

ROCK



CHICK

RENEGADE

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK FOUR

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTEN ASHLEY

ROCK CHICK RENEGADE

ROCK CHICK RENEGADE

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK FOUR

KRISTEN ASHLEY



ROCK CHICK
P R E S S

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK FOUR

KRISTEN ASHLEY



Rock Chick

RENEGADE

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK FOUR

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTEN ASHLEY



Rock Chick Renegade

By Kristen Ashley

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

Copyright ©2011 by Kristen Ashley

Bonus Content Copyright © 2023 by Kristen Ashley

All rights reserved. In accordance with the US Copyright Act of 1976, scanning, uploading and electronic sharing of any part of this book without permission of the publisher constitutes unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from this book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at info@kristenashley.net. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Cover Art and Interior Graphics: [Pixel Mischief Design](#)

Rock Chick Renegade

By Kristen Ashley

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

Copyright ©2011 by Kristen Ashley

Bonus Content Copyright © 2023 by Kristen Ashley

All rights reserved. In accordance with the US Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading and electronic sharing of any part of this book without permission of the publisher constitutes unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at info@kristenashley.net. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Cover Art and Interior Graphics: [Pixel Mischief Design](#)

CONTENTS

1. [Law](#)
2. [Levitate](#)
3. [The Interrogation](#)
4. [I Wanna Be You](#)
5. [Nick's Third Degree](#)
6. [Superheroes](#)
7. [Wear Something Nice](#)
8. [You Like Bikes?](#)
9. [Stop Chuckling](#)
10. [Mine](#)
11. [We Sleepin' at Your Place or Mine?](#)
12. [Channeling My Head-Crackin' Mamma Jamma](#)
13. [My List](#)
14. [Your Real Family](#)
15. [You Got a New Partner Now](#)
16. [You Wanna Talk Now?](#)
17. [Give It a Week, with Me](#)
18. [Pizza, Football and Facials](#)
19. [Hush](#)
20. [Yoko Ono](#)

21. [Sometime Next Week](#)
22. [Home](#)
23. [Toiletries and Tiaras](#)
24. [Chopped Liver](#)
25. [Quick Could Be Good](#)
26. [Shrink-Wrapped](#)
27. [Home Part Two](#)
28. [Waiting](#)
29. [No Matter What](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

[Learn More About Rock Chick Revenge](#)

[Rock Chick Revenge](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kristen Ashley](#)

21. [Sometime Next Week](#)
22. [Home](#)
23. [Toiletries and Tiaras](#)
24. [Chopped Liver](#)
25. [Quick Could Be Good](#)
26. [Shrink-Wrapped](#)
27. [Home Part Two](#)
28. [Waiting](#)
29. [No Matter What](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

[Learn More About Rock Chick Revenge](#)

[Rock Chick Revenge](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kristen Ashley](#)

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Rebecca Ann Mahan-Womack
or Auntie Bec.*

Her birthstone was amethyst.

And to William Womack.

His birthstone is emerald.



And lastly to Cedric, the inspiration for Boo and the best cat ever

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Rebecca Ann Mahan-Womack,
or Auntie Bec.*

Her birthstone was amethyst.

And to William Womack.

His birthstone is emerald.



And lastly to Cedric, the inspiration for Boo and the best cat ever.

ONE



LAW

Well, I guessed eventually it would come to this. It wasn't like I expecting it. I knew when I started this crusade that something could happen, probably would happen, and here I was, in a dead end facing down Vance Crowe.

Shit, Lee Nightingale's tracker.

Of all the fucking bad luck.

Rumor on the street, Crowe was third in command at Night Investigations, after Lee and Lee's right hand man, Luke Stark.

This was saying a lot, considering all the men employed by Night Investigations were the *crème de la crème* of private investigations, surveillance and bond skip tracing, with a small dose of head-c thrown in for shits and giggles. In fact, Nightingale, Stark and Crowe guns-drawn face down with some low-life drug dealer at a society party month ago. Crowe had blown off the guy's hand.

Rumor had a lot of things about Vance Crowe. In fact, I knew women who'd had a couple of things from Crowe. By their report good things, though he didn't stick around to give them more than a very good things, much to their dismay.

“Put your gun down,” Crowe said to me.

“Back off,” I returned, keeping my gun aimed at him.

I wasn’t going to shoot him, of course. I was anti-violence. That was one of the reasons why I was in this mess in the first place.

He kept walking toward me, unarmed and apparently unafraid.

I took aim at his Harley. It would kill me to harm the Harley, but I’

“Shoot my bike, there’ll be consequences,” Crowe warned in a voice that wasn’t said he meant it.

like this
d alley,

Fuck.

I aimed at him again.

“Back off,” I repeated as he kept advancing.

“You’re Law,” he told me.

tingale
Damn, he knew who I was.

“Stop moving,” I said, ignoring what he said.

tingale
He got about a foot away from the barrel of my gun, which was positioned in front of his chest, and he stopped.

racking
“I work for Lee Nightingale.”

e had a
“I know who you work for and I know who you are,” I told him.

y just a
Then I stared at him.

ew two
is, very
couple
Damn, but he was good-looking. Native American coloring, black hair pulled into a ponytail at the back of his neck. He was about six inches taller than me, with a fantastic body, dark-brown eyes, thick, unbelievable bone structure, high cheekbones and a square jaw. It should be a crime to be that hot.

“Put the gun down, Law,” he ordered, using my street name.

My street name was kind of a joke. The kids gave it to me. My real name was Juliet Lawler. Most everyone called me Jules, but the kids called me Law because at the shelter, what I said was “law.” It had taken on a life of its own these past four months, and now I wished they’d never given it to me.

“Step back, Crowe. I’ll just get in the car and go. I have no argument with you.”

And I didn’t. I had a lot of arguments with a lot of people, but not with anyone at Nightingale Investigations. From what I heard (which was true) they weren’t exactly lily white, but any fool would be crazy to go head-to-head with a Nightingale Man. I was a fool, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t crazy.

“I’ll say it one more time,” Crowe informed me quietly. “Put the gun down.”

“Step back,” I returned.

He moved faster than I’d seen anyone move, and before I knew it, he no longer had the gun.

Not only that, but he had my arm twisted behind my back and slammed my front up against his hard body.

I struggled.

This was not a good choice. I’d had a free hand and some of my momentum on my left. In seconds, he shoved my gun in the back waistband of his jeans, his other arm twisted behind me and he moved me, shuffling me back under the side of my car. Then he pressed into me full body.

I tilted my head back and shouted in his face, “Let go and step away from me!”

“Two cops were standing in Fortnum’s when you had your shot with Cordova. They saw the whole thing. You got a permit for that gun Law asked.

“Yes.” This was true. Zip got it for me. Zip was a benefactor who supported my crusade. Zip taught me how to shoot and Zip was a good friend with me, therefore so was I.

Though, it was a little worrying that two cops saw me face down with Cordova. However, I didn’t figure Sal was going to run to the police station on me, considering he was a criminal and a total jackass to boot.

“I’m takin’ you into the offices. We’re gonna have a talk,” Vance said to me. I wasn’t sure.

Oh crap.

I didn’t know what he thought we had to talk about, but I was half of it. Lee Nightingale’s brother and father were cops, and so was my friend. No way was I going to any offices with Crowe.

I kept staring him straight in the eye. It was kind of hard, since he was hot. I was beginning to feel weird about it, especially with him present. I had a gun pointed against me.

I kept at it all the same.

“I haven’t done anything to you. Just let me be on my way,” I said.

He got closer. If you’d asked me the second before if he could, I probably would have said no. But his face came within an inch of mine and his body pressed against me until I hit deeper into me.

“This is a dangerous game you’re playin’, Law. Vigilante justice, my friend!”

wdown I knew that, though I didn't say.

un?" he When I didn't speak, he went on, "You've got the attention of Dar
Marcus. This is not a good thing. Do you know what I'm sayin' to you

or. Zip I felt a little thrill go through me, and not the kind that was going t
od shot, me with just his body pressed against mine.

Darius Tucker and Marcus Sloan were the two biggest crime h
wn Sal Denver, Colorado. I was happy they knew who I was. I didn't figu
and tell were scared, but I intended them to be.

Well, maybe one day.

said to Crowe must have seen something on my face because his eyes flas

"I should take you to the offices, lock you in the safe room and ke
there until you've had some goddamned sense talked into you."

ving no He said "should." This I decided to treat as a good thing. I didn'
his best what the safe room was, but I didn't want any part of that either.

I kept staring at him and kept my mouth shut, thinking maybe he'c
was so go.

ssed up He stared right back.

We were both silent, staring, his body pressed against mine.

I kept my chin up and hoped I kept my face blank.

[would "Jesus, you think you're fuckin' Catwoman," he muttered.

pressed "I do not. Catwoman wore a leotard and stupid ears and fake
That's just silly."

he told I had no idea why I shared my views on Catwoman. I should ha
my mouth shut.

I thought this primarily because what I said made Crowe's face
ius and He wasn't looking at me like he was the pissed-off, badass boy trying
?" off the helpless, hapless female who dared enter his turf. He was look
through me in an entirely different way. A way that made me even *more* aware
body pressed against mine.

eads in "Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" he asked, and even his voice
re they changed. It was deep and masculine, but now it was also smooth,
across my skin like silk.

I decided it was best to go silent again.

hed. He tried a different question. "Why was Cordova chasing you?"

ep you I kept my silence.

Then something else about him changed. It changed the way he look
even changed the atmosphere.
t know

I'd been staring at him to keep a brave face and tough out a c
l let me situation. With the change, I was staring at him because I had to. It wa
was drawn to him. My body softened. Even my arms (which he st
behind me) that had been rigid with tension, relaxed.

"I could make you talk," he threatened, his voice low and quiet
knew, in that instant, he could.

"Let me go," I whispered, beginning to lose my fight.

This was a first. If Nick knew, he would freak out. He told me I'd
claws. livewire since he met me at age six, always beating up kids on the play
who bullied other kids, sometimes losing, sometimes winning.
ve kept phoning and writing senators or congressmen and telling them what I
and how they should vote. Always having some cause that I'd fight
passion that was nearly an obsession.

change. Crowe kept staring me in the eyes, which kept me stuck to him by a warm magnetic, macho man forcefield.

Looking at him, “You need to stop what you’re doin’ or you’re gonna get hurt,” he told me, his voice still silky low.

“I can’t,” I admitted. Don’t ask me why, but I had to say it.

“Then somebody has to stop you.”

Sliding his hands down my arms, he let go of my hands and he was holding me. Actually *holding* me, his arms around me, mine loose at my sides.

It took a lot, but I shook off whatever was keeping me entranced. I pulled my hands and pressed against his chest, hard.

He didn’t budge.

Fuck.

“Let me go!” I shouted.

His arms tightened with a jerk and my hands slid up his chest to his shoulders. I immediately began pushing. This didn’t work, but it was a message so I kept doing it.

“I’ll let you go and I’ll talk to Hank and Eddie. But I hear you’re on the street, I’ll find you and shut you down.”

He could find me, I knew it. He found people for a living, and I could be believed, he was really good at it.

I knew who Hank and Eddie were too. Both good cops, Hank Nightingale and Eddie Chavez—Lee Nightingale’s brother and best friend. I was glad this meant Crowe would get me off the hook for shooting out Cordova in broad daylight in the middle of Broadway, one of the busiest streets

y some Denver. It had been showy and stupid and I knew better. Zip was disappointed. Nick would be furious.

Crowe What I didn't know was how Crowe would shut me down.

"All right, Crowe. Let me go, I'll stop," I lied.

At my words, he grinned.

I stared (again).

was just He had the most arrogant shit-eating grin I'd ever seen in my twenty
at my (nearly twenty-seven) years of life.

My belly fluttered.

I, lifted A belly flutter? What was *that* all about?

"What?" I snapped and ignored my belly.

"You're lyin'."

"I am not lying," I lied again.

He shook his head. Then, to my surprise, he let me go and stepped

rest on I stood there, feeling weirdly bereft.

t sent a "That's it?" I asked.

on the "No," he said.

I waited, then waited more.

if word "Well, finish it," I demanded when he didn't say anything.

"I get the feelin' I'll see you again," he told me.

tingale Oh crap.

uessing I didn't figure that was good at all.

a's tires He pulled my gun out of his jeans, released the clip, and with a
reets in overarm throw he tossed it well away. Then he leaned in and shoved

ould bein the waistband of my cords, right in front, by my hipbone.

He turned and walked away, threw a muscled thigh over his Har
roared off.

I stared until I couldn't see him anymore.

Then I pulled my gun out, lifted up my sweater and checked to
there was a mark where his hand slid against me.

enty-six I did this because it still burned.



I PARKED Hazel (my vintage red Camaro) in the garage behind my
scanning my mirrors while the door came down just to be certain I w
These days there was no telling.

I got out of Hazel and did the routine of walking the fifteen feet fr
garage to the back door. Eyes open, gun at the ready (I had an extra
my glove compartment), listening and praying no one was out to get m
back.

I unlocked the door and walked through the shared back room
duplex where Nick and I kept our washer and dryer, an extra freezer
old paint cans and the kitty litter, which Boo, my cat, could access t
the cat flap in my back door.

I unlocked that door, unarmed the alarm and flipped the light sv
my retro kitchen. Pink metal cabinets, pink fridge, pink oven doo
black and white diamond tiles patterning the floor. One wall was br
rest painted steel gray. It was cool as shit, but not on purpose. Only tha
been there so long, it had come back into fashion. I'd bought a high,
style black Formica-topped table with gleaming stainless steel sic
kickass retro stools with black leather swivel seats because the
casual demanded it.
the gun

Boo approached from the other door and began immediately to
ley and about his day.

My cat was black with dense, soft fur and yellow eyes. He was
unbelievably proud, and he was the only clumsy cat I'd ever know
to see if pretended he meant to fall over and miss his leaps from furniture to
whatever, but he was just not coordinated. At all.

"Meow, meow, meow. Meow meow. *Meoow*," Boo told me, ob
having a full day and feeling I needed to be kept apprised of every se
house,^{it.}

as safe. I threw my gun and bag on the table and swiped him off the floor.

"*Meow!*" Boo protested.

rom the "Shut up, Boo. Mommy's had a very bad day. She did something
clip in then got cornered by a hot guy, and now she's pretty much fucked."

ie. "Meow," Boo replied, thinking his news was more important than

of my To shut him up I gave him kitty treats, feeding him from fingers to

r, tools, This made him happy until I stopped giving him treats
through complained, "Meow."

vitch to "That's it," I told him. "Only three or the vet is going to yell at me

r, huge "Meow." Boo didn't care what the vet thought.

ick, the "Whatever." I wasn't in the mood to argue with Boo.

at it had I dropped my cat, walked into the hall and pulled off my boots.

fifties- Nick owned the whole of the duplex. He let me stay in my side
les and the mortgage, kind of. Even though I was now twenty-six (nearly
kitchen seven), he didn't like me paying for anything, even my rent. So I pu
bank account each month and gave him a check on New Year's Day

tell me year. He tore up the check so the money just sat there earning interest.

Sometimes you just didn't argue with Nick.

too fat, The duplexes were weird. They weren't in the greatest part of town. But though I thought it was pretty, or at least part of it was. It was off-table or Baker Historical District, but the not-so-good part.

We were on Elati and had a park in front of our house, but there was a previously subsidized high-rise apartment building on one side of the park and a low-condo apartment building across the park opposite it.

Our house was historically registered and Nick kept it in great condition regardless of the 'hood. He'd redone his side—knocked out walls, put a bedroom and tore out his pink kitchen.

stupid I had not redone my side.

So my side was a lot like a loft. Nick had put in a new bathroom and I'd carpeted the whole place in a thick, soft gray. The front room had huge arched windows, a brick wall, the other walls painted a soft lilac color, and the chaise lounge was enormous. It fit all my fancy furniture, including the dove-gray chaise lounge that sat by the front window and my sweep-lined lilac ottoman which flanked a gleaming, square pub set with midnight-blue leather-upholstered pads on the benches and a blue-gray overstuffed chair and ottoman. An antique oval walnut dining table was at the inside wall. The half-backed chairs I'd had reupholstered in the same dove-gray velvet lounge.

for half There was a closet that separated the living room from the bedroom, though you could only loosely call it a "bedroom." It was really a kind of t it in a mattress set on a platform that sat four feet above the floor and was accessible by every the hall. I had to climb up three narrow stairs to get to it. There was

underneath it and big areas cut in around the side walls of the bed th
above the lowered ceiling of the hall and closet. This was where I kept
candles and a television set.

f town,

officially This was my refuge. A little, feminine cave with fancy cream sl
fluffy green and cream patterned comforter, and an overwhelming a
pillows from standard to European to bedrolls to toss.

e was a

ow rent Then there was the bathroom and the kitchen. The hall was lin
floor to ceiling bookshelves that housed my massive CD collection.

ndition

rock 'n' roll.

ut in a

I loved my duplex and it was all for me. I didn't have parties be
didn't have very many friends, and none of them I knew well enough
to a party. I didn't have a rollicking good time in my bedroom refuge b
I'd never had a boyfriend.

for me

om had

In my life, it was just Nick and me.

, and it

Before that, it was Nick and Auntie Reba and me.

r velvet

couch,

Before that, before I could really remember, there was Mom and I
Mikey and me.

studded

an. My

circle-

as the

But when I was six, Mom and Dad and Mikey died in a car crash
Mom and Dad did, instantly. My brother Mikey died in surgery a
hours later, though it was the same thing. I'd been with them and su
even though I'd been in the hospital for three months.

Then I went home to Nick and Auntie Reba.

droom,

g-sized

open to

storage

Auntie Reba was Mom's only sibling, much younger than Mom. I
had no siblings and all the grandparents were dead except my mom
and at the time he had Parkinson's and was in a home (now he was dea

at were Auntie Reba and Nick had only been together a few months when I was born. My family died. They got married a few months after I got out of the hospital.

When I was fifteen, Auntie Reba died. She'd had a routine surgery, went well, and then a couple of days later, she just died.

A blood clot dislodged in her leg and lodged in her heart and then.

Nick, who wasn't even my real family, didn't turn me out.

Something happened between us, losing Auntie Reba like that.

Mostly

The only love I knew growing up (or remembered really) was

Reba and Nick's love for me.

cause I

And I knew Nick's love for Auntie Reba.

to ask

He loved her in a way that was indescribable. It wasn't like she was the water or was the earth and moon and stars.

It was different.

It was breath.

Dad and It was necessity.

She was the last of my blood and she was life to him.

Well, So we hung on to each other. It was the only thing we could do.

Nick put up with me, which was saying a lot. I was a difficult child, even worse teen, always on a mission to save a broken-winged bird schoolmate, a forest in Brazil I'd never even see. I didn't party or get out of control in any normal way, but I was out of control just the same.

My dad I became a social worker, which had Nick worried. He didn't need any more causes.

and too). "Christ, you've saved the trees, you've made the wilting violet i

hen my prom queen and you've marched to take back the night. You can't s
ital. "world, Jules," Nick said.

ery. All "Maybe not, but I can try," I retorted, full of youthful bravado.

"Then I hope the Lord saves us all from you *trying* to save us all
..gone. finished.

After graduating from college, I had a few jobs and kept my bou
Nick was surprised. He was certain I'd run amok in my quest to s
world.
Auntie

This unfortunately put Nick at his ease. He'd thought I'd settled do

Then I got the job at King's Shelter for runaway kids.

lked on This went well, for a while. The kids responded to me and I'd fo
niche.

That was until about four months ago, when I walked into the she
Roam and Sniff were looking funny.



I WALKED BACK into the kitchen opened a bottle of red wine and
myself a glass in one of my big-bowled red wineglasses. I went back t
the hall to the living room and threw myself on the chaise lounge.

hild, an Boo jumped up and settled in my lap.

l, a shy "Meow," he said to me.

t out of "Quiet, Mommy's thinking," I told him, and then slid my finger ur
jaw and rubbed.

think I He purred.

into the I looked out the window, and even though I didn't want to, I remer



ave the ROAM, Sniff and Park were my boys. We were close. It took months
worked hard and got them to trust me.

They'd been on the street for years, but none of them was over
," Nick I'd rounded them into the shelter, going day in and day out to 16th Street
where they hung out, and talked to them. I got a lot of kids from the
adaries. into the shelter, then into counseling, then to reunions with their parents
ave the worked), then family counseling and then home (if it really worked).

Roam, Sniff and Park were never going to go home. They told me
own. their homes. Their homes were evil and there was no way I'd find a
kind of reunion. So I just worked at keeping them clean, safe, fed
educated.

und my That day. That shitty, awful day when I arrived at King's, I noticed
wasn't there and I knew that Roam and Sniff knew something.

lter and I cornered Sniff, the weakest of the pack, and asked where Park was.
"Dunno," Sniff replied.

poured Park had a crush on me. I knew this and used it. It was not that I thought
through was all that, even though Auntie Reba and Nick told me I was, in
words, "extraordinarily beautiful." He said this because he loved me
have a mirror though, and even though I didn't think I was the hottest
hotties, I was nothing to sneeze at. I had Dad's black hair, but on me, I
I wore it long, it had a bit of wave. I had Mom's violet-blue eyes and
ider his skin and Mom's curves too. I wasn't going to win any beauty pageants
no one was going to hand me a bag to put over my head, either.

To be honest, I had a crush on Park too, but obviously not the same
numbered as he had on me.

He was funny, sweet and smart as hell. He made me laugh so hard

s, but I stomach ached and he looked at me in a way that made me know making a difference.

sixteen. I was beginning to realize I wasn't going to save the world, but I let Mallhell was going to save Park, even if it killed me. I knew I should be street boundaries, but I loved that kid. I loved all three of them.

its (if it Park knew I'd be at King's that day. He wouldn't miss a chance me.

e about "Sniff, no pudding cup for you if you don't spill," I threatened.

gle that Sniff liked his pudding cups.

'ed and "Dunno, Law. Just...not here."

ed Park The sacrifice of the pudding cup was a surprise and heralded bad Sniff knew something was going on and Park could be problematic. I too smart for his own good and needed challenges to keep his active moving, especially moving away from a life that was pretty much shit. is. in trouble a lot, searching for adventure and release and a way to get brought I from it all. I had my hands full with him. I had my hands full with all the Nick's them.

e. I did I grabbed the material of Sniff's overlarge sweatshirt at his arm t of the dragged him to Roam.

because "Let's go boys. We're finding Park."

nd pale They came with me mainly because it meant they could ride in Hazards, but

We found Park. It took hours. We searched all his places, and the a fair few, but we found him.

ne kind I'll never forget it.

ard my The syringe was resting in the alley by his lifeless hand.

7 I was Bad dope.

He was stiff. Rigor mortis had set in. His eyes were open, his
sure as beautiful skin was pale.

d have I took one long look at him and then shouted, “Goddammit!”

Sniff puked.

to see Roam put both of his palms to the top of his head, his eyes never
the dead body of his friend.

I cursed a bit more (okay, maybe a lot more) then crouched low
and stared at him.

It didn’t even look like him. I’d never met a person with more li
tidings. Park. Seeing him lifeless was like looking at another human being.

He was I dropped my head and cursed some more.

e mind Then I pulled out my phone and called the police. When I was
He got stared at Park again.

et away After a while, when the vision of him was burned on my brain, I
three of my eyes and found the vision of him was burned on the insides of my

rm and That was when I knew what I had to do.

It just came to me.

I got out of my crouch and looked at Roam. “Who sold him the stu
zel.

re were Roam was black, tall, gangly, and when he filled out he woul
looker. Sniff was white, overly-thin, short and had acne. Park ha
Mexican American, medium height and already handsome. If he’d rea
age, he’d have been a knockout.

I knew from my work with him that Roam was sliding across the
never knew if I was going to get through to him. Every day I went to F

held my breath hoping he'd be there, as that was the only indication th
usually I was doing was working.

Roam's black eyes stared at me, but he didn't say a word.

I put my hand to his chest and shoved him against the wall of the b
next to Park's body. Then I got in his face.

leaving Roam was fifteen, but five inches taller than me, and if he tried, h
take me.

oy Park He didn't try.

"Who sold him the fucking dope?" I demanded.

ife than "Don't know his name."

"Can you take me to him?"

Roam's eyes moved, quick as a flash, surprised but not wanting t
done, it.

"Law," he said.

closed That was all he said, and I knew he could.

eyelids. "Tonight. You take me to him," I ordered.

Roam's face went hard and I knew why. Roam and Park had been
since they could remember. They knew the bad times at home and the
ff?" but-still-shit times on the street. Sniff had come later. New on the stre
ld be a had taken him under his wing. The three had been inseparable ever sin

id been Until now.

ched an "Yeah," Roam agreed, and I knew why he did that too, and that
going to happen.

edge. I "You aren't getting involved. You show me who it is and then y
King's I

at whatshadow.”

“Law,” Roam repeated.

“No, Roam. This isn’t a discussion.”

uilding “Ain’t no place for white bitches. These people’ll fuck you up,”
told me.

e could “Don’t worry about me. And don’t call me a bitch, it’s rude.”

What could I say? I was still the adult in the situation.

That night, Roam showed me who it was.

I didn’t go after him. I wasn’t that stupid.

Instead, I followed him and I planned.

I also went to Zip’s Gun Emporium and bought a gun.

o show Zip was as old as time. White, short, wrinkled, skinny and most
except for about a dozen long, white hairs that were attached randoml
skull.

Zip watched me as I handled the guns in his shop, making my deci

“You ever held a gun?” he asked.

friends “Nope,” I answered.

better- “You buyin’ it for protection? To put in your purse?”
et, Park

ce. “Nope,” I repeated.

Zip watched me some more. “Goin’ after your ex?” he asked.

wasn’t “Nope,” I said again.

Zip’s eyes got wide for a fraction of a second then they narrowed.

ou’re a after someone else?”

I looked at Zip.

Then, I didn't know why, maybe I needed to talk about it, maybe I wanted someone to talk me out of my plan, but for whatever reason, I told Zip at the Park.

' Roam Then I told him about my plan.

He stared at me for what seemed a long time.

Finally, he walked down the display case, opened one up, pulled out a black gun and said, "Glock 19, nine millimeter. It's light, it's dependable, it'll fit in your purse."

Hallelujah.

"Sold," I said.

"Got a shooting range out back. Every day, you're in here for at least an hour. Every day, I'll give you the hour free and I'll teach you. You don't want to be bald on the street until you can handle that gun. And I got some boys I want you to talk to. They'll show you how to handle yourself. Be here tomorrow at 10:00."

I was a little shocked, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. So I nodded.

"Let's fill out the paperwork," Zip finished.

Zip made me practice shooting until my arms ached. Sometimes his boys, Heavy or Frank, would come get me and take me out and show me other things. They taught me about knives—mostly how to use them, but also how to handle them. They also taught me how to scrap, how to punch, how to duck. They taught me how to drive, how to use stun guns, Tasers and Mace, how to be quiet, how to be invisible and how to disappear.

"Goin' Most importantly, Heavy taught me, "You get in a tussle, go for the gonads. Always."

needed It was good advice, but I didn't expect to get that close.

p about I expected to be a nuisance.

I was going to use guerrilla tactics.

And I did.

I followed Park's killer, and while he was off making a sale I used
d out a Zip's knives and slashed all his tires.

ble and Sure, it might seem silly and immature, but you make a drug sale
want to get away and make another sale, not call AAA.

Then during one of Park's killer's sales, while hidden, I threw a
bomb at them, interrupting the sale and freaking everyone way the he
least and didn't expect he lost his customers. Drug addicts would get over a f
on't go when they needed a score. Still, it would aggravate the dealer, and th
t you to what I was after.

ix." I followed Park's killer some more and saw his supplier.

e mouth Then I followed his supplier and I slashed *his* tires.

I did this a lot, messing with their heads, doing stupid, annoying s
got right up their noses. My favorite was the plastic wrap I attached b
one of forth on the doorway when the dealer was taking a break from des
they'd people's lives and banging his girlfriend. When he was done, he
o avoid through the plastic wrap on the door and for a second had no idea wh
how to walked through. He'd started yelling and carrying on, throwing hi
n guns, everywhere, plastic wrap clinging to him.

ppear. I watched the whole thing and nearly peed my pants laughing.

for the During the day, I listened to the kids.

At night, I eavesdropped on the dealers, the suppliers and the junkie

This was how I learned the street, or part of it anyway.

I paid attention. I memorized faces, names and places, and I spent time with Zip, Heavy and Frank.

And I widened my net.

Sal Cordova was my first mistake.

Cordova was a small-time supplier and part-time dealer and I got nose too just for the hell of it, mainly because he was a swaggering jerk. I thought he was God's gift to women. Following him, hiding in the shadows in bars and watching him, I noticed he seriously thought he was God's gift to women, even when the women didn't agree. I worried that Sal Cordova was the kind of guy who would *make* a woman agree.

One could say Sal was good-looking. He was a couple inches taller than me, decent body (not Vance Crowe-esque but then again, who was?) brown hair, blue eyes.

Problem was, Sal was a jerk, he was a leech and he was so stupidly cocky.

One day I got close, sliding into the opposite side of a booth in the kitchen at a greasy spoon.

He looked at me, surprised, then he smiled, thinking I was coming to see him.

"Hey, darlin'," he said and winked.

Um...*pu-lease*.

"I'm Jules," I told him, trying not to vomit.

"Hey, Jules." His smile widened.

Okay, so that was all I could take.

I didn't waste any time and told him why I was there.

a lot of "Sell dope to kids, any kids, including the runaways, you'll be business. Remember, I'm watching."

Then I got up and left.

As I said, cocky.

t up his And cocky was not good.

rk who That was when people—not the right kind of people—found our shadows was.

s gift to Zip was not pleased.

va was "Girl, you got a screw loose," Zip said.

ler than When I told Nick (I told Nick everything; I did this because he'd f anyway, I learned that a *long* time ago), to say he was not pleased), light-understatement.

d, I got "Are you out of your flippin' mind?" Nick yelled.

I didn't answer. I learned a long time ago too that silence was t way to go with Nick. front of

It was Roam and Sniff who spread the name Law.

g on to Roam knew me. He knew what I was like and he'd heard about my on the street. He figured out it was me right away and he made a mist: told Sniff.

Sniff could never keep his mouth shut about anything and he love They both did, so Sniff and Roam thought what I was doing was the sh

By the time I talked Sniff into keeping his mouth shut, it was too was Law and that was it.

Sal took my approaching him in the greasy spoon as a challenge. I
out of he wanted to “shut me down” as Crowe did, but that he wanted some-
else entirely from me. Something icky, when you thought about doing
Sal (way *not* icky when you thought about doing it with Crowe, but
go there).

So instead of coming after me to stop me from getting up his nose
could believe this, Sal Cordova was actually trying to get me to go o
t who I him.

Yes, that’s exactly how stupid he is.

All of this brought me to my current predicament.

Sal had caught up with me and made his intentions clear.

ind out I’d told him to go fuck himself.

was an

He got a little excited and there was a bit of a car chase.

We ended up in a guns drawn faceoff in the middle of a busy or
four-lane street, right in front of a used bookstore that was the
he best hangout for Lee Nightingale and his boys.

The rest was history.



y antics. “MEOW?” Boo asked, staring at me and knowing with feline instincts
ake. He life was fucked, and probably wondering if something happened to r
would feed him.

d Park. “Yeah, Boo. You called it. Meow,” I answered.

it.

o late. I

Sal took my approaching him in the greasy spoon as a challenge. Not that he wanted to “shut me down” as Crowe did, but that he wanted something else entirely from me. Something icky, when you thought about doing it with Sal (way *not* icky when you thought about doing it with Crowe, but I didn’t go there).

So instead of coming after me to stop me from getting up his nose, if you could believe this, Sal Cordova was actually trying to get me to go out with him.

Yes, that’s exactly how stupid he is.

All of this brought me to my current predicament.

Sal had caught up with me and made his intentions clear.

I’d told him to go fuck himself.

He got a little excited and there was a bit of a car chase.

We ended up in a guns drawn faceoff in the middle of a busy one-way, four-lane street, right in front of a used bookstore that was the known hangout for Lee Nightingale and his boys.

The rest was history.



“MEOW?” Boo asked, staring at me and knowing with feline instincts that my life was fucked, and probably wondering if something happened to me who would feed him.

“Yeah, Boo. You called it. Meow,” I answered.

TWO



LEVITATE

My phone rang and I got up. I mentally shook away my me dislodged Boo on an angry “Meow!” and walked across the room it up.

“Hello?”

“You’re fuckin’ loco. Loco!” Zip shouted in my ear.

I guessed word of my faceoff with Cordova had made the rounds.

“Zip—” I started.

“You’re off duty. You’re lyin’ low. Least a week, maybe a month, forever,” Zip interrupted me.

“I’m not lying low,” I told him.

Zip talked over me in full rant.

“It isn’t Cordova. You could handle Cordova. Hell, a five-year-old handle Cordova. We’re talkin’ Lee Nightingale now. *Lee Nightingale* you *know* who was in fuckin’ Fortnum’s Bookstore watchin’ yo hotshot, shootin’ out Cordova’s tires like you were in a goddamn Hollywood movie?”

“Um...” I mumbled.

“No?” Zip didn’t let me answer. “First off, Lee fuckin’ Nightingal

Hank fuckin' Nightingale. Make matters worse, Eddie fuckin' Chavez officers of the goddamned law."

"Zip—" I tried to butt in.

He ignored me.

"And if you already weren't screwed three ways 'til Sunday fuckin' Stark, Kai fuckin' Mason and Vance fuckin' Crowe."

"Well, I knew about Crowe," I said.

mories, And I guessed the rest, or some of them.

to pick

It wasn't good that I had the attention of the Nightingale brother Chavez, but Crowe had said he'd talk to them. Having Stark and witnessing me facedown Cordova was kind of embarrassing. If we even remotely correct, Stark was one badass mother. Kai Mason, known as Mace, was also known for not being far behind Stark in the badass stakes, not to mention he had a reputation for having a seriously short temper.

maybe "Oh yeah? How's that?" Zip asked, interrupting my moment of momentary reflection.

"He kinda caught up with me," I told Zip.

Silence.

d could "Zip?"

ple. Do "He there?" Zip asked.

u be a Zip's question confused me. "Sorry?"

danned "Crowe, is he with you now?"

"No. Of course not. We had a talk. He let me go."

"He's not there?" Zip asked, surprise evident in his tone.

e. Then

z. Two “Um...no.” I drew out the “no” thinking maybe Zip had finally lost the marbles he had left.

“You sure he isn’t there?”

That was when I got a chill up my spine and looked out the front window. Luke No Harleys in sight.

I let out a breath.

“He’s not here Zip. What are you going on about?”

“Crowe’s got a way with the ladies. You look like you do, which means if you get in his sights, he’ll nail you faster ’n snot.”

I Mace I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

My word was Pu-lease.

own as “I hardly think so,” I said.

mother fuse. “Girl, you’re loco. Pure loco. What’d Crowe say during this talk?”

certified “Not much,” I lied.

I was already freaked out and Zip was pissed off. I didn’t want to be more pissed off, which would serve only to heighten my freakout.

“He get a good look at you?” Zip asked.

I would guess the answer to that was “yes,” considering his face was an inch from mine and his body was pressed against me.

My belly fluttered just thinking about it.

I ignored the belly flutter (again).

“Yeah. Zip, don’t worry about it.”

“These boys got a way about ’em, Jules. They don’t fuck around. They see somethin’ they want, they get it. They’re fuckin’ famous for it. A

st what don't stand a chance. He seem interested?"

I had no idea the answer to that and I didn't care (well, maybe a little. I had bigger fish to fry).

indow. "Listen, Zip, honestly, there's nothing to worry about. We will go separate ways. I'll be smarter, I'll be more quiet. I'll be—"

"Laid, good and simple. Crowe got a good look at you, you're his. You're gonna be fucked and I mean that literally."

you do, "Zip!" I yelled, shocked.

He ignored me. "Though, this may not be a bad thing. Crowe won't let a woman of his gallivantin' around town, lettin' off smoke bombs, setting tires and puttin' herself out there. You've been noticed. You're gettin' attention. It makes me *un-comfortable*. You get me? You were supposed to be invisible, you ain't invisible. Everyone knows about 'The Law.' Crowe and Frank and me been talkin'..."

Oh crap. Not Zip, Heavy and Frank talking. That was not good.

get Zip Every once in a while they got worried about me, a lot more often than I needed. I found ways to calm them down, but I didn't figure this would last for long. I needed them. I had a lot to learn and they could teach me. I also liked them and I liked spending time with them.

was an They were the closest things to true, good friends that I had. It might be a little pathetic that a twenty-six-year-old social worker's friend posse included an old, bald gun shop owner, a guy whose nickname "Heavy" said it all, and then there was Frank, who looked like he could hole himself up in a bunker with fifty years of provisions and mastermind a violent world takeover.

l. They computer. woman But I didn't care if it was pathetic, they were my friends and that was

cared about.

tle, but “Zip, stop and listen to me. Vance Crowe is not in the picture. I
and I’m not stopping.”

ent our “Jules.”

“Zip,” I said quietly and then, with feeling, “No.”

You’re He was silent again. He knew what my quiet voice meant. M,
wasn’t law for nothing.

“Zip, I promise, I’ll do better,” I assured him.

l’t want He was silent for another beat then he gave in.

slashin’ “Jules, you be safe, you hear? Keep your eyes and ears open ar
a lot of head down. I want you in here tomorrow, got me?”

osed to I smiled. Crisis averted.

Heavy

“Got you.”

“Fuckin’ loco,” he muttered and hung up without saying good-bye.



lately. I
rever. I I WAS GETTING ready to go out and wreak some havoc on bad guys
d them heard a knock at my back door and Nick came in.

“Jules? You home?”

ght be a “Yeah,” I called from the bathroom.

cluded I finished wrapping the band around my ponytail and went i
all, andkitchen.

a cabin Boo was telling Nick about my day, snitching on me in kitty langu.

er on a Luckily, Nick didn’t speak kitty language.

was all I I looked at Nick.

He was tall, with salt and pepper hair, blue eyes, glasses, kinda 'm fine. He was only sixteen years older than me and I figured most of the salt and pepper hair was put there by me. He was dispatched for a trucking company because he loved doing it, he worked as a DJ most Friday and Saturday nights. He was responsible for my love of music, but mostly my love of the 'n' roll.

My word He took one look at my black turtleneck, black jeans and black shoes and muttered under his breath.

"Nick—" I started.

And your "I don't wanna talk about it. Talkin' about it flips me out, so I don't wanna talk about it. You're old enough to make your own decisions. The fact that they aren't the *right* decisions is outta my hands. I've been practicing my morgue face for when I have to go identify your body. Wanna see it?" He said then he arranged his face in this kind of mock, sad, shocked look and slowly shook his head like a world with vigilante social workers marching on him.

When I "Good?" he asked.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed.

"You aren't going to have to identify my body," I told him.

"I hope not. Your timing, it'll be during a Broncos game. That'd be the off."

I smiled at him. "Okay, I'll try not to get killed during a Broncos game." He gave me one of his looks, the kind he'd been giving me for months. The kind that made my gut twist. It was fleeting and he hid it but I saw it and I knew he was worried.

stocky. I decided not to go there.

It in his “Do you want me to make you dinner?” I asked.

ly, and His eyes got huge. “What? Now you tryin’ to kill *me*?”

aturday It was safe to say I wasn’t the best of cooks.

of rock Auntie Reba could cook. She was the queen of time-economy cooking. She took her about fifteen minutes to prepare a delicious, three-course feast for thirty people. She was a kitchen goddess.

Pumas Unfortunately, while she was doing this, Nick and I were listening to Stevie Wonder or Elton John or The Marshall Tucker Band, depending on our mood. Therefore, I never learned to cook.

I don’t “I was thinking quesadillas,” I suggested.

The fact “Anyone could melt cheese between a couple of tortillas. How hard is that?” Nick asked.

cin’ my “You eaten yet?” Nick asked.

?” Nick “Nope,” I told him.

ok and that be? “Goin’ out tonight?” he went on.

ystified “Yep.”

“I’ll make dinner,” he decided.

piss me We both knew that was probably best.

ame.” And most nights Nick made dinner anyway.

or four I SAT at a table in the back of the bar, my back to the wall, watching the film roll by so fast, Tucker.

He was a tall, lean, black man with twists in his hair. He was very



looking and had a way of holding himself that made you notice him was also a very bad guy.

I knew as much, and was surprised by the fact that he was rep close to both Lee Nightingale and Eddie Chavez. Nightingale wor money, and from what I could tell had a foot planted on both sides king. It fence. But Chavez was a cop.

east for

This relationship intrigued me.

I'd been on the tail of one of Darius's boys, a dealer. The dealer le ning to Darius and I was watching.

ling on

It was late. I was tired. I'd had a shit day, not to mention I'd m relived the whole Park nightmare. I wasn't sure I was in the m mayhem so I'd decided to give the night over to reconnaissance.

d could

Know thy enemy.

I was keeping my eye out for Crowe or any of the Nightingale b only ever seen Crowe. The rest of them were still shadows for me. ' I'd heard enough about them that I could probably pick them out in a c

I was sitting on my phone and it vibrated against my ass.

Not taking my eyes from the room, I pulled it out, flipped it open it to my ear.

"Yeah?"

"Law?" Sniff said, and he didn't sound right.

My back went straight. "Sniff?"

Darius

"Law...shit. Law, he'll kill me if he knows I told you but...Roam.

y good-

I was already standing, my body tense, my mind wired.

"Tell me, Sniff," I demanded, hitching the strap of my black pur

and hemy shoulder.

“He’s been talkin’ lately, got this idea to help you out,” Sniff told r

ortedly *Fuck!*

ked for I was worried that something like this would happen.

; of the “You with him?” I asked, moving through the bar, keeping
between Tucker, his dealer and me.

d me to “Watchin’ him. Law, shit...he’s gonna kill me.”

“Where are you?”

ientally “He’s followin’ someone. I’m followin’ him. Goin’ down
od for Boulevard bike path, close to Logan.”

“Which side are you on?”

“South side.”

oys. I’d “What direction are you headed?”

Though “West. Shit, Law.”

rowd. He sounded scared.

and put “I’ll be there in ten minutes. You stick to him, Sniff, but do not g
Do you hear me? Something happens, you don’t call me. You call the
Got me?”

“Law, can’t call the cops.”

“You think something’s gonna go down, you get out of there a
911. Promise me.”

..” “Law, I call the cops, Roam’d never talk to me again.”

“Promise me, Sniff.”

se over I was at the Camaro and Sniff hesitated.

Then he said, "Fuck. I promise."

ne. "I'll be there in ten," I told him. "And don't say fuck."

I swung myself behind Hazel's wheel, started her up and drove madwoman. I parked in the Fox TV station lot, pulled my Mace (people shoved it in my front pocket. I shoved my gun in the back waistband jeans and held my stun gun in my hand. I got out, locked up and pocket keys.

I crossed Speer, which wasn't easy. It was a busy three-lane street late at night. Then I headed to the bike path, keeping my eyes open. Speer

I moved swiftly and quietly.

It was nearing midnight. It was dark. The street was bright, but the path wasn't well lit.

I saw nothing and kept going, hoping they stayed on the path. I caught a call to Sniff. I didn't know if Roam and whoever Roam following would hear it. So I just moved as fast as I could without any noise.

et near. What seemed like an eternity later, but was probably five minutes police. Sniff's gray sweatshirt. We were almost to Broadway when I got to him

He was standing, trying to hide, but you could see his sweat approached him from behind and touched his shoulder. He jumped and call whirled, dropping his phone with a clatter.

"Shit, Law!" he hissed.

I bent down, got his phone and gave it to him.

"Roam still here?" I whispered.

"Yeah, up ahead," Sniff whispered back.

I handed him my car keys. "Camaro's in the Fox station lot. Go to the station, lock up and wait for me."

He looked like a "Law..." he hesitated.

He stepped out and I got close and clipped, "Move!"

He looked at me and I said, "He took off."

He looked at me and I said, "Told you my word was law."

I moved forward enough to see that there were people in front of the store, even standing, pretty as you please next to a streetlight. A dealer making a sale. Anyone else might have thought they were just talking, on the Speer path at midnight.

He looked at me and I said, "I knew it was a sale because I'd witnessed a lot of them the past few months."

Roam couldn't be seen. Roam was nowhere to be seen.

I got into the shadows, watched and waited.

The sale went down. The buyers took off west, the dealer came my way. Shit.

The dealer got close and I recognized him. Name was Shard. A low profile player, just a piece of scum caught in the wheel of the big drug machine.

I made a decision, came out to the path and started toward him like I was taking a moonlight stroll. I figured I'd walk by him, find Roam and get the hell out of there.

Shard noticed me, hesitated, and then for no apparent reason he turned and jerked and he whirled.

I stared, not knowing what was happening and wondering if maybe I suffered from epilepsy or something.

o it, get He jerked again, then again, then caught sight of something a
toward it, away from me. He jerked again while he was running and I
noticed Roam, standing a bit away, throwing rocks at Shard.

Oh shit.

I ran after Shard. Roam saw us both and shot out of his hiding h
took off.

of me, We were all running, flat out, and I realized in a panic there was
a sale. I'd catch Shard and Roam. Roam was quick. Shard was quicker.

er bike I did catch up with them, though the only reason I was able to w
Shard caught up with Roam, did a flying tackle and brought him down
st four struggled. He rolled Roam to his back and reared to punch him, but be
did I made it to them, grabbed Shard's wrist and twisted it, spinning
of Roam.

Shard rolled into me, took me down and my stun gun went flying.

r way. "Roam, run!" I shouted as Shard got on top of me. We were stru
his hands at my wrists. He was stronger than me, way stronger. I loo
my opening to knee him in the 'nads when Roam body tackled him sid

w level We all went rolling, Shard taking me with his hands at my wrists.

ie. We stopped rolling, still scuffling. Shard was working to free
e I was from Roam and me when all of a sudden he was lifted clean up into
get the like he was levitating, arms and legs reeling.

I stared in shock. Roam went still and then Shard was slammed fa
is body on the ground next to me.

That's when I saw Crowe.

aybe he He was crouched low. He planted his knee in Shard's back,

and ran Shard's hands behind him and secured his wrists in cuffs like Shard
: finally struggling like a mother (which he was).

Crowe straightened, jerking Shard up with him. Crowe cocked his
the back of one of Shard's, taking Shard down.

ole and I was lying on my back, staring up, unable to move.

Roam was lying on his side next to me, up on an elbow.

no way We were both (I hate to admit it) in awe.

I didn't have to wonder why Crowe was there. He was following
was that order to "shut me down."

n. They Shit.

efore he Crowe pulled a gun out of a holster on his belt and trained it on Sh.
him off "Don't move," he said to Shard. His deep voice was scary.

Then his head turned and even in the shadowed light I knew
looking at me. I knew it because I felt his eyes burning into me.

iggling,
ked for "Get up," he ordered.

eways. I did as I was told, frankly too scared to do otherwise. He was holding
gun, and he seemed a bit pissed off, and he'd made a grown man bleed

Even *I* wasn't fool enough to spit in the eye of that kind of tiger.
himself turned and helped Roam get up.

the air, Crowe pulled a phone out of his back pocket, flipped it open
handed and hit a button.

ice first I breathed heavily, staring at him.

"You...are...the...*man*," Roam whispered. He was staring at Crowe
eyes wide with wonder.
pulled

wasn't "Jack? I got a pick up," Crowe said into the phone. "Speer bik south side, close to Broadway," he hesitated, listening, then went on knee to "Yeah. Out."

He flipped the phone shut and looked at me again.

"You wanna tell me what the fuck's goin' on?" he asked me, hi still pissed off.

I didn't, really, so I didn't say anything.

g me in "How'd you do that?" Roam asked, cutting into Crowe's short, on conversation with me.

I looked at Roam. He was still staring at Crowe like he was a god ard. men. Then I remembered to be angry at him and turned to face him.

"What did you think you were doing?" I shouted.

he was Roam's eyes came to me. "Law—"

"Don't 'Law' me. I should knock some sense into you. You cou got hurt, pelting drug dealers with rocks. Are you nuts?" I yelled.

lding a "You do it," Roam said, assuming a teenage boy's pissed-off-ye evitate. stance of jutting lip and slightly leaning body.

Then I "I do not pelt drug dealers with rocks. That's a fool thing to do. Ho Roam, what am I gonna do with you?"

ed one "You're Law?" Shard said, butting into my tirade and looking up a I caught his look, and even shadowed it made me shiver.

"Quiet," Crowe told Shard, but Shard kept staring at me like we too, memorizing me. I knew this wasn't good and that shiver turned into a

"Eyes to the ground," Crowe ordered Shard, and when he he Crowe's hand snaked out, shoving the back of his head so he faced do

the path, I felt the disquiet of fear crawling along my skin, but I pushed it away briefly. I turned back to Roam.

“We’re not done. Go find my stun gun, I dropped it. I’m taking you to the shelter tonight. Tomorrow, we’ll talk.”

His voice “Seriously, Law, I was only tryin’—” Roam started, but I interrupted. “Stun gun. Now. Talk. Tomorrow. Go,” I snapped.

He grumbled something about “fuckin’ bossy white bitches” and sped away.

I stared daggers at his back.

among “What’d I say about calling me a bitch?” I yelled at his back.

“Law,” Crowe cut in.

My head rounded to him, and I’m afraid to say I’d had about all I could take.

I’d have “Not now. I’ve had a bad day. I have to get these kids to bed and then I’m gonna go home and have a bubble bath. Then I’m gonna sleep like the dead. I have to be ready for tomorrow because tomorrow, I’m going to kick that black-teenage-kid ass.”

Honestly, Crowe didn’t say anything. Then again, what could you say?

I looked down at Shard then back at Crowe.

It was me. “You have this covered?” I asked, like I’d been helpful in somehow taking down Shard.

He was “I’m thinkin’...yeah,” Crowe told me.

He quivered. “Good. Great. Marvelous. Have a fabulous evening.”

Disoriented, Then I stormed up to the bike path where Roam was waiting for me.

vay and held out my stun gun, and I snatched it out of his hand.

“Let’s get to Hazel. Move. Sniff is probably scared shitless. I don’t know what to say. You get out your phone and call your friend. Tell them you’re okay...”

And the whole way down the bike path, even while Roam was on the phone with Sniff, I reamed him.

And most of the way, even though I didn’t know it, Vance heard me

I could

then I’m

dead. I

kick some

the way

me. He

held out my stun gun, and I snatched it out of his hand.

“Let’s get to Hazel. Move. Sniff is probably scared shitless. I don’t even *know* what to say. You get out your phone and call your friend. Tell him you’re okay...”

And the whole way down the bike path, even while Roam was on the phone with Sniff, I reamed him.

And most of the way, even though I didn’t know it, Vance heard me.



THE INTERROGATION

I took the boys to King's and got them to their beds.

King's had six bedrooms, each with three sets of bunk beds rooms for boys, three rooms for girls. Not many of the kids spent there. Usually they came during the day to hang, play pool, eat, and were lucky, talk to the social workers or work with the tutors.

I talked Park, Roam and Sniff into staying most nights there. They had permanent beds for months. Roam on the top of the last bunk by the window, Sniff in the bunk under him.

Park had slept on the top bunk in the bed next to Roam. Even though it had been months, no kid had slept there since Park, mainly because he frowned on this.

As they settled, I stood beside their beds and looked at Roam. He had his back, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling and ignoring me.

I knew he was angry. Not only had Sniff ratted him out and I cut him out of action, but I'd embarrassed him in front of macho man Vance Crowe.

"Be mad at me, Roam," I said softly. "But don't be mad at Sniff. He did the right thing."

Roam didn't reply.

I didn't touch the boys, touching was not right. I might nudge or shove their shoulder playfully, but I only did these things after more getting to know them. The only other time I'd touched Roam was to sl against the building when we found Park.

After hesitating, I laid my hand on Roam's chest.

"Something happened to you, I don't know what I'd do. We lost don't want to lose another one of you," I whispered.

I felt his breathing go heavy like he was fighting emotion. He still say anything and I left him alone.

I bent to Sniff. He was also lying on his back, arms to his sides. see his eyes staring at the top bunk.

"You did the right thing, Sniff," I told him.

Sniff turned his back to me.

Oh well. So be it.

For now.

I left them to their thoughts and went home.

I let myself in, set the alarm so the door and window sensor activated, but the motion sensors were not. I took a long, hot bubble bath let the tension seep out of my body. Then I got out, toweled off and sl the door to the under bed storage.

I had two dressers under there. My clothes were mostly utilitarian, for comfort with only a bit of attention to style.

My nightwear was anything but.

Outside of decorating my house, my only extravagance was nightgowns. I had two drawers stuffed full of them.

hem or I pulled out a nightie and put it on. It had smoky-gray lace
nths oftriangular bosoms and at the hem, which came to my upper thighs. T
am himstraps and body of the nightie were the palest pink satin.

I climbed into bed and Boo settled in beside me.

I shut down my mind, and just as I told Crowe, slept like the dead.

Park. I



I WOKE UP, groggy from sleeping heavily, and felt strange. The cover
I didn't tucked close to my back, an odd intense warmth coming from there. I
some reason, even though he'd never done this, Boo was draped over
I could waist.

My eyes opened slowly and I saw Boo lying beside me, watching
waiting for me to get up and give him his morning portion of wet food.
favorite part of Boo's day.

I closed my eyes again. My morning alarm buzzer hadn't gone off, so
figured I had time to sleep some more.

Then my eyes opened again and I stared at Boo.

If Boo was lying beside me, then what was draped over my waist?

's were

My mind cleared.

ath and

Oh crap.

id open

I moved quickly, dislodging what was on my waist and heading out the door.

chosen

At my sudden movement, Boo went flying on an angry, "Meow!"

I was snagged around the midriff and thrown back to the bed, my head
hitting the pillows, and Vance Crowe rolled his body over mine.

is sexy

I stilled and looked up into his dark, lushly-lashed eyes.

"Oh my God," I breathed.

at the “Mornin’,” he said to me, like we woke up next to each other every
he thin “Oh my God,” I breathed again.

His hair was not in a ponytail, but falling around his face and she
and I kid you not, he looked like a Native American Warrior God.

“Do I have your attention?” he asked.

Yes, he had my attention. He seriously had my attention.

rs were “How did you get in here? My alarm—” I started.

And for “I disabled it.”
ver my

“Oh my God,” I said again.

me and My alarm was a good one. Nick had it installed for me. It had setti
od, the when I was home and when I was not. The motion sensors ha
specifically placed so Boo wouldn’t set them off, even if he used h
off so I flap. When an intruder tripped it, an alarm sounded and it immediately
a security dispatch then the police. It was not a rinky-dink alarm. It
fortune, not only installation but monthly maintenance fees.

“How did you disable it?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. Instead he gave me his shit-eating grin.

Then it came to me where I was, where *he* was and I bucked to thr
off.

t. This didn’t work.

“Get off me!” I yelled.

ly head “We’re gonna talk,” Crowe replied.

“No...we...are...not. *Off!*” I was using my Law-at-the-shelter-telli
the-kids voice.

7 day. This had no effect on Crowe.

“Don’t make me hurt you,” I warned, mostly for show.

oulders, The shit-eating grin spread to an amused smile and that pissed me

“Like to see you try.” He said it like he would, indeed, like to see r

It was a challenge, and because I was all kinds of fool, I took him
it.

Heavy and Frank had shown me a number of moves and they’d m
practice them until my body ached. Unfortunately, these moves were
done standing up, but I used them all the same.

ings for We wrestled and I realized Crowe knew all my moves, knew also
d been deflect them, and he had far more moves in his arsenal, not to mention
is kitty a hell of a lot stronger than me.

y called Nevertheless, I pushed him off, got my opening and surged to my
t cost a the bed in order to run. This was not smart, considering the platform
my bed sat had a five-foot ceiling.

I slammed the top of my head against it and then went down, hard,
knees. I saw stars and my right palm went to my head, my left palm ca
to steady my body and landed on Crowe’s chest. I settled my ass
ow him calves.

“Jesus, Law, you okay?” Crowe asked, coming up from his back,
my hand with him.

I blinked to take the stars away. This didn’t work so I blinked again

ing-off- “Jules?” Crowe called, using my real name for the first time. One
hands went to my hip, the other one was sliding up the arm that wa
toward my head.

With effort, I focused on him. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

I was sitting back on my calves, my hand still on his chest. He was off. up, torso twisted to me, hands on me. His face had softened to a look that did something to my heart rate. ne try.

I took him in. n up on

He was wearing his clothes from last night, without the jacket, made me Henley now untucked and jeans. His feet were bare.

For some reason, I stared at his feet. mostly

Most feet weren’t very attractive, but his were somehow sexy. I how to could have sexy feet, I did not know, but I figured if anyone would ha he was feet, the unfair laws of the universe that made *everything* about Vance sexy would also give him sexy feet.

This reminded me I was pissed off. feet on

I made a move, hopeful that I’d take him off guard, but alas, I didn n where

His hand moved from my hip. His arm swept under my legs, pulling , on my out from under me, and I landed head on the pillows again.

He got on top and we struggled. I looked for a chance to knee him me out on my nads, but he got up and sat astride me, making my legs useless even th

kicked out to dislodge him. He caught my wrists and held them down , takingsides of my head and loomed over me. I pushed my wrists against hi and bucked my hips. He didn’t move.

“Get off!” I shouted. 1.

“No. You lose, now you talk,” he said. e of his

“Get...off,” I demanded. is lifted

“What were you doin’ last night?” he asked, ignoring my demand.

I stared at him, stopped struggling and kept silent.

is sitting “Who was that kid?” he went on.

icern, a I kept my mouth shut.

“Is he from King’s?” Crowe continued.

I felt my heart begin to race, but I kept my face blank, or at least I
a black did.

“He one of your street kids?” Crowe kept at it and I kept silent.

“This have to do with Park?” he carried on, and I couldn’t help
how he body stilled at his use of Park’s name, and my head turned slightly to
ve sexy in an attempt to hide my reaction.

Crowe How he knew about Park, King’s and my “street kids” I didn’t know.
I didn’t want to know. But he told me.

“You’re on record as finding Park’s body. You made a statement
’t. police, told them you were workin’ with him at King’s. Park had a juv
ig them mile long last few years of his life. Your name is in it.” He paused.
your name is in it a lot.”

n in the I looked back at him and frowned but kept silent.

hough I He changed tactics. “Tell me about Cordova.”

n at the I clenched my teeth and just stared at him. When I didn’t speak, he
s hands back at me.

Then he did the change. I saw it, felt it and was captivated by it.

I watched, enthralled, as his head came toward mine. My racin
skipped into overdrive and I felt a belly flutter so strong it had to be
charts.

When his face was an inch from mine, he said, his deep voice silk

I'm gonna have to make you talk.”

“No,” I finally spoke, but it was too late.

His mouth came down on mine and the belly flutter broke the scale.

hoped I You should know about something I hadn't yet shared.

See, I was not exactly experienced in the boy department. I'd had dates here and there, some kissing, some groping, but other than nothing.

it. My Yes, I was a twenty-six-year-old virgin.
the side

Many women would be embarrassed by this. Not me. I had no interest in sex, relationships or romance, and I had no time for it. I was out to save the world, or at least save a few kids. And anyway, people in my life had shown me awful ways of dying on me, Park being the latest. I had to guard my heart like I did, like a vicious, trained Rottweiler.

“Jules, My body tensed and I tried hard not to react, but the kiss was nice. His hands on me, even if they were holding me down, and I liked his hands on me.”

Then his tongue touched my lips and I felt a strong, pleasant tingle between my legs. I opened my mouth to say something, get him off his tongue slid inside. He slanted his head and the kiss got serious.

I stared I was not experienced, but I could tell he was good at it, mainly because he melted. My lips fitted themselves to his and I kissed him back.

His mouth disengaged from mine, but he kept kissing me, lightly, then he said against my mouth, “I wanna know about Cordova.”

off the I shook my head, not only in a “no” to his request but also to clear my head. He kissed me again. The between-the-legs-tingle strengthened and ended. I y, “See

out through my body and my mind muddled again, focused only on what his mouth was doing to me. My wrists pressed against his, not to get away

Richter I could touch him.

I wanted to touch him, *needed* it.

His grip tightened, likely thinking I was trying to struggle even though I was kissing him back.

His mouth came away just a fraction and he spoke against my lips: "Who taught you to shoot?"

I was breathing heavily and I just stared at him, trying to clear my mind

"Who's in on this with you?" he asked.

I kept silent.

"Who're you after?" he persisted.

"Please get off me," I said softly.

He shook his head, his lips turned up a bit and he kissed me again.

I lost any clarity that I had gained with his mouth not on mine and he kissed me back, struggling against his hands at my wrists. His mouth moved down my cheek to my ear and he said, "I'll keep this up all day. I'm gonna talk to me, Jules."

I twisted my head, and don't ask me why—I was just doing something I couldn't control—I touched the tip of my tongue to his neck

This caused an interesting response. His knees slid down so his hands came to rest on top of mine and his hands let go of my wrists. My arm

wrapped around him immediately. He brought his lips to mine again and I kissed him back, and he changed.

This wasn't a muddle-your-mind, get-you-talking kiss.

what his This was something entirely different.

7 but so My body reacted instantly, softening, melding itself to him, and my hands went under his shirt, my fingers tracing the hard muscle a skin of his back above the waistband of his jeans then they slid enough indentation of his spine.

He made a noise low in his throat that shot straight through my breasts again, pounded between my legs.

He rolled to his side, taking me with him, kissing me, hot, hungry head. hands gliding over the satin of my nightie. I could feel the calluses fingers snagging at the material, and for some reason, this thrilled me.

His leg moved. He pushed a hard thigh between mine, and his hand down my back, over my bottom, up the back of my thigh, lifting my my knee and hooking it around his hip. Then his thigh pressed up between my legs.

It was then the phone beside my bed rang.

I kissed Vance ignored it and so did I. We kept kissing, Vance using his tongue, then he'd give me soft, quick kisses, then he'd use his tongue. You're My hands moved up his back, feeling him and pressing him to me at that time.

ven by I hadn't gone the way of voicemail. I still had an answering machine. mainly because I liked to see it blinking on the very odd occasions body someone phoned me.

as went My voice could be heard asking the caller to leave a message as his kiss and I kissed and groped, totally oblivious to the sound.

“Jules? This is May. I know it's early, hon, sorry. Listen, do you where Sniff and Roam are? Their beds have been slept in but they're g

My body froze for a nanosecond then I pulled away from Vance. I came up on my knees, my ass again on my calves, and I snagged the phone. “May?” I said into the phone, slightly breathless.

May was a volunteer at the shelter. She worked more than most paid staff. She was a sweetheart and a soft touch, but she hid it just enough and the kids wouldn’t walk all over her.

“Hey, hon,” May said into my ear. “You sound like you were running, his” “No, just...never mind,” I said, not about to explain it. “What’s up on his Sniff and Roam?”

“They’re not here. Thought you might know something. The kids talking, but not straight out. We think something is happening, happened, and we’re a little concerned.”

I closed my eyes and dropped my head.

Then I took a deep breath to calm my heart and mind and said, “there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, hon. See you when you get here.”

She disconnected. I put the phone back and turned my eyes to Vance.

He was on his side, up on an elbow, watching me.

“Sorry. Gotta go,” I said.

And before he could respond I scooted to the end of the bed, using the steps, I jumped to the ground, landing lightly on my feet. I went straight to the kitchen.

I went to the table, pulled my cell out of my purse, found Roam’s number and called it. It rang to no answer and Vance walked into the kitchen. “one...” stopped, leaned a hip against the counter and crossed his arms on his

rolled, watching me while I left a message.

hone. “Roam, you get this message, you call me immediately. Got me?”

Then I hit the off button and scrolled to Sniff’s number.

t of the “You gonna share?” Vance asked.

ough so I kept my eyes on him while I listened to the phone ring. What I did
was share.

ing.” Sniff didn’t pick up either, so I left the same message.

up with I flipped the phone shut, threw it on my purse and headed to a cupboard.
Boo was circling my feet. Oddly absent during the bed area frolick
ids are was now ready for breakfast and told me so repeatedly. I got out his water
or has got out one of his bowls and made him breakfast.

Vance watched me and I was acutely aware that I was only wearing
nightie.

“I’ll be Though considering he had his tongue in my mouth and his hands
ass (and elsewhere), being prudish about the nightie seemed a bit silly.

“Jules,” Vance called after I’d put the food down.

ce. I headed out of the room, right past him.

“I’m going to King’s,” I informed him.

I walked down the hall and went to the closet in my living room. I
and not out a pair of jeans and yanked them on under my nightie.

headed I had them zipped and buttoned when a hand curled around my upper
and I was shifted and pressed into the wall. Then Vance got into my
number seriously into my space, head bent close to mine.

men. He “We were in the middle of something,” he told me, like I didn’t
s chest, know that and wasn’t trying my utmost to forget it.

“Yeah. I know. Sorry about that,” I said airily, like it was all the same (even though it was *not*) and his eyes flashed dangerously at my toes.

Um.

Yikes.

I decided to explain. “It’s probably for the best. We don’t want things to get complicated.”

He came closer.

“We don’t want things to get complicated?” he repeated what I said.

“Um...yeah,” I replied.

“You think things aren’t *already* complicated?”

He had a point.

I remained silent.

He got even closer. His hands slid around my hips to the very top behind and he pressed my body into his. His head tilted so it was hairbreadth from mine. I put my hands between us, but this didn’t serve any purpose at all, because Vance didn’t let it.

“I know about Cordova. I know he wants to get in your pants,” he said to me.

My eyes narrowed at him. “If you knew, why did you ask?”

He ignored my question and said something that threw me right off my feet.

“Jules, listen to me. Since *I* intend to get in your pants, he’s gonna back off,” Vance announced, rocking my world. Then before I could even respond to his words, he finished. “I’ll take care of Cordova.”

same to Oh crap.

ne. “Vance,” I whispered, not sure what I intended to say, but I intended to say something.

For some reason, this made him smile. It was a new smile to me. His eyes soft and sexy and I felt my breath catch so I didn’t say another thing.

“I like that,” he said quietly, his voice back to silk.

“What?” I whispered.

d. “You sayin’ my name,” he told me. “I’ll like it better when you’re here tonight, when I’m inside you.”

My stomach plummeted. You would think this was a terrible setback but instead it was thrilling, like being on a roller coaster.

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

o of my “Tonight, at dinner, we’re gonna talk about what you’re doing at dinner, we’re gonna finish what we started this morning.”

rve any “Vance,” I said, at that moment wanting to have dinner with him and wanted oxygen to remain present on the earth. And wanting to finish what he told started like I’d wanted nothing else before in my life.

However, I knew this wasn’t smart and it was not going to happen.

He kept talking. “I’ll pick you up here, six thirty. You’re not here, I’ll find you.”

“Vance, listen to me,” I said.

have to “You feel like talkin’ now?” he asked, his head cocked, and his eyes flashed again.

At his scary, threatening look, I forgot what I was going to say.

His mouth came to mine. "Six thirty, Jules. Be here."

Then he kissed me, hard and deep.

After he kissed me, he let me go, walked away, grabbed his boot
It made the floor and walked down the hall.

I moved to look down the hall but he'd vanished.

I heard the back door open and shut and I knew he was gone.

noan it,

nsation,

. After

n like I

vhat we

ere, I'll

is eyes

His mouth came to mine. “Six thirty, Jules. Be here.”

Then he kissed me, hard and deep.

After he kissed me, he let me go, walked away, grabbed his boots from the floor and walked down the hall.

I moved to look down the hall but he'd vanished.

I heard the back door open and shut and I knew he was gone.

FOUR



I WANNA BE YOU

I swung into King's and knew immediately something was up.

King's Shelter was a huge, ugly building off Evans, close to consisted of a big rec room with a pool table, television and bunc couches and chairs, an enormous kitchen and dining area, six large bec a conference room where we did our family reunions, an open plan and three smaller rooms where we did counseling and tutoring.

There was a manager who ran the place and raised the money to going, two full-time social workers, myself included, and one half-tim We had two half-time professionals volunteering—one a social worke tutor. Last, we had five volunteers who came and went as they please men and two women. They cooked, cleaned, spent time with the k stayed the night to let kids in or out and to keep an eye on things.

The place was packed when I walked in and everyone's eyes swiv me and most everyone stared. Not good. King's usually had a number hanging around, but this, in my experience, was an all-time record.

May saw me the minute I walked in and she approached me.

May was one of our daytime volunteers and did most of the cooki was well into her fifties. She was short, black, round, and straighter hair then arranged it so she looked like a heavy-set, African-American

Kennedy circa the White House years.

“Hey, hon,” she said when she made it to me.

“Hey, May. Any sign of Sniff and Roam?” I asked.

“No, girl, but we gotta talk.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

Before she could lead me away, Josefa, a thirteen-year-old Mexican American girl who’d been on the streets for six months before I got to King’s, approached us. She’d been reunited with her family a couple weeks ago and they were in counseling. She wasn’t my kid. In other words, I wasn’t working her case, but I knew her all the same. I knew all the kid rooms,

office, A gaggle of her girlfriends were standing close and staring at me much like I stared at Crowe last night (and possibly this morning).

keep it My heart stuttered, thinking she knew something about Sniff and the tutor. and I asked her, “Is what true? And by the way, hello and how are you today?” I not-so-subtly reminded her of the pleasantries of conversation, one a

d, three She ignored my reminder and said, “That you’ve partnered with kids and Is it true you and Crowe are patrollin’ the street and takin’ down the of Denver? A vendetta for Park?”

veled to Oh crap.
of kids

“Mm-hmm. This is what we gotta talk about,” May told me.

I looked from May to Josefa to her posse.

ng. She “No. It’s not true,” I replied, and it wasn’t, *exactly*.

ned her “But I heard you and him took down Shard last night,” Josefa Jackie looking disappointed.

I closed my eyes. Sniff and his big mouth.

Then I opened my eyes. “Josefa, I have not partnered with anyone believe everything you hear.”

It wasn’t exactly a lie. I hadn’t partnered with anyone and it was who took down Shard, it was Vance. I wasn’t going to share this with however.

Mexican

“But I heard—” Josefa went on.

t her to

“Josefa, girl, enough. Leave Law alone. Go on. Scoot,” May cut in

uple of

Josefa stared at me, so did her posse, then they shuffled away.

words, I

ds.

May caught my arm, dragged me to a quiet corner and turned to me

“Well? Is it true?” she asked, her eyes lit with a fire I’d never seen

in awe,

“May—”

“Don’t think we don’t know what you’ve been doin’. These kids

Roam,

are you

n.

Crowe.

dealers

They been whisperin’ about you for weeks. I’ve been keepin’ myself, not likin’ you out there alone, but not disagreein’ with you

Park was a good kid. We all loved him. You partner with the likes of well, I’m thinkin’ that’s a bit of all right.”

“May, I haven’t partnered with Crowe. Something happened yesterday and...erm...last night.” And that morning but I didn’t go into that.

him. We’ve talked. He helped me with a situation and that’s it. We partners.”

“He as cute as they say?” May asked, eyes still dancing with excitement

Crowe? Cute?

fa said,

I couldn’t help myself. I threw back my head and laughed.

“What’s funny?” May talked over my laughter.

“Vance Crowe is *not* cute,” I said when I got myself under control.
Don’t May’s nose scrunched. “That’s damned disappointing. I heard he
little hottie.”

sn’t me “Oh, he’s hot all right, but he isn’t cute. You don’t describe a m
Josefathat as *cute*,” I told May.

May’s eyes lit again. “How *do* you describe him then?”

I thought about this and couldn’t come up with anything. He was
indescribable. You had to see him, and if you were lucky (which surpr
I was) *feel* him.

e. “Just...not cute,” I answered.

before. May must have caught something on my face because she smile
“Bet he wouldn’t describe you as cute either,” she told me.

ds talk. Whatever.

yself to Time to move on.

either. “You hear anything about Roam and Sniff?”

Crowe, “Not word one. They’re out on the street, of course, probably sp
this ‘Crowe and Law Death to All Denver Dealers Crusade’ story
sterdaywide. I was you, I’d get those boys in here. Pronto.”

“I met I nodded because she was so right. Then I went into the office to g
aren’t I had to get done done so I could go and look for my boys.

I checked my email, my voicemail, did a few return calls and to
ment. two morning appointments I’d made with a couple of my kids. I had
afternoon, which I was going to use to do some paperwork, make son
and sit out in the rec room and talk to the kids, but I grabbed my pu
headed out to Hazel.

Hazel and I cruised the streets of Denver checking out Sniff and I was a places, then checking out places where all the kids hung out, the who keeping my eyes peeled for Crowe or Cordova.

I came up with zilch. No one had seen them. This meant no o talking.

I got myself some chicken tenders, an M&M cookie and a Die simply from Safeway and sat in the car, eating and thinking of where Roam risingly Sniff would go.

Then it hit me.

Shit.

I put my head to the steering wheel and said to Hazel, “Please tell r d wide.

Last night, Roam had looked at Crowe like he’d stepped right up Messiah. There was the vague possibility that Roam would try to tail especially if he was shit-hot to “help” me in my crusade and lookin mentor. This meant Roam would look in three places.

One was the Nightingale Investigations office. I didn’t know wh reading was, but I figured a phonebook or the Internet would tell me (and Roam far and

However, I doubted Roam would approach the offices. Watch maybe. Approach them, no. et what

There were two other Nightingale Boys hangouts that I knew of.

One was Lincoln’s Road House, a biker bar. ook the

The other was Fortnum’s Bookstore. l a free

I threw my chicken tenders bag on the passenger side floor, sucke ne calls rse andsome diet, ignored my cookie (for now) and headed to Fortnum’s.



Roam's FORTNUM'S WAS in my 'hood.

le time I'd been there a few times to buy books. It was only four or so from my house. It had been there forever and had that feel about it. I ne waswas pretty certain some of the books had been there since it opened.

It was huge, smelled musty and had three big rooms. The front room had a Cokean espresso counter against the side wall facing Bayaud, a bookshelf facing Broadway and a door that opened from the corner. There was a couch at its back at the store length Broadway window, another couch facing Broadway and a coffee table in between. There were bunches of tables and chairs and comfortable armchairs. Behind the book counter there were rows and rows of shelves, then another smaller room full of more shelves and a table with open milk crates stuffed full of old, vinyl records, then a huge room filled with more shelves and books.

Crowe, It was popular and getting more popular by the day. They had a guy for a guy the last time I went there who made unbelievable lattes. Rumor had got into trouble, dragging the bookstore's owner, India Savage, with her. Luckily for Indy, her boyfriend was Lee Nightingale, thus explaining why the kickass Nightingale Boys chose to hang out at a bookstore. So her parents were sorted pretty damn quick.

The coffee guy took off and I heard they had a new coffee guy who was supposed to be a maestro of espresso, the best of the best.

I parked the Camaro on Broadway and headed in. The bell over the door rang and everyone looked at me. When they saw me, most everyone looked down for a second then most of them smiled.

Except one.

"Oh shit," a super-deep, gravelly voice said.

The voice came from a man behind the book counter, and he was not smiling. He had long gray hair pulled back in a braid, a red bandana wrapped around his forehead and a thick gray beard. He had a black Harley-Davidson long-sleeved T-shirt, over which he wore a leather vest.

Standing beside him was a gorgeous redhead who I knew was Savage, the owner of the store and Lee Nightingale's woman.

Sitting on the counter was a beautiful blonde woman wearing a few outfits, and next to her was a woman who looked exactly like Dollywood wearing a velour powder-blue tracksuit, the top unzipped and showing much cleavage she'd be arrested in some places.

Behind the espresso counter was an enormous man with lots of blond hair and a russet beard and beside him was a pretty blonde.

Looking at the women I decided there was another, more obvious one, the Nightingale Boys hung out at Fortnum's.

Even though it was well in the afternoon, way past coffee time there were three customers waiting to give their order, two waiting for pick-ups and a scattering of customers in the seating area.

"Fuckin' A, turkey!" the big man behind the espresso counter barked, looking extremely pleased, and for some reason he pointed at the man.

I ignored their bizarre behavior and did another scan of the room.

That was when I saw in the corner next to the espresso counter, Roy and Sniff sitting at a table trying to look inconspicuous even though they were the age where they should be at school *and* they were wearing homey clothes.

I stalked up to them.

the one "Let's go," I ordered.

I rolled "Law," Roam replied, just that, but it was enough.

and on a "Up! Now!" I snapped.

a black "Law, no one's even come in yet," Sniff told me.

as Indy I turned to Sniff, not knowing what he was talking about and not

"I've been worried sick and driving all over Denver looking for you to need to have a talk. We're going back to King's. Get up. Let's a killer repeated.

Parton, They looked at each other and didn't move.

ving so I put my hands on my hips. "Boys." My tone held a warning.

of wild "Law. We been waitin' forever," Sniff said.

Roam was silent.

reason "For what?" I asked.

"One of the boys to come in. Any of 'em," Sniff told me.

e, there Roam sat back in his chair and threw Sniff a "shut up" look.

up and I leaned in. "I cannot believe this," I snapped and shook my head. I really couldn't. "Which one of you started the rumor about last ni oomed,asked.

Harley Sniff went silent and I got my answer.

"So, you're sitting around waiting for one of the Nightingale I show up, is that it?" I went on.

am and "Wanna talk to Crowe," Roam finally spoke.

were of I opened my mouth to reply, or maybe yell (okay, probably yell clothes. was interrupted.

“Hey, woman,” the big guy behind the espresso counter boomed and I looked at him. “You wanna latte? I’ll make you my special house.”

His generosity was a surprise and I looked around the room again.

Most of the customers from around the espresso counter had clear caring. rest of the folks, who looked like regulars, were all watching me open wo. We grinning like lunatics. I didn’t want to upset the lunatic asylum and go,” I know how it’d look if I waltzed in, yelled at a couple of runaways and buy a coffee.

So I said to the big man, “Sure.”

“I’m Tex,” he informed me, even though I didn’t ask, and he banging on the espresso machine in an alarming way.

“I’m Jules,” I replied because I didn’t want to appear rude.

“She’s called Law,” Sniff declared loudly.

Oh crap.

“Law?” The blonde behind the espresso counter walked to our side because looked at us, smiling. Her smile was amazing, and for a second ght?” I dazzled.

“Yeah. She’s Law. Street name. Got it ’cause she’s The Law. bring down all the dealers. She goes out huntin’ ’em down at night, j 3oys toBatman,” Sniff announced.

“Enough, Sniff,” I said, my voice low.

The blonde’s eyes turned to me. They’d grown round.

), but I In fact, the whole place had gone silent and there was a tremor in that was almost physical.

l at me Then the big man pointed at me and boomed, “Fuckin’ A, darlin’!
On thehe threw his head back and shouted, “*Yee ha!*”

Yikes.

Indy, the blonde, and the Dolly Parton lady had approached us.

ed. The “Seriously?” the blonde from the book counter asked, staring at me

nly and I glared at Sniff.

l didn’t “I’m Indy.” The redhead came up to me and shook my hand, sav
l didn’t from having to answer.

“Jet,” the blonde behind the espresso counter said and waved.

started “I’m Roxie,” the blonde from the book counter put in. She sho
hand too.

“Daisy. Sugar, I like your boots,” the Dolly Parton woman offered
shaking my hand, but she was looking down at my shiny black cowboy
They were a Christmas present from Nick the year before.

“Me too,” Indy said. “They’re the shit.”

ide and “Um...thanks,” I replied as the bell over the door went.

I was “Holy fuck,” Roam breathed from behind me.

Gonna I twisted to look at him, but he was staring, eyes wide at the door.
ust like I turned around to the door, feelings of dread seeping through me.

Three men had walked in and at the sight of them my breath left
whoosh.

All tall, all dark. One looked like the All-American boy gone wro
in a good way (a *very* good way). Another had close-clipped black h
the air killer facial hair, his mustache trimmed to razor sharpness down the s
his mouth. If it had been on anyone else, it would have looked ridicul

!" Then on him it was quite simply *hot*. The last was taller than the other two meant he was seriously tall). He had coloring and eyes that I knew from stories I'd heard about him were from his Hawaiian ancestry. They had fantastic bodies, clearly noticeable under their clothes, and they all looked like the badass mothers I knew them to be.

These men were Lee Nightingale, Luke Stark and Kai "Mace" Mace in that order.

"Goddammit," I muttered under my breath.

They approached and instinctively I moved in front of the boys.

All of their eyes were on me and they noticed my movement. One by one Stark's lips went up in a sexy half-grin, Nightingale's eyes crinkled at the corners and Mace smiled flat out.

They thought I was some silly woman, the jerks.

My back went straight and my chin went up.

"Law," Nightingale said when he arrived at our group.

"Shit, Law. He knows who you are!" Sniff piped up behind me, his face filled with excitement.

"Quiet, Sniff," I said, not taking my eyes from Nightingale.

"You got business here?" Stark asked, positioning himself beside me and telling me not so subtly that I *didn't* have business there.

"I've just come to get my boys," I assured Stark. Then, eyes still on Stark, I said to Roam and Sniff, "Let's go guys."

I didn't hear chairs scraping so I turned to them. They hadn't moved.

"I said, *let's go*." And I used my word-is-law voice.

They both immediately stood.

(which “Don’t forget your coffee,” Tex boomed.

om the I nodded to the big man but said to the boys, “Hazel’s down the
all had Get in. I’ll be there in a minute.”

looked “But, Law,” Sniff whined.

ason, in “I’ll be there in a minute,” I repeated, walking over to take my latte

I wrapped my fingers around its heat, ready to offer to pay when
over the door rang. I looked toward it and saw Vance walk in.

“God *dammit*,” I hissed under my breath.

side of His gaze locked on me and he walked to our group and stopped, h
l at the never leaving me. I felt his stare like he was touching me, and my
working against me, flashed on this morning, and my body, also v
against me, reacted.

Roam and Sniff had frozen.

I shook off the Crowe Effect. “Boys, get to the car.”

is voice “I wanna work with you,” Roam said to Vance, and Vance’s eyes
face and sliced to Roam, but he didn’t say a word.

“I wanna be, like, your trainee or somethin’,” Roam went on, a
could tell just by looking at him that this was taking everything he had

e Roxie Crowe’s face was blank and he showed no reaction, not even to l
obvious mixture of discomfort and longing. I felt my heart squeeze
n Stark, breath freeze, worried that Crowe would make a fool of him.

There was nothing in Roam’s life that he ever wanted that he actual
d. and you could see, quite plainly, that there was likely nothing in Roam
that he wanted more than he wanted this.

“Roam—” I started to break in.

“You on the street?” Vance asked Roam and my eyes swung to Vance’s street. He was not blank anymore. He was watching Roam closely.

“Sometimes,” Roam said. “At King’s,” he went on.

“Stay at King’s,” Crowe returned and that was all he intended to say. I could tell because his eyes cut to me.

The bell rang. I could feel Roam’s disappointment. It filled the air.

“We need to talk,” Vance said to me.

“I’ll do what you say!” Roam continued, and everyone looked at him because his voice had gotten louder, higher, more desperate. His body was tense, solid, and I felt my throat close. “Anything you say. I won’t mess with you. I’ll just do it. I won’t be a problem, I swear.”

“Roam?” Crowe asked, and Roam nodded confirming that was his answer. “Get your diploma, get smart. Once you do that, I’ll think about it.”

Roam shook his head, not letting it go. “Has to be now.”

“Roam, we’ll talk about this in the car,” I said to him.

Roam’s body swung to me.

“*It has to be now!*” he shouted, and my body jerked.

I’d never heard him shout.

Roam’s face was distorted with something, an internal battle, the product of a manifestation of which could be seen in his expression.

“Be dead in three years,” Roam continued, and my heart stopped.

“Roam, don’t say that,” Sniff put in quietly.

“I’m gonna get ’em. All of ’em, and I gotta know how to do it. If they’ll kill me.”

nce. I started to walk along the front row of the crowd to get to Roam a
just passing Vance when Roam started to back up. Vance stopped me
arm around my waist and he pulled my back to his front. I didn't fight
and didn't try to get to the retreating Roam.

o say. I

Roam backed up until he was against the wall.

"Roam, we'll get back to King's. We'll talk," I said softly.

at him
dy was
uth off.
"No. You're after them. You're doin' it. I'm gonna do it too. They
Park. They didn't shoot 'im, but they might as well have. Park was
stopped, his voice went hoarse. "Park wanted..." He tried to go
stopped again.

I leaned away from Vance to detach his arm from me so I could
Roam, but Vance's arm tightened and he pulled me deeper into his boc
s name.

"Best way to get them, Roam, is not to become one of them," Nigh
cut in, his eyes sharp on Roam, and I could tell he'd taken in everythin

"You don't know," Roam spat at Lee, taking (I thought) his life
hands. I didn't expect many people talked to Lee Nightingale lik
certainly not fifteen-year-old boys. "You have no fuckin' clue."

"My best friend is Darius Tucker," Lee told him.

Roam's body went still and his eyes grew wide. Mine did too.

hysical

"I do know," Lee said with finality.

This hit Roam, I could tell, but he didn't give up. His eyes went to
Vance.

"I wanna be you," he said to Vance quietly.

I don't,

"You can't be me. You gotta be you. And right now, you're a ki
kid," Vance advised from behind me.

and was “I’m not a kid,” Roam protested.

with an “That ain’t a bad thing, sugar,” Daisy put in.

t Vance “I’m not a kid!” Roam yelled at her.

All right. Enough was enough.

“Roam, don’t speak that way to people. It’s rude,” I put in and
forward, detaching from Vance and going to Roam. “We’ll ge
y killed hamburgers and we’ll go somewhere and talk. The three of us.”

...” He “Done talkin’,” Roam said.

on, but “Roam, let’s talk with Law. Come on.” Sniff approached him too.

l get to Roam looked down on me. “You saw him lyin’ there, in a fuckin
ly. fuckin’ shit and trash all around him. Trash, Law. *Trash*. You and

tingale Sniff, we all saw Park lyin’ in the fuckin’ trash,” he said to me, and
the vision of Park’s dead body was burned on his brain too.

g. I swallowed then said, “Yeah, Roam, I saw him.”

e in his “We was gonna go to California, learn how to surf. We was gonn
ce that, Alaska and wrestle polar bears,” Roam told me, for the first time co
the teenage boy dreams he shared with Park.

“Polar bears are mean motherfuckers. I saw that on some nature ch
Sniff informed Roam, trying to be helpful.

“Stop saying motherfuckers,” I said to Sniff, then turned again to
me and “Let’s get a burger. Come on.”

“Park’d do it for me,” Roam said, still not letting it go.

I wanted to touch him, hold him, put my arms around him, but I k
d. Be a wouldn’t want it. He was a teenage boy and he was a street tough star
front of a posse of the biggest badasses in Denver. He’d freak if I

mother him. Not to mention he'd never had a mother who'd touched him and put her arms around him in a loving way. He wouldn't know what to do.

So instead I smiled at him. "Yeah, Park would do it for you, and I'd be just as pissed at him, nagging him and getting in his face because it just doesn't make sense." Roam took a deep breath, maybe to say something, but I didn't let him. "And then he'd listen to me and let me help him get his life sorted out."

Roam stared at me.

"You know he would, Roam. Think about it. You know it," I told him.

"He would. He thought Law was the shit, even before she actually showed up." The Law," Sniff added.

Roam kept staring at me.

"For God's sakes, are you boys hungry or what?" I asked, throwing my arms out and pretending to sound exasperated.

"I'm hungry," Sniff said.

"You're always hungry," I told him.

Sniff grinned. "I'm a growin' boy."

"I hope so. You need to fill out. The inspectors come to the shelter to look at you, they'll think we're starving you all to death," I said.

Roam. "Specially if they look at May. I swear, she eats most of the popcorn," Sniff returned.

"That's not nice," I admonished.

"It's true," Sniff retorted, his grin growing into a smile.

"Okay, maybe it's true," I relented, giving him a subtle wink.

Roam tried to

ed him, “Would you two shut up? I want a double beef burger with
t knowgiganto-sized,” Roam cut in.

I nodded to Roam immediately, trying my damndest not to
l I’d behappy and relieved as I was that whatever it was that had a hold of hi
st isn’tlet go.

dn’t let I turned to take the boys out and stopped dead.

l out.”

Everyone was watching us, including and especially Vance.

His eyes were on me and there was something in them I couldn
im. Something familiar, even precious. Something I remembered from
lly wastime ago, but hadn’t seen in so long, I didn’t remember where I saw i
first place. Before I could figure it out, the look disappeared.

I nodded in the general direction of everyone.

ing my “Nice to meet you all,” I said then started to shove through, but
caught my bicep and stopped me.

“Your place, six thirty,” he reminded me, his eyes serious.

I just gave him a look. He released me, and the boys and I walked :

“What was that about?” Sniff stage-whispered to me.

lter and “They got a date,” Roam answered, too quick for his own goc
mine).

udding “No shit? You got a date with Crowe? Holy fuck!” Sniff yelled.

I rolled my eyes.

Now *this* would be all over the street in an hour.

“Keep your voice down, Sniff. And don’t say shit or fuck. Do
boys ever listen to me?”

cheese, “No,” Roam said and grinned at me.

For the first time that day the sky of my life brightened and I look asback at him.

m, he’d Just as the door closed behind me, I could swear I heard, “No thinking Law’s the shit.”

This was said in an unfamiliar man’s voice so it had to be Mac hadn’t spoken.

’t read. “You ain’t wrong about that, sugar.” This was obviously Daisy.

a long I ignored their words, got the kids in the Camaro and we went t in theburgers.

It wasn’t until after we were sitting eating burgers that I tasted n and, even cold, it was the best flipping thing I’d ever tasted in my life.

: Vance

away.

od (and

n’t you

“No,” Roam said and grinned at me.

For the first time that day the sky of my life brightened and I grinned back at him.

Just as the door closed behind me, I could swear I heard, “Now *I*’m thinking Law’s the shit.”

This was said in an unfamiliar man’s voice so it had to be Mace, who hadn’t spoken.

“You ain’t wrong about that, sugar.” This was obviously Daisy.

I ignored their words, got the kids in the Camaro and we went to get burgers.

It wasn’t until after we were sitting eating burgers that I tasted my latte and, even cold, it was the best flipping thing I’d ever tasted in my life.



NICK'S THIRD DEGREE

At six thirty, when I was supposed to be nervously anticipating my arrival at my duplex, I was in Heavy's garage, wearing silver sweatpants with two black stripes running up the sides and a white t-shirt with the arms cut off with GOLD'S GYM on the front in black. I was jabbing a punching bag and sweating like a pig.

"Jab, Jules, fuckin' *jab!*" Heavy shouted at me, sitting on a box of Ding Dongs stacked at the side of his garage, working through his second pack of Ding Dongs. "You jab like a girl. Keep your leg back, aim for the kidneys. *Jab!*"

"I'm jabbing, Heavy!" I shouted through my panting, then quit jabbing and started roundhouse punching the sides of the bag, then I quit doing that too. I hugged the bag and stared at Heavy. "How long do I have to do this?" I asked.

"You only been at it an hour," Heavy answered and then shoved another Ding Dong in his mouth.

I glared at him. "Don't you think an hour is enough?" I asked. "You're exactly going to be boxing with drug dealers for a whole fifteen rounds."

"Don't do fifteen rounds anymore, the sissies, only do twelve," Heavy informed me.

“Well, I won’t be going twelve rounds with them either.”

“You gotta be in shape. ’Specially now that you’re goin’ up aga
Nightingale Boys. Fuck, girl, you...are...loco.”

I used my teeth to yank at the strings of my boxing gloves, shov
under the pit of an arm and tugged it off. “I’m not up against the Nigh
Boys,” I said.

Heavy shook his head. “Got a friend, he’s a cop, says Hank Nigh
Vance’s and Eddie Chavez pulled up all sorts of shit on you yesterday. Searchi
ry-gray name and findin’ it all over your kids’ records.”

T-shirt So *that* was how Vance knew everything.

bbing a I found this annoying. The whole bedroom interrogation that n
was bullshit. Vance knew the answers to most of his questions befo
inch of even asked them. This meant his “making me talk” was just an excuse
doubleme.

for the I didn’t know what to do with that so I didn’t do anything with it. I
time to think about it, maybe when I was eighty.

jabbing Heavy was watching me closely as I tugged off the other glove.

ing that “Unh-hunh.” He read my face correctly and went on. “Nighting
this?” I Chavez searched you, and Lee’s got a big nerd workin’ for him wh
hack into the computers at the Pentagon. By now, they know eve
n entire about you, even your panty size.”

This gave me pause for reflection. I didn’t like the idea of Vance k
I’m not *everything* about me. Though I didn’t care about my panty size, unless
s.” like buying me a present for my birthday, which was only a few days a

Heavy What was I thinking?

Vance was not going to be in my life, thus no birthday present certainly not panties.

I looked at Heavy.

“My birthday is Thursday,” I told him.

“Well, happy fuckin’ birthday.” Heavy grinned, white cream chocolate cake in his teeth.

I dropped my gloves to the floor, sat next to him on the boxes and n’ your back some tendrils of hair that had come loose from my ponytail.

“Not today, Thursday.” I took a deep breath and then went for it “want to go out for a drink or something?”

Heavy stared at me. “Don’t you have girlfriends?” he asked.

I pulled in my lips and hit him in the shoulder.

“Forget it,” I said and smiled. “I gotta stretch.”

I got up and walked over to a mat that Heavy had put out for w showed me moves to defend myself against attack. I dropped down on started to stretch.

“You goin’ to the range after this?” Heavy asked, still staring at me

“Yeah.”

“You goin’ out after that?” he went on, and I knew what he meant.

Was I going out after bad guys?

I’d been giving it some thought, especially after what Roam had ; he felt wasn’t exactly being the best role model.

Still, I was an adult. I was being smart and I was getting trained. I a kid pelting a drug dealer with rocks (I had to admit, though I’d ne

it. And Roam, that was a good one).

I looked at Heavy. "I'm going home for food, and then, yeah, I'm out."

"Be safe," he said, got up and went into the house.

m and I stretched, and when I was finished I pulled on my black sweatshirt and grabbed my bag. I walked into the house and I could l pulled back of Heavy's blond head. He was sitting in front of Monday Football.

t. "You "I'm outta here, Heavy," I called.

