

ROCK



CHICK

REVENGE

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK FIVE

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTEN ASHLEY

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By Kristen Ashley

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

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*This book is dedicated to Gib Moutaw,
who's cooler than Lee, Eddie, Hank, Vance, Luke, Mace and Hector
together.*

Keep whistlin' in the dark, my brother.

*This book is dedicated to Gib Moutaw,
who's cooler than Lee, Eddie, Hank, Vance, Luke, Mace and Hector all put
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Keep whistlin' in the dark, my brother.

CONTENTS

1. [Bad Ava, Good Ava](#)
2. [A Little Bit of Trouble](#)
3. [That's Who I'm Keeping Safe](#)
4. [Payment](#)
5. [I Need Cookies](#)
6. [What I Don't Get](#)
7. [Pink Lady Sandy](#)
8. [Get the Business](#)
9. [Feeling Fine, Feeling Loose](#)
10. [Mrs. Stark](#)
11. [That Didn't Go Too Good](#)
12. [Pins and Needles](#)
13. [Solid](#)
14. [You Missed It Again, Babe](#)
15. [Together in A Way You Can't Deny](#)
16. [Milano Interruptus](#)
17. [Missed You](#)
18. [Fight](#)
19. [Cornered](#)
20. [Straighter](#)

21. [Earning Retribution](#)
22. [Precious Cargo](#)
23. [Gonzo](#)
24. [Vibrator Ceremony](#)
25. [Barlow Bitches from Hell](#)
26. [Manipulate a Macho Man Underwear](#)
27. [Octuple Revenge](#)
28. [Two Kinds of Women](#)
29. [Convoy, Chaos and Cookies](#)
30. [Bliss](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

[Learn More About Rock Chick Reckoning](#)

[Rock Chick Reckoning](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kristen Ashley](#)

21. [Earning Retribution](#)
22. [Precious Cargo](#)
23. [Gonzo](#)
24. [Vibrator Ceremony](#)
25. [Barlow Bitches from Hell](#)
26. [Manipulate a Macho Man Underwear](#)
27. [Octuple Revenge](#)
28. [Two Kinds of Women](#)
29. [Convoy, Chaos and Cookies](#)
30. [Bliss](#)

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ONE



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 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 grandmothers' hair. The hair I had always wanted all my life, even prayed for.

od Avanever had, until now.

Last time I saw Luke he was wearing all black: black suit, black tie. It was a funeral but Luke had always been partial to black and I was glad because he looked good in it.

Even when he was a teenager he usually wore tight, black T-shirt and 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 were really a dark, dark indigo and totally yum.

At the funeral I noticed he had grown a beard. Not full and thick but well-trimmed, and it looked great on him.

I nearly melted into a puddle when his eyes moved through the 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 to pounce on him.

Instead of shoving the mourners aside and pouncing (which would have been highly inappropriate), I just gave him what I hoped was a jaunty grin and a stupid half wave. The grin went full-fledged (guess the jaunty grin worked, but then again my stupid, dorky behavior always seemed to work on 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 regretted that day.

I never thought I would rue anything, but I rued that day for certain

However, now I needed Luke.

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 (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.

Two days after he moved in across the street I caught him in the alley, and at that time he was twelve and smoking in the alley, and at that time I 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 lifting weights. I watched this out of my bedroom window and it was more than anything on television, believe you me.

He always had a different girlfriend and you could tell they were a different type of girl, 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 out 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 the toughest 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.

2. *Be nice,* Good Ava said.

and my Before I could chicken out, I got out of the Range Rover and walked
y Rockthe building.

hunter,



Indy'sI HAD serious second thoughts about my choice of clothing the moment
opened the door to the offices of Nightingale Investigations. I thought
guy, mercenary, bounty hunting private eyes would have shithole
ie alleyCouches 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 betterat 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
and there was a pretty older black woman sitting behind it. She had
ing my biggest Afro I had ever seen in my life and she appeared to be both a
e while calzone and painting her fingernails a frosty, raspberry sherbet-type color.

I was wearing seriously faded Levi's I'd found in a vintage clothing
of his (and they were *the best*), my black Green Day T-shirt over a white t-shirt
came a 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.

ent into 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.

minute I Hell and damnation.

it tough “Can I help you?” the lady behind the reception desk asked, breaking out of my idiot thoughts.

offices. I looked at her.

kets on I hesitated for a moment, wanting to run, then I took a deep breath and said, “I’m looking for Lucas Stark.”

—stuff “You got an appointment with Luke?” the lady asked, looking at the total mess on her desk, not that she would ever find anything.

eamings “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, I had a mess, I read that me closely.

ing out “No,” I replied quickly, relieved beyond belief that Luke was somewhere else.

the statue There it was, the gods telling me that this was not meant to be.

with a mess, I was going to go with that.

read that me closely. Big time.

ating a “I’ll just...” I stopped and looked around, deciding to get the fuck out of my Dodge. “Forget it. Could you please just tell him Ava Barlow was here and try to catch him later.”

lor. I was rethinking telling this woman my name (too late now) when she smiled huge like she had just thought of some hilarious joke but wasn’t

to let me in on it.

on done “No problem to give him a bell,” she pushed. “I got his number on dial.”

Oh crap.

ing me “No!” I cried, suddenly sounding desperate, because suddenly desperate. I shouldn’t have come there. I could get the goods on stupid-ass cheating jerk of a husband myself. It couldn’t be that hard. ath and need Luke. I didn’t need anyone. “Really, thanks, but I’ll just go, I’ve be somewhere anyway.”

I started edging away, deciding on escape.

through “Just hang on one tick,” the lady said, ever helpful, getting up and ap the her hands to dry her nails. “I’ll just talk to the boys in the back. May know where he is.” end.”

Eek!

Boys in the back?

ewhere A door opened and a man (most definitely *not* a boy) walked in, one glance at him I stared.

At first I was worried it was going to be Luke, but it wasn’t. This g tall, dark-haired with jade-green eyes, a lean, muscled body to die for was unbelievably gorgeous. Not your average, everyday gorgec otherworldly gorgeous. His green eyes were on me and he looked l k out of too, thought something was hilarious.

re? I’ll I thought distractedly, considering everyone looked about ready to that this must be a fun place to work.

en she “Luke just called in,” he said to the black lady, but his eyes never t going

and all thoughts of a fun place to work flew from my head because
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
Guy was standing between the exit and me.
I was

Sissy’s Crap.

I didn’t “Hi, um...?” I looked at him.

g got to “Mace,” he said and I blinked.

Yikes.

What kind of name was Mace? He certainly looked like he had some
waving Caucasian ethnicity to him, maybe Polynesian, and who was I to say
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.

“Luke’ll be here in five,” was all he said.

guy was He stood with his arms crossed on his chest and I got the (c
and he impression that for some reason he wasn’t going to allow me to leave.
us but

like he, I found this somewhat alarming.

I gave up on him because he was a big guy and he didn’t look like
y laugh, easily swayed and turned back to the receptionist.

“Um, really, I’ve got to go. I just remembered a dentist appointment
left me They get kind of touchy when you miss your appointments.”

use all This made her laugh.

“No, really. Sometimes they charge you,” I went on.

advice, “Girl, so I can watch whatever’s gonna happen next, *I’ll* pay
n Eyed charge you,” the lady said.

Okay, it was safe to say I’d left the real, sane world and entered
bin.

“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
ne non-couldn’t leave and everyone in the room (but me) was okay with that.

ty what “Hey there,” Shirleen said. “Second, to understand what’s going
gotta know all that’s gone on before you. Since Luke’ll be here in five-

“Three,” Mace interrupted from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder at him, beginning to feel out-and-out
and then turned back to Shirleen.

“In three,” Shirleen continued. “There ain’t enough time. Just tr
girl, go with the flow.”

correct) She was making no sense at all.

“What flow?” I asked, then shook my head because I didn’t have t
information about the flow. I had to *go*.

he was I turned and started toward Mace. They couldn’t actually keep me
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 if they and about ten 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 on your 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.

I had kind of a temper (okay, so maybe one could say I had a time for temper) and right then I needed to go before Luke got there and I calculated had 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

and swung me around. I struggled, and laughably quick he subdued me from behind, 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 then suddenly I was standing 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 cramoily!

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 it 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 him, he didn't let me go.

"Too late again," Luke muttered, sounding amused, his eyes on me.

me, mygot the feeling he wasn't talking to me.

ands at “Not quite,” Shirleen told him and she sounded like she was tryin
not to laugh.

flipping This exchange confused me, but I had no time to ask or say anyt
e at the all. Luke's eyes moved away from me and scanned the room. Ob
looking for something then not finding it, his gaze sliced back to Shirle

r heads “Where's Ava?” he asked.

His eyes narrowed, the arms around me tightened and both my cap
I straightened.

“What do you mean, where's Ava? Boy, you looked right a
st four Shirleen answered.

aring a I heard a door open, but since it was behind my back and there wa
air was solid guy there, I couldn't look. Not that I would have. Luke's eyes ha
one and me and pinned me to the spot.

l 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 ha
me go and I felt like a big dork.

melted Luke did a body scan then his eyes came back to mine. “What t
me, he 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
een. 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

I just kept my eyes on Luke who looked, for some insane reason, a
tor and blow.

His jaw clenched and his gaze moved to the man behind me.

it her,” “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.
missed because I was out. Four I had listened to, sitting there while
Not the 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.

“You didn’t call back and now you wanna have a beer?”

His tone was even more frightening than before. I wouldn’t have thought 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 Investigative and the

“What’re you doin’ here?” Luke asked again.

“I told you,” I answered.

“You lied,” he stated.

My mouth dropped open.

I had lied of course, but how could he know that? And anyway, accusing me of lying in front of other people.

I felt my temper flare.

“I did not,” I snapped (and lied again).

“Bullshit.”

“Don’t you say ‘bullshit’ to me, Lucas Stark.”

“Don’t lie to me, Ava. What’re you doin’ here?” He wasn’t going to go.

“I was going to ask you out for a beer. Then I remembered I have a dentist appointment and now I’m late so I’m just going to...” I was pr

for escape.

I kept out 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 my belly. He lifted up and started moving, taking me with him.

I thought 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, wrapped around the backs of my thighs. He walked from the room, open door and carrying me with him as he went through.

I'm home, g smart ns). At this turn of events I was too stunned to move, much less struggle. I did lift my head to see Shirleen and Mace, as well as another black another seriously hot guy and a movie star gorgeous woman with black and violet eyes, all watching us go.

We were in a hall and I saw the door close behind us right before I got to myself and yelled, "Let me down!"

he was 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.

I have a eparing Luke came up close, the heat from his body hitting me, his face in my face and I stilled. He was so tall and broad I couldn't see anything but his face. He was so pissed off and full of attitude I was captivated by him and wanted to be with him.

have been able to look or move away if I tried.

“What’re you doin’ here?” he repeated, dark-blue eyes
he was dangerously.

I ignored the danger, mainly because at this point I was seriously a

“Did you just carry me in here?” I snapped.

“Ava, I’m only gonna ask one more time,” Luke warned.

I put my hands in the spare space between us, right on his rock-solid
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 mo
e. But I an inch.

Holy shit.

Okay then, new tactic.

“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?”

“Step back, Luke.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“Step back!” I shouted.

He didn’t step back.

Instead, he got closer. So much closer, his body touched mine and
his hands went to the door beside my head, the other by my hip. I was
trapped.

I sucked in breath.

Yippee! Bad Ava shouted in my ear.

couldn’t

Oh my, Good Ava breathed.

shining 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 chest Gentle. Affectionate.

ands. I should have responded to his tone, but he was so close. My hea ove, not back 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.

s 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 looke with warmth in his eyes and I knew he didn’t look at everyone that w

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.

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 year. 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 Nearctic 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 year 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 you. 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 opportunity, you go back to bitchy and lying."

I was staring at him. I couldn't help it. I'd never heard anyone

nt, waybrutally 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 of my thoughts. Gentle, affectionate Luke totally gone, we were being dangerously pissed-off Luke. “You got trouble, you tell me right now or I’ll 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.

underthal “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 going to find out.

moment “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. “You won’t find out I am. In fact, I can promise you won’t see me
ck your I bit out, glaring at him.

rtunity, “I’ll see you again,” he said in a way that I felt a thrill go up my back.

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 a
of Luke’s grasp. He was, for some reason, now grinning, face relax
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 compl
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 lik
'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 i
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.

arm out I opened the outer door.

ed, one Before it closed behind me, I heard Luke say strangely, “Tonight.”

Then everyone laughed.

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rude.

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n other

“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.

TWO



A LITTLE BIT OF TROUBLE

I was standing in my dinky little kitchen, taking my post-Luke attitude out on an innocent cucumber.

That didn't go very well, Good Ava said on a sigh, resting the side of her head in her hand and her elbow on her thigh.

I thought it went great! Bad Ava yelled enthusiastically, jumping down.

I tried to ignore them both and pounded the big cleaver in the cucumber, chopping it in a cucumber-decimating frenzy, trying to get Luke and everyone in his office out of my head.



I LIVED in a row house in the Highlands area of Denver. I called it The Little Row House in Denver.

See? I'm a dork.

It had a living room with two big arched windows at the front, separated by double doors that rolled into the walls and led to the dining room with two big windows, these facing the back. There was a small kitchen off the dining room and a screened-in porch out the back door of the kitchen.

All hardwood floors, except in the minuscule kitchen, which I'd

slate with the countertops tiled in shiny black. I put in white cupboards and the hanging ones glass-fronted and displaying my huge collection of Fiestaware.

There were two bedrooms and a massive bathroom with a claw-foot tub upstairs.

I had a big, old basement, its door leading off the kitchen. The basement had two rooms and an old coal room. It was more of a pit than a basement. Unrenovated and long-since unused, wallpaper peeling and exposed light bulbs. I only went down there to do my laundry because it creeped me out.

My row house was historically registered and had three fireplaces (one in the dining room, living room and bedroom) and a sweet, little shady back yard with trees kitty-corner at the ends.

It wasn't in the best neighborhood, but who cared? It had character, a history, a low mortgage, a garage out back where my Range Rover could be stored safely and I dug it.

I'd lived in Denver my whole life and was never going to move. Denver was home. It had everything you needed: the big city culture, food, shopping and entertainment all with a small town feel.

My family felt differently.



AFTER MY DAD left us when I was fourteen (rat-bastard number one in my class) and all us girls graduated high school, Mom took off to Phoenix. She hated the cold and the snow and all the familiar reminders of my father. She also liked to be tan, but felt claustrophobic in sunbeds.

I had two older sisters.

My oldest one, Marilyn, moved to St. Louis after high school and

birds, all married to a car salesman, then divorced him and almost immediately married to a lawyer, with whom she was currently involved in a bitter (at the same time dating a doctor, thus moving up in her chosen career path trophy wife). So far Marilyn had managed to work approximately 18 months of her life and spent the rest of it in spas, malls and on her basement with sweaty slimeballs pumping away at her. I knew this because she talked her active sex life a good deal. A kind of *gross* good deal.

Read: ick.

My other sister, Sofia, moved to San Diego and became a cheerleader for the San Diego Chargers. Sofia worked her way through the offensive line then the defensive line (something, I might add, she also did as a cheerleader in high school). Now, retired from her career as an active cheerleader and a football player groupie, she was running a cheerleading camp and engaged a sports agent who was more of a slimeball than both of Marilyn's husbands put together. And that was quite a feat considering Marilyn's husband was seriously the scum of the earth.

By the way, my mom had named us all, with high hopes, after Hollywood bombshells.

My sisters had both been bombshells from puberty, all thick, shiny, shining hair, big boobs, tight asses, flat stomachs, long legs and sultry

I had to work hard at bombshell status, and even then didn't quite make it because I was a big dork.

It was safe to say my sisters and I weren't close.

Sissy Whitchurch was another story.



Sissy and I had been best friends since second grade and we were close

ely gotwas the bestest best friend in the world. Good at keeping secrets, happ
divorcemy silly and sometimes mean sisters to shreds with me, loyal to the c
reer asalways up for an adventure.

ly four One problem with Sissy, she had shit taste in men.

ck with Though, considering good men were non-existent, all women didr
d about much choice.

However, Sissy's husband, Dominic, was beyond the pale in the sl
stakes. Dom was a world-class asshole.

ader for Dominic Vincetti was very good-looking (and knew it), made his
ine and dubiously (and didn't hide it) and treated Sissy like shit (and
rleader apologized). He didn't hit her, but he cheated on her openly, walked
der and her and talked down to her in a way that made my teeth go on edge.

aged to Before Dom, Sissy was funny and sweet and there was no one
isbands world who was better to go to a rock concert with. She loved music lil
ds were and she went wild at concerts, dancing, screaming. She always knew
words to the songs and sang them loud.

lywood After five years of marriage, Dom had forced all that good stuff
Sissy, making her quiet, shy, uncertain and a homebody and Sissy didr
, dark, notice it was happening.

eyes. I noticed and it pissed me off.

make it Sissy loved him, though, and put up with it and it wasn't my place
anything. If she wanted him then I was there. My only other choice
stop spending time with her and a life without Sissy...well, I c
imagine it.

se. She But when I changed, lost weight, dyed my hair, Dom noticed.

y to rip In fact, a lot of people noticed.

ore and In fact, even though I'd dated when I was heavy, I started to get serious male attention as the weight dropped off then more, then more. Luke's dad's funeral, I'd had my first three longish-term boyfriends.

i't have I had to admit, in the dream world I had in the back of my head were all practice for Luke. Of course I never told them that and I couldn't have fallen in love with any one of them if they hadn't all turned out to be jerks.

There was Rick, who cheated on me (um, no).

money Then there was Dave, who had a collection of pornography so he never could have opened his own store. And he called phone sex lines, like all over the place. Neither of these were bad things, as such. Except phone bills over a hundred dollars month after month were a bit much. Not to mention he wanted to have sex, like, twelve times a day, walked around naked like I did times and tried to get me to go to swinger parties (um, no again).

r all the Then there was Noah, who took my Auntie Ella's jewelry and pawned it. This, I didn't find out until he also took my ATM card, found out my phone number and cleaned out my checking and savings accounts before I even noticed they disappeared. Luckily, I had the inheritance money my Aunt Ella gave me in a different account. She gave me her jewelry and a shitload of money, but she gave Marilyn and Sofia a token, which pissed them off big time. But she was always been mean to her and I hadn't, so fuck them.

e to say See? All men were scum.

ouldn't I wasn't a bitter, twisted spinster. I'd put myself out there and I had all the reasons to think that, what with my choices, Sissy's choices and my own choices, not to mention my fucking dad, who'd left and never came back. All men were scum.



et some AFTER NOAH TOOK OFF, Dom started to flirt with me right in front of
e. Since couldn't believe it and did my absolute best not to rip his face off w
fingernails. However, there were a lot of times I wanted to rip Dom's
id, they with my fingernails. Not just when he was flirting with me, but wh
ld have ask Sissy if she *really* should be eating that second slice of pizza, givin
arks. shitty look when he didn't quite like the outfit she put on, causing he
and change it, getting pissy when he was served leftovers and the like.

Sissy ignored the flirting. So did I, passing it off as a joke.

big he Dom took this as a challenge. Dom was the kind of guy girls res
e, a lot. to, mainly because he was really handsome, which sucked. I figured h
er five use a scar or two, put there by my fingernails of course.
tion he

d at all When I didn't respond, he flirted more. He started touching and j
weeks ago he backed me into the corner of their kitchen and kissed me
mouthed.

ny PIN I bit his tongue.

fore he "What the fuck!" he hissed, hand swiping at his mouth and glaring
me in a He was hot—all macho, Italian bad boy, dark, wavy hair, dark eye
out onlyhips, broad shoulders.

: they'd When we'd first seen him, Sissy and I had both fallen in lust. Si
been over the moon when he asked her out. Sissy had never been hea
had blue eyes and strawberry-blond hair and was pretty, petite and
I I hadlike a grown up human-sized fairy, without the pointy ears.

sisters' "Get away from me," I had snapped at Dom.

ck, that His face had changed from angry, to calculating. "You want it, A
know you do. I've seen the way you look at me."

Like I said, he was hot, so he probably wasn't wrong. But he was a
Sissy. I best friend's husband.

with my "Get over yourself," I told him.

face off "I'd rather get on top of you."

en he'd

ing her a I wanted to laugh in his face. That was a really bad line. Dom, I
er to go because I'd seen it, could do a lot better.

Instead, I said, "Fuck off, Dom. Sissy's in the other room."

"I get what I want," he replied, and something about the way he
ponded kind of freaked me out.

e could He said it like he meant it and he was looking at me in a way that
my scalp tingle, and not in a good way. I didn't know what he did
ust two living, but I didn't think it was good, and Sissy never talked about it
, open- was concerning. Sissy and I talked about everything. He struck me as a
guy, not only because he was a cheat and a jerk, but also for other reasons.

"Dom, fuck...off," I snapped, but he kissed me again, arms going
me, tongue sliding in my mouth.
at me.

I struggled and pushed. Dom pinned me against the wall, his hands
es, slim up my shirt.

We both heard a noise. Dom let me go and stepped back, and I
ssy had Sissy standing in the door.

vy. She

dainty, "Sis, girl..." Dom said, his voice conciliatory, and I wanted to kick
mean, what did he expect to happen?

I didn't kick him though, mainly because I was horrified and
through to my fucking soul that I might have just lost my best friend.

va, you

But Sissy looked at me and asked, "Ava, would you help me pack?"

also my Then she walked out of the room.

Halle-fucking-lujah.

I shoved Dom's shoulder as I walked by him and glared, but repeated, staring at me with an intensity that I did...not...like, "Av. I knew, what I want."

I rolled my eyes and left the room. I helped Sissy pack and she m with me for a few days. She cried a lot and I listened a lot and I seethed a lot more. Then she went to her mom's place in Wyoming. I said it until after we'd hatched our plan.

Sissy was going to move away and I was going to get the goods c it made so Sissy could divorce him and take him to the cleaners. d for a

That was the plan.

I wasn't sure *how* to get the goods on Dom.

That was where tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunter, private ey ons. Stark was supposed to come into the scenario. around



Sissy knew Luke, had met him several times and had stood beside m d going bedroom window checking him out on numerous occasions while h we saw weights in his dad's garage.

She also knew how I felt about him (read: big, huge, twenty-one-y < him. I crush).

Dragging Luke into the deal was her idea.

Sissy also knew about the funeral and what happened there. In f scared knew everything about Luke.

She knew that when I was nine and was walking home from schoo

boys I detested had caught up with me, calling me Fatty Fatty Four Ey original, but it hurt, anyway).

he just She knew how Luke, thirteen and already a tough customer, came
a, I get nowhere and punched one of them in the nose, bloodying it and mal
three run away. She also knew after that was over that I made some
comment making Luke laugh, because being teased all the time for be
oved in and ugly, one only had two choices: go silent and shy, or become a sr
quietly I chose the latter. After I made him laugh, he'd walked me home.
But not

She also knew, after that, no kids ever teased me.

in Dom Not ever again.

Further, she knew about when Luke was fourteen and I was ten. H
one of many humdinger fights with his dad that I heard all the way ac
street. He'd torn out of the house and I'd gone after him. I found h
park, ass to the ground, back against a tree, his head bent, wrists res
e Luke his cocked knees. I'd sat beside him and started telling jokes until h
out of his mood and started laughing.

She also knew about when I was twelve and Luke was sixteen, an
e at my his dad and mom had come over for dinner. My mother, an aging
e lifted queen who still had two shelves full of trophies and ribbons from "th
old days," got tipsy and announced to the table, "I'm so lucky. I ha
near-old beautiful daughters and one smart one." Marilyn and Sofia grinned
other. My father got red in the face and looked like he was going to
roof. Luke's dad chuckled uncomfortably in a way that sounded str
act, she but his mom stared at me with concern.

I squirmed.

l, three Luke leaned back in his chair, looked at Sofia and said, "Congratu

yes (not you must have made the honor roll.”

Sofia’s mouth dropped open in horror (I wasn’t the only Barlow girl out of a crush on Luke, all three of us had the hots for him). I immediately started squirming and laughed so hard at Sofia’s horrified expression, I snorted smart. Sissy also knew about the time, only five days before he graduating high school, when I was fourteen and Luke was eighteen, and it had been clear my dad had left and wasn’t coming back. I was sitting on our stoop.

You could hear my mother crying and carrying on inside while my dad argued with each other over a curling iron or something idiotic.

I saw Luke come out of his house on his way to his motorcycle. He’d had a car accident, changed directions, crossed the street and sat down beside me. He didn’t say a word and neither did I. I just stared at his boots and wished he was my boyfriend, not for the first or the last time. It would have been a lot easier to cope with losing Dad if I’d had Luke as a boyfriend. Or anyone for that matter, but especially Luke.

I was close with my dad. I thought we had a bond. I always thought of us as the two of us against the other silly bitches in the house. I knew he felt the same way about trying to his patience—my mother, flighty, naggy, demanding, wanted a better life, house, car, curtains, whatever and always going on about it. I knew she *didn’t* choose so she could be with the best. I knew he was rubbing his nose in it constantly. I knew, too, that he lamented where he was wrong with snotty, bitchy, catty Marilyn and Sofia, though he didn’t look too far. My mom was a good teacher.

Dad had come into my bedroom late at night the day before he died. He said, “Sorry, Ava, darlin’, but I just can’t take it anymore.”

He'd woken me up and I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't explain and he didn't say anything more.

The next day he was gone.

"I thought..." I said to Luke, and then stopped because I didn't know what I thought.

Luke slid his arm around my waist and pulled me to his side. I put my head on his shoulder and we sat there a long time before Luke bumped his foot against mine. I got the hint and pulled back. He got up, leaned over and touched my nose then he was gone.

A few days later, like my dad, he was really gone.

Luke came back every once in a while, though, visiting his mom, his dad and popping by to say hi to me.

Then he disappeared for eight years. I didn't know where he went because my mother wasn't talking or I would have found out, because normally she tells me everything.

Lastly, Sissy knew about Luke's father's funeral.

I was twenty-four, Luke was twenty-eight. After the funeral, at the graveside, the Barlow Girl Brigade walked up to Luke and his mom and cheek kisses were passed around, both Marilyn and Sofia going for gusto with Luke, but his body went stiff when they pressed against him, which was embarrassing for me, having to watch it and knowing the girls were my sisters. As gorgeous as they were, Luke was totally aloof from the Bombshell Barlow Girls.

That was until his eyes moved to me and I leaned in to kiss his cheek. His arms came around me and he pulled me into a close hug, pressing his jaw against my temple.

out. He “Good to see you, Ava,” he murmured, and it sounded like he mea

“You too, Luke,” I said, pulling back a bit and looking at him. “E
in there?” I asked softly.

t know His eyes were warm, his face was hard, and he was so fucking hai
it took my breath away.

put my He kept his arms around me and looked down at me.

ped his “Yeah,” he answered.

l down, “Wanna get drunk?” I asked, mostly teasing.

“Yeah,” he answered, definitely not teasing.

ighting “I can probably arrange that,” I told him, still trying to keep the tor
but wanting to help ease his pain all the same.

and his He and his dad never got along, I knew that. Still, his dad ha
she told youngish and it was a shock. Massive heart attack. Not good, even
didn’t get along.

“I’ll take you up on that,” Luke said. Then his eyes moved to his

He let me go and touched my nose. “I’ll call you.”

still at I nodded. “It’s a deal,” I promised.

1. Hugs We moved away and more mourners moved into our space to off
for the condolences. I walked away slowly, wanting to be in his presence for
st him, as I could drag it out.
y were

om the It was later I overheard my sisters talking in our living room.

ek. His bulging,” Marilyn said.

bearded “I know, I think I threw up a little looking at them. He could ba
his arms around her,” Sofia replied.

nt it. “I came all this way just to see him and he barely looked at me.
langing hugged Ava. How fucking weird is that?” Marilyn went on.

“Maybe he’s gay,” Sofia suggested.

ndsome Then they’d laughed, thinking they were hilarious.

Okay, it was safe to say that not only weren’t my sisters and I
kind of didn’t like them, as in *really* didn’t like them.

But for me, hearing what they said, that was it.

The final straw.

That was when I made my decision, my vow, that the next time
ie light, Lucas Stark, and if he hugged me or touched me, no one who was loc
us would think it was sick, gross or throw up a little at the sight of us.

id been That was why I didn’t take his calls and go out and get drunk w
if they like I promised I would.

Instead, I went and found a personal trainer and had a mortifying
mother. test. I was put on a program, dumped all the shit food out of my ho
started reading *Self* and *Shape* magazines religiously. I lost twenty po
the first month (water weight). The next fifty-five were a lot hard
trainer changed my program every six weeks and drilled me like a N
er their name was Riley. He was always tan and not sunbed tan. He was outsid
as long even in the winter. He had blond hair, brown eyes and a great body,
told me I was going to be his Mona Lisa. I wasn’t going for Mona Lis
going for Jennifer Aniston, but I decided not to share that with Riley.

at, like, Riley was a good guy, though likely a total jerk to his girlfriend
was I to know? Regardless, I didn’t want to let him or myself down
rely get dedicated and motivated and living, cycling, treading, stair climb

But he curling and weight training for the day when Luke saw me again.

Though it didn't turn out like I'd planned. Mainly because, even in my partial bombshell status, I became an asshole-magnet and realized it was just Sissy, Marilyn, Sofia and Mom's bad taste in men. It was just that they weren't worth the effort.

So by the time I was ready for Luke, mentally and physically prepared to seek him out, I'd gone off men. I made a new vow that I was dedicated to fitness as much as to sex.

I was never going to get tangled up with a man again, no matter how close I saw him.

Looking at



AFTER NOAH CLEANED ME OUT, Sissy and I went to Pandora's on Broadway. I stocked up and got myself a rabbit vibrator *and* a smooth silver one (so I could have variety) and enough batteries to last a year. When I got them home, out of their boxes and loaded up with batteries, I used them with everlasting fidelity to my vibrators.

That was that.

Seriously.

The end.

So there I was, now a dedicated, bitter spinster with revenge on my mind.

Not revenge for myself, but for Sissy and every other woman who had been fucked over by a shithead guy.



s. How

I STOPPED CLEAVING at the cucumber, tossed it into a bowl with the other ingredients, and I'd already nearly annihilated, and had started on the onion when the

rang.

I threw down the cleaver and picked up the phone.

en with “Yo,” I said.

wasn't “Yo, yourself,” Sissy said to me. “How'd it go with Luke?”

at men I could hear the anticipation in her voice. She thought he'd fall with me on sight and put a ring on my finger within the hour. She loared to and thought I was funny and cool. What could I say? It sucked to disl to just her.

“Not good. I didn't ask him. I'm going it alone.” I tried to make who, no and sweet.

Silence for a beat and then, “What do you mean, not good?”

