surprise that she was serious.

“Why on earth is he worried?” I asked, forgetting, for one moment, that my life was one devastating trauma after the other.

“He doesn’t know, can’t put his finger on it,” Jet explained. “He talks about it a lot.”

ned Jet me about it and he wanted us to make sure you're okay."

of my Daisy and Ava got closer and I looked at them. They all looked  
oss, ID, now and my happy buzz slipped a notch.

"You know, sugar, I been through what you been through," Dai  
me.

it when My confused eyes moved to her.

eeze." "You have?"

she had She got closer. "Was workin' at Smithie's, it's a strip joint. Marci  
was too owned it back then. I didn't know him, but I saw him come in every on  
to take while. After a show, one of the customers raped me behind Smith  
wasn't as bad as what you went through but it was bad."

ier eyes At this announcement, I felt my face pale as my happy buzz vapori

Daisy went on, "Smithie and Marcus found out and they flipped. I  
doubled up on bouncers and made it policy that all the girls were esc  
their cars after we closed. And Marcus, well...that's when Marcus  
got together, kind of. It wasn't like he asked me out, but every day  
happened he sent me bouquets of daisies. Every day. For weeks. U  
house was so filled with pretty flowers that it was hard to keep my n  
c in my ugly thoughts."

I stared at her, my heart hurting for her.

s being Then I whispered, "I *knew* I liked Marcus."

She smiled at me, reached out, caught my hand and held it tight.

shining "When he decided the time was right, he came at me. It was tough  
and I made it tough on him, but he never gave up. He kept comin' unti

lked to in. And I'm glad he did."



“You have to know,” Ava put in before I could process what Daisy said. “That what it is with these guys is different than what it is with other guys. It’s different than what it is with the kind of guy who would hurt you like that man did to you or how other men can tear you down. They can’t be strong because they *are* strong, not because they’re jerks or anything.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “Okay.”

“Hector’s a good guy,” Jet told me, and I looked at her.

It hit my drunken brain what they were saying and I felt my shield drop automatically.

“I know,” I replied.

“You have to let him in.” Daisy squeezed my hand.

Oh no.

Just.

No.

They didn’t get it. They probably couldn’t.

They weren’t me.

There were two sides to this coin.

The one side was me and the fact that Hector was likely too good for me. The other side was life as I knew it, that I couldn’t trust anyone and that nothing worked out for me. It couldn’t. I was who I was, and I did whatever Hector had in store for me, using me then leaving me behind.

Maybe a girl who’d had friends, whose mother hadn’t been murdered while protecting her, whose father hadn’t kept her imprisoned in a big mansion her whole life, a girl who hadn’t been brutally raped, could understand.

sy said. But that girl wasn't me.

r guys. I couldn't tell them *any* of that.

l, either I wanted to.

ome on But I couldn't.

Because they wouldn't get it.

"We're okay," Pretend Sadie promised on a smile.

s go up They all stared at me.

"No, really," I said.

"You're holdin' somethin' back," Daisy accused.

"No, I'm not," I lied.

I was drunk but not drunk enough to share. I'd done enough s  
Sharing was only going to get me in deeper and I was deep enough as :

Ava looked at Daisy then at me. "You'll want to run, to keep y  
safe. I know the feeling, we all do. Listen to the voices of experier  
move beyond this faster than we did. It's worth it, I promise." I nodc  
she got closer. "Seriously, Sadie, it's worth it. I promise," she repeated

I knew she knew that, the way Luke held her that night. And I w  
for me. she had that. She was sweet.

nd that But that was never going to happen for me.

eserved I wanted it more than anything in the world, to know Hector was

his arms around *me*. But he wasn't. There was no "me." He was either

urdered his arms around "His Sadie," a creature that didn't exist, or hi  
eautiful conquest.

d trust, Simple as that.

These were good women. They'd never been taught that lesson.

And I hoped they never learned.

I pulled in my lips and pretended to think about it.

Then I nodded.

"I don't—" Daisy started, staring at me closely.

"Let her alone," Jet cut her off.

"But—" Daisy went on.

"Give her time to think," Jet interrupted again and looked at me  
need to talk, anytime, day, night, whenever, you call one of us. We'll  
Sadie. Always."

sharing. I pulled my lips in and didn't have to pretend or force the tears that  
it was. shining in my eyes at what she said. I was wishing this could be real  
be my life, but I knew it couldn't.

yourself Unable to speak, I just nodded again.

ice and "We're done here," Jet told Ava and Daisy.

led, but "We're not done," Daisy pushed.

l. "We're done," Ava announced firmly.

Daisy dropped my hand but only to cross her arms on her chest.

"I'll be watchin' you," she warned.

putting I decided to set this firmly aside and go back to enjoying the  
putting portion of the night.

s latest "Okay," I told her like I could care less.

Jet smiled at Ava.

Daisy narrowed her eyes at me.

We heard Stella's voice and I knew the band was going to start again.  
"Rock 'n' roll!" I shouted, whirled and used that as my excuse for  
I threw open the door, flew out of the restroom, got two steps into  
and slammed into something solid.

Hands came to my upper arms. I looked up and all my breath left  
rush.

"Jerry?" I whispered, not believing my eyes or my fucking terrible

re here, I mean, seriously!  
Why me?

Out of the frying pan and into the fire!

at were I looked again, but my eyes did not deceive me.

l, could It *was* Jerry, one of the henchmen in my father's gentleman arm  
blond-haired, blue-eyed, good-looking, and normally, mostly silent  
disappeared the minute the DEA moved in and I hadn't seen him since

"Sadie," Jerry replied.

"Who're you?" Ava asked from beside me.

"Stand back. Now." Daisy didn't care who he was, and at her words  
the girls got close to me.

Jerry ignored Daisy. "Your father's got a message for you."

lrunken My eyes went wide.

Then my back went straight and my chin went out.

All right.

I'd had *enough*.

This was *not* happening.

in. I'd had a tough day. A tough week! A tough fucking life!

escape. I was going to take no more.

the hall "Is that so? Well I have a message for him too," I snapped back.

Jerry's hands went tight on my arms. So tight, they hurt.

me in a "Quiet and listen to me."

"Last warning, stand back." Daisy got in closer.

luck. I ignored her and leaned in. "No, you listen to me. No message, nothing. My father doesn't exist anymore. You tell him that." Then, for my own measure, I used one of Hector's badass lines, "Got me?"

Jerry ignored my fairy princess/bimbo groupie badass and responded. "Sadie, I'm warnin' you, Seth is losin' patience with you."

y. Tall, Ice Princess gave him a Chill Factor Sub-Zero Glare. "Do I look like I care?"

. He leaned in and we were nose-to-nose right before he said threateningly. "Girl, you better care."

"Take your hands off her," I heard Eddie say from behind Jerry.

ords all I looked around to see him standing there, feet planted wide, arms spread at his sides and looking unhappy.

Jerry let me go and turned to Eddie. Then he gave an amused hoot.

"Detective Chavez," Jerry said in an ugly voice. "Now I'm confident I thought it was your brother who was tappin' her ass."

I gasped.

"Uh-oh," Ava said from beside me as Eddie's body went visibly tense.

Jet, Daisy, Ava and I huddled as Eddie warned Jerry, "You get your hands off her."

second to disappear.”

“Yeah?” Jerry taunted, pretending to look around. “You sure you try to get a piece of me? I don’t see Nightingale at your back.”

“Eddie, let’s just go,” Jet put in.

“Move away,” Eddie told Jet, not taking his eyes from Jerry.

“Eddie—” Jet kept trying.

ges, no “Jet,” Eddie clipped, and that was all he had to say.

or good Jet shuffled us all back. We moved as one in our Rock Chick huc  
of our eyes locked on Eddie and Jerry.

turned, “Fuck, you think you can get a piece of me.” Jerry sounded amused

Eddie didn’t say a word. He didn’t move. His eyes didn’t leave Jer

k like I “This is gonna be fun,” Jerry went on and Eddie still didn’t reply, I  
Jerry to ask, “You gonna stare at me all night?”

ningly, Eddie still didn’t move.

But he did speak.

“No, I’m gonna ask you what Townsend would think if he knew yo  
is loose meetin’ with Donny Balducci.”

*What?*

Jerry and Donny?

fused. I No way.

Jerry’s eyes narrowed. “You been watchin’ me, spic?”

I gasped again, this time angrily.

ut. “Oh Lord,” Ava muttered.

got one “What did he just say?” Jet asked, her voice trembling.

“Stand down, Jet, I think Eddie’s got this covered,” Daisy told Jet, wanna the huddle back another few steps.

Eddie had gone silent again, but the air had changed. It became heavy, very, very scary.

Jerry waited for a reaction to his racial slur, and when none forthcoming, he (stupidly, if you asked me) decided to create one.

His arm reached out. He planted his hand in Eddie’s chest and I suddenly, all give a shove.

I stared and my mouth dropped open.

I was certain he’d given a shove, but Eddie’s body didn’t move.

No kidding, it didn’t move an inch.

Solid as a rock.

I watched surprise slide across Jerry’s face, surprise I was pretty sure was mingled with a hint of fear as Eddie encouraged in a low, m voice, “Keep goin’.”

“Fuck you!” Jerry clipped and immediately threw a punch.

Quick as a flash, Eddie ducked but came up. Body cocked to the side swinging, he landed a fist in Jerry’s stomach and I heard Jerry’s awful

“Oh for goodness sake, we’re missin’ Stella,” Daisy grumble Eddie’s fight with one of my father’s henchmen was akin to an air traffic delay on the way to a movie and I looked at her, mouth still open was digging in her purse (not all Rock Chicks went purse-less) and she out with a stun gun.

Oh boy.

This was getting worse by the second!

pulling Jerry threw another punch. Eddie's chin jerked back, and again missed his target. But Eddie moved swiftly and landed another bloody and time to Jerry's kidneys, and this time Jerry's grunt was filled with pain.

"Give me that stun gun! I want to stun that jackass!" Jet cried, his hand was going out to wrap around Daisy's wrist and the now crackling stun gun.

That was when Jet and Daisy started to scuffle, both trying to get away from him of the stun gun.

And there it was.

The night got even worse!

My eyes swung from Jet and Daisy to Jerry and Eddie as Jerry and Eddie, advancing quickly. Eddie was retreating but he was weaving casually (not joking, casually!) while Jerry tried some one-two combination but none of them connected.

We had an audience now. People were amassing in the hall to watch. No one seemed to want to get involved. That was, no one except a big man who was shoving his way through from the back.

"What the fuck?" Tex asked when he made it to the front, right as Eddie stopped retreating and weaving and landed another savage body blow, causing another grunt of pain from Jerry. "That's it, Chavez, fuck him!" Tex boomed his approval.

What he did not do, I noticed immediately, was intervene. Then he shook his head and gave out a wild catcall.

Really!

These people were *nuts*!

"This is *just great*," I snapped to no one as Daisy and Jet were gr



1, Jerry for the stun gun next to me, Ava was trying to stay out of their way  
w, this and Jerry kept at it and Tex settled in for the show. “Can’t I have one  
free night?” I went on complaining (again, to no one).

er hand At that moment, I had a stroke of luck and Daisy dropped the stun

1. Without thinking and fed up, I bent down, picked up the gun, and  
control Princess in total control, just like I’d done it dozens of times before, I  
right up to Jerry, reached up and touched the hissing prongs to his shoulder.

Hector told me a second would give an incapacitating jolt, three  
bring him down.

went at He wasn’t wrong.

almost After the third second, Jerry was at my feet. But I was bent over  
ations, kept the stun gun on him even as his body jerked around on the floor with  
bolts I was zapping into him.

tch, but Around about the seventh second, Eddie pulled me away.

g blond “I think that’ll do it, *chica*,” Eddie said in my ear, his arm around  
waist, my back against his front.

it when I looked up at him, nodded, then looked down at Jerry.

y blow, “Tell your lord and master to fuck off,” I said to the blinking  
m up!” otherwise unmoving Jerry. “I mean it. I’m done with him, done with  
done with that life. You can tell Donny when you see him next to father  
e threw too. Get this straight, Jerry, tell them both to...*fuck...off*.”

Jerry just kept blinking at me and I decided to take that as his agreement  
to deliver my message.

I took a deep breath and shoved Jerry and my father mentally aside (applying  
the time being). I turned in Eddie’s arm. It went loose and I smiled up

; Eddie deciding to mix New Nice Sadie with Pretend Happy Sadie and get a  
traumathe *good* part of the night.

“Thanks for fighting for me,” I said breezily. “You want me to buy  
gun. beer?”

and Ice Eddie stared at me blank faced for a second then his eyes went wide  
walkedthe dimple came out.

ilder. What he didn’t do was answer.

ould “Okay then,” I decided for him in order to move past this latest  
(which I had again somehow survived, and luckily so had everyone

“Beer for you,” I told Eddie and went on. “Shots for the girls. Come  
r and I yelled, turned, stepped over the prone Jerry and started to head to the bar

with the Then I stopped, turned back around and leaned down to Jerry again

“One more thing. I know I zapped a bunch of your brain cells ju  
but the word you were looking for has *three* syllables.” I lifted r  
and myshoved it close to Jerry’s face, my fingers flicked out and I counted th  
as I spoke, “His...pan...ic, you moron.”

Then I straightened and saw Jet, Ava and Daisy grinning at me  
ing butwhirled on a flounce and stomped away on my new motorcycle boots.

th you, I was shoving through the people (not really getting very far) wh  
uck offparted like I was Moses and they were the Red Sea. Tex’s hand came  
top of my head.

reement “I’ll take a beer too,” Tex said to me, his hand leaving my head,  
didn’t leave my side.

ide (for “I’ll buy you a beer. Heck, I’m rich. In fact, I’m totally loaded.  
at him, *everyone* in the club a fucking beer,” I answered.

on with      Tex boomed out a laugh.

“She’s not buyin’ the house a round,” Eddie said, materializing c  
y you any other side and making me jump. I hadn’t even felt his approach.

“She’s rich, what’s there to do with money but buy a round?” Te  
irm and good-naturedly.

“She’s not fuckin’ buyin’ the house a round,” Eddie returned sharp

“All right, badass, stand down. Shee-it,” Tex gave in.

t fiasco      I would not be denied some form of generous gesture, howeve  
e else). buying you both a beer,” I told Eddie, stopping at the bar.

on!” I      “I’m drivin’, no beer,” Eddie looked down at me.

ar.      Blooming heck, but being nice was not easy.

l.      “Well then, I’m buying Tex a beer and the girls shots,” I returned.

st now,      Eddie grinned. “*That* you can do.”

ny fist,      I gave him the Ice Princess Icicle Ray of Death Glare.

rem off      “Well, thank you,” I said coldly.

e, but I      His arm came around my shoulders, he tucked me into his side  
kissed the side of my head.

en they      *Unbelievable.*

e to the      Was the Ice Princess, like, *invisible* to these people?

“Yo!” Eddie called.

but he      The bartender trotted up and Eddie gave my shoulder an affec  
squeeze as indication I should give my order.

I’ll buy      Apparently, she was.

Oh well, so be it.

I decided to skip the fancy stuff and ordered straight tequila shots.

close to     What the heck.

Right?

x asked



ly.     “I CAN WALK TO THE DOOR,” I told Lee as he walked beside me  
Hector’s front door.

Lee looked down at me and smiled. “I know.”

r. “I’m     I weaved a little bit.

Seriously, he had a *great* smile.

And at that moment, I decided that he should be made aware of this.

“You know,” I informed him (yes, I was drunk, or more drunk, or  
*uber* drunk), “I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this but you have  
handsome smile.”

He slung an arm around my shoulders (what *was* it with these guys  
the arms around the shoulders? not that I was complaining, it was not  
still, how touchy could you be?).

and he

“It’s been mentioned,” he replied, his head coming up to look at the  
and his chin gave a jerk.

My eyes followed his and I saw Hector standing inside his open  
door. He was dressed—jeans, boots, white T-shirt under a buttoned  
untucked flannel. The flannel was bunched up around the gun that was  
on a belt at the side of his hip.

I decided at that moment that Hector looked good wearing a gun.

Then again, Hector always looked good.

“Hi,” I called and waved to Hector as Lee and I walked up the front

Hector just stared at me. Then his eyes cut to Lee.

It was then I realized Lee's arm was still around me.

I looked up at Lee when we stopped in front of Hector and informed helpfully, "You might want to take your arm away. Blanca tells me she doesn't like men touching me."

"Blanca told you that?" Lee asked, his smile (and arm) still in place.

"Yes. She's known Hector, like, his *whole* life, so I think she's in a position to know."

Lee nodded, his smile somehow bigger like he was trying not to laugh.

Then his eyes moved to Hector and he said, "I tried to stop it."

Hector looked at Lee, then looked at me and he muttered, "Oh fuck."

"It was Ally's idea," Lee told Hector.

"What was Ally's idea?" Hector asked Lee.

"It was *not* Ally's idea!" I cried.

"It wasn't!" super-power-eared Ally yelled from the open back window of Lee's Explorer. "It was Sadie's idea. I just was offering moral support."

"Shut up, Ally!" Indy shouted out the open passenger side window.

"I will not shut up! I'm not taking the fall for this one!" Ally screamed from the back.

I turned to the car, dislodging Lee's arm. I lifted both my hands and pressed down.

"No one's going to take a fall. Everyone calm down. It's all okay. *rock 'n' roll!*" I screamed.

It steps.

“*Righteous!*” Ally screamed back.

“*Rock on, sister!*” Indy screamed too.

ied him “It’s rock ’n’ roll?” Lee asked, sounding as amused as he looked.

Hector “You all wanna quit screamin’ at three o’clock in the mornin’ fuckin’ neighborhood?” Hector suggested.

mly in Mm, well maybe we were being an *eensy* bit loud.

“Time for beddie by,” I announced (sounding like Ralphie). I go  
s in the tiptoe, kissed Lee’s cheek (like Ralphie and Buddy would do to me),  
and gave Indy and Ally a double devil’s horns (like Ava taught m  
ugh. shouted, “Rock on!”

They shouted back in unison, “Rock on!”

.” “Christ,” Hector muttered, but I ignored him, walked into the ho  
headed toward the stairs.

I was in his bedroom. I’d turned on the light by the bed and was sit  
its side when he arrived.

indow “What did Lee try to stop?” Hector asked when he hit the room.

ort.” I leaned over, yanked off a boot then held it up to him.

.” “Look at this boot!” I cried, “Isn’t it *aces*? Daisy and the gang bo  
shouted for me. They bought me my whole outfit!” Then I threw the boot  
thinking it was so cool, he might want to get a closer look.

ids and He caught it, stared at it for less than a second then tossed it tow  
pile that had somehow sprung up in the short time since Blanca’s  
effort.

ay. *It’s* “Hey!” I snapped. “Don’t throw my new boot. It’ll get scuffed.”

Hector advanced, saying, “It’s a motorcycle boot. It’s suppose

scuffed.”

Oh.

I didn't know that.

in my Boy, I had a lot to learn about being a Rock Chick.

I was going to have to start taking notes!

I leaned over and pulled off the other one while he stopped in front  
t up on Then I hesitated.

turned Oh, what the heck.

e), and I threw it in the pile and took off my socks.

“Can I ask you to do somethin’ for me?” Hector asked.

I looked up and saw he had his hands on his hips and was toweri  
use and me. I couldn't read his expression, mainly because it was unreadable.

I decided I didn't like him towering over me. I also decided I did  
ting on so many clothes on him. He looked *far* better naked.

So I stood up and started to unbutton his shirt.

“What?” I said to his shirt, concentrating on my task.

“Burn that fuckin’ skirt.”

ought it My hands stilled and my head snapped back.  
at him,

“Excuse me?”

ard the “That skirt. Burn it.”

tidying I was confused. I liked my skirt.

No, I *loved* it.

“Why?” I asked.

d to be His hands came to my shirt and he pulled it up. My arms went wit

he whipped it off.

“*Mamita*, just don’t wear it again.”

I decided to give in and not wear it in front of him, but not burn it. I would wear it on Crete and he’d never know.

“Oh, all right,” I agreed, but I didn’t sound happy about it (because I wasn’t).

His hands came to my hips and mine went back to his shirt.

“Now, what did Lee try to stop?” He went back to his earlier subject.

I’d kind of lost track of things so my mind rewound the evening, remembered Eddie’s fight with Jerry, which Lee didn’t even see, and I was confused.

“Me stun gunning Jerry, my father’s henchman?” I guessed as I finished with the buttons, lifted my hands and pulled the shirt off his shoulders.

His hands left my hips when I leaned into him and tugged the shirt down his arms. Then I whipped it around, shrugged it on and started to button the two buttons at my breasts while his hands came back to me. This time he buttoned the front button and zip on my skirt.

“Nope, Eddie called, told me about Jerry. Lee knows I know about what else happened tonight, after the fight?”

I pulled in my lips and tried to think as Hector slid down the zip of my skirt (and thinking was not easy to do). I decided to help him and lifted the hem of the flannel to get it out of his way. He slid the skirt over my hips and pushed down. It fell to my ankles, but Hector’s hands, and body, froze.

Then he moved. One hand went low on my right hip. The other went to the side of my belly by my hip and he framed the bandage that was on my hip.



hip bone with his hands.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, then his eyes cut to me.

I could “Oh yeah!” I yelled, even though he was right there, barely a foot away.  
“I got a tattoo.”

cause I Hector’s brows went up and I smiled at him.

“That must be what Lee was talking about,” I informed him. “He thought it was a good idea. Neither did Eddie. Or Hank, for that matter. Hank thinks I’m a nut. Duke and Mace liked it, though, and the girls thought it was perfect. So do I. Look!”

I bent over and peeled the bandage away, exposing the brand-new tattoo on my hip and my skin glistening with tattoo goo.

It was a black panther, fierce, graceful and snarling.

*I loved it.*

“It’s a black panther,” I informed Hector unnecessarily as his hand was still framing it. His body was leaned slightly to the side, his head cocked back, and his eyes were locked on my hip. “I thought my idea was lame at first, but I couldn’t think of anything else that represented you.”

I noticed his head jerk and his eyes slice to me, but I didn’t process it until I kept talking.

“Then I told the artist guy about you, that you had black hair and eyes that could go really intense and you were a badass and I liked that you moved, graceful and in control, like a cat. He sketched that and showed it to all the girls, even Shirleen, thought it was *perfect*. So, I said—”

I stopped talking because Hector’s hands moved away from my hips and they closed around my waist, tight. So tight, his fingers were digging into my

that got my attention.

He'd straightened and those black eyes I told the tattoo artist about away, intense. Beyond intense. They were burning right into me.

"How fucked up are you?" he asked.

I thought this was a strange question, so my head tilted to the side and I didn't ask back, "What?"

er. Tex He let me go, but only so he could pull off his T-shirt and he did that

t it was At the sight of his chest, my breath left me in a *whoosh*.

"How fucked up are you?" he repeated. He unclipped his gun from his belt and threw it on the nightstand, all the while looking at me.

fucked up. Shitfaced. Trashed. Loaded. *Drunk*. How fucked up are you

I was still confused, watching him, feeling his heat, his intense something hungry about him. Seriously hungry. Therefore I was watching him, confused, yet getting turned on at the same time.

ked and Way turned on.

t. But I He leaned down and pulled off his boots, sending them, in turn, across the room.

it. Then his hands came back to me, his thumbs went into my underarms, hooking into the sides. He shoved them down until they fell to my ankles.

d black Oh my *God*.

he way Did he just do that?

me and "Sadie, answer me."

hip and "Um, on a scale of one to ten?" I asked, unsure how to answer. I didn't know what to do. Not even sure I still remembered how to breathe.

; in and

He lifted me up. I let out a surprised gasp and my arms and legs w  
ut were around him.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

“You put my mark on you. To show my appreciation, I’m gonna fu  
le and I until you scream my name and I wanna make sure you remember it  
how fuckin’ drunk are you?”

is fast. My heart was beating wildly, my belly had melted to oblivion an  
pretty certain sure I’d had a mini-orgasm.

rom his What I wasn’t was drunk.

“Sadie, Not anymore.

i?” “I’m not drunk anymore.”

ity and “Good.” He put a knee to the bed but didn’t put me down. “Now, r  
atching where the tat is, I can’t be on top so you got two choices. Either you  
or I get creative. Your choice, but choose now.”

I swallowed.

sailing “Hector—” I started.

He cut me off, “Now.”

erwear, Oh my.

les. He meant business.

And I liked his business.

So, I whispered, “Creative.”

He grinned, slow and sweet.

Unsure Then he got creative.

rapped

ick you  
t. Now,

d I was

*namita,*  
ride me

NINETEEN



## IBUPROFEN AND MIDOL

*Sadie*

“**P**reciosa, wake up.”

My eyes opened and I saw Hector sitting on the side of the bed. He had on jeans and a tight-fitting, navy T-shirt and he looked awake and

I glanced at him through slitted eyes.

He had worked last night, until late. Then he'd vigorously shown his appreciation for my tattoo just like he said he would.

And, really, how bizarre was *that*? It was *my* tattoo. But apparently Hector was more excited about it than I was. As in *loads* more in a man, badass, fuck-me-until-I-screamed-his-name type of way, of course.

Though, I didn't scream his name when he made me come, but I did scream it, and I did this *loud*.

Nevertheless, *he* hadn't tied one on last night, mixing margaritas with Tires and tequila shots. *He* was likely not hungover like I knew I was very much in the moment. *He* was not having a life filled with daily multiple-tattoos. And lastly, *he* didn't have an opening at his gallery tomorrow night.

So *he* could be awake and alert on a Sunday morning.

*I* was hungover. I felt it in my stomach and my head. So *I* was g

sleep.

To communicate all of that, I mumbled, "Sleep." Then I burrowed into the pillows.

Once I did this, the covers were pulled down and I made a pheeew. But he ignored this. His hands went to my waist. He twisted me, pulled up and across his lap, settling me there and his arms came around me.

I decided to ignore his latest smooth move and shoved my face into his neck, burrowing into his heat and hoping he'd get the message.

"Sadie, look at me," he murmured, and the way he did made me squeeze painfully.

I took a deep breath, wondering what was happening now. I pulled my face from his neck and looked at him.

"Jimmy's downstairs," he told me.

I let out the breath.

"That was it?"

"Another visitor?"

"Boy, Hector was a popular guy."

"Jimmy?" I asked.

"Detective Marker."

"My body went tight."

"Hector's hand went to my neck and slid up into my hair."

"Harvey Balducci was murdered last night."

All of a sudden, I felt even sicker.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

“Jimmy wants to talk to you.”

ed and That was when I understood and I felt something lodge in my throat. It was big, it threatened to choke me.

l noise. “I didn’t do it,” I blurted, and as I was concentrating on swallowing I didn’t notice Hector’s brows draw together.

“Sadie—”

ed in his I cut him off, beginning to feel panic slide through my system. “I didn’t do it. I swear. I didn’t.”

y heart The arm Hector had around me got tight and I watched his eyes narrow.

led my “What the fuck?”

I kept on, “I don’t like Harvey. He’s a jerk and I want him to stay the fuck away from me, but I didn’t kill him, Hector. I swear.”

I’d begun to tremble, my body shaking. Hector’s hand came out from behind my hair and locked around my waist. Then he gave me a gentle but firm squeeze and stilled and looked at him. His eyes were now fully narrowed and he looked angry.

“What the fuck are you talkin’ about?”

“You said Detective Marker is here to talk to me—”

“Jimmy’s here to make sure you hear it from someone who gives a damn. He’s here to make sure you’re okay. He’s here to let you know Rico bonded out this morning. And he’s here to ask you a few questions. He’s here because you’re a suspect. Your phones are tapped, practically every move you make is followed by cameras, and you’re never fuckin’ safe. Even without that, no one would think it was you. Jesus, Sadie, what

your fuckin' head?"

boat. So I felt fear replacing the panic in my system at the first part of his  
so I missed most of the other stuff he said.

wing, I "Ricky was bonded out?" I breathed.

I watched fascinated, as the anger slid out of his eyes and a different  
of anger replaced it (don't ask me how I knew this, I just knew). Then  
I didn't muscle leap in Hector's cheek.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess Donny and Marty were moved to brother  
start to once Harvey'd been poisoned while on the inside."

I closed my eyes.

The doorbell rang.

y away Hector muttered, "Fuck."

I opened my eyes again and he was looking at me.

of my "Get dressed and come downstairs. We'll talk later about what  
shake. I your fuckin' head," he finished.

looked Great, *just great*.

He stood up, taking me with him and putting me on my feet.

I was realizing for the first time that I was naked as the day I was  
when both of Hector's hands came to my neck, fingers sliding up in my  
; a shit. thumbs on the undersides of my jaw and he tipped my head back to  
cky go him.

le's not He touched his mouth to mine softly, eyes open the whole time, and  
y every his head moved back half an inch, he said, voice low and powerful, "I  
alone. gonna fuckin' touch you."

hat's in He watched me until I nodded, my head moving against his hands.



Then he was gone.

speech, I pulled my head together and quickly got dressed (in the forbidden  
but I shunned the Stella tee and put on Hector's flannel because it (c  
more). I ran to the bathroom and let out a surprised, muted scream  
ent kind looked at myself in the mirror.

I saw a Eighties Rock Video Bimbo was scary the night of, but she was  
raising (literally) the morning after.

rly love And Hector had seen me like that!

*And* kissed me!

Oh...my...*God!*

I took a deep breath and calmed the mental flipout. I washed my  
found Hector's brush and was tearing it through my wild, bimbo-g  
morning after hair when there came a knock at the door.

was in Before I called, it opened and Hector came in. I just stared at him  
walked up to me and put a cup of steaming coffee on the side of the s  
turned to me, grabbed my wrist, opened my palm with his other ha  
planted four white pills in it.

as born "Hangover cocktail, ibuprofen and Midol. Don't ask, it works. Th  
you salve for the tattoo?" he asked.

ny hair, I was staring at the pills, but I looked up at him and nodded.

look at

"Douse it before you come down. You gotta keep it moist so it  
fade."  
d when

He isn't He reached beyond me, opened the medicine cabinet, rooted thro  
and came out with a package of new tops for an electric toothbru  
handed them to me without a word, touched my lips with his again

was gone.

en skirt, I kept watching the door, not knowing what to feel.

covered After my mom left (or, I should say, was murdered), whenever I w  
when I my father sent one of our maids to take care of me. They did it because  
their job, not because they cared about me.

as hair- But no one had brought me a hangover cocktail in my life.

No one.

Shakily, I sucked down the pills, pulled his electric toothbrush out  
charger, found his toothpaste and went to town on my teeth. Once done  
the tattoo balm out of my skirt pocket, pulled up my skirt and peeled b  
y face, bandage to salve the tattoo. While I was righting everything, I he  
groupie, doorbell ring again.

I sighed, wondering what now. I wiped the goo off my hands  
n as he towel, grabbed my mug and walked downstairs.

ink. He I stopped at the foot of the stairs.

nd and The living room was filled with people. Detective Marker was the  
so were Jet and Eddie, Indy and Lee, Hank and Roxie and Daisy and M

ey give Someone had uncovered and moved a couch and a coffee table i  
living room. There was a box of donuts opened on the table. Everyon  
mug of coffee, apparently courtesy of Jet, who was holding the  
doesn't coffeepot and on her way back to the kitchen.

“Mornin’ sugar, I brought hangover donuts,” Daisy called, wa  
ough it glazed in my direction.

ish. He “How’s the tattoo?” Roxie asked, sitting by Daisy on the cou  
and he leaning toward the donut box.

I came unstuck and walked into the room.

“It’s okay,” I answered Roxie as she pulled out a long, glazed cinnamon twist. Then I looked around. “What are you all doing here?”

“Eddie heard the news. We had to come up to the Highlands any day now. *La Reunión* so I came with him,” Jet told me on a smile then lifted the coffee pot. “I’ll make more coffee.” And she exited the room.

“Lee heard too,” Indy said. “I came because you left your purse in the Explorer and because I’m nosy.” Then she scrunched her nose, took a bite, I dug a powdered sugar, chocolate icing-filled donut and grinned.

“Hank heard too. I thought I’d come to introduce you to Sham and the chocolate lab. He’s out in Hank’s SUV,” Roxie added.

“Marcus heard too. I decided to bring the donuts,” Daisy finished.

That was super sweet of her, of all of them, because I knew they were there because of Family Meetings, returning my purse, being nosy, and to introduce me to family pets or bringing donuts. They were there for me, and

This felt nice. *Super* nice.

Though, the very thought of donuts made me queasy.

I looked at Roxie.

“Why’s Shamus in the car? Why didn’t you bring him in?”

“I didn’t know if you’d want me to, but I can go get him now,” I answered, her eyes lighting up.

“That’d be great,” I smiled.

Before Roxie could move, Detective Marker cleared his throat.

“Maybe you can meet the dog in a minute, Sadie. If you don’t mind, I need to talk.”

Oh darn.

I minded.

I minded *loads*.

But my father taught me *never* to procrastinate. Get things done in a timely manner and do the tough jobs first to get them out of the way.

I'd much rather meet Shamus.

But instead I blew out a sigh (even though it was rude) and Detective Marker, "All right."

I walked into the room and sat on the arm of the couch next to Indy. "Hector told you Harvey was found dead last night?" Detective Marker asked me.

I nodded. "What happened?"

"We don't know. We're investigating. It looks like poison," Detective Marker answered.

"How could someone poison him in jail?" I asked.

"Don't know that either. They're lookin' into it. You know Donny bonded for Ricky?" Detective Marker carried on.

Indy's hand went to my knee. She squeezed there and her hand went away.

I took in a deep breath, weirdly fortified by Indy's knee squeeze, and nodded at Detective Marker.

"You been in contact with your father recently?" Detective Marker

So, this was what this was all about.

I looked around the room and noted everyone was watching me.

The daughter of a killer, sitting in their midst.

I felt bile fill my throat and swallowed it down.

I looked back at Detective Marker. “It can’t be him. He’s in prison  
ne in a “Have you talked to him? Does he know what the Balduccis’ve  
doin’ to you?” Detective Marker pressed gently.

“I got a call from him a few days ago. He didn’t mention it, but I  
said to answered. “Not Harvey, just Ricky and the rape. Still, I think he’s go  
of staying informed.”

7. “He didn’t say anything about Harvey or Ricky?” Detective  
Marker pushed.

I shook my head. “He was more concerned about why I haven’t  
touch, why I haven’t visited him. And he’d heard about Hector and  
he wasn’t happy.”

etective  
Detective Marker nodded.

“Do you think he did it?” I asked softly, trying not to think of ever  
the room and what they might be thinking of my father, of me, of w  
posted  
all meant.

“Lotta folks would do Ricky. He’s not got a lot of friends. Ma  
d went  
Donny, I could see them being put on hit lists, they’re not friendl  
either. Harvey was just a dumb fuck, annoying and stupid. He rubbed  
ze, and  
the wrong way, but he wasn’t a threat to anyone. Makes the list of s  
shorter,” Detective Marker told me.

asked. “So, you think it’s my father,” I answered for him, my heart sinkin

“No, we’re lookin’ into every possibility. Including Marty, Don  
Ricky. Their brother might not have been a threat to anyone else,

fucked up, forced your hand, put himself and Ricky behind bars. His stupid meant he was a liability. This wasn't the first time he fucked up. He weakened the family position. Those boys'd eat their own young. I don't do anything past them."

"I've been thinking about this for a while. This was true. The Balducci brothers weren't only insane. They were mean and insane. I knew that better than anyone."

"I did," I said. "I'm not sure I can help you. I'm trying not to have anything to do with my father," I told Detective Marker.

Marker said, "I know that, Sadie. That's why I'm gonna ask you to do something that might not be easy."

I said, "Blooming heck."

He said, "He was going to ask me to do something not easy."

"My whole life was something 'not easy.'"

"What?" I asked.

"Eddie tells me one of your father's boys tried to pass you a message last night. I know you two are estranged. Still, he's your father, so I understand this might be tough for you. But, if he contacts you, however he does, please askin' you to let me know he's done it and what he said."

"Oh."

"Was that it?"

"Certainly," I replied immediately.

Detective Marker blinked and I felt a strangeness fill the air in the room.

"Sadie, I know this is hard—" Detective Marker went on.

"It's not hard," I answered easily. Then I offered, "I try not to take any calls. Do you want me to take them and get him to talk?"

n bein' Detective Marker blinked again, then his head turned and he lo  
ked up, Hector.

on't put I followed his gaze and saw the Hot Bunch settled around the ar  
Hank was sitting on the arm of the chair, Lee opposite him, standin  
y were crossed on his chest.

They looked almost like twins, except Lee had chocolate-brown e  
do with Hank's were the color of whisky.

Hector stood by Hank, hands on his hips. Eddie at his side, an  
in' that Lee's.

They almost looked like twins too, except Eddie's hair was only  
one week past needing a cut and Hector's was at least two (probably th

They were all looking at me, but Hector was watching me with the  
intensity, this time mingled with what I could swear was approval, ar  
that weird happy glow start to light in my chest.

age last "You willin' to do that?" Detective Marker asked me, and m  
erstand moved off the happy glow and my eyes moved back to him.

; it, I'm I shrugged. "Sure. I might need some coaching or a script or somet  
he won't cotton on, but I could do it."

Something flashed across Detective Marker's face before it we  
"You been through a lot, Sadie. This would be—"

I cut him off. "This would be nothing, Detective Marker. I've  
playing a game all my life around my father. This is just a new gam  
room. simply need someone to explain the rules. Give me some coachi  
phones are already tapped so it's all good."

ake his Detective Marker kept staring at me then he said, "Sadie, if it

oked at father exacting vengeance for what they did to you, that means R probably next.”

mchair. “And?” I asked.

g, arms Detective Marker didn’t answer.

“You think I’d rather not stand in his way if he’s going to whack I yes and I answered for him (again).

“I’m just—” Detective Marker started, but I interrupted him as n ms like went straight.

“My father taught me a great deal, Detective Marker. He’d had maybe knock life and he was generous with those life lessons. He’s a crimi ree). he did bad things, but his lessons were good. He didn’t hide who he w it warm me, but part of his teaching didn’t include how to be a killer. Either be id I felt be an accessory to one. If he killed Harvey and plans on killing Ricky sins are going to be on *his* soul, not mine. So if you’re asking me y mind impede, even if that impeding meant standing aside and doing nothi investigation into the murder of the man who assaulted me or the p hing so murder of the man who raped me, the answer is no.” After deliver speech, I stood, back ramrod straight and finished, “Can I meet Roxi now?”

nt soft. Detective Marker’s lips twitched (now, what did *he* find amusing?

I didn’t get it), and he said, “Yeah, Sadie, we’re done.”

re been “Good,” I replied shortly, leaned down and picked out a cho e and I covered yeast. “C’mon Roxie, I want to meet Shamus,” I called, sw 1g. My room with a glance noticing that the entirety of the Hot Bunch had twitch going on, except Hector, who was grinning straight out.

’s your Seriously, what *exactly* was so fucking funny?



icky is I decided I didn't care. I ignored them and sashayed out of the h  
my indecently short bimbo skirt that Hector made me promise never  
again (ha! take that!), bare feet (thank goodness it was warm, even fo  
Autumn) and Hector's huge flannel.

Ricky," It wasn't until Daisy and Indy joined us, Jet had come out with th  
pot to give us all a warm up and Roxie was holding my coffee and  
while I threw a Frisbee for the adorable, cuddly, soft, seriously-over  
y back Shamus that I realized that I'd spent the entire morning as me.

a hard- No Ice Princess, no Attitude Sadie, no Take Charge Sadie and no  
nal and Sadie.

as from Just me.

e one or And I didn't know what to think of that.

y, those But I did know it brought the weird, happy glow back.

e if I'd And, incidentally, Hector was not wrong about the ibuprofen and M

ing, the It worked like a charm.

planned  
ing my  
e's dog



### *The Best Day of Sadie Marie Townsend's Life*

' really, EXCEPT FOR THE MORNING, that Sunday was the best day of my life.

Better than any of the days when my father was away "on business:  
ocolate- could pretend I was free.

rept the Better, even, than any of the waning memories of being with my m

the lip Simply the best.



AT FIRST, I thought it was going to go from bad to worse.

ouse in     Because, after the men held a meeting inside while the women  
to wear coffee, played with Shamus and picked over Hector's response to my  
or early (at length and in some detail) outside, Detective Marker left. So did  
Lee, Roxie, Hank and Shamus.

ie fresh     Eddie, Jet, Daisy and Marcus stayed, but only so Hector, Marcus  
I donut Eddie could go over what they wanted me to try to get my father to talk  
:happy and how I should do that.

Once they were through, I smiled and said, "Easy."

Pretend     Eddie and Marcus looked at each other, not in a friendly way.  
They didn't appear to like each other much, but instead they seemed  
putting up with each other for the sake of whatever was happening  
with my father.

Midol.     Hector kept looking at me. "Not easy, Sadie. You're gonna have  
sharp and on target and listen to any cues he gives you that he knows  
you're up to."

"No problem," I responded.

Hector bit his lip and shook his head, then he said softly, "Marcus  
know you been playin' your father your whole life, but when you were  
weren't sleepin' with the guy who put him in prison. He doesn't trust  
now. You're safe, no one can get to you. But you want to get anything  
s" and I him, you gotta be smart, not cocky."

Someone, please tell me Hector didn't just call me cocky!

om.     "I'm not being cocky!" I snapped.

"You're bein' cocky," he returned.

I gave him a glare. "Trust me, Hector, I know what I'm doing."

I drank “Just listen to what I’m sayin’ to you,” Hector returned calmly.

My tattoo I kept glaring.

And Indy, He kept watching me.

We went into a staredown.

Thus and I became aware of the other people in the room and I thought  
back about probably rude to continue a staredown so I gave in.

But I didn’t like it.

though. “Oh, all right.”

And to be His mouth moved like he was fighting a smile.

So (now) I looked at Daisy and rolled my eyes.

She let out a Christmas bells giggle.

to stay Then Jet said something that threw me.

vs what “We better go. I promised Blanca I’d help her get ready for *La Re*  
She looked at Eddie. “Are we all going together?”

Even though Jet asked Eddie, Hector answered, “Sadie’s gotta cha  
*mita*, I My heart leapt into my throat.

There, you “Change for what?” I asked.

Just you Hector’s eyes came to me. “*La Reunión*.”

So out of I blinked, thinking I knew what he was talking about, but hopin  
*not*.

“Why do I have to change?”

“*Mamita*, you aren’t wearin’ that fuckin’ skirt out of the house un  
to walk out to the Bronco and walk into the brownstone to get changed  
goin’ to *Mamá*’s.”

My heart in my throat grew to about ten times its size.

“I’m not going to your mother’s,” I whispered.

“You are.”

My eyes went wide.

it was “I’m not. It’s a Family Meeting, I’m not family.”

The air in the room went electric. Hector’s eyes grew dark and his  
went tense.

Sensing the change, Eddie, Jet, Daisy and Marcus cautiously  
away.

“You shittin’ me?” Hector asked, oblivious to our audience.

Now I was confused.

“No,” I answered honestly.

unión.” “*Mujer*, your mark is on my back, my mark is on your hip, and  
sayin’ you aren’t family?”

nge.” Oh my.

Mr. Mood Swing looked angry.

And I didn’t know what *mujer* meant but it didn’t sound as good  
*preciosa* or *mi cielo*.

g I did “Um...” I replied, because I didn’t know what else to say. The Sc  
Hector Glare was burning straight into my brain, making my mind go l

Hector’s eyes sliced to Eddie.

less it’s “We’ll be there after Sadie changes.”

l before Eddie (wisely, in my personal opinion) silently nodded and ev  
prepared to leave.

I took Daisy and Jet aside on Hector's front porch and I whispered  
"What does *mujer* mean?"

Jet bit her lip before saying, "It means 'woman' and it usually is  
but I think Hector's kind of mad."

Kind of?

is body She'd obviously not been seared by The Scorch.

moved I looked at Eddie, Marcus and Hector, who were all standing by  
shiny red Dodge Ram and talking.

"Does he think I'm family?" I breathed.

"Oh Sadie, Blanca calls you *mi hija* and Hector's a Chavez through  
through. They work fast. Even if Hector decided to give you a break  
you out of *La Reunión*, Blanca would hunt you down. No doubt about

you're I stared at her.

How did *this* happen?

"This must be what he meant by not fucking around anymore,"  
them.

as, say, "What does that mean?" Daisy asked, and still reeling from all the  
happening I shared our conversation from the morning before. Or F  
conversation since I wasn't allowed to talk (I told them that too).

orching Daisy and Jet grinned at each other. Not like something was fun  
blank. like something made them really, *really* happy.

Then Daisy said, "Sugar, count your lucky stars he gave you a v  
fuckin' around. Now that he's serious, you're his. No ifs, ands or bu  
everyoneplain ole *his*. *Comprende?*"

"But—" I started.

l to Jet, “I say this to all the girls, even though they never listen, but I’ll  
again. Don’t fight it,” Jet cut in.

n’t bad, “But—” I tried again.

Daisy giggled at Jet. “Now we get to the fun stuff.”

Fun?

Were they plumb crazy?

Eddie’s This was *not* fun!

Before I could say more, they hugged me and left.

Leaving me alone with Angry Hector.

ugh and Blooming heck.

and let  
it.”

His long strides took him from the sidewalk to me in no time at  
grabbed my hand and dragged me into the house.

“Choose now. We shower here or we shower at your place,” he s  
breaking stride as he pulled me up the stairs.

’ I told We shower?

We?

hat was  
ector’s

“Hector—”

He turned unexpectedly and tugged me into the bathroom.

ny, but “We shower here. Ralphie and Buddy might be at your place. He  
can make all the noise you want.”

veek of Noise?

its, just I was going to make noise?

Why would I...?

Then it came to me.

I say it     Oh no.

“Hector—”

His hands went to the hem of the flannel, up, and then it was gone.

“Hector!” I snapped.

His blazing eyes locked on mine. “*Mamita*, we don’t have a lot of time. Don’t piss me off. Pissin’ me off is gonna take time.”

My mouth dropped open.

Then I snapped it shut.

“Don’t...don’t...” I stuttered. Then I demanded to know, “Why are you so angry?”

all. He     He put his hands to both sides of my neck, pulled me close and tilted his head down to look at me.

aid, not     “I don’t know,” he replied sharply. “Maybe it’s because your first thought this morning was that anyone would think you were a murderer, even if I said, ‘Fuck, you sat in my fuckin’ lap and swore to me you didn’t do it like I did. I think for one fuckin’ second that you would.’”

“But—” I tried to cut in, but he kept talking.

“Or maybe it’s because, no matter what I do and what *you* do, you’re not fuckin’ cluein’ into what’s happenin’ here.”

re, you     “And what, *exactly*, is happening here?” I shot back.

His eyes got dark (or I should say, *darker*) and he said quietly, “You’re pissin’ me off.”

I threw my hands out to the sides, exasperated. “Why?”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you payin’ attention at all?”