"Cool," Heavy called back.

I walked to the front door and I heard Heavy say my name, so I tur

"What?" I asked, peering around a column to look into the living r

He'd twisted around the side of his reclining chair to look at me.

hen he out for your birthday, but not to one of those girlie bars with martinis n it and of that shit. American beer. Televisions. Women wearing tight T-shir doin' that for your birthday?"

e. I smiled at him. "I could do that."

"Great. I'll be there."

Then he twisted around again and stared at the football.



done. I I WENT to the range and shot for half an hour, then gabbed to Zip for hour, then went home figuring Vance would be long gone. It was we eight and I didn't think Vance was the kind of guy who hung around f wasn't after it was obvious his date had stood him up.

ver tell I let myself into the duplex and listened to Boo telling me about

for a few minutes before I shut him up with some treats. Then I list
n going Boo complaining about lack of treats for a few minutes before I shut
with a kitty cuddle.

I dropped him and took off my clothes, got in the shower and clea
zip-up the sweat and gun smoke.

see the When I stopped the shower, Boo was sitting on my toilet seat, st
7 Night me, and then he told me how he felt about me stopping his cuddles and
a shower.

“Oh, Boo. Shut up,” I said.

He gave me a look and jumped down off the toilet seat. He did
ned. graceless skid on the bath mat, corrected himself and flounced out
oom. bathroom, all haughty.

“Damn cat,” I muttered, smiling to myself.

I slathered with lotion that smelled of cucumbers and melon and p
; or any comb through my hair. I put on underwear then I yanked on a pair o
ts. You navy-blue fleecy sweats with a drawstring waistband that I let ride low
hips. The sweats had loose hems that had a small notch on each side
ankle. They were too long and rested over most of my feet and dragge
my heels. I pulled on a white thermal long-sleeved shirt, scooped up E
headed over to Nick’s for leftovers. I knocked on the back door and st
head in.

half an “Nick?” I called.

all after “In the living room,” Nick yelled back, sounding impatient. “N
or long Night Football,” he finished, explaining the impatience.

You didn’t interrupt Monday Night Football at Nick’s. Or S
his day collegiate games. Or Sunday NFL day.

ened to I walked in, dropped Boo and he pranced into the living room, big
him upblack tail straight up. Then I heard him immediately complain to Nick
the lack of treats and cuddles on the other side of the house.

ned off I opened Nick's fridge.

"You got any leftovers?" I shouted, head in the fridge.

aring at "In here," Nick yelled again.

I taking I pulled my head out of the fridge, straightened, closed the fridge,
and stopped dead.

a little Vance was standing in Nick's kitchen in the exact same pose he
of the standing in mine that very morning, arms crossed, hip against the coun

My eyes narrowed and I crossed the room in a flash, getting in his

"What are you doing here?" I hissed in a whisper, forgetting
moment about our date and thinking he'd broken in, just like he had
pulled a side.

if faded I was angry but also a little amazed. He hadn't made a sound.

r on my "Oh, Jules?" Nick called from the other room. "We got company.
e at the you're a little late for your date. I let him in so he could wait over here
d under

300 and Then I heard Nick chuckle to himself.

uck my I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

When I opened them Vance was grinning at me.

I clenched my teeth.

Monday Vance's eyes scanned my face. "Murder is illegal," he said to me.

aturday "I'm willing to do my time. I just don't know which of you to ki
much more do you get if it's a double homicide?" I asked.

, bushy His hand shot out and wrapped around my neck then he pulled me
k about and I hit his body, full on. I put my hands on his chest and pressed ba
both my neck and my hands, but I didn't move so I gave up.

Vance got close to my face. "You don't want me dead, you wan
fuck you. You can kill me after," he said.

My eyes rounded at his bluntness then I pressed again, and his ot
, turned wrapped around my waist and he pulled me deeper into him. I tilted n
back and opened my mouth to say something smart, but he got there
me.

'd been
ter. "Be careful, Jules," he warned, voice low so Nick wouldn't hear, h
face. flashing with an anger that I hadn't noticed before. "I'm bein' patien
I'm not overly fond of bein' stood up."

g for a Unfortunately, since Vance hadn't made anyone levitate recentl
on my was standing in the kitchen of the only family I had, I felt safe so I dec
spit in the eye of the tiger.

"I didn't agree to go on a date with you. If I remember, you *told*
Seems were going out," I said in a quiet voice too.

." "We have things to talk about," he returned.

"No, we don't. You already know everything. Your cop friend
searching my name yesterday and you have a computer guy at the
who's been looking into me. You just used that as an excuse to m
talk."

ll. How He got closer, apparently unsurprised I knew all of this. "Okay, w
have things to talk about. We have things to *do*," he said.

My belly fluttered.

to him “Like what?”

ck with “Like finish what we started this morning.”

I knew that was what he was going to say.

t me to “That’s not gonna happen.”

her arm “Yes. It is.”

ly head “No. It...is...not.”

before “You gonna come in here and get some food or what?” Nick shout

“Yeah,” I called.

his eyes Vance’s arms tightened.

nt here. “Let me go,” I said to Vance, going back to my quiet voice.

His hand fisted in my wet hair, held my head steady and he kissed

y and I Oh crap.

ided to This was not good.

me we I resisted and it worked for a few beats then his mouth opened over

Mine automatically opened to let in his tongue, and the minute it sliced

my mouth I melted into him and kissed him back.

Almost as quickly as it began, it ended and I felt a sudden

ls were disappointment.

office His head came up and he looked down at me.

ake me “I’m gonna have you, Jules,” he promised, and at his promise

re don’t rushed across my skin in a very a pleasant way.

Then he let me go, turned me and gave me a little push toward the

I walked into Nick’s living room. Nick was lying full out on his couch.

“Hey, Jules,” Nick said, grinning at me.

“Would you like your hemlock now or should I put it in the Thank turkey?” I asked Nick, throwing myself in an armchair.

Boo jumped up in my lap and out of habit I began to stroke h settled in and began to purr.

“Like you’re cookin’ the Thanksgiving turkey. Please,” Nick return eyes sliding to the TV.

Vance settled into another armchair. He nabbed a can of pop fr ed. coffee table that he’d obviously been drinking and sat back, cro scuffed cowboy-booted ankle on his knee.

“Jules doesn’t cook. You should know that. Kitchen plus food pl equals disaster,” Nick told Vance.

me. “I’ll keep that in mind,” Vance responded, his eyes cutting to r there wasn’t any anger there anymore, just amusement.

“Nick. Shut up,” I said, and I was sure my eyes still had anger in th r mine. “She can be rude sometimes too,” Nick shared, his gaze never leav l inside TV.

“I’ve already learned that,” Vance replied.

urge of I leaned forward and grabbed a slice of pizza from the open box sit the coffee table. I took a big bite, chomping on it and deciding to wa football and ignore both of them.

tingles “She makes a killer margarita though,” Nick went on, a font o Lawler information and happy to impart it on anyone.

hall. “I don’t drink,” Vance said.

uch. This was such a strange comment that both Nick and I looked at V.

“No?” Nick asked.

sgiving “Recovering alcoholic,” Vance said, now his eyes were on the TV.

I moved my eyes back to the TV too shocked at this knowledge
im. Hewanting to make a big deal of it.

I couldn’t imagine Vance as a drunk or out of control in any w
ned, hisseemed to be totally on top of every situation.

I took another big bite of pizza, chewed and pulled off a bit and f
om theBoo, who was staring at my slice of pizza with desperate kitty eyes.

ssing a “How long you been dry?” Nick asked.

is Jules “Ten years. Dried out in prison,” Vance replied.

ne, and Nick and I looked at Vance again.

“Prison?” Nick asked.

“Two years. Grand theft auto.”

I swallowed hard and turned back to the television.

“Christ, man,” Nick said softly. “You must have been what, a teen
ring the

“Sent down when I was twenty,” Vance replied.

I took another bite of pizza and gave another piece to Boo.

Boo was in heaven.

I was freaking out.

“Close with your folks?” Nick asked.

f Juliet “Nick...” I decided to cut in. He was getting a bit nosy.

He was the only father I ever knew and any father’s duty was to
on his daughter’s dates, especially when they informed you the
ance. recovering alcoholics and ex-cons.

But this wasn’t high school and this was a bit much.

“Haven’t seen ’em since I was ten,” Vance answered without hesitation and not a word. My head swung around and I looked at Vance. He was leaning back in his chair, eyes on the TV, casual and laidback, seemingly unaffected by the game. He was in the third degree.

I looked hard at him, an expert at reading people, it was part of my job, but he gave no indication he was uncomfortable in any way.

“Why not?” Nick asked, giving up on football and turned fully to look at me.

“Father turned me out. Wasn’t a good place to be so I didn’t go back.”

I took another bite, forced my eyes to the television and fed Boo a little tidbit. I tried to take my mind off a ten-year-old Vance turned out to be home, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t imagine any ten-year-old being turned out of their home, even though I did what I did. It still surprised me, practically every day. And I didn’t even want to consider the idea that it happened to Vance.

“Why?”
“In fact, I hated the idea so much it caused me physical pain. My stomach began to hurt, like I was going to be sick, but I forced myself to eat though it felt like nothing was wrong.”

“Well, there you go.” Even Nick couldn’t go on after that piece of information was shared.

“Can we watch football?” I asked the television.

“Yes ma’am,” Nick answered.

The room went silent. I finished my pizza and found my mouth watering, probably for more reasons than just eating a slice of pepperoni pizza. I picked up Boo, got up and dumped him on Nick’s stomach.

“I need a beer. Nick?” I asked.

ation. “No, Jules. I’m fine.”

k in his My gaze moved to Vance. He was looking up at me and I couldn't see anything in his eyes.

“Another pop?” I asked.

my job, He shook his head but kept watching me. I looked at the floor and then back at Vance from the room.

Vance. I had to pass Vance’s chair to get to the kitchen. As I did I slowed down. My hand came out and I ran the back of my fingers along Vance’s jaw.

Do not ask me why I did this. I couldn’t tell you. When I was walking out of the kitchen I didn’t look at him. I didn’t stop, I just kept on walking to the kitchen and didn’t look back.

And when I got into the kitchen I filed my touch in my memory, touched the cabinet and locked the door.

tomach



AFTER MONDAY NIGHT Football was over, we said goodnight to Nick.

Boo and I walked through the back room and over to my side. I opened the back door. Boo shot in, I turned and stood in the door, showing Vance I was not invited inside. There was a step up from the back room to my kitchen. Vance was looking down at Vance and he was looking up at me.

“Well, nice date. I had a good time. Thanks,” I said, even though I had screwed up the date totally, so much it really wasn’t even a date. He picked up my intention was to make my message clear. No entry.

Vance looked at me a beat, then his shit-eating grin spread on his face. He put a hand to my belly, pushing me back as he stepped up and walked through the door, clearing the door. He shut the door behind him, took his hand from my belly.

stomach and turned to my alarm panel. He hit a four-digit code and
ld read the sequence of buzzes that meant my door and window sensors were a

I had the fleeting feeling of anger that he shoved inside, but th
swept away by surprised admiration when I watched him set my alarm

. started “How do you know my code?” I asked when he turned back to me.

Vance just kept grinning at me and then he started walking toward

, and as My admiration cleared.

of my Um...not good.

I started backing up.

done, I “Erm...Crowe, the date’s over,” I told him.

n and I He shook his head and kept advancing.

y filing I kept retreating.

“Really, it’s late. I’m tired.” I wasn’t. I was going out that nigh
needed him to get gone.

Vance, “You have two choices,” Vance told me.

ned the I stopped in the doorway to the hall and put my hands on my hips.

he was “And those would be?” I asked.

ten so I “We can talk or we can fuck.”

ugh I’d My eyes rounded. Then they narrowed.

owever, I didn’t answer.

“Though,” he went on, “I should tell you even if you pick talkin
we’re done, we’re still gonna fuck.”

lked in, I frowned at him and leaned in.

om my “You are *too much*,” I snapped.

I heard He ignored my threatening posture. “You don’t choose, I will pick fucking. We can talk after.”

his was I was right, he was too much.

· “I’m not going to sleep with you,” I told him.

· He just smiled at me.

me. “Excuse me, but didn’t we just meet yesterday? I’m not that kind of

At that, he threw his head back and laughed.

“What’s so damned funny?” I asked, frowning and just stopping from giving him a big old girlie shove.

He looked at me. “You were that kind of girl this morning.”

He was right, I was. Another ten minutes and I’d have been so literally. I wasn’t sure that was a good thing for a number of reasons. At that moment, most especially, I didn’t want him to know I was a virgin and I might have an adverse effect on my street cred.

“Temporary insanity,” I retorted.

“Jules, choose.”

“No.”

His hands shot out and grabbed me, yanking me forward. Then he wrapped around me, pulling me into his body. I should have been smart enough to learn, after seeing it enough times, how quickly he could move

g, after “How about this?” he suggested looking down at me. “We talk, save the fucking until later, maybe after our second date when I actually have you out somewhere.”

There wasn’t going to be a second date so I took this as a boon.

and I'll "Agreed," I said.

He smiled at me in a way that made me think he knew my thoughts.

He let me go. I walked down the hall, but he grabbed my hand when we were walking by the bed platform and stopped me.

I turned to him.

"What?" I asked.

His eyes shifted to the bed. "Climb up," he said.

My mouth dropped open. "I thought we were going to talk."

"Yeah, we're gonna do it up there."

Was he crazy?

"We're not going to talk on the bed!"

"Climb up, Jules."

"We can talk in the living room."

"Climb up."

"No one talks on a bed."

"Jules, climb...the fuck...up."

I whirled to make my way into the living room.

I didn't get even a step.

Lightnin' Crowe grabbed my hand again, spun me around the way he wanted, twisting his body and lifting me so he was carrying me around his shoulder. He took one hand on my arm, his other arm around my thighs.

"Holy shit! Crowe, put me down!" I yelled.

I figured he was going to hurt me. No way was he going to climb up and get me into my bed without slamming me into the ceiling. The l

ceiling was low, the bed area was an elevated alcove, the ceiling high
s. was only a small gap to get in and a lot of that was taken by the bed.
hen we after living there five years, still conked my head on the hallway ce
least once a month.

I shouldn't have worried. This was Vance Crowe we were talking a

He climbed, bent nearly double, shoved his torso through with me
his shoulders, not even scraping the ceiling. He released me, rolled me
came up behind me, snagging me under my armpits and hauling me
bed. He lay down on his back and pulled me up over his body.

I was too shocked to move and staring at him in disbelief.

God, he was good.

"Now we can talk," he said, his arms wrapped around my waist.

"Why do you want to talk up here?" I asked.

"I like it up here."

I rolled my eyes.

Whatever.

Time to get this over with so I could go out and annoy bad guys.

"How do you know my alarm code?" I asked.

He didn't answer, just smiled.

n bent, "Crowe! I want to know."

oulders, "You wanna know, I'll show you. Later, not tonight."

I blinked at him.

"Seriously?" I asked, so wanting to learn that I completely forg
ip steps tonight was our only night and tomorrow I was going to figure out a
hallway

l. Thereget Vance Crowe out of my life for good.

Even I, “You wanna know, I’ll show you,” he repeated.

iling at “Wow. Thanks.” I was still forgetting.

about. “I like Nick,” he stated conversationally.

around I couldn’t help myself. I smiled. “I do too.”

e in and “What do you call him?” he asked what I thought was a strange qu

up the “I call him Nick.” I replied.

“No. He isn’t your dad, but he is, so what do you call him?”

I stared at him. “How do you know that?”

“He and I talked.”

I went still. “About what?”

“About him raisin’ you, about your family dyin’, your granddad
your aunt dyin’.”

I gasped. I did this partly because Nick had apparently shared a gr
of information about me, but mainly because Nick never talked about
Reba, not to anyone but me.

“He told you about Auntie Reba?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t know what to do with that because I felt it said somethin
Vance that Nick would trust him enough upon first meeting him to r
it. It freaked me way the hell out.

I shirked off my freakout and forged ahead.

got that “What else did he tell you?” I asked, feeling uncomfortable w
way to knowledge that he knew way too much about me.

“He told me I was your first date in five years.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered, horrified.

I was going to *kill* Nick.

“And he told me your birthday is Thursday.”

I decided to be quiet and hoped that our talk wasn't going to be a distraction. After two minutes I was over it and wanted to shut down, move my mind with something else, anything else, but Vance.

Vance watched me. I kept silent.

“Tell me about Park,” he demanded softly.

“No,” I said instantly and pushed away.

The conversation was officially over.

His arms tightened. He came up, twisting me to my back and he rolled into me so he was half on me, his thigh thrown over both of me, pinning me to the bed.

He looked down at me. “You already know we investigated you,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“You're a busy woman.”

I stared at him and kept silent.

“Even before this shit went down with Park your name is all over the records. You worked at a battered woman's shelter, got involved in a number of messy cases. You got mentions in a number of kids' files, coming to the station when they got into trouble, puttin' in a word for them. Got into King's.”

I stayed silent.

“Park was different,” Vance said in a way that I knew wasn’t a que
I sucked in my lips and stayed quiet.

“So are Roam and Sniff, aren’t they?”

I couldn’t keep it up. “They’re my boys.”

a long He watched me, his eyes scanning my face, and something can
on, fillhim. Not the sexy something, something else. Something that loo
awful lot like concern.

“Jules, you know, you gotta keep a distance. You don’t, it’ll destro

“I can keep a distance.”

“Yeah? Like spendin’ your nights puttin’ your ass on the line,
drug dealers pay for what they did to Park?”

is body My eyes slid to the side.

f mine, “Um...” I mumbled.

“And runnin’ around lookin’ after two teenage runaways like the
he said.your own flesh and blood?”

I brought my eyes back to him and stayed silent.

“That shit with Roam today at Fortnum’s...Jesus, Jules, you are
sister, you’re his social worker.”

r police “I know that.”

couple “Didn’t look like it to me.”

lown to “Don’t tell me how to do my job,” I clipped.

’em out “I’m tryin’ to talk some sense into you.”

“You don’t know these boys.”

“Yes I do. I grew up with kids like them.”

stion. This shut me up because that night I learned he had. It was some
didn't allow my mind to go because I hated the thought of some
magnificent as Vance Crowe living on the street, but now he said it
out, it forced my mind to go there.

I felt my discomfort edge away and I just stopped myself from te
ne over him.
ked an

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He shook his head and his eyes got hard. “Jules, listen to me close
y you.” not another one of your causes. I survived. It was shit and I nearly did
I came out the other side. What I went through, it made me who I am.
makin’ your job, only your job, those boys’ll come out the other side too.”

Then I whispered—don’t ask me why, but I did, “I love them.”

He watched me a beat then his eyes changed again. Not to the con
look, or the sexy look, but the look he’d given me that day at Fortnum
y were It touched me somewhere deep. Somewhere I’d forgotten I had.

“They’re good kids. They make me laugh,” I went on, unable
myself. “They’re smart, sharp as tacks and not just street smart. All t
en’t histhey’ve had no love, Vance, no love in their lives at all. Only abus
didn’t leave home because of teenage rebellion or family misunders
or minds not meeting. They left home because they had to to sur
they’d go crazy or get hurt. The only people in their lives they can tru
could trust, are each other...and me. Now Park’s gone, it’s just the t
us. Park was their leader. He was the best of them, keeping them s
straight even as he searched for release for himself. Without him,
know if I can save them.”

Vance watched me while I talked, but at my last words he br

where I “They gotta save themselves.”

one as “They’re kids!” I protested.

straight “They’ve learned enough to know their lives are in their hands.”

ouching “They’re kids, Vance.”

“Jules.”

“No,” I shook my head. “No. They’re special and if I don’t do a
else in my life, I’m gonna make sure *they* have one.”

ly. I’m “Jules.”

n’t, but “No!” I shouted.

You do

Vance stared at me then I could tell he came to a decision.

“I’m not gonna change your mind, am I?” he asked.

cerned I shook my head.

’s. “Then you gotta stop what you’re doin’ at night so you can be an
take care of them.”

to stop I went back to silence.

hat and Vance stared at me again.

e. They Then he muttered, “Shit.”

tanding I couldn’t help myself. I knew he was giving up so I grinned.

vive or He caught the grin and his eyes flashed.

st, ever I stopped grinning.

hree of “You go out, I’m your shadow,” he said. “Someone has to ke
afe and I don’t safe.”

Um...no, I thought.

oke in. “No,” I said out loud.

“Yes.”

“No!” I yelled. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You don’t have a fuckin’ clue.”

I frowned at him. “Leave it alone, Vance. I know what I’m doing. you and all the boys think that I’m some kind of idiot female, but I’m nothing know what I’m doing.”

He dropped to his side, taking me with him so we were face-to-face

“I’m keepin’ you alive,” he said.

“Vance—”

“You’re gonna stay alive. At least until we have a second date.”

I rolled my eyes.

It was my turn to give up.

ound to It was his turn to grin.

Okay, then I was going to get something out of it.

“I want a favor,” I declared.

His grin deepened and the change happened, this time it was the change. “Yeah?”

“You’ll get a second date if you come into King’s tomorrow and Roam.”

The change vanished. “I’m not takin’ him in.”

ep you I shook my head. “No. I don’t want you teaching him. I just want walk up to him, talk to him in front of the other kids like you know him you respect him. Roam and Sniff. All the kids know about you, they you. You act like Roam’s your boy, it’ll enhance his reputation. It’ll

something to the other kids. It'll give him confidence."

It would do more than that. It would give him just a tiny smidgen of what he wanted. It would be the first time he got even a taste of a life's desire.

I know To Vance, it was taking thirty minutes and talking to a kid.

and not. I To Roam, it could change his life.

Vance didn't answer. He just looked at me.

and I. I leaned in a bit, not much, and then I whispered, so low you couldn't hear it, "Please."

Vance's eyes changed again. They went soft and sexy and I had a little breath catch.

"I'll do it."

I didn't realize my body was so tense, but when he agreed I relaxed. His arms got tight and his hands drifted up my back, pressing me against his body.

"One condition," he said.

Oh crap.

and I. "What?" I asked.

and I. "This second date is tomorrow night. You'll be here and you won't be talking to me up."

"Okay," I agreed instantly.

"That's not the condition."

and I. "Fuck."

and I. "What?" I repeated.

and I. "I take you out, after, I spend the night here. You don't go out."

drug dealers. You stay in, all night, with me, in this bed, naked, and
of what make you come you say my name.”

re. My stomach plummeted again. It felt good again, but still, I just s
him.

I couldn't promise that.

“Crowe—” I started.

almost “Take it or leave it.”

I could just not believe this.

felt my “I'm asking you to do something nice for a kid and you're as
you're...I don't *believe* you.”

“Maybe I should tell you somethin' about me. I learned early yo
ed into do somethin' for nothin' and you get the best deal out of your end as y
e to his I want you. I want to taste you. I want to fuck you. I want to make yo
and I want to hear you moan my name when you do so I know that yo
it's me who made you come. You don't agree, I don't see Roam.”

I frowned at him. “I think you might just be a bastard,” I snapped.

“Get over it,” he returned.

't stand I stayed silent, trying hard not to scratch his eyes out or knee hin
balls.

“Jules, you want it too,” he told me, and even though he was right
pissed me off.

“All right, fine,” I clipped. “Tomorrow night.”

God, the things I did for my boys.

huntin' He rolled into me again, pushing me to my back, and I glared at hi

when I “Is our talk over?” I asked irritably.

“Yeah,” he said, but the change was over him and he was smiling
tared at It was a small smile, but a satisfied one.

“Good, then you can go.”

“In a minute.” His face was coming toward mine.

“No. Now,” I ordered.

“Not until I’ve had another sample.”

“Crowe!” I got out before he kissed me.

king... I pushed against him and tried to pull away, but he rolled fully on
me, pressing me into the bed and insisting with his tongue that I o
u don’t mouth. I resisted, trying to twist my head away, but he didn’t stop. Hi
ou can. were moving on my body when his head finally came up.

u come “Tomorrow night,” I said.

u know He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me with his eyes soft an
His hand went under my shirt, sliding up the skin of my midriff and n
froze. It did this mainly because the tingles had started and the warmth
hand felt nice, but I was still trying to resist.

n in the His head came back down again and his lips hit mine at about the t
hand cupped my breast.

; it still My mouth opened in a gasp. His tongue slid in, my body melt
tingles took over and Vance got his sample.

n.

“Is our talk over?” I asked irritably.

“Yeah,” he said, but the change was over him and he was smiling at me. It was a small smile, but a satisfied one.

“Good, then you can go.”

“In a minute.” His face was coming toward mine.

“No. Now,” I ordered.

“Not until I’ve had another sample.”

“Crowe!” I got out before he kissed me.

I pushed against him and tried to pull away, but he rolled fully on top of me, pressing me into the bed and insisting with his tongue that I open my mouth. I resisted, trying to twist my head away, but he didn’t stop. His hands were moving on my body when his head finally came up.

“Tomorrow night,” I said.

He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me with his eyes soft and sexy. His hand went under my shirt, sliding up the skin of my midriff and my body froze. It did this mainly because the tingles had started and the warmth of his hand felt nice, but I was still trying to resist.

His head came back down again and his lips hit mine at about the time his hand cupped my breast.

My mouth opened in a gasp. His tongue slid in, my body melted, the tingles took over and Vance got his sample.



SUPERHEROES

After Vance got his sample, he kissed my mouth lightly a few times, lifted up and kissed my forehead, then he was gone.

I lay in bed for a while, recovering.

Then I lay in bed for a while wondering how in *the hell* I was going to get out of tomorrow night.

I couldn't sleep with Vance. Not only would he find out I was a virgin, but he had no idea what I was doing (mainly because I was a virgin).

He was obviously good at it. I even knew a few women who had sex with him firsthand he was good at it. How embarrassing would it be when I was good at it?

I decided to think about it later, much later, after I'd jumped a plane to Nicaragua tomorrow afternoon and disappeared off Vance Crowe Road.

I jumped down off the bed, scattering and ticking off Boo, who was with us for the night. I put on a chocolate-brown turtleneck (as dark as chocolate, almost black), matching cords, a deep-brown belt and black boots. The boots had low heels, they were comfortable and I could walk in them. The best thing about the boots though, even with all that, they looked killer (you couldn't be a badass mother without killer boots, i

rule).

I pulled back my hair in a ponytail and I was ready to roll.

Then I turned out the lights and I waited.

I didn't put it past Vance to watch the house and then follow me.

After I figured he'd given up (if he was out there at all), I gathered weapons, went out to Hazel and I took on the night.



es thenMY PLAN WAS SIMPLE.

Wreak enough havoc on the dealers and the suppliers of the dealers made their sales in the places where the runaways hung out so that they would eventually give up and find some other place to do business.

If the runaways followed the dealers, I would move to new turf.

I wasn't taking on all Denver dealers, trying to shut down their business, I just wanted them to leave my kids alone.

I knew driving Hazel was stupid and I was considering dipping into the never growing mortgage fund that Nick never touched and buying something for patrol that was less conspicuous than a red cherry-conditioned Camaro. I just couldn't find the time.

I patrolled and kept my eyes peeled for a tail. There wasn't one.

Things were quiet. Some kids were out. It was cold, so not many weren't any dealers around.

I was considering going to the bar where I'd seen Darius last night, watching him, or just giving up, packing it in and getting some shuteye when I saw them.

Martin and Curtis, two runaways from King's. They were b

fourteen and twelve. They'd come in about a month after Park died. I knew it was because they heard about me (because of Sniff, everyone heard about me).

They hit my caseload, so I was working with them. They hadn't taken much and didn't spend the night at King's, but I was hoping for a breakthrough soon.

I watched as they ran out of an alley and down 15th Street. They were being followed by two dealers.

I knew the dealers. They weren't small time. They were serious players who

My heart started thumping and I followed them. The kids ducked into another alley and the dealers followed.

If I followed in Hazel, they'd see me. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad so I made a split-second decision.

Quickly, I parked on the street. I had my Mace in my pocket, my shotgun and Glock on the seat. I grabbed the Glock, exited the car and ran into the alley. I ran into the alley and hoped I wouldn't pee my pants.

By the time I got to them, Martin, the older brother, was wrestling with one of them, grunting and losing. The other one had his back against the wall.

Fuck.

I aimed my gun at the dealer on Curtis.

"Back off!" I shouted.

His head whipped around. The other one got Martin in a headlock and twisted him around violently so he could look at me.

Their names were Clarence and Jermaine, no street names that I knew.

d and I Clarence had Martin. Jermaine had Curtis.

me had I kept my gun and eye on Jermaine and channeled my internal mother.

told me “Back off,” I repeated, low.

for a “Holy shit!” Jermaine laughed. “It’s The Law.”

He pulled Curtis forward by his collar and slammed him viciously were the wall and I heard Curtis’s skull crack against the brick.

Um...

yers.

I...did...not...*think*...so.

ed into

My eyes narrowed and my head cocked to the sight of the gun.

In a serious, pissed-off voice, I said, “I’ll say it one more time. I good or go.”

To my surprise, he let him go. To my despair, he only did it so h tun gun come at me. left it

Martin was still struggling against the headlock, intermittently g tand-up and whining. His feral noises of fear were spurring me on by pissing even more. l Curtis

Curtis was standing frozen, likely partially dazed, partially scared s

“Watcha gonna do Law? Slash my tires? Throw a smoke bomb some shit on fire on my doorstep? You’re a fuckin’ joke,” Jermaine ta

Excuse me, I never lit poo on fire on someone’s doorstep. Th immature.

ck and

“Go. Now,” I returned, ignoring his words. “Leave the kids alone new of. go, no one will get hurt.”

“Fuck you, bitch,” Jermaine snarled and then came at me.

badass When he came at me, I switched my gun to the other hand knowing I would get physical just to prove a point. The big man subdued the silly woman.
Fuck him.

Right away he gave me my opening, throwing out his arm to grab me. I took it.

When he arrived at me, I grabbed his wrist and leaned down, coming under his arm. Using my leverage, his momentum and bulk, I twisted and flipped him up and around. He landed with a sickening thud on his back.

Without hesitation, I aimed and kicked him savagely between his legs. He let out a ferocious howl and curled into a fetal position. I put my boot on his neck and leaned my weight into it (maybe a little more weight than I should have, but I told myself that I was new to this and allowed myself some leeway).
Let him
e could

I lifted my head, my eyes slicing to Clarence. I switched my gun to my right hand, cupped it with my left and aimed.

roaning
me off
“Let him go,” I ordered.

Clarence was staring at me in shock, so much so he didn’t let Martin go.

I dropped my aim and fired. The bullet hit next to his left foot. He fell stiff.
? Light
nted.
at was

impact and jumped but he didn’t let Martin go.
I lifted my gun, aimed it at his head and cocked my own to the ready.
sight. “I said, let...him...go.”

He let Martin go.

. If you
Martin ran immediately to Curtis.

I stood aiming at Clarence, my boot still at the writhing Jermaine’s feet, and I wondered what the hell I should do now.

Then Clarence's eyes moved from their study of my gun to look at my shoulder.

"Holy fuck. It's true," Clarence whispered, but loudly so I could hear.

Like a sixth sense, I felt rather than saw Crowe coming up behind me. So I got up beside me and stopped, his eyes on the man at my boot.

I guessed I was wrong about not having a tail.

God, he was *good*.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a shadow move from behind Clarence. I focused and Mace arrived at the scene. He was looking at Vance. Hesight of Mace, I got over my admiration of Crowe.

This is just great, I thought with mental sarcasm.

"Did I see what I think I just saw?" Mace asked to Crowe.

"You saw it," Crowe replied then he looked at me.

It was dark. I couldn't read his eyes and didn't try. I looked back at Mace and Clarence.

Mace's eyes had cut to me. He stared at me a second and I could see the white flash in his mouth area that he grinned. Then he grabbed Clarence's wrist, twisted it around to his back and shoved him face first against the wall. He pulled some cuffs out of the back of his cargo pants and put them on Clarence.

"Stay," he said to Clarence as if he was a dog.

I dropped my gun and put it in the back waistband of my jeans.

"You can take your boot out of his neck now," Vance said to me.

I looked down. Jermaine was still curled up in apparent agony and wasn't going anywhere.

ver my “Whoops,” I muttered and lifted my foot.

Vance crouched and cuffed Jermaine. Mace had pulled a phone out of his pocket and he'd connected.

me. He “Luke. We got a pick up. Yeah, another couple from Law.” He faced the shadows and I heard him say, “You are not gonna fuckin’ believe t

I walked to Martin and Curtis. “You guys okay?”

They didn’t speak, just nodded, mouths open in disbelief.

Clarence. “Curtis, your head?” I asked.

At the He just kept nodding.

“Why were they chasing you?” I asked them.

They kept staring at me.

“Come on boys, spill. These are bad guys, worse than most. What are they doing chasing you?”

at Mace “We thought we’d help you go after the drug guys,” Curtis told me

“Yeah, we been followin’ them two for a while,” Martin threw a glance at me by pride.

Clarence’s Oh crap. Not this again.

the brick “All the kids are talkin’ ’bout doin’ it. We got sick of talkin’ about it,” Curtis went on.

“It’s so fuckin cool you’re workin’ with Crowe,” Martin said and turned to his brother. “Told you she was workin’ with Crowe.”

Curtis nodded but was silent, overwhelmed by the excitement of the moment. His eyes moving between me and Vance, who had pulled up Jermaine and not was positioning him against the wall next to Clarence.

My eyes returned to the kids. “Don’t say fuck and I’m not workin
it of his Crowe.”

“Yeah you are. I heard he’s, like, your man and you’re, like, his w
led into Martin replied.

his...” “Yeah, Sniff said that today you two were huggin’ at that bo
where they all hang out,” Curtis put in.

Damn Sniff and his mouth.

I looked at Vance and noticed he had turned to us. I didn’t know h
enough to guess his reaction to this latest fiasco, but if I’d had to g
wouldn’t have been him smiling wide like he was pleased about som
which was exactly what he was doing.

I sent him a look and turned back to the boys. “All right, kids, I
at were this straight. You two do not go out on the street and get in the faces
guys. Anyone else you hear talking about it, you tell them I said the s
: them. Do you hear me?” I said in my word-is-law voice.

in with “We hear you,” Curtis replied.

“No need. You workin’ with Crowe, and that Mace guy in on it
Martin added, trailing off, awe still in his voice.

so we “Streets’ll be clean in no time,” Curtis finished, like we were super

I looked back at Vance and he was still smiling.

I turned I rolled my eyes.

Headlights came from behind me. I turned and saw a black Ford E
f it all heading down the alley. It stopped close to us and Stark swung out
ine and driver’s side. A huge blond guy that looked like a relative of the big
Fortnum’s got out the passenger side. They walked up to us. Both c

ng with were grinning.

Martin and Curtis's mouths had dropped open again.

oman," "Goddammit," I hissed under my breath.

Just what I needed, Super Dude Stark and Paul Bunyan sweeping
okstore trash. The kids were going to talk about this until Christmas.

Mace re-emerged from the shadows just as the huge blond said,
Law, you ever take a night off?"

im well "The Law never takes a break," Curtis offered.

guess, it I looked skyward. As I was doing so, Vance approached me and cu
ething, arm around my neck, pulling me into the side of his body. Martin and
had trained their gazes on us, and again their mouths dropped open, b
et's get their eyes were bugged nearly clear out of their heads.

of bad "Knew you were his woman," Martin finally said.

same to I'd had enough. "You two know Hazel?" I asked.

More awestruck looks.

too..." "Your Camaro?" Curtis breathed.

heroes. "Yeah. She's parked on the street. Lock yourselves in until I ge
Tonight, you're sleeping at King's."

"We get to ride in Hazel?" Martin asked.

"Move!" I snapped.

xplorer They both ran.

t of the I turned toward Vance, which only succeeded in me curling into hi
man at I pulled back at the neck, but his arm didn't go anywhere so I gave up.

of them He was grinning down at me.

“Take your arm away,” I demanded.

He didn’t. Instead, he leaned in and kissed my forehead. This was a strange thing to do in the current situation, and I was so shocked I blinked at him.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Jesus, I’m just relieved that when you told me you knew what you were doing, you actually knew what you were doing.”

It wasn’t a well-lit alley, but I was pretty sure he was looking at me with a new respect. I felt a rush of warmth, starting at my belly and going out to my arms. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

The big blond guy and Mace were pushing Clarence and Jermaine toward the Explorer.

“Where are they taking them?” I asked.

“Don’t know. We still got Shard in the holding room. You’re challenging our capacity,” Vance replied.

“You...you...what do you mean you still have Shard? What’s a holding room?”

Vance was watching them load up Clarence and Jermaine. His eyes shifted down to me and his arm loosened, sliding from around my shoulders. I stepped back, but he kept me close with his fingers curled around my neck.

“I didn’t like the way Shard was lookin’ at you last night. We took the holding room in the offices to talk to him, convince him he didn’t deserve retribution. He’s being difficult.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

That did *not* sound good.

“Don’t worry, he won’t touch you,” Vance assured me, and I
; such a either they would talk him out of it or Vance would stop him. One way
by it, I other, he wouldn’t touch me. Something about the thought of that ma
rush of warmth intensify.

“So what about Clarence and Jermaine?” I asked.

e doin’, “They aren’t low level. We’ll need to talk to their people. Lee’s
taken his side in this. Whatever happens, you won’t feel it.”

ne with My head jerked in surprise and I stared at him in the shadows. “V
towards. you mean, Lee’s taken a side?”

“I mean he’s made it known where he stands,” Vance replied.

toward “And where does he stand?” I asked.

“By you.”

My breath caught and it was my turn for my mouth to drop open. “
lengingjoking.”

“Nope. Not a popular opinion. Hank and Chavez both want yo
holdingdown. They think you’re gonna get hurt, and vigilantism isn’t a big l
them. You aren’t real popular with Darius, either. Still, Lee
as came somethin’, that’s it,” Crowe said.

I pulled “Where do you stand?” I asked.

“Got your back when you’re on the street. The rest of the time
: him to tryin’ to talk you out of it.”

’t want I put my hands to my hips.

“I thought you just said I knew what I was doing?” I asked.

“He gave you a classic opening and you took advantage of it. He t
you were a joke. You kept your cool and did well, but word’ll get .

figured Somehow, with your shit, it gets around faster than most. People will try or they take you more seriously. Maybe take you as a challenge and look for a side that You won't get the same opening again."

"I'll be ready for it," I said. "That's not my only move."

Vance's shit-eating grin made an appearance.

already "So what you're sayin' is...you *wanted* to lose this morning when we were wrestling in bed?" Vance asked.

What do I opened my mouth to speak (or probably yell) when Luke materialized on our side.

He was smiling huge, no half-mouthed grin this time, and I knew I heard what Vance said.

Vance dropped his hand from my neck.

'You're "Hate to break up this lover's chat, but we gotta take these boys into account. I'm gonna speak for Law or you want me to do it?" he asked.

you shut "Speak for me?" I asked.

wait with "I'll do it," Vance said, ignoring me.

decides "Speak for me?" I repeated.

"You givin' her your protection?" Luke asked, ignoring me too.

"Speak for me?" I said again then I hesitated, my eyes narrowed. I'll be went on, "Protection?"

"Yeah," Vance answered Luke's protection question.

"Um...protection?" I asked.

Mace arrived at us. "Tell them she's got mine too," he said.

thought "Excuse me...boys?" I cut in.
around.

begin to Vance looked at Luke. “What about you?” he asked.

or you. “I’m in,” Luke replied.

“Helloooooo?” I called.

“You want to call Lee, make it official?” Mace asked.

I gave up, crossed my arms on my chest and tapped my toe.

hen we “Yeah,” Luke answered on a short laugh. “He’s at dinner with
Roxie, Hank, Ally, Tex and his parents. Welcome to Denver for Roxi
lized at probably ready to murder someone about now. He’d kill to get a high
call.”

new he The guys looked at each other with amused faces.

“Um, pardon me, but it *is* after midnight. I doubt they’re still at di
informed them.

in. You They all looked at me.

“Shit,” Mace muttered.

“Probably shouldn’t call him then,” Luke half-grinned.

These guys.

“Does someone want to tell me what you’re talking about?” I asked.

“We’ll leave that to Crowe. Later,” Luke said then he de-mater
d and I poof, gone.

Same with Mace.

I didn’t ask how these boys seemed to appear and disappear
apparently moving. I had more important things on my mind.

“What’s that mean, speaking for me and protection?” I asked,
fully to Vance.

“Jermaine and Clarence work for the same guy. Not good to have boys in a showdown with a white woman in an alley and they get Normally, Princess, you could expect retribution. Someone’s gotta hit him to convince him not to send someone to put a bullet in your brain someone is me.”

I didn’t say anything, partially because I didn’t want to think about a bullet in my brain, and partially because he called me “Princess.”

“At the same time I make this rumor of you and me bein’ partners. He’s give you my protection and they’ll take that into consideration before anyone, thinks to move on you. It’ll mean a fuck of a lot more with M. priority Luke in. It’ll mean even more if Lee throws down.”

“Princess?” I I knew he was saying serious stuff, but the only thing I could think was, “Princess?”

He got close, his hands went to my hips and pulled them to his waist. He looked down at me.

“You understand what I just said to you?” he asked softly.

I nodded but said, “Princess?”

He grinned and got closer, his shadowed face blocking out the amount of light.

His voice still soft, he said, “You sleep in that big bed, wearin’ some nightgowns, all those fancy sheets and pillows and fancy furniture without living room. You live like a fuckin’ princess.”

“I’m not a princess,” I whispered.

“You are to me.” turning

Oh my *God*.

ve your I didn't say anything, *couldn't* say anything. I just stood there and
bested.at his shadowed face.

talk to He kissed my forehead and murmured, "Get your kids home."
n. That And then he too vanished into the night.

about a

s true. I
they, or
ace and

κ to say

and he

e small

oft, lacy

: in the

I didn't say anything, *couldn't* say anything. I just stood there and stared at his shadowed face.

He kissed my forehead and murmured, "Get your kids home."

And then he too vanished into the night.

SEVEN



WEAR SOMETHING NICE

The minute I swung into King's the next morning I knew the escapade had already made the rounds.

There were twice as many kids there than yesterday. They all looked at me when I walked in and the room went wired.

"Goddammit," I muttered under my breath.

"Hey, Law!" Curtis shouted from across the room.

I walked to him, ignoring the eyes that followed my progress.

"How's your head?" I asked.

"Good," he answered, grinning at me like a fool.

"You have a headache, dizzy at all?"

"Nope, nothin'."

"You feel dizzy, you tell someone, yeah?"

He nodded.

I turned to Martin, who was standing beside him. "You okay?" I asked.

"Definitely," he nodded, pleased as punch to be a central character in the crusade.

I shook my head, shoved his shoulder, turned and saw May bearing

on me like a storm cloud. Without a word she grabbed my arm, drag
across the room and into the quiet hall.

“Thought you said you weren’t partnered with Crowe?” she asked
bright again.

But this time her excitement was mixed with a shade of anger at not
being in the loop.

“Um...” I mumbled.

night’s “And what’s this I hear ’bout you two havin’ a date? You go out on
with Crowe last night and didn’t tell me?” she kept on.

oked at “It wasn’t a date, as such,” I hedged.

“You spend time with him last night, outside of kickin’ black boy
ass, that is?”

“Well...yeah,” I admitted.

“He get in your panties?” she was relentless.

“May!”

“Well, did he?”

“No,” I answered.

“Did he try?” she went on.

My eyes slid away.

This was none of her business, of course, but one didn’t really
;ked. against May. She might be a soft touch, but she was also a mother her
nosy, straight-talking one at that.

r in my “Hon,” she started, and I noticed her anger was gone. “This is the
g down news I’ve heard all month, maybe all year.”

ged me My eyes came back to her.

“What?” I asked.

d, eyes “You need a man. Don’t know why the boys aren’t crawlin’ all ov
way you look. Hate to see you lonely, livin’ your life for a bunch o
t being most of ’em won’t give you the time of day. Every girl needs to get he
and get it regular if she can. You need a life outside this place, and
hear of him, you settle him down a bit, Crowe might be just the boy to
n a date to you.”

I thought for a second about the herculean task of “settling” Crow
a bit. It almost made me laugh. And then I looked at May’s face and c
against it.

r dealer “May, it isn’t like that.”

She just looked at me.

“May it was just one, kind of, date,” I told her.

“He ask you out again?”

“Um...” I hesitated, and May leaned threateningly closer.
tonight,” I admitted.

“Mm-hmm,” she mumbled, crossing her arms and nodding at me.

I stared at her a beat.

r go up Whatever.

1, and a Time to move on.

“I have work to do,” I said.

he best She stopped me as I tried to move away.

“You really flip Jermaine on his back and kick him in the ball.

whispered.

Slowly, I nodded.

“Girl, you’re workin’ on becomin’ famous.” She smiled and let me
Famous was not what I was going for, but I figured infamous was
where I was headed.

I went in search of Sniff and Roam and found them in their bedroom
I stuck my head in and said, “I want you both here all day. Later
going to talk.”

“Hey, Law,” Sniff called. “Fuckin’ cool what you did last night.”

I gave him a look. “Stop saying fuck,” I ordered.

Sniff grinned.

I looked at Roam. He was smiling at me.

I couldn’t help myself. I smiled back.



IT WAS NIGH ON IMPOSSIBLE to get any work done. Kids and colleagues
“Yeah, approached me. Some asked flat out if what they’d heard about last night
true (those were my kids). Some skirted the issue and looked at me
might be a touch crazy (those were my colleagues).

I did my best to talk it down, making it sound like your normal, a
everyday drive through town in the middle of the night when
coincidentally find yourself running into two drug dealers and confront
them in an alley with a Glock (though I didn’t mention the Glock).

Furthermore, my mind kept racing forward to that night, when
going out with (and then getting laid by) Vance Crowe. I still hadn’t
s?” she with a delay tactic and the flight to Nicaragua was looking more and

appealing as the day wore on.

I took two appointments with kids. I called a couple parents, did paperwork, and along with the talk of my adventure last night, I heard the whisperings that the kids thought it was so cool some of them wanted out for themselves. This was regardless of my warning to Martin and C

I wanted to ignore it and hope it was all talk, but it was beginning to become clear that I wouldn't get that choice.

May approached me after lunch. "Hon, you're gonna have somethin'. You can't ignore this. You tell them not to do it, they won't. They look up to you. They'll listen to you."

I looked at her, not certain she was right. The kids never listened to anyone. My word might be law in the shelter, but it didn't hold the same weight when it came to the street.

Then I looked across my cubicle to Andy, the other full-time worker. He heard May and silently nodded his head. That was when I realized May was right.

Damn.

I pushed back my chair.

The rec room was still packed when May and I entered it, and everyone's eyes swiveled to me.

May clapped her hands and announced, "Quiet, ya'll. Eyes on Law. I got somethin' to say. Clarice, you turn off that TV. We need your attention." When Clarice, a heavysset, sixteen-year-old black girl that I was pulled from The Mall a few months ago flipped off the TV and all eyes locked on me, May turned to me and said, "Go on, hon. Tell it like it is."

I didn't know how to tell it like it was, but I looked at the kids standing around me and I knew I had to try.

"All right, folks, listen up," I began. "We hear you talking about trying to avenge Park. But I'm telling you right now you're not going to do it. I see any of you kids on the streets, getting into different kinds of trouble than you normally find, I'll shut you down myself. Got me?"

I was channeling Crowe Speak to make my point. Nothing gets through to say across like talking like a badass mother when they thought you weren't do it, mother.

They all just stared at me.

"Got me?" I snapped.

The door opened, but I ignored it, thinking that it was just more arriving.

"Where's Shard?" someone called to me. "He ain't on the street, I knew Nightingale torturing him?"

"Yeah, you bring 'em down and the Nightingale guys take 'em and make 'em pay. Is that how it is?" someone else threw in.

I looked at the ceiling, then I looked at May, then I looked back at the room.

Where did they get this shit?

"No, the Nightingale Investigation Team is *not* torturing Shard," I answered.

At least, I didn't think they were.

"Where is he then?" another kid called out.

"I don't know, maybe at church, praying for his sins," I replied.

aring at Some kids laughed. One kid called out another question.

“You flip Jermaine like they said? Kick him in the nuts?”

t going “I’m not discussing what happened last night,” I said in my word
t going voice.

inds of “She did, it was fucking awesome,” Curtis called out, ignoring my
is-law voice.

ie word “Yeah and she shot at Clarence, right by his foot. Swear to C
badass jumped like a spider. He was *all* freaked out. Thought he’d shit in his
Martin added.

“Boys, quiet. Curtis, don’t say fuck. Martin, don’t say shit.”
addressed the entire room. “This conversation is over.”

re kids I was losing their attention. Something had caught it and several
kids were looking toward the door.

eets. Is I forged ahead to finish my point. “I’ll say it one last time. Not one
goes on the streets looking for trouble. You do...” I hesitated, not
in andbadass threatening. Then I remembered what Vance said to me when
at his Harley. “There’ll be consequences.”

κ at the They weren’t paying attention at all anymore. Most of the kids
staring at the door, some with wide eyes, some with mouths hanging o

“Sweet baby Jesus,” May breathed from beside me.

ard,” I I looked at the door.

Vance, Lee and Luke were all standing there.

Vance was wearing a black turtleneck, faded jeans, black cowboy boots,
and a black leather jacket that hung over his hips. His hair, as usual,
pulled back in a ponytail at the base of his neck, and above all, he look

He also looked like he was about ready to burst out laughing.

Lee was standing next to him, wearing an olive drab V-necked sweater over a white T-shirt under it, jeans, boots and a clay-colored suede jacket.

Luke was next to Lee wearing head to toe black, a tight black T-shirt with a word you could see stretching across his pecs under his black motorcycle jacket, black cargo pants and black boots.

Lee and Luke also looked highly amused. It was clear they'd heard the word.

"Goddammit," I muttered under my breath.

The boys advanced into the room coming at me. The kids were mesmerized, their heads moving with the progress of the Nightingale March.

"Hi, boys," I said when they arrived.

Luke half grinned. Lee's eyes crinkled. Vance smiled at me flat out.

"Law," Vance replied.

I rolled my eyes at him for using my street name. If it could be believed, he looked even *more* amused at my eye roll.

"Hon," May said from beside me, sounding slightly breathy. I looked at her and she was taking in the boys. "Hon," she repeated. "Oh my, honey, she was just looking at Crowe."

"May," I said sharply to break through the Crowe Effect.

She blinked and looked at me. "What?"

"Snap out of it," I whispered to her.

She shook her head. "Yeah, yeah, right."

I introduced her. "Boys, this is May. May, this is Vance Crowe. He's a little bit hot."

Nightingale and Luke Stark.”

They all turned amused looks to her.

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times and then said in a breathy voice, “Hi, ya’ll.”

I looked at Vance and shook my head. He just gave me one of his

This made my belly flutter, especially when my mind took that unfocused every moment to fast forward to what was supposed to happen later that night. It was like he read my mind and his grin turned wicked. I frowned. When so, I wasn’t sure, but it looked like he was again trying hard not to laugh.

“We need to talk,” Lee cut in to Vance’s and my bizarre non-exchange, but he was looking around at all the kids watching us. “You somewhere private?” he asked when he turned to me.

May threw up a hand. “I’ll go check. See if one of the counseling rooms is open. Won’t be a minute.” Then she whirled and trotted off.

I looked back at The Boys. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Private,” Luke said, and at this single word I sucked in my lips thinking this was not good.

“Hey, Crowe,” Sniff greeted, as if Crowe was his best friend and he hung out all the time.

He came up on one side of me.

Roam silently moved in at my other side.

“Sniff,” Crowe replied then he looked at Roam who was standing between Vance and I. “Roam,” he said.

Roam nodded his greeting.

“Throw rocks at any dealers lately?” Crowe asked.

Roam's body jerked, not sure if Crowe was fucking with him in
way or a bad way, and I watched them both closely.

id in a "No," Roam answered hesitantly.

"Too bad," Luke put in. "Shard won't forget *you* anytime soon."

s grins. Roam's eyes swung to Luke and I saw hope fill them for a second
fortunatehe hid it.

light. It "Yeah?" Roam asked, trying to be cool.

en I did "Yeah," Luke answered. "Not sure that's a good thing, kid. We
gh.
go, he may come lookin' for you."

nverbal Roam's body went stiff, whether from fear or what he thought
ou have admonishment from Stark, I couldn't tell.

rooms "That won't happen," Crowe offered casually, but there was a
undercurrent to his words as if he would personally be looking out for

Roam's eyes skidded to Vance and the hope in them lasted long
time. I felt what was becoming a familiar warmth start to spread thro
hinkingas I looked between Vance and Roam.

nd they "You studyin'?" Vance asked him.

Roam nodded.

"You are not, Roam," Sniff put in, ever the big mouth.

"Shut up, Sniff," Roam hissed, then looked at Crowe. "I'm gonna
diploma. Then I'll come lookin' for you."

tanding Vance's eyes moved to me. "Likely you won't have to come look
said.

Oh my *God*.

a good What in *the hell* did that mean?

I stared at him. The warmth had turned to fire and I stopped breath

Sniff was looking between Vance and me.

“You guys gonna get married or somethin’?” Sniff asked.

l before My eyes unlocked from Vance’s and my head snapped around to
Sniff. I let out my breath in a whoosh, using all my strength not to s
the life out of him.

let him “Sniff!” I clipped, my body burning for an entirely different

“Why on earth would you say such a thing?”

was an “What?” he asked, all innocent, looking at me. “It could happen.
be, like, your pall bearer or something.”

a fierce I heard Luke chuckle. I knew it was amusing. However, I the
Roam. would be a lot more amusing if it was happening to someone else.

ger this “Ring bearer, stupid. A pall bearer carries a casket,” Roam to
ugh me “And anyway, you’re too old to be a ring bearer. You could be an
They seat people.”

“How you know all this shit about weddings?” Sniff asked, an
didn’t wait for an answer but kept right on talking, as usual. “Just as lo
get to wear one of them fancy suits. Those are *the shit*.”

get my “Stop saying shit,” I cut in, having had enough. “Don’t you boys l
appointment with the tutor about now?”

in’,” he Sniff grinned at me. “Yeah.”

“Well then, go.” I took a deep breath and turned back to the Nigh
Boys.

As I guessed, they were all looking at me with their amused faces.

Whatever.

ing. I looked to Roam to tell him to go to the tutor, but he was looking at Crowe.

glare at “See you around?” Roam asked, not quite able to hide the craving in his voice, and I sucked in a breath.

strangle Crowe just looked at him and I felt my heart begin to pound. Then he lifted his hand and palm out, he shoved Roam’s head to the side in those macho-man to mini-macho-man head-cuffs.

reason. Crowe’s hand dropped and he murmured, “Yeah.”

I could Roam’s face split into a huge smile. His glance skidded along Lu Lee and he turned. His smile hit me and he walked away, but before he purposefully bumped me with his shoulder in a teenage boy shoulder that was meant to show affection without really showing it. Then he walked away, throwing an arm around Sniff’s neck, putting him in a headlock taking Sniff with him before Sniff could say anything (else) stupid.

ld him. I looked at Vance and felt the clouds that followed my life crack open once and gorgeous sunlight beamed down on me.

ush. I’d asked him to be nice to the kid, show him some attention. He had gone way beyond the call of duty.

ave an I could have kissed him. Of course, I did not.

May jogged up to us.

“Blue room’s free,” she announced.

tingale “Thanks, May,” I said, pushing down my thoughts of kissing him, thinking maybe simply thanking him was a better way to go and lead the Nightingale Boys to the blue room.

I opened the door to the blue room and let them precede me.

king at I caught Crowe by the arm before he went inside and whispered, this, I want to talk to you.”

g in his He looked at me closely for a beat trying to read me, but I kept my blank as I could. Then he nodded. Crowe and I went in and I closed the door behind us.

one of There was a couch and a table with some chairs around it. No one didn’t either.

“What’s going on?” I asked Lee.

ike and “Darius wants a meet,” Lee told me, not leading into it, just said he straight out.

r bump My mouth dropped open. Then I snapped it shut because I figured a badass mother wouldn’t stare with her mouth open.

ck and “With me?” I asked stupidly. They hadn’t come all the way to the to tell me Darius wanted to meet with the Queen of England.

pen for “Yeah. It’ll be you and Vance, Darius and me. Tomorrow night. Can you fit that into your ass-kicking schedule?” Lee inquired.

ad, but Luke chuckled again. I frowned at Luke and he quit chuckling, gave me one of his sexy half-grins. I turned back to Lee.

“What’s this meet about?” I asked.

Vance was standing at my side. Close to my side. Not close-closetogether, but close enough.

Crowe, “He’s got an offer he wants to make you,” Lee answered.

ling the “What kind of offer?” I pushed.

“Don’t know. He hasn’t shared. He wants you off the street and

willing to negotiate,” Lee told me.

“After I stared at him. This was an interesting turn of events.

“What does that mean, negotiate? Is he going to offer me more money?” I asked, my face as pressed.

“Likely,” Luke said and my eyes cut to him. Then they went back to the door.

“Forget it. I’m not taking money,” I declared, and I felt Vance glance at me as he sat so close beside me.

In fact, the entire room got tense.

“Law—” Lee started.

“No way. Forget it,” I stated in my word-is-law voice.

“Take the meet. Listen to what he has to say,” Lee advised.

“I’m not going to sit down with a drug dealer and listen to him come up to me and tell me money he’s made by destroying people’s lives. No. That is *not* going to happen,” I stated.

“Law, this is a game,” Lee informed me. “You entered the game, now you have to play it. You don’t take the meet, it’s disrespect. Darius would do that.”

“Do I care?” I asked.

Vance came closer and turned his body into mine, cutting Lee out of my sight.

“Take the meet, Jules,” he said.

I looked up at him and opened my mouth to speak, but he got there first.

“Take the meet. Listen to what he has to say. You can say no. That’s fine, but he’s

can tell him what you want. Maybe we can come to a compromise, not. You don't take the meet, everyone will lose," Vance went on.

ney?" I "What do I have to lose?" I asked.

"You don't want to go up against Darius. You do, since we made positions clear last night, that puts us against him. That means war with Lee. caught in the middle and the middle is an uncomfortable place." et tense closer and his voice dropped. "Jules, we're talkin' war between Lee and Darius. You don't want to be the cause of that."

Again I opened my mouth to speak, but he kept going, voice ever eyes intense. I'd never seen him so intense (well he was normally a trifle intense, but this was something else). So I stared at him.

"It'd be like Sniff goin' bad and Roam challengin' him to a death offering. In that situation, nobody wins. Do you understand what I'm sayin' to you?" I kept staring at him and it came to me. Eddie Chavez, Lee Night and Darius Tucker, all friends, all close, just like Park, Roam and me, now guessed that somewhere along the line, Darius turned, went bad. Reg'n't like Eddie and Lee stayed close to him, such was their bond. It was precious. Something would eventually test it, something just like this was bound to happen. You couldn't have a cop, a PI and a drug dealer remain off from without it going sour somewhere along the line.

But I didn't want it to be me that made it go sour.

I nodded to Vance. "I'll take the meet."

before His lips turned up at the ends and I knew he approved. I got that feeling again, but kept my face blank and he moved away from me.

then you Lee and Luke were watching me, not amused anymore.

maybe “Is everything okay with Jermaine and Clarence?” I asked.

“Vance took care of you,” Luke answered. “You need to be safe, th

“You get in a situation like last night, you call backup before goi
ade ourLee added.

ith you “Backup?” I asked.

He got “Vance will give you the number,” Lee stated, but didn’t ans
ee and question.

I lower, I turned to Vance. “Backup?”

lways a “You call the Nightingale control room,” Vance explained. “On
will take your back.”

match. Oh my God.

rou?” Were they serious?

tingale “That isn’t necessary,” I announced.

Sniff. I Lee was making a move to go.

ardless, “You’ve been smart so far. Don’t be stupid now,” he warned, th
arious, talk was over. He jerked his head to Luke and Vance, and Luke
ound to move.

friends “In a minute,” Vance said.

They glanced at him. Lee nodded. Luke grinned. They closed th
when they left.

Vance turned, and with his eyes on me and us being alone, I totally
t warm why I asked to talk to him in the first place.

“Jules?”

With effort, I cleared my head. “Um, I just wanted to say...” I lost

got it back again. “Thanks. You didn’t have to go that far with Roar
ough.” appreciate it.”

ing in,” The air changed. Vance’s macho man forcefield clicked on and
swear my body leaned into him a bit.

Then his eyes got soft and sexy. My belly fluttered.

ver my His voice came at me, smooth as silk. “You want to thank me, y
want to thank me, you don’t say it to me. You show me.”

I stared. “Sorry?”

e of us He didn’t explain, he just said, “Come here.”

Without hesitation, I went to him, such was the power of the forcef

When I made it to him, one of his arms went around my waist. H
hand twisted around and around in my ponytail, fisted, and he pulled n
back gently.

Then he said, “Kiss me.”

nen our My belly plummeted.

made a “Sorry?” I repeated, this time in a whisper.

His face came so close I could feel his lips against mine.

“Kiss me,” he said there.

ne door Oh crap.

I wasn’t sure I even knew how to kiss someone.

y forgot “Vance—” I breathed.

“Kiss me. Now,” he ordered.

I kissed him. I had no idea what I was doing, but I just went t
t it then figured it was better to get it over with because I was learning fast that

n and I wouldn't let it go.

I put my arms around his neck, grasping my right wrist in my left. I could lift up on my toes a bit, just as I put pressure on his neck. I opened my mouth under his, going for the gusto, but in the back of my head I wondered I should start small.

ou ever Apparently I made the right choice. His mouth opened immediately, his tongue slid inside and that was all I had to do. That was the extent of the kiss.

field. Vance walked me back quickly. I slammed against the wall, tightened at my hair and his other hand slid down over my bottom. He pressed me against him. He forced my tongue out of his mouth and slid his other tongue into mine.

ly head It felt so damned good I fit my body to his, pressing in close, or curling around his neck and the other hand pushing inside his jacket. I was wrapped around his waist then it went tight.

It got a little hot and heavy after that. There was some groping (on Vance's part) and maybe a few throat moans (on my part), and then my mouth tore free.

He pulled back, just an inch, and he stared at me, his eyes wide. Something strange there, almost like surprise.

I stared back. We were both breathing heavily.

Finally he muttered, "Jesus."

He could say that again.

for it. I I felt hot—everywhere—and I was pretty certain my stomach evacuated my body.
t Vance

“I should have broke in last night, woke you up, fucked you with my hand. I couldn’t breathe. I thought about it. I should have fuckin’ done it.”

Oh my *God*.

He said this like he was talking to himself. Still, I heard it and it came out.

“Vance—” I whispered.

“Save it,” he cut me off. “Tonight. Six thirty.”

Then the tractor beam switched off.

His chin lifted, he kissed my forehead and he said, “Wear something nice.”

He let me go, but his hand wrapped around mine. The warmth of his hand in mine, the strength I felt there, the intimacy of the gesture took my arm guard.

Okay, so we’d necked, groped, laid in my bed (of all places) and I’d held him at gunpoint and he’d beat me at wrestling. Even though that all passed between us, his holding my hand made a statement that went beyond the cat and mouse game we seemed to be playing since we laid on each other.

I didn’t know if you held hands with a woman you intended to sleep and then leave, which Crowe had a reputation for doing. He slept with who he conquered, he left.

Furthermore, I had no girlfriends to ask. I didn’t expect this was a normal conversation that either Zip or Heavy would be delighted to get into with me.

Though, if I were to guess, my answer would be no.

I didn’t know what to do with this and I was struggling to process

until you he turned us to the door, and in the window to the room that faced the
saw several kids (and I could swear May as well) quickly move away
heard movement and giggling and then nothing.

flipped “Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath.

Vance just looked down at me, wearing his arrogant, shit-eating grin.

And all of a sudden I had new things to worry about. This made
include, my soon-to-be-fucking by Vance Crowe, everyone at King’s
about our make-out session, what it meant that Vance held my hand,
fact that I had absolutely nothing “nice” to wear on our date.

nothing



LATER THAT AFTERNOON I cornered Roam and Sniff. Roam was looking
his hand funny. Sniff was grinning.

me off “Hey, Law,” Sniff said.

I pushed his shoulder and then swung my gaze between the both of
talked. “I got a favor to ask you two.”

his had “Anything, Law,” Sniff said immediately.

at went “Depends on what it is,” Roam said cautiously.

hid eyes I sat down on the arm of the chair that Sniff was sitting in.

ep with “You hear anyone talking about going out at night—” I started.

aw, he “We ain’t snitchin’,” Roam broke in.

I shook my head. “I don’t want you to snitch. I want you to tell the
topic of bad idea. Talk them out of it. They’ll listen to you.”

ith me. “They’d listen to Park,” Sniff put in.

I turned to Sniff. “Now they’ll listen to you.”

it when Sniff looked like he didn’t believe me and he threw a glance at Roam.

hall we ay. We in. “Like it or not,” I began, “Park left you something. You two have been on the street longer than most and seen more than most, including finding Park and knowing the Nightingale. You can ignore that, use it the wrong way or use it the right way. I’m counting on you to do the right thing. That’s it. Now it’s your choice.”

my list hearing something, anything, but they gave me nothing so I gave up.

and the “All right, I said my piece.” I got up from the chair preparing to leave. Roam stopped me from leaving.

“Law,” he called.

g at me I looked down at him. He and Sniff exchanged another glance and hesitated like he didn’t know what to say or didn’t want to say what was next.

if them. “Yeah?” I prompted.

Roam took a breath. “Careful of Crowe.”

Sniff looked at his feet.

“Sorry?” I asked.

Roam got up and looked down on me.

Sniff got up too, but he was inching away.

“He’s a player,” Roam told me. “Heard about you two. Even me, it’s all over the place talking about it. He’s movin’ in fast.”

I could tell he was uncomfortable.

So was I, so I cut in. “Roam, don’t worry about me. It’s not—”

“He’s a player,” Roam interrupted me.

am.

ve been “Roam—”

en a lot “He’s a player,” he repeated. “Everybody knows it. He wants a p
e Boys.your ass.”

asking “Roam!” I snapped.

ited for “That’s all he wants.” Roam was a dog with a bone.

“I think I know what I’m doing,” I said, even though I didn’t, bu
could not believe I was getting a talking to from a fifteen-year-old boy
go, but

So he had more earth-shattering life experiences than your average
Still.

and he “Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Roam finished, and before I co
it came anything he and Sniff moved away.

I watched them go and I was trying to get my mind around w
happened when I heard an exclamation from across the room.

“Sugar, I just *love* that sweater! Where’d you get it?”

I turned to look at the front door, and Indy, Jet, Roxie, Daisy
beautiful brunette who looked like a female version of Lee Nightinga
standing there. Daisy was addressing Clarice, who was wearing a big
pink sweater.

“Stole it,” Clarice declared boldly to Daisy.

ryone’s Daisy didn’t even blink. “Okay then, where did you steal it?” Tl
turned to Indy. “Gotta get me one of those. It’d go *perfect* with my ne
cowboy boots.” She turned back to Clarice. “You steal another one,
my size is medium.”

“Daisy!” Jet exclaimed.

“What?” Daisy asked.

Clarice stared at her like she'd dropped to earth from another galaxy. She walked up to them.

"Hey, Jules," Indy said when I arrived.

"Hi. Um..." I didn't know what to say.

Roxie smiled at me. "Thought we'd pop by, say hi."

"I'm Ally Nightingale." The brunette offered her hand and I shook it. I was surprised by her last name.

"Hey," I greeted then turned to Daisy. "Sorry about this, but you probably shouldn't encourage the kids to steal. We try to talk them out of that kind of thing."

Daisy looked at me for a beat then turned to Clarice. "What's your name, sugar?"

"Clarice," Clarice told her.

"Well, I'm Daisy. You go back to that shop, you let me know when you're there. You have a cell?"

Clarice nodded.

"Give it to me, I'll program in my number," Daisy told her.

I stared, and so did Indy, Roxie, Jet and Ally.

Street tough Clarice, looking a little dazed, gave Daisy her cell number. When she had a whole time Daisy punched in numbers, she talked. "We won't steal anything, we'll just browse. Then maybe go get a coffee. You drink coffee, sugar, darlin'."

"Um..." Clarice mumbled.

"I'll get you a soda. That pink really suits your coloring. You go home." Daisy went on.

alaxy. I Clarice continued to stare and only blinked when Daisy handed h
her phone.

Then Daisy turned to me.

Obviously ready to move on, she asked, “You got a place to talk?”

I nodded, thinking maybe this was the weirdest day in my life.

κ it, not “Sure,” I replied.

“What’s goin’ on?” May trundled up to us looking amongst the hot
robablyand being clear she wanted in on the ground floor of any new eve
kind ofrocked my life.

I introduced her. “May, this is Daisy, Ally, Roxie, Indy and Jet
r name,this is May. She’s a volunteer here.”

They all did their greetings and Daisy repeated, “We gotta talk, gi
got somewhere private?”

and I’ll “Blue room’s still open,” May put in immediately, and I added Ma
top of my ever growing mental list of people I wanted to murder.

“Well, what are we waitin’ for?” Daisy asked and then shoved f
like she owned the place and knew exactly where she was going.

May pushed up next to her and we all followed.

and the When we got to the blue room, May closed the door behind us a
ything, time everyone settled into a seat like they were going to spend the day
r?” girlie talk in a counseling room at a shelter for runaways. Daisy, A
Roxie sat on the couch. Indy, Jet and May pulled chairs around to
Daisy patted the arm of the couch next to her, and with no other optio
t flair,” running screaming from the room, which I wanted to do, but though
be rude), I sat on it.

er back “What’s up?” I asked.

“We just came to see how you’re doing,” Indy answered. “You oka

I looked at her confused, not knowing what she was really asking.

“Yeah,” I said.

“We heard about last night...and, um, the night before,” Jet put in.

I switched my gaze to Jet. “What’d you hear?”

t chicks “That you’re one kickass bitch, that’s what we heard. You c
ent that somethin’?” Daisy asked, clearly not in the mood to beat around the bu
the other women.

. Guys, “No,” I replied, my eyes narrowing as I looked down at her.

Daisy took my narrowed look and it bounced off her like she was r
rl. YouTeflon.

“All right, sugar, I believe you,” she said then giggled and it sound
y to the tinkly bells.

“We hear you’re going out with Vance,” Ally put in.

forward My eyes moved to her. “Not exactly,” I replied.

They all looked disappointed.

“Yes you are,” May threw in. “You had a date with him last night.”

nd this They all perked up.

y doing “You had a date last night with Vance?” Indy asked.

lly and I opened my mouth to say something when Roxie cut in. “Tha
face it. on (likecool!” Then she leaned toward me. “What’s a date with Vance like?”

t might “It wasn’t exactly a date,” I told her, feeling weird, mainly becau
was weird. “We watched Monday Night Football with my uncle a

talked.”

ay?” They all looked disappointed again.

“You were necking with him like a teenager in this very room couple of hours ago. I saw you my damned self,” May carried on, spill my secrets.

I widened my eyes in a “shut up” look at her and noticed the hot had all gone perky again.

razy or
ish like “I bet he’s a good kisser,” Ally said.

“I bet he’s a good everything,” Daisy put in. “You get anything else from him?”

nade of Was this really happening? I didn’t even know these people.

led like “Um...” I muttered. It wasn’t any of her business, but I didn’t want to appear rude.

“Oh come on, share. You’re among friends,” Ally told me, even though I knew her less than the other four, and I didn’t know the other four at all.

I didn’t do girl talk, or at least I hadn’t really done it since college. I didn’t know where to begin, and anyway, it was important to note (and I didn’t even know these people).

” “Maybe you should understand something,” Indy said, watching me closely. “Lee and I are getting married.”

I just looked at her. I didn’t know how that information made a difference. It was a little more understandable.

“Congratulations,” I said.

use this “Eddie and I are living together,” Jet put in.

and then I looked at her, guessing she was talking about Eddie Chavez.

wondering why she shared this information.

She kept talking. “We met, like, five months ago. Then I had a situation where a loan shark was after my dad but came after me, then another guy tried to rape me and then—”

“I’m still sorry about that, sugar,” Daisy interrupted.

“It wasn’t your fault, Daisy,” Jet assured her, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

“Still, he was workin’ for my husband. I feel responsible,” Daisy went on.

“Don’t,” Jet said on a dazzling smile.

I watched this conversation wondering if maybe *they* were a little when Roxie butted in.

“I’m living with Hank, Lee’s brother. We met each other less than six months ago. I moved from Chicago. My ex was kind of a jerk—”

“Kind of? He was a first class jerk,” Ally threw in. “He was more like a grade A prime asshole.”

Roxie smiled at her. “Yeah, well, anyway,” she looked back at me again. “Point is he kidnapped me and then, after I was rescued, he stalked me like a nightmare. Vance was the one who rescued me. Tracked me down, found me handcuffed to a sink in a sleazebag motel in Nebraska. He was so cool about it, took me to an outlet mall on the way home and everything I didn’t even have to ask.”

I nodded, not knowing what to say. Stalking ex-boyfriends, kidnappers, rapists, outlet malls. It was too bizarre for words.

Indy smiled at me. “We know you know Lee. Well, Lee, Eddie and they’re all part of our tribe. Vance is too. What we’re saying is yep, and

sucked in by one of the boys, you're part of our tribe too."

ad this "We're the Rock Chick Welcome Wagon," Ally noted on a grin.

n some "See, these guys move kind of fast," Jet added.

"It can make you dizzy," Roxie said.

"So you need your girls around you," Indy finished.

l giving I looked to May to see how she was taking all of this and she was
at me like a loon.

went on. Maybe she *was* a loon.

Maybe *all* of them were loons.

e crazy "So, what's goin' on with you and Vance? Spill, sugar. We're h
you," Daisy told me.

ian two My eyes settled on her and it struck me immediately that she was
saying that. I realized with some intuitive clarity that they weren't her
e like a nosy and interfering. They meant all this shit.

I opened my mouth to tell them it was none of their business, to gu
re, "the heart like an emotional Rottweiler, when, just like I did with Zip blurt
. It was my plan to save all the runaways from drug dealers, I told them everyth
wn and *Everything.*

as very From the minute Vance cornered me in the alley to when he was l
ng, and my hand. I held nothing back. I even told them I was a virgin.

apping, When I was done, they were all staring at me with wide eyes ar
mouths.

l Hank, "Shit," Daisy breathed then swung her head to Roxie. "He mov
you get faster than Hank."

“You can say that again,” Roxie replied.

“You’re a virgin?” Ally asked, eyes still huge.

“I can’t think about that right now,” I said to Ally. “It’s one thing time. He told me I should wear something nice. I don’t have anything. The only nice thing I have is a dress I wore to a colleague’s wedding years ago, and it’s a summer dress and it’s November. I can’t wear a summer dress in November. And anyway, I don’t even know what ‘nice’ means.”

“Well, I can help with that,” Indy announced and looked at Ally. “I’ll call Tod and Stevie.”

“I’ll help with the outfit,” Roxie put in, and Indy nodded.

“I’ll do your makeup,” Jet said on a smile.

“I’ll do your hair,” Daisy offered.

“No!” Indy, Ally and Jet all cried in unison, making everyone else

“I’ll do your hair,” Indy declared firmly.

“She gives good hair,” Ally informed me.

“You got her outfit,” Daisy complained. “You can’t have her hair. What am I gonna do?”

“You can take the virgin part,” Indy offered.

Daisy’s blue eyes swung to me and they were bright. “Oh yeah. I’ll take that.”

“Where do you live?” Ally asked.

I wasn’t keeping up, and before I could think better of it I gave them the address. They all got up.

“She’s in the ’hood,” Indy noted to the group and then looked at

live two blocks away from you.”

I nodded, still not keeping up.

ng at a Indy turned to the group again. “Five fifteen, we all meet at Jules’s
ig nice. what you can,” Indy ordered.

ng two “I’m comin’ too,” May threw in and looked at me. “Moral support.

summer “Works for me,” Ally replied.

s.”

“Me too. See you there,” Roxie said to me.

“We’ll

Then they were gone.

May and I stared at the door.

“What just happened?” I asked the door and felt, rather than saw,
eyes on me.

jump. “What just happened was, just like I said, Crowe’s offerin’ you a
you’re smart, which I know you are, you’re gonna reach out and grab i

Then she was gone too.

air too.

can do

rem my

: me. “I

live two blocks away from you.”

I nodded, still not keeping up.

Indy turned to the group again. “Five fifteen, we all meet at Jules’s. Bring what you can,” Indy ordered.

“I’m comin’ too,” May threw in and looked at me. “Moral support.”

“Works for me,” Ally replied.

“Me too. See you there,” Roxie said to me.

Then they were gone.

May and I stared at the door.

“What just happened?” I asked the door and felt, rather than saw, May’s eyes on me.

“What just happened was, just like I said, Crowe’s offerin’ you a life. If you’re smart, which I know you are, you’re gonna reach out and grab it.”

Then she was gone too.



YOU LIKE BIKES?

“**S**he needs more sparkle,” Daisy announced, and I could see her outer corners of my eyes, to which Jet was applying shadow. Daisy had her hands on her hips and she was staring at me assessingly, and I could tell she did not like what she saw.

“She doesn’t need *any* sparkle. She’s going on a date with Vanessa and going ballroom dancing at The Ritz,” Indy returned, standing beside me and holding a curling iron in my hair.

“Tod, she needs sparkle. Every girl needs sparkle. Find some good sparkle, *comprende?*” Daisy ordered, ignoring Indy.

The gang had descended on my house about five minutes after I got home from the shelter. They came in carrying hangers full of clothes, irons, hairdryers, cosmetics bags stuffed with makeup, accessories and a pair of shoes.

They had two gay men in tow. One, Tod, was a tall, lean, effeminate white man with a brown crew cut. The other, Stevie, was shorter, more muscular, handsome and Hispanic. Tod, they told me, was Denver’s top drag queen and his alter ego known as Burgundy Rose. Stevie, they also told me, was a long-suffering but nevertheless obviously-loving partner.

“Sparkle,” Tod muttered, digging through piles of clothes, belts,

and shoes. "Gotcha."

"I'm not sure about sparkle," I whispered to Jet.

"Don't worry," Jet replied with a small smile to me, then she glared worriedly at Indy.

I figured this worried glance was not good. Really not good. My butterflies in my stomach started fluttering, and not in a good Vance-seduced-did-something-sexy way, but in an oh-my-God-get-me-out-of-here way.

Roxie was sitting on my couch drinking a margarita, Boo in her lap. Her yellow eyes were closed and she was stroking him full body.

He was in heaven.

I was in hell.

"We already decided. She's wearing the black," Roxie put in.

"You decided," Daisy returned. "Black is boring. I think we should go with sequins."

My eyes swung to May, who was lounging in my chaise. She lifted her margarita glass at me and winked.

"Daisy, give it up. No sequins, for God's sake. This is Denver, fucking Oscars. Talk to Jules about Vance popping her cherry," Ally called. She and Stevie were re-hanging clothes that Tod was tearing off hangers.

At Ally's comment I sucked in breath and I was pretty sure I experienced a heart palpitation.

"Ally Nightingale. Don't be crass. You've scared the poor girl to death," Tod admonished, and Ally threw him a look.

"I think you should just tell him you're a virgin," Jet suggested. "Understand and be gentle."

“Oh. My. God. Do *not*, whatever you do, tell him you’re a virgin.”
I sat down next to Roxie on the side of the couch, which was closest to the
glanced at the armchair I was sitting in, and she leaned into me, full-on cleavage baring
over the arm of the couch. “Go with the flow,” she advised. “If you like
something you like, you do it back to him. You want to touch him or use
d. The mouth on him, just do it. Whatever you do, he’ll like it. Men aren’t
said-or- discerning. All that touching stuff just gets in the way of the real thing.
y. won’t care, long as he gets some.”

ap. His “Daisy, that’s just not true,” Roxie put in. “Men like foreplay
much as women.” Stevie made a noise and Roxie turned to him. “Do
they?” she asked.

“Don’t look at me. I’m not getting into it,” Stevie said.

“Stevie—” Roxie started, but he shook his head.

I do the “You two’ve been foolin’ around. He seem to notice you don’t
what you’re doin’?” Daisy asked me.

ted her “Um,” I mumbled, my eyes sliding again to May.

May just sucked back more of her margarita.

not the “Don’t do that,” Jet said to my eye slide. “I’ve got to do your
ordered. Wide eyes, open mouth, look up,” Jet demanded, and I did as I was told.
rs.

rienced “Well?” Daisy pushed, and I blinked repeatedly as Jet applied massage.

“I don’t think so,” I answered, trying to talk and keep my mouth shut
the same time. “Though the only thing I ever did was um...” I started
irlie to wondering how I’d gotten into this mess with this gaggle of women who
even know, sharing stuff so private I wouldn’t have even told Auntie
“He’ll about it. “Touch my tongue to his neck and ran my hands up his back.”

” Daisy “What’d he do when you did that?” Indy asked, twisting the curler to the around another lock of hair.

anging “Well, he kind of...groaned, and then things kind of...escalated,” I le does for the words.

se your “He liked it,” Roxie declared, and I could hear a smile in her voice i’t very

ing. He “Just pay attention, listen and learn. He’ll have hot spots and you them. Just explore,” Daisy advised.

just as “Hon,” May butted in, speaking for the first time since everyone g
“Don’t other than to say, “I’ll take one of them margaritas.” “Folks have bee
this since folks have existed. It’s instinctive. Just relax. What I saw
that boy’s so into you, you got nothin’ to worry about. He’ll lead the w

I took a deep breath and nodded (slightly, Jet was still doi
mascara).

t know “What does she do when he, um...” Jet started, but didn’t finish.

“It’ll hurt,” Roxie said.

“Mine didn’t hurt,” Ally stated and went on, “Just a twinge. Har
blood at all.”

mascara. My wide eyes widened further and I looked at Jet, who was so c
d. my face she was all I could see. She pulled back, her hand went to m
cara. and she squeezed.

open at “Mine hurt like a mother,” Roxie muttered.

topped, “Jules is old enough maybe she doesn’t have a cherry anymore. I
I didn’t horseback ridin’, sugar?” Daisy asked me.

ie Reba
, “That’s an urban myth,” Indy cut in before I could answer. “I did
mine at all,” she finished, then she unraveled a new curl.

ng iron “You were drunk off your ass,” Ally reminded her.

“Was not,” Indy retorted.

[fought “You were too,” Ally returned.

· suggested. “Gettin’ drunk may be a good thing. Loosen you up a bit,”

l’ll find “Can we stop talking about this?” I asked suddenly. “I’m sorry, freaking me out.”

ot there “I’m with Jules. Let’s stop talking about this. Blood and pain. I n doin’ making me squeamish,” Tod said.

r today, I glanced his way and he did, indeed, look pale. ay.”

“But—” Daisy protested.

ing my “Daisy,” Stevie started quietly, “Jules asked us to stop talking about Daisy leaned back, crossed her arms on her massive chest (no me and started pouting, clearly denied the likely gory details of her deflowering.

dly any “Just a little cherry lip balm. Don’t want color just in case he kisse Jet muttered to herself, swiping my mouth with balm. Then she ann close to “Done with her makeup.” She leaned back and took in my face y knee discerning eye.

Tod moved in behind her. “Girlie, you are the Mistress of Make looks like a goddamned movie star.”

You go Everyone came around to look. They all nodded approvingly, Daisy.

n’t feel “Needs more sparkle,” Daisy muttered.

“Shut up, Daisy,” Indy said, unwrapping another curl. Then she

some gunk from a jar, rubbed it in her hands, ran her fingers through it and mussed it. She stepped back, pulling some tendrils here and there from my face. Then she looked at the finished product and smiled. "done."

Daisy "Um, hate to tell you this, hon," May broke into the Check Out Jul
"But you got fifteen minutes to get dressed and get this place clean
but it's he'll be here and see your posse givin' you the works."

"Holy crap!" Indy shouted. "Unplug the curling iron," she ordered
ck. It's and everyone.

"Get me that cosmetic bag," Jet snapped her fingers at Stevie. "No
Roxie pulled me out of my chair. "Let's get you dressed."

She shoved a pile of clothes in my arms and pushed me toward
it it." bathroom.

an feat) I walked into the bathroom with my pile. They'd even picked
er own underwear and on top was a new bottle of perfume that Roxie stopped
mall and bought me on the way over.

s you," I bought some sexy underwear as a side obsession to my sexy nig
ounced, since they sold the stuff in the same department. I didn't have much
with a they'd found the sexiest. A pair of black, lacy, Brazilian-cut pants
matching demi-cupped bra.

up. She Over this I put on a pair of Roxie's black slacks, which looked
until they were on. They rode way low—even lower than my cords and
except—exposing the small of my back in a serious way when I bent even slightly.
They had a straight front and wide leg.

On top of this they gave me Indy's plain black T-shirt. Again, it
gouged normal until I put it on. It was stretchy with a hint of spandex and fit

my hairglove. It came down over the waistband of the trousers, but again, if I
e awaytrousers went down, the shirt rode up and the small of my back was ex
“Hair’s “Shit,” I whispered, the butterflies exploding, and I sat on the toi
to put on the high-heeled shoes, which had a half an inch platform sole
es Fest.a-boo toe and ankle strap.

d up or I spritzed with the cologne and put on Roxie’s jewelry. A wide silv
bracelet and some wide silver hooped earrings.

no one Then I looked in the full-length mirror on the back of my bathroom
“Oh my God,” I breathed.

w!” I looked like a girl. My hair was in curls. Not masses of them, but
and pretty. My eyes were done up smoky, and even I had to admit, sex
ard thethe outfit was simple, but kick-fucking-ass.

Especially the shoes (which were Tod’s).

out my I took a deep breath, opened the door and walked down the ha
l by the place was cleaned up and tidy. All paraphernalia had already been lo
cars and there was not a margarita glass in sight.

ghtwear Everyone looked at me when I walked in and they stared.

ch, but Then they smiled.

ies and And I felt for the first time all day that maybe I could pull this off.

normal “Told you she didn’t need sparkle,” Indy said to Daisy.

id jeans “Sugar, you got *that* right,” Daisy replied.

lightly. “Hon,” May said, smiling at me. “Don’t you worry about getti
Trust me. You got *nothin’* to worry about.”

looked



t like a TEN MINUTES later everyone was gone, giving out hugs, air kisses and

sat, the wishes for a successful cherry popping as they went.

posed. Before she left, May hugged me tight and looked me deep in the eyes. The let seat whispered, "Nothin' to worry about."

3, peek- Even with May's encouragement I'd just sucked down a shot of tequila. I winced as it hit my throat and decided again that there was no way I was ever cuffgoing to pull this off.

I shoved the tequila bottle to the back of the counter behind the main door. The glasses that someone had washed and were resting upside down on a towel. I put the shot glass in the sink and was wondering if they had any redeye flights from Denver International Airport to Nicaragua when the door opened and Vance walked in.

t subtle cy. And I stared at him. He stared at me.

I was pretty certain I was looking at him like a deer caught in headlights. The He wasn't looking at me that way. He was looking at me in an added in different way. A way that made the butterflies come back. This time the good ones seemed to be at war with the bad ones and it was up in the air which ones would win.

He hadn't changed clothes, which was one for the side of the good butterflies. I worried that I looked like I was trying too hard.

Finally I said, "Both doors were locked. How did you get in?"

He started walking toward me but didn't answer.

I was right by the counter. I backed up a step and my hips ran into the door. n' laid.

"You don't have to break in, you know. You could knock on the door like a normal person," I told him as he arrived at me.

nd well I thought he'd stop but he didn't, not until he got into my space. Well

my space. So into my space I could feel the heat from his body, and he
eye and into me, putting his hands on the counter on either side of me.

I leaned back and tilted my head to look up at him. “Hello? Crow
tequila, you in the room?”

✓ I was “Shut up,” he said, and I blinked then my eyes narrowed.

“What did you just say?”

argarita Then his head dropped, his mouth hit mine and he kissed me. He
kitchen touch me, not with his body or his hands, though I was acutely aware
had any position of both.

ly back No, he touched me only with his mouth and kept me locked to him
using his macho man tractor beam in cahoots with his talented tongue
the good butterflies got an advantage.

lights. His head moved away an inch and he murmured, “Tequila.”

entirely Fuck.

re good Sucking face with a recovering alcoholic after a shot of some
r which spirits was probably not a good thing.

“Crowe—” I began.

he bad His head dropped again and he ran his tongue across my lower lip.

I stopped breathing.

“I like it,” he said low. He moved back a fraction and looked at me
then up to my eyes. “I like all of it.” Then he came in close again and I
it. did the same. “You look good, you taste good.” His mouth came close
re front his eyes stared into mine. “I bet other places taste even better.”

Oh my *God*.

✓ay into The good butterflies started to beat the shit out of the bad butterfly

I leaned back a bit. “I’m sorry about the tequila. I had some over...” I partially lied, not about to impart the information on him. Are we needed liquid courage for our date.

“Jules, people drink. I don’t. Don’t worry about it,” he said like he worried about it at all.

“Okay,” I replied softly.

Then he did something strange. His hand lifted and he ran his fingers through my hair at the side of my head all the way down the back. I pulled some over my shoulder and started to play with it, twisting Indy’s curls around his fingers just above my breast. All the while, I watched his hand as if his mind was somewhere else.

It felt nice. It sent tingles along my scalp and skin. Sexy tingles, something else too. Something warmer, sweeter.

“Vance?”

His eyes came to mine and I realized his mind was *not* somewhere else. I swallowed.

Then I asked, “Are we going out or what?”

He grinned, his fingers still playing with my hair, and I could feel the heat from his hand on my chest.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Shouldn’t we, like, go?” I went on.

He kept grinning.

“Yeah,” he repeated.

I waited. He didn’t move.

is.

friends “Well, *are* we gonna go?” I asked.

1 that I “You got a jacket? We’re on the Harley.”

My stomach fluttered. Not butterflies, just excitement. I wasn’t motorcycles.

His forcefield intensified when he caught sight of my obvious excitement and he moved in so our bodies were now touching.

fingers “You like bikes?” he asked.

Then he I nodded, trying to be cool (but probably failing).

one of “You got a jacket?” he repeated.

hile he I nodded again.

les, but He grabbed my hand and moved away.

“Let’s go,” he said.



else. VANCE TOOK me to The Broker Restaurant.

I’d been there only once before. Nick had taken me there for my sixteenth birthday.

the heat The Broker had been around for years. A fancy restaurant built inside a bank vault in the basement of the old Denver National Bank building. You even had to walk through the cage and round steel door of the old vault into the seating area. It had burgundy leather, button-backed booths and cream tablecloths and napkins. They gave you a big bowl of huge shrimp as a complimentary appetizer.

I was pleased that I was wearing something nice. One didn’t do justice at The Broker, unless one was Vance Crowe, who looked in jeans like other men looked in a tuxedo.

We were shown to a half-oval booth. I stared at it and bit my lip. I meant we'd be sitting side-by-side and I wasn't sure this was a good thing.

I didn't say anything and slid in. Vance came in after me and settled along the back of the booth behind me. I leaned forward, slipped off my blazer style black leather jacket and threw it to the side of me with my feet. I kept my body forward, the better to stay out of reach.

The waiter asked what we wanted to drink. I wanted tequila neat and a side of Valium and a time machine that took me back to that moment before I shot out Sal Cordova's tires so I could rethink my actions.

I ordered a cosmopolitan.

"Sir?" the waiter asked, his glance going to Crowe.

Vance didn't reply. I looked over my shoulder at him. His eyes were looking down and toward my bottom. I glanced around and saw no one else exposed. My torso shot straight and I leaned back against the seat.

Fuck.

Vance's eyes came to mine. They were soft and sexy and a little arrogant. His look scored one for the good butterflies.

Then his gaze moved slowly to the waiter. "Cranberry juice."

The waiter nodded and walked away.

Vance turned back to me. I snatched my napkin out of the wine glass and arranged it on my knee with obsessive attention to its placement and smoothness.

"Jules."

"Mm?" I asked, still smoothing at my napkin.

"Jules."

p. This I looked at him.
ing. “Relax. I’m not going to tear your clothes off in a booth at a steak j

ed, arm I stared at him.
off my The Broker Restaurant was hardly a “steak joint.” It was a
/ purse. established, highly-rated gourmet restaurant. They had more than jus
They had fish and lamb and pasta too.

: with a And complimentary steamed shrimp. No one gave you complir
when I steamed shrimp. They weren’t rinky-dink shrimp, either. They were th
shrimp, the big meaty ones.

I shook off thoughts of defending The Broker’s greatness.

“I came here for my sixteenth birthday,” I told him in an effort to l
as were conversation away from tearing my clothes off.

ny skin He got closer and gave the impression he was supremely interestec
trivial comment. I didn’t realize that it was the first time I’d shared a
personal with him that he hadn’t had to force out of me.

nused. “Yeah?” he asked.

I nodded. That was it. The extent of my conversation.

“What are you doin’ this birthday?” Vance asked.

I was so nervous, without thinking I blurted, “Going for drinl
ass andHeavy and Zip.”

nt and It was his turn to stare at me, and he did so as if I’d just announce
going to hula dance on the moon.

“Heavy and Zip,” he said.

Damn. Not good.

“They’re—” I started, thinking fast for a lie. I didn’t figure them joint.” dozens of men in Denver nicknamed Heavy and Zip, but I was going to take two of them up, no doubt about it.

“A retired PI and a gun shop owner. I know who they are. Jesus, Vance shook his head.

Too late for the lie.

“They’re my friends,” I said.

“They’re in on this with you.”

“They know what they’re doing,” I told him.

“Yeah, Heavy knew what he was doing about five years ago when he should have retired. Instead, he retired last year when he was well into Zip’s just a lunatic,” Vance returned.

I felt my blood pressure rise. “Zip is *not* a lunatic. He’s a good shot.

“It all comes out,” he muttered.

“And Heavy used to be a cop before he was a PI. He still has friction the force and his ear to the ground. Not to mention he was a semi-pro ball player.

“And his wife was a speed freak and he couldn’t get her clear. He scraped her off to save himself, even though he didn’t want to, and it was with his head. Now he’s using you to exact vengeance.”