Box on “I mean not good.” I decided maybe I shouldn't tell her right now how it actually went. She had enough on her plate and anyway, I h, sleek ready to relive it. “I think he's kinda pissed that I didn't return his call. Once I his father's funeral.” vowed

“You should have called him,” Sissy told me, and she'd told me before, like, five dozen times.

“Too late now. Anyway, we go ahead with the plan as it was, just with Luke. I'll go to your house tonight.”

Sissy hesitated. “I'd be a lot more comfortable if you had Luke with me in mind.”

“That isn't gonna happen.”

'd been “Okay, then maybe you can call Riley. I think he has a bit of a crush on you, now that you're hot. Maybe he'll go with you.”

arugula The idea of Riley, who'd done a body fat test on me seventy-five ago (and one just three weeks ago and about seventeen in between) had a crush on me made me burst out laughing.

“Riley does not have a crush on me,” I said when I quit laughing.

“Riley thinks you’re fine,” Sissy returned.

“Riley has a girlfriend with bleached teeth and a perma-tan,” I told

in love “He broke up with her *ages* ago. Anyway, you make Riley laugh
ved mewhen he’s holding your feet and you’re doing ab curls.”

appoint “There’s nothing to laugh about when you’re doing ab curls.”

This was true. I hated ab curls. I hated exercise and I wasn’t that
it short cucumber, arugula, onion and bulgur wheat tabouleh. I’d rather have
burrito with spiced meat, cheese, sour cream and guacamole
humungous chocolate chip cookie, but I hadn’t worked my ass off (li
v about to go back now.

wasn’t “Tell me about Luke,” Sissy changed the subject knowing, after 1
lls aftertwo years of being my best friend, that I was holding out on her.

“Later.”

me this “Now.”

“Later, Sissy. It...” I stopped, then started again, “Wasn’t good.”

without “Was it bad?”

h you.” “No, it was just...weird.”

Weird really wasn’t the word for it, but I was going to go with
now.

rush on “Well,” she began, giving in, and her voice had gone soft. “The
worry about Dom. I’ll come home in a few days, we’ll do it together.”

pounds “No!” I said, kind of loud. I didn’t want her to come back. I didn
aving a Dom to talk her into taking him back. I wanted her clear of him. I
Sissy to come back to herself and for Dom to be out of her life forev

take care of it,” I finished.

“I don’t...”

her. “Sissy, I’ll take care of it.”

h, even “I don’t like it. Dom’s not really a guy you mess with.”

“I won’t get caught.”

“Crap,” Sissy muttered, her second thoughts clear in her voice.

hot on “I’ll be all right. I’ll go tonight, search the house. It’s his poke
a huge right?”

and a “Yeah.” I could tell she still didn’t like it. “Call me when you get h
terally)

“Okay.”

twenty-
“Later, honey.”

“Later.”

I hung up and tossed the draining bulgur wheat in with the other
chopped the onions, cried a little bit, threw them in, too. I mixed it up
dash of olive oil, lemon juice and salt and pepper.

I got out a fork, took a huge bite and said, mouth full, “Blech.”

It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t a burrito and a chocolate chip cookie ei

that for *You know, you really should listen to Sissy, Good Ava said to me.
I think some breaking and entering will be fun!* Bad Ava put in.

n don’t
Shit.



I WAS ABOUT to head out for my evening’s festivities when the phone r
l’t want
wanted
er. “I’ll
I’d put on dark jeans, a black stretchy, fitted, long-sleeved T-shir
flip-flops and, of course, my silver.

I should probably have left my silver out of the equation since glittery and would catch the light, but I didn't go anywhere without my

And anyway, I'd been to Dom and Sissy's a gazillion times. A neighbors knew me and wouldn't blink an eye that I was there. Further I had a key (well, not really, but I knew where they hid the spare).

I didn't answer the phone. Night had fallen, it was getting late and told me that Dom's return from the poker game was up in the air. If r night, doing well, he stayed out late. If he was losing, he cut it short, came and likely took his bad luck out on Sissy by saying shit to her that morning. "I feel like dirt."

The answering machine kicked in as I grabbed my keys and bag.

"Hey, Ava? It's Ally. Long time no see or hear, chickie. You've like, Ms. Invisible and loads of shit has gone down." Pause, then, "junk. I you were at my brother's offices this afternoon and had a situation with a Sister, what was *that* all about? I didn't even know you knew Luke. Call pronto. I want the dirt. Indy wants the dirt. We *all* want the dirt. We drinks. Hornet, tomorrow night, seven o'clock. See you there."

ther. Disconnect.

Shit.

Indy Savage and Ally Nightingale were Rock Chicks like Sissy and I. Those two were hilarious, crazier by far than Sissy and me, or at least recently, for sure.

We'd met at a concert years ago and went to dozens of them together. ang. Sissy and I usually never missed one of Indy's kickass parties, she hated, black of them and she always had bowls of cashews and everyone knew because cashews meant kickass party.

it was Sissy and I also used to hang out at the used bookstore on Broadway silver. Indy owned, called Fortnum's. I hadn't been in ages, at least eight or all their maybe longer. Since before Indy hooked up with Lee Nightingale.

ermore, Indy had had a crush on Lee since practically birth. Indy and parents were best friends and she and Lee and Ally and Lee's brother and Sissy had grown up together. It was super-fucking-fly that they were he was together. It made you think the world wasn't shit.

home It wasn't that I didn't want to go to Fortnum's or see Indy and Ally (she worked there on occasion). It was just that Noah had cleaned out my accounts. I'd felt the need to score a couple more accounts for my architectural graphic design business to make up for the money he stole so, unus e been, was busy.

I heard See, with Aunt Ella's money and a barely-there mortgage, I didn't h Luke. work that hard. I'd bought the house dirt cheap, mainly because it 'all me, nightmare when I bought it, but I'd fixed it up, mostly myself. I 'e'll do electricity or the plumbing, just refinished the floors, re-skimmed the did the tile work, painted, shit like that. I had a couple of business clients kept me relatively busy, out of trouble and in plentiful amounts of my However, when your rat-bastard ex-boyfriend steals over five thousand dollars from you, it pushes you to put your nose to the grindstone.

and me. I decided to call Ally tomorrow, after I searched Dom's house and st Sissy out what I'd tell her about Luke.

together. I went to my Range Rover, backed it out, hit the button for the door to close and headed to Sissy and Dom's. They had a very nice place and a lot top bungalow in Washington Park. Sissy loved it and I liked it too. I owls of she got it in the divorce settlement.

ay that I did a drive-by, checking for lights and to see if Dom's BM
months, parked in their back drive off the alley. It wasn't, so I parked around
corner, hoofed it up to the house, went around the side to the back and
Lee's Sissy's fake rock by their outdoor Jacuzzi which held the key. I opened
, Hank, with the combination she gave me, put the rock back where I found it
finally to the door and let myself in.

I didn't bother with gloves. My prints were likely all over the
y (Ally anyway.

my bank I also didn't turn on the lights. I knew the house like the back of my
it-home I'd partied in it, had Christmas dinner in it, had crashed there on
ually, I occasions (normally drunk) and even helped Sissy clean it a number of

I didn't know what I was looking for. Shirts with lipstick on the
have to Love letters?

was a I had the bad feeling that I was going to have to follow Dom
Not the camera and take pictures of him while he was doing the nasty with
e walls, bimbo. I didn't relish that idea so I hoped Dom was a love-letter-keepi
nts that of guy.

7 silver. I went to the kitchen drawer where I knew Sissy kept her small
ousand and decided to start in the bedroom.

I'd seen enough movies and television to do a decent search. I started
figured his nightstand and found an industrial-sized box of condoms he had
bought at some warehouse retail store. I didn't even know they made
garage of condoms that big.

opped- I made note of this, knowing that Sissy was on the Pill, therefore
I hoped didn't need condoms.

Sissy and I had both gone on the Pill together, me for friendship's

It was the time since I'd been a virgin. I lost my virginity at twenty-three to a
and the goofy, geeky guy named George (it wasn't awful, but it also wasn't good
I found the way), but I'd been on the Pill for two years before that for no reason
I renewed it all.

It went I shrugged off thoughts of my contraception history, checked the
and insides of the drawer, the back and bottom of the nightstand, but I
I was housegoing.

I was moving to the closet, intent on my task, when suddenly
my hand-band-like arm wrapped around my waist, a hand went over my mouth
I was many was lifted clean off my feet.

I freaked out, legs pumping and screaming under the hand, I was
I was collar? out of the bedroom and into the living room like I weighed as much
I was a ragdoll.

I planted a well-aimed, savage elbow to the side of who I suspected
I was some Dom, someone who I not only didn't want to catch me snooping, I also
I was a type want to be alone with him, at all. Ever.

I heard a grunt when my elbow connected and I was dropped
I was Maglite pumping, mind flying from thought to thought, I caught only one and that
I thought was *go*.

I started to run but was caught by the back of my shirt. It went with
I was against my chest and I was yanked back, again off my feet. My shoes
I was slammed against something hard right before I was whirled around. The
I went around me tight, pulling me against a solid torso just as the hand
I was Dom back over my mouth.

"Quiet," Luke Stark clipped.

I was a Ho-ly *crap*.

is sweet, I went still and stared, though I couldn't see much of anything
reat, bydropped the Maglite somewhere in the bedroom.

ason at What in *the hell* was he doing there?

“You gonna stay quiet?” Luke asked.

bottom I nodded. His hand went away.

nothing “What the fuck are you doing here?” I whispered, not knowing
think, or feel. Just shocked out of my mind.

a steel- Was he following me? And, if so, why?
h and I

“Could ask you the same thing,” he said to me, cutting into my thoughts.

carried “I’m visiting a friend,” I lied quickly.

ch as a His body tensed and I felt something fill the room, something cruel
and dangerous. I couldn't see it in the dark, but I could feel it. I couldn't
ted wasbecause his arm got tight and it hauled me even deeper into his body
o didn'twere pressed close, chest to crotch.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

. Heart “Stop lying to me, Ava.”

hat one I could tell by his tone that he was not happy. So not happy that I
admit I was a little scared of him.

ay tight “I’m not lying,” I lied.

oulders “You’re tellin’ me that Dom Vincetti is a friend of yours?”

the arm “No, Sissy Vincetti is.”
id went

He knew Sissy. He’d met her way back in the day. This was like
his arm relaxed enough for me to pull away and put a foot of space between
us, which was a far more comfortable position, believe you me.

ng. I'd "Sissy isn't here," Luke said to me.

"Well, I know that now," I said, like I'd expected her to be there.

In other words, I lied, again.

"You often go to your friends' houses when they're not home and them in the dark?"

what to Eek!

Before I could think up another lie—because it wasn't any of his b what I was doing there—I mean, it would have been his business, if he ughts. carried me through his offices like a caveman that afternoon, but it wa business anymore—he reached forward and grabbed my hand, tugg back into the bedroom.

ackling "Luke, stop. What are you doing?"
I feel it

7 so we He bent down, nabbed the still-lit Maglite from the floor and sna off.

"We're gettin' out of here," he said, pulling me out of the bedro back into the living room.

I had to I planted my feet when he started to yank me across the room. He s and looked back at me.

"No. *You're* getting out of here," I flashed at him. "I'm, um...look the earring I left here the other night."

That sounded like a good lie.

ly why tug. I fell forward, and without a word he started walking, dragg between behind him.

I yanked my hand out of his, stopped again and cried, "Luke!"

That was when the room exploded.

One second, we were standing there, me glaring at him in the distance, holding his body tense like he was just stopping himself from shaking his sense into me. The next minute there was so much noise and flying debris that every thought flew out of my head.

Luke moved quickly. He threw himself at me in a body tackle and went down to the floor. He landed on top of me, body slamming into me and immediately pulled himself up. He wrapped his arms around me and leaned his shoulder into the floor, my face pressed into his chest. My head tucked in, temple against the top of my forehead.

Glass, dust, plaster and bits of Sissy's adored pottery collection were everywhere as machine gunfire blasted through the huge living room window.

I lay under Luke, pretty certain I was going to die and wishing I'd never been born. Now my sisters and mother were going to get all Aunt Ella's money and should have left it to Sissy and a cat shelter.

The noise finally stopped, and even though it felt like it had gone on forever, it was probably less than a minute. Luke didn't move, just kept tucking tight underneath him, and it hit me that our position meant he was using himself as a shield to keep me safe.

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

a sharp Stop right there.

That was too much. It was all too much. Time for me to bury myself somewhere deep and have a nervous breakdown later, when Sissy and Dom are on a beach enjoying Dom's money.

“Luke,” I whispered and his head came up.

rk, him I was quiet because I could tell he was listening and not to me. T
g somehead tilted down and I could feel his eyes on me.

debris, I lifted my hand up between our faces, index finger and thumb
inch apart and I said, “Maybe I’m in *a little bit* of trouble.”

and we It was then he made a noise and it sounded an awful lot like a grow
o mine,
y head
oat, his

on flew
; room

made a
oney. I

gone on
cept me
he was

all this
l I were

“Luke,” I whispered and his head came up.

I was quiet because I could tell he was listening and not to me. Then his head tilted down and I could feel his eyes on me.

I lifted my hand up between our faces, index finger and thumb held an inch apart and I said, “Maybe I’m in *a little bit* of trouble.”

It was then he made a noise and it sounded an awful lot like a growl.

THREE



THAT'S WHO I'M KEEPING SAFE

“L uke?”

“Quiet.”

He knifed off me, yanked me to my feet and wasted no time pulling through the room, through the kitchen and out the back door.

I didn't resist.

I didn't want to be anywhere near a room that exploded with gunfire. I was more than happy to be moving away from it, swiftly, hand in hand with a tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunter, private eye type person who knew what the hell he was doing.

Luke jogged through the back yard then broke into a sprint down the alley, his hand in mine, dragging me behind him, and let me tell you it was not an easy sprinting in flip-flops. I was going to have to rethink my footwear for my next nail-Dom-to-the-wall assignment.

I saw lights go on in houses and heard police sirens, but Luke just kept going.

It took me a moment, considering the fact that I was freaking out, perhaps fleeing for my life (on flip-flops no less), to realize that I was moving in the wrong direction.

I pulled at his hand.

“My car’s the other way,” I whispered loudly to his back.

He kept going, dragging me with him.

“Luke!” I hissed, tugging hard.

He didn’t stop, just kept dragging me.

We shot out of the alley, stopped next to a shiny black Porsche
bleeped the locks. He opened the passenger side door.

I had to admit, even in my current state, I was impressed that he
Porsche.

ling me “Get in,” he ordered, snapping me out of my thoughts about his Po

“What?” I asked, confused, freaked, winded from the flip-flop g
and wanting maybe to take a second and do a cartwheel of joy that I v
nfire. I alive and not full of holes.

l with a “Get in the fucking car,” Luke clipped.

clearly I guessed Luke wasn’t into cartwheels of joy.

own the “My car is...” I started to tell him, but I stopped talking when h
wasn’t went to the top of my head and he pressed me into the car.

r on my He did this so forcefully my body had no choice but to comply. M
just buckled and my ass, of its own accord, aimed for the seat. He sl
the door the minute my feet cleared the frame.

ist kept He was in the driver’s side before I finished blinking away my surp

out and I turned on him.

he was “I want you to take me to my car,” I told him.

My purse was in my car and I needed my purse. My cell was in my

and just like anyone, I felt naked without my cell phone.

He started the Porsche (incidentally, it purred like a kitten).

Maybe not thinking clearly, I turned to the door, my hand on the deciding I would run to my own car.

What happened next shocked the breath right out of me.

and he Luke grabbed my wrist. He pulled me away from the door, forward and yanked a set of handcuffs out of the glove compartment, letting me go the whole time. He snapped a bracelet on my left wrist and another on his right. As I was staring at our wrists bound together, he drove a Porsche in gear, my arm moving with his, and we rocketed from the curb.

It took a few seconds, but then I stammered, “You just...you get away handcuffed me to you!”
was still

“That’s right,” he told me as he, or more to the point *we*, kept shifting.

“You just handcuffed me to you,” I repeated inanely.

He didn’t answer.

is hand “Why did you handcuff me to you?” I asked.

He remained silent.

My legs “Luke!”

ammed “Quiet, Ava.”

It was then I lost it. I had an excuse. I *had* just had a near-miss experience.

“You’re nuts! You’re crazy! You’re following me. You handcuffed me to you! We just got shot at. I can’t believe this shit. Take me to my goddamned car!”

My purse, He pulled over. The Porsche moved sleekly under his command, and I

was still sudden enough for me to snap my mouth shut. When he had idling he turned to me. His left hand shot out, wrapping around my n handle, pulling me toward him.

Our faces an inch apart, he ordered, "Quiet, Ava."

"*I will not be quiet!*" I screamed in his face. "I'm freaked right t leaned out. We were just shot at! I think we just ran away from a crime scene. ent, not repeat, you just handcuffed me to you!"

and the "You got the choice to be quiet or I'll shut you up."

put the "Yeah? How are you gonna do that? Gag me?" I yelled.

rb. "I had somethin' else in mind."

just... "Fuck quiet!" I shouted, ignoring his words, totally in Freak Ou Land. "I need tequila. I need my car. I need to call Sissy."

ing. I was rambling and I knew it, but I had been in a room that *explode*

"Quiet," he repeated, his voice holding a low warning.

I also ignored the warning. "Seriously, take me to my goddamned c

"Why am I always repeating myself with you?" he asked, sc slightly impatient.

"Maybe because I don't snap to when you tell me to do something the other women in your life likely do," I retorted, sounding bitchy as :

ir-death It was at that he jerked me forward with his hand at my neck, h slanted, and I kid you *not*, he kissed me.

fed me. For your information, those lips were hard when they kissed you.

d car!" Ho-ly crap!

but this I was stunned still as his mouth moved over mine. Then he let m

the car quickly as he kissed me, turned back to the wheel and we moved into traffic and I decided my best course of action at that moment was to stay silent.

It was a good thing to do. It gave me the time to bury Luke's harsh kiss right down deep next to him shielding me from gunfire with his body and us getting shot at.

And, I'd wanted Luke to kiss me, like, for ages, but not like that. I didn't know you could kiss someone like that.

My silence and our drive also gave me time mentally to rehearse a conversation with Sissy about this incident: *Um, Sissy, you know that "of the Dead" pottery collection by Stephen Kilborn, you've been painstakingly collecting for years...?*

We were in lower downtown when Luke's right hand moved to flip down his sun visor, taking my left one with it, pulling me out of my usual thoughts. The car slowed and he hit a button affixed to his visor that flipped it back up, his (and my) hand moving to the stick as he downshifted the car.

"Where are we going?" I broke the silence.

He turned into an underground parking area and headed to an open spot of which I noted there were many.

"You're staying at my place while I find out what the fuck is going on."

He parked, pulled up the brake and turned off the car while I processed this information, coming to the conclusion I did not want to be at his place while he found out what was going on. I didn't want to be at his place at all.

Before I could protest (not that it would matter), he got out the car and I followed him. As which meant, considering I was attached to him, I had to scramble to

traffic. seat and follow him.

it. “Luke, I need to get my car, my purse is in my car,” I said with a angry closed the door behind me and beeped the locks.

is body I used a calmer, more rational voice, hoping to impress him with my attitude and get him to do what I wanted.

it’s even “One of the boys will bring it here,” he said, hitting the button for the elevator.

rise my “What boys?”

it “Day “Lee’s boys.”

been Oh. Well then. That was my car taken care of.

up down I carried on to the next important subject. “I should go home, I supposed to call Sissy.”

unhappy He turned to me, eyes assessing.

then he “You know where Sissy is?” he asked.

lifted. Oops. I’d just outed myself on the “just visiting Sissy at her house”

in spot, Argh!

“Um...” I muttered, wondering how to backtrack on what I had said. away.

processed “Jesus Christ. You two are in on this together,” he said, yanking me away from Luke’s the elevator and pressing a button. We were still cuffed together, but Luke’s holding my hand.

“There’s nothing to be in on together.” Oh man, there it was, lying on my side, I was going straight to hell.

over the “You two were always in on something together,” Luke returned.

“We were not,” I lied (again!).

While he Luke looked at me and I found it hard to return his angry stare.

“What about the time you two lit off bottle rockets in the middle of a cool night in Old Man Humphries’s back yard? He nearly had a stroke.”

I made a sound like “humph.” “He deserved it. He shot Sissy’s dog down for trespassing! How can a dog trespass?”

Luke didn’t answer me. He went on, “And the time you sold a pound of oregano to Mitch and Josh Burk, telling them it was pot?”

“We needed money. There was a Kiss tribute show coming up and I never figured it out, said it was the best weed they’d ever had.”

1e. I’m “And the time you filled Megan Carmichael’s car with popcorn?”

“She was a bitch. She stole Sissy’s boyfriend.”

He shook his head as if *I* was the crazy person in this scenario, not Mr. Handcuff Man. The doors opened and we walked into a semi-dark room. It wasn’t that dark since the lights of LoDo were shining in from a number of huge floor to almost-ceiling arched windows.

1d given I knew it was a loft, a kickass loft, but this was confirmed when he flipped a switch. Soft lamps lit the space and he dragged me into it.

me into I didn’t fight. I stared.

he was His loft was super-fly.

3 again. One huge room with four huge windows down one side, two windows down both the narrow sides. All the walls were exposed brick, the ceiling duct work painted black, and the floor was shining wood planks cut or covered with rugs under the bed and living room areas.

Smack center, between the four windows opposite the elevator, the

a kitchen area with a counter against the wall, a semi-circular bar facing the room, stools around the bar with stainless steel bases and black leather seats. There were shiny, black appliances including an enormous fridge.

part of the

To the side, stationed between the two windows, there was a black leather chair, a huge black recliner to one side, a black-lacquered coffee table and a gigantic flat screen TV was fixed to the wall.

bag...for

Across from the kitchen was a big bed with a black slatted headboard, footboard and deep-gray sheets and comforter.

bag of

The other side of the room had a set of weights, a weight bench, a weight machine and an elliptical machine. In the corner next to the window there was a small room made of glass block that I assumed was the bathroom.

They

It was obviously occupied by a man. There were clothes all over the place, magazines and opened mail in disarray on every surface and dishes in the sink. The bed had been slept in and hadn't been made.

of him,

space.

quite a

Still, even with the mess, the tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunter's private eye business must pay well for Luke to have a Porsche and a loft like this.

n Luke

I was now definitely impressed.

This lasted for two seconds, mainly because Luke had dragged me to the side of the bed and he was now unlocking the bracelet on his wrist.

"What're you doing?" I asked, watching him.

indows

ing had

ly with

"Cuffing you to the bed."

My body went solid.

Then I screeched, "What?"

ere was

Too late. I should have run, struggled, something. Instead I went straight

ing the the big dork I was, and he pushed me back with a hand to my chest. I
er seats. the bed. He leaned into me, and before I knew it, or even began to sit
he had cuffed me to one of the slats.

couch, I stared at my hand cuffed to the slat then I stared at him, complet
and a loss for words.

He was looking down at me and he seemed deep in thought.

ad and “I don’t like this,” he informed me.

He didn’t like it?

a fancy I found some words. *Loud* ones.

weights, “I don’t like it either!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. “Uncuff m
hroom.

ver the He put a knee to the bed, grabbed my other wrist then came forw
ishes in pinned me with his heavy body.

unting, This time I struggled, twisting under him, but it was like I didn
a LoDo move. He worked at the cuffs, pulled up my other arm and slapp
bracelet on that one so I had no free hand. He did this all with minima
but I was breathing like I had just run a marathon.

He got off me, stood and stared down at me.

e to the “That’s better,” he murmured.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” I said softly, and I was hoping he
was hoping this was all a big joke. He would give me one of his ha
and say, “Psych.”

“Be good while I’m away,” he answered instead as he turned.

“Get back here! Uncuff me!” I shouted. “Luke, I’ll scream my head

ill, like “Do it,” he invited, hitting the button to the elevator and turning
looking totally calm, and I wished I could throw something at him. “T

I fell toupstairs is vacant, for sale. The people downstairs are still in Florida
truggle, winter. Each loft is the whole floor. No one's around to hear you."

The elevators opened, he flipped the lights off and disappeared.
ely at a I screamed, "I'm going to kill you!"

The elevator doors closed and he was gone.

Well, this is a fine mess you've gotten us into, Good Ava said into

Oo, we're in Luke's bed, Bad Ava cooed into my other one.

Shit.



e!" WHEN YOU WERE FUELED with adrenaline, shot at and were lying han
ard and to a bed owned by a man you had a screaming crush on for most of yo
it was impossible to sleep. Not to mention, both arms over your head
l't even a comfortable position.

ped the So I laid awake thinking of all the ways I wanted to kill Luke.

l effort, Then I realized, when I couldn't find a way I liked, I didn't want
Luke because I wasn't a killing type of person.

Instead, I focused on all the reasons why I hated men.

They cheated on you. They lied to you. They stole your stuff. The
e was. If you feel like shit. And they cuffed you to beds.

lf-grins I was mentally arranging and rearranging all the men I hated in c
the ones I hated the most (Luke being on the top of that list i
arrangement, for obvious reasons) when the elevator doors slid open.

d off!" He had been gone a long time. It felt like hours, though it p
to me, wasn't.

The loft He walked silently into the room. I saw him moving because th

for the was dimly lit with the city lights, but he barely made a sound.

something on the kitchen counter and I watched, quiet and fascinated, as his upper body twisted when he pulled off his tee. I held my breath as I saw skin in the moonlight, and even the definition of muscle. What I saw was nice.

He turned to the bed, walked to it and sat on the side then bent forward to my ear and tugged off a boot.

“Please take me home,” I said quietly.

I had decided quiet was the way to go. All my other attempts to get out of here (yelling, screaming, shouting and struggling) didn’t work so I was handcuffed out other options.

our life, “No,” he said just as quietly, foiling my new tactic and dropping his hands. It was *not* to the floor.

“I need to take out my contacts,” I told him and this was true.

He stopped taking off his second boot then bent down, picked up the first one and tugged it back on.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he got up.

He walked to the tee he threw on the floor, pulled it on and went to the elevator.

“I’ll be back,” he said, standing at the elevators.

order of “Wait!” I called, but too late.

The doors opened, he disappeared and the light from the elevator was probably extinguished as the doors closed.



THIS TIME he wasn’t gone long and came back less silent because he was in the room.

He put carrying a rustling bag.

secretly “Where did you go?” I asked as he went back to the counter, then held my bag on it and then again pulled off his tee and dropped it to the floor.

cle, and “Contact solution and a case,” he said, coming to the bed.

forward He sat on the edge again and tugged off his boot.

“You can just take me home, I have, like, a million cases the contact solution.” This was obvious, but I pointed it out anyway.

get my “I’m not taking you home, Ava.” He dropped boot one.

s trying “I don’t understand. Why? Whoever they were, they weren’t shoot me. No one even knew I was there.”

his boot He dropped boot two. “I know. They were shooting at Vincet pulled off a sock.

I sucked in breath.

the first This was news.

“They were shooting at Dom?” I whispered, unable to wrap my mind around this fact.

t to the “He isn’t a well-liked guy.” He pulled off the other sock.

This didn’t surprise me. As I explained, Dom was a jerk. But shoot his living room with an Uzi? That seemed a bit much, and this was from a woman who was searching his house to try to find evidence against him in an upcoming divorce battle.

tor was “Why would they shoot out his living room with an Uzi when he was there?”

he was “It wasn’t an Uzi. It was an AK-47. And they were sending a mess

He had turned toward me and was leaned into me, working at the c
rew the I sucked in breath again, mainly because Luke's naked chest was c
my face and it was freaking me out and playing havoc with my vow
faithful to my vibrators.

I felt my hands freed and I pulled my arms down, sat up and shoc
ere and out. Pins and needles shot up them and I took a deep breath to tamp do
temper. It wouldn't serve any purpose. I was learning quickly Luke
like my temper and he was a lot stronger than me.

He seemed in a mellow mood and I wasn't going to piss him off.
oting at him off wouldn't get me home and I needed to get home and soon. I
him going out and buying me contact lens solution meant he thoug
ti." He some reason, I was spending the night. My purse was in my Range Ro
I was pretty certain Sissy had called my cell, probably dozens of
checking in. She was likely panicked. I needed to phone her and quick

Still, I couldn't stop myself from saying softly as I rubbed at both
y mindarms, "That hurt."

Luke threw the cuffs on the nightstand, twisted at the waist, grab
left wrist and started to massage my arm.

Oh my goodness, Luke's massaging your arm! Isn't that sweet!
ting out Ava trilled in my ear.
coming

Jump him! Rip his pants off! Bad Ava shouted in my other ear.
to nail

I ignored my advisors and sat, completely still, registering how
wasn't warm and strong Luke's hands were. They felt good. No, they felt great
age." Shit.

"I needed to make sure you were safe," he told me, thankfully pul

uffs. away from thoughts of his hands feeling great.

close to “They didn’t shoot out *my* windows,” I pointed out.

to stay “Then I needed to make sure you didn’t do something stupid.”

Hmm.

ok them One, two, three, four, five...okay, temper under control.

own my “Now that you know I’m safe and I can promise you I won’t do a
: didn’t stupid,” *Tonight*, I thought, but did not say, “Can I please go home?”

“No.”

Pissing

figured

“Luke!”

ght, for His hands went to my armpits. He got up, taking me with him, and
ver and feet on the floor.

: times, I had kicked off my flip-flops and they were lying somewhere in t

. There was something very weird about me, barefoot, standing in Luke
1 of my loft *with* Luke also standing barefoot and shirtless with me. The
something intimate about it, something sweet and nice and wonderful.

bed my Hell and damnation.

He took my hand, led me across the room to a dresser, opened a
? Good and took something out. He led me to the bar and grabbed the bag. I
led me to the bathroom, flipped a switch and gave me a gentle push
He tossed the stuff in the sink and looked at me.

w nice, “Take out your contacts, get changed, we’re going to bed.”

it. I stood, blinking in the lit room, mouth dropped open and watch
door close through my blinking.

ling me *We’re going to bed. WE are going to bed, he said. Yippee!* B.
yelled happily in my ear, punching the air and doing a touchdown dance

He's so thoughtful, going out to get your contact stuff. I think it's adorable, Good Ava shared.

Oh for goodness sake. Good Ava needed a reality check. Adorable?

Please.

I sighed. No reason to fight it because I obviously wasn't going to do anything. Tomorrow, he would take me home and I would forget all of this. It happened. This was not likely, but I was going with it for the moment.

I pulled the stuff out of the bag, noting he also bought me a toothbrush. I took out my contacts and used the bathroom because I needed it, but I found this mortifying for some bizarre reason. Everyone had to use the bathroom.

Still, it wasn't like I was removed in any way from Luke. There was no other room in the place, he could probably hear. I was pretty certain he'd gone through my whole life, even when he came over with his parents. They were over at his house, without Luke ever knowing I had any need for bathroom facilities.