“Yes!” I snapped, totally over it, and then I went straight into a rant. I don’t get it. Excuse me, Hector Chavez, but you saw how I grew up. I know! I’ve never been to a Family Meeting! I’ve never put on lip gloss in a restroom of a club with my girlfriends! I’ve never sat around a dinner table looking through photos and reminiscing! All this is happening while the Balducci brothers are assaulting and threatening me, my father is freaking out and I’m having conversations with police detectives. Not to mention you’ve decided not to ‘fuck around anymore,’ whatever *that* means. I’ll have an opening tomorrow! So, if I’m a little slow, you’ll have to give me some *fucking* slack, all right?”

Somewhere during my rant, Mr. Mood Swing decided he wasn’t going to keep up anymore (really! how was I supposed to keep up with this guy?) and I went soft. His eyes went so warm they were hot and his fingers dripped into my hair.

As his head descended, he murmured, “All right, *mi corazón*. I’ll give you some slack.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, sounding snippy, which was hard with my mouth had settled on mine.

“Now I’m gonna do you in the shower then we’ll get you home. You get changed and get your stuff because you’re spendin’ the night tonight. We’ll go to *La Reunión*.”

My heart flipped, my belly melted and my irritation disappeared.

“Do me in the shower?” I breathed.

His tongue traced my bottom lip and that felt so nice, my knees buckled right out from under me. So badly I had to grab on to the material of his pants at his waist to stay standing.



at. “But His eyes were open and looking into mine.

ip. You “Yeah,” he said against my mouth.

s in the “I think I’m not over my rant.”

er table His hands left my hair. He pulled my skirt up around my wa  
nile the thumbs hooked into my panties and I gasped against his mouth as he  
king me them down.

ention, “You can yell at me while I’m fuckin’ you.”

, and I Oh my.

cut me That was it.

t angry I wished I could say I was stronger, held out a little longer, but I m

his face And, incidentally, we showered. He *did* me in the shower, m  
fted up against the tiled wall, my legs wrapped around his waist, my  
everywhere they could touch. And I didn’t yell at him while he was do

cut you



THE REST of the day weirded me out. So much I couldn’t handle  
hen his decided to ride with it and memorize every last second so I could carry  
me forever.

ou can We went to the brownstone and I did my business, with the add  
ght, and Buddy begging Hector and me to take YoYo, even if she was spend  
night at Hector’s. This was because, he explained, Ralphie was becom  
attached to the dog, Buddy feared there would be a dognapping.

We loaded up my stuff (Hector told me to “pack heavy,” which  
juckled more than a night’s worth, and after my rant I didn’t have it in me to p  
is tee at fight so I did as he ordered), YoYo, YoYo’s doggie paraphernalia  
Ralphie’s maniacal dognapper-in-the-making glare) and we headed

Blanca's.

Jet and Eddie were getting married imminently and Jet was holding on to her dream vision of a wedding. She'd given into the Catholic Mass thing (for Blanca), but for a reception, she'd hired somewhere in the mountains, replete with a hog roast, hayrides, a bonfire, and s'mores at the end.

Bizarrely, at the same time, Blanca and Nancy had rented the local lounge music during a sit down, four-course meal.

And apparently, Blanca and Nancy's vision included loads of late night bunting.

After a gut-busting lunch, Nancy and Blanca ganged up on Jet.

I sat with YoYo in my lap and noticed right away that Jet was down.

First off, Eddie was removed, entirely. In fact, he looked like he'd been the whole thing was funny and didn't even flinch when Jet glared daggers at him. Hector and Carlos stayed silent, but they also appeared to find the thing amusing. Gloria, Rosa and Elena were also silent. I could tell the commiserating with Jet but they didn't have the guts to jump in. Coming the girlfriend, Maria, sat silent too, but she looked scared out of her mind (probably exactly what I looked like). Tex, on the other hand, was eating through the leftovers on the platters of food on Blanca's table. It meant appeared he didn't even know the meeting was happening at all.

So it became apparent that it was going to have to be me.

I thought about how to do this without Blanca's house exploding the force of a Full-Blown Blanca (and Nancy) Hissy Fit.

Then I came up with a plan.

barely “I’ve never had roasted hog,” I announced during a lull in  
the whole browbeating.

a barn Everyone’s (surprised) eyes came to me.

fire and Even though they were scaring me (particularly Blanca, but also I  
as per usual I sallied forth.

al hall. “And I’ve never taken a hayride.” I looked at Jet and informed him  
in a chirpy voice, “I’ve always wanted a s’more but my father never let me  
go to camp. Or take a hayride. Or go to a hog roast. He was weird that way,  
you know, being kind of suffocating and not letting me be social or have fun.”  
I glanced across the table and declared, “Sounds like fun!”

So I was manipulating the fact that they were nice people and trying to  
make them feel sorry for me.

It was the only card I had to play, and for Jet, I played it.

thought Jet was smiling at me, beautiful and huge.

My fingers at Eddie wasn’t smiling, exactly, but I could see his dimple.

the whole Hector was shaking his head, but his eyes were warm and intense.  
They were new way that was mixed with humor and affection, and *that* brought  
me Carlos’s that lovely, snug, comfy feeling.

he busily Tex’s head snapped in my direction.

he and it “Fuckin’ A, woman. You’ve never had a s’more?” he boomed.

I shook my head.

“Christ, everyone’s gotta have a s’more before they die. Fuck that  
shit, I’ll build a fire in my backyard tonight and I’ll stop by Kumar’s on the way  
home to get the stuff. Everyone can come by—”

Damn and blast!

n Jet's Tex was being really nice, but he was *ruining* everything!

"No," I cut in quickly. "I can wait until Jet's wedding."

"There's no waitin' for s'mores," Tex boomed back.

Nancy), "But—" I started.

"No lip!" Tex boomed again.

ier in a "Sadie and I have plans tonight," Hector put in smoothly, and Tex  
ie go to went to him.

ay, you They narrowed then I watched as the light dawned, and slowly  
riends." back.

ying to "I'll make you a s'more latte so you'll have somethin' to go on u  
and Eddie's wedding," Tex told me, then his eyes moved to Jet.  
where's this fuckin' barn and do I have to wear a fuckin' tie?"

The power, I could tell, had shifted.

I could tell this because Nancy and Blanca went thin-lipped.

ise in a "Yay!" I shouted as my finale, hoping to shift the balance irrevoc  
ht back Jet's side. To do this, I clapped, YoYo yapped happily in my lap and r  
went a little OTT. "Roasted hog!" I cried happily. "Hayrides! Bonfir  
*can't...wait!*"

Blanca and Nancy looked at each other.

I held my breath.

They stayed silent.

at shit, That's when I knew we won.

he way They didn't like it, but they didn't push it.

I let out my breath and sat back.

My work was done.

And, believe it or not, Jet gave me a look of such shining gratitude, kidding, I almost cried right there on the spot (I, of course, did not).

Before we left (believe it or not again!), she asked me to be a bride

Me!

Jet's eyes A bridesmaid!

For a second, I was so excited at the prospect of being a bridesmaid that I forgot I was moving to Crete and I couldn't stop myself from hugging her and saying yes.

Then it hit me. But I didn't take it back. I wanted to live that one glorious moment, and even if it made me selfish, I didn't care.

I wasn't going to give it up.

No way.

I promised myself I'd call her and explain everything.

I'd just do it...later.

Shortly after, I was still in the moment when Hector and I left. I...didn't go to his house. We went to the grocery store.

Sadie Townsend, daughter of a fallen Drug King, and ex-DEA Hector "Oh my God" Chavez *grocery shopping*.

If my father saw us (or when he heard), he'd have a kitten!

Since I was in the moment and enjoying said moment, I didn't fight.

Instead, I went with it.

Even when Hector put his hands on the cart handle beside mine,

meant the heat of his body was pressed against my back, his chin was on my shoulder and we walked a whole aisle that way (a whole aisle! when Hector laughed at me when I asked him where the Pilsbury roll dough was (what was funny about that, I wanted to know, but I didn't ask). Even when he ran into some guy he knew, a handsome, American, off-duty police sergeant named Willie, and he introduced them. Even when they chatted, all the while Hector had his arm wrapped around my neck, me tucked firmly into his side, making me feel like a girlfriend, someone who actually *belonged* tucked firmly into his head. He chatted with a friend.

Yes, even through all of that.

The moment continued when we got to his place, unpacked the groceries and he asked me if I wanted to watch a movie. In turn, I asked him if he would help him on his house by sanding his floors. His chin jerked at my question and he looked at me funny, like I surprised him, but he agreed.

He patiently showed me what to do and we spent the afternoon in the living room sanding his floors. Him using this big sander thingie and my hands and knees using a small handheld sander close to the wall and the corners. Other than doing dishes, laundry and cleaning my house a while (I had a cleaning lady, what could I say? I was rich), I'd never done manual labor in my life. And even if it made me a freak, I didn't care.

There was nothing better than sanding Hector's living room floors with Hector.

Nothing.

Okay, maybe there were some things, but those involved Hector to some degree, which at that point, I was beyond "the moment." I was living the dream.

restingfell into it, letting the warm, lovely, snugly, comfy waters sweep o  
) . Evenhead, sucking me down.

resent      Happily, gratefully, I let myself sink.

I didn't      We finished sanding the floor and took another shower (yes, tog  
African      got dressed and Hector barbecued pork chops outside on the grill  
ed me.      made a salad (I could cut up vegetables, no problem), boiled son  
asually      potatoes (boiling! easy!) and baked Pillsbury crescent rolls (they en  
e a real      perfect, absolutely delicious, all you had to do was follow the directio  
it while

Since it was still warm(ish), I put on his flannel and we ate  
backyard at his outside table by his huge hot tub with YoYo sitting on  
the other chairs and me feeding her tidbits with my fingers.

roceries      When we were done eating, I was rinsing the dishes and load  
I could      Hector's rickety old dishwasher and Hector was outside at the grill  
request      YoYo was with him, racing around the yard, and I watched throu  
window as the flames went high.

i in the      Then he came back inside and disappeared into the house. He reap  
l me on      with a wire hanger and a tool and grabbed some stuff out of the cup  
. and in      Then, without a word, he tagged my hand and pulled me back outside.

once in      He positioned me by the still flaming grill and started to cut the  
er done      with some wire clippers.

..      "What are you doing?" I asked.

or with      He picked up a bag of marshmallows and tossed them to me.

I caught them but kept looking at him.

o.      "S'mores," was all he said.

n and I      My breathing went funny.

ver my So maybe I was slow. He bought the stuff with me at his side  
grocery store. But how was I to know what he had planned? I just tho  
was a man who liked marshmallows, chocolate bars and graham crac  
(ether!), the house. I'd personally never had all three in my house at once, b  
while I item individually, sure!

ne new I decided not to make a big deal of it, like burst into tears, throw  
ded up in his arms and declare my everlasting love for him.

is!). Instead, I asked, "Did you ever go to camp?"

in the He grinned, and it was a new grin. An *effective* new grin, because  
one of so wicked, it made my belly melt.

"If you count three months in juvie when I was fourteen then, ye  
ling up we didn't have s'mores."

l again. My mouth dropped open.

igh the Then I asked, "You, Agent Hector Chavez, did a stint in juvie?"

He was straightening out the hanger and still grinning. "Yeah."

appeared It was too much, I couldn't help it.

boards. I burst out laughing.

hanger My eyes were closed so I didn't see him move until his arm was w  
around my neck. I was yanked against his body so hard I slammed in  
and he kissed me, hot, wet, open-mouthed and long enough for me  
into him (and then some).

Then his mouth broke from mine. He touched his forehead to mi  
nanosecond before he moved away and I felt my breath catch  
sweetness of it.

"Like it when you laugh, *mamita*," he said quietly.



I stared at him then I swallowed.

He didn't wait for a response, maybe didn't need one. I didn't know he didn't ask. Instead, he handed me the hanger and took the marshmallows from me, opening the bag with his teeth.

"What'd you do?" I asked.

"Probably better to ask what I didn't do."

I let out another small laugh as he made me hold my hanger up in my hand and he fed some big, fat marshmallows on it.

"Okay, what didn't you do?"

He gave me one of his glamorous smiles. "I never killed anyone."

My body started shaking with laughter.

Through my laughter, I said, "So I take it you're one of the ones who got fucked around enough to cause your parents problems."

He guided my hanger over the grill and dumped the bag of marshmallows on the side shelf but kept his arm wrapped around my neck, his eyes on my marshmallows.

"Carlos, Rosa and Elena were the good kids, Eddie, Gloria and me were the not so good. So good."

I felt this somewhere deep and the laughter left my body.

Hector's arm gave my neck a squeeze. I knew he wanted my attention. I looked up at him.

He was watching me closely.

"Now what's in your head?" he asked softly.

"She loves you all the same. The good and the not so good," I whispered.

referring to Blanca.

ow and “Always has,” he replied.

nallows Immediately, I replied, “You’re very lucky.”

At my words, he curled me so my front was against his and he dipped to mine.

I saw that look in his eyes. The warm, intense, eyes-soft, face to his signifying-possession look, but something else was there. Not perhaps maybe understanding that he had something beautiful that I had not. instinctively he didn’t feel sorry for me, but he felt something.

“I know,” he murmured, and there was a great deal of feeling in his words.

es who Perhaps sensing I’d had enough, perhaps wanting a s’more, he showed me how to make them and we ate them. Then we made out by the grill in the now-chilly autumn air, our mouths tasting of s’mores (Hector’s kisses were amazing, but when he tasted of s’mores, they were simply *heaven*).

nallows trained After s’mores, we walked upstairs and lay, fully-clothed (but shoes off) on his bed and watched a movie (*The Big Easy*, I hadn’t seen it in years...not forgot how good it was).

tion so Then, likely inspired by the movie (thank *God*), Hector played a certain part. But his effort lasted longer, was a bit more creative, in addition more than just fingers (moving on to lips and tongues), and it finished a whole lot differently.

Before he snapped out the light, he put balm and a new bandage on my tattoo.

ispered, Then he tucked my back to his front. YoYo snuggled close into the

of my lap, Hector held me tight and I lay there, listening to him breathe (YoYo snort) until I knew he was asleep.

Then I rewound my day from start to finish.

his face Then I rewound it again.

Then I did it again.

re-hard, Then I felt the wetness slide silently down the sides of my eyes, softly, but into the mound of pillows I shared with Hector. I put my arm on his I knew waist and linked our fingers.

In his sleep, his fingers tensed until they held mine tight.

his soft Only then did I fall asleep.



showed

### **Hector**

ll in the HECTOR FELT Sadie's fingers relax in his and he knew she was finally asleep were

He took in the scent of her expensive perfume, knowing and likely the fact that it was on his sheets.

less) on His arm wrapped tighter around her waist, pulling her deeper into his arms and body.

l out a Her head tilted forward. His went with it, he buried his face into her neck but he felt the wetness her tears left on the pillow against his cheek.

cluded His eyes opened in the dark.

ished a "Fucking hell," he muttered.

on my

e crook

of my lap, Hector held me tight and I lay there, listening to him breathe (and YoYo snort) until I knew he was asleep.

Then I rewound my day from start to finish.

Then I rewound it again.

Then I did it again.

Then I felt the wetness slide silently down the sides of my eyes, soaking into the mound of pillows I shared with Hector. I put my arm on his at my waist and linked our fingers.

In his sleep, his fingers tensed until they held mine tight.

Only then did I fall asleep.



### ***Hector***

HECTOR FELT Sadie's fingers relax in his and he knew she was finally asleep.

He took in the scent of her expensive perfume, knowing and liking the fact that it was on his sheets.

His arm wrapped tighter around her waist, pulling her deeper into his body.

Her head tilted forward. His went with it, he buried his face into her hair, but he felt the wetness her tears left on the pillow against his cheek.

His eyes opened in the dark.

"Fucking hell," he muttered.

TWENTY



## BON BONS

*Sadie*

**A**rt was filled, shoulder to shoulder with people.

I'd never had an opening this huge.

Even before my father was arrested for trafficking drugs and his contacts shunned my openings (the other half only continuing to come to drink my champagne, look down their noses at me and feel superior), this opening had been this popular.

My artist, Lisette (who painted unbelievable watercolors), was herself with the turnout.

I didn't have the heart to tell her it was not prospective buyers, but a party Rock Chick/Hot Bunch crew, complete with the entire family, Indy's dad Tom, Tod and Stevie, Tex and Nancy, and his wife Dolores. Even the Zano clan came, Uncle Vito and Angel and Sissy, and Ren and some woman I didn't know.

Indeed, every single Rock Chick and their respective Hot Bunch G were there. All the girls looking glamorous, all the men looking knockout guys wearing suits and shirts with collars opened at the neck.

That said, Duke had dressed up how I guessed any Harley biker

would dress up. He still had the bandana around his forehead and the vest, but his black T-shirt had long sleeves and no saying emblazoned chest and he'd switched to black jeans. Tex, on the other hand, didn't look any different and was wearing jeans and a plaid flannel shirt.

I didn't even know they'd been invited (Ralphie's doing, no doubt had to admit, I was happy they were there.

It felt different with them there. Good. Safe. My openings had never been that crowded, they'd never been that filled with laughter.

"I told you pigs in a blanket would be a hit," Shirleen said from me, nabbing (at my count) her fourth gourmet "pig in a blanket" off a tray and shoving the entire thing in her mouth.

Half my  
come to  
ior), no  
She wasn't wrong. The blanket pigs were going down a treat. Everyone seemed to love them.

"You were right Shirleen. I promise I won't have another one without pigs in a blanket," I assured her, crossing my heart and putting two fingers beside  
beside

"Damn straight," she replied, her tawny eyes smiling. Her gaze  
but the  
Hector's  
I looked at Hector.

and Duke  
a, Dom  
She was not wrong.

I'd gotten ready at his house that morning and he'd dropped me off. The day had been busy, hanging the paintings and going over everything  
Guy was  
largeous  
The day had been busy, hanging the paintings and going over everything last time, even though I didn't have to. I was obsessively organized  
procrastinated, always checked and double-checked every detail and list maker. The entire thing was ready to roll with no hiccups days in a  
ker guy  
(as usual). Even the installation had gone easier than normal because

leather Roxie, Stella and Ava came to help.

l on the Hector had stayed away all day. He didn't even call. It felt weird  
i't look away from him that long. Since Ralphie let him in the brownstone  
week ago, it seemed like he was always around, or at least never far av

). But I When I said it felt weird, I meant I didn't like it.

At all.

ot only I liked having him around.

And that meant I was seriously in trouble.

beside After we were done with the hanging and everything was ready, I  
passing took me home so we could dress for the opening.

everyone Hector told me that morning he'd meet me at the gallery. He sho  
half an hour after the festivities started wearing a suit.

opening One look at him and my heart stopped.

ting up His suit, at first I thought was black. But on closer inspection I rea  
was a very dark gray. He also had on a tailored, collared shirt that v  
shade lighter than the suit and black cowboy boots. That's it.  
moved

It seemed simple, but on Hector, it was highly effective.

Sometime during the day he'd had his hair cut though. And he'c  
cut in a way that now it looked sexy, messy, long-ish and still in r  
imminent cutting, but it looked good on him.

f at Art. Way good.

ing one Too good.

l, never Honest to God, he never looked better.

l was a However, he was very far away from me and over the last two hou

advance Daisy,

stayed that way. When he arrived, he'd come to me and kissed the top of my head but that was it.

over a At first, this weirded me out.

way. I was still living the dream. The dream of Hector and Sadie to sanding floors and making s'mores and owning a pug that raced around the backyard.

Him staying away made me think I'd done something wrong.

I'd reverted to my designer armor (it was an art opening and I *did* come to a gallery, I couldn't exactly wear flannel like Tex).

I was wearing a slim-fitting, brush-the-knees ecru skirt that was covered in opalescent beading. My top was stretchy, ecru knit silk, long-sleeved and tucked off the shoulders, but very snug. I had a velvet ecru ribbon tied around my neck, pointed-toed, spike-heeled, ecru satin mules with beads stitched on the toe and my hair pulled back severely from my forehead and fastened with another velvet ribbon at my nape. It was definitely *one* Princess outfit.

I knew Hector didn't like my armor and I thought it pissed him off.

But even though he stayed away, I knew he knew where I was at a party (don't ask me how, I just did). Sometimes, when my eyes would stray to him, I saw he was watching me. Sometimes, his face would grow soft. But most times, he looked like he was trying to figure me out (those times were my favorite times; I didn't want to be figured out, no way).

I tried not to think about it and instead did my job making sure champagne flowed, the trays of hors d'oeuvres were plentiful, and everyone was mingling.

It was about an hour after he arrived that I understood why he



of my away.

He stayed away because I was working and he was giving me space.

And, at that thought, I quit panicking and I also quit sinking down together, warm, comfy water where the possibility of a “Hector and Sadie” had found theme. Instead, I executed a below the surface back flip.

I turned away from Hector, who was now standing talking with Tom Hank, and looked at Shirleen.

“Hector’s the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on in my life,” I told her bluntly, and I didn’t even care what she thought about me saying it.

“Mm-hmm,” Shirleen agreed, her eyes still locked on Hector. She had fancied me a brown boy, but given the chance, I wouldn’t say no to a choker Chavez. No fuckin’ way.”

After she said that, she tore her gaze from Hector, looked at me and grinned at her. She grinned back then her eyes flicked over my shoulder and her grin died.

“Shit. Society bitch, three o’clock and closing in. Gotta go,” she whispered and then, *poof*, she was gone, disappearing in the crowd.

Dazed at her quick disappearing act, I turned around and watched her go to him, Henrique bearing down on me.

Oh no.

What was *she* doing there?

She’d hated me since the whole Nanette thing went down!

And she was *definitely* not on the guest list and hadn’t been since the Daisy Incident.

And there was no way Ralphie would invite her. She’d come before

Ralphie instantly loathed her.

e. “*Sadie!*” she screeched, fake smile on her face, throwing her arms straight in front of her like we were best friends reunited after years apart. Before I could escape, she grabbed my upper arms and pulled me in for air kisses. First one cheek then the other, then she leaned back, still with her hands on me.

“Oh my *God!*” she continued to screech (loudly), her eyes on my face. “What happened to your face?”

Someone, please tell me she did *not* just say that.

“Never” I felt people turning to look at us and I wanted to cut and run.

Hector Of course, I did not.

My back went straight, my chin jutted out and I ignored her unbelievable and insensitive question.

“Monica. Lovely to see you,” I said in a voice that made it clear I was on the opposite.

Shirleen She ignored my tone and let go of my arms, but only to get close to me and link her arm with mine.

Monica “Sadie, I don’t know if you know this,” she whispered conspiratorially.

“But *Daisy Sloan* is here.” And she said Daisy’s name like it tasted bad.

My body stayed frozen stiff, but my head turned slowly to look at her.

“I know,” I said. “Daisy was *invited.*” I stressed the last word to make my point.

ice The But it flew directly over Monica’s head.

ore and Or more likely, she ignored it because she was a bitch.

A look went across her face like she was thinking about this th  
ms outcame to a conclusion and carried on, “Well, her husband is load  
art. you’ve got paintings to sell, now that your situation has, um...chan  
e in for stared at her, shocked even further that she brought up my father,  
with her didn’t notice it and went right on talking. “We must do what we must c

I felt the saliva gather in my mouth.

cheek. Instead of spitting it at her (which I really wanted to do), I swall  
Because right then, I knew why she was there.

I knew.

She was there to rub my nose in my own misfortune.

See!

ievably Total bitch!

My mind started whirling to try and hit on something (anything  
felt thewould make her let me go without causing a scene and make her just p  
without, again, causing a scene because I did, indeed, have paintings  
e to my A scene might hinder that effort.

Before I could come up with a plan, her eyes caught on somethi  
orially. her head came up.

l. “Don’t I know him?” she asked, and my head turned in the d  
ner. where she was looking.

ake my I saw Hector, his handsome face carefully blank, but his eyes were  
and I could see, even across the room they were alert.

I turned back to Monica and opened my mouth to speak when h  
went squinty like she was looking into the sun.

“I think he works for my yard company. He’s one of those, you l

then she immigrant workers or whatever. What's he doing *here*?"

d. And My head jerked back like she slapped me right before my hands  
ged." I into fists.

but she Now, someone please tell me she did *not* just insinuate that Hect  
do." my God" Chavez was an immigrant yard worker crashing an art openi

She kept going, oblivious to my tense posture and what had to be a  
wed it. vibe emanating from every pore in my body.

Her eyes still on Hector she said, "God, Sadie, he's staring at you.  
know, he's definitely good-looking, if you like that kind of thing, b  
dear, he's heading our way!"

She jerked my arm as if to pull me away, but I stood rooted to the s

I yanked away from her and stayed where I was, but my head tu  
g!) that watch Hector walk the last six feet to my side.

lain go The minute he did, I moved in.

to sell. I put one of my hands on his abs and leaned up on tiptoe to l  
downturned lips.

ing and "Hi, babe," I said softly and saw something warm flash in his eye  
ignored it.

irection Somewhere along the line, something had exploded in my brain an  
powerless to control my own actions.

e on me That was to say, I was beyond worrying about causing a scene.

Or, I should say I was about to cause *the* scene that would end *all* s

er eyes I leaned my body into him until his arm slid along my waist and I  
to Monica.

know... "Hector, this is Monica Henrique. Monica, this is Hector Chavez.

used to be an agent for the DEA, which is why you probably recognized because he was undercover in my father's operation for over a year before he brought him down. So obviously, he used to be around a lot. Now he's sleeping together, and let me tell you, he's *amazing*."

I felt Hector's body grow tight and I saw Monica's face pale, but she wasn't on talking.

"Hector," I flicked my hand out to Monica, "Monica never worked in her life. She hasn't slept with her husband in five years, but she has with the guys who work for her gardener, *loads* of them. She also gets injections. So much, I think it's affected her brain because she thought she worked for her yard company. I'm guessing, wishful thinking?"

Monica sweetly.

Now Monica's mouth had dropped open.

"Sadie—" I heard Hector say in a low voice from beside me.

But I ignored that too and kept my eyes on Monica even as I saw her approaching from all sides.

"And, just to set the record straight, I don't sell paintings because I'm rich, my mother was rich, my mother's mother was rich, my mother's *mother* was rich. My family struck it big in the gold boom and we've been fat cats in Denver for years before you crawled out from under the belly of whatever scaly, reptilian, dragon queen that spawned me. I don't have to work. I sell paintings because I'm good at it."

Vaguely, I heard a gasp that might have been Daisy, but I didn't have time to look.

I was on a roll and kept going.

Hector "And I got this cut on my cheek when I was beaten and raped a

ze him,ago. You know that, everyone knows it, and you're just being a scr  
efore hebitch by bringing it up."

, we're Hector's hand got tight at my waist and he repeated, "Sadie—"

I continued to ignore him and ranted on, even as more people appi  
t I keptour group.

"And I'll finish with this little nugget, and Monica, I want you t  
d a daywell. Don't you dare waltz uninvited into my gallery and disrespect  
as sleptfriends and my boyfriend. You do it again, I'll drag you out of here l  
s Botoxhair. Got me?" I snapped.

ght you Monica sputtered once then twice then breathed, "I don't believe—  
I asked

I leaned in and interrupted her, "It was a yes or no question."

Her eyes narrowed, she sucked in breath and (believe it or no  
hissed, "You'll never sell another painting in Denver again!"

people Now, how unoriginal was *that*?

It was the worst comeback ever!

! I have "Oh well, I guess I'll just sit on top of my big pile of money and  
mother's ons," I returned casually. Then, quick as lightning, I morphed to not  
om and at all, leaned back toward her and clipped, "Now get out of my gallery

om the She pressed her lips together, gave me a squinty-eyed look, trar  
you. I the look to Hector, then back to me, and she turned and marched out.

It was at that juncture I realized I was breathing heavily.

!t have Hector's dark-gray shirt came into my vision and I looked up i  
black eyes.

"What the fuck was that about?" he asked.

month "She's a bitch," I answered.

reaming “I gathered that, *mamita*,” he told me, and I could hear the amuse  
his voice.

And it was at *that* juncture I realized he was fighting a grin.

roached And I knew not one single thing was funny about this particular sit  
I got closer to him as it hit me that we had an audience and likely I  
o listenfor some time.

me, my “This isn’t funny,” I whispered to Hector, ignoring the people g  
y youraround.

His body started to shake with laughter. “You just told her yo  
-” gonna sit on your big pile of money and eat bon bons. Sadie, serious  
you not get that that’s funny?”

t!), she I opened my mouth to speak, but didn’t get out a single sound  
heard a woman’s voice call, “Sadie?”

I looked to the side and saw the whole gang gathered around  
Chicks, Hot Bunch, family and friends, all of them obviously gettin  
eat bon was funny because they were all smiling.

t casual But there were two new people there I’d never seen before ex  
.” pictures. A man and a woman. They were both tall, slim, dark-hairec  
isferred knew they were Hank, Lee and Ally’s parents, the Nightingales.

“Sadie,” the woman whispered, tears shimmering in her eyes. She  
right to me and pulled me in her arms for a fierce hug. I felt her head t  
she murmured in my ear, “My God, sweetheart, you look exact  
nto his Lizzie.”

Oh my.

This, I knew, was Kitty Sue, my mom’s best friend.

ment in     While Kitty Sue hugged me, I looked at the man at her side. I  
              smiling down at me.

              And that was Malcolm.

uation.     Before I could wrap my head around this, she pulled away. I  
had one     looked at her I saw she had herself together. She was smiling from ear  
              and the tears were gone.

athered     “It’s so good to see you,” she told me and turned to her husband.  
              doesn’t she look just like Lizzie?”

u were     He leaned in and kissed my cheek.

isly, do     Yes.

*Kissed my cheek!*

when I     I hadn’t seen him since I was three!

              “Spittin’ image,” he said when he moved away.

l. Rock     I wondered what I should do in this situation (again, the etiquette  
ig what     didn’t cover this topic), but I didn’t have to wonder long. Kitty Sue too

cept in     “I hope you don’t mind, we crashed your party. But I couldn’t wait  
l, and I     you. Malc and I just got back from Hawaii last night. I wanted to call  
              totally crashed. Jetlag. Serious. Crazy. Have you ever been jetlagged

asked but didn’t wait for an answer. “Anyway, you and I have so much  
walked     talk about. I hear Tom showed you some pictures, but I have more.  
urn and     blathered on, hand on my upper arm, fingers squeezing affectionately.

ly like     I was staring at her, lips parted, stunned silent (not that I could get  
in edgewise) when she was interrupted and someone new called my name.

              She dropped her hand, looked over my shoulder and so did I.

              There stood Aaron Lockhart, leaning on a cane, liver-spotted, most



He was head shining in the lights of the gallery.

Blooming heck!

“My dear,” Aaron said, and then it was his turn to lean in (or up, as when I was kind of stooped) and kiss my cheek.

What was going on?

Aaron was always invited but never came (his wife didn’t like to see Malcolm much).

“Aaron, how are you?” I asked.

Ever the hostess, I took his hand and gave it a squeeze before dropping

“In a hurry,” he answered. “Berta’s out in the car with the five dogs I told me then looked up at Hector, and for some reason shared, “Pomeranians. Five Pomeranian dogs. One is too many. Five is the definition of living.” I told her that I’d named our son as my life insurance beneficiary, but she thinks she’s trying to kill me.”

There were chuckles all around, but again, I didn’t find anything funny.

This was because I was getting a bad feeling about his visit to the audience.

“Aaron, do we need to go somewhere and talk?” I asked.

“No, Sadie. This will be quick. Just popped by to give you the good news.” She

that you’re in luck. Mrs. Burnsley’s family is moving her into assisted living at the end of the month so the London flat will be available. It’s coming outside season so the property in Crete will be open in a few weeks and you can stay that way until mid-February. The booking company has plenty of time to move people around before next year so you’re free to go to either place.

My body went solid and I heard the chuckles die away.

“Are you going on vacation, Sadie?” Ralphie materialized close to me. His voice sounded confused.

Aaron I looked at him and opened my mouth to speak, but damn and Aaron got there first.

“Not vacation. Moving,” Aaron answered.

I heard gasps, but worse, I felt a fierce electrical current whip around me and I knew what *that* meant.

Aaron, somehow oblivious to the current (and the gasps), was speaking. “Which brings me to my next subjects. Taxes, health insurance, re-entries, visas. I’m looking into them and I’ll get the information to you by the end of the week. I’m advising Crete, better weather, and London is expensive for Americans. It would be difficult for you on a fixed income, even yours. The exchange rate is hell. I’m certain death. Also, I’ll need to get into your storage locker. Auctioneers can have a look at your belongings and give you a quote on selling them.”

“Moving?” Ralphie butted in, and I looked at him.

He was pale and I felt that hard, hot thing start forming in my chest.

“Moving,” Aaron (again!) answered.

“You can’t...I don’t understand—” Ralphie stuttered.

“Ralphie, we’ll talk about it later,” I said quietly, trying to ignore the thing in my chest and the current in the air.

“Ralphie? Is this Ralph Mankowicz?” Aaron asked.

“Aaron, please, maybe we can go—” I tried damage control.

“Yes, I’m Ralph Mankowicz,” Ralphie answered, ignoring my effort at damage control.

by and “I have some paperwork for you to sign, son,” Aaron replied. “It’s  
car, I’ll just—”

blasted “No!” I cut in, “Aaron, can we—” I started again, but Ralphie interrupted  
me.

“Paperwork?”

going all “Yes, to sign over the gallery,” Aaron, ever informative, answered.

The air in the room was now heavy, tense *and* electric, and everyone was watching, listening and not liking what they heard.

sidency Why, I will ask again, was everything in my life so...*fucking...diff*

end of “Sign over the gallery?” Ralphie repeated.

ensive, “Yes, to you and a Mr. Leon Simmons,” Aaron told him, and he  
age rate came to me, heavy, wiry white eyebrows raised in question. “Is  
so the right?”

I didn’t answer Aaron because Ralphie was looking at me. His eyes  
wide. There was confusion written plain on his face, right alongside  
looked an awful lot like hurt.

again. My heart squeezed.

“Ralphie, we’ll talk about this later,” I tried again, my voice quiet.

ore the “Later? You want to talk about it later? You’re moving and signing  
the gallery to Buddy and me and you want to talk about it later? What  
all about?” Ralphie didn’t feel like letting me try. He felt like being d  
(as usual) and angry (not as usual).

“Let’s go somewhere else—” I tried yet again.

effort at “No, I want to know, right now, what this is all about,” Ralphie  
arms crossing on his chest.

s in the I swallowed.

Then to get it over with I told him on a rush, “I’m giving you and interrupted the gallery as a thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

He stared at me, face shocked. Then I watched as his eyes went ha  
I thought he’d be pleased.

He was absolutely not.

I knew “You’re joking,” he breathed.

“No. I want you to know how much I appreciate everything...all  
icult? just everything.”

“You could do that by not moving to fucking *Greece*,” he snapped  
is gaze I blinked.

It that “What?” I asked.

“I don’t want your fucking gallery. I want you and not via e-ma  
es were your new life on the Med. I want you here. Close. Where we can drink  
le what drops and watch *Veronica Mars*.”

I couldn’t think what to say. I thought certain sure he’d love own  
gallery. He was good at what he did. The best. He’d be his own bos  
make loads more money.

ng over He must not get it.

at’s this “Ralphie, I’m not sure you understand. I don’t just own the gallery  
ramatic *the building*. You and Buddy will get it all. This is LoDo, prime real es  
informed him.

replied, That was when Ralphie leaned in and shouted, “Fuck the building!  
I winced.

Apparently he got it.

Buddy He just didn't want it.

"Ralphie, please quiet down," I whispered.

rd. "I will *not* be quiet. I cannot *believe* you're moving to Greece. That's *insane*."

Now hang on a second!

"It's not insane," I shot back.

l that... "It is! Who moves to Greece? Do you know a single soul who's m  
Greece?" He didn't give me a chance to reply before he continued, "I  
back. neither. No one moves to Greece. Goes there. Yes. Gets laid. De  
Drinks ouzo. Lots of it. Gets a sunburn. Of course! But you don'  
there!" He was still shouting. "And giving me a *building*? A *buildir*  
you nuts?"

il from Seriously, this was getting right on my nerves!

κ lemon Why wouldn't anyone let me be nice?

uing the "I owe you so much, I had to do something!" I shouted back.

s. He'd Ralphie threw his hands high into the air.

"You *are* nuts," he yelled. "This is what friends do! There is no  
Someday, my precious momma's going to die or I'm going to get a h  
and you'll be there for me. That's how you give back. You don't g  
r. I own lavish Christmas bonuses, expensive birthday gifts and buildings, for  
state," I sake!"

„ Oh my God!

"I thought you liked my birthday presents!" I yelled back.

"I do. But only if they're given from the heart, not to buy my frien

he shot back.

It felt like he slapped me right across the face.

I flinched and took a step back. That step forced me into something and breathing heavily, my heart beating in my throat, the hot knot buried in my chest, I turned and looked up to see Hector.

Oh my.

The muscle was jumping in his cheek. His face was stony but his eyes were on Ralphie.

“You done?” he clipped at Ralphie.

“No,” Ralphie snapped.

“You are for now,” Hector replied, and without hesitation he leaned over, took my hand then dragged me through our stunned audience, through the rest of the crowd, down my back hall to my office.

He threw open the door, flipped on the switch and pulled me in with controlled violence that sent me flying several steps into my office. He slammed the door behind us.

I stopped in the middle of the room, turned and looked at him.

That knot in my chest expanded, searing painfully wider through my chest and lungs and *just this close* to my heart.

Hector stood in front of the door, eyes beyond scorching. I didn't know what beyond scorching was, but whatever it was, his eyes were doing it.

“Were you gonna tell me?” he asked, voice low and vibrating, but his words were enunciated perfectly clearly.

“No,” I answered, and his eyes flashed dangerously. “Yes,” I wished quickly, and there was another flash. “I couldn't make up my mind about this,”

finished lamely.

“Why?” he snapped.

g solid, “Why?” I asked.

ning in “Sadie—” His tone held a warning.

I realized I was trembling, deep body shakes, and my hands went to my cheeks, rubbing and pressing at the same time, shoving my skin toward his eyesears.

Then I decided that it was time.

It was time a week ago, but I’d given in. I’d been weak. I’d wanted the dream.

ned in, Now, it was definitely time.

ugh the “I know what you’re doing,” I told him.

Without hesitation, he shot back, “Yeah? What am I doin’?”

with a I dropped my hands and straightened my shoulders. “I know how you felt that night in my father’s study when I walked away from you. You were angry. You weren’t even angry, you were livid. A woman doesn’t do that to a man, not a man like you, not without some kind of...” I stopped then and again, “I know you were angry and now you’re paying me back.”

I stopped talking.

’t know I did this because the voltage of the electric current whipping through the room intensified so sharply, if I’d looked I would have surely seen bright hot sparks crackling around the room.

“A man like me,” he said slowly.

vent on I swallowed.  
ind,” I

He continued.

“A man like me who’d use your body and abuse your heart to fuckin’ retribution just because you walked away leavin’ my cock hard

Well, since what he said sounded kind of stupid, I realized belatedly that I might have been wrong about that.

“You think that’s the kind of man I am?” he pushed.

“Hector—”

It was then he lost control of his anger and the room went wired.

“Answer me, goddamn it! *You think I’m that kind of man?*” he barked.

I jumped and stepped back.

He advanced.

That knot in my chest spread to my belly and my heart, burning through me so I couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t touch me,” I whispered.

“I wouldn’t touch you, Sadie. Not that way.” He stopped just short of me and looked down at my face. “I’d like to knock some fuckin’ sense into you, but that’s not the kind of man I am.”

At his words, my stomach clenched.

Painfully.

“Maybe I was wrong,” I said quietly.

His head cocked to the side and his eyes flashed again. “Maybe?”

I reached back with both hands and grabbed my hair at my ponytail, my hands fisting in it.

“I’m confused!” I cried, “I don’t have a lot of experience—”



He interrupted me. “*Mamita*, I’m warnin’ you. That excuse is no exactthin real fuckin’ fast.”

My breath was coming in quick bursts, I dropped my hands abruptly I “You don’t understand.”

“Explain it to me.”

“You still wouldn’t understand.”

“*Explain it to me!*” he roared.

I shook my head, or more like, jerked it from side to side.

I couldn’t take anymore.

Not one more second.

I couldn’t breathe, my stomach hurt, my head was pounding a through thing in my chest was threatening to explode.

I had to go, get out of there, go far, far away.

I rushed around him, got to the door and threw it open, but only to t of me step into the hall before his fingers wrapped tight around my upper a to you, he swung me around.

“Take your hand off me!” I shouted.

“We’re not fuckin’ done.”

“We’re done!”

“No we fucking well are not!” he yelled.

Then it all came out in a humiliating, painful burst.

I couldn’t control it. I had to get it out. The burning hot knot would fail, my me if I didn’t.

“*I’m protecting you!*” I screamed, “Don’t you get it? I’m protecting

wearin’ He blinked, slowly, his brows coming up in surprise, but I kept go  
I did it loudly, shouting at the top of my lungs.

nd said, “You deserve better than me, Hector Chavez! You’re a good man  
good family surrounded by good people. My father was a Drug King. I  
people! It’s what I am, he *made* me. And Ricky Balducci rap  
brutalized me. You know it. You saw it. *You were even there!*” I scr  
out of control, breath coming fast, eyes stinging with tears. “You s  
You told me you’d never forget. You saw me! You’re better than tha  
know it. You deserve more than that. You don’t think you do, but you  
a tattoo on you that reminds you to think with your head, not your  
don’t want to be the next tattoo you get when you learn your lesson c  
nd that and realize what you’ve done. That you could have had better. Th  
could have had more. That you could have someone good and cle  
right. Someone who belongs at your side. Not someone vile and ug  
tawdry and used that you should have never, ever, *ever* settled for!”

ook one He pulled me closer, muttering, “*Mamita,*” and I saw it in his eyes.  
rm and They’d gone so warm they burned a hole straight through my heart  
With superhuman effort I yanked my arm out his grasp, whirled an  
“Don’t follow me,” I shouted over my shoulder as I saw him advan  
the hall. I stopped and turned again. “*Don’t!*” I shrieked, my voice so s  
was like a physical thing clawing through the air.

Then I whirled again and ran, blind, mind blank, heart beating so  
thought it’d hammer out of my chest.

uld kill I pushed through people, felt hands on me, heard calls, shout  
grunts. But I ran through it all, straight to the counter. I yanked open a  
g you!” and pulled out the keys to my apartment.

ing and     People got in my way. I heard their voices speaking to me urger  
nothing penetrated.

from a     I dodged, ducked, yanked my body away. I heard a gravelly voice  
He kills got her,” but I was gone, out the door into the cold night air, running.

ed and     After a block I bent double, pulled off my shoes and threw them in  
eeched, Then I sprinted like the devil was at my heels, the second block, t  
aw me! third, then the fourth. On the fifth I was at my apartment building.  
at and I open the outer door, punched in the security code, yanked open the inn  
i’ve got and darted into the lobby.

body. I     I hadn’t been there since the rape and I didn’t think about it. I ran  
one day to the stairs, stitch in my side, breath rasping in my throat, up the four  
rat you then out into the hall and to my door. With shaking hands I tried to ur  
:an and It took me three tries and then I was in, and I stopped, looking around  
gly and dark, feeling the emptiness, remembering...

My nails went to my scalp and I ripped them through my hair, fel  
painful and harsh as I dragged them along my scalp, down the back  
: head, pulling the ribbon free.

d ran.     I couldn’t be there.

nce into     I couldn’t go to Art.

shrill, it     I couldn’t go to Ralphie and Buddy.

o hard I     I couldn’t go to a Rock Chick.

o hard I     I couldn’t go to Hector.

s, even     I couldn’t go anywhere.

drawer     There was nowhere I belonged.

Nowhere safe.

ntly but I went to my bedroom.

Quickly walking through, the memories of the night when Ricky b  
say, “Istabbing at my brain. I walked straight to the sliding doors that led  
balcony. I closed the door behind me and stepped out into the cold.  
traffic.plastered my back against the stone wall and drifted down. My shirt a  
hen thesnagging against the stone, down I went until my bottom hit the concr  
I threwknees were up. I put my cheek against them and I tried to find one  
er doorSadies to help me.

But they were gone.

straight Not on vacation, not having cocktails, not getting facials. I  
: flightsPrincess, Attitude Sadie, Take Charge Sadie and Pretend Sadie  
clock it.vanished. They didn’t exist anymore. They weren’t there to be called.  
d in the It was just me.

Only me.

lt them, I was all there was left.

of my I wrapped my arms around my legs. The cold night air crept i  
bones. I kept my cheek to my knees and I sat there in the dark stillnes  
night.

Alone.



THE SLIDING GLASS DOOR OPENED.

I heard it and kept my cheek to my knees, my face turned away, n  
so cold I was shivering.

A hand slid along my lower back, another one under my knees.

I twisted as the arms lifted me. I turned to fight and stilled at what

I thought it would be Hector.

It wasn't.

It was Duke.

Then I He carried me into my bedroom, set me on my feet and turned  
nd skirt sliding door, pushing it shut.

ete. My Then I watched in stunned silence as he came to me, and when h  
: of my were wrapping around me, pulling me tight to his big, warm body, I  
violent noise coming from outside the apartment, like a body had t  
against the door.

My Ice I jumped and my head snapped around.

had all “Hector,” Duke said over my head. “He’s out there, the boys a  
him. They’re holding him back so I don’t have a lotta time.”

My lungs seized at his words, and even though the warmth of h  
was heating me, I still shivered.

“Knew your mom,” he went on. “Didn’t know her well. I was a  
nto my then, gettin’ my Master’s, but I hung out at Ellen’s store. Ellen was  
s of the Grandma. She gave the store to Indy when she died.”

I didn’t reply. I stood in his arms and tried to keep my mind blank,  
words came at me and I had nothing left in me to fight in order to kee  
from penetrating my brain.

“I used to study there, made friends with Ellen. Katie, Indy’s mom  
y body and Kitty Sue came in all the time. So did your dad.”

I sucked in a shocked breath at this announcement and waited.

“Loved your mom, your dad did. Thought she hung the moon. Yo  
I saw. see it every time he looked at her. I didn’t get a good feelin’ about t

but Ellen thought he was special. ‘Sharp as a tack, big heart,’ she told me. She had good instincts. She could sense things in people. She never said much, but she did tell me things weren’t happy at home for your dad. It wasn’t a good place for him to be. So he spent all the time he could get to the Lizzie.”

I was blinking, rapid and uncontrollable, as he kept sharing. “Things happen, life is shit, decisions are made, paths are chosen. My dad chose the wrong paths. But I suspect he chose them for good reasons. I’m thinkin’ he was doin’ the right thing, wantin’ to give you and Lizzie a better life than what he had. I know this, Sadie, he loved your mom. And she loved him. Back then he was her world. So, I suspect what made you were with them. They loved each other, Sadie, and that’s what made you. It might have been wrong. It might have gone bad. But that’s the way it started, that’s who you are.”