Wow. I didn’t know that.

I didn’t let Vance in on the fact that this was a revelation.

“That isn’t true,” I protested.

“Which part? Her bein’ a speed freak or you bein’ his instrument?”

I turned my body to him and my eyes narrowed. “Me bein’ his instrument?”

re were instrument.”

o make Vance’s head went around and he watched the waiter putting do
shrimp bowl. Then, without a word to the waiter, he turned back to m
Jules.”the waiter moved to leave.

“Jules—”

“Vance, we’re not talking about this,” I declared.

“We are. You want to get serious, you come into the office. Mace c
will work with you.”

That was not going to happen.

hen he “I’m fine with Zip, Heavy and Frank,” I said, not wanting to wo
past it. Mace and Luke, mainly because they’d kick my ass.

I looked at Vance and saw his expression had changed from just d
t.” to disbelief mingled with anger.

“*Frank?*” he said low.

ends on Whoops.

oxer.” “Um...” I stalled.

1 so he “Please tell me you are not working with Frank Muñoz.”

fucked “He’s a good guy,” I defended Frank.

“He makes Zip look adjusted.”

“Okay,” I gave in a smidge. “So he’s a little intense.”

“A little? He has stockpiles of arms, water and canned goods
basement.”

“He does?” I asked.

ing his Vance nodded.

See? I knew Frank was thinking about destroying the world.

wn our Damn.

e when “From now on, you’re workin’ with Mace and Luke,” Vance stat
that was that.

He moved away from me and leaned back as our drinks arrived.

“I’m not. I’m fine where I am.”

or Luke “Are you ready to order?” the waiter asked.

I looked down at my menu, which I hadn’t even opened.

“No,” Vance said shortly.

rk with “*Thank you,*” I finished for Vance.

isbelief The waiter moved away.

Vance turned to me again and got even closer than last time. “Jule
son OD’d in the eighties. Heavy’s wife was a speed freak. They’re
revenge and using you to get it. Frank is just a nutcase.”

I didn’t know Zip’s son OD’d, either. I hated it that Vance knew
than me.

“Crowe—” I started.

“You keep this up, you need to work with people who have their h
the game.”

“Like Mace and Luke aren’t their own kind of crazy,” I said.

in his His eyes flashed.

Yikes.

Again, not good. I’d definitely said the wrong thing.

“Mace and Luke know their shit, understand their limits and play

strengths. They do what they do because they're good at it. They could show you a few things."

ed as if I was sure they could.

Still.

I looked away, picked up my menu and started to read it like it was the most fascinating novel ever written, nonverbally making the point that our discussion was over.

Vance pulled the menu out of my hands and tossed it on the table, nonverbally making the point that our discussion was *not* over.

"I was reading that," I protested.

"In a minute."

s, Zip's out for "Now. The sooner we order, the sooner this date is over, the sooner it's over."

At my words I watched, fascinated in a kind of passing-a-car-away way, as he leaned in and his eyes went hard. If I thought I'd made him more angry earlier with my (admittedly stupid) comment about his friends, I'd thought I'd made him angry now.

"We're not over because of an idiotic fight."

leads in "We haven't even begun, Crowe, and this isn't an idiotic fight. I'm trying to tell me what to do."

"I'm tryin' to help you."

"Then maybe you can find a better way to communicate that than saying nasty things about my friends."

"I haven't said anything that isn't the truth."

to their "They aren't using me."

d teach “Jules, they are.”

“Then they are, but still, they like me,” I said, and I said it in a way that made it sound like I desperately needed to believe it. And if anatomically possible, I would have kicked myself.

was the His chin dipped, his head went back in a slow jerk and he stared at our beat. Then something happened to his face. The anger just disappeared. Vanished. Gone. In its place was something else. Something something I couldn't read.

at table, “Jules,” he said quietly.

I grabbed my menu, entirely unable to deal with the something else on his face.

or we're “Let's just order,” I snapped, opened the menu and studied it.

After the waiter had taken our orders, I sipped my cosmo and stared at the tablecloth of the booth across from us. Vance allowed this for a few seconds then his arm came from the back of the booth, wrapped around me and his hand cupped my shoulder. He curled me to face him and (*again*) gave me no space.

“Excuse me,” I said, all haughty.

You're “We *have* begun,” he said, his eyes staring into mine.

“No,” I stated.

“I don't know what shit you're workin' through, but I know it's not fair. I know you'd rather not even acknowledge it and definitely don't want to be a part of the process. I don't care. Princess, this is happening between you and me.”

“What, exactly, do you mean by ‘this?’ You fucking me?” I said.

being nasty. It wasn't me and I didn't like it, but I couldn't stop
say that either.

it was "Yeah. Me fucking you. In your bed, on your couch, in my b
anywhere else I can think of. I'm gonna do you on your back, on you
at me a and you're gonna ride me. And when I've exhausted you and you dor
peared. those fucking shields up, I'm gonna make you talk to me and tell n
softer, this shit is about, and then, maybe, I can help you with it."

What he said stunned me, shocked me and made me feel funny,
exactly in a bad way. In kind of a good-but-scary way.

e in his My emotional Rottweiler started barking and drooling and I pulle
from Vance, but his arm tightened keeping me where I was.

"You've got tonight. Then that's it," I announced.

d at the He shook his head. "You have no idea what you're dealin' with."

seconds "I know exactly what I'm dealing with," I told him.

and his He let me go and grabbed a shrimp.

t in my Then he said, "We'll see."

there. I

t me to

een you

rapped,

being nasty. It wasn't me and I didn't like it, but I couldn't stop myself, either.

“Yeah. Me fucking you. In your bed, on your couch, in *my* bed and anywhere else I can think of. I'm gonna do you on your back, on your knees and you're gonna ride me. And when I've exhausted you and you don't have those fucking shields up, I'm gonna make you talk to me and tell me what this shit is about, and then, maybe, I can help you with it.”

What he said stunned me, shocked me and made me feel funny, but not exactly in a bad way. In kind of a good-but-scary way.

My emotional Rottweiler started barking and drooling and I pulled away from Vance, but his arm tightened keeping me where I was.

“You've got tonight. Then that's it,” I announced.

He shook his head. “You have no idea what you're dealin' with.”

“I know exactly what I'm dealing with,” I told him.

He let me go and grabbed a shrimp.

Then he said, “We'll see.”



STOP CHUCKLING

It had to be, officially, the worst date on record.

We ate, we drank and we didn't speak.

Well, Vance spoke. I didn't speak. After we ate the shrimp, he pulled a hair off my shoulder, leaned into my ear and whispered, "Stop being Jules."

I just threw him a look. He gave me an arrogant grin.

He seemed unaffected by my snit. In fact, he carried on like nothing was wrong and I wasn't emanating Go-To-Hell-Vance-Crowe Death Rays.

Between the salad and main course his arm came around me, tucked into his side, while his hand played with a curl in my hair. I allowed it because to struggle would be tacky, and we were in The Broker, the tacky place in Denver.

Between the main course and dessert, when I'd forgotten about the front of my slacks again and had leaned forward, he ran his fingers across my exposed skin.

After we were done, he paid. We walked to his bike and he got on behind him, thinking that a motorcycle was *the worst* form of transportation when you were holding an angry grudge against its driver.

started the bike, leaned back into me and grabbed my wrists, pulling me around his waist, which pressed my torso into his back. Before I could disconnect, he rocketed from the curb and I hung on so I didn't go off the bike and to a scary, body-skidding-on-pavement-tearing-skin-of

He parked behind my house and I let us in. Even though I wanted him to break in, I wasn't in the mood to ask. Once in, I switched on the lights.

Boo walked into the kitchen as I shrugged off my jacket and threw my purse on the table. Boo then immediately started complaining about my absence and other imagined kitty insults. I scooped him up, walked down the hallway and wandered around the living room, turning on lamps, Boo pulled my arms.

angry, Boo talked through this. "Meow, meow, meow."

I finished with the lamps and looked at Vance, who was leaning against the hall entryway, watching me.

ing was I really wished he wasn't so good-looking. It would make sucking being pissed off at him a lot easier to do.

ing me "Shut up, Boo," I said, eyes on Vance.

ved this "Meow," Boo replied, eyes on me.

re least I looked at Boo. "You already had your treats."

e dip in "Meow."

oss my "No more, you're too fat."

"Meow!"

n. I got "I don't want to hear it," I told Boo.

orm of "Meooow!" Boo returned.

ver. He "Are you talkin' to a cat?" Vance asked.

g them I looked at Vance but didn't answer him. I gave Boo a cuddle, bent
I could bit and dropped him.

the end "Meow," Boo said after he landed on his feet, always one to get in
f death. word.

l to see He went over to Vance, rubbed against his ankles and then walked
ght. the hall, likely heading to his dry food bowl.

v it and "How long you gonna stay pissed at me?" Vance asked. Through
out my Boo's exit his eyes never left me.

own the "Until the end of time," I answered.

o in my For some reason, my snotty comment amused him.

Whatever.

against "That should make tonight interesting," he said, pushing away from
wall and coming to me.

staining I turned away from him, pulled off Roxie's wrist cuff and dropped
the pub set. Then I brought my hands up to take off my earring. My heart
beating like a jackhammer, and the butterflies, which had gone through a
struggle valiantly elsewhere throughout our terrible date, came back,
prepared to put up an epic battle of good versus bad in the pit of my stomach.

I felt Vance behind me and he swept my hair from one shoulder and
the other. I bit my lip, put the back on the pierced earring and dropped
the table then went after the other one. His arm wrapped around my
and he pulled my back to his front. His lips went to my neck.

This felt nice. Too nice, melt-your-anger nice, and I stiffened my
response.

I got the earring out and put the back on it, and Vance said quietly

t over my neck, “Stop bein’ angry, Jules.”

“You can’t tell me to stop being angry. You can’t tell me who to
the last my time with. You can’t break into my house and get into bed with me
I sleep. And you can’t make me have sex with you in return for you
d down something nice for a kid who’s had no nice things happen to him in his
I declared.

Throughout I dropped the earring and turned and looked up at him, o
appropriately, *glared* up at him.

He watched me for a few seconds, one arm still around me, then I
“I can see you aren’t in the mood. We’ll sleep on it tonight. Tomorrow
we meet with Darius, we’ll talk. Then we’ll do what we should have
two days ago.”

From the Damn.

I’d forgotten about the meet with Darius.

ed it on Was I ever going to get Vance Crowe out of my life?

part was I took a deep breath and nodded, grasping on to his out like a lifeline

way to “Perfect. Wonderful. Sounds good to me,” I agreed, decidin

clearly tomach. tomorrow I’d definitely be in Nicaragua by dinnertime.

nd over He watched me again and then said, “We sleep together though.”

ed it to Hmm.

middle Maybe it was not so much of a lifeline as a noose.

body in “I don’t think so,” I returned.

I could tell he was making a decision. I watched him as he made it.

against His face came closer to mine and he said, “Then tonight we do w
should have done two days ago.”

“Crowe—” I started to pull back against his arm but his other hand wrapped around me.

“Jules, I’ll tell you now what I would have told you at dinner if I had been speakin’ to me. This,” he said, one hand dropping to my buttocks, pulling my hips into his, one going up my back to press my torso to his.

“is the sweetest thing I’ve had in my life and I haven’t even fucked you yet. I never expected to get a chance at anything so sweet, and now that I got it, I’m not gonna let it go. If you think you can act like a bitch and make me go home, you’re wrong.”

“Was I being a bitch?”

“Okay, so the ‘until the end of time’ comment was a wee bit bitchy, but I was telling me what to do and saying bad things about my friends!”

“You were telling me what to do,” I said quietly, still fighting my confusion.

“I know what I’m talkin’ about.”

This was true. He knew more about Zip, Heavy and Frank than I did. He certainly was more of a badass mother than I was.

“They’re my friends,” I said.

“I’m your friend,” he told me, and I couldn’t help it. I stared.

At his words, the good butterflies trounced the bad butterflies, and the bad ones retreated to Siberia.

“Vance,” I whispered, my emotional Rottweiler deciding to take an inappropriately timed nap, and my anger started to melt away.

“Stop bein’ angry,” he repeated his earlier command, but in his soft, soothing voice.

I kept staring at him a beat. Then it wasn’t just my anger melting away.

er one My body melted into his.

“Okay,” I whispered.

f you’d At my whisper, his lips turned up, his head came down and he kiss
om and I kissed him back.
s chest, I wound my arms around his neck and pressed into him, and his
u yet. I my bottom came up then went down again, this time inside my pants.
t it I’m the feel of it there, as in *really* liked it.
ie back

My mouth opened under his and his tongue slid in. I realized in
hazy recess of my mind that somehow managed to be unaffected by
that this was actually going to happen.
, but he

His mouth moved away from mine and slid to my jaw, then to m
and his hand at my behind went deeper.
corner.

“Vance,” I whispered against his neck.

“Yeah?”

did and “We have to talk about something,” I said, thinking perhaps I
share my virginal status.

It might turn him off, and if that was the case I had nothing
because if it did, and he didn’t understand, then I didn’t want to be w
and the anyway. If it didn’t turn him off, it might make things go easier for t
of us.

ake an His head came up and he looked at me, his lips still turned up at th

“Princess.” He pressed his hips into me at the same time his hand
ft, silky mine to him and I felt his hardness. It freaked me out and made m
flutter at the same time. “The time to talk was at dinner.”

g away. I opened my mouth to say something but he kissed me again,

tongue, his other hand going up my shirt and sliding along the skin
back. It felt good, good enough for me to go with it.

ed me. He ended the deep kiss and kissed me lightly—once, twice, and
pulled the ponytail out of his hair and slid my fingers in. His hair was
thick and that felt good too.

hand at

I liked “Vance, seriously—” I whispered, my fingers tangled in his hair.

Then I lost my train of thought when his hand came out of my pants
pulled away and then both hands slipped my T-shirt up. My fingers un-
his kiss from his hair, my arms rose with the T-shirt and then it was gone.

Um...

y neck, Yikes.

“Two seconds,” I said, beginning to feel the edge of desperation.

He wasn’t listening to me. He was staring at my body. One of his hands
held the bottom half of me to him at my waist while his other hand explored
should my side, my ribcage and then up. He cupped my breast over the bra, he
watching his hand, then the tips of his fingers traced the lace across
breast.

to lose

ith him My desperation disintegrated and with it my ability to breathe in a
he both rhythm.

All right, well, whatever. So he discovered I was a virgin at the first
e ends. possible second. Who cared? People were starving in Africa. There were
bigger things to worry about.

I pulled

y belly But I’d worry about them later.

I leaned into him, pressing myself against him with his hand between
lots of at my breast, and I kissed him.

at my May was right. People had been doing this for ages and instinct kicked in. It went from slow and sweet to hot and hungry in a flash.

gain. I Our lips disengaged, my mouth moved along his jaw, my tongue as silky under his ear. I put my hands in his jacket, pushed it off his shoulder and it dropped to the floor. Then I did the same as he did with my T-shirt and tugged off his turtleneck.

nts. He “Dear Christ,” I whispered when I caught a look at his chest and his tangled stomach muscles tight and defined. “Maybe I *will* work with Luke and if I can get as ripped as you.”

He pulled me into him then his hands began roaming my skin and his mouth went to my neck.

“Jules?” he called there, and a thrill shivered across my skin at his arms vibrating against my neck.

explored “Mm?” My hand had moved between us, fingertips exploring the his eyes of his abs. I felt them tighten at my touch, and at his reflex a pleasant jolt between my legs.

“Not a good idea to mention Luke and Mace right now.”

normal “Oh,” I muttered, my fingers halting and I felt like an idiot. “Sorry.”

He kissed me again. I forgot about feeling like an idiot when he pushed the last hips back and undid my pants. He pushed them down my hips and they were away. Before I could feel weird about standing in my living room in

but underwear and high heels his arm went around my waist. He lifted me clear of my slacks and set me down, leaned back and looked at me, full

ween us That was when I started to feel weird about standing in my living room in nothing but underwear and high heels.

cked in. This lasted two seconds then he yanked me into him. My body sl
against his and he kissed me again, hotter and hungrier than he'd ever
tasting me before. Then with light kisses and hands sliding down my ass, he
s and it me back, toward the couch.

irt and "You do anything to change your body, I'll shackle you to the b
murmured against my mouth.

abs, his "Really?" I asked, just because I felt what he said needed a resp
d Macewas too occupied by trying to figure out how I could get his pants off
about his answer.

and his "Why does it take superhuman effort to get anything out of you, bu
we're havin' sex you won't shut up?"

s voice The backs of my legs hit the couch and I went down. Vance cam
on top of me. His weight and warmth felt good so I put my arms arou
e ridges and looked at him.

olt shot "You were the one who said something."

"Shut up, Jules."

I rolled my eyes.

." He grinned at me and moved partially to the side.

lled his All of a sudden his hand slid down my belly and I felt his finger
hey fell between my legs.

nothing This invasion came quickly and I probably should have been sl
fted me Instead it felt good. So good, my hips bucked involuntarily and r
l body. parted.

room in Wow.

His fingers pressed deeper and that felt even better.

ammed I hooked my leg around his hip instinctively, giving him easier
r kissed and I lifted my head and kissed him, our mouths open, my tongue slid
walked At this, his hand went away but came back inside my panties this time
he touched me.

ed,” he The first time anyone touched me there (other than myself, of course)

It felt so damned good, incredibly good, otherworldly good, I s
onse. I kissing him and moaned into his mouth.

to care His fingers moved, my hips moved. His fingers moved more, n
scraped his back and after a while of this, I felt something begin t
it while inside me, something exciting and beautiful, and my neck arched w
sheer pleasure of it.

e down “Look at me, Jules,” he commanded softly.

nd him I dropped my chin and with effort opened my eyes and looked at h

The moment I did, his finger slid inside me.

My bones turned to water.

“Vance,” I breathed.

The second I muttered his name his eyes went so intense it felt li
burned into me. His finger slid out and then back in again, and I pulle
rs press me as I pressed up toward him.

Then his body stilled. His finger froze and his head came up.

ocked. I stared and it was as if ice water had been poured over my skin.

ny lips He’d figured out I was a virgin.

Goddammit, I thought.

“Vance—” I began.

access, “Quiet, Princess,” he whispered.

l inside. It was my turn to freeze.

ne, and Gently his hand moved away and he jackknifed off me, but c
gained his feet he leaned in and brought me up with him.

se). He kissed me swiftly then said, “Get dressed. Get your gun. After
stopped arm the doors and windows and call the control room.”

Then he let me go, went across the room, tagged his sweater off th
y nails and pulled it on. I stared at him, stunned immobile, as he pulled his ha
o build into a ponytail.

with the He looked at me. “Now, Jules. Someone’s out there.”

My body came unstuck and I dressed quickly. I had my pants on w
made a noise like a half whistle. I looked up at him and he tossed
im. phone. He had his jacket in his hand.

“Control room,” he said low, and then he pulled his gun out of his
dropped the jacket on the armchair and took off on silent feet.

I yanked my shirt on, following him down the hall. By the time I
ke they to the kitchen, he was gone.

l him to I locked the door, armed the alarm and went to the dresser under
platform and got my gun. I stood in the hall and I started to sc
phonebook, but it was the first choice. I hit the green button.

It barely rang.

“Yo,” someone answered.

“This is Jules,” I said into the phone.

“Shit. Do you have another pick up?” It was Mace. “I thought y
Vance were out tonight.”

“No. Listen. I’m at my house and Vance says someone’s outside gone—” I stopped talking and my body went stiff when I heard gunfire once he was close.

Just as quickly I unfroze, started talking again and I bent down to the buckle of the ankle strap of one of my shoes. “Gunfire, Mace, fuck I leave,

“We’re on it,” Mace’s voice wasn’t teasing, it was all business.

“Do you need my address?”

“No. Stay inside, stay safe—”

I heard more gunfire as I kicked off a shoe.

I interrupted him, “More gunfire.”

“Stay inside. Keep your house armed.”

“I’m going out there.”

“Stay inside, Law,” Mace ordered. “We’ll be there in five.”

I kicked off the other shoe. “We don’t *have* five,” I snapped, flip phone shut and threw it on the bed.

I ran to the closet, pulled out my Pumas, yanked them on and tied them quickly as I could. Then, with my gun, I ran through the house, unarmed, alarm and went out.

I barely cleared the back door when Sal Cordova careened into me backward and his arm went around me.

“Fuck, he shot me,” Sal groaned, looking up at me and leaning down on me. I took on most of his weight and staggered with it. “Your fuckin’ shot me in the ass.”

With the arm not locked around me, Sal was holding on to his back

e. He's "Jules. Goddammit." Vance was standing a few feet away.

nfire. It I spared him a glance and he had his gun trained on Cordova.

I bent at the knees, taking Sal down with me and planting his ass
pull at ground. He gave out a howl and rolled to the side. I shrugged off his a
." bent down to yank his gun out of his hand, then took a step away.

"You shot me. You shot me in my goddamned ass," Sal whined to
and any worry I had for him was lost. His voice was strong, strong en
whine. I figured he'd be okay. "You didn't have to shoot me," Sal wen

Vance grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back so I was
him.

"You shot first," Vance returned sharply. "What the fuck we
thinkin'?"

Um...Vance sounded pissed right the hell off. Then again, he'
working at getting in my panties for a few days now. He was proba
ped the pleased that five minutes after achieving his aim he'd been interrup
having to shoot someone.

them as "You're movin' in on my action," Sal explained.

ned the It was my turn to be not pleased.

. I went I turned to Sal.

"Oh, for God's sake. Seriously, Sal?" I asked, not believing my ear

rep into "You got the hots for me, I know it. Sat right across from me and
partner started.

"I sat across from you and threatened you," I told him.

side. "Playin' hard to get. You women always play hard to get," Sal repl

"Maybe it isn't because we're playing hard to get. Maybe it's beca

don't want to get got in the first place," I explained.

"Naw. It's not that."

is on the Yes, Sal was that stupid.

firm and "Do we need to call an ambulance?" This came from somewhere
Vance and my left then Luke materialized and came to stand by Vance

Vance, He looked down on Sal.

ough to "Yeah," Vance responded. "Although I'd rather let him bleed to de
it on.

"Shit," Sal moaned.

behind Luke pulled out his phone. I listened to Luke calling the control ro
asking for the ambulance and the police. While I did this I thought ab
re you current situation.

The good news was Vance hadn't figured out I was a virgin.

'd been The bad news was Vance had been stopped at a really good part.

bly not I turned to Vance.
pted by

"How long is this gonna take?" I asked impatiently.

I felt his eyes on me in the dark. Then I saw the flash of whit
smiled. His arm came around me and he pulled me to him. I could fo
him better at closer range and caught his arrogant grin close up.

s. "Probably a while, Princess. Longer 'cause I'll have to get stitches.

—" Sal My breath fled my body.

When I sucked in air, I asked, "Why?"

"He tagged me. Thigh, just skimmed. I'll need to have it looked at.

lied. "You're hit?" Luke asked from beside us.

use we "It's nothing," Vance answered, and I saw Luke nod. Apparently t

good enough for him.

“Crowe,” I said, weird feelings going through me, feelings I ne before and feelings I didn’t like.

here to “It’s nothing,” Vance repeated.

∴ “Crowe! It is not nothing! You’ve been shot!”

“I’ve been shot before, Jules. Trust me, this is nothing.”

ath.” This time instead of my breath fleeing, I sucked in air on a gasp.

“You’ve been shot before?” I asked on the exhale.

om and “Yeah, last time wasn’t pretty,” Luke volunteered.

out the “Luke’s had worse,” Vance informed me. “Gut wound.”

“Survived,” Luke said casually. “You got it in the lung.”

Oh my *God*.

“Stop talking,” I snapped, cutting into their gruesome, macho tri memory lane.

I heard Luke chuckle.

e as he “Stop chuckling,” I clipped.

ocus on He didn’t stop chuckling, but luckily the sirens heading our way d him out.

” The outside light came on, the back door opened and Nick stood th took us all in, wearing a real life rendition of his Morgue Face.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

” “Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath.



hat was I WAS in my bathroom washing my face.

Vance was somewhere in my duplex, doing whatever he did before he felt to bed.

I didn't know how I got talked into letting him spend the night with me, though I had to admit, it didn't take much. I figured it was partially for the favor to be nice to Roam, partially the fact that I felt responsible for him getting shot.

Earlier, outside before the ambulance came, I'd explained things to him and his mouth got tight. He looked like he was ready to tie me up in my room and leave me there until I died so I wouldn't get anyone else shot for my fool crusades. But luckily, we didn't have an attic room.

The ambulance came and carted off the moaning, whining Sal. The paramedic came at the same time and talked to everyone, including me.

I finally got a chance to see, though not meet, Hank Nightingale and Eddie Chavez.

Hank looked like a Nightingale, tall and dark, except he was a handsome all-American boy. Eddie Chavez was just as friendly and good-looking as the rest of The Boys.

They did flybys, likely hearing that Vance got shot and coming to check on him. When they came Vance was sitting on my back stairs and the paramedic had cut away the thigh of his jeans and was checking his wounds. He was standing several feet away with Nick. Both Hank and Eddie glanced in my direction, and they didn't look like they were card carrying members of the Indy and the girls' Welcome Wagon.

Lee swung by too, another flyby to check on Vance. He didn't stay long then he was gone.

I talked with a police detective named Jimmy Marker. I gave

e going slightly tweaked version of the Sal Cordova story making Sal sound like a garden-variety stalker, which, in a way, he was.

With me, When I was done talking, Detective Marker looked at me and said, "You Law?"

I kept my eyes on him, my face blank and my mouth shut.

"Know you're workin' with Heavy," Marker noted.

I was surprised but kept silent.

"Heavy's a good man," Marker went on.

I nodded once, not sure where this conversation was going.

"What you're doin' is stupid and unsafe," he continued.

Now I knew where this conversation was going and I kept quiet.

"You should stop or you'll get yourself killed," he advised, and his tone was both sharp and concerned.

I figured they taught this in cop school.

I didn't reply.

"Or you'll get someone else killed," he finished.

It took a great deal of effort, but I stayed silent and didn't bite my tongue. I wanted to.

He watched me, shook his head and then strangely muttered under his breath, "These boys need to get their heads examined."

Then he walked away.

I drove Vance to the hospital in my Camaro.

He was right, it wasn't that bad. He got cleaned up and stitched and came out of the treatment room with his jeans on, the thigh cut away from him a

I like a could see a white bandage there.

We went back to Hazel.

asked, “Where do you live?” I asked when we were standing by Hazel.

Before I knew what he was talking about, he took the keys from me.

“Spendin’ the night with you,” he replied.

“What are you doing? Give me my keys.” I made a grab for them, yanked them out of reach.

“Get in the car,” he ordered.

“No one drives Hazel but me,” I told him.

“Hazel?” he asked.

“My Camaro,” I replied.

is voice He stared at me for a beat then grinned and shook his head as if downright adorable. This caused me to feel that sweet warmth again, I shook it off and focused on our current verbal tussle.

“Crowe,” I said warningly.

lip like The grin faded. “Please don’t argue, Jules. Just get in the car.” Vance said in a weary voice.

I sucked in my lips, his weary voice getting to me. I walked under his passenger side and Vance took me home.

up. He Upon entry he locked the door behind us and turned to arm my a /, and I went directly to my dressers, rooting through them to find my least sexy apparel (I had none). I settled on a baby-blue silk nightgown that looked like an old fashioned slip. It was tight against the midriff, had an A-lined slip, and I skimmed my knees and a thick rim of ecru lace along the top and edges. I stalked to the bathroom, leaving Vance to do whatever he wanted.

do, which was what he'd do anyway.

Now *I* didn't know what to do. The heat of the moment was over, and the emotional Rottweiler had woken up and was on the alert.

I put my hair in a sloppy bun at the back of my head with a ponytail holder and stared at my face in the mirror. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders and left the bathroom.

, but he

Better to get it over with, whatever "it" might be.

The house was dark when I got out of the bathroom, except a dim light came from the bed platform. I went to the steps, climbed up one and lay on Vance under the covers, comforter up to his waist, a bunch of my hair behind his back so he was sitting up.

His chest was bare. Boo was lying smack in the middle of it, and I was sweeping in a wide arc along Vance's abs and waist. Vance was stroking Boo, but I could hear Boo purring from where I was standing.

Clearly Boo didn't object to a new presence in the house.

Vance's eyes moved to me and I climbed into bed as gracefully as I could (which I feared wasn't graceful at all). Then I crawled to the opposite side of the bed, as far away from Vance as I could get, and got under the covers.

I laid back, stared at the ceiling and wondered what Vance had on under the covers, or if he had anything on at all.

At the final thought, my breath went funny.

"Jules."

"What?" I said to the ceiling.

"Come here."

I thought about fighting it and decided against it. Don't ask me what

it had been a weird day. In fact, it had been a weird four months. Work, my training and my nightly patrol—and now my head-to-head with Vance—I was tired and I simply didn't have it in me.

I scooted closer. Vance's arm came around my back, curled me to his side, and I had no choice but to rest my head against his shoulder. I laid my body tense. I didn't know what to do with my hands so I tucked one underneath me and stroked Boo's side with the other.

"How's your leg?" I asked.

"I'll live," he answered.

"I'm sorry. It's my fault you got shot."

"It isn't your fault Sal Cordova is a moron."

This was true.

I went silent.

Vance reached up and turned out the light. In the darkness I felt him seeping into me and my body began to relax.

I laid there for a while and listened to Boo purring. I stopped stroking and rested my hand on Vance a few inches below my face. I was getting the impression that nothing was going to happen at this juncture to continue tonight's sexual activities. Vance was action man. If he meant to make me he would have done so by now.

I took a deep breath, let it out and my body relaxed more.

"I ruined our second date," I whispered.

Vance didn't say anything.

I went silent again.

Then for some bizarre reason, I started talking.

with my
d battle

“I told you I went there for my sixteenth birthday. Nick took me.”
Vance still didn’t say anything.

I kept talking. “It was five and a half months after Auntie Reba di
into his had been...” I hesitated. “It wasn’t good. She died sudden, unexpe
d there, seemed the clouds over our lives would never clear.”

ne arm

Vance still stayed silent.

I went on, “Nick wanted to make the day special. The sixteenth bi
for a girl, is important. He bought me a dozen pink roses, because they
favorites, and gave them to me in the car. Made me take them with m
restaurant so people would know it was my day. He had them brin
cake with sparklers on it.”

Somewhere along the line while I was talking, Vance started strok
back.

his heat

I relaxed deeper into him. “We had fun. It was the first time since
Reba died that we forgot the hole she left for a couple of hours and e
ourselves. We even laughed.”

ing him

Boo got tired of being petted, walked across my waist and settl
ting the kitty curl at the base of my spine.

nue the

“As a present, he gave me a diamond necklace made from Auntie
a move engagement ring.”

Vance stopped stroking my back, his arm went tight around me
rolled to face me. This trapped my hand between us and his other har
to rest on my hip.

There was a small window at the head of the bed, and I could just
make out the planes and angles of his face in the moonlight.

He still didn't say anything, but I could see he was looking at me.

"I'm sorry about the tequila," I whispered, changing to a different s

led. We Finally he spoke but quietly, "Don't worry about it."

cted. It "You licked my lip," I reminded him.

"You tasted of cherries," he told me.

Oh right, Jet's lip balm.

irthday, "I forgot."

y're my "Drinking is my problem. I won't make it yours," he told me. H
e to the voice was relaxed, even sleepy, but there was still that fierce under
g me a that he used when he was talking to Roam.

ing my I didn't say anything.

I waited. A few minutes passed, and then I went on, "I can't belie
Auntie shot Sal Cordova in the ass."

enjoyed I couldn't help myself. I thought it was funny, even though I
shouldn't, so I smiled at him in the moonlight.

ed in a "Seemed a good place to aim," he told me, and I felt my body go
stiff.

Reba's "You *meant* to shoot him in the ass?" I asked.

"He *is* an ass," was Vance's reply.

and he "That's true," I told him and then relaxed again.

id went I sighed and was silent for a few beats.

"What did you mean when you told me you never expected to
t barely chance at something so sweet?" I whispered in a voice so low I
maybe he wouldn't hear it.

His hands slid along the silk of my nightgown, down over my
subject. then I felt the fingers of one hand curl into the material. He pulled it
then one of his arms went tight at my waist. The other hand skimmed
my bottom and pulled me deeper into him.

What he didn't do was answer.

Or, maybe, that *was* his answer.

I held my breath through his movements, my belly fluttering, but t
hand and arm went still.

is deep "Vance? Did you hear me?" I asked a little louder.

current "I heard you." That's all he said.

"Um..." I started, knowing it was likely rude but finding courage
dark and saying it all the same, "From what I hear, you've had a lot o
eve you things."

knew I "No. I've had a lot of easy things."

"I know a couple of girls you've—"

slightly "None of them smelled of melons, tasted of cherries or ended up
the effort," he said bluntly.

I blinked at him in the dark. "Are you saying I'll be worth the ef
asked.

"Yeah," he responded immediately.

I blinked again, stunned and feeling weird. Good weird, bad weird
weird, Rottweiler snarling weird.

get the "How do you know I'll be worth the effort?" I asked.

thought "I know."

bottom, “How?” I pushed.

up and “I just know.”

ed over “How?” I didn’t let it go.

“You eat shit most your life, work, sweat and bleed for anything you could get the rest of it, you know sweet when you taste it.”

Oh my *God*.

hen his I didn’t know what to say to that so I didn’t say anything at all and I was silent.

“You done talkin’?” he asked after a few minutes.

I nodded.

e in the His hand at my waist slid up my back to my head. He tucked my face against his throat and he held me.

I laid there awhile.

Then when I thought he was asleep, I took my hand from where it was pressed against his chest and I wrapped it around his waist.

o worth When I did this, his arms went tight. He yanked out my ponytail and my hair spilled over his hand. He ran his fingers through it, the way he always did. “Fort?” I heard him twirling a tendril somewhere in the area between my shoulder blades.

I guessed that meant he wasn’t asleep.

Whatever.

d, scary I closed my eyes and settled in.

He kept playing with my hair.

Before I knew it, before I even would have thought it possible to fall asleep.

ng you

and fell

ace into

e it was

. holder

n I felt

les.

e, I fell

TEN



MINE

I woke up with a belly in the state of advanced fluttering. In fact I was certain in the recesses of my deep sleep I'd already experienced significant flutterings and thought they were a dream.

I knew by now, with Vance's relentless pursuit of me and all that happened during that pursuit, that what I was feeling was very, very on.

This had to do with the fact that Vance's body was pressed close back.

It also had to do with the fact that Vance's hardness was pressed my bottom.

But mostly, it had to do with the fact that Vance's hand was at my and his thumb was stroking lightly back and forth across my nipple.

I moved slightly and so did Vance, pressing into me.

With his mouth at the back of my neck, he said, "Mornin'."

At the same time his thumb stopped stroking. It was joined by his and they pressed together. Also at the same time his other hand slid in front of my panties and went deep.

I felt a shockwave shoot from my nipple and detonate between my

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

He didn't stop. Both his hands worked me and I pushed back into his body, nestling my bottom into his crotch. I started breathing heavily, my sleepy mind completely muddled.

I tried to turn, to touch him, but his arms tensed and he held me where I was.

I gave up, giving into the sensations. I felt his teeth nip my shoulder, catching the strap of my nightgown. His body moved as his mouth slid down the strap, exposing my breast. He was now skin against skin against my breast. One of his fingers slid inside me and I felt heat slice through my body. I tried to turn again, but he kept me where I was, finger moving in and out, and instinct made my hips move with it, riding his hand.

“Jesus, Jules,” he said at my neck, his voice hoarse, and his fingers moved to my shoulder and touched me again, moving, swirling, and I felt it coming.

I'd had orgasms before, self-induced, but it was nothing like this. I felt it against my chest at all. It overwhelmed me. I sucked in breath and Vance knew it was going to happen.

He rolled me to my back, his hand still between my legs. I wrapped my arms around him, bucked my hips, his mouth came to mine and it hit me.

And when it did I moaned his name.

The minute I finished his name, he moved away. I made a detached gesture of protest at the loss of his heat and hand, but he wasn't going anywhere.

I was still in the throes of my orgasm when he tore my panties down my legs, spread my thighs, came up between them and filled me.

It didn't hurt, not at all.

Instead it felt beautiful.

into his I whispered his name again. He pulled up my legs at the knees, I
my stilldeeper, moving rhythmically and my hips matched the movements of I

“Jesus Christ, you’re tight,” he muttered into my neck and I wrap
where Iarms around him, pulling my knees back further so he could slide deep

He went up on his hands. Grinding into me, looking down at me, I
oulder,dilated and his hair around his shoulders.

I pulled Looking up at him, at that moment, he was the most beautiful th
I at myever seen.

y body. “Come back to me,” I murmured, and the minute I asked he did, h
in andmoving between us, touching me, pressing into me. I was sensitive

ready again. I started panting. It was too much. I thought it would shatt

ger slid “Vance,” I whispered in an urgent voice.

“Let go,” he told me, deep voice husky, eyes staring into mine.

Nothing I did.

going to

A few minutes later, he did too.



ped my I USED to go to summer camp in the mountains for two weeks, and wh
re. older I became a camp counselor.

We did a lot of horseback riding.

ed mew

Maybe Indy was wrong and it *wasn't* an urban myth.

re.

Whatever. It didn't matter.

own my

What mattered was the fact that I just discovered that sex was gre
was wonderful. Sex was *the best* thing ever invented.

Vance's weight was on me, pressing me into the bed. He was still pushing me, my arms wrapped around his waist, thighs tight against his hips. I was thinking stupid thoughts, my mind racing, my body spent.

Vance slowly, gently slid out of me and shifted to the side, taking me with him. I lifted my chin to look at him, maybe even smile at him, but his eyes told me one look I knew something was definitely not right.

Damn.

Maybe I'd done it wrong.

"Vance..."

His eyes were intense, more intense than his normal intense. Something was there, in his face, something not right, and I didn't know if it was good for me. but whatever it was, it was immense.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

So that was it.

I shook my head.

His hand moved between us, then between my legs, touching me. My hips jerked at his touch because I was still tender.

The whole time he looked into my eyes, staring at me in that intense way.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"Checkin' for blood."

My breath caught.

Oh crap.

He knew. He knew I was a virgin.

How did he know?

I inside It was my turn to stare at him.

s, and I “Are you on the Pill?” he asked.

I shook my head again.

ing me
ut with His hand went away, his eyes went to it then he moved to the bo
the bed and dropped over the edge silently. I stared at him while he c
stunned immobile, then his hands wrapped around my ankles and he c
me down the bed. He caught me when I came over the side and put me
feet.

“What are you doing?” I asked, unable to keep up.

nething He grabbed my hand and pulled me into the bathroom.

or bad, “Am I bleeding?” I went on.

“No.”

“Then, why—?”

He stopped in the bathroom and nabbed a rolled washcloth (mir
Egyptian cotton, my towels were *lush*) out of a basket on the back
gently.toilet. He threw it into the sink and turned on the tap.

“Vance, for God’s sake, what are you doing?” I snapped, my p
se way. spent.

He came at me, face clouded.

I took one look at his face and retreated. Without far to go in th
room, my back hit the bathroom wall and his body came up against mi

“You were a virgin,” he stated.

I opened and shut my mouth three times, not knowing what to say.

“Don’t deny it,” he warned.

“How did you know?” I whispered.

“No one’s that fuckin’ tight. Jesus, Jules, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Turn off the faucet,” I ordered in an effort to stall.

bottom of I did *not* want to have this particular conversation.

lid this, “Answer me,” he demanded.

dragged Vance was apparently intent on having this particular conversation

on my I gave in to get it over with. “I tried, last night, but things got...” I then stopped. “And this morning things were advanced—”

He interrupted me, “I didn’t use protection.”

I blinked at him then my eyes got wide.

“*Fuck!*” The word was a gentle explosion under his breath and he got further into my space, his face close to mine. “I didn’t expect it to be that far.”

it-green This was not good.

of the “What did you expect to happen?” I asked.

patience “I expected to make you come with my hand and have time for protection before I fucked you. But Christ, your face when you came...”

He stopped speaking and I stopped breathing.

the small Then he went on, “I also expected you to be the kind of woman with enough experience and brains to keep herself protected.”

me. My mouth dropped open then I snapped it shut and said, “You don’t sound like my fault.”

“You didn’t tell me you were a virgin. Things would have been different if you had.”

I didn't know what that meant and I didn't get the chance to ask.

ing?" He kept talking.

"How in *the fuck* does someone who looks like you remain a virgin you're twenty-six fuckin' years old?"

Okay, so I was getting the impression that my virginal status was off.

started Instead of this making me angry, it hurt me someplace private, so there was no way in hell I'd ever let show.

I pretended his words didn't affect me and looked for an excuse.

"I've been kinda busy," I told him.

then he "That's not it."

go that "I'm a lesbian?" I tried.

He stared at me like he thought it might be a good idea to call a kind of doctor.

to get Then he twisted his torso around, turned off the faucet, came back his hands on the wall on either side of me.

." "No one has ever touched you?" he asked, his voice still sounding intense, and I didn't know how to react.

an with I mean this wasn't exactly the end of the world, was it?

Was I that bad?

make it "No one's ever touched me," I answered softly.

"No one?"

e gone I shook my head.

"Put their mouth on you?" he continued.

“Vance!” I exclaimed.

“Answer me, goddammit!” he clipped, his eyes flashing, the in
in until escalating, and my heart began to race.

“No!” I yelled.

s a turn I was confused and beginning to get freaked right the hell out.

When I said no, he moved quickly, yanking my body to him, t
neplacearms went around me tight and his mouth came down on mine in a l
heavy, full-on-tongue-action kiss.

It took my breath away.

He pulled away, but only to yank my nightgown over my head and
it aside. I noticed his nakedness then, forgetting my own, and st
amazement at his body for the second he gave me before it was again
pressing me to the wall, hands everywhere, mouth on mine.

certain My belly was fluttering again, wildly, and I went with it, explor
skin with my hands.

and put Okay, so maybe I was wrong about my virginal status being a turn

; angry, It was out of control. Even though we’d just finished we started
and it was not like before. I thought that had been intense, but *this* was
violent, unrestrained. We were all over each other and it was :
amazing.

Within minutes I was alternately panting, kissing him, tasting hi
his collarbone, his shoulders. My hands were running over his ass w
bent, lifted my leg, swung it around his hip and slammed into me.

My head went back when he filled me and cracked against the wall

Vance heard it, picked me up with his hands at my behind, still ins

I wrapped my legs around his hips and my arms around his shoulders. He moved us into the hall, his head tilted back and mine tipped down, our mouths locked together.

He fell to his knee on the floor and dropped me to my back. He moved over me. I kept my legs and arms around him and he started moving inside me, hard, fast, deep, my body jolting with his thrusts. It was good, beyond good, straight to magnificent.

His hands went to the sides of my head, fingers in my hair, and he looked down at me while he moved. I tried to kiss him, but he dodged my mouth.

“Never,” he said, his voice gruff, his hips stopping their thrust and grinding into me.

“Never what?” I murmured, one of my hands sliding down his back, the other one went into his hair.

“Outside my bike, never has anything important in my life been mine.”

My body stilled. So did my heart, and my eyes locked with his.

He started moving again, slowly, deeply, and he kept talking. “No castoffs, leftovers, used, sometimes even food from dumpsters.”

My heart started beating again, only to trip over itself. My breath came fast, not only from what was happening to my body, but what he was saying.

“Vance—”

His lips came to mine. His hands moved out of my hair and went to the sides of my face and he stared in my eyes, pressing deep inside.

“Mine,” he muttered, his deep voice hoarse, that fierce undercurrent.

His tone caused a shiver to run through me, straight through to my

ers. He Then he kissed me.

vn, our



“I’VE GOT to get to work,” Vance said to me, or more appropriately, moved my neck.

mediately We were back in bed, comforter up to our waists. Vance had his arms around me. It felt like I had my hands pressed against his chest.

Boo was sitting on the end of the bed, staring at us with barely concealed impatience at what he considered the unacceptable delay in the arrival of the morning wet food breakfast.

After we were done on the floor in the hall, wordlessly Vance had picked me up to the bed. Not like last time, but cradled in his arms. He’d made that feat too, gracefully. He pulled me into bed, yanked the comforter over me, and he held me, still silent.

I was silent too. My body was completely sated after three shattering, back-to-back orgasms. So much so, I could barely move.

My mind was blank with shock and if I admitted it to myself it was always unadulterated fear.

I pulled my thoughts together, tossed my emotional Rottweiler behind my back and twisted my head to look at Vance. “We have to talk.”

And we did. We so had to talk.

He kissed me quickly then looked in my eyes. “Is this one of those ‘whisper-sweet-stories-about-your-life-and-smile-at-me’ talks or something else?” he asked.

“Something else,” I told him.

“Then we don’t have to talk.”

“Crowe.”

He kissed me again.

against “I’ll call you later,” he said.

“Crowe—”

is arms “We’ll go out to dinner before the meet with Darius.”

“Crowe!”

ncealed He leaned in, kissed my forehead, let me go, moved swift
l of his disappeared off the edge of the platform.

carried “*Crowe!*” I shouted.

managed I scrambled to the end of the bed, wrapping the comforter arou
over us naked body. With effort and absolutely no grace I threw my legs over t
of the bed. I stumbled, corrected myself and jumped down, pulling t
earth- of the king-sized comforter with me.

I went charging into the living room, Boo hot on my heels, but Var
lf, pure gone.

“Goddammit!” I shouted at the empty room.

a juicy “*Meow!*” Boo concurred.



I ARRIVED at King’s nearly an hour late, and the minute I came thro
of your door May bore down on me like I was a clueless tourist wandering i
nothing street in Pamplona and she was the bull.

She was followed, to my complete surprise and absolute mortifica
Daisy and Roxie.

“Well?” May asked after she arrived, looking at my face closely.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I stated, walked right by the t stomped across the room, ignoring the kids who were staring at me.

The ladies caught me at the entry to the hall and hustled me, protes the way, into the yellow counseling room. Roxie shut the door and Ma the blind on the window to the hall.

“Oh sugar, what happened?” Daisy asked, eyes on me, her voice g

Ily and I faced off against Daisy and ignored her soft look. “I said I don’t talk about it.”

And I didn’t. My emotional Rottweiler was straining against his snarling and barking, teeth bared.

ind my I didn’t need this shit. I didn’t need these people.

the side I didn’t need to think about the fact that I’d had unprotected sex he bulk with Crowe. If his swimmers were anything like him they were gor had probably already fertilized at least one of my eggs, and as I stood ice was yellow counseling room were likely creating a beautiful baby with da dark eyes and amazing bone structure. This would mean I’d *never* get Crowe out of my life.

Furthermore, I didn’t need to think about what he said to me, how it or how it made me feel.

ugh the I needed to think about my mission. I needed to keep my head into the game.

The door flew open, and Roxie, who still had her hand on the kno tion, by flying.

Indy, Ally and Jet stormed into the room. I looked to the ceiling fought for patience, deliverance, or the ability to beam myself to Nicar

rio and I came back into the room when I heard Indy say, “Sorry Roxie.”
“What’d we miss?” Ally was staring at me.

sting all Jet closed the door.
ly drew “I have to get to work,” I announced, stalking to the door, but Daisy
in front of me and stopped me.

entle. “He hurt you?” she asked, her voice still kind.

want to “No,” I answered. “I’m late. I have appointments.”

chain, “Does anyone know if they did it?” Jet whispered to May.
“We haven’t got that far,” May replied.

“Sugar, talk to us.” Daisy grabbed my hand.

, twice, I looked at our hands then at her then I pulled my hand out of
Daisy’s and “Listen, I don’t mean to be rude, but I have work to do and this, really,
is none of your business.”

rk hair, Daisy’s head jerked and she took a step back.

Vance I went to walk by her, but a strong hand wrapped around my upper
ultra-long fingernails (I noticed at a glance they were painted frosty pink
he said swipes of silver across the tips) biting into my flesh, and Daisy turned
back around.

l in the I was now facing a Daisy without the kind and gentle look on her face.
This was a serious Daisy, serious as a heart attack.

b, went “Girl, I know you’re a kickass, head-crackin’ mamma jammer,
whatever happened with Vance you ain’t ever gonna get through if you
ng and talk to your girlfriends, *comprende?*”

agua. “You aren’t my girlfriends,” I told her.

Her eyes narrowed.

“Excuse me, but we held the goddamned Sacred Girlfriend Ritual night in your very own livin’ room,” Daisy declared. “Complete margaritas and makeup.”

“Sorry, Jules, but you aren’t getting rid of us,” Indy said.

“If he hurt her, I’m gonna kick his fuckin’ ass,” Ally said to no one.

“Vance wouldn’t hurt her, no way,” Roxie said quietly, watching n

May pushed through everyone and grabbed on to my upper arms.

“Talk, girl,” she said quietly in her Mama’s-Gonna-Make-It-Better and even I, head-crackin’ mamma jamma (whatever that meant), match for May’s mama voice.

I took a deep breath and let it go.

“The date was terrible,” I told them.

May’s hands dropped and she stepped back, her face falling in disappointment.

“Oh no,” Jet whispered.

“We fought,” I explained.

“About what?” Roxie asked.

“He tried to tell me what to do,” I answered.

“Well, *that* wasn’t the way to go,” Indy muttered.

“When we got back to my house, we made up,” I went on.

“That’s good,” Jet put in, her expression brightening.

“Then we started to...um, you know...” I faltered.

“Go on,” Ally encouraged.

“Then, at a good part, Vance had to stop and go outside to shake hands with Cordova, who was stalking me.”

Daisy started to giggle.

“He shot him in the ass,” I told Daisy, and I had to grin because I thought it was funny.

“What kind of good part?” Ally asked, bringing me back to the moment with her hand.

I looked at her, grin still on my face now for a different reason.

“A *really* good part,” I told her.

“What we talkin’ about here? Hands and fingers or mouth and tongue?” Daisy demanded to know.

“Or fingers and tongue?” Ally threw in an alternate combo.

“Hands and fingers, mainly fingers,” I answered.

“Oh my,” Roxie breathed.

“Vance got shot too,” I said.

“No!” Indy exclaimed. “Lee didn’t tell me.”

“He’s okay. Just a graze, some stitches in his thigh,” I assured Indy.

“So, you didn’t do it,” May said.

I looked to May. “Yes. We did. This morning. Twice.”

Their eyes grew round and they leaned in.

“How was it?” Indy asked.

“What’s his body like?” Ally asked.

“Did it hurt? Are you okay?” Roxie asked.

I closed my eyes, bit my lip, and then opened my eyes again a

oot Salthem the rest. All the rest. Everything. When I was done talking, the
staring at me, mouths open.

“Holy crap,” Indy breathed.

e I still “I knew that horse ridin’ thing was no urban myth,” Daisy said to I
I looked at Roxie and she had tears in her eyes. I watched her a
matter atand forgetting about my travails, I walked to her.

“I’m okay,” I assured her, and she nodded, tears still threatening.
asked, “Are you okay?”

“Vance. We...” She stopped. “Jules, remember I told you yester
ngue?” was the one who rescued me when my ex kidnapped me?”

I nodded.

Roxie nodded back and kept going.

“Well, after he brought me back, he went after my ex, Billy, who
got away. Tracked him for days. In the end, during the big face dow
Billy caught up with us at Daisy’s party, Vance shot him in the hand.”

I stared.

7. I’d heard the story but I didn’t know it was Roxie’s boyfriend or
party.

Wow.

I shook off my wonder at this news and focused on Roxie.

“You said ‘us,’” I told her, getting closer but not touching her. “I
see that happen? The shooting?”

She nodded.

nd told “Roxie, that must have been tough,” I said softly.

They were She blinked at me. "I'm not crying because of *that*."

This surprised me.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

Indy. "I'm crying because of something Hank told me, the reason why second, went after Billy. See, when Billy kidnapped me, he beat me up pretty broke some ribs. When Vance found me, I was a mess. He didn't take Then I very well, said any man who raised his hand to a woman had to pay told me he went after Billy because Vance came from a violent home. My dad put him out of the house when he was ten because Vance tried to get between his dad and his mom when his dad was beating her. This rday he together and it makes me happy he found you, but it also makes me sad he had to live through that before he did."

"My God, I didn't know that," Ally said from behind me.

Indy Billy
Indy when "I did," Indy replied quietly.

"You went through a lot with this Billy," I said to Roxie, ignoring words about Vance.

Daisy's That was another thing I didn't need. Knowing why Vance was out. Knowing he'd witnessed his mother's abuse. Knowing he'd had strength of will, sense of self and capacity for love at age ten to go against his father in an effort to protect his mother.

I didn't need that at all.

Did you So I rolled it up in a big old ball and threw it in the high, chain-linked fenced compound that stood behind my emotional Rottweiler.

"Jules, did you hear what I said about Vance?" Roxie asked, taking from my thoughts.

“I heard you. I know about Vance. I know he was a street kid and ex-con and recovering alcoholic.”

“Holy shit. I didn’t know that either,” Ally said again.

Vance “I did,” Indy repeated.

badly, “How do you know all this shit?” Ally asked.

to that “Lee told me,” Indy replied.

Hank “That boy has a big mouth,” Daisy put in.

ne. His “He does not,” Indy defended Lee.

o get in “He tells you everything,” Jet entered the conversation.

all fits “Of course he does. We don’t have any secrets,” Indy replied.

sad that “Oh, please. You lie to him all the time,” Ally returned.

“Okay then, *Lee* doesn’t have any secrets,” Indy retorted.

“Excuse me girls, but can we get to the topic at hand here?” May
ing herand looked at me. “When’re you gonna see him again?”

“I’m breaking up with him tonight,” I announced.

turned May gasped.

enough Daisy looked at the ceiling.

inst his “Here we go again,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

ain link “Jet tried to break up with Eddie,” Daisy told me.

“Didn’t work,” Jet said on a smile.

ing me I turned to Jet in surprise. “Why did you try to break up with him
him last night. He’s hot.”

he's an Jet just stared at me like she thought maybe I'd recently sustained injury.

“And Roxie tried to break up with Hank. That didn't work either,” continued.

My eyes swung to Roxie. “You did? I saw him last night too. He's I took them both in. “Are you two nuts?”

“Um...have you *looked* at Vance?” Jet asked me.

I shook my head. “It's not the same thing. Anyway, it's not about t they look. It's about how they act.”

“Sugar, how...exactly...is Vance acting like someone you'd wann up with?” Daisy queried.

“He said ‘mine,’ like he was claiming me. Like I was a posses something,” I argued.

y cut in This was true. It was just like I was a possession, a highly-valued heirloom with treasured, precious memories attached that had gone r and was thought never to be found, but all of a sudden it was back.

I didn't tell the girls that though.

“Our boys can get kind of possessive,” Indy shared, but she didn't too upset by it. “You get used to it. I just try to ignore it,” she advised.

I persevered.

“And he tells me what to do. All the time,” I informed them.

“Yeah, they can be bossy too,” Indy said on a sigh. “I just go n way and ignore that too.”
? I saw

“Wait until you're branded. Eddie branded me,” Jet added.

I blinked at her. “Branded you? Like they do to cows?” I asked.

a head She smiled. “Not exactly like that. He just made it known that if touches me, they’ll answer to him or any of his friends.”

” Daisy “Lee did that with me too, in a way,” Indy threw in.

“Hank too,” Roxie said.

s lush.” Damn.

“Vance has already done that. The whole Nightingale Investigation has thrown down on my side,” I shared.

he way Indy smiled. “I knew that too.”

“I didn’t! Dammit! Why am I so out of the loop?” Ally snapped.

a break May broke into Ally’s rant. She sounded exasperated too, but at m

sion or “Oh for goodness sake, Jules, you break up with that boy you’re Christmas card list.”

I just stared at her, keeping my mouth shut.

family She took my stare and then pulled out the big guns. “And no b missing cake for you. I know you like your cake and your birthday is tomorrow had a good one all planned to make for you. But you let go of Vance forget it,” May went on.

t sound “May, that’s not fair!” I protested, and it was true, it *wasn’t* fair. cruel.

I loved her birthday cakes. Everyone loved her birthday cakes. She the best birthday cakes ever, even better than Auntie Reba (but I’d ne ny own Nick that). Last year, she made me German chocolate cake with that d condensed milk frosting with pecans in it. It was amazing.

I carried on my argument to May, “It’s my life. I know what I’m d

“Mm-hmm,” was all May uttered.

anyone The rest of the girls were looking at each other.

“Your birthday is tomorrow?” Jet asked.

“Let’s have a party!” Ally yelled.

“Great idea,” Indy said.

“No!” I broke in. “No party.”

n Team “Too late, sugar. Ain’t no stoppin’ the Rock Chicks when there’s a
to party,” Daisy told me.

They started smiling.

Oh *crap*.

e. I took a deep breath.

off my Whatever.

Time to move on. It was obvious I wasn’t going to get anywhere w
pack.

irthday “I have to get to work,” I told them.

w and I “We’ll get together tonight, plan the party,” Ally decided. “Eight c
Crowe, Brother’s.”

. It was “We should go together, since we live close,” Indy said to me. “I
to ride in your Camaro.”

e made Daisy was watching me closely. She was also smiling.

ever tell I sucked in my lips. I really didn’t need this shit.

elicious “I’ll pick you up, quarter to eight,” I said to Indy. “After I get bac
the shooting range.”

oing!” “The shooting range?” Indy asked, eyes wide with excitement.
Can I go with you?”

I stared at her. Then I sighed.

“Yeah, give me your cell. I’ll program in my number.”

Told you I was a fool.

reason

with this

o’clock.

’d love

ek from

“Cool!

I stared at her. Then I sighed.

“Yeah, give me your cell. I’ll program in my number.”

Told you I was a fool.

ELEVEN



WE SLEEPIN' AT YOUR PLACE OR MINE?

Indy and I pulled up to Heavy's house at five thirty.

The Rock Chicks and I had all exchanged phones and numbers. Indy had called me that afternoon. When I told her I had to train with the Rock Chicks before the shooting range, she asked to come along to that too.

I'd said yes.

More fool I.

I pulled my exercise bag out of the back seat and led Indy into Heavy's house.

"Heavy!" I called. "We're here."

"Who's fuckin' 'we?'" Heavy came out of the kitchen and stared at us.

"Uncle Charlie!" Indy yelled when she saw him.

"India Savage!" Heavy yelled back, a huge, goofy smile spreading across his face. "Get over here, girl, give your Uncle Charlie a hug."

They hugged each other.

I stared.

"What's going on?" I asked.

They ignored me.

“I didn’t know you were called Heavy,” Indy told him, leaning on his beefy arms.

“Long story, girl. God, I haven’t seen you in ages. Not since the picnic, what, two years ago? Hear you’re shackled up with Night?” Heavy replied.

Indy got all girly and showed him her ring, wiggling her fingers for effect. “We’re getting married,” she said.

“About fuckin’ time you two got together,” Heavy replied, letting out a long, low whistle. “Luckiest boy on the planet.”

rs, and I was still staring.

Heavy

Heavy had never given any indication at all, whatsoever, that he was the kind of man who would allow anyone to call him “Uncle Charlie” with a swift upper cut leading directly to a KO.

Boy, I really did *not* know Heavy.

Heavy’s

I should probably learn a lesson from this and research my benefits a bit more in future.

“Helloooo?” I called.

t Indy.

Heavy grinned at me. “This is Indy Savage, Tom Savage’s daughter,” she said this like I didn’t already know it already. “Tom and I worked together on his when I was on the force. I’ve known Indy since she was y’all tall.” He held his hand to about thigh level.

Then something occurred to him, his grin fled and he blinked at Indy.

“What’re you doin’ with Jules?” he asked, morphing into Father. I had the thought that Indy was turning vigilante and joining my crusade.

“We’re going out tonight for dinner after she trains and shoots,” Indy

back in Heavy. "I heard she's good. I wanted to watch."

Heavy kept staring at her.

at FOP "Honestly, Uncle Charlie," Indy assured him. "I'm not getting in
ingale," with Jules's other business. Lee would handcuff me to the bed again."

Again?

gers for I didn't get to ask the "handcuff to the bed *again*" question l
Heavy's stare sliced to me and it was my turn to get the Father
her go. treatment.

"Speakin' of that, what's this I hear of you goin' hand to har
Jermaine and Clarence?"

was the "I took Jermaine down," I told Heavy.

ithout a "Word is you went in after 'em, confronted 'em. What I train you,
for defense, not offense. Got me?"

"They had a couple of runaways," I explained.

actors a "Shit, Jules. Now you're gonna have every fuckin' asshole on th
callin' you out. It'll be like the Wild Fuckin' West. You learn qui
you're gettin' strong, but you go up against one of them mother
ter," he without surprise on your side, they're gonna wipe the floor with you."

ogether My back went straight. "Heavy, don't worry about it," I said.

held up "I *do* worry about it," he retorted.

"Well, don't," I told him.

dy. "I know you got Nightingale's team at your back. They're good, b
Bear at got business to attend to. They can't protect you every minute of the
day," Heavy went on.

idy told "Vance won't let anyone hurt her," Indy decided to share, her face

Then she confided, leaning toward Heavy, “They’re going out.”

I looked to the ceiling, took in a deep breath and let it out on a long, low sigh.

Damn.

When I looked back at Heavy he was staring at me again.

“He fuck you yet?” Heavy asked.

“Uncle Charlie!” Indy snapped.

“Heavy!” I said at the same time.

Heavy kept his eyes on me. “Girl, that boy is a player. P-l-a-y wears a skirt, has a pretty face, long legs and a sweet ass, he’ll charm he’ll fuck it. You got all a’ those in abundance.”

Indy was glaring at Heavy with her hands on her hips.

My eyes narrowed on Heavy. “Do *not* refer to women as ‘it,’” I said. “This conversation is over.”

Heavy opened his mouth to speak.

“Over! O-v-e-r,” I snapped in my word-is-law voice, using his own spelling tactic against him to make my point and then I walked toward the garage door. “Let’s train.”



MY PHONE RANG in the car while I was pulling the keys out of the ignition. Indy and I were parked in the lot outside of Zip’s.

The display said UNKNOWN CALLER. I flipped it open.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?” It was Vance.

happy.

My heart did a funny flip. I mentally told it to behave.

id, long “Well, hello to you too,” I replied.

“Where are you?” he repeated.

“At the library,” I lied.

“You’re sittin’ outside Zip’s.”

At his words I looked around, but didn’t see any Harleys or Explorers.

I caught Indy’s eye and she mouthed, “Who is it?”

7-e-r. It I mouthed back, “Vance.”

it then “Jules,” Vance said in my ear.

“Where are *you*?” I asked.

warned. “I’m standin’ in your living room, waitin’ to take you out to dinner Whoops.

“Um...” I mumbled.

1 word- “What’d I say about how I felt about bein’ stood up?”

ard the “You said you’d call,” I told him.

“I got busy, but our plans didn’t change.”

“Vance, I hate to tell you this, but they were *your* plans.”

Hazel’s He was silent.

I didn’t take this as a good sign.

Finally he warned in a low, quiet voice, “Don’t make me con you.”

Yikes.

I bugged my eyes out at Indy. She bit her lip on a smile.

“How did you know where I was?” I asked, deciding to change the subject.

“I planted a device in your car,” he told me.

I sucked in breath and this time, my eyes, still on Indy, went dark. A black shock.

Her smile faded and she mouthed, “What?”

“You planted a tracking device in my car?” I said slowly.

Indy put her hand to her open mouth.

“And in your bag,” Vance said.

“I do not believe you,” I hissed.

“Jules, get home.”

“I’m shooting then I’m going out for drinks with the girls,” I told her.

“Jules—”

I cut him off. “When’s this meet with Darius?”

“Goddammit, Jules—”

“Forget it, I’ll ask Indy to call Lee. I’ll see you there.” I flipped the phone shut and looked at Indy. “Can you call Lee—?” I started.

She was nodding, already digging through her purse.

“I’m on it,” she said.



After
When we walked into Zip’s, Indy had her phone to her ear and she was just inside the door while I approached Zip who was behind the counter.

“Girl, you are *loco*!” Zip shouted at me the minute he saw me.

“Now...Zip,” I said placatingly, arriving across the counter from him. “Do not ‘Zip’ me. You’re fuckin’ loony tunes. It’s like you sent engraved invitation to every fuckin’ asshole on the street, ‘You are cordially invited to try and kick my ass.’ Shee-it.”

“Zip, let me—”

“And you got the Nightingale Boys backin’ you. Christ Almighty! Those boys’re crazier than you.” His eyes went beyond me. “Fuck, Indy Savage?” Zip asked, staring at Indy.

“Yes—” I began.

“Oh no. No, no, no. I don’t want Lee Nightingale on my ass. You draggin’ her into this. She’ll recruit Chavez’s woman and Nightingale and it’ll be the Rock Chick Renegades against the Denver Drug Dealers. Rivers of blood and pissed-off bad boys denied their pieces of ass and come after *me*. No fuckin’ way, I won’t be a part of it.”

I couldn’t help it. He was being so dramatic I had to smile.

“Zip, listen to me. Indy just wants to see me shoot. She’s not ‘intimidated.’ Please, Zip, she’s just...” I hesitated and stared at him. “A friend,” I finished.

Zip went silent and watched me. He knew enough about me to know the importance of what I’d just said.

Then he asked, “Crowe fucked you yet?”

“Zip!” I snapped.

“Well, has he?”

“That’s none of your business.”

He dropped his chin and shook his head.

“He has,” Zip muttered to the display case like I was his twelve-year-old brother.

im. kid and he was disappointed in finding me in the garage stealing a
out an Then he looked up at me again. "Girl, you're cruisin' for a broken head
ordially bullet-ridden body. Goddamn." He reached into the case, pulled out a
ammo and slammed it on the counter, indicating my tongue-lashing with
"Get her glasses and ear protectors. Three's open. Goddamn."

ty, girl. Indy took her phone away from her ear, flipped it shut and approached
is that smiling at Zip.

"Hey, Zip," she said.

"Goddamn," he replied.

are not Indy threw me a look. I mouthed "not now" and I walked her back
's sister range.

rs. I see "What was wrong with him?" she whispered as we stood in the
they'll soundproof antechamber, putting on glasses and wrapping ear protectors
around our necks.

o this. "Nothing. He just gets a bit...overprotective," I explained. "What
'say?"

nished. She scrunched her nose. "Lee said that you go to the meet with Van

ow the "Goddammit," I muttered.

I was worried those boys would stick together.

"I tried to get it out of him. I even offered naked gratitude. But he
bite," Indy told me.

"Naked gratitude?" I smiled at her.

She linked her arm in mine and turned us to face the door to the
"Why do you think I know everything? Naked gratitude. Works every
She winked at me. Then she said, "Well, *nearly* every time."
ear-old

smoke. I was still smiling at her.

rt and a We put our ear protectors over our ears and stepped inside the rang
box of



as over. WITH THE TARGET twenty-five yards away, I had both my arms up,
hand, the side of my right hand above my wrist held in my left ha
hed us, arms slightly bent to absorb the impact of the recoil, my head tilted
gun's sight, I emptied a clip in the target.

Seventeen rounds, head for three, then chest for three, and back
until the clip was spent. I dropped my gun and squinted at the target
k to the that I didn't do too badly even with my arms aching, and Indy came up
to my back. Super close, weird close.

e small Yikes.

otectors I started to turn to tell her to back off, but it wasn't Indy.

It was Vance.

t'd Lee Before I could react, he reached low, grabbed my wrist with one ha
twisted the gun out of my grip with his other.

nce." Oh crap.

I stared at Vance's angry face for a beat then my eyes slid to the side.

Indy was sitting on a stool behind me. For the last twenty minutes
e didn't been taking turns with my gun. Her father had taught her how to shoot
she wasn't a bad shot.

Now she was sitting frozen and throwing me an "eek" look.

range. Vance's hand was still at my wrist. He dragged me right by Indy
7 time." sparing her a glance and toward the soundproof door.

I tried to pull free.

This didn't work.

We went through the door into the antechamber and he closed it
us.

I tore off my ear protectors and goggles and tossed them on the s
nd. Mythe wall.

l to the "What the fuck?" I snapped.

He shoved my gun in the back waistband of his jeans, ripped
k again protective gear and tossed it on a shelf next to mine.

t. I saw "What the fuck?" I repeated, thinking he hadn't heard me with
p close protectors on.

Then he looked at me.

Wow.

I didn't have to know him very well to know he was seriously piss

and and "You hung up on me," he said, voice smooth and quiet.

"Vance."

"Don't ever hang up on me."

de. Most girls would probably hear the way he said those six words a
as we'd meekly.

oot and I wasn't like most girls.

"You put a tracking device on my car," I said in my defense.

"So?" he responded.

without "And in my purse," I went on.

"This is a problem because...?" he asked.

"This is a problem because..." I couldn't think why it was a proble

his angry eyes on me. Then it came to me. “It’s intrusive,” I finished.

behind “It’s intrusive,” he repeated.

“Yes,” I clipped.

half on “Then you’ll probably not be happy to learn that your house is t
The living room and kitchen have cameras, as do the front an
entrances.”

off his My mouth dropped open. “You’re joking,” I whispered.

his ear “I put them in myself the first night I broke in. The only rea
windows don’t have them is because you have protective bars.”

Oh my *God*.

I was going to have to learn not to sleep so heavily. I didn’t know
manage that, but I’d have to try.

ed. I could not believe he wired my house while I was asleep.

God, he was fucking *good*.

I shrugged off my admiration and pulled back my anger.

“You’re watching me?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

nd nod “The team’s watching you in the surveillance room at the office.”

Oh my God.

My mind flashed to the Sacred Girlfriend Ritual, complet
margaritas and makeup and discussion of popping cherries. Mace had
the surveillance room last night. He’d picked up my call when Var
gone after Sal. He’d probably watched and listened to the whole thing.

No doubt about it, I was moving to Nicaragua.

em with “Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath, and embarra

overwhelming me, I sagged against the wall.

Then my mind flashed to Vance and I on the couch, and my head was tilted down to stare at my boots, shot up.

suggested. “Last night—” I started.

and back “They’re instructed to turn off the internal cameras when I’m with Vance told me.

“What if they don’t?” I asked.

son the “They do.”

“What if they don’t?”

“They fuckin’ do. Jesus, Jules, that isn’t the point.”

how to “What *is* the point?”

He moved quick and got in my space.

I was *really* going to have to learn to be prepared for how quickly he moved.

He stared down at me, eyes still angry. “The point is you stood me up, you hung up on me. That’s what we’re talkin’ about.”

“No, now we’re talking about you and your boys keeping tabs on me.”

“We’re protecting you.”

me with “I want them taken out. The cameras, the bugs, the tracking device been in it,” I demanded.

once had “That isn’t gonna happen.”

“I’ll take them out myself,” I told him.

“You wouldn’t find them.”

assessment He was probably right.

“I’ll ask Frank to take them out,” I said.

, which Frank would find them, I was certain.

“Muñoz pulls them, I’ll put more in,” Vance shot back.

“Goddammit, Crowe.”

h you,” “Jules, the shit stays at your house so I can protect you. No discuss
That’s when I saw red and I snapped, “I *hate* it when you do that.”

“What?”

“Make these macho man declarations. It pisses me off.”

“If you weren’t so fuckin’ antagonistic, you’d realize it’s for yo
damned good.”

Again, he was probably right.

Still.

ckly he My anger ebbed a bit. I frowned at him but this had no effect.

up and Vance said.
“We’ll take Indy home. Then we’re goin’ to dinner and we’re t

ne.” “No, I can’t. The Rock Chicks have decided to throw me a birthda
and we’re going to Brother’s to plan it.”

s, all of His eyes narrowed. “You wanna explain to me how you’re all of a
close with Indy and her gang?”

I shook my head, not because I didn’t want to explain it, but be
couldn’t.

“I have no idea.” When he looked dubious I continued, “Hon
swear. I actually tried to get them to leave me alone, but I thought Da
going to take me down in a bitch-slapping fight when I told her my l

none of her business. Have you seen that woman's nails? I'm not going there."

He shook his head a few times and his hand came to the wall at my back. He leaned into it and therefore leaned into me, getting way close.

ion." "We got shit to discuss," he said, his face an inch from mine.

"Yes. We do. Unfortunately, I'm moving to Nicaragua after our trip with Darius so we won't be able to do that," I declared.

He stared at me a beat then slowly his anger disappeared and he gave me a look just like he did last night, as if I was downright adorable.

ur own "What'll Roam and Sniff do if you move to Nicaragua?" he asked.

With him no longer being angry, the smooth was still in his voice but it was an altogether different kind of smooth. This had an effect on me that I ignored.

"I'll take them with me," I decided on the fly.

alkin'," He moved in closer, his free hand coming to my hip, his eyes getting darker and sexy, and I felt my belly flutter in a way I *couldn't* ignore. "What's your party if you move to Nicaragua?"

Immediately I mouthed off. Do not ask me why, but I was going to use my sudden Belly Flutter Defense.

"Find yourself a woman who can cook and doesn't mind you ordering around all the time, being bossy and dictatorial and macho and hyper-competitive and actually *likes* it when you get all...whatever...and make her belly flutter."

After I said that, my mouth snapped shut.

Damn.

onna go I'd gotten carried away and went too far.

y waist. Vance finished moving in, pressing me back into the wall with his

ir meet "I do that to you?" he asked, his voice silk.

grinned, Like he didn't know.

er meet "Back off, Crowe."

chest. His eyes dropped to my mouth and my heart started hammering

grinned, "I do it to you," he muttered.

See? I knew he knew.

e but it "Back off," I repeated.

me, an His hand came from the wall to curl around the side of my ne
other arm went around my waist and he pulled me to him. "Get Indy t
you where the offices are. Meet us there after Brother's."

ing soft I nodded, deciding tardily to keep silent.

t'll I do "We sleepin' at your place or mine?" he asked.

with the I changed my mind about keeping silent.

"I'm sleeping at my place," I informed him.

"That works for me. I like your bed."

ring her I rolled my eyes. When they came back to him, he was grinning ag
·intense What...ever.

r belly The door opened and Indy came through. She closed the door a
off her ear protectors.

"Sorry guys, I tried to give you time," she said.

I slid away from Crowe.

“That’s all right,” I told her. “We’re done.”

body. Indy turned to take off her goggles and put them and the ear pro
away. When she did, with an arm around my waist, Vance pulled my
his front. He slid my gun in the back waistband of my cords and his
came to my ear.

“We’re far from done,” he said there.

; in my

Over my shoulder, I threw him a look.

He threw me a grin.

Again.

Whatever.

ck. His

o show

ain.

nd took

“That’s all right,” I told her. “We’re done.”

Indy turned to take off her goggles and put them and the ear protectors away. When she did, with an arm around my waist, Vance pulled my back to his front. He slid my gun in the back waistband of my cords and his mouth came to my ear.

“We’re far from done,” he said there.

Over my shoulder, I threw him a look.

He threw me a grin.

Again.

Whatever.



CHANNELING MY HEAD-CRACKIN' MAMMA JAMMA

“I think we should have a theme.”

“A theme?”

“We’re not having a theme.”

“We’ve never had a theme. We should do something, like dress James Bond characters.”

“It’s tomorrow night. We don’t have time.”

“I am *not* dressing up like a James Bond character.”

We were sitting in the back room of My Brother’s Bar, a d establishment in lower, *lower* downtown that was decorated in “wood had no bottled beer, only beer on tap, and had arguably the best bar r Denver, including buffalo burgers, hot soft pretzels with jalapeño cheese, and fantastic onion rings.

We’d been there over an hour and had dinner (I got the ticky tur hot, shaved turkey sandwich with jalapeño cream cheese and some d orange gunk on a fresh hoagie roll).

Most everyone was into their third or fourth beer. I was drinki cola. I wanted nothing to impair my judgment when I sat down with D

The conversation was fast and furious, and as far as I could decisions had been made.

I was not participating. I'd never had a birthday party with more than Nick and Auntie Reba in attendance. I didn't feel I had anything to

Our group consisted of all the girlie gang, including May, Tod and and surprisingly Indy's coffee guy, the humongous, hairy Tex.

Tex also didn't participate in the party planning discussion.

Hank brought Roxie. Eddie brought Jet. Hank and Eddie didn't : us, but positioned themselves in the front room at the bar by the door. this was because they didn't have a lot of insight into planning pa figured their presence at the bar at all was because I was there. They th up like was dangerous, I was with their women and they weren't taking any c Thus they moved off to stand at the entrance and keep watch.

"Jules, who do you want us to invite?" Indy asked, pulling me fr thoughts.

rinkin "Just Nick, my uncle, and Zip, Heavy and Frank," I answered, wor . They if they decided on a theme, how any of those men would take to th nenu in Not very well, I guessed, and the thought of Heavy in a James Bon cream costume made me smile.

I came back into the room and saw they were all staring at me.

key—a "Zip the gun shop guy?" Jet asked.

elicious "Yeah, he's my friend," I told her.

"Anyone else?" Indy cut in.

ng diet I shook my head.

arius. She stared at me.

tell no “No one?” she went on.

I kept shaking my head.

people “Friends from work?” Roxie prompted and I started to get uncomf
o offer. “Let’s move on,” Tex boomed from beside me, saying his first w
Stevie, the night except, “Give me a Ralphie Burger and a Bud,” then, “What
mean, you don’t have Budweiser? Fuck! This is America!”

Everyone jumped at Tex’s boom, looked at each other, and the
sit withstarted a bewildering conversation about cashews.

Jet said This went on for a while when Tex leaned into me.

rties. I “You wanna blow this joint, go out, crack together some dealer l
ought I he asked in a booming whisper.
hances.

The group had moved on to whether they should make a bowl of s
pitchers of margaritas or personally created mojitos, which was appar
om my very important decision that took all their undivided attention, so they
Tex’s boom.

idering, I turned to him. “I don’t crack heads very often. I usually slash ti
at idea. throw smoke bombs,” I told him.

d-esque He stared at me.

I went on, “Sometimes I get creative with plastic wrap, and once I
a dealer’s Mercedes with canola oil. Inside and out.”

At this he grinned.

“Bet that took a lot of oil,” he remarked, sounding impressed.

“Three gallon jugs.” I smiled.

He nodded his appreciation. “You ever want to get serious, I know
to get teargas and grenades,” he told me.

It was my turn to stare, not knowing if he was serious or trying to be funny. I decided he was trying to be funny.

comfortable. "I'll keep that in mind."

words of He nodded again and then turned to the group and boomed, "So do you
Next topic!"

I got up and announced, "I'm getting a drink. Anyone need anything?"
en they Lots of shaking heads and then they moved on to decorations. Yay
and if yay, what kind?

I wandered to the bar. When I got to the front room it was packed.
heads?" only space available at the bar was next to Eddie Chavez.

Damn.

sangria, Just my luck.

rently a I took a deep breath, slid in beside him and caught the bartender's
missed attention.

"What 'cha need?" the bartender asked me.

res and "Diet," I ordered.

He put ice in a glass and pulled out the soft drink gun. I felt, rather
saw, Hank and Eddie's eyes on me.

doused I turned to them.

"Hey," I said.

Yep, they were both looking at me but neither responded to my greeting.

Whatever.

The bartender set the drink in front of me.

where "How much?" I asked.

g to be He grinned then winked. “That’s on the house.”

Pu-lease.

I’d heard that before.

hangria! “How much?” I repeated, making my point that I was *not* interested

He blinked then his face fell. He was cute and probably not accustomed to being shot down.

or nay, I felt sorry for him, but I needed to flirt with a bartender like I needed a hole in the head. Firstly, Eddie and Hank were watching, they were friends. The Vance’s, and even though I was not *with* Vance, everyone, including Eddie, thought I was. Secondly, I wasn’t into the bartender. I wasn’t into anyone, including Vance (okay, that last part was a lie, but I wasn’t averse to flirting with myself in extreme situations).

ender’s “A buck fifty,” the bartender cut into my Romantic Denial Reverie

I dug in my purse, got out my wallet, gave him two dollars and he wandered away.

“Crash and burn,” Eddie muttered under his breath as I threw my wallet back in my purse.

ier than “Sorry?” I asked even though I heard him.

Eddie moved away from the bar to stand beside me and Hank moved forward, both of them effectively fencing me in.

eting. “Word of advice?” Eddie asked, ignoring my earlier question.

I took a sip and glanced at him over the rim of my glass. Then I took a drink on the bar.

I did not want a word of advice from Eddie Chavez.

Instead, so as not to be rude, I said, “Sure.”

“Whatever Darius offers, take it. Save face and get off the street.”

Hmm.

I was thinking these boys weren't big fans of The Law.

d. I decided not to answer.

stomed “You have a good reputation for the work you do. People respect y
have for a long time. Until this,” Hank said, standing in front of m
eeded a understandable. You work hard to keep these kids clean, when one c
ends of goes down you want to do something. But Jules, you're goin' about
Vance, wrong way.”

anyone, Okay, so even though Hank was being nice, I figured it was tim
lying torude.

. “Thanks for the advice, but you don't know what the fuck you're
about,” I said to Hank.

and he “We're both Vice,” Eddie told me.

“I know what you are,” I replied.

7 wallet “That means we do know what we're talkin' about,” Hank explain
I turned back to Hank. “I know what Vice is.”

“It's about the kids,” Eddie murmured to Hank.

moved “Yeah,” I said to Eddie, my voice was low and serious and no
mistaken. “It's about the kids.”

Eddie just looked at me, unaffected by my-word-is-law tone.

put the “Maybe you should know Lee's on his own with this one. Darius
you off the streets, and so do I,” Eddie shared. “I don't agree with Lee
I see you on the streets, fuckin' around where you shouldn't be, I'll ta
down.”

The way he said it made me think this wasn't an idle threat.

So now I had the dealers and the cops actively against me.

This wasn't surprising, but it was annoying.

I didn't respond.

you and me. "You get caught, taken in, it could mean you lose your job," Hank said. "It's me."

of them "I'll take my chances," I returned.

it it the "We bring you down, we'll go after Zip, Heavy and Frank next should know better than encourage you to put your ass out there," Hank said. e to be on.

Damn, Vance had been talking.

talking Now I was beginning to get mad. "Zip, Heavy and Frank don't w out there. They can't control me any more than Crowe can. They giving me the knowledge to keep me from getting hurt."

ed. "They don't have that much knowledge," Hank retorted, his vo eyes hard.

Before I could reply, Eddie leaned in. "Something else, Law. You involved in any of this shit, and she, or any of them, gets caught up o danger—" it to be

"Back off, Chavez." My patience was waning. "They came to me. recruiting. This is a one woman deal."

s wants "This shit spreads," Eddie warned.

, and if "I'd sooner gnaw off my own goddamned arm than see Jet or i ke you Roxie, or any of them get hurt," I told the boys.

To my surprise I meant it, and the looks on their faces told n

believed me.

Finally.

“They’re planning a birthday party, not a vigilante drug v
continued.

nk told This was met with silence.

“Though, Tex did offer me teargas and grenades,” I shared.

“Jesus Christ,” Hank muttered under his breath.

t. They “Don’t take him up on it,” Eddie said straight out.

lk went I stared.

“I thought he was joking,” I murmured.

“Fuck.” It was Eddie’s turn to mutter under his breath.

’ant me Before anyone could say anything else, Indy walked up to us, but
’re just in between Eddie and Hank.

“Hey, guys.” She smiled, then she looked between the three of
ice and felt the tension and her smile faded. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said immediately. “So, is it cashews or macadamia nu
get Jet She looked at me. “Cashews. It’s always cashews, and you aren’t
r put in anyone.” Her eyes flashed between Eddie and Hank. “You two, back o

“Stay out of it, Indy,” Eddie ordered.

I’m not “You stay out of it. This is Jules’s deal,” Indy returned.

“Indy—” Hank started, but Indy cut him off.

Indy or “Excuse me, but wasn’t it you who went ballistic when Rox
kidnapped? Lee nearly had to lock you in the safe room.”

ne they Hank’s eyes remained hard, but he didn’t respond.

Indy's gaze cut to Eddie. "As for you, you think you would be a maverick if something happened to Hector?" Indy asked Eddie.

"Hector?" I cut in.

"Eddie's younger brother," Indy told me.

"I'm a cop," Eddie reminded Indy.

"You're a cop who already doesn't follow the rules. You'd lose your fucking mind if something happened to Hector, and it could and would you know it."

"Hector's my brother. This kid Jules is avenging—" Eddie started.

"He meant something to her," Indy interrupted him.

"Goddammit, Indy—" Eddie carried on and Indy leaned in.

"He *meant* something to her," she said quietly. "You know how it already lost Darius, Eddie, and what happened to him turned you into a mess. You *know*."

I watched fascinated as Indy and Eddie squared off.

Neither spoke. Neither moved.

I was beginning to think Indy was a bit of a head-crackin' mamma fucker too.

I realized this could go on all night so I cut in, "Oh, for goodness sake it's cool. We're cool. The world is cool. Indy, do you want a drink?"

She tore her gaze away from Eddie's and looked at me. "I can't stay. I'm called. It's time."

Saved by the call from the badass boy.

"Great," I said. "Let's go."

Indy kept glaring at them both, deciding to include Hank
unhappiness. I grabbed her arm, deciding not to go the way of the gl
already been rude enough.

I dragged her to the door.

We were in Hazel and on our way to the Nightingale Investi
se your offices before I asked about Hector.

ve both “Lee, Eddie and Darius were all best friends for as long as
remember. As kids they were wild. Serious wild. Crazy wild,” she t
then stopped.

“Yeah?” I prompted.

I kept my eyes on the road, but I heard and felt her move in her
turn to me.

is. You “It isn’t my place to say, but we all loved Darius. We all still d
a cop. said, shocking me.

I didn’t respond.

“He was a great guy. I think he still is that guy, somewhere deep
he was in his late teens, his dad was murdered. Long story, sad an
jamma Darius had a rough time, fell in with a bad man, lost his way and neve
it back.”

s sakes, I nodded.

Some people were born bad. Some people were forced into it.
1’t. Lee interesting to know which sort of person Darius was.

“Lee and Eddie had different reactions to this. Lee straightened
went into the Army. Eddie straightened up and went into the Ac
Regardless, they’re all close to this day.”

in her “And Hector?” I asked.

are. I’d “Hector’s a wildcard. No one knows what he’s into, and he’s gone
radar. Eddie and Lee are trying to get a lock on him, but they’re
nothing. I told you about Lee, Eddie and Darius because they could
gations some big trouble, hotwiring cars, bar fights, shit like that. Rumor
Hector’s giving them a run for their money. We’re talking bad
; I can beyond hotwiring cars and bar fights.”

old me, I pulled in my lips, catching her meaning. I didn’t respond and
drove.

Indy went silent until we got close to Lee’s offices and she direc
seat to into an underground parking area. I parked next to Vance’s Harley.

The sight of it made my heart skip a beat.

o,” she “Vance has a great bike,” Indy breathed, staring at it.

“You can say that again,” I told her.

She smiled at me. “You ride on it yet?”

. When I nodded.

d ugly. “Is it hot?” she asked.

r found I nodded again, this time on a grin.

“Lee has a Ducati.”

“Nice,” I said slow.

It was She started to giggle, and for some reason so did I.

up and After we finished giggling, we got out, went into the building and
ademy. up some flights of stairs. Outside the door that had a plaque th
“Nightingale Investigations” on it, I stopped and turned to her.

“I hear anything about Hector, I’ll let you know. You can do
off the whatever you want.”

getting “I’d appreciate that,” she said. Then she went on, “So would Eddie
get into I figured I could use a favor from Eddie, especially since he inte
: has it “take me down.”

shit far We walked into the offices. All the lights were on and I was surp
the reception area. It screamed money. The place was decorated
simply Cowboy chic, gleaming wood, leather couches and a bronze bucking
on a column in the corner. Behind the huge reception desk sat a
ted mewoman who was so gorgeous, she looked cut out of the pages of a
magazine. The woman looked up, her brows drew together, and she s
us with undisguised dislike as we approached the desk.

Yikes.

“Hi, Dawn,” Indy greeted, smiling sweetly but supremely fake.

I was impressed.

“Hi, Indy,” Dawn returned the favor and her gaze moved to me. ‘
this? Is it *The Law*?’ she asked sarcastically.

Oh my God.

What a bitch!

“My name is Juliet Lawler,” I told her, my voice cold.

“Yeah, I know,” she said back, her voice arctic.

walked Wow.

at said She *was* a bitch.

I wondered if it was just us or if this woman was mean to everyo
walked through the doors. If so, Lee needed a new receptionist.

with it Indy leaned into her and said with false concern for Dawn's v
 “You *do* know there are cameras and bugs in here?”

.” Dawn didn't bother to respond, got up and walked around the desk
nded to “I'll tell Lee you're here,” she said.

 “I'm sure he already knows,” Indy replied.

rised at Dawn disappeared behind a door.

richly. “What a bitch,” I spoke my thoughts aloud to Indy.

bronco “She had a thing for Lee,” Indy informed me.

blonde I made a face. “You're kidding? Did he know?”

fashion She nodded her head. “Yeah, he didn't care. Not interested. Then :
tared at a thing for Vance.”

 This information, coupled with the knowledge that everyone
everyone) kept telling me Vance was a player, made my stomach cler
very unhappy way.

“Who's I couldn't help myself, I blurted out in a whisper, “Oh my God. Di
her?”

 This time she shook her head. “No way.”

 “Thank God,” I breathed.

 If Vance touched Dawn, well...one word, *ick*.

 “Then she had a thing for Luke. No go. Then Mace, then Hank. T
think she's a bitch.”

 “Why does Lee keep her?”

ne who “Says she's efficient and...” she hesitated, “*cordial*.”

 After she said this, in unison we both widened our eyes at each ot

welfare, then burst out laughing. In fact, at the idea of Dawn being cordial we laughed so hard we bent double with it.

“Having fun?” Lee asked, moving toward Indy, having entered the doorway.

Vance was coming at me and Dawn was walking behind me. I straightened, wiped a tear of laughter from my eye and watched Lee approach Indy, which gave me the opportunity to ignore Vance.

Lee put his hands to either side of Indy’s neck and kissed her right lips. After he was done, Indy smiled up at him. His eyes crinkled watching them, my heart spasmed.

she had What in *the hell* was that all about?

A heart spasm at the sight of true love?

(as in What kind of head-crackin’ mamma jamma was I?
rich in a

“Law,” Vance said beside me.

d he do I turned to him.

“Crowe,” I returned the greeting.

I held my body stiff. My emotional Rottweiler had woken up and guarded. Vance watched me closely and I got the impression he sensed the Rottweiler and decided he was a cuddly puppy. I got this impression as his sexual tractor beam switched on. His eyes got soft and his arm wrapped they all around my waist, pulling me around and into his body.

“Crowe,” I said low and quiet, a warning in my voice.

He ignored my warning and his face dipped close to mine.

“Shut up,” he said, but he said it through one of his grins.

her and “Don’t tell me to shut up,” I flashed.

laughed He just kept grinning.

Whatever.

from the “Are we going to do this or what?” I asked.

Instantly his eyes went serious, but he didn’t let me go.

desk. I “We get there, you let Darius talk first. You let him have his say and
approach listen. Then you let Lee guide the conversation and you take cues from
Yeah?”

t on the “I’m not stupid,” I told him.

ed and “I know you aren’t,” he surprised me by saying.

I blinked at him.

“Really?” I blurted then I wished I hadn’t because his eyes got so
and I was having trouble channeling my head-crackin’ mamma jamn
his soft eyes on me.

“Really,” he said quietly.

“I thought you thought I was a little crazy.”

“Crazy. Yeah. Stupid. No.”

was on Hmm.

aw my That was *mostly* good.

because curled What was I thinking? I didn’t care if Vance thought I was crazy or
Before I could purposefully kill the mood, Luke did it for me.

“Fuck. You guys havin’ a sit down with Darius or an orgy in recep

I went up on my toes and looked over Vance’s shoulder. Lu
standing in the doorway, arms crossed on his chest. He looked like he
know whether to grin or vomit. A glance at Dawn showed she de

wished she could vomit and her eyes were on Vance and me.

I smiled brightly at her just because. I felt Vance's body move with laughter even though he didn't make a sound.

I turned my head and frowned at him.

and you "What?" I snapped.

m Lee. His mouth came to my ear. "Wouldn't know, don't want to know what bet she doesn't taste like cherries."

That got a belly flutter.

I sicced the Rottweiler on my belly flutter and glared at Vance with my head came away from my neck. "Stop talking to me. I'm trying to concentrate on my head-crackin' mamma jamma."

na with At my words, a hint of surprise passed his face then he got that "adorable" look again, and even though I knew he heard me, he asked "what?"

Time to stop speaking.

He watched me a beat and then looked at Lee.

"We movin'?" he asked.

stupid. "Yeah," Lee answered and his eyes cut to Dawn. "Dawn, that's stayin' late. We're done for the day." Then he looked down at Indy and watched as *his* face went soft. "Luke's takin' you home."

tion?" of kindness. "Lee, if you want, I can take Indy home," Dawn said sweetly, the

ke was Blech.

e didn't It was my turn to consider vomiting.
:finitely

“I got her.” Luke walked forward without sparing Dawn a glance.

Vance let me go and I turned to Indy just as she arrived at me and gave me a big surprise hug. I stood in her arms uncertain what to do for a moment, then I hugged her back.

“Good luck,” she said when she let me go. She stayed close to me, but I whispered, “Remember, deep down, he’s a great guy.”

I took a breath and nodded.

Before Indy and Luke left, Luke stopped at the door and sliced his hand across his forehead. He looked at me.

“Tomorrow, five thirty. Here. You and me. Don’t be late.”

Then he was gone.

I stared at the door but asked Vance, “What did that mean?”

“You’re training with Luke tomorrow,” Vance told me.

I totally lost any hold on my head-crackin’ mamma jamma and my mind dropped open. “No I’m not.”

“I were you,” Lee said, coming up to us, “I wouldn’t be late.”

I stared at the both of them.

“Fuck.”



VANCE FOLLOWED me to my house on his Harley. We parked Haze in the garage. I jumped on his bike and we met Lee at a bar on Colfax, the same place I’d seen Darius in a few days before.