Oh well, what the hell.

I washed my hands, took off my clothes, shoved my silver in my pockets and pulled on the tee he had given me.

It was seriously cool. Old, faded, soft and black with a T-shirt with a motorcycle in silver on the front of it. It was huge on me, coming down to my hips to my upper thighs. It felt good on, nice and snug and I tried not to think of wearing Luke's T-shirt, at the same time trying to figure out how to steal it.

I folded my clothes neatly, as if my life depended on it. Without a

nk he's else to do to delay, I opened the bathroom door, switched off the li,
walked into the loft.

Luke? The loft was still lit only by the lights outside.

Luke, I saw, my heart beginning to beat a little faster in my che
lying in bed, sheets to his waist, hands behind his head, staring at the
to win. seeming peaceful and Zen, as if he spent a lot of time in that positio
is ever was all I really saw, mainly because without my contacts, my visi
blurry. Which I had to admit, still struggling with fidelity to my vi
brush. I was kind of a bummer.

badly. I I walked slowly to the bar, semi-feeling my way with my feet, and
use the clothes on a stool. Then I turned to him.

“Can I use your phone?” I asked.

as only Instead of answering, he took his hands from behind his head, tw
in I had the nightstand and pulled the phone out of its cradle.

, or we I walked to him and took it from his outstretched hand.

l of the “It’s long distance,” I told him.

“Where’s Sissy?” he asked.

y jeans I rolled my eyes, mainly because I was also noticing that you dic
much by Luke and that was kind of annoying.

“Wyoming.”

’rumph “As long as it isn’t England.”

vn over I nearly smiled at him, but stopped myself just in time.

l (hard) I looked at the phone. Then I realized I had a slight problem. Altl
ure out had memorized Sissy’s mom’s number, I couldn’t see the keypad with
nything contacts. It was a new phone to me, who knew where the buttons were

ght and Shit.

I was wrong, the going to the bathroom thing was embarrassing. *T*
mortifying.

st, was I stood there, uncertain. Then I realized I had no choice. Sis
ceiling probably packing the car as I hesitated, ready to come down to find o
n. This happened to me and face my house, empty, or her house, probably cc
on was off with police tape. Then she would lose it, thinking Dom had killed
brators, more likely, I had killed Dom.

Crap.

put my “Luke?”

“Yeah?”

I couldn’t tell for sure, but I thought he was looking at me.

isted to “I need you to dial the number. I can’t see the phone.”

I didn’t know what I expected him to do. Still, I was surpris
without hesitation he sat up and took the phone out of my hand.

“What’s the number?” he asked.

I told him. He punched it in with his thumb and handed it to me.

ln’t get “Thanks,” I whispered, listening to it ring.

“Good to have you back, babe,” he said, his voice soft,
affectionate, and I felt my body jerk in reaction to his tone *and* his wo
before Sissy answered the phone.

“Please let this be Ava,” she said.

ough I “Yo,” I replied, turning away from Luke, wishing I could run awa
out my Luke, and again wondering what in *the hell* I was doing.

?

“I’ve called a gazillion times!” Sissy shouted in my ear.

his was “I know. I’m sorry. I...something happened and I got separated from my purse.” I made it to the window by the kitchen, leaned against the balcony and stared out at LoDo.

ut what It was blurry, but I could still tell that Luke had a kickass view.

rdoned “Are you okay?” Sissy asked.

me, or “Yeah, fine.”

“My phone says this number is blocked. Are you home?”

Shit.

I had to make a split-second decision. Lie to her or tell her the truth. The truth would both freak her out (her living room getting shot out and still her husband, being delivered a very scary message) and make her cry for joy (that I was standing in Luke’s T-shirt in his loft in LoDo).

ed that I decided to hedge. “Listen, I’m really tired, I’ll call you tomorrow about you all about it.”

“Did you find anything?”

I had to give her something and that something had to be something Luke, who I was certain was listening, couldn’t get anything out of.

gentle, “Just an industrial-sized box of condoms in his nightstand.”

rds just Silence.

“Sissy?”

“Guess he isn’t pining for me, hunh?”

ay from “Sissy,” I said softly, feeling her pain as only best friends do and since she were closer so I could give her a hug.

“Get to sleep, it’s late. Tell me about it tomorrow,” she said.

from my “Okay.”

rick sill “I want to hear about the Luke thing tomorrow too. Ally called r said something happened between you guys. She said he carried you t the reception area!”

Oh crap.

“Ally,” Sissy laughed. “She’s so full of shit.”

Oh *crap!*

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I told her.

1, when “Ava?”

d Dom, “Yeah?”

er jump “Thanks. You’re the bestest best friend a girl could have.”

I smiled into the phone. *That* was worth getting shot at for.

w. Tell “Later,” I said.

“Later.” And I heard her disconnect.

nothing I looked at the phone and realized I didn’t know how to turn it off.

I didn’t have to wonder long. It was pulled out of my hand because again silent as a cat, was right beside me. He beeped it off as I stared and saw he was wearing nothing but a pair of dark (probably black) that rode low on his hips, but were long on his thighs.

I swallowed as he walked away and put the phone on the kitchen c Then he turned and started back to me.

wishing Now what?

I looked from his shorts to his face.

“Do you have a blanket?” I asked.

“Why?” he asked back, stopping close.

ny cell, “So I can sleep on your couch.”

through “You aren’t sleeping on the couch.”

I looked around, confused, then asked, “Why not?”

“You’re sleeping in the bed.”

“So you’re sleeping on the couch?”

“No.”

“Are you sleeping on the floor?” I asked, surprised, but figured maybe some Zen macho guy thing, roughing it on a plank wood floor.

“No.”

Uh-oh.

“Where are you sleeping?” I continued my sleeping arrangement interrogation.

His hand shot out, and too late I saw the blurry glint of steel and heard clanking right before the bracelet was slapped on my wrist.

e Luke, I pulled back.

l at him “Oh no,” I said, my heart thumping in my chest and my blood pressure short through my veins.

He slapped the other bracelet on his own wrist.

ounter. “No!” I shouted, yanking back, viciously this time, but it was didn’t feel the pull.

He just leaned in, shoulder to my belly. He picked me up, his fingers around my thighs, his other wrist bound to mine and he started to the bathroom.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted, feet kicking, pushing waist with my free hand.

This was too much. Too *fucking* much.

“Going to bed,” Luke said calmly.

“Handcuffed to me?”

“Damn straight.”

“You’re nuts.”

“I’m not taking any chances,” he replied, tossing me on the bed as it was coming down with me.

I tried to scramble away. He pulled me back with a jerk on the cuff.

I stopped scrambling and stared at his fuzzy face in the dark. “No chances with what?”

“You taking off in the middle of the night, getting shot at, kidnapped, car bombed, any of it.”

I was right, he *was* nuts. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ll tell you in the morning, after you tell me about your *little* trouble.”

“Eek!”

I decided to ignore the second part of that. “Tell me now.”

“Go to sleep, Ava.”

“Uncuff me!”

“Settle down and go to sleep,” he ordered, settling himself on his back.

“Un...cuff...me!” I pulled hard at the cuff.

He jerked it again, harder, and I toppled into him, breasts to chest.

g at his other arm went tight around my waist.

“Settle,” he said low.

I glared in the general direction of his face, knowing I would never but not about to give in gracefully.

“I hate you,” I declared.

“You don’t.”

“I do.”

ed and “Okay, maybe whoever this new Ava is does, but she’s a bitch and give a fuck if she hates me. The old Ava doesn’t hate me and she’s i
: somewhere, I saw her five minutes ago, and that’s who I’m keeping sa

t taking That knocked the breath out of me and cut me deep.

again, So deep, to hide how much it hurt, I did as he told me to do and into his side, my body mostly on him because my right wrist was cu
his left and his arm was thrown out wide to keep me there. Without an else to put it, I rested my head on his shoulder.

2 bit of Still, I held myself tense because I was totally freaked out.

Woo hoo! We’re in bed with Luke! Bad Ava crowed.

Oh, this feels nice. His chest is so hard and his body is so warm
Ava breathed.

If Good Ava and Bad Ava could get close, I was certain they would five.

ack. Jeez.

I lay there, trying to relax. I couldn’t relax.

est. His So I started talking.

“I won’t get shot at again,” I muttered into his shoulder.

“I’m not taking any chances.”

“I certainly won’t get kidnapped. The idea is ridiculous.”

He was silent.

“And a car bomb, what on earth?” I mumbled.

“Babe.”

“What?”

“Please be quiet and go to sleep.”

“Fine,” I snapped.

His arm around my waist tightened and his other hand came close on his chest, forcing my hand to rest on his chest, too. I slid off his back and settled, he held me close to his side.

I figured I’d never in a million years, snuggled up next to Luke, man of my dreams, wearing his T-shirt, lying in his big bed, in his house and handcuffed to him for God’s sake, get to sleep.

It took, like, five minutes and I was dead to the world.

l, Good

ild high

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It took, like, five minutes and I was dead to the world.

FOUR



PAYMENT

I woke up in the middle of the night when my body moved, not of volition.

I opened my eyes.

It was still dark. Luke had turned into me, his arm holding me pulling me over the top of his body.

“What’s going on?” I whispered, my voice sleepy.

“Shh.” He shushed me and rolled, taking me with him, settling me other side.

Our cuffed arms were cocked and up between our bodies and he close so his and my forearms were pressed beneath my breasts. His fr slid down my hip to my thigh, pulling it up, gliding down the back thigh to my knee and hooking my leg over his hip.

If I hadn’t been mostly asleep, I would have probably flipped out intimacy of this position, struggled and maybe thrown a hissy fit.

Instead, I was warm, tired and the position was ultra-comfortable.

I snuggled into his warm body. His arm moved to rest at my waist fell back to sleep.



I WOKE up and blinked at all the sunlight coming into the room.

Denver was a sunny place but this was crazy.

I stared at the wall of hard-muscled chest that was right in front of my eyes and for a second felt confusion.

Then it all came back to me and I tensed.

Inventorying my situation I realized I was pressed against Luke's side. I was on his back, our cuffed arms on the bed under our bodies, my head thrown across both of his, my head on his shoulder, my free arm across his abs.

Ho-ly shit!

I rolled away onto my back.

"You're awake," Luke said.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

"Yeah," I said to the ceiling.

He rolled toward me, hand going to my hip, his fingers putting pressure there so I turned into him and we were face-to-face. Since we were close, it was light, I could see him pretty well.

He looked very awake, very alert and very gorgeous.

Holy cramoly.

"Time to talk," he said.

Eek!

I was a morning person. I usually only had to brush my teeth and take a couple sips of Diet Coke to clear out the sleep cobwebs and then I had my morning energy. Still, I wasn't ready to talk, certainly not lying face-

in Luke's bed.

"I need to brush my teeth," I told him.

"After we talk."

"No, seriously, I can't face the day without brushing my teeth mentioned before, this was the truth.

Luke stared at me, probably trying to decide if I was lying or not. He didn't blame him. I had lied to him a lot in the last less-than-twenty-four hours.

He must have made his decision because he rolled into me, over my shoulder, reached to the nightstand. He opened a drawer and pulled out his keys. He rolled back, lifted our wrists and unlocked my bracelet. I was silent to this as I'd had another close-up view of his chest and I was fighting to keep my mouth shut. He pressed his lips to my wrist and I won't even mention what I wanted to do with my tongue.

The minute I was free I didn't hesitate. I jumped off the bed, high-tailed it to the bathroom, totally intent on escape. It was after I used the faucet pressure to splash water on my face to wash away the sleep, brushed my teeth, and pulled out my contacts that I realized my mistake.

I should have brought my clothes in with me.

Hell and damnation.

I pulled my hair back away from my face with both hands and stared at my light-brown eyes in the mirror. Both my sisters had sultry, dark eyes, which sucked and wasn't fair. I couldn't dye my eyes and I didn't have a colored contacts looked fake.

Since I couldn't at that moment do anything about the fact that I was all-nude, I focused on what to do with my hair.

Last time I saw Luke, my hair had been shoulder length. I'd only gotten trims since then, allowing my hair to grow long, down my back to strap with thick, chunky layers cut in. It had always had an unruly wave length and weight had done nothing to tame it. In fact, it went all the way wild. I needed a ponytail holder. It was now a mess of waves and tangles currently in an untamable state without a shampoo and a shitload of products. I didn't want to force it under my control.

Oh well, what the hell. I had to go with it. No way was I taking a shower in Luke's bathroom, for this would mean being naked and there was no way in hell I was going to be naked at Luke's place, not even in the shower.

I dropped my hands, walked out of the bathroom and stopped dead in my tracks.

A man was walking out of the elevator carrying my purse. He was trim, fit and ultra-cute. His eyes cut to me and took me in, top to toe, so I was there frozen and wearing nothing but Luke's Triumph tee.

Then he grinned.

Crap.

His eyes moved to Luke. So did mine.

Luke was standing by the semi-circle kitchen counter, wearing black shorts (yes, black) that were made of that breathable material with those little dents in it like basketball players wore. They hung loose and supported on his hips, running long but not as long as the basketball ones, padding down his thighs. They showed not only the definition of his hip bones and relief, but most of a pair of knockout muscular thighs and calves.

I would be remiss not to mention a full blown, sunny loft, corner view of his well-defined chest with not-too-much, not-too-little, but *perfect amount* of chest hair, jutting collarbone and stubbled jaw.

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ve, and
ie more
gles and
product

There was also a long, brutal looking scar tracing across his six pack.
Ho-ly crap.
My knees wobbled at the sight.
“Shit, Luke, I had two days in the pool. Christ, you tied Lee’s record,” the blond guy said.

shower
no way
·
·
; blond, Ava.”

Luke did a half-grin.
“What?” I asked.
The blond guy looked at me, still grinning.
“Nothin’,” he said. “I’m Matt.”
I pulled out of my mini-hot guy trance and walked toward him.

tanding

“I know.” He was still grinning, his blue eyes dancing.
I figured I wasn’t in on the joke but let it slide considering I had to get on getting dressed and getting out of there without having Luke’s talk.

ig only
he tiny
per low
artially
in sexy

“I brought your bag.” He handed it to me and I took it.
“Thanks,” I said, feeling like a dork, but happy to have my purse.
“Your Rover’s in the garage,” Matt carried on.
I looked at him and smiled, more than happy to have my car. “Thanks again.”
“Your keys.” He handed them to me and I took them. “Your phone is beeping.”

tacts in
just the

I dipped my chin, feeling kind of weird because he was really cute. He kept grinning at me.
“Thanks again, again,” I said to him.

ck. His grin faded a bit but didn't go away and he was now watch closely. "You okay after last night?"

Wow, what a sweet guy, Good Ava said in my ear.

rd," the *Flirt!* Bad Ava yelled.

As usual, I ignored them.

"Sure," I said. "It gives me something juicy to put in my memoirs."

He threw back his head and laughed. His laughter was deep and n laughed with him.

"You got that right," he told me when he was done laughing.

n. "I'm I got over feeling weird and gave him a big smile.

"Matt."

Both our heads swung to Luke, who hadn't moved, but now h o focus were crossed on his chest. His legs were planted and his brows were k looked kind of pissed off, which was confusing.

Maybe he wasn't a morning person.

Matt looked at his feet and chuckled. I threw Luke a look, walke counter and plopped my purse and keys on it, digging for my cell.

Thanks "I need to go out," I announced, still digging in my purse. "Ge pop."

urse is This was met with silence. I located my cell and yanked it out, flij open and glancing at Luke. Matt had come closer and both of thei staring at me.

ute and "Diet pop?" Luke asked.

"Do you have any?" I returned.

ing me “No,” Luke stated.

“Then I need to get some.”

“It’s seven o’clock in the morning,” Luke told me.

“I know.”

“You drink diet pop at seven in the morning?” Luke asked.

” “Well...yeah. I need to wash the toothpaste taste out of my mouth.

ice so I Luke and Matt kept staring at me.

I looked at my cell. Six missed calls.

Crap.

I pressed buttons on my cell, my eyes on it, and said, “I’ll just get and pop out.”

is arms I really did need diet pop to wash the taste of toothpaste out of my
nit. He However, this had the double duty of being my excuse to get the hel
there, so my Diet Pop Destination was my very own fridge.

“Do you mind?” I heard Luke ask and my head came up. “Ava
d to theneed to talk.”

Matt was grinning at me again.

t a diet “You need anything else?” he asked me, amusement in his
“Breakfast?”

pping it I looked at Matt then at Luke. “No, really, I’ll go.”

n were “You’re not going,” Luke declared.

I narrowed my eyes at Luke. “I’m going.”

“Matt’s goin’.” Luke returned.

I opened my mouth to say something, but Matt moved.

“No problem. Diet pop,” Matt said.

“Get a case,” Luke told him.

My eyes bugged out. A case of diet would last me a month.

Matt burst out laughing and hit the button on the elevator.

“I don’t need a case. I just need one,” I told Matt.

” “A case,” Luke said decisively.

The elevator doors opened and Matt walked in.

“I’ll get a case,” he told Luke, and the doors closed.

“Really, that’s unnecessary,” I said to Luke.

dressed He didn’t reply.

I sighed, heavy and annoyed. He wanted a case of diet? Fine. Who
mouth. I gave up and scrolled through my missed calls. Five from Sis
l out of from Riley.

Hmm. Riley. Interesting.

and me “Ava.”

My head came up and I looked at Luke.

voice. Shit. It was time for the talk.

“Do you have any food?” I asked in an effort to delay. I didn’t like
before I’d had my Diet Coke, but desperate times called for de
measures.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Do you mind?”

His body relaxed and his lips moved. They kind of twitched, like h
my thoughts and found me amusing but was trying not to smile.

I squelched the desire to throw my phone at him as he offered yourself.”

I dropped my phone in my purse, walked around the counter the o side to Luke and went to his fridge.

I was stunned to see it was packed with healthy eating options: yogurt, high-quality, multi-grain bread, tons of fruit and veggies. I half a cantaloupe wrapped in cling film and pulled it out.

“Can I have some cantaloupe?” I asked, turning to Luke.

He tilted his chin up in a nonverbal “yes.”

There was a cutting board in his sink. I put down the cantaloupe ar to work cleaning the cutting board.

cared? “You’re well stocked.” Again, I was delaying “the talk.”

sy, one “Sandra went shopping.”

“Sandra?”

“A woman I’m seein’.”

At his words it took every bit of energy I had not to freeze, gasp or vomit.

Of course he would be seeing someone. Luke was hot. Luke was e to eat Luke had a testosterone-fueled job. He had to be getting it from some speratedidn’t strike me as the kind of guy who would be faithful to his han was faithful to my vibrators.

“Will she mind if I eat her cantaloupe?” I asked, drying the board looking at him.

ie knew “It’s my cantaloupe. Sandra got it, but I paid for it and it’s in my : Luke answered.

, “Help I nodded. I set down the board, unwrapped the cantaloupe, grabbed a knife out of a big butcher block and started cutting. I tried not to think about the messy bed Luke threw me into last night and hoped he hadn’t thrown me into a bed that got messy through his activities with another woman.

low-fat I failed at not thinking about it.

spied a “Will she mind that I spent the night?”

Why did you ask that? Silly girl, Good Ava reprimanded me.

I’m so sure! He handcuffed you to him and slept with you while I was seeing someone else. What a jerk, Bad Ava huffed.

and went “We’re not exclusive, so it’s none of her business,” Luke answered.

See! He’s a jerk, Bad Ava ranted.

Good Ava kept her silence, likely pouting.

Luke had come to stand by me at the counter. I could see the side of his hip leaning against it out of the corner of my eye. I ignored the hip and kept cutting.

maybe “Do you want cantaloupe?” I asked, keeping my eyes on my task.

“No, I want to stop talking about cantaloupe and start talking about my relationship troubles.”

one. He Shit.

and like I “Okay,” I said, still cutting. Then I was silent.

So was Luke, for a moment. Then he broke the silence.

and not “Ava.” His voice held a warning.

fridge,” My mind raced for an excuse for another delay and it found none.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

ibbed a Time to get it over with.

k about “Um...well. You know my friend Sissy?” I asked, eyes on the mel

own me “Yeah.”

“She’s married to Dominic Vincetti.”

“I worked that part out,” he told me.

“Now, they’re kind of separated.”

Silence.

en he’s “She’s going to file for divorce.”

More silence.

l. “She’s up in Wyoming, staying with her mom.”

I looked at the cantaloupe and realized I had cut far too much myself. Oh well, at least Sandra wouldn’t have to worry about cutting e of his cantaloupe next time she was there.

nd kept I put down the knife, picked up a chunk of melon and popped it i mouth.

“Are you done?” Luke asked.

ut your My eyes slid sideways to look at him and I swallowed.

“Um...yeah.”

“That’s it? Your trouble is that Sissy’s filing for divorce?”

I grabbed another chunk and put it into my mouth while I turned and leaned my hip against the counter.

“She’s my best friend. Her troubles are my troubles.”

Luke stared at me for a beat then asked, “So why were you th night?”

“She needed something and asked me to get it for her.”

on. “She needed something out of Vincetti’s nightstand?”

Hell and damnation.

I looked down at the melon and back at Luke.

“I cut too much melon just for me. You sure you don’t want it
stalled again.

He shook his head, totally seeing through me, but took a chunk and
in his mouth. I found watching him chew was weirdly fascinating.
I decided I was not a dork, I was a freak.

Once he swallowed, he said (his voice kind of scary), “Ava, I
gonna tell you again not to lie.”

for just
; up the

Crap.

I took another chunk of melon and chewed while glaring at him.

nto my
business.”

“You know,” I told him, again trying to stall, “this is really none
of my business.”

“It became my business when you and I were caught in a hail of gunfire.”

Hmm.

In all fairness, he was kind of right, though I wasn’t about to tell him
nor was I going to give in. I didn’t ask him to be there.

to him
glaring at him.

I nabbed another chunk of melon and chewed it angrily, now seething
and glaring at him.

“I didn’t ask you to be there,” I pointed out. “You weren’t even supposed
to be there.”

ere last
“Okay, then it became my business when you walked into the room.”

yesterday.”

“No it didn’t.”

“Yes, it did.”

“No. It didn’t.”

any?” I He took another chunk of melon and threw it in his mouth calmly
his eyes came back to me and I noticed he was totally oblivious to my

d put it “I don’t need your help,” I told him, switching subjects and still de

ng and “Right,” he said.

“I don’t.”

I’m not “Maybe you would have had the presence of mind to get out of the
fire last night, maybe you wouldn’t. With the way you freaked out aft
I doubt you would have. The way I figure it, you owe me double.”

I blinked with confusion.

of your “Double?” I asked. “I owe you double for what?”

infire.” “Saving your ass last night and not telling me you have a situation.

I shook my head, not following. “Excuse me?”

im that, you if I found out you had trouble, you’d pay. You’re paying.”

I was not getting a good feeling about this.

eriously “I don’t...I don’t even know what to say. That’s just crazy,” I told

pposed “Nope, it isn’t. Last November a friend of mine did something br
stupid to save someone she cared about. She got a bullet to the ch
another one to the belly for her troubles.”

offices Yikes.

I sucked in breath at his announcement and the way he shared looked angry, his body was tense and I knew this event affected him in a profound way, as it would anyone.

I stared at him, but he wasn't finished talking. "I saw her on the floor, bleeding while her man tried to staunch the flow with a fucking bath towel. Before she went down, she shot a man in the head, killing him. She's still alive with two kinds of scars now. The kind you can see and the kind you can't."

Ho-ly crap.

"Luke." I had lost my glare and my anger and my voice went soft. Luke didn't feel like responding to my soft voice. He came close to me, took a lot of effort, because his intensity was freaking me out. But I knew where I was, even when I saw his eyes were shining with anger.

"I'm not playing this fucking game with you, Ava. You told me last time you wanted to know why I cuffed you. So now I'll tell you. You're not safe with fire and I'm not about to stand around and watch you get burned. Jules got shot, there was Roxie, another friend of mine's woman who was stalked by her ex, beaten, abducted right from his fuckin' house while she was out runnin', and taken on a crazed, zigzag ride through three states. When she got cuffed to the sink in a sleazy motel. Before Roxie there was Jet, whose dad got some poker debt and his loan shark tried to use Jet to force payment on him. She caught the attention of a fuckwad and ended up kidnapped and held captive butraped. Before Jet there was—"

"Okay, I get it," I broke in quietly.

Jeez.

I was freaked out and he hadn't even gotten to the car bombs yet.

l it. He Boy, and I thought all the men I had met were assholes.

im in a “Tell me right now what you and Sissy are up to,” Luke den
moving back, but only slightly.

e floor, I gave in. I might as well. He wasn’t going to let it go, that w
i towel, enough to read. And anyway, I knew this extent of sharing was takin
s got to effort for him, what with being a tough guy, macho man and all. I did
nd you that he was angry and struggling with unhappy memories, and I furthe
like that I was the cause of it. It made me feel like crap.

“I don’t want Sissy to come back here,” I blurted, and Luke’s boc
still, likely preparing for what I would say next. “Dom’s good at
r and it talking her back to him and he’s a total jerk and no good for her. I w
stayed into it, but trust me, he’s seriously no good for her. While she’s
promised to get the goods on Dom, find some evidence to use so the
st night would go well for her.”

playin’ “So you were searchin’ his shit last night to find somethin’ on him.

Before “Yeah.”

ho was His body visibly relaxed and I felt my body relax in response. I
he was know his tension was making me tense and I didn’t know what to n
e found that. I decided not to think about it as I watched him nab another cl
whose melon and throw it in his mouth.

ayment. “It’s covered,” he told me, mid-chew.

l nearly I stared at him. “What?”

“I’ll get what Sissy needs.”

Yee ha!

“Really?” I breathed.

Yay! No more breaking and entering and stupid behavior, God randed, shouted happily.

Damn, there goes all the fun, Bad Ava pouted.

as easy “Really,” Luke said.

g some I couldn’t help it. I smiled at him. This was good, really good for
n’t like; imagined Luke knew what he was doing, considering the loft and the I
r didn’t showed that people paid him a lot to do it.

His eyes dropped to my mouth and watched me smile. When t
ly went this, his face, as usual, stayed hard, but his eyes lost the shiny, dar
sweet-anger and became soft and warm.

on’t get I ignored this because it made my knees wobble.

gone, I “What do I do?” I asked. “Do I go to the offices and talk to Shirle
divorce up an account?”

„ His eyes moved back to mine. “You aren’t gonna pay Nigh
Investigations.”

I didn’t My smile widened and I had the happy thought that maybe the
nake of good guys out there and Luke was one of them.

runk of “No, that’s okay. I have money and Dom’s loaded. Once Sissy na
she’ll have more than enough to cover—”

“You aren’t payin’.”

“Luke, really, it’s cool,” I told him.

“I’ll rephrase. You aren’t payin’ in money.”

My smile died, my heart clenched and I feared that he was going t
my earlier thought wrong about there being good guys out there.

“Excuse me?” I whispered.

old Ava “This means you owe me triple,” he told me.

“Excuse me?” I repeated.

“You owe me triple.”

My body stiffened.

Sissy. I Nope, there it was. No good guys. Of course he wouldn't do something for nothing. Of course he wouldn't do something just because he was a Porsche guy.

hey did Fucking hell.

dangerous “What does that mean?” I asked.

“I haven't decided yet.”

“Okay then, what does *that* mean?” I pushed.

en? Set My eyes narrowed on him and I found it kind of hard not to yell out and go out and buy an island for just me and my girlfriends, no men allowed. I wanted to go to a girls only island.

tingale He cut into thoughts of my Girls Only Island and said, “That's why tonight we're havin' dinner and I'm gonna find out what happened to the girls. I know. Once I find that out, I'll decide.”

Holy shit.

ils him, “Nothing happened to the old Ava,” I told him.

He shook his head. “The old Ava was funny, smart and sweet. The new Ava acts more like Marilyn and Sofia.”

It felt like he had slapped me across the face. I even felt myself flinch at his words. Seriously not a good guy and knowing this about Luke hurt more than his words.

“That wasn't nice,” I whispered.

“No, it wasn’t, but it’s true.”

Damn, but he was honest.

Still, he didn’t know what he was talking about.

He didn’t know the half of it about Dom and he didn’t know anything about Rick, Dave and Noah. It wasn’t like I was being a bitch for the a good it. I had reasons and he didn’t even bother to find out what they were he made a judgment. I didn’t care about his offer of dinner so he could give my explanation. He knew, maybe more than anyone (except Sissy and dad), how much it would hurt to compare me to Marilyn and Sofia.

“A lot has happened since I last saw you,” I said, not about to go into detail, *never* going to go into detail. He could blow for his explanation

“Yeah, that’s obvious.”

Time for an evasive maneuver. This talk was beginning to suck my strength, suck my energy and make me want to stay in bed for a week means rolls of chocolate chip cookie dough, bags of cheese puffs and tubs of the Ava cream (of all flavors).

“I can’t go to dinner tonight, I’m meeting some friends,” I told him.

“We’ll talk after you meet with your friends.”

I thought about Ally and The Hornet. I figured it was a taxi ride, certainly, considering nearly any time I had spent with Ally ended up with me being shitfaced and sleeping with a foot on the floor so the room would be spinning. *Not* the disposition I wanted to be in for the next brutally cold third degree.

“It’s probably going to be a late night.”

“I’ll wait.”

“It might be a wild night.”

He gave me a half-grin. “That’ll work.”

Shit.

nothing “Luke,” I said, sounding like I was putting a line under this conver

fun of He ignored my line. “I’ll give you a remote for the garage and a ke

before don’t come here after you’re done, I’ll find you. You make me find y

uld get owe me quadruple.”

and my This talk was not going my way in *any* way.

go into “Why can’t I just pay money for your services like normal people?

“You aren’t normal people.”

“I am.”

sap my “You’re Ava.”

eat eating “I’m that too.”

s of ice “I’ve known you since you were eight.”

“So?”

l. “I’ve liked you since you were eight.”

Oh! I like him again, Good Ava told me.

ight for *Jump him! Rip his shorts off!* Bad Ava urged.

vith me Luke kept talking over Good Ava and Bad Ava’s blathering. “That

uld quit you my people.”

honest Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Stop right there.

I needed time to bury that deep before I set myself up to start thin was a good guy again, only to find out he wasn't.

To buy that time I said quietly, "Luke."

sation. "We're not talking about this anymore," Luke told me.

ey. You "We are."

ou, you "We're not."

I glared. "We are. Give me something to go on here. What's payment mean?" I asked, sounding kind of bitchy.

"I told you, I haven't decided."

"Which way are you leaning? Maid service? Vacation planning? I your socks?"

He threw back his head and laughed. I crossed my arms on my che

"This isn't funny," I told him.

And it wasn't.

Before I could react his hand snaked out and wrapped around m pulling me forward with a gentle jerk and my hands came up to shi fall. They hit his chest right before my hips slammed into his.