I heard my own breaths escaping my nostrils in sharp bursts and student-violent noise sounded in the hall. “Somethin’ else darlin’,” he went on quickly, and his voice loud. “Your mom was here, she saw what I saw at your gallery, heard what you say, but his you say, it’d tear out her heart. Girl, it would just kill her to think you’d hurt that of yourself. She made the ultimate sacrifice for you. Don’t let it be nothin’. Take hold of life and live it beautiful like she wanted you to do it.” I gulped down a sob, but it tore through and now I was shivering for a different reason, tears flowing down my face. I pressed my cheek against his chest and wrapped my arms around his girth.

“Now, darlin’, there’s a man outside who’s likely to do something to you. You could be that guy, regret to men he respects if you don’t get out there and stop it.”

old me. I pulled in my lips, but as I did it, without thinking and without hes-  
shared I pulled free of Duke, walked on my frozen feet through the bedroom  
dad. It room, straight to the front door, which I yanked open.

ld with Ten feet down the hall I saw the backs of the Hot Bunch (and Tex  
Hank, Mace, Vance, Luke (and Tex) were all there. Their bodies he  
way that was just plain scary and the air in the hall was thick and hosti

1. Your They heard the door, turned and parted. I saw Eddie and Hector, I  
easons, back to me, body confronting Hector, Hector facing me.

a better Eddie turned. Hector's eyes sliced to me and I started walking forw

e loved Hector advanced.

is love. I started running.

re gone I ran straight into him and his arms closed around me.

ere you I shoved my face in his chest, my fists gathering the material of h  
another by my cheeks and I cried hard, shoulder-shaking, uncontrollable sobs.

His arms went tighter and the heat of his body enveloped me.

owered. "I'm an idiot," I said into his chest.

I heard "You're not an idiot, *mi cielo*," he murmured.

thought I shook my head, but kept his shirt in my fists so my face was I  
t be for against his chest.  
o."

ig for a "I'm an idiot," I repeated through my bawling.

inst his "You're a pain in the ass, but you're not an idiot," he replied.

I tipped my head back and looked at him. I couldn't see m  
n' he'll anything. He was blurry through my tears.

"I told you that you were going to have to cut me some slack!" I cr

sitation, He stared down at me. "You movin' to Greece?"

, living "No," I said immediately.

I felt the tension leave his body then one of his hands drifted up m  
x). Lee, up my neck, his fingers sliding into my hair.

ld in a His head dipped down and he touched my lips.

le.

Eddie's "Good," he said against my mouth. "Now let's go home."

ard.

his shirt

rubbing

uch of

ied.



He stared down at me. “You movin’ to Greece?”

“No,” I said immediately.

I felt the tension leave his body then one of his hands drifted up my back, up my neck, his fingers sliding into my hair.

His head dipped down and he touched my lips.

“Good,” he said against my mouth. “Now let’s go home.”



## A COOLER AND A PICNIC BASKET

*Sadie*

I woke in Hector's bed, feeling Hector's heat at my back, his mouth on my shoulder and his hands moving on me.

I sensed it immediately. The urgency and the tingles started.

"Hector?" I whispered.

He answered in Spanish, his mouth at my neck, words I didn't understand causing the tingles to grow into shivers.

I turned in his arms, pressing into his body. He fell to his back, me on top of him. One of his hands went into my panties, the fingers of the other one slid into my hair.

I put my mouth to his. His hand put pressure on my head, we kissed and melted immediately as the kiss shot straight to hot, hungry and wild.

I'd gone to bed wearing my panties and one of his flannel shirts and they were gone within minutes.

Luckily, Hector had gone to bed naked.

I used my mouth on him, his throat, neck, down his chest, my tongue dragging across his nipples, my tongue outlining his tattoo.

Then down further, tracing his abdominal muscles with my lips,

while my hand was wrapped around him, stroking, until, finally, I went even further.

When I did, I heard his groan and his fingers slid in my hair, pulling back. While I worked him, my gaze drifted up his chest. I saw him watching me, eyes blazing. A thrill shot through me and I felt the wetness immediately gather between my legs.

He allowed this for a while then pulled me up so I was on my belly side. Before I could turn, he did an abdominal curl, and all of a sudden, he was on me, between my legs, lifting my hips so I was on my knees. He positioned himself at my entrance and drove inside.

My head flew back. I came up to my hands then lifted my torso, reaching out to grab the headboard as he pounded into me. One of his hands reached up to cup my breast, finger and thumb doing an amazingly effective nipple routine. His other hand went between my legs, finger honing in on the target. He was bent to mine and his face was in my neck. I turned my head to him, pulling him closer. “I love,” I panted, too turned on by what we were doing to think about the words, “being connected to you.”

As an answer, he drove in deep and stayed there, grinding hard, his body wedged between my legs creating magic.

My head went back again, colliding with his shoulder as the ground beneath us tightened, intensified and exploded. It was so immense, it took me out of time, out of my world, into the world of a real Hector and I. Together. Connected.

And everything about them very, very right.



AFTER HE FINISHED, he gently pulled out, fell to his back, positioning himself all the way.

at downtop of him. One of his arms wrapped lightly around my waist, the fir  
his other hand traced mindless patterns on my bottom. My face was  
illing it neck.

atching “Take hold of life and live it beautiful like she wanted you to do.”  
mediately words sounded in my brain.

“They’re gone,” I whispered.

y at his His arm at my waist tightened, his other hand stopped moving and  
as over my behind.

sitioned “Sorry?” he asked, his voice rough, probably from what just hap  
and I felt that roughness somewhere happy and deep.

eaching “My Sadies,” I explained quietly. Embarrassed and unsure, I kept r  
went to in his neck, and taking a deep breath, I powered on. “See, like I told  
oll. His get through I needed the Ice Princess. But these last few weeks, trying  
is torso my way I created more of them, Attitude Sadie, Take Charge Sadi  
l. Sadie...I tried to find them last night to help me, but they’re gone.”

out my He gave me a squeeze and ordered softly, “Look at me.”

I didn’t want to.

s finger No, I *really* didn’t want to.

So I didn’t.

glorious “I don’t think I can,” I told him. “You probably think I’m crazy.”  
ook me

. Sadie. He gave me another squeeze, waiting a moment and then he spoke.

“Mamita, they’re not gone. They’ve always been there. You  
discovered them. They’re who you are.”

His words surprised me, mainly because they made sense, and I lit  
; me onhead to look at him.

ingers of “Do you think so?” I asked.

s in his He rolled us so he was mostly on top and his eyes scanned my face

Duke’s “Yeah,” he answered. “You’re the most complicated woman I’ve  
met.”

My brows drew together in confusion.

“Is that good?”

cupped He grinned and his eyes went warm.

opened, “Fuck yeah,” he told me through his grin. “Gotta tell you, *mi cie*  
missed a few.”

ny face This time, my brows went up.

you, to “I did?”

to find His mouth touched mine, but his eyes stayed open, staring at me  
e, Nice his head moved away an inch.

“Yeah. Crazy Sadie. Sweet Sadie. Funny Sadie. And my favorite  
Sadie who just let me fuck her the way I wanted and she got off on  
more than me.”

Someone, please tell me he did not just say that.

My eyes narrowed.

“I did *not* get off on it more than you.”

This time he smiled and it was his wicked smile. So, even though  
angry, my belly still melted at the sight.

ou just “You did,” he said.

fted my “I did not,” I retorted.

His hands started moving on me and his mouth came back to mine

kiss me, but instead he murmured against my lips, “*Mamita*, don’t you can feel you? You’re so wet, you’re slick. You feel like silk. You can  
ve ever You always come hard. I know it, I can feel it. When you do, you fuckin’ tight...”

Oh my God!

Even as his words were turning me on (yes, again!), I interrupted h

“You think a lot of yourself, Hector Chavez,” I snapped, lifting my  
to push at his shoulders.

He moved away a few inches, but his smile got bigger, whiter  
more glamorous.

“Yeah, and you do too.”

I gasped, outraged.

He bit his lip watching me then said, “I see I got Attitude Sadie  
Then his head bent and he nuzzled my neck. “I like her too.”

At his words, for some bizarre reason ice water flooded my veins  
body froze.

“Don’t make fun of me,” I whispered.

Immediately, his head came up and I noticed his smile had vanishe

He stared at me a second, eyes dark, then he spoke.

“I’m not makin’ fun of you, Sadie. I’m teasin’ you. There’s a big  
difference.”

I watched him and realized belatedly that his smile had not only va  
Mr. Mood Swing was getting downright angry.

He kept talking, proving me right.

. Not to

I think I “*Mujer*, you’re gonna have to learn pretty fuckin’ quick, to trust me hard, not like the people you know, the society bitches, the assholes you get so recruited. You don’t have to shut down. You don’t have to put those shields up. Christ, I *want* you to be who you are.”

Yes. I was right. He was downright angry.

im. My heart lurched.

y hands I did it again. I insulted him. Not as badly as last night, but not either.

and far “Hector—” I started.

“This is your gig, Sadie. I can’t help you. You’re gonna have to figure out, and fast. I’m not walkin’ on eggshells wonderin’ what fuckin’ reaction you’re gonna have to everything I say. I’m gonna say this once and get your attention. I’m not passin’ the time here, enjoyin’ a sweet, hot piece of fuck of it. If you don’t get it yet, I’ll give it to you. What we got, it’s somethin’. Do you understand?”

and my

My heart lurched again, but this time it felt nice and that warm, glow hit my chest.

d. “I understand,” I whispered.

“You better fuckin’ understand,” he bit out.

fuckin’ I closed my eyes tight then opened them again.

“I’m sorry.” He stared at me silently and I continued, “About just now, and about last night. I was horrible. I said horrible...” I stopped and started again, “I’m working through it, I promise.”

He kept staring at me a second then two, then his fingers slid into the top of my hair and I saw his mood swing again. But not fully, he was holding

ne. I'm to some of his anger. I could see it.

r father "Jesus, you're a pain in the ass," he muttered.

fuckin' "I'm sorry about that too," I said instantly, and I meant it.

His thumb came out of my hair and started sliding along my temple.

"I'll make up for it," I told him.

His eyes were watching his thumb, but at my words, they came to  
st good "Yeah?"

"I'll buy you a building," I offered.

His body went tight and his eyes narrowed.

figure it "Or, an island somewhere," I went on quickly. "I don't know how  
reaction islands cost, but there has to be one in my price range."

so pay It was then I felt him relax. His mouth did that fighting-a-grin  
for the knew he finally let go of his anger and the happy glow settled in.  
means

Since what I was doing appeared to be working, I kept talking. "I  
, happy just be a beach and a palm tree, but what else do you need on an island

He lost the fight with his grin, his head descended, and I carried on  
when his lips were against mine.

"We'll bring a cooler and a picnic basket..." I stopped talking bec  
started kissing me, open mouthed and sweet.

st now, His body settled on mine and his arms were sliding around me w  
cell rang.

nd then He lifted his head and I saw right away that he'd morphed again, th  
looking frustrated.

the side He pressed into me as he reached to the nightstand to nab his phon  
ding on



“This is over, *mi cielo*,” his eyes came to me as he flipped on the phone, “I’m takin’ you to a fuckin’ island.” Then he put his phone to his ear and clipped, “Yeah?”

e. My gaze was on Hector’s face. My thoughts were on being on an island with Hector, and in the very, very back of my mind I figured my mom would like that. I mean, I wasn’t altogether certain my mom would be thrilled to mine. Hector’s creativity in the sack (or my response to it), but what he did was beautiful in its way, and he made me feel good so she had to appreciate that.

Right?

v much Then I saw his face grow tight and thoughts of my mom’s approval. Hector disintegrated.

thing. I Oh no.

What now?

t might “No joke?” Hector asked into the phone, his eyes moving to me. “?”

I did not like what I saw. Not at all.

on even “Right,” he went on. “We’re comin’ down.”

ause he Without saying good-bye, he flipped the phone shut, tossed it on the nightstand and then stared at it, his face still tight, body now tense.

hen his “Hector?” I called.

His chin dipped and he looked at me.

his time “Maybe we’ll go to an island today,” he murmured.

Damn and blast!

e. “What?” I asked.

pen his His face went soft and he muttered, “Shit, Sadie.”

his ear “What?” I snapped.

He rolled us. Once he got to his back, he did an ab curl, his hands at the backs of my knees so we were sitting with me straddling him. He tilted back, mine down, my hands on his shoulders, his arms loose about me.

l to me “Your gallery has been torched,” he told me.

rove of Convulsively, my hands moved to his neck and my fingers squeezed

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

oval of “Fire started at five this morning. It’s out now. They don’t know much damage yet, but it didn’t spread.” He paused then asked “insured?”

I was speechless so I nodded. For some reason, all I could think of was my lovely gift wrap and organdie ribbon, now probably reduced to ash and Lisette’s paintings!

I closed my eyes tight, and not even thinking about it, I dropped my head until my forehead was resting on Hector’s.

on the “Lisette’s paintings,” I whispered.

His arms tightened and I opened my eyes.

“You wanna go down there?”

“No,” I told him. “But I’m going to go.”

His hands went to my waist. He lifted me off him and to the side. He came over me, off the bed, hands back to my waist and he pulled me up on the bed and set me on my feet.

Without a word, he tagged my hand and led the way to the shower.



tugging AFTER HECTOR and I had our (yes, *our!*) shower, I called Buddy and I  
lis head to give them the news.

around Buddy answered and I felt weird. After last night, I thought the  
mad at me. But Buddy's voice was its usual soft and sweet.

"You okay, sweetheart?" he asked.

ed. "Yes. Did Ralphie—?"

"He told me. He's upset, thinks he hurt your feelings," Buddy inter

w how "He didn't hurt my feelings. I was worried I hurt his."

, "You "No, he gets what you were trying to do. He overreacted, as usual."

"It wasn't his fault."

of was Buddy changed the subject. "Are you really movin' to Greece?"

"Not anymore," I answered.

ly head Silence for a second then, teasing, "Damn, there went my vacation

I smiled into the phone, relief rolling over me for a brief shining r  
then my smile faded and I said, "I've got bad news."

More silence, then I told him about the gallery.

Then he shouted, "*What?*"

I winced.

ide. He I heard him cover the mouthpiece and even though it was covered,  
e out of Ralphie's shrill scream.

Buddy came back to me. "Ralphie, YoYo and me'll meet you there

"See you soon," I said and we disconnected.

I dressed in my Lucky jeans, a slimfit, long-sleeved white T-shirt, a black belt with the rose buckle and motorcycle boots that Daisy, Roxie, Ralphie and Stevie gave me. I left my hair long to dry in crazy, natural wavy ringlets and did a half-assed pass with blusher, shadow and mascara. They'd be I spent more time on my lip gloss. You had to be careful with lip gloss when you were about to view your burned-out building. If you didn't look like a clown.

Hector and I climbed into the Bronco and headed into town.

We hit LoDo and I saw Hector avoid the Nightingale garage, rupted. would be the perfect parking opportunity.

"You can park in the garage," I told him as he navigated early n, downtown traffic.

His eyes came to me briefly then went back to the road.

"I'm thinkin' you've scaled enough mountains for now, *mami* muttered, and his casual kindness made that happy glow grow a s plans."wider.

He drove until he found a spot on the street three blocks from the moment and parallel parked.

Then Hector and I walked hand in hand toward the gallery.

As we approached, I saw the crowd forming a U in front of what v of Art. Traffic had been diverted. There were barricades up in a wide I heard front of the gallery. The fire trucks and police cars were still there and were standing around the barricades in the street.

Without apology, Hector shoved his way through the crowd .". barricades and walked right through.

airt, the A uniformed officer looked at him and gave him a chin lift. Hector  
ie, Todwalked into the opened area where firemen and police were milling ab  
ves and I stared at my building. The brick on the outside was blackene  
Though, windows had shattered, the inside was blackened too, and wat  
ss, even everywhere.

t you'd Hector walked us to Detective Marker who was standing watch  
approach. We got close and stopped.

“Jimmy,” Hector said, dropping my hand, but his arm slid arou  
which shoulders and he pulled me into his side.

“Hector,” Detective Marker greeted then his eyes came to me. “Sat  
morning “Detective Marker,” I replied and looked back at my gallery.

My heart sank at the same time my body sagged despondent  
Hector’s side. In response, his arm curled around my neck and tightene  
ta,” he “Donny Balducci’s a firebug,” Detective Marker remarked, hi  
midgen never leaving the building.

“Yeah,” Hector agreed, his eyes also locked on what was left of Ar  
gallery My head tilted back to look at Hector.

His face was stony.

My gaze drifted to Detective Marker.

He looked a weird mixture of angry and resigned. In other words,  
e arc in what could only be called a Cop Look.  
people

Then Hector started talking again.

to the “Jack’s sending the tapes by courier to the station. We got them  
cameras. Jack saw ’em break in and called it in. Said he saw Donny v  
gasoline, either Marty or Ricky with him. He didn’t get a good lool

or and I second guy but he knew it was a Balducci. They made fast work of  
out. The place was ablaze and they were gone before anyone got here.”

ed. The “I hope its Ricky,” Detective Marker replied, fishing his phone ou  
er was suit jacket.

“Yeah,” Hector said. “I’m thinkin’ arson is probably a violation  
ning us bond.”

I was no longer listening. A thin film of red had descended over m  
ind my and there was a buzzing in my ears.

My sagging body went tight and I put my hand on Hector’s sto  
die.” pulled slightly away and looked up at him.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

ly into Hector’s chin dipped and his eyes came to mine.

ed. “Parceling out the bad news, *mamita*,” he said softly. “You can or  
is gaze so much at once.”

I blinked at him and then took in both Hector and Detective Marke  
t.

“Let me get this straight,” I said, my voice trembling, something  
happening to me.

It was *not* my weird, warm, happy glow (not even fucking *close*).

It was *not* that hot, hard, painful knot in my chest.

he had It was something else altogether.

When I had both their attention, I kept talking.

“First, for weeks, all the fucking Balduccis call me, stop by the  
on the only when I’m alone, show up at my apartment day and night, doin  
with the shit, saying crazy things and freaking me out. Then Ricky fucking B  
at the breaks in, beats me up and rapes me. Then Harvey fucking Balducci :

it. Theme and tries to kidnap me. *Then* Marty fucking Balducci threatens n  
the phone and calls me the C-word, *twice*. Now, Donny fucking Baldu  
it of his burned down my gallery?”

I was shouting, people were looking at me and I didn't care.

l of his “You have *got* to be *shitting* me!” I yelled.

Hector got in my line of sight.

ny eyes “*Mamita*, calm down,” he muttered.

I looked up at him and grabbed on to his tee, fisting it in my fing  
nach. I giving him a shake (well, trying to, but he didn't move, just his tee did

“*You* be calm! I'm pissed right the fuck *off!*” I screamed.

“This is gonna end soon, Sadie, trust me.”

“Yeah, it's going to end soon. I'm gonna hunt those motherfucker  
ily take and—”

Hector's hand came over my mouth, and I finished my shouted th  
r. it sounded like, “Kff thff.”

strange Hector shuffled me back, arm still tight around my neck, hand o  
mouth, until we were away from Detective Marker and everyone.

Then his head came close. “*Mamita*, he knows you're emotion  
don't mean it. Still, not good to threaten homicide in front of a cop.”

I just glared at him over his hand on my mouth.

“You in control?” he asked.

gallery “No!” I said under his hand but it came out, “Nff!”

g crazy His body started to shake and I knew he was laughing.

alducci My head prepared to explode.

assaults

ne over Now, really, seriously, there was *nothing* fucking funny about *this*.  
icci has “This is not fucking funny,” I said under his hand, but again it ca  
“Thff if nf ffing ffny.”

I knew he was about to burst out laughing, which would mean I’d  
kill *him* right in front of Detective Marker (or not kill him because  
him, but at least do him some bodily harm) when we heard, “We’  
them.”

ers and Hector and my heads turned to the side and we saw Ralphie and  
) with YoYo on a leash trying to get by a uniformed officer.

Hector dropped his arms, letting me go, and called, “Joe, it’s all rig

s down “Joe” looked at Hector, nodded and stepped aside. Ralphie and  
forged through, both of them walking slowly, their heads turned to t  
staring at Art. YoYo strained at her lead, tongue lolling, bugged out  
me, and Ralphie let her go. She scampered across the space. I lean  
reat so and picked her up. She decided she needed to bathe my neck and ja  
her tongue so this was what she did, squiggling in my arms, all happy ]

ver my “Stop,” Hector suddenly clipped at the pug.

YoYo went still immediately and stared at him.

ial and At his tone, so did I.

“She’s just happy to see me,” I explained to Hector.

“Only tongue on your neck is mine,” he returned.

My eyes bugged out as far as YoYo’s.

“You’re jealous of a dog?”

“Fuck no,” he answered, staring at me like I had a screw loose.  
might have a mind to put my mouth on you and I don’t want to do it



dog.”

me out, Well.

Had to admit, he had a point.

have to And it was an interesting point.

I liked And the thought of his mouth on me made me forget all about the  
re with mean, fucking Balduccis.

Ralphie and Buddy made it to us and they gave chin lifts to  
Buddy (Ralphie’s came with a, “Hey, Double H”) and hugs and cheek kisse  
(Ralphie’s hug was tighter than normal, longer, and after he looked i  
ght.” eyes until I smiled at him, only then did he move away).

Buddy “Lisette is gonna freak. She’d been working on that collection for  
he sideyear,” Ralphie said, his eyes now on the blackened building, and my tl  
eyes on went right back to the crazy, mean, fucking Balduccis.

d down “Hector said it was Donny Balducci,” I informed them, and in  
lw with they looked at me. “I know. But you aren’t allowed to threaten his life  
puppy. front of the police, or so Hector says.”

“Can I threaten to beat the crap out of him?” Buddy asked.

I looked at Hector to assess his response to this.

He was fighting a grin but he shook his head at me.

“Probably not,” I told Buddy.

“Well!” Ralphie cried (loudly). “Life gives you lemons, you  
lemonade. We’re insured against loss of income, this means vacatio  
means shopping. This means trips to the spa. This means learning  
“But I make that complicated lemon soufflé.”

: after a “You don’t cook,” Buddy cut in.

“Well, I’m gonna learn,” Ralphie shot back. “And that means Table, Cherry Creek Mall, after breakfast. Maybe Williams Sonoma calling the Rock Chicks. I’m thinking Mercury Café.” He turned to me call Lisette, and after I’m done calling Daisy, I’ll call the insurance We eat then we’re shopping for kitchen implements.”

“We don’t need any kitchen implements,” Buddy cut in again.

“One *always* needs kitchen implements,” Ralphie returned.

“No shopping and no breakfast with the Rock Chicks. Unless I can get a man on Sadie, she’s staying at the offices today,” Hector entered into my conversation.

“That’s all right, Double H, I’m on the case,” Ralphie assured him.

Hector’s face went a weird mixture of hard and soft and I realized when he started speaking in a voice that was the same as his face.

“No. I want a trained man on her. Buildings are burning. The Baby, not in here feelin’ pressure. I want her covered by a professional.”

I stared at Hector, cuddling YoYo closer to the warm, happy glow of the chest because at that point it hit me not a lot of macho badasses would go out with Ralphie (maybe Buddy but never Ralphie). They wouldn’t want to be with him. They wouldn’t have dinner with him. They certainly wouldn’t be nice to him when they knew what they said could hurt his feelings.

And that was when I knew.

Right then and there, watching Hector be careful with Ralphie’s feelings, I knew how to make a man.

It had happened.

I *was* living the dream.

Sur La The dream of a good man who would save me. The dream of a man. I would sweep away my bad life and take me to a jumbled bungalow (Hector's house wasn't a bungalow, but still) and make me safe. Make me happy. Make me so warm, I'd never feel cold again.

The force of this realization caused me to take a step back as if a colossal weight that landed on me and I had to hold it up but couldn't manage it.

Hector, Buddy and Ralphie's eyes all snapped to me.

"Sadie?" Buddy asked, but Hector got close.

"*Mamita?*" His hands came to my neck.

I looked up at him. "I'm okay."

He scanned my face and his brows drew together.

"You're shuttin' down," he said, but immediately so he wouldn't that, I shook my head and got closer, a lot closer, crushing YoYo (who seem to mind) between us.

I tilted my head back further.

"You don't get it," I whispered to him. "I'm okay."

He stared at me and I went on.

"My gallery is burned beyond recognition. I'm estranged from my Crazy men are after me. I had the freakout to end all freakouts in my friends and most of my clients last night but...I'm okay."

I felt his fingers squeeze my neck as I watched his eyes grow warm. I knew mine were the same.

"Finally!" Ralphie cried. Hector and I lost the moment and turned at him. "Told her to enjoy the ride, Double H, *ages* ago. She didn't

an who Finally, she's learning to enjoy the fucking ride!"

(though I shifted and pressed my side against Hector's front.

ake me His arm curled around my neck.

Then I felt his lips kiss the top of my head.

t was a I mentally pried my hands off the safety bar that was tucked, ti;  
't quite secure, across my lap and lifted them straight in the air.



"DO YOU EVER FILE A THING?" Kitty Sue asked Shirleen from her ha  
knees on the floor.

Daisy and I were with her, alphabetizing a mountain of paperv  
twenty-six piles across the Nightingale Investigation's reception area.

"It's not in my job description," Shirleen replied from her seat bel  
't think reception desk, currently engaged in the difficult task of painting her  
) didn't frosty grape.

Kitty Sue sat up so she was on her knees. She planted her hands  
hips, twisted to Shirleen and glared.

"You're the receptionist!"

"Yeah? So?" Shirleen asked, not taking her eyes from her nails.

r father. "Receptionists file," Kitty Sue retorted.

front of "Filing people file. Receptionists answer phones and guard the  
Shirleen returned.

m and I Daisy looked at me and giggled. I pulled my lips between my te  
tried not to laugh. Kitty Sue didn't look like she thought anything was

to look "This is my son's livelihood," Kitty Sue said as she got to her feet.  
t listen. if he needed something urgently and couldn't find it?"

Shirleen threw her head back and laughed for a long time.

“That’s funny,” she declared (unnecessarily) when she finished laughing.

“What’s funny? I’m being serious,” Kitty Sue shot back.

Shirleen leveled her amused gaze on Kitty Sue. “I practically gotta get Lee to his chair to get him to fill out reports, type out notes and write other shit he’s gotta do. He *hates* paperwork. All the boys do. Badass niggers get fuckin’ grumpy when Shirleen rides their asses to get them to put their hands and fingers to keyboards. If it wasn’t for me, our invoices would be six months late goin’ out and no one would get paid. Including Shirleen. And Shirleen likes to get paid. I got two growin’ boys who eat me out of house and home and are always takin’ bitches to the movies and shit like that. I don’t get paid, I’m fucked and Roam and Sniff’ll look like beggars behind the door of their babes. Not...gonna...happen.”

“Well,” the wind, I could tell, had gone out of Kitty Sue’s sails, “the only thing you could do is help us now.”

“I will help you,” Shirleen replied. “I’ll tell you you missed a pile of papers she nodded to a pile of papers at the end of her desk that was at least four feet high.”

“Shit,” Daisy muttered.

That was when I giggled at the same time the door opened and Aimee walked in, laughing.

I sat back on my calves and smiled at them as they called, “Hello, everyone.”

Not two months ago, I walked into this office feeling the frost of rejection. “What the fuck,” I thought, knowing they hated me and wishing I was one of them.

Now I was sitting on the floor, sorting through Lee and The  
ghing. confidential paperwork, having spent the day getting to know Bro  
computer geek, and I mean *geek*), Monty (the guy who managed  
surveillance room, where I was a bit weirded out to see they had  
a chain Fortnum's, which meant my meltdown there was witnessed by everyone  
hatever people than I knew at the time) and Shirleen.  
nothers

Kitty Sue had come by with lunch. We ate. We chatted. She told me  
open to stories about my mom that only a best friend would know and she apologized  
s would about seven million five hundred thousand times about not "protecting"  
Shirleen. throughout my life and not coming to see me after my father was put  
out of bars.  
ke that.

"I kept trying to figure out how to do it. What I should say  
in front whispered to me, holding my hand. "I didn't know what to say."

I squeezed her fingers.

"It's done now. Over. Don't think about it." I blew it off as if  
e." And nothing so she would stop beating herself up. Then I changed the subject  
t a foot "You told me about my mom, now will you tell me about Katherine?"

She smiled, let go of my hand, sat back and told me great stories  
Katherine.

Later, Daisy came around, Kitty Sue spied the paperwork and we  
lly and busy.

"What in *the hell* are you doing?" Ally asked, staring at the papers  
ley," to over the floor.

"Filing," I answered.

Indy turned to Shirleen. "I thought that was your job."

Boys' "Do I look like a file clerk to you?" Shirleen's eyes narrowed, dy (thebecoming frustrated with this topic.

ged the "You're sitting behind a receptionist desk," Indy returned.

mitored "Maybe we shouldn't talk about this anymore," I cut in, trying to h

n more "Does Lee know you don't do the filing?" Indy, apparently, didn my help.

ie great Shirleen grinned. "That's it. *You* talk to Lee about paperwork. *Y* logized him lip about paperwork. Now *that* I'd like to see. Make sure Sh ng" me around when you talk to Lee about paperwork. He *loves* to talk behind paperwork."

y," she At this juncture, wisely, Kitty Sue decided to intervene.

"Ally, get that pile from the end of Shirleen's desk and you and In sort. Shirleen, move out from behind the desk, Sadie's going to type la the computer and make up folders. Daisy, start with the As, file what it was has a folder in the cabinet, give Sadie the rest so she can make folders subject. on girls," she clapped her hands, "let's go."

s about Boy, you could tell Kitty Sue was a mom. Even Daisy and Shirleen she ordered, which meant Shirleen moved to the far more comfortable and kept polishing her nails.

all got I found the folders and labels and started typing. Daisy started Kitty Sue, Indy and Ally kept on sorting.

pers all In an hour, we were done. The last label typed. The last folder pu Kitty Sue closed a drawer with her foot and swiped her hands toget she was brushing off dust.

"Oowee, world's put to rights, Lee's paperwork is filed. I'll c

clearly mayor,” Shirleen announced from her reclining position on the couch, her head coming up from her perusal of *Us* magazine.

Daisy, Ally, Indy and Kitty Sue all went red in the face and glared at Shirleen.

“Why don’t we go to dinner? My treat,” I offered before anyone could commit a violent act, or worse, say something they regretted.

“Can’t,” Shirleen said, sitting up. “Orders are you stay here unless the Hot Bunch is around to escort you. They’re all tied up. You’re stuck.”

“Then we’ll order pizza,” I decided.

Shirleen nodded and grinned. “That’ll work. I got Famous on speed dial. Of course she did.”

“I’ll call the girls. The Hot Bunch are all working tonight so the phones are free,” Indy put in.

“Tell Jet to stop by Pasquini’s and pick up dessert,” Ally threw in.

“Tell Jules to bring Max. I haven’t seen him in *ages*,” Kitty Sue said.

“Tell Roxie to pop by the liquor store and get beer,” Daisy finished.

I moved out from behind the desk to give Shirleen room and walked to the side of the couch to pick up my purse so I could call Ralphie and see if they wanted to come around.

I grabbed my phone, dropped my purse to the couch and turned, away from the door, to face the girls, all of whom were across the room.

“I’ll call Ralphie and Bud—” I started but didn’t finish.

The door opened behind me. I didn’t have a chance to turn, but I saw Daisy’s face grow pale, her mouth opened to say something, but I heard something very unpleasant touch my neck.



ch, her I dropped the phone and everything went black.

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I dropped the phone and everything went black.

TWENTY-TWO



## HE TAUGHT ME HOW TO MAKE S'MORES

*Sadie*

**I**t was well past dawn when the door opened, the lights went on and I walked in.

I'd been up for hours watching the sun lighten the dark room as it shined through the closed curtains at the window.

I did not spend this time scared.

I spent it angry.

I was over this.

Over.

This.

*All of it.*

The fact that it was Jerry who'd kidnapped me right out of Night Investigations reception area and not one of the crazy, mean, Balducci Brothers didn't make me any happier.

This was only partly because I was over all the shitty, terrible things that kept making my life so fucking difficult.

It was also because I knew Hector—and everyone, for that matter

probably scared out of their minds that I'd been gone all night.

And them being scared pissed me right off.

I yanked my hand, which was handcuffed to an iron bedstead so made an awful clink and I glared at him.

"Uncuff me," I snapped.

"No fuckin' way. You get uncuffed after you talk to your dad," replied, putting a mug of coffee and a bowl of cereal on the nightstand

The room I was in was clean, drab and had no personal items. double bed, dresser and two nightstands.

id Jerry

"Where am I?" I demanded, taking a different tact.

peeped

"Your father's safe house. The Feds never found it," Jerry standing several feet away from the bed, arms crossed on his chest, down at me.

"Where is it?"

"You're spreadin' your legs for an ex-Fed PI, Sadie," he returned tone ugly. "I'm not gonna tell you where your father's safe house is."

I decided to ignore his rude words.

"How did you get me?"

"Stun gun. You went down. I dragged you out. Your bitches can'tingale me. I fired warning shots, they backed off. Got you in the car, Nighti fucking operations man, Monty whoever-the-fuck, came after me, I shot out

You started to come around, I gave you a different kind of shot. raumasnight."

I felt my breath catch. "You *shot* at them?"

—were

"Warning shots."

I yanked my hand against the cuffs and got up on my knees.

“I swear to *God*, Jerry, you hurt any of them, I’ll fucking *kill* you!”

He grinned like he thought I was hilarious. “Much as I’d like to see a bullet in Nightingale’s piece or his fuckin’ sister, who’s a pain in *every* ass, your dad’s orders were to get you. No collateral damage. That’s what I did.”

” Jerry

That made me feel better, but I still spat at him, “You’re a pig.”

Just a At my words, his face went hard.

“Rather be a pig than a traitor.” He leaned in and his face started turning ugly. “You make me sick. The idea of that asshole’s hands on you, his dick in you, Christ, your father trusted him and Chavez trusted him. He fucked all of us. Now you’re lettin’ him fuck you. Can you imagine how that makes your dad feel?”

replied,  
looking

“My father feels? Wow, Jerry, thanks for sharing. That’s news to me. I retorted sarcastically, too beyond angry to stop myself.

ied, his

His face twisted with fury. “It was me you fucked over that way, not the Balduccis play with you. Not Seth. ‘Take ’em down, one-by-one, don’t hurt,’ he says to me. ‘Keep an eye on Sadie, Chavez falls down on me, I’ll make sure she’s safe,’ he says. Fuck.”

ne after

My body had gone solid.

ingale’s

*Make sure she’s safe*, he said.

his tire.

My father wanted to be sure I was safe.

Nightingale

And if I read it right, he was resigned to Hector having that job.

I couldn’t wrap my mind around it and I started to tremble, but Jerry didn’t notice.

“Eat. Your father’ll call. He’ll talk. You’ll fuckin’ listen, then I  
you back to your fuck buddy,” Jerry finished our *tête-à-tête* and turned  
o put a In desperation, before I could stop myself, I blurted, “I need  
*ryone’s*Hector.”

what I Jerry stopped and grinned again, then his eyes got weird in a wa  
*not like.*

“Like the idea of seein’ what you’d do to get that call, Sadie. Ma  
make you let me fuck that smart mouth of yours.” My heart started  
to turn harder just as my eyes narrowed but he kept on, “But I like the  
; mouth Chavez tearin’ Denver apart lookin’ for you more.”

fucked Then he was gone.

magine I stared at the door giving it my Icicle Ray of Death Glare, which  
work no matter how hard I tried. Then I ate my cereal, drank my cof  
me,” Iwaited.

Jerry came back, stun gun in one hand, keys to the handcuffs in an  
, I’d let “Bathroom. You got one minute then I come in,” he threatened.

make it I didn’t fight and did as he asked.

the job, I just had to wait. He said I had to listen to my father and for De  
Marker this was what I was supposed to be doing. I didn’t pretend  
happy about the circumstances, but I wasn’t going to do anything  
either. Jerry was mean and I didn’t want to test him. I wanted to get t  
this latest trauma alive and breathing and go on. I was noticing the ba  
were interspersed with good parts. And of those good parts, some c  
were great, some of them were fun and all of them gave me that  
luckily snugly, safe feeling.

'll take If all I had to do was talk to my father to get back to all that, tl  
l to go. what I'd do.

to call After my bathroom break, Jerry cuffed me to the bed and disap  
again.

ly I *did* I tried not to think about Hector tearing Denver apart looking  
(which I was pretty certain sure he was doing), or the rest of my  
ybe I'd worried about me (again).

beating Instead, I decided what color Hector's living room should be pai  
idea of dusky gray like the thermal he owned that I liked so much). Then I c  
he should install an island like Buddy and Ralphie's in his kitchen (I  
that would work if it was an eensy bit smaller).

1 didn't It might have been an hour, maybe longer, when Jerry came back.

fee and He had a cell to his ear and he was nodding.

"She's right here," he said into the cell.

other. He stopped by the bed and handed it to me.

I took it and put it to my ear.

"Sadie?" my father said.

etective I thought about my coaching from Hector, Eddie and Marcus  
d to be snapped into the phone, "You had me kidnapped."

, stupid "Sadie—"

through I interrupted him and clipped, throwing Jerry right under the bus  
id parts he belonged, in my personal opinion), "I asked to make a phone c  
of them Jerry told me he wanted to fuck my smart mouth!"

warm,

Silence.

Or I should say, *scary* silence.

That was As usual, I sallied forth. “Is this how we spend father and daughter  
now, *Daddy*? Any time you want to speak to me, one of your heroes  
kidnaps me and threatens me with sexual violation before you and I have  
chat?”

for me “I’ll have a word with Jerry,” my father said.

friends He sounded angry and I looked up at Jerry who now looked pale.

Ha!

intended (a “Make it two. I think *two* words with Jerry would probably be better  
decided retorted, my eyes locked on Jerry.

figured That was when Jerry’s handsome face twisted in that ugly way again  
even though deep down inside it scared me half to death, I just kept glaring  
him.

“Sadie, there are things I have to go over with you. I don’t have  
time so I need you to be quiet and listen.”

“Well, *Daddy*, seeing as I’m handcuffed to a bed in a room in a  
where I don’t know where the hell I am, I’ve got nothing better to do.  
away.”

and I He sighed then he said, “I need to tell you where the money is.”

This surprised me. I had no idea what he was going to say, but I  
figure that would be it.

(where Giving me grief about Hector, yes.

all and Money, no.

My chin dropped and I blinked at the bedclothes.

“What money?”

“My money, your money, our money.”



er hour “I know where *my* money is. Aaron takes care of it.”

rchmen “That’s your grandmother’s money. This is our money. The m  
ave our earned, the money the Feds didn’t get. It’s in your name in an account  
Caymans.”

I felt my heart lodge in my throat.

He was joking.

Right?

etter,” I “Do you need me to get it for you?” I asked stupidly.

What was he going to do with it?

in, and Unless he was planning a prison break.

aring at

Someone please tell me he wasn’t planning a prison break!

a lot of “No,” he answered, and I let out a quiet, relieved breath. “I need t  
you can get to it if you need to.”

a house This surprised me too. More than before. Down to my core.

So fire My heart slid to the side, lengthwise, threatening to choke me.

“I don’t want your money,” I whispered.

“Sadie, you need to get gone, until the Balduccis—”

I didn’t “Hector’s taking care of me,” I cut in.

“Yes, I can see that. He’s doing a stellar job. That’s why you’re cu  
a bed,” my father shot back impatiently.

Oh no, he was not going to lay this on Hector!

“Only because Jerry shot at the Rock Chicks!” I cried.

“You think one of the Balducci boys wouldn’t shoot at those girls  
wouldn’t think twice. And they wouldn’t intentionally miss.”

He was probably right about that.

Money I I, of course, was not going to tell him that.

it in the “Even the Balduccis wouldn’t be fool enough to walk in Nightingale’s office and nab me. Jerry’s fucked. Hector’s probably li the Nightingale Men are going to freak.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he asked sharply. “I need Lee Nigh breathing down my neck like I need a hole in my head. Sadie, you for hand, put me in a situation where I had to put one of my men at risk j could talk to my own goddamned daughter.”

I steeled myself so his words wouldn’t affect me.

“Are we done here?” I asked, sounding like I was definitely done.

o know “No. I need to give you the name of the bank, the account numbers

“I think I already told you I don’t want your money and I’m fine am.”

More silence.

This stretched longer, became scarier, then my father said in a low a voice I knew very well, the voice he used when he meant to be list and obeyed.

“We need to talk about Chavez.”

iffed to I fought against my conditioning to listen and obey and sai breezily, “Talk away.”

“I don’t like you with him.”

“Well, I didn’t suspect you’d be leaping for joy, but I also don’t s? Theylike him. He taught me how to make s’mores.”

Silence again. This time it wasn’t scary, it was something else.

“S’mores?” he asked, and I could swear my always, unruffled  
sounded confused.

to Lee “Yes, those graham cracker sandwiches where you roast a marsh—  
vid and “I know what s’mores are, Sadie.”

“Well, he taught me how to make them. He found out I’d never ha  
tingaleand always wanted to make some and he made sure I had them. /  
ced mysanded his floors. And his mother likes me. She’s going to teach me  
ust so Icook.”

The scary was back. “He’s got you, *my daughter*, sanding his floor

“I asked to do it. Hector wanted to watch a movie.”

“Jesus Christ,” my father muttered.

—” At this point, in order to speed things up and get the hell out of  
where Ichanneled Hector and explained, “I know you don’t have a lot of ti  
you’re not getting this so I’ll give it to you. See, a good life is about :  
floors, making s’mores and laughing while you do the dishes. It’s  
putting lip gloss on in the restroom with your girlfriends during a rc  
/ voice, It’s about being able to say things that aren’t smart or do things that ar  
ened to stupid and people forgiving you. It’s about looking after each other. T  
good life. Ralphie and Buddy, my friends, gave that to me. Then Hecto  
into my life and made it even better. I’ve had that life for...”

d fake- I stopped, counted and then went on.

“Five weeks and five days. I like it. I’m not giving it up. I’m not g  
the Caymans and living the big life off your drug money, surround  
care. I pretty things, eating the finest foods, drinking champagne, but being  
alone and utterly lonely. I’d rather paint Hector’s living room, which  
I might do today, if he lets me. Now, can we stop talking so Jerry can t

home and good people can stop worrying about me?"

Apparently, he didn't listen to a word I said.

"It's my job to take care of you, I'm your father," he told me.

"Well, if it's your job, you're fired," I replied calmly, proud of myself.

Who would have known I had it in me?

But there it was.

Silence again, then, "This isn't done, Sadie."

It was my turn to sigh. "I didn't figure it would be. But can it be for me?"  
I need a shower."

Then he surprised me again, he did this by giving in.

My father *never* gave in.

Ever!

"Give the phone to Jerry," he ordered.

I smiled with saccharin sweetness (through my surprise) at Jerry and handed out the phone.

"Daddy wants to talk to you." I told him.

Jerry gave me a glare. He took the phone, turned his back to me, and walked out of the room.

Minutes later he came back holding a funny looking gun.

I stared in shock at the gun.

"Lights out," Jerry said, and the last thing I saw were the Taser coming at me.

totally

is what

take me

I CAME to strapped into the front seat of Jerry's BMW and he was driving



didn't know how long I'd been out, but it took a while for me to faculties together.

I figured I'd chatted enough with Jerry. He wasn't a conversationalist so even when I had myself sorted, I kept my mouth self.

After a while, Jerry, unfortunately, felt like talking.

"I'm gonna stop for a second. You're not clear of the car, I run you You try something smart, I go for payback. I'll be nicer to you than Blood would put me off getting off. Who knows? Maybe you'd ever or now? it."

Seriously.

What a jerk!

"Swine," I mumbled, breaking my vow not to speak to him.

He kept on, clearly unhappy about me throwing him under the maybe he *was* swine).

nd held "Don't mind sayin', all the boys had a thing for you. Chavez wa only one. He just hid it better than the rest of us. You, Christ, all h bitchy and ice cold. We spent a lot of time talkin' about how you'd fe me and got a piece of you. If our cocks would freeze off or if you'd finally l and be a wildcat. Your dad's still got power, but you try me, I figure i be worth his retribution to have a crack at you and find out."

I turned to Jerry. "You *do* know I was raped, don't you? You *d* that every word out of your mouth makes you lower than low, slimy prongs slime, scumier than scum? Don't you?"

He didn't answer.

iving. I I saw we were getting close to the Nightingale Offices and I kn

get my was where he was going to let me off.

I unbuckled my seatbelt, put my hand on the door handle and kept my greatmouth shut until I had just enough time to say exactly what I wanted to say. Then, when the time was right, I said it.

“Just to appease your curiosity, Jerry, I like it fast, hot, hard and loud. *and* I like it slow, gentle and sweet. I like it any way Hector wants to do it. Ricky to me and he gives it to me *loads*. So you can tell those assholes who are so pansy-assed and afraid of my father, they missed out because I *am* a man. And that’s why Hector’s getting it. Because he’s not pansy-assed or a pussy. *anything.*”

And before he came to a full stop or could say a word, I threw open the door, put my feet to the pavement and ran.

I didn’t look back. I went straight into the building and to the stairs, not bothering with the elevator.

I rounded the landing on the first flight and slammed right into Mace. Without a word, he took my hand and dragged me up to the third floor into the hall and directly into the offices.

Shirleen was standing behind her desk, phone to her ear, eyes—wide with relief—on me.

“Hector?” Mace asked Shirleen.

He didn’t break stride. He kept dragging me through the reception area. Shirleen put her hand over the mouthpiece nodding.

“On his way,” Shirleen replied.

Mace punched a code into the keypad by the inner door.

“I’m okay,” I told Shirleen.

“Thank God, child,” she said back.

cept my Mace dragged me through the door.

o say. “Call Detective Marker,” I shouted as the door closed behind me.

Mace dragged me straight to Lee’s office and pulled me in.

l rough Tom Savage, Malcolm Nightingale and Monty were all at Lee’s

o give it There was a mess of papers on it, papers that looked like maps and  
, being plans.

wildcat. Their heads came up and they stared at me.

fraid of Then Tom broke away from the rest and came at me muttering,  
Jesus.”

pen the Before I knew it, he had me in his arms.

airs not “Christ. Jesus. Jesus Christ,” he whispered over my head.

ce. So lightning wouldn’t strike him for taking the Lord’s name  
(repeatedly), I said into his chest, “I’m okay. It was my father. He had

d floor, his men kidnap me. He didn’t hurt me. My father just wanted to talk.”

-full of Tom leaned back and looked at me. “We know it was Jerry.  
recognized him. We just didn’t know what your father had planned.”

area. I saw the relief written all over his face, and even though it was u  
circumstances that gave him that look, for some reason somewhere  
made me happy. So happy I slid my arms around his waist, pressed my  
against his chest and hugged him.

I don’t remember hugging anyone like that of my own accord (and  
the middle of a major flipout) since my mom was killed.