We got drinks, Vance a soda, me a diet soda (even though I wanted tequila, I was still going for a clear head) and Lee a beer.

We stood at the bar, me and the badasses, surveying the room and giving speaking.

Vance didn't get touchy and sexy. This was a different Vance. The badass Vance. He was relaxed, but alert and very serious. We weren't here, we were partners. How he communicated this I could not tell you he did. I knew it, felt it. Anyone in that bar fucked with me, they fucked Vance.

And it was pretty clear no one wanted to fuck with Vance.

Or Lee.

Me, now that was probably another story.

Still, we were given a wide berth.

After about ten minutes, Lee murmured, "Let's go."

I had no idea why he said this, if he got some sign, but they moved followed. We walked to the back of the bar, down a hall and into a room.

In the room were three people. Darius sitting at a round table supplier I'd heard of and seen once or twice (but didn't know his name) Darius's left, and on his right, a pretty middle-aged black woman with brown eyes and a huge Afro.

"Lee Boy! Lookin' good," the woman shouted when we walked sounding happy and welcoming, like we'd come to her dinner party.

"Shirleen," Lee said, walking into the room.

I followed. Vance followed me.

Lee put his beer bottle down and sat. I put my glass down and sat next to him, thinking this was the right thing to do. I rethought it when Lee positioned himself standing behind me and to my right. Instead of

and not indecisive and getting up to stand with Vance, I kept my seat.

The supplier's eyes went to Vance. They got hard and scary and his was my breath.

Vance hadn't allowed me to bring my gun, even though I was your lover, but certain he and Lee were carrying, though Vance didn't share. He would send the wrong message for me to walk in armed. And since I'd had a sit down with a drug dealer, and expected he knew what he was about, I gave in.

At that moment though, I wished I had it just in case.

Lee felt me tense. His eyes cut to me, and quickly, to my shock, *I not*, he winked at me.

Lee "Badass Mother" Nightingale winked...at...me.

I guessed this meant everything was all right.

I let out my breath and tried to relax.

The seating scenario had us facing off against Darius, Shirleen (and I) and another guy.

"So you're The Law," Shirleen said, looking at me. "You're a tiny thing. How you flip Jermaine on his back?" she asked.

"Um..." I started, thinking I wasn't exactly tiny, but then again she wasn't tiny, so it was all relative.

"Not that I think that's bad, mind," she went on as if I hadn't uttered a sound. "Jermaine is one evil brother. I do not like him *at all*. Got my first daughter, Shaneequa, pregnant then left her high and dry. No child support. We was *thrilled* when we heard you kicked him in the balls. He deserved it."

“Shirleen,” Darius said quietly.

l I held “Well, he did,” Shirleen retorted. “Got his ass kicked by a white
tiny white girl. I cannot wait to tell Shaneequa,” Shirleen said to me
s pretty now!” she exclaimed. “Why don’t you come with me to see Shar
said it She’d love to meet you. She’ll give you a big, fat kiss.”

d never “Shirleen,” Darius said again, sounding more impatient now.
talking I stared.

I couldn’t help it. This was definitely not how I expected this sit c
be.

kid you Shirleen ignored Darius’s impatience.

“I hear you work with them kids at that shelter. Well, I got me
friend. Last year, her boy, he went to the street. So young, that boy.
know why, but he did. His parents are good people, no reason why he
to the street. One of you social workers found him and talked to him, s
and the to the shelter then got him back home. Lord knows what was goin’ on
boy’s head. Still, they was glad to have him home, I can tell you that.”

ay little Darius was now sitting back, his eyes were on Lee. He was
harassed.

e really “What was the boy’s name?” I asked Shirleen.

“His name was Tye. Who names their child Tye, with an ‘e?’ Wh
tered a with that?” Shirleen answered but I leaned forward.

friend’s “Tye?” I asked. “I know Tye.”

upport, And I did. He was young, eleven, and luckily I got to him early
ills. He he’d been chewed up and spit out. He’d only been on the streets a few
when I talked him into the shelter. By that time, he’d been scared ou

mind. The reunion had been quick, maybe only a few weeks more.

girl. A “You do?” Shirleen was leaning forward too.

3. “Hey “Yeah. I got him off the street. He wasn’t one of my cases, but we
neequa?talk all the time in the rec room. How is he? Is he doing okay?” I went

“Got on the A and B honor roll last year,” Shirleen bragged, as if
her own son.

“Oh, that’s great. Tell him I said hi.”

lown to “Will do, girl,” Shirleen said to me. “Maybe I’ll get him to con
when we visit Shaneequa.”

“I’d like that,” I replied, smiling at her.

another All of a sudden Shirleen’s eyes changed. They didn’t go scary, l
Do *not*supplier’s had. They went kind. The change was so swift it took me of
e’d takeand I had no chance to respond to it.

got him “Your time’s better spent in that shelter than on the street,” she said
i in that

My smile faded and I felt my head-crackin’ mamma jamma comin
me. Luckily, before it got a full hold and I fucked everything up, S
lookingcontinued.

“Darius and me been talkin’. We’re passin’ the business on slo
Too much headache, now with dealers gettin’ smoke bombed and
at is *up*wrapped. They’re unhappy, want us to whack a social worker. I draw
at whackin’ social workers, un-unh. Not me. So we’re makin’ deal
indicated the supplier with a nod of her head. “Boys wanna move up
before let ’em. We’ll start with passin’ off the dealers who deal to the k
7 weeks more. We move on from there. The games are goin’ good. We’ll sti
t of his that.”

I felt my heart racing.

I could not believe she was telling me this. I could not believe the used to getting out of the drug business.

on. The room had gone wired. Lee had tensed beside me, waves of sorrow he was—emotion, disbelief, whatever—were coming off him and bouncing off me. I felt it at my back from Vance too.

I understood what it meant.

me over It meant this was huge.

“You all right with that?” Shirleen asked me (as if I’d say no).

I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I just nodded.

like the “It’ll take time. You should know we don’t speak for the others. You if guard on the street, you don’t have no protection from us. We’re Switzerland it comes to you. And this deal does not leave this room. Word hits the ground before we pull out, it’s war. Got me?” Shirleen went on.

ng over Her eyes were no longer kind. They were hard and they were sharp.

Shirleen I just nodded again. She stared at me a beat that turned into two.

Then the sharpness went out of her eyes and she said quietly, “Thank you for takin’ care of Tye.”

plastic Oh my God.

the line She’d known all along it was me who got Tye off the street.

s.” She I felt something hit my chest. A weight I hadn’t felt in a long time, we’ll since Auntie Reba died.

ids. No I knew what it was. It was tears.

I swallowed and quickly pulled myself together.

“Tye’s a good kid,” I said softly.

“They all are,” she replied just as softly.

Then abruptly she put her hand on Darius’s shoulder and stood. “I nethingdrink. Who needs a drink?” No one said anything. “Suit you ff me. IShirleen’s gettin’ a drink.”

Then she was gone.

We all stayed where we were and were silent.

Finally, Lee, his eyes on Darius, asked from beside me, “She sp you?”

Darius shook his head, not in the negative, but instead, partially a ou takepartially beleaguered.

“You know Aunt Shirleen,” was all he said.

“You told Eddie?” Lee asked.

“We’ve set up a meet after this one,” Darius replied.

“This gonna go well for you?” Lee went on, and Darius’s eyes cl went hard, scary.

“I had to guess? No,” Darius answered.

More waves of something I didn’t get started pounding around the

“You know—?” Lee started, but Darius interrupted him.

“I know.”

Lee nodded then his eyes cut to me. “Let’s go.”

I got up and followed Vance in order to leave the room. Lee follow

Before we got to the door, Darius addressed me for the first ti called, “Law.”

I turned and looked at him.

He stared at me, his face blank. I stared at him the same way.

I need a Then he said, "Tye's my nephew."

rselves. This news hit me like a physical blow. It was a miracle I didn't
back, but somehow I found the internal strength and kept myself
control.

Again, I just nodded but didn't say a word.

reak for Lee's hand went to my back, and with a gentle push, he mov
forward.

mused, Without a word, we left the bar. Vance and I got on his bike and
in his Crossfire.

Vance flicked two fingers at Lee, I put my arms around Vance's
and we shot off.



anged, VANCE PARKED CLOSE to the back door of my house and we got off th
He grabbed my hand and started toward the house, but I stopped him
jerk on his hand. When he turned his eyes to me, I realized I was trembl

room. "What just happened?" I whispered.

"We'll talk inside."

"It was important, wasn't it?"

"Jules," Vance said softly. "Let's get inside."

red me. Then he tensed and his head swung to the side of the house, h
me and narrowing. Lee materialized out of the darkness. I stared at him as he
to us, straight to us, straight *to me*.

My body went solid. My hand tightened in Vance's, but Lee s

close. He leaned in, wrapped a hand around the back of my head and me to him. He kissed my forehead, let me go and then, just as fast as there, he was gone.

stagger I didn't realize I was holding my breath and I let it out in a rush.
f under "It was important," I whispered to the darkness.

ved me

Lee got

middle

re bike.

l with a

ling.

his eyes

walked

stopped

close. He leaned in, wrapped a hand around the back of my head and pulled me to him. He kissed my forehead, let me go and then, just as fast as he got there, he was gone.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath and I let it out in a rush.

"It was important," I whispered to the darkness.

THIRTEEN



MY LIST

I let us in. Vance locked the door behind us and unarmed the beeping then rearmed it for windows and doors. Throughout this he never let go of my hand.

Boo pranced into the kitchen, took one look at us and let loose with a wail of his day and his dissatisfaction at the wait to get his treats.

Vance murmured, “Quiet, cat.”

Boo, surprisingly, ceased meowing, though he did it with a kitty face.

Vance curled me into his body and his arms went around me tight.

I didn’t resist this. I told my Rottweiler to hush because I needed to rest this once, just this time.

I put my arms around him, pressed my face into his neck and his back. Slowly, I felt his strong, warm body absorb my trembles until they were gone.

Vance’s phone rang. He ignored it and kept hold of me.

His phone quit ringing and he said quietly, “You did well.”

I nodded against his neck. Vance saying that meant a lot, more than I wanted it to mean, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to let it show.

He kept hold of me as the minutes ticked by and Boo started swirling kitty body around our ankles.

Then Vance's phone rang again. I pulled back, but Vance's arms were around me.

I looked at him and whispered, "I'm okay. Get your phone."

He watched me a few beats, read on my face that I wasn't fibbing and let me go.

While I got Boo his treats, Vance pulled out his phone, flipped it open and said, "Yeah?"

Boo came with me into the bathroom and watched while I brushed my newsteeth and washed my face. I slathered on my night cream that smelled like oranges and changed into my blue nightgown. I wrapped my fleecy gray robe around me, walked into the living room, lit some candles and a lamp and lay on my side on my lilac couch, Boo tucked into the crook of my pouty lap.

I stroked him. He purred and I thought about what a funny world it was.

I may not have saved Park, but I saved Tye, and with him I managed to help to save Darius, and maybe even Shirleen.

I listened vaguely to Vance talking on the phone in the kitchen and then I listened when he stopped talking. Without him making a sound, suddenly he was there, his thighs in my line of vision. I followed them with my eyes just when my eyes hit his face he leaned over, gently gathered me up and dropped him in the armchair and turned back around.

Then he gathered *me*.

Picking me up, Vance turned. He sat, twisted then settled back, lying

ling his length on the couch with me on top of him. I put my elbow into the cushion between him and the back of the couch, lifted up my torso, and stayed looking down at him.

“Anything important on the phone?” I asked.

“It’ll wait,” he said, eyes on my face. The fingers of one hand opened my robe then slid from my hip and up my side.

“I like Shirleen. She’s funny,” I told Vance, ignoring his movement as his hand went from my side to move forward across my ribcage.

“Everyone likes Shirleen,” he replied.

“Are they going to be able to get out of the business without being hurt?” I asked.

His fingers curled, his knuckles stroked feather light against the underside of my breast and my belly fluttered in what I was classifying as a three flutter (yes, I could classify them now, Grade Ten was an orgasm).

“Don’t know,” he answered.

I swallowed.

“We need to talk,” I informed him, deciding it was time. Definitely way past time. My emotional Rottweiler was growling warningly, telling me if I didn’t do something soon it would be too late.

“All right,” Vance agreed, his hand moving away from my body up, and came up then pulled my robe down my shoulder.

“Crowe, seriously.” I shrugged my shoulder to try to keep the place, but he already had it down my arm and then it was off on one side.

His hand slid around my waist to my back and he pulled me to himself, full-mouth going to my neck.

he seat “Talk,” he said there, and I admitted to myself that I liked it w
so and spoke against my neck. It felt good.

“You have to listen,” I said to him, feeling Grade Three rise to
Four, and being unable to do anything about it when his lips hit my
spread he traced the outer edges with his tongue.

“I’m listening,” he murmured in my ear when he was done.

its even A shiver went through me.

Okay, whatever. I had to move on before I lost the will to move on

He wanted it this way, fine.

getting “We have to stop seeing each other,” I announced.

I’d lost track of his hand, what with his mouth at my ear, but now
derside pull my nightgown to my waist. Then his hand slid down insi
Grade underwear and cupped my ass.

n). Oh crap.

That felt good too.

“How about we stop seein’ each other tomorrow?” Vance suggeste

ly time. “Crowe...” I started, getting the distinct impression he wasn’t tak
ling me seriously, but he stopped me speaking by kissing me. While he did
pulled out my ponytail holder and my hair fell around us.

7, but it When his mouth disengaged from mine, I was breathing heavily
lips slid back to my neck.

robe in “How’re you feelin’?” he asked quietly.

de.

I nodded. At that point, with his hand at my ass and his lips at my
him, his was feeling *fine*.

When he His head came back and he looked at me. His eyes were warm, I soft and sexy, and his hand at my behind moved to the small of my back. Grade started stroking me lightly there with his fingertips and tingles were ear and across my skin.

“Are you tender?” he went on, and I realized what he was asking.

I shook my head.

One of his hands pulled back my hair and wrapped it around his forehead. The other hand went from the small of my back, sliding across my side to my breast.

When his thumb stroked my nipple I shot to Grade Five.

I felt it He kissed me again, deep and lots of tongue then soft, sweet, light kisses, then lots of tongue again. The whole time his thumb stroked my nipple and his hand was fisted in my hair.

By the time he stopped kissing me, I was firmly established at Grade Six.

I completely forgot about not seeing him anymore. I shrugged off the other side of my robe and threw it over the back of the couch. Then I pulled his T-shirt out of his jeans. He let go of my hair, did an ab curl, I put my feet up on the coffee table over his head and tossed it aside. My mouth went to his collarbone. This, he turned down his chest, exploring, watching the muscles contract, fascinated. I turned on I took myself to Grade Seven.

and his When I made it to his stomach and was sliding lower, using my hands and my tongue, he pulled me up and kissed me again, hot and to the point of control.

neck, I “I want you to ride me,” he murmured against my mouth, and just those words shot me to Grade Eight. His eyes looked into mine. “You think you could do that?” he asked.

his face I bit my lip and nodded. I was pretty sure I could do that. If not, I'd be a quick learner.

sliding His hand went back into my panties, sliding them part the way down behind, and he whispered, lips still against my mouth, "Take off your underwear."

My heart was beating so hard, I thought he had to be able to feel it. I swung my hips and legs up to the side, pulled off my underwear and tossed it to the floor. When I finished, to hide the fact that I felt so embarrassed by what I'd just done, I put my mouth on his and kissed him.

One of his hands was at my ass, the other one between us working my belt and fly. His mouth and tongue went to my neck, my tingles turned to shivers, the shivers to trembles. I was teetering on the edge of Grace and he wasn't even inside me yet.

"You sat there, facin' a drug dealer across the table, totally in control. Like you were made of ice," Vance whispered against my neck. "I'm fucking proud of you."

Oh my *God*.

He did *not* just say that.

"Vance," I breathed, my heart racing for a new reason, a different kind of warmth spreading through me.

His fingers curled around my wrist, pulled my hand between his legs and wrapped it around him. My head shot around and I stared at him.

I'd never touched a man like that before, nowhere near it.

"Sit up," he ordered softly before I could freak out.

He kept my hand where it was. I positioned myself to sit astride him.

I was a pulling up my knees on the couch, lifting up my torso. As I did, our hands together guiding him, he slid inside me and then gently Vance pulled my hands away.

Then I was up and he had filled me.

It was *nice*. Grade Nine nice.

“Wow,” I whispered.

His hands came to my hips and he coaxed me to move.

It didn’t take a lot of coaxing, it came naturally. I moved and found a rhythm, one of Vance’s hands at my waist, one cupping my ass. It felt like I was in control. Unbelievable.

I watched him as I moved. His eyes were locked on mine, that intense possessive “mine” look in them. If anything, it made me breathe faster, my heart tripping in my chest, the trembles gathering, joining forces, building momentum and then shooting between my legs.

“Come closer,” Vance demanded, and without hesitation I leaned into him. “Hold on to me,” he ordered, and I put my hands on his shoulders. He again looked me in the eyes.

That was when he bucked, slamming inside me. I moaned. I couldn’t describe it, it felt so good. He did it again and again and I learned what he meant by riding him, and if I thought it was unbelievable before, I was mistaken. It was unbelievable.

His hand went between us. He touched me at the exact right spot and my hips jerked. I moved with his hand and his bucking hips. I bent close, my chest against his, my lips against his, and he kissed me.

I was close, heading toward Grade Ten like a rocket.

r hands “Say my name,” he demanded.

led our I opened my eyes and looked into his. He slammed into me again, his finger pressing deep and moving.

Grade Ten hit me with an overwhelming force, and when it did, his mouth, I moaned his name.



I FOUND there was an annoying side effect to having an orgasm, a side effect that Vance didn't seem to share.

und my It great My body became acquiescent and my mind drifted to ridiculous thoughts like what I'd wear to my birthday party.

intense, I never worried about what I was going to wear.

ter, my Vance held me for a while after we finished, me still astride him, his hands gaining inside me, my mind inventorying my closet and deciding I needed to go to the mall.

ed into Then he knifed up so he was seated, me still astride him, and I felt a little mew because it felt kind of good. I could swear I felt him smile against my neck when he heard the sound.

n't help He disengaged from me gently, pulling me up at the waist. He tucked me under the seat and set me on my feet in front of him. He held me steady, his hands on my hips, still seated, looking up at me, and I stared down at him.

God, he was beautiful.

and my He got up, pulled up his jeans and picked me up, again cradled against his chest, my arms. He carried me to bed, deposited me on the end of it and I had enough wherewithal to crawl towards the pillows and collapse.

Vance got fully undressed in the hall and followed me up, pulling

covers out from beneath me and then over both of us. He turned me :
ain, his arms, tucking my face in his neck.

“Jules.”

against “Mm?” I murmured.

My mind had wandered again and I was thinking I might need
underwear, and maybe a new pair of ass-kicking boots, from the mall.

e effect As well as my party outfit, of course.

“I didn’t use protection.”

oughts, At his words, my trip to the mall went out of my head with a “poc
my body went rock-solid. Then I unfroze, pulled back and looked at hi

He was smiling.

him still Smiling.

o go to I stared at him like he was a lunatic.

made a “What, exactly, is there to smile about?” I yelled. Visions of
against teaching a dark haired little boy how to feloniously disable an alarm
unwanted into my head, and I quit yelling and breathed, “Oh my God

I repeated it, “Oh my God.”

rned in He rolled me to my back, his body mostly over mine. He came up
ands at elbow, still smiling.

“Calm down,” he said.

l in his “Calm...*calm down*? I’m always lecturing the kids about using co
ad just I’m like...why didn’t you...oh my *God*.”

“I’ll use protection next time.”

ing the My eyes narrowed. “Next time?”

into his He kissed me softly then pulled back.

“Yeah,” he said casually.

“It might be too late,” I informed him, deciding to fight the “next fight later.

d more I mean, didn’t men flip out about these things too? His behavior v
bizarre.

He didn’t respond.

“What if it’s too late?” I asked.

of,” and “If it’s too late, you’ll make a good mother, if you remember t
m. babysitter before you go out and crack heads.”

My eyes bugged out and my mouth dropped open. He was making
Making jokes.

He took in my bug-eyed look and I felt his body shake with la
Vance Then I *heard* his laughter and my blood pressure skyrocketed.

popped “This is *not* funny, Crowe,” I snapped.

.” Then “Yeah it is.”

“What’s so damned funny about it?”

on his “You,” he replied. “You’re very cute, Princess.”

Um.

ndoms. He did *not* just say that.

“Vance...” I said his name in my-word-is-law-and-you-are-in-
voice.

He ignored my voice. “What’s done is done. We can’t go back. ‘
no point getting upset about it.”

“Excuse me, but—” I interrupted, but he talked over me.

“Odds are I didn’t get you pregnant, but if there’s anyone I know at this time” could cope, it’s you.”

“Maybe I don’t want to cope,” I snapped.

He grinned. “Too late now.”

He thought this was hilarious.

I slapped his arm. “Stop grinning.”

He ran his fingers through my hair at the side of my head and then pulled a bunch of it around his fist.

“Motherhood won’t be a challenge for you,” he went on, laughing in my voice.

Apparently he thought he was funny.

I frowned at him.

I did not think he was funny.

At all.

“Let’s see, Sunday night, you saved a runaway from a drug dealer who started.”

“I did not, you did. He was kicking my ass,” I reminded him.

He talked over me. “Monday night, you brought down two dealers handedly.”

“Well, I *did* do that,” I allowed.

He kept talking. “Tuesday night, you had to take a break from keeping these streets safe for the citizens of Denver to go out with me.”

“Crowe—”

“Tonight, you began the healing process of three brothers who’ve
w who torn apart by tragedy. They’re not blood, but brothers all the same.”

“Stop talking.”

“What’re you gonna do tomorrow? Cure world hunger?”

“Crowe, I said *stop talking*.”

He started to laugh again. He let go of my hair, curled his arms around
and rolled to his back, taking me with him. I lifted my head, placed my
i curled forearms in his chest and frowned down at him, but he ignored my frown
kept talking. Or, I should say, teasing.

“Discover the cure for cancer?”

“Crowe. I’ll say it again, this is *not* funny.”

His face changed, went soft. His tractor beam switched on and he faded
quietly, almost as if he was talking to himself. “Motherhood won’t be your
challenge for you.”

“Crowe.”

“Stop worrying about it, Jules. We’ll deal with it if it happens.”

“No, *we* won’t. We’re over. Done. I’m breaking up with you.”
announced.

There.

single-
I did it.

His hand twisted in my hair again and he brought my face to his
can break up with me on Friday. I wanna take you to your birthday
ing the tomorrow.”

Well, I guessed I didn’t do it and he was still not taking me seriously

'd been “Stop joking, I’m being serious,” I informed him.

He brought my face the rest of the way to his and kissed me. No this time, there was meaning to his kiss.

I was a little breathless and my head was slightly muddled when detached from mine, but I kept at it even when his lips went to my neck

und me “We need to talk about this,” I told him.

ted my “We’ll talk about it on Friday,” he murmured against my neck
wn andknew the way he said it that he had absolutely no intention of talking
Friday.

Then his tongue slid from my jaw to my shoulder and I shivered.

“We need to talk about it now,” I tried to speak in my word-is-law
inishedbut it came out breathy.

’t be a “Friday,” he rolled me to my back again and came over me.

“Vance—”

His mouth against mine, he said softly, “Shut up, Jules.”

“Stop telling me to shut up.”

you,” I He kissed me quiet, and while he did his hand went up my neck
straight to my breast and his thumb took a swipe at my nipple. I
against his mouth, and after my gasp he lifted his head an inch and loo
in the eye. His eyes were now full-on intense. His sexual tractor be
gone super-powered and all my breath escaped my lungs.

s. “You
y party “You wanna talk while I go down on you, be my guest. But I’m
gonna taste you, and then I’m gonna fuck you again, and it m
ly. distracting.”

Oh my *God*.

I was already at Grade Six.

It softly “You wanna talk?” he asked.

I immediately shook my head. Not because I didn’t have anything on my mind, but mainly because I couldn’t speak.

He grinned and it was wicked.

Then his mouth came to mine and after that he did as he promised.

But he wore a condom this time.



THE HOUSE WAS DARK. Boo was snuggled into the small of my back and curled into Vance’s side, my arm around his waist, his tucked under my voice, curled around me, hand at my hip.

I was thinking that sex was good, but oral sex might be even better than a tossup, and I was mentally enumerating the pros (there were lots) and cons (I couldn’t find any) of both when Vance said softly, “Tell me about Aunt Reba.”

Still in the throes of post-orgasm mellowness, I didn’t clam up.

Instead, I asked, “What do you want to know?”

His fingers were tracing patterns on my hip and I liked the feel. It was sweet and relaxing.

“Did she look like you?” he asked.

I shook my head against his shoulder but said, “Maybe a little in the end, finally I look like my mom. I have my dad’s hair.”

At that, Vance’s hand went from my hip. His fingers captured a tangle of my hair and I could feel him twisting it at my back.

That was sweet and relaxing too.

“She was wise,” I whispered, smiling against his shoulder and thinking about Auntie Reba. “She was a lot younger than my mom but very wise. I know a lot of people don’t believe in this kind of thing, but I’m sure she was an old soul.”

His body heat was warming me. I pushed closer to him and for some reason kept talking.

“She was really young when my family died, probably too young for me on, but she was all I had left. Nick and her had just started going out when it happened. I think they got married because of me.”

When I stopped talking, Vance didn’t say anything so I kept going.

“Not that they wouldn’t have gotten married anyway. Nick...I’ve never seen a love like that. He’s still lost to this day without her. I used to wish I could find someone, but he never will. It makes me sad, but I’m glad Auntie Reba still has someone to love her like that. She deserved it because she got your love like that.”

Vance stopped twirling my hair and turned into me, wrapping his arms around me.

He remained silent and I looked at his face in the moonlight from the window. Then, do not ask me why, looking at Vance in the moonlight, I shared my most favorite memory of my Auntie Reba.

“Nick and I used to listen to music. A lot. Nick was into Southern rock, but also a big fan of Elton John. I loved Stevie Wonder, and Nick encouraged my love of music, so he bought me everything that had anything to do with Stevie. I remember lying in our living room. We lived in a dorm house then. I had my back on this big, pink beanbag they bought me for Christmas, and Nick and I were listening to Stevie. Auntie Reba came

hinking lay down beside me, her back on the beanbag with me. Stevie's 'Is
wise. I Lovely' came on and Auntie Reba grabbed my hand in the middle
she had song. After the song was done, she just looked at me."

I sucked in my lips and Vance's hand came to my jaw. His thumb
r some across my lower lip when I released it, and his eyes, I could tell, were
in mine.

to take I was whispering when I carried on, "I knew what she meant. She
it when have to say anything. Even though I wasn't their child, I knew what
meant. Have you heard that song? Do you know what I mean?"

"I've heard the song," he responded softly.

e never I took in a breath. It broke in the middle but I kept it together.

sh he'd Then I stared at him, and with a lot of courage and a little moor
ie Reba asked quietly, "What was your mom like?"

ave her He answered immediately, "She was beautiful. She was broken."

both his I waited but he didn't continue.

"Do you ever think you'll try to find them?" I asked.

"I know where they are."

om the I blinked at him.

light, I "Have you...?" I started, but he knew what I was going to say.

1 Rock, "No," he answered.

iked to "Will you?"

thing to "No."

ifferent "Do you want to tell me about it?" I whispered, my stomach clenched
me for my heart slowing, knowing I shouldn't care but wanting him to say yes
e in and

n't She "No," he said.

of the I nodded, letting him have his space, but feeling disappointment
through me like acid. I dipped my chin and pressed my face into his th
mb ran he wouldn't see it.

looking "Maybe," he said from above me, "if you break up with me on Sat
might tell you on Friday."

e didn't My body went still.

hat she "Though, I'm thinkin' I'll tell you on Saturday if you break up v
on Sunday."

My head tipped back and he was grinning down at me.

My eyes narrowed on him. "Crowe."

light, I "Shut up, Jules."

"Don't tell me—"

His lips touched mine. "Shut up," he said quietly. "Go to sleep."

I tried to force my way out of his arms, but they went ultra-tight
kept me where I was.

"You're very annoying," I told his throat.

He didn't answer.

"I'm still breaking up with you on Friday," I went on.

"No you aren't."

I went silent.

Whatever.

nching, I tried to hold a grudge, but I was too tired. His body was too wa
s. I'd had two orgasms. A grudge was physically and mentally impossibl

Instead, my body relaxed, my mind went blank and I fell asleep.

running



throat so I WAS dead asleep when I felt Vance tense then move swiftly. He pressed against my back and I felt the cool air when his body came from mine.

urday, I

I turned, got up on an elbow and watched Boo go flying off the table as Vance vanished over the side.

with me

I came up to a seated position, confused, then my breath caught in my throat when I heard a knock on the back door. It opened, the alarm beeping its warning and Nick called, “Jules?”

“Hey, Nick!” I yelled immediately and rolled forward, taking them with me. I twisted to the side, yanking the sheet around me, frantic for a different reason.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed, missed the steps and went

I would have landed likely painfully on all fours, but Vance caught me and held me the last minute with an arm around my waist. I doubled over his arm and he said “oof.” He pulled my torso up and set me on my feet, his arm still around my back to his front.

Throughout all of this, Nick kept talking while he punched in my code and walked through the kitchen. “I thought I’d treat the birthday coffee and a muffin. What do you say to—?”

He stopped talking when he hit the doorway to the hall and caught sight of Vance and me. Then he came to a dead halt.

Oh crap.

arm and
e.

I really hoped that Vance had some clothes on even though I did not

the sheet. Somewhere during the second round last night I'd been in a nightgown.

'd been Um...

e away How embarrassing was this?

"Nick—" I started.

ed just He didn't miss a beat. "Vance can come too."

"Nick."

t in my "We'll go to Fortnum's. I hear they have a great new coffee guy
started continued.

e sheet I nodded, deciding to pretend I was dressed, life was cool and I
w for a caught by the only father I remembered standing in an advanced s
undress in the arms of...whatever Vance was to me.

ly flying. "That sounds good," I said.

it me at "Vance?" Nick's eyes went over my shoulder.

with an "Yeah," Vance said.

nd me, "Great. Just knock on my door when you two are ready."

y alarmback and I went ramrod straight again.

r girl to I heard Vance's quiet laughter in my ear and I kept my face p
composed and my body still so as not to turn around and gouge his eye

ht sight "Just to say...I'll be a little more cautious next time. Don't wan
shot in the ass walking into my niece's kitchen," Nick remarked.

Behind his glasses, Nick was laughing too.

not, just The men in my life. I wanted to murder them all except Roam and

ost mybut they weren't men yet, they were boys. When they became men I w
they'd get scratched onto Jules Hit List just because men on the who
vastly annoying and they wouldn't be able to help themselves.

Before I could say anything, Nick was gone.

The minute I heard the door close, I whirled on Vance and s:
luckily he had his jeans on. Unfortunately, he had his gun in his hand.

I ignored his gun and the sight of his chest (very hard to ignore, sei
and clipped, "What's funny now?"
, " Nick

Instead of answering, he snatched me into his arms and kissed r
on, full tongue. Even in a snit, I had to admit, it was delicious.
wasn't

When he lifted his head, he said in his silky voice, "Happy b:
Princess."

Um...

Wow.

He looked at me with sexy eyes and stated, "Let's take a shower."

I could do a shower. I could do a lot of things after a "happy bi
like that.
: turned

He let me go and twisted to put the gun on the side of the bed platf
the mattress.
erfectly

That was when I saw his back.
s out.

"Oh my God," I breathed.
t to get

Vance came back around to me, but my eyes didn't move from th
where I'd seen it, even though I was now staring at his chest.

d Sniff, "Jules?" I heard him call.

was sure I walked around him and he came with me, but I put my hand to his
le were and whispered, "Stand still."

Surprisingly, he did as I asked.

I got to his back and saw the puckered scar of the gunshot wound
aw that both my hands on him then, my arms tight against my sides to hold
sheet. One hand went to his belly, one hand at the small of his back.

riously) I leaned around and looked at his chest.

Nothing.

ne, full I looked to his back again.

Gunshot wound.

irthday, I went back to his chest then to his back and again.

Then...

I lost my mind.

"They shot you in the back?" I yelled.

rthday" He turned to face me. "Jules."

I lifted my eyes to his face.

orm by "The back?" I shouted.

His arms started to come around me but I jerked away.

"What kind of asshole shoots someone in the back?" I was still shouting.

"Jules, listen—"

e space "That is just...I cannot believe...no one shoots anyone in the back.
gutless sissies would shoot someone in the back." My brows drew tight
and I frowned at Vance. "What happened?"

Correctly reading that there was no way he could interfere with n

is waist Vance leaned against the bed platform and crossed his arms.

“I can’t tell you. When it happened, we were workin’ a contract v
Feds.”

d. I put I put my hands on my hips. The sheet started unraveling
up the compromised and put one hand to my hip while the other one held th
around me.

“How did you get shot in the back?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that, Jules.”

I looked to the ceiling.

“I just cannot believe this shit,” I told the ceiling like it would r
Then I looked back at Vance. “I want a word with Lee. Government co
where you go up against cowardly assholes that would shoot his mer
back, I...think...*not*.”

“I’m fine,” Vance assured me.

“I know you’re fine. I can *see* you’re fine. I do not *care* if you are
ended my tirade enunciating every word like my life depended
particular communication.

In the face of my anger, Vance started laughing.

Laughing!

uting. My body prepared to have a stroke.

“This is not fucking funny!” I shouted.

k. Only He moved fast. His hands came to my hips giving me a swift yank
together forward and slammed against his body.

His shaking-with-laughter body.

ny rant,

His arms went around me. His face went to my neck and I
with the laughter there too.

Finally he said, “You wanna break up with me now?”

g so I Oh my *God*.

ie sheet He did *not* just say that.

“What’s your middle name?” I snapped.

His head came up and he was still smiling. “Why?”

“Tell me your middle name,” I demanded.

He kept smiling but he told me. “It’s Ouray.”

espond. I blinked. “Ouray? Like, the town?”

ontracts “Yeah. It’s Ute. It means ‘arrow.’”

1 in the “Okay, then,” I took a deep breath and let loose, “Vance Ouray Cro
not fucking piss me off. It’s my fucking birthday and when I say thi
fine.” I funny, it is not fucking funny!”

on that Vance stared at me a beat, that Jules-is-downright-adorable look
eye.

Then he asked conversationally, his arrogant grin replacing his
“Do you think Nick’ll wait for coffee long enough for me to fuck you?”

My eyes narrowed.

“You’ve just moved to the top of my list,” I informed him snottily.

His grin didn’t waver. “Your list?”

∴ I flew “My ‘Men in My Life I’m Going to Kill’ List. You’re at the top.”

This time he threw his head back and laughed, full body, full th
full-on laughter.

felt his When he was finished, his eyes came back to me and he said, “You
kill me after I fuck you.”

“Vance!”

His mouth came to mine and he gave me a soft kiss. “Shut up, Ju
need to shower.”

“It’s my birthday. Don’t tell me to shut up.”

“Nick’s waiting. You can keep yellin’ at me later.”

This was true, Nick was waiting.

I pulled out of his arms and stomped to the kitchen, grumbling un
breath and tightening the sheet around me. “I have to feed Boo. *Then*
take a shower. *Then* we’ll go to coffee. *Then* I’m gonna call Lee and g
a piece of my mind.”

owe, do I heard the bathroom door close and I realized Vance wasn’t listen
s is not thing I said.

I yanked Boo’s food bowl out of the cupboard and slammed it
in his counter.

Whatever.

; smile,

,”

roated,

When he was finished, his eyes came back to me and he said, “You can kill me after I fuck you.”

“Vance!”

His mouth came to mine and he gave me a soft kiss. “Shut up, Jules. We need to shower.”

“It’s my birthday. Don’t tell me to shut up.”

“Nick’s waiting. You can keep yellin’ at me later.”

This was true, Nick was waiting.

I pulled out of his arms and stomped to the kitchen, grumbling under my breath and tightening the sheet around me. “I have to feed Boo. *Then* we can take a shower. *Then* we’ll go to coffee. *Then* I’m gonna call Lee and give him a piece of my mind.”

I heard the bathroom door close and I realized Vance wasn’t listening to a thing I said.

I yanked Boo’s food bowl out of the cupboard and slammed it on the counter.

Whatever.

FOURTEEN



YOUR REAL FAMILY

Nick walked into Fortnum's ahead of Vance and me. We walked in (you not) holding hands. Or Vance was holding my hand and I was myself a secret birthday present by letting him.

Yes, the badass mother and the head-crackin' mamma jamma holding hands. The dealers would probably piss their pants laughing if they saw

The place was packed.

Tex, Jet and Ally were working the espresso counter. Indy was c used cups from the seating area. The big, gray-haired, gravelly-voiced guy was behind the book counter next to a woman I hadn't seen the first time I was there. She was dark-haired, painfully thin and very tall.

"Oh fuck," the Harley guy said loudly when he saw me. "Batten down the hatches."

Nick's eyes moved to the Harley guy and then narrowed when Nick realized that he was talking about me.

"What's his problem?" Nick asked just as loudly, turning to Vance and me.

Um.

Uh-oh.

“I’ve no idea,” I replied, feigning innocence.

“She’s my problem,” the Harley guy answered, still looking
“We’ve had the works. Indy’s kidnappings and murder. Jet’s kidnapping
rape attempt. Roxie’s kidnapping and stalking. Car bombs. Grenades
fights. Female wrestling at Chinese restaurants. Mayhem at a haunted
Gunshots at a strip club. Showdowns at society parties. Now we
vigilante on our hands.” The man looked at Vance while the tall
edged away from him and disappeared into the shelves, which I thought
a smart move. “What is it with you boys?” he asked Vance. “I really
know.”

Everyone was staring at us and there were a lot of everyones. Nick
were staring at the Harley guy, both of our mouths open.

“Excuse me, I’ve gotta talk to Duke,” Vance murmured, face
which I didn’t figure was a good sign.

He let go of my hand and walked to the book counter.

Nick’s arm went around my shoulders and he dipped his head to
“You think he knows about you?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” I nodded, “I think he knows about me.”

“Do you know what he’s talking about? Mayhem at a haunted
Gunshots at a strip club?” Nick asked.

“Some of it,” I answered.

Nick looked closely at me. He was wearing a rendition of his
Face with a little bit of “Oh my God” thrown in. Then he shook his head.

“Don’t tell me. I don’t wanna know,” he said.

“Gotcha,” I replied, thinking he really didn’t want to know.

“Shee-it, it’s the fuckin’ birthday girl,” Tex boomed from behind the counter, a crazy-man grin on his face. “Get up here, Law.”

“Hey, Tex,” I called.

“Do you know these people?” Nick was still whispering as he moved toward the coffee bar.

“Um...yeah. We’ve kind of become friends. Vance hangs out with a lot of people,” I answered.

“Ah,” Nick said slowly, though his expression showed that he didn’t know if that was a good thing.

“Get outta the way. Get...the fuck...outta the way. There’s a birthday girl here. She comes to the front of the line,” Tex was booming at the customer.

They were looking at each other. Some of them seemed taken aback. Others, likely the regulars, just did what they were told.

“I’ll make you today’s special. Vanilla and spice. It’s a knockout drink on me,” Tex told me as we approached him then. When we arrived at the counter, he asked, “Who’s this guy?” His eyes were on Nick.

I introduced Nick to everyone. Indy came up and gave me a birthday wish and Jet and Ally wished me a happy birthday while they completed our orders.

We placed our orders and moved to the other side of the counter for our drinks. Vance met us there. When he did I looked back at Duke and he was frowning at me. I looked at Vance again.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

Vance just smiled at me. I decided to take that as a “yes,” though his face said it was a “no.”

“What’re you havin’?” Tex boomed at Vance.

and the “Sorry, but I was next.” The male customer at the front of the line, having a death wish, spoke up.

Tex’s eyes cut to the customer and his brows drew together.

led me Um.

Yikes.

ere,” I “Oh yeah? You are?” Tex asked the customer.

“Uh...yeah,” the customer answered, now sounding not so sure he didn’t though he was standing at the front of the line.

“You a badass motherfucker who hunts down drug dealers at night day girl went on.

omers. The customer stared at Tex, then he stared at Vance, then he started aback. at Tex.

“Er...no,” he replied.

and it’s “You a badass motherfucker *at all?*” Tex continued.

l at the The customer looked at Vance. Then he looked at Tex. The customer’s thinning sandy-brown hair, was an inch or two shorter than me, was very ay hug, a suit and was perhaps ten pounds underweight. He was no fees. motherfucker. He looked like an accountant.

to wait The customer decided belatedly to keep his mouth shut.

e. Duke “That boy is a badass motherfucker. Badass motherfuckers get coffee first. It’s a rule at Fortnum’s. You become a badass motherfucker get to go to the front of the line. You got me?” Tex declared.

Duke’s The customer nodded, perhaps the only thing he was able to do, figured was why he didn’t turn around and leave.

Tex turned back to Vance. “Now, what’ll it be?”

clearly “Americano, room for cream,” Vance said. His lips, I noted twitching. I could tell he wanted to grin, but he was trying really hard not to.

“You got it,” Tex returned.

I waited. Then, when nothing else happened, I took a deep breath and relaxed, thinking that our dramatic entrance was over.

I was wrong. Very, very wrong.

“All of a sudden Tex boomed again. This time he pointed at the coffee pot in front of the window with a wide arc of his arm, the espresso filter in his hand. A pot of used, soggy grounds went flying across the room to splatter on the floor in front of the couch. The people preparing to sit on the couch moved away from the splattering grounds.”

“What now?”

Nick muttered from beside me.

“You! Yeah you!” Tex boomed, shaking the filter at a couple servers frozen in front of the couch. “Do not put your asses on that couch. That is sittin’ there with her uncle. Move!”

“Tex, we’re fine,”

I said, my eyes on the scurrying customers.

“Stop scaring the customers,”

Indy snapped over my words. Her hands were on her hips.

“And stop tossing the portafilter around. You’re making coffee grounds everywhere. Do you ever clean them up when you clean up?”

No! I clean them up. Jet cleans them up. Jane cleans them up. Does Tex clean them up? No, Tex does *not* clean them up!”

Jet was giggling, hips leaned against the back counter, arms wrapped around her middle. Ally was grinning like a loon while she grabbed a cloth and hustled towards the couch to clean up the grounds.

I was thinking if I had one birthday wish, I would start the day again with a clean slate.

I was thinking if I had one birthday wish, I would start the day again with a clean slate.

I, were miss Fortnum's and getting caught by Nick wearing nothing but a sheet
not to. Though I'd keep the shower with Vance. It was fast but it was *nice*

"That's the best goddamned seat in the house," Tex explained t
ath and cutting into my thoughts. "And Law's sittin' there."

"Tex—" Indy began.

"No lip!" Tex slammed down Nick's cappuccino next to my spec
ouch in the foam sloshed over the sides. Then he looked at me. "Sit!"

is hand. "All right, we're sitting," I said, smiling at him, hopefully plac
on the "Calm down, big man."

jumped Tex glared at the next customer, the unfortunate who'd opened his

"She's a badass motherfuckeress. She'd kick your ass soon as look

You've clapped your eyes on The Law. Count yourself lucky, sucker
tanding what'll it fuckin' be?"

he Law I looked at the ceiling. Then I looked at the customer who w
staring at me and shook my head with an apologetic wince.

"I see you've given up on keepin' a low profile," Nick remarked, v
r hands with me to the couch.

getting I decided to keep my mouth shut.

lo that? I heard Vance laugh softly beside me. I threw him a frown. T.
x clean laughter became not-so-soft.

Whatever.

rapped We settled on a couch, me by the arm, Vance on the arm next to m
a towel on the seat on my other side.

ain and Nick took a sip of his cappuccino.

His eyes got big and he stared into his paper cup. "Now I understa

at. they put up with him. This coffee is great.”

. I just nodded and took a sip of my own and decided “great” didn’t
o Indy, justice.

Nick’s hand went into his jacket and he pulled out a long, thin
wrapped with pink paper topped with a little pink bow.

cial and “Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he said, his eyes warm on me
handing the box to me.

atingly. I slammed my special on the table in front of me and clapped. I could
help it, I loved presents and Nick’s presents were *the best*.

mouth. “What is it?” I asked stupidly.

at you. “Open it.” Nick smiled at me.

r. Now, I took it and ripped into it like a girlie girl (I did have a reason, since
his presents were the *best*). I tore off the paper and threw open the box
as now Then I froze.

In it was a silver bracelet, a beautiful silver bracelet. It was made of
walking hammered, matte silver squares each about an inch wide held together by
small links. Each square was different. Some had etchings, some had
gold or copper soldered on to them. Four of them had stones of various
hen his shapes, sizes and colors.

“I had it made special,” Nick told me and started pointing. “That one’s
blue topaz, your mother’s birthstone. That one’s garnet, your father’s.
e, Nick peridot, for Mikey. The last one’s amethyst, for Reba.”

At his words, the weight hit me in the chest again so hard my
moved with the force of it. I leaned back and I felt Vance’s wariness
against my back. My throat closed and my vision got blurry.
nd why

“Nick,” I whispered.

Nick looked at me then started talking fast. “Now, Jules, don’t you start, I’ll—”

“Where’s your birthstone?” I asked, my voice soft and it sounded c
“That bracelet represents your family,” Nick explained.

“Yeah. I know,” I replied, my voice still sounding funny. “Where
birthstone?”

“Your real family, Jules,” Nick said softly.

I stared at him a beat then I slowly leaned into him, put my hand
knee and looked in his eyes.

“Yeah. I know,” I repeated. “Where’s *your* stone?”

Nick just looked at me, and the way he did made me start blinking,

I was not going to cry, I wasn’t. Not in front of Nick, who would c
me. I knew it and I didn’t want that for him. Not in front of Vance (no
ade of hell). And not in front of everyone at Fortnum’s who thought I was
ther by crackin’ mamma jamma.

“Here,” I said, pulling the bracelet out of the box and throwing the
the table. “Put it on me.” I handed it to him and then gave him my
forced brightness into my voice and continued as if the emotional r
it one’s had never occurred, “I want to know where you got it. Your stone is e
That’s right?”

“Yeah, sweetheart. That’s right,” Nick murmured, his voice sc
y body funny too.

“You’ll take me there. We’ll get them to put in another square. Ok

“Okay,” he whispered.

He fastened it on me and I shook my wrist around.

start. If “Beautiful, Nick. Perfect.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Thank
“You’re welcome, Jules.”

roaky. I turned to Vance and shook my wrist at him. “See? Isn’t it pretty?”

Vance grabbed my wrist, which was shaking too hard for him
’s your anything, and he held it fast. My eyes, which were avoiding his, now
look at him.

He was staring down at me. He had that “mine” possessive look
l on his face, but that other look was there too. The look that clawed at my ribs
and made my heart skip every other beat.

I stared at him, captured by the look, flipping through my memories
fast. cabinets to find the memory, but before I could the look was gone.

ry with His hand twisted so that his fingers laced in mine. He gave my
way in gentle yank and I came forward. He leaned down and kissed me softly.

a head- “It’s beautiful,” he said when he was done kissing me, and I was
staring at him again.

box on “Well!” Nick said from behind us and Vance let me go. That moment
wrist. I lost too and I turned to Nick. “I gotta get to work. You two go
moment tonight?” he asked, standing up.

emerald, I stood up with him and felt Vance move to his feet behind me,
got close.

ounding “No. The gang here is having a party for me. I’m not sure where
where, but when I find out, will you come?” I asked.

ay?” Nick watched me a second, not able to hide his surprise at an
throwing a party for me. I had a slumber party once when I was thirteen

was it. I wasn't Johnny-no-mates. I had friends and went to their party
ks.” had only ever had that one party for me.

Then Nick's eyes moved to Vance. He stared at Vance for a few
„ did a slow smile and looked at me.

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek
to see shook Vance's hand, grabbed his cappuccino, then he was gone.
oved to

I watched the door close behind him then I turned to Vance.

“I have to get to work too,” I told him, feeling weird at what
on his memory witnessed.

Weird as in exposed.

He nodded, his arm came around me and pulled me to his body.

Vance didn't feel weird.

“Don't forget, you're trainin' with Luke at five thirty,” he reminded
hand a

I shook my head. “I can't.”

“Why not?”
is stuck

“I have to go to the mall. Buy a party outfit.”

Vance grinned. “Not sure Luke will accept the mall as an excuse.”
ent was

“I'm not sure I care if Luke will accept it or not.”
in' out

“Five thirty,” Vance said, still grinning.

“Crowe, I need to go to the mall.” It sounded almost, but thankf
then he quite, like a whine.
ien and

Vance didn't respond to my whine.

Instead, he said, “I'll meet you at your house in time to take you
y gang party.”
n. That

ies, but “We don’t know when or where that’ll be.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out.”

v beats, I was sure he wasn’t wrong. Most of the party planners were in the same room and he worked with their boyfriends.

ek. He “All right,” I gave in.

“Pack a bag. I want you at my place tonight.”

at he’d Vance lived. I knew I shouldn’t want to, but I did. I also wanted “want” me at his place. I knew I shouldn’t want that either, but I did.

And it was my birthday so I should get what I wanted.

Clearly It was then my emotional Rottweiler started panting and whining.

Damn.

d me. “Vance—” I started.

“Pack a bag.”

My eyes narrowed. “Seriously, you’re going to have to do something about that macho-speak.”

“Jules, pack a bag.”

I frowned at him. He stared at me.

Then I gave in.

illy not “All *right*,” I said.

He kissed me again, softly, and I was a bit disappointed at getting a sweet kiss. Not that it was a bad kiss, not at all, but it *was* my birthday.

1 to the When his head moved away, he was wearing his shit-eating grin and I knew my thoughts.

“Later, Princess,” he said.

Then he was gone.

he very No sooner had he vanished than the Rock Chicks descended.

“Let me see that bracelet,” Indy demanded, grabbing my wrist.
gorgeous! I want one!”

“I see you didn’t break up with Vance last night,” Jet said, smiling

where “I did,” I told her. “He just kinda ignored me.”

him to She was still smiling.

Whatever.

“I have a problem,” I told them. “I need to go to work and I need
with Luke at five thirty, and then there’s the party, and somehow
between I need to go to the mall and get a party outfit.”

“You have a lunch hour?” Indy asked immediately, dropping my w

“You’re training with Luke?” Ally asked, eyes wide.

nothing “Yeah, but it’s only an hour,” I told Indy. “And, yeah, but again
will,” I told Ally.

“Doesn’t matter,” Indy said. “Meet us at Cherry Creek Mall. By
Noon. We’ll sort you out.”

“But—” I started.

“Noon,” Indy repeated.

g a soft, “I wanna train with Luke,” Ally put in.

“Everyone wants to train with Luke,” Jet replied.

like he We all looked at each other. Then we all started giggling.

Once we were done giggling, Indy and Ally went back to work,

walked me to the door, checking out my bracelet.

I looked at her.

I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to ask. I wanted to know, but I

“That’s want to know.”

Oh hell, I just went for it.

at me. “Jet?”

Her head came around to look at me. I stopped and so did she.

“Yeah?”

“What’s it mean when a guy holds your hand?” I asked.

to train Her fingers were around my wrist. They moved to wrap around my

here in “It means he likes you,” she replied.

“What’s it mean when he’s a guy like Vance?” I went on.

wrist. Her hand squeezed mine.

“It means he really likes you,” she repeated.

inst my “What’s it mean when he’s a known player and a guy like Vance?”

at it.

Aveda. She reached out and grabbed my other hand.

“Jules, it means he really, *really* likes you,” she said softly.

I sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

She smiled at me. “I told Roxie and I’ll tell you, trust me on this fight it,” Jet said.

My voice got low. “I have to.”

“Why?”

but Jet “I don’t know, I just do,” I lied.

I knew perfectly well, I just didn't want to share.

She nodded. "I understand."

I didn't I blinked at her. "You do?"

"I'll tell you about Eddie and me sometime. Actually," she said, her face getting bright, "I take that back. Fight it. It's much more interesting that way."

"For who?" I asked.

"All of us." She grinned. "Including you."

Hmm.

My hand. That did *not* sound good.



THE GIRLS (and boys) and I swung into the doors at King's only ten minutes late from my lunch hour.

We'd just conquered Cherry Creek Mall and in the trunk of Hazel's car was a new party outfit with shoes, a new nightie to take to Vance's sleepover, two new sets of very sexy underwear, a cute pair of cords I really need, a couple of T-shirts I really didn't need, a fantastic new belt I really, really didn't need and a serious new pair of ass-kicking boots.

This was accomplished because it wasn't just Indy, Jet and Ally who came with me at the mall. Roxie, Daisy, Tod and Stevie had come with.

s, don't I stood in different fitting rooms in different stores and they threw clothes at me. In came clothes, out went clothes. Some would go scout other stores and whisk me away on the trot if they saw something I *had* to try on.

I didn't need to train with Luke that evening. I'd had the workout all workouts at the mall.

But my party outfit was killer and the shoes were *amazing*.

We'd all just made it through the door when May came trotting up, her hands moving around in circles at her side, highly agitated about some-

er eyes Oh crap.

ng that The minute she made it to us I asked, "Where are Roam and Sniff?"

"What?" she asked, her eyes bright. "They're in with a tutor, yo—"

"They're okay?" I went on.

"Yeah, hon, you gotta—"

"You look like something's wrong. What's wrong?" I pushed.

"I'm tellin' you, you gotta—"

minutes "Is it one of the other kids?" I cut in.

I had a She put her hand to my mouth. "Hush, girl. You gotta come with me. Then she grabbed my wrist but stopped and stared down. "Ooo, look on my pretty bracelet!" she exclaimed.

I didn't "May! What's going on?" I clipped.

louse I She snapped to and said, "Right." Then she dragged me through the room, turning around towards my posse. "Hey, ya'll," she greeted and I wasn't acting bizarre in the extreme.

clothes "Hey, May," they replied, almost in unison.

r stores May took us down the hall into the shared office space. When the door burst through the door, everyone in the room looked up and stared.

t to end I wasn't paying attention to anyone. On my desk was a beautiful bouquet of the most exquisite pale pink roses.

I smiled. May let go of my wrist and I walked forward.

p to us, “Holy crap,” Indy breathed.

thing. “Good God,” Roxie whispered.

” They all followed me to my desk and we stood staring in silent aw
roses, such was their magnificence.

u gotta I dumped my purse on my desk, breaking into the Rose Stupor,
said, “I would never have thought Vance was a flower type of guy.”

“Me either,” Ally put in. “More like edible undies.”

“Ally!” Tod snapped. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking,” Ally defended herself.

“They’re not from Vance,” I told them.

Everyone looked at me.

th me.” “They’re not?” May asked.

at that I reached for the card and shook my head. “They’re from my Uncl
He knows pink roses are my favorites.”

I was a little surprised. Nick was super generous, but a specially d
the rebracelet must have set him back a whack. A dozen pink roses, esj
s if sheroses like this, perfect, so pale pink they were blush, every bloo
perfection, must have cost some serious cake. They weren’t even a tra
bouquet with all that baby’s breath in a heavily cut glass vase. Thei
just the roses with thin spikes of green shooting out here and there t
nine of around the blooms and a simple, cylindrical vase that was pure cla
bouquet was a work of art.

ouquet “Well, that’s damned disappointing,” Daisy muttered from beside
gently touched a rose.

“Your uncle is feeling generous this year.” Indy smiled at me.

“Probably thinks she won’t see another birthday,” Stevie murmured.

“Shh, Stevie,” Jet shushed him.

I slid my fingernail under the heavy cream paper of the card’s envelope and pulled it out.

Then I froze.

There was only one letter on the card, nothing else.

In black, bold pen it said, “V.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

“What?” someone asked (I was too freaked to distinguish voices).

“What is it?” someone else asked.

I swayed a bit, suddenly lightheaded, and someone else yelled, “Get her! She’s going down!”

I was pressed into my office chair. My mind started clearing and Roxie said, “Get her some water.”

Tod picked up a manila folder from my desk and started fanning me especially. “Deep breaths, girlie. Deep breaths. Do you think she should put her total between her knees?” he asked Jet.

May swiped the card from my fingers. She looked at it and a slow smile spread on her face.

“These ain’t from her uncle. Praise be to Jesus.”

“Let me see that.” Daisy snatched the card out May’s hand. “It just ‘V,’” she told everyone, her eyes big and happy. She looked around the room as I said, “How hot is that? That boy’s got *class*.”

They were all looking at me grinning like fools.

d. “I told him,” I whispered and then stopped talking.

“What’s that, sugar?” Daisy inquired.

velope I cleared my throat and looked up at them. “I told him about Nick
me pink roses on my sixteenth birthday and how they were my favo
was a few months after my Auntie Reba died and how Nick and I
first good night since she...” I stopped again and looked around them.
him,” I repeated.

“Righteous,” Ally said softly.

I felt something hit me then. Something terrifying, a delayed rea
grabbed my purse, pulled out my phone and shot out of the chair.

“Jules—” Indy said my name, her grin had gone uncertain.

rab her!

“I need his number,” I announced.

“What?” Roxie asked.

I heard

“Give me his cell number!” I shouted. “Who’s got his number?”

ne with

Everyone started pulling out their phones.

er head

“I have his number,” Indy told me.

w smile

“I don’t have his number,” Daisy said, but she was still digging t
her purse as if she could help.

“I *wish* I had his number,” Tod put in.

“Here it is,” Indy said and recited the number.

ist says

I punched it in then walked out of the room, down the hall and s
e gang. blue room’s blind was closed. I went to the yellow room. It was fr
walked in, shut the blinds, closed the door and put my back to it. Th

the green button.

It rang, once.

“Yeah?”

giving “Vance?”

rites. It “You called me, Princess, who else would it be?” he asked, his
had the voice was silk.

“I told “We have to stop seeing each other,” I told him.

Silence.

I waited.

ction. I Then I waited some more.

My emotional Rottweiler had torn free of his chains and he was b
snarling, drooling, jumping around and ready to attack.

When he still didn’t say anything, I called, “Vance?”

“Why?” he asked.

“What?”

“Why?” he repeated. This time there was impatience in his tone.

hrough “This isn’t going to work,” I said, as if that was an explanation.

“Why?” he obviously realized it wasn’t an explanation.

*Because I like you a lot. Because you’re beautiful and strong and
me feel things I can’t allow myself to feel. Because you listen to me
moonlight like every word I say forms a drop of nectar. Because you’ve
saw the a shit life and come out the other side to be someone amazing. Because
ee so I you live a dangerous life with a scar on your back to prove it and
en I hit afford to lose anyone else that means something to me, I thought.*

“I can’t explain it,” I said.

“Try.” His voice was beyond impatience now. It was short and clipped.

“Okay then, I’m *not* going to explain it because I don’t have to. It isn’t going to work.”

amused More silence and I could actually feel the anger coming through the phone.

Then he said, “You’re mine tonight.”

My belly fluttered. “Vance.”

“Tomorrow it’s over. Tonight you’re mine.”

“That isn’t smart.”

marking, “I don’t give a fuck.”

“I really don’t think—”

“I’ll be at your house at five to eight. We’re on the Harley tonight. I’ll bring a bag.”

“Really, I think, after the party—”

“You’re in my bed tonight. I want your scent on my sheets.”

Oh my *God*.

“Vance,” I said again. This time it sounded like a plea.

d make “Five to eight,” he repeated.

g in the Then he disconnected.

ve lived I stood there, back to the door, and kept the dead phone to my ear.

ise now Then I slid down the door, ass to the floor, knees pointed to the floor, hands on my knees. I stared into space, forcing my mind blank, telling myself I could do this and tomorrow it would be over and my life would be

normal.

oped. Myself didn't really believe I could do this and it didn't much l
. It just idea of normal.

igh the

Pack a

ceiling,
myself
back to

normal.

Myself didn't really believe I could do this and it didn't much like the idea of normal.



YOU GOT A NEW PARTNER NOW

I was on my back on the mat on the floor in the “down room” Nightingale Investigations office.

It was a big room with a couch, TV, treadmill, weights and an e bike. The guys used it for down time or when they were hanging around call (only the bad boys at Nightingale Investigations would call a room workout equipment the “down room”).

And of course the mat on the floor where Luke was kicking my ass “You’re not focused,” Luke said.

He was standing over me, staring down at me, hands on his hips.

He was right, I wasn’t focused. My mind was everywhere but Heavy would be disappointed.

Luke was good. He knew far more moves than Heavy, was stronger faster and constantly surprising me. Still, even as a novice, I knew more I was showing.

“Get your head in the game,” Luke continued, bending and offering his hand to help me up for about the twenty-fourth time.

I nodded mutely, locked my fingers around his wrist, put my other to his forearm and then I gave a solid jerk, hoping to take him by surprise.

take him down just once for the sake of my pride.

His feet were planted. He stood strong, only his arm and shoulder with my jerk, which was disappointing. The corner of his lip went up side. He yanked me up and I found my feet. I immediately shifted my to one leg, threw my other calf around the backs of his and tagged behind the knees. They buckled but he released my hand, his other arm around my waist and he twisted.

We both went down. His arm tightened around my waist, the other went out to shield our fall. I landed in a poor strategic position, on my back with him on top of me, his full weight pressing me into the mat. My leg was incapacitated, and if he hadn't cushioned our fall my head would have slammed against the mat and his weight would have knocked the wind out of me.

His head came up and he gave me a half-grin. "Better," he said.

"Thanks," I said back.

"You're still fucked."

"I kinda noticed that," I told him.

"Don't go out on the street with your mind on the mall."

"My mind isn't on the mall. I've already done the mall and my outfit is brilliant."

He just stared at me, looking like he might laugh, and I noticed his eyes weren't brown or black like I thought. They were a deep, dark blue.

Wow.

"You wanna get up?" I asked, pushing thoughts about his eyes to the back recesses of my mind so as never to pull them up again and place

hands on his biceps to push him.

moving “Not particularly,” he said casually, like he could lie on top of
on onenight, which he probably could.

weight Hmm.

ed him Not good.

m went “Well, I want you to get up,” I said.

er hand “It’s good to want things.”

y back, “Luke, get off me.”

gs were “How solid are you and Vance?” he asked.

d have It was my turn to stare. “Why?”

l out of “Just answer the question.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause I’m thinkin’ not many men want their woman roaming the
at night lookin’ for trouble, no matter if she can handle a gun and he
don’t see a good future for you two unless you get your ass back
shelter and your mind on what you really can do to help those kids.”

One thing you could say for that, it sure was honest.

y party “Well, then you’ll be pleased to know we broke up today. We’
going to the party together because we made a deal.”

his dark I passed the torch and it was his turn to stare. Then for some
ie. reason he started to look a little angry.

“That didn’t take long,” he murmured as if to himself.

he very “Shit happens. Now, get off.”

ing my The door opened and both of our heads twisted to it. Vance was s

there. He stood frozen for a beat, hand on the doorknob.

me all Then his arms crossed on his chest, his eyes went hard and his face scary.

“What...the...fuck?” His voice was low and as scary as his face.

Luke looked at Vance then he looked at me. Luke’s face was blank, his eyes were active and I could tell he was thinking about something.

I looked back at Vance.

“He’s showing me some moves,” I told Vance.

“Yeah, I can see,” Vance replied.

Um.

Yikes.

streets to him. I didn’t move away because there were crackling-not-happy floating around the room and I didn’t want to do anything to set them off. I And anyway, I was feeling very weird around Vance. I’d broken up with him, he’d kind of accepted it, yet we weren’t through. I’d become used to that being around, getting in my space, descending into what had been familiar banter. This was just weird. It felt foreign, uncomfortable, wrong.

re only We all stared at each other.

strange Then Luke asked, “You two over after the party?”

Vance’s eyes sliced to Luke. My lungs squeezed painfully, my mouth widened and moved to him too.

Vance didn’t answer. Neither did I.

tanding “You’re through with Law then you won’t mind me movin’ in,” Vance said, clearly not worried about fanning the flames of the crackling noise.

vibes.

face got *Oh my God.*

I continued staring at Luke with wide eyes, but my mouth had dropped open.

ink, but “You move in, we have problems,” Vance returned softly.

“You move out, don’t seem like it’s much of your business.”

The crackling vibes got red-hot.

It was time for me to say something.

“Excuse me, but I *am* in the room,” I snapped. “I thought you saw many men like their women roaming the streets looking for trouble. I pointed out to Luke.

id close “Yeah, I did. Though *I* think it’s kinda cute,” Luke replied.

y vibes *Oh my God.*

em off. “Well hurray for you, but come tomorrow, you boys are off the job with him, single-act show again,” I returned.

to him “You’re in for trainin’ tomorrow, same time,” Luke shot back.

come a “No fucking way.”

ng. “Only a girl would turn her back on a good deal just because she got fucked in the process.”

ly eyes hips. “News flash, Luke. I *am* a girl,” I returned heatedly, hands going to my hips.

“Yeah.” He grinned, leaning back. “I noticed that.”

Vance moved.

” Luke Luke and I swung our eyes to him and I realized too late the red-hot t-happy

went white.

His movement wasn't distinguishable. He was still standing, arms
ad now on his chest, but something about him went hostile.

I waited. Luke (thankfully) was silent. The room burned.

Then Vance said, eyes on me, "Five to eight."

Then he was gone.

I whirled on Luke. "What in the hell was that all about?"

He just grinned at me.

aid not "Stop grinning," I demanded.

ble?" I "Tomorrow, after training, you and I patrol."

"I don't think so."

"I do. You aren't going to learn shit on a mat. You gotta learn
field."

o. I'm a "I said *no*."

He kept grinning. "You got a new partner now."

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

These guys.

she got



I WORE a little black dress to the party.

to my And it was *little*.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, before the flowers, bef
freakout, when I was in a happy birthday daze.

It wasn't a good idea now.

ot vibes I'd gone home from training, packed a backpack (better for the I

showered and done the whole makeup and hair bit. Subtle makeup—it
crossed I knew how to do—and my hair was up in a messy twist, which I didn't
how to do, but luckily, after five tries, it worked.

During the mall extravaganza, as birthday presents, Roxie bought
lotion that made my legs look shiny and ultra-smooth. Jet had given me
kinds of flavored lip gloss (I'd made the mistake of telling her about V
“you smell of melons and taste of cherries” comment and she got
overexcited): bubble gum, grape and, of course, cherry.

I went with grape for the evening.

My dress was clingy black jersey, to the knee, halter-necked. The
fell in a drape, low on my cleavage. The back also had a drape, sup
exposing most of the small of my back. My shoes were spike-
pointed-toe, open sides, but with a full back and a thick strap across the
i in the top of my foot, just under the ankle.

I went with bare Roxie-lotion-shiny legs, my new bracelet on my
and Auntie Reba's diamond at my neck.

I was filling Boo's food bowl, telling him he had to be a good kitty
got home the next day, when Vance walked in the back door.

I straightened and stared at him.

Hair back, leather jacket, black cowboy boots, thick black belt
heavy silver buckle, jeans and a crisp shirt with subtle stripes of wine
midnight and charcoal patterned into it. The shirt was opened at the th
ore my

At the sight of him my mouth went dry.

“You gonna be able to ride on the Harley in that?” he asked.

I decided a snotty, “Well, hello to you too,” was no longer in (Harley),

was all wasn't sure, as I'd had no experience, but I figured I'd lost the right to
't know when I told him we had to stop seeing each other.

I also decided to ignore the clench in my gut that he didn't n
me this against the counter and kiss me like last time.

ie three "It's stretchy," I answered.

√ance's His eyes moved the length of me then came back to mine. I couldn
ot a bit them.

"Get a jacket," he replied. "Where's your bag?"

I put on my black leather blazer and the backpack and we
ie front Fortnum's.

er-low, The lights were blazing in Fortnum's windows and I could see th
-heeled, was already packed.
he very

I was a little shocked. They'd only planned the party the night bef
y wrist spent most of the afternoon with me at the mall and the shelter.

I hopped off the back of the bike, rearranged my skirt, and Vance
/ until I backpack down an arm. I whirled with it as he pulled it off the other s
I ended up facing him. He threw it over one of his shoulders.

I looked up at him. His face was blank. My stomach had decided t
into a permanent, painful twist.

with a I turned away, biting my lip and feeling the weight in my ch
e, navy, threatened tears.
coat.

The sooner we got in there, the sooner the party would be ov
sooner the night would be over, the sooner I could face whatever ch
the next day brought.

order. I Or move to Nicaragua.

o bicker Vance caught my wrist and swung me back around, his body
toward me at the same time so I collided with it.

ush me He dropped my wrist, his arm went around me inside my jacket
hand dipped straight into the drape at my back.

My lips parted and his other hand went into my hair, pulled out
n't read and my hair fell over his hand and my shoulders.

“Crowe! It took me five tries to twist that thing in my hair.”

I forgot about not bickering.

rode to He ignored my comment. “You get the idea to experiment with fl
front of me, think again. I won’t like it and you’ll be the one who’ll pa

e place I closed my eyes, sucked in a breath then opened them again.

“Can we just get through the night?” I asked.

ore and “We’ll get through the night,” he promised, and something
promise made me shiver.

slid the He stared at me, hand at my behind, the other one in my hair.

ide and I became conscious of the fact that anyone could see us fr
windows.

o settle “Can you take your hand off my ass?” I asked, allowing myself
shade of snotty.

est that We *were* standing on a public street and in full view of the windo
Nick might be in there.

ver, the Instead of doing as I asked, he pulled me deeper into him and kis
allenge This wasn’t a soft, sweet kiss, but deep, hard and full-on tongue.

When he quit kissing me, he whispered, “Grape,” against my lips
eyes looked in mine.

moving My stomach lurched painfully into a tighter knot at the memo-
better time.

and his I held my breath, wondering why I gave in to tonight, to the party,
everything. I was so much better on my own. Dinners with Nick, Boc
the clipbed partner and my music to keep my company.

Before I could find an answer to my mental question, Vance relea-
grabbed my hand and we walked in.

Everyone yelled happy birthday.

irtin' in Even though I felt like crying, I did my very best to smile.
y.”



“METHINKS, even with the mini-make-out-session on the sidewalk, al-
well in paradise,” Tod remarked, standing beside me, both of us
glasses of champagne.
in that

It was an hour into the party and I was trying to have fun (a-
succeeding).

They'd decided on baked Camembert and crackers, fruit trays, c-
om the champagne and truffles. All the men, including everyone from Nigh-
Investigations (except a guy I hadn't yet met named Ike, who had nig-
a little; in the control room), were there and wearing jeans and nice sl-
sweaters. Tod and Stevie wore casual suits and Tex wore one of his
ows and flannel shirts. All the women were dressed to the nines—little dresses,
hair and makeup.

sed me. Nick was there and seemed to be enjoying himself. Heavy and Z-
also there, and both seemed a bit uncomfortable. Frank was a no sho-
and his exactly the most sociable person one-on-one, he might have been abl-
beers at a bar, but parties were a no-go.

ry of a Tex surprised me because he was with a pretty blonde lady and
looked close. I wouldn't have expected Tex to have a date, especially
Vance, pretty blonde lady. I was further surprised (a nice way to say abso-
lutely) as my floored) to find out she was Jet's mother, Nancy.

Duke surprised me by showing up at all. He brought his wife, I
sed me, and she was a cracker.

Jet and Eddie had yet to arrive.

I was avoiding Vance like I'd forgotten to wear deodorant (I hadn't
didn't want him to find out.

I was avoiding Luke because Luke was a wildcard. I didn't want
ll is not flirt with me then me be the one to pay.

holding Vance looked seriously unhappy. Luke looked seriously amused.

I looked to Tod and he was watching me closely.

and not "Everything's fine," I assured him.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Tod said.

rudités, "No really, it is."

tingale "Girlie, pu-lease. I had a hot guy like that I'd be all over
ght duty embarrassing my friends enough to leave early so I could *really* be a
irts or him."

normal, lots of "You do have a hot guy like that," I told him.

"Not the same ten years on. You two are in the first blush of ro-
ip were You should be going at it like rabbits."

ow. Not "I broke up with him," I blurted. Do not ask me why. I shouldn't
le to do and I knew it.

Tod blinked at me, face shocked.

and they See? I knew I shouldn't have.

Why not a "What?" he asked.

absolutely "I broke up with him when I ran out of the room after I saw the flicker. I called him and broke up with him. We made a deal. He gets tonight, Dolores, we're over."

"You said you phoned to thank him," Tod told me.

"I kinda...um...fibbed."

and I Tod looked at me. He opened his mouth, then closed it and looked at the floor. Then he looked back, opened his mouth again and yelled, "Are you nuts?"

Most everyone turned to stare including, to my horror, Vance.

I turned to Tod, my back to the room (and Vance). "Tod! Keep your voice down."

"Girl, that boy is hot for you, not to mention that boy is just plain handsome."

"Tod—"

"You need a doctor. You need an intervention. You need Daisy over here," said and started looking around the room.

all over "No! Do not call Daisy over here. Why do you think I fibbed earlier today? I didn't want this kind of reaction."

"What's going on?" Roxie hissed from beside us.

romance. She looked gorgeous, wearing a figure-skimming strapless little dress of her own and her shoes were nearly as amazing as mine.

it have "Jules broke up with Vance. It's over. Done. Kaput," Tod announced.

"What?" Roxie screeched.

This time I felt the room's attention on my back at Roxie's outburst. I closed my eyes (I really shouldn't have told Tod) then I opened them. I

"Please, be quiet," I begged.

"Why did you break up with him?" Roxie asked in a low voice.

"It's too complicated to explain."

"But...he's macho, he rides a Harley and he bought you flowers. Men who ride Harleys don't buy women flowers. They take them to a roadhouse, get them drunk and get in their pants," Roxie explained.

"What's happening?" Ally asked. She and Indy had arrived together.

"Don't tell them," I said quickly.

"Jules broke up with Vance. It's over," Roxie said over me.

Both of them turned to stare at me.

"That's what she did after she saw the flowers," Tod shared.

"I thought you said you were thanking him," Indy said.

"She lied," Tod told them.

"Why on earth would you do that?" Ally (kind of) yelled.

"Because I didn't want this exact same thing to happen," I said in a whisper, giving up on getting them to be quiet.

"Ya'll, what is goin' on?" May asked, pushing close, and I caught Daisy on her heels.

Damn.

Daisy. Not good.

And May. Worse.

"Jules broke up with Vance. It's over," Roxie, Tod and Al

t. together.

mem. “You are jokin’,” Daisy said, her eyes narrowed, and I moved back wanting to be in bitch-slapping, nail-scratching distance.

“Where’s that cake? I’m takin’ back the cake. Lettin’ my grandpa eat it. They aren’t crazy fools. They deserve it,” May announced.

Macho
m to a “Please don’t make a big deal of this. This is not a big deal. We’ve been together a few days,” I told them.

er. “A few days for these boys is a few months for normal men. He’s in you’re in deep and you damn well know it,” Daisy snapped.

“Yes. I do,” I snapped back, leaning into her and having...had...en

It was my fucking life and it was my fucking birthday and I could do whatever the hell I wanted.

At my tone, and what I didn’t know was the look on my face, even I leaned back a bit.

n a soft
uld see
ly said “My whole family died in a car crash when I was six. My mom, my older brother. I was with them, got really hurt, spent a lot of time in hospital, but I survived. When I was ten, my new puppy was run over by a truck. Splat!” I clapped one palm on the other and everyone jumped. “When I was eleven, my grandpa, the only living grandparent I had left, died of Parkinson’s. When I was fifteen, my Auntie Reba died after having knee replacement surgery. *Knee replacement surgery*,” I hissed the last words. “Four months ago, Park died. I found him in an alley. He was the kid I’d ever met and I’ve met a lot of them. This morning, I saw the gunshot wound Vance got during some business he was doing for me. I was shot again a few days ago, protecting me. I will *not* lose another person in my life. I will *not* lose someone else I care about. *I will not.*”

“Girlie—” Tod said softly.

ack not My eyes were blurry again and I just hated that.

“I will not,” I repeated, turning to Tod.

children “What on earth is going on?” Stevie asked, coming late. “Ever
staring.”

ve only My eyes moved to Stevie and my stomach twisted tighter to th
where I thought I might be sick.

n deep, “Could they hear me?” I whispered after I’d swallowed back the na

Stevie took one look at my face and blinked. Then he looked at To
ough. shook his head.

ould do Stevie’s eyes came back to me. “No, they couldn’t hear you. *A*
okay?”

everyone “No, I’m not okay,” I said to Stevie and then looked at May. “C
please, please,” I grabbed her hand and leaned into her, “please, just se
lad and cake? I really need that cake.”

in the She didn’t argue. She nodded her head and her hand squeezed
er by a “Sure, hon, I’ll serve the cake.”

When I I closed my eyes again, let out a deep breath and then looked a
died of “Thank you.”

ig knee May peeled off to serve the cake.

it three I looked around at the concerned faces. “Can we quit talking ab
he best and just enjoy this wonderful party?”

Lee. He Daisy came forward, her arm went around my waist and she held c
person “Sure, sugar.” Then she looked back at the gang. “I think we nee
champagne.”

“That’d be good,” I whispered, blinking a few times until my
cleared.

That was when Jet arrived. She was smiling so huge it lit up the
She walked up looking somehow dazed and completely unaware, obliv
yone is the undercurrents of the recent drama.

“Hey, guys,” she said then smiled at me and gave me a kiss on the
e point “Happy birthday, Jules.”

On closer inspection she didn’t look dazed. She looked dreamy.
ausea.

“Jet,” I began. “Are you okay?”
od. Tod

“I’m okay. I’m way okay. I’m so okay it’s worth the fucking F-wc
fucking, *fucking* okay.”
Are you

“What’s going on?” Ally asked.

Jet turned to her. “Eddie told me he loved me tonight. That’s why
an you late. I, um...kinda pounced on him when he did it.”
erve the

Everyone stared.

My stomach twisted further, hateful jealousy I wished I didn
l mine. causing the pain even as my heart warmed for Jet.

Daisy let me go and hugged Jet.
at May.

“That is so sweet,” she said when she broke the hug. “Champag
need champagne! Right here!” she shouted, though who she was shout
did not know. There weren’t any waiters. It was a help-yourself kind o
out this

“I’ll get the champagne,” Indy offered with a hand squeeze for Je
quick, worried look at me.
n tight.

I ignored the worried look. I didn’t need any worried looks. I need
d more night to be over.

vision Jet moved beside me as Tod, Daisy and Roxie formed a huddle c
(likely to talk about me, I ignored that too) and Ally wandered away,
e room. in a direction that would lead her to Vance (I ignored that too).

vious to “Did you tell him you love him?” I asked Jet.

“I told him ages ago when I tried to break up with him.”

cheek. I couldn’t help it. Even with all the emotion, what she said made n
and thus made me smile.

“As you know I’m no expert, but that sure as hell doesn’t sound i
way to break up with someone,” I told her.

ord. I’m She grinned at me, still in her dreamy daze. “It wasn’t, though i
know that. I moved in during my troubles, and he didn’t let me break i
him when they were over and never let me move out. This past we
even painted his bathroom this really cool shade of deep, deep lave
y we’re really rich color, but Ally said Eddie’d lose his mind to have a
bathroom. Still, he told me he loved me. Even a purple bathroom did
Eddie.”

1’t feel She was gazing across the room while she talked and I followed h
I looked across the room and saw Eddie, his eyes on Jet. His lip
twitching, his thoughts clearly private, but in a seriously sexy, public v

ne! We I put my arm around her waist and she did the same with mine. ‘
ing at I you could have painted the bathroom flamingo pink and it wouldr
f deal. Eddie.”

t and a She looked at me. Her face had settled, lost its daze and was n
plain happy.

led this “I know,” she said softly.

lose by Don't ask me why, but I touched the side of my head to hers and g
scarilywaist a squeeze. She squeezed me back.

Then May came out with a birthday cake loaded with lit candles,
happy birthday and everyone joined in.



o sense A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, the party was winding down and Nick wa
to me.

like the With a polite smile, he pulled me away from talking to Zip and He
"I'm leavin', Jules," he said to me, walking me to the door w
I didn't stopped.

up with "Did you have fun?" I asked, smiling up at him.

ekend I "Yeah. They're good people."

nder, a He was right, they were.

purple
n't faze "Got somethin' to say, Jules."

I cocked my head to the side, not sure I liked his tone but having l
enough champagne to be able to ignore that too.

er gaze. "Noticed you gave Vance a wide berth tonight. Don't know why,
as were none of my business."
vay.

'I think I held my breath, knowing from experience he wasn't done talkin
n't faze was right.

Nick continued, "Been scared stiff these past four months, you doi
ow just you're doin'. You know that. The only two good nights of sleep I've
those months have been the last two, with his Harley sittin' outside tl
door."

Oh crap.

ave her Vance had Nick's approval.

I knew that, but I'd been trying to ignore it. I also knew that he was singing about me a lot and I'd been trying to ignore that too.

What I didn't need to know was that Vance made him feel like I was

lked up "Nick, his Harley won't be out there anymore," I told him softly.

Nick didn't even try to hide the disappointment on his face. I'd been trying to ignore that too.

avy. I failed.

here he "The way you two are tonight, was worried about that," Nick said.

I took a breath and forged ahead. "I won't be home tonight. Can you get Boo in the morning?"

Nick stared at me a beat, clearly confused at this contradictory information.

I didn't enlighten him.

had just Then he said, "I hope you know what you're doin', Jules."

and it's "I do," I replied with fake brightness. "Don't I always?"

"Yeah," he said, but he shook his head. "You always know what you're doin'. Just can't say you've always done the right thing."

g, and I "Nick—"

n' what "It may almost always be the right thing for others, but it usually isn't the right thing for you," he told me. "Life ain't worth livin', Jules, but you had in don't take a few risks, and I'm not talkin' about puttin' your ass on the line to save the world. I'm talkin' about puttin' your ass on the line to save yourself."

I didn't have anything to say to that and I didn't have a chance
worried anything to say. Vance walked up beside us, approaching me for the fi
that evening, although I'd seen him talking several times with Nick.

as safe. "Time to go," he said, eyes on me. The look in them sent a shiver
spine, and not in the usual good way.

tried to I nodded.

His eyes cut to Nick and his hand came out.

"Night, Nick," he said.

"Vance," Nick shook his hand and then they broke off. "You tw
ou feed the rest of your evening."

Then Nick went out the door.

idictory "I'll get your jacket," Vance said and peeled off.

While he was gone I lifted my chin, squared my shoulders, n
prepared for what was to come, and in the middle of that I caught Indy

She was standing next to Lee. He had his arm around her should
was talking to Eddie. Indy had her arm around his waist and she was
at me. She put her head to his chest and smiled encouragingly.

you're Vance came up, my backpack over one of his shoulders, my jack
his arm.

wasn't "Thanks, everybody!" I yelled.

if you They turned, called their goodnights and happy birthdays.

line to I waved with pretend happiness. I even blew a few kisses, which
to save good for a head-crackin' mamma jamma to do, but for once I was a
friends.

And then we were gone.

to find
rst time

' up my

o enjoy

ientally
's eye.

ers and
looking

et over

was not
mongst



YOU WANNA TALK NOW?

We took Sixth Avenue west to I-70, Vance riding fast. Me pressed him from crotch to shoulders (dress stretched to the max), arm around his waist, backpack on my back, Harley roaring between my legs flying behind me, my legs freezing in the cold. I alternately pressed myself into his shoulder or gazed over it, not quite sad, scared or cold enough to enjoy the ride.

We went into the foothills, past the end of the city lights, strip malls and suburbs where the skies became a bit clearer and you could see the whole lot better.

Vance exited I-70 and I memorized our route, just because, letting myself pretend that I might take it again one day. It was major thoroughfare turned minor thoroughfare. Minor thoroughfare right to a one-lane road. One road left to a dirt road.

I was guessing we were somewhere between Golden and Evergreen.

What I did know was that we were in the middle of nowhere.

Finally, he pulled off into a gravel lane and his headlight flashed on a small, one-story log cabin surrounded by pine trees, except for a clearing to the north where there was a major outbuilding.

In the drive there was an oldish Ford pickup truck. Not ancient, but at least ten years on it. It was blue, it was dusty and you could tell it was used. Next to that was a horse trailer.

Vance stopped the bike and cut the light. I got off and pulled down my skirt. So did he, without the skirt part. We did the whole backpack thing again. He grabbed my hand and walked me to the house. All this was in silence.

against I was finding it hard to deal with silence.

as tight “Do you have horses?” I asked.

gs, hair “One. Stable two for my neighbors in exchange for them feeding my cheekwatering and exercising mine when I’m in town, which is most of the time. He replied in a way that didn’t invite further questions.

He walked right up to the house, hand wrapped around mine, and unlocked the door.

stars a “You don’t lock your house?” I asked, shocked.

Vance, security expert, didn’t lock his own house. He was in the middle of nowhere, but still.

left to “Got nothin’ to steal,” he said.

ne-lane We walked in and he flipped on a light, and with one look at me realized he was right. He indeed had nothing to steal.

n. He dropped my hand, closed the door and walked through the house leaving me at the door and disappearing down a dark hall. Then a light came on from there.

ring to I looked around more, came forward and took my blazer off, wrapped it around the back of a chair.

it it had It could be cute, his cabin. Definitely cozy. The walls were made of
was wellsealed logs. The floors were wood with some rugs thrown over them—
multi-colored and braided, not tatty, but not designer-cabin-chic either.
own my front room was one biggish room incorporating the dining room, living
rl thing and kitchen. There was a big stone hearth on the side wall of the living
done in a smaller one on the opposite side, next to the dining table.

To the right was the living room. He had a couch, and over it was
a colorful Native American blanket. A coffee table in front, cluttered
books—some opened and placed facedown, some stacked even on top
and under the table. A floor lamp made of a twisted branch was beside
eeding, couch, buffalos dancing across the shade. The back of a beat-up
e time,” armchair faced the dining room-kitchen area.

And that was it. No television, no stereo, no pictures, nothing.
opened

The kitchen was a U-shape. The back and side walls had top and
cabinets, a counter delineating it from the dining area with only
cabinets. The cabinets were made of a fantastic knotty pine. They
middle great refinished and with a gleam to them, especially if granite or
countertops replaced the old worn brown one he had. A coffeemaker
toaster were the only things on the counter except for a stack of mugs.
round dining area held an old, round oak four-seater. Like everything else, it
good condition but worn. Maybe bought secondhand because it was
house, enough to pre-date Vance’s ownership, and too worn for stuff that he
it came use if he wasn’t home very often.

Vance came back into the room and I looked at him.

pping it He stopped in the entryway to the hall and leaned a shoulder against
eyes on me.

of well- “If you don’t stay here very often, where do you stay when you
-mostlytown?” I’d asked out of curiosity, not able to help myself. Mostly be
er. Thewanted to know.

g room It wasn’t a good decision.

g room, He stayed silent for a beat after my question, then his face changed
not in a good way.

thrown “You wanna talk now?” he asked, voice low. “Get to know me
ed with, better?”

ie floor Um.

side the Not good.

leather Someone was not in a happy mood.

“Crowe, I’m just trying to make conversation,” I said quietly, d
bottomnot to spit in the eye of the tiger at this juncture.

bottom He pushed away from the wall and started toward me.

’d look “I don’t wanna have a conversation. I wanna fuck.”

oncrete My body prepared to flee, but my mind stopped it and I held my gr

r and a “I’m beginning to hate it when you say it like that,” I said sharply.

ail. The I didn’t really hate it, not before. It was kind of a turn on. But I dic
: was in now, especially the way he just said it, which was not nice.

vas old He stopped in front of me and just at the edge of my space. The
ad little time he approached me, his eyes were on mine.

“I work when I’m in town. If I need to sleep, I sleep on the couch
ainst it, down room. If I need to shower, I use the shower there. I keep clothes
locker. A lot of the time I’m out hunting and not in town at all. I co
here when I have time off, which isn’t very often,” he answered my qu

u're in "Why do you work so much?" I asked, but wished I hadn't.

cause I Again I couldn't help myself. I just wanted to know.

"It's what I do," he replied.

"But why?"

ged and He stared at me a second, leaned forward and took my hand. "Q
time is over."

a little Oh crap.

He turned and pulled me across the room and down the hall.

It was undignified to struggle, especially in high heels and a little
dress. So I didn't, but my belly flutter, coupled with the stomach twist
me feel a little queasy.

eciding He pulled me into a room off the left of the hall. His bedroom.

The lamp was on by the bed. It was an old iron bed, painted to
double. The mattresses, though, looked firm and new. There was a
comforter on it covered in a dark-brown twill, and another Native American
ound. blanket thrown over the comforter. Light-brown pillowcases over the pillows.
There was a dresser, two nightstands, both with lamps and more books
l hate it them, and an old wardrobe because there was no closet. On the outside
was another stone hearth fireplace nearly as big as the living room. The
thing on the walls was a hide stretched across and stitched tight to
: whole piece of wood, an image of an eagle shaved into the fur.

Vance stopped by the bed. He'd already taken off his jacket earlier
h in the now he started to unbutton his shirt.

s in my "Crowe—" I started.

ome up "Take off your dress," he interrupted me, his voice sharp.
estion.

I blinked at him, shocked at his tone.

Then I rallied. “Can we please talk, just for a few minutes?”

I wasn’t beginning to get freaked. I was full-on freaked.

It didn’t take an experienced relationship expert to realize he was pissed off and I didn’t understand. If he was pissed off why did he want me all? It was like he wanted to make this hard on me and I didn’t like talking about him.

Furthermore, why *was* I there? I’d never agreed to it. I hadn’t even agreed to going to the party with him.

Before I could answer my questions, his hands came away from my chest, he unbuttoned the top button, he shrugged his shirt off his shoulders and it fell to the floor. He then captured me by the hips, pulled me closer, and with a swish he had my dress clutched in his fingers and up over my head. Then it was gone.

I was wearing a pair of red satin panties with a little black bow under my navel (one of my new pairs) and no bra.

For a second, shock hit me and I stood frozen. Then I covered my face with an arm and bent to retrieve my dress.

I’d decided that it was time to *fuck this*. My head-crackin’ mamma was coming out.

There were a lot of things I didn’t need that had come at me in the last few days, but Vance being a complete asshole was the biggest one of them all.

Vance caught me as I bent over and pulled me back up.

“Take your hands off me, Crowe. I’m going home,” I snapped. I stood straight and looking at him. His arms were wrapping around my

pulling me to him.

I tried to push back. They went tight with a jerk and my body slid into his.

I pissed “You aren’t goin’ anywhere.”

there at “I don’t like this. You’re making me uncomfortable,” I informed him.

hat, not “You’ll be comfortable in a second when my mouth is between your legs.”

I agreed Oh my *God*.

He did *not* just say that.

the last “You’re an ass!” I shouted. “This is *not* happening.”

Then he “It’s happening, Princess. I have one more night of your sweet pussy dress I’m gonna take it.”

Inder my “You’re gonna have to *take* it because I’m not *giving* it.”

“You’ll give it.”

breasts “Fuck you!” I was still shouting, and now I was pushing away from him.

“Yeah,” he returned. “Exactly.”

jamma Then he twisted me. We went down on the bed, him on top, and his weight hit me hard.

the last I struggled, I swear I did, but he got my wrists to the sides of my head. His mouth was on me everywhere and I couldn’t keep it up. I wanted to fight it, but I didn’t win.

when I He kissed me hard and deep then his mouth moved over my neck, collarbone, between my breasts, doing amazing things to my nipples. I just too much. I hated him at first, then I hated myself for giving in, and me and

I couldn't think of anything (certainly not hate) when his mouth kept a
ammed He knew when I quit fighting. He let my wrists go and I pushed
his back, too turned on to think of running. I did the same to him,
Daisy told me to do. If he did something I liked, I should do it back.

im. I went further, though. Out-of-control turned on, yanking his belt
undoing his fly, pulling his jeans down. I took him in my hand, and I
n your not, no experience, nothing but instinct, I took him in my mouth.

I had no idea what I was doing, but I just winged it. I did what I liked
I liked what I did, and I knew he liked it too, because after a while he
to make low, growling noises.

Then he pulled me up and to the side. He sat up, yanked off his boots
ess and socks, stood up and pulled off his jeans. I used that time to push the
my shoes against the heels, shoving them off. He bent over me, feet
the floor, one hand to the bed beside me. He reached down and drag
my panties. When they were gone, he spread my legs and then he was
n him. slamming inside me.

“Vance,” I breathed when he did.

and his “Say it again,” he demanded against my mouth.

I did.

ead and It was like it was in the hall of my house—hard, fast, deep, and
ed to. I coming close to orgasm just from the velvet violence of it.

Suddenly his hand glided down the back of my leg, lifted it at the
, to my and he slid out of me. He rolled me to my belly, repositioned between
. It was legs and, hands at my hips, he pulled me up, just the lower half of my
nd then and then he was inside me again.

t me. I felt a moment of being stunned then it melted away. He could go him to that way, harder, and God, it felt good. I pushed my hips into him, cur just as fingers into the covers at the sides of my head and little mewling noise from my throat that I couldn't control.

t loose, It would seem impersonal, him being so far away, but he didn't let kid you hands went from my hips, fingertips brushing my behind, the small back softly then back to hold my hips.

ked and That was all nice, even fantastic, but better yet the position felt r started and it was simply downright *hot*.

I was close. The noises I was making were getting urgent, and he out and flipped me around again. He dropped to his side, his arms around me then he went to his back, taking me with him, rolling me over still on "Don't stop!" I cried (kind of loud and snappish), but he just stared off my eyes. He pulled my legs up on either side of him, guided himself there, and sat up.

Um.

Wow.

His head was tilted back, eyes still on me and I looked down at him

"I wanna see your face when you come," he murmured.

l I was Um.

Wow again.

ie knee My arms went around his shoulders and immediately I started to eek my mouth at his. We were both breathing hard, not kissing, lips just to y body, It didn't take long before my Grade Nine and Three Quarters bypassed Ten and went straight to Grade Thirteen and a Half.



deeper

led my I SHIVERED.

as came “I’m cold,” I whispered, face in his neck, lips at his ear.

He reached across the bed and pulled the blanket over us. I was
t it. His top, still astride him, my torso against his, my knees pressed against hi

of my I was trying to quiet my mind.