I tilted my head back to look at him and pulled at his hand at m This served no purpose. So I glared at him and pushed against his che t makes also served no purpose.

I saw, in close proximity, that his eyes were very warm.

Eek!

Danger, danger! Retreat, Ava Barlow. Retreat!

Before I could push away, he spoke, sounding lost in thought. "

king he part of your payment is makin' you worry what your payment will be.'

See? There it was again.

Not.

Nice.

I pushed against his chest again and pulled my hips away. His ot
slid along my waist and pulled me back, pinning my hands and arms
s triple were helpless between our bodies.

"That's really not nice," I told him, but he didn't respond so I den
"Let me go."

Darning His eyes moved over my face and hair and then settled on my n
pursed it angrily. The minute he saw the pursing of lips he did the half

st. "Gotta admit, I'm beginning to like the bitch."

"Stop calling me a bitch."

His eyes came back to mine. "Stop actin' like one."

y neck, "Men suck," I told him, because this was true.

ield my "See you don't feel like not actin' like a bitch."

"You suck too," I went on, going for the gusto.

y neck. Why not? I had nothing to lose.

st. This "Babe," he said, sounding like I was entertaining him.

"Stop calling me 'babe.' It's demeaning. I'm not a babe, I'm a wor

The fingers of his hand at my neck slid into my hair then twi
wrapping it around his hand.

This wasn't a rough gesture. It was a sensual one and it made tingl
'Maybe across my scalp, the good kind. I stared at him, realizing belatedly w

' ultra-close, and my eyes dropped back to his lips of their own accord.

“Where’s Matt with my diet?” I asked, sounding desperate and breathy, and not taking my eyes from his mouth. My body was going and I couldn’t control it even if I tried (though, I didn’t).

ner arm I knew he felt me melting into him. I knew this because his arm
so they me drew me closer and his fist in my hair gently pulled my head back.

This was not a good position to be in, plastered against him, arms
randed, head tilted back in a way that my face was an open target for anyone
wanted to do. My eyes shifted to his, the warmer-than-normal warmth
still there and my knees got weak.

mouth. I
-grin. Shit.

I tried to pull myself together, mentally chanting “men suck” reminding myself I knew exactly where to place the vibrator to get maximum orgasmic pleasure, thus no fiddling around and experimenting with hitting target like most men found difficult to do. Even so, I found it impossible his mouth so close to me, his lips being so fantastic and my eyes dropping them again.

They were *fine*.

I licked my lips.

“Ava.”

nan.” My eyes drifted back to his and I was in a Luke Lip Fog. “Yeah?”

sted it, “You lick your lips while looking at my mouth one more time, you know that pretty pink tongue of yours *in* my mouth.”

es slide Ho-ly shit.

ve were His face came closer and I watched, frozen and fascinated,

because that meant his lips were also coming closer. His indigo eyes melted to pure, liquid ink and I forgot totally that men sucked.

“You wanna taste me?” he murmured.

Yes, I wanted to taste him. I would pay every penny of Auntie’s inheritance to taste him.

“No,” I lied.

He did a full grin this time, a full *satisfied* grin. It was hot. So hot my knees totally buckled and he took all my weight into his body.

“Liar,” he whispered, knowing he had me (he couldn’t actually know considering I’d lost the ability to stand on my own two feet).

I watched as his lips started to get closer. In response, my eyes blinked and my lips parted in preparation for contact.

Honestly? I hated to admit it, but I could barely wait.

It was then the doors to the elevator glided open. My eyes flew open and our heads twisted to watch Matt walk out, carrying a case of Diet Coke.

Thank you *God*.

I instantly tried to pull out of Luke’s arms, but he didn’t let me move an inch even though his hand went out of my hair. It only did this to keep me around my back to keep me where I was.

“Hey, sorry,” Matt said, grinning like an idiot, not looking sorry and even with the idiot grin I wanted to kiss him for interrupting.

My vibrators were going to divorce me if I kept going like this.

I looked at Luke and saw his lips were pressed together and he seemed happy.

“Next time, buzz up,” Luke’s voice proved my theory correct and

yes had me slightly concerned about his use of the words “next time.”

Matt put the case of soda on the counter.

“Will do,” he replied cheerily, ignoring Luke’s pissed-off voice. “t Ella’s be going.”

“Good idea,” Luke said.

Matt lifted a hand in a small wave as he walked across the room a hot my he hit the elevator button. I pulled again at Luke’s arms. He looked c me, still with an unhappy expression, but let me go.

miss it, I moved straight to the case of Diet Coke.

“Later!” I called to Matt as the doors started to close.

egan to He lifted his hand to his forehead, gave me a wink and a salu before we lost sight of him.

Burying the latest episode with Luke deep, deeper, deepest, I ign open and even happened and got myself a can of pop, a glass, some ice from the e. and poured it. All the while I was doing this, Luke watched me around his kitchen, his back to the counter, hips against it, arms cro knew this not only because I saw him looking at me, but I also *felt* it.

love an o wrap “You want a soda?” I asked, pretending not to be affected l watching me.

at all, “No,” Luke answered.

“I’m going to get dressed,” I told him.

Luke didn’t respond.

didn’t I took my glass of pop, grabbed my clothes and moved tow bathroom, sensing escape and planning my grocery store dash, direc d made cookie dough.

“Ava,” Luke called.

I stopped and turned to him. “Yeah?”

I’ll just “I’ve decided your payment.”

My body froze and a thrill ran up my back. It was a good thrill, even a great thrill—definitely a vibrator-cheating thrill—and I stared a

nd then “What is it?”

lown at “Be here tonight when you’re done with your friends.”

I did not *think* so.

“Luke, just tell me.”

“Be here tonight.”

te right I would have put my hands on my hips if my arms weren’t full. In
hitched a hip and put a foot out in Bitch Attitude Stance.

ored it “Tell me,” I demanded.

e fridge “Tonight.”

moving I glared at him. He watched me.

ossed. I Then he turned away, threw another chunk of melon into his mo
by him started to make coffee.

I made the instant decision that there was no way I was coming to that night.

Fuck that.

And he couldn’t make me pay him anything unless he sent
ard the goddamned invoice. That, I would gladly pay.

t to the On that thought, I stomped to the bathroom sucking back some soc
kicked the door shut with my foot.

maybe
t him.

stead, I

uth and

his loft

t me a

la and I



I NEED COOKIES

I was standing in the cookie section at King Soopers, searching for a motivational healthy living mojo when my phone rang. I dug through my bag, pulled it out and saw RILEY CALLING. I flipped it open and put it to my ear.

“Thank God it’s you. Chips Ahoy or Nutter Butter?” I asked instead of saying hello.

Riley laughed in my ear. “Neither, where are you?”

“King Soopers and I had a shit night. I need processed cookie-type food.”

“No shit night is worth processed cookie-type food,” Riley told me.

He was so wrong.

“Last night was, believe me,” I said.

“Ava, step away from the cookies.”

“No.”

“Do it.”

“No.”

“Step away from the cookies and I’ll bring lunch to your place, one day. Deal?”

Holy crap.

What was *that* all about?

I'd never seen Riley outside of the gym.

Well, not exactly. He'd been to all my birthday parties for five years and my annual Thank God It's Summer Party that I held on Memorial Day every year. Maybe we should just say I'd never seen Riley at my house *alone*.

"Deal," I said, feeling kind of weird.

for my "Later."

ugh my Disconnect.

t to my *Well, that's interesting,* Good Ava noted.

stead of *Luke's cuter, he has better lips and he has good chest hair. I mention his eyes are total YUM when they turn ink,* Bad Ava said as she peered across my neck at Good Ava. *Did you see his eyes?*

food." *I saw 'em. They were YUM!* Good Ava agreed.

Shut up," I whispered, and a lady standing beside me gave me a look.

I shot her an embarrassed smile, went directly to the produce section, bought enough grapes, oranges and plums to unconstipate the French Foreign Legion.

At Luke's I had dressed quickly, came out of the bathroom, grabbed my purse and keys and gave him a "Later." The whole time he sat on a bench holding his coffee cup, watching me and not saying a word. I had managed to escape without him giving me keys or his remote, which I figured would be in my favor.

I went directly to King Soopers and was saved by Riley.

After I left King Soopers and was heading home, I decided I would call Shirleen at Nightingale Investigations and set up an account. I figured they would take my information and invoice me. It was a business and they would keep their men in lofts and Porsches. They weren't going to turn do

ars and
y every

2. What I didn't allow myself to think about was *anything* that had anything to do with Luke, his eyes turning to ink, the scar across his belly, his hair, how good a night's rest I had while lying beside him (even hands or what he might taste like).

And I definitely didn't think about getting shot at by AK-47s.

I let myself into my house and to keep my mind busy I cleaned it. I did not take a shower and tamed my hair. I swiped on a hint of makeup (Riley had then coming over, after all) and because it was warm I put on a black Foo Fighters babydoll tee, another pair of faded (but not quite as faded as yesterday's Levi's and a shitload of my silver to buoy my spirits.

a weird After I'd done that, I had about a half an hour before Riley got the day got to work on one of my accounts. A deadline was drawing near, and all the Sissy business, I was procrastinating. I had to get some work done or I'd be fucked.

ion and
Foreign

The office was upstairs in my second bedroom. The walls were painted a soft salmon because I heard that orange sparked energy and creativity. There was a desk and futon in there for overnight guests. I'd made it a funky room with cool, light wicker baskets and boxes, colorful toss pillows on the futon and a kickass, state-of-the-art swivel chair so I wouldn't be spending time there while I worked.

bed my
barstool
aged to
rked in

I barely got my computer booted up when my phone rang.

uld call I answered it with a, “Yo.”
red she “You didn’t call me,” Sissy said, her voice sounding funny.
r had to “Hey,” I replied. “You okay?”
own my “The police called me.”

nything Uh-oh.
is chest “Sissy—” I started.
cuffed), “Someone shot up my house and Dom is missing.”
I blinked.

“Dom is missing?” I asked.
Then I “Yeah. They waited for him at the house and they called his c
ley was answer. They went to his office and he hasn’t shown up for work
fighters days, no calls to explain why he wasn’t there. Nothing.”

terday) I knew Dom had an office. He “worked” for his Uncle Vito
suspected it was a front for something. I didn’t ask because Sissy w
re, so I tell. And anyway, I liked Uncle Vito. I met him at Sissy and
nd with engagement party and he was a hoot. He thought I was hilarious and
done or laughed at my jokes. I didn’t like thinking he was a criminal mast
mafia-type person. That would suck.

ainted a “Are you okay?” I asked.
ity and “I’m freaked. Can you check my house?”
t into a “Sure,” I told her.
pillows “Thank God you weren’t there,” she breathed. “They told me they
’t mind machine gun, totally shot up my living room. Can you imagine if yc
there?”

Yep, I could imagine.

“Go to the house during the day,” she said. “Take someone with you.”

“Riley’s coming over for lunch. I’ll ask him if he wants to go.”

Silence then, “Riley’s coming over for lunch?”

“Yeah. He called me this morning and told me he was coming over.”

“What’s *that* all about?”

I laughed at her saying my thoughts out loud. “Hell if I know.”

“Call me the minute you find out.”

“I will.”

cell, no “Do you think I should come home?” she asked.

for two “Let me check it out, Sis. I’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” there was a pause then, quietly, “I hope Dom is okay.” I
speak. “I know you don’t like him, and I know he’s a jerk, but I can
couldn’t how I feel.”

Dom’s “I know, Sis. I hope he’s okay too.”

always There it was again. Liar, liar pants on fire.

ermind We said good-bye and I had barely put the phone down when
again.

I picked it up. “Yo.”

“Yo back at ’cha,” Ally Nightingale said in my ear. “You comin’
Hornet?”

r used a “Hey, girl. Sure,” I told her.

ou were “Cool, but you gotta give me something early. The girls are goin’
You know Luke?” she asked.

Shit.

ou.” “What girls?” I asked back.

“The Rock Chicks. Indy, Jet, Roxie, Daisy, Jules—”

My breath caught. “Jet, Roxie and Jules?” I asked.

r.” Those were the names of Luke’s friends that he told me about, and not many people were named Jet, Roxie and Jules, they had to be...

“Yeah. Jet works for Indy and she’s living with Eddie Chavez. For my brother Hank’s girlfriend, they’re living together too. Jules is with one of Lee’s boys.”

Holy cramoily.

See, what’d I say about Denver having a small town feel?

“So...Luke?” Ally prompted.

I didn’t
n’t help

“I’ve known him since I was eight. He lived across the street.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Wicked, sister. Luke is hot,” she said.

it rang Boy, did I ever know *that*.

“He works for my brother,” she went on.

“I know.”

to The “What happened yesterday?”

“I don’t know. He went gonzo on me. I haven’t seen him in y
popped by and he just lost it.”

n’ nuts. Silence then, “Girl, I know Luke pretty well. He doesn’t lose it un
has a reason.” She said this with only a hint of accusation, but I fel

bitch.

Maybe I was turning into Marilyn and Sofia. I shivered and I shivered because that would suck.

Time to fight back the Barlow Bitch Pull.

id since “It’s a long story,” I confided. “We have some history. I made a promise I didn’t keep and it was important to him.”

roxie is “You two work things out?”

Vance, “Not really.”

“You gonna work things out?”

I hoped not. I didn’t know what working things out would entail but I had a scary feeling it would entail Vibrator Infidelity.

“We’ll see,” I allowed. “I’ll tell you about it tonight.”

“Righteous. See you at seven.”

“Cool.”

We hung up and I sat looking at the phone with the very unhappy realization that my life was about to get pretty fucking complicated.

I had barely pulled up my files when the doorbell went. I sighed, got away from the computer and down the stairs. I opened my door and there he was.

Really, he was seriously good-looking. I wasn’t into blond guys, but I was I’d likely have a crush on him.

years. I “Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he replied on a white smile and lifted up a bag. “Noodles, unless he’s no processed cookie-type food.”
t like a

“Damn,” I mumbled to be funny, and as usual when I was trying to be funny, Riley laughed.

As I let him in the phone started ringing.

I took the bag from him saying, “I’ll see to the food, you get the phone.”
“No problem.”

I headed to the kitchen. Riley headed to the cordless in the living room.

I was pulling noodles and veggies out of the bag (which, I had to admit, looked good) to put on Fiesta ware plates (cobalt blue for Riley, pink for me) when he walked in saying, “Sure, she’s right here.”

He took the phone away from his ear and said on a grin. “It’s for you.”
I reached for the phone. “What a surprise, Riley, you big dork.”

He reached out and nabbed the back of my head. Pulling it to his face, he kissed my forehead.

I went solid, phone in my hand and stared at him totally stunned.
He’d never done that before. Sure, it was kind of brotherly and cute, but it was a kiss.

To cover my freakout, I ordered, “Quit kissing me, Riley, you’ll get me d Rileycooties.”

“Fuck off,” he returned, still grinning at me.

I put the phone to my ear and greeted, “Yo.”
Silence.

“Hello?” I called into the silence.

“Who’s Riley?”

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

g to be It was Luke.

“Luke?”

“Who the fuck is Riley?”

one.” Wow. He sounded pissed off. As in *extremely* pissed off.

om. it for me. “Um...a friend?” It came out as a question, like I needed Luke to

o admit, “You didn’t tell me about any friends this morning.”

for me) “You didn’t ask.”

“Okay, then I’m askin’ now.”

ou.” “About what?”

“How many friends do you have?”

him, he “A lot of them.”

“I’m talkin’ about the ones who kiss you.”

e, but it, in my ear. *Someone’s got the wrong end of the stick. Hee hee, Bad Ava sing-*

give me *Oh dear, Good Ava said in the other one.*

“I can’t talk now, I’m kinda busy.” I wasn’t playing games. I was aware of Riley watching me and the fact he had just kissed my forehead. This was a weird situation I’d never found myself in. I honestly didn’t know what to do.

I felt unhappy vibes stinging my ear through the phone.

“Why are you calling?” I asked when Luke made no response.

“You forgot the remote and keys.”

“Erm...”

“You gonna be home for a while?”

“I have company.”

“You gonna be home for a while?” Luke repeated.

“Um, no, we have an errand to run after we have lunch.”

answer “We do?” Riley asked and I waved at him to shut up.

“You gonna be home after your errand?” Luke asked in my ear.

Shit.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“I’ll be there at four,” Luke declared.

“Luke.”

He didn’t hear me say his name, he had already disconnected.

“My life is fucked,” I told Riley, punching the off button on the
with my thumb.

-songed “Who was that?” he asked, his face morphing to concern.

“An old friend,” I blew it off, not wanting to delve deeper and c
not willing to share.

acutely Thankfully, Riley let it go.

ead and “What errand we running?” he asked.

’t know I told him about Sissy’s place.

“Holy shit. Sure, I’ll go with you,” he told me.

“Thanks, Riles.”

We ate lunch. We chatted. Riley teased me (as usual). I made him
(as usual). Nothing weird, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to ma
seem in any way other than our normal friendship.

Nothing.

After we were done, he drove me to Sissy's and we inspected the place using the key I still had after pocketing it last night.

"Holy shit," Riley repeated his words of earlier, looking around standing in the living room.

Holy shit was right. The place was a mess. The front window and doors were boarded, debris everywhere. I started to get the shakes, for more than just seeing the devastation an AK-47 could do. Flashback City.

Riley put an arm around me and guided me out. "Let's get you home here."

"Sissy's going to freak," I told him.

"Sissy's going to freak," he agreed.

phone "I think this is a processed cookie-type food moment."

"Ava, *no* moment is a processed cookie-type food moment. I mean, however, a shot of tequila-type moment."

certainly He was not wrong.

We went to Reiver's, a bar on South Gaylord that was close to home. It had been there forever and was decorated entirely in wood. The kickass black bean dip there, but I did not suggest this to Riley who would likely find that suggestion a disappointing testament to lack of motivation and healthy living mojo.

I had a shot of tequila, chased by a Diet Coke. Riley had a beer and engaged me in a conversation that would take my thoughts off Sissy's room, and what he didn't know were my thoughts of my own mortal plans to draw up a will, ASAP.

n laugh
ake this

Eventually, I looked at my watch and gave a little scream.

damage “What?” Riley asked.

“It’s ten to four. Luke’s gonna be at my house at four. We gotta
d while I’d jumped off my barstool and was hopping around on my flip-flops,
way the hell out.

nd door “Who’s Luke?” Riley was watching me closely.

reasons “An old friend.”

His eyes narrowed. “You got a lot of them.”

. out of “Let’s go!” I nearly shouted.

“All right, all right. Keep your pants on.”

We paid. We left. We got home too late.

I knew this because the clock on the dash of Riley’s Pathfinder said
quarter after four. I also knew this because as we rolled up to my
This is, Luke’s Porsche was parked there, Luke leaning against it, arms crossed
his chest. He didn’t look happy, and this unhappiness increased expon
when his head turned and he saw Riley and me pulling up.

Sissy’s “Crap,” I whispered.

ney had “That Luke?” Riley asked, checking him out.

o would “Yeah.”

tion for “You owe him money?” Riley asked, maybe trying to be funny,
question was too close to the bone.

l. Riley “Thanks for lunch, for going with me, for the tequila, everything,”
s living turning to him as I saw Luke push away from the Porsche.

lity and “I’ll just make sure everything’s okay. He doesn’t look—”

“No!” I cried, again in a near shout.

Riley’s eyes cut to me.

move.” “I’ll just make sure everything’s okay,” Riley repeated in a tone I’d never heard him use before. He was usually laidback. He looked not at all like that anymore.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

Riley got out. I got out. Luke met us on the sidewalk by Riley’s car in front of my house. Luke and Riley sized each other up. Riley was a personal trainer and Luke *still* looked like he could wipe the floor with me.

“You Luke?” Riley asked, even though he knew the answer.

“Yeah. You Riley?” Luke asked, even though he, likely, knew the answer, too.

and it was
my house
was based on
entirely

“Yeah.”

They stared at each other and I had visions of them wrestling on the ground in a tough guy death match and this made me ultra-uncomfortable.

“I need cookies,” I blurted, and both men looked at me.

Luke’s mouth twitched. Riley’s brows drew together.

“You gonna be okay with this guy?” Riley asked what I thought was a question that proved he was a lunatic.

but his

Luckily Luke showed no reaction to this in-your-face question.

“Of course,” I replied.

’ I said,

Riley looked like he didn’t believe me. Then he did the wrap-his-hand-around-my-head-kiss-my-forehead thing again, but left his hand where it was and looked me in the eyes.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked softly.

I nodded.

Riley threw a scowl at Luke, who was back to looking unhappy in a way that made Riley’s scowl seem amateur.

Riley got in his Pathfinder and took off. I turned to Luke.

Now he was glaring at me.

“You have something to give me?” I asked.

“In the house.”

“Luke, I need to get some work done. I haven’t had—”

“In the house.”

Jeez.

All right, in the house, if that’s what he wanted. The sooner I did what he wanted, the sooner I’d get this over with.

I stomped up to the house and let us in. I walked into the living room, threw my keys and purse on the couch and turned to Luke.

“Okay, Luke, we’re in the house.” I put my hand out, palm up. “You have something to give me?”

“Who’s that guy to you?”

“Riley?”

“No, Jack Lemmon,” he quipped, and I couldn’t help it, I laughed because it was funny.

He advanced so fast, I barely got my feet coordinated to retreat. But he went all the way across the living room, until my back hit the wall and Luke was up close. One of his hands hit the wall by my head, the other arm was

around my waist and pulled me into his body.

I stared at him, shocked breathless at his behavior, and every thought
1 a way from my head.

“You like playin’ games?” he asked, and his eyes were
dangerously.

“No.”

“You like yankin’ men’s chains?” he asked.

Holy crap.

Where was *this* coming from?

“No!” I shouted.

“Lose weight, get contacts, dye your hair, become a knockout and
what he all the men pay who wouldn’t look at you before?” he clipped.

At his words, I lost it.

3 room, I mean, how *dare* he?

“Fuck you!” I yelled.

ou have “Why did you come to the offices yesterday?” he asked.

“Go to hell, Lucas Stark.”

His palm pounded on the wall next to my head and his face got
mine so he was the only thing I could see and this scared the shit out of

mainly “Don’t fuck with me, Ava,” he warned.

“I’m not fucking with you,” I whispered, totally freaked out.

it I did, “Who’s Riley to you?”

ie came “He’s my personal trainer,” I said immediately.

rapped “You fuckin’ him?”

My eyes rounded and I instantly answered, “No!”

light flew “He wants to fuck you.”

“He does not. We’re friends.”

shining “He does.”

“No he doesn’t.”

“Yes, Ava, he does.”

“Step back.”

He didn’t step back.

He came closer, or more to the point, brought me closer. Both wrapping around me, he hauled me tight against his body.

and make “You just earned a preview of tonight,” he told me, face so close mouth was nearly on mine.

“I don’t...” I cleared my throat and that pissed me off because it must sound scared. I *was* scared, I just didn’t want to *sound* scared. “I don’t preview.”

“Too bad.”

“Luke.”

right in “You’re gonna be in my bed and not like last night. I’m gonna give f me. taste of me and I’m gonna take more than a taste of you.”

Holy...fucking...shit.

“Luke,” I repeated.

“One thing you need to know. While you’re sharing my bed, I don’t share your body.”

At this, I blinked, thinking I saw red film covering my eyes, but I

on before I could say a word.

“Until we’re done, however long that takes, no one touches you, n
to kiss your goddamned forehead. Got me?”

Um.

One, two, three...oh fuck it.

“You are fucking *kidding* me,” I snapped.

“Not even a little bit.”

“What about Sandra?”

h arms “Sandra is gone.”

“Her food is in your fridge!” I yelled.

ose his “She’s gone.”

“Have you told her that?”

ade me “Not yet, but she’s my next visit.”

want a Oh my God, he was a jerk. He was beyond a jerk. He was the jerki
I’d ever met.

“You’re a jerk,” I told him.

His brows snapped together. “You *want* me to fuck Sandra wh
e you a fuckin’ you?”

“You’re not gonna fuck me.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“No, you aren’t.”

’t share “Ava, you missed it when it happened so I’ll clue you in. Las
around the time you fell asleep against me, you became mine.”

ie went My eyes went huge. “How do you figure that?”

All of a sudden, his face changed. He was watching me and I could not even think about something, and by the look of him, whatever it was bode well for me.

“Luke, step back,” I demanded.

“No,” he said softly, but it wasn’t to my demand, it was to himself. “I’ve been thinkin’ you’ve been mine a lot longer than that.”

I stopped breathing and stared at him, scared far, *far* more now than I had been when he was angry.

His eyes roamed my face and hair again then they locked on mine. “I’ve been thinkin’ you been mine since about the time your dad left your mom.”

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

This was *not* happening.

“Step back,” I whispered.

st jerk

“Maybe before.” He was still talking to himself.

“Please, step back.”

ile I’m

His eyes had gone far away, but they came back and focused on me. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“You’re crazy and an out of control macho man is what you are.”

“I’m right.”

“You’re nuts.”

t night,

“Think about it.”

I wasn’t going to think about it. I was going to move to Wyoming to live with Sissy and her mother to get away from Luke.

I tell he That was when I realized something and my eyes snapped back
s didn't "How did you know my phone number? It's unlisted."

His face began to relax from its trip down memory lane intensit
was way behind him, still back at being pissed off.

lf. "I'm "Babe, I work at a private investigations agency."

"Is that how you found out where I live?"

m I had "Yeah."

"Did you follow me from here last night?"

e. "I'm "Yeah."

I found that my hands were holding on to his waist and there was
to put them between us, so I grabbed at his tee and tried to shove.

He didn't move.

"Luke, forget finding dirt on Dom. You're fired. I'll hire
investigations agency."

"First they'll have to find Vincetti, which they won't do nearly as
Vance's gonna do and he's already working on it."

ie. "I'm "Goddammit!" I shouted, foiled again.

Luke did the half-grin. I glared at him.

"Don't fight it." His voice was soft, gentle and affectionate, and I
claw at my anger to keep it with me, I liked that voice so much.

"Please go."

The grin didn't fade, but he did let me go to move away about two
ing and Then he dug in his pocket, pulled something out and shoved it in th
pocket of my Levi's.

to his. His eyes came to mine and he said, “See you tonight. You get drunk, call me. I’ll come get you.”

But I didn’t answer, I just glared at him. He ignored the glare, touched my nose with his finger, and then he was gone.

Oh my. I’ve got goose bumps. That was INTENSE, Good Ava told me.
I think I had an orgasm, Bad Ava shared.

I slid down the wall and put my head on my knees.

Yep, I was right.

My life just got pretty fucking complicated.

no way

another

as fast as

I had to

inches.

in front

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WHAT I DON'T GET

Once I got off my ass, I called Sissy and told her about the state living room (and her pottery) and told her not to come home. When Dom was caught up in, I wanted her to be far, far away from it.

Then, because she was my bestest best friend, I told her about every last detail about every second, from the minute I walked into Nightingale Investigations offices to the minute he walked out of my house including being there during the shooting, which made her scream a little.

“Wow,” Sissy said when I was done, sounding like she’d just finished a hundred yard dash.

Wow didn’t cover it.

“You don’t have to worry, Sis,” I told her. “I get the impression that Luke’s loft and Porsche and what I saw of the Nightingale Investigations offices, people pay a high premium for their services. They’ll find Dom and get the dirt on him. You just stay safe with your mom.”

“Okay,” Sissy replied, paused and went on, “Ava?”

“Yeah, honey?”

In a very quiet voice she whispered, “Luke called you a knockout.”

I hadn’t let that penetrate until the moment Sissy repeated it to me.

“Holy crap,” I whispered back.

“I think you may want to rethink your vow to hate men forever,” she advised.

Not gonna happen.

“Yeah, and maybe Sandra Whoever-She-Was rethought her vow to hate men when she got hooked up with Luke and filled his fridge with healthy food, thinking thoughts of a long and happy life together. Not to mention crying her eyes out and eating her way through a three pound bag of M&Ms.” Sissy remembered what Luke looked like as a teenager. Sissy remembered Sandra Whoever-She-Was was *definitely* crying her eyes out with Luke.

“You have a point,” she conceded. “We’ll see how this goes.”

I didn’t say anything because I knew how this was going to go. It wasn’t going to go *anywhere*.

I got off the phone with Sissy and dug in my pocket to see what he gave me. His remote, a key and a business card with his name on it, his address and cell numbers written in black ink on the back.

I picked up the phone, called his office and shoved the card in my pocket.

“Nightingale Investigations,” Shirleen answered.

“Hey, Shirleen, this is Ava Barlow. From yesterday?”

“Girl, how’re you doin’ today? Heard you spent the night with Luke.” I sat, stunned speechless, and stared at my computer.

Then I said, “Matt’s got a big mouth.”

“They all got big mouths, girl, learn that quick. These boys talk me

a pack of women. I lost fifty bucks on you.”

er,” she I was stunned speechless again. This time it didn’t last as long.

“What?”

“See, Lee nailed Indy the first night they were together. Not *nail* to give nailed her, but she was in his bed. Eddie with Jet, it took a few days ge with and Roxie, like, a day. Vance, like three, but Jules was a virgin and he w she’s interrupt the festivities once to go out and shoot someone.”

I&Ms.” I was blinking rapidly and feeling kind of faint at the amou y knew sensitivity of information Shirleen was imparting, not to mention a three might mean to me.

“So we had a pool,” Shirleen carried on. “Everyone threw down on when they thought Luke would nail you. Mace won five hundred do o. This Ho-ly *crap*.

“So,” she went on. “Did he *nail* you nail you or did you two just sl at Luke For some reason, I answered her unbelievably nosy question. “V s home slept.”

“New pool!” she shouted.

Oh my God.

Wyoming all of a sudden looked even better.

“Shirleen,” I cut to the chase because I was beginning to feel sic calling to set up an account. Luke and Vance are doing some work ce.” and I need you to invoice—”

“Oh girl, I don’t *think* so. Luke already told me you’d try somethi this. He says you two got something worked out and we don’t want to ore than *that*, do we?”

“Yes, we do,” I told her.

At least *I* wanted to step on it. I wanted to stomp all over it.

She laughed in my ear, loud and happy. “This is gonna be fun. For the first time in a long time, I’ve been in on, on the ground floor.”

“Hank, I could almost hear her rubbing her hands together.

“I had to,” she declared, I thought bizarrely. “See, I got Indy ’cause no one knew them then. Daisy got Jet. Everyone took it and Roxie ’cause that was some *serious* shit that went down. May go what it because they knew each other beforehand, but we all kicked in, seeing as I was a virgin and all. Though I wasn’t in on the cherry poppin’ disc money I’ve seen the tape.”

“ollars.” The tape?

“Anyhoots,” she went on. “See you at The Hornet tonight. I can’t v eep?” Then she hung up.

We just I put down the phone kind of in a daze, picked it up immediately called Sissy.