“I’m okay,” I repeated.

He hugged me back. “Thinkin’ about givin’ up Mexican food, ;

least until we know you're safe. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

I pulled away and looked up at him.

"That's sayin' a lot, Tom likes his Mexican food," Monty called from his spot by the desk.

s desk. "I wouldn't want you to give up something you liked," I told Tom.

id floor He smiled at me as Malcolm asked Mace, "Someone call Hector?"

"Shirleen," Mace replied.

"The girls?" Tom asked.

"Christ "Shirleen," Mace repeated.

"Prepare for a Rock Chick invasion," Monty muttered.

I looked at Monty, then at Mace and finally at Malcolm and Tom.

"I'm sorry to worry you. I—"

in vain Malcolm cut me off, "Didn't hear Kitty Sue, Indy or Ally say you were  
l one of out with Jerry, arms linked and laughin', so stop apologizin'."

I nodded.

. Daisy Then, even though it probably sounded stupid, it was true, I said to

nhappy "I really could use a cup of coffee. Do you guys have a kitchenette?"

deep it "I'll get Brody to make a pot," Mace told me.

y cheek "Shit no!" Monty exclaimed, moving away from the desk. "I  
d not in coffee's thicker than custard. One cup'll keep you awake a week. I'll  
it."

"Thanks, Monty," I said to his back.

girl. At He didn't turn around. He just lifted up a hand, flicked out his in-  
middle fingers and walked out.



“Shit to do,” Mace mumbled.

He tagged me with a hand behind my head and brought me close from his leaned low (Mace was really tall), kissed my forehead then he was gone.

Monty made coffee and Shirleen, who didn't file but apparently did coffee, or at least she did to recently returned kidnap victims, brought with milk, sugar and mugs.

I had just taken my first fortifying sip (Monty made excellent when the door opened and Hector was there.

He looked at me, his face as dark as thunder.

I smiled at him.

For some reason, his face stayed dark and his gaze moved to the room.

“Get out,” he told everyone.

waltzed  
My smile died.

“Hector!” I snapped.

No one seemed offended by this and everyone moved to leave  
were smiles and Monty even chuckled.  
) Mace,

I didn't think this was funny.

Hector was being rude!

Brody's  
“You don't have to leave,” I told them, putting my mug on the desk.

ll make  
But they were gone, the door closing behind Tom. But right before  
I saw him turn and wink. Then he disappeared from sight.

I glared at Hector.

lex and  
“That was rude,” I told him.

He was three feet away from me.

Then, without apparently moving, he was right there, his arms around me. He crushed me tightly. My body plastered against his, his mouth came down on mine.

His kiss took my breath away. The only thing I could do was put my hands to either side of his neck and hold on.

He tore his mouth from mine and touched our foreheads for a nanosecond before moving back an inch.

His eyes were blazing hot. Not with desire or anger, but with something else that *still* made my knees go weak.

“Scared the shit out of me,” he told me.

At the depth of feeling in his voice, all my organs at once working.

“Hector,” I whispered.

“Don’t remember the last time I was fuckin’ scared. I don’t fuckin’ scared. That’s why I used to find trouble. Would do anything, try anything. There fuckin’ fearless. Drove *Mamá* up the wall. Even undercover for the agency. Fed off the danger. Loved every fuckin’ minute of it. Never felt fear once. Not until last night.”

Oh...my...*God!*

Did he just say that?

He went on, “I didn’t like it, Sadie.”

Yes, he just said it.

My fingers tightened on his neck.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

“This has got to end,” he told me, and I really didn’t like the tone.

nd me, voice. I didn't like it so much my fingers went even tighter at his neck.  
vn hard "What does that mean?" I asked.

"That means Plan B."

put my "What's Plan B?"

"Plan B means this ends."

second My heart started tripping over itself (but at least it was now beating

nothing "What are you going to do?"

"Was toyin' with 'em, the Balduccis, pittin' them against each other. I  
wanted them to feel the fear. Trip up. Get angry. Turn their attentio  
you to each other so they'd implode. I wanted them to do stupid shi  
ceased could get them and they'd go down. They took it beyond my expect  
poisoned their own fuckin' brother. Then they branched back out you  
torched your gallery. In the meantime your father stepped in, and if w  
cin' get shut him down, he's gonna fuck everything up."

anything, I was stuck on his earlier point.

gency. I "Do you think they poisoned Harvey?" I asked.

ar. Not "Poison isn't Seth's style. He doesn't mind mess. He likes to  
statement."

He was talking about my father and his words made my blood run

Hector went on, "Marty has a chemistry set. We know he roofies  
wants to fuck who won't give him the time of day. Likes to do the s  
adversaries, makes it easier to kick the shit out of them. Word is, he's  
interest. He does research, plays around with pharmaceuticals just to s  
they'd do. Eddie says there were two deaths by poison last year, both e  
of the Balduccis."

e of his

I stared at Hector.

Veronica Mars had been “roofied.” In other words, slipped a date sedative so she’d go incoherent before she passed out. When she’d been with that creepy, weak, homicidal high school kid had his way with her (he’d been with her sweet high school ex-boyfriend did too, but he had an excuse, he’d also been roofied—it wasn’t a good night for our plucky Veronica).

3).

“That’s gross,” I said to Hector.

“That’s Marty,” Hector said back.

other. I

“What’s Plan B?”

m from

t so we

tations,

ur way,

re don’t

“You don’t have to know what Plan B is. But while it’s happening, you aren’t outside touching distance of me or one of the boys. Clear?”

“Clear,” I agreed. “But I think I want to know what Plan B is.”

He shook his head.

“Hector—” I started.

“You agreed I’d take care of you, I’m takin’ care of you. That’s what you need to know.”

make a

“Hector!”

girls he

cold.

same to

got an

ee what

enemies

He gave me a squeeze. His eyes went narrow and then, obviously realizing this was important, for good measure he gave me a shake.

“Sadie, I’m askin’ you to trust me.”

I pulled in my lips, bit them and stared at him.

I’d made this bed, I’d tested that trust, I’d let him know it and now he was lying in said bed.

Blooming heck!

I had only one choice.

ite rape     “Oh, all right,” I gave in and watched his face start to relax. “But  
did, theyou let me paint your living room whatever color I want.”

er cute,     It was his turn to stare.

so been     And he did this for a while.

Finally, he said, “*Mamita*, you’re a little crazy.”

Maybe I was.

But I was also on a mission.

n’, you     “Do I get to paint your living room?” I asked.

He sighed then rested his forehead against mine. This time, he  
there.

Then it was his turn to give in. “Just not pink.”

“I’m not going to paint your living room pink!” I yelled, pulling n  
away. “I can’t believe you’d even think that.”

all you     At my outburst, his face went warm and for some bizarre rea  
muttered, “Will of fuckin’ steel.”

because     “What?” I asked.

“Shit keeps comin’ at you. Bad shit. Rape, your mother’s murder  
kidnapping, and you’re standin’ here wantin’ to paint my living room  
got a will of fuckin’ steel.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I didn’t say anything.

w I was     But Hector did.

“And before you ask, *mi corazón*, that’s good,” he told me quietly.

My belly went into melt mode. He touched his lips to mine, soft

and way too short.

only if I decided to change the subject from my “will of steel” (even though I liked that he thought that about me, it felt good).

“I need to talk to you about what Jerry and my father said.”

“You had breakfast?”

“Jerry gave me a bowl of cereal.”

He let me go and stepped away, but curled his arm around my neck and headed us to the door.

kept it “I’ll feed you. You tell me, then we’ll go to Home Depot, get you paint.”

I smiled at him. I couldn’t help it because there it was again.

I had a trauma.

my head I survived it.

Then Hector made life better again.

son he I stopped our progress to the door by planting my feet, putting a hand on his stomach and pressing into his side. I leaned up on tiptoes and this touched my mouth to *his*.

, arson, “Thanks, babe,” I said softly against his mouth.

m. You At my words I watched, close up, as his eyes flared. He curled me into his front, his mouth came down on mine and he gave me a kiss that was far from a touch on the lips, it wasn’t even funny.

When he was done, he lifted his head. I was leaned into him, arms around him, unable to hold myself up and he had that possessive look in his eyes.

; sweet “There she is,” he whispered.

“Who?” I asked.

rough I “My Sadie.”

And, indeed, there I was.

And being there, Hector’s Sadie smiled.

eck and

u some

hand to

s time *I*

fully to

was so

around

7e.

“Who?” I asked.

“*My Sadie.*”

And, indeed, there I was.

And being there, Hector’s Sadie smiled.



TWENTY-THREE



## FRED AND WILMA

*Sadie*

I felt warmth at my neck. It moved up and then fingers sifted into my hair. This was such a pleasant sensation, my mind decided to come a little closer. I opened my eyes and looked up.

“Hi,” I said softly to Hector, who was sitting on the edge of the couch.

I was on my side, hands in prayer position under my cheek, my head bent, and his hips were in the crook of my lap.

“If I didn’t see it for myself, *mamita*, I’d ask if you got any paint on the wall,” he said right before his hand left my hair and his index finger traced a line across my cheek and down the side of my mouth.

I knew he was tracing a paint mark, just one of many.

I ignored what his soft touch did to my body and got up on an elbow, my hand pulling the hair away from my face and getting stuck in the clogged tangles.

“Painting’s kind of messy,” I informed him.

His eyes gave me a hair, face and torso scan. “It’s not *that* messy.”

I grinned and pushed all the way up. Going behind him, I got to my

I leaned in, grabbed his hand, pulled him up and invited, “Come lo

I dragged him from the north room to the south room and we stood in the middle.

I was thrilled with the results. The dusky gray went *great* with the gray-blue of the other room. There were all sorts of ways to tie them together. Toss pillows, throws, pictures—the mind boggled with the (at least mine did). It was perfect.

I dropped his hand and pointed to the bottom of the walls.

hair. “You said don’t worry about the skirting boards, you were going to wake. I wood ones in. Look!” I cried happily. “Matt helped by yanking off ones. He threw them in a pile in the backyard.”

ich. Hector wasn’t looking at where the skirting boards used to be. I y knees looking at me.

“Matt was here to watch you, not help renovate the room,” Hector me.

t on the I waved my hand in between us. “I know. That’s okay. Duke came ger slid helped him. They never left me alone. Promise.” Then I looked at “Where’s Matt anyway?”

ow, one “I let him go. I’m on duty now.”

paint- “Oh! Okay!” I chirped. Then I put my hand to his shoulder and him toward the fireplace. “While they were doing that, since we couldn’t paint, Roxie, Ava, Stella, Ralphie and I stripped the wood on the fireplace. Isn’t that wood fantastic? Who in their right minds would *paint* wood that?” I asked and didn’t wait for an answer. “As you can see, we couldn’t y feet. in some of the grooves. But Duke said there’s some goo you can brush loosen it up and scrape it out. He’s going to bring some by tomorrow.”

ok.” Hector was looking at the fireplace, but his arm slid along my shoulder and he pulled me to his side.

“I’ve got the ‘goo,’” he said to the fireplace, but I saw his lips twitch dusky “It’s in the kitchen.”

“Fantastic!” I cried, clapping my hands then I threw out an arm. ‘Painted. We did the ceiling white, like you did in the other room. Ava edging because she’s an artist and she has a steady hand. It didn’t take time at all with the five of us, and we even did two coats. I think it looks

Don’t you?”

I tilted my head to look up at him.

He was watching me, eyes amused, and he nodded.

I smiled and went on, “Duke says we got the order wrong. We have painted before we sanded the floors. Now I have to sand them splodges off.”

Hector curled me into his front and looked down at me. “We did by the order wrong. You didn’t ask to paint. You asked to sand the floors around. I blinked at him as I slid my arms loosely around his waist. “Oh should have said.”

“You seemed all fired up to sand. I didn’t want to disappoint you.” turned explained.

My belly went into melt mode (yes, over Hector letting me sand replace floors).

How bizarre was *that*?

I shook it off. Too excited by the news I had to impart on him, I couldn’t think about my melted belly.

oulders “Anyway, Duke’s coming over tomorrow to stain the floors and  
going to show me how!” I announced like Duke promised a o  
itching comprehensive course in the intricacies of neurosurgery.

Hector grinned, but said, “Not to put a damper on your good  
‘We all *mamita*, and as much as I appreciate Duke’s help, I wanna walk on *my*  
did the not Duke’s.”

ake any Oh. Wow.

oks *fab*. He wanted to refinish his own floors.

That got a belly melt too!

Seriously, I was so weird!

“No worries,” I told Hector, again ignoring the belly melt. “I’ll be  
should Duke.”

e paint He bent his head and touched his mouth briefly to mine. “We g  
business done, this weekend we’ll finish the floors. Then we’ll  
ln’t get somewhere to sit other than the bed.”

” I leaned further into him, liking that idea. Liking it *loads*.

h. You It was not a surprise that got a belly melt too.

“Okay,” I said softly.

ou,” he His eyes went over my face and hair again then he informed me, ‘  
you out to dinner, get showered.”

and his “Okay,” I repeated.

I smiled at him, pulled away and headed to the stairs.

ouldn’t I was up three steps when Hector called, “We’re goin’ to Linco  
stopped, looked at him and he went on, “It’s a roadhouse. You we  
designer armor, we’re likely to get ejected.”

and he's I didn't answer. He was grinning at me and I knew he was teasing me. I shook my head in a non-verbal "whatever," trying to suppress my own thoughts (and failing) and headed upstairs.

At that time, I took a shower, scrubbed off the paint and thought about my day.

On the 7th floor, Outside of waking up kidnapped and the hours after that were in Jerry Swine's company, that day had been the second best day of my life.

Hector and I had breakfast at a greasy spoon and Detective Marker and I went out for coffee at the end. I told them both about Jerry spilling that my father told him to take down the Balduccis one-by-one and I told them about the money.

It's hard to make it to the top. Even though I'd been convinced this wouldn't faze me, it did. There was something about knowing my father ordered Jerry to protect me, to be avenging me against the Balduccis and he wanted me to be comfortable. Money-wise, that made me feel that uneasy bit like the traitor Jerry called me.

On the other hand, he'd had me kidnapped, maybe murdered my mother and as Hector put it, "didn't mind mess." So, even though way in the back of my mind, I wondered if I was doing the right thing as a daughter, I, I didn't have to wonder about being a good citizen.

During my story, Detective Marker and Hector exchanged some looks. "Takin' glances, but didn't share with me and I didn't push it. They both told me I did a great job and they also told me (weirdly) no matter what, I was not to let my father give me the Caymans account information.

For the most part, Hector listened without reaction except when I mentioned Jerry's threats and commentary. Those little nuggets made his eyes go dark and that muscle leap in his cheek (so I didn't share half of what I thought that was wise).

g. I just Then, as he told me he would, Hector took me to Home Depot  
wn grinwent to the paint section. I picked the color. Hector approved. The pa  
squirted some dye into cans, shook the big buckets in a killer, wild, s  
machine that I liked so much, I told Hector I wanted to buy one.

erry the This made Hector burst out laughing for some reason I did not get.

Okay, so I probably didn't have that much paint to mix, but se  
r joined anyone could see it was a cool machine.

y father Matt (a.k.a. Surfer Dude Hottie) was waiting on Hector's porc  
out theRalphie and YoYo (Ralphie holding a s'more latte from Tex) when w

Hector's house. Then Hector gave me a hot, long, leg-buckling kiss a  
ere was off. Ava, Stella and Roxie (called by Ralphie) showed up ten minute  
he was Duke (called by Roxie) half an hour after that.

ortable, Then the fun began.

ed me. It might be a little weird that I liked painting, sanding and all the  
mother, didn't care.

back of Not even a little bit.

at least I finished the shower and put some goo on my scabbed over t  
swiped my face with powder, went a bit heavier than normal on the l  
nowingtook some time on shading my eyes with three different colors, slap  
ne I did mascara and did the lip gloss routine. I gunked up my hair with sm  
t to let elixir, gave it a quick blow dry, gunked it up more with pomade and t  
it loose to fall down my shoulders and back.

1 I told I went back to the bedroom and tore through my overnight b  
ade hispacked heavy, but I had nothing to wear to a roadhouse. Even if I l  
of it, Iwhole wardrobe handy, I'd still have nothing to wear to a roadhouse.

I wasn't certain sure I knew what a roadhouse was.

and we Instead of calling downstairs and asking Hector (which might be embarrassing), I put on a pair of black low-rider cords, my rose-silver-buckled belt, a wrap-around lilac sweater with bell sleeves that showed some cleavage and my motorcycle boots. I figured the lilac sweater was pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable at a roadhouse, but thoughtfully, I balanced it out.

Then me and my boots clomped downstairs.

When I got to the room, and again, I admired the new walls. The difference was astounding and it looked like our work took us leaps ahead in making Hector's home. There was actual physical evidence that I accomplished something that felt nice.

I found Hector in the kitchen sitting on the countertop sorting through mail, but I

His head came up when I walked in. He did a full body scan, hair then up again, stopping at my breasts.

His eyes lifted to mine. "You got a tank to wear under that?"

I looked down at myself.

"Under what?" I asked stupidly, for where else would you wear a tank top?

"Your sweater," Hector answered.

I looked out the window at the darkness. "Is it that cold?"

Hector didn't answer me so my gaze swung back to him and I saw his face was the same mixture of hard and soft it was when he talked to me yesterday.

In fact, "Come here," he demanded, and without question I did.

ght be When I got close he spread his legs and I took that as my cue and  
tampedbetween them. When I felt his heat, I stopped, put my hands on h  
showedthighs and his hands came to my neck.

ter was “I forget, with all the shit that’s gone down, we don’t know eac  
e boots that well so I’ll explain somethin’ about me you gotta understand.”

Oh my.

I didn’t have a good feeling about this.

e living I decided to gird.

nishing It was a good decision.

house a “What?” I asked.

ing and His thumbs started circling on my neck, which felt nice, but even :  
hroughmy best to pay attention when he started talking.

“You were just a beautiful woman. Now you’re *my* beautiful v  
o boots What you got under your clothes is for me. No one else. They don  
They don’t touch. That’s the deal. Yeah?”

I stared at him, speechless.

Which was a good thing because if I had words, I would have sai  
ank? so loudly the neighbors would hear.

“Now,” he went on, either not feeling or not caring about the bad  
bad vibes emanating from me directly toward him, “go put on a tank.”

That was when I found my words.

saw his “Maybe I should go put on my ragged white dress and stone neckl  
Ralphie you can put on your leopard-skin tunic and we can pedal in our ston  
the roadhouse before you go bowling with Barney and I go shoppin  
Betty, Fred.”



walked His thumbs stopped circling and his eyes narrowed.

his hard “You wanna repeat that?”

h other His voice was low with warning, telling me that, no, I didn’t repeat it. I wanted to run upstairs and put on a tank.

This, of course, I did not do.

“I’m referring to the Flintstones who lived in the Stone Age.”

“I know what you’re referrin’ to.”

“My point is, Hector and Sadie are not Fred and Wilma. We don’t live in the Stone Age. We live in the here and now, where women show confidence and men don’t tell their women what to wear.”

so I did “I asked nice.”

“You didn’t ask, you told.”

woman. “All right, I told nice.”

’t look. I had no answer because this was true.

I still was not going to put on a tank.

id them Therefore, coming to a verbal stalemate, we locked eyes and went into stare-down mode.

ler than This lasted a long time. So long, I quivered internally and was a little give in when Hector blew out a sigh.

“You’re not gonna give in, are you?” he asked.

“No,” I lied.

ace and I was so going to give in.

e car to He looked over my shoulder and muttered, “Fuck.”

ing with I tried hard not to smile. It would be bad sportsmanship.

Instead, I said, "Painting's hard work, I'm hungry."

His eyes came back to mine and I was pleased to see he wasn't angry. I couldn't say he wasn't annoyed.

I could handle annoyed.

"Let's go." He pushed me back, jumped off the counter in front of me, grabbed my hand, walking me to the back of the house rather than the front where he always parked his Bronco.

We went into the little mudroom off the kitchen that was full of boots (yes, more boots!), more renovation equipment and other miscellaneous detritus. He reached up on a shelf and pulled down two black-motorcycle helmets and he handed me one.

I stared at the helmet in my hand then up at Hector, my heart beating a little faster.

"You have a bike?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied.

My heart started beating even faster and I could feel my lips forming a smile.

"I've never ridden on a bike."

His hand came to my neck and he lost his annoyed look.

"Tonight's your night, *mamita*."

Then he put a hand to the small of my back and turned me to the door.



"I'm gonna get us more beers," I told the table, which included Lu and Ava, who were at Lincoln's when we arrived.

They'd only just sat down and got their drinks so Ava told us

perfect timing. They did a seat shuffle. Luke sat by Ava at the tall table  
gry, but bar, her on the inside by the wall. Hector sat by me. I was across from

We ordered “Cajun Popcorn” as an appetizer (battered, deep  
crawfish) and I got a meatloaf cheeseburger with fries. Even after the  
me and Popcorn, I ate every last bite of my burger and every single fry and  
ie front even care. Manual labor made you ravenous. Blanca would be thrilled.

I loved Lincoln’s. There were interesting people there, not just bik  
of more also urbanites, probably from the local neighborhood. It was worn in  
isculine worn out, and the waitresses were super friendly.

I also loved Hector’s bike, mainly because it meant I could  
visored transported from one place to the other with my front plastered to Hector’s  
ating a hard, hot back, my arms around his tight abs and the wind hitting  
everywhere. I decided the minute we hit the road and picked up speed  
was nothing in the whole, wide world better than *that*.

I grabbed my wallet out of my purse and popped off the back of  
rounding Hector. But I only got a step away before I was halted by  
ming a curling into the waistband of my cords. I looked back as Hector pulled  
him and his mouth came to my ear.

“Give me your wallet and put it on the tab,” he muttered in my ear.

“I’ve got money,” I told him.

“*Mi cielo*, wallet.” His tone didn’t invite discussion.

oor. I figured I was lucky to get away with the “Fred and Wilma” argument.

I wasn’t going to push my luck. I cocked my arm so my hand with the  
like and was over my shoulder. He took it from me then kept talking in my ear.

“This end of the bar, I wanna be able to see you at all times.”

it was

by the I turned my head, nodded to him and he let me go.

Ava. I smiled to myself on the way to the bar, that warm, happy glow m  
ep-fried with the lovely, safe, snugly comfort.

Cajun It felt good to be looked after.

I didn't "Four Fat Tires," I called to the bartender when he jerked his chin

I felt a presence slide in beside me and I looked to my right then c  
ers but shoulder of the beautiful, dark-haired woman there to ascertain if I co  
but not see Hector. I could so my body settled.

"I'm Natalie," the woman said and my surprised eyes went to her.

ld get  
ector's  
Wow.

ing me She was nice. Walking right up to me and introducing herself.

ed there "Hi. I'm Sadie," I returned the niceness.

"Saw you with Hector," she said to me.

arstool, I blinked at her, not certain sure where this was going and thir  
fingers might not be nice at all.

d me to "Yes," I said hesitantly.

She leaned in. "Not bein' a bitch or anything, but, girl to girl, be ca

I blinked again.

"What?"

"Hector. Be careful. He's a dawg."

ment so  
e wallet  
"A dog?"

"A dawg," she repeated.

My eyes narrowed and my back went straight. "He's not a dog.  
man."

“Not a dog. A dawg. D-a-w-g. Dawg. A player.”

lingling I knew what a player was.

I looked back over her shoulder at Hector.

at me. He was listening to Ava, however Luke, I noted, was watching me.  
My eyes went to Natalie.

over the “Maybe you’re thinking of a different Hector,” I tried.

uld still “Nope. He’s nailed me and half the women in this place. Girls  
him as a challenge. I know because I did it too. He’s got the reputa  
bein’ good, as in *good*, which by the way, he was. Off the fuckin’  
He’s also got a reputation for not hangin’ around, at all, not even spen  
night in most cases. Every girl here probably thought she’d be the on  
a return visit, but far’s I know, he never went back twice. Not to me  
anyone.”

lking it After the words “nailed me” I felt like she started repeatedly punch  
in the stomach.

Hector had sex with Natalie?

ireful.” And *half the women in this place?*

I looked around the bar scanning the women. Luckily, the place  
packed, but it was relatively busy. Busy enough to mean, if this w  
*Hector* had been busy.

Again, I looked at Natalie and breathed, “You’re joking.”

She shook her head and I tried to read her face. She didn’t look l  
was being catty, just...real.

He’s a Natalie went on, “You look like a fairy princess who lives  
enchanted castle, not exactly a Lincoln’s regular. We girls have t

together. I'm just givin' you the heads up."

It was my turn to shake my head. "He's changed. He's different now."

"Yeah? He fucked me six weeks ago. No joke, it was so good I can remember when, where and every second of it. I'm not complainin', I'm just sayin' so you know, I called him three times and he didn't return a single call."

The bartender put my beers on the bar just as I grabbed on to the bar to hold myself up.

look at  
tion for  
charts.  
Six weeks ago was when I walked into Nightingale Investigations right before I got raped.

din' the  
And Hector had been in Natalie's bed.

e to get  
Or, worse, she'd been in his!

, not to  
She interrupted my crazed thoughts by putting her hand on mine bar.

ing me  
"Listen, Sadie, I'm sorry. You look freaked. I gotta say, I been with him and he looks into you, way into you. Never seen him like that with any other girl maybe I'm wrong. Put it in the back of your mind. All I'm sayin' is be careful."

wasn't  
Then she was gone.

as true,  
I was so busy trying not to hyperventilate it took the bartender a minute to try to get my attention. I told him to put it on our tab, grabbed the beer bottles by their necks, and on shaky legs I carried them to the table.

like she  
I saw Luke's eyes on me and I avoided them, scooted behind Hector. He was taking great care like it was a priceless artifact, I tucked my wallet into the pocket Hector had set on my purse, inside.

in an  
o stick  
"Everything okay, Sadie?" Luke asked, and my eyes flew to him.

“Fine, great, wonderful,” I lied, nabbed my beer and took a long swig.

I felt Hector’s eyes on me, but I turned my attention to tracing the condensation on my bottle with my thumb and trying not to let my hand shake.

“*Mamita*, look at me.”

My eyes lifted to Hector.

His brows went together.

“You’re not fine,” he said.

From my peripheral vision I saw Ava and Luke look at each other. I was too busy lying again to Hector to take much notice.

“I think painting the living room just hit me. What with all the food and beer, all of a sudden I’m tired.”

“I’m going to the bathroom. Sadie, do you need to go to the bathroom?” Ava asked suddenly.

I shook my head, too freaked out to catch her hint.

Hector’s hand went to the back pocket of his jeans.

“We’ll get you home,” he said.

My head jerked to him.

“No!” I cried. His narrowed eyes came to me and I made an effort to look down. “No. You’re having fun, everyone’s having fun. I just got more beer. We’ll drink them and go.”

Ava looked at Luke, slid off her stool and headed to the bathroom. Hector pulled out his wallet and came off his stool too.

“I’ll pay the tab so we’ll be ready to roll.”

He walked to the bar.

allow. I watched him stop and I realized my happy glow was long gone  
ie label heart actually hurt.

“Natalie was before you, Sadie,” Luke said.

I tore my eyes from Hector and looked at Luke to find he was w  
me.

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t know what she said to freak you, but I got a fair guess, a  
r, but I gotta know, Natalie was before you.”

I pulled in my lips.

od and I was not talking about this with Luke Stark. Ralphie, yes. Dais  
Any Rock Chick, yes. Luke Stark, absolutely not.

room?” I took another sip from my beer and looked anywhere but at Luke.

“Hector didn’t share what happened when he was workin’ with yo  
We all figure, with the way things are now, you two had a thing. W  
that thing was, the way you were in the offices that day, it wasn’t on  
means it wasn’t on when he was with Natalie.”

I nodded to Luke, knowing for whatever reason this didn’t make  
even a little bit better, but unfortunately he wasn’t done.

to calm “You know I was there that night,” he told me softly.

re beer. My heart tripped, I swallowed then said, “Please, Luke—”

Hector “Never seen a man like that. Felt like it, with Ava, never seen it.  
not happy when you went unconscious and he was less happy wh  
wouldn’t allow him to stay in your exam bay until you re  
consciousness. That’s all he asked, they refused. He lost it, got physic  
me and a security guard had to take him out. I figure, after seei



and my whatever he had with Natalie is shit compared to what he feels for you

Somehow, I didn't know why and I didn't want to process it at the moment (especially not with Luke), what he said made my heart hurt watching "I think I was wrong about finishing the beer. I'm really tired. I'm to ask Hector to take me home," I told Luke.

"Sadie—" he started, but I slid off the barstool and walked to Hector and you He had his back to me and he was talking to someone I couldn't see I got close, lifted my hand to touch his shoulder but I stilled when what the man was saying.

sy, yes. "...a fuckin' certificate for nailin' Townsend's piece."

Somewhere at the edges of my mind I realized belatedly Hector just standing at the bar. He was standing straight, his body rock solid our dad. bar.

whatever The man I couldn't see went on and it also hit the edges of my r, which sounded more than a little inebriated.

The man hooted and practically shouted, "You're tappin' Ice F me feelass! Shit! Any time surveillance photos came in of her, we'd fight chance to make copies. She was the most jacked-off-on piece in history you're nailin' her. Chavez, that makes you a *legend*."

Both my hands went to my forehead, my fingers sliding into my hair. I'd barely finished this maneuver when Hector's fist flashed out, connecting and the man went down at Hector's feet.

He was en they regained cal, and n' that, Hector didn't like him down. He bent over, picked him up by his shoulders, hustled him backwards until the man slammed against the doorframe of another room. Hector pulled him away from the frame only to slam him

.” into it again. So brutally, his head cracked against the frame.

at very “What the fuck!” the man shouted.

more. I came unstuck and ran forward to Hector’s left side. I saw  
n going materialize on his right and a man wearing a black Lincoln’s long-sleeve  
was behind Luke.

or. Hector didn’t notice us and put his face close to the man’s.

e. “That’s my fuckin’ woman you’re talkin’ about,” he growled, and  
I heard stepped back, taking the man with him and slammed him into the door  
again.

“Hector,” I whispered, putting a hand to his forearm, but he didn’t  
wasn’t look at me.

l, at the The man put his hands on Hector’s forearms too. “Christ, man  
givin’ you a fuckin’ compliment!”

nind he Hector did the slamming then getting into his face business again.  
snarled, “By tellin’ me you jacked off to her picture? What the fuck  
’rincess matter with you?”

t at the “Hector, stand down,” Luke said in a low voice.

ry. And “Take it outside,” the Lincoln’s guy put in.

“What’s going on?” Ava asked from behind me.

air. But “Hector, let him go,” I ignored Ava and got closer to Hector.

nnected Hector didn’t let him go and the man’s face started getting red.

Or *more* red.

hirt and “Fuck, I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d have a shit fit. Christ. I’m  
e to the okay?”  
brutally

Hector gave him a good old, scorching glare and then stepped back with another solid push while letting go.

“Then he turned The Scorch to me and ordered, ‘Get our shit. Get it moved teegone.’”

I thought my best move at this juncture was to “get my shit” and push. Which I did.

I grabbed my purse and waved good-bye to Ava and a bit more before Luke. Hector was bent over, nabbing the helmets out from under the

I saw Natalie walk by, her face pale, her eyes on me. I could swear I didn’t even mouthed the words, with the barest whisper of sound, “I’m sorry, wrong.” And then she hurried away when Hector straightened.

I didn’t have a chance to process this. Hector tossed me my helmet, I caught it and he moved in. His arm curled around my neck and he guided me firmly out to the bike.

“Maybe you should calm down before we get on the bike,” I suggested when we stopped by his motorcycle and he took his arm away.

Hector’s eyes sliced to me. “Next time we go out, I’m not being the tank guy and backin’ down. You’re gonna put on the fuckin’ tank.”

My eyes bugged out.

How did this get to be about *me*?

“Now this is about me?” I asked.

“You came up behind me, I smelled your perfume. You heard him talking about you. So yeah, it’s about you. This whole fuckin’ thing proves my fuckin’ point,” he shot back.

“That’s very bizarre logic, Hector Chavez.”

ck with “It makes perfect sense to me.”

“Well, perhaps you shouldn’t be seeing me then,” I returned. “I  
We’re you should be seeing someone else that people *won’t* talk about. How  
Natalie? I met her tonight at the bar. She seems like a nice girl. No  
onto. you’ve already fucked *her!*” I yelled.

Hector got close.

sitantly I could feel his fury, I didn’t have to see it, and I retreated until I fe  
table as “*Dios mio,*” he hissed. “Natalie. That’s why you looked like some  
ear she over your puppy when you came back to the table.”

, I was “Heck yes!”

“What the fuck did she say?”

met. I “To be careful of you, you were a dawg and that your dawg-ness  
ded me ancient history, like I tried to tell her it was, since you nailed her six  
ago.”

ggested His hand went up, he tore his fingers through his hair then he  
dropped again to his side.

he nice “And this pisses you off?” he asked, sounding now both furic  
perplexed.

I opened and closed my mouth twice before shouting, “Yes!”

“I hate to break this to you, *mamita*, but I wasn’t a virgin our first  
he told me sarcastically.

talkin’ “Count back, Hector. Six weeks. *Six weeks!*” I yelled.

ves my “Yeah? So?”

“Six weeks ago, tonight, I was raped!”

His body went completely still.

Perhaps Mine couldn't go still, I was breathing too heavily.

about When he spoke, his voice was a lot quieter but I could still hear the  
of anger.

“Sadie, I wasn't fuckin' Natalie while you were bein' raped.”

“The night before?” I snapped.

It bike. He shook his head but did it jerkily, still angry, but now his voice  
one ran thread of impatience. “I don't fuckin' remember.”

“She says you nailed half the women in there.”

“She's probably right.”

I leaned away from him and breathed, “Oh my God.”

was not He got closer, taking away the minute space I'd gained. “Sadie,  
weeks two choices. You can list for me all the men who got in your pants, I  
is hand don't wanna fuckin' know, and I can return the favor, which, true  
past is fuckin' history. Choose. Now. I'm not livin' under the threat  
of fuckin' time bomb either.”

I turned away. “Take me to Ralphie and Buddy's.”

His fingers curled around my bicep and he pulled me back to facing

time,” “No fuckin' way. You sleep in my bed.”

“Take me to Ralphie and Buddy's!” I yelled.

“No,” he bit off.

I jerked my arm from his hand.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Let's go home.”

He leaned to the side and hooked his helmet on the handgrip of his bike.  
Then both his hands came to my neck.

On the edge I tipped my head back and glared at him.

“I said, let’s go home,” I repeated.

“You don’t even hear what’s comin’ out of your own mouth.”

“Yes?” I asked, saccharin sweet. “Enlighten me. What’s coming out of your own mouth?”

“You said, ‘take me back to Ralphie and Buddy’s’ then you call that place ‘home.’”

At this canny, scary and life-altering observation, I took in an extremely shocked breath, but he kept talking.

“How long’s it gonna take for this shit to sink in for you?”

which I decided my best bet was to keep quiet and simply glare and tell him exactly what I did.

me, the Hector’s hands went away from my neck. He angled to the side again and grabbed his helmet.

“Helmet up,” he ordered, his voice sharp and still way beyond my hearing.

“Don’t give a fuck if you’re hot, wet and panting or pissed as hell, get the fuck out of here and go sleepin’ by me, in my bed, at *home*.”

Without a decent retort (or at least one that would compare to his) and with no other choice, I “helmeted up” and got on his bike behind him.

He shot out into the street so fast, the loose hold I had on his waistband was lost and I had to lean close and wrap my arms around him.

Wasn’t this *just great*?

is bike.

; out of

led my

audible,

his was

ain and

ked off.

you're

is) and

ist was

## TWENTY-FOUR



## NEXT!

### *Sadie*

I clomped on my boots into the house in front of Hector and stopped at the doorway of the darkened kitchen. He reached into me and flipped on the kitchen lights, then I clomped to the counter and slammed my purse on it.

I dug out my cell phone, shoved it in my back pocket, and without glancing at him, I clomped out of the kitchen and upstairs to the bedroom.

I dragged out my pajamas (hot pink with tiny peach polka dots on the bottoms, peach camisole) and clomped into the bathroom.

I slammed the door.

Then I locked it.

Then I pulled out my cell, threw down the lid to the toilet seat, and sat down.

I scrolled down to Jet in my phonebook and hit the green button.

She said I could call her anytime, day or night.

And she was marrying a Chavez man.

For these two reasons, on the ride back to the house, my mind went from one option to the next, I finally decided to call Jet.



I heard one ring, two then three then Eddie's voice saying, "Yeah?  
Great.

Just great.

Eddie answered Jet's cell.

"Hi, Eddie!" I chirped. "How are you?"

"Sadie?"

"Yes."

"You okay?"

d in the  
on the  
it.

"I think so. I haven't been kidnapped and no more property I o  
been burned to a cinder...that I know of...so, yes. I'm okay."

ut even  
om.

I heard him chuckle.

"Can I talk to Jet?" I asked.

on the

"Yeah. She's right here."

I crossed my legs, leaned forward with my elbow on my knee and  
my foot impatiently.

and sat

Jet came on the line. "Sadie?"

"Hi, Jet."

"Is everything all right?"

I didn't really know how girlfriends did this kind of thing. D  
exchange pleasantries first and ease into it? Or did they just go for it?

I decided against easing into it.

whirling

"Heck no!" I replied.

Silence for a second then, "What's up?"

” “You said I could call. Is it too late?”

“No, it’s fine. What’s going on?”

Still not easing into it, I told her.

Everything.

From Hector’s demand I put on a tank, to the Fred and Wilma arg to Natalie’s revelations, to Hector going berserk and finishing conversation by the bike.

When I was done, there was a moment of silence then she asked  
wn has all happened in one night?”

“Yes. One night. Not even a night, a few hours,” I told her. “ marrying one of them. I figure you have to be an expert. Is Eddie like t

She laughed then said, “Um...yes.”

Why was she laughing?

What, I must ask, was funny about this?  
I jerked

“Oh...my...*God!* How do you stand it?” I exclaimed.

“There’s a lot here, Sadie. Maybe we should break it down suggested.

“Please do,” I agreed graciously.

“First off, I wear what I want, but I don’t go over that line that  
id they send a hot-blooded Mexican American man over the edge. It’s just no it. A little cleavage, he has to get over it. The skirt you wore to Stell unacceptable.”

“Hector told me to burn that skirt,” I informed her.

She let out another laugh. “I’m not surprised. If Eddie saw me

skirt, his head would explode.”

I had to admit, the skirt was an *eensy* bit OTT.

Well then, one down.

“Next!” I cried.

gument, I heard her laugh again then she said, “The girl at the bar—”

on the When she hesitated, I encouraged, “Go on.”

“Well, that’s harder. But see, Indy told me Lee had a reputation, Eddie, both of them *bad*. Vance was considered a legend. Everyone knew he was a player. Luke even had a woman when he started with Ava. He brought her off the minute Ava came into his life. Hank, more discreet, but—”

his?” I interrupted her impatiently, “You’re telling me this because...?”

“I’m telling you his because you know them now.”

Hmm.

This was a point to ponder.

They all seemed pretty devoted. In fact, if the stories were anything less than sheby, they’d gone above and beyond the call of duty to win the hearts of their respective Rock Chicks.

My foot stopped jerking and I decided it was time to get serious.

So I told her, “Jet, she was a nice girl. He didn’t even remember what she looked like when she slept with her.”

I heard her sigh. “Duke explains this better, but it has something to do with the kind of men they are, the dangerous work they do, knowing what they are and what they want, recognizing it when they find it and not being afraid to go around in making it theirs. Or...something like that. Anyway, whoever she was, she obviously wasn’t the one, because, Sadie, *you* are.”

Oh *my*.

I didn't know what to say to that because what on earth did you  
that?

Then, for some reason, I blurted, "I saw him."

"What?" she asked.

I took in a deep breath and shared, "That night, when he brought  
the hospital after I was raped. I passed out and when I woke up  
emergency room, I saw them force Hector out of my bay. He didn't  
go. Luke told me tonight that Hector asked if he could stick around  
woke up. They said no and he lost it." I waited for her reaction  
announcement, and when none was forthcoming I pushed, "Really, J  
bizarre is *that*?"

"It doesn't sound at all bizarre to me," she answered quietly.

I shook my head thinking she was not getting it and sat up, pulling  
through my hair and then dropping it into my lap.

"You don't understand. We didn't know each other. I mean, we  
around each other a lot when he was undercover, and one night we  
thing that didn't end well. But other than that..." I stopped then we  
don't get it."

"I don't either," she told me. "It even happened to me. One second  
minding my own business, trying to avoid Eddie. The next second  
informed me he was making me his business and the second after that  
living with him. I watched it happen to Roxie, Jules, Ava, Stella, and  
fucking it happened to Indy. I don't know how these guys know. I don't know  
their minds work. It just happens. They just know. I've stopped trying  
figure it out."

Well.

I say to It wasn't an answer but it was one.

Still.

It was time to get to the heart of the matter.

"What do I do now?"

t me to Jet answered instantly, "Do what they do. Go with your instincts.  
in the work out in the end, I promise."

want to That didn't give me anything to go on.

until I "You okay now?" Jet asked.

to this I sighed then said, "No."

et, how "You will be, honey," she replied softly. "It's hard. Then, when y  
it's for real, it gets a whole lot easier."

a hand I answered, "Okay," but I didn't mean it.

re were She changed the subject to a much better one. "We need to get yo  
for your bridesmaid's dress. Can you do that tomorrow?"

e had a At last, something to look forward to.

t on, "I "I think so. I'll have to check with whatever bodyguard I have."

l, I was She giggled. "Oh, I hope it's Bobby. I bet he'll love going to a  
shop."

nd, he I smiled into the phone. Even though I didn't know Bobby, none o  
t, I was were bridal shop type of men.

I knew Then I whispered, "Thanks Jet."

ow how "Anytime, honey."

ying to We disconnected. I did the getting ready for bed thing, gathered

clothes and boots and walked into the bedroom.

The lamp was lit on the nightstand by Hector's side of the bed. I was sitting up against all (yes, *all!*) the pillows, chest bare, legs stretched in front of him, ankles crossed, wearing a pair of gray drawstring sweatpants that had also been cut off (poorly) at mid-thigh.

It'll all He looked better than ever, which at that moment I thought stunk.

A game was on TV, but his eyes sliced to me the minute I walked in.

It took effort but I ignored him. I wasn't quite finished being angry though I wasn't certain sure what I was angry about anymore. And I was quite ready to make amends and didn't know how anyway. So I dumped my stuff on my overnight bag and headed to the other side just as he angrily got out of the bed and stalked out of the room.

I stared at his back until he went into the bathroom then I climbed in and stole two of the four pillows as should be my ration and propped them up against my side well away from his. I sat on the covers, arms crossed on my knees, legs out, ankles crossed, and I locked my eyes on the TV.

I didn't watch sports, except tennis. Those tennis players had firm and nice legs—so the football didn't do anything for me. But I watched it because it fascinated me beyond imagining even though Hector wasn't in the room (practice).

Therefore, when he came back, I kept my eyes glued to the TV and didn't look at him, except when he walked in front of the TV, of course. I didn't look at him when he got to his side of the bed and I didn't look at him when he resumed his position.

Then, all of a sudden, his arm sliced along the small of my back between me and the pillows. He yanked me across the bed until my body hit his.

his arm bent so my front was against his side.

Hector I put a hand on his abs to push away but his arm went tight.

hed out “What are you doing?” I snapped, looking up, but he leaned across  
sweatpants and grabbed my pillows. Doing an ab curl, he shoved them behind

“Hey!” I cried. “Those are my pillows.”

“Settle, Sadie,” he ordered in a low voice.

in. I. Did. Not. *Think*. So.

angry, “Don’t tell me to settle! You just stole my pillows!”

wasn’t I pushed away.

ped my His arm got tighter.

pled off I pushed harder, putting my full body into it.

in bed, His other hand came to my hip and held on.

n up on I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and pulled it away.

midriff, His wrist twisted and then his fingers wrapped around *my* wrist.

Thus began The Tussle.

resse— I had no chance in heck of winning, but it didn’t stop me from trying

d it like There was a lot of grunting (Hector and me), some sharp cries (and  
e room panting (mostly me), rolling (both of us), more rolling...still more rolling

I didn’t Then it changed from being all about limb maneuvering, strategic  
I didn’t strength to being about getting as close as physically possible,  
n when touching, kissing and even biting (me again).

He yanked off my pajama bottoms and panties. I tugged  
between sweatpants. Then we went back at each other like there were ten seconds  
is then before the whole of planet earth was going to explode.

Finally, I ended up on my back, my legs wrapped around his hip  
he drove deep inside me, our mouths touching, but we weren't kissi  
breathing heavily. The delicious anticipation was hitting critical mass  
body. My nails tore up his back, he groaned against my mouth at th  
precise second his last, deep thrust caused the sweet tension to rele  
explode and I gasped against his lips.

When we were both finished, his weight settled on me, h  
surrounded me and he stayed deep inside me. We were both panting  
rested his forehead against mine, eyes closed.

Then his eyes opened and he said softly, "Christ, Sadie, puttin' u  
you demonstrating how many more ways you can be a pain in the a  
worth every fuckin' second if that was the end result."

Someone, please tell me he did *not* just say that.

"You did not just say that," I said to him.

He didn't answer.

Instead, he abruptly switched topics. "Who'd you call?"

I blinked in confusion. "What?"

"In the bathroom."

Not that it was any of his business, I still answered, "Jet."

"She sort you out?"

I felt my eyes narrow. "Do you *want* me to be mad at you?"

His hips moved slightly and I couldn't help it, I was still tender, I l  
off his little moan.

When I was done moaning, he grinned at me wickedly and m  
"I'm thinkin', yeah."



s while I glared.

ng, just His grin died, face and voice now serious, he said, “We gotta get  
s in my *mamita*.”

le same I kept glaring.

ase and Then my mind flashed on the memory of Luke and the security  
forcing Hector away from me in the hospital when he didn’t want to go

is heat And, even though if you asked me if I had any instincts, I would ha  
and he you no, I pulled them up from wherever they were lying latent and  
with them.

ip with “Other than you, I’ve had two lovers,” I announced and watched l  
ass was grow dark and begin to morph toward angry. “No. I don’t want you t  
yours. I’m just saying, neither of them...well, they weren’t...” I stop  
then started again, “You need to know, I haven’t let anyone close and  
you found out why.”

“Maybe you should keep talkin’,” Hector told me, not yet fully m  
into anger, not ready to break into a grin either.

“That man at the bar, who was he?”

Hector’s head cocked impatiently at my off the subject question  
answered, “Knew him. Worked with him briefly. He’s in the business.

I nodded then I lifted my hand to the side of his face and rested it t

et out a “What he said to you, about me, knowing you were with me, fee  
was okay to say that...Hector, even when they were beginning,  
imagine anyone walking up to Lee and talking that way about Indy. O  
about Jet. Or any of them. But me, Seth Townsend’s daughter.” M  
uttered, dropped to a whisper. “I’m fair game.”