Once he covered us, his arms went back around me and he h
naughty pressed tight against him.

We hadn’t used protection again, which was another thing I *did not*
e pulled This time I understood that it was out of either of our control. But w
is went playing Russian roulette with my ovaries and eventually my ovarie
top. going to succumb to the bullet.

ed into Gently he rolled me to the side, still under the blanket, and he
f inside away.

“Furnace,” was all he said, and he was gone.

I lay there alone, under the blanket, while he went to turn on the f
I hadn’t realized how cold it was inside, but then again it was colder
1. and I’d been half frozen when I walked in.

At this thought, my mind finally stilled, and that side effect that I
before was annoying now seemed charming because the ridiculous th
didn’t hit me. What just happened came over me in a humiliating rush.

move, Everyone told me he was a player. He’d get into my panties, and
uching. pissed off as I was and *he* was, he did, and I’d let him. I hadn’t begg
Grade with words, but my body had done it and I hated myself for it.

I got up, wrapped the blanket around me and was trying to p

underwear on when he walked in.

He was naked, apparently oblivious to the cold, looking beautiful (as usual). His ponytail had come out somewhere along the way. There was still one clean, white bandage wrapped around his thigh where he'd been shot. Behind him the house was dark.

"Don't do that," he said to me.

"I'm going home," I told him, still trying to get the panties up under the big blanket. I was no longer looking at him, but anywhere else. "Do I need to borrow your truck? You can pick it up from the shelter tomorrow. I'll have the keys." May the keys."

He came forward as I was still fighting with my panties and he grabbed me, moving me gently but firmly back, around, over, his arm coming around my waist to hold me to him. He leaned down and flipped back the comforter. It wasn't much use fighting him and trying to keep the blanket around my panties in place at the same time.

My hands gave up on my underwear and they dropped to the floor. I was trying instead to keep hold of the blanket at the same time I was slapping his hands. I lost that battle too. He pulled the blanket away from me and tossed it on the bed. He leaned into me and we went down.

I tried to roll away while he pulled the comforter back, but he caught me and rolled me to him face-to-face, his arms going around me.

I stilled and stopped fighting. I knew I wouldn't win, no matter how many moves I knew.

"I'm going home," I said, looking at him.

He didn't say anything.

I closed my eyes tight and dipped my chin so I wouldn't see him. Then I opened them again and said what I had to say.

"Please, Vance. I can't stay here now." My voice was barely a whisper, and "Not after that."

"What was wrong with that?" he asked.

"It was humiliating."

It was his turn to still. "How was it humiliating?"

"Just let me get dressed and go home."

His hand went into my hair and he tugged at it until my head came

"Tell me what was humiliating about what we just did." His voice was quiet, low and I knew he was pissed off again.

"I gave in. I barely fought. You just had to...I don't know...kiss me and that was it. It's humiliating."

At my words, his body relaxed and his hand smoothed over my hair. I knew right off that he wasn't pissed anymore, but he wasn't going to let me go away the Return of the Major Freakout.

"I don't even know what I'm doing here!" I cried suddenly. "I broke up with you this afternoon. Hell, I broke up with you last night!"

"Think hard, Princess. You might come up with an answer."

"I don't want an answer," I said truthfully, shocking myself with so many words.

Damn and double damn.

I didn't need *that* either, so I mentally pushed it to the side.

"I didn't think so," he murmured, making me think and making me

is face. out more that he had my number.

audible. “I need to go home,” I said, pulling back, but his arms got tight again. “I know you need to go home, Jules, but you’re not gonna go home.” I gave up pulling away.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, looking at him.

“You want to stop seeing me then you’ll stop seeing me, at least then I’m not gonna play that game.”

“I’m not playing games,” I snapped, interrupting him, now getting back. off myself.

ice was “Yeah. You are. You just don’t have enough experience to know are.”

me and My mouth dropped open.

He did *not* just say that.

y hip. I “I’m not playing games,” I repeated, a little more heatedly this time. smooth “What were you doin’ with Luke this afternoon?”

roke up “I wasn’t playing a game.”

“Well Luke was, and is, and will continue to do it. And you didn’t and won’t get it until you get your head out of your ass.”

ith my No...

Wait.

He did not just say *that*.

“I don’t have my head in my ass. He was *kicking* my ass!”

ie freak “He was fuckin’ with your head.”

I pulled free saying, “I’m going home.”

He caught me, rolled me to my back and rolled on me, full body. His hand came down, pulling out one of my legs until his hips were between both of them.

“Get off me, Crowe,” I demanded, squirming underneath him.

“Stop fightin’, Jules.”

“Get off me!”

“Stop fighting!” His voice had risen.

I’d never heard his raised voice and my body froze at his tone.

“Don’t yell at me,” I whispered, feeling that weight in my chest knowing he was that angry with me, and I hated that too.

It felt like these days I was always on the verge of crying and I can’t remember the last time I cried.

What was up with that?

He talked over my secondary freakout, further fueling the fire of my anger. “For Christ’s sake, I’m givin’ you what you want. I don’t know what’s in your fuckin’ head, *you* don’t even know what’s in your fuckin’ head. You’re ready to sort it out, it’s gonna stay fucked up and I know you can’t get it sorted. I know there isn’t a fuckin’ thing I can do about it. So you want this to end. But tonight is mine. You want to fuck it up further, keep fighting but I’m gonna have you fightin’ or sweet. I don’t care. But Jules, I’m not gonna hurt you, I’d rather it be sweet.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I didn’t say anything. I just stayed silent.

He watched me for a while then he said, “I’d be happy with fightin’ if what happened ten minutes ago is any indication, maybe I’d rather it be sweet.”

dy. His fightin'."

settled I didn't know if he was joking or being serious.

I decided to go with joking.

"Stop joking," I said quietly.

"I wasn't joking."

Okay then, he *wasn't* joking.

That got a belly flutter.

"Well, I've decided to be sweet," I said, just to be contrary.

it again He grinned and his grin was so at the ready it made me wonder
used reverse psychology on me. Then his face came down and disappe
ouldn't my neck and I felt his lips there.

The belly flutter escalated to Grade Two.

ay first. "I've changed my mind," I told the ceiling, "I'm going back to fight
hat's in kid you not, he slid inside me. Slowly, gently, but I could feel he wa
l. Until rock hard.

ough to My breath went out in a rush at the surprise of it and the fact that I
end, it from a Grade Two to a Grade Six in about three seconds.

in' me, "Vance," I said softly, and his lips moved from my neck to my mo
n tellin'

stayed "That's it, beautiful. Every time I slide inside you, I want you to
name," he muttered there.

He'd started moving and I started moving with him.

in' too. "I thought it was every time I came," I whispered, and his hands
er it beon me, a thumb sliding across my nipple as my hands roamed his back

“I want you to say it then too.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I like it.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know why. It doesn’t matter why. I just do.”

That seemed plausible to me.

“Okay,” I said agreeably, my hands going over his ass, and either word or my hands (or both) made him grin again. He kissed me and if he’d moving faster.

When he stopped kissing me and his mouth went to my ear, I said
“You have to get a condom.”

“In a minute.”

“Vance.”

“In a minute.”

I rolled my eyes.

He drove in deep.

When he did, it felt so good I whispered his name low into his ear.

Then I slid my hands in his hair, pulling it back, and I traced the
edges of his ear with my tongue just like he’d done to me last night,
say my liked that too.



AFTER THE SECOND TIME, when it was dark and I was curled into
side, his fingers drawing on my hip, the moonlight coming in from
windows on either side of the fireplace and the one at the back of the

asked him in a whisper, "Were you mad at me when we got here?"

"I wasn't happy to walk in the down room and see Luke on top o
wasn't happy that you ignored me at the party. And I wasn't happy yo
breakin' up with me. So yeah, I was mad at you when we got here."

I went silent because I knew the answer already. I didn't even kno
I asked. I supposed if that was the way he took out his anger it wasn't
bad.

her my
started

The minutes ticked away.

Then I asked, "Why do you have so many books in the living room

l in his,

"I like to read when I'm here," he answered.

"Why don't you get a bookshelf?"

"Don't need one."

I supposed he didn't. Still, he could use one.

For some reason I went on advising him about the décor of his
"You should put new countertops in and refinish the cabinets in the ki
I told him.

"Why?"

"It'll look nicer."

ie outer
and I'd

"It doesn't have to look nice. It needs to keep me dry and warm."

"But it's your home," I said.

"It's just a cabin."

√ance's

Something about that hit me somewhere deep.

the two

room, I Denver, where was home?

If this wasn't what he considered his home and he had no p

I decided not to ask. He wouldn't answer anyway and considering if you were breaking up I had no right to know.

Instead, I said, "I like my space to be special."

His hand went still and he rolled into me.

"Yeah," he said, "I noticed."

all that

I stared at his face in the moonlight, not sure if what he said was good or bad. Considering the way his space was, I decided it was bad.

"You don't like it."

l?"

He looked me in my eyes for a moment then he kissed my forehead.

"I like it," he said softly when he was looking at me again.

I stared at him, memorizing his face when it was like it was beautiful and gentle.

"The moon seems brighter here," I whispered.

is cabin.

"It is." His hand came up and he started to play with my hair.

itchen,"

I pressed in closer to his warm body.

"It's been a weird birthday," I told him, my voice still quiet.

He didn't answer.

I kept silent for a few minutes, then, knowing I should tell him, I decided to tell him and knowing I'd only have the courage in the dark, I said, "I don't know if you saw the roses but they were beautiful."

His arm came tighter around me and fitted me to his body, but he didn't say anything. He just looked at me in the moonlight.

place in

"They were perfect, each one of them. I've never seen anything like them."

He still didn't say anything.

ing we “You should know that everyone was there when I saw them. Ind
Jet, Daisy, Roxie, even Tod and Stevie.”

He kept quiet.

“Daisy said you have class.”

He finally spoke. “I’m not certain how to take that, comin’ from D
good or I smiled at him. “Believe me, she meant it as a compliment.”

The smile was still on my face when his hand came to my jaw, ar
though I couldn’t see it in the dark, I just knew his eyes had change
d. them warm on my face.

Then he kissed me. It was long, slow and sweet. He carefully pu
s now. covers down our bodies. The air in the cabin was no longer bitter col
still hit me.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he rolled over me.

“I’m gonna fuck you in the moonlight.”

“It’s cold,” I told him.

“You’ll get warm.”

He wasn’t wrong.

eeding

‘I don’t

e didn’t

e it.”

“You should know that everyone was there when I saw them. Indy, Ally, Jet, Daisy, Roxie, even Tod and Stevie.”

He kept quiet.

“Daisy said you have class.”

He finally spoke. “I’m not certain how to take that, comin’ from Daisy.”

I smiled at him. “Believe me, she meant it as a compliment.”

The smile was still on my face when his hand came to my jaw, and even though I couldn’t see it in the dark, I just knew his eyes had changed. I felt them warm on my face.

Then he kissed me. It was long, slow and sweet. He carefully pulled the covers down our bodies. The air in the cabin was no longer bitter cold, but it still hit me.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he rolled over me.

“I’m gonna fuck you in the moonlight.”

“It’s cold,” I told him.

“You’ll get warm.”

He wasn’t wrong.

SEVENTEEN



GIVE IT A WEEK, WITH ME

Luke and I walked up to my house after a night of patrol.

Patrol, I decided, was boring as hell.

I'd much rather be pouring canola oil on a Mercedes Benz or th
smoke bombs than driving around town looking for trouble when th
none to be found.

It had been one of the worst days of my life (and I'd had a few), ar
the most boring night.



VANCE HAD WOKEN me up by making love to me, slow, sweet, tak
time. It was a new experience and one that I liked (a lot).

We'd taken a shower, gotten dressed and he drove me to my house

Without a word he walked me to the back stoop, kissed me (als
sweet and taking his time), then he walked back to his bike and roared

Gone. Just like that.

It was done.

I stared at the spot where I last saw him as my stomach twisted ti
my heart squeezed.

Then I went inside and listened to Boo telling me that Nick hadn't

up his wet food with a fork like I normally do.

I picked him up and gave him a cuddle.

“Be quiet, Boo,” I whispered with my cheek pressed to his fur.

Boo was quiet.



I'D SPENT the day waiting for Vance to call, walk into King's, do some Vance-like to invade my space and my life.

Nothing.

May was openly worried about me and talking constantly in her Mrowning Gonna-Make-It-Better voice. May was a love, a good friend and a kind one but no mama in the world would make me feel better.

All the gang phoned me. Roxie phoned twice. They were checking up and offering me everything to keep my mind off Vance. Y and sparkling wine (Tod and Stevie). A movie (Indy and Jet). A c night of debauchery (Ally). A day at the spa (Daisy). And a shopping his (Roxie).

I'd turned them all down and mentally licked my wounds while emotional Rottweiler sat next to me, tongue lolling, tail wagging, happy o slow, I was thinking I needed a new emotional guard dog. Something c off. cuddly with a smushy face that I could carry around in a purse and c ridiculous doggie clothes.

Something like a pug.

ght and The only bright spot had been when I'd called Nightingale Investi and asked to speak to Luke. Without hesitation the guy named Mon answered gave me Luke's cell number.
broken

When I called, Luke answered by saying, “You’re not gettin’ trainin’. I don’t care if he dumped you.”

“He didn’t dump me!” I (kind of) shouted. Then I realized he knew me who was calling. “How do you know my number?” I asked.

“Everybody’s got your number. You’re an unofficial member of the Night Investigation Team.”

Oh. I didn’t know that. An unofficial member of the Night Investigation Team.

That was way cool.

I shrugged off the way coolness of being a member of the team, even though I was unofficial.

“I want to bring Roam and Sniff—” I started.

“Not gonna happen,” Luke interrupted me.

“Luke! I don’t want you to train them. I just want them to come to the office and watch. Maybe they’ll learn something. And they’ll be impressed by the good male role models in the offices. And I want them to hang around good male role models.”

Silence.

“Luke?” I called when the silence stretched.

“Good male role models?” Luke asked.

I could tell by his tone he thought that was funny.

“Can I bring them or what?” I snapped, losing patience.

“Don’t be late.”

I guessed that was a yes.

Roam and Sniff walked into the offices trying to be cool, but I was

out of they couldn't hide it. I knew they were impressed.

I walked into the office, scared to death I'd run into Vance.

it was Dawn smiled at me sweet as pie and informed me Vance was no building.

of the Bitch.

Then Roam and Sniff watched me get my ass kicked by Luke and laughing themselves stupid. I told myself when their eyes weren't closed laughter they probably learned something, so it was worth it.

After training, I took Roam and Sniff out for burgers then back to Shelter. Then I went home to Boo and listened to him complain about constant absence. Mostly I ignored him.

I took a shower, dressed in my take-on-the-night uniform. My burgundy cords, black belt, black cowboy boots, black, stretchy, tight-sleeved tee and black leather blazer. I waited for Vance to break in, but he wasn't going to let me go, like Eddie had done to Jet, and apparently by the way he had done to Roxie, and also Lee had done to Indy.

No Vance.

I told myself this was good. I didn't believe myself and was beginning to think myself was a big, fat moron.

Luke picked me up. We drove around for two hours, doing nothing and saying absolutely nothing (Luke, I found, wasn't a conversationalist). We stopped a couple of times so I could talk to someone and that was it.



is right, AT MY DOOR I pulled my keys out of my pocket.

Luke pulled my keys out of my hand.

“What the...?” I started, but with a Super Dude super-door-unlock in the power he was already pushing open my door.

When he was inside, he turned to my alarm and punched in a code.

“How do you know my code?” I asked, coming in behind him.

l they’d He threw my keys on my chaise and walked into the house.

ed with “Everyone knows your code,” he told me, still walking across the room.

to the I stared at his back.

out my So much for my life going back to normal.

I closed the door, turned on a lamp and followed him. I saw the light on in the kitchen and heard Boo talking to Luke.

ly new Luke was making himself at home and opening a bottle of Fat Tire when I arrived. Boo was asking him who the hell he thought he was a t, long- could he spare a few kitty treats for a poor, abused house cat? say he y Hank

“What are you doing?” I asked as he leaned his hips against the and took a pull off the beer.

ning to “Havin’ a beer,” he answered when he was done swallowing.

mostly “I can see you’re having a beer. *Why* are you having a beer?”

a big “I’m thirsty.”

ne kids Oh for goodness sakes.

“Luke. It’s late. I’m tired. I’ve just been bored out of my mind. even know what patrol *is*. All I know is, so far, fieldwork sucks.”

“Fieldwork is the business.”

“My business is plastic wrap and canola oil,” I told him.

locking- After I was done with my statement he gave me one of his half-gr
I realized what I said sounded like.

“Go home,” I ordered, deciding to get snippy instead of blush.

“If you’re worried Vance can see us on the cameras, don’t. He’s
skip.”

e living With everything that happened, I’d forgotten about the cameras.

I did a mental review of my time in the house without Vance and I
with relief I’d been clothed through all of it and hadn’t done an
embarrassing like dance around singing “Sir Duke” with Stevie Nicks
which I was prone to do.

ight go

I decided to ignore the cameras, for now. “A skip?”

ire beer

“Someone who skipped bond. Vance is in Wyoming.”

nd also

For some strange reason, knowing that and finding out from Luke
deep like a knife to the chest and it hurt like hell.

counter

He pushed away from the counter, index and middle fingers around
neck of the bottle, and walked up to me, like Vance did, overpowering
right in my space.

Then he put the hand not holding the beer to my neck, thumb at my
had no idea what he was up to, but I stood my ground, head-crackin’ in
jamma that I was, no retreat.

I rethought my decision when I looked in his face.

I don’t

This was not badass, Super Dude Luke. His look was gentle, and
was kickass hot normally, gentle would have taken me to a serious
Three belly flutter if I wasn’t hung up on Vance.

“He shouldn’t have fucked a virgin,” Luke said to me.

ins and Oh my *God*.

Any hint of a belly flutter disappeared. Mace had heard the popping discussion and talked.

after a I tried to jerk my head away, but his fingers tightened around the my neck and I felt the warmth of his body as he got closer, way close still not quite touching me with his body.

realized “Nothin’ to be embarrassed about, Jules.” His voice was soft.

nything “Maybe you should go home now,” I suggested, deciding he was Vonder, There was indeed something to be embarrassed about, but I didn’t have this discussion with him, or anyone for that matter.

“It’s sweet as hell and every fuckin’ guy at the office wished they after you and trapped you in that alley after you shot out Cordova Including me.”

slid in Oh...my...*God*.

und the These guys gossiped like a bunch of women.

ing and “I wouldn’t have fucked you and left you, though. No fuckin’ w went on, still talking softly, but sounding like he meant it.

y jaw. I Um.

namma Wow.

I swallowed and straightened my shoulders. “You don’t know you’re talking about.”

id if he “I know Vance.”

; Grade “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I repeated, and he and I wasn’t going to tell him.

He stared at me a beat.

Then he said (luckily deciding to switch topics), “Tomorrow, I’m takin’ you out to dinner then we’re going on patrol.”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday. No training and I’m going to annoy some back of tomorrow night. I haven’t done it in days. I don’t want them—”

ser, but “Training at four. Dinner. Patrol. You need to take a break from dealers,” he interrupted me.

“Luke, I’m not going to stop.”

wrong. “I’m not tellin’ you to stop. I’m tellin’ you to take a break, make want to think Darius negotiated you off the streets. Get some action where you try what you’ve learned. Then you can go back after them.”

’d gone “Luke—”

’s tires. “Give it a week, with me.”

I didn’t know what he was asking and I didn’t want to know, because I was afraid of what he *might* be asking.

He knew what I was thinking. “Just training, just patrol, just ride ay,” he when I’m workin’. Anything else you can think of that doesn’t have with that, I’m open to it.”

I couldn’t help myself. A ride-along while he was working was too to miss.

what Anything that didn’t have to do with that I wasn’t going to think about
“Okay, training and patrol tomorrow...no dinner,” I gave in partial
“Dinner.”

didn’t “No dinner.”

He got closer and my breasts brushed his chest.

training Um.

Yikes.

dealers “Dinner,” he said softly.

Time to retreat.

om the I pulled back. “Training and patrol. If I’m hungry, dinner.”

“You’ll be hungry.”

Whatever.

re them Time to stop talking.
you can

I frowned at him. He gave me a half smile.

Then he touched my nose with his finger and was gone.

I stood in the kitchen and wondered what in the hell just happened.

mainly Then I decided not to wonder. Best to leave it alone and book my flight to Nicaragua first thing in the morning.

e-along I got ready for bed, making certain I did it in the bathroom where
e to do told me there were no cameras (and I hoped he wasn’t lying).

no good I climbed in bed and waited for Vance to break in. Wyoming was
far away, just a few hours. He could make it back in time. From what
he was a good tracker.

out. I tried to stay awake so I could hear him when he came in and be r
ly. give him a piece of my mind before I jumped his bones.

Then, when I dozed, I tried to do it lightly.

Then I fell dead asleep.



I WOKE to the phone ringing.

I didn't open my eyes and did a body scan, feeling for extra h
weight of an arm on me.

Nothing.

I opened my eyes and saw Boo staring at me.

"Meow," Boo said.

I slept on my side in the middle of the bed. Even though it was a
it wouldn't give Vance much room to sleep and not touch me if I wa
middle.

Still, I turned to my back and twisted my head to look.

No one there.

Boo walked onto my chest, sat down and stared at me.

"*Me...ow*," he repeated.

light to

My answering machine clicked on.

Vance

"In a second, Boo," I whispered, waiting for a voice to give a n
and hating myself because I was holding my breath.

n't that

The voice came.

I heard

It wasn't Vance. It was Ally.

eady to

"Girl, wake *up*. We're all doing mimosas and eggs benedict. I
Meeting in an hour. Be prepared, Tod's bringing the Wedding Planne
It might get hairy." She paused. "By the way, 'in an hour' means nine

I listened to her disconnect.

I laid there, stared at the ceiling and stroked Boo. Boo liked breakf
he liked stroking better so he settled in and waited.

I wondered if I could do mimosas and eggs benedict with a ga
eat, the Vance's friends. I wondered how, if I *did* do mimosas and eggs ben
would go back to a normal life. I wondered what the Wedding Planne
was.

I curled my arm around Boo, threw back the covers and Boo and I
the bed.

I got Boo breakfast.
big bed
s in the Then I got ready for Dozens.



AFTER ANOTHER BORING, useless, action-free night of patrol, Luke
walked up to my house.

I told him he could just take off, but he insisted on walking me up
door.

I'd had another shit day. No calls, no space invasions, no nothin
Vance.

I shouldn't be surprised. I *did* break up with him and I wasn't
message
games.

Still, I didn't expect him to give up so easily.



Dozens. I FOUND out at breakfast that Tod had declared himself Indy and
r Book. official wedding planner and thus had created The Wedding Planner
thirty." Indy hadn't actually made this officially official, but was letting Tod
dream.

For some reason though, throughout breakfast, Tod argued with
ast, but (not Indy) about all things wedding. This argument took the form
saying what was going to happen and Roxie saying whatever Tod s:

ggle of going to happen *wasn't* going to happen with a lot of, "We've been
edict, before, Tod."

er Book Indy ignored them and gabbed with the rest of us about her and
plans to go to Lee's cabin in Grand Lake for Thanksgiving, and
slid off something big was going to happen between Tex and Jet's mom (apparently
Tex was Roxie's uncle and that would make Jet and Roxie related
marriage—I was learning this was an incestuous group), and a
discussion about Luke and my conversation last night.

Indy confirmed that all the guys on the team knew about my
popping.

At this news I ordered another mimosa.

p to the "Men think virginity is hot," Ally assured me after I'd given the
my order.

ig from "Maybe for eighteen-year-olds. Not for twenty-six, nearly twenty
year-olds," I told her.

playing "No...um, they just think it's hot," Indy put in. "Even Lee thought
hot."

I stared at her.

"Yeah, Eddie thought it was hot too," Jet shared.

l Lee's I turned my head and my eyes bugged out at Jet. "How does Eddie
Book. He's not even a member of the team."

live the She just looked at Indy and kept her mouth shut.

Lee had told Eddie.

l Roxie These guys.
of Tod

aid was "Hank knows too," Roxie decided to stop arguing with Tod and en

en hereconversation. I actually felt the blood drain from my face when I lo
her. “For the record, he also thinks it’s hot.”

d Lee’s That was it.

whether “I’m moving to Nicaragua,” I announced.

arently “Oh sugar, it ain’t that bad,” Daisy threw in. “Vance thought it was

ated by That was true, Vance thought it was hot—for about a day (okay,
lengthy two).

cherry I caught the waitress and doubled my mimosa order.

“You should know pretty much everyone is pissed at Vance for
you,” Indy said after I finished my bid for a drunken stupor.

waitress “He didn’t leave me. I broke up with him,” I reminded her.

“They don’t look at it that way. They figure if he wanted you, h
-seven- have, you know, talked you out of it,” Indy went on.

I was thinking, deep down inside where I didn’t want to go, the
t it was right.

Any thinking about Vance made my heart hurt so I pushed it aside.

“It’s better this way,” I told them all.

They just stared at me and I knew they didn’t believe me.

know? Whatever.

Time to talk about something else.

I turned to Tod.

“I like tangerine and chocolate for wedding colors,” I lied.

Tod’s eyes got wide and happy.

fter our “Oh shit,” Ally muttered.

oked at “Do not *even* go there,” Roxie warned, eyes narrowing on Tod.

The discussion soon got heated.

I was off the hook.



s hot.” I WENT to training with Luke, and nearly at the end of our hour’s se
maybe dropped him to his back with me on top.

“Yee ha!” I shouted in his face, sitting astride him, chest pressed to

“What do you do now?” Luke asked, hands at my hips, mini half-
leaving his lips.

“I don’t know.” I sat up. “Maybe this?” Then I swung my arms
front of me in a continuous loop and chanted, “Go Jules, go Jules, go J

e could The door opened, my head swung to it in an oh-my-God-not-Vanc
and I saw Mace walking in wearing a white tee with some surfer de
y were the front and black track pants with white stripes up the side. He look
on the floor, face blank like every day he walked into the down room a
a woman astride Luke.

Maybe he did.

Then I was flipped onto my back and Luke was on top.

“Hey!” I snapped. “I was celebrating.”

“Probably you should celebrate after you’ve incapacitated your tar;
told me.

“I was thinking you might want to have a family one day,” I return

He laughed in my face.

I frowned in his.

“Babe, you weren’t even close. Though, you wanna be, I’d give it a

“Stop flirting with me,” I snapped.

“Stop bein’ so cute,” he shot back.

The treadmill came on and both of us looked to it and saw Mace j
ssion, It was then I realized I was lying on the floor with Luke on top of me,
a conversation.

his. Damn.

grin on “Don’t mind me,” Mace said, face no longer blank.

I didn’t know him very well and he normally looked like he was i
out in mood (Mace was Mr. Seriously Broody Hot Guy Badass), but now he
ules.” like he was going to laugh.

panic “You have a big mouth,” I told him, turning my snit on him.

sign on He jacked up the speed on the treadmill and the jog went to a run.
ed at us completely unaffected by my snit.

nd saw “Too good not to share,” was all he said, knowing exactly wha
talking about.

“You’re on my list,” I said to Mace and then looked at Luke. “You

“What list?” Luke asked.

“My Annoying-Men-I’m-Going-To-Kill List.”

get,” he Luke rolled to his side and came up on an elbow. He was flat out
now.

ed. “Why me?” he asked.

“Just because,” I retorted and got to my feet.

I looked at Mace. “If you told Dawn, I’m going to torture you befo

a shot.”you.”

“Dawn doesn’t know,” Mace said, amused look gone.

“Dawn’s not gonna know,” Luke said, on his feet too.

ogging. Well, that was something.

having Luke threw his arm around my shoulders.

“Let’s get a beer,” he said and walked me out of the room.

I didn’t argue, mainly because I could use a beer.



n a bad WE WENT to Lincoln’s Road House for beer and dinner. It would seem
looked had been right, I *was* hungry.

Lincoln’s was a biker bar on a slip road facing I-25. It had great
broken-in feel, hot guys, women wearing chaps, and slick bikes o
He was make, model and color lined up on the side road that flanked the bar.

They had a band so we watched it for a while.

t I was Then we got in a big fight about who was going to pay, because I
if he paid it’d be a date, and Luke figured he was a man with a sig
too.” overabundance of testosterone so he was going to pay no matter wh
wasn’t exactly his argument, more my take on the underlying message

People started staring.

smiling I shut up.

Luke paid.

Then we went on patrol.



re I kill THIS TIME at my door after patrol, keys held firmly and at the r
shouldered up to the door and let myself in.

Before I could claim the doorway and keep him out, Luke shoved with a hand at the small of my back, closed the door behind us and u the alarm.

Then he walked through my living room.

“I’m tired, Luke,” I told his back.

He disappeared into the dark hall.

I sighed and turned on a lamp. I shrugged off my blazer, threw it chaise and followed him into the kitchen.

n Luke The light was on and Boo was telling on me because I’d run out treats and hadn’t been to the grocery store. Luckily, Luke didn’t sp food, a and seemed to have the Super Dude super-power to be totally obliv Boo’s meows.
f every

Luke handed me an opened beer when I walked in and then he set hips against the counter, arms crossed on his chest, lifting his forearm a pull off his beer every once in a while.

figured We didn’t speak.

nificant For my part, this was mainly because the only thing I could think at (this about was whether Vance was back in town or not. And I wasn’t goin). that.

For Luke’s part, on the whole, he didn’t talk much.

Finally Luke spoke. “Tomorrow, you’re off. Monday, I’m work you’re ride-along.”

I nodded, drank some of my beer, settled my hips against the cour looked at my boots.

eady, I I was happy about ride-along. It was something to look forward

I me in future that all of a sudden seemed kind of bleak.

named I never thought about my future. I lived life day-to-day. I thought about everyone else's future—Roam and Sniff, Nick—but not my own.

Luke's boots came into my line of vision and I looked up. He was... He set his beer bottle on the counter beside me, pulled mine out of my hand and put it next to his.

on the Then, before I knew what he was about, his fingers curled around my wrists. He lifted my arms, got deep into my space, wrapped my wrists with his neck and his face started coming toward mine.

of kitty "What are you...?" I started then stopped.

ak Cat His hands slid down the undersides of my arms and a thrill shot through me before (I kid you not) he kissed me.

rious to I felt his hands glide down my sides, around my back low and he pulled his to take me to him.

It was a great kiss. It was a hot kiss. There was a goodly amount of tongue and Luke seriously knew what he was doing.

to talk But it wasn't a Vance kiss.

g to do I participated. I didn't know why. Maybe because I thought it was... but also because it felt really nice.

Luke's head came up and he stared at me.

in' and Then he muttered, "Fuck."

"What?" I asked, keeping my arms around his neck.

ter and He still had his around my back.

"You taste like bubble gum."

to in a

My stomach went into a painful twist and I slid my hands to his chest, putting my arms between us and pushing back a bit. He allowed this, but my arms got tight when he was done allowing it, his message clear. I stopped.

"Vance told me you're playing games," I said to Luke.

"Vance would know about games," Luke said back.

"Please don't talk about him like that," I whispered. "You don't understand what happened."

"I understand."

"You don't."

"Babe."

The way he said that made me shut up.

"I'm thinkin' you should train with Mace from now on," he said.

Um.

Yikes.

What did *that* mean?

I decided I didn't want to know and this was mostly denial because I didn't know.

"I'm thinking that maybe training is a waste of time," I told him. "I'm hardly going to get into hand-to-hand combat with these guys doing gymnastics maneuvers."

"You're on the street you need to be ready for anything."

I rolled my eyes.

Drama.

s chest, “It wasn’t like it was before, Jules. They’re gonna be gunnin’ at me
but hisnow,” he said to my eye roll.

, and I I had to admit he was probably right.

“All right,” I said, giving in.

“You still do ride-along with me.”

“Okay,” I agreed immediately.

i don’t At that, he grinned.

I realized his arms were still around me and my hands were still
chest. I pushed back and he let me go, touched my nose, then he was g

I did the getting ready for bed gig, promised Boo I’d buy him
tomorrow (and mentally added beer to my grocery list) and lay in bed
for Vance to break in.

He didn’t.

The longer I waited, the more my chest got tight, the more I
practice deep breathing in order not to cry.

It was my decision to break up with Vance. I made it. I carried it t
se I *did* It was better for me, I knew it.

The problem was, lying in bed, alone in the moonlight, I didn’t
n. “I’m me anymore.

uerrilla

“It wasn’t like it was before, Jules. They’re gonna be gunnin’ for you now,” he said to my eye roll.

I had to admit he was probably right.

“All right,” I said, giving in.

“You still do ride-along with me.”

“Okay,” I agreed immediately.

At that, he grinned.

I realized his arms were still around me and my hands were still on his chest. I pushed back and he let me go, touched my nose, then he was gone.

I did the getting ready for bed gig, promised Boo I’d buy him treats tomorrow (and mentally added beer to my grocery list) and lay in bed waiting for Vance to break in.

He didn’t.

The longer I waited, the more my chest got tight, the more I had to practice deep breathing in order not to cry.

It was my decision to break up with Vance. I made it. I carried it through. It was better for me, I knew it.

The problem was, lying in bed, alone in the moonlight, I didn’t believe me anymore.

EIGHTEEN



PIZZA, FOOTBALL AND FACIALS

From somewhere far away I heard my phone ringing.

With effort I dragged myself out of a deep sleep to hear the voice of my answering machine message.

“Babe, pick up the phone.”

Luke.

I rolled over, reached up to the high alcove next to the bed and clicked down the phone.

“What?” I said into it.

“Get dressed. We got a takedown. Be there in five.”

Disconnect.

I laid there with my phone to my ear for a second then blinked up at the clock. It was after two in the morning.

Luke had a takedown. That meant they were going after a bad guy and also meant that Luke wanted me to come with them.

I threw back the covers, Boo screeched, “Meow!” and I swung out of bed.



IT WAS Sunday night (Monday morning, really) and I’d had a day of no

It was another shit day, post-Vance.

Still no word, no sign, nothing.

I'd woken up that morning after the Luke Kiss, dragged myself
bed, dragged on my clothes and dragged my ass to the grocery store to
treats and the makings for quesadillas.

I had no idea what was in a quesadilla or how to make one, but I g
I bought a bunch of other stuff too.

While rolling my cart through the grocery store I decided to learn
ce aftercook. I was going to take a new lease on life. I was going to be th
Jules. I was going to learn to cook. I was going to be a better mama to
might even learn to knit. I was going to be a domestic goddess, supe
worker by day and a drug dealer ass-kicker by night. I was going to fi
second with new, golden opportunities. I was going to take on the l
dragged make my cat the happiest cat on the planet, buy myself some knitting
and then take on the world.

On the way home, I stopped by the liquor store and bought more F

I went home and gave Boo enough kitty treats to send him into
treat coma. He got all purry and then flopped down in a sunbeam
p at thechaise lounge and didn't move for hours.

I was cleaning the house and baking brownies from a box (starting
y. Thatwhen a knock came at the door.

It was Daisy.

off the It wasn't just Daisy. It was Daisy carrying an overnight bag.

"Are you moving in?" I asked, staring at the bag.

rest. "Home facial!" she shouted.

She shoved me aside and walked in.

She dumped the overnight bag down on my couch and started to pull out jars, bottles, towels, sprays and all sorts of stuff.

“Put on a camisole, I’m doin’ the neck too,” she ordered.

“Daisy, I’m in the middle of cleaning the house.”

“You can clean the house any ole time. Now’s a special time. *facial time.*”

“I’ve never had a facial,” I told her.

Her head snapped up from looking at the bag and her eyes buggered me.

“Never had a facial?” she asked, like I said I’d never breathed outside of my little bubble room.

I shook my head.

She snapped at me with her fingers. “Camisole. Now.”

I put away the window cleaner and put on a camisole.

I was lying on my couch, a big pillow from my bed under my head on the shoulders, a towel draped over the pillow, mud-colored gunk smudged over my neck and face, cotton wipes doused in lavender water on my lap when there was another knock on the door.

I sat up and the cotton wipes fell into my lap. Daisy was sitting in the armchair, foot on my pub set, painting her toenails. I was supposed to be relaxing and letting the facemask dry.

“Get that, will you, sugar? I’m wet,” Daisy said, not looking up.

I rolled off the couch and tossed the wipes on a towel on the pu... I walked across the room and opened the door.

“Fuckin’ A, Law. What’s all over your face?”

pull out Tex was standing at my door.

I stared at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Came by with these,” he replied, indicating an old, beat-up work he was carrying and he shoved inside. “Yo, Daisy,” he called to Daisy.

Now’s “Yo, Tex,” Daisy called back then she stuck her tongue to the side mouth and concentrated on her toenails again.

“What’s this?” I asked as Tex dumped the workout bag by the chair d out at “Teargas. You don’t have to use ’em, but they ain’t goin’ nowhere place. Thought I’d drop ’em by, just in case. What’s that smell? Some oxygen burnin’?”

Damn.

“My brownies!” I yelled and ran to the kitchen.

The brownies were burned to a crisp. Total disaster. I set them stovetop and walked back into the living room.

head and Tex was lying on the chaise stroking Boo, who was lying smack lged all middle of Tex’s big, barrel chest. They both looked like they were g y eyes, stay a while.

“You got a cat,” he told me like I didn’t know.

; in my “That’s Boo.”

d to be “Hey, Boo,” Tex said to Boo.

Boo purred.

“You ever need a cat sitter, call me. I got a business on the side b set. I offered.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I told him, thinking it was a bit strange Tex
cat sitter on the side. But then again, he’d just dumped a bag full of tea
my living room. Pretty much everything about Tex was strange. “I’m
on vacation,” I went on.

out bag

“Vance’ll take care of that. Indy and Lee are goin’ to Grand L
Thanksgivin’. Jet and Eddie are goin’ to Cabo for Christmas. And Ha
e of her Roxie are goin’ to St. Thomas in January.”

se.
“Vance and Jules broke up,” Daisy put in.

Tex made a noise that sounded like “puh” then he said, “That’ll la
e at my a minute.”
methin’

“She broke up with him two days ago. They’re over,” Daisy shared
Tex’s big head swung to me.

“Over?” he asked, like the concept of two people ending a relat
was foreign to him.

on the

I nodded.

κ in the
“Shee-it,” he muttered.

going to
There came another knock on my door.

“What now?” I mumbled as I walked to it and opened it.

“Fuck,” Roam said, standing outside next to Sniff.

They were both staring at me.

“Don’t say fuck,” I told him. “What are you doing here? You okay

“Yeah, what’s on your face?” Sniff asked.

e,” Tex
“A facemask,” I answered.

Both of them kept staring at me. I knew it hurt my street cred, T

x was a walking around in a facemask.

argas in “It’s important to take care of your skin,” I defended myself.

ever go They blinked.

ake for “Crowe around?” Roam asked. The first to get over the severe l
my reputation, he was looking past me.

ink and “They fuckin’ broke up,” Tex boomed from the chaise.

Roam and Sniff stared at me again. Sniff looked disappointed. I
face went hard. I knew what he was thinking.

st, like, “Roam, it isn’t...” I started.

l. “Get in here boys, we’re orderin’ pizza,” Daisy called over me.

“We are?” I asked when I’d turned to Daisy.

ionship “Sure. Pizza, football and facials. What else do you do on a Sunday

Roam and Sniff pushed in.

Daisy stood up, twisting the top back onto the nail polish. “Time
off the mud. Lay down, sugar. You, Sniff, go wet this cloth, hot water.
you can get it,” Daisy ordered Sniff and threw him a pale-pink washclo

Sniff stood staring at the cloth a second then, without a word
miracle), he walked down the hall.

I lay down. Roam turned on the TV.

Thirty minutes later, slathered with face lotion and glistenin
?” shoulders to hairline, facial done, enough pizza on the pub set to
army, the boxes sitting next to the jars and bottles of the facial debris,
knock came at the door.

he Law Daisy, Tex, Roam and Sniff were all watching the game. I walked

door.

It was Heavy and Zip.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked.

Slow to “Came to see if you’re still alive,” Zip replied, pushing in.

“That the Broncos game?” Heavy asked, pushing in too and staring at the TV.

Roam’s “Naw, Broncos don’t start until three,” Tex answered.

“You want pizza?” Daisy asked.

“Fuck yeah,” Heavy replied, already sitting on the couch and reaching for a slice.

I stood by the door staring at my ever-growing company and wondering how this had happened.

I wanted a quiet day. I wanted to learn how to cook. I wanted to spend the afternoon at a hobby shop perusing skeins of wool.

Hot as “Crowe here?” Zip asked.

“They broke up,” Sniff informed him, eyes never leaving the game.

(small Zip hadn’t moved into the room. He was still standing by me at the door and his eyes turned to me.

“Girl, I told you,” he said.

g from “I don’t want to hear it, Zip,” I replied in a soft voice.

feed an He stared at me a moment then he looked to the floor and shook his head. To my surprise, when he looked up again he also lifted a hand and patted my shoulder. Then he got himself a slice of pizza and a seat on the couch.

l to the Heavy wasn’t watching the game. He was looking over the back of the couch.

couch at me.

“I don’t want it from you either, Heavy,” I told him.

He watched me a beat, nodded slowly once then looked back at the

My cell phone rang. It was Ally telling me that she was coming ov

g at the “Bring beer,” I said to her and stared at my living room. “Lots of it

“Gotcha,” she replied.

“And some pop, Roam and Sniff are here.”

“No problem.”

ing for “Indy, Jet and Roxie coming?” I asked.

“Negative, sister. They’re spending the day with their men.”

ndering I felt a stomach twist.

“See you in ten,” she said in my ear.

end the I flipped the phone shut, beginning to get good at ignoring the s
twist, and I sat on the floor beside Heavy.

He pulled at a lock of my hair. I looked up at him. He winked at m

My stomach twist felt a little better at the wink, but my eyes got bl

he door Then a knock came from the back door.

“Jules?” Nick called from there.

“We’re in the living room,” I called back.



is head. I SWUNG into the black Explorer next to Luke.

tted me Luke stared at me.

couch. “Ready,” I informed him, buckling in.

k of the

“You wearin’ purple pants to a takedown?” he asked, eyes on my t

I looked down at my cords. They weren’t purple, as such. The
TV. more like a lavender-ish gray. I also had on my black cowboy boots,
er. belt, a dusty gray, thick knit, long-sleeved tee with a hood and my
..” leather blazer. The hood of my tee was over the back collar of my blaz

I thought my outfit was kickass, especially putting it together after
the morning with only five minutes to do it.

One look at Luke said he didn’t agree.

“Just drive,” I said.

He drove, but he drove with a grin on his face.

We went to the old Stapleton airport area. Not the ritzy part that ha
redone, the shitty part that hadn’t.

“What’s the deal?” I asked on the way.

tomach “Skip. High bond, means the bondsman’s out a whack if we do
him in. Name’s Warren. Total scum. He’s a dealer and a pimp. M
e. second, keeps his girls high and workin’ for him doin’ the first. Yo
urry. him?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“I got a Taser for you,” Luke told me. “Please tell me you got yo
somewhere in those purple pants.”

I pulled it out of my back waistband and showed it to him.

“You need a holster,” he said to me.

I nodded, thinking of going shopping at Zip’s tomorrow night. A
would be dead cool.

“Ike’s on him. Says he went into a house and hasn’t come out.

highlights. backup. Warren's a mean motherfucker and usually not far from his gun. My eyes were closed. I nodded again, rethinking my excitement at a ride-along for a take-a-black-eye. We stopped in a not-so-good neighborhood. The second Luke yanked the blacklights, my door was thrown open. I jumped and twisted in my seat. "Calm, Law," the man said, and since Luke didn't shoot him or anyone else, I figured he was one of the good guys.

He was Vance's height. Bald, lean and wiry, and from what I could see in the dark, black with light skin. He had a killer tattoo slithering up his arm from the collar of his black tee.

"I like your tattoo," I told him.

"You haven't seen it all yet," he told me.

He'd said "yet."

Hmm.

"Do all of you guys flirt rather than just talking like normal people?" I asked who I assumed was Ike.

"Mace doesn't flirt," Ike told me, stepping out of my way so I could get down.

"I don't flirt either," Luke added coming around the back of the E-1, attaching a fully loaded gun belt to his hips.

I whirled on Luke. "You're the King of Flirt! You flirt all the time."

Luke's eyes sliced to me. I could feel them hot on me in the dark.

"Maybe you wanna call Warren. Tell him we're waitin' out here for him to get his ass kicked. Give him a good chance to load up his gun so he can blow your brains out?" Luke asked after my outburst.

Called

in.” Okay, so maybe I was a bit loud.

down. “Sorry,” I whispered.

cut his I looked at Ike. Ike was smiling.

Damn.

nything I was screwing up my first takedown.

“He’s got a couple women in there and Barry White’s playin’. He
d tell in hear a thing,” Ike informed us.

is neck Ike and Luke looked at each other. All of a sudden they seemed
about something.

Luke’s eyes cut back to me.

“Keep quiet and stay behind me,” he ordered. I nodded and he handed
a Taser. “We try for alive when we’re bringin’ ’em in. Dead is a last
Luke went on.

ople?” I Yikes.

I nodded again. Then we moved in.

uld get As we approached a house a couple doors down from where Luke
Ike disappeared, vanishing into the night. Luke walked right up to the
explorer, bold as brass and something about the way he did it was way fucking cool.

I could hear Barry White crooning inside the house.

” Luke shoved me to one side of the door. I had my gun stuck in my
waistband at my left hip and the Taser in my hand.

to take Luke pounded on the door and shouted, “Bond enforcement.”

ow our After waiting about three seconds, Luke put the sole of a boot to the
by the handle and it popped open. He disappeared inside. I followed him

It was dark and I could barely see, but Luke moved through the hotel hallway. He'd been there hundreds of times before. I kept my eyes on his back as he moved behind him.

There was dim light coming from a hallway, the source of Barry's flashlight. We went down the hallway and into a room lit with candles and lamp shades. Scarves were draped over them. Luke stopped just inside the door, silent, still, watching.

I moved to his left to look.

"Euw!"

Yes, that was me, and I said it loudly. I couldn't help it. On the bed were two skanky, skinny women. So skinny, their ribs showed. Both were washing their hair in a *major* way. They were naked and working on a fat, hairy, naked white guy. Hairy as in *hairy*. He was covered in hair. "Point that you could call it fur."

The inhabitants of the bed ceased their writhing and groaning, stopped kissing and looked up at us.

"Bond enforcement," Luke announced, but I could tell, even though my eyes were riveted to the bed in frozen horror, that Luke was laughing.

Before I knew what was happening, the big, hairy, *naked* white guy moved. He was fast for a big man and he came off the bed like a shot.

At me.

I didn't have time to blink. I just lifted up my Taser and shot him.

He immediately went down with a thud and I was pretty certain that the furniture in the room jumped when he landed.

Wow.

I added a Taser to my mental Zip's Gun Emporium shopping list.

use like Breaking into my mental list-making, one of the naked skanks shocked and me, “What the fuck you doin’? You can’t come in here and Taser me! Who the fuck you think you are?”

White. Then *she* came at me, body parts jiggling, lanky hair flying.
ps with My Taser prongs were in Warren so I dropped it. She gave me the opening as Jermaine had done, ready to scratch my eyes out. I grabbed her wrist, flipped her and she landed on her back. I heard her breath escape whoosh when she hit the floor.

ed were “*Aiiiyeeee!*” the other skank screamed, coming at me too.
eded to I hadn’t recovered from the first skank. So I planted my feet, dropped my shoulder when she got close and rolled her over my back. She flew off to the arms and legs pumping and landed on the floor.

 I pulled my gun out of my waistband and trained it on them two-ha sucking “Don’t move,” I ordered.

 They stared, eyes wide, at my gun.
ugh my I glared back. “Stupid skanks,” I muttered under my breath.

 I felt a presence beside me and I looked over at Luke.
ite guy His eyes were on the skanks. Then he looked at me and a slow spread on his face.

 “Babe,” was all he said.

 Ike moved in on my other side. He was looking at the skanks’ most of prone body of Warren. Then his eyes moved to Luke.

 “Lee’s recruitin’. Should we get her an application?”



LUKE TOLD the skanks to dress Warren, and without a word they did

outed at Warren. Explorer and Ike took him to the station.

Luke and I went to my house. I let us in.

My blood was still pumping at my triple takedown. I wanted to be the same about it, but I was pretty fucking pleased with myself.

I switched on a lamp, dumped my blazer on the chaise and sniped her in a Luke.

“Want a beer?” I asked brightly.

He watched me.

“Jazzed?” he asked, one side of his mouth going up in his sexy grin. I nodded.

His eyes cut to the ratty workout bag that was still where Tex dropped it, incongruous in my fancy-ass living room.

“Teargas,” I answered his unspoken question.

Luke looked at me again then he shook his head.

“The smell?” Luke asked when he was done shaking his head.

“Burned brownies. I’m trying to teach myself to be domesticated.”
“Smells like you’re failing.”

I shrugged, still smiling at him.

He kept looking at me.

“Beer?” I offered.

Slowly, eyes still on me, Luke’s grin faded.

“I don’t want a beer,” he said.

“Coffee?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

in Ike's "No," he replied.

Something had changed in the room. The air had started crackling.

Before I could put my finger on it or do anything to disburse it, Luke be coolso in my space he was my space, arms around me, mouth on mine, me.

Smiled at Instinctively I put my arms around his neck. He walked me back moving up my sides, across my back, over my ass, all this time his to my mouth. I felt my thighs hit the arm of the couch and we both we and down, Luke controlling the fall with an arm out. Then his body se mine.

1. My heart was pumping with adrenaline and excitement, both night's activities and the couch activities.

pped it, He was good with his mouth. Different than Vance, less intense titillating, almost teasing. His lips were always there, but his tongue playing with mine, giving me a taste of something hot then disappearing when I wanted more, making me go after it. Eventually his mouth disengaged from mine and went down my neck and his hands went up my back. I shivered and returned the gesture, liking the feel of the skin and muscle back.

His tongue was doing things behind my ear that felt good and I wanted it, wanted him.

And then just as quickly as I realized that, I *didn't* want it.

Then, I kid you not, I started crying for the first time since Auntie died. I couldn't have helped it if I tried, but I didn't even try. I was just tired of holding them back.

I turned my head, put my lips to his neck and said quietly, "Luke."

At the sound of his name, his tongue stopped and he turned his
look at me. He watched me for a few seconds while the tears slid down
sides of my eyes.

Then he said, his voice soft and not angry, "Not normally the rea
get, babe."

My hands left the inside of his tee and one arm wrapped around hi
the other hand went to the back of his head.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

He didn't answer. He rolled to the side, back to the couch, and pu
up so we were full on the couch. He kept his arms around me and I
my cheek to his chest. I took deep breaths and after a few minutes co
the tears.

Once I'd done that, I tilted my head back to look at him.

"You want a beer?" I asked, voice still quiet.

He used his thumb to wipe the tears from my face, and when he w
he kissed my nose.

Then he answered, "Yeah."

I nodded, pulled away, got up and got us both a beer.

When I walked back into the living room, the TV was on. The sou
some action movie with explosions was playing. I gave him the b
down beside him and yanked off my boots. When I settled back i
couch, he pulled me into his body, arm around my shoulders.

Boo jumped up and I lifted my legs to the couch and curled into
warmth, head on his shoulder. Boo settled in the space between u
stroked him.

head to I wasn't afraid I was giving mixed messages. Instinctively I understood that Luke knew the score, knew I needed not to be alone and was offering that and nothing else.

action I It was kind. It was huge. It was as un-badass as it could get and then even more badass than ever.

s waist, I'd never forget it and I'd always be thankful for it.

I drank my beer. Luke drank his. I put the empty bottle on the pub table and watched the movie.

illed us Then I fell asleep cuddled into Luke.

pressed



ntrolled "BABE," Luke said low.

I opened my eyes and looked up.

He'd reclined on the couch and I was tucked into his side, my back against the couch, my head on his chest.

as done "Bed," Luke said.

I nodded.

We got up and he walked to the door taking me with him, arm around my shoulders. He stopped at the door, kissed my nose and looked at me and then bit my lip.

eer, sat "Jules," he said.

nto the "Yeah?" I answered.

He stared at me a moment before answering.

Luke's "I was playin' a game," he told me.

s and I

It was my turn to stare at him. Somehow that hurt and I didn't ne

erstood more of that. I had way, way too much of that.

ring me “Now,” he went on, “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doin’.”

Oh my *God*.

erefore Neither of us said anything. There wasn’t anything to say.

Then without another word he was gone.

I locked the door behind him, armed the alarm and got ready for
set and the bathroom.

I settled in bed, Boo curled into the small of my back.

I felt sadness seep through me, no anticipation, no hope. I knew
wasn’t breaking in.

I worried about Luke and me. I liked him. He was cool and he was
and in an alternate universe I knew something would have happened.

y back It couldn’t, not now.

I was in love with Vance.

How did *that* happen?

I lay in bed knowing I was hugely fucked. Somehow my life had
und my totally out of control.

beat. I The Fortnum’s gang of Rock Chicks had adopted me. The Night
Investigation Team had accepted me. Luke wanted me. And all of that
Vance tied up in it and that hurt me.

I definitely needed to round up Roam and Sniff and get my
Nicaragua.

I pulled a pillow to my stomach, hugged it close and tilted my head
stare at the moonlight.

With effort I forced my mind to still.

Then I fell asleep.

bed in

Vance

funny,

id gone

tingale

his had

ass to

head to

With effort I forced my mind to still.

Then I fell asleep.

NINETEEN



HUSH

I was certain I was awake, though I hadn't opened my eyes, and I knew I was having a sleepy body scan that I couldn't be.

There was heat at my back and a weight on my hip. It was full-on definitely not Boo. I snuggled backwards into it, figuring if I was going to have a good dream, I was going to go for the gusto.

The weight at my hip moved, slid up to my waist then down, around my belly. The heat behind me was solid. Both I knew were no

My eyes opened.

Then I turned.

Vance was in bed with me.

He was awake, *very* awake, and staring at me, face blank.

I was also now *very* awake and staring at him, face probably not blank.

My heart had stopped. I felt something crawling through my veins, something weird, good mingled with bad.

Fear and hope.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered.

I had turned within his arm. It was still around my waist, hand cur

my hip against the bed. When I asked my question, his fingers bit into
as they tightened.

“Had duty in the surveillance room last night,” was Vance’s my:
answer.

I blinked at him.

Then I remembered.

Oh my *God*.

ew with The cameras.

How in *the hell* was I always forgetting the cameras?

on heat, “Crowe—” I started, my heart beating now, double time.

oing to “I did *not* like what I saw,” Vance interrupted me, his voice und
his words, and a shiver slithered across my skin at his tone.

curling “Crowe—” I began again.

dream.

“He touches you again, there’s gonna be a problem.” The tone
voice, if it could be believed, was deteriorating, and I got the
impression there already *was* a problem.

Um.

Yikes.

ank. “Crowe—” I tried again.

system, “I want to know you understand me,” Vance kept going.

“Crowe—”

“Do you understand me?” he asked. He sounded supremely pis
now and edging toward impatient.

led into “Please listen to me—” I started.

my hip “None of it. Watchin’ TV together. You curled up to him on the
and definitely not his tongue in your fuckin’ mouth and his hands u
sterious fuckin’ shirt.” His voice was getting dangerous, or I should say
dangerous, and his face was no longer blank.

“If you’d just—”

“Jules, do you fucking understand me?”

He was keeping his control, but I could tell just barely. I could t
because his eyes had gone hard and his mouth had gone tight.

That was it.

I sat up and shouted, “Shut *up*, Crowe!”

erlining He came up with me, face like thunder, eyes flashing, and I knew
ready to blow.

One look at his face and I thought fuck it.

of his It was now or never.

distinct I stood next to my barking, snarling Rottweiler, ripped the plasti
big, huge, juicy steak with a thick, meaty bone in and threw it to h
nabbed it in midair, settled down and started gnawing.

Then I pounced.

And finally I surprised Vance Ouray Crowe.

In the beginning he thought I was going to fight him.

Couldn’t really fight someone with your tongue in his mouth.

sed off Well, you could, but it wasn’t my style.

I was all over him. My hands were all over him. My mouth was :
him.

the couch He was naked, which, if I wasn't in desperation mode to get him
up yourup and pay attention to me, I would have thought was kind of
y moreconsidering the fact that we were over.

Instead, I thought it was good. A time saver.

When he realized I wasn't attacking him, his arms went around me
force that squeezed my breath out of me, and that was it.

tell this It was hot, heavy, lots of everything like we hadn't seen each other
three years rather than three days. I got astride him and lifted up, pulling
nightie over my head while he watched. When I was done, he rolled over
and tore off my underwear.

he was Then we went back at it.

Within minutes I was at Grade Nine.

"I want you inside me," I said breathlessly in his ear.

He started to pull away.

ic off a "Where are you going?" I was no longer breathless but sounding like
im. He a little bit shrill.

"Condom," was all he said.

Oh.

That.

I yanked him to me and rolled on my back, opening my legs and he
slid between them. "In a minute," I said.

"Jules—"

all over "In a minute."

His head came up and he looked at me, hair around his shoulders,

to shut beautiful as ever.

brazen, I could swear I saw a hint of a grin before his face disappeared neck.

Then he slid inside.

with a



AFTER WE WERE DONE, and once Vance had come back to me after getting in the bathroom and dealing with the condom, which he did finally using my showed me how to put it on (which gave a new dimension to birth control that I liked very much, and I got the impression that he liked even better laid in his arms.

We were side-by-side, my face tucked into his throat.

I had no ridiculous thoughts about my wardrobe or summer camp because my Rottweiler had looked up from his bone and had begun to growl.

Hush, I whispered.

My Rottie cocked his head, whined a bit then went back to his bone and

Through my mental turmoil Vance was silent.

I was wondering about his mood.

Okay, I was worried about his mood.

Okay, I was scared to death about his mood.

his hips “I need to go to work,” I whispered against his throat.

The fear and hope were back. The longer he stayed silent the more fear was winning.

Vance’s arms went loose and he moved a bit away.

, just as The fear took further hold. I couldn’t remember a time when Vance easily let me go.

I looked at him and couldn't read his face.

I in my Damn it all to hell.

"You going to work?" I asked in an effort to force him to speak.

"Been up all night. I'll go to the down room and crash."

I kept watching him, but my throat was beginning to feel funny. I was going to close up on me.

I knew how important what just happened was to me. I didn't know Vance was thinking, and from the look of him it wasn't good. Wasn't it in wasn't anything, which was definitely not good.

"Okay," I said, and it sounded kind of croaky.

I sat up, taking the sheet with me and holding it to my chest. I moved, getting ready to exit the bed.

I grabbed his hand. Do not ask me why, but I did. He stilled and looked at me.

And before I could stop myself I whispered, "You can crash here."

Vance didn't speak.

"You can shower here too," I went on quickly so as not to arouse Rottie.

He kept looking at me.

My jaw started hurting with the effort to keep the fear and the shame away.

"Whenever you want," I said. "Crash, I mean. And...um, shower."

I thought what I just said was huge.

Vance gave me nothing.

“I’ll give you a key,” I told him, the last ditch effort to get m
across.

That was super-huge.

More nothing from Vance.

, like it Not...one...thing.

That was when I nodded.

w what There you had it.

good as The fear changed from being scared of not getting Vance back t
my life would mean knowing I couldn’t have him back.

Time to move on.

Vance I’d deal with it later. A lot later. When I was making quesadilla
pro while wearing a sweater I knitted for myself in Nicaragua.

oked at “Okay,” I said, my voice sounded higher and I let go of his han
gonna get ready for work.”

I moved toward the end of the bed, but his arm came around my be
he threw me back against the pillows and settled his body on top of mi
use my breath went out of me at his movements and I stared at him with wide

“Was it that hard?” he asked, looking down at me, face still show
nothing.

tears at I could no longer speak so I shook my head, nonverbally lying.

It had been harder than hell.

“I don’t need a key,” he said.

I blinked, not sure how to take that.

“You don’t?” I asked, finding my voice.

y point He shook his head. “Though it’d be easier than breakin’ in all the
he told me.

I felt relief start invading, washing away the fear.

“Probably,” I whispered, still a little scared because he was still
blank, not intense or a different kind of intense, but not giving me any
go on.

“Do you understand about Luke?” he asked.

to what I nodded.

He got closer, his face got closer, his body pressing me deeper i
bed. “Then we’ll make sure you understand it all.”

s like a Uh-oh.

I didn’t like the sound of that.

d. “I’m I didn’t share this and just watched him and waited.

“You’re mine, Jules. That means no one puts their hands on you
ally and one puts their mouth on you. I almost came out of my skin watchin’ t
ine. My night. You’re with me and that means we’re exclusive. I do not share.
eyes. means no one touches you. Not again. You got me?”

ring me I nodded. I couldn’t imagine what I’d do if I saw him that wa
another woman, but I was a head-crackin’ mamma jamma. I probably
have lost my mind. A macho man badass was even worse.

I decided not to say anything. It was bad enough and saying sor
would likely just dig my hole deeper. I knew I was already skating
ice. I sure as hell wasn’t going to go under, not again.

It was cold down there, freezing.

“You got your head straight?” he asked, breaking into my icy rever

...time,” I nodded again, though I was a little confused at his question.

He kept talking. “We’re not playin’ this fuckin’ game. You try and take me away, I’m takin’ you to the cabin and chainin’ you to the bed until I being got your head sorted once and for all. What we have genuinely doesn’t like it’s gonna work, we’ll talk it through and come to an understanding when it’s good and you get freaked, you aren’t makin’ the decision for us because you’re scared out of your mind and don’t have the guts about it.”

Wow.

I knew Vance was a straight-talker, but, um...yikes.

I thought it was time to cut in. “Vance—”

“I’m talkin’ now.”

At his tone I shut up.

Definitely not the time to cut in.

“You lie in bed in the moonlight when you think it doesn’t count as a Which let me in. I’m tellin’ you now...it counts, Jules.”

I kept silent.

Vance kept talking.

“I don’t want you sweet after I’ve made you come and you don’t have your guard up. I want you sweet all the time. You don’t start trusting anything the daylight this isn’t gonna work.”

I stayed silent.

“You go out into the night makin’ trouble, fearless. With everything that means something in your life, you’re shit scared. You’re gonna find a way to get the fuck over it.”

I pulled my lips in and bit them to stay quiet.

and push He was right and that was so annoying.

until you “You’re mine,” he repeated like I didn’t get it the first time.

’t seem I let my lips go and said, “Okay.”

ng. But He stared at me.

or both “Can I say something now?” I asked when he seemed to be finished.

to talk “Just don’t piss me off,” he warned.

Like I’d do *that*, especially at this juncture.

I waited a beat then took in a breath, and then did something that made my Rottweiler go berserk.

I ignored my Rottie. It took all I had but I did it.

“I know it counts,” I whispered.

Vance didn’t move, didn’t speak, didn’t do anything.

and you Then, drool flying everywhere in white globs, jumping up and tearing free from his chains, my Rottweiler came at me and I ran like a woman, taking my life in my hands. I passed him, threw open the door, chain link fenced box and ran inside. I slammed the door closed behind me and locked it, keeping my Rottweiler at bay.

’t have Then I ran my hands up Vance’s back, stopping when I felt his skin. To make my point, I left my fingers there.

“You’re right, you scare the hell out of me,” I said it so low I was sure he heard it.

ing else I didn’t have to wonder long. He heard it and he understood it.

have to He rolled to his side and took me with him, arms going around me.

He didn't need to say anything because that was enough.

I put my face in his throat again.

"I need a boyfriend with a safe job. Like checkout guy at King So
I told Vance's throat.

He stayed silent.

d. "The worst thing that could happen is he'd fall off his rolling stool
the cash register. Maybe hit his head or something. Sprain a wrist."

Vance still didn't speak.

at made "They have good benefits there, I heard. Great insurance."

More silence.

"That could be a rumor though," I muttered to myself since Var
obviously not listening.

"Jules."

down,
e a mad "What?"

r to the He pulled my hair with a gentle tug and I looked up at him. His eyes
ind me soft and sexy when I looked into them, and when he spoke his deep
was silk.

"Shut up."

car and Looking at him, the fear moved out of me and I melted into him b
one look at him I just *knew* and the clouds over my life parted and I
n't sure warmth of sunshine.

"Don't tell me to shut up," I whispered.

ie tight. That was when he gave me one of his grins and I knew I wa
Everything was going to be fine. Then he kissed me—slow, sweet, lo

we had all day—and I knew everything was *really* fine.

When he was done, there were no clouds in the sky. None at all.

oper's," Just sunshine.

"I'm sorry about last night," I said quietly, because I had to.

"You need to talk to Luke," he told me.

behind I nodded. He was right. I needed to talk to Luke. I didn't want to
sure as hell needed to.

"Are you two gonna be okay?" I asked.

"He keeps his distance, yeah. He keeps at this game, no."

Hmm.

ice was That didn't sound good. That sounded like I was Yoko Ono
Nightingale Investigation Team's Beatles. I didn't want to be the wom
fucked up the band.

es were "I'll talk to him," I said, then went for another, much safer topic (a
p voice thought it was safer, but I was very, very wrong). "How long have yo
here?"

"About an hour. The minute Bobby walked in, I took off."

"Why didn't you wake me when you got here?" I asked.

ecause, "I was pissed. I needed to calm down before I talked to you."

felt the "You could calm down lying naked in bed with me?" I que
disbelief.

s right. "Lots of ways to work through anger, Jules, and I'm learnin' tha
the way *you* work through it a lot."

ng, like I blinked at him. Then I remembered the grin I thought I saw be

slid inside me.

“You knew we were going to have sex,” I breathed as the realization hit me.

I caught the grin this time, full on.

My body tensed and my blood started pumping through my veins.

“How could you know we were going to have sex? We were broken up, but I shouted, trying to pull away, but his arms got tight and his brow furrowed together.

“We weren’t broken up. I was givin’ you time to get your head straight,” he said.

Um.

to the
an who
What?

“We were broken up,” I repeated.

“We weren’t,” he repeated right back at me.

“We most certainly were,” I snapped.

“Jules, for fuck’s sake, you don’t kiss a woman that you’ve broken up with good-bye.”

This gave me pause for reflection because it made sense.

Still.

Before I could say anything he went on, “At the cabin, we made up our minds.”

“At the cabin, we were saying good-bye.”

He stared at me for a beat then his brows unknitted and he started laughing.

before he *Laughing!*

I yanked back and gained some space.

tion hit He yanked me forward and took it away.

“This isn’t funny, Crowe,” I snapped.

“You think you fuck four times to say good-bye?” he asked with
laughter.

en up!” This gave me pause for reflection too, because I had to admit it s
s drew pretty ridiculous.

I didn’t tell him that.

sorted,” I tried a different tactic. “Why didn’t you call me if we we
together?”

“Hard to give you space and call you.”

Then something else hit me and my eyes narrowed. “You thought
Luke kiss me when you and I were together?”

“You let Luke kiss you *and* put his hands up your shirt,” Vance co
me.

ken up “Whatever,” I said.

His eyes flashed. “Not whatever.”

“I thought we were broken up.” Now my voice was louder.

.” “I know that *now*. I thought you were workin’ through
).” experimenting.”

Oh my *God*.

started He did *not* just say that.

“Experimenting?” My voice was no longer loud. It was quiet, s
seriously pissed off.

I'd just gone through all sorts of hell, nearly got emotionally checked out by my Rottweiler, and through all that, he thought we were still together and he was just giving me space. Not only that, he thought I was the woman who'd "experiment" with another guy.

through

I took a deep breath to calm myself.

ounded

Then...

I lost my mind.

re still

I pulled out of his arms and sat up, wrapping the sheet around myself, twisting toward him.

"I'm not fifteen years old, Vance, experimenting with every hot guy who comes along! Why didn't you tell me you were giving me space?"

t I'd let

He came up after me and twisted to face me.

"Calm down, Jules," he ordered.

orrected

"Fuck calm and answer me."

"Jules—"

I forgot I demanded an answer and kept ranting, so in a snit that I couldn't think about what I said.

h shit,

"I've been *freaking out* for three days. I thought I'd broken up with you, and you'd *let* me. I thought we were over and you weren't going to get me back. Everyone thinks it!" I yelled.

His arms came around me, pulled me to him and I pulled back, but he tussled. This, of course, ended with me flat on my back, head on the pillow, and Vance's body pinning mine to the bed.

oft and

"Get off me!" I shouted in his face.

"Quiet, Jules, and listen to me."

owed to “I don’t want to listen to you,” I snapped.

ogether His eyes flashed. His face changed, his hands went to either side
kind of head and he held my face to look at him.

“Quiet,” he ordered low, and my whole body stilled at his tone
look on his face.

When he had my attention, he started talking.

“You freaked when you got the flowers, and the way you told me
me and over, I knew you needed that and was willin’ to give it to you, but
takin’ one last night. You agreed. I used that night to get you to stop t
uy who crazy and pushin’ me away and it worked.”

“It didn’t.”

“You started redecorating my cabin, you thanked me for the flower
let me make love to you in the moonlight and again in the mornin
showered with me, you held on tight on the bike when I brought you h
that the behavior of a woman who’s just broken up with you?”

I forgot Hmm.

He had a point.

ith you I kept at it. “You didn’t call me for three days.”

try and “I was workin’ and it’s been intense between us. You freak out any
get close. You needed space to get your head together. I backed off fo
ck. We days and gave it to you.”

pillows Okay, that made sense. It was even nice.

Still.

“I do not freak out,” I snapped.

He raised his brows.

Fuck!

end of my I was freaking out as we talked.

I glared at him because I didn't have a leg to stand on and I knew and themy pride wouldn't let me admit it out loud.

He watched me, then his face started to go soft and sexy and I knew he knew my thoughts.

end it was Vance Crowe *totally* had my number.

that I was Damn.

thinkin' Time to move on.

"All right, well...whatever."

ers, you It was weak, but I didn't know what else to say.

g. You I caught his grin definitely this time before his face disappeared in
ome. Is neck. He knew he'd won in more ways than one.

"Next time I give you space, I'll tell you," he said into my neck.

I didn't want there to be a next time. This last time was bad enough

I didn't share that with him, however.

His mouth moved on my neck and then came to mine and he kissed
y time I soft and quick and my freakout started to melt away. Then he lifted his

or a few "Go to work. I'm tired and need sleep," he said quietly, his face
from mine.

"That didn't take long," I replied, kind of snotty but not really mean
"We're back to macho-speak."

"Go to work," he returned, knowing I didn't mean it.

I stared at him.

I started to move away, but his arms got tight. I looked at him
kissed me again, this time slow and sweet, but with lots of tongue.

it, but That was more like it.

When he was done, my freakout had disintegrated.

ew that Gone.

I looked him in the eyes for a beat then said against his mouth,
well.”

He kissed my forehead and I grabbed my nightie and pulled it o
head. I turned off the alarm so it wouldn't wake Vance, swung off
and went to feed Boo.

I showered, got ready as quietly as I could and chanced a glance u
bed before I left.

nto my Vance was lying on his stomach, sheet down to his waist, and I co
his brown-skinned, muscled back, which looked even browner agai
cream sheets. Boo was curled into the side of his waist and didn't ev
1. at me when I peeked.

I had to hold on to the bed platform, not because of a belly flut
sed me, because my knees went weak. There were all sorts of reasons for this,
; head. which I had the time or inclination to explore at that moment.

an inch I pulled myself together and walked outside.

Nick was standing in the yard staring at Vance's Harley, whi
ning it, parked close to the back door.

Nick's eyes swung to me, but he didn't say a word.

“Um...seems Vance and I are back together,” I informed
explaining the bike.

and he Nick watched me a beat then dropped his head, stared at his shoes, and
muttered something under his breath I didn't catch.

I walked closer to him.

"Sorry?" I asked. "I didn't hear that."

He looked at me.

"Sleep "These are the times I hate," he said louder.

I just stared at him.

over my Then I asked, "What times?"

the bed "The times when I don't know what Reba explained to you and what
I didn't."

up at the Oh crap.

could see Not one of *those* times. Those times were always embarrassing for
of us. Always.

inst my "Nick—" I started, but Nick interrupted me, and I could tell it was
en look effort to get what he had to say over with and quick.

ter, but "Don't fuck with this guy, Jules. This is not the type of guy you
none of with. I figure he's got a lot of patience, and to be honest, no one else
sweetheart, he's gonna need it with you. But don't use up his patience
that make sense?"

ch was I was still caught at Nick dropping the F-bomb. Nick didn't tend to
the F-word very often.

Nick took my silence as confusion, came closer to me and explained.

"What I'm sayin' is, don't jack him around."

Nick, "Nick!"

oes and “I’m just sayin’.”

“I’m not jacking Vance around!” Okay, maybe I was, but I didn’t
it at the time. “I’m just...” I went on, “working through some issues.”

“Well, don’t tease him while you’re doin’ it, that’s all I’m sayin’.”

“Tease him?” I whispered.

Oh my *God*.

Was I teasing Vance? Was I teasing Luke? Was I teasing both Vance
Luke?

hat she Oh...my...*God*.

How did I go from virgin to slut to tease in a week?

“Do you think I’m teasing him?” I breathed, beginning to freak out

or both “Uh...” Nick mumbled, watching me freak out and then lifted a hand
scratch the back of his head. “Maybe you should talk to one of the girls
as in an bookstore about it.”

“I think I’ll do that,” I agreed quietly, and I was damned certain I would

ou fuck If there was ever a time for a girlfriend, *this* was the time.

offense, Nick came forward and kissed my cheek, then he was gone.

e. Does I got into Hazel and freaked out.

l to use. Then I thought of Vance sleeping in my bed and I freaked out more
in a good way).

blained, Then I felt something funny, sweet and wet nudging around
memory filing cabinets. I looked through my chain link fence and saw
fawn-colored pug puppy with a black face pushing his nose through the
and giving me sloppy, puppy kisses.

I looked through the fence.

I realize My Rottie was nowhere to be seen.

I wondered if I'd miss him.

nce and

..

hand to

s at the

would.

ore (but

in my

a cute,

ie fence

I looked through the fence.

My Rottie was nowhere to be seen.

I wondered if I'd miss him.

TWENTY



YOKO ONO

I sat in the parking lot at King's and pulled out my cell phone. I scrolled down to Luke's number, took a deep breath and hit the green button.

"Yeah?" he answered after the first ring.

"Hey, it's Jules."

"I know who it is and I know why you're callin'. I'm lookin' at the security monitors and I see Vance's Harley sittin' outside your house."

Whoops.

"Um, seems there was a misunderstanding," I told him.

"Bet there was, especially with him doin' surveillance room last night."

"He kinda saw us," I explained unnecessarily.

"I know where the cameras are positioned, babe. He more than kinda saw us."

He'd said "cameras," plural. It was a big room, but still.

I decided it was best not to think about it.

"He wasn't happy," I went on.

Silence, but I heard a door close.

"Seems that we weren't broken up after all," I kept going. "He v

giving me space.”

More silence for a beat then quietly, “I hope that’s it. I find out he away his nice shiny toy then got pissed when he saw someone else with it, *I’m* the one who’s not gonna be happy.”

Um.

Yikes.

“I’m not sure I like being described as a toy,” I said, feeling the scrolled crackin’ vibe coming over me.

“I’m not the one treatin’ you like a toy,” Luke shot back.

I decided this wasn’t going very well. “There are things you understand.”

at the “Right.”

Time to play peacemaker. “Luke, seriously, I don’t want to be Ono.”

“Come again?”

ght.” “I don’t want to be the one who breaks up the band.”

More silence then, “Babe.”

ida saw I felt relief sweep through me. His “babe” was amused. He underst

Then he continued talking, “Mace heard how you took down War his girls and saw you floor Jermaine. He and I agree, you’re ready to time in the field. No more training. It’s showtime. You’re ride-along v tonight.”

He wasn’t asking. I didn’t know how Vance would feel about this hoped I could talk him into it because I really, *really* wanted to do ride was just

“What time?” I asked.

e threw “Pick you up at nine.”

playin’ “Gotcha.”

“Out.”

He disconnected.



e head-I HAD A MORNING FROM HELL. Phone ringing off the hook, kids all c
wanting dirt on my now-famous takedown of the furry pimp and his v
word as usual traveling fast (the two skanks obviously had been t
1 don’t appointments stacked up. I didn’t have a chance to breathe.

May had been busy in the kitchen and I didn’t have the opportu
corner her to ask her opinion about Nick’s “teasing and jacking
e Yoko around” concerns.

I escaped at lunch, doing a run at Chipotle for Andy and me. I s
through the doors at King’s carrying a bag full of two fat, foil-w
burritos.

“Hey, sugar!” Daisy called.

ood. My head swung toward the couches and I saw Daisy sitting with
ren and They both were wearing identical fluffy ice-blue angora V-neck sv
be full black (Clarice) and white (Daisy) cleavage bursting forth in abundance
with me “Please tell me you paid for those,” I said, walking up to Dai
Clarice.

s, but I “I quit shop-liftin’ when I was thirteen. It lost its allure after a
-along. month stint in juvie. Gettin’ Clarice here to turn over a new leaf. Th
Clarice?” Daisy turned to Clarice.

“Unh-hunh,” Clarice answered.

I wondered about Daisy’s ability to be a mentor to a sixteen-year-old runaway. I didn’t know that much about Daisy, but with what I did know I decided she’d probably be a kickass mentor.

I looked at Daisy.

“I need a gathering,” I told her.

Clarice and Daisy stared at me.

“What kind of gathering?” Daisy asked.

“Apparently Vance and I aren’t broken up. There’s no misunderstanding. He was giving me space. He’s sleeping at my house now.”

Daisy’s eyes got huge. Then they got bright. Then she jumped up from the couch and grabbed on to my forearms with both of her hands and bounced up and down, her enormous head of teased-out platinum-blond hair bouncing with every jump. I didn’t look at her cleavage, and luck didn’t either or there might have been blackened eyes.

“Yee-ha!” she screamed.

I didn’t jump with her as I was a head-crackin’ mamma jamma. Daisy didn’t seem to mind.

Still, I couldn’t help but smile.

“This is so great!” she shouted then let me go and turned to Clarice. “This great?”

“Fuck yeah,” Clarice said, smiling broadly at me.

All the kids knew Vance and I were together and also likely knew I’d split up. Sniff had been in the building.

“Don’t say fuck,” I said to Clarice and turned to Daisy. “I
near-old gathering. Can you get the girls together after work?”

know, I “What’s the subject?” Daisy asked.

I kept my eyes trained on Daisy, not wanting Clarice in on the Is-J
Slut-Or-A-Tease- If-So-Discuss Gathering.

“Long story. I’ll explain at the gathering. Tell me where and
May.”

“You betcha, sugar,” Daisy said. She pulled out her cell phone and
was a stabbing at the buttons with her long, lethally-pointed fingernail.

se right Okay, one down, one to go.

I gave Andy his burrito and took mine into the empty yellow room
up from my cell. I sat down at the table and peeled back the paper and foil
jumped burrito. Then I scrolled down to Vance’s number and hit the green button.

le hair It rang five times (I counted) then he answered, “Yeah?”

ily she “Hey, it’s Jules.”

He was quiet for a second then he said softly, sounding like
through a smile, “You know, Princess, I have your number program
and as my phone.”

This made me freak out, but again in a good way.

“It’s rude just to launch in and talk,” I told him, not letting on to
n. “Isn’t it freak out. “You should always identify yourself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Did I wake you?” I asked this even though he sounded awake and
r Vance Then again he always sounded awake and alert.

“You caught me in the shower.”

need a Oh my *God*.

Major Good Freakout.

I cleared visions of Vance naked in my shower out of my mind. I Jules-A-good at doing this I completely blanked my mind and forgot why calling.

I'll tell "Jules?"

"Um...yeah."

started *Pull yourself together, Jules.*

"I'm meeting the girls after work," I told him.

"When are you gonna be done? I'll make dinner."

m with This was too much. I could barely process Vance sleeping in my b
on my he'd done it before. I'd even slept in his bed. The shower, dinner, I c
ton. hack it.

"Jules?"

"What?"

it was "Are we done talkin'?"
med in

"No."

"Then maybe you should talk."

ly good God, I was such an idiot.

"You cook?" I asked.

"No," Vance answered.

id alert. I blinked at my burrito. "Didn't you just say you were making dinn

"There's a tray of what looks like incinerated brownies on your sto
guessin' we'd do better to take our chances with me."

He was probably right. Still, it was slightly embarrassing.

I made a mental note to throw out the brownie tray. “Nick no
was so cooks. Maybe we should bum a meal off him.”

’ I was “I like Nick, Princess, but I been away for three days. You just l
guard down and told me you’re off with the girls for part of the night.
about all I’m willin’ to share.”

Uh-oh.

“Um...” I mumbled.

“That doesn’t sound like a good ‘um,’” Vance noted.

Throughout our conversation he’d sounded mellow, relaxed, in
ed and mood, amused.

ouldn’t Now, he did not.

“I kinda promised to go ride-along with Luke tonight.”

Silence.

“Vance?”

“How ‘kinda’?” he asked.

“Kind of *definitely* kinda,” I answered.

The phone came away from his mouth, but I still heard him swea
his voice was back in my ear. “I thought we agreed you’d call him.”

“We did.”

“You need to call him.”

ier?” “I did.”

ve. I’m Silence for a beat then, “Did you actually *speak* to him?”

“Yes.”

“So tell me, how did your tellin’ him to back off translate into normally along?”

Yes, I was right. Vance had definitely lost his mellow, relaxed, and let your good mood.

. That’s “He understands about Yoko Ono,” I explained. “It’ll be all right.”

More silence then, “Maybe you should explain to *me* about Yoko (

The words were a suggestion. The way he said them was not.

“Do you know who Yoko Ono is?” I inquired.

Vance didn’t answer.

a good I figured everyone knew who Yoko Ono was, so I just forged

“Well, see, The Beatles had this thing, no women in the—”

“I know about The Beatles,” Vance cut in.

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

“You like them? Their music, that is.”

I asked because I was curious. Everything with Vance had been so intense, it felt like it had been years and it’d only been a week. I had r. Then learn and I figured no better time than the present.


And anyway, I loved The Beatles. If he didn’t like them that would be a problem. If he was in the house what would I do when I was in a Sgt. Pepper’s r

“For Christ’s sake, Jules, get to the point.”

Yikes.

Maybe now was not the time for a “getting to know you” conversation.

“Well, if you know about The Beatles and Yoko Ono then you get

a ride- “No.”
mused, “I don’t want to be the woman who breaks up the band.”
Again silence.
“Luke gets it. I think he’ll be cool,” I went on.
He still didn’t speak.
“no.” “I really want to do a ride-along. I think I could learn a lot.”
More silence.
“Vance, you have to trust me,” I said quietly.
A beat more of silence then I heard a sigh. “Come back for dinner ahead, you’re done with Luke, I’ll be at the cabin.”
For a second I didn’t breathe. Then my mind shouted, *Yay!*
He trusted me.
And I was getting a ride-along. *And* I was getting to go back to the
“You have to leave the door open,” I told him.
“I always leave the door open. Do you know how to get there?”
seen so Hell yes, I’d memorized it even though I thought we were breaking
a lot to I wasn’t going to tell him that.
d suck. “Maybe you should write out directions.”
nood? 
THE GATHERING WAS at Fortnum’s at five thirty. I got there late a
crowd had already assembled. It included May, Daisy, Roxie, Jet, Ind,
Tod, Stevie, and for some bizarre reason, Tex.
tion. Tod and Stevie I could understand. Tex seemed like curry
it.” sprinkled on an ice cream sundae.

Whatever.

I sat down while everyone watched me, all of them grinning but saying a word.

“It seems there was a misunderstanding,” I started.

Lots of nods.

“I thought we were breaking up,” I continued. “Vance thought we were making up. Then he decided to give me some space because things were so intense.”

More nods, grins turning into smiles.

. When

“Seems you don’t have sex four times while breaking up and saying good-bye,” I went on.

Mouths dropped open, except Daisy, who emitted a tinkly-bell laugh.

cabin.

“Vance tells me that’s more of a making-up kind of thing to tell me,” I informed them.

Everyone looked at each other and I thought I heard Ally give a small gasp of amusement.

3 up.

“This morning, my Rottweiler took a hike,” I kept going.

The smiles disappeared and faces turned confused.

I took in a deep breath and told them about my emotional Rottweiler’s disappearance, and even told them about my cute, new, cuddly, spaniel and the pug puppy.

y, Ally,

The smiles came back.

powder

“Last night, I made out with Luke,” I continued.

The smiles vanished again.

“And, kind of, the night before.”

no one Eyes bugged out.

“Holy crap,” Indy finally spoke.

“What’s he like?” Roxie asked.

I just looked at her.

we were She took one look at my face, which obviously said a thousand
ere too words, and when her hand went up to her throat it was shaking.

I carried on, “Vance wired my house, put cameras in to keep an
me and protect me. He was working the surveillance room last night.
saying the whole thing.”

“Jesus, sweet Lord in Heaven,” May whispered.

gh. “I’d just taken down a furry pimp, some guy who skipped bond a
do,” I of his girls, Taser and hand-to-hand. Luke and Ike didn’t need to lift a
After it was over, I was kind of...jazzed and I’m guessing so was L
short of explained. “And anyway, I thought Vance and I were over.”

More nods.

“The time before, well...it just happened,” I shared. “Still, I
Vance and I were over or no way.”

iler and “I hear you, sister,” Ally said.

quirmy “Luke wouldn’t move in if he thought you were Vance’s woman,”
threw in. “He doesn’t do that.”

“How do you know?” Tod asked.

“He told me,” Roxie answered.

“That seems an odd thing to share,” Jet entered the disc

“Especially for Luke.”

“It’s a long story,” Roxie said.

Everyone stared at her. With everyone’s gaze on her, she told u how Luke told her he was interested if it didn’t work out with Ha something about “Denver men being men.”

(good) When she was done, everyone kept staring at her.

“That Luke sure gets around,” Stevie muttered.

eye on “Boy needs to find his own woman,” May declared.

He saw “You got that right, sister,” Jet said.

“Mm,” Ally murmured. Her eyes had gone glazed.

“People, fuckin’ focus. I’m thinkin’ The Law ain’t here to tal and two bullshit. What’s this about a furry pimp?” Tex barked.

finger. “That’s over. Ike took him in. It took like thirty seconds for me to o uke,” I three of them,” I told him.

“Righteous,” Ally remarked.

“So what d’you need from us?” Tex asked. “Need a partner when thought out? Want to double up on maneuvers. You get seen harassin’ one while someone else douses another’s car with vegetable oil? Get tl freaked out that The Law can be two places at once? That kind of thing

’ Roxie That wasn’t a bad idea.

I looked around the room and was surprised to see everyone’s fa eager except Stevie, who was staring at the ceiling looking like praying.

ussion. “Well, actually, I *did* come here to talk girlie bullshit. See, I’m v I’m a tease,” I admitted.

I saw a couple of blinks but mostly blank stares.

“Excuse me?” Jet asked.

“Misunderstanding the whole make-up, break-up scenario with Kissing Luke,” I explained. “I don’t want them to think I’m jackin around. I don’t want to be a tease.”

Everyone looked at me.

“Jay-sus,” Tex boomed then he got up, stalked behind the coffee and started banging on the espresso machine.

“How did you leave it with Vance?” Indy asked, ignoring Tex.

“He’s making me dinner after the gathering, and after the ride-along with Luke I’m going to meet him at his cabin.”

“Ride-along with Luke?” Stevie asked.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Vance know about the ride-along with Luke?” Stevie went on.

“Yeah, I explained Yoko Ono to him, and to Luke, they understood.”

Indy, Ally, Jet and Roxie all nodded sagely, totally getting it. Tod, Stevie and May gave me blank stares.

“It’s a long story,” I told them.

“Girl,” I heard from behind me.

I turned around, my eyes hit a faded black T-shirt and the edge of a black leather vest. I looked up and saw Duke standing behind me.

Uh-oh.

I didn’t know that Duke was even there, much less that he was listening.

“Hi,” I said.

He didn’t return my greeting.

Vance. Instead he asked, “You were a virgin right?”

g them Shit!

Why did everyone know I was a virgin?

I didn’t answer, I just stared.

counter

“Those boys aren’t stupid. They know who you are, what you are, a lot more of how a woman’s mind works than you’d like them to know, told me.

ng with

This gave me pause for reflection because I had more than a suspicion that Vance had my number.

My reflecting didn’t last long.

Duke kept talking.

l.” “They don’t fuck around because they see a lot of shit in their business. They know the risks they take and they know the danger. Daisy don’t have time to pussyfoot around and process emotions. They see what they want, they get it. The end.”

Oh my God.

I kept silent and kept staring. I couldn’t help myself.

es of a

Duke carried on, “He knows you were a virgin. It’s impossible for a clueless virgin one day and a tease the next. Or, at least what I see it’s impossible for you.”

stening

I hadn’t agreed that I was a *clueless* virgin.

I didn’t have time to squabble, Duke was on a roll.

“Vance knows that. If he’s havin’ dinner with you and he wants his bed, you got nothin’ to worry about. And if Luke knows you’re with Vance and he wants you ride-along, you got nothin’ to worry about with either. Yoko Ono my ass.”

Well, there you go.

Duke’s eyes turned to May. “When Luke’s ready, mark my words. I’ll get his own fuckin’ woman, and God save us all.”

e and a
,” Duke

Then he stomped away. Everyone watched him go.

Finally Stevie said, “Guess the gathering is over.”

a small

“Yeah, well, Duke has a way,” Roxie mumbled.

“I’ll say,” May put in.

“Anyone want coffee?” Tex boomed. “If not, I’m shuttin’ her down for the night.”

line of
r. They

“I have to get home. Lee’s taking me to Barolo Grill tonight,” Indy said, standing.

ae what

“Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you. Eddie called. Lee and him have some plans on tonight. I told him to tell Lee I’d tell you,” Jet explained.

“You’re shitting me.” For some reason Indy looked ready to bolt. She suspected she really (really) liked Barolo Grill.

to be a
of you,

Ally laughed.

“You and Lee and Barolo Grill...not...gonna...happen,” Ally told

“Hank and I were supposed to go to a movie. He’s sucked into work and this is too,” Roxie said.

Indy sighed. “Such is the life of the Woman of a Badass.”

you in “You got that right, sister,” Jet said.
re with Everyone laughed.
ith him, I didn’t. I was reflecting and kept reflecting while they all decide
to Brother’s for burgers.
I headed home.
ls, he’ll To Vance.



WE WERE LYING in my bed.

Vance was wearing jeans and a heathered, dark-gray Henley with heavy-buckled black belt. His feet were bare and I had to admit, the still sexy.

I was wearing low-rider, midnight-blue cords, a cool, heavy-l
black belt of my own, and dark, gray-blue, fitted long-sleeved tee (I
ly said, figure Luke would have issues with blue cords). My feet were bare
my toenails were painted a dark, electric blue. It had seemed a good
nothing the time. I was feeling in a funky-girl mood. I decided I needed a pedic

Vance had made quesadillas and they were good. He’d even put ja
and bits of sautéed chicken breast in them. When we were done eatin
blow. I the dishes while he made some calls (it was only fair, he cooked). He
that night, back at work tomorrow. He was going to the cabin after
picked me up.

Indy. When he was done with the phone and I was done with the dis
hatever guided me to the steps to the bed and we climbed up.

Luke was due at my house in just over an hour. I figured Vance w
straight for the hanky panky. We had time.

He didn't.

He lay down on his back and tucked me in his side, my cheek
d to go shoulder. Then his hand went up the back of my shirt, but only t
mindless patterns on the skin of my lower back. Other than that, he wa
and he didn't touch me or try to kiss me.

Hmm.

His fingers were having an effect. As I'd attacked him that mor
thought it was his turn. But I didn't know how to communicate this
making it my turn.

a cool,
y were

"Vance?"

"Yeah."

uckled

"What're we doing?"

I didn't

"Lying in bed."

too and

"I know, but...why?"

idea at

"Why not?"

ure.

I didn't have an answer for that.

lapeños

Wait, I did.

ing I did

"I'm not good at lying around."

was off

r Luke

"Princess, you need to learn to be still."

I thought about that, thinking maybe he was right. I was rarely stil
hes, he usually on the go, always had been my whole life. Hard to save the
lying in bed and doing nothing.

ould go

"Is this a Native American thing?" I asked.

"What?" There seemed a hint of laughter in his voice and I got up

elbow and looked at him.

on his I was right, definitely laughter. In fact, a full-blown grin.

o draw “What’s funny?” I asked.

is silent “You.”

“How am I funny? I don’t know anyone who sits around, doing
and being still.”

orning, I “Lot of people do it. Most the time they fuck it up with their eyes &
without a television set, filling their mind with garbage.”

I had to admit this was true.

“Is that why you think I’m funny? Because I can’t be still?”

“I think you’re funny because you asked me if it was a Native Ar
thing.”

“Why’s that funny?”

“The only thing I know about my culture is what I’ve read in books
off the rez by the time I was twelve. The two years before that, I was b
around amongst people with good hearts who took me in but not
patience to deal with my shit. Before that, all I knew was my dad
shitfaced drunk every fuckin’ night of his life, most of those beatin’ m
bloody while my brother and I watched.”

Every muscle, bone and piece of tissue in my body froze includ
l. I was lungs and heart. Then I snapped out of it, leaned over him, reached h
e world turned out the light.

“Jules?”

I settled in beside him, put my arm around his waist and pulled hir
on my side, facing me.

“Jules,” he repeated.

I looked up at him. My arm stayed around his waist and I pressed front to his.

Then I whispered, “I can’t do it, Vance. You have to give me time nothing the moonlight.” I took a deep breath, then said, “But before you go you have to know that I know it counts, this counts more than any of it

glued to A change came about him. I could barely see it but I could definitely it.

“Jesus, Jules,” he muttered, but he wasn’t disappointed in me. something else. Something bigger, something that made his voice sound of husky.

American It was something good.

I pushed deeper into him.

“If I had a superpower,” I whispered, “I’d go back in time. I’d talk dad to an AA meeting. I’d get you back your family.” s. I was ounced

enough “Quiet, Jules.”

gettin’ “I’d fix your mom so she was only beautiful and not broken—”

my mom “Quiet.”