I GOT about an hour of work done before I started my preparation for the nightmare of the day.

k. “I’m I decided to go heavy on the makeup and the silver. I spent ages for me hair, pulling it back away from my face smooth in parts, other parts in and even other parts in braids, and clipped it at the back of my head ing like huge silver barrette, leaving the back long.

step on I also decided to wear my kickass, rock ’n’ roll, deep-green, fitted sleeved tee that had such a wide neckline, it fell off my shoulder.

This meant, since I didn't have a strapless bra (and no way I'd go sporting C-cup boobs), I had to wear my baby pink, satin bustier-slash like contraption with snaps at the crotch. It fit like a glove, had beige tu of lace at the hipbones and cups of the brassiere area and some soft that moved with my body. I'd bought it to wear with a strapless dress to the New Year's Eve party Dom, Sissy, Noah and I went to the year e, Ally last and it was the only time I wore it. Noah loved it, thought it was ho care of

For my evening at The Hornet (and the rest of forever), it had utilitarian purpose. Jules ' as she

I re-donned my faded jeans, ran a long, silver scarf through my belt, buckled on a pair of matte-silver strappy sandals and called a taxi.

By the time I got there, I was ten minutes late.

I walked into The Hornet and it was packed. It was a warm Friday *vait.* March, so Denverites were ready to roll to summer. The bar ar shoulder to shoulder, the seating area was entirely filled and neither a ely and a seat with Indy's and Ally's asses sitting on them.

I went to the back room where the pool tables were and immedi my left I saw them. Indy, Ally and eight other people, including T he next Stevie, Indy's neighbors who I'd met several times before (gay, p totally fucking cool), Shirleen and the other black lady from the on my yesterday, not to mention the black-haired, violet-eyed Glamour Girl.

Holy cramoly.

"Ava!" Indy called and everyone's gaze swung to me.

"Hey," I said weakly, deciding that, yes, this was the next night l, long- my day.

I was introduced to the rest. A honey-blonde with green eyes

braless fantastic smile (Jet). A dark blonde with blue eyes and a great outfit (A -teddy-). A platinum blonde that looked so much like Dolly Parton I thought she was Dolly for a minute, including the cleavage and a denim jacket with silver studs and rhinestones, she lit up the dim room. Her name was The other black lady, older than the girls, with a Jacqueline Kennedy before (May). And Glamour Girl (Jules).

Indy, by the way, was a tall, built, fantastic redhead, and Ally was only a lean and gorgeous with shiny dark-brown hair.

“Sit down, sit down. Let’s get to it. Someone get this girl a drink,” Shirleen had a seat saved for me, right next to her, right smack in the middle of the long table. She was patting it and grinning at me huge.

“I’ll get you a drink,” Stevie mumbled getting up. “What’ll you have?” “Cranberry juice and vodka. Let me give you some money,” I told her. “Girlie, sit! Gay men don’t get to buy women drinks very often. Tod shouted.”

Stevie moved off, I sat and Shirleen yelled after Stevie. “Hurry up and drink, you don’t want to miss anything.” Then her eyes moved back to me and “All right, girl, tell us *all* about it.”

“Maybe we should tell our stories first,” Jet suggested.

“I’m thinking that’s a good idea,” Indy put in.

I was happy to be off the hot seat, even if it was for five minutes. I nodded.

It wasn’t for five minutes. It was for a helluva lot longer. Two full hours longer.

Indy told me her story. As she did, I was glad when Stevie brought me a drink and a

Roxie).drink because Indy’s story included the car bombs (yes, bombzzz, plur: she was Even though Luke gave me the scary-ass flavor of Jet, Roxie and o many stories, he didn’t get into the half of it (not even a quarter of it).

Daisy. What he missed out was the part that included Eddie making Jet r hairdo with him during her drama and she never moved out. Hank and he conspiring to move Roxie in with Hank after her drama, and she di as tall, lastly, Jules doubling up on toiletries in about ten days between her pl Vance’s place. She was still doubled up as they had her place in the c drink.”his cabin in the mountains.

e center Every single one of them had been nailed and then *nailed* within a “I need another drink,” I whispered when Jules was done.

ve?” May patted my arm and Stevie disappeared for more drinks.

him. “Now, *your* turn,” Shirleen said.

Live it Instead of launching into my story, I turned to Jules, who’d been one to share and said, “I know you got shot and I’m sorry about the ith that think what you did was brave.”

to me. Jules stared at me.

Indy, Ally, Tod and Stevie were already my friends, and Shirle claimed me, whatever that meant. I could tell right off that Jet, Roxie and May were cool.

es, so I Jules I hadn’t cracked. Jules wasn’t looking at me with kind ey was looking at me with assessing ones. I didn’t know what to make of

l drinks When she didn’t speak, I looked away. “Sorry, not my place to say

“What I did was stupid,” she said to me, and my eyes moved back

ght my “Maybe, but it was brave too and you saved someone’s life. So ev

al). was stupid, he's still here and so are you. I think brave outweighs st
Jules's the end, don't you?"

May was smiling at me with a warmth I felt from across the table
nove in a quick glance I noticed everyone else was too. My eyes settled on Jul
r uncle was pleased to note she was smiling too.

id. And Stevie set my drink in front of me and I took a gulp, looked around
ace and and saw the expectant faces.

ity and There was nothing for it. I took a deep breath and started fr
beginning.

week. Two drinks later, I was done.

I told them the whole shebang, leaving nothing out. Not my weight
my dad. Not my sisters and mother. Not my years-long crush on Luke
Luke punching out the boys who called me Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes. Not
sitting next to me on the stoop after my dad left. Not our embrace at hi
the last funeral. Not my promise and breaking it with my non-return of Luke
it, but I Not Rick, Dave and Noah. Not Dom. Not Sandra Whoever-She-W
Luke cuffing me to him and his bed.

en had Not a thing.

, Daisy Everyone stared at me when I was done.

es. She "Oowee, these boys don't play games," Shirleen announced, sittin
and fanning herself with her hand.

her. "Holy crap," Indy mumbled.

." "He even makes Lee's pursuit look old-fashioned and Lee used c
you too," Ally said, moving her stare to Indy.

ven if it "What 'cha gonna do now, sugar?" Daisy asked.

upid in “Yeah, are you going to Luke’s place tonight or your own?” Roxie
I looked at Roxie.

and on “My place,” I said without hesitation.
es and I Everyone drew in breaths.

d again “Oh Lordy,” Stevie whispered.
“Here we go again,” Jet said.

om the “No, really, it isn’t like that,” I told them.
“It’s *always* like that,” Daisy told me.

ht. Not “What I don’t get,” Shirleen said to the table, “is why you wome
ke. Not just give in? It ain’t like these boys aren’t fine. Are they fine?” she ask
and Stevie.

ot him “They’re fine,” Stevie confirmed.

is dad’s “They are so fine,” Tod threw in with a little jazz hand w
’s calls.emphasize his point.

as. Not “I mean, I get me a chance at a taste o’ Luke Stark, I’d take a bi
that boy faster ’n Jiminy Cricket,” Shirleen said.

“You called it, sugar,” Daisy giggled and it sounded like tinkling b

“Men suck,” I declared, not having much fight in me after four cr
ig backjuice and vodkas and zero dinner.

“Maybe so, but Luke Stark pushed me against the wall and told
was gonna fuck me, I’d say, ‘When and what you want me to wear?
uffs on would not care if he *did* pull a slam-bam-thank-you-ma’am. I’d just t
orgasm and *go*. You hear what I’m sayin’ to you?” Shirleen asked.

I heard what she was saying. I heard it loud and clear.

put in. “Did you *not* hear me when I told you Noah stole five thousand hundred and twenty-five dollars from me?” I asked back.

“I was you, I’d tell Luke Stark about them five thousand so dollars. He’d find this Noah whose-ee-whatsit and nail his ass to the May told me.

“That’s right,” Shirleen agreed.

“Okay, then Dave, Rick, *Dom*,” I went on. “Men are all asshole looked at Tod and Stevie. “Present company excepted, of course.”

“Of course,” Stevie mumbled.

n don’t
ed Tod
Tod just smiled.

“Hank’s not an asshole,” Roxie muttered.

“I’m glad for you. It sounds like he isn’t and that’s cool.” I emp my comment by reaching out and squeezing Roxie’s hand. Then I s and declared, “But for me, I’ll take my rabbit vibrator, thank you. I every time.”

te outta
“No vibrator is better than Eddie,” Jet whispered to a grinning
“Trust me, I know.”

ells.
anberry
“Just this morning, Lee had me singing the Hallelujah Chorus, Indy didn’t whisper. “I haven’t touched a vibrator in ten months.”

“I didn’t even bring my vibrator from Chicago. I tossed it in a dun
me he
Roxie threw down. “And I do *not* miss it.”

’ And I
“Why are we talking about vibrators?” Stevie asked May.

ake my
She started shaking with laughter.

“I’ve vowed fidelity to my vibrators,” I told them. “I’m not going talked down to, stolen from, cheated on, walked all over or walked

1, three Not like Sissy, not like myself and *not* like my mom. No way. No way.”

ne odd There was a lot of grinning, some shaking of heads and at least one
e wall,”the eyes.

Oh well. There was no convincing this crowd.

But *I* knew if I could shed seventy-five pounds and go from a Fatt
oles.” I Four-Eyes to someone Lucas Stark would call a knockout, I could and
remain faithful to my vibrators.

On that thought, I got up. “I’m getting a drink. Who needs a drink?”

“We all need drinks, girlie,” Tod replied.

“My shout, I’ll find a waitress,” I announced, and then weav
hasized unsteady way through the crowd to the bar.

at back I didn’t make it.

t works Five steps away from the bar two big, beefy guys came up on eith
of me, both with a hand at each of my elbows, but only one leaned

g Jules. asked, “You know Dominic Vincetti?”

Uh-oh.

twice,” *This doesn’t look good*, Bad Ava told me.

Eek! Good Ava screeched.

npster,” Shit.

That was when I was kidnapped.



THEY WEREN’T GOOD KIDNAPPERS.

g to get I knew this because I got away.
out on.

fucking They pulled me out of the bar and behind the back-to-the-alley area and shoved me in the back seat of the car. They weren't rough and weren't gentle. But they were in a hurry. They didn't take my purse and didn't ask any questions outside of the first one, which incidentally I answered, but they took me anyway.

My Fatty What they *did* say was that if I didn't go with them, they would blow my head off. It didn't occur to me that it was unlikely that they would blow my head off in a crowded bar. The only thing that occurred to me was that they would blow my head where it was.

Therefore, I went with them.

They were huge guys. Both dark, both Italian-looking, both wearing well-fitting suits and on one of them I could see his shoulder holster and the top of a gun.

Thus, me going with them.

I sat in the back of the car wishing I'd had dinner. Firstly, because I was hungry. Secondly, because I was now a lot more drunk than I normally would have been if I had only had four cranberry juice and vodkas. Thirdly, but not least, if I was going to die, I wished I had had a last meal that consisted of something other than noodles and veggies.

We drove down Broadway toward Englewood and I wondered how the gang was going to notice I was gone. They'd probably call Luke and he would probably get pissed. *At me.*

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

"Mr. Zano wants to see you," the big guy in the passenger seat turned to tell me.

"Okay," I said, deciding to be cooperative in order not to get beat

parking shot at, chained to a sink, car bombed or the like.

1. They “You know Mr. Zano?” he asked.

nd they “No,” I told him.

I didn’t I mean, I knew several Zanos, including Uncle Vito and Dom’s
cousin Ren Zano, but I could call both of them friends and neither
low my would kidnap me.

low my He looked at his friend then back at me. “Mr. Zano knows you.”

: I liked “Okay,” I agreed, even though I knew no kidnapping, having
henchmen “Mr. Zano.”

ring ill- “Mr. Zano also knows you were at Dominic’s house last night with
the butt Are you like The Law?” he asked.

“Law” was Jules’s street name. Jules was a social worker and mon
she’d started a rather successful one-woman vigilante operation agai
drug dealers in the city. This was part of why she was shot. She also
e I was with Lee’s boys for a few days and did what she did with them so
r would significantly enhanced her street cred. She didn’t do that anymore
because apparently she hadn’t been forgotten.

of more “No,” I repeated.

hen the “What were you two doin’ there?” he went on.

d Luke “Sissy Vincetti is my friend. She left Dom and she wanted some
stuff. We went to get it for her,” I lied.

He looked at his partner as if his partner could confirm my sto
partner shrugged. The guy talking to me lost interest in our conversat
rned to turned back to the front.

I looked out the window, trying not to hyperventilate as we pull
iten up,

stop at a red light, and my eyes moved across the street.

Brightly lit and totally still open was a Walgreens.

I looked to my door. It was unlocked.

shit-hot I looked to my kidnappers. They weren't paying any attention to m

of them I didn't know Mr. Zano, but I knew anyone who sent two big goo

a woman was someone I didn't really want to talk to. I'd also heard o

show once that it was actually hard to shoot someone, considering

beefy-were little tiny things, targets were usually moving and most people w
shots.

h Stark. I sighed, said a little prayer, promised myself that tomorrow
drawing up a will, opened my door and took off like a shot.

ths ago "What the fuck!" one of the guys shouted.

inst the I zigzagged across Broadway, throwing my arms out as I got fr
workedsouthbound lane, where the traffic was stopped, to the northboun
well itwhere traffic was flowing. Cars honked and swerved and I ran in m
re, butheeled sandals as best as I could.

I hit the sidewalk and heard him pounding behind me, more cars b
and I was worried he was close.

Damn, damn, damn it!

of her I kept going, not looking back. The automatic door swooped ope
ran directly to the cash register.

ry. His I stopped, bent over, breathing heavily as the cashier said to me, "I
ion andall right?"

I looked at the doors.

ed to a The Passenger Seat Guy was stopped outside the door and glari

pointed at me, moving his mouth saying something I couldn't hear, and he turned and jogged away.

I watched him go, memorizing as much as I could about what he was wearing and how he looked.

When he disappeared, I turned to the cashier and said, "I've just been kidnapped. I need you to phone the police."

bullets



IN THE NEXT FIFTEEN MINUTES, I met both Roxie's boyfriend, Hank (he looked like a Nightingale, tall, lean and handsome as all get out) and Eddie's boyfriend, Eddie (he was Mexican American, also tall, also lean and also hot). They were both cops and they were the first to the scene after the car.

Two minutes later, Luke's Porsche glided in and parked in the lined area right at the front doors next to Eddie's red Dodge Ram.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

He strode through the doors and all the Walgreens employees took a step back after one glance at him. I figured they did this not only because he looked like he wanted to rip someone's head off, but also because he looked like he *could*.

One of the cops straightened when Luke arrived at our huddle and I was sitting (more like shaking like a fucking leaf) on one of the cash registers and all the cops were surrounding me.

"Stark," the uniform cop greeted.

"You all right?" Luke ignored him and asked me.

I nodded.

ing. He

nd then “You know her?” the other uniform asked.

“Yeah,” Luke bit off.

he was There were two uniform cops, one youngish-looking white guy and a handsome black guy. They looked at Luke, then at me, then at the waitress who had been staring at me.

“Oh shit,” the white cop said.

“This your woman?” the black cop asked.

ink (he

“Yeah,” Luke answered.

nd Jet’s

fucking

“I am *not* your woman,” I snapped.

e squad

“Oh shit,” the white cop repeated.

Eddie, standing beside me, chuckled. Hank, standing by Eddie, looked at the yellow ceiling.

“We gotta take her to the station. Take her statement, show her the mugshot, and give her a few shots,” the white cop said.

κ a step “I’ll take her to the station,” Luke told them.

ause he “Works for me,” the black cop said.

looked

“Wait!” I cried, jumping off the counter. “Aren’t I supposed to go with you guys?”

. I was

They were already on the move.

register

“You can go with Stark,” the black cop told me.

“What if I don’t want to go with Stark?” I asked.

The black cop looked at Luke and grinned. Then his grin swung away but he didn’t answer. He and the other uniform walked away.

“Go on vacation,” Hank advised Luke, also moving toward the door.

“Seriously, Luke. Just pack her up and go. Let whatever this is blow
Come back in a month.”

nd one “That’s good advice,” Eddie agreed, following Hank. “Go somewh
y Luke away. Australia.”

Then they were both gone.

I stood, still trembling, because let us not forget I’d just been kidn
and I watched the automatic doors close behind Eddie.

My eyes moved to Luke.

“Let’s go,” he said.

His hand came out, palm up, toward me.

oked at I swear to God, I had no control over what I did next. I looke
strong hand and walked forward, ignoring the hand. I moved right by
er mug kept walking until I collided with his hard body, head on. I shoved my
his chest, grabbed fistfuls of his shirt right next to my cheeks and l
while I let the tremors overwhelm me.

Within a second of making contact with his body, Luke’s arms w
around me.

go with Tight.

to me,

e door.

“Seriously, Luke. Just pack her up and go. Let whatever this is blow over. Come back in a month.”

“That’s good advice,” Eddie agreed, following Hank. “Go somewhere far away. Australia.”

Then they were both gone.

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My eyes moved to Luke.

“Let’s go,” he said.

His hand came out, palm up, toward me.

I swear to God, I had no control over what I did next. I looked at his strong hand and walked forward, ignoring the hand. I moved right by it and kept walking until I collided with his hard body, head on. I shoved my face in his chest, grabbed fistfuls of his shirt right next to my cheeks and held on while I let the tremors overwhelm me.

Within a second of making contact with his body, Luke’s arms wrapped around me.

Tight.

SEVEN



PINK LADY SANDY

For the next year of my life (not really), I looked at seven million hundred thousand and forty-four (not really) mug shots.

I found the pictures of both the guys who kidnapped me. The identification of them made Luke's mouth get tight when he saw their faces. I didn't ask why, mainly because I didn't want to know.

This was after I told a nice, older man, named Detective Jimmy I told him my kidnapping story. This short story took a lot longer because Indy, Shirleen, Daisy and Jules all phoned me while I was telling it to find out if I was okay. I was guessing Jet and Roxie got the story from Eddie and Ally and Shirleen, Daisy and Jules got my number from Indy or Ally.

After this was all over, Luke took me to his Porsche. We strapped in and the Porsche glided to the street (even post-kidnapping I had to appreciate the ride was sweet) and I requested quietly, "Please take me home."

Luke didn't answer. What he did do was drive through LoDo, Speer Boulevard all the way into the Highlands, which led to my house. In front of my house I got out of the car and made my way to the door. Luke took the keys from my hand at the door, let us in and stopped me just inside.

"Stay here, I'm gonna check the house," he ordered.

I did as I was told.

When he was done, he came back to me and closed the door.

“Ava.”

I looked up at him.

“I’m spendin’ the night.”

I let out a breath.

Thank you *God*.

on, two

I nodded.

ie. My
faces. I

He watched me a beat and said, “I’m gonna do a scan
neighborhood. Lock the door behind me.”

I nodded again. He turned to leave.

Marker,

“Luke?”

y, Ally,

He turned back.

out if I

l Hank,

“You should park your Porsche in my garage. This neighborhood
good.”

“Got an extra remote?”

l in and

iate the

I took him to the kitchen, dug through my junk drawer and gave l
extra remote and an extra set of keys.

He left. I locked the door behind him.

taking

ouse. In

r. Luke

inside.

I walked upstairs and went straight to the linen closet, pulling
bedding and extra pillows for the futon. My futon was a fancy one
armrests and everything. It was a pain in the ass to get open because
weighed a ton. I figured I’d make the bed when Luke got back
probably be able to pull it out by glaring at it.

I went to my bedroom and dropped the Roman blinds. I'd painted the bedroom in a soft eggshell blue. It had a white bed stand. Solid wood slats, which meant no way to cuff me to it, which was not why I bought it but that had now become an additional bonus.

There were two thin white nightstands on either side, a white dressing table with a big mirror and a tall, narrow seven-drawer lingerie dresser.

The sheets on the bed were pale green, the bedspread and pillow covers were a pattern of eggshell blue and green that matched the tile around the fireplace.

The big windows had wispy white curtains and custom-made blinds.

I took one look at my room and decided I was never going to live here ever again, in my whole fucking life.

Unfortunately, before I could do that I had to take out my contacts.

I pulled off my silver and dropped it on the dressing table, unbuckled and flipped off my shoes, yanked the scarf out of my belt loops and pulled down my T-shirt. I took out my barrette and arranged my hair up in a messy bun on top of my head.

I didn't know how long it took to "scan the neighborhood" and pick up the Porsche, but, considering Luke was likely thorough in his job, I figured it would take a while. Therefore, I thought I was safe (and alone) in the house for that while.

What could I say? I'd just been kidnapped by beefy Italian bad guys. I wasn't thinking clearly.

I walked barefoot in my jeans and teddy-type-thing to the bathroom. I stood at the sink and looked in the mirror.

ted my “Fuck,” I said to myself.

ood, no You can say that again, Bad Ava agreed.

ught it, You shouldn’t curse, even if you have been kidnapped. It isn’t ladylike, Good Ava chastised.

lressing I ignored both of them, pulled open my medicine cabinet and took out my contact solution. I had just readied the case with solution when I heard a faint movement at the bathroom door.

und the I whirled and shrieked (yes, girlie *shrieked*), my hand coming up to my chest.

Roman Luke stood there.

eave it, Okay, so maybe it didn’t take long to scan the neighborhood. And seeing that I should have probably closed the bathroom door.

Luke’s eyes were on my torso, and even standing all the way across the bathroom, I could tell they were ink.

led and Ho-ly *shit*.

off my I turned back to the sink, trying to be cool. It wasn’t like I was nervous about anything. In fact, I had dresses that I wore out in public that showed my midriff and skin.

ark the I leaned into the mirror and pulled open an eye with one hand, my index finger of the other up and ready to take out the contact.

e house Luke materialized behind me in the mirror. *Close* behind me.

guys. I I poked myself in the eye.

athroom, After I quit blinking, I glared at him. I was certain he’d be laughing at me, least giving me a half-grin.

He was not. His mind was clearly on other things. I knew this with

hand, fingers splayed, hit my side and slid around my midriff. He watched its movement in the mirror.

My knees did a little wobble.

“We need to make up the futon,” I told him, deciding to pretend the wobble didn’t happen.

“Why?” he asked.

“So you can sleep there,” I replied, and successfully (thank God) got my contact out the contact.

“I’m sleepin’ with you,” he said, his hand sliding further across my midriff toward my other side, which meant to accommodate its motion and my body moved back into his.

“No you aren’t.”

“Yes I am.”

“Luke, I don’t want to argue about this.”

His eyes moved to mine in the mirror. “Then don’t.”

“Shit. How did you respond to that?”

My head dropped. I started cleaning my contact in my palm and used my net to try and pretend everything else that was happening to me wasn’t happening (rapid heartbeat, blood warming, nipples hardening) just the knee wobble.

I pulled at his arm to lean in to the mirror to take out the other contact. He watched me do this, which, I might add, was supremely nerve-wracking. I got the contact on the first go and leaned back, squirting solution on it with my palm to clean it. Luke’s hand slid up to the side of my breast so his fingers were pressed underneath both of them.

is eyes There was the knee wobble again.

Hell and damnation.

I looked at us in the mirror and we were fuzzy. But even fuzzy
and the what I saw.

“Luke.”

I watched as his head bent and felt as his mouth hit my neck.

) pulled “I like this,” he said against my neck and showed me what he m
rubbing his thumb along the side of my breast.

oss my It felt nice.

ion my I closed my eyes then opened them again.

“Noah liked it too,” I told him, calmly morphing into Barlow Supe
but my heart was beating so fast I thought it would tear right out of m
and I was finding it hard to breathe. But none of the physical manife
of Luke’s touch stopped me. “He liked it a lot. So much, it’s kinda sur
he didn’t steal it when he cleaned out my bank accounts, took all my
Ella’s gold jewelry and disappeared.”

videned I felt and saw Luke’s head come up and I was pretty certain
y body looking at me in the mirror.

ig), not “He should have taken it, a memento of good times,” I went on, se
Barlow Super Bitch.

tact. He “Let’s go back to the part about cleaning out your bank accounts,”
g. I got mouth was close to my ear and I actually felt his deep voice rumble t
: in my my body.

forearm “Five thousand, three hundred and twenty-five dollars, everythin
in savings and checking. It took him days of maximum ATM withd

but you have to hand it to him, he stuck to it.”

I ignored the scary, pissed-off life force emanating from Luke the
I liked the room as I opened the medicine cabinet. I replaced the solution and
for the bottle that I knew was my face soap, and as I did this Luke
dropped away.

Then I felt Luke’s presence move away.

When I knew he was gone (and peeked to check), I put both my h
eant by the basin and dropped my head.

Now, that wasn’t nice, Good Ava sounded disappointed.

It wasn’t, Bad Ava, surprisingly, agreed.

“Shut up,” I whispered.

r Bitch,
y chest I washed my face, brushed my teeth, slathered with moisturizer ar
stations to my room.

rprising I closed the door this time and changed into my pajamas (cream
Auntiesatin, drawstring pants and a matching camisole with spaghetti straps,
under my breasts and a low, straight back that cut just under my sl
he was blades). I got in bed and pulled up the covers.

I didn’t know where Luke was, but I told myself I didn’t care, not
eriously now I was lying to myself.

I was planning my strategy to get all men out of my life (which in
Luke’s gaining back every one of those seventy-five pounds—and then sor
through eating my way through the entire inventory of LaMar’s donuts every
a month, as well as firing Riley) when the door opened and Luke walk

g I had The house behind him was dark and so was the room. As I watc
lrawals, shadowy form move, he walked right to the bed and sat on the edge li

been in my room hundreds of times.

at filled “Luke, the futon is in the second bedroom,” I informed him.

I aimed I heard his boot hit the floor.

e’s arm “Or, you can sleep on the couch downstairs,” I went on.

I heard his other boot hit the floor.

ands to “There’s pillows and blankets on the futon. I got them out,” I perse

He leaned forward a bit, lifted his arms so his hands went betw
shoulder blades and he tugged off his tee.

“Luke!”

He stood and for a second I thought he was going to leave. Also, I
admit, for a second I felt unbelievably disappointed.

nd went Instead, he dropped his cargo pants and I heard his belt hit the floo

Holy crap!

, silky- Then he pulled the covers back and settled on his back in the bed.
gathers

houlder I came up on an elbow and glared at him, or in his general di
“You aren’t sleeping here.”

ing that “What’s Noah’s last name?”

I blinked in the darkness.

cluded “Excuse me?” I asked.

ne—by “His last name,” Luke repeated.

day for “Dexter, why?”

ed in. “He white?”

hed his “Sorry?”

ke he’d “Caucasian.”

“Yes,” I answered, deciding to move away from this strange turn of conversation. “About the futon—”

“Do you know his birthdate?”

“Luke—”

“Ava, what’s his fucking birthday?”

“July twenty-third. Why are you asking me this?”

“You got a social security number?”

I felt a thrill slide through me as I cottoned on to the purpose of the interrogation and I shot up to a sitting position in the bed.

“Don’t you—!” I started to protest, but Luke sat up too, faster than I had seen anyone move, giving new meaning to “abs of steel.” In the blink of an eye I found myself on my back, Luke full body on top of me.

“Get off me!” I shouted, bucking my body under his.

“This Noah guy’s got her.”

I was back to blinking, so confused I stilled.

“Got who?” I asked.

“The old Ava.”

Instantly I felt the tears stinging my eyes, all fight left me and I turned my head to the side.

His hands came to either side of my face and he turned it back.

“He took her when he disappeared, didn’t he?” Luke asked, his voice gentle.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

His gentle voice got me every fucking time.

1 of the “A piece of her,” I whispered. Do *not* ask me why, but I did (I kne
The Voice).

“Who’s got the other pieces?”

I shook my head against his hands. I didn’t think the minuscule am
information I shared on Noah boded well for Noah’s future. Luke
realizing, was not the kind of guy who fucked around. I couldn’t imag
Noah was still in town, but I knew Rick and Dave were and I didn
Luke hunting them down and doing whatever. They were jerks, but the
: of his also history.

“Please, get off me,” I said softly.

han I’d “Ava, I spent years doin’ some crazy shit and gettin’ paid well for
k of an enough that by the time I came back to Denver for my father’s fu
could retire.”

Ho-ly shit.

He’d been twenty-eight! What kind of “crazy shit” paid you enc
retire at twenty-eight?

I sucked in breath and stared.

Luke kept talking. “To keep from gettin’ bored, because I like it, l
ned my I’m good at it and because Lee pays me a shitload of money to do it, I
could walk away from it tomorrow and live a good life, even takin’
someone along the way.”

s voice Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

I was digging deeper than ever to bury *that*.

“I’d never fuck you over, steal your money. No fuckin’ way,” he fi

w why, And even deeper to bury that.

“Please, Luke, get off me.”

To my surprise he did, sliding off to my side. I immediately turned around and scooted away several inches. He wanted to sleep with me, I was fine, we’d sleep. Then tomorrow, I was moving to Wyoming.

ine that Luke had other ideas.

’t want His arm slid under me, hooked at my waist and hauled me back to his body. The second I made contact, his body pressed into mine and his arm went around me.

“I want her back,” he said into my hair, and his words made me shiver. Well I had to close my eyes tight to stop my tears and my thoughts.

neral, I He went on, “I’ve decided I like the bitchy Ava. The way you throw your attitude around is sexy as hell, but I still want the old Ava back.”

ough to “She’s gone,” I whispered again. Do *not* ask me why.

His arms tightened and his mouth came to my ear.

“She’s right here.”



because YOU WOULD HAVE THOUGHT I’d never get to sleep after that, but somehow I did.

care of Deeper in the night, when it was still dark, my body moved, again of its own volition.

Sometime during the night we’d come face-to-face. Arms around me, Luke rolled me over his body and to his other side. Again he hooked his arm over his hip.

nished. “Why do you do that?” I whispered sleepily as I wrapped my arm

his waist, slid the fingers of my other hand into the hair at his chest, pressed in close to his warm, hard body.

ned my
with me He might have answered, but I didn't hear him because I was back to sleep.



I WOKE and the light was trying to force its way through my shades.

into his
is other I was back in the position I'd woken up in yesterday, tight against his side, arm wrapped around his abs, leg thrown over his thighs.

Shit.

iver. I tilted my head and looked at him to see that he was still asleep. I don't have clear vision, but even with the mini-blur, his face in sleep somehow looked hard.

ow your I rolled away and he moved into the space I left. I stilled and looked at him, but he didn't wake.