I saw an angry but understanding flare before he closed his eyes . . .  
by this, thumb moved to trace his bottom lip. When it did, his eyes opened again  
the anger was gone.

“Sadie—”

I talked over him. “Enter Ice Princess. She was the only way to  
when people thought about me like that, talked about me like that guy  
me, like Jerry did this morning. I knew it happened. They never  
directly to me because of my father, but I heard pieces here and there  
I went always *knew*. Until people forget, that’s not going to change. They’re  
to think it’s okay—”

“It’s not fuckin’ okay. It wasn’t then and it isn’t now,” Hector b  
sharply, and my hand drifted down to cup his jaw.

“No, you’re right, it wasn’t and isn’t. But they’re going to think i  
you can’t beat up every one of them.”

He didn’t say anything. He just stared at me.

So, as usual, I sallied forth.

“What Natalie said freaked me out,” I went on and his gaze d  
again, but I shook my head, took my hand from his jaw and wrapped b  
arms around him, squeezing his hips with my thighs. “Listen to me, H  
freaked me out because I was unprepared. I’d had a good day. I’d had  
meal. I felt safe. I was happy. I wasn’t expecting that. It threw me. If  
time to think about it, which I didn’t, I would have worked through it  
own.”

Again, he didn’t respond, at least not verbally.

What he did was much better.

and my His head dropped and he nuzzled my neck with his nose then his  
ain and was there and my arms went tighter.

I turned my lips to his ear and whispered, "I won't wear that skin  
but anything else, Hector, you have to let me be me. And the jerks  
get by jerks and they can think what they want. But we'll just come home and  
y. Or to the game."

said it Again, he didn't answer.

e and I Instead, his face came out of my neck and he kissed me, slow and s

e going And, I figured, with his reaction, my instincts were right.

roke in When his head moved away an inch, he looked in my eyes and  
softly, "Which Sadie is this?"

t is and I felt my mouth form a little grin and I answered honestly, "I've no  
haven't met her yet."

He touched his forehead to mine a nanosecond. Then Smooth  
Hector did a push up. Our bodies disconnected, but his arm came around  
lower back. He lifted me to him until my limbs wrapped tight around  
around body. His arm went away and he yanked down the covers under  
both my settled me in the bed. He joined me, snapping the covers back over  
ector. His hands went into my camisole and he tugged it up and off and tossed it  
l a nice side of the bed. He finished by rolling us, him to his back, me tucked  
I'd had side, and he settled the covers up around his stomach and under my arm

on my I put my head on his chest, wrapped my arm around his belly and  
asleep watching football.



**Hector**

Hector pulled gently away from Sadie's sleeping body. He got out  
 leaned back in and tucked the covers around her.

He walked to the bathroom, took a shower, shaved and went back  
 to the bedroom.

He dressed with his eyes on Sadie to make sure she didn't wake  
 because she looked cute when she slept, hands tucked under her cheeks,  
 thick, soft, wild hair everywhere.

Her scarred cheek was against the pillow, which Hector thought was a  
 good thing. She seemed not to notice it anymore or she'd put it somewhere  
 on her head where she didn't think about it. But every once in a while the  
 thought of it and the reason it was there crept into Hector's consciousness  
 and would serve as an angry reminder. This was happening a lot less lately,  
 but when it did, it didn't lose any of its intensity.

Once dressed, he leaned in and kissed the top of Sadie's head.

She didn't stir.

He went downstairs.

He made coffee, flipped the switch on the coffeemaker, wrote a note  
 for Sadie and went upstairs and put it on the pillow. He was walking  
 back downstairs when the knock came at the door.

He opened the door to see Bobby.

"Hombre," he said.

Bobby jutted out his chin and stepped in.

Hector closed the door and went on, "Sadie's sleeping."

"Got coffee?" Bobby asked.

Hector led the way to the kitchen, poured a mug for Bobby and

of bed, mug for himself. Bobby walked with him to the front door.

“Cell contact okay?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah,” Hector replied.

“You thinkin’ positive thoughts?” Bobby went on.

“No,” Hector responded.

His first errand that day was unpleasant but unavoidable.

Bobby nodded.

Hector walked out into the pre-dawn morning, got in the Bronco, and drove to Vance’s house.

Just before Max was born, Vance and Jules had moved from their duplex to a three-bedroom bungalow with a white picket fence that was a few doors down from Indy and Lee’s place, but still only a block away from Jules’s Uncle Nick.

Hector parked in front of their house and had a hand on the door handle when he saw Vance exit the house and stop. Jules was there, holding a travel mug and wearing a robe. Her hair was down and mussed and she looked like she had just woken up.

She lifted a hand to wave at Hector. He gave her a chin lift and a nod. Then she tilted her face to Vance, who accepted her invitation and bent his head to her.

Hector looked away.

Minutes later, Vance opened the door, slid in, put his travel mug between his knees and buckled up.

Hector took off.

“This gonna go well?” Vance asked the windshield.

Hector didn't take his eyes from the road. "I'm thinkin', no."

"How far you gonna push it?" Vance asked.

"As far as I have to."

Vance didn't respond and the conversation died, both men lost in their own thoughts.

It took an hour and a half to drive to the prison. Hector had called a few markers, or a few *more* markers. This business with Sadie was done on his reserves, but he also didn't give a fuck.

They were met at the entrance and taken to a room. Bars on the windows, a couch, a table, two chairs. They stayed standing and waited, silent.

Less than ten minutes later, the door opened and Seth Townsend came in with a security guard.

He took one look at Hector, not even glancing at Vance, and he turned to handle the security guard.

"Take me back."

The security guard's eyes moved to Hector before he closed the door. He stood in front of it.

"Take me back," Seth repeated to the guard.

Hector studied him.

Even with months inside, he looked good. Body fit, his prison clothes wrinkle-free like he had them ironed, his hair cut neatly.

Hector tried to find some hint of Sadie in him, but it wasn't there.

Seth Townsend was tall, dark-haired with some distinguishing gray hair. His body was made up of lean, muscled bulk. He was impressive, his presence that was both magnetic and menacing, even in prison.

How this man made Sadie, Hector couldn't begin to guess. If he seen the photos of Sadie's mother, he would have thought she was ado

"We gotta talk," Hector said.

in their Seth's gaze sliced to him but he was silent.

"I wanna cut a deal," Hector went on.

ed in a Seth's eyes flashed and he smiled. It was not an amused smile. I  
laining triumphant one.

He walked further into the room.

indows, "You want to cut a deal," Seth repeated.

"Yeah," Hector replied.

walked Seth put his hands in the pockets of his pants and rocked back  
heels.

ined to "All of a sudden, I want to cut a deal too," Seth said.

It was Hector's turn to stay silent.

oor and Then, as if Vance nor the guard were in the room, Seth offered, "I'  
it worth your while to stay away from her."

Hector showed no reaction to this and remained silent.

"Good enough to fix up that house of yours, trade up to a better ca  
afford a decent haircut."

n blues Exposing his knowledge of Hector's living arrangements and  
mixed with the inference that Hector was beneath Sadie's notice,  
knew Seth was trying to rattle him.

ay, and Considering he left Sadie naked and asleep in his bed, Hector re  
, had a unrattled.

hadn't Seth watched him closely then said, "No? Then I'll make it *no*  
pted. your while to stay with her."

"This how you scared away Tracy and Brent?" Hector asked  
Sadie's only two boyfriends.

She didn't need to tell him about them last night. He already knew  
t was a dug them up as a matter of course during the investigation and knew a  
them.

"They took the first option," Seth replied without remorse.

"I'm waitin' for option three. The one where, once you get out, yo  
me to Thanksgiving dinner," Hector returned casually.

Seth showed no response.  
on his

"We done with this topic?" Hector decided it was time to move on.

Seth shrugged.

"Sadie's bad business has to stop," Hector continued.

Instantly Seth retorted, "You *are* clever. You come up with that c  
ll make own?"

Hector ignored him. "You can carry on and fuck it up or we ca  
ar, even together."

Seth's eyes went hard. "You have got to be joking, Chavez. No  
vehicle hell we're working together."

"Then I got a choice," Hector replied immediately. "Vance here h  
Hector diggin' around Elizabeth's disappearance. Vance is pretty good at find  
mained out. So good, he found out she was whacked by Mickey Balducci  
remember Mickey Balducci?"

Hector watched with some degree of surprise as Seth showed a rea



t worth Before he could control it, pain sliced across his face.

The one thing Seth had given Sadie was the ability to put  
l about impenetrable defense. This was a first.

Still, Seth didn't respond.

v. He'd Hector kept at him. "Vance can share with Sadie what he knows  
ll about can let her go on thinkin' you did it."

That was when Seth Townsend's magnetic, menacing, invulnerable  
cracked. His body jerked and his face went pale.

u invite "She thinks *I* did it?" he whispered.

Hector nodded. Seth's hand came out of his pocket and up slightly  
was going to tear through his hair. He realized quickly what this  
expose, dropped his hand and he looked out the window.

Hector opened his mouth to speak when his cell went. He decided  
Seth a moment to reflect, dug it out of his back pocket and looked  
on your display, which said SADIE CALLING.

His eyes cut to Vance as he flipped it open and put it to his ear.

n work "Sadie," he answered, and he felt the air in the room grow dense.

She was whispering, voice panicked, "I got up. You weren't here  
way in going down to the kitchen to find you. I was on the landing,  
downstairs and I saw a *man's legs* on the couch. They weren't yours.  
where are you? *Someone's in the house.*"

as been *Fuck*, he thought, anger gripping him at the fear in her voice.

lin' shit Without hesitating and without giving a thought to his audience,  
i. You his head, stepped away and turned so his side was to the room.

ction. "Calm down, *mamita*. That's Bobby. He's lookin' after you today.

you see the note I put on the pillow?”

up an He heard her take a deep breath and then he heard her move.

Finally, she sighed.

“Blooming heck, I’m sorry. It’s right here. I didn’t see it.”

s or we “You okay?” he asked immediately.

“Yes,” she replied, and she sounded okay, in an instant totally o  
le aurapanic. Will of fucking steel. “Where are you?” she asked.

“Doin’ some business.”

She hesitated and he knew she was bracing before exposing hers  
7 as if itdid that a lot, and he figured, didn’t know she was doing it.

would He wondered vaguely when it would stop when he heard her ask,  
going to see you today?”

to give He fought a smile. His head came up and he looked sightlessly  
l at the window.

“Yeah, this won’t take long, but I got other shit after this. No matte  
I’ll be home tonight, take you to dinner.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go out. We’re not really good with goi  
e. I wasMaybe we should cook something here.”

looked “Whatever you want, *mi corazón*.”

Hector, “After we eat, you can take me for another bike ride,” she told him  
bit his lip and shook his head.

“Gotta say, *mujer*, it’s good you like the bike.”

he bent “Will you take me for a ride?” she pressed.

. Didn’t “I’ll take you for a ride.”

She didn't respond to this, but he heard the pleasure in her voice she went onto a different subject like they had all day to talk. "I have to go with Jet to get fitted for a bridesmaid's dress today. Do you think you would take me?"

The thought of Bobby taking Sadie to get fitted for a bridesmaid's dress made Hector lose the battle with his smile.

over her

"Yeah."

She carried on, "I know you want to do your floors, but if I have time, can I go to your fireplace?"

elf. She

He couldn't help it. He gave a short laugh. She made "going to the fireplace" sound like it was the height of entertainment. He didn't know how a single woman who thought "going to the fireplace" was a thrill a minute.

"Am I

"Yeah," he repeated, still smiling.

out the

"Where's the goo?"

er what,

"Back room," he answered. "Listen, *mamita*, I'm in the microwave, something."

ng out.

"Oh! Sorry. You should have said."

"I just did."

and he

When she spoke again, he heard the smile in her voice. "Okay, I'll go."

"You leave the house, you're never outside of touching distance from Bobby, got me?"

"Got you," she replied readily.

The tension left his body. "Later."

Then he heard her voice going soft and breathy like it always did.

e when she said it, “Bye, babe.”

’e to go And like it always did, he felt that soft, breathy word in his gut be Bobby flipped the phone shut, turned back to the room and found Seth To staring at him.

’s dress Something had changed. Hector couldn’t put his finger on it, but he before Seth spoke and confirmed it, that whatever it was, it was big.

“I was like you,” Seth told him, voice hard, eyes active, body tau me, can like you.”

Hector’s eyes narrowed.

ng” his “I doubt that,” he replied scathingly.

know a “You’re wrong,” Seth returned, and then, voice still hard but his were soft, “Just like you.” He paused and went on, “You fuck her or kill you.”

Vance moved. It was almost imperceptible, but the threat was not. Idle of put his hand up toward Vance because he knew Seth had just given in.

Seth crossed his arms on his chest.

“You know about Mickey. What else do you know?” he asked Hec

“That you avenged your wife by bringin’ down Luther, who orde let you hit, and takin’ Mickey out altogether. The Balducci boys didn’t for have been tryin’ to chip away at you for a long time. With you commission, they went after Sadie.”

Seth’s only reaction to this was lifting his chin then he said, “ your deal.”

Hector glanced at Vance then back at Seth.

d when “Jerry isn’t your soldier anymore. He’s pissed about me, he’s

about Sadie and he's pissed about your instructions to look after her. I  
before he so, forcin' him to put himself at risk with Lee, somethin' no one does  
wnt send down free will. Somehow he knows about the Caymans accounts a  
Sadie's the only one who can get to the money. He's struck a deal  
e knew, workin' with Donny now. You're playin' right into their hands. He's  
your orders until Sadie gets the account information. She knows ab  
accounts, she's fucked. They got options. They could roofie her, they  
it. "Just threaten her, whatever. They take her to the Caymans, sedated or  
duress, she hands them the money. They don't have a use for her a  
and they either play with her, take her out, or both. In the me  
whatever power you got left takes another hit without that cash. You're  
; words the Balduccis avenge their father's murder and you're as fucked as Sac

ver, I'll Seth did not look happy and asked, "I thought you boys had Do  
tape torching her gallery?"

Hector "We're after him, the police are after him, but he's proving diff  
find," Hector replied.

At that news, Seth looked even less happy.

tor. "What's the deal?" he ground out.

red the "You back off, let me handle it. That's the deal."

get and "You must be joking," Seth returned.

out of Hector shook his head.

Tell me "That's not a deal," Seth snapped.

"Only one you got," Hector shot back.

"You want me to stand back and—"

pissed "No, you tell me everything, everything the Feds didn't find. The l

in doin' of your safe house, any other property you own, where your money's  
of theirfrom, what soldiers you got left workin' for you, where I can find 'em  
nd thatkeep tryin' to contact Sadie, but you get hold of her, you don't fuckin'  
il. He'sshit."

obeyin' "And what, you hand this over to the Feds?"

out the "No, the boys go huntin'. The Balduccis are hidden, we figure  
y could helpin'. They're usin' your own resources to fuck you."

r under "This doesn't make any fucking sense. The Balduccis want my b  
nymore They can't waltz around Denver being the big men now. They fucked  
antime, caught on camera committing arson. Ricky's—"  
e weak,

lie." "Seth, they don't want your business. They don't intend to stay i

many on They get your money, they live off your back for the rest of the  
knowin' they got everything you had, including bringin' Sadie low."

icult to Seth stared at Hector then his mouth got tight.

"Goddamn it," he muttered.

"We got a deal?" Hector pushed.

Seth kept staring at Hector. His gaze sliced to Vance, then his e  
back and locked on Hector.

"Deal."

ocation

of your safe house, any other property you own, where your money's comin' from, what soldiers you got left workin' for you, where I can find 'em. You keep tryin' to contact Sadie, but you get hold of her, you don't fuckin' tell her shit."

"And what, you hand this over to the Feds?"

"No, the boys go huntin'. The Balduccis are hidden, we figure Jerry's helpin'. They're usin' your own resources to fuck you."

"This doesn't make any fucking sense. The Balduccis want my business. They can't waltz around Denver being the big men now. They fucked up, got caught on camera committing arson. Ricky's—"

"Seth, they don't want your business. They don't intend to stay in town. They get your money, they live off your back for the rest of their lives knowin' they got everything you had, including bringin' Sadie low."

Seth stared at Hector then his mouth got tight.

"Goddamn it," he muttered.

"We got a deal?" Hector pushed.

Seth kept staring at Hector. His gaze sliced to Vance, then his eyes cut back and locked on Hector.

"Deal."

TWENTY-FIVE



CODE ONE

*Sadie*

“Yahtzee!” I yelled, bouncing on my bottom on the couch that was situated in the front window of Fortnum’s.

“Girlie, you’re on a hot streak!” Stevie cried, leaning forward and giving me a high five.

He wasn’t wrong. It was my third Yahtzee that game and I’d had two more games before. I was kicking Yahtzee *butt*.

“Three yahtzees in one game, two the game before. That’s unheard of! Fuck this shit, we need to go to DIA and get a direct flight to Vegas. Whatever way Sadie’s rollin’, we hit the craps table, we’ll all retire,” Shirleen announced.

“I could go to Vegas,” I told Shirleen, and I could.

Why not?

It sounded fun. I’d only been to Vegas once and that was with my boss. It was a business trip and I had to entertain almost the whole time I was there. I’d been able to see a few of the sights, but I hadn’t been able to get them all.

And I was on a hot streak.



I already had enough money to retire but more never hurt.

Right?

“You’re not going to Vegas.” Bobby frowned at me.

I looked at Bobby (a.k.a. Alaskan Hottie), opened my mouth something then decided to close it.

I’d only just met him that morning and practically the first thing (after drinking coffee and making toast) was make him help me fix fireplace and scrape paint out of grooves.

That was He didn’t mind this, but then I’d made him help me sand the fireplace down (by hand).

Not giving He didn’t mind this either.

Then I’d made him sit in a bridal shop with Jet, Nancy, Blanca, and two theStevie.

He minded that.

Word of. Tod and Stevie, I found out, were the officially unofficial Rock With the Wedding Planners, or at least Tod was (and, by the by, Tod didn’t have Shirleen’s idea of a hayride either, but he declared magnanimously was going to with it”).

Jet had chosen the color, but all her bridesmaids could pick their style decided which style I wanted immediately, but Tod made me try on more dresses just in case.

As there. Then they made Nancy and Blanca try on mother-of-the-bride and mother-of-the-groom gowns, even though Nancy and Blanca both were to get something at a department store (Tod changed their mind about and all three of us ordered gowns that day).

We then got into a complicated discussion about accessories. Tia or both? Gloves, yes or no? If yes, full length, half length, only hand? gloves at all, fingerless or not?

Needless to say, I was not Bobby's favorite person at that moment.

After the three-hour bridal shop session, Nancy and Blanca had gone separate ways and Jet, Bobby, Tod, Stevie and I went back to Fortnum & Mason to play Yahtzee. Tex, Indy, Duke and Jane (another of Indy's employees who was a painfully quiet, equally painfully thin and even more painfully old woman of indeterminate age) were working.

Once we arrived, Indy and Jet mostly played Yahtzee with Tod, and me. Jane disappeared into the shelves with an armload of books, came back and get another armload and disappear again. Tex stayed behind the espresso counter with a steady stream of customers, some supremely ungracious to (but bizarrely, they didn't seem to mind) and some played wingman behind the espresso counter or manned the bookshelf. Chick when a book was sold. Finally, Shirleen had arrived half an hour after we had like the

Ralphie phoned in between Yahtzee games four and five to tell me he was cooking dinner for Double H and me the next night, and since this was a cooking premiere, if we didn't show he was disowning us (his words).

Not wanting to be disowned, I called Hector to ask him about Ralphie's invitation. He accepted without reservation, even after I explained to him that Ralphie was most definitely not the cook in the family. I also let him know I was hanging out at Fortnum's.

Between my turns with the fake-velvet lined Yahtzee cup (it was informed me, the Yahtzee "Deluxe" edition), I was struggling with

ra, veil decision of which was my second best day ever, yesterday or today.

And if Trying on bridesmaid dresses and looking at tiaras and veils was I'd never done it. And, with Tod taking charge and Nancy and Blanca scaring me, it was good spending time with them. It was neat watching them with Nancy. The mother/daughter banter, the familiarity, the way they act—she it obvious they were close.

But what was almost better was the way Blanca was with Jet. How shy clear she was already a member of the family, accepted, loved and sometimes (I noticed), precious.

Stevie That last part, and the hope I held in the very, very back of my mind I'd have that too (one day), edged out yesterday as my best day.

Especially when I thought of my phone conversation with Hec he was morning.

Duke Just the thought of that phone conversation gave me goose bumps counter good kind.

I'd let my guard down. I'd let him in. I'd shared my secrets. I'd opened a small door to a little place inside me, and he'd slid in. I found he not only he was he seemed comfortable there and I liked it.

But, better, it seemed he liked being there. Not just a little, a lot.

And sensing that, the severed edges torn apart in my heart that I would never heal felt whole again.

“No time for Vegas,” Jet said, taking me out of my thoughts. I glanced at her and she was looking out the window. Then her eyes came to me. “H is here,” she finished on a grin.

I rolled my eyes at her use of “Double H,” turned in my seat and

out the big front window to see Hector slamming the door on the I  
fun and Fortnum's was on a corner and he'd parked on the cross street oppo  
nca not store.

ing Jet I watched as he caught the light just right and started to jog acr  
y made four lanes of Broadway.

He looked good jogging. Natural, cool, casual, his body at his co  
v it was and I liked watching him. So much, I felt my heart start to beat a littl  
d even, and my mouth began to form a smile.

That was when the shots rang out.  
ind that I froze, heard startled cries, but my eyes stayed riveted on Hecto  
body jerked. He bent over, now running. His hand going to the back  
tor that jeans, I saw him pull out a gun.

That was all I saw.  
ps—the I was lifted bodily from the couch. This surprised me and I let out  
scream, not only because of the surprise, but because I was being  
pened away and I couldn't see Hector around Bobby's big body.

only fit, "Put me down!" I yelled, squirming in his arms until I could see  
his massive shoulders.

I caught a glimpse of Hector crouched in front of a car in f  
thought Fortnum's. He pulled up slightly, arms cocked and out in front o  
pointed upward, gun hand resting in his other palm, and he fired once.

nced at I lost sight again when my bottom was planted on the book coun  
Double without hesitation Bobby put a hand in my chest and gave me a shov  
fell backward, arms wheeling around to regain balance, I noticed mo  
looked all around the store. Indy was shouting at customers to stay in the st  
move to the book aisles.

Bronco. Before I fell, strong hands came to my waist and I was yanked across the site to the other side of the counter. My feet hit the floor and Duke pressed into me. We were both hunkered down, Duke's big body mostly covering mine.

I heard pounding feet, more cries, more gunshots, and in a panic, I surge up but Duke kept solid.

"Stay still!" he ordered.

"Hector!" I shouted toward the floor (which was my forced vantage point) as Duke had my head tucked down with one of his hands) and I continued to push against Duke's bulk.

"Still!" Duke repeated, pressing into me.

"Shots fired. Fortnum's bookstore, Bayaud and Broadway," I heard a boom from across the room, obviously on the phone, then in a louder voice, "Loopy Loo, don't worry about the customers, get to cover, *now!*"

"Oh my God," I breathed, and Tex continued.

"Hector Chavez is the target. He's outside with Bobby Zanzinski. They are returnin' fire."

"Oh my God," I breathed again.

I felt movement, Duke was jostled and I was able to lift my head. I saw Jet shove a customer behind the book counter with us. They both got down, low, sat on their behinds, knees up, backs to the shelves.

"Bobby's gone out," Jet told Duke, her face pale.

I looked at Duke and saw his mouth grow tight as more gunshots came. I heard.

My eyes moved back to Jet.

"This isn't happening," I told her stupidly because it

over the fucking...*happening*.

me until “Stay calm, darlin’.” Duke’s gravelly voice came at me, and n  
sliced to him.

tried to “You stay calm!” I snapped, again trying (and failing) to push at hi  
boyfriend’s out there!”

“He knows what he’s doin’ and there ain’t no way you can help  
e point, Duke shot back.

ued to My heart racing, I glared at Duke, knowing he was right. Then I g  
Jet then at the trembling female customer, who was huddled next to  
who looked like one of those grunge rock band people who needed a  
ard Tex and shampoo.

: boom, Without any option open to me, I did the only thing I could do.

I made an empty threat.

“All I can say is, if this is a Balducci, I’m hunting him down a  
ci, both going to rip his heart out with my bare hands and use it as a soccer ball

The Grunge Customer stared at me and slid a little closer to Jet.

I heard sirens and noticed that there weren’t any more gunshots.

a bit. I “The shots have stopped,” I told Duke immediately.

oth got “Stay low,” Duke replied.

“We need to see if Hector and Bobby are all right,” I went on.

“Sadie, stay low,” Duke repeated.

ould be Even though I really didn’t want to, I stayed low and tried t  
breathe.

This was hard.

was...

My eyes locked on Jet's.

My eyes She nodded reassuringly to me, put her arm around the tre customer and pulled her close.

m. "My I nodded back and pulled in more breath, but no matter how de were, I couldn't seem to get enough oxygen in my lungs.

p him," We waited what seemed like four days.

Four *long* days.

lared at Finally, I heard Bobby say from the front of the store, "Tex, Jet and Shirleen, we're movin' Sadie out."

shower Before I could react to Bobby being back, Duke hauled me up and me out from behind the book counter.

I saw Bobby, alive, no bullet holes or blood visible, seemingly fiddle standing at the door, gun in his hand. The black Nightingale E and I'm was pulled up on the sidewalk right outside the front door.

!" "Hector?" I asked Bobby.

"He's fine," Bobby answered.

I pulled in more breath and finally felt oxygen hit my lungs.

Then, as if she couldn't hear Bobby, I shouted toward the book c  
"Jet, he's fine!"

"I heard! Get gone!" Jet's voice shouted back.

"Indy?" I yelled.

o deep "I'm fine, go!" I heard Indy yell back from behind the espresso cou

"Tod, Stevie?" I called.

"Girlie, go!" Tod called back from somewhere in the books

“We’re fine.”

umbling Before I could do any more, Shirleen, Tex and Duke got close and  
me out while Bobby kept his gun up and his eyes peeled. In second  
ep they was out the door, in the back of the Explorer and the door was  
Shirleen climbed into the passenger side, Bobby behind the wheel  
took off.

“Where’s Hector?” I asked, buckling up.

Duke, “With Ricky,” Bobby replied.

It felt like a ten-ton weight hit my chest and I stopped breathing en  
hustled Luckily, Shirleen spoke for me. “What’d you say?”

“It was Ricky Balducci shootin’ at him. I drew his fire, Hector r  
fit as a the building, climbed the fire escape and got him,” Bobby answered.

explorer Visions of Hector choking the life out of Ricky (or worse) filled m  
I started breathing again (more like hyperventilating) and yelle  
back! You can’t leave Hector with Ricky! He’s going to—”

“He had him disarmed, cuffed to a door and he’s got a gun or  
Bobby interrupted me. “The cops were approachin’ when I left. I  
facin’ rape, arson and now attempted murder. Hector assaults him, he  
counter, up. Hector’s a wild man but ain’t no way he’s gonna fuck this up, no  
how much he wants to kick Balducci’s ass.”

This made sense and it made me stop hyperventilating.

inter. Then another thought occurred to me.

“Why did you move me out?”

shelves. “Hector wants you at the offices,” Bobby answered.

“Why?” I pressed.



“I didn’t ask. I don’t care. He wants you there, I take you there. I hurried orders and I don’t question them. Ever,” Bobby returned.

I decided (since Bobby had just been in a gunfight), that maybe not the time to be asking any more questions.

He took us to the offices and parked in the underground garage. I have time to have an emotional drama that I was back in the garage first time since I’d careened in there after being raped. Shirleen and hustled me out of the car, up the stairs and into the offices before tiredly. blink.

Shirleen stayed in the reception area, but Bobby took me straight to the door to the back rooms and into the surveillance room, which was rounded with a couple of desks, monitors, equipment and the big, muscular body was Jack.

Jack turned to us. His eyes did a professional full body scan of my head. d, “Go they moved to Bobby.

“Got the call,” he told Bobby.

1 him,” “Code One?” Bobby asked.

Ricky’s “Yup,” Jack replied.

fucks it I looked between them, wondering who would explain.

matter “I’m off,” Bobby said. Then he was.

The door closed behind him. This I took as Bobby not being the explain.

Therefore, I turned and asked Jack, “What’s Code One?”

“Sit. Watch the monitors,” Jack responded.

I sat in a swivel chair in front of the bank of monitors, six across

followrows, each with what looked like a DVD recorder under it. I trained n  
on the screens and repeated, “What’s Code One?”

ow was “Do as I say, when I say, no matter what you see on the monitors  
answered.

I didn’t Though this wasn’t really an answer, I didn’t quibble. I didn’t susp  
for thenow was Quibble Time. Quibble Time was after whatever Code One v  
Bobbyover and I was innocently playing Yahtzee with my friends again.

I could “Should I be worried about whatever’s happening?” I went on.

“Nope.”

through “You’re sure?” I pressed.

is filled  
ulk that

“Yup.”

I didn’t really believe him, but as I mentioned it was not Quibble T

ne then We watched the monitors.

Then I asked, “What are we looking for?”

“Anything.”

“What kind of anything?”

“Anything, anything.”

I was feeling ill-equipped to be Jack’s Monitor Helper, but I dec  
stop asking questions about my assignment. It was not only not C  
Time, it was probably not Question Time either. Except for things  
one to like they’d gone back to normal at Fortnum’s and a bunch of people  
pool hall doing pool hall type activities, nothing much was happening.

I decided on a different subject. “Can I call Hector?”

“Nope.”

ss, four

my gaze Blooming heck!

“Can I call him in, say, fifteen minutes?” I tried.

is,” Jack “You can shut up. That’d be good.”

My back went straight, but my eyes didn’t leave the screens.

ect that “Did you just tell me to shut up?”

vas was “I see you didn’t hear me.”

“Hector was in a gunfight!” I snapped.

“Not the first, probably not the last.”

Oh my.

*That* shut me up.

ime. I decided not to think about that until I was, say, six hundred years old and silently we watched the screens.

Then I saw something in the pool hall.

“Oh my God!” I cried.

Jack went on alert.

“What?”

ided to “Look at her outfit!” I pointed at a girl in the pool hall. “Her tan Quibble skintight and she’s not wearing a bra. And her skirt is shorter than the one she wore to Stella’s gig!”

looking Jack was silent, but I felt he’d lost his intensity.

2 in the I peered closer.

The girl on the screen bent over a pool table and I gasped when she was treated to a partial moon.

“Blooming heck! She’s wearing a *thong*!” I exclaimed then w

“Now, if you’re going to wear a skirt that short, you really should wear proper underwear.”

Jack remained silent.

I looked at him. “Don’t you think?”

Jack’s eyes remained on the screens. “I think Hector owes me big time for what I think.”

Hmm.

Perhaps Jack was not the kind of man who discussed women’s unwise choices, even after dramatic shootouts (or perhaps ever).

I decided that was my cue to stay silent again.

This lasted less than a minute.

years old,

“Why are we watching a pool hall?”

“The Balduccis own that pool hall.”

I felt bile slide up my throat and I swallowed it down.

I thought that was apropos. The Evil Fitzpatrick clan hung out at the pool hall in Veronica Mars.

I didn’t share this with Jack.

back top is

“Oh,” was all I said, but I watched closer.

the one I

We sat in silence for a while, and then I saw Hector’s Bronco enter the garage.

“Thank you, God,” I breathed, watching him park.

1 I was

He got out, started toward the door to the stairs and I felt my body begin to relax. But then I saw Hector stop and look toward the entrance to the garage.

went on,

d wear Jack tensed.

I tensed.

Then I saw a BMW careening into the garage.

Hector pulled his gun out of the back of his jeans again  
time, is automatically went into a squat, not standing, not sitting, and not sure  
was going to do.

“Sit,” Jack ordered, not taking his eyes from the screen.

lerwear I sat.

I stared.

The BMW halted and Hector had his head cocked and his gun up,  
on the car.

I held my breath.

Marty Balducci got out of the BMW and my body automaticall  
into my ready to run squat again.

: a pool “Sit!” Jack repeated, louder this time, and I didn’t want to, I really  
want to, but I sat again.

Marty didn’t look good, and I felt the blood drain out of my  
couldn’t see all that clearly on the small screen but he appeared  
bleeding from multiple gunshot wounds to the chest.

nter the

Marty held on to the open car door to keep himself up, but I could  
was struggling. He lifted his gun toward Hector, but he couldn’t quit  
far enough. I could see they were talking (or shouting) at each other.

y begin

arms out, gun up, was advancing slowly.

of the

Jack hit a button on the console and the room filled with the ringi  
phone.

Then, on another monitor, I watched as an Explorer entered the garage. I stared, body tense, as it parked at an angle behind Marty's BMW. Lee and Luke got out, already armed, guns up and trained on Marty.

and I "What's happening?" I whispered, but Jack didn't answer.

what I He had his hands on the console in front of us, close to both the guns that were pointed in his direction and a number of buttons and knobs.

"Nine, one, one," a voice said. "What's your emergency?"

trained "I need an ambulance. There's a man with multiple gunshot wounds in the garage under Nightingale Investigations..." Jack told the operator, speaking clearly, calmly, giving an address, his name, a telephone number.

While Jack talked, I saw Lee and Luke advance on Marty, just as Hector. They all seemed to be talking to each other and moving in a jerky motion.

y went Without warning, likely unable to hold himself up anymore, Jack suddenly went down.

y didn't "He's down," Jack said to the 911 operator.

face. I Hector and Lee stopped moving slowly and rushed to Marty. I kicked Marty's gun away, shoved his own into his jeans, got down on my knees and bent over Marty, obscuring our view. Luke ran to the back of the Explorer.

l tell he Something caught in my corner vision and I looked to a monitor on the lift it banks up and to the right and at what I saw, I shouted (and pointed for Hector, measure), "Jack! It's Donny!"

ing of a Donny Balducci and two men I didn't know were creeping along a hallway, which hallway I didn't know.

age. "We need cars," Jack barked at the 911 operator. "Squads. We got  
W and men, all armed, in the building approaching the Nightingale offices  
address as for the ambulance. We got civilians in here. We're on the  
floor. Over and out."

phones Then he hit a button and immediately flipped a switch.

"Lockdown. Three armed men approaching," Jack said, but I hit  
over a PA, which seemed to be all around us.

unds in I watched Shirleen jump up, open a drawer, pull out a gun and she  
operator, the front office door and locked it. I felt Jack's movements as he hit  
button and the room filled with ringing again.

st like "Get out of there Shirleen, get out, get out..." I chanted, watching  
in slow and his gang approach the office door as Shirleen hustled toward the  
door.

Marty "Stark," I heard Luke's voice fill the room and tore my eyes away  
Donny to see Luke standing in the garage, his phone to his ear.

Hector "Donny's in the building, two men with him, all armed in the lobby  
outside the front office door. We're in lockdown. Ambulance is in transit  
Marty. I called squads. Over."

κ of the Jack was talking, but Luke was now moving, jogging toward the  
Lee breaking away from Hector and coming with Luke. Somewhere  
the line someone had given Hector a first aid kit, but it was sitting next  
tor two on the concrete unused and Hector was giving Marty CPR.

or good Then I saw Shirleen disappear from the reception area.

ong the "Status. Over," Luke said.

"Shirleen's in the hall, Brody's in the back office. Sadie and me

ot three surveillance room. Everyone else out on assignment. Over.”

Same “Shirleen goes in with Sadie. You’re in the hall. Over and out.”

fourth Luke and Lee had disappeared from the screen because they’d  
stairs. Jack pressed some buttons and the viewpoint changed on some  
monitors and I saw Luke and Lee on the stairs, taking them two at a tir

heard it Jack got up, and when I turned to him, he had a gun.

“No matter what you see or what you hear, you do not leave this  
e ran to Got me?”

another I nodded.

“Repeat it,” he said.

Donny “No matter what, I won’t leave this room,” I said quickly.

e inner He nodded then he was gone, Shirleen passing him on his way out.

y from “Jack got the police comin’?” Shirleen asked, her eyes going dir  
the monitors and she started scanning them as she took a seat.

hallway “Police and ambulance,” I replied.

nsit for “Holy shit, what’s happened in the garage?” Her eyes were riv  
Hector giving Marty CPR.

e stairs, “Marty drove in, got out of the car. He was filled with bull  
e along collapsed. Hector’s working on him. Lee and Luke are headed up here.

t to him Shirleen was silent.

Then quietly she remarked, “They don’t have vests.”

“What?”

She looked at me then back at the monitors and muttered, “Nothin’

e in the It hit me she meant bulletproof vests.



I felt fear slice through me as I watched, mouth dropping open, as he gave up trying to force the door open with his foot, took a step back, hit the wall, drilled some rounds in it with his gun. Then he kicked the door open and all surged in just as Lee and Luke rounded another flight of stairs.

“Why don’t they wait for the police?” I shouted, coming into the room again, and I wasn’t going to sit down, no way. I didn’t know how to breathe anymore.

Visions, unbidden, forced themselves into my head. Lee and Ava’s wedding picture in the paper. Luke taking Ava in his arms and talking to her mouth. Both of them teasing me.

It hit me that these were my friends and they were in danger.

Because of me.

I straightened out of my squat and stood.

“Child, settle,” Shirleen said softly.

All at once, everything happened on the monitors and in the office.

I heard more gunshots, these close, coming from Donny, who was at the inner door. The paramedics were running toward Hector. Uniformed police were running up the stairs, guns drawn. Lee and Luke were in the hallway and jogging toward the offices.

“Stay back!” I shouted, leaning forward now, hands on the console, trembling, eyes going manically from screen to screen.

Lee stopped outside the door and flattened himself against the wall. With quick head jerks he peered around the door, Luke beside him, as he pulled open the inner door.

“Jack,” I breathed.

Donny More gunshots. Shirleen and I sucked in breath as Lee then Luke  
ick andaround the door and into reception.

nd they My body jerked as I heard shouts, gunshots, close.

Very close.

a squat I saw both Lee and Luke were inside reception, both moving and  
v to sit, just as I noted on another screen, Hector running up the stairs, taking  
three at a time.

Indy's Without thinking, I turned and bolted to the door.

against Before I got close, Shirleen caught me in two strong arms and pu  
back.

There were more gunshots and I closed my eyes, put my hands o  
ears and I heard Jack's voice, soft and reassuring, coming at me fr  
memory banks the night of my rape.

*It's okay. It's okay. You're okay. You're safe.*

The pain of fear for Jack sliced through my gut.

s firing The gunshots and shouting stopped.

formed My eyes flew open and I looked to my left at the monitors. Shirlee  
the hall stood, her arms wrapped around me, and we watched. Luke, the pol  
now Hector were in the reception area. Luke and Hector were adv  
e, body both still armed, guns pointed to something on the ground, the polic  
moving around talking into the mouthpieces at their shoulders.

all, and Lee had disappeared.

Donny "Can we go out now? Can we go?" I asked Shirleen.

"Hang on, baby. Stay with me," Shirleen cooed softly.

"Lee. Jack," I whispered.

surged “Hang on.”

We lost sight of Hector and Luke, and Shirleen and I stood watching the monitors. It seemed odd and distressing that everything normal at Fortnum’s.

I firing, They had no idea.

ing them No idea.

It could have been seconds, but it felt like hours before the door and Hector stood there.

lled me Shirleen’s arms dropped away and I surged forward, my body slung into his, his arms closing around me.

ver my “Please, please, please, please, please,” I breathed into his throat.

om my “Jack got clipped, just a nick in the neck. He’s fine. He’d had time on a vest,” Hector said, and I could feel the vibration of his voice at his against my lips.

“Lee?”

“Lee’s fine. He’s seein’ to Jack.”

on and I My body sagged into his. His arms got tighter and I felt rather than ice and Shirleen squeeze by us and leave the room.

ancing, I tilted my head back and looked at Hector.

re were “Are you okay?”

He dipped his chin and his black eyes caught mine. “Yeah, *mami*, all right.”

My arms tensed. “I’m so sorry. So, so, sorry.”

I watched as his eyes flashed and he murmured, “*Cállate, mi amor*.”

“It’s my fault,” I went on.

silently “*Cállate*,” he repeated softly.

ng was I blinked then my brows drew together in confusion. “What’s that?”

“It means shut up.”

Oh.

Well then.

opened “That sounds nicer than the English shut up,” I told him.

His lips twitched. “It isn’t.”

imming I didn’t have the time to worry about Hector being rude.

I took in breath and asked, “Marty?”

e to put the hospital, not here.”  
s throat

I moved on. “Donny?”

“Donny and his boys were all down with officers workin’ on ’em  
got here. But Luke and Lee got a lot of experience with this shit. The  
shoot to kill, just neutralize.”

ian saw That might be so, but there was no way they had time even to aim.

So I told Hector, “What just happened was insane. They didn’t ha  
—”

He interrupted me by saying firmly, “They had time.”

ita. I’m I stared at him and realized he wasn’t lying.

I decided to move on again.

,” “Why did it all...” I stopped then started again, “What happened?”

His face dipped lower, he touched his lips to mine and he said,

talk about it later. After we talk to the cops and after we're done sittin  
hot tub."

mean?" Right away, this made me smile. I couldn't help it. Even with  
drama, the very thought of sitting in a hot tub with Hector sounded *gre*

No, *especially* with all the drama.

And there it was again.

Drama. Gunfights. Paramedics. Police officers. Fear. Panic  
threatening situations. Jack getting "clipped."

And Hector swept it all away with hot tub promises.

I snuggled closer, then my smile faded.

"I'm not allowed," I told him.

His head jerked with surprise right before his face changed and he  
like he was about to laugh.

Now, really, seriously, truly there was *absolutely* nothing funny  
when I *this*.

you don't "You're not allowed?" he repeated.

"My tattoo," I explained. "The tattoo guy said—"

He interrupted me again. "It'll be okay."

I cocked my head and asked, "You sure?"

One of his arms came from around me and his hand went to my ne  
up, his fingers sliding into my hair. Instead of tilting my head back, h  
it down and I felt his lips moving against the top of my head.

"I'm sure."

Then he kissed me there.  
"We'll

' in the After that, he and I went out into the hall and I took over "seein' to



all the "BACK IN THE news today is Nightingale Investigations. Some month  
at. the private investigations firm achieved local fame while guarding t  
singer of a popular local band. This afternoon, on Broadway, a g  
played out between—"

. Life- The newscaster was cut off when Hector pressed a button on the  
and the TV screen went blank.

I lifted my still wet-haired-from-the-hot-tub head from his ch  
looked up at him.

"I was watching that," I protested.

He threw the remote on the nightstand. His body turned into min  
looked found myself on my back with Hector mostly on top of me.

y about "I don't wanna watch the news," he told me, his eyes locking wit  
"I wanna fool around with my girlfriend."

My belly melted, even though we'd just "fooled around" in the  
not an hour ago.

"We just fooled around in the hot tub," I reminded him, as if h  
forget.

One thing was certain sure, *I* couldn't forget.

ck then Hot tub sex was *amazing*.

ie tilted (Oh Lord, I hoped he *couldn't* forget).

He grinned wickedly (he didn't forget) and his head started desc  
"Don't care."

"What if they said something about me on the news?"

Jack.” His mouth hit mine. “Don’t care.”

“What if they said something about you?”

is back,  
he lead Since I persisted in talking, his lips left my mouth, trailed do  
cheek, along my jaw to below my ear. “Don’t care.”

unfight “What if they said something about my father?”

remote His tongue touched the skin below my ear, moved down and for  
my throat.

est and I shivered, then he said, voice deeper now, “Don’t care.”

“Hector,” I called, my arms going around him, one hand going up  
hair. Truth be told, I really wanted to have sex (yes, again, but he *did* j  
me his girlfriend and I liked it, I liked it *loads*, and I felt like I should  
e and I celebrate). But, as hateful as it was, I had to know so I went on,  
happened today?”

h mine. He pulled up and looked at me. Then one of his hands came to rest  
side of my head.

hot tub Then he did something strange.

His thumb came out and slid across the scar on my cheek and h  
e could warm and intense, watched it move while I held my breath at this ger  
somehow weirdly profound, gesture.

His gaze came back to mine.

“Today, we got one step closer to this bein’ over.”

This surprised me.

ending. “One step?” I asked, confused. “But Ricky’s in jail. Marty and Do  
in the hospital under armed guard—”

His mouth touched mine and I quit talking, then he said, “Or

*mamita*. There's still more cleanup to do."

"What cleanup?"

He stared at me a second, then two, then on the third second he cor  
wn my "I just wanna make sure you're safe."

"But—"

His thumb moved from my cheek to my lips, effectively quieting n  
ward to

"One night, Sadie. One night just you and me and this bed and you  
and none of this shit comes in. For one night, I wanna forget it. Can y  
into his that to me?"

I pulled in my lips.  
ust call

I really wanted to know what happened that day and why, w  
d get to "WhatBalduccis gone, he thought he still needed to make sure I was safe.

But I realized two things at once and they hit me with the strengt  
t on theoncoming train.

First, he'd never asked me for anything.

That wasn't strictly true. He'd taken things and he'd given thir  
is eyes,he'd never asked for anything except to take care of me, for me to tr  
tle, yetand to give him this and none of those things took anything from m  
just gave.

Second, earlier that day, he'd called me *mi amor*, "my love," accoi  
Jet, the ultimate Spanish endearment.

Because of those two things, I nodded.

Then I watched, close up and fascinated, as his face went soft.  
nny are

His mouth came toward mine.

ie step,



Then we forgot everything and it was just him and me and our bed.

continued,

re.

ur body

ou give

with the

h of an

igs, but

ust him

e. They

rding to

Then we forgot everything and it was just him and me and our bodies in his bed.

TWENTY-SIX



## CHRISTMAS DINNER AT THE BIG HOUSE

*Sadie*

I woke up, alone, the bedclothes tucked tight all around me.

I pulled some of Hector's pillow hoard under the covers with me and them to my chest and stared at the wall for several moments, mind blank, half asleep.

Then I wondered if sometime during that day I'd be undecided in ranking it as my second best day ever against the day before, and the day before (barring kidnappings and gunfights, of course).

Then I wondered if there would be a day when there were so many bad days, I wouldn't be able to rank them anymore.

And somewhere in the very, very back of my mind, I had a feeling that would.

This thought made me smile at the wall.

I got up, still sleepy because Hector kept me up late.

"Fooling around," I learned, was different than the other stuff we did. It took longer, *loads* longer, not that I was complaining (at all).

I put on my pajamas and one of Hector's flannel shirts and shuffled

the hall.

I smelled bacon cooking and heard voices downstairs and I knew I had company (again).

I wandered downstairs, through the living room and into the kitchen.

Hector not only had company, he had loads of company. Tom, Ki and Malcolm were there. Blanca was at the stove. Vance was leaning against the counter. All of them had coffee mugs.