“And you’d know all about your culture because you should.”

ing my He rolled into me then on top of me. “If you aren’t quiet, I’ll make igh and quiet.”

“You should at least find your brother, Vance.”

His hands came to either side of my face.

in to his “I’ll help you,” I offered.

He kissed me and he didn't stop there. He did a lot of things that made me stay quiet.

Not exactly quiet, as such, but the sounds I was making didn't need anything to do with a recognized language.

I was upset, So I guess I figured out how to get Vance to make a move and take his turn.

My only feeling After we were done, he pulled a soft knit, chenille blanket out of the cubbyhole over the hall ceiling and arranged it on top of us.

It was He held me front to front, my face in his throat.

and kind After a few minutes I said, "I want you to tell me more."

He was silent.

"Please. I know it's hard but—" I went on.

"Later."

like your "Promise?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

His arms already around me, tightened when I gave in.

I lay there—still—and thinking it was not that hard.

like you

He kissed me and he didn't stop there. He did a lot of things that made me stay quiet.

Not exactly quiet, as such, but the sounds I was making didn't have anything to do with a recognized language.

So I guess I figured out how to get Vance to make a move and take his turn.

After we were done, he pulled a soft knit, chenille blanket out of the cubbyhole over the hall ceiling and arranged it on top of us.

He held me front to front, my face in his throat.

After a few minutes I said, "I want you to tell me more."

He was silent.

"Please. I know it's hard but—" I went on.

"Later."

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

His arms already around me, tightened when I gave in.

I lay there—still—and thinking it was not that hard.



SOMETIME NEXT WEEK

The knock came and although it didn't take two people to open the door, Vance walked me to it. His arm was curled around my neck in a way that even I, with my significant lack of experience, knew was so excessively proprietary. I had no choice but to wrap my arm around his shoulder or I would look awkward and be uncomfortable.

Surprisingly, the minute I did this I was comfortable, very comfortable.

This was not a bad thing. Just that I thought it was kind of in your face for Luke, considering.

Vance opened the door and stepped us both back, keeping me at a distance while Luke came into the house.

Luke looked at me then at Vance, his face blank. I held my breath.

"We good?" Vance asked.

Luke's lips twitched. "Yeah," he replied.

I blinked.

Was that it?

Vance's arm around my neck tightened and he curled me into his side so we were full frontal. When I looked up at him, he was grinning.

Well, I guessed that *was* it.

Guys were so weird.

Vance started talking. "Jules, be smart. Watch Luke and do what I don't wanna have to come back down the mountain to sit in an ER room."

"Okay," I said.

"No drug dealers tonight. Just business. Got me?" Vance went on.

Hmm.

a door,
way that
newhat
is waist

Macho-speak.

I decided against answering and instead I just frowned.

"Got me?" he repeated.

Okay, so I had to answer and I did so snottily. "Are you aiming make-up to be the shortest in history or what?"

Vance grinned again. It was his turn not to answer and he did it better than me.

"I kid you not, Crowe, I'm working the King Sooper's stores tonight. I'm gonna find me a checkout boy. Safe job, good insurance and he probably won't tell me what to do."

At my threat Vance kissed my forehead. Then he let me go.

I took this to mean he didn't feel the King Sooper's checkout boy was much competition.

He was probably right.

"Bye, Boo," I called.

nobody so

"Meow," Boo called back from somewhere in the house, somewhere where he was getting into trouble.

“Be good,” I called in warning just in case he was getting into trouble says. “Meow!” Boo called back again, sounding harassed.

waiting I turned to Luke. “I’m ready now.”

Luke had a full-on smile going. They were rare and they were effective. Some woman was going to be super lucky one day. I just hoped that woman was just as lucky.

We started to move. Vance grabbed my hand, gave it a tug and I came back to him. His head bent and he touched his lips to mine.

“Be careful,” he murmured, his face close, his eyes soft and warm.

My breath caught.

for our I nodded and whispered, “I will.”

We left and I swung into the passenger side of the Explorer.

it better “King Sooper’s checkout boys?” Luke asked after I’d buckled in.

“My dream men,” I replied.

tomorrow. “Babe.” He started up the SUV and we headed out. “At least you’re probably wearing purple pants tonight,” he noted.

“I didn’t want to embarrass the team.”

“I’m thinkin’ that’d be impossible.”

ys were Wow.

That was huge.

Even with that hugeness uttered, I decided to take a page out of the book and be quiet.

likely



IT WASN’T a silent night for Luke.

ble. He talked.

He told me Nightingale Investigations had a varied clientele.

The bulk of which was corporate investigations, background checks, effective employees, looking into fraud, that kind of thing. This was done in at Luke usually by their computer hacker, a guy named Brody, as well as t surveillance.

turned They also did some domestic investigations: cheating husbands, c wives, pilfering money from joint bank accounts.

Luke told me they used to do security, but now only watched Fox and recently my place.

Further, they took on some government contracts, federal, state and They also took on specialized cases.

These Luke didn't share much about, but explained they were almost exclusively by what I was realizing were the Top Four: Lee Mace and Vance.

aren't Last, the team also did a lot of skip tracing and this they did nationwide the skip seriously skipped. Mostly it was done in a six or seven states which Luke considered "local."

Vance, Luke confirmed, was their top tracker. He also did all the work. Further, he was the guy they chose to do most reconnaissance and he was ultra-quiet, something he'd learned during his past as a felon.

Luke's Lee was ex-special operations force, Army Night Stalkers. Monty ex-Navy SEAL. Lee's specialty was everything. Monty's special planning operations, these operations Luke also didn't go into detail at

Matt and Bobby, two more of Lee's team, were local boys who

have been cops but preferred an extra challenge. They spent a lot of time pulling in skips, taking photos during dangerous liaisons, doing stunts, providing security (as in bodyguards) when a client needed it and the cops as added manpower. "Foot soldiers" was how Luke described them.

"Good ones," he said.

Ike had been a cop until something ugly went down. That something wasn't shared by Luke either. He was tracker number two on the team and was often out of town, the same as Vance.

Jack, another guy I hadn't met, was muscle.

"That's it?" I asked.

"Except for taking most night shifts in the surveillance room, yeah," he answered.

Mace sounded interesting, mainly from what Luke *didn't* say.

Apparently he used to be a world-class surfer. He was half Hawaiian and he came to Colorado to take up snowboarding, something in which he also excelled. Mace, like Lee and Vance, was good at everything he did. He had no specialty. They were all his specialties (except with snow, which Luke explained only Lee, Monty and Vance knew how to do). It was due to a life as an athlete, some of that professional. He knew how to use his body and his instincts and reflexes were sharp.

"How did he go from a professional surfer/snowboarder to a private investigator/bounty hunter? That seems a strange career move," I noted.

I thought of surfers and boarders as Zen masters, riding the waves out on the snow, one with nature, not out cracking heads and looking pissed off all the time.

of time “Personal reasons,” Luke answered.

keouts, “What personal reasons?” I asked.

y acted Luke didn’t answer.

I gave up mainly because I knew I’d get nowhere as well as the fact
was none of my business.

ng ugly “And you?” I went on.

am and “Me?”

“Why are you in the game?”

He turned to look at me with a half smile on his lips. “Shits and gri

,” Luke His eyes went back to the road.

He was holding back. How I knew this I didn’t know. I just knew i

“Bullshit,” I muttered.

Native The air in the SUV changed rather dramatically and my
hing at automatically tensed at the feel of it.

hing he Then Luke spoke and it wasn’t with his usual somewhat-
rework, bordering-on-affectionate tone.

)). This “Babe, there comes a time when you’re sharin’ my bed and you f
v to use to turn your attitude on me with your body pressed against mine, then
be in the position to know.”

private Well then, there you go.

l. I suspected Luke was “good” with the situation just as long as I
and the push it.

all the Good to know.

I decided to change the subject. “What’s on tonight?”

“Search. Got a client who wants dirt on his wife before he ask divorce.”

“Is she cheating on him?”

“He’s the one who found a replacement. Lookin’ for a way to m divorce payout more comfortable.”

Um.

No.

“This guy sounds like a jerk,” I said.

“He *is* a jerk,” Luke replied.

Luke pulled over and parked in a well-lit street in a neighborhood with comfortable houses of the nearly very rich. He made to exit the ve

“Wait,” I called.

He turned to me and raised his brows.

“We can’t do this,” I told him.

“Why not?” he asked.

“It’s not right.”

Luke twisted his body fully to face me. “We don’t make judgment you’ll send invoices.”

I could see right away where there might be a problem with my b the team. I didn’t make judgments, but I sure as hell had a moral code.

I decided not to debate this point with Luke, mainly because I figure I’d change his mind in the few minutes I had.

I tried a different tactic. “I don’t see how this is going to help me t of a nuisance to drug dealers.”

is for a “This isn’t training, babe, this is a ride-along. You go where I go, if you don’t like it, I’ll take you home and you can have a bubble bath.”

In truth, a bubble bath sounded good. However, I figured if I fucked this chance there wouldn’t be another one. I was too curious about what the team of badassess did for a living, considering I was “with” one of them.

I didn’t know how to describe my relationship with Vance except calling him my “boyfriend” sounded pretty stupid. We were exclusive, that was made that clear, but how to translate that into a descriptive modifier was unclear.

Also, I had the impression that the team liked me, respected me. I had a good impression because somewhat easily they’d accepted me. If I went home and had a bubble bath I knew that would disintegrate faster than the bubble bath.

“Let’s do this,” I muttered, getting out my side.

As he did last night, Luke walked straight up to the house like he owned the place. He opened the door with a key.

“You have a key?” I whispered, not about to make the same mistake I’d made last night by being loud and calling attention to us.

He looked at me. “Client gave it to us.”

Oh. Right. That made sense.

Luke entered and didn’t turn on any lights. He went directly to a room in the kitchen like he’d taken that route on numerous occasions. I followed.

He went straight to a small office off the kitchen that even in the dark I could see was decorated by a woman. Luke pulled on a pair of plastic gloves, then took a small flashlight out of his belt and started to rifle through the desk.

o. You “What are you looking for?” I asked.

“Anything,” Luke answered.

oked up I stood there, watching.

hat this The flashlight often slid along the walls and I saw one of those
l. boards with the criss-cross ribbons on it. Business cards, receipts,
ept that letters and photos were shoved into the ribbons. The photos were d
, Vance shots of the same four people, a woman, a man and two young boys.

ier was “They have children,” I hissed at Luke.

Luke didn’t answer, he kept searching.

ad this I got more uncomfortable. I wanted to pretend it didn’t matter, but
me and against the grain. So deeply against the grain that the grain was feeling
s.

“Luke.”

owned He straightened and turned to me. “Not our problem.”

“But—”

take as “Babe.” His voice was a warning. I was trying his patience.

I snapped my mouth shut and crossed my arms on my chest.

I decided a bubble bath was sounding good. In fact, after we we
here, I was going to ask Luke to take me home. Then I was going to
nassive bath oil in my bag for the cabin and take my bath there, where, afte
done, I could cozy up to Vance.

e dark I Fuck this shit.

: gloves So I would lose my unofficial place on the team.

ugh the Whatever.

Luke lost interest in the office and went upstairs. He was nearly a

as Vance.

I followed, trying hard not to stomp and throw a tantrum, although I thought the situation warranted it.

We went to the bedroom and Luke rifled some more—drawers, medicine cabinet in the bathroom, nightstand. Then he got on his side on the floor, swung the light underneath the bed. He dropped to his back and shoved his shoulder.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“What?” I asked, arms still crossed on my chest, hip hitched, one foot flat. My stance said “attitude,” but I had to admit I was curious.

Luke came out with a box. He’d opened it under the bed. He got on his feet, put the little flashlight between his teeth and with the box open in his hand, he rifled through it with the other.

I walked forward and looked then stared with my mouth open.

It was a little pharmaceutical cabinet. Not just pills (lots of pills), but also filled with white powder, three of them, two very full, one half-empty. A mirror, a razor blade and a rolled up bill.

“Bitch is a cokehead,” Luke remarked after he’d taken the flashlight out of his teeth.

“It could be his,” I suggested.

“He’s payin’ us to search his house. You think he’d leave his stuff around?”

Damn.

That made sense.

“Maybe he planted it,” I tried again.

“Doubtful. It isn’t hers, he’ll have a problem proving it if she finds it. Considering what’s at stake, she will. Easy enough to find out if she’s honest enough to ask for it to be printed.”

“Damn again!”

I glared at him.

Luke ignored my glare, dropped down and replaced the box.

“Don’t you need to photograph that or something?” I asked when I got back on his feet and back to searching.

“Call goes out to the husband tonight. They’re at a show. He’ll be home, knows right where to find it, big scene. He asks for the divorce papers, she got the dirt to nail her. She has no idea he has a woman on the side. She’ll be in one because she’s fucked.”

His scenario left a bad taste in my mouth. This wasn’t about two weeks, it was about four.

Fuck.

After finding something, Luke’s search intensified. In the end he found two more hidden vials of coke, both nearly empty, and another knife, a mirror, blade and bill. He also found so many pill bottles hidden just about everywhere that it wasn’t funny. Finally he found an envelope taped to the back of the dining room hutch. In it was a stack of receipts from pawnshop, Pill-Poppin’ Mama Cokehead was pawning jewelry, silver, Waterford and a goodly number of other household items to finance her habit.

Luke yanked off his gloves and I knew we were done. We left the house, I came in, got in the car and Luke called it in. I sat there not knowing what to feel.

lights it. Those two boys had a cheating father who wanted to screw over his smart and a drug addict mother who, from the looks of it, was either high or significantly sedated on a regular basis.

After Luke was done describing where the bulk of the evidence was found, he said, “Out,” then he started the Explorer and pulled away from the curb.

he was “This feels shit,” I told him, staring angrily out the window.

Luke didn’t respond.

comes “People suck,” I went on.

e. He’s Luke stayed silent.

e caves I crossed my arms on my chest.

“We gonna go somewhere and crack some heads now?” I asked.

people, Luke chuckled.

“You’re gettin’ it,” he said.

Whatever.

e found

it with

it about

l to the

shops.

crystal

and would

thought

now we

what to

WE DIDN’T CRACK HEADS.

Or I should say, *I* didn’t crack heads.

We did something else that rocked my world. It wasn’t worse than what I left with musings of the terrible life ahead for two little boys I didn’t know and would never meet, but it was something that shook my world and thought was my place in it.

We went to a bar off Evans, a dive I’d never been to and likely never see again.



is wife, In the parking lot Luke turned to me. “The guy we’re gonna meet is a kitegonna be happy to see me.”

“Why?” I asked.

ould be “He’ll be expecting Bobby or Matt. At most, Ike.”

rom the “What does that mean?”

“That means he thinks he’s flyin’ under radar and we aren’t taking seriously. I walk in there, he’s gonna know we’re serious. You got a gun?”

I’d put it under my seat. I bent to retrieve it, but he stopped me with his hand on my arm.

“You don’t go in there carryin’. With this you’re not the one posing a threat. I am.”

This all seemed quite complicated. I wanted to ask questions but I just nodded.

Luke entered the bar in his usual manner, body language communicating confidently that he knew who he was, he knew what he was doing, he knew where he was going. I followed, probably not looking as confident as Luke because I didn’t know any of those things.

n being Still, people turned to look when we walked in, and when they saw their looks became stares.

’t know

l what I

Luke walked to a booth. A man was sitting in it and he reminded me of Sal Cordova. Ladies’ man, or at least he thought he was. Caucasian with short blond hair, dressed to the nines.

r would

His face showed surprise and perhaps a hint of fear when his eyes met Luke, then he covered it. His gaze hit on me and he stared but again c

et isn't a moment, then his eyes went back to Luke.

“Stark,” he said when Luke arrived at the table. “Didn't expect you running errands for Marcus. What? You get demoted?”

My body went rock-solid and I looked at Luke. Then I realized I was giving away and I forced myself to relax.

in' him Running an errand for Marcus?

ot your Marcus Sloan?

Gun runner with drug dealer and pimp on the side?

with a Luke looked at me and I felt he was telling me something. It took
beats for me to cotton on, then I slid in the booth opposite Ladies' Man.
sin' the Luke slid in beside me.

“Who's this? The Law?” Ladies' Man was joking.

instead I “Yeah,” Luke answered.

Ladies' Man's eyes cut to me and the forced joviality faded from his
indicating I could tell he didn't know what to make of me.

and he I kept quiet.

ool and “She on the payroll now or what?” Ladies' Man asked, going on to

“I heard she took down Warren last night.”

saw us “We're not here to talk about Law,” Luke said.

Ladies' Man's attention returned to Luke. “Hey, man, I don't know
l me of this is all about. When I got the message, I was fuckin' stunned. Seer
, dirty- of trouble over nothin'.”

eyes hit For some reason Luke said, “Stop,” and I didn't think he was telling
only for to stop talking.

Ladies' Man kept on smiling his good ole boy smile. "What?"

u to be "Stop," Luke repeated.

"I know you're a man of few words, but what? Is this the message what I me a clue." He turned to me. "Law? Do you know? How many sy Sounds like?"

Over the past few days Luke and I had shared a lot, or at least guessed in the World of Luke was a lot. So I felt pretty safe in thinking Luke would not take to this guy being a smartass very well.

k a few I wasn't wrong.

lan and Luke lifted up in a squat, leaned across the table, and I kid y grabbed on to Ladies' Man's collar and pulled him clean out of his s put his other hand on him then twisted.

I reared back and was just barely missed when Ladies' Man's boc flying by me and into the booth behind us. his face.

Oh...my...*God*.

I got the keen sensation that Luke had been holding back in our t sessions. to note,

Like.

A lot.

w what Luke slid out of our booth and stalked to the other one.

ns a lot I followed.

By the time I made it to him, Luke had Ladies' Man by the collar ing him pulled him out of that thankfully empty booth and whirled, slammi against a wall.

There was music playing in the bar, but the hum of conversation

everyone watched Luke.

Luke yanked Ladies' Man forward and then slammed him against the wall again. I could hear the crack of his skull against the wall.

Yikes.

Luke held him pressed there, his legs dangling beneath him a foot off the floor, his hands wrapped around Luke's wrist and forearm. Just like in the movies, Luke held him aloft one-handed. I didn't even know people could do that in real life.

It was a sight to see. It gave me a belly flutter and a heart flutter and I was jealous as all hell.

Luke wasn't just kickass. He was *kickass*.

"Stop," Luke repeated the same word.

Ladies Man wasn't feeling like being a smartass anymore. He was scared shitless.

"Got me?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Got you. Tell Marcus, nothin' to worry about. I'm not worried." Ladies Man rasped because Luke's hand was wrapped around his throat.

Luke dropped him.

Ladies Man's legs buckled a bit when he landed, but he pulled himself together and his hands went to his neck.

Luke turned his head to me. I got the message loud and clear and I knew what he'd said. He'd walked out.

We were buckled in and on the road before I found my voice. "That wasn't fair. You hogged all the head-crackin'."

Luke was silent, but I could tell he was amused.

“Next time I get to throw the guy across the booth,” I announced.

inst the “Not tonight. We’re done.”

“Done?”

“Done.”

off the “That’s it?”

e in the “Yep.”

ould do “But we’ve only been out...” I looked at the dashboard clock. “A
and a half.”

d I was “Nothin’ more on tonight’s agenda, babe.”

Well that was disappointing.

“You should come on a ride-along on one of my nights out. It lasts
and is a lot more fun.” I told him.

looked “I’ll take you up on that.”

Whoops.

n out,” I’d said it to be snotty. I didn’t expect he’d agree. This meant
at. conversation with Vance.

Shit.

himself Luke again walked me to my door, took my keys, pushed in ahead
and turned off my alarm. This time he didn’t head to the kitchen. I th
best not to offer him a beer.

ve both Then I asked what had been praying on my mind for the last
minutes. “Do you guys work for Marcus Sloan?”

. “That

“We’re on retainer,” Luke answered.

I closed my eyes.

This was *not* good.

“Babe.”

I opened my eyes again.

“He’s a drug dealer. He runs guns. He sells flesh,” I whispered.

“He’s also Daisy’s husband,” Luke responded.

I felt like he’d punched me in the gut.

An hour Daisy’s husband? Daisy was married to a drug dealer? A flesh ped
gun runner?

“What?” My voice was so low even I wondered if I’d made any noise.
Super Dude Luke’s superpowers included super hearing. “He isn’t
; longer guy, but he’s a good ally.”

I didn’t speak, *couldn’t* speak. I was trying to process. I was also trying
breathe. Both I was finding difficult.

“Daisy’s clean,” Luke told me.

another “Does she know what he does?”

“I’m guessin’, yeah.”

“Then she can’t be clean.”

d of me “She’s clean.”

ought it “I think you and I may have different definitions of the word ‘clean’.”

All of a sudden he advanced. Even knowing I was a head-c
twenty mamma jamma, I retreated.

I was vulnerable. I liked Daisy. I liked her a lot. I wanted to be her
but more, I wanted her to be mine. I’d suffered a blow from which I
know if I could recover.

Somehow Luke got me up against a wall and he came in close wasn't predatory, I'm-going-to-kiss-you close, this was pay attention close.

"People do what people do, to get by or get ahead, or leave sh behind. But there are lots of things that define them. How they act, t they treat people they care about. Daisy lives well off dirty mone minute she entered Indy's life, Lee investigated her and she's ha dler? Abumps than most, enough for her to deserve to live well. She's a good and she isn't involved in Marcus's business. He's got legitimate shit r ise. alongside his other concerns. Both sides are lucrative. He used to w a good whatever he got out of it. Now he works for her. There's beauty in tha isn't for you to judge."

ying to "But—"

"Jules, it isn't for you to judge."

"I disagree."

"You pull out of that gang, you strike a blow to a good womar taken to carin' about you because you think you're too good for her does that say about you?"

1." What he said gave me pause. Pizza, football and facials gave me Daisy taking Clarice shopping and hanging out with her at King's g pause.

rackin' "Shit," I whispered, and my eyes slid to the side, away from Luke.

friend, His hand came to my neck, thumb at my jaw and my eyes slid back

I didn't He wasn't looking at me like he was swinging toward disappointe his eyes were warm with approval and something else.

e. This “Now that you worked that out, somethin’ else you should know to me said.

Uh-oh.

it lives “Luke—”

he way “Vance is a friend, has been for a while. I like him. I respect his way. The good at what he does and I know he has my back. He knows I have his

d more This, I thought, was good.

person “I get the barest, fuckin’ inkling he’s fuckin’ you around, I’m there

running This, I thought, was not good.

ork for “I’m in love with him,” I blurted.

it and it
Now why did I say that? I hadn’t even told Vance that. I wasn’t *going* to tell Vance that. Not until he told me. I wasn’t going to be out of limb like Jet was with Eddie for months or for forever, worried about painting bathrooms purple or...whatever.

1 who’s No way.

2. What “I know you are,” Luke said.

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head.

3 pause. What?

ave me Oh my God.

“How do you know?” I whispered.

4. “A woman like you, a woman who *looks* like you, doesn’t save her
d. Now because she feels in the mood for an adventure.”

This was true.

ow,” he Shit.

This meant Duke was right. Men *did* know a lot more about the woman’s mind works than we wanted them to know.

I decided this was not a good thing, especially if Vance had figured it out. He’s the same thing.

.” I was fucked.

I decided not to think about it at all, ever, or at least not until tomorrow.

.” “Nearly twenty-seven,” I said in an attempt to be amusing and to get away from a tense subject.

One side of his mouth went up in a grin. I thought that I’d succeeded. It wasn’t even wrong.

”On the “With Vance or without, you always got me,” Luke declared.

I about I felt that weight hit my chest, tears heavy there, and I sucked in breath to control them.

“Thank you,” I whispered because I didn’t know what else to say. You, um, always got me too.”

He shook his head, touched his finger to my nose, then he was gone.

I stared at the door that he’d closed behind him.

Wow.



self for HAZEL, Boo and I went right to Vance’s cabin without one glance at Vance’s directions.
of days

Boo was not used to car rides and told me he didn’t like them much. Indeed, he described his displeasure at length. Then he asked me if it was an unheard of nocturnal visit to his most hated person in the world.

vet. When I assured him we were going to see Vance, not the vet, he
way a my thigh and dug his claws into my flesh to hold on and started purring.

Crazy fucking cat.

red out We parked close to the cabin door next to Vance's Harley. With
and purse over my shoulder, Boo's litter box in my hand and Boo
under my other arm, we made our awkward way to the cabin. The c
were open, the windows were lit and the light coming into the surro
row. darkness seemed warm and welcoming.

steer us I opened the door and dropped Boo, who immediately began to ex
put his litter box in the corner.

eded. I Vance wasn't in the room, but the buffalo-shaded floor lamp was
the cabin was warm, far warmer than the last time I was there.

reath to It was nearly midnight and I figured Vance was asleep.

I was wrong.

7. "You He walked down the hall, feet bare, still wearing his clothes. He s
at the entry into the living room and leaned a shoulder against it. His h
not pulled back. He looked relaxed, at ease, at home and *hot*.

e. "Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said.

"Meow," Boo said.

Vance's "I brought Boo," I explained unnecessarily. "I hope that's all ri
doesn't like the way Nick serves his breakfast."

overly Vance grinned but didn't say anything. I decided to take this as
l if this clear for the uninvited feline houseguest.

rd, the "Learn anything?" Vance asked.

sat on “I learned that Luke hogs all the action,” I replied.

g. Vance’s grin turned to a smile.

I was standing by the dining room table and it seemed that Vance my bag away.

tucked I felt weird. I’d never had a sleepover at my boyfriend’s (or w/ curtains house. I mean, I did have a sleepover, but that was a break-up/rounding session that included a rousing fight, unbelievable sex and a heartb misunderstanding. I hoped this wasn’t going to be the same (thou plo. I unbelievable sex wouldn’t be unwelcome).

I needed him to make a move, but he seemed happy where he was.

lit and Hmm.

“I’m going to take a bubble bath,” I announced.

The vibe changed, his tractor beam flipped on and I felt my bo towards him.

stopped Finally he walked to me, grabbed my bag off my shoulder ar air was walked away. I followed him to the bedroom. He dumped my bag on and then he lay down, picked up his book and started reading.

Okay then, tractor beam malfunction.

I got my stuff, took a long bubble bath, lotioned up with cucumber and put on my new nightie—soft, pale-lemon silk with an edge of pea ght. He that hit the tops of my thighs. I yanked on my new lacy white hipst bundled my hair in a loose knot with a ponytail holder at the top of m an all- I left my bathroom stuff where it was, gathered up my clothes and wer bedroom.

The house was dark, but the light was on in the bedroom. My b

now on the floor. Vance was under the covers, Boo lying on his stomach making himself at home. Vance's chest was bare and he was up on his hands reading, his fingers rubbing Boo's neck.

When I entered, Vance's eyes cut to me. I rushed to my side of the bed, trying not to look like I was rushing. I dumped my clothes, climbed on top of Boo and confiscated Boo for a cuddle. Boo had been comfy and protested.

"Hush, Boo. Mommy wants a cuddle," I told him.

"Meow."

"Hush."

I felt like an idiot talking to my cat, taking a bubble bath, having a boyfriend.

I was kind of flipping out.

This was normal stuff that normal girls do.

I'd never been normal. I'd always been kind of a freak.

And anyway, Vance was hot. I often forgot how hot he was, what he was doing, arguing most of the time. He was just as beautiful lying in bed reading as he was kicking bad guy ass. Being reminded of that fact without him inside me or in a heated discussion with me made me feel...unsure.

We'd not had many quiet, normal, mellow times. Hardly any.

I found I couldn't handle it.

"I can't handle this," I told Vance, letting Boo go.

Boo hustled to the end of the bed, plopped down on his side and glared at me.

"What?" Vance asked.

My bag was

omach, “This.” I threw my arm out.

pillows, Boo had given up the glare and started cleaning his face with h
likely washing away cucumber melon lotion residue.

he bed, “You’re gonna have to explain, Princess.”

in and “I can’t explain.” And I couldn’t, at least not without sounding like

See, I’d never thought I’d have this in my life. I always thought
alone. I was happy with that. I liked being alone, as long as Nick w
door and Boo felt talkative, which was all the time.

What if this worked for us? I got used to taking bubble baths in V
aving a cabin. Boo lying on the end of his bed like he’d lived there his who
life. Vance crashing at my place and using my shower and making us c

What if I eventually had clothes here? What if I doubled up
toiletries, litter box and kitty bowls so I didn’t have to cart them ba
forth?

with us What if Vance’s jeans hung in my closet and I had to sh
g as he nightgowns so he could have space for his T-shirts?

moving What if I got used to that? What if I liked it then it was all swept av

My cute pug was chewing on my fingers, baby-dog teething.

Did pugs go bad?

I started to breathe heavily and I realized I was close to hyperventil

Shit!

gave me “For fuck’s sake,” Vance muttered. He’d been staring at me the
time I was processing and obviously lost patience.

He put down his book, hauled me across the bed and into his arm
on top of him.

ce were paying any attention to my negative body language grudge (regardless
him use cheek on his shoulder *and* my arm, which had snaked around his wa
ender. reading like he didn't have a care in the world. He told me what to do
serious time, in macho-speak no less, and in front of other people.

While I was mentally enumerating, his fingers pulled up my night
at him. hand slid inside my panties, over the cheek of my ass, to come to rest
against my hip.

o got to That felt nice.

As in way nice.

So nice, my body relaxed, giving up the grudge.

Okay, then I'd break up with him the day after tomorrow.

Or maybe sometime next week.

When I made that decision, I fell asleep.

his side.

week on

arted to

ing. I'd

f all the

ere, not

paying any attention to my negative body language grudge (regardless of my cheek on his shoulder *and* my arm, which had snaked around his waist) and reading like he didn't have a care in the world. He told me what to do all the time, in macho-speak no less, and in front of other people.

While I was mentally enumerating, his fingers pulled up my nightie, his hand slid inside my panties, over the cheek of my ass, to come to rest flat against my hip.

That felt nice.

As in *way* nice.

So nice, my body relaxed, giving up the grudge.

Okay, then I'd break up with him the day after tomorrow.

Or maybe sometime next week.

When I made that decision, I fell asleep.

TWENTY-TWO



HOME

“**M** eeeeeooow!”

My eyes opened and I saw smooth brown skin.

My head turned and I realized I was partially on my side, partially on Vance. I was pressed up against Vance’s side and back, he was on my stomach. My cheek had been resting on his shoulder, my arms cocked out, one hand against his side, the other flat on his back. My hips and legs were in contact, my top leg thrown over his thigh.

Major cuddle action.

Um.

Serious yikes.

Boo was standing on my shoulder staring down at me, each of his paws pressing into me like they weighed a ton, even though Boo weighed less than twelve pounds.

He was confused at his unprecedented new location and thinking four hours ahead, perhaps in Boston (even though it was doubtful he knew Boston existed), rather than outside Golden and in the same time zone as always. Therefore he’d decided he wanted an early breakfast.

“*Meeeeeeeeooooooooooow!*”

Jeez.

I moved away from Vance, trying to do it gently so as not to wake Boo hadn't already.

"Hush, Boo," I whispered, my voice sounding hoarse with sleep.

I was a heavy sleeper. I knew it was early and I was *not* happy to h sleep and my warm cuddle interrupted.

Vance moved, coming up on his forearms and looking toward me.

"I got him," Vance's voice was sleepy too. Husky-sleepy. Sexy-sleepy.

ally on "That's okay," I said.

on his Then I stopped talking, stopped breathing and my belly fluttered
ed, one Grade Eight, followed by a rollercoaster plummet when I looked at hir
e in full

His voice wasn't the only thing that was sexy-husky-sleepy. H were soft, warm and unguarded and he was looking at me with that possessive look, but also that other look too. The one I could never fig but I knew I remembered. This time, early in the morning, dawn not promise, the room dim and Vance unguarded, the look was magnified.

his kitty And I finally remembered where I'd seen that look before.

himself No one had ever looked at me that way.

No, I'd seen someone else looking at someone else that way.

he was Nick used to look at Auntie Reba that way.

e knew Like she was breath.

zone as Like she was necessity.

Like she was life.

That was the way Vance was looking at me.

him, if Right then, in the dim room, his eyes half sleepy and half full...of
Oh...my...God.

“I got him,” Vance repeated not realizing I’d frozen. He leaned
ave myme, touched his lips to mine and got out of bed. He pulled on his jea
up all the buttons but two, rifled through my bag until he found Boo
and walked out of the bedroom, Boo prancing in his wake, tail straight

-husky- I collapsed on the pillows and turned my back to the door.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap,” I whispered to myself again and
holding the pillow to me. Then I stopped when I thought maybe Vanc
hear.
in deep

n. Something was stealing over me, over my skin, through my insi
is eyes both places it felt like velvet. Then it was all around me like a cocoor
“mine”,and sweet and safe.

ure out, Then Auntie Reba’s voice came to me, the first time in years.

even a After she died I’d hear it a lot, sometimes memories, sometimes I
was talking to me. I used to think I was a little insane so I kept it to m
didn’t even tell Nick. It was my secret and I didn’t want anyone to t
out of having her voice with me. The months passed and it went aw
now it was back. I heard her voice, soft and wise, just like it had been
she said the words.

Nick was in danger of getting transferred to Springfield, Illinois. I
want to go to Springfield. Nick didn’t want to go to Springfield. Aunt
didn’t want to go to Springfield. We were in the kitchen and I was pit
teenage fit. Denver was all I knew. It was *home*.

Auntie Reba, on the other hand, seemed totally at peace.

me. “How can you be so calm?” I’d shouted.

She turned to me, a small smile on her lips. “Jules, sweetheart, home is a place. Home is anywhere, just as long as the people you love are there.”

ms, did Nick never got transferred and a few months later Auntie Reba died.

’s food And home was torn away from us. We’d been homeless ever since.

up.

Or we thought we were.

The tears hit my chest with a weight so hard it shoved itself up my throat again, and I could do nothing about it. It hurt too much to hold them back, so they sprang from my eyes.

I was finally, *finally* back home.

ides. In

But having Nick all these years I realized I’d never left.

l, warm

“I’m so stupid,” I told the pillow.

“Jules?”

I turned in the bed flat on my back and looked at Vance standing in the doorway, tears streaming from my eyes.

talk me

“I...I’m so f-fucking stupid,” I sobbed.

ay, but

“Jesus,” he whispered, took two long strides and then I was in his arms.

the day

“She left and sh-she was...ho-ho-home,” I said against his chest.

somehow

somehow I was in his lap and holding on tight. “And N-N-Nick and not me.”

I didn’t

I’m so stupid.”

ie Reba

I was making no sense. I knew it, but I couldn’t help it.

ching a

Vance had an arm tight around my waist, the other hand stroking my hair.

back.

“She died twelve years ago. *When is it going to stop hurting?*” I sc
over his shoulder.

ne isn't “I don't know, Princess,” Vance murmured into my neck.

re.” I sat in his lap holding on to him and then all of a sudden I shoute
d. a *freak!*”

I was bouncing from subject to subject, my mind unable to
thought.

y throat He pulled away and looked at me. “Sorry?”

k, they “I'm twenty-seven years old and I've never had a boyfriend. I'm
fucking *freak*. I don't know what to do with you. Even though I've
gotten over the whole Vance Crowe, badass, super-cool, macho-man, c
seeker gig, that still, like, flips me out, by the way, now I don't know
be normal. I don't know what *to do*. Auntie Reba would tell me.”

Vance was staring at me like he didn't know what to do either, l
leaning towards a call to the doctor.

g in the “I need to call Nick,” I announced, “I have to tell him I love him.”

“It's barely six o'clock in the morning.”

“He's an early riser.”

arms.

“Jules, I think he knows you love him.”

s neck,

I stared at him and narrowed my eyes. “Are you sure?”

ow this.

He grinned at me. “Pretty much.”

I nodded my head decisively once. “Okay then.”

ing my

Vance kept watching me closely.

Finally he asked, “Are you all right?”

reamed “No, I’m not all right. I’m stupid. I’m totally clueless. I’m a mess
freak. I thought we’d already established that.”

His grin faded and the atmosphere in the room went electric. I
d, “I’m relaxed even though I was crying, my body using his for strength
warmth. I tensed when the room changed because he’d tensed. In
hold a went solid as a rock.

His arms went from around me and he pulled the ponytail holder
the mess of hair at the top of my head and then twisted, tossing it
nightstand.

a total,
e semi- Then he came back to me.

danger- When he did, even in the dim light I saw his eyes were intense
how to intense than usual, burning into me. His hands slid through my hair
sides of my head, his fingers combing through it all the way down my
out was His hands came up to either side of my head, holding it in position to
him, his thumbs coming forward and wiping away my tears.

I got the impression he did all this as an effort at control. What
trying to control, I did not know, but I was about to find out.

“You’re a woman who lost her family, *all* of her family, and did what
had to do to keep going. There’s not one fuckin’ thing stupid or crazy
about that.”

“Crowe—”

He interrupted me, “I hear you call yourself that again, it’s gonna
off.”

Um.

Yikes.

s. I'm a He already sounded pissed off.

“Are you angry with me?” I whispered.

'd been He ignored my question and carried on, “If you'd given your
gth and someone else, you wouldn't be mine. And that would *seriously* piss me
fact he

Okay, now he sounded *seriously* pissed off.

“Crowe—” I tried again.

out of “Far as I can see, with the time she had, your aunt did a fuckin' g
on the with you and left you in the hands of a man who handled you with care
understand you miss her, but if she was alive, she'd be proud of who
become.”

o, more Oh my God.

r at the That velvet feeling was back and it wasn't only enshrouding me
y back. Vance wrapped up in it too.
look at

“Crowe, stop talking,” I whispered.

he was “You want to know more about me?” he offered and at that mo
didn't. I couldn't take anymore.

hat she I didn't have the choice.

clueless “My life has been shit. I'd never been touched with gentleness
understood it, until I saw you handle Roam in Fortnum's. Then the
watchin' football with Nick, you showed it to me by runnin' your
piss me along my jaw after I told you the worst in me. I was once Roam, Juli
might not think it, but it isn't the kids who have two parents and a
home who are the luckiest ones. It's the kids who know the taste
because they've been eatin' it all their lives, and then someone find
and offers them a taste of somethin' sweeter and they learn that life

good. They learn to trust. They learn that if you care about someone, you put your ass on the line to keep them safe. They learn that love doesn't come with conditions. Roam and Sniff are the luckiest kids alive. I never had anyone else offer to put their ass on the line for me. No one gave a shit enough to see it through. No one ever offered to put their ass on the line for me until you."

It was my turn to hold his face. I put both hands up and kept them there.

"Vance—" I started, but he interrupted me again.

"I've been playin' this cool so I wouldn't scare the shit out of you because you're jumpy as a fuckin' jackrabbit, but I'm done with that. You won't listen to you call yourself a freak and I'll let you know something and I don't give a fuck if it flips you out. If you ever think of takin' off, ever get scared enough at what I do for a living that you decide you want to leave, it had better be because you want to, because unless what we have turns out to be something, everything else in my life, I'm not ever letting you go."

"Listen to me—"

"Do you understand what I just said to you?"

"Vance, please listen—"

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said softly.

He stared at me, or more to the point, *glared* at me.

I decided it was time to come clean too. "Well then, maybe you should also be aware of the fact that I know you have a reputation as a player. You know a lot of other people know that. If any woman tries to cut in on my action, I'm taking her down."

I thought I sounded relatively badass and super-cool, for a girl.

you put Vance just kept staring at me a beat, still tense, then his body relaxed. His lips turned up at the ends in an amused mini smile.

ad that. Um.

ne that, No.

there. “This isn’t funny. I’m serious,” I informed him. “I’m a head-c
mamma jamma. You’re too handsome for your own good. I’ll have
most of the single female population of Denver.”

of you Even though I was, indeed, being perfectly serious, his body
now. I moving and it felt a lot like laughter. He twisted and we went down,
ing else my back, him on top of me. By the time he came over me, I knew
; if you laughter, mainly because it had become audible.

u can’t I was offended.

shit like

“Excuse me! This is *not* funny. How come you can make intense,
man statements and I can’t?”

His lips touched mine. He was still laughing.

“Shut up, Jules,” he said there.

“Do *not* tell me to shut up,” I snapped.

So he didn’t.

Using hands, mouth, tongue and other parts of his anatomy, he s
up a different way.

should



er and I VANCE MADE LOVE TO ME. He did it slow, took his time and it was
nto my beautiful.

We took a quick shower, got dressed and went back into town.

In a morning of significant moments, two more were still to come.

ked and First, he told me to leave my stuff in the bathroom.

“I can’t, I need it,” I told him.

“Buy more,” he replied, then walked into the kitchen to make to remake toast. I’d had a go, and I’d burned it. Twice.

rackin’ I added a trip to the mall on my mental agenda for the day and I to deckproblem with it whatsoever. In fact, my pug had never been to the n he was all excited to go (something else about my pug—his fur and f started little wet nose felt like velvet too).

me on Second, Vance followed me on his Harley all the way into Denve it washim in my rearview mirror and I didn’t lose sight of him until I turned into the garage behind the duplex. I knew this took him out of his w offices were in LoDo (lower downtown). He’d gone ten, fifteen minu of his way.

macho-

I could not explain why this was significant, but it was. I’d been own a long time and knowing someone had my back, as it were, w plain nice.

I dropped off Boo, his litter and my bag, and went to King’s.

May descended the minute I came through the door.

shut me I took one look at her stormy face and asked, “What?”

“You still together with Crowe?”

What now?

beyond “Why?” I asked.

“Tell me,” she snapped.

“Yes. Why?” I snapped back.

Her face melted and she was all smiles.

“Just checkin’,” she said, storm cloud gone, all bouncy and happy
want a pudding cup?”

ast. Or, “May, it’s eight thirty in the morning.”

“There’s no time limit on pudding cups.”

had no Jeez.

all and She was grinning at me, pleased as punch that I was getting it regu
ace and I looked at her.

r. I saw *Home*. The word came into my head in Auntie Reba’s voice and
my car shiver ran along my skin.

ay. His “Love you, May,” I said softly.

ites out May blinked at me. “What’d you say, hon?”

I walked the step of distance between us, put my hands on either
on my her neck, bent at the waist and laid my forehead against hers.

was just “Love you,” I whispered.

I watched close up as tears filled her eyes.

She tried to pull away. It wouldn’t be cool for the kids to see us li
but I didn’t care and I held on tight. Maybe they *should* see.

“I think Vance loves me,” I whispered as I lifted my forehead fro
but kept looking in her teary eyes. “He looked at me this morning in
May, you wouldn’t believe. And he told me he’d never let me go.”

May was still staring at me. She’d never heard me share info
about myself freely, certainly not something important, not with
having to drag it out of me.

I let her go, but put an arm around her shoulders and walked her

7. “Youthe office. The whole time my head was bent to hers and I told her ab morning.

“Praise be to Jesus!” she shouted right before we disappeared i hall.

All the kids (luckily, there weren’t that many of them that early morning) stared.
lar.



THE MORNING WAS its usual madness.
a warm

I called my doctor to make an appointment to discuss birth because I was done with the condom business. There might be ways t it fun, but Vance and I were kind of active (okay, *really* activ spontaneous and enough was enough.

side of My cell rang midmorning. The display said, CROWE CALLING.

I flipped it open. “Hey,” I said.

“Got time for lunch?”

I didn’t and that sucked. “Not really,” I told him.

ke this, “I’ll bring something to the shelter.”

I smiled into the phone. “That’d work.”

m hers, “See you around noon.”

a way, My pug gave me a sleepy puppy cuddle.

mation “Okay,” I said.

out her I went in search of Martin and Curtis and hustled them into the room. It was time to get to the bottom of why they’d run away so I cou toward fixing it. But even though I knew I had their respect, they gave me not

We walked out of the yellow room and one of the tutors, Stua

out my coming at me. The boys took off. Most of the kids avoided the tutors
plague.

nto the “Hey, Stu,” I said.

“Got a problem,” he told me. “Roam and Sniff had an appointment
in theme yesterday and today. They missed them both.”

Hmm.

Not good.

Roam seemed all fired up to get an education so he could be
control badass mother. Clearly he'd lost interest when he thought Vance was
o make my life.

re) and “I'll take care of it,” I said to Stu, and I went in search of the boys.

Not stupid, they knew I'd come after them and I caught them
their getaway. I cornered them outside, in front of the building.

“You missed two tutor appointments,” I told them.

“What of it?” Roam asked, all lip and attitude.

“You need to get caught up so we can enroll you in high school
foster home sorted, get your life sorted.”

“Life's good,” Sniff put in in an attempt to assure me they knew
they were doing.

My eyes sliced to him and the look in them made him clamp his
shut for once.

yellow I looked back to Roam. “I thought you wanted to get your diploma

uld start “Don't matter now,” Roam said to me.

hing. “I don't think you understand, what happened with me and Crov

irt, was

like the started.

“I understand, Law, you know I fuckin’ do. Can’t trust no-fuckin’
You think they’re cool, got it goin’ on, and you find out they’re just as
nt with Everyone’s a fuckin’ asshole.”

Hmm.

Really not good.

I got closer.

come a “Roam—” I started again, but to my shock (and it must be said, s
s out of annoyance), he put both hands to my shoulders and shoved me hard.

I went back on a foot and then steadied.

“Fuck off, Law,” he clipped.

making “Hang on a goddamned minute,” I snapped, but I’d lost his attenti
already tense body froze and he was looking over my shoulder.

I looked too.

Vance was not a foot behind me. How he’d materialized, I did no
l, get a I hadn’t heard him or sensed him, but I couldn’t worry about that
moment. Vance’s face was hard and set, his eyes were scary and his
w what was tight. I’d never seen him look that angry. In fact, the word angry
begin to do it justice.

mouth “What the fuck?” Vance’s eyes flashed on Roam.

“What are you doin’ here?” Sniff asked.

.” Vance didn’t take his gaze off Roam.

“I said,” Vance went on, his deep voice quiet, pure silk, but not in
ve—” I way. “What the fuck?”

Roam brought himself up to full height, which was an inch taller than Crowe, but he still looked like a boy. Crowe didn't move from behind his shoulders. I could feel the white-hot vibes crackling between them.

Roam didn't answer.

"Never," Vance continued in his scary voice, "do you put your hands on a woman in anger."

All of a sudden I was finding it difficult to breathe, realizing because of the supreme why Vance looked ready to commit murder.

Roam swallowed. His eyes darted to me then back to Vance, but in his position, his guard up and his mouth shut.

"Okay boys—" I decided it was time to cut in.

on. His Vance didn't agree.

"I see you do that again, I hear you did it, I'll find you and knock goddamned sense into you," Vance warned and I knew it wasn't a threat. I suspected so did Roam. "Now's the time when you nod your head," he prompted.

mouth Roam decided to play with fire. "Don't see why it's your business. You dumped her."

Uh-oh.

"Roam, there's been a—" I started *again* and got interrupted *again*.

Roam continued talking, "Thought you were the shit. Thought you were a good thing. Thought you knew *everything*. You don't know nothing. You threw away a piece like that?" Roam's head jerked in my direction. "You're a good asshole."

Yikes.

er than “Roam,” Sniff said in a cautionary tone. Even Sniff knew Roam
me and carrying it too far.

“Okay, listen to me right now—” I put in, only to be thwarted again.

“I have another rule,” Vance talked over me. His voice was still
ids on a however now it was *scary-scary* and I knew he was just hanging on
control. “You call Jules a piece again and you’ll be sucking your
elatedly through a straw. I don’t care if you’re a kid.”

Roam looked from me to Vance and back again and opened his mouth
he kept say something, but luckily Vance got there before he dug his hole any

“Only reason I don’t put my hands on you right now is because
pissed on Jules’s behalf. We had a misunderstanding. I didn’t dump
We’re together. Nothing’s changed except the fact that I was gonna find
and offer you some time. You want that time, see what I do, understand
k some you have to be smart, you learn some goddamned control.”

eat, and
Vance

Roam’s face changed, confusion warring with hope.

My face probably changed too, mainly because Vance just offered
fuckin’ Roam under his wing. I was finding it hard not to turn to him and kiss
inch of his beautiful face.

“You’re still together?” Roam asked.

“Yeah,” Vance answered.

u knew

“Hey! Cool!” Sniff exclaimed.

1’. You

“You didn’t dump her?” Roam continued.

‘You’re

Vance didn’t bother responding.

Roam looked at me.

“Why didn’t you fuckin’ say anything?” he asked, or more like c

im was and I knew he felt like a fool.

“Sorry, Roam. I didn’t know I needed to inform you of the intricacies of my love life. I’ll add your name to my girlfriend list and invite you to the next gathering,” I said it full of attitude, hopefully loving attitude, and not scary, on. “And for fuck’s sake, stop saying *fuck!*”

The confusion faded from Roam’s eyes, leaving only the hope.

He turned them to Vance.

“I’ll learn control,” he promised.

“I fuckin’ hope so,” Vance responded.

“It won’t happen again.”

Vance nodded.

The crackling, white-hot vibes disintegrated.

Crisis averted.

Thank God.

“Go make an appointment with the tutor,” I ordered.

“This mean I’ll get to be a pall bearer?” Sniff put in.

I looked to the heavens.

Jeez.

“*Ring* bearer, stupid. How many times do I hafta—” Roam started.

“Tutor! Now!” I snapped in my word-is-law voice.

Sniff grinned at me.

Roam didn’t, but his eyes were shining.

“Later?” he asked Vance.

accused Vance nodded again.

They took off.

acies of I turned to Vance.

1 to the He didn't look ready to commit murder anymore. He was staring
id went front door of King's where Roam and Sniff had disappeared and he
like he was thinking about something.

"You okay?" I asked.

His eyes came to me. "That boy'd lay his life down for you."

I blinked.

Then I realized he was right. Not a lot of people would throw at
Vance like that, especially when he was promising physical retribution

I felt that velvet shroud coming around me again and I mentally sr
into it.

I looked at his empty hands. "I thought you were bringing lunch?"

"I left it in the Explorer. Saw you with Roam and Sniff and didn't
good feeling about the body language."

He'd come to my rescue.

"I want to kiss you right now," I blurted.

Oh jeez.

Why did I say that?

Before I could take it back or affect a head-crackin' mamma jamr
Vance's face went soft and sexy and his arms came around me, draw
into his body.

"Don't," I protested. "We're standing right out front, everyone ca
already had a public display of affection with May this morning. I ca

another direct hit to my street cred.”

His head was descending, completely ignoring me.

g at the “Your street cred?” he asked, his voice silk again, this time in
looked way. His eyes were amused.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck your street cred,” Vance murmured against my mouth
kissed me.

Not a touch of the lips but, full on, open mouths, lots of tongue. I
itude at choice but to wrap my arms around his neck, and when I did he lean
bent back and we went at it like teenagers.

l. It took a while for the catcalls and wolf whistles to penetrate our in
ruggled fortress. It was around the time a kid yelled, “You go, dawg!” that I
away.

have a Vance and I looked to the entrance of the shelter and at least a
(maybe more) kids were standing outside the door. May was there b
from ear to ear. More kids, along with Stu and Andy, were looking
windows.

We received an ovation, more whistles, catcalls, shouts of r
encouragement and full-on clapping applause.

na pose, “Goddammit,” I whispered to Vance’s neck, trying to pull out
arms, but they just went tighter.

ring me “I think that should do it,” he said to me, and I looked into his eyes

“What?”

n see. I “Don’t expect anyone will think you’re dumped anymore.”

n’t take Oh.

Well.

I suspected he was right.

a good I relaxed in his arms and smiled at him, street cred be damned.

Vance smiled back.

and he

had no
ed in. I

rvisible
[pulled

a dozen
eaming
out the

aunchy

: of his

h.

Well.

I suspected he was right.

I relaxed in his arms and smiled at him, street cred be damned.

Vance smiled back.

TWENTY-THREE



TOILETRIES AND TIARAS

This was my afternoon and evening:

About ten minutes after Vance left from lunch came call number
Indy.

“Hey, what’re you doin’ tonight?”

“I have to go to the mall,” I told her. “Vance made me leave my
and stuff at his house so I need to double up on toiletries.”

“That is so cool!” she shouted so loud I had to take the phone away
my ear.

“Um...you want to come to the mall?” I asked.

“Wish I could celebrate doubled toiletries, but I’m meeting a couple
friends of mine, Andrea and Marianne, at The Hornet. Want to pop
there after the mall, have a drink? They’d love to meet you and we can
the toiletries. Or are you out with Vance?”

“Vance has an uncertain schedule tonight,” I explained. “He’s
come to my place whenever he’s done. I’m thinking about going out
crackin’ heads later anyway. Probably shouldn’t have impaired judgment

Or more impaired than normal.

Indy laughed. “Probably not.”

“Um...” I hesitated again. “Did you ever double up on toilet paper with Lee?”

“Negative, sister,” she replied, “I moved in with him the first time we were together, kind of.”

“Wow,” I whispered.

“I know,” she said. Then she giggled, and for some strange reason I giggled too.

About an hour before leaving work came call number two.

“Jet.”

“Hey, what’re you doing for Thanksgiving?”

Something felt funny in my belly. Not exactly the flutter. Something like a flutter mixed with a whoosh of happiness. This was because I was I’d be spending Thanksgiving with Nick and Vance and that would be

“I don’t know,” I told her.

“Well, Eddie and I are going to Eddie’s mom, Blanca’s house, and Mom and Tex are together, he and Mom are coming, and since Roxie’s uncle, she and Hank are coming, and since Ally is Hank’s sister and Hank’s parents are coming. Blanca asked me to ask you if you, and Nick want to come.”

“I’ll have to ask Vance and Nick.”

“Okay, let me know. Eddie and I are going over there for dinner and so just give me a ring.”

“Cool,” I said then, “um...Jet?”

“Yeah?”

“Vance asked me to leave my lotion and stuff at his place this morning.”

es with “That is so cool!” she shouted.

I grinned at the phone.

ight we “Did you ever double up on toiletries with Eddie?” I asked. “One his place, one set for yours?”

“No. Didn’t have to do that. I moved in with Eddie after a few d
eason I never moved out.”

Yikes.

What was it with these guys?

I was heading to the mall when call number three came.

Daisy.

ng else, “Hey, sugar. What’s shakin’?”

hoping “I’m on my way to the mall,” I told her. “Vance said to leave my cool. and stuff at his house so I’m doubling up on toiletries.”

“That is so cool!” she shouted.

d since I started laughing.

Tex is I flipped the phone shut after listening to Daisy telling me about h
er, Ally masseuse was coming that night. It was only after I hung up that I real
Vance just talked to a drug-dealing gun-running pimp’s wife and I had no p
with that.

tonight None at all.

How weird was that?

Call number four came about five minutes after Daisy. It was Tod.

“Girlie! You’re doubling up on toiletries?”

ning.” Someone was obviously talking and that someone was either a red

platinum blonde or a honey blonde. I was guessing platinum or Daisy.

set for
"That calls for champagne!" Tod screeched. "I'm getting on a flight with we speak and Stevie's in Baltimore. We're both back in a couple of days and then we're having a Toiletries and Tiaras party."

ays and flight attendants. By the way, when Tod wasn't a drag queen, both Stevie and Tod were flight attendants.

"Toiletries and Tiaras?" I asked.

"Everything goes with tiaras, girlie."

There you go.

Call number five came when I was in Bath and Body Works at Creek Mall. It was Roxie.

y lotion
"Daisy says you're at the mall." Her tone sounded accusatory.

"Um, yeah. Vance told me to leave my lotion—" I started to say.

ow her
"I know, I know. Why didn't you call and tell me you were going to the mall?" she asked then didn't give me time to answer. "I'll meet you outside the MAC store in fifteen minutes. We'll shop then get pizza at California Kitchen and we'll gab." Again, she didn't let me answer, she disconnected I'd

problem
Roxie and I were browsing in the underwear section of Nordstrom when call number six came.

Ally.

"Hey, chickie. What's this I hear about leaving your lotion at Vance's?"

I gave her the lowdown.

head, a
"That is so cool!" she yelled then, "Listen, I'm working at the Brother's Bar." Ally, I'd found out the other night, was a bartender at the Brother's Bar when she wasn't working at Fortnum's. "Come over, I'll

you a drink to celebrate.”

light as “Can’t. Roxie and I are at the mall. We’re looking at undies then
ays and getting a pizza. Anyway, Tod is going to have a Toiletries and Tiaras j
a couple of days,” I said.

nd were “Works for me,” Ally replied, clearly always up for any kind of pa
I was buying three new silky, lacy and satiny underwear sets w/ l
number seven came.

Vance.

“Where are you?” he asked. Not taking my instruction in common
Cherry that you should identify yourself, he launched right in with macho-spe

“Buying underwear at Nordstrom with Roxie.”

Silence.

“Vance?”

g to the “Give me a minute, Princess.”

side the “Why?”

a Pizza “I’m enjoying a mental picture.”

cted.

I grinned at the phone. “Still your mind, Crowe, and tell me w
n when called.”

“Lee tells me you’re goin’ out tonight.”

“How did he...?” I started.
e’s?”

This time, I figured it was the redhead who had the big mouth. Ind

Jeez.

shift at “Yeah, I’m thinking about it,” I said.
at My

I’ll buy “I’m caught up in something. I can’t take your back.”

“That’s okay.”

n we’re party in streets without someone doin’ backup.” More silence for a beat and then, “It’s *not* okay. I don’t want you

“Crowe, I’ve been doing this alone for months.”

erty. “You’re not doin’ it alone anymore.”

ien call Again the macho-speak.

“Crowe—”

“I’ll ask around, get one of the guys to ride with you.”

civility ak. “Crowe—” I started again, but I heard the disconnect.

“Goddammit!” I shouted at my dead phone.

“What?” Roxie asked.

“Vance is arranging for someone to ride with me tonight, even I’m perfectly fine going it alone. I mean, I did flip a drug dealer onto h and nearly shot another one in the foot not a week ago, and two nigh on my own, I dropped a pimp and two of his whores!” I snapped.

The customer service representative who was ringing up my sexy hy youlacy, satiny, delicate, pretty, girlie underwear gasped.

Roxie’s gaze swung to her then back to me and she giggled.

Then she said, “Ask Uncle Tex. He’s *dying* for some action.”

This was true, he was. But Tex was a little scary. Tex had an old g full of teargas at the ready. Tex, I thought, was not a good idea.

“I don’t think—” I started, but she was already hitting the green bu her phone.

“Uncle Tex? It’s Roxie, listen Jules needs someone to ride w

tonight...”

I on the I sighed and looked at the customer service representative. She pale.

“What can you do?” I asked her.

She shook her head and rushed through my purchase.

Call number eight came while we were walking towards Californi Kitchen. I pulled out my phone wondering if it could overheat. I’d nev this popular.

It was Zip and he didn’t have the courtesy to identify himself eithe

“What? You got the big boys teachin’ you the fancy moves, yo need me, Heavy and Frank no more?”

Uh-oh.

though
his back
its ago,
Zip—” I started.

“You’re comin’ in to target practice. Tonight.”

“Zip, I just doubled up on toiletries because Vance told me to leav
7, silky, at his place. Now I’m getting pizza with Roxie. Then I’m going out t
some heads. I don’t have time to shoot.”

“You left your stuff at Crowe’s?” Zip asked, “I thought you t
broken up.”

ym bag “There was a misunderstanding. Apparently we hadn’t.”

“Yeah. I bet. Heard you’ve been on the street with Stark. One mo
itton on the other moves in, the first one decides he doesn’t feel so much like
out no more.”

with her “It wasn’t like that,” I told him.

“Don’t got time to process your love life. Girl, you are loco. Fucki
looked You don’t leave your stuff at a man’s house after knowin’ him for a w

“Of course not,” I snapped. “I’ve known him for a week and two d

“Shee-it. Those fuckin’ guys,” Zip said then gave up. “You’re
tomorrow night. No excuses.”

a Pizza Disconnect.

er been When our pizzas were served, I asked Roxie, “So, did you ever do
on toiletries with Hank?”

r. She shook her head. “I lived in Chicago. When I was in Denver, I
u don’tthe time I stayed with Hank. I went back to Chicago for a few weeks
up and when I got to Denver, I moved right in with Hank. I was supp
get an apartment for six months, but Hank didn’t like that idea. As it
didn’t like it.”

I blinked at her.

re mine “These guys move fast,” I whispered.

o crack She smiled and I realized that she’d been living with Hank for as
I’d known Vance. She’d moved to Denver the day I met him
relationship was still relatively new.

wo had “How’s it going?” I asked softly.

Her smile got bright but her eyes got soft and she didn’t answer l
she didn’t have to.

ves out, “I’m so glad, Roxie.” Then, before I could stop myself, I reach
movin’ grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

She squeezed back, then she started giggling and again, I did too.

Call number nine came after Roxie and I said good-bye and

n' loco. walking back to my car. It was Luke.

EEK!" "What the fuck?" He also hadn't taken phone etiquette classes.

ays." "What the fuck what?" I asked.

in here "I thought you were givin' me a week? Shortest fuckin' week in I
you goin' out tonight with Tex."

"How did you know I was going out with Tex?"

uble up "Clue in, Law. People talk."

I was beginning to realize that.

most of "I thought our deal went south when Vance and I got back toge
to pack explained.

osed to "A deal's a deal."

n really

I thought about this. I thought about what Vance would think about
figured Vance wouldn't like it much. Furthermore, I decided I did
ride-alongs, partly because they reminded me that people sucked and
because Luke hogged all the action.

long as "You hog all the action," I told him.

. Their "Babe," he replied.

"No, seriously."

because "Wasn't me who took down a pimp and two whores single-handed
Hmm.

ied out, He was right.

Time for a different tactic.

"If we keep our deal, I have to explain it to Vance. I'm not sure
I was can take another Yoko Ono conversation," I told Luke.

Silence.

“Luke?”

“Jesus,” came the muttered reply.

history, “What?”

He didn’t answer on our primary topic, instead he said, “Tonight, sure you take lead. Tex is a nut and Tex is an ex-con. Do not let anything crazy. You go down, you got no priors. He goes down, he’s The cops want you off the streets and they’ll be aimin’ for you. Take ther,” I Camino, your Camaro’s too visible. And for fuck’s sake, keep sharp.”

Disconnect.

Call number ten came when I was in my kitchen, punching in my code and Boo was shouting at me for treats, very unhappy with my trip it this. I mall and my gab with Roxie at California Pizza Kitchen and not afraid n’t like me. I partly

I dumped my shopping bags and purse on the kitchen table and set out the phone.

Vance.

“What’s this about Tex?”

Jeez.

“Crowe—”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

Time for evasive maneuvering.

Vance “Jet wants to know if you want to have Thanksgiving at Eddie’s house with her and Eddie, Tex and Nancy, Roxie and Hank, Ally and parents. Or do you just want to have it with Nick and me? Or, erm...c

um, have to work or something?”

Oh my *God*.

I was *such* a dork.

When Vance answered, his voice was pure silk. Evasive maneuver was effective and it was clear Vance didn't think I was a dork.

“What do you want, Princess?”

I felt the warm whoosh in my belly.

“Just you and Nick,” I replied.

“That's what we'll do then.”

I smiled at the phone. Again.

“I'll make pumpkin pie,” I said.

“We'll get one at King Soopers.”

Disconnect.

I stared at the phone.

“I am so sure,” I said to the phone.

“Meow!” Boo said to me.



TEX DROVE a bronze El Camino and Tex played his rock 'n' roll loud.

Therefore, when we went barreling into the parking lot toward the deal, the Doobie Brother's "Listen to the Music" was blasting.

Tex screeched to a halt, swinging the wheel at the last minute so with a 180 degree turn.

We were such a sight to see (and hear) that instead of running, the mom's and her and seller stared at us in frozen shock and I didn't blame them. lid you,

Then during the Doobie Brothers singing the chorus, Tex got out I got out my side and we lobbed the smoke bombs. Three for him, three for me. The buyers and seller started choking, spluttering, cursing and scurrying

Tex and I jumped into the car and Tex peeled away.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about, turkey!” Tex shouted at the window and banged his fist on the steering wheel. He did this every time we were in action, except once, instead of “turkey,” he said, “sucka.”

It had been an active night. We were out of smoke bombs.

Make no mistake, The Law and her sidekick, Tex, the Crackpot Guy, were on the job.

“We’re out of smoke bombs,” I told Tex.

“Could swing by your place, pick up the teargas,” Tex suggested.

Um.

No.

“I don’t think smoke bombs are illegal. I’m not sure about teargas.”

Tex was silent for a moment as if contemplating this.

Finally he said, “See your point.”

“Maybe we should call it a night?”

“We goin’ out again tomorrow?”

Hmm.

He said “we.”

I was a loner, or had been until recently. I hadn’t seen a lot of other buyers in a while and that had been at night when I thought Vance and I had set up.

his side, That time wasn't fun.

free for Furthermore, Tex was huge, burly and relaxed. He caused mayhem
rrying. was second nature. He made me feel safe.

It was a new experience, being out making life a pain for drug
shield with Tex.

'd seen I liked it.

"Sure," I said.

"Fuckin' A, woman!" Tex boomed.

Coffee I smiled.

We went to his house. He stood on the sidewalk and didn't make
toward his door until I was in my car and headed down the street.



I WAS NEGOTIATING the alley toward Nick and my garage when a car r
out of a back drive right into the alley, right in front of me. To av
„ slammed on the brakes and came to a bone-jarring halt.

I stared out the windshield. The car was dark, no lights.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

I threw the Camaro in reverse and looked over my shoulder, b
could see was a motorcycle parked perpendicular to my car.

I'd wasted precious time shifting to reverse. I should have lock
doors. I didn't even get a chance to move when my door was thrown o

Before I could grab my gun or stun gun on the seat beside me, s
ne time reached in, undid my belt and yanked me out of the car.

broken

He slammed the door and then slammed me against the car and
close, his hard body to my soft one, his heat slamming into me like a p

thing.

When I got a look at him in the hazy alley streetlight, I went still.

He looked like a somewhat younger, tougher, rougher, but just as handsome version of Eddie Chavez.

This had to be Hector Chavez, Eddie's brother.

Oh my *God*.

Before I could say a word or do a thing, he started speaking.

“Get off the street Law. Shard, Jermaine and Clarence are looking for retribution, no matter what protection Crowe is offering. They aren't going to take you down. They're gonna take you somewhere and play with you awhile, games you won't think are fun.”

I'd stilled at the sight of him, but his words sent a chill through my veins.

“When they're done, you'll beg them to kill you,” he went on.

Um.

Yikes.

“Do I make myself clear?” he asked.

Without delay, I nodded. He made himself clear all right.

He stared at me. I could tell his eyes were dark, liquid black like his brother's, and I found myself wishing for more light just so I could see them.

He got closer. This wouldn't seem possible, but just like Van Dine, someone Hector did—right deep, face-to-face in my space.

“You tell anyone you saw me you'll blow my cover and I won't be happy, mainly because I won't be breathin'.”

Physical

I swallowed.

“Nod if you understand,” he demanded.

red-hot I nodded again. I understood.

He was a cop...or something. Likely deep cover if even Eddie a didn't know what he was up to.

“Does that mean you don't want me to say anything to...?” I starte

He looked to his left, nodded once, then back at me. “The boys'll k cin' forkeep their mouths shut.”

t gonna Then, as fast as he'd come, he was gone, disappearing into the nig
ith youcar in front of Hazel took off. The motorcycle behind her did the :
never even saw the drivers.

blood. Wow.

With full body shakes I drove Hazel to the garage, super cautiou
checking mirrors, willing my ears to have powers beyond normal. I
secured the garage and then ran into the house, even though I wanted
and kiss Vance's Harley which was sitting outside my back door.

I flew into the kitchen and dumped my weapons and bag on th
Then I locked the door and armed the alarm.

like his Boo sauntered in and looked at me.

ld read “Meow,” he said.

ce had, Obviously Vance had given him treats or pets because Boo was a
a lot more calm than me.

on't be I stared at my cat for a beat.

Then I screeched, “*Crowe!*”

I was standing and hyperventilating in my kitchen when Vance was there. He took one look at me and came to a dead halt.

“I, you...we...oh my *God*,” I said.

and Lee “Jesus, Jules. Are you all right?”

I shook my head, then I nodded it, then I shook it again.

d. He started toward me. I took a step back and he stopped again, then his brows came together.

“You’re not gonna try and break up with me again, are you?” he asked. The This time I just shook my head.

same. I His eyes narrowed under knitted brows. “Is Tex okay?”

I nodded.

“Are you okay?”

is, eyes I shook my head.

parked, He came forward again and I didn’t retreat. “Are you hurt?”
to stop

“I just met Hector Chavez,” I announced.

e table. Vance stopped again, in my space. I saw his eyes flash.

“What the fuck?” he murmured.

“Just now, he and a couple of his buddies fenced me and Hazel in the alley. He yanked me out of the car, warned me off the street. Told me fuck of Jermaine and Clarence were going to hurt me no matter what price you’re offering.”

This didn’t make Vance look happy. “He say anything else?”

“Nothing I care repeating. Not on that subject anyway. He did say to anyone about our chat, I’d blow his cover, which means he would

lked in, breathing anymore...or something like that.”

Vance stared at me then he muttered, “Christ.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what I was feeling, but I thought it might be f
A lot of fear.

I wasn’t going to admit to that out loud so I just took a deep breat
his time and control it. That didn’t work so I leaned forward, head down, and c
with Crowe, forehead to his shoulder.

iked. He took my weight without a word, his arms coming around me.

“You gotta get off the street,” he said softly.

“If I do, they win,” I said just as softly, even though I agreed with l
Vance didn’t respond.

I didn’t want to play the games Shard, Clarence and Jermai
planned for me. I knew I’d be disappointing Tex, but if something ha
to me, who’d take care of Roam and Sniff? Who’d have dinner with N
drive him crazy occasionally? Who’d give it to Vance regularly?

I didn’t want to think of anyone (or multiple anyones) giving it to
regularly.

This meant I had to get off the street.

l, in the *Goddammit.*

: Shard, I looked up at Vance.

rotection “Shit,” I said.

His arms got tighter and he kissed my forehead, but he still did
if I told anything.

dn’t be There was something nice about that. He didn’t rub it in or mak

deal about it. He just let my decision...be.

Even though I was freaking out, I felt another pleasant whoosh
ear. belly.

“This sucks,” I told him. “Tex and I had fun tonight. He’s
h to try sidekick. We used up all our smoke bombs. He’s gonna be pissed w
collided going out tomorrow night.”

“He’ll get over it,” Vance replied.

“I have seventeen rolls of plastic wrap. What am I going to c
seventeen rolls of plastic wrap? I never have leftovers. I don’t cook.”

Vance grinned at me. “Maybe Nick can use them,” he suggested.
aim.

“What am I going to do at night?” I went on. “I’m used to ni
ne had action. I’m going to get bored. I can’t go from making an art of h
ppened lying around reading a book. I’ll go nuts.”

His eyes got soft and sexy. “We’ll find some way to keep you busy
ick and My belly fluttered.

“Hmm.”
Vance

“What if you’re working or out of town?” I inquired.

“For the time being, I’ll work something out with Lee.”

“I don’t want you getting into trouble at work,” I told him.

His grin turned into a smile. “Maybe you don’t get it, Princess. Le
you fucked up by Shard, Clarence and Jermaine only slightly less tha
ln’t say You got nothin’ to worry about.”

That caused a belly whoosh too. Not as big as the other one, but
e a big still nice.

“Crowe.”

in my “You got nothin’ to worry about,” he repeated.

“I don’t think—”

a great “Shut up, Jules.”

e aren’t

It was my turn for my brows to knit over narrowed eyes. “Serious the last time, don’t tell me to shut up.”

Crowe ignored my attitude, stepped away from me and looked around with room.

“Why are we standin’ in the kitchen?” he asked.

I blinked at him, not keeping up. I thought we had begun to bicker. I didn’t of liked bickering with him. His question threw me.

avoc to

“What?” I asked.

“Lots of better places for us to be,” was his answer.

.”

Before I could reply, he leaned down, put a shoulder in my belly, at my wrist and an arm around my thighs and lifted, wrapping me around neck. He turned and started walking toward the hall.

I shouted, “Crowe!” as if I minded him carrying me to bed.

Um.

Hardly.

e wants

in I do.

I didn’t mind at all.

t it was

“Crowe.”

“You got nothin’ to worry about,” he repeated.

“I don’t think—”

“Shut up, Jules.”

It was my turn for my brows to knit over narrowed eyes. “Seriously, for the last time, don’t tell me to shut up.”

Crowe ignored my attitude, stepped away from me and looked around the room.

“Why are we standin’ in the kitchen?” he asked.

I blinked at him, not keeping up. I thought we had begun to bicker. I kind of liked bickering with him. His question threw me.

“What?” I asked.

“Lots of better places for us to be,” was his answer.

Before I could reply, he leaned down, put a shoulder in my belly, a hand at my wrist and an arm around my thighs and lifted, wrapping me around his neck. He turned and started walking toward the hall.

I shouted, “Crowe!” as if I minded him carrying me to bed.

Um.

Hardly.

I didn’t mind at all.



CHOPPED LIVER

I woke up to heavy kitty footfalls on my body.

I felt Vance's warmth against my back, his body spooning me with his forearm resting just below my waist.

I decided this was my Number One Most Favorite Sleeping Position. Vance and I was looking forward to ranking alternates.

Boo walked back and forth across Vance and me. I could tell he was doing this because his kitty feet would leave me and then come back a lot further down or up my body.

I opened my eyes. It was still dark, night on winter so the days were short but I knew it was too early for Boo Breakfast.

When Boo was four footed on my body, I did a jerk. He lost his paws and slid clumsily down my belly with an angry, "Meow!"

I wrapped an arm around him and tucked him into my body. He was purring loudly.

"Would you break up with me if I killed your cat?" Vance's sleepy voice sounded against the back of my neck.

"Probably."

Vance's arm moved, his hand sliding up my belly, midriff, then c

rest cupping my breast.

I was wrong. There was only a subtle change, but *this* was my **1**
One Most Favorite Sleeping Position with Vance.



I WOKE up again and it was later. I didn't know how much later
instinctively knew there wasn't much time before the alarm went.

I rolled to my belly, dislodging Boo and Vance's arm. Vance
automatically, falling to his back. I turned into him, ready to say sorry
but when I lifted up on my elbows I realized he was still asleep.
ine, his

I wished I could turn on a light. I'd never seen him asleep. He was
up before or with me.
on with

I studied him. There was something about him asleep from what
see in the near-dark. He seemed almost...boyish.
he was

God, I wanted to kiss him, as in *really* wanted to kiss him.
to me a

This gave me pause for reflection. Not as to why I'd want to ki
because that was obvious, but as to why I didn't. He *was* my boyfri
whatever). We *were* exclusive. He *was* sleeping in my bed. We
incredible sex not seven hours earlier.
osition

Why not? Why couldn't I kiss him?

So I kissed him.
started

Not a full-on, full-tongue, let's-have-sex-*right-now* kiss, but I touc
lips to his.
y-rough

When I pulled back, his eyes were open.

"Good morning," I said and smiled.

He stared at me and he didn't look boyish anymore.
came to

Um.

Number Maybe I shouldn't have kissed him.

As he kept staring at me, my smile began to fade.

; but I "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake—" I started.

Then he moved, arms going around me, body rolling into me pressing between my legs, mouth on mine.

moved His kiss was a full-on, full-tongue, we're-going-to-have-sex-right something, kiss and I responded. I had no choice. However, if I was given one, I said yes.

always He was all over me and it became clear very quickly he wasn't mood for me to be all over him. I figured this out because he even I could pinned my hands to the bed, his at my wrists and he did magnificent things my mouth, neck and breasts with his mouth and tongue, and shocking very effectively, with his teeth.

ss him, When I was making noises I couldn't control and struggling at his end (or in order to touch him, he went lower, letting my wrists go so he could I'd had my legs.

Then his mouth was *there*.

Yay! My brain screamed.

My hands slid into his hair. His hands tilted my hips and very hed my after I was panting, rocketing to Grade Ten with my entire body on fire enjoying the ride.

"Vance," I whispered, coming close.

He kept going and my rocket ride kept ascending.

"Vance," I breathed before I hit the stratosphere, dazzled by the stars.

Vance came up over me. I was still flying high when he rolled us, him back, me on top. He pulled up my knees so I was astride him. He c with me and reached to the shelf, nabbing a condom.

“I’ll do it,” I whispered, still breathing heavily.

“Quiet.”

ly, thigh

Obviously he didn’t feel like playing around. One second he was the packet open with his white teeth, the next second he was inside me

ght-now

’d have

My head fell back.

He rolled again, him on top of me, but not for very long. He kept bent and lifted up his torso. Coming to his knees, he pulled up my h drove into me. The whole time he moved inside me, he was watching I was watching him.

t in the

ntually

ings to

gly, but

s hands

l spread

Even though he was far away, the intimacy of our connection, the of him, the way he was watching me with that fierce “mine” look on l overwhelmed me. And although I’d descended to a Grade Six or Sev my orgasm, it started coming over me again.

It was helped when his hand took mine, moving it between us so feel him sliding inside me. Then his fingers pressed mine deep, jus right spot, and manipulated them. It didn’t take long before I let go, his name again.

shortly

fire and



WHILE VANCE WENT to the bathroom, I laid in bed thinking that I’d sp newly-free evenings trying to learn how to knit so I could make sweaters.

I was mentally designing a sexy turtleneck when the alarm sou ars, and rolled over and slapped the off button, rolled back and cuddled i

1 on his pillows.

ame up Boo said, "Meow," which meant "breakfast."

"Not now, Boo, Mommy just had two orgasms. She's recovering."

Boo was not impressed with this new and unusual excuse and gave me a kitty pouty face.

tearing Vance came back and curled me into his arms, full frontal, thigh pinning me between my legs so I was forced to wrap one around his hip.

"What was that?" I asked him.

ny legs "What?"

ips and "What you just did."

me and

He grinned his shit-eating grin. "It was good morning."

beauty "Good" didn't quite cover it.

his face He sure did "good morning" a lot better than me.

en after "Next time I get to pin your hands down to the bed and have my way with you," I told him.

I could I wanted to try the teeth thing on him. That was nice.

t at the He didn't answer, but he looked amused.

saying "No, seriously. It's only fair," I said.

"You could try."

end my Hmm.

Vance He said "try."

Whatever.

nded. I I was feeling too mellow to bicker.

nto the "What's on for your day?" he asked.

“First up, doctor’s appointment,” I started, but Vance interrupt remnants of his amused look faded and his body got tense.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you goin’ to the doctor?”

“Um...”

“Are you okay?”

I felt that whoosh of warmth through my belly at his concern couldn’t help but smile at him.

“Yeah, we just need to discuss, erm...” Why was this embarrassing just had his mouth between my legs. I told myself to get over it and on, “Contraception.”

His body relaxed and he kissed my forehead.

“That’d be good,” he said softly. “Then what?”

“Work. I need to get to Fortnum’s, break it to Tex that his night sidekick will be short-lived. Then I’m going to the hobby shop and up a How-To-Knit Kit.”

I didn’t know if there was such a thing as a How-To-Knit-Kit, but have time to wonder for long because Vance’s body started to shudder with laughter.

“How to knit?” he asked, voice still amused.

“Yeah, I’ll need to do something in the evenings that doesn’t involve getting me kidnapped and other things that freak me out. I tried baking, as you could see, didn’t work. Now I’m going to try knitting.”

ed, the Knitting didn't burn when Daisy came over to give you an imp facial and you forgot it so I thought it was a safe bet.

Vance rolled into me so he was partly on top of me, partly at my s was shaking his head and he had that look on his face, the look that sai too adorable for words. His hand went to the side of my head and his ran through my hair.

“What’s on for your day?” I asked, and I found that I liked this.

I liked cuddling and talking after spending the night together and n 1 and I sex. It didn't cause a belly whoosh or flutter or plummet, it just made warm, relaxed, mellow...happy.

3? He'd I hadn't felt really happy in twelve years and it was nice. As in forged nice.

“I’m gonna take Roam and Sniff out later. Can you bring t Fortnum’s when you talk to Tex?”

Okay, I was back to the belly whoosh.

its as a I nodded, smiling at him again, and this time I suspected it was ; picking This was confirmed when Vance’s eyes got warm and soft. Or warn softer.

I didn't “Doesn’t take much with you, does it?” he murmured.

ke with “This may not seem much for you, Crowe, but it’s gonna rock Ro Sniff’s worlds.”

He didn't respond.

involve “What does it take for you?” I whispered and wished I hadn't.

g. That, That was a moonlight question. Even feeling mellow and happy, I quite sure I was ready for a moonlight conversation in the morning. W

romptuone yesterday and I was thinking once a week was my quota.

Surprisingly, he didn't hesitate in giving his response, clearly not
ide. He my moonlight restrictions on deep, meaningful, soul-sh
d I was conversations.

fingers "Making you come, watching you come, hearin' you say my nam
you do."

Well, one thing you could say for that, it had a theme.

orning He wasn't finished.

me feel "Not knowin' what ridiculous shit is gonna come out of your mo
make me smile, Yoko Ono, learnin' to knit, namin' your car Hazel."

1 super Okay, I was back to needing the moonlight. That was too
Especially since his face had changed and so had the air. He still h
hem to warm and soft look, but somehow it was mingled with intensity and
know what was going to come next. What I did know was that I wasn't
to be prepared for it whatever it was.

giddily. "Crowe—"

ner and I was right, he'd saved the real whammy for last and I wasn't prep
it.

When he spoke again, his voice had that fierce undercurrent and
am and across my skin, shrouding me in velvet.

"Knowin' I got something to live for now that you're mine. Ke
that way, workin' at keepin' this good like it is right now."

I stopped breathing and he kept talking.

wasn't "I can go back now, to the rez, to my family with you on the back
e'd had bike."

My lungs started burning with lack of oxygen, but that was sharing considering my heart had also stopped beating. I figured I was going to atter any moment and I was totally fine with that.

Vance continued, “They can see that, despite them I made it to the side, past their shit. While they lived their dysfunction, I worked my something better, ridin’ up with you wrapped around me.”

I butted in. It took a great deal of effort, mainly because overwhelmed by what he was saying.

uth and “Vance, you’re defined by more than just me giving my virginity to
After I said that he kissed me softly, then he did it again, then again
much. Then, his face an inch away from mine, he said, “You’re right, P
ad that That’s not what I’m sayin’. It isn’t about that, though that was a bonu
I didn’t if I hadn’t been your first, I still would claim you as mine. But any
’t going defined by the woman who shares her bed with him.”

“That isn’t true.”

“It is, and it works the other way too.”

ared for Oh my *God*.

Did he really think that?

l it slid “Crowe—”

“Which means, if someone like you, someone as unbelievably b
epin’ it as you, as crazy and sweet as you, filled with attitude and courage w
heart in the right place, in a lot of right places even though her head n
isn’t...if someone like you shares her bed with me, then that says sor
κ of my about me.”

Oh...my...God.

s okay I was going to let the comment about my head not being in the right
to die at slide because the rest of it was so fucking nice.

“Vance—”

ie other “Shut up, Jules.”

way to I decided to give up telling him not to tell me to shut up and despaired
I looked for a different topic that was safe for morning discussions. I needed
I was move on, process this later. Perhaps in the nighttime hours with
moonlight coming in the window and Vance asleep while we were
to you.” driving another Most Favorite Sleeping Position.

1. Finally I blurted, “You never answered me. Do you like The Beatles?”

rincess. He stared at me a beat then asked, “What?”

s. Even “The Beatles. Do you like them?”

man is He totally had my number. I knew it when the intensity slid away, my
grin spread on his face and he kissed me softly again. Thankfully, the
moonlight conversation goes on and I knew this was because he knew I
him to let it go...for now.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Stevie Wonder?”

“Yeah,” he repeated.

beautiful I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Well, that’s a load off my mind.”

with her He shook his head again, eyes amused, then he switched the subject
formally “Today, I want you checkin’ in with me regularly, and if you can’t
nothing through to me then call the surveillance room. Yeah?”

I nodded. I could do that. That didn’t sound hard.

Vance carried on, “I’ll get a panic button from the office. I’ll give

at place you at Fortnum's."

Um.

No.

I scrunched my nose. A head-crackin' mamma jamma with a
operately button?

eded to I didn't think so.

ith the Vance's relaxed grin faded. "I'm not arguing about this, Jules. You
re test- take the panic button or you got a bodyguard, whether you want one
Your choice. You're protected one way or the other until we pick up
as?" Jermaine and Clarence and convince them to change their minds."

Hmm.

Macho-speak.

a slow My eyes narrowed.

let the "Choose, Jules."

needed "Is there a door number three?" I asked.

"Yeah. They can pick you up, gang rape you repeatedly while alternate
beatin' the shit out of you until you wished you were dead. Then I'd
hunt them down and kill them, and after that I'd spend the rest of my
prison. That's door number three."

Um.

subject. Yikes.

in't get "I choose the panic button," I said immediately.

His body relaxed.

ve it to He kissed my forehead again and said, "Wise choice."



WE WERE SITTING in the Arby's drive-through in May's grandma van, the wheel and me in the passenger seat. Clarice was in the back seat with Roam and Sniff. She was on the phone taking orders from Daisy, who was in a panic at Fortnum's, where we were heading after Arby's.

I had three months of birth control pills in my purse and I was supposed to start taking them after my next period, which I hoped and prayed would either come right on schedule in two days.

or not. Things were going well with Vance and I. Super well, beyond-qualified. Shard, powered well, in the way that only these badass boys seemed to be able to pull off.

Still, I didn't want to be carrying around a mini-Vance just yet.

I'd told Roam and Sniff that Vance was picking them up after school. Roam was playing it cool. Sniff was jumping around the seat radiating excitement, unable to contain it.

I'd called and checked in three times, once when I got to the doctor's, unfortunately once when I got to work from the doctor's, and then when I left the house to have to go with May and the kids for lunch. Vance had answered his phone each time.

life in The last time I called, I said, "I'm kind of...um, over this check-up shit."

He laughed. "Princess, it's only been half a day."

"You think you could round up Jermaine, Clarence and Shard quickly? This is cutting into my whole head-crackin' mamma jamma vibe."

"I thought you were going to learn how to knit."

"Yeah, for now. Once you take care of the bad guys then Tex and I can

back on the street.”

May at Silence.

at with Then, “Christ.”

was at “Vance.”

pposed “Later, Princess.”

l would Disconnect.

Obviously, Vance didn’t feel like bickering (or arguing) today either. After picking up enough utterly delicious processed roast beef covered in orange cheese (and even more orange special sauce) to feed an army, we headed to Fortnum’s.

I knew something wasn’t right the minute we walked in. I knew it because both Zip and Heavy were there and neither of them were the radiating guys who hung out at a bookstore.

Indy was behind the espresso counter. Jet was walking up to the doctor’s, Daisy was sitting on a couch. The skinny, tall lady was behind the Shelter counter and there were about five customers sitting around in the seatime, enjoying coffee.

king in I looked to Heavy and Zip and gave them a smile.

“Hey. What are you guys—?” I started to say but Heavy stormed in to me.

ork-like? My Arby’s bags were confiscated by Heavy, who shoved the surprised Jet’s hands. Then Zip, Duke and Tex descended and I was being bounced off one man into another then another then another until I was down the aisle of the book section and shoved right into one of the rows.

nd I are “What’s going on?” I asked when they’d stopped me, my back

books.

They had surrounded me, all wearing identical father-about-to-spare-recalcitrant-daughter expressions, except Tex, who looked like he was about to rip someone's head off, and I just hoped it wasn't mine.

"You're off-duty," Zip declared.

"No more night patrol. Done." Tex shocked me by booming.

er. "Everywhere you go, one of us goes with," Heavy announced.

ered in "If you ain't in Fortnum's, at the shelter or home, you got an
my, we Duke stated.

I looked around the pack of them.

ew this "I take it you heard about Shard, Jermaine and Clarence," I guessed.

kind of "Sure thing, sugar." Daisy had arrived. She burrowed into the beef
stand in front of Tex. "My husband gave me the scoop last night and
me and your boys. Rumor on the street is you're a marked woman. Whatever
e book have planned, we're gonna make sure it ain't gonna happen, *comprend*

ng area Shit, now even Marcus Sloan was looking after me.

I didn't know what to do with that and didn't have a chance to process.

"No discussion," Zip broke into my thoughts. "No, 'Zip' is gone
right up you out of this one," Zip imitated my word-is-law voice when he said
own name and it was hard not to laugh.

m in a The good thing about this was Tex wasn't going to be pissed that
rustled, weren't going out that night.

l I was The bad news was I didn't much like people telling me what to
7S. already decided to lay low until the coast was clear. I didn't need the C
to the Middle-Aged Men Posse and Daisy telling me what to do.

“Listen, folks—” I began to say in my word-is-law voice.

May forced her way into the group.

Not good.

“What’s goin’ on?” she asked, eyes narrowed. She planted her hands on her ample hips, elbowing Zip and Duke as she did so.

“Nothing, May. Everything’s fine,” I answered, even though it was an obvious lie.

I didn’t need May to know what was happening. She’d freak.

May’s narrowed eyes focused on me. “You thinkin’ of breakin’ up with Crowe again?”

“No!” I snapped, exasperated.

So I broke up with him once and it almost took effect. I’d learned a lesson. Was I going to pay for it for the rest of my life?

Jeez.

“Vance and I are solid, we’re real solid,” I went on, assuring her. “We’re...good.”

I started smiling to myself. I couldn’t help it. Vance and I were a damn good team. Even I, Miss No Relationship or Sex Experience, knew enough to know that we were seriously good.

At the sight of my smile, Daisy gave a tinkly-bell laugh.

The men weren’t laughing.

“Better wipe that goofy-assed smile off your face, Law, and get your fuckin’ head in the game,” Heavy barged right into my happy thoughts. Grumpy scowled at him.

“I have my head in the game,” I told him.

“Your mind’s somewhere else. Probably knitting baby booties,” Z and even though I knew he was trying to goad my head-crackin’ r
ands on jamma to the surface, I still took the bait.

“No! Not booties. Knitting sweaters for Vance. Babies are out
was an question, for now.”

Daisy gave another tinkly laugh.

“Hon, you thinkin’ about babies?” May asked, her face now the pi
up with motherly worry. “Don’t you think it’s a bit too soon? As in, *seriou*
soon? I mean, it’s only been a week.”

“A week and three days,” I replied.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Zip said to the ceiling.
ned my

“Let me get this straight. A second ago we were talkin’ about thre
drug dealers markin’ you for rape and torture, and now we’re talkin
you knittin’ sweaters for Crowe?” Duke asked. “Jesus fuckin’ Chri
g May. fuckin’ girls.”

At Duke’s words, May lost her motherly worry face and it went
e good. the narrow-eyed, pissed-off face.
ow we

Then I watched, fascinated, as her face started to get red.

Zip and Duke moved a bit away from her.

Then she exploded.

“*What?*” she screeched.
et your

“What’s goin’ on?”
hts so I

Everyone turned and Vance was standing at the end of the row.

He had his hands to his hips. He was wearing a black T-shirt, hip said, leather jacket and black cowboy boots. His hands had pushed the jack namma and you could see a gun clipped to the wide belt on his jeans.

He looked good.

of the He also looked unhappy.

Before I could say anything, May advanced on him, arm up, pointed. She got right into his space and poked him in the chest.

cture of Uh-oh.

isly too That was spitting in the eye of the tiger if I ever saw it.

“What you doin’ about this, boy?” she snapped.

Um.

Yikes.

e angry May called Vance “boy.” I wasn’t sure that was good.

’ about Vance didn’t respond. He just looked down his nose at her.

st. You I wasn’t sure that was good either.

back to “My girl’s been marked for rape and torture and you swing by to your Arby’s roast beef and cheese?” May continued.

“It’s covered,” Vance replied.

May’s back was to me, but I saw her body go rigid.

“Covered?” she shrieked.

Time to intervene.

“May,” I said as I pushed through Duke and Heavy and headed Vance and May. “It’s okay,” I told her when I arrived. “I told Var night I was off the streets. He’s giving me a panic button and I’m chec

s blackregularly.”

et back “Panic...checking...” May spluttered. “I do not *believe* what I’m h
What kind of lame-ass bullshit is this?”

I noticed with dismay that Roam, Sniff, Clarice, Indy and Jet
joined our party.

finger “Jules has tracking devices on her car and in her bag. Her house i
and under surveillance. I’m giving her a panic button and I kn
schedule for the day. She checks in whenever she arrives somewhere,”
explained, and I thought it was rather nice of him. He didn’t have to. T
eyes cut to me. “Which you *didn’t* do when you arrived at Fortnum’s.”

Whoops.

That explained his unhappy face.

“That’s what I’m sayin’. Lame-ass bullshit,” May kept at it,
taking me off the hot seat for not calling in.

“May, I can take care of myself,” I put in.

“Yeah, maybe you can. Maybe you can’t. You’re dating one
pick upbaddest badasses in Denver and he’s workin’ with the rest of the
badasses. Indy, Jet and Roxie got bodyguards. What are you? C
liver?” After delivering this tirade, May turned back to Vance. “She lo
chopped liver to you, boy?”

Oh no, there was the “boy” comment again.

“May, I think it best you don’t call Vance ‘boy’ anymore,” I whisp
toward her.

rice last “He *is* a boy to me!” May shouted back at me.

:king in I stepped away a bit.

“Jules didn’t want a bodyguard,” Vance informed May.

earing. “Yeah, well, she didn’t want a boyfriend either and you took that,” May shot back.

had all Hmm.

She had a point.

s wired “She’s got bodyguards,” Heavy joined the conversation from behind

ow her “Yeah. Us,” Zip added.

’ Vance May turned slowly and looked the Middle-Aged Man Posse up and

hen his You could tell she found them somewhat lacking and I understood why she turned back to Vance.

“Roxie told me when she was being stalked, Luke Stark was her bodyguard.”

luckily I had a feeling, even though he was older, Duke knew what he was doing. After my experience with Heavy, Zip and Tex, I knew for a fact they were doing what they were doing.

of the Still, I had to admit they didn’t compare to Luke.

baddest I bugged my eyes out at Vance in a non-verbal “Do something!”

hopped just crossed his arms on his chest.

ook like I guessed it was up to me.