I grabbed my glasses (kickass, black-rimmed, oval-framed, D&C), went to the nightstand, yanked my thin, yellow-green cotton cardigan off the back of the door and got the hell out of there.

ehow I I went to the bathroom, washed my face, brushed and flossed and pulled my hair in a less-messy-but-still-tangled bundle on top of my head.

not of I put on my glasses and shrugged on the cardigan as I went downstairs to the kitchen, grabbed myself a cold Diet Coke from the fridge and some coffee. I cut up fruit, enough for both Luke and me, tossed his in a bowl, and put it in the fridge. I dumped a couple of globs of yogurt on my legs, sprinkled it with my homemade granola (delicious with tons of sesame seeds and almonds) and did what I did every morning when it was semi-warm.

around I took my bowl and diet and went to the back porch. I sat on the

rest and cushion of my wicker loveseat with my heels to the edge and my
pointed skyward. Then I stared at the sun hitting my yard and, while
already planned my day.

First up, get rid of Luke.

Second, go workout with Riley.

Third, get some work done.

Luke's Fourth, learn how to become a lesbian.

"Babe," I heard, and my head twisted to see Luke standing in the
the porch wearing nothing but his cargo pants, belt not done (and neither
I didn't the top button) and an intriguing trail of black hair disappearing in
ow still waistband.

God, he was fucking *hot*.

oked at So much for becoming a lesbian.

"Hey," I said.

;) from He gave me a sexy half-grin.

ook on I got up and walked to him. He moved out of my way as I went in
I settled kitchen and put my empty bowl in the sink.

"You want coffee?" I asked.

stairs to "Yeah."

started He was standing, arms crossed, hip against the counter, watching
a bowl move.

1 mine, Ee-yikes!

e seeds I pulled down a cup ignoring his eyes on me, or trying and, admittedly,
n. failing. "You want some breakfast? Fruit, yogurt and granola?"

2 bright

7 knees “Sounds good.”

eating, I nodded and poured coffee. “Do you take sugar or milk?”

“Black.”

I nodded again and handed him his coffee without looking at him. I went to the fridge to get his fruit and the yogurt, all the while gabbing.

“Sofia tried to start drinking coffee at twelve, she thought it was weird, so I told him just for something to say because I was flipping way the hell out. I went to the door to set the bowl down, grabbed a spoon from the drawer and opened the door. She was like, ‘Mom told her if she did she would grow chest hair.’ My eyes moved to his chest then lifted to his face. “When did you start drinking coffee?” I asked.

“When I was twelve.”

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it, it was funny.

I started to pile globs of yogurt on his fruit, still smiling.

“Babe,” he called.

“What?” I kept my head bent to my task.

into the “Ava.”

I turned to him, still smiling.

I should have paid attention to what was happening with Luke and the yogurt.

ing me His face was hard but his eyes were ink.

Uh-oh.

“Luke—”

ittedly, He pulled the yogurt out of my hand, put it on the counter and then took the spoon and tossed it in the bowl.

I moved to take a step back, again reacting too late. He leaned in, went around my waist and he drew me to his body. His other hand went to my back and into the hair at the base of my head.

Then I I pulled back and his arms tightened, moving me forward.

“This isn’t a good idea,” I whispered, watching his lips come toward me.

cool,” I “This is a fucking great idea,” he muttered.

ll out. I Then he kissed me.

yogurt. For your information, the hard kiss Luke gave me to shut me up was nothing like this.

ked. Yes, his lips were hard, but they were also effective.

Coupled with his tongue, they were ultra-effective.

It took, like, two seconds before my knees buckled. He took my arms and I lifted my arms to wrap them around his neck, the fingers of one hand sliding across his spiky hair.

At first he teased me with his tongue, playing with me, making me want and then taking it away, so I went after it. The minute my tongue entered his mouth, he sucked it in deeper.

not the Holy...fucking...shit.

I didn’t mean to, but I moaned into his mouth. I got up on tiptoes and pressed myself against him full frontal.

When I did that, his head slanted and he leaned in. His hand in my hair moved down so that his arm was wrapped around my shoulder blades, one hand at my armpit, the other one still sliced around my waist. Both arms tightened and my back arched with his lean pressing my whole torso and hips into him.

The kiss went wild. He didn’t tease anymore. He meant serious business.

his arm and I liked Luke's serious business, and so did my body.

vent up Finally, he tore his mouth from mine and stared at me, his eyes so warm and inky it was not funny. They were molten. I was uncontrollable Luke Lip Fog, mainly because his lips had been on my rd me. I was staring at him eyes half-mast, lips parted.

"Christ," he bit off tersely, his hands going down over my ass.

He lifted me up and I threw my legs around his hips and tensed n up was around his neck. Before I could think a single thought, he kissed m and started walking.

I didn't know how someone could kiss someone while carrying th walking through three rooms, but he did it. I thought we were going couch in the living room (that was where I would have headed) but he weight straight through my living room to the stairwell entry.

ie hand I didn't care where we were going. Lucas Stark was kissing r tongue in my mouth, my special girl parts pressed against his hard bo want it He could have taken me to the moon and I wouldn't have given a shit.

red his He had one foot on the bottom stair when there was a pounding door.

Not a knock, a *pound*.

toe and He stopped walking, stopped kissing me and his head jerked bac mine lifted up. We looked at each other.

ny hair The pounding came again, louder and more insistent this time.

fingers "What the fuck?" Luke muttered.

ghtened "Ava, open the door! I know you're on the back porch!" Sissy : to his. and then pounded again while my mouth dropped open. What on ea business

Sissy doing there? “Don’t make me walk back there, I have suitcase
beyond yelled.

in an Oh shit.

lips, so “Jesus Christ,” Luke mumbled, and he dropped me to my feet.

“That’s Sissy,” I told him over the pounding.

“No kidding.” He was joking, but he wasn’t laughing.

my arms
e again Eek.

Someone was not happy to be interrupted.

em and *I’m not happy either,* Bad Ava complained.

to my Good Ava had no comment.

walked I skirted past him to the door, but before I could open it, he pulled
back, arm at my waist.

me, his “What are you doing?” I asked over the pounding as he shoved me
y parts.him, unlocked the deadbolt and the chain and opened the door.

Sissy was standing there, arm up, hand in mid-pound. She stopped
g at the when she caught sight of Luke, and she gawked. Full on, mouth open
bugged out, *gawked*.

“Holy crap,” she breathed.

k while “Sissy, what are you doing here?” I asked, peeking around Luke’s

Sissy (and I could see the effort it took her) tore her eyes from
chested Luke and looked at me.

She took in my messy hair, the glasses I wore only at home (if
shouted help it) and pajamas and shouted, “Holy *crap!*”

rth was I slid in front of Luke, grabbed Sissy’s still upraised wrist and pulled

is!” she into the entryway.

“What are you doing here?” I repeated.

She was looking between Luke and me and blinking slowly.

“What?” she asked in a dazed voice.

“You’re supposed to be in Wyoming,” I told her.

She focused on me. “The cops called, said you were kidnapped. I had to do with Dom and they thought whoever it was might come a next, the Denver boys warned the local authorities in Wyoming and came by my mom’s house to talk about protection. I packed up early morning and hauled ass down here.” Then realizing where she was current scenario of our lives her eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you tell lled me were kidnapped?”

Uh-oh.

behind “Um...” I mumbled.

ed dead “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were kidnapped.”

ed, eyes “Sissy, honey—”

“When a girl gets laid, she tells her best friend. When a girl finds she tells her best friend. When a girl finds a kick-ass shade of nail pol tells her best friend. And, I might add, when a girl gets kidnapped, s body. *her best friend!*” Sissy was shouting when she finished.

n bare- “Sissy, calm down.”

I could Luke. “I will not calm down.” She was still yelling and she turned her “Where were you when this happened, stud?”

lled her Oh no. Sissy was channeling Olivia Newton-John from *Grease*. never good when Sissy channeled Sandy’s Pink Lady from the finale

didn't normally lose her temper; usually sweet as pie, totally Sandy. She had not a single thread of Rizzo in her. When Sissy channeled Pink Lady the results were disastrous.

I chanced a glance at Luke and he was smiling his sexy half-grin.
Shit.

Since it "Luke, can you get her bags?" I asked and didn't wait for his response. I pulled Sissy into and through the living room directly to the kitchen.

and they I stopped and turned to her.

rly this "Pull yourself together," I hissed.

and the "Pull myself...pull myself..." she stammered, eyes wide. "Pull me yourself together!" she shouted then, still shouting, she cried, "Last time I talked to you, you were going out on the town, had everything sorted with the hot private eye guys and were sworn off men forever. Hours later, I'd been kidnapped, Mr. Beefcake's in there barely clothed and you're wearing pajamas and glasses for God's sake!" She stopped and looked at me with mock confusion. "Have I entered an alternate universe?"

a lump, "I haven't had a chance to call."

ish, she "That's no excuse."

he tells "We got home late."

"We?"

"Sissy!"

eyes to She glared at me. Then I watched as her face fell, the anger faded and her eyes started shimmering and Pink Lady Sandy was a memory.

It was "I got my best friend kidnapped," she whispered and then burst into tears.

Sissy I pulled her into my arms and held on tight. As I absorbed her sobs,

She had sobbed into my body, I double-vowed revenge against Dominic and Sandy, Vincetti (rat-bastard).

“Sissy,” I murmured into the top of her hair, and that was when Luke leaning against the doorframe between the living and dining room. He’d put on a T-shirt and done up his belt. His eyes were on me and I saw the warmth in them from across the room.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

“You could have been hurt,” Sissy mumbled.

“I wasn’t,” I said, totally unable to take my eyes from Luke.

“You could have,” Sissy went on.

“I’m fine,” I assured her.

She looked up at me, saw my eyes and followed them to Luke. She realized what she was about, pulled out of my arms and swiped at her face. “Hey, Luke,” Sissy said in belated greeting, and I had to press my lips together not to laugh.

“Sissy,” Luke replied.

“Sorry I yelled at you,” she told him.

He did a single shoulder shrug.

“I’m usually not this loud,” she went on.

He did the half-grin. Sissy stared, transfixed at all that was Luke. I saw my eyes and caught a look at the clock on the wall.

“Shit!” I shouted. “I’m supposed to meet Riley in twenty minutes. I made a mad dash out of the kitchen and then halted and whirled. I got coffee, get settled, I’ll be back in a couple of hours and we’ll talk, shaking Sissy, and then whirled again and restarted the dash.”

fucking I got four feet and was caught short when Luke threw an arm out a
 about to pass him, so it caught me at my waist.

I I saw I let out an “oof” and heard Luke say, “Just a minute,” to Sis
 rooms. grabbed my hand and dragged me through the living room, up the sta
 I could to the bedroom.

I allowed this, mainly because I didn’t want Sissy to hear me stru
 and also I was mentally counting to ten.

When he’d closed the door to the bedroom, I turned on him.

Half-Grin, Amused Luke was gone, brows drawn, Pissed-Off Luk
 place.

“What was that?” I asked, foolishly ignoring Pissed-Off Luke.

ke. She “I thought I made myself clear about Riley.”

face. “He’s my personal trainer.”

my lips “He wants to fuck you.”

I looked at the ceiling seeking divine intervention.

When none was to be had, I looked back at Luke. “He’s a friend.”

“He wants to fuck you,” Luke repeated.

“Okay then, he wants to fuck me. He’s not *going* to fuck me. N
 going to fuck me.”

I rolled “I’m gonna fuck you.”

I put my hands to my hips and leaned forward. Yes, now Pissed-O
 ites!” I “Luke, get it through your head. You and me, not...gonna...happ

“Have His brows went up. “So tell me, what was that ten minutes ago?”

” I told
 Hmm.

is I was He had a point.

“Temporary insanity,” I answered.

ssy. He “Because you’ve sworn off men?”

airs and Hell and damnation.

iggling, Sissy and her Pink Lady Sandy big mouth.

“Yes,” I snapped.

We stared at each other, Pissed-Off Luke vs. Pissed-Off Ava, the b
the century.

e in his Then to my surprise (and discomfort), he grinned. Not a half-grin
fledged one.

I did not take this as a good sign.

“What’s with the grin?” I asked, wary.

“I like this,” he told me.

“What?”

Instead of answering my question, looking very pleased about sor
he said, “I’m gonna enjoy this.”

“*What?*” I snapped.

o one’s Again he didn’t answer my question.

Instead, he said, “We still haven’t discussed your payment.”

I threw up my hands.

ff Ava. Jeez.

n.”

I couldn’t take anymore.

“Oh for goodness sakes!” I cried and started to move toward the cl
don’t have time for this. I have things to do.”

He caught me and swung me into his body. Both his arms locked my waist and he looked down at me.

“I’ll take you to the gym. After you’re done, I’ll pick you up. I don’t want you going anywhere alone, so whatever you gotta do, wherever you go, I’ll be there. Either I take you or I’ll arrange for someone to do it. Same with Sissy. Last night you likely pissed off some pretty dangerous people. I’m not around with this.”

“Fine,” I clipped, mainly so he would let me go, but also so I wouldn’t have to think about dangerous people being pissed off at me, and so I could get to the gym. It was rude to be late.

“Tonight, we talk about your payment.”

“Fine,” I lied, totally not going to talk about payment or be anywhere near Luke that night.

He shook his head while it dropped toward mine and I knew he was lying.

His face an inch away from mine he said, “If you think I’m gonna go back on that promise you made me in the kitchen, think again.”

“I didn’t make any promise.”

“Oh yeah you did.”

I gave up. “Luke, let me go. I’m going to be late.”

He kept looking at me then his eyes got ultra-warm and he murmured, “Yeah, I’m gonna enjoy this.”

Shit.

Reset. “I

around

i't want
otta go,
y. Last
fuckin'

ouldn't
I could

ywhere

knew I

let you

mured,

EIGHT



GET THE BUSINESS

This was my morning:

Luke took me to the gym. Sissy decided to go with, so we all t out to the garage. Luke took the keys to *my* car out of *my* hand and d *he* was going to drive. Standing outside of the garage we had a fight who was going to drive.

Luke won.

Then Luke drove us to the gym. Luke got out when we got ther told him he didn't need to walk us into the gym. Standing by my Rover, we got in a fight about whether he was going to walk us into t or not.

Luke won.

Then when we got *into* the gym, Luke asked to talk to Riley p "outside." Standing in the reception area of the gym, Luke and I got in about him talking to Riley privately "outside."

Luke won.

I waited until they returned, both stony-faced with the addition c looking way, *way* pissed off and I opened my mouth to give it to L being a he-man, tough guy jerk when he grabbed my purse. I stared, st

my mouth open, as he dug through my purse, took out my phone and to hit buttons.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Programming my numbers into your phone. Call me when you’re

I snatched my purse out of his hand, which he allowed. Then I w the phone, which he didn’t allow and stopped me by pinning me to hi with one of his arms and holding my struggling body while he beeped with the phone held behind my back.

trudged He let me go and handed me my phone.

leclared “I hate you,” I snapped.

it about “No you don’t,” he replied calmly.

He grabbed the back of my neck, yanked me into his body and kis hard, open-mouthed and hot until my knees buckled and I melted into l

e and I Then he let me go, gave me a half-grin, touched my nose and left.

Range Jerk.

he gym I whirled around and Sissy was standing there.

“Oh my God, you totally need to fuck him or you’re go spontaneously combust,” she said.

rivatey Argh!

a fight

Needless to say, my workout nearly kicked my ass. I was so pur and Riley was so pissed off, I pushed myself hard and he ran me ra tried to talk to Riley a couple of times, but he wasn’t in a talkative mo of Riley was in a kick Ava’s ass mood, therefore I quit trying to talk to him uke for couldn’t talk at all because I was breathing too hard.

ill with

After we were done, I called Luke, saying only, “We’re done,”

started hung up on him.

Ha!

We showered and changed into normal clothes and I took my sweet time. I did my hair, my makeup, and I put on a pair of jeans, a cornflower-blue blouse with a silver-thread design on the front, a square neckline and cap sleeves and finished my ensemble with silvery-blue flip-flops, because seriously, Luke was in the picture.

him and thought he was a jerk, but I had been crushing on him since eighth grade. I wasn't going to look like garbage when he was hanging around.

I breezed through the reception area, but Luke wasn't in the reception area. He was waiting outside in the Range Rover, which made my effort "breezing" moot.

sed me,
him. We got in the Range Rover and Sissy suggested happily, "I know, let's get some coffee!"

I turned in my seat and glared at her. She grinned at me. Luke took me to Fortnum's.

We got there and everyone was there. Indy, Ally, Daisy, Shirleen, Jet, Roxie, Vance, some guy who looked a lot like Hank (who I found out was Lee, Indy's fiancé and Luke's boss), and even Matt.

Shirleen took one look at me and announced, "Nope. They haven't picked up it yet. You're out," she said to Matt and then smiled at me. "I'm still invested in my money down that you get the business on Monday."

ood. He I felt the heat hit my face just as my stomach dropped.

when I Sissy, to my total disbelief, burst out laughing and asked, "Which ones are free? I want in."

then I

Oh...my...God!

“That’s it!” I yelled at her. “You aren’t my best friend anymore. I’m filing for best friend divorce.”

Sissy just kept laughing.

“You must be Sissy. Come here, child, sit by Shirleen. I think Wednesday open, but that’s nearly a whole *week* after this all started. Good odds,” Shirleen informed her.

Everyone was staring at us so I whirled on Luke who was standing next to me. “This is all your fault.”

“Babe,” he replied, his eyes warm, his tone gentle and affectionate. “Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.”

I like it when he calls us “babe.” It’s sweet, Good Ava said.

It isn’t sweet, it’s HOT, Bad Ava contradicted.

I dropped my head and looked at my toes. They were painted hot pink. I inspected them because if I was thinking about my toenail color I wouldn’t think about how my life had gone out of my control.

This wasn’t a smart thing to do, letting my guard down when Luke was so close. His boots came into my vision very close to my toes and his hands wrapped around the back of my neck. His fingers started to knead my muscles and I lifted my eyes to his.

“You’re tight,” he said low, eyes no longer just warm but ultra-warm.

“Are you surprised?” I snapped. “My life is total shit. I’m completely stressed out.”

His fingers kept kneading, but he also put a different kind of pressure on my neck there so that I leaned closer to him. I had to tilt my head back further, and

didn't topple over my hands went to his stomach, which, by the way, was as hard as a rock.

He tipped his face to mine and murmured, "After we talk tonight, I'll give you a rubdown."

Ho-ly crap.

A rubdown from Lucas Stark. I had barely processed the kiss-an-ally through the living room. I couldn't even begin to contemplate a rubdown behind my back. I felt my nipples tingle.

"I need cookies," I told him to move talk away from rubdowns. "Cookies are the only thing that works on stress."

That and tequila, but I wasn't going to get snocked anywhere near Luke. I lost all inhibitions when I got snocked and that would *not* be good.

The warmth in his eyes was tinged with amusement. "I'll also give you cookies."

"Nutter Butters and Chips Ahoy. Not the soft ones, the hard cookies I ordered, blathering on for some ungodly reason. "And those Peppermint Farms Milano thingies. And Oreos with double stuff, but not dipped in chocolate, because that's too much of a good thing. And if I have Oreos, I have to have milk. I can't eat Oreos without milk."

He was laughing now, softly. I liked the sound and I liked that he was making me laugh. I'd always liked it when I made him laugh.

Boy, was I screwed.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"I think that'll do it."

His eyes moved from me to across the room then back to me. "Vari-

ay, was I got shit to do. Stay here. If you go home or anywhere, go with Lee Duke or Tex.”

I’ll give I knew Duke. He’d worked at Fortnum’s for years and was like second father. He was an old Harley guy, long gray braid, gray beard, wearing a black leather vest and a red bandana wrapped around his forehead.

I didn’t know any Tex.

“Tex?”

“Coffee guy,” Luke told me. “You might have one of his coffees. Cookies soothe the cookie craving.”

“*Nothing* soothes the cookie craving.”

His face got even closer. “I know something that’ll soothe the good. craving.”

Eek!

I walked right into that one.

New topic!

“What are you and Vance gonna do?” I asked.

“Hunt down Vincetti and Dexter.”

My already tight muscles turned to steel. “Luke—” I started, touched his lips to mine to stop me from speaking.

“Gotta go,” he said.

My hands grabbed fistfuls of his T-shirt so he wouldn’t move. “V you hunting down Noah?”

Without hesitation he gave me an answer that made the world tilt under my feet.

nce and

3, Matt, “He took a piece of you. I’m gonna find him and get it back.”

Oh my goodness gracious. I LOVE him, Good Ava trilled.

Indy’s
always
rehead.
“Luke,” I whispered, not knowing what I was feeling, just knowin
really, *really* nice.

He squeezed my neck one last time, then his fingers wrapped around
wrists, pulled them away from his shirt and he said, “Later.”

It may
Then he was gone.

I watched the door close behind him and Vance.

cookie
“Oowee, now I’m thinking Monday’s odds aren’t good,” Shirlee
on me, declared to the room.



THIS WAS MY AFTERNOON:

Tex, the coffee guy, was a huge, blond man with a wild russet beard
wilder eyes and a very loud voice. And Luke was right, Tex made
skinny vanilla latte and it was so good, it totally soothed the cookie craving.

Lee and Matt escorted all the girls to Las Delicias and we had lunch
but he food. Lee, by the way, was absolutely gorgeous and very nice, but even
kind of scared me. He was intense the way Luke was intense. A tough
bad boy so deep to the core, you just knew that you did *not* mess with him.

Why are
t under
Luckily, all through lunch no one mentioned when I was going to ‘
business.” After Las Delicias, Matt followed Sissy and me home. He
walkthrough of the house before he let us in, stood and chatted for a while
and then he left.

The minute he was gone and we’d locked the door, Sissy turned

“You want to talk about Luke?” she asked.

No, I definitely didn’t want to talk about Luke. I didn’t want to talk about him, think about him or see him ever again (liar, liar, *liar*).

“I need to get some work done,” I said.

“Do you want to talk about the kidnapping?”

I shook my head and gave her a small smile. “It wasn’t as bad as it sounds.”

She stared at me a few beats to assess if I was lying, and since I wasn’t (really) she nodded. “Get some work done. I need to call my dad.”

I went upstairs and worked for a couple of hours. Around five o’clock Sissy walked in and started to sort through her suitcases. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door.

“That must be Dad,” Sissy said.

“What?”

I swiveled around in my chair. “What’s your dad doing here?”

“I’m staying with him for a couple of days.”

“What, what, *what*?”

I got out of my chair and followed her down the stairs. She was carrying one of her smaller suitcases.

“I thought you were staying with me,” I said to her.

“I was, now I’m going to stay with my dad.” She was at the door, unlocking it.

“Why?” I asked.

She opened the door so I didn’t get my answer. Though I knew

answer.

k about *Shit!*

“Hey, Dad,” she greeted.

Mr. Whitchurch smiled at his daughter and gave her a big hug. I cc
straight off he looked worried because of the strain around his mout
id as it meant Sissy must have told him what was going on and I tripled
revenge against Dom because he made Mr. Whitchurch worried.

wasn't I'd known Mr. Whitchurch since forever and liked him. It was a b
when he and Sissy's mom got divorced and Mrs. Whitchurch mc
'clock, Wyoming. Fortunately (for me), Sissy stayed in Denver with her di
es later Whitchurch and I got along great, most recently because we both hatec

“Beautiful Ava,” he said, kissing my cheek. He'd always cal
“Beautiful Ava,” even when I was Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes.

“Hey, Mr. Whitchurch.”

“Hear you been takin' care of my daughter.”

“Nothing she wouldn't do for me,” I told him.

He stared at me and sighed. “Dom's a shithead,” he said.

arrying “Dad!” Sissy snapped.

“Well, he is.” Mr. Whitchurch was not to be denied.

Sissy glared at him. He took her glare in stride. He'd been gettin
or and Glares for twenty-nine years and he knew she never meant them.

“Um, Mr. Whitchurch,” I interrupted the Sissy Glare, “can Sissy
have a second?”

ew my He looked at me a beat, correctly assessed I had something weiq
my mind and nodded. Then he took her suitcase and walked to his car.

I closed the door and turned to Sissy. “Why didn’t you tell me you were going to stay with your dad?”

“I wasn’t going to stay with him.”

“Well, you’re staying with him,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, *now*,” she returned.

“Why now?” I asked even though I knew the answer.

That was when she gave me the answer I knew. “I know Noah is a asshole and Dom treats me like shit. I know Dave was weird and Rick is a jerk. I know your dad broke your heart when he left. I know you don’t want to get hurt again. But I also know you’ve been in love with Luke since you were eight years old and now he looks at you like you’re lured me he missed breakfast *and* dinner.”

“Sissy—”

“No, Ava. I know about your vow and I know you like your vibrator. I know you think all men are shit, but there are good ones out there. I think Luke is one of them. I’m not standing in the way of that and I’m not taking it to you straight, girlfriend, neither should you.”

Jeez.

Was no one on my side?

“I’m not,” Bad Ava said. *I want to get MORE of a taste of Luke.*

“I’m not either,” Good Ava agreed. *I think Luke is lush.*

“Argh!”

I focused on Sissy. “Seriously, I told you how he’s been behaving. I saw him again. He’s *not* a normal guy.”

Her hands came to either side of my face and she looked me in the

ou were “No, he’s not and that’s a *good* thing.” She pulled my face down to our foreheads were touching. “Call me a hopeless romantic, but I want my friend with the guy she’s been pining for forever.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I want that more than anything on this earth.”

Oh crap.

Tears filled my eyes, but before I could let them loose her hands were gone. She gave me a smile and a wink then she was gone.

was an

I locked the door behind her and rested my forehead against it.

k was a

“My life is shit,” I told the door.

r’t ever

The door had no response.

ie Stark

ich and

I went back to work. Half an hour later, my phone rang.

“Yo.”

“Babe.”

ors and

Hell and damnation.

e and I

It was Luke. My knees wobbled and I wasn’t even standing.

rtelling

“Did you get my cookies?” I asked.

I heard his soft laughter then, “Not yet.”

What was I doing?

I was trying to be cute and funny. I wasn’t supposed to be trying to be cute and funny with Luke. I was supposed to drive him away by being like a screaming shrew.

Bad, *bad* Ava.

since I

“Why are you calling?” I asked, trying to pull up the Barlow Superhero

but it sounded halfhearted.

ie eyes.

hers so “I’ll pick you up at seven. We’re goin’ to Lincoln’s for dinner, m
it to see to talk afterward. Sissy got anybody who’ll stay with her or do I
ed to arrange company?”

“Sissy’s gone.”

Silence.

moved “Luke?”

“Come again?”

“Sissy’s gone. She’s staying with her dad for a couple of days.”

“You’re alone in your house?”

“Well...yeah.”

“Fuck,” he clipped, sounding pissed.

“What?” I asked.

“Tell me your doors are locked.”

“Of course.”

“Somebody will be there soon. If it’s someone you haven’t met,
you to tell you who to expect.”

“Luke, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Right. That’s what Lee thought when he left Indy at her house
g to be they let off a car bomb that drew her out and she was kidnapped and
having taken to Costa Rica.”

Oh yeah. I forgot about that.

Belated *EEK!*

r Bitch, “Don’t open the door to anyone but one of Lee’s boys, got me?”

“Okay.”

y place “I’ll see you at seven.”

need to Disconnect.

Oh shit.

I didn’t even get a chance to argue with him to tell him I wasn’t anywhere with him that night. My mortal danger was getting in the way of me protecting myself from the carnal danger that was Luke.

I mentally shrugged it off and went back to work. I was making good headway on my deadline, so at least *that* wouldn’t be stressing along with everything else.

Five minutes after I put down the phone from Luke, I heard a floorboard creak in my office. I swiveled in my chair expecting to see Luke. Incidentally, I noticed I had pocketed the extra set of keys I gave him last night.

Instead, I saw Dom.

I shot out of the chair and opened my mouth to scream. Dom was in a flash and everything went black.

I’ll call



THIS WAS MY EARLY EVENING:

I woke up in the back of Dom’s BMW. I’d been in Dom’s BMW before gazillion times, but I’d never been lying in the back unable to move my limbs nearly (okay, so a few drunken times I’d been lying in the back, but I’d been unable to move my limbs).

The inability to move my limbs freaked me right the hell out.

“Dom,” I whispered.

He didn’t reply. Maybe he didn’t hear me. Maybe he was concerned about driving. I started to get tingling in my extremities, which I took as

sign, while I felt the car moving like it was going in long circles getting my strength back and was just able to pull myself into a position when Dom parked, got out of the car then got in the back seat with me.

“Hey, you’re awake,” he said, settling next to me and turning toward me. Then for some bizarre reason, he pulled my still not-entirely-unclear control body across his lap and leaned into me.

I blinked.

“What did you do to me?” I asked.

“Stun gun. Sorry, Ava, but we need to talk and I didn’t want to talk with your mouth.”

Stun gun?

Stun gun?

Dom stun-gunned me?

I’d never even seen a stun gun. I saw a video of someone getting stunned on YouTube (and I might add I was not at all happy that Dom had done that to me), but I’d never seen a stun gun.

What a jerk!

“You stun-gunned me?” I asked.

“We need to talk.”

I was getting back to fighting fit (read: could control my hands) when he shoved against him, but his fingers wrapped around my wrists and he held them tight.

“We don’t need to talk,” I told him then asked, “What are you doing here? Where have you been? The police said you were missing.”

. I was His eyes narrowed. "You talked to the police about me?"
sitting "No, the police talked to *me* about *you*. Your living room was s
at with and for some reason a Mr. Zano sent some henchmen to kidnap me an
ard me. something to do with you. Is this Mr. Zano related to you and Uncle V
ler-my- A weird look crossed his face before he muttered, "Fuck."
"Fuck is right!" I snapped. "What's going on?"
"I got a problem at work. I'm fixing it," he said, passing it off like
nothing. "Listen, Ava, you and me—"
"There is no you and me," I interrupted him.
put up His hands tightened on my wrists.
"Listen!" he clipped. "I know you got a problem with the whol
thing—"
The whole "Sissy thing?"
Oh...my...*God*.
Fasered I vowed quadruple-revenge against Dom, rat-bastard.
one that He went on, "I'm leaving her."
"You can't leave her, she already left you," I reminded him.
"Then I'll give her a divorce, no contest."
Well this was good news.
) and I "Wonderful. I can't wait to tell her. She'll be over the moon."
held on Obviously, Dom didn't care that his wife of five years would be
at his granting a no-contest divorce.
1 doing I knew this mainly because he said, "Then you and I can hook up."
I blinked again.

Was he insane?

hot up, Why were men such total assholes?

d it has “We’re not hooking up,” I snapped.

ito?”

I watched as his face changed in a soft, sexy way, and I felt a moment of sadness. Mainly because he was hot and that look on his face was even hotter. If he’d been a good guy, some woman (read: Sissy) would have been very lucky. Instead, he was a rat-bastard, tore through women and left devastation in his wake.

“You changed. Noah fucked you over and you changed,” he said in a voice just as soft and sexy as his face, and I stared at him. “You have this...*attitude*.” His eyes dropped to my mouth. “Fuck, makes me hard to thinkin’ about it,” he muttered.

Ho-ly *crap*.

I pulled at my wrists.

“Let me go!” I shouted.