Hector was sitting on the counter and I smiled to everyone, gave a little wave, but shuffled straight to Hector.

He opened his legs when I approached and I went straight in. My arms, held around his waist, I pressed my cheek to his chest and one of his hands, still went around my shoulders.

His other hand came to my chin and lifted my face. When I saw that his eyes were soft and warm, which made *me* feel soft and warm as well as more than snugly, comfy and lovely.

“You okay?” he muttered.

I nodded and murmured, “Sleepy.”

“You should have stayed in bed.”

I grinned, cuddled closer, and my voice breathy, I said, “Babe. Am I not the party?”

His face changed. It got that soft, hard, possessive look and his eyes went from warm to hot. If we didn’t have an audience, I knew something would have happened, but instead he let go of my chin. I dipped my head and pressed my cheek against his chest again. He muttered some soft words in Spanish into my hair and then kissed me there.

I caught sight of Blanca, who was staring at us, bacon fork pointing  
Hector coffee mug in her other hand.

I blinked then blinked again, but even so, the expression on her face  
n. didn't change. She was watching me with a feminine, motherly version of  
Kitty Sue's same soft, hard, possessive look that her son had just treated me to.  
I didn't know what to make of that except it made that snugly, comfy, lovely  
feeling intensify.

"Blanca, can you teach me how to speak Spanish while you teach me  
how to cook?" I called to her.

Her body gave a start and she shook her head as if clearing it, then  
she smiled. "Sí, mi hija."

"Gracias," I returned.

She grinned.

I grinned back.

Kitty Sue burst out laughing.

My eyes moved to her.

"What's funny?" I asked.

"I just think it's cute. After twenty-six years, you haven't changed  
your habit of misover at your mom's having coffee in the morning and you'd get  
so sleepy, and come in and give her a snuggle just like you're doing with  
me right now."

I was blinking again, that snugly, comfy, lovely feeling blossoming  
in my chest and a warm glow starting in my chest.

"Really?" I asked Kitty Sue.

"Really, honey," she replied. Her eyes shifted to Malcolm, to Hector,

ted up, to me, and, her voice pitched lower, she told me, “Though, if your d  
having coffee with us, you always went straight to him. Always.”

er face At her words, my body went ramrod straight and Hector’s arm wen  
n of the It occurred to my still waking brain that everyone being there w  
I didn’t social call.

feeling Instantly, I looked up to Hector and declared, “I’m going to Vegas  
hot yesterday playing Yahtzee. I’m taking the Rock Chicks with me a  
ne how going to win enough money for them to retire.”

“Not sure bein’ hot at Yahtzee translates in Vegas, *mamita*,” Hec  
en said, me.

“You weren’t there, it was huge. I got three yahtzees in one g  
explained.

Hector grinned, but his thighs tightened around me and he said  
“Sorry, *preciosa*, hate to say it but you’re not gonna get out of this.”

I sighed.

I knew it.

I just *knew* it.

. I’d be So I was having some really good days.

up, all But they were still mingled with some really bad times.

Hector “That’s what I was afraid of,” I whispered to Hector.

ing, the I turned my back to him and faced the room. Hector’s arm went  
my chest and he pulled my back to his front and I was glad. His bo  
warm, hard and strong and I had a feeling I was going to need it.

Malcolm asked my preference then brought me a cup of coffee.  
tor then

lad was “All right, sock it to me,” I said to the room after Malcolm handed coffee.

it tight. “After breakfast,” Blanca decreed.

wasn't a For some bizarre reason (lack of sleep, a latent bent toward dai decided to go head to head with Blanca.

s. I was “I'm sorry, Blanca, but seriously, whatever it is, I'd rather get and I'm with.”

She gave me a good, long Blanca stare.

tor told I gave her a good, long Sadie stare.

This lasted awhile.

ame,” I Then she said, whirling the bacon fork in the air, “*Como quieras.*”

I had no idea if I won or lost so I twisted my neck and looked softly, Hector.

“What'd she say?” I whispered.

“As you wish,” he answered, his lips twitching.

I turned back to Blanca. “Oh. That's pretty. *Como quieras.* As you Nice.”

Blanca smiled and I felt Hector's body move with laughter. Var grinning his arrogant grin at me and everyone else was chuckling.

I twisted back to Hector. “Did I say something funny?”

around He burst out laughing.

dy was Apparently, I did.

Whatever.

It was time to get back to the matter at hand.

me my I looked back at the room. “Can we please focus, people?” I asked.  
The smiles and chuckles died away and immediately I wanted then  
Too late, because Tom started talking.

nger), I “Sadie, you remember a few days ago when we talked in Lee’s off  
Oh my.

it over This was not starting out well.

Of course I remembered. How could I forget? It was when I found  
mother was probably murdered.

Who would forget that?

“Yes,” I replied hesitantly.

“Well,” Tom went on. “Eddie asked Vance to look into things. Va  
d up at and he found out what happened to Lizzie.”

My body lurched and a hand went out to Hector’s knee, fingers  
around it, gripping hard. Hector’s arm around my chest squeezed.

I looked at Vance.

u wish. “I’m sorry, Sadie,” Vance said softly, and I knew I wasn’t going  
good news.

ice was Mom wasn’t waiting for me in a small agricultural village  
mountains of Peru where news was brought on foot through trea  
mountain paths so she didn’t know yet it was safe to come home.

I closed my eyes and on the backs of my eyelids I saw my mom  
at me.

I opened my eyes again and said to Vance, “Tell me.”

Vance’s gaze cut to Hector, came back to me, and without hesita



told me.

back. “Luther Diggs found out what your mom was doin’. He ordered Mickey Balducci was one of his men back then. He carried it out.”

ice?” This hurt, like, *loads*.

I didn’t let it show.

“Where is she?” I asked, and I was proud that my voice only held out my tremor.

Vance stared at me closely then asked carefully, “You mean her bc That hurt even more.

Her body.

nce did My mom’s body.

Dumped somewhere, in a river, in a shallow grave, alone, uncurling undiscovered, gone.

These thoughts penetrated my heart like a million little, sharp daggs I didn’t let this show either.

g to get Instead, I simply nodded.

His eyes stayed gentle on me. “I don’t know.”

in the I nodded again.

cherous “Your dad didn’t know she was informing on him,” Malcolm cut my gaze moved to him.

smiling “He didn’t?”

Malcolm shook his head. “No.”

iting he “A couple of months after it happened, word got to Seth that ordered the hit and why.” Tom entered the conversation. “You rer

Bernie Watson?”

the hit. I nodded yet again.

Bernie had been my father’s right hand man for years. He’d been for as long as I could remember. Old enough to be my father’s father retired to Florida five years ago. He’d always scared me a little, but always kind of liked him. We sent each other Christmas cards and he sent me a birthday card, every year, with a five dollar bill in it just gave me when I was a kid.

l a little  
dy?”

“I remember Bernie. He sends me birthday cards,” I told Tom.

“I talked to Bernie,” Vance said to me, and I looked back to him. ‘ had a lot to say. About your dad, about your mom. About how you didn’t give a shit about your mom informing on him, but he did give marked, that she’d been taken out. Bernie told me when he found out, your dad cold. That was his word. Cold. He started takeover maneuvers against ers. immediately. Took him down within ten months of finding out.”

I realized I’d started trembling only when Hector’s hand came and took my coffee cup away. Then he leaned into me, his hands going down arms, his fingers curling around my wrists. He wrapped both my arms around my body and rested his chin on my shoulder.

This should have helped. Somewhere deep I realized it felt nice.

in, and

But it didn’t help.

“He took care of Mickey Balducci too, didn’t he?” I whispered. Balducci Boys aren’t insane and mean. They were after revenge. Not they?”

Luther  
member

Vance didn’t say anything. He just nodded.

I twisted my head to look at Hector. His chin came away from his shoulder and his eyes caught mine.

around "I don't know what to do with this," I said softly.

her, he "Nothin' to do with it, Sadie, except know he loved her, he avenge  
t I still and he didn't kill her," Hector told me.

always "I don't know what to do with that, either," I said back.

like he "Seth didn't come over with your mom. He wasn't social." Malcolm  
started talking, and my eyes moved from Hector to Malcolm. "But watch  
him. Sometimes he'd come out to dinner or pick Lizzie up from a bar  
"Bernie and stay for a beer. He wasn't a mellow guy. He wasn't laidback,  
our dad wasn't the man he is now. Not back then. Losin' her did that to him. I  
e a shit it then, I'm sure of it now."

ad went I didn't have time to process that before Vance spoke again.

t Diggs "I found her stuff."

out and I started blinking.

own my Yes, again.

his arms "Her...*stuff*?" I asked Vance.

"Her stuff. Your dad kept it. It's in a storage unit in Aurora. The  
filled with clothes, jewelry, shoes, photos, books. It isn't just  
preserved. Every piece has been carefully packed away, the  
temperature controlled, sealed against water damage and it's fireproof.

l. "The like that cost a fortune."  
Aren't

"Oh my God," I breathed, my trembling body starting to shiver.

My father hadn't gotten rid of every memory of her.

He'd kept it.

om my     My father hadn't killed her.

He'd avenged her.

My body went straight and I pulled away from Hector a bit and lo  
ged her Kitty Sue. "Tell me how I was again with my father."

Kitty Sue looked at Malcolm and she swallowed before looking  
me.

Malcolm     "Lizzie used to say she sometimes wondered if you knew she exist  
e knew told me, when you were a baby, Seth used to get up and give you your  
ar beque in the night because you'd cry if she went to you. But you'd settle  
but he handed you to him so he just did it all the time. She said he didn't mi  
thought thought he secretly loved it. Anytime you'd fall over, bang your  
something, you'd always go running to him—"

I shook my head and Kitty Sue stopped talking.

That couldn't be true.

It was my mom. It was always my mom.

"No," I breathed.

I pulled fully away from Hector and took a few steps into the room

unit is     "Sadie, come here," Hector called softly.

ed, it's     I turned to him and it all came to me, stuff I hadn't remembered in

unit is     I closed my eyes tight against the memories, the strongest of whi  
f. Units     how he'd come in after Mom brushed my hair at night and kiss the top  
head, just like Hector.

He'd tuck the bedclothes tight around me and turn out the light.

"'Night, my beautiful, sweet Sadie," he'd whisper.

“*Night, Daddy,*” I’d whisper back.

Oh. My. *God.*

oked at How could I forget?

How?

back to “I informed on him,” I said to Hector.

Hector jumped down from the counter and came at me, but I  
ed. She away, putting up a hand.

bottles “When you were undercover and...and...*just a few days ago!*” I sh

if she “*Mi amor,* come here.”

nd. She I shook my head, still backing away.

self on “He wanted to be sure I was safe, taken care of. He asked Jerry—”

“He did make sure you were safe,” Hector told me. “If he hadn’t  
we wouldn’t have flushed the Balduccis out yesterday. It would hav  
days, maybe weeks before we got them.”

I stopped my retreat and stared at Hector, not sure I heard him corr

“What?” I asked.

Hector stopped too, but he kept talking.

“Vance and I went to see him yesterday.”

years. At this announcement, my mouth dropped open, but Hector kept g

ich was “Jerry had aligned himself with Donny. I told Seth that and he g  
of my everything. They were hidin’ in one of his safe houses. He has three.  
and I hit one. Lee and Luke another one. Mace and Monty hit the third  
they were stayin’. But they must have got word and they cleared out  
Mace and Monty got there. Then they panicked. Ricky came af

Thinkin' that Marty gave them up, Donny shot him. But he got away, c  
us for protection. Donny followed, but knowin' they were fucked, he  
out a last ditch effort at vengeance, guessin' correctly we had you."

I was stuck on an earlier point.

"You went to see my father?" I asked.

backed Hector nodded. "Yeah."

"He talked to you?"

outed. "He gave me everything."

I couldn't believe this, because frankly it was absolutely, po  
*unbelievable.*

"He helped you?"

helped, Hector nodded again, watching me closely.

e taken "You?" I repeated.

"Me," Hector replied.

ectly. "For me," I whispered.

"For you."

I pulled in my lips and I felt the tears hit the back of my eyes, s  
there.

oing. "I'm *not* going to cry!" I yelled. Then, damn and blast, blast,  
gave us promptly burst into tears. "Fuck!" I shouted and found myself in F  
arms. "I'm crying," I told Hector's chest unnecessarily, my arms w  
Vance around his waist and my body pressing against his.

, where "Cry, *mi cielo*. Who gives a fuck?" Hector said over my head.

before "I do! I'm sick of crying! But he's been...he's been..." I chok  
ter me.

came to hiccupped. “He’s been trying to get hold of me and I haven’t even played see him!”

Even though the last bout of tears hadn’t yet gone stale, I burst into ones all the same.

Hector’s arms grew tighter.

“We’ll go next visiting day. I’ll take you.”

I was shocked at this offer. So much, my tears ceased immediately.

I tilted my head back, looked at Hector through blurry eyes and sitively “You will?”

I was pretty certain he nodded.

“I can’t believe he helped you,” I whispered.

“He helped *you*,” Hector amended. “He didn’t help me and he did see in’ me either. It wasn’t like he invited me to Christmas dinner at house.”

I couldn’t help it. What he said was funny, so, through my waning burst out laughing.

tinging “Christmas dinner at the big house?” I repeated, still giggling.

One of Hector’s hands came up and wiped at my tears. He grinned didn’t respond.

blast, I “Do you think he knows I informed on him with you?”

Hector’s rapping Hector’s gaze went from my cheeks to my eyes. “No.”

“Why wasn’t he angry that my mom betrayed him?” I asked, as if would know.

ed then Apparently Hector did know because he answered.

gone to “Because he loved her. You love someone, you forgive a lot of sl  
wasn’t exactly doin’ the wrong thing, *mamita*. He was.”

to fresh Hector was right.

I pulled in breath, looked at him a second then two, then let the br  
and leaned into him, pressing my cheek against his chest and giving  
tight squeeze.

. Then I moved, doing a circle so his arms were still around me  
l asked, back was to his front.

I looked at the room to see everyone was watching.

“I’m okay,” I announced to the room, and surprisingly I was.

I looked at Vance and my voice went soft.

n’t like “Thank you,” I said, and he gave me a chin lift, which I took to  
the big *you’re welcome*.

My eyes skimmed across Malcolm, Kitty Sue and Tom and then re  
tears, Blanca.

“Unless someone else wants to rock my world, I think we ca  
breakfast now,” I told her. “Can I help?”

l but he Blanca gave me a close look.

She must have approved of what she saw because she smil  
declared, “Today, I’ll teach you to scramble eggs.”

I knew how to scramble eggs, but I decided not to tell Blanca  
Hector might spoil the fun.

And heaven knew, I needed some fun.

I felt Hector lean into me and he whispered in my ear so only  
hear, “Will of fuckin’ steel.”



hit. She The warm, snugly, comfy, lovely feeling was back *with* the happy  
and I knew part of it had to do with what I learned that morning.

And the fact that Hector had given me that too.

death go Now, in my bizarre world of bizarre events that happened every day  
; him away was the bizarrest of all. My boyfriend, who happened bizarrely to be

DEA agent that brought down my Drug Kingpin father, also, in a  
but my way, brought my father back to me.

Blooming heck.

How totally bizarre was *that*?

I could be my own soap opera!

Instead of sharing any of this with Hector, I turned to look at him,  
, mean, in and touched my mouth to his. Even though his arms flexed around  
his eyes flashed at my mouth touch, I gave him a small smile, pulled  
and headed toward Blanca.  
rested on

Kitty Sue grabbed a bag of bread and the toaster.

in have Tom moved to make another pot of coffee.

Then Blanca taught me something I already knew.

And after breakfast, I walked hand in hand with Hector, following  
ed and to the door, and I asked Vance if he had time that day to take me  
mother's stuff.

that. It Vance said he did.

That was when I knew that day was *definitely* going to beat out yesterday  
and the day before as my second best day ever.

I could Though, nothing was going to beat The Day of Hector and The S'n  
Nothing.

y glow

ay, that  
the ex-  
bizarre

leaned  
me and  
d away

g Vance  
to my

sterday

nores.

## TWENTY-SEVEN



## MR. EDGE

### *Sadie*

As all others around me clapped, hooted and screamed, I stood with my mouth hanging open, staring at the darkened stage.

Roxie leaned into me and screamed, “She’s the shit, isn’t she?”

Still too stunned to look away from the stage, I just nodded.



AFTER THE TRAUMATIC pre-breakfast events and relearning to scrambled eggs with Blanca, Ralphie called and told me that the new Balduccis going down was so good, he’d changed that evening from dinner for four to “A Big Ol’ Blowout” (Ralphie’s words).

All the Rock Chicks (plus Tod and Stevie, Duke and Tex) were in Ralphie and Buddy’s for a “The Balducci Brothers Have Finally Brought Down Blowout.”

We ate Ralphie’s hors d’oeuvres (which were actually really good) brought some chocolate, caramel brownies that were to die for, Indy had a humungous bag of whole, salted cashews and the rest of the girls had enough booze for fifteen Balducci Brothers Blowouts.

Hector and the Hot Bunch, all busy with other activities (likely c

up my problems—I still didn't know what this meant and didn't a because I didn't want to know, because I'd had a hectic day, wh sorting through my thoughts, my mom's stuff and helping Ralphie and with the party), managed to show their faces, even if it was for a few n

They shifted through, eating, having a soda, toasting to one gazillion boisterous Balducci Brothers Have Finally Been Brought Toasts (the Rock Chicks started a competition for the best toast declared Shirleen the winner with her "Burn Motherfuckers Burn" toast then sliding out again.

stunned

Later, when we got bored with the toasts and were full up with was time to consider alternate party activities and Stevie suggested a marathon (too many people). Ralphie suggested a Veronica Mars marathon (not active enough). Ally suggested traveling up to Fort Collins to see gig (we were drinking too much, it was too far away and the gig had makestarted).

s of the

Then Jet suggested we go to Smithie's, a strip club.

a cozy

Everyone agreed to Smithie's.

In my sheltered life, I'd never had cause to think of strip club vited to strippers, much less consider the possibility I'd ever go to a club an y Been stripper. Since Daisy had stripped there in a past life, Jet had worked t a cocktail waitress when her thing was going on with Eddie and the ba od). Jet and Jet's sister was currently the top dancer for Smithie, not to ment broughttold me (with pride), she was the finest stripper in the Rocky M broughtRegion, I thought it best not to pass judgment.

leaning

Though, I wasn't certain sure about hanging out at a strip club.



ask, not AT INDY'S REQUEST, I phoned Jack at the offices to ask him to put a  
at with for rides to the club. We'd already been drinking heavily, and appare  
Buddy Hot Bunch didn't only act as protectors and bad business cleaner-uppe  
minutes. were also on call to be designated drivers when the Rock Chicks we  
of the one on.

Down This, by the way, was my fourth call to Jack that day.

it, Ally This was how the last call went:

ist) and Me: "Jack?"

food, it Jack (loud and angry): "Would you quit fuckin' callin'? I w  
Yahtzee clipped. It took six measly stitches to close it up. For the last tin  
arathon fuckin' fine!"

Stella's Me (snappy and impatient): "Well! Don't blame me for worrying!  
already has ever been shot keeping me safe before!"

Jack (after an angry sigh): "I'm beginnin' to wish I hadn't put  
vest."

Me (full of attitude): "Jack, you're just going to have to deal. I  
they do when someone saves someone's life and for the rest  
lubs or someone's life, the other someone looks out for them."

d see a Jack (now angry and confused): "What?"

here as Me (just confused): "I don't know. I think it's Asian. May  
d guys, Me (just confused): "I don't know. I think it's Asian. May  
ion, Jet Samurai?"

ountain Jack (muttering): "Jesus. Chavez owes me big for this."

Me (deciding to move on): "Anyway, we need designated drivers  
going to Smithie's."

Jack: "I'm on it."

callout Disconnect (without a good-bye).

ntly the Well!

rs, they



re tying HECTOR, Matt and Bobby showed up, everyone squeezed into SUVs (and we rolled out to the strip club.

Hector took Ralphie, Buddy, Daisy, Ally and me in his Bronco. T escorted us in, right past the long line outside that was standing at the rope (without the doorman even looking twice at us) and through the We'd barely cleared the doors when a big, on the good side of middle black man approached, and just like Tex he cleared a path through t and shoved some men away from tables at the front, left side of the sta

No one We followed in his wake.

“VIPs, fuckin’ *move*,” he shouted at the men at the tables, ar on the scurried immediately.

Wow, the Rock Chicks were something!

it’s like Jumping the velvet rope and front row seats at a strip club!

of that How bizarre (and cool) was *that*?

Then he turned to me and opened his mouth. But before he said : Jet was there.

’be the “No, Smithie, she doesn’t dance.”

Smithie turned wide eyes to Jet. “What? You think I’m crazy? Seth Townsend’s daughter to strip for me? He’d have my balls for . We’re battered and fried.”

Oh my.

Me?

Stripping?

Oh.

My.

tightly) Jet looked like she was going to mouth off so I intervened.

“I’m Sadie,” I told him unnecessarily and put my hand out.

he men My small hand was engulfed in his big one and he squeezed.

the velvet  
e doors. “I’m Smithie and I know who you are. Heard about you. Thought  
le aged talk was bullshit, but you actually do look like a fuckin’ fairy princess.

he club I smiled at him and leaned in. “That’s nice, but I know it’s no  
ge. true.”

He’d leaned in to listen but leaned back, brows drawn and said,  
id they look in a mirror. You’re right out of a fuckin’ movie.”

I was a little shocked he called me a bitch, but by the way he :  
didn’t think he meant anything bad by it.

Then he leaned back in and proved me right when he went on, “  
fuckin’ bad they don’t fry men for what Ricky Balducci did to you.  
the chair, I’d be happy to flip the fuckin’ switch.”

a word, My eyes got big at what he said, but not the part about him ob  
knowing I’d been raped. I’d realized by that time the Rock Chicks  
keep secrets, not even personal ones. He pulled away again, dropped n  
Askin’ and looked at Hector.

dinner, “You stayin’?” he asked Hector.

“Nope. Lenny on tonight?” Hector replied.

Smithie nodded, said (bizarrely), “He’s on her,” then he left.

Hector curled me into his heat with an arm around my neck and I  
up at him.

“Boys’re busy, but you’ll have rides home,” he told me. “Lenny is  
Smithie’s bouncers. He’s good. Lee tried to recruit him, but he couldn  
for Lee and study for his Master’s at DU at the same time. Even thou  
good, he’s untrained. So don’t make it tough on him. Keep him in sigl  
times and don’t let the girls talk you into anything stupid.”

t all the I nodded.

” Hector kept talking.

t really “I get done before you leave, I’ll come get you. We’ll sleep at my  
You get done before I get here, you go home with Ralphie and Buddy  
“Bitch, be there later.”

I tilted my head to the side and asked, “Do you want me to wait  
spoke I you?”

He shook his head and answered with a demand, “Give me your ke  
It’s too I gave him my brownstone keys and the alarm code. He kissed m  
He got and hard and he was gone, leaving me swaying.

Then we sat. Lenny, a huge, tall, muscular, midnight-skinned bla  
viously materialized and positioned himself behind my chair. Shirleen talked :  
; didn’t trying appletinis (they were *fab*). We gossiped, giggled and son  
ly hand watched the strippers.

I sat there thinking it was definitely my second best day ever.

Not just my friends and the Balducci Blowout party, but also b  
that afternoon, Vance took me to my father’s storage locker.

Hector was busy, but at his arrangement (which, personally, I t



looked was ultra sweet and super thoughtful and worth some sort of payback,  
have to think of something other than a building or an island,  
; one of something that involved lingerie), Daisy and Kitty Sue met us there.  
't work Vance opened the locker, and with a hand on the small of my  
gh he's pushed me in, walking in behind me. He turned on the light, but it  
ht at all before the unit was illuminated.

The smell.

My mother's perfume.

White Shoulders.

y place. I hadn't smelled that smell in years.

and I'll I took a step back and my shoulder ran into Vance's hard body.

I stopped, frozen for a moment, then twisted my head to look  
: up for Vance.

"Her perfume," I whispered, tears stinging the backs of my eyes.  
'ys."

His hand slid up my back to my neck and his fingers curled there,  
e quick me a squeeze.

"We can come back," he told me, his voice and eyes soft.

ck man I took in a deep breath, shook my head and Vance and I walked  
me into weird, warm, reassurance of Vance's hand didn't leave my neck  
netimes dropped to my knees at the first box.

We stayed there an hour, all of us going through boxes (except  
who, after helping me through my initial weird out, stood outside). I  
ecause, little bit and Daisy held me. Kitty Sue cried a little bit and I held her.

When we left, I had a list in my purse of the things I'd come back  
thought later.

but I'd But there were two things I took then.

maybe I'd uncovered a framed photo. A photo I'd forgotten existed, but to sit pride of place on our mantel.

y back, It was a picture unlike anything the Seth Townsend of now would hit me It was taken when I was six, out in our backyard, by a professional photographer. However the setting was casual, my mom's flower garden in the background, and the pose was natural.

My father sat in a garden chair and had Mom in his lap, his arm her waist, his fingers curled at her hip. Both her arms were around shoulders and she had her cheek against his. I was standing, pressed to other side, his other arm wrapped around my little kid body, my head into his chest. Mom and I were laughing at the camera. I didn't remember why.

My father wasn't laughing, but he was smiling. Not like someone amused him, but like he was happy and *precisely* where he wanted to be, giving I couldn't believe I forgot that photo.

Then, forcing myself to get over it, I vowed I'd never forget it again.

I also found something else I forgot. The necklace Mom used to wear in. The until I stopped wearing it a year or so before she disappeared.

Vance, It was a thin gold chain, which hung to the dip in the throat and lay either side to a pendant that was a connected, scrolled, elegant "E" and cried a The top curve of the "E" and the bottom curve of the "S" each had a diamond in them.

and get When we left, I held the picture to my belly, the necklace in my fist got in Vance's Explorer.

I asked Ralphie and Buddy and they let me put the picture on the shelves it used to be on.

I put the necklace on for the party.

Then I helped my boys get ready for the party. The girls and guys, professional or not, we drank, we toasted, we ate, we went to the strip club and we had a complete and total blast.

After a while, Jet's sister Lottie came on, and I forever would never have a judgment on strippers again. She was sultry. She was intoxicating. She moved so beautifully it was art, not stripping. She had me enthralled into her seconds and on my feet (with everyone else) after moments. She danced two songs and only took her fabulous, turquoise-and-peacock-blue-satin bra off at the last minute, exposing perfect breasts for only a flash before the lights went black.

She was, as Roxie said, *the shit*.

No doubt about it.

"Oh...my...God!" I shouted to Roxie, and Jet's eyes came to me. "Do you think she'll teach me to dance?"

Jet grinned.

"Who you think taught her to dance, sugar?" Daisy asked me. "In my day, I had a velvet rope too."

I stared at Daisy.

"Then you're the shit too!" I screamed at her then looked back at her. "I wanna strip!"

"Oh Lord," Shirleen groaned, sitting down. "First she wants to be a star, and now she wants to be a stripper." Then she lifted her hand and s

in their her fingers at no one in particular. “Somebody, get her another a before we gotta explain to Hector ‘Mr. Edge’ Chavez why his woman to strip.”

rs came Everyone started laughing and I did too.

e had a Hard.

ver cast So hard, my sides hurt and I bent forward and wrapped my arms my middle.

e could Finally, I found something funny.

. within The very thought of someone telling Hector I wanted to strip, iced for mention Shirleen calling him “Mr. Edge...”

equined Well...

fore the It was, quite simply, hilarious.

Stevie found a waitress and we all got more drinks.

And I sat with my girls and (some of) my boys and looked around something settling safely inside me.

“I want That something was me thinking that finally I was living a beautiful and hoping that, wherever she was, my mom could see me and so happy.

e on a It was on my fourth sip of my new appletini when Roxie said sorry to me. I looked at her and she looked blurry.

I blinked and lifted my hand to my head, all of a sudden feeling funny.

Roxie. I couldn’t put my finger on it but I wasn’t right.

I felt a presence at my back and Lenny leaned into my ear. “Get a rock escort Bonnie to her car. She’s got a kid, her shift ends early. I’ll be napped ten. Don’t move.”

ppletini I nodded, but it felt like my head was immersed in water, not in a  
1 wantssnugly, comfy, safe way, and I was fighting the current.

I took another sip of appletini, hoping to wash the weird feeling away  
it didn't help. In fact, I felt worse. Woozy, fuzzy and not myself.

Boy, those appletinis were serious business!

around I leaned into Roxie and whispered, "I think I've had too much. I'm  
to go splash water on my face."

Roxie looked behind me, saw Lenny gone and I heard her say, "Wait

not to But I got up, shoved my purse strap over my shoulder and tri  
grabbed on to the back of a chair, righted myself and staggered forward

I definitely needed to splash water on my face.

Definitely.

"I'm going with Sadie, we'll be back," I heard Roxie say, but I  
d them, wait for her.

I moved forward. The room seemed to be swaying, the huge crowd  
iful lifepeople going in and out of focus.

he was Something was really wrong, terribly wrong, and because of that I  
a mission, pushing through, sliding by, evading, weaving. It was easy  
nothing even though I was in pumps. I was small and the men were stationary  
on the stage. I nearly made it to the hall where the bathrooms were when  
headfirst into someone.  
my.

I felt arms go around me and I looked up at the man I ran into  
couldn't keep him in focus.

otta go I was almost certain he was smiling at me then the smile faded.  
back in

"Hey, babe, you okay?"

It was warm, “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

His fuzzy face got closer. “You gonna puke?”

Maybe, but And I knew, somehow, this wasn’t drunk. This was something  
Something bad. Really, really, *really* bad.

Something that happened to Veronica Mars!

I shook my head.

“Sadie, hold up!” I heard Roxie call from what seemed like far away  
“Said.”

I looked over my shoulder, trying to find her and thinking I should  
I fought the crowds to get to me, Tex close to her back.

I turned to the man whose arms were around me.

“I’ve been roofied,” I said to him.

“What?” he asked.

“Roofied. Someone slipped me a date rape drug.”

I felt, vaguely, his body going solid, and I saw, in a fuzzy way, his  
I saw a whip to the side.

“Jamie, see that big black guy? He’s the owner. Get to him, fast. I  
was on someone’s slippin’ date rape shit in his drinks.” He started pulling  
for me, out of the crowd to the hall, “You got friends here?” he asked me.

“Yes.” I tried to lift my arm but it didn’t work. Still I said, “Over the  
my eyes  
then I ran

I felt my body collapse into him because I couldn’t hold my  
I  
no but I anymore.

He took my weight, his arms went tighter around me and he m  
“Fuck. Hang on.” Then something happened. I couldn’t tell what, but  
the man say, his voice sharp, “What the fuck?”

Then there was an ugly thud. He was falling, and as his arms were me, I was falling with him.

ig else. I was on the floor, tangled up with him. I heard my name shout screamed, but I was being lifted in the air, arms holding me tight, so running with me.

I tried to control my head, look to see who had me. I was jostled w person turned. He shoved a door open with his back and I felt the col ay. air.

aw her All of a sudden, I got scared. The cold night air didn't alleviate th feeling or the fuzziness and it didn't give me my strength back. Instin I knew it wasn't a member of the Hot Bunch who had me, or Tex, Buddy, Ralphie, Tod or Stevie.

"Let me go," I mumbled.

"Now, Sadie, darlin', why would I do that?" Jerry replied.

is head Darn it all to *heck*.



ell him I WOKE up and I was cuffed to a bed.

re back I didn't feel great, I didn't feel bad. I didn't feel entirely awa whatever drug I'd been given, which made me pass out about two 1 here." into the ride in Jerry's BMW, had worn off.

self up I looked around the room and knew I was in a hotel. I could tell was weak, but it was coming in around the curtains and there was a lig uttered, looked down at myself and saw, thankfully, I still had on my jeans, w I heard belt and cream cashmere sweater with a deep V and three-quarter sl even still had on my gold cuff at my wrist.

around      However, my tan peek-a-boo-toed pumps were gone, my feet bare.  
The bathroom door opened and Jerry walked out.

ed then      Damn and blast.

omeone      “Does my father want to talk to me again?” I asked, my voice snotty.  
He stopped at the foot of the bed and grinned.

hen the  
ld night      He was in a pair of well-fitting gray suit trousers with a tailored  
sheen, soft-gray shirt. No tie, sleeves rolled up his forearms. I found  
e weird      thinking, stupidly, that he was handsome. Not Hector “Oh my God”  
ctively,      handsome, but someone at whom you’d look twice.  
, Duke,      For some reason, I thought this was a crying shame.  
“No,” he answered, then he leaned down and his fingers curled  
my ankles.

My body froze.

He pulled my ankles apart.

My body unfroze and I twisted viciously.

He was stronger than me. He kept me where I was with little effort,  
ke, but      put a knee to the bed between my legs and then moved forward, pressing  
minutes      himself on me full body, except his hips and legs were between mine.

the sun      My breath suddenly coming in sharp gasps, I put my free hand on my  
shoulder and shoved at the same time I bucked.

ght on. I      He ignored this and buried his face in my neck.

ride tan      I opened my mouth to scream right before he said, “You make a  
eeves. I      sound, I give the order and your dad’s breakfast gets Harvey Ball’s  
special sauce.”



The scream died in my throat and my body went still.

I heard him laugh against my neck.

“Nice to see you cooperatin’, darlin’, showin’ some love for your f  
ty.

*You swine*, I said in my head, but not out loud. I couldn’t speak,  
because bile had forced its way up my throat and I was worried if I  
d, low- my mouth, I’d throw up.

myself His mouth was at my neck, it moved along my jaw then to my lips  
Chavez he kissed me lightly.

I stayed stock still, and when his eyes caught mine, I glared at him.

“Been waitin’ for you to wake up, Sadie. This’ll be so much m  
around with your participation.”

The bile disappeared, but my heart slid up in its place and lodged  
throat.

I decided to try to talk my way out of it.

“Jerry—”

ort. He One of his hands slid down my side, the other one went to my fre  
lanting and pulled it over my head.

“I’m thinkin’ I want it slow and sweet first, then I’ll do you rou  
l to his hard.”

I closed my eyes tight.

Somebody, please tell me this wasn’t happening.

fuckin’ I turned my head to the side, opened my eyes, my mind spinnin  
ducci’sunhappy thought to unhappy thought, and I saw my purse sitting on th  
desk.

The stun gun Hector gave me was in my purse.

My heart slid back down and my breath started to come fast again.

father.” All I had to do was get uncuffed and get to my purse. I was in a hurry, mainly the looks of it a nice one. There had to be tons of people around. I just opened my eyes, get out and get to a phone. I’d call the Nightingale offices, tell them they’d call the prison and stop my father from having breakfast.

where I looked back at Jerry. “So, I’m taking this to mean you’re not assessed anymore.”

His eyes narrowed and his face started to turn ugly.

more fun I laughed softly at him then I lifted my head and slid my nose along his jaw.

in my At this, his body went tight.

“You playin’ with me?” he growled.

I felt my heart beating in my throat, my stomach clenched with fear, but I put my lips to his ear and whispered, “You want to know what it’s like being Seth Townsend’s daughter?”

I dipped my face and used my nose again to flick his earlobe and whisper, “I’m still whispering.”

“Under his thumb? Watched? Protected? Suffocated? His father’s a gentleman army wandering around, I could look but I couldn’t touch hot guys like you?”

I felt his body jerk then grow tighter when I put my mouth close to his ear and talked low in my throat.

“Do you know what that was like? What it was like for a girl like me? Can you imagine how I feel...” I paused for effect, waited then continued.

“How I feel, now that I’m free?”

My mouth moved along his cheek to his mouth.

otel, by He didn’t speak and our eyes locked.

t had to “Can I make a request?” I asked against his mouth. He still didn’t  
m, andso I lifted my head, pressed closer and whispered, “Let’s start with h  
rough.”

pansy- He stared at me, hard, trying, I guessed, to see if I was messing v  
head.

I blinked slowly, not opening my eyes fully, then let the corners  
ong hislips tip up.

He watched my eyes, then my mouth, then he groaned and kissed r

I guessed I had a new Sadie in me. I didn’t know who she was  
hoped like hell she could get me out of this latest trauma in one piece.

nausea, I kissed him back and hated every second of it. It was nowhere nea  
t it washard, urgent, fiery Hector kiss. Jerry might have been handsome,  
wasn’t a good kisser. His kiss made my stomach turn unpleasantly  
vent on, ignored it and pressed my body into his, curled a leg around his l  
wrapped my arm around his back.

shit-hot I pulled at the other arm. The handcuff made a loud clunk and h  
1? Shit-came up, his eyes going to my cuffed hand.

“Leave it, it’s hot,” I breathed and put my mouth to his neck.

r to his His eyes flashed and he kissed me again.

One of his hands went into my hair. His other hand was everyw  
ke me?acted like I loved it, wanted more of it, was gagging for it.

tinued, But I hated every blooming nanosecond of it.

I grasped his shirt, yanking it out of his trousers. My hand went back then I engaged my nails, digging in perhaps an *eensy* bit harder needed and I pulled at my cuffed hand again so it made another clunk noise.

answer,

ard and His mouth went to my neck and down, he muttered, "Wildcat," chest.

with his My lip curled in disgust, but my hand went to his side, drifting there then between our bodies and down his abs to the waistband trousers.

s of my

I pulled at my cuffed hand again and it made another clunk, then again and the clunk was louder.

ne.

s, but I His head came up and his hand went to his pocket.

"Fuck it," he snapped.

ir a hot, I felt my lungs fill with anticipatory oxygen.

but he "Jerry, leave it. I've never done it cuffed to a bed," I fake protested

7, but I His eyes came to mine and his hand came out of his pocket.

rip and "I been waitin' years for this, Sadie, and now that I got it, I want touch me," he told me, and I felt triumphant elation slide through me.

is head I hid it and muttered, "Whatever."

He leaned up and uncuffed me.

Keeping the other cuff on my wrist, he slid the key back into his and his eyes came back to mine. "You're playin' a game and you t where. Ifuck me over, you're back to bein' cuffed. I'll also gag you and I won't a fuck if you enjoy it or not."

I was a little surprised he wanted me to enjoy it at all, but I shook t

Both my arms went around him, my mouth went to his, my eyes open  
r than I gazed were locked again.

I smiled against his mouth and said, “You’re a pig, Jerry.”

Then I kissed him.

We went at it. There was a lot of rolling, hand action, more rolling  
action. I managed to evade him taking off any of my clothes (though I  
softly unbuckle my belt), but I got his shirt unbuttoned and used my mouth  
of his chest.

Then, when I thought I had him, I rolled on top, straddled his h  
I did it whipped off my sweater, exposing my lace-over-satin, blush-colored  
bra.

I pressed my hips into him and asked, “Do you have a condom?”

“Jesus,” was his whispered answer.

His eyes were on my breasts, his hands sliding up the skin of my si  
l.

When he didn’t answer, I lied, “No worries, I do.”

I lifted a leg, rolled off him and jumped off the bed.

I was across the room and digging through my purse when his arm  
around me from behind, his hands moving across my belly and ribs  
mouth in my neck.

I tried to stay cool, not to tense and freak out. I kept digging thro  
pocket purse, trying to find the stun gun, hoping I’d get it out without him see

I found it, closed my eyes tight, took in a deep breath and relax  
into him as my fingers curled around the stun gun.

“Never thought you’d be like this, Sadie,” he said into my neck. “I  
his off. of this a thousand fuckin’ times, never thought it’d be this good.”

and our I felt a shiver flow through me. It wasn't pleasure. It was fear r  
with repulsion mingled with something bizarrely sad.

Jerry mistook its meaning and smiled in my neck.

"Jerry?" I called.

, mouth His head came out of my neck. I turned my own and kissed him,  
let him out the stun gun and twisted in his arms, our lips still attached. I wen  
i on his tiptoe, pressed myself against him and my arms went around him.

My thumb searched for the on button as I stuck my tongue in his  
lips and and tried not to gag.

I found the switch.

I flipped it on.

He deepened the kiss.

I heard the crackling.

des. I positioned it, pressed into his body and touched the prongs to his

One...

His mouth tore from mine, he went still and I kept the prongs on hi

is came  
age, his Two...

Three.

ugh my He went down.

ing it. I bent over him and went back in and touched the prongs to him

ed back His body jerked and I kept it pushed in, counting to three again fo  
measure.

Thought Then I pulled away, and without delay I ran to my sweater on the  
yanked it on and grabbed my purse, left my shoes, and not looking bac

ningled to the door. I threw it open, was two steps away before I was nabbed  
waist and pulled back roughly.

I let out a little surprised scream. I twisted and stilled when I saw  
shock and horror, Glover, another of my father's henchmen.

, pulled "What the...!" he started, but I still had the stun gun in my hand  
it up on was on.

I put it to his shoulder. He tensed and I kept it there, but a hand  
mouth around my wrist. It was pulled back. Glover sagged against the wall  
didn't watch. I whirled to see who had my wrist.

It was twisted. I cried out as pain shot up my arm and dropped the  
gun. Looking up, I saw Cordell, another of my father's gentleman arr  
he looked bizarrely confused.

Really, why, why, *why* was everything so fucking *difficult*!

back. "Damn and blast!" I shouted in his face.

He bent down, put a shoulder in my belly and lifted me, carrying me  
into the room.

m. I had the sinking feeling that, at this juncture, I was majorly screwed

1 again.

or good

floor. I

ok, I ran

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TWENTY-EIGHT



I'M SADIE

*Hector*

“**F**ind her,” Seth Townsend said in Hector’s ear.

Hector’s jaw clenched, his eyes on Eddie, his body tight.

“Jerry, Glover and Cordell have been off the radar since we did this yesterday. All night, the whole team and half the DPD have been Denver inside out. No fuckin’ sign. You got any fuckin’ clue where take her?” Hector, hating his need to make the call, ground out each word.

Hours had gone by since he got the call that Sadie had been in Denver. There was no sign, no word, and now the fear was a constant, bitter ache in his gut.

“You boys are supposed to be the best. How’d this fucking happen snapped.

Hector didn’t know how to answer him. He’d been asking him the same fucking question for the last five hours.

“Her cell is tracked. She left it on the table at the club. We placed a tracking device in her lipstick. She must have left it behind. The guy guarding his position but warned her he was goin’, explained when he’d been told to sit tight. She was with fourteen people, but walked away from the club.

table alone. One of the girls and men tried to follow but they got held back by the crowd. A witness who tried to help her told us she told him that he roofied her. She was dazed and not in control. He got clubbed on the back of the head with a gun butt, went unconscious and Sadie got taken.”

“Why weren’t you with her?” Seth clipped.

“Because I was huntin’ down your rogue soldiers,” Hector shot back.

“They went rogue because Sadie’s with you,” Seth returned.

Hector lost his patience and his temper.

“They went rogue because they’re assholes, Seth. Don’t fuckin’ shit on me. This whole trip is yours, from the Balduccis down. You left her alone, unprotected. You knew the Balduccis were out for revenge. You had your boys at your disposal and you left her exposed. *You* put her in this predicament and I’ve been workin’ my ass off for six weeks tryin’ to pull her out.”

“Chavez—”

“She’s been raped, assaulted, kidnapped, now twice. Once by you, once by me. I’ll remind you. She found out her mother was whacked, had her fuckin’ ass torched and has been drugged against her will. She’s been holdin’ on. She’s gonna fuckin’ break. After all that, anyone would fuckin’ break.”

“Chavez—”

Hector cut him off, his voice had gone low and it shook with rage. “Seth, I find her and they’ve broken her, you’ll pay.”

When he spoke again, Seth’s voice had changed too, it had gone cold. “Hector—”

“No joke. You’ll pay,” Hector repeated.

The door opened to Lee’s office and Lee’s upper body swung in

and up by but he didn't enter and he didn't take his hand off the knob.

at they "Call came in. Darius spotted Jerry's BMW in the parking lot  
side of Place Hotel, DIA."

"Anyone close?" Eddie asked, already moving around the desk.

"Marcus is headin' his way," Lee replied. "Said he'd be there in five  
k.

"Hector, what's happening?" Seth asked in his ear.

"We got a lead," Hector replied to Seth. "Pray she's not broken." [Hector  
flipped his phone shut and moved toward the door. "Let's roll."]

lay this

left her

you had

position

ou, I'll

gallery

on, but

,

nenace,

on?"

ne soft.

with it,



### *Sadie*

CORDELL THREW me on the bed.

I rolled off and scrambled. He cut off my exit. I feinted to the  
followed) then to the right (he followed again!) then stopped and w  
into a staredown.

Glover lurched in, closing the door behind him. His eyes went t  
still on the floor, but he was now moving around.

Great.

*Just great!*

Then Glover's eyes came to me, and he snapped, "What the fuck  
on?"

I looked at him then I put my hands on my hips and said, "A  
kidding me?"

Glover and Cordell stared at me.

I knew them both.

Like Jerry, Cordell had worked for my father for years. I didn't know Hyatt very well, but we'd chatted because, well, he was around and not would be rude.

Glover had been a new recruit a few months before my father went there." Both of them were good-looking, fit, well-dressed and well-groomed. All of this slid through my mind in a flash.

Then he But mostly all I thought about was the fact that I was done.

Done.

Done!

Did I say *done*?

"Seriously!" I threw my hands out. "Did you think I'd just, left (he know...what did you think I'd do?"

He went They kept staring at me.

"You roofied me!" I yelled.  
to Jerry

Glover's body jerked and his eyes shot to Cordell. I watched as Cordell's brows drew together.

Then Cordell hissed, "Jesus, Sadie, keep your voice down."

"Are you going to poison my father like you did Harvey?" I snapped. Cordell and Glover looked at each other while Jerry pulled himself into a sitting position.

are you It would dawn on me later that they looked at each other in confusion. Since I was in a full-blown hissy fit, I unfortunately didn't notice it at the time.

"Well? Are you?" I pushed.

ow him     Everyone stayed silent.

to chat     “Whatever,” I snapped and put my hands back to my hips. “Let  
let’s make a fucking deal. All right?”

: down.     Cordell and Glover just kept looking at me like I was some ur  
ed.         entity as yet undiscovered, not like I was someone who served them  
on more than one occasion.

“I need clothes, nice ones,” I went on. “I’m not going on an interr  
flight without good clothes. We’ll call my father. I’ll get the C  
account info. We’ll all go on a trip. You can have it. All of it. Every  
You just promise to let me go at the end of it and promise you won’t  
my father or hurt him in any way.”

I don’t     Glover’s eyebrows shot up and Jerry pulled himself unsteadily to h

“Sadie—” Jerry started.

“You, shut the fuck up. I’m tired of talking to you,” I clipped a  
Then, apparently not tired of talking to him, I went on, “And by th  
ordell’syou’re cute, but you’re a crap kisser.”

So stuck in my hissy fit, I was on a roll. I looked back at Cordell  
Glover and both of their eyebrows were at their hairlines after my  
ed, andkisser” comment.

f up to     I ignored this and kept right on talking.