“May, simmer down. It’s going to be fine,” I said.

ered to She made an angry and unimpressed noise that sounded like “humpf”

“No, really. I have a lot of people looking out for me,” I went on.

“Something happens to you, what are those boys gonna do?” she asked me. I looked to Roam and Sniff.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” I assured her.

care of “Something happens to you, what’s your uncle gonna do?” she carried
a dog with a bone, as usual.

“May, nothing’s gonna happen to me,” I repeated.

She walked to me, got in my space and looked up at me.

id us. Quietly, she said, “Something happens to you, what am *I* gonna do

It was then I saw the tears she was trying not to shed shimmering
l down. eyes.

y when She was scared. Scared for me. Scared that something would happen
me that decades of using her Mama’s-Gonna-Make-It-Better Voice
was her never heal.

I put my arms around her and held her close. She did the same to me
s doing. I’d never hugged May and in the back of my head it registered that
y knew gave good hugs.

I looked around and saw Indy, Jet, Roam, Sniff and Clarice at one
the row, all staring at me. Even Roam, Sniff and Clarice, hardened street
but he couldn’t hide their worried expressions.

Duke, Tex, Zip and Heavy were in the middle of the row, still looking
like my favorite uncles, all pissed off and wanting a role in my protection.

Daisy was standing with them. She was hard to read, but I suspected
ph.” was patiently waiting for me to make the right decision and that was his

May and Vance were at my end of the row.

pointed *Home*, Auntie Reba whispered in my ear.

My eyes locked on Vance’s.

Then I closed them slowly, and when I opened them again he w
ried on, looking at me, but he had that look in his eyes again. And now that
what that look meant, a happy shiver slid up my spine.

Shit.

I'd just made a decision.

?” Even when this was all over, I wasn't going back on the street. To
g in her people cared about what happened to me and they would get hurt if I g

With one look at me Daisy knew I'd come to my decision. She
ppen to and gave me an approving wink. Then she came forward and pulle
would away from me.

“Let's get you your roast beef sandwich,” she said, guiding May av
ie. Everyone followed.

hat she “I'm first up,” Duke said, pointing at me before he left.

I rolled my eyes (just for show), and when I was done with my e
end of Vance was there.

et kids, His arm went around my neck and he pulled me to him.

“Thinkin' something big just happened there,” he said, looking c
lookingme.

ion. “Yeah,” I whispered.

ted she “Wanna share?”

uge. I shook my head but I said it anyway. “I'm giving up the street.”

Vance's body went tense.

“For good?” he asked.

“For good,” I answered.

was still It was his turn to close his eyes, but as with everything Vance, h
I knew better than me.

 In closer proximity, he dropped his forehead to mine, opened h
again to look into mine and breathed out on a quiet sigh, “Good.”

 “You think Lee would let me go out with the boys every now and
o many keep my skills sharp?” I tried.

ot hurt. He lifted his forehead from mine and shook his head. “I’m think
smiled might think you’re a distraction.”

ed May I was afraid of that.

 Then I asked the all-important question.

ay. I stared deep into his eyes and whispered, “Do you think Park
understand?”

 His arm went from around me and his hands came to either side
ye roll, face. “Yeah.”

 I nodded.

 Then I let my body relax into his. His arms went around my wai
lown at tucked the side of my face into his throat.

 “‘What’s this about knittin’ sweaters for me?’” Vance asked.

 Shit.



MY BED MOVED when Vance got in it.

 Normally, I figured I would have slept through this and I had no id
I didn’t. It could have been the covers moving as Vance slid between
Vance’s heat hitting me, or him pulling my back into his front and h
making contact with mine from shoulders to heels.

e did it He settled into me silently. I settled into him the same way.

After a while he asked quietly against the back of my neck, “His eyes go?”

I knew he meant my evening.

l again, “Weird,” I whispered back.

Duke had been in the parking lot leaning against his bike when I finished at the shelter that afternoon. He followed me to the hobby shop and my side as I made my knitting selections, and even when I wandered to the sticker and card-making sections, just in case knitting didn’t take.

I thought this was something which would annoy him, but he seemed to have all the patience in the world for hobby shop shopping.

“You’re good at this,” I told Duke in the checkout line.

of my “What?” he asked.

“Shopping.”

“Dolores paints,” Duke replied then went on, “and does macramé, crochets, and does a bit of cake decorating and dried flower arranging.”

Sounded like Duke was no stranger to hobby shops.

I handed over my credit card and turned fully to him. “Why are you doing this?”

“What?” he asked again.

“Protecting me. You barely know me.”

lea why He regarded me for a second.

n them, Then he said, “Got a feeling you’re gonna be a fixture in Indy
is body Whoever is a fixture in Indy’s life is a fixture in mine. Don’t got no

outside Dolores and her folks. What family I got walks through the door that store on a regular basis. I'm guessin' by the way Vance looks at you, you're gonna be walkin' through those doors on a regular basis. I'm gonna do my bit to make sure you can walkin' through those doors. Where I come from, you take care of your family."

Finished
was by
into the
the same, I told him, "I don't have much family."

At his words, I'd had to put my hand to the counter to hold myself steady. For some bizarre reason, maybe because he'd shared so much with me, I felt I should be the same, I told him, "I don't have much family."

imed to
"You do now," he replied.

I had the strange but strong desire to hug him. I didn't, instead I turned to the clerk and took my credit card back.

Duke followed me home and did a walkthrough of my house, though I told him there were cameras everywhere. He stayed for a while long enough for me to knit and purl my way through a line of wool, and a while Duke reading the directions to me.

Finally he said, "Gotta go or Dolores'll be pissed I let the dinner go."

I walked him to the door.

u doing
"You go anywhere, you call me or one of the boys. Hear me out, I've ordered."

I wanted to be a head-crackin' mamma jamma, but I couldn't, not after what he said at the hobby shop, and not after what happened at Fort Worth that afternoon.

r's life. I just nodded.

family He gave me a look as if to assess my honesty. I must have passed.

looks of honesty test because he nodded and left.

ou, and While I was eating a dinner of microwave popcorn (I might not
h those good with an oven, but I was hell on wheels with a microwave), Sniff
ontinue called.

of your He was full of stories. He told me of their official tour through
Nightingale Investigations offices, their “cool-as-shit” (Sniff’s words)
steady. long shift in the surveillance room and working with Brody, Lee’s hacker
ould do the computers.

He told me of dinner at Lincoln’s Road House and I made a man
to have a word with Vance about taking my (underage) boys to a biker
dinner.
rned to

He also told me of their ride-along with Vance after they ate.

2, even I was only slightly alarmed to learn that Vance had gone gung-
eer and starting slowly, he had taken them along on a break-and-enter search
all the included disabling an alarm, picking a lock and rifling through
possessions and computer files of a possible corporate embezzler. Vance
could.” this so well, the “possible” became “definite,” and the boys were high
excitement.

ie?” he They were also left understanding that you had to be more than
physically fit to do the job. It wasn’t just about cracking heads. You
know computers. You had to understand electronics. And you had to be
ot after smart, thinking three steps ahead so you didn’t get caught.
return’s

If Roam and Sniff thought Vance was the shit before, they were
more convinced of it now.

sed the “He didn’t make, like, a sound. It was like he was a ghost. It was
cool!” Sniff told me.

I smiled into the phone but said, “Sniff, for the last time, don’t say
be any After my conversation with Sniff, I knitted and purled a line ab
iff had length of my house and took a bubble bath. I was about to head to bec
book when a knock went at my door.

igh the I looked out the window and saw Tex standing outside.

;) hour- I opened the door and looked up at him.

ker, on “What’re you doing here?” I asked.

tal note “You got any plastic wrap?” he asked in return.

bar for I stared at him.

Then I smiled. “Yeah.”

He smiled back. His smile was kinda scary, but it worked.

no. Not I loaded Tex up with my plastic wrap stash and waved him on his
ch that way.

gh the My phone rang about ten minutes after Tex left. It was Zip.

nce did “You still breathin’?” he asked after I answered.

gh with “Yes,” I replied unnecessarily.

ian just “Good.”

had to Disconnect.

l to be This was rude, but it was also sweet and I felt the warm whoosh
belly again.

re even After Zip’s call I went to bed.

I told Vance about my adventures in boring, everyone else having
fuckin’ me knitting the world’s longest micro-scarf and taking a bubble bath.

“How was your night?” I asked.

fuck.” “I picked up Clarence and Jermaine.”

out the My body went still.

l with a Wow.

That didn't take long.

God, he was *good*.

“And?”

“Mace is workin' with them.”

Yikes.

I didn't figure that was good for Clarence and Jermaine. Mace reputation for fucking people up and good.

“What's that mean?” I asked.

s merry “I'm thinkin' you don't want to know.”

“I'm thinking I do.”

Vance pulled me deeper into his body and I felt his lips touch the my neck.

Then he said, “Mace doesn't have a lot of patience with men w/ with women. He doesn't give a shit if they do it or threaten it. Livin' of gettin' hurt is almost as bad as gettin' hurt. Mace'll do what he has to get them to back off.”

1 in my “What about their boss? Won't he be pissed, you guys fucking v boys?”

fun and “You already know we've declared protection. Lee drew a line sand. Everyone on the street knows you're marked, which means stepped over that line. What *that* means is if the bosses back their boys

at war. That kind of war has no rules.”

Oh my God.

I had no idea this was so huge.

I rolled so I was facing Vance and looked at him in the moonlight that mean you guys are up against the drug lords?”

He shook his head. “The bosses have cut their boys loose. Shard’s beef with you. I took him down. He’s just an ass. Clarence and Jermain gone against direct orders. You’re an annoyance, but you’re also a worker. There are lots of ways to put you out of commission that I had a include what those boys had planned for you. I made a deal with the They reneged on that deal. Looks bad for the boss. This morning we word you’re off the street. They should have backed down. They They’re on their own. Not a lot of people would invite war against least not about this.”

nape of “So now it’s just Shard.”

“It’s just Shard.”

to fuck “You going to find Shard?”

in fear He shook his head again. “Luke and Ike are tracking Shard.”

to do to I figured Shard would shortly be joining Mace’s party.

“What about Hector?” I asked. “Did you tell Lee I saw him?”

with his “Yeah. Lee told Eddie, they intensified Brody’s hack. Hector’s

Deep cover, been workin’ at gettin’ close to a local big man for over and has had success. Anyone finds out he approached you, he’s dead.”

they’ve *Fuck!*

s, we’re I closed my eyes and pressed into him, nuzzling my face in his nec

I was such an idiot.

What was I thinking, going out and annoying drug dealers?

How lucky was I, that in the end I found Vance?

. “Does If I hadn’t and I was alone facing this shit, I’d be fucked, and r
good way.

; got no “I’m an idiot,” I whispered.

ne have His arms got tight around me.

a social “You’re not an idiot,” he whispered back.

it don’t “I just wanted to—”
ir boss.

spread Vance interrupted me. “You got passion. You got courage. No
didn’t. wrong with either of those. You just got to learn to point them in th
Lee, at direction.”

He was right.

I *hated* it when he was right.

“If anyone gets hurt because of me—” I started.

“No one’s gonna get hurt.”

He said that with such certainty that I believed him.

I willed myself to relax, willed my mind and body to go still.

It didn’t work.

s DEA. “Vance?”

r a year “Yeah, Princess?”

I looked up at his face in the moonlight.

It was time.

k.

I took a deep breath then said, "Do you want me to tell you what I says about *me* that you share my bed?"

He was looking down at me.

ot in a "No," he answered bluntly.

I blinked.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't want you to tell me."

Well, that took the wind right out of my sails and for some reason just a little bit (okay, so it hurt a lot). I thought he'd want to know. I him to want to know and furthermore, I was ready to tell him.

ie right Before I could hide my face and my disappointment, his mouth c mine.

"I want you to show me," he said there.

I looked into his dark eyes close up, and even in the moonlight they were burning into mine.

"Okay," I whispered.

Then I did as he asked.

I took a deep breath then said, “Do you want me to tell you what I think it says about *me* that you share my bed?”

He was looking down at me.

“No,” he answered bluntly.

I blinked.

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to tell me.”

Well, that took the wind right out of my sails and for some reason it hurt, just a little bit (okay, so it hurt a lot). I thought he’d want to know. I *wanted* him to want to know and furthermore, I was ready to tell him.

Before I could hide my face and my disappointment, his mouth came to mine.

“I want you to show me,” he said there.

I looked into his dark eyes close up, and even in the moonlight I knew they were burning into mine.

“Okay,” I whispered.

Then I did as he asked.



QUICK COULD BE GOOD

The phone was ringing and my eyes opened.

I knew it was the dead of night and in the nanosecond before I moved, I knew I had a big time contender for Number One Most Favored Sleeping Position with Vance. On my belly, one leg crooked, Vance curled into my back, leg bent into mine, arm around me.

Seriously nice.

He disengaged gently and rolled away to pick up the phone.

“Yeah?” I heard, pause, “Right.”

When I heard the phone hit the cradle, I turned. “What was that?”

Vance’s arms came around me and he settled on his back, me in front (just for your information, I liked this as a cuddle position, but it was in the lower half of the top five as a sleeping position).

“They got Shard.”

Hallelujah, I thought.

“No more panic button?” I asked.

“You keep the panic button.”

My head came up. “Why?”

“Humor me.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve made enemies and captured attention. Until we talk on the street, I want to know you’re safe.”

I supposed I could do that.

I settled in, ready to go back to sleep. So ready in fact, that I didn’t before he Vance’s body had gone tight.

favorite “You gonna do this for me?” he asked.

pressed “Sure,” I replied as if that was a given.

After a few minutes ticked by, his body relaxed and he said, you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Am not,” I mumbled sleepily into his shoulder.

His hand came up and started to play with my hair.

I fell asleep.

his side

s in the



I WOKE up with the alarm and Vance wasn’t in bed, but I heard the going.

There was no Boo either.

I hit the off button on the alarm and searched for my nightgown underwear that Vance had divested me of the night before. I struggled them on in a lying position, which was not easy. After I succeeded, I the bed platform.

I walked to the kitchen.

Boo's breakfast bowl was down and had already been licked clean.

I looked at the coffeemaker. There was a pot at the ready.

I walked into the living room. Boo was lying on my chaise
hear no cleaning his face. He didn't even spare me a glance, much less
morning kitty meow. He was sated and preparing for his morning nap.

I walked back into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee.

realize Then I stood with my hips against the counter, coffee cup aloft,
into space, wondering how my world had turned on its head in a week
four days.

I had a boyfriend who fed my cat, made coffee, had a kickass job,
care of me, was great in bed and was *hot*. I had a family of friends
"Jesus, out for me, calling me and wanting to spend time with me. They even
mad at me when I tried to go to the mall alone.

This freaked me out, but in a good way.

My pug nestled up to me and decided he wanted to play just as
walked out of the bathroom. Chest bare, black hair wet and slicked back,
one of my mint-green, Egyptian cotton towels wrapped around his hips.

shower My mouth went dry.

He walked toward me, got in my space, dodging the coffee cup
move, put his hands on either side of my neck and touched his lips to my

wn and "Mornin', Princess," he said, not moving out of my space.

l to put "Thanks for feeding Boo."

slid off He grinned and dropped his hands to my waist.

"Thanks for making coffee," I went on.

He kept grinning.

“You done in the bathroom?” I asked.

He nodded.

I put the unsipped coffee on the counter, skirted around him and a goodthe bathroom. I brushed and flossed then washed my face.

I left the bathroom and went in search of Vance.

He wasn't hard to find, considering I only had three rooms in the staring(three and a half, if you counted the bed platform). He was sitting nek andcouch, clothed in the outfit he had on yesterday, pulling on his boots.

“What're you doing?” I asked, staring at him.

b, took “Puttin' on my boots,” he replied, looking up at me.

looking I blinked.

ven got “You wore that yesterday,” I said.

“Yeah.” He pulled on the second boot and stood.

Vance “If you're going to stay here you should keep some clothes here.”

ack and Now, why did I just say that?

s. I was going to freak him out. He was going to think I loved something.

I didn't I, of course, *did* love him, but he didn't know that. Or at least I think he knew that. Now he'd think I was a clingy, stalker, psycho bitch hell and moving too fast and I was going to scare him off.

Shit.

“All right,” he said.

I blinked again.

“Did you say ‘all right?’” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied.

Guess I didn’t freak him out.

went to He came up to me, wrapped a hand around the back of my head and
kissed my forehead. “Later, Princess.”

My body went still.

e house “What?” I asked, looking up at him as he dropped his hand.

on my “Later. I gotta get to the office.”

I stared.

“What?” I repeated.

He watched me a beat. “Are you okay?”

I thought about it.

Then I said, “No, I’m not okay.”

“What’s the matter?”

“You fed my cat,” I told him.

He watched me again, this time perhaps wondering if my body had
him or taken over by nonsense-speaking aliens.

“And?” he prompted.

I didn’t “And now you’re leaving.”

ch from “I have to get to the office. They’re holding three assholes who want
hurt you. I wanna find out what’s happening.”

This sounded plausible.

I still didn’t like it.

“But we haven’t had sex yet,” I blurted.

For a second I realized I threw him and he looked surprised. I had absolutely no idea that was going to come out of my mouth.

“Then again, neither did I.”

Still, I’d said it so I was going to have to go with it.

“We always have morning sex. We always have nighttime sex. We don’t *not* have morning sex. What does that mean? Next we’re not going to have nighttime sex?” I asked.

His lips started twitching as I continued.

“You fed my cat. I always have to feed my cat. How am I going to be used to not being the one who *has* to feed my cat? It’s always been just me. And Nick, of course, but that’s not the same thing. He doesn’t break up food like you and I do.”

I was babbling. I knew it and I didn’t care.

I wanted to have sex.

“Jules—”

“You can’t just get up, make me coffee, feed my cat and then go to bed. What’s up with *that*?” I went on.

“Jules—”

“We have a ritual,” I interrupted him. “I like our ritual. I’m not going to be asked to change.”

Now I was lying. I had no problem with change.

Bottom line, I wanted sex.

His hands came to the sides of my face and he said again, “Jules.”

“What?” I snapped.

He had “Take off your underwear.”

My belly did a rollercoaster plummet and I blinked, *again*.

“What?”

“Do it,” he demanded.

I can't to have sex, even though I wanted sex now more than ever. Okay, now I was freaking out and deciding maybe I didn't want

All the while looking at him, I pushed down my underwear and it hit the floor. No sooner did it hit my feet then he lifted me up, hands at my arms and legs automatically circled him.

He went down to the floor on his knee then he put me on my back. Boo's covered me with his body.

“What are we doing?” I asked, staring into his eyes.

I felt his hand between us, working at his belt.

“We're gonna have to be quick.”

“How quick?”

I leave. “Real quick.”

“I'm not sure I want quick.”

His face went into my neck. I nod with

“You don't have much choice,” he said in my ear, which made me Then I felt his tongue touch me and slide down my neck to my collar which made me shiver more.

“Is quick good?” I asked.

“It can be,” he said at the base of my throat. Then he touched me b

my legs and I sucked in breath.

His mouth came to mine and I could feel he was smiling, please something.

He looked in my eyes and said, "Christ, you're always wet."

"Is that good?"

to have "Fuck yeah."

"I think it happened when you told me to take off my underwear," I informed him helpfully.

my ass His finger slid inside me. "I'll remember that."

My hands pushed into his jeans and I ran them over his ass. I was talking and so was Vance.

And, for your information, quick could be good.



IT WAS near to the end of the day when my cell rang.

It was sitting on my desk and the display said, CROWE CALLING.

Looking at it, I smiled.



VANCE HAD CALLED me in the morning to give me the lowdown on Clarence and Jermaine.

Apparently, Mace had done his job well. This was because Luke shivered. I felt like getting in on the act. So they'd all done their job well. arbone,

They'd done it so well, Shard, Clarence and Jermaine not only didn't want to fuck with me, they also decided that maybe Denver wasn't for them. Luke, Mace and Ike had convinced them to try their luck at ruining people's lives somewhere outside the Mile High City. They weren't only

town, they'd already left. Vance knew this because Mace, Ike and Luke escorted them to the city limits.

This made me feel weird. It was weird because I felt safe and protected but I also felt badly that they likely had to commit acts of violence in order to make me feel safe and protected.

I spent the morning struggling with that.

Since I figured Shard, Clarence and Jermaine had destroyed a number of lives, by the time the clock struck twelve, I got over it.

Then I called Luke.

"Babe," he answered.

"I don't know what to say."

Silence then, "I'm guessin' you're talkin' about the boys."

"I'm talking about what you and Mace and Ike did for me. I feel like I should do something to repay you."

"Not necessary."

"Maybe I should make you some cookies," I suggested.

"*Really* not necessary."

At first I was shocked at the emphasis to his "really." Then I remembered that Luke had smelled the results of my last attempt at being a goddess.

"Okay, maybe I should buy you some cookies."

"That'd work."

Disconnect.

Well then, there it was.

like had Store cookies seemed kind of a lame “thank you” for driving the dealers hell-bent on gang raping and torturing you out of town, but protected, cookies were no thank you at all.

order to I made a mental note to hit the bakery at Safeway and got back to v



NOW VANCE WAS CALLING AGAIN and I tried to be cool, but I had to number of (just to myself) I liked to see CROWE CALLING on my display.

I liked it a lot.

I picked up my phone and flipped it open.

“Hey,” I said to Crowe.

“Hey. Got some things to do tonight. Thought I’d take you to Li for dinner before I did ’em.”

I like I “That sounds good.”

“Meet you at your place at six.”

“Okay.”

“Later, Princess.”

Disconnect.

numbered I sat there with the phone to my ear and stayed that way. I liked how baking even after a quick, meaningless phone call from Vance telling me taking me out to dinner. I wondered if I’d always feel like that and I would.

Slowly I flipped the phone shut and set it on my desk, realizing would be only the second time we’d been out to dinner. We’d had our date and we were practically living together. He was moving clothes house, I had toiletries at his.

ee drug Realizing this, I started to laugh, my body shaking with it.

it burnt Vance had done it. Just like everyone said he would, just like Lee and Hank before him. He hadn't wasted any time (I, however, had) at work. moved so fast I didn't even realize it was happening. Hell, it was *my* i him to leave clothes at my house.

o admit I was laughing so hard I snorted, and Andy, who was on the looked up at me with knitted inquiring brows.

I shook my head at him and mouthed, "I'll tell you later."

Andy blinked in surprise.

I'd been working with Andy for a while. He'd come to the shelte ncoln's six months after they hired me. I'd never, not once, told him a personal about me. He was a good guy and he could make me laugh. a wife and a little girl. He shared stories all the time about what they' funny things his kid said.

Me, nothing. I never shared.

I'd gone through life alone (my choice), in order not to feel, so I w get hurt.

Now I knew what I was missing.

w I felt What kind a fucking idiot was I?
he was

hoped I I struggled with that long after Andy got off the phone. Long shared with Andy that Vance was practically moving in with me.

ng this Andy had said, hesitantly and with concern, "Um...Jules, don't yo
nly one this is a bit fast?"

s to my Then I'd told him about Indy, Jet and Roxie, his eyes got big, didn't look any less concerned.

I kept struggling long after I hit two different Safeways and cleaned out of their M&M cookies (the absolute best) and picked up some provisions, doing this randomly because, although Vance was going to hang clothes in my closet, I had no idea what kind of food he liked for house.

This last thought had me cracking up hysterically in the meat and cheese section and people gave me a wide berth. This was a good thing as it had the meat and cheese section all to myself without anyone breathing my neck to make a selection.

I got over my latest emotional struggle when I put the cookies on the kitchen counter, put the food away and gave Boo his kitty treats, letting him have a few more because I was in a good mood. Then Boo and I went to Nick's. Realizing it was nearly six, I stopped outside Nick's back door. Boo and I went back to my side. I dropped Boo long enough to write a note saying I was on Nick's side. I didn't want him to think he was still again. Vance didn't like that.

When I was done, I stared at the note on the counter and went through an emotionally struggling with having to write a note to someone to explain my whereabouts, something I'd never done in my life. This didn't take long because, as I stared at the note that velvet shroud wrapped around me, I stopped staring at the note and started smiling at it.

Then I snatched up Boo and we went back to Nick's.

I knocked on the door and stuck my head in. "Nick?"

"Hey, Jules, be right there."

I walked in and dropped Boo who immediately went in search of Nick. I went in search of beer.

ed them I'd just pulled out a Fat Tire when Nick came in.

e other "Hey," I said.

g to be "Hey," Nick replied, staring at me intensely.

d in the "What?" I asked about the stare.

cheese "I don't know," Nick answered.

meant I "Why are you looking at me like that?"

g down He leaned a hip against the counter. "I'm waiting to see what you say. I don't know if you're gonna tell me someone's been shot, you be on the with Vance again or you've decided to single-handedly plan a ma ing him Washington due to the lack of AIDS medications available to dev over to countries. I gotta be prepared for anything."

oor and I grinned at him and popped open the beer. Then I handed it to h Vance leaned a hip against the counter myself.

tood up "I'm going to tell you that I'm off the streets."

back to His body moved, only slightly, but it still moved. It got tense, relaxed in such a way that his relief could be read in every line.

lain my "Good," he said quietly.

xe long I had to admit, I felt guilt at this. Nick's reaction wasn't an overwh e, and I reaction, but it said it all.

I decided to move onto a different subject before I could figure anatomically possible way to kick myself in the backside.

"I'm also going to tell you that Vance is moving some clothes house."

lick. Without hesitation he said, "Good."

It was my turn to stare. I thought for certain I'd get a lecture that was going too fast.

"Don't you think we're going too fast?" I asked.

"Vance the reason you're off the streets?"

"Part of it."

"What's the other part?"

have to "You."

woke up His body moved again in the same way, then he closed his eyes. When he reopened them, what I saw made that velvet shroud wrap closer. My arms snuggled in and licked my face.

Before I could struggle with this too, Nick started talking.

him and "I like Vance. I like that since he came into your life you got girls throwin' you parties and folks showin' up at your house to watch football like lookin' out the front window seein' guys I don't know, but I know then it trust, knockin' on your door. I like knowin' you aren't alone over the just Boo and Stevie Wonder for company. No, I don't think you're too fast. What happened to your family hadn't happened, I'd have married Reba within months of knowin' her. When you know it's right, you know. I got a feelin' Vance knows it's right. I'm glad that you figured out an I'd be honored to walk you down the aisle, if we were walkin' to Vance, even if you told me it was happening tomorrow."

I couldn't help it. One night off the job and I was already losing it to my my head-crackin' mamma jamma. Therefore, at his words I burst into

Nick's arms came around me, I shoved my face in his neck and Auntie Reba's voice in my ear.

ve were *Home.*

My tears turned to sobs and now I was emotionally struggling w
fact that I was a big sissy.

A knock came at the door.

“Yeah?” Nick called.

I heard it open and I lifted my, what I was sure was red, wet an
face away from Nick, and saw Vance standing there watching us.

hen he *Shit.*

My pug “I’ll come back,” Vance murmured.

“Think you best take over here,” Nick answered, gently mov
towards Vance.

friends “I’m okay.” I wiped my tears with my fingers, but made one o
otball. Isilly, girlie, sobby hiccoughs.

w I can Vance came forward and his arms went around me. At the feel of
re with started crying again, harder, so I shoved my face in *his* neck.

movin’ “What happened?” Vance asked Nick.

married “I don’t know. Do you ever know? She’s a girl,” Nick answered.

ou just My body went solid and I pulled my head out of Vance’s neck.

l it out. “I’m not a girl!” I shouted at Nick. “I’m a head-crackin’ mamma ja

owards “Sure you are,” Nick soothed, but I could swear he sounded a l
hold onlike he was laughing.

tears. I narrowed teary eyes at him. “I am!”

I heard Vance totally ignored me, but kept his arms around me.

“We’re goin’ to Lincoln’s for dinner. You’re welcome,” Vance tol

“Nah, game on tonight,” Nick answered.

with the “Another time,” Vance said.

“Sure, sounds good. Haven’t been there in a while.”

“Not much has changed.”

“Best part about it.”

d scary “Hello!” I shouted, pulling out of Vance’s arms and pointing to
with both hands. “Having total emotional breakdown! Anyone? Anyor

Nick started out and out laughing. Vance just grinned at me.

“You done?” Vance asked me.

ing me I rolled my eyes.

Whatever.

if those I’d finish my total emotional breakdown later when I was alone, p
while listening to Stevie Wonder singing “All in Love Is Fair,” which
them, I best time to have them.

“I’m hungry,” I grumbled, wiping my face with my hands. Then I
“Boo!”

Boo trotted in, tail straight in the air, equally oblivious to my en
turmoil.

mma!” I scooped him up, glared at Nick, swung my glare to Vance, wal
ittle bit of Nick’s and went to my side.

I was in the bathroom cleaning up my face and repairing makeup (I
when I heard Vance return. Then I heard a rustling bag.

When I walked into the kitchen, Vance was eating an M&M cooki

d Nick. “Don’t eat that! Those are for Luke, Ike and Mace,” I snapped.

Vance stared at me for a beat then looked into the bag.

Then he looked at me. “There’s at least thirty cookies in there.”

“Thirty-three,” I told him. Then I scowled at his cookie. “Now, two. How am I going to divide thirty-two cookies three ways?”

He didn’t answer me. Instead he said, “Why are you giving Luke, myself
ie?”
Mace thirty-two cookies?”

“They beat people up for me,” I replied. “That requires payback. I can’t bake, I can’t *make* them cookies. Knitting is boring, as in *super* so I can’t knit them sweaters. I don’t think they’d like a homemade anything I could do with the stickers I bought. There will likely not be where I could beat up someone for them. Therefore,” I pointed to the “cookies.”

possibly
was theto
He took another bite of his cookie while walking up to me. His hand was theto my neck and he brought me closer to his body by putting pressure th

I put my hands on his waist and looked up at him.

called,
“Princess?”

“What?”

otional
“You have to be the fucking craziest woman I’ve ever met.”

ked out
I was back to glaring at him. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He grinned. “I meant it as one.”

damage
Well.

There you go.

e.
I couldn’t help it. I smiled.



WE WERE SITTING at Lincoln's Road House. It was after we ate, the dishes still in front of us, and we managed the whole thing, from duke, bike to Road House, door to table, menu to ordering, ordering to all without fighting (or even bickering) once.

Ike and It had to be a record.

I was enjoying my second beer, relaxed, mellow, maybe even a little with the world.

Since I boring, "You wanna tell me why you were cryin'?" Vance asked, and n card or moved to him.

at a time I instantly decided I was not at peace with the world.

the bag, "Um...no," I answered.

There was no way I was ready to tell Vance that Nick was coming walking me down the aisle toward Vance even if it happened tomorrow here.

No way in hell.

Vance shook his head and looked away, his eyes moving to the teardrops hanging by the bar, and I had the feeling I'd disappointed him.

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked to change the subject and I slid back to me.

"Got a job. It'll take a few hours."

"Are you coming back to my place when you're done?"

I found I was worried about his answer.

"Yeah."

I found I was relieved at his answer.

"Okay," I smiled at him.

ie dirty His gaze dropped to my mouth, taking in my smile. Then he looked
plex toeyes again and his were serious.

eating, “Princess, we’re gonna have to do something about your inab
share.”

“I’m working on it,” I promised.

t peace He watched me a bit and then said, “Somethin’ else.”

Uh-oh.

ay eyes He still had the serious look in his eye.

“Yeah?” I asked, but I didn’t want to know.

“I’m wonderin’ why you bought Mace, Ike and Luke cookies wh
the one who brought in Clarence and Jermaine yesterday.”

ol with I didn’t know what to make of this question. The answer seemed c
v. to me, but I gave it to him anyway.

“You get naked gratitude,” I told him.

evision He stared at me a beat and again I knew I threw him.

Then he gave me one of his shit-eating grins.

his eyes “A *lot* of it,” I went on.

The grin turned into a smile.

“Vance!” a female voice called from behind me.

Vance’s eyes cut to the voice, his smile vanished, and I looked o
shoulder.

Coming toward us was a fantastic-looking, curvy, leggy, long
haired brunette. She had on a short skirt, high-heeled boots and
sweater that was giving some serious cleavage.

d in my She was also smiling at Vance in a way that I *did not* like.

ility tothis “Hey,” she breathed when she got to our table and I realized instar
had been one of the many girls who had come before me.

Poof! There it was. My head-crackin’ mamma jamma came out.

“Jackie,” Vance replied.

He was across the table from me, but I could see his face and
blank.

I hated his blank look when he directed it at me. I liked his bla
when he was giving it to leggy brunettes in short skirts that he’d
somewhere down the line.
ien I’m

obvious Jackie’s eyes moved to me, looked me up and down where I sat
stool, then she dismissed me and her eyes went back to Vance. She tu
her back was slightly to me.

Um.

No.

“What’re you up to these days? Haven’t seen you in ages,” Jacki
Vance in a way that communicated she thought his answer might jus
key to the meaning of life.

“Jackie, this is Jules,” Vance said, I thought making a point and
have kissed him.

ver my She swung her head (as well as her hair) around and glanced at me

“Jules,” she muttered, then she swung her head (and hair) bac
wavy-how’re things?” Jackie went on, missing the point.

a tight Vance opened his mouth to speak, but I’d kind of had enough.

“Things are good,” I put in, and Jackie’s head (and hair) swung

me. Her eyes had narrowed.

itly that “Excuse me?” she asked.

“Things are good,” I repeated, giving her a huge, happy smile. T
eyes moved to Vance. “Aren’t they, honey?”

Now that, I hoped, was a point Jackie wouldn’t miss.

it was The corners of Vance’s lips turned up.

Jackie didn’t wait for Vance to answer.

nk look To me she said, “I’m so pleased for you.”

fucked She did not mean this.

Translation: Shut the fuck up, I’m not talking to you. I’m flirtin
on my your boyfriend.

rned so She swung back to Vance and leaned in a bit (the better to sh
cleavage), smiled and said in a voice I was meant to hear but s
pretending I wasn’t, “We’ll talk some other time. Give me a call.”

Vance again opened his mouth to speak, but again I got there first.

e asked “What did you just say?” I asked.

t be the Vance’s eyes moved to me.

I could “Jules.” His tone held a warning, but he looked like he was about r
laugh.

again. I wasn’t paying a lot of attention to Vance. My eyes were on Jackie

k. “So, Jackie leaned back and put up her hands.

“Nothing to get excited about,” she said.

I came off my stool.

back to “Are you saying that you coming onto my fucking boyfriend right

of me is nothing to get excited about?” I demanded.

My voice was a wee bit loud. So much of a wee bit people stare when my stare.

Jackie looked from me to Vance then back to me. “If he’s your man or girlfriend, you got nothing to worry about from me.”

She did not mean this either.

Translation: If he’s your man, you better keep him happy. You do not pounce.

It was at that moment, I really wished I had my gun.

Then she went on, not, I noted, very good at reading body language. My body language said I was about to kick her ass.

“We’re just friends. Good friends. Hey, Vance?”

I looked at Vance. He was still sitting on his stool and it was evident he had decided not to intervene. I also noted that his lips were twitching.

“She must have been one of those easy things you were talking about,” I said to Vance.

He pressed his lips together and shook his head slowly. This was a negative headshake that said Jackie wasn’t one of his easy things. I was ready to give him a negative headshake that said he thought I was the fucking craziest he’d ever met.

“Excuse me?” Jackie asked again.

Jackie now turned full body to me and I stepped clear of the table, preparing to throw down.

“I said you must be one of the easy things Vance told me about in front of me, easy pieces of ass. Before he met me,” I informed her, my

dripping with acid sweetness.

started to “You did *not* just say that,” she said to me.

“I sure did,” I shot back.

in, then “Jackie, I wouldn’t rile Jules,” Vance decided to wade in.

“You calling me easy?” Jackie decided to ignore Vance.

“Have you slept with Vance?” I asked, even though I knew.

n’t, I’ll She leaned forward with a catty smile. “It was the best night
goddamned life.”

“It’s good you’ll have that memory,” I stated calmly as if I wa
e, as in happy for her.

“You bitch!” she screamed.

Then she came at me, hand out, probably to grab my hair.

ent that I was getting that opening a lot these days. I planted my feet, cau
g. wrist and flipped her on her back on the floor without barely moving.

bout,” I Vance did move. He had his wallet out and threw some money
table. Everyone was staring now. Most of them had turned to us, enjoy
is not a show.

t was a I took a step toward her so I was looking down at her.

woman

“Stay away from Vance,” I warned.

She was struggling to get up. “Fuck you!”

e table “That’s Vance’s job,” I retorted.

Vance had me around the waist and was pulling me toward the
it. You Jackie made it to her feet.

y voice

“I won’t forget this!” she yelled after us.

“I hope not!” I yelled back at her, fighting against Vance’s arm
way, next time you’ll keep your fucking mouth shut or you won’t find
easy to get up!”

Then Vance had me out the door. He let me go, grabbed my hand and
dragged me to his Harley.

“I cannot believe that just happened,” I ranted at his back. “What
I wish I had my stun gun. I wish I had my Mace. What a bitch!” I repeated
of my

He stopped at his bike and pulled me so my back was to it. I was
him and he settled his hands at my hips.
as truly

I looked up at him.

“You could have done something,” I snapped.

“And missed the show?”

I hadn’t noticed it, but right then I did.
right her

He was grinning, huge.

“You think that was amusing?” I asked.
on the

He stepped into me, arms going around me and he touched his
mine.
ring the

I stood stiff as a board.

“Princess?”

“What?” I clipped.

“Take your time learnin’ to share.”

I blinked. It was my turn to feel thrown.
door as

“What?”

One of his hands went to my jaw and his thumb came out to run along

.. “That lower lip.

nd it so “All the time you want,” he said softly, not answering my question

The velvet shroud came around us again and I leaned into him.

nd and “Am I going to be beating up all your ex-lovers?” I asked.

“No. Just Jackie, she’s a bitch.”

a bitch!

I didn’t want to ask. I knew I shouldn’t ask.

ated.

But I asked.

; facing

“What were you thinking, being with her?”

“She’s not a bitch to me,” he replied.

True enough. It was pretty clear she really liked Vance.

Then for some reason, do not ask me why, I threw myself in the de

“Was she good?”

“No,” he replied immediately.

This time I sagged into him, glad I hadn’t sunk to the bottom of t
like a rock.

lips to

“You’re not just saying that?” I asked.

He shook his head.

My hands came up and I started to play with the edges of his
jacket. “When do you have to get to your job?”

“Gonna see to my other job first,” he told me.

“What other job?”

His white teeth flashed. “The job of fuckin’ you.”

He was teasing me.

ong my

I stopped playing with his jacket.

“This isn’t really funny,” I clipped.

“It’s hilarious. That, particularly, was my favorite part.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it,” I said, sounding snotty.

He touched his lips to mine. “Let’s get you home.”

Whatever.

He let me go and got on the bike. I got on behind him.

He leaned back, grabbed my wrists and wrapped my arms tight
him.

I put my chin to his shoulder and we took off.



ep end. SOMETIME IN THE dead of night, I didn’t feel the bed move when Vance
it, but I did wake when his warmth hit me from shoulders to heels.

“Hey,” I mumbled.

he pool “Hey,” he replied softly. “Go back to sleep.”

I felt Boo walking up the bed and then heard him slip off the side
platform with an “I meant to do that” meow.

“It was Nick,” I told Vance, still half asleep.

leather “Sorry?”

“Nick made me cry. He approves of you, like, a lot.”

Vance’s arm tightened around me and drew me deeper into his bod

“Go back to sleep, Jules,” Vance whispered into my hair.

“Okay.”

I snuggled in and then fell asleep.

around

e got in

e to the

ly.



SHRINK-WRAPPED

The next morning I woke up before Vance and I tried my new wakening him with a kiss. This time I decided to put my lips on other parts of his anatomy.

I was left in little doubt that he appreciated my creativity.

We were showered, dressed and in the kitchen eating bowls of Cream of Wheat that I prepared (because you could cook Cream of Wheat in the microwave). Vance was sitting on the kitchen counter. I was standing with my hip leaned partially into the counter, partially into Vance's knee. Bob was sitting in front of us, tail sweeping the floor in a wide arc, staring at our bowls with greedy eyes.

"What's on for your day?" Vance asked.

I looked up at him and gulped down a bite of Cream of Wheat. "Then I should go talk to Heavy, Frank and Zip, tell them the party's over." "Good idea."

I had one more thing on my agenda and that was waiting for my phone to come. Vance and I were moving fast, but not fast enough for me to do *that*.

Instead I said, somewhat wistfully, "I'm gonna miss the street."

“You left it in good hands.” Vance’s lips weren’t smiling, but his eyes were.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Jack told me a dealer’s entire car was shrink-wrapped the other night. I felt my eyes widen. “What?”

“Tex shrink-wrapped a dealer’s BMW. Wrapped the whole thing in plastic wrap and then used a portable blow dryer on it to tighten the skill of Word has it, it was several layers deep.”

er parts I was thankful I didn’t have a mouthful of Cream of Wheat or it would have come out my nose, I laughed so hard.

“Tex is a nut,” I said when I was done laughing.

ream of “Tex is a nut,” Vance agreed.

in the “What’s on for your day?” I asked.

; with a “Never know where the day’ll take me,” he replied.

oo was I sighed and leaned into his knee. “That’d be nice.” I took another
; at our Cream of Wheat.

“Jules?”

Shelter. “What?” I asked with my mouth full (Auntie Reba would have
er.” conniption). Then I swallowed.

“Wherever it takes me, good to know in the end it’ll lead back to you.”

eriod to Luckily I had swallowed because my mouth dropped open.

o share Vance watched me a beat and said, “If you fuckin’ freak out, I’m
you to the bed.”

My mouth snapped shut.

his eyes “Indy says that doesn’t work,” I informed him snottily.

He watched me another beat, again openly surprised by what I
Then he laughed.

ght.” “That’s more than I needed to know about Lee’s relationship with
Vance said through his laughter.

hing in Then a thought hit me.

plastic. “Don’t tell anyone I told you that,” I demanded.

He grinned at me. “Why not?”

ould “Because it’s nobody’s business.”

“Indy told you.”

“Yes but she probably didn’t expect me to blab it to you.”

“Women talk.”

I turned away from him and put my bowl in the sink.

“Women talk! Ha!” I said. “You boys are the biggest gossips I’ve
bite of met.”

Vance jumped off the counter and leaned into me to put his bowl
mine. “You ever do a shift in the surveillance room, you’ll understand
e had have something to break the monotony.”

I turned to him. “Well, break it with something else. I don’t want to
ou.” an enemy of Lee.”

His arms slid around me. “That’s not gonna happen.” His face came
cuffin’ to mine. “The cherry poppin’ conversation in your living room was the
of conversation for days. Mace taped it and played it for the whole time
was back to staring at him with my mouth open and I thought my heart
stopped beating. “Look at this as your way of getting even,” he finished

“That’s it!” I declared. “No cookies for Mace. I don’t care if he c
shared, someone up for me.”

I felt Vance’s body move against mine with laughter.

“Indy,” Still laughing, he touched my lips with his own and said, “Gotta go

“Fine,” I grumbled.

He grinned, ignoring my grumble. “I get done in time, I’ll make di

“Fine.” I was still not over the fact that the cherry popping conve
was taped and used for the Nightingale Investigation Team’s amu
Then another thought struck me. “If Dawn ever sees that tape—”

The laughter went out of his eyes. “Dawn is *never* gonna see that t

At that, I smiled.

Vance smiled back, grabbed the cookies and then he was gone.

Then I remembered something and, probably too late, I yelled,
“Forget! No cookies for Mace!”

I heard the back door slam.



next to

l. Gotta THAT AFTERNOON, still with no sign of my monthly visitor who alway
on time and was *never* late, I called Vance (though, not to give
o make progress report on my monthly visitor).

“Yeah?” he answered.

ie close “Hey,” I said.

ie topic “I was just gonna call you,” he told me.

eam.” I “You making dinner?” I asked.

y heart “Don’t think so, I’m in New Mexico.” My body went still and Van
d.

lid beat talking. "I'm after a skip."

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't often that you were standing in the kitchen in Denver with someone, calmly eating Cream of Wheat in the morning and in the afternoon, without warning, they were in New Mexico."

"Jules?"

anner." "I...okay," I said.

ersation "You all right with this?"

sement. "Um, sure," I lied.

I was freaking out. Do not ask me why. I just was.

ape." "Trail's hot. It won't take long."

I didn't want to sound like a clingy, stalker, psycho bitch from hell. I didn't know what to say at that moment that wouldn't sound like a stalker, psycho bitch from hell.

So I stayed silent.

Vance kept talking. "I'm off tomorrow. Do you want to spend the night in the cabin? I'll meet you there."

rs came "No," I replied. "I think I'll call the girls, see if they want to go out with him. I'll talk with Heavy, Zip and Frank."

"I'll come to your place when I'm done with this."

That, at least, made me feel better.

"Okay."

It was Vance's turn to be silent.

"Vance?"

ice kept "You're not okay with this," he said.

“It’s what you do,” I told him as if he didn’t know.

in your “Yeah.”

in the “I’ll get used to it.”

xico. Silence.

“You just surprised me,” I explained.

More silence.

“New Mexico is only one state away. It isn’t like you’re all of a sudden in New Zealand.”

More silence.

“Though, I’ve always wanted to go to New Zealand. I’ve heard it’s beautiful there and the people are nice.”

clingy, More silence.

“I should probably take Roam to a beach during my next vacation so he can learn how to surf.”

night at “Jules?” Vance finally spoke.

“Yeah?”

t after I “Shut up.”

I smiled.



I’D SPENT some time in the rec room with the kids and was walking down the hallway on my way back to the office when I turned my head and looked out the window to the blue room. With the tutor, Stu, sat Roam, Sniff and Clay.

I kept walking a few paces and then stopped dead. Then I turned around backwards and looked into the room.

My eyes were not deceiving me. Sitting in the room with Roam, Si the tutor was Clarice.

Before they could see me, I kept walking.

Clarice had never gone to a tutoring session. Andy was working w but she was a no-go. Tough as nails and out on the street nearly as Roam had been, I thought she only came to the shelter to watch tel get a decent meal and brag about her shoplifting escapades.

dden in

Now she was working with Stu.

That was a mini miracle. And the mini miracle worker was Daisy.

ard it's

When I got to my desk, I flipped open my phone and called Daisy.

“Hey, sugar, what’s up?” Daisy answered.

n so he

“Vance is after a skip,” I told her. “He’s in New Mexico. Thought if you’re not busy, you might want to go out and get some drinks, dinner.”

“I’ll have to check with my husband.”

“If you have to do something with Marcus, that’s cool, I’ll call—”

“What did you say?” Daisy cut in, but she did it on a whisper.

It was weird hearing Daisy whisper. I’d never heard it before. S not a whispering kind of person.

own the

“I said if you have to do something with Marcus, that’s cool. I’ll j ___”

d in the

rice.

“You know?” Daisy broke in again.

walked

“Know what?”

“Know...do you know who Marcus is?”

iff and Finally I got it.

“Yeah,” I said quietly.

“I’ve been trying to find a way to tell you. How long have you kno

ith her, “Awhile,” I said. “Luke told me.”

long as She was silent a few beats then she asked, “Do you *really* kno
evision, Marcus is?”

“Yeah,” I repeated, again quietly.

“You don’t mind?”

Oh, I minded.

One thing I’d learned in life was that women could bitch about th
until they were blue in the face and you could listen and nod an
maybe, support. But you never—as in *never*—said something bad about a w
maybe, man, no matter how much she bitched or how much he may deser
always came back to haunt you.

“Just call me after you talk to Marcus,” I said instead of answering

“All right, sugar,” Daisy replied. Now her tone was quiet. Not a w
but barely there.

he was “Daisy?” I called.

“Yeah?”

ust call “Clarice is in with the tutors,” I told her.

Daisy was silent.

“Thanks,” I said.

Then I flipped my phone shut.



“OH SHIT, I know who this is,” Zip shouted across his Gun Emporium. Daisy and I sauntered in. “No, no, no. Should I say it again? I think I will. Fuck...*no!*”

“Zip,” I said in a soothing voice as Daisy and I approached him. He was standing in front of the counter opposite him. Both of them were scowling at me.

“No. You aren’t gonna get Marcus Sloan’s wife filled full of hole kind of shit hits the fan, everyone gets splattered. I do not want to be splattered with shit. Jesus, girl, you are loco.” He shook his head and narrowed his eyes and said, “I heard you were off the streets.”

“I am,” I replied, stopping in front of the counter.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Heavy asked.

“Thought I’d come by, tell you in person. Then I thought maybe you might want to meet us for drinks later.”

They stared at me. Then they stared at each other.

“Shee-it. Crowe’s dumped her again,” Zip muttered.

Daisy giggled.

“Crowe has *not* dumped me,” I snapped. “And he didn’t dump me the first time. It was a misunderstanding!”

“Why aren’t you havin’ drinks with him?” Heavy asked.

“He’s in New Mexico after a skip.”

The light dawned and both of them looked a lot less cantankerous.

“Where you goin’ for the drink?” Zip asked.

“Smithie’s,” Daisy replied.

ium as “I’m in,” Heavy answered immediately.

fuckin’ “Me too,” Zip put in.

Smithie’s was a strip club. Daisy used to work there (as a stripp Heavy Marcus). Jet did too (as a cocktail waitress, pre- and start-of-Eddie, b n were definitely not now as Eddie wasn’t fond of the outfit the waitresses wear or the clientele). Jet’s sister Lottie (better known as Lottie Mac, s. That of the Corvette calendar) now worked there as a stripper, apparently t t to be one this side of the Mississippi, and that included Vegas. She was id the good stripper, Lottie was a local celebrity. Even I had heard of her.

“We’re going to get something to eat. We’ll see you at Smithie you close down the shop,” I told them.

“Later,” Heavy said.

ou guys As we walked away, we overheard Zip saying, “Loco, fuckin’ loc kind of women go drinking at a strip club?”

Daisy turned her head and smiled at me.

I smiled back.



me the “OH MY GOD,” I breathed after Lottie was done with her two song da want to be a stripper.”

Roxie giggled beside me. “That’s what everyone says.”

Lottie was gone, disappeared behind the stage. The crowd was screaming for an encore. I was right with them on my feet shouting fo come back.

She didn’t strip. I didn’t know what she did, but it wasn’t st though she did dance around in fancy underwear and rip her bra of

end.

The only way to describe it was a work of art.

er, pre- We were sitting in the VIP section right up next to the stage.

ut most When Daisy and I drove up in Daisy's Mercedes, I thought we'd
had to get in. There was a velvet rope and a line clear around the building.

Queen Daisy just walked up to the front of the line, said, "Hey, Lenny,"
he best huge black guy that was the bouncer, and then swanned in like the pla
such a named "Daisy's" and not "Smithie's."

's after She went directly to a cordoned off area where Jet, Roxie, Indy, Al
and Stevie were all sitting.

Our asses no sooner hit the chairs when an older, heavysset bla
came trotting up to us.

o, what "Smithie!" Daisy squealed with delight.

Smithie ignored her and pointed at me.

"You!" he shouted, even though he'd stopped not two feet away fr

I went still and stared at him, mentally inventorying my pu
weapons. I'd so lost hold on my head-crackin' mamma jamma that t
nce. "I things I could think of to use were my nail file, or I could throw m
button at him. Neither of these were likely to instill terror in his heart.

"Can I help you?" I asked, slowly standing again.

wired,
r her to "You Law?" he shot back.

Oh shit.

ipping,
f at the I decided on silence.

"I want no trouble tonight. We've had our quota of bar brawls thi

Smithie said to me.

“Smithie,” Jet put in placatingly.

Smithie’s angry gaze swung to Jet.

“You were the cause of two of them,” he snapped.

“Was not!” Jet huffed. “Just one, the other one was a shooting.”

Smithie looked to the ceiling.

Jet looked at me. “No one got shot,” Jet assured me. “All the s jumped the shooter. It’s kinda funny if you—”

“It *ain’t* funny!” Smithie roared, and everyone around us turned to

“Smithie, sugar, Law’s given up the street,” Daisy cut in.

“Yeah, right. Trouble follows you bitches around like the plag more often than not, it traipses its tight ass and long legs in here. Not t Got me?” Smithie declared.

“We’re just having a few drinks,” Ally said.

“See that you do.” He snapped his fingers and a waitress in a red mini and a black skintight camisole with SMITHIE’S in red script ac he only front came tottering to our table on high heels.

Smithie’s eyes moved to me and he stared. I stared back.

Then he looked me up and down and asked, “You dance?”

“No!” Indy, Jet, Roxie, Tod, Ally and Stevie all said in unison.

“All right, all right. Shit.” Smithie put his hands up and then looke again. “Hear you’re Crowe’s woman.”

I nodded that, yes, I was Crowe’s woman.

At the thought, I grinned.

Smithie did not. "Shit. Those boys need to get their heads examined."
Then he was gone.

"What can I get you to drink?" the waitress asked.

"I'll take an appletini." This was said from behind me and I turned to see Shirleen powering through to our table.

"Well, the night is complete!" Daisy hooted. "Shirleen, girl, good trip to you."

Shirleen, I was surprised to see, got hugs and cheek kisses from everyone while I ordered a cosmopolitan. Then again, she was Darius's aunt. Darius was Lee's best friend, so I guessed she was part of the tribe.

"Hey, Law," Shirleen said, eyes on me and sitting across from me.

"How're things?" I asked.

"Goin' well," she replied, nodding then her eyes got intense. "Real good," she repeated with meaning.

I smiled at her. She smiled back.

"You two know each other?" Daisy asked, looking between the two of us.
Everyone was staring.

"Law helped with a family problem," Shirleen explained.

Everyone seemed okay with that answer so I looked at Daisy and changed the subject quickly. "What did Smithie mean when he asked if I danced?"

Daisy nodded to the stage. "He meant stripped."

My eyes went to the stage. The three women there were gorgeous. Perfect bodies oiled up and glistening, their nipples covered with spiced pasties. They knew how to move and they had tons of money sticking

d.” their G-strings to prove it.

Still.

“Um...” I said.

l to see “The word is,” Tod began, “yikes.”

“Nothin’ wrong with strippin’,” Daisy said to Tod.

l to see “Not for you, but she’s a social worker,” Tod retorted. “Social v
don’t strip.”

everyone Daisy turned fully to Tod and I felt her attitude hit our table like a
nt and lightning. “Why not?”

“Uh-oh, another white people fight and I don’t have my appletini
Shirleen muttered.

I felt the tension in the air (hell, everyone felt the tension in the a
l well,” to dispel it, I blurted, “I haven’t got my period yet.”

Everyone turned to me. My tactic worked, maybe too well.

Shirleen craned her head around, looking for our waitress. “Ho
o of us. This is heavy. I need my appletini.”

“How late are you?” Indy asked.

“I should have started today,” I told her.

hanged “Not to worry,” Daisy said, cooling off her attitude when confront
d?” a girlfriend problem. “Rule is you don’t need to worry until at least a v

I shook my head. “I always start like clockwork, late morning
is, their special day. I haven’t started yet.”

arkling “I think I need to stretch my legs,” Stevie murmured,
; out of uncomfortable with the conversational turn.

“What?” Ally said. “We’re talking about menstrual cycles. It’s th natural thing in the world.”

Stevie glared at her. “I’m gay but I’m still a man. We don’t do pe could barely cope with the in-depth cherry popping trip down memory

“Okay, no more about periods,” Roxie threw in and looked at me
workers just talk about cause and possible effect. How many times did yo unprotected?”

bolt of “Too many,” I admitted.

They all stared at me.

ni yet,” “Girlie, I know you were a virgin but you got to take care of yo
Tod advised, not unkind but slightly impatient.

ir), and “What’s in Vance’s head?” Jet murmured. “At least he should better.”

“I know what’s in Vance’s head,” Indy replied.

ly shit. Jet and Indy looked at each other and their faces broke out in smile
Shit.

“You were a virgin?” Shirleen asked, wide-eyed.

Shit again.

ed with I decided not to answer Shirleen and totally ignore Indy and Jet.

week.” I’d had more than enough conversations about my ex-virginal sta
on thecherry popping. One of them was even on tape.

“Word is you’re with Crowe,” Shirleen went on.

clearly This time I answered with a nod.

“He pop your cherry?” she asked.

ie most Daisy gave a tinkly-bell laugh while I closed my eyes in despair.

riods. I “Shee-it. Every girl wished the likes of Vance Crowe popped their
You’re livin’ the dream,” Shirleen continued when I opened my eyes.

lane.” She wasn’t wrong. I was living the dream.

. “Let’s “Was he gentle?” Shirleen pushed, nosy as all hell.

u do it “Um...no,” I answered, and her brows flew together.

“He hurt you?” she snapped.

“Um...no.” I was beginning to get uncomfortable.

urself,” The waitress put our drinks on the table and I smiled at her in hope
the current discussion would end now that Shirleen had her appetini.

My hopes were soon dashed.

l know “You come?” Shirleen kept at it.

“Oh for goodness sake,” Stevie muttered the words that I was think

s. “Well, did you?” Shirleen pressed when I didn’t answer.

“I don’t think—” I started.

Shirleen leaned forward, not to be denied. “Did you?”

“Three times,” I gave in.

Shirleen’s brows flew apart and her eyes nearly popped out of her l

tus and “Three times in one go?” she breathed as if she, personally, was g
find Vance and give him an award for Best Cherry Popping in the His
the World.

“Two, um...goes,” I answered.

“Still...” She sat back and gave me a huge smile. “Hold on to tha
she commanded.

I nodded again.

cherry. That I would try my damndest to do.

“We’re with them,” we heard from behind us and everyone turned as a bouncer was trying to keep Heavy and Zip away from our table.

“Hey, guys!” I called, thankful the menstrual cycle-slash-sex talk was done before Heavy and Zip got there.

“See!” Zip snapped at the bouncer and he and Heavy pushed through.

I got out of my chair and made introductions. Neither Heavy nor Shirleen looked too happy to be sharing libations with the ex (hopefully) drug dealer. They sat down, ordered drinks, and trained their eyes to the stage, making it clear they weren’t there for the talk at a strip club with a gaggle of women and two gay guys.

“Ain’t this fun?” Daisy said, wiggling in her chair, happy as a lark.

I couldn’t help myself. Even after the cherry popping third deejay smiled at her.

“Yeah,” I said low.

Daisy’s eyes came to me, they got soft and she winked.

My pug liked Daisy’s wink. He got all squirmy happy and gave me a head full of sloppy puppy kisses.

We drank. We chatted. We drank more. We watched the stripper tell her story of drank more, getting tipsy. We laughed and giggled because we were tipsy. We drank more. Lottie came on and we all went as nuts for her the rest of the audience.

We were settling in our seats with fresh drinks, the other stripper started to do their thing post-Lottie when I heard, “*You!*”

This was a high-pitched, female screech and I turned to look.

“Oh shit,” I muttered when I saw Jackie, Vance’s ex...whatever, I
to look through the crowd toward us.

What on earth was *she* doing there?

ilk was Considering the fact she was a woman and she was gorgeous, the b
didn’t even try to hold her back.

gh. I came out of my chair.

ior Zip Jackie got right into my space and right into my face and my boc
; dealerstill.

lks and “You bitch!” she screamed.

r small “Uh-oh,” Ally muttered.

“What the fuck?” Heavy asked.

I could feel him moving behind me, coming in close.

egree, I “Move away,” I warned.

I didn’t want Smithie to get mad at me and I didn’t want our fun i
end by being ejected from a strip club because I had to kick one of V
ex-bimbo’s asses (again).

ne tons Four other girls pushed in around Jackie and Jackie swung her he
hair) around to them.

rs. We “This is the bitch I told you about,” Jackie informed her friends,
getting five of them turned to glare at me, mouths in girlie bitch pouts, hands c
r as the

I feared I wasn’t going to get my earlier wish.

ers had “Who you callin’ a bitch?” Daisy was up, and even though she
least five inches shorter than any of the women confronting us, she

bitch pout, hand on hip, attitude right back at them, and it must be said
pushing scarier than any of them.

“Stay out of it,” one of Jackie’s friends snapped at Daisy.

Um.

ouncer I didn’t think that was good.

“Don’t tell her what to do,” Ally entered the fray.

She was up and moving around the table.

ly went Fuck.

That *definitely* wasn’t good.

“You stay out of it too,” another of Jackie’s friends disengaged from
pack, getting ready to confront Ally.

Indy was up and tense. So were Jet and Roxie.

I didn’t figure Lee, Eddie and Hank would pat me on the back for
their women into a catfight at a strip club even if it was against a bitch
night to skank from hell.

ance’s “Ladies—” Stevie tried to play peacemaker, and I had the fleeting
that Stevie’s quiet magic would work.

ad (and “Shut up, homo,” Jackie sneered at Stevie and she barely got
“mo” part of “homo” when I lost all thoughts of peacemaking and went
and all about my friends.

on hips. It was then that my head-crackin’ mamma jamma snapped into place.
I moved.

was at I took Jackie by the wrist, swung it in a wide arc, spinning her around
was all ducked, positioning myself and her. I bounced her off my back and she
flying into the tables. She crashed, as did the tables and all of our drinks.

id, a lota number of empties), to the floor.

I watched Jackie struggle amongst the overturned tables, her ar
legs pumping, soaked with appletinis, cosmopolitans, and rum and
when I felt my hair being tugged backwards.

I reached back, grabbed both wrists of the hands that were in my p
and whipped one of Jackie's friends around to my front. I felt anot
grab at me, but I stayed focused and planted my feet, dropped one
wrists and flipped her on her back using what had become my si
move. She landed with a thud of flesh on flesh, right on top of Jack
both women grunted in very unladylike ways.

rom the Then I dealt with the next one who was pulling at my shirt. I tag
with a calf in the back of her knees. She teetered, I gave her a nasty s
the chest and she landed on Jackie and the other girl with a high-
getting screech.

i bimbo I spun around and confronted the last two, lifting my hands and wi
my fingers at them. I was too focused to notice that everyone had sto
ig hope stare. Everyone, even the strippers.

“You want a piece of this?” I taunted and jumped forward once.

out the They jumped back, bitch pouty looks gone, their eyes wide with fe
orrying I smiled at them and came back around. Jackie's friends were
were helping Jackie up too.

ace and I pushed forward, shoved her friends out of the way and grabbe
Jackie's sweater, taking a bunch of it in both of my fists. I advanced,
ound. I her backward until she was at the stage. I leaned in and she had no cho
ie went to arch her back over the stage.

ks (and “Stevie come here!” I yelled, my face in Jackie's, her eyes wi

freaked out, my hands not leaving her sweater.

ms and “Girlie, I’m here,” Stevie said quietly from my side. “You can
Cokesskank go.”

“Apologize,” I snapped at Jackie, not listening to Stevie.

onytail “I...I’m sorry,” she stammered, not taking her eyes off me.

her girl “Not to me, you stupid bitch, to him. Apologize!”

of her “Holy crap,” I heard Indy say from behind me.

gnature “You got that right, sister,” Jet muttered from behind me too.

ie, and Jackie’s eyes moved to Stevie and she repeated her apology.

ged her “You ever gonna use that word again?” I asked when her eyes can
hove into me.

pitched She shook her head (and hair). I moved back, pulled her up with
then pushed her away from me so she staggered back into the stage.

iggling “Am I ever going to see you again?” I kept at her.

pped to She shook her head (and hair) again.

“Go!” I clipped.

She stood frozen.

ar. I took a step into her. “Move!”

up and She moved and her friends moved. They moved as fast as their hig
would take them. I watched them go until they disappeared.

d on to I straightened my back and cocked my head to the side quickly as I
forcing back to the room. The whole place—not just my posse, but everyone
dice but staring at me.

ide and Smithie was close, standing by Daisy, arms crossed, eyes on me.

Fuck.

let the We were going to be ejected, I was sure of it.

“Sorry. I’ll pay for any damage,” I said to him.

“Shit, bitch. I’m thinkin’ about askin’ you to make that a regular at Smithie’s.” He shocked me by saying. “Hot babe kicks ass. They’ll to see it.”

“Fuck yeah!” Shirleen yelled. “Girl, you are *the shit*.”

“Righteous!” Ally shouted.

Jet started clapping. So did Tod. Roxie did too. Indy joined in, and so did everyone else, including the audience and the strippers. Daisy whooping shout and Stevie hugged me.

me and The bouncers righted the tables and Smithie shouted, “Get these some drinks!”

I was about to sit down as the applause died away when I caught Heavy’s eyes.

“You do a man proud,” Heavy said to me and the look on his face his words.

Zip nodded.

h heels I smiled and my pug wiggled in close, proud of me too.

I sat down and ordered another cosmopolitan.

I turned
e—was

Fuck.

We were going to be ejected, I was sure of it.

“Sorry. I’ll pay for any damage,” I said to him.

“Shit, bitch. I’m thinkin’ about askin’ you to make that a regular feature at Smithie’s.” He shocked me by saying. “Hot babe kicks ass. They’ll line up to see it.”

“Fuck yeah!” Shirleen yelled. “Girl, you are *the shit*.”

“Righteous!” Ally shouted.

Jet started clapping. So did Tod. Roxie did too. Indy joined in, and then so did everyone else, including the audience and the strippers. Daisy gave a whooping shout and Stevie hugged me.

The bouncers righted the tables and Smithie shouted, “Get these bitches some drinks!”

I was about to sit down as the applause died away when I caught Zip and Heavy’s eyes.

“You do a man proud,” Heavy said to me and the look on his face echoed his words.

Zip nodded.

I smiled and my pug wiggled in close, proud of me too.

I sat down and ordered another cosmopolitan.

TWENTY-SEVEN



TWENTY-SEVEN



HOME PART TWO

I'd barely got Boo and I settled in bed when my phone rang.

After Lottie's third act we all left Smithie's. Daisy was too d drive so she left her Mercedes at Smithie's. One of Marcus's men came her and Shirleen grabbed a ride with them. Since I was in the 'hood, I a ride with Lee, who came in one of the company's Explorers to get Tod and Stevie. Roxie was designated driver for Jet and Ally.

We all hugged and told each other we loved each other, waxed on how great the night was and that we'd be best friends forever for about minutes before Lee grabbed Indy and my upper arms and steered us Explorer.

They dropped me first, if you could call Lee walking me to the door making sure I got safely inside "dropping me," and they took off. I watched out the window, Indy, Tod and Stevie waved at me as Lee drove.

I weaved a bit and giggled to myself, cooing to Boo, "Mommy's coming" as I walked to the bathroom. I washed my face, slathered it with moisture and changed into a nightgown and Boo and I climbed somewhat gracefully into the bed.

Then the phone rang so I grabbed it.

“Hello,” I sang happily (okay, more like drunkenly).

“Go set your alarm,” Vance said in my ear.

“What?”

“Bobby just called me, told me you got home. Lee walked you door, but you didn’t set your alarm. Go set it.”

“Okay,” I said, again happily (yes, more appropriately drunken scooted to the end of the bed.

I took the phone with me and held it to my ear as I jumped drunk tumbled a little and muttered, “Shit,” before giggling.

Throughout this there was silence in my ear.

Then, “Are you drunk?”

Shit.

“Um...” I mumbled.

Vance was an alcoholic. I was a social worker so I knew al alcoholics. Still, I’d never read a book about how to deal with one w was your shit-hot boyfriend. Actually, I was pretty sure I had, bu forgetting in my drunken state what it said.

Therefore I stayed silent after my initial “um.”

“How drunk are you?” Vance asked as I made it to the alarm ke *drunk!*”the living room.

I didn’t answer, intent on the task at hand. I punched in some n ssly up and the keypad started beeping angrily.

“Whoops,” I said and narrowed my eyes at the keypad.

“Jules,” Vance said in my ear.

“Quiet, I’m concentrating.” And I was.

I heard him chuckle.

“Quiet!” I demanded.

His amusement still came at me as I punched the right code in .
alarm stopped beeping.

ly) and “Did it!” I announced as if I’d just cracked the code to the security
protecting the Hope Diamond.

down, I started walking back to the bed as Vance asked again, “Al
Princess. Now tell me. How drunk are you?”

Oh well, honesty, Auntie Reba and Nick always told me, was t
policy.

“Five cosmos drunk,” I told him.

“Five?”

I about I decided to fib by omission and leave out mentioning the shots,
when he started up the steps to the bed platform and cracked my head against
t I was ceiling.

“Ouch!”

“Jules?” Vance said in my ear.

ypad in “Okay. It’s okay. I’m okay. Everyone’s okay,” I declared as I
myself in the opening and collapsed on the bed.

umbers Vance was laughing again.

“You aren’t mad?” I asked.

“Fuck no. Five cosmos drunk means you’ll still be drunk whe
back.”

“Is that good?”

“Yeah, Princess, it’s good.”

“Why?”

and the He didn’t answer, he just said, “The skip was wanted in C Spring
just processed him at a station there and I’m passing the Academy n
system be home in a little over an hour.”

“Okay,” I replied happily (this time more happily than drunkenly).

I right, “Take off your underwear.”

My breath caught and I went instantly sober.

he best “What?” I whispered.

“Go to sleep without any underwear.”

“Vance,” I was still whispering.

when I “Princess, do it.” His voice was silk and it slid through the pho
the hall across my skin like it was alive.

“Okay.” Yes, still whispering.

“See you soon,” he said.

“Okay.”

Disconnect.

shoved I laid there a second, wondering if I could sleep without my und
Considering the fact that I was seriously turned on, I figured I wouldn
anyway so I took off my underwear, turned off the light and set
cuddling Boo and waiting for Vance.

n I get In about two minutes, I was asleep.



I WAS YANKED off the edge of the bed with hands at my ankles.

I let out a surprised gasp. Boo went flying. I landed hard on the floor. An arm came around my waist while a hand went over my mouth.

In the darkness I saw Hector Chavez.

I screamed against his hand and started struggling.

He pushed me into the bed platform, his body hard against mine. Again I felt his immense heat.

“Quiet. Roam’s in trouble,” he hissed at me. I stopped struggling immediately at his words and he dropped his hand and stepped away from me. “Get dressed. Get your gun. Now.”

Without asking a single question and flying through the house, I grabbed my clothes and shoes then ran into the bathroom and dressed.

I thanked my lucky stars I had worn a longish nightgown to bed because I was still panty-less when Hector pulled me out. I also thanked my lucky stars that fear for one of my boys made me sober as a nun. Vance would be happy I was sober, but maybe I’d do a shot or two of tequila when I get home with this gig.

After I dressed, I exited the bathroom, knelt in the hall and put my underwear on. “What’s happening?”

“Cordova got him,” Hector answered.

“Goddammit,” I snapped.

I went to the sliding doors under my bed, opened a drawer and pulled through my underwear until I had my gun. I knew Cordova had been released from the hospital (it was only a flesh wound), but I thought he’d

released to jail.

oor and As I looked for my gun, I asked, “Why?”

“Fuck knows. He’s pissed at you. Maybe he thinks he can use R
it in the make you pay.”

“I thought Cordova was in jail,” I said while I tucked my gun i
back waistband of my cords.

ne, and “Bonded out.”

“Fuck,” I muttered.

uggling “Let’s go,” he said.

y from We went.



grabbed IT’S important to note at this point there were a lot of things I shou
done.

ecause I I should have taken my purse. I had my panic button and phone
luckier purse. Not to mention a tracking device.

ldn’t be I should have called Vance, told him where I was going so he w
ot done worry.

Not doing that, I should have left a note.

y black I should also have called the surveillance room at Nigh
Investigations. Even the Nightingale Men didn’t go into a situation
backup.

rooted own brand of badass mother, perhaps scarier than them all. And this
released Cordova we were talking about. Sal was an idiot.

d been So I didn’t do any of these things.

I should have.



Bobby

oam to

BOBBY ZANZINSKI HATED NIGHTTIME SURVEILLANCE. All of the Night Men hated nighttime surveillance except Jack, though Jack was kind of a weird guy.

Nighttime surveillance was boring as hell. It meant Fortnum's was normally at Jules's (or Jules was asleep) so you could watch her wandering around saying stupid shit to her cat.

Bobby could watch Jules for hours. Any of them could. That was *smokin'*.

ld have He sat in the surveillance room and came instantly alert when Chavez approached the house. Bobby watched Hector break into the duplex then disable her alarm.

in my "Fuck," he muttered.

ouldn't He knew who Hector was, but Bobby was still alarmed. Those deep DEA guys were nuts, pure and simple. Fuck knew why Hector was broken in, so Bobby leaned forward, turned up the volume to her speakers and was ready to call Vance.

tingale As he reached for the phone, on another monitor Bobby saw Vance without. into the underground parking area. Vance would come up and drop the

Bobby decided to wait and tell him when he got there.

was his *Lord knows The Law can take care of herself*, Bobby thought on a

was Sal



Shirleen

SHIRLEEN HEARD HER PHONE RINGING.

She rolled, reached out, grabbed it and put it to her ear.

“This better be good,” she mumbled.

tingale “Aunt Shirleen,” Darius said in her ear.

nd of a Shirleen came instantly awake *and* sober. “What’s up, son?”

closed “Got word. Shard’s back.”

ouldn’t Shirleen felt a chill snake down her spine. Anyone with an ear
ground knew what was on Shard’s mind, namely making Jules pay.

ian was “I thought Lee’s boys—” Shirleen started.

Hector her out.”
Law’s Shirleen threw back her purple, satin covers.

“Call Lee,” she ordered.

“I’ll take care of it. I’ve got some boys out lookin’ for him.”

p cover “No, boy. You call Lee. Let the professionals handle this.”

reaking “Aunt Shirleen.”

and got “Boy—”

re drive “I’ll handle it.”

keys. Disconnect.

Shirleen stared at the phone in the darkness for two seconds. Th
turned on the light and ran to her desk to find Daisy’s home number.
smile.



Sniff

SNIFF WAS RUNNING.

He was running, crying, snot coming out of his nose, breathing heavy. He had to get to Law. He had to get to her.

He had to get to her *now*.

When Cordova took Roam, Sniff had seen it. He'd followed knowing that Cordova was an idiot and an asshole. Roam could handle Cordova. Hell, their geeky tutor Stu could handle Cordova. Sniff could handle Cordova.

to the

Sniff had caught a ride with some Mexican gang-bangers he knew he had to put up with Sniff because they thought he was funny. They took Cordova's place then they'd peeled out, leaving him there.

to draw

Sniff had approached the house thinking to get a giggle while he'd kicked Cordova's ass and when he saw what he saw through the window he'd taken off.

He was so freaked out, he'd dropped his fucking, *fucking* (and he'd told himself he'd never say "fucking" again if Law got Roam out of this somewhere along the way, and as usual he had no money to make a payment).

A car came down the street. Sniff stopped and put out his arm to stop it down, desperate, shouting.

The car passed him.

then she

Without hesitation, he kept running and trying to keep the vision of Roam, bloody and what Sniff hoped was only unconscious, out of his mind.

Worse still, the vision of a dead Cordova.

It wasn't working.

Sniff turned onto Colfax, running down the busier street, hoping he could flag down a ride.

ivy. He was miles away from Law. He'd never make it.

He saw a black Porsche pass him. The brake lights lit and the Porsche pulled over. Sniff ran toward it, opening his mouth to yell when the door opened and Luke Stark knifed out the driver's side.

handle Sniff could have jumped for joy.

ld even Instead he stopped, and as Stark approached him he doubled over, in his side, and sucked in breath.

ow who "Sniff." Luke put a hand to the back of his neck.

him to Sniff looked up at him, not caring even a little bit that this super car was going to see his tears and snot and he said, "We gotta find Law."

Roam Stark took one look at Sniff's face and his own went hard in such a way that Sniff felt a thrill of fear mingled with hope.

"Get in the car," Stark ordered.

vowed Sniff ran to the car.

) phone

y call.



Roam

) flag it ROAM WAS awake but pretending to be out.

Cordova was dead.

Shard had shot him, like, seven times. Right in front of Roam. Roam had never seen so much blood in his life and Roam had seen a lot of shit in his life, including blood, including his own, but not *that* much.

Roam had not put up much of a fuss when Cordova took him at gunpoint to his house, mumbling stupid shit about making Law pay, getting his attention. Roam figured he'd find some way out of it. Anyway, he knew he had seen them and Sniff would call Law. His idiot, big-mouth friend

done it before, he'd do it again. Everyone knew Law could handle C
en the She could handle just about anyone.

hen the They'd got to his house, Cordova still ranting, telling Roam
continuing to talk about Law and how she was just playing with him
really wanted him, and Roam thought it was kind of funny. It'd be
a stitch story, it'd make Law laugh. He liked to make her laugh. She had
laugh. She was one fucking hot white bitch normally, but when she l
her face was amazing.

ool guy Park made her laugh all the time. Park had worked hard at it. He l
make Law laugh.

1 a way Hell, everyone did.

Then Shard had walked right in the front door, as calm as you plea
Cordova turned to him, saying, "What the—?" and that was it.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

Dead.

Roam had been frozen in shock.

He should have run.

If he'd been like Crowe he might have had his head together enoug
am had something, if not to save Cordova, then to save himself.

t in his Roam wasn't like Crowe.

unpoint But when Shard turned to Roam, he didn't shoot him. He beat the
of him. Roam put up a fight, but even all beaten up himself (his face
ing her swollen, bruised mess) Shard was still stronger, older and smarter than

w Sniff So finally, nose bloodied, face cut, ribs burning and after he'd
nd had blood the second time, Roam feigned being knocked out and went dow

ordova. And he waited.

Shard stood over Roam. Roam felt him there instead of opening his mouth to sit. He listened as Shard called someone and said, "Got Roam. Tell the bitch and she at Cordova's. She comes alone or I put a bullet in his brain."

a good Then he flipped his phone shut and waited.

a good Roam hoped Law wasn't stupid enough to come alone. He'd never laughed her in action personally, but Martin and Curtis said she was the shit.

oved to Still, Roam hoped she'd send Crowe.



Jules

HECTOR STOPPED his car and turned to me.

se. "Let's roll," he said.

I went out my side, he went out his.

He disappeared into the night.

I ran to the house Hector told me was Cordova's, one block and a half down.

Hector, still trying to protect his cover, couldn't be seen. He was supposed to do backup for me only if I needed it, and while he was positioning himself back of the house I was going to the front.

I hadn't brought my phone and Hector didn't know who had his shit out. We figured I could call the police or Vance once I sorted out Cordova. It wouldn't take long.

. Roam. It was a stupid plan.

spit up

/n.



Bobby

BOBBY WATCHED Vance shoot out of the underground parking area
is eyes. Harley.

tch I'm He had his earpiece in his ear, phone on in his jacket pocket.

Bobby's eyes were on the GPS screen and he was going to give
directions to Cordova's house via speakerphone.

er seen By the time Vance made it up to the offices, Bobby had heard
telling Jules why he'd broken in. Bobby had already had the GPS di
to Cordova's house on screen when Vance opened the door and st
torso in.

"Keys," Vance had said, obviously not intent on hanging arou
tossed the keys to Bobby without fully entering the room.

"We got a situation," Bobby told him after he'd nabbed the keys. "

Vance's face got tight and without hesitation he entered the room.
briefed him in thirty seconds.

d three Vance had his earphone in his ear before the door to the survi
room closed behind him.

running "Turn left," Bobby told Vance.

lf at the *Jesus, Cordova's a fuckin' idiot, Bobby thought, Crowe's gonna fe
his balls for dinner.*

tapped. "Next street, turn right," Bobby said out loud.

lova. It



Lee

THE PHONE RANG beside the bed. Lee gently rolled away from the soft
body of a dead-to-the-world Indy and snatched his cell off the night
flipped it open and put it to his ear.

on his “Yeah?” he answered.

“Lee.” It was Darius.

Lee got tense.

Vance Darius went on, “Shard’s in town. He’s got one of Law’s kids. Roa

“Fuck,” Lee clipped.

Hector Lee was out of bed, dressed and out of the house in two minutes.

rections
uck his Indy didn’t wake.



Shirleen

nd. He
SHIRLEEN WAS PACING her living room.

Law.” The phone rang and she pounced on it.

Bobby “What?” she snapped.

“He’s got the brother. Kid’s name is Roam,” Darius told her.

eillance Shirleen closed her eyes. “Call Lee.”

“Already did. We need to find Law’s other kid. I need Daisy’s nun

“I called her. She’s got Marcus on it.”

zed him “I’ll call Marcus.”

Disconnect.

Shirleen sat down on her white couch. She put her elbows to he
and her head in her hands and for the first time in a long time, she pray



Luke

t, warm
it table, LUKE LISTENED to the phone ringing in his ear, it rang twice before cor

“Yeah?”

“Lee. I got Sniff. He says Shard’s back in town. He’s got Roam headed to Cordova’s.”

“Why’re you headed to Cordova’s?”

im.” “Sniff says Shard’s there. He looked through the window. If Cordova is dead, Roam isn’t in good shape. I found Sniff running Colfax headed to Law.”

“Darius called, told me about Shard and Roam, though he didn’t know where he was.” There was a pause then, “*Fuck!*” Lee exploded and his mouth tightened as he heard Lee uncharacteristically lose control. “I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

Luke didn’t either. He had a fucking shitty feeling about this.

“Sniff’s leading me to the house, he doesn’t know the address. I’ll call you when I get there,” Luke said.

“I’ll call the office for directions,” Lee returned. “Out.”

Disconnect.

iber.” Luke drove, Sniff gave directions. The kid had gotten control, he was crying, wiped his face on his sweatshirt and was pointing the way with a certainty than Luke would have expected him to in his state.

Luke’s phone rang again.

r knees Luke flipped it open and put it to his ear. “Yeah?”

red. “Pick up the speed, Luke,” Lee said. “I called the office. Hector got word about Roam. For some fuckin’ reason he went for Law to get him probably already there. Out.”

inect. Disconnect.

“*Fuck!*” Luke snarled.

m. I'm He flipped the phone shut, threw it on the dash, put his foot down
Porsche shot forward.



Jules

le says

' down NEVER, not in a million years, would I have thought Sal Cordova would
hurt Roam.

t know He wanted me, then he was going to get me.

Luke's But he wouldn't hurt Roam.

Luke, I Maybe bore him to death with idiot stories about being a supposed
man, but that wouldn't be physically painful, just mentally painful.

That was why, just like Luke, I went up to the front door, cocky
I'll get it hell, knocked three times and shouted, "It's Jules!"

Then without hesitation, I pulled out my gun, put my hand to the
handle, turned it and went in.

I saw in a quick heart-stopping scan of the room that considering I
stopped dead—not just dead, *very* dead—that I was right, he couldn't hurt Roam.

th more I also saw that somehow Roam *was* hurt, unconscious and bloody
lying on the floor.

Without a thought (I really should have thought), I ran into the
toward Roam, but to my surprise he surged up shouting, "Law!" behind me.
ot word

. She's I whirled and saw Shard, gun up, pointed at me, his bruised and
face grinning, eyes hard.

"Fuckin' bitch," Shard said.

Then he fired.

and the Unfortunately Roam had enough chance to get himself in front of my
body jerked when the bullet slammed into it and he went down at my feet.
Rage shot through me. I screamed bloody murder, lifted my gun, and fired.

ld have Shard fired too.

My first bullet hit him in the shoulder. I didn't aim to hurt him much.

His first bullet hit me in the gut. He aimed to kill me.

d ladies The burning sensation in my belly was nearly overpowering.

y as all The will to live, thankfully, put the "nearly" in my previous statement.
With a gut wound, knowing his intention, Roam at my feet not moving
and Shard's gun still aimed at me, I had no choice but to fire again, this
re door with a different aim.

His second shot hit me in the chest.

Sal was My second shot went straight into his frontal lobe.
m.



dy and

Luke

LUKE SAW the Harley in front of him, Vance astride it. Luke flashed
e room lights, Vance lifted his hand. Luke parked the Porsche behind the Harley
his eyes doors down from Cordova's house.

"Stay here, kid," Luke ordered Sniff.

swollen Sniff nodded but Luke didn't see him. He was already out of the car.

"I take front, you take back," Vance said when Luke made it to the
already approaching the house at a jog.

me. His Luke nodded, jogging beside Vance, then Luke separated, beginning to move across the lawn of the house next to Cordova's, heading toward the back.

Then they heard the shot then the scream and the second they did both sprinted forward at a dead run to Cordova's front door.

By the time they made it and Vance kicked in the door, four more had been fired.



Jules

I FELL DOWN on my ass, reached out toward a prone Roam. I couldn't find the strength or my breath to make it to him so I fell to my back.

I closed my eyes, fighting the pain and thinking about getting to a safe place. When I opened my eyes again, Vance's face was the only thing I saw.

"Hey," I said, because I figured I'd passed out (I didn't think I'd feel the pain of multiple gunshot wounds hurt like a mother and I didn't figure I'd feel pain in Heaven) and this was a dream so I smiled at him.

"Hey, Princess," he replied, eyes on me, hands working somewhere.

Then I felt my shirt ripped open from hem to collar.

"Get a goddamned medic here," I heard Luke bark from somewhere in the room.

I turned my head to see where Luke was, but instead saw Hector kneeling over Roam.

I looked back to Vance.

"Is Roam okay?" I asked.

"Let's worry about you right now," Vance said.

ning to He moved away from sight and I saw his hands catch something
ard theVance wasn't filling my vision I was pretty certain I was seeing
because I could swear I caught a glimpse of Darius, and then Vance
id, theyback to me.

I was losing it, fading, and I knew it. My body was going into s
re shotscould feel the warm blood sliding out of me even as Vance put pres
the wounds to stop the bleeding. I didn't know if I went unconsciou
wake up again.

I blinked.

find the “Crowe,” I called.

His eyes had moved from mine to my torso but they came back
phone.“Yeah?”

I had a lot of things to tell him, a lot of things I needed him to unde
ied, theand I knew I didn't have a lot of time.

re they I lifted my hand but couldn't keep it up. Before it fell Vance caught

I looked into his eyes as his strong fingers closed around mine an
e else. the only thing I could think to communicate everything he needed to k

“Home.”

here in Then everything went black.

neeling

He moved away from sight and I saw his hands catch something. When Vance wasn't filling my vision I was pretty certain I was seeing things because I could swear I caught a glimpse of Darius, and then Vance came back to me.

I was losing it, fading, and I knew it. My body was going into shock. I could feel the warm blood sliding out of me even as Vance put pressure on the wounds to stop the bleeding. I didn't know if I went unconscious, if I'd wake up again.

I blinked.

"Crowe," I called.

His eyes had moved from mine to my torso but they came back to me. "Yeah?"

I had a lot of things to tell him, a lot of things I needed him to understand, and I knew I didn't have a lot of time.

I lifted my hand but couldn't keep it up. Before it fell Vance caught it.

I looked into his eyes as his strong fingers closed around mine and I said the only thing I could think to communicate everything he needed to know.

"Home."

Then everything went black.

TWENTY-EIGHT



WAITING

Jet

It was the middle of the night and Eddie's phone was ringing.

This happened a lot seeing as Eddie was a cop, so we were practiced at him answering it without disturbing me (too much).

I was curled into his side.

His arm went to the nightstand. He nabbed the phone, flipped it open and said quietly, "Yeah?"

He listened for five seconds then I felt his body go completely solid. My head shot up.

Eddie rolled away and turned on the light. When he rolled back, his eyes were on me. I didn't like what I saw and I pushed up, one hand on his abs, one hand in the bed.

"Where're they takin' her?" Eddie asked.

Oh no.

No, no, no.

My first thought was Mom. My mom had a stroke nearly a year ago and it had been bad but she had made it. My greatest fear was that it would

again and worse. Without asking, I whirled around, threw back the covers and jumped out of the bed.

“Right. Later,” Eddie said, his voice urgent.

I was hopping around, pulling on my jeans when Eddie caught me by the waist.

“Jet,” he said softly.

I turned to him and pushed off, going back to pulling on my jeans. I was looking up at him. “Is it Mom? Where is she?”

“It isn’t your mom,” I stopped and stared at him. He didn’t make any sense. “It’s Jules. She’s been shot.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

“It’s not good,” Eddie said.

I couldn’t move. I just stayed still, a foot away from Eddie, staring at him.

“How not good?” I finally asked.

“Chest and gut.”

I felt somehow as if an imaginary bullet tore through me in each place.

“*Twice?*” I cried, my voice shrill.

“*Cariño.*” He came forward, but I jumped away, pulling up my jeans at the same time.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“There’s nothin’ we can do.”

I yanked off his T-shirt that I’d drunkenly pulled on before I’d fallen into bed what seemed like only minutes ago and I turned to the chest of drawers and pulled out a bra and put it on while I glared at him.

covers “Let’s go.”

He stared at me a beat then bent to grab his jeans from the floor.

Within five minutes we were out the back door and in the garage by the yanking open the passenger side door to Eddie’s red Dodge Ram when he shoved it closed. I turned to him, mouth open to ask him what he was doing when he put a hand to my belly and pushed me up against the door, following me there and pinning me with his body.

His forehead came to mine, his one hand between us at my belly, the other hand came to my neck and we just stood there, looking into each other’s eyes and breathing.

“Fuck,” Eddie murmured.

“I love you,” I told him.

His mouth touched mine and with his lips still there, he said, “Me too.”

I nodded, my forehead rolling against his. He took in a deep breath and moved away.

We got in the truck and he drove us to Denver Health.



Indy

“HEY, GORGEOUS,” Lee said in my ear.

I opened my eyes and in the dark I could see his hips clad in jeans and bed beside me.

I was tangled up in the sheets. This meant I’d been sleeping alone while. I was an active sleeper. If Lee was with me, he controlled it by pulling me deliciously to the bed with his hard body. Sometime between drunkenly falling into bed, wearing nothing but my underwear, and not

had been somewhere.

I came up on my elbow and Lee reached out and turned on the light. I was I stared as he did it.

on Eddie Lee's work had no office hours, but he went to pains to make certain things didn't affect me. Never in five months of living together had he turned on the truck light when he got home in the dead of night, which happened a lot of times. Each time he came home he woke me up, as he'd promised, to let me know he was okay, but he'd never turned on the light.

to each My eyes moved to him and my heart started beating hard in my chest.

Lee was sitting there, for that I could be thankful. But a lot of people I loved had dangerous jobs. Hank for one, Eddie for another. My dad, who was a cop, Lee's dad, who was a cop too, and then there was Lee's dad. "I don't want to see any of them go to work."

ath and "What is it?" I asked.

"Jules has been shot."

I sucked in breath, not expecting to hear that, and came up to a sitting position.

Lee's eyes moved with me, never leaving mine. "Chest and gut. Not good. She's at Denver Health. Vance wanted to go get her uncle but he said we'd do it."

"Of course," I mumbled, pulling the sheets away from my body.

re for a Lee's hands took mine and my eyes went back to his. "Vance is pinning me. Said he needed to do it. I want you to be there for him and his family. They're gonna need you. Vance agreed to that."

ow, Lee "Okay," I whispered.

“Hurry, Vance is waiting downstairs.”

I flew from the bed, got dressed faster than I ever had in my life downstairs.

Vance was standing, staring out the front window. I noticed him wearing one of Lee’s sweaters and I didn’t want to know what that meant. Every Lee was on the phone.

Lee said, “Gotta go,” into the phone when he saw me and flipped it. Vance’s eyes moved to mine and I felt my stomach pitch by what I saw.

Or more to the point, what I *didn’t*. I bit my top lip and swallowed, then released it. “Hey, Vance,” I said.

He lifted his chin.

“Let’s go.” Lee was already moving to the back door.

Lee had the Explorer blocking the back alley. I wanted to sit in the car but Vance opened the front door for me and motioned me in.

“You...” I started.

He shook his head.

I didn’t delay any further.

Lee drove the two blocks to Jules’s house while I was turned in the car. I didn’t look at Vance. “What do you want me to do?”

Vance was looking out the window, but when I asked my question his eyes moved to mine again and he said, “Just be you.”

I nodded, not really knowing what that meant, but thinking I could

do that.

and ran Lee stopped and idled and Vance was out the door. I looked at I
jerked his chin toward my door. I nodded again and trailed Vance to
he was door.

ant. Vance knocked and I stood next to him. I felt stupid just standing
him, so I reached out and touched his hand with my knuckles. Imme
his hand twisted and his fingers closed over mine hard. I bit my up
t shut.
again as his hand crushed mine, but I didn't make a peep.

[saw in The outside light came on, the door opened and Nick stood th
looked through the screen at Vance then at me then back to Vance.

Vance and I watched as he closed his eyes tight, and before Var
could say a word he opened his eyes again and I had to suck in both
lips at the pain written on his face.

Then he pushed open the screen door and he said, "Come in and s
I get dressed."

ie back,



Roxie

HANK'S PHONE RANG.

I was warm and cozy, stuck between the heat of Hank and our ch
lab, Shamus. I felt the cold air as Hank rolled away.

ny seat "Yeah?" I heard him say. I was already falling back to sleep, c
into Shamus's warm, soft fur, when I heard Hank say in a quiet, t
voice I'd never heard him use before, "No."

ion his

I turned and looked at him in the dark, and as I did that he sat up,
and switched on the light. Then his whisky-colored eyes moved to m
at least what I saw there made me stare.

“We’ll be there. Yeah. Shit. Yeah.” He flipped his phone shut.

Lee. He “Whisky?” I called.

Nick’s He put his hands under my armpits, pulled me toward him, across and buried his face in my neck as his arms went tight around me.

next to “Whisky,” I whispered, beginning to tremble.

mediately Something was wrong, really wrong.

upper lip His head came up and his eyes found mine. “Sunshine, Jules has
ere. He shot. Twice. It’s bad. We gotta go.”

My breath caught painfully at this news, but Hank either didn’t notice or I he wasn’t going to be delayed. He got up, arms around me taking notice of my him. When he was standing, he set me on my feet.

We dressed silently. Hank finished first (as usual) and let Shamus
it while back for a quick break before we left.

We made it to the hospital and I saw Eddie and Jet first. The already in the waiting room. Jet was sitting with Sniff, arm around him he was staring at the floor. Eddie was pacing. My eyes scanned the room I saw Indy with Jules’s Uncle Nick, both sitting, Indy holding his hand

I kept scanning, and Vance was there too, standing and staring
chocolate window. Lee was with him, not close but also not far.