His fingers tightened and it kinda hurt. “You and me will be together. Explosive,” he told me.

“You’ve got a screw loose! You’re my best friend’s husband!”

“Not for long.”

“Fuck off!” I yelled.

He yanked me forward by my wrists and kissed me. Dom had a lot of practice at kissing. He was, I noted with some detachment, a good kisser. I was thrilled.

I noted this right before I bit his tongue.

He reared back. “Stop doing that!”

“Stop kissing me!” I yelled and began struggling in earnest.

This didn't go well for me. Yes, I had lost seventy-five pounds, but not a lightweight. I worked out, was fit and did strength training. But he was six foot tall and all lean, compacted muscle. He had me on my back and was on top of me in no time.

I would have

This was not good.

's lives

It was then I began to panic. “Get off me!”

“Ava, you want it, I want it and I'm gonna fuckin' take it.”

aid, his

“No!” I shouted and bucked.

'ou got
ard just

Then the door was thrown open, and to my utter disbelief, Mr. Kumar leaned in, pounding on Dom's back with both his hands clenched together. I did it.

I stared, momentarily stunned.

Mr. Kumar was a Middle Eastern guy who owned a corner store block and a half away from my house. Pre-weight loss, I went in there regularly to get provisions. I also went there to have a good old gossip with Mr. and Mrs. Kumar. They were good people. They struggled against the odds to keep their little corner store open and they looked after their neighborhood. Post-weight loss, since the corner store was stocked with junk food, pop and smokes, I went in there just for the gossip and diet soda and gum.

a lot of
er.

How Mr. Kumar was in Dom's car was beyond me, but I wanted to get in there for joy.

“Unhand her!” Mr. Kumar shouted.

“What the fuck?” Dom muttered, letting me go and turning to Mr. Kumar.

I got over feeling stunned and we all started wrestling in the bar and because there wasn't a lot of room, fell out the open door and wrestling on the concrete. Mr. Kumar was a little guy and I guessed wrong side of his fifties, and I must repeat, Dom was strong. Dom took us on and seemed to be winning.

Dom shoved off Mr. Kumar, who went rolling, then tackled me trying to get up and get some leverage on the situation when he did my blouse tear at the neckline as I went down hard on my palms and landed on top of me. I twisted underneath him and lifted my hands finally, after all these years, got the opportunity to scratch his face.

Kumar His head shot back as, with satisfaction (it might not be nice, but either to honest), I saw blood form on his cheek and he shouted, "Fuckin' bitch

Mr. Kumar jumped on top of him. We wrestled more and I got on under Dom. As he was trying to subdue Mr. Kumar, I gained my feet about any opportunity and aimed a kick. I missed where I was aiming and then there him savagely in the gut.

Dom grunted and curled into himself.

I immediately grabbed Mr. Kumar's hand and pulled him up. "Let's

We ran willy-nilly because I had no idea where I was going and mostly Kumar was freaked way the hell out.

"My car's over here," Mr. Kumar finally said, and we ran toward faded-yellow Cadillac Seville.

We stopped at his car and Mr. Kumar fumbled for his keys.

"You drive," he said, his hands shaking, his hair and clothing exactly like he'd been wrestling with a strong Italian American twenty years his junior. Mr. Kumar handed me the keys and automatic

ck seat, took them.

started “I can’t drive, I’ve been stun-gunned. You drive.” I handed him b
on the keys.

ok both “I can’t drive, I’m shaky. We’ll get in an accident. You drive.” He
me back the keys.

. I was Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dom running toward us.

it. I felt “Get in the car!” I shouted, going to the driver’s side.

id Dom We got in, locked our doors and belted up. Dom at my door tr
up, and open it, I started the car (it took two goes, but I did it) and we shot forv
a screech of tires.

t it was We were in a parking garage, a weirdly vacant parking garage, an
p,” no idea how to get out.

ut from “Where’s the exit?” I yelled, turning in a way that seemed to be ta
t. I saw deeper into the garage.
kicked

“I don’t know. Let me think. I can’t think,” Mr. Kumar was still
out then he shouted, “There! It says exit! Go left.”

s go!” I went left.

nd Mr. “No, I mean right,” he said.

Shit!

his old, I did a u-ie through some parking spots and went right. We went l
through the parking garage and past Dom’s BMW that was going th
way. We went up two levels and I shot out into the street not even loo
car swerved to avoid me, honking his horn and giving me the finger. I
looking the pedal down and the big car roared.

at least “Where are we?” I asked, looking around, trying to get my bearing
ically I

“I don’t know. I saw him carrying you to his car and I told Mrs. Ki
ack thecall Tex and I followed. I didn’t pay attention to where we were going;
paid attention to following you.”

handed “Tex?” I asked.

“Tex, he lives down the block opposite the store from you. He tak
of the neighbors.”

I found it bizarre that I would hear the name “Tex” twice in one da
ying to I had never known a Tex in my whole life.

ward on I finally figured out where we were and this made some of my pa
adrenaline subside. I did some deep breathing and pointed us home. I
d I had onto my block and my stomach clenched.

My street was filled with cars. Big, shiny ones (except for Luke’s I
king us and a Crossfire, they weren’t big, just shiny). What looked like Eddi
Ram was there, a black GMC truck, several black Ford Explorers and
freaked Toyota 4Runner.

I double parked the Caddy (because there were no spaces on the
right outside my front door and saw, over the roof of Luke’s Porsche, 1
Boy Brigade standing in my front yard, all wearing scary faces.

Those faces turned to the Caddy as it stopped. Luke, Lee, Vance
Eddie, Matt, Mace and, what I realized was not coincidental, Tex, th
jack up eyed coffee guy from Fortnum’s.

ie other “Uh-oh,” I said.

king. A

just put

s.

“I don’t know. I saw him carrying you to his car and I told Mrs. Kumar to call Tex and I followed. I didn’t pay attention to where we were going. I just paid attention to following you.”

“Tex?” I asked.

“Tex, he lives down the block opposite the store from you. He takes care of the neighbors.”

I found it bizarre that I would hear the name “Tex” twice in one day when I had never known a Tex in my whole life.

I finally figured out where we were and this made some of my panic and adrenaline subside. I did some deep breathing and pointed us home. I turned onto my block and my stomach clenched.

My street was filled with cars. Big, shiny ones (except for Luke’s Porsche and a Crossfire, they weren’t big, just shiny). What looked like Eddie’s red Ram was there, a black GMC truck, several black Ford Explorers and a black Toyota 4Runner.

I double parked the Caddy (because there were no spaces on the street) right outside my front door and saw, over the roof of Luke’s Porsche, the Bad Boy Brigade standing in my front yard, all wearing scary faces.

Those faces turned to the Caddy as it stopped. Luke, Lee, Vance, Hank, Eddie, Matt, Mace and, what I realized was not coincidental, Tex, the wild-eyed coffee guy from Fortnum’s.

“Uh-oh,” I said.



FEELING FINE, FEELING LOOSE

Mr. Kumar and I got out of the car as Luke detached from the Bunch and I met him on the sidewalk.

I tilted my head back to look at him and said softly, “Seem kidnapped again.”

His mouth got tight and his eyes did a body scan.

I looked down at myself.

Blouse torn, scrapes on my belatedly stinging palms and what appeared to be smears of blood on the skin of my chest (this, I hoped, was Dom’s).

“You all right?” Luke asked, and my eyes moved back to his.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Please tell me that isn’t your blood.”

It was then I did something ultra-stupid.

The something ultra-stupid I did was say, “It’s Dom’s.”

It seemed Luke sucked in every molecule of oxygen in the Denver area when he did a swift intake of breath. With one look at his face it would not have surprised me if he had walked to his Porsche in Incredible style, picked it up and hurled it down the street.

Mr. Kumar stood beside us.

“I saw him carry her out of the house,” he shared, and Luke’s eyes turned to Mr. Kumar as the Bad Boys gathered around us. “She was unconscious and I knew something was wrong. I followed in my car when they stopped I wanted to wait for Tex and was about to call on her but I didn’t know where we were.” Everyone watched him talk and he turned around, nervous at being the center of attention. “I was going to call the police, but then he started kissing her and Ava didn’t like it and I knew”

Oh shit.

Luke’s eyes sliced to me.

Oh *shit!*

“I had to do something,” Mr. Kumar finished.

Luke was still looking at me. Or more to the point, scowling at me in a very scary way.

“Um...” I said to him, lifting my hand to do the finger and thumb half-inch-apart gesture again. “There might be a *wee bit* of my troubles I shared.”

I watched, somewhat fascinated, as Luke pulled in his very nice lower lip and bit it with his equally nice, straight, white teeth. The Bad Boy Brigade looked at each other with knowing, equally (almost) pissed-off-in-camaraderie faces and they took a step back.

Then Luke grabbed my upraised wrist, yanked me up my walk and took me to my house.

“Luke!” I yelled.

He ignored me, walked up the stairs and took me to the bathroom

we stopped.

and my “Where’s your first aid?” he asked.

he was I stared at him, surprised at his question, thinking he was going to
car and me.

ny cell, “What?” I asked back.

looked “First aid. Your palms.”

call the

7...” Oh. My palms.

“Closet,” I told him, motioning with my hand to the closet door.

He walked to the bathroom closet and pulled out the first aid
opened it, sorted through it, found what he wanted and dragged me
sink.

“Wash your hands,” he ordered.

me in a I did what I was told, finding his behavior somewhat intriguing.

half-an- tell (hell, anyone could tell) he was angry, but he was controlling
haven’t taking care of me.

Hmm.

ower lip *He’s very nice. And you can tell he’s mad, but he’s still being l*
gade all *like that,* Good Ava informed me.

n-male- *He’s hot when he’s all pissed-off-but-controlling-it. Jump him! B*
suggested.

nd into I blinked away my advice angels, finished with my hands and
Luke’s most recent behavior right alongside all the rest of it.

1 where He’d gone back to the closet and nabbed a clean hand towel. He t
to me and I dried my hands carefully while he took a washcloth, we
went to work on the blood on my chest.

“Luke.”

“Quiet.”

I shut my mouth. I knew what Luke’s “quiet” meant when said tone and I didn’t want a repeat of Hard Angry Kiss.

He finished wiping off the blood, took the towel from my hands them both in the sink and wiped at my scrapes with an alcohol swab. I in breath at the sting, but he kept going, albeit gently.

He tossed the swab in the trash and then looked at me. “Now. Shar

kit. He I didn’t have to ask what he meant. I took in a deep breath.

“Well...” I started and stopped, not certain how to proceed.

Luke got close, his patience visibly waning. “Ava.”

“All right,” I said and leaned back. Then I told him the story of I could flirting, Dom touching, Dom cornering me in the kitchen and that be it and reason Sissy left him. I told him about Dom’s threat to “get what I v finished on a description of the last forty-five minutes.

Luke was silent after I stopped talking. His face was hard, but I : ovely. I eyes were working. I also saw his jaw was working too, clenchi unclenching, and I did not take this as a good sign. I held my breath this happened.

ad Ava

Finally he said, “Pack a bag.”

buried

“Excuse me?” I asked on a gush of air.

“Pack a bag.”

ossed it

“What? Why?”

t it and

“You’re movin’ in with me.”

My eyes bugged out.

“What? Why?” I repeated.

in that “Just do it.”

Ho-ly *shit*.

), threw Lee had made Indy stay with him to keep her safe when she was
sucked shot at and kidnapped. He moved into her duplex after it was over and
they were getting married. Eddie had also made Jet move in with him
e.” her safe. He never let her move out and she had just bought a new house.
Roxie had stayed with Hank during her troubles, because at the time she was
in Chicago. After she was safe, she had decided to move to Denver to be with
Hank, thinking to move into an apartment for six months to “see how it
but he had talked her into moving in with him. Now she was entering
of Dom into a Frisbee competition.

ing the I felt panic seize my chest. “I’m not moving in with you.”

vant.” I

“You’re movin’ in with me.”

saw his “I’m not.”

ng and He reached behind his back then his arm came forward and I saw
h while cuffs.

Oh no.

I started to take off, but didn’t even get by him. He whirled me
around, hand wrapped around my upper arm. I yanked at my arm,
grabbed my wrist and slapped the bracelet on me and then he slapped
other bracelet on him.

“I can’t believe you cuffed me to you again!” I shouted.

“Now, we’re packing.”

“I’m not moving in with you.” I pulled back, putting all my weight as he started walking.

He dragged me, and all my weight, into the bedroom.

“This is too much,” I snapped as he went to the closet and threw o
s being door.

nd now He turned to me. “Pack.”

to keep “I have my office here. I have my yoga mat here. I can’t move
lender.babbled.

re lived He jerked on our cuffed hands and I flew forward, slamming into h

be with His arms went around me (thus taking one of my arms and twi
t went” behind my back) and he held on tight, his face dipping to mine.

his dog “Since I seem to have to repeat myself every time I need to get sor
through to you, I’ll keep doin’ it.” His eyes were shining dangerously
was clear his patience was at an end.

EEK.

“First,” he continued, “I’m not gonna fuck around with this shit.
saw the been kidnapped twice in two days and shot at. As of now that shit is ov
building is secure, your house is not. You’re movin’ in, end of disc

Second, I want you in my bed. I want you to look at me the way you
re back at me after our first kiss, but I want you to do it when my cock is
but he inside you. Third, you owe me and you’re gonna pay. The first
ped the happening now. The last two are gonna happen tonight. Do you und
me?”

I understood him. I so understood him.

I stared at him. My chest seemed to have expanded and my eyes

t into it frozen in a wide-open position. Unable to speak after what he'd just
nodded.

“Good,” he clipped. “Now, pack.”

pen the At that juncture, I thought it prudent to pack.

So I packed.



out,” I WAS DRUNK.

I knew it wasn't smart, but I didn't care. I'd been kidnapped
wrestled with my best friend's husband in a parking garage and me
with Luke. I needed to get drunk.

Screw the consequences.



nothing

y and it AT MY HOUSE I PACKED. Luke uncuffed me so I could do it.

This was after, still attached to him, I threw a few things in a bag
muttered, “Done.”

You've He looked at the bag and back at me and demanded, “More.”

er. My I sighed. He uncuffed me and I packed more.

ussion. We toted my two suitcases (and my yoga mat) out to his Porsche
looked Bad Boy Bunch was still hanging around outside, likely for moral s
buried They all looked at Luke with understanding and at me with impatier
one is except Tex, who was grinning at me like the crazy guy I was thinking I

erstand For some reason, even though I didn't know him (at all), he put
hand on the top of my head and said, “Been a long time since we had
excitement, darlin'.”

seemed Luke glared at him, obviously not sharing in Tex's excitement

he said, I chuckled as he took his hand from my head.

While I thanked Mr. Kumar for saving me from dastardly Don, I talked to Matt, who peeled off and went back into my house.

“What’s he doing?” I asked as Luke led me to the Porsche.

“Your computer,” Luke said.

Shit.

He had it all covered.

(twice), I was so screwed.

oved in We went to his place and dumped my stuff. I unpacked my toiletries in the bathroom, changed out of my torn blouse and cleaned up.

Then he took me to Lincoln’s Road House, a no-frills biker bar tucked away located on a slip road off I-25. They had great food, great atmosphere, and usually great music. It was Saturday night and a band was playing when I got there. Luke glared at a couple of guys who were hanging out but not too far away from a table. He planted my ass on a stool and got menus.

I could tell he was still pissed. I could also tell he was still controlling.

He got me a Fat Tire beer and I was reading the menu (Luke was likely to know it by heart) when Jules and Vance joined us.

support. I could have done a cartwheel of joy. Saved from Luke’s bad attitude. All my ex-vigilante current-social worker new friend and her bounty hunter boyfriend.

his big We all ordered food and we ate.

d some I was trying very hard not to think about what Luke said in my best

I was scared to death about that night.

nt. Tex No, I was scared to death about everything. Everything about Luke

everything about my life. I couldn't deal, not openly, so I buried it, and buried each and every word he said and all that had happened the 1 days, I got more and more stressed out.

Therefore, when Hank and Roxie joined us and Daisy and Shirleen party, and then Tex ambled in, I decided, fuck it.

Time to party.

So I got drunk.



"How's it goin', sugar?" Daisy asked me, blue eyes soft with concern. In all the girls were shoulder-to-shoulder in the tiny bathroom, breaking and reapplying lipstick.

I knew she was likely asking if I was okay about Kidnapping Pa but I ignored that and got to the important stuff.

"I moved in with Luke this afternoon," I told her, and she sucked in her breath, her eyes slid to Shirleen and they both smiled at each other.

I was in my Good Drunk Zone, feeling fine, feeling loose, talkative, which was, along with losing my inhibitions, another bad habit I had when I was tipsy.

"This is *not* good. You would *not* believe what he said to me," I announced.

Roxie and Jules got close, and even though I barely knew any of them, I told them about the latest incident and I did so in great detail.

There was more sucking in of breath than more smiles.

"Shit. I thought some of the stuff that Vance said to you was *Se*

Boy Hot, but Luke's got him beat by a mile," Daisy told Jules.

and as I “I’d *pay* a man to talk to me that way,” Shirleen put in.

ast two “He’s a jerk,” I said happily, sounding as if this was a good thing applying shiny lip gloss to my lips in the mirror. “I hate him.” Agatha hit our was said with drunken good cheer and all the girls looked at each other tipped up at the ends. “I’m moving to Wyoming the first chance I get moving in with Sissy’s mother, even if Sissy isn’t there anymore. Whitchurch likes me and she owns a shotgun on account of the bears always going through her trash.”

1, when Daisy gave a tinkly-bell laugh.

the seal Jules came up behind me in the mirror. “During my thing, I convinced myself I was moving to Nicaragua,” she shared.

rt Two, “Nicaragua sounds good, but it’s filled with those Latin-lover types trying to get *away* from macho men.”

cked in She pressed her lips together like she was trying not to laugh and glared at Roxie.

feeling I ignored them and turned, screwing on the cap to my lip gloss. The band strike up again after a break and I instantly got the best feeling I decided at that moment, that I’d ever had *in my life*.

me,” I So of course I had to share and I shouted, “Let’s dance!”

I shoved my lip gloss in my pocket and charged out the door through them, Ibar right by the table where all the Bad Boys were sitting and straight to the dance floor. The Girl Gang followed me.

I loved music and I loved to dance. There were times in my life when Sissy and I went out and I didn’t drink a drop, just danced like a lunatic. When I was Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes I was the kind of person who got lost in the music and didn’t care who was watching. Now, especially as I was I

towards three sheets to the wind, I let it all hang out.

ing and Of course, I'd never been to a club where Luke could see me, but
in, this feeling fine, feeling loose, and as the girls and I moved in our Girlie
ier, lips Circle, I was having the time of my life.

get. I'm After a few songs I shouted the latest, greatest idea I ever had in m
e. Mrs. "Shots!" Then I peeled off and went to the bar.

that are The place was packed and the bar was three deep. Two guys saw
shifted to the side to let me through. I smiled at them huge and bellie
the bar.

vinced "Hey, thanks," I said, still throwing a smile over my shoulder.

"Don't mention it, darlin'," one of them replied.

es. I'm It took a few minutes, but a bartender made it to me.

glanced "I want..." I turned to the dance floor and counted my Gir
membership. "Five shots of tequila. Don't bother with the lime. We'r
Chicks, we can hack it," I informed him.

I heard The guy behind me chuckled. I gave him another over the should
idea, I not exactly knowing what he found funny, but also not caring. If he v
good mood then I thought it was rude not to share in his good mood.

"Outta my way," I heard, and the crowd around me parted
ugh the comment.

it to the This was somewhat unusual, seeing as we were at a biker b
someone pushing through the crowd was normally frowned u
e when understood why there was no comment when Wild Man Tex moved in
c. Even me. Not many people would stand in Wild Man's way.

st in the "Hey, Tex. How ya doin'?" I asked, as if we had known each other
reading

lives and he was my best friend in the whole world.

it I was He looked at me then he commented, "Darlin', you're shitfaced."

: Dance I leaned into him. "Yeah. Isn't it *great*?"

He shook his head and grinned but said, "I don't mean to rain c
ny life, parade. You deserve a good night after a coupla kidnappin's, but you
watchin' your step. Your man ain't likin' what he's seein' a
me and atmosphere is gettin' *tense*."

id up to I blinked at him. "My man?"

"Luke," Tex told me.

I swung my head around and looked at Luke. He was watching m
appeared Tex was right, he didn't seem happy.

I turned back to Tex. "He isn't my man."

I Gang "Girl, it don't matter you don't think he is, *he* thinks he is. There
e Rock Badass Motherfucker Land, that means *he is*."

I laughed and waved my hand between us, dismissing Tex's war
er grin, the bartender set the shots in front of me.

vas in a "Everything will be okay," I assured Tex.

without Tex held up a bill to the bartender for my drinks and I smiled at
gathered all the shots in two hands, but Tex grabbed my elbow and le
before I moved away.

oar and "One more thing," Tex said.

ipon. I I stopped and looked up at him. It registered in my drunken state
i beside looked ultra-serious.

: all our "Yeah?" I asked.

“Long as things are under the boys’ control, excitement is excitement is fun. We all get a buzz off it. Last time, though, it got out of the boys’ control and we almost lost Jules.”

Part of my fine and loose feeling slid away as Tex kept staring at me intently.

“Be smart. These boys know what they’re doin’ and they’ll do what they can to keep you safe as long as you stay smart. Don’t make it hard on them. They got enough to worry about on a day-to-day basis without some of your ‘em cares about doin’ stupid shit and puttin’ her ass on the line. Go home.” Tex asked.

I swallowed. Then I nodded.

He let go of my elbow and said, “Have fun.”

Shit.

I headed back to the Girl Gang, handed out the shots, and standing in a circle we threw them back. Mine played double duty of helping me erase the latest scary-assed conversation, most especially the part about Tex telling me I was someone Luke “cares about.”

I shook it off as the band started playing “Ding Dong Daddy.” I threw her hands up in the air and shouted, “That’s what I’m talkin’ about, sister!” and I was immediately back to feeling fine and loose.

Three songs later, I was giggling at Roxie, who was pretending to be outrageously sexy and throwing kissy-faces at Hank when a waitress came over to me and handed me a shot.

“Bass,” she said, jerking her head toward the bass player.

“Thanks,” I muttered and took the glass, my eyes moving to the

... good player, who I noted was watching me.

... of the The minute my eyes hit his, he smiled at me. I smiled back, lifted the shot glass in a thank you salute, sniffed the shot (tequila) and tossed it back

... at me I no sooner had my head straightened when my wrist was seized and my hand was dragged across the dance floor.

... all they “What the—?” I started to say, but Luke pulled me to a halt, grabbed my purse from the table and threw it at me. I caught it and noticed the Barone one were all glaring at me unhappily and I blinked at them in confusion. “What the hell is that?” he tore the shot glass out of my hand, crashed it to the table and dragged me out of the bar.

“Hey! I was having fun!” I yelled at his back.

... He stopped at the Porsche and yanked me around, my back to it, my front to the front of me, and he closed in until I felt car behind me and had nowhere to go in our retreat.

... ease my Then he growled, “I noticed.”

... ling me “Why’d you drag me out of there?”

“We’re goin’ home.”

... ’ Daisy It was then I got a good look at him.

... about, “Are you angry?” I asked stupidly, because it was clear he was not happy. I was angry, he was *angry*.

... o dance “You’ve got to be fuckin’ shittin’ me,” he clipped.

... ame up “What?”

... he bass He moved around me to open the door, but being drunk and not thinking clearly (if I was thinking clearly I would have run screaming into the room) he moved into his face.

“What?” I asked again.

“Get in the car.”

“What?”

“Jesus. I want to think you aren’t playin’ games, but I know fuckin’ playin’ games. Nobody’s that stupid.”

My fine and loose feeling slipped a notch, mainly because, again like he’d slapped me across the face.

He watched my face change in the streetlight.

“I’m not stupid,” I whispered.

He got close and backed me against the car again. I went, my head back to look at him, my feelings still smarting from his comment.

“So you’re sayin’ you don’t know that every fuckin’ guy’s dick from watchin’ you move. Christ, give you a pole and put you in a G you wouldn’t have been more effective.”

My mouth dropped open. Then I snapped it shut.

“I was just dancing,” I told him.

“Right.”

“I was.”

He watched me but stayed silent.

“I like to dance,” I said softly. “I was just dancing.”

He kept watching me and it seemed like he did this for a long time. Finally, his hand came to my neck with his thumb out to touch my jaw

“Jesus, you aren’t lyin’,” he muttered.

I shook my head because no, I wasn’t lying. Instead, I was freak

about what he said.

“I’m never going to dance again,” I said quietly to myself on
tremble, so upset at the thought of people watching me, *men* watching
having that reaction, that I didn’t even care I was quoting bad eighties
you’re

Serious yuck.

l, it felt “Ava.”

My eyes had slid to the side and they came back to Luke. “Men s
whispered. “They take everything. *Everything.*”

Before he could respond, I slid out from between him and the
turned to the door. He didn’t say a word just bleeped the locks. I ope
id tilted door and got in. He shut it for me, got in on his side and we glided
the street.

is hard I watched Denver pass me as Luke took us to his loft. Neithe
-string, spoke. I was still drunk and I wanted to be happy, but I couldn’t stop t
“all men are bastards” thoughts from flooding my head.

He parked and we took the elevator to his loft. He switched on the
and I went directly to the Triumph T-shirt which was sitting, folded,
barstool where I left it two days ago. I dumped my purse on the bar, g
the tee and walked to the bathroom.

“I’m going to bed,” I announced and then walked into the bathroom.

I shut the door, took out my contacts, got ready for bed, put on my
g time. and walked out. I dumped my clothes on my suitcases and headed tow
bed.

I saw that Luke was in the kitchen. I grabbed a pillow and walke
ing out couch. I threw the pillow down, threw myself on the couch and settlec

side. I was going to sleep there, without a blanket if I had to, I didn't care a little. On this thought, Luke's legs came into my vision. I looked up. I saw him andholding a glass of water out to me.

music. "What's that?"

"Ibuprofen and water. Take it, you'll need it for the morning."

"I don't get hangovers," I informed him, again not lying.

suck," I I had to be far drunker than I was to get a hangover. Sissy called it a gift. She got a hangover after two beers.

car and "Take it," he demanded.

ned my I was in no mood to argue. I was in the mood to go to sleep for the next few years, wake up an old maid and live out my life in a nursing home with the only excitement being Friday Night Bingo.

r of us I sat up, took the pills he had in his fist and drank the water. When the dark done, he pulled the empty glass from my hand and put it on the coffee table.

Then he came back to me, and I kid you not, picked me up (again with the lamps) turned and sat on the couch, settling me in his lap, his arms around me.

on the "Luke, it really bugs me when you haul me around," I told him, so he grabbed bitchy.

He ignored my bitchiness. "We're gonna talk."

n. Right then, still drunk and feeling in a shitty mood, I thought this was an excellent idea.

ard the "Good. I have a few things to say," I informed him.

d to the He stared at me a beat before he invited, "Shoot."

l on my "First, I'm confiscating this T-shirt," I announced.

are. He kept staring at me.

He was Then he asked, "Come again?"

"From this point on, your Triumph tee is now *my* Triumph declared.

His lips did that twitch thing like he was trying not to laugh.

I crossed my arms. "I'm being perfectly serious."

d it my "Babe, I'll make you a deal. As long as you share my bed, the T-yours."

"No. The T-shirt is mine *forever*," I countered.

or fifty He shook his head. "You're not sharin' my bed, the tee stays here."

with my "I'll give you twenty-five dollars for it," I started to haggle.

n I was The lip twitch came back and it looked like he was losing his b-biting back his smile.

e table. "No," he said.

n!). He "Fifty."

ounding "No."

"One hundred dollars!" I cried a little loudly, because I had never hundred dollars for a T-shirt in my life and I was worried he would acc

was an "I gave you an offer, it's the only one you're gonna get."

"Okay then, I'll steal it," I blabbed.

His body started shaking and I was pretty sure it was with silent lau

"Probably shouldn't tell me your plan to steal my tee," he advised.

"Forget I said anything," I told him.

He shook his head, still silently laughing, and when he was dc

arms got a little tighter. “Now we’re talkin’ about what I want to talk a

“I’m not finished.”

tee,” I “We’ll get back to your shit later.”

I made a “harrumph” sound and glared at him.

“You owe me,” he said (again).

“I don’t—”

-shirt is He interrupted me, “Your first payment is to tell me who else got
of you.”

Was that it?

’ I thought he was going to make me clean his bathroom with a too
or something else. Something that required me being naked, but I didn’t
attle at to think thoughts of being naked with Luke. Not when I was sitting in
on his couch, in his loft, wearing his T-shirt.

Not *ever*.

“Okay,” I agreed happily.

I shuffled my bottom in his lap, settling in, and I began.

paid a “There was Dave. He was a sex pervert. Wanted me to go to s
ept. parties with him and had a huge collection of porn. He tried to convi
this was perfectly normal, which I’ll grant it is, but it wasn’t my sce
ignored me telling him it wasn’t my scene and he got pushy, then
pouty. Then he got angry, then he started being mean to me so I kick
ghter. out.”

Luke was silent, but he moved. He fell to his side and stretched ou
couch.

me, his During this he took me with him. I was so intent on my story, his

bout.” barely registered and I just stretched out too.

“Before him, there was Rick. He was hot. Seriously. He knew it. He cheated on me right off the bat, wasn’t good at hiding it, probably because he knew I’d put up with it. I did, because I was so into him, but I warned him not to do it again, full of piss and vinegar and thinking he just strayed. I caught him again, I found out again we had a rip-roarin’ affair and he promised never to do it again. Which, in like a month, he did. Three strikes, he was out.”

a piece Luke was still silent, and since I was sharing (and still drunk) I noticed that, even in his silence, he was communicating to me, communicating something that should have made me keep my mouth shut. He moved through me like he did in bed so that for a few seconds I was on top of him. I didn’t want to slid to his side so his back was to the room, mine to the couch.

his lap, Through all this, I kept blabbing.

“Then there’s Dom, you know about him. Then there’s my Marilyn’s *first* husband, who was a slimeball cheat and a drunk. I think I might have slapped her around a bit, but she would never say. I saw her with a black eye and she said she fell down the stairs. A, they didn’t fall down stairs at their house and B, how do you get a black eye by falling down stairs?”

once me Luke didn’t answer. I kept gabbing.

he got “Then there’s Marilyn’s *second* husband, who made her first husband look like a choirboy. *Total* slimeball. I don’t like Marilyn ’cause she’s a bitch, but I truly think she loved her first husband and it hurt when he fucked her over. She’s my sister. Even though I don’t want to hurt her when she hurts. Do you know what I mean?”

actions I didn’t wait for him to reply (not that he would have). I was on a roll

just kept talking.

though. “Then there’s Dad, you know all about that. He never came back because called, never sent a card, nothing. Not when I turned sixteen, I called him graduated from high school or college, nothing. Disappeared. Gone.”