“I call my father, warn him about the poison so you assholes dc  
ifusion.him anyway, just to be assholes, and he gives me the account numbers

t at the     “What’s she talkin’ about?” Glover asked Cordell.

Cordell shrugged.

It was my turn to stare.

“What do you mean, what am I talking about? Jerry poisoned  
t’s play Balducci and told me if I didn’t sleep with him, he’d put that same  
sauce on my father’s breakfast,” I informed Glover and Cordell.

unknown They both turned to Jerry.

coffee “Jerry?” Cordell called, and something in the room made me snarl  
out of the hissy fit and start to pay attention. “I thought we were run  
national errand for Seth. Gettin’ Sadie out of a bad fix, gettin’ her free from (C  
aymans What the fuck is this?” Cordell asked, turning away from me and  
penny. Jerry.

poison Jerry was looking pale.

Light, luckily for me, was beginning to dawn.

his feet. “He was working with Donny Balducci,” I told Glover and Cordell  
Jerry’s eyes came to me. “Shut your fuckin’ mouth.”

t Jerry. Oh my.

ie way, I decided, since things seemed to be a bit confused and Cord  
Glover weren’t paying much attention to me, that I should start  
then at slowly toward the door.

y “crap So that was what I did.

But I kept talking.

“The Caymans accounts,” I said to Jerry as it hit me. “The Ba  
n’t kill wanted the money in those accounts. Revenge against my father. You  
.” going to get your share, weren’t you?”

“Shut the fuck up!” Jerry shouted, starting to come toward r  
Cordell and Glover moved, fencing him in, so he stopped.

“Mickey Balducci killed my mother,” I announced to the room

Harvey father avenged her death. The Balducci Brothers wanted retaliation. Je special working with them.”

Cordell and Glover didn't move, but Jerry's eyes were locked on his face twisted with rage.

ap right “You fuckin’ bitch,” he hissed.

min’ an I kept moving slowly to the door, but for some bizarre reason Jerry Chavez totally and completely, and he kept talking.

toward “I was Seth’s boy. *Me*. Then fuckin’ Chavez comes along and Seth his shit don’t stink. ‘Hector this...’ and ‘Hector that...’ like he walked on water. Everyone knew once Bernie left and Seth settled on boy, that new boy would get you. Everyone. We all worked on it, wanted it. We knew the only one Seth would trust with you, the one Seth would trust to take care of you, was his boy. The one who’d t place when he retired. That was *me* until fuckin’ Chavez came along.”

I couldn’t help myself. His words shook me so much I’d stopped a ell and staring at him, mouth open.

moving “Then Chavez fucked us,” Jerry snapped, his eyes moving to Corc Glover. “He fucked you too. Made Seth look the fool and he fucked us

“Don’t know about you but I’m still gettin’ paid,” Glover returned.

“You dumb fuck. Seth isn’t eligible for parole for years. Do yo lduccis —?” Jerry started but Cordell interrupted him.

ou were “Yeah, and for those years he put you in charge. He made you again and now *you’ve* fucked him. So, tell me Jerry, who’s the dumb fi ne, but

Then Glover remarked, his voice full of disbelief, “Shit, Jerry roofied Sadie? Jeez, Seth’s gonna be pissed.”

n. “My

erry was “Like I said. Dumb fuck,” Cordell put in.

“Fuck you!” Jerry shouted in Cordell’ face.

me and “Blow me,” Cordell returned.

Oh my.

This wasn’t going well for Jerry, but also (more importantly) I  
lost it, idea what it meant for me.

Then everything happened at once.

1 thinks Jerry charged Cordell. I could tell it was not to fight him, but so h  
fuckin’ get by him and get to me.

his new I came unstuck and ran to the door. I got my hand on the knob, but  
we all open when I did. I wheeled backwards, lost balance and landed  
ly one behind.  
ake his

Marcus and African American Hottie were in the room, guns  
nd was shouting.

Cordell and Glover twirled, pulled out their guns and started s  
ell and back.

all.” Jerry jumped across the bed, toward *me*.

I got on my feet and twisted. I grabbed the first thing I could find  
u think was a lamp, and twisted back to see he was nearly on me.

“Stop!” Marcus yelled, but Jerry didn’t stop.

his boy I swung the lamp just as a shot was fired. I hit Jerry in the should  
uck?” the lamp and he went down, but his hands went to his thigh where blo  
ry, you coming from a bullet wound.

“Stay down,” Marcus ordered, advancing, gun on Jerry as  
American Hottie was still in an armed faceoff with Cordell and Glover



I stood, clutching the lamp and breathing like I'd run a race.

"Sadie, you okay?" Marcus asked.

I slammed the lamp down and then put my hands back to my hips.

"No. I. Am. *Not*. I'm *sick* of being kidnapped. *Hector's probably* had no *his mind!*" I screeched.

Marcus kept his eyes and gun on Jerry, but I could swear his lips twitched like he was fighting a grin.

Now, really, seriously, by all that was holy, somebody, *please* tell me what on *earth* was funny about *this*?

I looked at African American Hottie and he looked like he was laughing at me on my <sup>too</sup>.

"What's fucking funny?" I shouted.

"Maybe you should sit down, love," Marcus suggested.

"I don't want to sit down. I want coffee. And brioche with marmalade. I'm *houting* snapped back, then I looked back at African American Hottie and realized I was still in an armed faceoff and I should probably do something about it.

"Um...African American Hottie?" I called. "They're good. They're good for me." , which

Cordell, who was also African American, had his eyes locked on African American Hottie and he asked, "Is she talkin' to you or me?"

"I've no fuckin' clue," African American Hottie replied.

"I know *your* name, Cordell. Blooming heck, I've known you for years. I'm talking to the *other* African American Hottie in the room," I explained.

Marcus (I'm not joking) started laughing.

Laughing!

“My name is Darius,” African American Hottie said.

Without anything else to say (and not wanting to be rude), I replied, “Darius.”

Then I waved for good measure.

“Who *are* you?” I heard said from below me, and I looked down at Jerry staring up at me like he’d never seen me before.

And that was when I knew.

I knew *exactly* who I was.

So, because I knew, I told Jerry, “I’m Sadie.”

amused



THE POLICE ARRIVED THEN the hotel management and security arrived. I had my belt, put on my shoes and was sitting in the hotel room desk chair with my handcuffs finally off, just about to put a cup of coffee to my lips. Hector, Eddie and Lee arrived.

Hector stopped just inside the door. His eyes scanned the room and he sized me up, did a head to toe. Then they moved to Jerry, now on the bed with towels wrapped around his leg and a uniformed officer guarding him.

Hector didn’t order everyone out and he didn’t move. His body was African and his eyes were scorching and that scorch was directed at Jerry.

Then I saw his jaw clench and a muscle move in his cheek.

Oh my.

I put my coffee cup in its saucer on the desk and moved swiftly across the room toward Hector.

I got within touching distance and Hector’s hands came to my hair. He didn’t look at me. His dark, angry eyes were locked on Jerry.

“I’m gonna fuckin’—” he started, but I pressed into him, put my hand over his mouth and muffled the rest.

“The police,” I warned, but his hand came from my hip and his fingers curled around my wrist. He pulled it away. Before he could speak, he said, “I’m all right. I’m fine. Everything’s okay.”

His scorching eyes turned to me.

My free hand went to the side of his face.

“Babe, I’m okay,” I whispered.

He looked at me for a second then two, then three, his eyes scanning my face, reading me.

I redid I got up on my toes and pressed even closer to his heat.

“Hector, baby, I’m okay,” I repeated softly.

Suddenly he let go of my wrist. His arms went around me, crushing me, and his mouth came down on mine in a long, hard, closed-mouthed kiss.

When his mouth detached from mine, his face went into my neck and his arms got even tighter.

“Fuck,” he said against my neck.

My arms wrapped around his shoulders and I held him close, this was best not to tell him, just yet, that I couldn’t breathe.

Finally, his arms loosened. His head came up and I pulled in a breath.

“Sorry, Chavez, we need to ask Sadie some questions,” a uniformed officer said from our side just as the paramedics came in with a gurney.

Hector nodded. We moved away so the paramedics could see to Jefferies. I sneaked a peek at the bed while we moved.

ly hand Jerry was glaring at Hector, eyes filled with hate. His obvious e  
made me sad, angry and happy. I couldn't process this. It was too cc  
fingers So I decided not to think about it until...well, never. I thought it best r  
quickly I think about it.

Ever.

We moved into the hall (unfortunately away from my coffee) and  
the Hot Bunch was amassing there. Darius was obviously a part of the  
effort. Lee and Eddie had come with Hector. Luke was now with the  
elevator pinged and Vance and Matt walked out of it, their eyes  
ing my directly to me as they moved down the hall toward us.

The uniformed officer had to wait while the Hot Bunch did their  
assessment. I got hugs, cheek kisses, temple kisses, and there were a lot  
but relieved male faces and firm, clenched, square jaws. I noticed they  
g me tired. None of them had shaved and none of them were wearing fresh c  
ed kiss. Mace and Bobby showed up in the meantime, and both of them (even  
and his engulfed me in bear hugs.

The elevator pinged again and Detective Marker walked out with  
uniformed officer asked, exasperated, "Do you guys mind if I talk  
aking it Sadie?"

I was feeling weird. A good weird.

a deep No, a *great* weird.

Not that they'd obviously had a tough night looking for me.

formed But, (I hated to admit it but had to) because they'd spent a tough  
r. looking for me.

rry and And they were relieved they found me alive, well and none the worse  
wear.

emotion They cared and they didn't mind who knew it. Not the hotel st  
omplex.customer onlookers, the police or the paramedics.

never to Tough guys or not, I was one of them.

I wasn't Ms. Townsend anymore.

I was Sadie, Rock Chick.

I noted How great was *that*?

rescue "You get her statement?" Detective Marker asked, coming up to r  
m. The coming a smile.

"Tryin'," the uniformed officer replied.

r Sadie "Well, fuck boy, get it so she can go home," Detective Marker snaj

ot of set The officer looked at the ceiling.

looked I pressed into Hector. His arm went around my neck and he pul  
clothes.deeper into his side, partially into his front.

Bobby) The officer asked me questions and I answered, telling my story.

hen the I was, of course, not thinking clearly, considering all that happen  
lk with was, I might have asked for privacy before I shared in front of Hecto  
duped Jerry.

The Hot Bunch clearly found my tactic amusing.

Hector, I could tell by the electric current whipping around th  
absolutely did not.

I hurried through the rest. The officer finished with some qu  
h night Detective Marker asked a few more and finally the officer flipped his i  
closed, nodded and took off.

orse for The Hot Bunch and Marcus had been joined by Tom, Hank and M

aff and this time. I got a couple more hugs and cheek kisses and we all stood in the hall with Detective Marker.

“So it goes.” Detective Marker looked at me. “The Balduccis talkin’. Pointin’ fingers at each other. It’s confusin’ as hell and most lies, but far’s I can read it, they been gettin’ pressure from outside fact

Detective Marker’s eyes slid to Hector then to Marcus and I could see he was lying when he went on.

ne with “Don’t know who. Don’t care.”

His eyes came back to me.

pped. “Those boys never trusted each other anyway. For weeks the establishin’ and breakin’ allegiances to each other and outside the fold was the smart one, pullin’ ahead of the pack, feignin’ loyalty to the b lled mebut makin’ outside deals. Donny felt the pressure, allied with Ricky, knew where Jerry’s head was at regardin’ Seth and you. He used it, fe some of Marty’s potions so he would take out Harvey, the weak link, l ed. If I so he’d cast suspicion on Marty. Don’t know where Glover and Cor r how I into all this, but Cordell has always been loyal to Seth. I’m surprised involved.”

ie hall, “I think Jerry lied to him about what he was doing. Neither he nor seemed to know what was happening. They didn’t even know Jerry me. They thought they were doing something for me on my father’s or told Detective Marker.

estions. Detective Marker nodded.  
notepad

onty by “At least that makes sense,” he said then he got closer. “Ricky, and Jerry obviously are goin’ down. But you gotta know, we don’t ha on Marty. Nothin’ that’ll stick anyway. He’s doin’ okay and he’ll be r

around without charge.”

Well, wasn't that *just great*?

are all Still, I had to worry about a mean, crazy, fucking Balducci.

t of it's I moved closer to Hector and his arm got tighter around my neck.  
ions.”

I tell he Detective Marker's eyes took in Marcus and the Hot Bunch, then  
came back to me.

“Marty's always been the brains of the bunch. Don't suspect I  
stupid enough to do anything with the kind of protection thrown down  
you. Regardless of this shit, Seth cuts a menacing figure, even in  
y been Word on the street isn't just that you got the protection of C  
. Marty Nightingale and the Denver Police Department, but Marcus and Vito.  
brothers and Ricky are crazy motherfuckers, but Marty'll think twice.”

and he Detective Marker glanced at Marcus again then to me.

ed Jerry “He's not in a good position. Part of the pressure the Balducci b  
out also means that their men and their contacts have been warned off in no ur  
rdell fit terms or recruited away. He's marked, and not in a good way.” He  
he was even closer and muttered, “Your boy's done good.” He nodded to  
“It'd be practically impossible for Marty to build up business again.”

Glover That made me feel the *eensiest* bit better and made me think pe  
roofied *should* buy Hector an island.  
ders,” I

Detective Marker looked straight at Hector and I didn't know if  
talking to Hector or me when he finished, “Keep safe anyway.”

Donny The elevator pinged and out surged a bevy of Rock Chicks led by  
ave shit Shirleen and Kitty Sue (Rock Chick, The First Generation, according t  
released Sue's stories). The paramedics wheeling Jerry on the gurney had t

through them as I was surrounded, hugged and kissed. There was r  
laughter, a few teary eyes then Tex showed up, wild-haired, wil  
obviously having been on the Sadie Hunt.

He boomed, "Outta my way!" shoved in and hugged me so tight b  
feet came off the floor.

en they

Ralphie and Buddy were there. Tod and Stevie, Duke and I

Malcolm, Blanca showed up with Gloria, Nancy arrived with Jet'  
ie'll be Lottie.

around

Everyone.

prison.

Chavez, All my friends (and Lottie, who I hadn't met yet).

Donny In the hallway of a hotel.

Genuine, honest to goodness friends.

*Mine.*

oys got I was sucked down, deep, deep, deepest, into the warm,  
ncertain comfortable, snugly, safe waters and somewhere, I knew my mo  
got in smiling.

Hector. "Christ, can I get to my fuckin' girlfriend?" Hector clipped (lou  
irately).

rhaps I The crowd stilled, even the hotel onlookers and lingering police, a  
parted. He and I had become disengaged, but now he came through, g  
he was my hand and tugged me away.

"We got a floor to refinish," he muttered on the way to the e  
r Daisy, tagging the button when he got there.

to Kitty I turned to my friends, smiled and waved.

to fight The doors opened and Hector dragged me inside (without, I n



believed smile or a wave at anyone).

d-eyed, The doors closed and without hesitation, he curled me into his front  
hand went into my hair, his head came to mine, slanted, and he gave  
both my hot, urgent, fiery kiss.

In the nanosecond before I melted into him and all thoughts flew  
Dolores, my head, I figured (correctly) we weren't going to get to refinish  
his sister floors.



“NIGHT, DOUBLE H,” I heard Ralphie whisper.

“Later, Hector,” Buddy whispered soon after.

Hector's body moved slightly under me and I could visualize him  
his chin.

I kept my eyes closed and feigned sleep, liking being tucked into Hector's  
heat on the couch.

clear,  
m was After my latest trauma was finally over, Hector took me to his home  
not, as I reckoned, to refinish the floors. He took me straight to his bedroom  
dly and and we had the best sex *ever* in the *history* of *man* (in my personal opinion).

Then, there was no other way to describe it, he pretty much passed  
nd then I stayed with him for hours as he slept. Sometimes, I'd doze. Some  
grabbed I'd daydream. Sometimes, I'd kiss his chest or neck while he slept.  
mostly, I just got used to feeling warm and safe and happy.

levator, He woke up when Buddy called, inviting us to dinner.

We showered (yes, together). Hector “did” me in the shower and  
then we laid in bed, him wearing his cutoff sweats, me wearing one  
flannels and my panties, and him holding me while I called the prison  
oted, a

to my father.

ont. His Cordell had already reported that I was all right. The conversati  
re me ashort and uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say, neither did my

After, even though I tried not to, I cried again, quietly into Hector's n  
7 out of held me while I did that then held me after I was done.

ing the We got dressed and went to Ralphie and Buddy's. Hector and  
YoYo for a long walk, we had an early dinner, then we crashed in fron  
TV to watch *Veronica Mars*.

This time, I burrowed into Hector's side without prompting and  
feet into Ralphie's lap for a massage. Neither man disappointed. Hecto  
jutting curled around my shoulders, Ralphie's hands were pure heaven.

After a while I fell asleep.

ector's Now, as I lay tucked into his hard body, my head on his chest  
deciding that this was my third best day *ever*.

use and "Mamita, I know you're awake." Hector's voice rumbled over my  
edroomthe same time it rumbled in my ear that was pressed to his chest.

nion). I pushed up and twisted to look at him, my hand pulling my hair  
out. my face.

etimes, He looked rough. He needed a haircut, even though he'd just had c  
pt. Butstubble was back, even though he'd shaved only ten hours ago. I  
wearing a tight, long-sleeved, army-drab T-shirt and faded jeans.

And he never looked better.

ain and "We gotta talk," he said, his voice firm, serious and slightly omino  
e of his My body froze and I felt a small spiral of fear in my belly.

to talk "About what?"

“About you and me.”

on was Oh no.

father. No.

eck. He Somebody, tell me, no.

I took Here it was.

it of the I knew it.

I just *knew* it.

put my I pushed further away, but his arm slid up my back, catching un  
r’s arm shoulder blades. He curled it, at the same time pushing himself to  
lounging position on the couch and twisting me so I was in his lap.

Then he started talking.

, I was “I got a few things to say. I know you’ve had a rough time, but it’  
this shit is out and you understand.”

head at I stared at him, mentally girding, preparing for the worst. Nar  
being over. Namely, me being too much trouble. Namely, him losing  
and moving on to the next Sadie or Natalie or whatever.

r out of With these dire thoughts in my head, mentally girded, I nodded.

me. His Might as well get it over with and then revisit my opportunities in (

He was I wasn’t going to pack beach towels. I was going to fill my lugga  
Kleenex.

us. “First off, I want you movin’ in. Not in a few months, now. I want  
my bed. I want you in my house. I wanna come home to you.”

I blinked in shock, mainly because what he said was shocking and  
all what I expected.

“What?” I breathed

“You heard me.”

I blinked again then, for some fool reason, I asked, “Don’t you think I should, I don’t know...date? At least for a while. You know, like other people.”

His mouth started moving like he was fighting a grin and I felt my blood pressure rise. “*Mi amor*, you are definitely not normal people and definitely not a normal relationship.”

I decided to ignore that and went on, again foolishly, “It’s too soon for me to date you.”

“I’ve known you over a year,” he returned.

“We’ve only been together two weeks!”

His voice got low and his mouth stopped moving like he was fighting a grin. Clearly Mr. Mood Swing’s mood was swinging.

“*Mujer*, we been together a lot longer than that and you know it.”

I had to admit, he had a point.

And he wanted me to move in with him!

Yay!

I smiled, mentally ungirding, snuggled closer and said softly, “Okay, I’ll do it.”

His body, which I hadn’t realized was tense, relaxed under mine as my hand sifted into the hair at the side of my head, his fingers curling around my skull.

“Now that’s decided, we gotta talk about your money.”

I should have regirded.

Instead, in Innocent and Happy About to Move in with Hector V

asked, "My money?"

He nodded.

I think we "What about it?"

normal "You just agreed to move in. That means you just agreed to of  
y becoming my woman. I take care of my woman. I pay the mortgage. I  
blood bills. I fix up the house. We go out, I pay. Your money is for you. I ta  
this is of us."

Now hang on a ding darn minute.

l." My body went straight.

"Excuse me, but—"

His fingers tightened on my scalp. "You're not gettin' this, Sac  
ghting at tellin' you the way it is. I'm not opening it up for discussion."

I felt my eyes narrow.

"Hector Chavez, don't you—"

He cut in again.

ly." "You agree to try life out with me, you get what you see. I don't  
and his designer shit. I don't have any fuckin' desire to live in a house that's  
und my than what I need. Life for me is simple. My car's gotta work for my l  
and get me from point A to point B. My house has gotta be as I  
because I made it that way. My job's gotta be somethin' that p  
challenges and doesn't make me lose sleep. And my woman's gotta be  
bed when I get home at night. You don't fit in with that, this isn't  
work."

I was finding it hard to breathe. This was good because if I'd been  
World, I breathe, I might have been a lot louder when I answered.

“You think I want the designer clothes and the mansion,” I accused.

“I know what you want *now*. I also know that can wear thin when used to havin’ a lot more. You think you’ll start wantin’ that, you thi  
fficially can use your money to push me into it, then we should stop right here.”

I tried to shove away, jump off his lap, but his hand left my hair a  
pay the ke care his arms went around me tight, holding me in place.

“Let me go,” I hissed.

“Sadie, you gotta answer this now.”

“Oh? Did you ask a question?” I shot back.

“*Mamita*—”

lie. I’m I kept pushing at him, so angry I was mumbling to myself, “I need  
Jet. Is it too late to call Jet?”

“Jet can’t help you with this one,” Hector told me. “It’s gotta be all

I glared at him.

Then I shared.

do that “You can’t know this so I’ll explain it to you. And, Hector Chav  
; bigger better listen good. I like clothes so I’ll buy what I want. I like pretty  
ifestyle too, so I’ll surround myself with them if I want to. I like to do nice thi

like it people, and since you’re people that means I might do nice things for y  
resents do, you’re gonna have to deal. But I don’t want ivory towers and fancy  
e in my want people in my life who care about me and who’ll let me care abo  
t gonna in return. I want to use the gift my mom gave me and use it right. She

die for me to live large. She died for me to live happy. Happiness  
able to money. I’ve had money my whole life and it *never* made me happy  
last few weeks, I’ve been happy and I’ve barely stepped foot in my fa

l. and I certainly haven't been living in an ivory tower. So, you can just—

you're I didn't finish because Hector moved.

ink you One second I was struggling and ranting while sitting in his lap. T

” second I was on my back on the couch and he was on top of me.

nd both This knocked the breath out of me so all I could do was stare at h  
which had gone that soft, hard possessive. The look in his eyes w  
warm.

Softly he announced, “All right, *mamita*, we got that out of the wa  
more thing.”

I expelled the breath caught in my lungs and snapped, “What?”

l to call This, for some bizarre reason, made him smile.

It also made him touch his lips to mine for a quick kiss.

l you.” When he was done kissing me, he said, “*Tu padre, mi cielo*, it's u  
he's ever gonna welcome me with open arms. What you and I got pl  
like I think it will, you gotta know that and be able to deal.”

ez, you “You're wrong,” I told him and watched his eyes narrow. “  
7 things wrong,” I whispered, the fight and anger left me and I wrapped m  
ings for around him. “He wants me to be happy. It'll take time, but he'l  
rou. If I around.”

7 cars. I Hector shook his head.

ut them I nodded mine.

e didn't Then his whole face went warm. “Sadie, you're settin' yourself  
s is not disappointment if you think that way.”

. These “Hector,” I returned quietly. “Trust me.”

ncy car He bit his lip, looked over my head for a second then back at m

—” guard your heart, *mi amor*, that’s all I’m sayin’.”

I lifted my head, touched my mouth to his and then, keeping my  
he next against his, I whispered, “Okay.”

His body relaxed into mine.

his face, My hand slid up his back and into his hair while I dropped my head  
as he pulled me onto the couch and asked, “Now, are you spending the night or what?”

At that, he granted me a glamorous, white smile.

ay. One Then he spent the night.

unlikely  
lays out

Totally  
y arms  
l come

up for

e. “Just



guard your heart, *mi amor*, that's all I'm sayin'."

I lifted my head, touched my mouth to his and then, keeping my mouth against his, I whispered, "Okay."

His body relaxed into mine.

My hand slid up his back and into his hair while I dropped my head back to the couch and asked, "Now, are you spending the night or what?"

At that, he granted me a glamorous, white smile.

Then he spent the night.

TWENTY-NINE



## GARDENIAS

*Sadie*

**H**ector and I stood together in the little, gray room.

My body was tense and ramrod straight. I was staring out the window but seeing nothing.

Hector was standing behind me close, his extraordinary heat beating my back, his arm around my waist, his chin brushing the hair on the top of my head.

For some bizarre reason, I was worried about what I was wearing.

Daisy, Ralphie, Roxie, Tod and Stevie and I spent five exhausting hours at the mall trying to find the exact right First Visit to Your Incar Father Outfit. Even though they assured me it was absolutely perfect, I was still uncertain.

I needed my father to know who I was. The Real Sadie. The one who owned her own gallery. Who moved in with Hector “Oh my God” the Sunday before last, the day after my ordeal was officially over. Who spent her days hanging at Fortnum’s with the girls and Ralphie, redecorating her burnt-out gallery. Who, thanks to Blanca, now knew how to cook from scratch—and they were tasty. Who begged her boyfriend to take

on his motorcycle after dinner—which he did, but only after making creative, earning the ride in a variety of delicious ways. And, w/ weekend, by his side, refinished his living room floor.

But even so, I didn't want to be too in your face about it.

That would be rude.

I was wearing a new pair of Lucky jeans, a camel-colored tailored blouse that fit snug up my sides and midriff and showed a hint of cleavage, the opened buttons (this made Hector's mouth go tight, which was good, it kept it shut), a chocolate-brown suede belt with a heavy silver buckle, a pair of kickass (Daisy's words) dark-brown boots that were both stylish and also rock 'n' roll, and a chocolate-brown suede, two-button blazer.

My hair was down and wild, falling on my shoulders, down my back, sometimes in my face (my father hated my hair down, said a lady with a top of hair back or up, anything else was common).

I was wearing long, wide, gold hoop earrings (a surprise present from Hector that he gave me the night I moved in with him—how he managed to find a jewelry shop, I don't know, but he did) and my mother's initial necklace was around my throat.

But, I was The outfit looked casual, but cost a blooming fortune.

I loved it, it was me.

But I knew my father would hate it.

"I'm scared to death," I whispered to the window.

Hector's arm got tight. His chin left my hair and I felt his mouth graze my neck. He was kissing me there when the door opened.

I jumped and turned.

her get Hector didn't jump nor did he drop his arm, but his head came out  
no, last neck and he moved with my turn.

My father stood there, wearing prison blues, but other than that, I  
surprisingly just like my father. Face tan, hair well-groomed, body  
made prison blues look like the next big thing in men's fashion.

I cotton I wanted to say something, but didn't know what. I had practiced  
ravage at openings, none of which I remembered at the crucial moment, and  
and since hesitation, I caught the killing look my father was giving Hector.

ickle, a This, of course, robbed me of speech. Not that I knew what  
lish but anyway, but still.

"You think I could spend some time with my fucking daughter  
back and you standing there with your hands on her?" my father asked Hector.

ore her Oh boy.

This was not a good start.

nt from "Daddy—" I said, but my voice sounded small.

aged to My father didn't even look at me.

s at my Surprisingly, Hector moved.

He got in front of me and grabbed my hand. He gave it a squeeze  
knew he intended to go.

I looked up at him, beginning to panic and blurted, "I don't want  
go."

o to my "I'll be right outside."

"Hector—"

Another hand squeeze, then a repeated, "Right outside," before  
touched his lips to mine, and without a glance at my father, he left.

t of my      So did the security guard.  
My father and I were alone.

looking      Blooming heck.

fit, he      “You get a kick out of that, Sadie? Bringing him here and shoving  
my face?”

a lot of      I stared at him.

l in my      I felt my heart start to beat faster and waited for it to happen. I wa  
who Hector called Stepford Sadie to slip into place. I waited for the au  
to say      dutiful daughter to arrive and be apologetic and hide the fact that Hec  
in my life or promise to get rid of him altogether.

without      Instead, Stepford Sadie, now good and dead, didn’t appear.  
“I’m sorry if that upset you, but you already know he’s in my  
answered softly.  
“He won’t be for long,” my father returned.  
My body went stiff. “Why’s that?”  
“Been lookin’ into Hector Chavez,” he replied, his tone cold. “He  
string of pieces, Sadie. You’re just the most recent one.”

e and I      I let out a breath and shook my head. “I know about the other wom  
“Then you aren’t as smart as I raised you to be.”

you to      “I’m living with him.”  
“Then you *really* aren’t as smart as I raised you to be.”  
I stared at him.  
He stared back.

fore he      This went on for a while.

I was not going to give in.

I knew he wouldn't either.

So it went on for a while longer.

him in To my shock, he finished the staredown by asking, "Are we done?"

And also to my shock, I had the perfect retort.

"I don't know, Daddy. Are we?"

ited for It was clear he didn't expect this answer and also clear he  
tomatic understand it.

tor was I decided to explain.

"You have two choices. One, you stay the way you became after  
Balducci murdered Mom and that means we go our separate ways. I w  
life," I a party to that kind of relationship with my father. Or two..."

I stopped and went to the vinyl couch where my bag was. I pulled  
large photograph, a duplicate of the picture I took from Mom's storage  
(the original now residing in some boxes in Hector's spare room, wait  
's got a the downstairs to be finished). I turned back to my father, walked  
closer this time, the picture turned to face him.

en." "We can go back to this. A family. Even without Mom with us." I  
the photo at him and his eyes didn't move from it. "Take it," I said  
allowed to give it to you."

Slowly, his eyes moved from the picture to me.

I took a stunned step back at what I saw.

Pain.

Utter, devastated, unhidden pain.

What was in his face sliced deep through me.

So deep I whispered an uncertain, "Daddy?"

"Where'd you find that?" he whispered back.

"One of Hector's friends found Mom's stuff."

He wasn't listening. His eyes were fastened at my neck and I watched in horror as the color drained out of his face.

didn't All of a sudden, he tore his eyes from my throat and walked without looking at me to the window where he stopped.

His back to me, he stared out the glass.

Mickey Then he said, "Get out."

won't be My body jerked as if he struck me.

"What?"

led out a "I know what you're doing Sadie. It's clear you're here with (locker with those things, to get a piece of me. Take it, cherish it, and get ting for out."

to him, I stood, stunned immobile for a second. Then my heart started to pump, my blood started pumping and I stomped to the table in the room, shoved photo on it and stomped to the window, right in front of my father.

d. "I'm "I will not get out," I snapped.

His eyes didn't move, but he put his hands in his pants pockets and looked over my head.

"Look at me," I demanded.

He didn't look. It was like I didn't exist.

I shoved his shoulders with both hands and yelled, "Dad! Look at r

Only his cold eyes tilted so he could look down his nose at me.

“I know everything. *Everything*,” I told him and he just kept looking down his nose at me so I repeated, “I know everything about you.”

I watched his lip curl before he said, “You don’t know shit.”

ched in “I know you loved her,” I shot back. “I know your parents weren’t  
you. I know she loved you too. I know that you were her world. I know  
by me were mine too, once, before she went away. I know you fed me in the  
when I was a baby—”

“Shut up, Sadie.”

“I know if I hurt myself, I went to you—”

“Sadie, shut up!”

“I know when I got up all sleepy, if you were home, I’d go directly  
—”  
Chavez,

he fuck His hands shot out of his pockets, grabbed on to my arms and shook  
hard as he shouted, “*Shut up!*”

reating, “*I will not shut up and I will not get out!*” I screamed in his  
put the “Decades ago, I had a father! I want him back!”

He shoved me away. I went back two feet, righted my involuntary  
and advanced again, grabbing on to his shirt with both fists and shaking

I stared “You used to kiss my head and tuck me into bed—”

His hands wrapped around my wrists and he pulled, but I held on tight

“Why’d you leave me? Once she was gone, I needed you!”

His body went still and his chin tipped down so he could look at me

ne!” “You didn’t need me,” he said.



“I did,” I returned.

looking “No, you didn’t.”

“*I did!*” I screamed.

“I killed her.”

nice to It was my body’s turn to go still.

ow you “What?”

ie night “I didn’t pull the trigger, but what I did put her in that position, so as well have been the one to blow her head off.”

His words cut through me and I closed my eyes tight.

“That’s what he did, Sadie. Mickey blew a hole in her head.”

“Quiet,” I whispered.

r to you He got close, his mouth came to my ear, and he whispered, “Before  
ook me the same to him, I made him take me to her. Bernie and I got her body-

“Please, don’t.”

is face. “We paid heavy to have her put in a marble tomb—”

“Don’t.”

r retreat “Pink marble, her favorite color.”

g. “Stop it.”

ight. He kept whispering in my ear. “Even now, when I’m in here, I know  
gardenias are placed on the steps of that tomb every Sunday afternoon.

e. I couldn’t help it. The fight went out of me. I let go of his shirt and  
into him, my arms wrapping around his waist. The tears were heavy  
throat, sliding down my face. I heard my own choking sobs, but he didn’t  
his arms around me. He didn’t hold me.

“But I wasn’t done, was I?” he asked softly.

I tilted my head back and stared at his blurry face.

Only then did he touch me.

I blinked and focused, catching his eyes staring at my cheek. His hand came to the side of my head, his thumb out and tracing the scar there.

I might “I got you raped. You. My sweet Sadie. All those years of protecting you so no one could hurt you. No one could get at you like they did Lizzie when I got sent down, I stepped back, wanting to give you your life, the kind of life your mother wanted for you. A good life, a clean one without regrets. And still it was me who got you violated.” His voice got deep and somber before he said, “My sweet baby.”

“Daddy—” I whispered, fresh tears sliding down my cheeks.

re I did I watched, fascinated, as his eyes cleared.

—”

His head cocked and he asked almost casually, “How can you even look at me?”

I blinked once then again then I said, “Because I was made from that’s who I am. And Hector says if you love someone, you forgive anything. So,” my voice dropped, “I’m guessing I can look at you because I love you.”

ow that He stared at me and I waited, my body still, the tears coming and sliding by slowly, each one of them taking hours.

and fell Then his arms came around me and he pulled me deep into him. I mouth kiss the top of my head and I got up on tiptoe, my arms going around my face going into his neck.

ln’t put

We held on to each other for a while, until my tears stopped, until

strength came back into my legs, and then I whispered in his ear, “Would you please take the photo?”

His arms gave me a squeeze. “I’ll take the photo, Sadie.”

When his arms  
were around me,  
I pushed it.

What could I say?

My father taught me to know when I had the advantage and when I didn’t. Then, it was my turn.

So I did as my father taught me.

“Do you mind if I wear the necklace?”

That got me another squeeze. He didn’t answer, but I took it as a yes. Then because I had to, because it was important, I took it further. When he gets up before me, he tucks the covers around me so I won’t be cold.”

My father’s body got tight.

“I don’t know why, but I went to him after the rape. He took me to the hospital. When the staff tried to separate him from me, it took two people to pull him away.”

He gave me a different kind of squeeze, one that told me to be quiet. I didn’t listen to the nonverbal command.

I went on, “He makes me feel safe.”

Finally he spoke. “Sadie—”

My voice went so low, I barely heard myself. “I think I love him.”

Silence again.

Then a deep sigh.

“It’d be a lot easier to hate the man if he wasn’t such a clever bastard.”

Will you I blinked into my father's neck. Then I pulled back and looked at him.  
"What does that mean?" I breathed.

His hand came back to my cheek. His thumb again traced the scar.  
His eyes moved to mine.

"Can I just get to know my daughter for a while before I have to  
to push with her new fucking boyfriend?"

My body sagged into his with relief.

Then I nodded.

Because I knew.

es. It would take a while, but it would happen.

l. "If he "I won't miss another visiting day," I promised.

"Good," he returned.

He wanted to know where she is. I want to take the gardenias there my  
e to the He sucked in breath, held it, then let it go and nodded. "I'll be sur  
men to arranged."

it. "I want you to be good so you can get out soon."

This made him smile. Not huge, but his lips turned up.

So, I smiled back.

Then I whispered, "I'm glad to have you back, Dad."

His hand sifted into the side of my hair, cupped my head and  
down.

He kissed the top of my head.

"Thank you for taking me back, Sadie," he said into my hair.

rd." At that, for the first time in eighteen years, I gave my father a hug.

im.

ar then

put up

self.”

e that’s

tilted it





# EPILOGUE

## COMO QUIERAS

### *Sadie*

“Jesus, Trish, I’m payin’ for the booze, I should be able to get di it,” Herb Logan, Roxie’s father, snapped at his wife (loudly).

“Keep your voice down, Herb,” Trish Logan, Roxie’s mother, back (also loudly). “Do you want your daughter’s wedding to be ma memories of her loud, drunken, hillbilly father?”

I looked at Jules, Vance, Stella and Mace, who were standing w Herb and Trish in our little (but loud) group.

“Roxie don’t care, she wants everyone to have a good time. Shit, Ally, she’s three sheets to the wind,” Herb returned.

We all turned in unison to look at Ally.

She, like Jules, Stella and I (as well as Annette, Daisy, Indy, Ava, Roxie’s sister, Mimi—being a Rock Chick, by the by, meant hav enormous wedding party) was wearing a glamorous, deep green, long dress—strapless, form-fitting with a sexy slit up the front and an elega of material at the bodice. We all had perfect, oval rubies (I bridesmaid’s gift—the green and red color combination was because



Christmas Eve) winking at our throats and matching studs at our ears, these displayed beautifully because our hair had been swept up in eludpos.

Ally and Ren Zano seemed to be having a very intense conversation. Ren's face was set, his jaw tight. Ally's face was red, her eyes flashing.

Then all of a sudden she shouted, "Go to hell, Ren Zano!" took a step back and cocked her arm, hand in a fist as if she was going to strike him.

"Oh my God," Jules breathed as Ally let fly.

But Ren caught Ally's fist, twisted it down and behind her back. Her body slammed into his. His mouth went to her ear and he said something that made her struggle. He turned them both, his and her arm still behind her back, and marched them out of the elegant Donald R. Seawell Ballroom of the Denver Performing Arts Complex.

"What was *that* all about?" Stella breathed as we all kept our eyes on the empty space where Ren and Ally used to be.

"Should we help her?" I asked, and Stella and Jules both looked at me and gave me small shakes of the head.

I didn't like seeing Ally so upset, but I figured Jules and Stella had to practice with this Rock Chick business. Not to mention, I knew Ren was a good guy, he'd never hurt anyone. So I let it go.

Jet and I, Roxie, and Trish, velvet stumped to the bar. "If she can shout 'go to hell' in this fancy-ass ballroom then I can have another fuckin' drink that I'm fuckin' payin' for," Herb announced.

Trish's eyes did a scan of Jules, Vance, Stella, Mace and me.

Then she asked, "Which of you girls are married? I forget."

both of “Just me, Mrs. Logan,” Jules answered.  
aborate Trish’s eyes came to me then went to Stella, “Don’t do it.”  
Then she stormed off toward Kitty Sue, Malcolm and Tom.  
rsation. Mace and Vance grinned at each other. Stella, Jules and I started gi  
;.  
a step I felt heat then I felt Hector’s hand at the small of my back. It sli  
m. my waist and his mouth came to my neck. I shivered, twisted my head  
side and smiled up at him.

His face got warm when he caught my smile, but his eyes went t  
so her and Vance.

ing that “What’s up with Zano?” he asked them.

ind her  
Grand Silence.

But I got the feeling it wasn’t because they didn’t know. It was l  
locked they weren’t saying in front of the loose-lipped Rock Chicks.

Stella got the same feeling and she turned into Mace. “You  
l at me something?”

“Fuck,” he muttered.

id more “Spill,” she shot back.

1 was a “Kitten,” Mace replied (though, you will note, he didn’t answer).

I smiled.

an have I loved it that Mace called Stella “kitten.” It was very cute. There  
ed and lot of things Mace was (he was hot, he was tall, he was handsome, h  
be a little scary and moody, he could also be surprisingly sweet), b  
was one thing he was not and that was cute.

Except when he was around Stella.

“Kai,” Stella returned, and I loved it when Stella called Mace by his name. No one else did, but she did. And when she did, it was also very (except now, when she did it with narrowed eyes).

My eyes moved to the door as Indy and Lee came through it. She was giggling, adjusting her bodice. Lee had her lipstick on his mouth.

I giggled.

Jules leaned in and whispered, “What’s funny?”

I tilted my head to Indy and Lee. Lee was now wiping the back of his hand against his mouth.

“I think Indy got some,” I whispered back to Jules.

Jules grinned.

“Weddings do that to people,” she told me. “Luke carried Ava out because of the fireman’s hold at my reception. Took her home, gave her the bouquet, brought her back. Her mouth was swollen, her face was flushed and I didn’t know what was all over the place.”

My eyes got round. “No kidding?”

She shook her head.

I had to admit (privately, to myself), she wasn’t wrong. At Eddie’s wedding a few months ago, Hector “gave me the business haystack.

It was *way* better than s’mores.

“What’s up?” Indy asked, she and Lee hitting our group.

“Not much. Herb’s shitfaced. Trish warned Sadie and me not to get married. Ally nearly punched Ren in the face after shouting ‘go to hell and the boys know what’s going on and aren’t spilling,” Stella answered.

is given     Indy turned to Lee. “Ally nearly punched Ren? What’s that all abo  
y sweet     Lee shook his head.

Indy’s eyes narrowed.

he was     “Maybe you shouldn’t have given him naked gratitude in the clo  
five minutes ago. Saved it for later,” Jules threw out.

Indy’s face got red. Her body turned slowly to Jules and Lee  
chuckling.

of his     “I don’t see what’s funny,” Indy snapped at Lee.

His mouth went to her ear, his hand went to her midriff and  
something to her that made her eyes go lazy and her body relax.

“Whatever,” she whispered and rolled her eyes at me.

out in a     I smiled. I had no idea why. I just did.

usiness,  
her hair     “What’s going on with Ally?” Roxie asked, her hand in Hank’s,  
them joining our group.

Roxie and Hank’s wedding couldn’t have been more different than  
and Jet’s.

As Jet wanted, she got her hog roast outside a barn/hayride/s  
Jet and reception. It had been a blast. Everyone kicking up their heels on the v  
s” in a slats in the barn to rock ‘n’ roll and country, getting drunk on be  
cocktails, eating roasted hog, toasting marshmallows outside ar  
massive bonfire with big logs, covered in fluffy wool blankets set all  
and letting their hair down.

to get     The only thing that slightly marred the festivities was when Ally s  
,’ loud, hay fight during the hayride. It got a little rowdy (Tex was on that ri  
ed.     we got threatened with hayride-ejection from the irate hayride driver.

ut?" But other than that, it was the best.

Jet had looked gorgeous. Incongruous with the surroundings she she'd gone the full-on, wide skirted, tons of tulle, lace and beading wedding dress route, truly looking like a fairy princess.

I wasn't the only one who thought so.

Standing at the front of the church, when Jet was about to hit the ai eyes had moved to Eddie. The minute he saw her, his whole body cha went still, then his eyes (no kidding) went liquid and (still no kidd broke tradition and walked right down the aisle. Right in front of ev he said Like he couldn't wait for her to walk to him (which, obviously, he cou

Ray, her father, who was escorting her down the aisle, burst out la but Eddie ignored him. She ended up with Eddie on one side, Ray other, both her father and her fiancé walking her down the aisle.

Blanca, who I thought would blow the roof off at this display, burst into loud, happy tears.

It had been the most romantic thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Until that day.

I looked at Roxie.

She was wearing an ivory satin gown, snug-fitting at chest, midrif and hips, its full skirt cut on the bias. There was a deep V at her cl material coming up and gathering in points into tiny, spaghetti strap: shoulders, which went up and over and draped down her back, I holding up the material of the dress at her bottom by a miracle. Her l seen from afar, looked totally exposed. The dress managed to be both and uber sexy. It was, put simply, breathtaking. The most unusu fantastic wedding gown I'd ever seen in my life. Her hair was in an el



rowed” of a crowd of family and friends, waiting to get married.

“The Hot Bunch knows, but they aren’t talking,” Stella filled in  
held attacking me out of my trip down Recent Memory Lane.

m-pom Roxie turned to Hank. “Do *you* know?”

ristmas “No idea,” Hank returned.

ugh the “You’re not lying to me on our wedding day?” Roxie asked, but  
ind my more of a warning.

“Sorry, Sunshine. Ally doesn’t keep in touch with me about her loc  
She’s my sister. I don’t wanna know. Never did. Never will,” Hank rep  
ughter)

Roxie’s eyes went round. “*Love life?* Ren and Ally? Whisky,  
know something!”

toward Hank’s eyes slid to Lee then he said, “Shit.”

Vance burst out laughing.

l by the Jules hit him in the shoulder.

That was when I burst out laughing.

Hector put pressure at my hip and curled me into his front.

,” Herb I tilted my head back to look at him, still laughing.

t. She’s He watched me, his handsome grin in place, until I was done.

Then he bent forward and his mouth touched mine.

“Do *you* know?” I asked softly, my arms sliding around his waist.

father’s He didn’t hesitate in answering. “The men talk. I don’t listen r  
know Ally’s got some business. Zano’s involved. They got history. Th  
tanding I know.”

in front I looked at the place where Ally and Ren disappeared and mu

“She’s a dark horse. She makes everyone spill their secrets but keep her own.”

“I’ve known Ally Nightingale since I was six. She’s the second most complicated woman I’ve ever met,” Hector replied. “One thing about her that’s always been the way, *mamita*, you do *not* get what you see.”

I cuddled closer, my elbows cocking, my hands going up his back to his shoulder blades. “Now, I’m intrigued.”

He shook his head. “You’re just gonna have to watch it play out the rest of us.” Then he added, “And hope to God no one gets hurt.”

Before I could say anything, Tex (wearing a tux and *not* happy about it) boomed from across the room, “Roxanne Giselle Lo...I mean, Nightingale. When are those fuckin’ harpists gonna shut the fuck up and so we can have some rock ‘n’ roll?”



I RESTED my head against the window of the Bronco and watched the parade slide by as Hector took us home from the wedding.

I was pleasantly drunk from champagne and totally exhausted from my share of bridesmaids duties (if I never saw another Christmas light again, I *do not* care, until tomorrow, that was) and the last two hours of dancing like a wild woman (mostly with Ava and Daisy) to rock ‘n’ roll.

My hand was taken from my lap. Hector’s fingers linked through mine and he set the back of my hand high up on his hard thigh.

“Did you have a good day?” he asked quietly.

“It was great. The wedding was beautiful. But I’m tired and my head is killing me.”

“We’ll be home soon, *mi corazón*.”



eps her “I know.”

“I told you after Eddie and Jet’s wedding not to wear those old most shoes,” he reminded me. “You complained then, I knew you’d cc ut Ally again.”

“I’m not going to wear ugly shoes with a bridesmaid’s dress, Hecto k to his “Isn’t there such a thing as not ugly shoes that are comfortable?”

“No,” I said shortly (and honestly).

like the He chuckled.

bout it) I rolled my eyes.

tingale! Hector, even after months together, still thought I was funny.

can get I still didn’t get it.