Hank started to go to Lee, but stopped when the door opened behind
huddling and Bobby walked in. Lee’s eyes had come to us when we arrived, but
mortured he saw Bobby he came our way.

“What?” Lee asked Bobby when he arrived at us.

twisted I peeked at Vance. His eyes hadn’t moved from the window.
ine and

I found this alarming. Vance was a Nightingale Man, an action m

Alert, and he hadn't even moved, not a muscle. Not when Hank and I
not even when Bobby arrived.

his lap My gaze swung to Jet, who caught my look and shook her head,
Indy, who did the same. I felt suddenly cold and was about to move to
when Hank's hand squeezed mine and Eddie hit our huddle.

as been "We had to lock Luke down," Bobby told Lee, and I drew in my b
this latest bit of shocking news. "Mace did it. Luke lost it. Totally p
Hector for taking Jules to Cordova. Doesn't give a shit that Hector
know about Shard." Bobby's eyes moved to Vance. "I thought you
otice or need me...Vance."

ne with I didn't know what he was talking about, but whatever it was, it c
wasn't good.

out the "Vance is hangin' in there," Lee said.

Bobby nodded and his eyes moved from Vance to Lee.

y were Then Bobby drew in a deep breath.

im, and "I waited," Bobby said on an exhale, and he blinked slowly th
om and talking. "Until Vance got up to the offices. I saw him on the monitors
l. the Explorer. I figured I could wait to tell him about Hector breaki
g out a Law's place until Vance got upstairs. Five minutes could have—"

hind us "Get it out of your head," Lee ordered.

it when "I shouldn't have waited," Bobby replied.

Lee leaned in, face tight and serious. "Bobby, right now, get it out
fucking head."

Bobby nodded once then his gaze sliced to Vance. He shook h
sharply, then he turned and was gone.
an, Mr.

arrived, We all watched the doors close behind Bobby and my heart went
to him because obviously he was blaming himself for something, but I turned
then to Lee spoke.

Vance “Fuck,” Lee whispered, “he shouldn’t have fucking waited.”

I leaned into Hank and Hank’s lips went to my ear.

reath at “Go to Vance now,” he told me.

issued at I nodded. Hank dropped my hand. I walked across the room and
I didn’t arm around Vance’s waist.

I might He turned to me, and when his eyes hit mine I blinked.

certainly His eyes were dead.

They weren’t blank, they were dead.

I felt my nostrils burning as I stared at him and I knew I was going
I turned into him, pressed my forehead against his shoulder, breathing
control the tears, and his arms went around me.

en kept We stayed that way for a long time and I managed to hold back the
parking He let me go and I took his hand.

ng into We stood together, Vance looking out the window, me standing
him. Daisy arrived with Marcus. Shirleen arrived with Darius. Ally
with Carl. Tex arrived with Nancy. Duke arrived with Dolores. Hea
Zip came separately. May charged in like a madwoman, tears streaming
down her face. Finally Tod and Stevie walked in, carrying enough
of your from some all night Winchell’s to feed an army.

Coffees were bought. Eddie or Hank, badges on display on their
is head walked to the nurse’s station and asked (okay, more like demanded) for
even though there were none to be had.

t out to Then the kids started coming.

rmed as First Clarice, Daisy's friend, came in alone and sat down next to
Daisy put her head on Clarice's shoulder and I didn't know that it was
miracle that Clarice didn't move away.

slid my Then another couple kids came in, two young boys who took
around. Their eyes hit Sniff then Vance, then they walked to a wall, sl
against it and stayed silent.

Then another kid came in. A couple more, a gaggle of girls, a p
boys. After a while the room was filled with the Rock Chick Tri
Jules's kids.

All of us silent or talking quietly, sipping coffee and eating donuts.

All of us waiting.

g to cry.
deep to

All the while Vance looked out the window while I held his hand.



Indy

e tears.

DAWN WAS BREAKING when the doctor walked in wearing clean scr
Crocs.

beside

arrived He looked around the room, filled to capacity with people, an
ivy and stood.

eaming I stood with him.

donuts "Juliet Lawler?" the doctor asked the room at large.

Lee came up beside me, but I moved close to Nick.

ir belts,
updates, "Me. Here. Me. I'm her uncle," Nick said, and he hadn't spoken si
arrived so his voice was hoarse, croaky.

He cleared his throat and I got closer.

The doctor walked to Nick. I saw a movement behind him as Daisy materialized and stood at his side. Roxie was not far away, Hank at her side, Eddie and Jet moved in beside Lee.

The doctor stopped at Nick, his eyes scanning the crowd again. They settled on Nick and he said, "She's pulled through. Your niece is a fighter. She's in ICU, critical. We'll watch her, but it looks good."

I took Nick's hand as his shoulders drooped and I squeezed. He squeezed back.

My eyes moved to Vance as Nick asked, "Can I see her?"

Vance's body was tense, but I was relieved to see his eyes were alive. They were back from whatever hideous place he'd been in last several hours.

I wanted to smile. Hell, I wanted to scream, but I kept my mouth shut.

"A quick visit," the doctor told Nick and started to move away.

"Roam!" we heard shouted, and everyone's eyes swung to Sniff.

The doctor turned back.

"I'm sorry?" he said to Sniff.

"My friend, Roam. The black kid. He was shot too. Is he okay too?"

Everyone's gaze swung to look at the doctor.

"Does he have family here?" the doctor asked.

Everyone looked at each other.

"Information can't be released to anyone but family," the doctor said.

Eddie and Hank both moved forward. Information could be released to the cops.

Vance “Sho ’nuff he has family. I’m his grandma,” Shirleen lied through her back teeth and hustled up to the doctor. “Tell me, how’s my baby?”

The doctor stared at her a second then said, “I’ll find out.”

“You do that doctor,” Shirleen said, and the doctor turned to look at her. Shirleen’s eyes slid to Sniff, then she winked.

Nick let go of my hand and followed the doctor, but he stopped and looked at the floor behind him as if expecting to see something there, then he lifted his eyes.

“Vance?” he called.

Everyone’s eyes swung to Vance, but he was already moving toward the door for the Nick.

Then they were out the door.

out.



Jules

I OPENED my eyes and it seemed like I was lying in a bed, but I felt absolutely nothing, like I had no body. I figured, since a little while ago I’d had a pretty significant pain and bleeding a lot and now I felt nothing, that I was dead. And I decided kind of woozily that I was obviously an angel.

I saw movement so I looked sideways and there was Vance staring at me.

His handsome face was tight, worried and maybe a little pissed, and my angel-self smiled at him because clearly I’d been given a chance to have a chat with Vance before I flew on my fancy, new, white angel wings to Heaven.

“Hey,” I said.

igh her My voice sounded really weak, raspy and quiet rather than so
super sweet and melodic like an angel's.

“Hey,” he replied.

Nick as “Do you see my angel wings?” I asked, my voice still sounding
“Are they pretty?”

ed. He He stared at me a second then I was pretty certain his lips twitched
then he “Yeah, Princess. They're gorgeous.”

“Yay,” I whispered.

“You're gonna be okay,” he told me.

owards “I know. I don't feel my body.”

I didn't realize I wasn't making any sense and wouldn't have
anyway. Angels probably didn't have to make sense. They could fly
for eternity talking nonsense, who was to care?

I was thinking about my angel outfit, wondering what angels would
olutely tried to look down at myself, but I found I didn't have a lot of energy
been in stopped trying and my eyes slid sideways to look back at Vance.

it I was “This angel stuff is exhausting,” I informed him.

g down “I bet.” His lips weren't twitching anymore. He was grinning flat out
I really loved his grin.

sed off That was when I remembered.

ven the “Did you get it?” I asked, realizing suddenly that I needed to take a
fluffy-angel nap and soon.

“Get what?”

“Home,” I said.

ounding “Sorry, Princess, I can’t hear...”

My eyes closed and I didn’t have the energy to open them so I
bother. I figured angels could fly blind. They had to have angel-like s
; raspy. something like that. Anyway, I would only bump into clouds ev
couldn’t fly blind and I didn’t figure clouds would hurt.

But before I took off to Heaven, I had to know, or more impo
Vance had to know.

So I asked Vance, my eyes still closed, “I said earlier ‘home,’ did
it?”

I felt him get close and I thought that was strange since I didn’t
body anymore, not really anyway, so I shouldn’t be feeling anything
e cared was certain I felt his cheek pressed against mine, his stubble rough
around my skin.

“No, Jules,” he said into my ear. “I didn’t get it.”

re, and I sighed huge and felt the angel nap tugging at me.

gy so I “Jules?” Vance called, and he sounded far away but it felt like
were at my ear.

ut. “Home...” I whispered and then slid closer to somewhere else,
Heaven. I didn’t know. There sure as hell weren’t any bright lights. (C
they probably didn’t say “hell” in Heaven. Oh *shit*, they probably dic
“shit” in Heaven either. I was already getting angel demerits and I
take an even been to angel orientation yet.

I had to finish my thought. It might be my last chance.

So I whispered in Vance’s ear because it seemed like it was really
my mouth (although I knew it couldn’t be because I didn’t really

mouth anymore as I didn't have a body).

I didn't "You're home. See, Auntie Reba said home isn't a place, h
onar or anywhere just as long as the people you love are there."

en if I Then I slid into Heaven, except weirdly, right before I drifted awa
some pain in my fingers, like someone was holding my hand too tight.

rtantly,

you get

have a

}. But I

against

his lips

maybe

Oh shit,

ln't say

hadn't

close to

have a

mouth anymore as I didn't have a body).

“You're home. See, Auntie Reba said home isn't a place, home is anywhere just as long as the people you love are there.”

Then I slid into Heaven, except weirdly, right before I drifted away, I felt some pain in my fingers, like someone was holding my hand too tight.



NO MATTER WHAT

I was an angel in Heaven for two days. Or at least I thought I was.

Really, I was whacked out on drugs and in ICU.

During these two days, I saw Vance once and Nick three times. I had the idea they came by often to spend time with me while I was taking angel. When I saw them I regaled them with stories of what it was like being an angel since, for two days, I thought I was an angel. I figured they could write a book about it and become millionaires. I even shared this idea with Vance.

The nurses told me it was the only time they'd ever heard that kind of laughter in ICU.

After two days, when it became clear I was going to survive, they moved me to a normal room. I stayed in the hospital a long time, but it was pretty uneventful, mainly because nothing in the World of Rock Chicago was uneventful.



VANCE DECIDED he didn't feel much like adhering to visitor's hours. They kept telling him he couldn't spend the night, sleeping in a chair next to the bed, but he did it anyway, and Vance seriously was not the kind of guy I wanted to argue with so they let him be.

I also told him, considering his job meant he always needed to be and alert, that he should stay at my place. He didn't pay one bit of attention to me and still came to the hospital anyway.

We bickered about it (because I didn't worry about arguing with Vance) and I lost.

Really, it wasn't fair for him to bicker with me when I was in a bad condition.

I informed him of this, but he just grinned at me.



A COUPLE of days after I was moved from ICU, in the middle of the day, I had no idea I heard weird noises.

Considering hospitals weren't the most restful places in the world, I suspected some doctor or nurse was there to check up on me. Instead, I found Vance and Hector in a death-lock at the door, torsos together, legs pressed against each other. Clearly Hector was trying to get in and just as clearly Vance didn't find it much fun allowing that.

"Vance," I whispered, and both men froze in death-lock position. I looked at me. "Let him in."

"Princess," Vance said low.

"Let him in."

Vance hesitated a moment then stepped out of the death-lock, and the staff didn't pretend to be happy about it.

Hector approached the bed.

"I didn't know about Shard," Hector told me the minute he stepped into my room. I was sitting up in bed, and I noticed he also hadn't gone to etiquette school to learn how to talk to me.

rested should start a conversation with words like, “hi,” “hello” or “glad to see you aren’t dead.”

“I know,” I told him.

ance). “I thought Roam wouldn’t want one of Lee’s boys saving his ass for Cordova. Cordova was a moron, Roam would lose face. I thought he’d let you to take care of it.”

“I know,” I repeated.

“If I’d have known—”

“I was cocky,” I broke in and my eyes slid to Vance, who’d moved to the other side of my bed.

I didn’t exactly want him to know this part since it might piss him off. However, I also didn’t want Hector to go on blaming himself, I saw something that was my fault.

I went on, “Earlier that night, I’d had too much to drink and I did something you that. I walked right in. I didn’t think. I saw Roam and just went in. It wasn’t your fault. It was mine. I didn’t think.”

“I shouldn’t have—” Hector began.

“You did the right thing, I didn’t. Please don’t worry about it. It’s my fault.”

He stared at me a beat and I stared back, noticing, even though I was in undercover-disheveled-mode (and seriously needed a haircut, but he was I to say all that thick, dark hair needed to be cut, mainly because it was and messy, it looked hot), he was a seriously good-looking guy. Eddie’s edge, the one that made you wonder about him, made you think you could turn to the dark side in a nanosecond.

see you Eddie had it under control.

Hector did not.

After we stared at each other awhile, he nodded and left without a glance at Vance.

When the door closed behind him, Vance called, "Jules."

My gaze slid to him. I took one look at his face and then I closed my eyes.

"I need an angel nap," I said, and I wasn't lying. I did need an angel nap. I also needed an excuse to avoid a Vance Lecture, and that was where naps came in handy.

Before I slid into my angel nap, I heard, "Jesus, you're a pain in the

self for



ROAM WAS RELEASED before I was, for some reason to Shirleen, who didn't tell hospital thought was his grandmother. A fact that Andy came from the hospital to confirm, lying like a pig in mud.

The bullet had hit Roam in his right side, luckily missing any vital organs. He was motionless on the floor because on his way down he smashed his head against Cordova's coffee table and it knocked him out. So not only was he beaten bloody and shot, he also had a serious concussion.

During a visit to me, Sniff explained that Roam didn't feel much about letting Shirleen mother him during his convalescence at her house. This was mainly because Shirleen wasn't a motherly-type person who cooks and spoils and ran herself ragged making certain that Roam had every comfort.

Instead, she told Roam what to do, like, a lot. Things like rest and exercise with Stu (who came over to work with Roam and Sniff) and not to

head with too much junk by watching television, but instead she grabbed books to read.

I knew it freaked out Sniff, but Roam put up with Shirleen. There he was probably scared not to.

Where Roam went, Sniff went, so Sniff was staying with Shirleen.

When Roam was fit enough to take to the streets again, Shirleen told him and Sniff they were welcome to stay as long as they liked.

They told me since Shirleen lived in “one phat crib” they decided to stay awhile, even if staying with her had rules.

It was a long time later that I realized that during all of Roam and Shirleen’s visits they never cursed.

Not once.



BY THE WAY, Roam and I never talked about it, him trying to save my life by taking two bullets to save his.

However, once, while I was still in the hospital, I caught him looking at me funny. I grabbed his hand and mine went tight.

So did his.

For a second.

Then he pulled away.

With a fifteen-year-old runaway that was all that needed to be said was the best he would allow me to give him and it was the best I was going for.

I was happy with that.



NEEDLESS TO SAY I wasn’t pregnant. I’d asked a nurse in a quiet moment

ive himshe told me there was bleeding, but what kind of bleeding she couldn't

After I got out of the hospital, my periods resumed as normal and
1 again, right on the Pill.

My body, the nurse told me, had been through too much trauma
too. miscarry.

ld both Whether I had been or hadn't been, I'd never know.



to stay ABOUT FOUR DAYS out of ICU, the girl gang showed up one afternoon
juicy piece of gossip.

Sniff's Indy, Ally, Jet, Roxie and Daisy all waltzed in grinning like fools
hung around my bed as Indy told me that Lee had fired Dawn.

I didn't gasp because that was a luxury I didn't have at the time
like a bitch, so did laughing, moving and breathing). So I just wide
life and eyes and my mouth dropped open.

"Apparently," Indy began, loving every minute of this, "Mace and
king at were in the surveillance room and for shits and giggles they flipped
sound and visual to the reception area. Dawn was on some call to a gi
and she was talking about you. I don't know what she said, but Ma
Monty went ballistic. They called Lee and Lee was with Luke."

Daisy let out a tinkly laugh and rubbed her hands together and I kn
we were getting to a good part.

. It was "Lee and Luke went directly to the offices," Indy continued. "Lee
; to get. right in and told her to pack up her desk. She was fired."


"Luke escorted her out of the building," Roxie threw in, her eyes a

ent and "They taped the whole thing," Jet added.

say. “Brody even cut it into a music video with some old footage
I went scowling and glaring and making catty phone calls. He gave it a sou
‘The Bitch is Back.’ It’s fuckin’ righteous! I can’t wait for you to see i
not to said, grinning like a loon.

“Yeah, we all went down there and watched it a billion times. Da
totally pissed when Lee fired her. It was great!” Indy finished.

Considering the fact that I’d had a near death experience, I knew I
with a be a better person, live my life doing good deeds and not be bitch
when it was being bitchy about someone who was a bitch. Neverth
s. They couldn’t help being pleased that Dawn had been fired. Especiall
everyone seemed so happy about it.

(it hurt And of course, the stupid bitch was talking about me.
ned my 

LUKE CAME TO VISIT ME.

Monty I was getting a lot of visitors. The girl gang, Tex and Nancy, T
on the Stevie, Duke and Dolores, Shirleen, Heavy and Zip.
rlfriend May came by all the time, full of stories from the shelter and c
ace and with her purloined pudding cups.

Frank slunk in, talked to me for five minutes and slunk out,
ew that uncomfortable with sunlight shining on him, even through a window.

A bunch of my kids came and the Nightingale Men came too: Ma
walked Bobby and Monty.

Then, of course, there were Nick and Vance, who spent the evenin
light. me, mostly kicked back and boring me to death by watching endless t
games, talking about who would win the Heisman Trophy and shit li
Luckily I was drugged out most of the time and slept a lot.

of her It was a while before Luke came.

ndtrack I was sleeping, and when I woke up I saw him sitting in a chair put
t,” Ally to the bed, his fingers linked and resting on the side of the bed. He w
forward, his forehead resting on his hands.

wn was I was a little stunned at his posture. It was seriously un-Super-Dude
“Hey,” I said.

should His head snapped up and he looked at me.

y, even This stunned me too, because Luke was not the kind of guy you
less, I take by surprise, and he was so lost in thought, I’d done that.
y since

“Hey,” he said, face serious, mouth tight. He sat back and
forearms to his knees.

“You okay?” I asked.

He stared at me and said, “I’ll be okay when I can close my eyes
and not see you lyin’ on the floor among a mess of dead bodies and blood
’od and Yikes.

arrying Not, I feared, a visual that led to sweet dreams.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, and wished there was something better to

clearly There wasn’t.

He kept staring at me but didn’t say anything.

ce, like, Then, with a voice low and quiet, he said, “You killed a man.”

I nodded.

gs with Shard was dead. I shot him in the head. The police waited until I
football of ICU, and with Vance standing next to me holding my hand, I’d made
ke that. statement. Roam and Sniff had made theirs too. The police were not g

press charges, as obviously I'd done it in self-defense. Shard had
illed up Cordova, shot me and Roam. They were more than happy to close the
as bent him.

For my part, I was trying not to think about it.

e-like. "You gonna be able to live with that?" Luke asked.

I nodded again. "I don't have much choice."

Luke kept staring at me so I kept talking.

u could "It's the difference between him being here and Roam and me bein
I picked Roam and me. I think that was the right decision."

put his "It was. It's still gonna fuck with your head," Luke told me.

I had no doubt he was right.

"It starts fuckin' with your head, you talk to Vance," Luke went on
at night can't get to Vance then me, Lee, Monty, Mace, Ike. Any of us'll lis
od." we'll know where your head will be at."

It was my turn to stare at him. If I was reading his underlying mess
was telling me they all had killed someone.

o say. "Now I'm really one of the boys," I said softly, testing out my thec

"Welcome to the club," he affirmed my guess.

He said this in jest, but he wasn't amused and neither of us laughed

"I was stupid. I shouldn't have—" I started, but he got up sudden
leaned into me.

was out Then he stunned me again by kissing me.

ade my Not a Luke, teasing, sexy kiss, but he put his hand to the side of n
going to and touched his lips to mine. He pulled back a couple of inches and sta

I killed in the eyes.

case on “You can go over it again and again, relive it a million different v
isn’t going to change anything. You saved your boy and you b
breathing. The end,” he said.

He stayed where he was for so long I felt the need to respond.

“Okay,” I said, but it was kind of shaky.

“You start relivin’ it, you talk to Vance or me or any of the boys
ig here. hold it inside. Again, we’ll listen.”

I nodded and was finding it hard to breathe and not because I’d be
in the chest, but because Luke was a great guy. Looking at Luke, I
with Luke, you’d never know Luke could be like this. His face was h
he was close and I saw the soft concern in his eyes and it made a n
1. “You fucking handsome guy look downright knock your socks off beautiful.
ten and

He trailed his thumb slowly across my cheekbone, his eyes never
mine.
age, he

Then he took his hand away, touched my nose, gave me a sexy h
and he was gone.
ry.



I DIDN’T GET Thanksgiving with just Vance, Nick and me. The Rock
l. had a huge Thanksgiving bash in my hospital room.

nly and They brought the whole meal and all the fixin’s and stood or sat
carting in chairs from other places, eating and chatting. All the women
a massive marathon game of Trivial Pursuit while the men watched for

ry head Of course, I had to suck my meal through a straw and eventu
red menurses had to come around and tell them they had to go, but still, it wa



MARTIN AND CURTIS had come to visit me.

ways. It The whole time they were there they didn't cuss either.

oth are Instead they told me why they were on the street. I'd been working for them for months and I had to get shot for them to open up to me.

I didn't complain.

Instead, once they left, I called Shirleen and we had a chat.

. Don't Then I called Andy and told him Martin and Curtis were ready for a reunion with their mom. She had a new boyfriend they didn't like. Then she shot reason not to like him, a really fucking good reason, and Andy knew what to do.

ard, but Martin and Curtis's mom either dumped a boyfriend that was abnormal or her boys or her boys were moving in with Shirleen.

Their mom dumped her boyfriend.

leaving Then she pressed charges.

alf-grin With what he did, her ex wouldn't have much fun in prison.



THEY RELEASED me after a few weeks and I went to Vance's cabin.

Chicks Vance and I bickered about this. Nick and I bickered about it too. They didn't want me sleeping on my couch nor climbing up to the bed platform.

around, They ganged up on me. It was clear they had made the decision without my input before I was released and I had no choice. This I found alarming. I played football. it might not bode well for my future.

ally the My head-crackin' mamma jamma was still with me. However, my strength had leaked out onto the floor of Sal Cordova's living room. I was going to take a little while longer for me to get fighting fit.

So I gave in.

Vance took me to his place, driving a new black GMC Sierra (though with told me that Indy told her that Lee told *her* that Vance bought because he didn't want me riding around in his rickety old truck and I was certainly in no shape to ride on the Harley).

Daisy and Roxie had packed up a bunch of my clothes. Nick had packed up Boo, his litter, food, treats and toys and he took my cat and I went to Vance's cabin.

Unfortunately for Vance and Nick (it was fortunately for me, I thought it was hilarious), the cabin wasn't nearly as restful as they thought it would be, namely because everyone came with great regularity and stayed for long lengths of time. Tod and Stevie set up an ongoing Yahtzee tournament that lasted for weeks (Jet won). Heavy even brought a punching bag there and set it up in Vance's second bedroom, and when I was up and around, he sat me down with Ding Dongs and Oreos and other chocolate-flavored snacks with a cream-like filling and drilled me relentlessly.



VANCE WORKED THROUGH MY RECOVERY, though Lee never assigned anything that would take him out of town. He also was never given shifts in the surveillance room.

This meant Vance was home by eight o'clock, usually earlier than I was up at night.



IN LATE DECEMBER, close to Christmas when I was still recovering from my surgery and getting stronger all the time, I stood in Vance's bathroom, wearing my favorite lace-trimmed but lacy, pink hipsters and staring into the mirror at my red, ugly, puffed-out lips.

very, very slowly fading scars.

at Ally They would fade, but they'd never go away and they were no
ause he attractive.

ly in no I put on a T-shirt of Vance's. I'd not worn a sexy nightie since
shot. The bodice of all of the ones I had showed the scar. I knew this l
packed I tried them all on and checked.

stuff to I walked to the bedroom.

Vance was lying in bed, chest bare, sheet to his waist, naked un
ought itsheet. I knew this because Vance slept naked, not that I'd acquire
ould be, vision during my recent trauma.

or great He was reading.

ent that Boo was on his belly, eyes closed, but his head was up.

e, set it I rounded the bed, flicked back the covers and lay down, pull
t eating covers up to my neck.
lubious

It was safe to say that multiple gunshot wounds put a serious c
your sex life. A crimp I wasn't all fired up to iron out.

him to In fact, I didn't think I ever wanted Vance to see me naked again.

n night "I think we should break up," I blurted to the ceiling, and then clo
eyes tight when I felt his mood change and fill the room with dai
, everywhite-hot electricity.

"Sorry?" he asked.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. I shouldn't have. He was loc
ing but me. His brows were knit and his eyes were narrowed and I'd learned t
nothing not a good combo with Vance.

kering, "I think we should break up," I told him.

“Jesus, you’re a pain in the ass,” he muttered and went back to his
t at all “Seriously, Vance.”

“Shut up, Jules,” he said without taking his eyes from his book.
getting I rolled to my side, reached out and pushed his book down. His e
because to me, and with one look in them I rethought my actions, but it was too

“Crowe—” I started, but Vance turned.

Boo flew off his belly and Vance put his book to the nightstand. I
ider the came back to me and rolled toward me. Arm going around my w
d x-ray pulled me to him. He did this gently, how he’d been touching me for
but this time it had meaning.

“What’s in that fucking head of yours?” he asked when we were
side by side, face-to-face, our bodies touching.

ing the “I...you...well...” I stopped then started again, “It’s pretty clear
the kind of guy who has to have sex, um...a lot of it and, um...we can
rimp insex anymore.”

“Why can’t we have sex anymore?”

“Well,” I started and halted.

sed my Did I really have to explain it?

ngerous I looked at him. He was glaring at me.

I guessed I did.

“I’m kind of gross,” I finished.

oking at “Gross?”
hat was

“Yes, gross.”

“How are you gross?”

book. Now I was getting pissed.

“I can’t believe you’re gonna make me spell it out for you,” I snapped.

His hand moved, it went down over my hip then up under my shirt. Both his arms wrapped around me.

“He could have blown off half your face, you survived, you’d be lyin’ beside me.”

I blinked.

He didn’t pause for me to wrap my head around that mind boggling statement.

He went on.

“One of those bullets could have torn through your spinal cord, you’d be lyin’ beside me.”

Oh my God.

His arms got tighter, pressing my body against his, and his face was super close.

“This is it. You and me. No matter what,” he declared.

“Crowe—” I whispered, so stunned, so moved I thought my heart had stopped beating.

“No matter what,” he said, his voice fierce and strong and rushing through me. “You told me I was home to you and I get it. You’re home to me. I’ve never had a home. I like the one I found and I’m not losing it. No matter what.”

I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to, but I started crying. It was wracking loud sobs kind of crying. It was the tears filling your eyes and spilling over silently kind of crying.

He watched me cry and didn't say a word, he just held me close.
ped. "You-you said..." I stammered, "if I ever changed my body—"

t before "Show me," he murmured, his voice and eyes had grown soft.

I stopped crying immediately and asked, "What?"

still be "Show me, Princess."

I stared at him for what seemed like ages, knowing exactly v
meant.

lowing His mouth came to mine and he said again, "Show me."

I sucked in a breath in an attempt to buy time to decide if I l
courage to show him. Then, deciding I did—in fact I had to—I pulle
ou'd beand he let me go.

He pushed down the covers. I pulled up the T-shirt and I closed my

I opened them again when I felt his mouth on me.

e came It moved, touching my scars gently, his hands roaming my sides, n
and then he pushed me on my back.

He came up, kissing the scar at my chest, then he moved his moutl
t had tobreasts, spending a lot more time there, first at one then the other. It fe
and I totally forgot how gross I was.

imbling Then his mouth went lower. Lower. He rolled between my legs
ome tomouth was there.

' it. No That was when I *really* totally forgot how gross I was.

After a while he pulled off my panties and made me come w
n't the mouth.

yes and It was fucking fantastic.

He rolled to his back. I got on top of him and wrapped my hand around his waist. I kissed his neck and shoulder.

“Jules, you don’t—” he started, but I leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

Then I guided him inside me and moved on top of him. I took my time, mainly because I’d just had an orgasm so I had all the time in the world to mention it felt really good.

what he

Vance wasn’t really into slow though. I figured he’d taken care of himself somewhere along the way, but maybe I was wrong. He got impatient with me, his hands at my hips coaxing me to go faster. They slid up my sides, his eyes locked on mine.

had the

d away

“I wanna take off your shirt,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I shook my head.

7 eyes.

He kissed me deep and hard.

Then he repeated, “I wanna take off your shirt.”

ry hips,

I was a bit muddled from the kiss so I said, “Okay.”

Gently, he pulled the T-shirt over my head.

h to my

!t great

His mouth was at my chest, my scar, my breasts, his hands pressing against my skin, making me arch my back and expose myself to him. I moved faster, faster, and he tipped his head back. His fingers slid into my hair, tilting my face towards his, and he kissed me right before he came.

and his

I guess he wasn’t grossed out by my body.



with his

WE HAD Christmas at Nick’s, just Vance, Nick and me.

I gave Nick tickets to an upcoming Springsteen concert. I gave Vance a kickass choker with a thick, braided leather band and two small silver charms.

around medallions at the front, one of an eagle and one of a buffalo. He tie
and usually I didn't like jewelry on guys, but that leather and silver
quiet. looked hot.

y time, Nick stole my bracelet while I was recovering and had three mo
rld, not put in.

One with an emerald, for Nick, which, days later, I found out s
himself goodness, fidelity and love.

and sat One with a blue topaz, for me, which signifies sincerity, coura
des and wisdom.

When I read this out to Vance and Nick, Nick said, "Don't know
that last one."

This comment Vance thought was so funny, he threw back his he
laughed, which meant I had to try and tackle him. But he just caught
swung me up in his arms and kept right on laughing, his face buried
neck.

And last, one with a pearl, for Vance, which signifies nobility, bea
peace.

ng in to How was that for perfect?

ster and Of course I burst into sloppy tears when I opened it, which pissed
lown to because I seemed to be crying all the time those days, but Vance put
into his lap and held me until I was done crying. Which, head-c
mamma jamma that I was, I still had to admit was super nice.

Zip dropped a gift by Nick's. It was gun holster with a note attach
said, "Just in case."

nce this I laughed my ass off.
, silver

d it on, Vance and Nick didn't think this was funny (at all).
on him We had Christmas dinner at my place because I had a better dinin
table.

re links I cooked dinner while Nick looked worried and Vance looked a
mainly because I banged around and cursed a lot through this process.

ignifies I'd been practicing cooking at Vance's cabin while I was recover
wasn't doing too badly. However the Christmas pork tenderloin so
ge and ended up kind of raw. I swore to both of them it was *not* my fault, it ha
my stupid oven.

v about Then Nick asked me what temperature I cooked it on and I said
fifty, like it says in the cookbook."

ead and Nick got the cookbook and showed me it said *three* fifty, which
ght me, proved it wasn't the oven.

l in my Vance, for your information, stayed silent through this ex
However he wore his shit-eating grin the entire time.

uty and Luckily, Nick cooked a backup pork tenderloin (just in case) so
saved.

Vance gave me my present later in bed when nothing but the mc
me off was shining down on us. It was an ultra-wide hammered silver ring th
lled me all the way up to my knuckle. It was *gorgeous*.

rackin' I put it on my right ring finger and Vance took it off and put it on
but not before kissing my finger and looking at me with that
ied that expression on his face.

I could see it, even in the moonlight.

What was more, I could feel it.

Since then, I've never taken that ring off.

g room



THE WEEK between Christmas and New Year's was busy because I was
imused, back to work after New Year's and Vance and I had a lot to do, consequently
we were splitting houses.

ing and He brought a bunch of his stuff to my house and I moved some
mehow stuff back, but left a lot of it at the cabin.

ad to be We doubled up on kitty paraphernalia so Boo could go back and
with us (Boo liked riding in the Sierra, by the way, crazy cat) with
l, "One carting around litter boxes and kitty bowls.

I bought Vance some bookshelves for his cabin. He bought me a stereo
I guess I could listen to music there. He also put in decent locks so no one
steal the stereo, which I thought was a smart move.

change. He gave me a key.



all was LEE WAS RECRUITING new Nightingale Investigations Men, not to mention
new receptionist, and he hit the jackpot that week before New Year's.

onlight Darius, finally disentangled from the drug trade, went to work for
at went Word on the street, Vance told me, this was not a popular move. They
didn't think anyone at Nightingale Investigations ever cared if something was
popular.

ny left,
"mine" Hector, who miraculously didn't blow his cover, ended his
investigation by getting his man. After that, for reasons only known to
(and I knew this for certain because Indy tried naked gratitude on Lee
seven times, and got nothing), he quit the DEA and went to work for Lee

The kicker was Shirleen, also now drug-trade-free, was looking for

to spend her days. She and Darius also owned a bar and ran a poker game. She shut down the game, hired a good manager for the bar and became a receptionist.

No one really knew why Lee hired a crazy, ex-drug dealing woman with a huge Afro and no experience whatsoever to be his receptionist (I've talked about it a lot, mostly over brunch at Dozens), but then again he hired Dawn, so go figure.



THE ONLY DOWNER about the New Year's Party Indy and Lee threw was when the fireworks started going off and I freaked out.

I didn't mean to, but I couldn't control it, the noise...I just panicked.

Once he ascertained I wasn't going to go off half-cocked and screaming into the night, Vance left me with the girls (and Tod and all crowded around me. Then he, Luke, Mace, Lee, Hank and Eddie (I mention Tex and Duke) took off, each one wearing a scary-angry look on their face. In about ten minutes there was no more noise and they came back with a shitload of confiscated fireworks.

So in some ways it was good being a badass's girlfriend.

Though the kids who were enjoying their firework celebrations probably wouldn't agree.



IN MARCH, we packed Sniff and Roam into the GMC. Nick waved Hector promising to break up Boo's wet food, and the four of us headed to Indy, Vance's hometown.

A week before we left, Vance had called his mom and told her we were coming to visit.

r game. She obviously hadn't been expecting a call from her long lost son
e Lee's flipped out then burst into uncontrollable sobs. That was when Vance
the phone to me and I gave him a dirty look, which he ignored. I cal
an with mom down and found out that we were more than welcome, we coul
and we anytime.

e'd also Anytime.

She said this, like, fifteen times.

About an hour out of Ignacio, I was fidgeting in my seat, more tha
at their Sniff normally fidgeted, totally flipped out.

I looked at Vance, who was sitting back, driving with only his le
d. on the steering wheel, eyes on the road, thoughts hidden, cool as a cucu

nd run He sensed my agitation, his eyes slid to me and he said, "Still."

Stevie) "Still, my ass," I murmured.

(not to Vance chuckled. So did Roam.
ook on

ll came We drove up to the house and Vance barely got his new, shin
truck stopped when the door flew open and a beautiful Native Am
woman, a hint of gray in her thick, black hair and cheekbones I'd sell r
robably for, came flying out of the house.

She ran half the way to the truck then halted. Her body went solid
stared at her grown son, seeing him for the first time in twenty years.

us off, Vance dropped down from the truck (still, I might add, coc
gnacio, cucumber, acting as if he came to visit every weekend) and he waited
to round the hood to get to him. He took my hand and we walked up
mom, Roam and Sniff hanging back.
re were

She was a tiny, little thing and she watched us coming, her eyes

and she Vance only once to slide to our linked hands and then to gaze moment
handed me. When we got close, she looked up at Vance like pretty much ev
ned his did—like he was a god fallen to earth (sometimes, normally post-or
d come suspected that he was, but I never told him that, though I did sh
suspicions with Ally, Indy, Jet, Roxie and Daisy and they'd all l
themselves stupid).

“My son,” she whispered as if she couldn't quite believe it.

an even “Yeah, Ma,” Vance said.

At his words, she burst into tears.

ft wrist Unfortunately, so did I.

umber. What could I say? Even a head-crackin' mamma jamma and a
worker who'd witnessed dozens of reunions was going to lose it in the
that kind of reunion.

Vance held his mom. Roam slid his arm around my shoulders
stuffed my face in his neck.

y black Finally, after a good long bawl, she looked at me.
nerican

ny soul “My name is Roslyn,” she said, wiping her face and trying to get c

“I'm Jules,” I told her, doing the same as she was.

and she Then, for some ungodly reason, we burst out crying again, movi
each other's arms.

l as a The guys just left us to it and unpacked the truck, though I heard
for me mutter, “Shit, silly bitches.”

p to his “Don't say bitches!” I shouted at his back just as the scree
slammed.

leaving Roslyn laughed.

tarily at I watched her and it hit me that her son looked a lot like her.
everyone



gasm, I WE STAYED with Roslyn for a couple of days. His dad was mysterious
are my fishing trip,” which Vance took in stride, but it pissed me right the f
aughed Though, with effort, I kept my mouth shut.

We found out his brother, Owen, was living in Santa Fe. Owen
family came up on our last day when Vance’s mom had a barbeque for
noon time before we were going to take off.

The reunion with Owen didn’t go so well. Owen sized up
immediately and didn’t like what he saw (pure jealousy, if you asked n

a social Owen was married with two young boys, was shorter than Vance
face of clearly took after his dad in the looks department. Vance looked l
mom, as in gorgeous. Owen wasn’t much, but then again I could
s and I prejudiced. Owen was kind of a jerk, I thought that right off.

Around about the dessert stage of the festivities, Owen teetered c
rim of happy drunk and got shitfaced drunk, loud and obnoxious in a w
knew he did it a lot, especially when both Roslyn and Owen’s wife g
ontrol. tense and started to shrink into themselves.

The whole time we were there Vance had been...well, Vance. C
ng into laidback. It put Roslyn and all of us at ease and our time with his m
been good. She was funny and sweet and obviously happy to have
l Roam her. Sometimes, though, I’d catch her looking at Vance in a way that v
and infinitely sad. Thank God Sniff was there. His motor mouth
n door served to snap her out of it.

But his brother’s drunken behavior got a reaction from Vance
looked at his two nephews, his mother and sister-in-law then he t

brother around the front of the house for a chat.

The chat degenerated when Owen became not only drunk, but also seriously pissed off. We heard the shouts all the way off the back and I got up and ran around to the front, the whole party following me. I tried to intercede as Owen yelled in Vance's face and Vance stared at me and hissed.

Owen turned an enraged face to me and screamed, "Shut up, bitch! You're the fuck're—?"

Quick as a flash (as was the way of Lightnin' Crowe), Owen lunged against the house, Vance's forearm to his throat and Vance in his face. There went the reunion barbeque.

Owen looked stunned that one second he was five feet away and suddenly he was pinned and powerless against the house. "Not smart," Vance said in a scary, quiet voice. He shoved off and ran over the roof at Roam. "Pack it up."

Roam, not looking all that happy himself, didn't hesitate. He grabbed Sniff and they ran into the house.

"But we haven't got to the pie yet!" Roslyn cried.

Vance was not in the mood to change his mind. We were packed ready to go in fifteen minutes. Owen had disappeared. His wife stood by Roslyn as we said our good-byes.

"You'll come back?" Roslyn asked Vance, standing a foot away from him and touching him and the sound of her voice made tears crawl up my throat.

"I'll be back," Vance told her.

I was standing at Vance's side and her eyes moved to me.

“You’ll bring him back?” she asked, even though Vance had
ud and answered the question.

way to I smiled at her. “I’ll bring him back.”

llowing I gave her a hug and told her to come visit us in Denver.

red him Vance touched his young nephews’ heads, nodded to his sister-in-l
turned to kiss his mother’s forehead.

h. Who Then we were gone.



was up AFTER THE EMOTIONAL start to our vacation, we spent the rest of th
camping.

Two street-smart, urban runaways roughing it in the mountains
houting Ouray was pretty hilarious. They didn’t have a clue.

se. Vance was a patient teacher.

looked I, on the other hand, never stopped giving them stick.



grabbed IT WAS LATE MARCH, and May and I were hanging in the surveillanc
with Vance, Monty and Mace.

May and I had brought a lunch of calzones from Pasquini’s for tl
up and and Shirleen. We were consuming them and giggling ourselves silly
nd kids watching Tex and Duke argue about what happened at Kent State (tl
didn’t understand what the argument was about, considering it sound
ay, not they both agreed) when Vance got tense and he leaned forward.

t. He turned down the volume to the Fortnum’s monitor and movec
monitor that showed a visual of the reception area.

Shirleen was sitting behind the reception desk, consuming h

already calzone while alternately painting her fingernails, a mean feat.

A woman had walked in.

I looked at her and liked her immediately.

Tall, curvy, super pretty and definitely cool in a female James Brown and throwaway cool type of way. She was wearing a pair of very faded Levi's, faded, they were worn nearly through in some advantageous areas, a black flip-flops, a black Green Day T-shirt over a white thermal, silver rings on nearly every finger, several silver necklaces around her neck, a pair of silver bracelets on both her wrists and wide silver hoops at her ears. Her streaked-blond hair was up in a twisty, untidy knot with chunks around her face in a way that looked artless and kickass.

outside

Her look was sah-weet. She had Rock Chick written all over her.

Vance turned up the volume to the reception monitor in time to hear Shirleen say, "...help you?"

The woman was looking at Shirleen and she didn't look happy. I couldn't fathom, but she looked like she wanted to be anywhere but there. She was about ready to turn on her flip-flop and leave.

the room

She hesitated for a moment then said, "I'm looking for Lucas Stark."

the boys

Uh-oh.

y while

I drew in breath.

rough I

"You got an appointment with Luke?" Shirleen asked, looking at the total mess on her desk as if she actually kept appointments for Luke.

led like

Luke didn't even take appointments. Luke was wherever Luke was. If you caught him you could count yourself lucky.

l to the

"No, I'm an..." the woman hesitated, licked her lips and finished

er own

friend.”

“Holy fuck,” Monty muttered under his breath, staring at the man with a pained expression and shaking his head. “Here we go again.”

Dean May and I looked at each other and grinned.

“He ain’t here, girl. You want, I can call him,” Shirleen told her.

“No,” the woman said quickly and she sounded downright relieved. “Just...” she hesitated again and looked around. She still looked tense. “I was pretty certain she was about to bolt. “Forget it. Could you please tell him Ava Barlow was here? I’ll try to catch him later.”

“Yep, I was right, she was about to bolt.”

Vance picked up the phone and hit a button.

Shirleen was smiling huge. “No problem to give him a bell. I’ll call the number on speed dial.”

“No!” Ava cried suddenly then continued. “Really, thanks, but I can’t go. I’ve got to be somewhere anyway.” She was edging away, desperate and losing it now. She was beginning to look jittery.

I heard Mace laughing softly behind me.

Vance spoke into the phone. “Luke,” pause, “you got a visitor.” I could hear the smile in Vance’s voice even though his face was turned away from her name’s Ava Barlow.”

“Just hang on one tick,” Shirleen said, getting up, waving her hand. “I’ll dry her nails. “I’ll just talk to the boys in the back. Maybe they know where he is.”

In the surveillance room, Vance said into the phone. “Looks scared, “oldfuckin’ jackrabbit. She’s about to take off.” Immediately, his eyes shifted

Mace and he did a flick of his hand, index finger pointed to the door,
monitors “Luke’ll be here in five.”

Mace disappeared and seconds later we saw him hit the reception
and move to block the exit.

“Luke just called in,” Mace lied to the staring Ava (it was hard
stare at Mace, especially upon first sight of him). “He’ll be here in five
ed. “I’ll

I could swear I saw Ava’s face grow pale.

“I’m thinkin’ Ava Barlow don’t have a prayer,” May whispered
but she was looking at the monitor and her whole body was shaking
laughter.

I found myself hoping Ava Barlow was good enough for Luke St
thinking that was a tall order.
got his

She liked Green Day though, so I figured that was a start.

Vance put down the phone and sat back, picking up his calzone. He
I’ll just
definitely moved to me and mine moved to him.

His eyes were amused but soft and sweet, and he had that “mine”
his face.

These days it was less intense, less raw, more settled, more content
I could
“Says liked that.

I liked it a lot.

Home, I heard Auntie Reba say in my head.

I know, I said back.

My pug puppy curled up in my mental lap and sighed a happy
ed as a
sigh.

My eyes still on Vance, I smiled.

saying,

The End

on area

l not to
:.”

to me,
ng with

ark and

lis gaze

look on

it, and I

puppy

The End

Rock Chick

BONUS CHAPTER

ADDED
OCTOBER 1, 2023



BONUS CONTENT

HIS

Boo

This was unacceptable.

Since the New Human showed (who Boo liked, he smelled good and liked the way he looked at Boo's Primary Human), Boo's schedule had been disrupted.

Boo wasn't thrilled about this, and as was his duty, he let them know about his every convenience.

But no one, not even the human next door (who he considered his Secondary Human), had come to feed him his breakfast. (He was troubled by the way his Primary looked at the New Human, that human was going to be the new Secondary Human, and the next-door human was going to be well...the Next-Door Human, known to other humans as "Nick").

Next-Door Human did not excel at the simple feat of breakfast. He would break up Boo's food like Primary did. She knew exactly how he liked his breakfast, though, her portions were puny, and he wasn't fond of the taste. It didn't make up for them with his required amount of treats. She was a good cuddler, she liked to talk to him as much as he liked to talk to her.

she kept his litter box clean. Therefore, he didn't complain...too much

But still, unbroken-up-correctly food was better than *no food at all*

The light outside had gone up and down, and still, *no breakfast*.

He didn't count his kibble, of which there was plenty. Everyone
kibble didn't count.

So.

Entirely...

Unacceptable.

So unacceptable, obviously, when he heard the key in the door
back, he jumped off his throne at the front by the window (he had
and Boothrones, indeed, every surface in the house was his throne) and had
ad beentoward the kitchen to let them know *precisely* how he felt about this de

He saw the light switch on before he got there.

now at He entered the room, noted it was New Secondary, not Primary
wasn't entirely unusual, but he still found it concerning).

red his And then he got a good look at New Secondary's face: the
hinkingPrimary called "Vance."

going to Boo decided to delay his litany of complaints because something
; to be, was not right.

he didn't, New Secondary (that was Vance) took two steps in, his eyes
leaving Boo.

ked his Boo didn't take his eyes off Vance either.

fact she Then the human did something funny.

s also a And Boo knew.
ier, and

He knew.

So when Vance folded down, right on the kitchen tile, sitting legged, still staring at Boo, Boo knew right what to do.

He jogged to Vance, stepped right in, circled in on himself in Vance's lap, and he got to work purring.

Vance's strong fingers sifted through Boo's fur.

"She's gonna be okay," Vance whispered.

Boo had no idea what that meant, but he wasn't all fired up about the tone, so he concentrated harder on purring.

Vance kept stroking him. "She's gonna be all right."

It'd take a lot of work purring to get Vance sorted out to finally lay down and get Boo some food.

He broke it up just like Primary did (known amongst the humans as Jules).

So when Vance put it down, it was perfect.

But Boo didn't eat it.

He sat on the toilet while Vance took a shower.

He sat in the hall and watched Vance put on clothes.

And he sat in the kitchen and watched Vance leave out the back door.

He still didn't go eat.

No.

He didn't.

It would come to be his and Vance's secret. He'd have some kibbles to keep his strength up (purring took a lot out of you, and so, he

find, did waiting).

g cross But until she came home, he wasn't hungry.

Vance's



He was in the kitty carrier in the back seat.

So, okay, they set him up in the middle so he could see a little out the and a lot of the front of the moving machine, and that was better than the seat and having nothing to look at but the back of another seat.

And she was with them.

get up Finally.

It had been *forever*.

nans as But this was intolerable.

“*Meow!*” he shared his thoughts.

She turned and looked around the seat at him.

“It’s okay, Boo.”

He had no clue what she was saying (other than knowing his name Boo), but considering she didn’t end it by reaching out and releasing him from this prison, he shouted, “*Meeeeeeeeooooow!*”

“We’re going to be at the cabin soon,” she promised.

He didn’t know what that meant either, and she *still* did not free him from his unearned incarceration, so he told her exactly how he felt about that.

le so he “Meow. Meow. Meowmeowmeow. *Meow!*”

! would “He hates his carrier,” she told Vance, who was where Boo should

Everyone *knew* when they were in the moving machine, Boo sat in the person at the wheel.

How was he supposed to help if he was stuck in confinement in the

“I don’t know how he’s gonna react to you being with us, and you a hundred percent, Princess. I don’t want him jumping on you.”

Boo didn’t understand that either, but he knew it didn’t bode well of them aimed his next, “*Meow!*” at Vance.

“We’re gonna be there, half an hour, tops,” Vance assured.

Even if he didn’t know what he was saying, he still read the to Boo was far from assured.

“Meow!” Boo put in.

Jules turned to look at him, and said in his most favoritist voice, you, baby. Missed you *so much*.”

Ugh.

Whatever.

Might as well use this time for some obsessive grooming so he cc a good hairball worked up and hurl it out as their punishment.

So he set about doing that.



m from

They were back in the wilds, a domicile Boo approved of.

He liked the smell. He liked sitting in the window and lording over critters outside who were too foolish to know how to bend humans would be. will so they gave in to your (almost) every whim. He loved that he cc

the lap of Vance was at home here and Jules was relaxed here.

Even though she was holding herself funny, he didn't love that.

Back? But it was morning. She was still in bed.

I'm not And Vance had just put his food bowl down in the kitchen.

Boo looked at the food perfectly prepared, then up at Vance.

Well, so he Vance was staring down at him.

Boo shoved his face in the food.

He didn't know what Vance said, but he felt the stroke down his
neck, and heard the relief in his tone when he whispered, "That's it, cat.
good. Mama's home."

Boo ate and ate and licked the bowl clean when he was done.

, "Love But don't worry, he shoved some food out on the floor with his
paw, they'd have to clean up after him.

He was happy Jules was back, ecstatic (though he'd be careful not
to let that show overly much).

could get But he was never derelict in his duties.



Boo carried out his complete inspection of her the first chance he got
it wasn't easy to find that chance. Vance was always there, helping
her around, stretched out next to her on the bed, sitting on the couch with
his head in his lap while he read and she listened to music.

to their He was an animal. He was intuitive.

could tell

He knew his playground (her body) was not accessible at this moment he couldn't go gallivanting on the bed when they were both in it wasn't enough room.

So when Vance went to shower, Boo jumped up on the bed (and *did* mean to miss the top so he had to sink his claws into the covers and pull himself up, he had to keep his claws sharp...*obviously*), and he gave good once-over with his eyes and nose.

She smelled like Jules.

s spine,

She smelled like home.

It's all

So he cuddled into her side and allowed her to scratch behind his back while she babbled at him words he'd never understand.

Vance came back, and Boo had to skedaddle as he helped her up the bathroom.

Vance returned alone, and Boo noted it was going to be more relaxing about they'd been doing, which Boo wholeheartedly supported.

To share this, while Jules showered, when Vance got dressed and came back down on the bed, Boo joined him, and there were no limits to his playground, so he settled right in on his chest, shut his eyes, and the moment Vance's strong fingers started to give him a neck massage, he started purring.

"Home," Vance murmured.

got, and

Boo didn't know what that meant either.

her get

But he knew two things.

with her

One, it was directed at Boo.

And two, Vance really, *really* meant it.

ent, so
. There



yes, he When he pulled into Shirleen's driveway and idled, and neither
nd pullboys moved, he knew something was up.

e her a He turned to Roam in the front seat, who was looking around the
Sniff.

After school, they'd come to the office and done their homework
surveillance room, which happened a lot these days, then they'd don
is earsurveillance in the surveillance room.

Twenty minutes ago, Shirleen texted, *If you don't have my boys l
and to twenty minutes, I won't be responsible for what I do.*

She was down with surveillance. She was down with the fact that
of this or Mace, and sometimes even Luke would go over their homework t
sure they got shit right.

nd laid But they had a weekday curfew of nine o'clock, and right then, it
to this past.

instant "Talk to me," he ordered.

urring. Roam's steady gaze came to him, but as usual, it was Sniff who tal
"We want you to teach us how to drive."

Vance looked over his shoulder at Sniff. "I thought Shirleen was t
you how to drive."

"Yeah, she is. Like a grandma," Sniff replied.

He couldn't imagine Shirleen did anything like a grandma, in
drive, so this was surprising.

“She’s probably just going cautious,” he suggested.

Roam chimed in. “We drive every Saturday with her. Sniff for a and a half, me for an hour and a half. We’ve been doing this for six of the And she doesn’t let us go over thirty in a forty, we haven’t parked the parking lot, much less parallel, and we haven’t been on the highway. back at drive around for three hours, pulling up in her driveway halfway through switch out drivers. We’re real good at reversing out of the driveway driving, and that’s it. When we ask her if we can do more, she tells us not ready. But we are. We’re real fuckin’ ready.”

Jesus.

She was teaching them to drive like a grandma.

And they were both turning sixteen soon, and like any teenage Monty, wanted the freedom of a driver’s license.

“I’ll talk to Shirleen.”

He said that.

What he meant was, he’d talk to Jules and Jules would talk to Shirleen. Slowly, as time went by, it was shifting (case in point, the curfew text). But Shirleen deferred a lot to Jules. She looked to her for guidance. the boys.

It was smart. She was a childless woman who took on two teenagers. And Jules had a lot of experience with runaway teenagers.

But she was finding her way, and Jules would eventually guide her taking over.

Though now, someone had to teach them how to drive.

That was going to be him, but it was Jules who would talk to Shirleen.

about it.

an hour Their relief filled the cab.

weeks. “I’m waiting!” Shirleen called from the open doorway to her house
car in ashe was standing.

We just “She’s gonna go over homework Monty already went over,”
ough to muttered. “Even knowin’ Monty went over it.”

ray and “Let her,” Vance advised. “She gets something important out of it.
s we’re hassle for you to give it to her, so give it to her.”

Roam nodded.

“You da man,” Sniff said.

er, they Vance sighed.

Sniff punched him in the shoulder and swung out. Roam held up a
fist, Vance bumped it, then he swung out.

Vance waited until the door closed on that new family, then he r
out of Shirleen’s drive.
leen.

When he got home, Boo was waiting at the back door for him, fill
ew and news of his day.

Vance ended the conversation by picking him up and curling hin
baby to his chest.

unaway He then went right to Boo’s treats.

Boo was snarfing them down, fingers to fangs, when Jules strolled
er into Vannce’s heartrate, never quite right when he was away from her, :

Her gaze went from him to her cat, back to him.

Shirleen “The vet said he was chonky,” she reminded him.

Vance quit feeding him treats because Boo turned his pointy face l and glowered at her.

where “Cats are supposed to be chonky,” he returned, which meant he go attention again, so he gave him another treat.

Roam Jules came fully into the kitchen and rested a hip to the counter. “not. If they were, the vet wouldn’t have pointed out he was chonky.”

It’s no Vance answered that by giving Boo another treat.

“We talked about this, Crowe,” Jules snapped. “We’re supposed down on his treats, not give him more.”

He’d never told her Boo had barely eaten while she was in the h And if she didn’t notice her cat had lost weight, he wasn’t going to out. She’d had her recovery to concentrate on. She didn’t need to worry closed her pet.

Therefore, as far as Vance was concerned, he and Boo were worl eversed getting him back to his fighting weight.

He fed him another treat.

Boo ate it, still purring.

“I hope you don’t spoil our daughter like that,” Jules remarked in n like a that had Vance’s eyes racing to her.

What he saw on her face made him go completely still.

They’d decided. Once the doc told her it was all systems go. O in. was back to her normal self physically, they decided. settled.

Life was too short. It was too filled with shit.

They weren’t going to wait.

On any of it.

er way Marriage. Babies.

Everything.

t Boo's They were going to do it all right away.

Therefore, she went off the Pill she'd barely got on, but they'd be
They're it might take a few months for her cycle to regulate.

Maybe it didn't take that long.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

l to cut “I took a test. Positive. So I went out and bought another test just :
Positive. So I got an appointment with my OB, and she confirmed
ospital. pregnant.”

point it Vance bent to drop Boo to his feet, scattered about fifteen treats
y about the floor, Boo purred a “Mrreow!” in excitement and chased after the
as Jules cried an irate, “Crowe!”

king on But Vance was across the room, in her space, in her face, fram
head in his hands.

His eyes roamed her face.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. More beautif
l a way anyone on a movie screen. More beautiful than any in the page
magazine.

And she was his.

nce she *His.*

And she was having his baby.

His.

“I take it you're happy,” she whispered.

He crashed his mouth down on hers and answered that question with his tongue.

When he lifted his head, she breathed, "You're happy."

When told "Yeah, I'm fuckin' happy," he replied.

Her violet eyes lit with joy as she returned, "Good. We're naming her Rebecca Ann."

"We're naming *him* Max."

In case. "It's not a him, Crowe."

It. I'm "It's a him, Princess."

"How can you know? I'm only six weeks. She's a mass of cells not even a

is across "I just know."

um, just "Whatever," she mumbled.

He took his hands from her head and slid them around her body, catching her. He pressed her up against his. "Who have you told?"

"You, and only you. That's all either of us are going to tell. Even Eve and May need to stay in the dark until I reach the three-month zone."

ful than He could be down with that.

es of a Still, he was telling the men. Doing the cigar shit, the whole c thing.

She watched him a beat, then her face screwed up. "You can't tell the guys."

"They won't say anything."

"They're sleeping with half the girls!" she shot back. "And they have their mouths."

with his “Not when it’s important.”

She couldn’t argue that, so she didn’t try.

Instead, she said, “If it’s a boy, we’re naming him Harry.”

ing her “No. Max. Then our next one is Sam. The one after that will be Re

“You have it all figured out.”

“Yup.”

She rolled her eyes, let that go, then asked, “Did you eat dinner?”

“Yup.”

w.” “Wanna celebrate me getting knocked up?”

He grinned at her and answered.

“Yup.”

rawing



in Nick They lay in her bed loft, both of them naked, Jules on top of h
moonlight filtering through the window at the head of the bed.

She had her face in the side of his neck, her finger drawing
damnedshoulder.

“You can tell the guys,” she whispered. “But really, I want it on th
tell thelow with everyone else. Life has a tendency to—”

He cut her off by using his arms already around her to squeeze her

“Nothing’s going to happen.”

ave big “I don’t want everyone to get excited for us and then put them t
something else after they went through all that business with what

did.”

He tucked his chin in his neck in an attempt to see her.

“What’s this?” he asked.

x.” She lifted her head and looked down at him. “Thanksgiving in a hospital room isn’t a lot of fun, Crowe.”

“Maybe you were still thinking you were an angel, because if you paid attention like I paid attention, you’d have seen a bunch of people who give two shits that they were celebrating Thanksgiving in a hospital. They were just happy you were alive.”

“Yeah, normally you don’t make your friends have to feel happy alive. They just take that for granted.”

“Do you think Roxie should feel guilt for being beat to shit and abducted?”

“No.”

“Do you think Jet should feel shit because her dad’s loan sharks threatened her to get him to pay, and some asshole was incapable of a blow to his manhood, so he wanted to make her pay?”

on his “No, of course not, Vance, but—”

“Listen, Princess, I’m down with you not wanting anyone to knock you down for a few weeks. But you’re fit. You’re healed. Roam’s fit. Him and Sniff are in a good home, being looked after by a good woman. They’re even in your arms right now. Our shit times are over.” He rolled her to her back and spread his hands over her belly. “Now it’s about making babies, getting married, and raising a family.”

through
t Shard She stared up at him through the moonlight. “Are you asking me to

you?”

“Kid’s gonna have my name when he comes out every way that Jules. Legally. Whatever god you pray to. All that shit. And if I’m hospital husband, they’ll probably give me the birth certificate to fill out, so I in the right name.”

She narrowed his eyes at him. “So you want to marry me so you’ll the name?”

He knew she was bickering because that was what they did. It was and it was loving, and it was them.

But when he answered, he was dead serious.

“No. I’m gonna marry you because I love you. I’m gonna marry you because you’re not only the best woman I’ve ever met, you’re the best person. I’m gonna marry you because my heart doesn’t beat right without you. I’m gonna marry you because we’re going to make beautiful babies. You’re gonna be an amazing mother. And you’re going to teach me how to be a good dad. I’m going to marry you because I want to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas and birthday with you until I die. I’m gonna marry you because you’re *mine*. I want that legal. I want that binding eyes of the law and whatever gods there are out there to pray for tomorrow, I’m going to get you a ring you won’t ever want to take off. As soon as we can manage it, I’m going to add a band to it. And for the rest of our school days, you’re at my side and in my life, Jules, as my woman, the mother of my children, and my wife.”

The unshed tears in her eyes that were shining in the moonlight glimmered at him as she whispered, “Your heart doesn’t beat right without me?”

“Does yours without me?”

Her whisper was even quieter when she gave him the answer he kn

“No.”

“So we doin’ this?”

“Yes.”

He kissed her. He did it a long time.

And when he was done, they were face-to-face, heads on the p
bathed in moonlight.

Boo came up and settled by draping himself across their ankles.

“You don’t need me to teach you to be a good dad, Vance. You’
he best patient.”

“We’ll see.”

“You are. You’re great with Roam and Sniff. They love you.”

They loved her. He just came with the bargain.

She cupped his cheek. “They love you, Crowe.”

“Whatever you say, Princess.”

She grinned at him. “And my baby pug loves you too. He thinks
the shit.”

Vance chuckled.

“Not to mention,” she went on. “You’ve kinda stolen Boo.”

“Not true,” he negated. “He’s all yours. He’s just accepted me
official minion.”

That was when she chuckled.

She stopped doing it to say, “I want your mom at our wedding.”

“I’m sure she’ll be happy to come.”

ew. And he was more than sure she would.

“Something simple. Not a big deal. That’s not us,” she decreed.

He was totally down with that.

He’d heard of Tod’s wedding planner book. He wanted no part
shit.

pillows, “You’re right. That’s not us.”

“Justice of the peace?” she suggested.

He grinned at her.

re very “Perfect.”



The next morning, Jules was off to the shelter by the time Vance
Boo tucked in his arm, moved across the back room to Nick’s door.

He knocked.

you’re Nick opened it, looking about ready to head off to face the day.

“Hey, Vance, everything good?”

“Yeah, got a second?”

Nick nodded and stepped back.

e as an Vance and Boo walked in.

“You two have really bonded, hunh?” Nick said, smiling at Vance
cargo.

“Until there was no pain, and she was getting around a lot be

didn't step on her. Not once. Never had a pet, don't know if they see kind of shit. But yeah. He gave her the space she needed, we bonded."

Nick was still smiling, and maybe reading between the lines, though he couldn't know that the only true comfort Vance had in those early days was a clumsy, talkative black cat who curled up in his lap and kept him company in that the dawn after his darkest hour.

"You had coffee?" Nick asked.

"Yep."

His eyes twinkled behind his glasses, already knowing the answer he asked, "Breakfast?"

"I'll pick something up on the way to the office. And I know I'm heading out, so I'll do this quick. I already asked her. She said yes, she wants to do this right. For both of you. For all of us."

Nick leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms on his chest, with never taking his gaze from Vance. "What's up?"

"I'd like to know you're good with me and Jules getting married."

He watched Nick's body start, then he watched his eyes get wet.

Vance scratched Boo's head, giving Nick a minute.

After that minute, Nick cleared his throat and answered gruffly, "I honored you're gonna be an official member of the family."

Vance jerked up his chin.

"She's pregnant, isn't she?" Nick whispered.

and his Vance said nothing, just held his gaze.

Nick explained. "I went over the other day. Let myself in. He puked, he puking in the bathroom."

use that His felt his spine snap straight. “Jules was puking?”

Nick’s brows went up. “She hasn’t told you?”

ough he “No,” Vance grunted.

s was a “Well, I didn’t either.”

pany in Vance nodded to affirm he got what Nick was saying.

“She’s worried,” Nick told him.

“She would be,” Vance replied.

r when “She’s also worried that you’ll be worried.”

Fuck.

you’re Nick pushed from the counter, approached, clapped him on the ar
i. But I clasped him there.

s chest, “It’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna be amazing. She’s not going to be
hide getting sick forever. She’ll settle in. It’s all gonna be as it’s supp
be.”

Yes. It absolutely fucking was.

“Yeah,” Vance agreed.

Nick clapped him on the arm again.

y, “I’m Vance headed to the door, saying, “I’ll let you get on with your day

“Vance?” Nick called when he was standing in the open door.

He turned back.

Nick’s voice was back to gruff when he said, “I’m so damned ha
you. For you and Jules. Damned happy.”

ard her Nick swallowed.

Then he finished.

“And Reba would be too.”

“Thanks, man,” Vance said quietly.

Nick nodded.

Vance and Boo went out the door.

And he took his little furry boy home.



They were back in moonlight, Jules lying on her back, Vance st
m then down her side, his hand on her belly.

“You gonna rest your hand on my stomach every night for the nex
able to and a half months?” she teased.

osed to He looked from her belly to her. “Yes.”

She stared at him.

Then she did an ab curl to touch her mouth to his before settling ag

“You got any symptoms yet?” he asked.

“Throwing up,” she said without hiding or hesitation. “That’s why
y.” the test. It’s a weird kind of nausea. I’ve never felt anything like it
And since we went off birth control...” She shrugged against the she
let that lie.

ppy for “Anything I can do?” he offered.

Her face warmed and her voice went soft. “I don’t think so. But tha

“Talked to Lee. He’s not going to give me any assignments that t
out of town throughout the pregnancy.”

Her face grew surprised. “That’s not necessary, Crowe.”

He put gentle pressure on her belly. “I’m not missing this, Jules second of it. I’m here, for you, for him. I’ll work, but I’ll be close. Let blink when I asked. He’s happy for us. Told me whatever I need. It’s g

“Crowe—”

He dipped down so he was nose to nose with her and enunciated word clearly. “Not. Missing. A. Second.”

She gave in a lot faster than he expected by lifting a hand and curled around his head. “Love you, Vance Ouray Crowe.”

“Love you too, Princess.”

She didn’t have to do an awkward curl to get her kiss that time.

He gave it to her.

But as he did, he didn’t take his hand from Max, growing and strong in the fierce protective womb of his warrior mother.

And for the next seven and a half months, his woman got used to it just like that.

I took
before.
ets and

anks.”

ake me

Her face grew surprised. “That’s not necessary, Crowe.”

He put gentle pressure on her belly. “I’m not missing this, Jules. Not a second of it. I’m here, for you, for him. I’ll work, but I’ll be close. Lee didn’t blink when I asked. He’s happy for us. Told me whatever I need. It’s good.”

“Crowe—”

He dipped down so he was nose to nose with her and enunciated each word clearly. “Not. Missing. A. Second.”

She gave in a lot faster than he expected by lifting a hand and curling it around his head. “Love you, Vance Ouray Crowe.”

“Love you too, Princess.”

She didn’t have to do an ab curl to get her kiss that time.

He gave it to her.

But as he did, he didn’t take his hand from Max, growing and getting strong in the fierce protective womb of his warrior mother.

And for the next seven and a half months, his woman got used to getting it just like that.



KristenAshley.net
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Rock Chick ride continues with
Rock Chick Revenge
the story of Luke and Ava.



LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCK CHICK REVENGE

Ava Barlow hates men. She has reason and she's vowed not only never involved with another one again, but also to exact vengeance on her friend's lying, cheating, rat-bastard husband. Since Luke Stark, childhood crush, is now a badass mother, she thinks to enlist his help. He changes her mind at the last second.

Too late.

Luke knows she's up to something and he's already seen many Rock Chick try to fight her own battles without the Hot Bunch stepping in. She's having none of it. She's having none of him.

The clash of the Rock Chick and Hot Guy begins, but Luke's got the advantage. He has handcuffs and he's not afraid to use them.

[Read an excerpt of Rock Chick Revenge now.](#)

LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCK CHICK REVENGE

Ava Barlow hates men. She has reason and she's vowed not only never to get involved with another one again, but also to exact vengeance on her best friend's lying, cheating, rat-bastard husband. Since Luke Stark, Ava's childhood crush, is now a badass mother, she thinks to enlist him, but changes her mind at the last second.

Too late.

Luke knows she's up to something and he's already seen many a Rock Chick try to fight her own battles without the Hot Bunch stepping in. He's having none of it. She's having none of him.

The clash of the Rock Chick and Hot Guy begins, but Luke's got the advantage. He has handcuffs and he's not afraid to use them.

[Read an excerpt of Rock Chick Revenge now.](#)



ROCK CHICK REVENGE



ROCK CHICK REVENGE

Bad Ava, Good Ava

I sat in my hunter-green Range Rover, hands resting on my steering wheel, forehead resting on my hands, wondering what in the hell I was doing.

Not only that I was parked on 15th Street outside the Night Investigations offices where Luke worked, but any of it, all of it, the shebang.

Do it, do it, you know you want to do it. Teeny-tiny Bad Ava, wearing a lacy red teddy, red stockings, spike-heeled, patent-leather red pumps, devil's ears, sat on my right shoulder and whispered in my ear.

Don't do it, go home, do yoga, light candles, meditate. Teeny-tiny Good Ava, wearing a white satin teddy edged in soft, fluffy feathers, gold-heeled sandals with straps that crisscrossed up her calves and sparkling glittery gold halo, sat on my left shoulder and whispered in my ear.

"I'm going nuts," me, the real Ava, said out loud.

You aren't nuts. You want to see him. You've wanted to see him for years. Girl, you are shit-hot now. Let him get a load of you! Bad Ava reminded me.

This was true. Not the shit-hot part, the other parts.

Go home, call Sissy and tell her you can't do it. Then call Luke and him over for dinner like a normal person. Don't do this. Don't! Good Ava cried.

Argh!

Do it, go in there, suck him in, chew him up, spit him out. Men stink! Ava encouraged.

Luke doesn't stink. We like Luke, Good Ava protested, leaning around her neck to glare at Bad Ava.

Bad Ava gave Good Ava the finger. Good Ava poked her tongue out at Bad Ava.

I ignored them.

Men did stink. This was true. Men were scum. All of them. Luke too. Probably.

I had known Luke Stark since he moved in across the street when I was eight years old and he was twelve. He was the most gorgeous boy I had ever seen in my little girl life, and when I saw him at his dad's funeral five years ago, I realized he had turned into the most gorgeous man.

Men stunk, on the whole, but Luke had always been ultra-nice to me. Then, as a kid, I was fat, four-eyed and had mousy-brown hair. And when I saw him at the funeral, I was still fat (more so), four-eyed and had mousy-brown hair. So I figured all that time he probably felt sorry for me.

Now I was seventy-five pounds lighter, wearing contacts and had a partial streaked blonde. A partial streak, just the top and sides. The bottom was left alone, and for some bizarre reason, against the blonde, it had turned a burnished chestnut color that was the same color as both my grandma's and

and ask sisters' hair. The hair I had always wanted all my life, even prayed
od Ava never had, until now.

Last time I saw Luke he was wearing all black: black suit, black
black tie. It was a funeral but Luke had always been partial to black and
I! Bad glad because he looked good in it.

Even when he was a teenager he usually wore tight, black T-shirt
and my motorcycle boots and jeans. I noted this like I noted everything about I

He had black hair, and on first glance, black eyes, though his eyes
e out at really a dark, dark indigo and totally yum.

At the funeral I noticed he had grown a beard. Not full and thick but
and trimmed, and it looked great on him.

I nearly melted into a puddle when his eyes moved through the crowd
crowd and stopped on me. They got soft and one side of his mouth was
one of his half-grins that made him look so yumalicious you wanted
n I was pounce on him.

Instead of shoving the mourners aside and pouncing (which would
e years been highly inappropriate), I just gave him what I hoped was a jaunty
and a stupid half wave. The grin went full-fledged (guess the jaunty
ne. But worked, but then again my stupid, dorky behavior always seemed to
when I Luke) and he turned away.

That was the very day I decided to turn my life around and that
day I turned my life on its fucking head.

I rued that day.

I never thought I would rue anything, but I rued that day for certain

However, now I needed Luke.

for but I knew from my mom talking to his mom (they were still friends though Luke's mom had moved into a condo in Governor's Park and his mom had moved to Phoenix), not to mention from Ally and Indy, my Chick friends, that Luke was some kind of kickass mercenary, bounty private investigator-type guy who worked for Ally's brother and fiancé, Lee Nightingale.

Luke. Luke had always been a badass.

es were Two days after he moved in across the street I caught him in the smoking cigarettes. He was twelve and smoking in the alley, and at that short thought that was way cool.

When he grew up, he drove muscle cars (loud and fast) and motorcycles (again, loud and fast) and sat in his dad's garage with the door rolled up in lifting weights. I watched this out of my bedroom window and it was better than anything on television, believe you me.

He always had a different girlfriend and you could tell they were a bad date but a nun would turn easy at one look at Luke.

And he was also always getting into trouble. I heard his mom tell me about it a lot. He'd been picked up by the cops more than once for carousing.

He was a tough guy in high school and he roared off the day after one of his many rip-roarin' fights with his dad and became a tougher guy (I heard his mom...well, you get the drift).

And right now, I needed a tough guy.

1. "Shit," I said out loud.

You go get him, girl, Bad Ava said.

ls even *Be nice*, Good Ava said.

and my Before I could chicken out, I got out of the Range Rover and went
y Rock the building.

hunter,



Indy's I had serious second thoughts about my choice of clothing the moment
I opened the door to the offices of Nightingale Investigations. I thought
guy, mercenary, bounty hunting private eyes would have shitholes
ie alley Couches with the stuffing sticking out, filing cabinets with wire baskets
eight I top overflowing with papers, dirty coffee cups, debris floating around
like that.

rcycles Nightingale Investigations' reception area was all smooth glass
led up, wood-paneled walls, expensive leather couches (with no stuffing com-
s better at all), a huge cowboy print in a heavy, carved-wood frame, a bronze
of a bucking bronco in the corner and a mammoth reception desk
ill easy, state-of-the-art computer on it.

The desk was the only thing in the room not neat and tidy. It was
ing my and there was a pretty older black woman sitting behind it. She had
e while biggest Afro I had ever seen in my life and she appeared to be both a
calzone and painting her fingernails a frosty, raspberry sherbet-type color.

of his I was wearing seriously faded Levi's I'd found in a vintage clothing
came a (and they were *the best*), my black Green Day T-shirt over a white t-shirt,
black flip-flops and my silver.

I was a silver freak, and that day, as with every day, I was dripping
it: four silver necklaces, five silver bracelets on my right wrist, three
left, long, silver hoops at my ears and nearly all my fingers had heavy
rings or bands on them. I'd slopped my hair in a messy knot on top

head with a ponytail holder and I'd gone makeup free.

I was pretending I had nothing to prove and no one to impress.

I should have worn a dress and heels *and* makeup. Not to mention something with my goddamned hair.

Hell and damnation.

"Can I help you?" the lady behind the reception desk asked, breaking me out of my idiot thoughts.

I looked at her.

I hesitated for a moment, wanting to run, then I took a deep breath and said, "I'm looking for Lucas Stark."

"You got an appointment with Luke?" the lady asked, looking at the total mess on her desk, not that she would ever find anything.

"No, I'm an..." I hesitated again, wondering if I wasn't perhaps the stupidest woman in the world. I licked my lips and went for it, "Old friend."

"He ain't here, girl. You want, I can call him," the lady offered, looking at me closely.

"No," I replied quickly, relieved beyond belief that Luke was somewhere else.

There it was, the gods telling me that this was not meant to be.

I was going to go with that.

Big time.

"I'll just..." I stopped and looked around, deciding to get the fuck out of Dodge. "Forget it. Could you please just tell him Ava Barlow was here and try to catch him later."

then she that this must be a fun place to work.

't going "Luke just called in," he said to the black lady, but his eyes never
and all thoughts of a fun place to work flew from my head beca
n speed thoughts flew from my head. "He'll be here in five."

I had a silent freakout and wondered why, now that I needed
Good Ava and Bad Ava disappeared. I noticed too late that Hot Gree
I was Guy was standing between the exit and me.

Sissy's Crap.

I didn't "Hi, um...?" I looked at him.

e got to "Mace," he said and I blinked.

Yikes.

What kind of name was Mace? He certainly looked like he had sor
waving Caucasian ethnicity to him, maybe Polynesian, and who was I to sa
be they Polynesians named their kids, but *Mace*?

"Well, Mace, I need to go," I told him.

He shook his head.

I stared at him, thinking maybe he didn't hear me right.

, and at "I need to go," I repeated.

guy was "Luke'll be here in five," was all he said.

and he He stood with his arms crossed on his chest and I got the (o
us but impression that for some reason he wasn't going to allow me to leave.

like he, I found this somewhat alarming.

I gave up on him because he was a big guy and he didn't look like
) laugh, easily swayed and turned back to the receptionist.

“Um, really, I’ve got to go. I just remembered a dentist appointment. They get kind of touchy when you miss your appointments.”

This made her laugh.

“No, really. Sometimes they charge you,” I went on.

“Girl, so I can watch whatever’s gonna happen next, I’ll pay for it,” the lady said.

Okay, it was safe to say I’d left the real, sane world and entered a new one.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“First, I’m Shirleen,” she told me.

“Um...hi?” I asked, still not following and wondering why it was so weird.

“Hey there,” Shirleen said. “Second, to understand what’s going on, you gotta know all that’s gone on before you. Since Luke’ll be here in five minutes—”

“Three,” Mace interrupted from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder at him, beginning to feel out-and-out weird, and then turned back to Shirleen.

“In three,” Shirleen continued. “There ain’t enough time. Just trust me, girl, go with the flow.”

She was making no sense at all.

“What flow?” I asked, then shook my head because I didn’t have that information about the flow. I had to go.

I turned and started toward Mace. They couldn’t actually keep me from going, but I was pretty certain that was against the law.

ntment. “I’m leaving,” I said to him.

His hard body went alert. I not only saw it, I felt it.

“Luke wants you here,” he told me.

I took two steps toward him, which meant I was a foot away from the door. I tipped my head back and looked surprised at what he said.

a loony “He doesn’t know I’m here,” I stated.

“He knows,” he replied.

“He doesn’t,” I pushed.

“We told him,” he shared.

clear I “How’d you know?” I asked.

He pointed and I followed his arm to see a camera in the corner of the room. The light on it was green.

—”

Goddamn.

The boys in the back had been watching.

t panic, My eyes went back to him.

“You can’t keep me here,” I said.

ust me, He shook his head to tell me I was wrong.

This made me angry.

ime for I had kind of a temper (okay, so maybe one could say I had a temper) and right then I needed to go before Luke got there and I calculated about a minute to make my getaway. Not being able to go got there. I of me, and frankly, when I had a moment to look back, I was kind of surprised it took that long.

“Get out of my way,” I snapped.

I charged ahead and tried to dodge him at the last minute. He caught me and swung me around. I struggled, and laughably quick he subdued me. His back pressed tight to his front, my arms crossed in front of me, his hands at my wrists.

We were both slightly bent at the waist and I was still struggling, but I figured out that suddenly I was stand up wrestling with a guy named Mace. At the same time trying to pull free, when the door opened.

Mace and I stayed locked together, but we both froze and our bodies jerked toward the door.

Luke stood there.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I noticed instantly he looked even better than ever. Tall, at least six inches taller than me (and I was five foot eight), lean and built, wearing a skintight black T-shirt, black cargo pants and black boots. His thick hair was clipped short to his head. Not a buzz cut, but short. The beard was gone and in its place was the baddest-ass mustache I’d ever seen, thick and dark across his lip and trimmed neat down the sides of his mouth.

Holy cramoly!

I wanted to know at that very moment what it felt like to have that mustache with that ’tache, on me, *any* part of me. I didn’t care which part of me wouldn’t have been choosy.

His eyes came to me, slid to Mace then back to me.

Then one side of his mouth went up in a half-grin. At the sight I looked into Mace, and even though he had to feel the fight had gone out of

didn't let me go.

ight me “Too late again,” Luke muttered, sounding amused, his eyes on me, mygot the feeling he wasn't talking to me.

ands at “Not quite,” Shirleen told him and she sounded like she was trying not to laugh.

flipping This exchange confused me, but I had no time to ask or say anything at theall. Luke's eyes moved away from me and scanned the room. Obviously looking for something then not finding it, his gaze sliced back to Shirleen's

r heads “Where's Ava?” he asked.

His eyes narrowed, the arms around me tightened and both my cap and I straightened.

“What do you mean, where's Ava? Boy, you looked right at me.”
Shirleen answered.

aring a I heard a door open, but since it was behind my back and there was no air was solid guy there, I couldn't look. Not that I would have. Luke's eyes had come and me and pinned me to the spot.

d black I went still and he stared at me.

“Hey, Luke,” I said, feeling and sounding stupid.

His brows came together.

mouth,
t and I “Ava?” he asked.

“In the flesh.” I tried for a jaunty smile even though Mace still had me go and I felt like a big dork.

melted
me, he Luke did a body scan then his eyes came back to mine. “What the hell happened to you?”

There was definitely a sort of pissed-off accusation in his tone. I

reaction I had dreamed of (quite a lot) when Luke saw the new me.

e, but I “I got contacts,” I told him.

He glared at me.

ng hard “And I dyed my hair.”

The glare turned scary.

hing at “And I lost seventy-five pounds.”

viously
en. For some reason, at this Shirleen burst out laughing and I could hear
laughter in the room as we’d been joined by more people that I couldn’t

tor and I just kept my eyes on Luke who looked, for some insane reason, a
blow.

it her,” His jaw clenched and his gaze moved to the man behind me.

“You wanna let her go?” he asked, but it wasn’t really a question
tone of his voice was downright frightening.

s a big, The arms around me loosened and I took a step away.
d cut to

Luke stayed where he was.

“What’re you doin’ here?” he asked, still weirdly pissed off and
angrily glaring at me.

I decided instantly I didn’t need a tough guy. I was going to go it a

So I lied, “Thought you might want to get a beer.”

dn’t let “I called you,” he said, changing the subject suddenly, see
oblivious to our audience.

he fuck Crap, I was worried about this.

He *had* called me, half a dozen times after his father’s funeral.
Not the missed because I was out. Four I had listened to, sitting there while

leaving the messages and I didn't answer.

None of them I returned.

"I know," I said softly.

"After my father died, I called you," he stated, and the laughter swam out of the room just as quickly as it came in.

"I know," I repeated.

Another "You didn't call back and now you wanna have a beer?"

I didn't see. His tone was even more frightening than before. I wouldn't have thought about it if it was possible, but there it was.

"Um...maybe not," I muttered, deciding that perhaps I should go to bed, get up again and try the day differently, next time making decisions about my actions (read: not going to Nightingale Investigations and the

"What're you doin' here?" Luke asked again.

"I told you," I answered.

"You lied," he stated.

and still My mouth dropped open.

I had lied of course, but how could he know that? And anyway, alone. accusing me of lying in front of other people.

I felt my temper flare.

Obviously "I did not," I snapped (and lied again).

"Bullshit."

"Don't you say 'bullshit' to me, Lucas Stark."

Two I "Don't lie to me, Ava. What're you doin' here?" He wasn't going to say he was going.

“I was going to ask you out for a beer. Then I remembered I had a dentist appointment and now I’m late so I’m just going to…” I was praying for escape.

I took two steps toward the door mid rant and Luke moved.

One second he was several feet away from me. The next second, right there, bent over, and I kid you not, his shoulder slammed straight into my belly. He lifted up and started moving, taking me with him.

I let out a small, surprised scream and I heard a couple of gasps. My shoulder twitched and he bumped me into a more solid position on it, his arms wrapped around the backs of my thighs. He walked from the room, opened the door and carrying me with him as he went through.

At this turn of events I was too stunned to move, much less struggle. I didn’t lift my head to see Shirleen and Mace, as well as another black man, another seriously hot guy and a movie star gorgeous woman with black hair and violet eyes, all watching us go.

We were in a hall and I saw the door close behind us right before I turned to myself and yelled, “Let me down!”

Luke didn’t answer.

He turned and we went through another door. He stepped free of the door, turned again and I saw we were in a kitchenette slash locker room. I heard the door close before Luke turned one more time, bent forward and set me down on my feet.

I would have done something (though I didn’t know what that something was) to get away, but he moved into me. I had no choice but to move and I slammed against the door.

Luke came up close, the heat from his body hitting me, his face in

have a and I stilled. He was so tall and broad I couldn't see anything but h
eparating was so pissed off and full of attitude I was captivated by him and w
have been able to look or move away if I tried.

“What’re you doin’ here?” he repeated, dark-blue eyes
he was dangerously.

ght into I ignored the danger, mainly because at this point I was seriously a

“Did you just carry me in here?” I snapped.

s as his “Ava, I’m only gonna ask one more time,” Luke warned.

his arm I put my hands in the spare space between us, right on his rock-soli
ening a and gave a mighty shove. Then my eyes widened and dropped to my h

I was pretty certain I had given a good old shove, but he didn’t mc
e. But I an inch.

ick lady,
Holy shit.

ick hair
Okay then, new tactic.

I came “First, your friend physically detains me and now you’re cart
around against my will!” I yelled. “I’m calling the police.”

“You’re gonna tell me what’s going on. Are you in trouble?”

ie door,
“Step back, Luke.”

ard the
“Are you in trouble?”

on my
“Step back!” I shouted.

He didn’t step back.

nething Instead, he got closer. So much closer, his body touched mine and
ve back his hands went to the door beside my head, the other by my hip. I was
trapped.

in mine

him. He I sucked in breath.

ouldn't *Yippee!* Bad Ava shouted in my ear.

shining *Oh my,* Good Ava breathed.

It was safe to say I pretty much would have sold my soul to the thousand times in my life to have Luke this close.

ngry. "Talk to me, Ava," Luke ordered.

His voice had dipped low. He didn't sound pissed off now. He s patient and a lot like Luke had always sounded whenever he talked id chestGentle. Affectionate.

ands. I should have responded to his tone, but he was so close. My hea ve, notback to look at him and my eyes caught on his mouth. That 'tache v but it surrounded the most superior set of lips I had ever seen in my goddamned life. I had, of course, noticed he had a nice mouth, but had the opportunity to stare at it in that kind of proximity.

ing me The top lip was nicely formed, the bottom one full. The balan perfect and there were these sexy ridges that made you want to explore

I found myself wondering if that mouth was soft or hard when he to kiss you. Then I found myself wondering what it tasted like. Then myself thinking I wanted to run my tongue along it.

"Ava." I watched it move as it said my name and my eyes dreamily up to Luke's.

I was in kind of a fog, so when my eyes hit his I was no longer t l one of clearly, totally lost in the moment, so lost I licked my lips.

; totally "Jesus," he muttered, his voice soft, and now he was staring at my

I watched, fascinated as his face stayed hard but his eyes went

Ultra-warm. Warm in a way I had never seen before. He always looked with warmth in his eyes and I knew he didn't look at everyone that way as he always looked at me that way. But I knew this was different. His eyes were warm in a way that made *me* feel warm, all over like a devil.

He wasn't that far away but he started to come even closer.

Ho-ly *shit*.

I blinked, and self-preservation in mind I shoved at him again, pulling my head back with a jerk and cracking it against the door.

The moment was broken.

"Step back!" I shouted.

Luke's eyes narrowed. "What are you playin' at?"

"I'm not playing at anything!" I yelled. "I was in the neighborhood for a whole I never thought I had time on my hands. Mom told me you worked here so why the fuck? Stop by and see an old friend. Then you all act like Nearce was crazies. Jeez. Forget it. I have to go to the dentist. He's gonna be pissed."

I shoved again, but Luke still didn't move.

"You're lying," he said.

"I am not!"

His face came closer. The closer I thought it would have come a minute ago when, for one heart-stopping, insane moment, it seemed like he was going to kiss me. This time, it came in threateningly.

"You waltz in here after five years, not lookin' like you, not acting like you, jittery and bitchy, somethin' I never would have expected from your mouth. You lie through your teeth then stare at my mouth like you want to stick your tongue down my throat, and when I'm ready to give you that oppo-

d at me you go back to bitchy and lying.”

ay, but I was staring at him. I couldn’t help it. I’d never heard anyone
nt, way brutally honest before in my life.

er. And he told me he was going to give me the opportunity to kiss him
Um...wow.

“I’m not playin’ this game, Ava,” he warned, snapping me out
ling my thoughts. Gentle, affectionate Luke totally gone, we were b
dangerously pissed-off Luke. “You got trouble, you tell me right now :
help you. I find out another way, you’ll pay.”

My head jerked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

hood, I I had heard him and I couldn’t believe what I had heard.

what the “Did you just threaten me?” I asked.

idertal “It wasn’t a threat.”
d.”

Read: it was a promise.

Yikes.

I didn’t know what “paying” would entail and I sure as hell wasn’t
to find out.

noment “I’m not in trouble,” I told him. And I wasn’t, not really.

he was Okay, maybe a little bit. But I was worried I was about to be in
trouble.

in’ like “I find out you are—”
m you.

ck your “You won’t find out I am. In fact, I can promise you won’t see me
rtunity, I bit out, glaring at him.

“I’ll see you again,” he said in a way that I felt a thrill go up my back that
be that Seriously, it was high time to escape.

“Step back,” I demanded.
n. He stared at me.

“Step back!” I shouted.
of my He stepped back.

ack to I whirled, threw open the door and stomped down the hall.
so I can

Then I was twirled around, a hand at my elbow and I jerked my arm
of Luke’s grasp. He was, for some reason, now grinning, face relaxed
corner of his lips tipped up.

“Wrong way,” he said, and he looked about ready to laugh.

Great.

I was a total dork, making my grand exit and going the wrong way

I threw him a look that should have made him spontaneously combust
course, it did not) and stomped the other way, Luke beside me the
time. His vibe had morphed from pissed off to amused and I didn’t like
’t going bit.

He opened the door to the reception area for me and I hightailed it
the room, focused on the outer door, escape, and not looking at anyone

a lot of “Later,” I said to the room at large because I didn’t want to appear

For some reason, this was met with Shirleen saying, “I’ll put
down that she’s livin’ with him in four days.”

again,” My confused gaze swung to Shirleen, but she was looking at the
star glamour girl who was looking at me.

ck. “Three days,” glamour girl said, smiling at me, and I thought in circumstances I would have liked to meet her.

“A week. She’s got spirit,” the other black lady said.

She was smiling at me, too. Not like I was the butt of some joke, in a kind way.

I shook my head. I needed to focus, leave these nutsos behind and *go*.

I opened the outer door.

arm out
ed, one

Before it closed behind me, I heard Luke say strangely, “Tonight.”

Then everyone laughed.

[Click here to purchase your copy of Rock Chick Revenge](#)

.
bust (of
: whole
e it one

t across
).

rude.
money

: movie

“Three days,” glamour girl said, smiling at me, and I thought in other circumstances I would have liked to meet her.

“A week. She’s got spirit,” the other black lady said.

She was smiling at me, too. Not like I was the butt of some joke, but in a kind way.

I shook my head. I needed to focus, leave these nutsos behind and go, go, *go*.

I opened the outer door.

Before it closed behind me, I heard Luke say strangely, “Tonight.”

Then everyone laughed.

[Click here to purchase your copy of Rock Chick Revenge](#)



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 author career.

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, thank 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



fourth-
ver, the
ed as a
pendent

publishing career. She now writes full-time.

Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through all of Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To this end, and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created the Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to her readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to your true self, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, take 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, weekends Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisterhood together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards, an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity and this number continues to rise.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation at KristenAshley.net.



ALSO BY KRISTEN ASHLEY

Rock Chick Series:

Rock Chick

Rock Chick Rescue

Rock Chick Redemption

Rock Chick Renegade

Rock Chick Revenge

Rock Chick Reckoning

Rock Chick Regret

Rock Chick Revolution

Rock Chick Reawakening

Rock Chick Reborn

Rock Chick Rematch

The 'Burg Series:

For You

At Peace

Golden Trail

Games of the Heart

The Promise

Hold On

The Chaos Series:

Own the Wind

Fire Inside

Ride Steady

Walk Through Fire

A Christmas to Remember

Rough Ride

Wild Like the Wind

Free

Wild Fire

Wild Wind

The Colorado Mountain Series:

The Gamble

Sweet Dreams

Lady Luck

Breathe

Jagged

Kaleidoscope

Bounty

Dream Man Series:

Mystery Man

Wild Man

Law Man

Motorcycle Man

Quiet Man

Dream Team Series:

Dream Maker

Dream Chaser

Dream Bites Cookbook

Dream Spinner

Dream Keeper

The Fantasyland Series:

Wildest Dreams

The Golden Dynasty

Fantastical

Broken Dove

Midnight Soul

Gossamer in the Darkness

Ghosts and Reincarnation Series:

Sommersgate House

Lacybourne Manor

Penmort Castle

Fairytale Come Alive

Lucky Stars

The Honey Series:

The Deep End

The Farthest Edge

The Greatest Risk

The Magdalene Series:

The Will

Soaring

The Time in Between

Mathilda, SuperWitch:

Mathilda's Book of Shadows

Mathilda The Rise of the Dark Lord

Misted Pines Series

The Girl in the Mist

The Girl in the Woods

Moonlight and Motor Oil Series:

The Hookup

The Slow Burn

The Rising Series:

The Beginning of Everything

The Plan Commences

The Dawn of the End

The Rising

The River Rain Series:

After the Climb

After the Climb Special Edition

Chasing Serenity

Taking the Leap

Making the Match

Fighting the Pull

The Three Series:

Until the Sun Falls from the Sky

With Everything I Am

Wild and Free

The Unfinished Hero Series:

Knight

Creed

Raid

Deacon

Sebring

Wild West MC Series:

Still Standing

Smoke and Steel

Other Titles by Kristen Ashley:

Heaven and Hell

Play It Safe

Three Wishes

Complicated

Loose Ends

Fast Lane

Perfect Together

Too Good To Be True

Too Good To Be True