“Jet’s pregnant,” he said suddenly.

My hand tensed in his.

Denver “What?”

n a day “Eddie told me tonight. It’s early. They’re keepin’ it to themselvo little while. Whatever you do, do not tell *Mamá*.”

[ would “Oh my God,” I whispered. “Are they happy about it?”

g like a His hand squeezed mine. “Don’t know about Jet, but Eddie’s o fuckin’ moon.”

h mine If that was the case then I knew about Jet. She was sure as certa the moon too.

feet are “That’s great,” I said softly.

“Yeah,” he replied, just as softly.

It was my turn to squeeze his hand. “Uncle Hector.”

Silence.

fuckin' Then, "Shit."

complain Then it was my turn to laugh.



or." WE WALKED UP to the house, hand in hand.

Hector let us in.

I flipped the switches and the lights came on.

Then I reached down, slipped off my high heels and tossed them c  
back of the couch into the living room. They bounced off the seat  
couch and I heard them hit the floor.

I tossed my purse in the same direction. It bounced on the seat and  
there.

The renovating the house business wasn't playing out like in my  
(exactly).

Hector and I fought tooth and nail about everything *house*.

es for a Once we were done with the floor, the mantel and the skirting  
Hector announced he wanted the living room off the kitchen—better  
to beer during games.

ver the I explained (patiently, at first) that the *dining room* had to be  
kitchen.

in over We hit a stalemate that meant weeks of stacked furniture cov  
plastic.

Then one night I got creative with lingerie and talked him into it  
two seconds before he climaxed).

It wasn't fair. In fact, it was really not fair, but this lesson served r

in the coming weeks.

Hector didn't seem to mind.

To the right was an antique, walnut, twelve-seat dining room found on Antique Row on Broadway. I had it refinished, the seats chairs redone in a dusky gray and dusky gray-blue stripe. It now had a round vase on it filled with calla lilies.

A matching sideboard sat against the wall to the kitchen, displaying my mom's Waterford crystal that I took from her locker, the family photo of Mom, Dad and me and another photo of Hector and his dad taken when Hector was nineteen. There were white Christmas lights weaved in red and green greenery on the mantel.

To the left was Hector's midnight blue twill furniture, but I'd added blue and chocolate brown toss pillows with blue, gray and chocolate brown designs. The TV in the bedroom was installed in the corner, all the furniture positioned for maximum viewing potential. In another corner was a huge, real fir Christmas tree decorated in blue and white lights, and blue, silver and white ornaments. There was more greenery and lights on the mantel weaving around framed photos of Hector's family and other photos of my mom, grandpa and grandfather. A huge white poinsettia in a shiny blue pot sat dead on the coffee table.

To the back of the living room through the French doors was a study complete with big desk, reclining chair and Hector's desktop computer.

The front rooms were all perfect.

The kitchen was now a pit. Everything had been yanked out by Buddy and Eddie a few weekends ago and carted off in a reclamation truck.

My cooking lessons were on hold. With the kitchen like it was, we

definitely not hosting Christmas dinner (Blanca was).

I walked in, pulled off my cape, draped it on the banister then went  
table I stairs and straight to the bedroom, where I fell face first on the bed.

of the I didn't used to be the kind of person who threw her shoes across  
d a big room (or her purse) and left my coats on the banister.

I used to be clean and tidy.

ing my Obsessively so.

hoto of I also used to be the kind of person who woke up at the barest  
1 when sound.

al pine I wasn't either of those anymore.

d some Real Sadie was a lot more relaxed. She slept better and she didn't  
rom the wound up about stupid stuff.

ximum I liked Real Sadie. Most of the time, she had it going on.

as tree I felt the bed move when Hector sat on it and the zipper at the  
aments, started going down.

silver- "I'm going to sleep right here," I informed him.

l mother "Como quieras," Hector said softly, and hearing those words I smiled  
l center the bed.

he den, I didn't have to open my eyes to see the room.

Hector had made the bedroom his next project (after the living room  
before the kitchen). He'd taken time off and we'd slept on the pull-out  
for a week while he refinished the floors, replaced the skirting boards

Hector, painted the walls (I wanted to help, but the gallery was being redecorated  
ruck. Roxie's wedding plans were heating up so Ralphie and I were kind of  
ve were

The walls were a warm gray-green and there were new, shiny

skirting boards. Hector had bought a new bed, nightstands and tv  
t up the dressers, one low with a mirror on top, one tall and wide with six draw

We fought about the furniture because I wanted to help pay.

ross the He refused.

I pushed it.

We came to a stalemate.

Days later, in bed, he held off letting me finish until I begged him  
hint of he demanded I shut up about the furniture, and I agreed.

Turnabout, I guessed, was fair play.

I wasn't complaining.

ln't get The zipper went all the way down. Hector got off the bed. The dr  
pulled off at my ankles and I heard the heavy material land somewhere  
room.

ly back This should have alarmed me. The dress was velvet, it was gorgeo  
it was expensive.

I didn't lift my head.

led into Instead, I lay in nothing but a pair of emerald-green, French-cut  
on the bed.

I heard Hector's boots then clothing hit the floor, then he came  
om and me. I was pulled up, rolled into him, the covers yanked out from un  
t couch then snapped back over me. I settled with my head on his chest, r  
rds and around his abs.

me and "Sadie, the pins in your hair are jabbing my skin."

busy). "Blooming heck," I muttered.

maple

vo new I rolled with a heavy sigh to my back and started to pull the pins  
ers. my hair.

Hector got up on an elbow and watched me.

Then he asked, “What’d we buy Hank and Roxie for their wedding

My hands in my hair stilled and just my eyeballs rolled to look at F

Hector and I had bought Eddie and Jet a brand-new kitchen for  
m, then wedding. Jet loved to cook. Eddie was fixing up their house, but on  
budget and with work and Rock Chick duties taking up most of his time  
not gotten around to giving her a new kitchen. I heard her (on  
occasions) waxing poetic about how she’d love something “state-of-the

So Hector and I gave it to her.  
ess was

It cost twenty thousand dollars and it made two hot-blooded M  
e in the American men temporarily lose their minds.

Jet, at first, had been shocked.  
ous and

Then, when I explained myself, she’d been understanding  
appreciative, then gleeful.

Blanca went straight to gleeful and started hinting (broadly) that  
needed a new kitchen too (Hector didn’t know it yet, but that was  
Christmas present).  
panties

Jet had talked Eddie around. It took awhile but she did it.  
back to  
ider me

“Um...” I answered Hector’s question.  
ny arm

He fell to his back, stared at the ceiling and muttered, “Fuck.”

I got up on my elbow and looked down at him, hair half falling  
half still in pins.

“Hector! I’m loaded! What am I going to do with my money but s

out of friends?”

He got up on his elbow, Mr. Mood Swing fully morphed into an  
faced me.

“I don’t know,” he clipped. “Save it? Put our kids through college  
If tonight was anything to go by, we’ll need it to pay for their godd  
weddings. Fuck, knowin’ you, we’ll need every last penny to pay for o  
or their

a cop’s My breath went out of me in a *whoosh*.

ie, he’d Then it came back on a surge.

several Then I whispered, “What?”

e-art.” “You heard me,” he shot back.

I sat up and looked down at him. “Are you asking me marry you?”

lexican He sat up and faced me. “Are you shittin’ me?”

I blinked.

Then I said, “No.”

, then “What do you think we’re doin’ here? Playin’ house?”

I blinked again.

hat she “Christ, Sadie,” he clipped. “Look at my fuckin’ arm.”  
vas her

I looked but I didn’t have to. He’d had the rose tattooed there mont  
within weeks of me moving in.

It was extraordinary. The stem, leaves, petals all exquisitely dra  
filled in with vibrant colors. It had taken two goes, the outline firs  
weeks later, after that healed, the filling in.

; down, My heart fluttered, then my belly fluttered, then I whispered, “Hec

pend it “What’d we get Hank and Roxie?” he ground out, interrupting me.

I decided just to answer and get it over with.

ger and “It didn’t cost as much as the kitchen,” I told him.

“What’d we get?” he repeated.

with it? “Nowhere *near* as much as the kitchen,” I said for good measure.

lanned He gave me The Scorch.

urs.”

I sighed.

“We bought them a full set of Mikasa china.”

Hector just kept giving me The Scorch.

“Twelve place settings,” I went on.

He continued The Scorch.

“And...um...serving dishes.”

More Scorch.

“And their silver.”

Still more Scorch.

“With the hostess set.”

More Scorch.

this ago, “That’s it,” I finished.

He dropped to his back, muttering, “*Dios mio.*”

wn and I pulled my lips in then my hands went back to my hair and I yan  
t, then, the rest of the pins.

While I did this, Hector lay with the back of his arm over his ey  
tor—” rose tattoo on full display.

I shook my fingers through my hair then leaned into him. Reachin



nightstand, I dropped the pins on it and then settled with my chest on h

“Hector,” I called.

Silence and no movement.

“Maybe we should...” I hesitated, not sure if now was the right  
“talk about what I did for Christmas.”

All of a sudden, he moved. His arms went around me, I was on m  
he was on top.

“I hope you got your energy back, *mamita*, because you owe me f  
he announced, displaying, again, very bizarre Hector Logic.

Then his face disappeared in my neck.

His tongue touched below my ear.

I did a casual back flip in the lovely warm waters where I cavorted  
my life as a happy mermaid.

My arms went around him and I smiled at the ceiling.



EARLY CHRISTMAS MORNING, the doorbell rang.

Since I'd been up for the last hour waiting for it, I was awa  
immediately rolled out of bed.

“I got it, *mamita*,” Hector muttered, rolling out the other side.

ked out I ignored him and put on my panties.

“Sadie, I got it,” Hector repeated, and I looked at him as I shrug  
yes, the one of his flannels. He had on a pair of rust-colored drawstring swe  
the hems loose around his ankles.

g to the I pulled on a pair of heathered-gray, fleecy shorts with notches at t  
while Hector yanked on a black thermal.

his. I also, by the way, pulled in my lips.

Hector stopped dressing and stared at me.

Then he put his hands to his hips.

at time, “What have you done?” he asked.

The doorbell rang again.

y back, I dashed out of the bedroom.

Hector followed a lot slower, but since his legs were also long  
or this,” caught up to me at the foot of the stairs and pulled me behind him. I grabbed  
as he walked to the door, unlocked it and tugged it open.

I peeked around Hector’s body.

Jack stood there.

now in “Hi, Jack,” I said. “Merry Christmas.”

Jack’s eyes came to me, and then (no kidding!) he winked.

Then his hand came up and he held out a set of keys to Hector.

Hector looked at the keys then at Jack.

like and Jack jerked his head to the street where a brand-new, shiny, black  
Yukon was parked behind Hector’s Bronco.

When Hector didn’t take the keys, Jack tossed them in the air. His  
hand shot out and caught them.

pped on Jack grinned at me. He turned, walked across the porch, down the  
atpants, and to the car parked behind the Yukon. Jack’s girlfriend, Melinda  
Smithie’s strippers—Jack was the only Nightingale man who didn’t  
his girlfriend stripped), was sitting in the front seat waving at us, a big  
he hips grin on her face.

I waved back.

Jack got into the driver's side and took off.

Hector closed the door.

Then, slowly, he turned to me.

I got one look at his face and started backing up, across the platform  
down the steps.

ger, he "It's really for me," I told him.

ot close He advanced.

I kept backing up.

"It's selfish, I know, but you never take one of Lee's Explorers. I  
make sure you're safe."

He kept advancing.

The back of my foot hit the stairs.

"Merry Christmas!" I shouted stupidly.

He stopped advancing slowly and launched himself at me.

k GMC I whirled and ran up the stairs.

I tripped almost all the way up and he caught me at the waist before  
Hector's He swung me up in his arms, my limbs flying out of control.

"Hector!" I yelled, but he walked with long strides to the bedroom  
ie stepstossed me on the bed.

(one of I turned, got on all fours and scrambled.

care if He caught my ankles, yanked my knees out from under me so I  
, goofy my belly, and he landed on top of me.

I squirmed.

He slid off the side, but one of his heavy thighs was on mine, his hand went straight into my shorts and panties, sliding from bottom to between my legs.

I stilled.

His hand kept going until his fingers curved around and hit the spot I wanted.

I whimpered and twisted my head. His mouth was there and he kissed me hot, deep, wet, urgent and fiery.

We went at it, all hands, mouths, teeth and tongues (then other parts of our anatomy).

It was wild.

want to

It was beautiful.

After, I was on top, still connected to him, my face in his throat, his breath still heavy.

Both his hands were cupping my bottom.

“You just can’t stop yourself can you?” he asked, referring to the Yukon.

I shook my head, burrowed closer and gave him a squeeze with my hands (and other parts of me besides). His fingers tensed on my bottom.

the I fell.

“Had my eye on one of those for a long time, *mamita*,” he muttered referring to the Yukon.

from and

“I know,” I replied softly. Then, for some reason, into his throat, quietly I whispered, “I love you, babe.”

His body went still.

was on

Then he rolled so I was on the bottom, he was on top.

His head came up and I saw his face was warm, his eyes, though

face in hot.

ver my He touched his mouth to mine and muttered, “*Y yo te amo tamb  
cielo.*”

And, from Blanca’s lessons, I knew this meant, *And I love you i  
t. sky.*

sed me, My belly fluttered and I smiled at him.

He smiled back.

parts of His mouth was coming toward mine when the doorbell rang again.

Instead of kissing me, his forehead came to rest on mine and he mu  
“Jesus.”

We did the getting up and putting on clothes thing again and  
at, my downstairs, side by side, his arm around my shoulders, mine arou  
waist.

He opened the door.

ukon. Buddy and Ralphie were standing there. Ralphie was hol  
y arms squirming, panting, blond-faced, black-bodied German Shepherd pup  
a big, red and green striped ribbon around its neck.

ed, still “*Oh my God!*” I squealed. The puppy jumped at my squeal, i  
coming to me. It leaped out of Ralphie’s arms into mine. “Budd  
wonderful man, you got Ralphie a puppy!”  
at, uber

I held the puppy to my chest. I walked into the living room, nuzzl  
soft face and puppy floppy ears with my nose, smelling the sweet  
scent as she licked me all over. I giggled and gave her soft pupp  
cuddles.

h, were I looked at Buddy. “You’re the greatest. I want one just like her.”

“Um...sweets?” Ralphie called and I looked at him.

I saw all three men standing there. Buddy and Ralphie were smiling. Hector had his arms crossed on his chest and his mouth was doing a fighting-a-grin thing.

“What?” I asked.

“Buddy didn’t give me that dog,” Ralphie answered.

My eyebrows drew together. “Did you buy it for yourself?”

Buddy chuckled. Hector lost the fight with his grin and smiled, fumbled, glamorous.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

Buddy answered, “She’s for you, sweetheart.”

I blinked.

“From Double H,” Ralphie added.

My eyes flew to Hector.

“It’s selfish,” he said. “I want to know you’re guarded when I’m home.”

I felt tears clog my throat.

Then I shouted, “I am *not* going to cry!” right before I burst into tears.

In a flash, the puppy and I were in Hector’s arms.

He held me. I cried. The puppy squirmed and licked. And I produced a camera and took a photo of the three of us.

It came out beautiful. Hector’s arm around my shoulders, his fingers in the ruff of the dog’s neck, his head bent to us, my forehead tucked against his, the puppy looking like she was smiling at both of us (but really she was just happy to be there).

was panting).

g huge. I named the dog Gretel (she *was* German).

ng that I put the picture on the mantel in the dining room.

***The End***

full and

I'm not

ars.

Ralphie

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lly, she

was panting).

I named the dog Gretel (she was German).

I put the picture on the mantel in the dining room.

***The End***



# Rock Chick

BONUS CHAPTER

ADDED  
OCTOBER 1, 2023





# BONUS CONTENT

## ONE ONE

### **Hector**

Hector sat next to Sadie at the table in the visitation room.

Seth sat opposite them.

Sadie had her head bent and she was talking a mile a minute while photos across the table toward her father.

“Her name is Gretl. She’s everything. Hector gave her to me for Christmas.”

Seth spared Hector a quick glance, then looked to the photo and murmured, “Adorable.”

“She totally is!” Sadie gushed. “I’m going to be sad when her ears are being floppy, but she’s such a good girl. Hector got her for my protection because she’s so friendly. I’m not sure she’ll be good at protection, unless the dog is allergic to dogs or being licked to death.”

The glance Seth gave him that time lasted longer, but not too long before he was sliding another photo across the table.

“That’s me with the girls at Roxie’s wedding. Roxie is obviously the bride.” She pointed the rest out. “That’s Indy, and that’s Ally. There

And there's Stella. And Jet and Jules. And that's Annette, she's a hottie. Daisy, you know. Also, Shirleen."

"That's a large wedding party," Seth noted.

"I know! Isn't it *aces*?" She asked a question, but she didn't wait for an answer. She slid another photo to him. "That's Tex. He's crazy. A little loud. But he's a total sweetheart and he makes *the best* coffee."

Seth frowned down at the picture that showed Sadie glued to Tex's side at Roxie's wedding, his arm around her shoulders crushing her there.

He was smiling at the camera.

If you were trying to be kind, you'd describe the smile as awkward. If you were telling it like it was, you'd describe it differently.

sliding "He looks like a serial killer," Seth said.

Yup.

me for That's how you'd describe it.

Sadie dissolved in peals of laughter, laughter that Hector paid very close attention to in order to assess if it was fake, stressed, forced or other.

But it was real.

ars stop What unnerved him was, when he returned his attention to Seth, he noticed her with her father's sharp attention on his daughter, he was making the bad guy assessment.

When she quit laughing, she assured, "He really is a sweetheart."

, Sadie "I'll take your word for it," Seth drawled.

Sadie smiled at him.

isly the And fuck him, Seth Townsend transformed when the man smiled back at her. 's Ava.

ot! And Because that was genuine too.

The bell rang, and that meant time was up.

Seth beat back his look of disappointment in record time (something that shocked the shit out of Hector, the fact he'd let it show at all).

nd very He then leveled his eyes on Sadie and said, "I'm glad you came, dad. I loved looking at your pictures. And please tell your friend, Jet, I appreciate the cookies. But if you don't mind, I'd like a quick word with Hector."

She paled a bit, looked between Hector and her dad, and settled on her dad.

vard. If "I do mind, Dad."

"It's not going to be bad," Seth told her.

"Then why can't you talk about it with me here?" she pushed.

Seth looked slightly sick when he replied, "Because it's up to Hector. He wants to share with you what we talk about."

y close "It's okay, *mamita*," he said quietly.

Sadie gave her dad a hard look before she hit Hector with the same

Then she got up and warned them both, "Be nice."

e knew She reached and grabbed her pictures, smiled at her dad, then  
e same around the table and gave him a quick peck on his cheek. She did this  
she shot an adorable warning look to Hector, and both men watched  
walked away.

When she was out of earshot, Seth clipped. "A puppy?"

Hector turned his attention to Seth. "She loves animals."

ack. "That's hardly enough protection, Chavez," Seth retorted. "And it

at least a year to train it to do what it should be doing.”

“Then it’s good Vance Crowe installed a security system in my house that’s so much better than the one you had at your house, it’s laughable. Yours was top of the line. And that Sadie agreed to keep the tracker on and continue to carry one in her bag. Also, to have her location monitored through her phone.”

Seth puffed up his chest and huffed out a breath, which was the only way he’d share that he found that acceptable.

But Hector wasn’t feeling good about this.

“There a reason I need to keep her covered?”

“No. Except she’s my daughter and the worst happened to her, so I hope you’d stay on target.”

“Since that’s always on both of our minds when it comes to safety, maybe don’t waste what little time we got left, and instead, what you really wanna ask me,” Hector ordered.

Their eyes clashed.

Then, through clenched teeth, Seth asked, “How is she coping?”

He meant about the rape, because, yeah, that was always on both minds when it came to Sadie’s safety.

It sucked the man was all in to be a good dad. It was a whole lot better when he was a cold, heartless asshole.

“She’s fine,” he gritted in return. “She has good friends, two of which I know what she’s been through, two others got her into counselling. She trusts her counsellor. Trusts her and connects with her when needed. My goal is to teach her how to cook. She goes in next week to get fitted for a uniform.”

bridesmaid dress, this time, for Ava's wedding. And if we don't kill  
y place other fighting over paint colors and shit, I'll be putting a ring on her  
le. And soon, so she'll be getting fitted for another type of dress."

her car Seth's face turned to stone.

nitored "You know it's going to happen," Hector warned low.

"There's movement on my appeal," Seth forced out.

ily way Their case had been tight, so he muttered, "Good luck with that."

"We're appealing the sentencing, not the verdict."

Hector sat still and studied him.

"Seems the judge may have acted improperly."

I would

"Fucking shit," Hector muttered.

Sadie's He'd been concerned about this.

ask me "You want your future fiancée's father incarcerated?"

"I want a criminal to pay for his crimes. After that's over, I'll worry  
you being my father-in-law."

"Well, you'll get that. Both, it would seem. It's simply that the man  
th their should have been five years, not fifteen. So I'll be eligible for parole  
year."

t easier "And you didn't want to tell Sadie this because...?" Hector prompted.

whom Again, he looked sick when he said, "Because I don't know where  
he likes she'll be glad to hear it, or won't want to know until it happens, so I  
figure out how she feels then. And you *do* know where she stands on this."

mom's He suspected he looked sick when he replied, "She'll want to know

another Seth smiled slow. "Then you have good news to give her."

ill each Even if Seth wasn't done, they were done.

r finger Hector stood.

Seth waylaid him by calling his name.

He looked down at the man, and surprisingly, Seth didn't move, he wasn't at an equal or advantageous position.

Uncharacteristic.

"Is she giving Lizzie her gardenias?"

"Every Sunday," Hector informed him.

Seth nodded.

Right. Now they were done.

Hector weaved his way through the tables of family and friends good-bye to inmates to get to Sadie.

When he got to her, she didn't delay. "What was that about?"

y about "In the truck, *preciosa*."

She rolled her eyes.

iximum He slung an arm around her shoulders and guided her to his truck.

le next When they were in his new vehicle, the one she gave him for Christmas, the heater blasting to force out the cold (and it didn't take ten minutes to get the heater to do this, like it did in his Bronco), and they were on their way.

ted. whether she snapped impatiently, "Well?"

she can "I see I got Attitude Sadie," he teased.

hat." "Oh my God. This is the worst. We're close to a prison when I see you murder someone."

v."

He burst out laughing.



“Hector Chavez! What did my dad say to you?” she demanded.

“Calm down, *mamita*. He just wanted to make sure I got more security than a three-month-old puppy. And he wanted to share the state appeal, which might be looking good for him.”

“*What?*” she breathed.

He glanced at her and saw he was right.

She was digging building this slightly-less-fucked-up-but-still-fuck new relationship with her father. And it would be easier to do if she have to wait a month between visits.

“He’s appealing the sentence, not the verdict, and he might have handed too strict of one.”

“Is that even possible?”

Hector blew out a breath.

Once he’d done that, he shared, “Yeah. It’s possible. Judges infallible. In this case, the judge was new. Only appointed six months Seth’s trial. Federal appointment, that’s about politics, not ability experience, or even understanding of the law. Our team was worried about him, because he seemed like a cowboy jackass who was aiming to make a name for himself, and that could swing both ways. Seth wasn’t found guilty on all counts, and gotta admit, we were shocked he got hammered with a big of a sentence. The judge pulled some shit with not allowing evidence during the sentencing phase, and I knew our prosecutor wasn’t feeling about it. Now I know why.”

“So what does this mean?”

“His sentence can be reduced to five years, which means he’s elig

parole next year.”

“Blooming heck,” she mumbled. But more clearly, she asked, “Wouldn’t he want me around when he talked about that?”

“Because he didn’t know if you’d take it as good news or bad, didn’t want to be there if you took it as bad.”

“Oh,” she whispered, the sadness not lost on him, even with that syllable.

He held out his hand to her, demanding, “Hand.”

She put hers in his.

He curled his fingers around and rested both on his thigh.

“Write to him,” he encouraged. “Let him know you’re feelin’ good about this possible change.”

“Okay.”

He brought her fingers to his lips and brushed them there.

“Do you still hate him?” she asked quietly.

“I won’t, if he gets out and considers his term in prison as indicated. I should retire. And then he retires. I will, if he causes you any worry, unless he puts you in danger.”

“It’ll be interesting to see how that goes,” she murmured.

Maybe interesting to her.

Hector was dreading it.

He knew she’d pick him and her new life over her father if it came to it. Regrettably for Seth, he might have spent years smothering her with a brand of protection to keep her safer than he did her mother, but he

spent those years being a good dad.

“Why But even if she’d been dead for years, for Sadie, she’d essentially j  
her mother.

and he He didn’t want her to lose the last blood family she had left.

Nope.

t single That wasn’t right.

He never wanted her to lose anything she didn’t want lost ever aga

In other words, whatever happened, he’d suck it up.

For Sadie.

d about



He came in the back door with Eddie. Jet was there, and Sac  
cooking dinner for all of them.

Eddie barely cleared the door after Hector when they heard shoute  
ition he *you high, Claree?*”

pset, or Hector stopped and looked to Eddie.

Eddie grinned at Hector.

A five-month-old German shepherd crashed into his shins.

He bent down to give his girl a head rub, agreeing with Sadie.

He missed her floppy ears.

e down But she was still their gorgeous girl.

with his “*Hola, mi perrita tan hermosa,*” he murmured.

hadn’t

Gretl licked his wrist.

“Ralphie, calm down,” they heard Sadie demand.

ust lost “Midnight blue and *ice*?” Ralphie asked. “*Ice* isn’t even a color.”

“Yes, it is!” Tod declared irately. “Look, right there.” They hear pounding, likely on the dining room table. “I only have *seventeen swan it.*”

in. “*Hermano*,” Eddie said low, still grinning. “I told you, put her in a marry her in Vegas, and skip the wedding planning.”

Sadie had her ring.

Sadie also had her last induction ceremony into the Rock Chicks.

Tod started a wedding planner book for her approximately a nanc after they announced they were engaged. And he could do this becau already bought a blank one for them. Not only that, but Sadie told h had already added some “preliminary concepts” in it.

lie was Apparently, he and Eddie had walked in while they were engag Rock Chick Gathering, nailing down those concepts.

d, “*Are* Hector and Eddie, with Gretl circling around Hector’s legs, walk the kitchen, and Hector saw through the doorway that led to the fron house that the gang was all there, crowded around the dining room ta many of them, they’d had to take the stools from the kitchen and stil asses were sharing seats.

But only Ralphie and Tod were facing off.

“Sadie veritably *screams* pink,” Ralphie proclaimed as Hector brother made the room and took the only positions they could since th was so crowded.

They leaned against a wall.

“We already did pink for Indy,” Tod sniffed.

“Indy doesn’t own the color pink,” Ralphie returned. “There’s ball  
d some And bubblegum pink. And watermelon. And blush. Rose. Mu  
tches of Carnation. Powder puff. Seashell. Flamingo. Fuchsia. *Oh my God!*”  
shouted, turning to Sadie. “Fuchsia and cobalt blue!”

a plane, “Jumpin’ Jehoshphats, *hot pink* would be just plain *hawt*,” Ann  
in.

“There’s also Barbie pink,” Roxie said, and Hector hoped like fu  
was joking.

second “Wait, isn’t Barbie and hot pink the same?” Stella asked.

se he’d “Nuances, girl,” Indy answered.

in Tod “Strawberry!” Daisy shouted out like it was a game to name all the  
of pink. “You could do one of those chocolate fountains, sugar, and ha  
ed in a and lots of strawberries.”

“Whatever it is, it’s gotta go with my ’fro,” Shirleen decreed. “B  
ed into mean, have a glitter spray that complements it. Though fortunately, v  
t of the skin, all shades of pink deliver.”

ible. So “Hot pink and Prince purple rain. Done. And sofa-king *phat!*”  
l, somethrew up the devil’s horns. “Totally rock ’n’ roll!”

“Kill me, love of my life,” Tod begged Stevie. “Plunge a knife  
heart and end my misery.”

and his “Oh please. Can anyone say *drama?*” Ralphie asked.

ie room “Cobalt blue and *fuchsia?*” Tod shot back.

“I think it’s probably best not to remind Tod at this point he su  
chocolate and mustard for Indy,” Ally stage-whispered, and Tod’

snapped around.

et pink. “It wasn’t chocolate and mustard. It was *tangerine* and chocolate.”

ilberry. “Orange and poo, same thing,” Ally, ever the shit-stirrer, stirred.

Ralphie Tod’s face got red.

ette put “Hi, babe,” Sadie called his way, and the minute she did, Gretl  
place sitting on his feet, panting to go to her mama.

He lifted his chin to her.

ick she Her ice-blue eyes sparkled.

He felt that flare in his gut, spreading warmth.

She was happy. In her element. Surrounded by friends.

shades Thank fuck he didn’t take her to Vegas to get hitched, she would  
ave lots missed this.

She then turned to Tod. “I like the idea of seashell, Tod. It’s opa

y that I You can work with that, you know, instead of ice? Right?”

with my Tod considered it a second, then he chanted, “I’m seeing it, I’m  
it.” He lifted his hands and spread them out like he was envisio  
marquee. “The most delicate iridescent seashell and the fire of...v  
Annette it...*opal!*”

in my “Oh...my...*gawd!*” Ralphie exclaimed. “It’s perfect!”

“Isn’t it?” Tod asked.

Ralphie threw his chair back. “Is the fabric store still open?”

ggested “They know me. Even if they’re closing, they’ll let us nip some sv  
while they sweep the floors.”

’s head Tod snatched up the planner lying spread out on the table, and

Ralphie bumped into each other on the way to the front door, but e they didn't miss a step.

“Guess I’m going. Love you, girly,” Stevie said, getting up and b kisses without using his hand.

left her “Me too,” Buddy put in. He gave Hector a chin lift, one to Eddie, around the table, then as he walked with Stevie to the door, he sug “We drop them, make sure they can get in. Then we’ll take my truck, beer, and they can meet us for dinner?”

“Works for me,” Stevie replied.

Clearly, Tod and Ralphie exiting the room and taking the wedding with them meant the Gathering was over.

ld have He knew this when Sadie came to Hector and rested her weight in where he stood leaning against the wall, arms crossed on his chest.

lescent. Gretl, as ever at her mama’s side, came with.

seeing “I’m making tacos. Jet says it’s easy. Just brown ground beef, thro water and seasoning in, and *voilà*.”

oming a “The food of my people,” he teased.

vait for She giggled.

When she was done doing that, she shared, “Ava and Stella popped out to get more beef and cheese and tortillas. And, um...sour and jalapeños and lettuce and other stuff.”

His eyes swept the table. “Good call.”

vatches Her voice dipped when she asked, “You’re not mad it’s not just y your brother, Jet and me?”

he and “You happy to cook for thirteen people?”

ven so, “Lee, Hank, Vance, with Max, Mace, Luke, Marcus and Jason are  
their way over.”

lowing He started laughing.

She smiled at him while he did.

a smile He circled her with his arms. “What? Not Tex?”

uggested,  
go get a “He said he’s setting fire to any wedding planner in his sight from  
until Ally gets hitched. So when Jet asked him to pop over tonight,  
he’s not coming within five miles of our house if the wedding planner  
it.”

; binder “Is Ally getting hitched?” he asked curiously, considering her smile  
with Ren Zano hadn’t yet been outed, at least, not that he knew.

nto him “I don’t know, is she?” Sadie asked back, watching him closely.

He shrugged a single shoulder.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

w some It was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

So he kissed her.



already

r cream

Hector stood back.

Sadie moved forward.

rou and And at the base of the pink marble tomb, she rested a spray of garden

She then sat on the step and said, “It’s official, mama. Our wedding  
colors are seashell and opal.”



e all on     Hector leaned against a tree.

Gretl found her spot and urinated next to a tombstone.

When she was done, she loped to Hector, and they waited as Sadie with her mother.

m now



he said

er is in     “C’mere,” Hector muttered.

Sadie fought the bubbles and drifted across the hot tub toward him.

ituation

Even though she’d seen them in it dozens of times, Gretl prow deck like she feared them drowning and sporadically barked at the f water.

Sadie straddled Hector and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Under the water, he did the same around her back.

“You good?” he asked.

She nodded, trying not to let it show. How happy she was. But from her like a beacon.

“We can wait,” he offered.

“What?”

“We can wait,” he repeated. “To get married. So your dad can g away.”

lenias.     Her eyes gleamed, but she bit her lip.

redding     She let it go to ask, “Do you want to wait?”

“I want you to have what you want.”

“It’s your wedding too.”

“Both Malcolm and Tom will come to blows to walk you down the aisle. So to avoid that, Seth filling that spot because it’s his wouldn’t suck.”

It was official.

The appeal had been upheld.

The sentence reduced.

In less than a year, her father would more than likely get parole. He was a model prisoner, and when he wanted to, he could charm a snake. A parole board would be eating out of his hands.

“It’s not set in stone he’ll get early release. We could be waiting a long time.” Sadie noted.

“You’re in my bed, *mi cielo*, your clothes in my closet. Not mine. This house has been ours since the first time you walked in the door. I know it is now, since you talked me into yellow cabinets in the kitchen.”

“They’re butter,” she mumbled irritably, the irritation probably from remembering the throwdown they’d had about it.

“Whatever,” he said on a grin.

“It’s clean and sunny and cheerful, and fits the age of the house.”

“Right,” he muttered.

“Ugh,” she grumbled.

He gave her a squeeze. “What I’m saying is, you got my ring on your finger. You got my ink in your skin. You got my commitment. I’ve got you. Who cares when we get married? If it’s next year or three years from now, you’re mine, I’m yours, that’s it. A wedding just makes it official.”

“I’m not sure I can keep Ralphie and Tod getting along for that long.”

time. There was a heated discussion about champagne fountains  
ie aisle, yesterday that nearly caught the place on fire...*again*.”

Hector smiled at her.

But...fuck.

He had to do it.

Since it was for her (mostly), he did it.

e was a “It would kill him to miss your wedding.”

. parole She pressed her lips together.

Then she ducked her head and moved in, putting them to his ear.

years,” “I love you loads and loads, Hector Chavez.”

Yeah.

. Ours. She knew he did it for her.

r. Fuck  
n.” Worth it.

coming He gave her a squeeze, “Love you too, *mi corazón*.” He turned h  
and returned her gesture, putting his lips to her ear. “Now, lose the bot

Her head went back, and he liked that glitter in the ice of her eyes :  
all.

She shifted away just enough to shimmy out of her bottoms.

And then she came right back.

on your  
t yours.  
m now,



ngth of head.  
He wanted to leave that room like he wanted someone to drill hole

in Art But he had to.

He kissed the tops of two heads before he went, heading to the room.

He walked in and all eyes came to him.

“It’s a girl. All systems go. Sadie is a fucking warrior,” he announced.

Cheers rang up.

Tex boomed, “Fuckin’ A, bubba!”

Buddy cracked open a box of cigars.

Ralphie and Tod hugged.

Eddie clapped him on the back then came in for a hug.

He got the same from several dozen more people before he found a pair of eyes.

Those two followed him back to Sadie’s room.

is head The instant she saw them, his mother babbled in Spanish until the words “overtook her, and Hector had to pull her in his arms.

most of Once *su madre* got her shit together, she got her first.

It was hard to get her away from her grandmother, but he did, and he took her to her grandfather.

Carefully, Hector eased his daughter into Seth’s arms.

The man stared down at her like he’d never seen anything so beautiful.

Obviously, he was right.

Nothing in history was as beautiful as the baby Hector and Sadie were holding.

is in his Seth moved that look to his daughter.

“Lola?” he asked to confirm the name Hector already told them.

“Lola Elizabeth,” Sadie whispered the whole thing for the first time waiting Hector heard his mother’s soft sob.

But he watched the tear slide out of Seth’s eye.

“She’s perfect,” he said gruffly, not taking his gaze from his own ground. Hector suspected he wasn’t the only one in the room who wasn’t sure “she” Seth was referring to.



Hector walked out, eyes to white sand that melted into spots of turquoise, then azure, then Mediterranean blue.

But mostly they were on the three females playing on the beach.

One, a little black-haired toddler wearing a red and pink polka dot piece. One, a curvy strawberry-blonde fairy princess beauty. And the mother.

He handed a bottle of Mythos to the man rocking in the rocker porch.

Seth took it and Hector folded into the other rocking chair next to her.

“He good?” Hector asked.

Seth gently patted the diapered bottom of Gus where he lay, on his granddad’s chest, head turned Hector’s way, his little pink lips eyes closed, the wispy black hairs on his head swaying in the breeze.

“He’d sleep through a hurricane,” Seth replied.

“Thank fuck,” Hector muttered.

e. Seth chuckled.

They sat in the shade sipping beer in comfortable silence, with women messed around under a Cretan sun.

girl, and Seth broke it.

which “I never thanked you. High time I did.”

“For what?”

“You know what.”

He did.

“I loved her,” Hector explained simply.

markling “Even then?”

Hector took a sip.

ot one- When he was done, he replied, “From the minute I laid eyes on her

last, his “I know that feeling.”

on the Finally, Hector looked to his father-in-law. “I know you do.” He g  
beat, taking in the man beside him, who was no less fit and vital than  
been the first time Hector met him, and he advised, “You should  
someone, man.”

him. Another pat on Gus’s diaper and, “I’m an old granddad now.”

is belly Not even close.

pursed, “You’re not even sixty.”

Seth’s focus sharpened on him. “I think you know, there’s only one

Hector turned to look at Sadie in her ice-blue bikini, swinging  
around, both of their laughter mingling and drifting up to the villa.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “There’s only one *one*.”

Hector took another sip of his beer and stretched out his legs.

While the Seth kept rocking so Gus would keep sleeping.

And the Cretan sun gleamed off the sea.

.”

ave it a  
an he'd  
ld find

e one.”

ig Lola

Hector took another sip of his beer and stretched out his legs.

Seth kept rocking so Gus would keep sleeping.

And the Cretan sun gleamed off the sea.



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**KristenAshley.net**  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Rock Chick ride continues with  
**Rock Chick Revolution**  
the story of Ren and Ally.





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Ally Nightingale has secrets. Secrets she doesn't even share with the Chicks. But two men know what she's up to. One has her back. The other has her heart, but he doesn't know it.

As Ally rewinds the last year of her life, she knows two things. One is never going to get what every Rock Chick should have—her own Hot guy. And two, she's a Nightingale through and through. She just isn't sure what to do about that.

But as her secrets are revealed, the men in her life react. Darius Tuohy, her lifelong friend, as usual takes her back. Ren Zano, the man she loves, is quite so sure. The Rock Chicks, Hot Bunch and the entire gang at Forever weigh in, and a Rock Chick Revolution starts brewing.

It's up to Ally to control it and prove what she knows down to her bones.

She's a Rock Chick, she deserves her hot guy and she's going to kick his ass if she has to. One she wants...

Because she's a Nightingale.

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# ROCK CHICK REVOLUTION



# ROCK CHICK REVOLUTION

## PROLOGUE

### **No More Anything**

I woke up naked, in a motel, with a man behind me.

We were spooning.

Ren always spooned me.

No, that wasn't right. He didn't always spoon me. Sometimes he tucked me into his side when he was on his back. Sometimes he tucked me in front when he was on his side and I was on my back. Sometimes I spooned him. But when I did, he held my hand to his chest, even in his sleep I couldn't escape.

He was a maximum contact sleeper.

I loved that.

Secretly.

The problem was, as far as I was concerned, he was just a fuck buddy. Lorenzo "Ren" Zano didn't feel the same way.

We'd been dancing this dance for over a year now. Ren tried to convince me we had something. Me disagreeing.

Nope. Again that wasn't right. Ren wasn't trying to convince me

something. He was simply convinced, and for the last eight months he was acting like he was my boyfriend. If boyfriends were bossy, annoying your face all the time, telling you what you could and couldn't do in any case, it was mostly what I *couldn't*).

The months before that, Ren had been trying to convince me we should explore what we had.

I guessed he just gave up trying to convince me and decided to be my boyfriend even if I didn't agree.

The problem with me not agreeing was I tended to do a few things when Ren was around. One was argue with him like he was my boyfriend. I was to have the occasional meal (or maybe not so occasional) with him. I was to shoot the breeze like he was my boyfriend. Another was sleep with him. I was to tuck and spend the night...like he was my boyfriend.

As to his "I know you're awake."

I rolled my newly awakened eyes.

Ren always woke up before me in the mornings and always sensed I was awake.

Except once.

Our first time together.

But what happened after I woke up that time nearly killed me, so I think about that.

Always when he sensed I was awake, he commenced with Talks (necessitating capital letters because Ren considered these Talks serious and took them that way—again, I disagreed).

Usually these Talks centered around what we argued about but



ad been jumped him. Or before he jumped me and we went on to have hours of  
and in boggling, soul-enriching, life-changing sex then passed out and  
(in my instigated Maximum Contact Sleep.

Today, I could tell by his tone, was not going to be different.

should “I need coffee,” I told him.

“I’ll get you coffee after we talk.”

be my See?

There it was.

is when  
Another

The Talk.

him and  
And bossy.

him and I sighed and stated, “Zano, I don’t wanna talk.”

He put a hand on my belly, slid away and pressed me to my back  
could loom over me. Then he proceeded to press deep into me with  
his body, but some of it up on an elbow on the bed, and loom over me.

d when Exhibit A—Ren assumed dominant positions regularly and often in  
to best be bossy, annoying and in my face. Like, say, pressing me to  
in a bed and looming over me after I said I didn’t want to talk.

I caught his eyes.

I didn’t God, he had gorgeous eyes.

To block out those eyes, I closed mine.

ie Talk Still, I saw him, *all* of him in my mind’s eye.

gravely His eyes, his face, his hair and other parts of his anatomy (that was  
all of it) usually were my undoing, and thus I would end up jumping

efore I even in the midst of a fight. Or alternately I wouldn’t struggle too much

f mind-jumped me.

id Ren He was Italian, straight up, no other blood in him. He might be Ar  
—fourth generation American to be precise—but other than not spe  
different language, I was pretty certain his entire family thought th  
lived in Sicily, even though most of them lived in Englewood, Co  
With the exception of Ren and his cousin Dominic Vincetti. They bot  
fifteen minutes to the north in Denver.

Ren was tall, very tall. Taller than me, and I was tall for a woman.

And he had a fabulous body. Lean hips that he knew how to u  
time). Broad shoulders, the power of which he also put to good us  
variety of delicious ways). Sleek, defined muscles all over that I knew  
a lot of work into in a way he got off on (and I did too, but for a d  
k so he<sup>reason</sup>).

most of But his way wasn't so he would look exceptionally hot (which he  
was having time to be in his head and shut everything else out, be ce  
n order get focused, be healthy. It was, like a lot of things about Ren, *righteou*.

ry back And last, he had unbelievable abs and hip muscles, which I t  
should be photographed and put in a museum. They were so  
everybody should get the chance to see.

He also had thick dark hair that felt good just normally, but  
*awesome* when your fingers were buried in it when his tongue was bu  
your mouth (or elsewhere on your body).

ould be All that was fabulous, but there were three things that *really* did it  
with Ren.  
ng him

ch if he His eyes were this beautiful espresso color, so rich and deep,  
weren't careful, you could lose yourself in them in a way you never

to be found.

American And he was confident.

making a Not arrogant. It wasn't about swagger. *Confident*. He just knew w  
they still body and mind could do, he knew what he liked, what he wanted and  
Colorado comfortable with all that. It oozed off him in the way cool oozed off  
th lived who were cool. And Ren was just that: *cool*. He was like a rock star  
the guitar and in a suit.

It was phenomenal.

use (big And last, he dressed really well. For work, fabulous suits tha  
se (in a tailored for him. Outside of work he could do jeans and even tees,  
he put wore them well, but usually he put on a shirt or a sweater (if it was col  
ifferent his jeans, and he wore those way better.

But with Ren it wasn't about the clothes.

did). It  
entered, It was about the man.

s. And Ren Zano was all man.

thought Unfortunately, I liked men who were all man.

perfect I also had a weakness for men in suits.

I just didn't like bossy, annoying and in my face.

it felt And, of course, someone who would eventually break my heart  
ried in though I figured he genuinely didn't know he was going to eventually

But I knew he would.

for me His voice came at me, smooth and deep, but also soft and sweet.

if you "Ally, baby, last night proved we have to have this out, once and fo  
wanted Shit.

He was using his sweet voice. That always did a number on me. This because when he switched to it during a fight, this would be around what his time I'd jump him.

he was I opened my eyes. "There's nothing to have out."

people His eyebrows shot up (he had great eyebrows too, by the way).  
without "Have you lost your mind?"

Ren asked this a lot.

"No," I replied.

it were And this was always my answer.  
and he

id) with His hand, still on my belly, pressed lightly as his face dipped  
"Babe, straight up, last night you fucked up. You've fucked up before last night, you *totally* fucked up. It'll take me, Uncle Vito, your brother of them, Marcus and pretty much every-fuckin'-body to cover your the shit you pulled last night."

Thus commenced the me-getting-pissed portion of The Talk, usually led to the me-yelling portion of The Talk, and that moved into Ren-yelling portion of The Talk, which tended to culminate in the stomping-out-portion of our talk (or alternately, us having a hot, greasy quickie, *then* I'd get dressed and stomp out).

it, even "I saved Faye's life last night," I reminded him curtly.  
do it.

"You got on some serious as shit radar last night," he returned.

"I got them what they wanted." I kept sharing recent memories.

or all," "You got on radar," he semi-repeated. "You do not want a single those men to know you exist. You *really* don't want them to know your access and skills. You dabble in this shit, Ally. It isn't your life

I knew pastime. You do not have a solid network. You do not have back up. You do not have experience. So far all you've got is a shitload of luck and persistence. The first eventually is gonna run out. The second is gonna run out and get you into trouble."

I didn't hear a lot of what he said since I was stuck on a word I was close to the beginning.

*Dabble.*

"Dabble?" I whispered warningly.

I knew he caught my warning because we'd managed, even with our buddies (according to me), to spend a lot of time together the last year closer. He could read me.

He was more, but I also knew he caught my warning because he threw one of his heavy, muscled legs over mine and he got even closer.

"Ally—"

which "Dabble?" My voice had risen as my eyes had narrowed.

into the "Do you get paid for this shit?" he asked.

he me- "Not in money," I answered.

at, fast "Then it's not a profession. It's a hobby. And it's dangerous, Ally. This is the last time I'm gonna tell you, you gotta stop doing it."

My eyes narrowed further. My chest started burning and I opened my mouth to commence the yelling portion of The Talk.

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“Not in money,” I answered.

“Then it's not a profession. It's a hobby. And it's dangerous, Ally. And this is the last time I'm gonna tell you, you gotta stop doing it.”

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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 15 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](http://KristenAshley.net)



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You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation at [KristenAshley.net](http://KristenAshley.net).



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*Too Good To Be True*