He did I realized belatedly where I was and what position I was in, but I didn’t care. It was rather comfy really, so I went on.

“Noah was hot, too. Really handsome and I thought totally into him. I didn’t know he was super sweet, bought me flowers, shit like that. Acted like there was no other woman in the world but me. At first I wasn’t into him, after David told me about it you can guess. But he worked at it hard, convinced me he was a good guy. Then he fell for it. All that time, he was planning on screwing me over. Not now. He left, cleaning me out, and still *I* felt like a moron. Rat-bastard.”

I sighed, searching my memory banks for more jerks to dredge up. My sister found I was empty, looked Luke in the eyes and decided it was time to think he up.

ever once “So you see, men suck. They’re all jerks. I vowed never to get caught with one again. Ever. Ever. *Ever*. That brings us to now. That’s why you’re down. I can’t get together, because I’m not going through that again. Once

Sissy get revenge on Dominic Dickhead, no more men in my life, even if that’s also why you need to send me an invoice. I don’t mind paying, but my husband Noah didn’t get the inheritance money Aunt Ella gave me. I’m not a kind of but I’m also not hurting—”

when he “Babe,” Luke finally spoke.

, I hurt “What?” I asked.

“You can shut up now.”

well so I I blinked then I thought maybe that was a good thing.

“Okay,” I agreed. Then I asked, “So, are we square?”

“You owed me triple. That was the first part. I’m gonna tell you the next part and I’m keepin’ one in reserve.”

“What’s next?” I asked, thinking this was easy. In fact, thinking it wasn’t been hard at all.

I thought it would be, but after six Fat Tires and two shots of tequila, I had been totally cool.

Luke’s arms, which had been loosely holding me, tightened so he pressed to him full frontal. He also threw his thigh over my legs.

Normally, I would have seen this as the warning sign it was. After six Fat Tires and two shots of tequila, I missed it.

Then he spoke. “The next part you pay is letting me cuff you naked and you stay that way while I eat you ’til you come and then fuck you come again.”

“Holy shit,” I breathed aloud, which was a feat, considering the fact my lungs had seized.

He didn’t allow me to process his demand.

He kept talking.

“Not tonight, not when you’re shitfaced. I want you clearheaded and loaded, do that to you. Tonight, after your rubdown, I’ll fuck you normally. I want your hands and mouth on me.”

It took me a few seconds to pull myself out of the complete and utter shock his brutally honest (and unbelievably sexy, if my hard nipples had anything to say about it) words caused.

Not to mention this was Luke Stark talking to *me*, Fatty Fatty Fatty

Ava Barlow. It was so incomprehensible he would say such things I t
he next there was a good possibility that Satan had ordered a fur coat.

“Didn’t you hear anything I just said?” I asked.

ng that “I heard it.”

“No more men.”

quila, it “I heard it.”

“That includes you.”

o I was “Did you bring lotion with you?”

I shook my head at what I thought was his strange question. I tried
six Fat away and didn’t get anywhere. So, I narrowed my eyes.

“Why do you want to know?”

d to my “Rubdown.”
you ’til

“Luke, you aren’t rubbing me down.”

act that His hands moved. One went up my back, his fingers sifting into m
one went down to rest on my bottom.

“We could go straight to the sex.” His mouth came to mine, but h
were open and watching me. I saw the warmth there, but there was sor
else, something I couldn’t put a finger on, something assessing. B
when I could figure it out, he continued, “That will work out the kinks.”

tonight, “I’m sleeping on the couch.”

id utter “You’re sleeping beside me.”

les had “I’m sleeping on the couch.”

“Then we’ll sleep here. And, if you want, we’ll fuck here too.”

ur-eyed “Luke!” I yanked my body backward, found nothing but the ver

thoughtcouch hampering any retreat, and realized too late I was in a very dangerous position.

“Ava, this is what’s gonna happen,” Luke said in a firm voice.

Uh-oh.

I can’t WAIT to see what he says next, Bad Ava was nearly drooling

Mm, Good Ava mumbled dreamily.

“You’re gonna get your lotion and I’m gonna work out the stress back. Then, together, we’re gonna work out the tension of the last couple of days. Tomorrow, or however long it takes, I’m gonna deal with Vince Dexter. You want a shot at Dexter when I find him, your call. We’ll have a safe place where you can say, or do, whatever you want to him, and I’ll be there if you need me when you do it. After that, you and I are gonna work this out, see where it takes us. If you’re even close to the promise you made me this morning, or what you showed on the dance floor tonight, that’s your hair, take a while. We’ll see how it goes. Got that?”

He had it all figured out and apparently he didn’t think I had a choice in my eyes. Fuck that.

Nothing I didn’t even try to count to ten, I just pushed against him. “No, I have that. You can’t just pick up Noah and...” I stopped and glared before I said, “What are you going to do when you pick up Noah?”

“I’m gonna tell him who I am and what I am to you, and then I’m gonna beat the shit out of him.”

I quit pushing and stared. I would have said it was impossible for that to shock me further, but there it was.

“You can’t do that,” I whispered.

dangerous “I can.”

“You can’t.”

“Ava, this isn’t up for discussion.”

“I don’t even want you to do that.”

g. “It isn’t for you to say. He took somethin’ that was mine. I’m g
back.”

in your Oh...my...God.

uple of “You’re nuts!” I cried. “I’m not yours. I haven’t even *seen* you
etti and years.”

ive him “You’ve been mine since you were eight.”

and I’ll That cut right to the bone.

ma ride Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

ou gave To hide it, I shoved hard. He rocked back an inch, moved forward
s gonna arms got so tight they crushed me to him.

ice. “I’m not yours. I’m not anyone’s ever again!” I shouted in hi
getting pissed instead of scared, because pissed was a whole lot bette
do not to be. “And I’m not paying the second part of your deal. No way. No
at him. way.”

“All right, then you pay by telling me why you didn’t pick up my
1 gonna see me after my father’s funeral. That was before all the shit went dov
those fuckin’ guys takin’ you away, piece by piece. I wanna hear w
him to stood by my father’s grave and made me a promise and days lat
reneged.”

My mouth snapped shut and my body went statue-still.

Okay, then there was really, really, *really* no way I was going to t

that. I was never going to tell him it embarrassed me that he held me was Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes. No way I was going to tell him that I lost dyed my hair and got contacts because I'd been in love with him since eight (he wasn't wrong about me being his, but I wasn't going to tell him either) and I wanted him to notice me.

ettin' it No way in hell.

In fact, there was so no way in hell that I made a split-second, da decision that would protect that knowledge forever.

in five "I'll get the lotion," I told him.

He stared at me a beat then pressed his lips together and tilted his looking for patience. His eyes came back to me.

"Jesus, you're a pain in the ass," he said.

"Are we doing this or what?" I asked, sounding bitchy, which was and his considering I *felt* hysterical, but I didn't want Luke to know that.

His arms went loose.

is face, I pushed up, scrambled over him, got to my feet and I shot
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fucking

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ell him

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His arms went loose.

I pushed up, scrambled over him, got to my feet and I shot to the bathroom like a rocket.

TEN



MRS. STARK

It was the dead of night when Luke moved me, arms around me, over him to his other side. He hooked my leg over his hip and I snuggled in.

“You’re nuts,” I mumbled into his throat.

Then I went back to sleep.



I WOKE up alone in Luke’s bed.

I stared at the pillowcase, quiet, still, listening and at the same time assessing my situation.

I heard the shower. I took a deep breath, rolled on my stomach, tucked Luke’s pillow into my belly and held it tight.

Last night, I’d dodged the bullet. As I lay in Luke’s bed thinking about what I’d decided this was because I was on an adrenaline crash after kidnapping, because I was drunk, but most especially because Luke was giving me really great rubdowns.

I got the lotion, gave it to Luke, took off my glasses and lay down on my belly, all bitch attitude, like a rubdown from Luke was akin to torture from an iron maiden. Just to be difficult, I kept on my tee and my panties

thank *God* were mocha-colored satin hipsters with a load of beige lace (not ratty old ones that sagged at the ass). Luke pushed up the tee, up, and I was forced to do a back arch and he whipped it over my head. He rubbed the lotion in his hands and went to work on me.

I wanted to stay tense, just to be contrary, but I couldn't. His hands were strong and you could tell he'd done this before (another thought I closed by telling myself it proved he was a womanizing rat-bastard). He worked out the kinks and worked them out. This was not a sensual massage to turn me up and ruggled. He genuinely was trying to relieve my stress.

When I wasn't freaked out that I was lying, in my undies, in Stark's bed (which was, at the beginning, my prevailing thought), I found the show of kindness disturbing, but in a good way. I was trying very hard to hold on to thoughts of him being an ultra-pushy, unbelievably blunt macho man, and Sandra Whoever-She-Was crying into her M&M's. At the time it was hard when underneath everything Luke did it seemed like he tried to be a nice guy trying to protect me and keep me safe, but in an ultra-unbelievably blunt, tough guy, macho man way.

Then again, I thought that about Rick when he promised not to come back, I pulled me. And Noah, when he worked so hard to win me before screwing me

And mostly my dad, when I thought it was him and me again against Dom's Barlow Super Bitches and he left me.

Slowly, as Luke worked at my back, all these thoughts sifted out of my head and I fell asleep.

That was it.

Except for Luke's weird habit of rolling me to the other side of the bed (which every night, all we did was sleep.

ace and I pulled the covers to my neck and was about to move to my
up until mental topic, how to successfully flee to Wyoming, when the bathroo
warmed opened.

That was when I realized my mistake. I should have gotten up
ls were dressed.

ung to, Instead, like the big dork I was, I lay in bed and let my mind war
right to much so I hadn't even heard the shower go off.

get me Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

When was I going to *learn*?

Lucas I reviewed my options, waited for Good Ava and Bad Ava to gi
ind this input (they were still sleeping, which figured—always chattering awa
hard to you didn't want them to, and never there when you needed them) and
; tough to pretend that I was still asleep. In fact, if I was good at it, mayb
Ms. But would get sick of waiting and go out and hunt down my ex-boyfrien
uly was beat the shit of them while I escaped and drove to Wyoming.
-pushy,

I was putting this plan into action, eyes closed, when I felt t
heat on depress as Luke sat on it.

e over. Uh-oh.

inst the I continued to feign sleep.

The covers slid down my body.

t of my Ee-yikes!

Luke may have felt gentlemanly enough to let me sleep at
rubdown, but he hadn't been gentlemanly enough to put my tee back
the bed Therefore, I was wearing nothing but my satin panties.

First, I had a silent freakout that I slept next to Luke mostly naked.

second had a silent freakout that he could see most of my body. I didn't know Jennifer Aniston looked like naked (and didn't want to know) and probably far off that mark, but Riley hadn't done badly with me.

and got Still, I wasn't ready for this.

Un-unh.

ider, so No way.

Luckily, I had the pillow pressed to my belly so all he could see was my naked back. Covers gone, the bed moved and I felt heat against my back. Luke settled in.

ve their This was not getting any better.

y when Then I was turned.

decided Seriously not better.

he Luke I held the pillow close to me like a shield, still pretending to sleep. Luke nudged it gently, and I had to make the decision whether or not to let it go. I held on to it for dear life like I wanted to, he'd know I was awake. Luke would foil my plan.

I let it go.

Second string defense, I moved my body into his to cover my chest, pressing my chest to his, tucking my face into his throat and snuggling into the hopes that he would think I was giving him a sleep cuddle.

This was a bad idea. I knew it the minute my mostly naked body was pressed against his bare chest.

on me. It felt nice, as in ultra-nice.

Shit.

Then I "Ava," he called my name softly, his arms around me, one hand

w whatup my back, fingers of the other hand trailing across the top, lacy edge
l I was underwear.

I kept pretending to sleep. This was hard. The trailing touch
underwear felt good.

His fingers went into my hair at the back of my head. “Babe, wake
Hmm.

was my I couldn’t ignore him much longer. He would think I was dead.

back as I was realizing my plan was going south, way south, when his
sifted through my hair a few inches then twisted around it. I felt his h
and my head was pulled back gently.

Not good.

I felt his mouth against mine.

p. Luke Worse!

go. If I “Babe,” he said against my lips, and I couldn’t pull it off anymore.

which Slowly, I opened my eyes.

As his lips were against mine, I was close enough to see, even with
contacts, his eyes were ink.

myself, “Hey,” I whispered, and luckily my voice sounded sleepy.

g in, in “Hey,” he said against my mouth, and something about that so
said by Luke in his bed, in the morning, against my mouth made me m

hit his When my body pressed deeper into him, his eyes went molten a
was it. No more stall tactics.

I was going to be screwed, literally.

He kissed me.

sliding

e of my Maybe I should have pushed it, torn away and stood firm to my
But he was a seriously good kisser.

at my Added to that, our mostly naked bodies were pressed up again
other. His chest hair felt sexy-rough against my breasts and his hand
up.” underwear was keeping up the lovely torture.

And this was Lucas Stark and he had always, in my heart, been
special guy.

fingers I gave up the ghost and kissed him back.

and fist When I did, he groaned into my mouth, rolling me to my back,
top of me. The groan sounded and felt good. So good I wrapped myself
around him and started to explore with my hands, wanting to make him
again.

This was when I discovered he was naked, mainly because my
drifted over his tight ass.

Holy cramoily.

Nice.

out my His head came up and I focused on him, barely. I was half in a Luke
Fog and half in a Luke Tight Ass Fog. I knew my eyes were hooded
was already breathing heavily.

ft word “Christ,” he muttered. “You look like that after I kiss you, what
elt. gonna look like when I make you come?”

nd that My hands slid up his back and I answered him, even though his question
wasn't one you answered.

“I don't know,” I whispered.

“Let's find out,” he murmured against my mouth.

7 vows. I found myself thinking that was a *great* idea.

Then Luke got down to “giving me the business.”

st each I discovered in short order that Luke’s lips were not just good at l
l at my They were good at a lot of things. They were good at my neck, beh
ear, trailing down my chest and they were *especially* good at my breasts

een my In what seemed like five minutes (but was longer, time flies when
getting so turned on you feel like you’re going to explode) he had me
gave Bad Ava what she wanted and I tasted more of Luke, my tongue
him on mouth moving to any piece of skin that came near it, my hands drifting
y arms nails dragging.

m do it I wanted all of him, every rock-solid inch I could get (and ever
encountered was just that), and for some reason I wasn’t scared that his
fingers

it.
He released my nipple after a delicious tug and a finishing swirl of
tongue and came back over me, kissing me again, hard, wild, his
teasing me and making me follow it, which I did, gladly.

uke Lip Then his hips slid to my side, his mouth still kissing me and he
d and I went into my panties. I gasped against his tongue, as with no fooling
no fumbling, no exploration, no hesitation, his finger hit the target.

are you “Holy crap,” I whispered against his mouth, my eyes flying open.

He was watching me, his gaze so hot I felt the heat of it through my

question “You’re dripping wet,” he told me, his voice sexy-hoarse. Before
react to this statement, his mouth came to mine again. My eyes stayed
and so did his. “I can’t fuckin’ wait to get a taste of you,” he said against
my mouth in a fierce way that I knew he *really* meant it, and his finger
did an unbelievable roll that was so good my neck arched and I sucked in breath.

My arms were around him, the fingers of one hand at the back of his head, but at the roll my other hand went to his wrist, holding it steady. I was kissing him I wanted more.

“Ava,” he muttered and my chin dipped to look at him.

“Do that again,” I murmured.

He did as I asked. I couldn’t help it, even though my eyes were wild. I closed I felt myself smile.

“Fuck,” he muttered against my mouth, and his finger slid inside me.

My hips moved, pressing against his hand, and his finger slid out, then again and again. My hand stayed wrapped around his wrist as he worked me, my other hand still at his head.

I pressed up not just my hips, my whole body, seeking contact with him and he didn’t disappoint me, pressing his body into me.

His finger slid out of me while he kissed me, his tongue sliding into my mouth as his finger did another roll, right on target, followed by another then another one.

I stopped kissing him, ready, close, my mouth against his palm. I opened my eyes to see him watching me, I knew he liked what he saw. I found that I liked that he liked what he saw.

“Show me,” he murmured, his voice a deep rumble, and at the sound of his body. His tongue coming, my tongue wet my lips.

And it was then the fucking door buzzer went.

His finger stopped rolling, his head jerked up and my body still against my door buzzer went again, this time for longer.

This was difficult to ignore.

of his It became worse when Luke's phone rang. Both of these were imp
telling to ignore. But then my purse started ringing.

"You have got to be fuckin' *kidding* me," Luke snarled.

The buzzer silenced then started again immediately.

Luke's hand moved away, his arms wrapped around me and he
mostly taking me with him and knifing to a sitting position on the side of the l
in his lap.

ie. He snatched the phone out of its cradle and growled into it, "Thi
then in, be fuckin' good." I was still out of it, trying to wrap my thoughts arou
s finger terrible turn of events, when Luke said, "Ma?"

Oh...my...*God*.

with his, I was sitting, nearly naked (Luke *was* naked) in Luke's lap, post-
having-a-Lucas-Stark-induced orgasm (something I'd wanted since
; in my sixteen and learned what they were) and Mrs. Stark was on the phone.

her one This was *not* happening.

I tried to tug away, but Luke's arm went tight and his eyes sliced to
ating. I "I'll buzz you in," he said, looking at me.

w and I My mouth dropped open and my eyes bugged out, totally affe
Sissy Gawk. He put the phone down.

nd I felt "My mother's here," he told me, totally calm, though his eyes w
ink.

I didn't have time for inky eyes. I flew into a tizzy.

ed. The "Holy crap. Oh my God. Holy crap," I chanted as I pulled out of
and threw myself on the bed, crawling over it to the other side where
tossed the Triumph tee last night. I nabbed it from the floor and whip

possible legs around into a sitting position, my back to Luke, and tugged it on. I snatched my glasses off the nightstand and slid them on my nose.

I jumped up, ready to sprint to the bathroom, and ran headlong into Luke whose arms closed around me.

I rolled, “Ava, calm down.”

He nudged me. I tilted my head to look up at him.

“Mrs. Stark is here!” I shouted.

It was better. He grinned.

And this. What there was to grin about, I did *not* know, but I didn’t have time to ask.

“Let me go. I need to get dressed. *You* need to get dressed.”

I nearly- I looked down and saw he was wearing his cargos.

I was Thank God for that.

I gave another tug, but his arms went tighter.

“Babe, seriously, calm down. Ma likes you. She’s always liked you.”

I stared at him again in a gawk.

I was acting a nice lady. I knew this, of course. Mrs. Stark had always been nice to me. She was a nice lady. I sometimes wondered why she was friends with my mom, but then again, she was friends with everybody.

There were still “I know that, Luke, but she doesn’t want to catch me up here wearing nothing but going commando in your cargos and me in nothing but a Triumph teardrop pair of panties.”

His lap “She’ll do fuckin’ cartwheels. She’s hated every woman I’ve ever been on.”

He nudged Luke. Whoa.
I pedaled my

Then I Whoa, whoa, whoa.

That had to go so deep I needed to bury it next to the molten core of Luke, center of the earth.

I tried to pull away, but it was too late. The elevator doors were open. My head snapped toward the doors and I froze, still standing in Luke's room as Mrs. Stark walked out of the elevator.

This is interesting, Bad Ava said, sounding sleepy.

Good Ava yawned. *What'd I miss?*

time to Mrs. Stark turned. She had a small smile on her face, but it went away when she caught sight of us standing across the room. Luke didn't drop his arms and as I was frozen, my hands resting on either side of his chest, his shoulders, I didn't move.

Luke looked like his dad.

His mom was petite and kind of round. She had blonde hair, but it was mostly gray and she left it at that. She was a motherly-type mom. 1.” She dressed like a mom, talked like a mom and acted like a mom. There she stood there wearing a pair of slacks with a neatly pressed crease, a white blouse, a set of classy but mom-like pumps with short heels, appropriate sized earrings and her hair had obviously been recently set.

“Oh my,” she said softly, her eyes moving to her son. “Luke you know what I have—”

me and a “Hey, Mrs. Stark,” I broke in nervously, taking my hands off my chest and turning.

dated.” One of his arms dropped away from me, the other one kept me close to his side by slicing across my waist, his fingers putting pressure at my hip.

Mrs. Stark blinked.

I hadn't seen her since her husband's funeral. Considering her reaction to the new me, I felt it was a good idea to cut to the chase.

"It's Ava," I said.

"Ava," she repeated and kept looking at me. After a beat, it dawned and she whispered, "Ava."

Then her eyes moved to Luke, then back to me then to Luke.

Then, I kid you not, she looked like she was going to burst into tears. "I just need to..." Her head swung around, for some reason frazzled. She spied the bathroom and started toward it. "Freshen up." She disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door.

I whirled on Luke, and completely at a loss for words, leaned forward with my hands straight down to my sides in fists and *glared*.

He took one look at me and burst into laughter. I lifted up both hands and gave him a big old shove. He didn't move back with the shove (of course). Instead, his arms closed around me and he pulled me close. His face pressed against my neck and he was still laughing so I could feel it against my skin.

"Babe," he said against my neck when he finished laughing.

"I hate you," I whispered.

His head came up and he was full-on smiling, which made my knees wobble, even though I was angry.

"No you don't," he whispered back.

I pulled out of his arms, ran to my suitcases and had a pair of jeans on in the time Mrs. Stark got out of the bathroom.

"Well, sorry about that. Nature calls," she said, blushing, even though

toilet didn't flush and her eyes were looking funny.

son's I walked up to her, lips pressed together. "Mrs. Stark, I'm sorry if you—"

Her head did a little jerk to the side. "Upset me? Oh, Ava, deie light didn't upset me."

Then she walked right up to me and gave me a tight hug.

Automatically, I wrapped my arms around her, confused.

rs. I thought she'd escaped to the bathroom to burst into tears of devotically. that her handsome, tough guy, macho man, shit-hot, rich enough to appeared twenty-eight (now thirty-three) son had the likes of Ava Barlow in his

Apparently this was not the case.

orward, She pulled back and her hands went to squeeze my upper arms.

"Well, look at you." She smiled at me. "You always were a pretnds and thing, but now," she leaned in, "you aren't even giving Marilyn and course).run for their money. You've left them in the dust," she told me quietly went to I blinked.

"Well!" she exclaimed as she patted me on the arm and walked i room, leaving me stunned and immobile in her wake. "I came by to could take my son, who, by the way, never sees his mother so she res do a show up unannounced at his house on a Sunday morning, to breakfas I'll take you both," she declared, clapping her hands together like this most fervent wish.

My eyes went to Luke who was standing there, arms crossed a s on by smiling, this time at his mother.

ugh the "Lucas, put a shirt on. You'll get a chill," Mrs. Stark ordered.

I couldn't help it. At her words, it was my turn to burst into laughter. I was upset.



WE WENT to Le Peep in Cherry Creek.

For me, you know, this, I thought, was good as they had granola pancakes there. I was in the mood to search for my healthy living mojo. I was going to ask for butter and syrup and a double side order of bacon.

We took my Range Rover, Luke driving, Mrs. Stark making a big fuss out of me sitting in the passenger seat by Luke.

Of course, I had to give in.

When we got to the restaurant, I hung back, intent on sitting at the table next to Mrs. Stark, when she made a big thing out of Luke and me sitting by side.

Again, I had to give in.

I knew this would be bad, but it got worse when Luke moved his chair closer than was seemly in front of Super Mom Stark, sat back and drew his arm across the back of my chair. He took it away to eat, but even part time he was eating, he left it there. Worse than that, his thigh being close to mine, his thigh was pressed full length down mine the whole time.

Argh!

To counteract the effects of Luke's thigh, I ordered a triple side of beef. I couldn't eat it, so Luke did. Seeing Luke eat off my plate made Mrs. Stark sigh in motherly contentment.

Throughout all of this, Mrs. Stark blathered on, eyes shiny happy, talking to everyone in our old neighborhood, all of them she was still in touch with. It wasn't surprised to note.

er. She also asked me a gazillion questions. So Luke found out I was employed graphic designer. That my sisters hadn't inherited as much from Auntie Ella because I was a favorite. That I fixed up my own house. And I wasn't in I was allergic to cheap brands of cosmetics.

or extra On the second pot of coffee, she announced, "Nature calls," and throwing a warm smile at the two lovebirds (which was what we look g thing seeing as Luke, now done eating, had leaned into me, arm around shoulders, fingers playing with a lock of my hair).

Once she disappeared in the bathroom, I turned to Luke, flipping me off my neck and out from between his fingers.

ing side "Stop it," I hissed.

"What?" He grinned.

"She's going to think we're together."

is chair "We are together."

ped his "We're not."

t of the "We are."

e meant I made a noise in the back of my throat and leaned into him so close, or, I should say, closer.

bacon. "When she comes back, I'll go to the bathroom and you tell her that what it seems."

s. Stark "And what should I tell her it is?"

7, about "That I've got some troubles, you're helping me sort them out and staying at your place until it's sorted. That's it, nothing more." with, I

He shook his head. "I'm not gonna do that."

"Why?" I cried.

; a self- “First, because she’ll worry if she thinks you’re in trouble.
h frombecause she’ll wonder what you’re still doin’ at my place when it’s a
nd thatThird, because that would be a lie because that’s not all it is, it’s a fuck
more.”

got up, My heart did a stutter and I ignored it. “It isn’t.”

ked like His hand came to the back of my neck. “I’m not sparrin’ with you
nd mythis, Ava.”

“You aren’t being very nice to your mother. She actually *likes* t
my hairthat we’re together. You let her go on thinking we are when we are
just mean.”

I should (again) have realized what it meant when his hand came
back of my neck. I should have read the warning sign.

I didn’t.

It was when his eyes got shiny dangerous, I read the warning sig
late.

“Tell me, after what happened in my bed this morning, how you
we’re *not* together?”
o I was

“That was nothing. I was asleep,” I lied. “You took me off guard.”

his isn’t Uh-oh.

His hand tightened on my neck and brought me even closer so w
ultra-close closer.

nd I’m “You’re too fuckin’ much. Throughout breakfast you’ve been c
how to lie to me, and yourself, about what happened. That same tir
been strugglin’ with the urge to walk away from my mother, drag you
my bed, rip your fuckin’ clothes off and bury myself so deep inside y

Second, feel me in your throat.”

ll over. Ho-ly *shit*.

cuva lot Did Luke just say that to me?

He did.

“Luke—”

u about “Save it,” he clipped. “I figure next time you’re ridin’ my hand is t
time I’ll get the truth out of you. I don’t trust a goddamn thing that cor
he idea of your mouth, but your body, *that* I trust.”

n’t, it’s There they were again, the words “next time.”

Shit.

e to the “I can’t believe you just said that to me,” I snapped.

“Believe it,” he bit off.

gn. Too “You’re way too blunt.”

“Deal with it.”

i figure “You’re a jerk.”

His fingers went tighter on my neck. “Ava, one more word—”

I opened my mouth to give him one more word.

Luke kissed me.

re were It started as a hard, angry, shut-Ava-up kiss, but then his tong
inside my mouth and it ended up as an Ava holding on to Luke’s sh
lecidin’ for dear life kissing him back kiss.

ne I’ve “Children,” Mrs. Stark whispered, and my whole body jerked as n
back to whipped around to see Mrs. Stark sitting across from us, her lips tilted
ou, you mini smile. “The other patrons can see you,” she warned us, but you

tell she didn't care, not even a little bit.

I was so screwed.

Luke and Mrs. Stark fought over who was going to pay (Luke won), got back in the Range Rover, went back to Luke's loft and Mrs. Stark came up to the loft with us.

His loft, I might add, magically now had a black lacquered desk in the next room out corner with my computer and two of my wicker baskets filled with wicker baskets sitting beside it.

I made a (somewhat desperate) demand that she stay for a cup of coffee and Luke shook his head at this, totally knowing my game. Mrs. Stark agreed happily. I made a full pot and she and I drank and chatted while we cleaned Luke's kitchen. Through this, Luke made a number of phone calls while I tried to ignore him. Then she and I sat on barstools and kept chatting.

Eventually, she cried, "Oh, look at the time!" and I felt my stomach ache because it was then I knew I was seriously screwed.

"We're auctioning a homemade quilt at the church. I'm supposed to bring iced tea and cookies. I'm going to be late." She was flying around in a panic, grabbing at her purse and rinsing her cup to put in the dishwasher.

She came to me and touched my cheek.

"Ava, so lovely to see you," she said softly.

Then Luke walked her to the elevator doors. They slid open, he moved around her and he bent to kiss her cheek as I watched, feeling, I admit, something warm spreading inside me as I did so.

Luke had never been close to his dad, but he'd always been close to his mom.

How Mr. and Mrs. Stark ever got together was beyond me. He macho man, like his son. She was Mrs. Cleaver. Why he and Luke did on, I never asked and I didn't know. Maybe too much alike. Or maybe Stark knew his son would be more than him and he didn't like it. Mrs. Stark must have felt like she was living in the depths of hell and it was a test to her quiet strength that she'd not only made it to the other side, she was auctioning quilts.

I was so caught up in these thoughts, just like the *screaming* dork that I didn't realize I should have either thrown myself out the window or locked myself in the bathroom.

Again, I was too late.

The elevator doors closed and Luke and I were alone.

He turned to me.

Eek.

I made a dash toward the bathroom. He caught me around the waist and swung me up in his arms and walked toward the bed.

"Luke, put me down," I yelled, legs kicking and arms pushing.

He did. He threw me on the bed. I rolled and scrambled. He caught my ankle, yanked me back and pinned me with his body.

"Get off me," I shouted.

"This latest bullshit maneuver bought you punishment."

Oh crap.

Considering "payment" meant me handcuffed naked to the bed with Luke had his wicked way with me, I wanted no part in "punishment." I wanted no part in "payment" (although I found the idea intriguing).

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. "Get off."

He stared at me. His eyes weren't shiny dangerous. They were somehow else far more scary.

"I knew I was gonna enjoy this, but it just keeps gettin' better and better." "Get off," I repeated.

He shook his head but said, "I gotta go out. Talk to Vance and I'll let you know what's happening with Vincetti and Dexter. Then Lee and I scheduled a meeting with Vito. When I get home, we'll see to your payment and punishment."

I blinked at him, not processing his last words as I was stuck on another one. "Vito?"

"Vito Zano, Vincetti's uncle and his boss. The guy who had me kidnapped."

Vito Zano?

Uncle Vito Zano?

Uncle Vito had me kidnapped?

"Uncle Vito?" I asked.

Luke stared at me.

"Oh my God." I put my hands to my face then took them away and smiled at Luke. "This is *great*."

Luke kept staring, but he was now doing it in a way like he had maybe I'd slid over the deep end.

"Uncle Vito loves me," I told Luke. "He's hilarious. We're partners during euchre games after Thanksgiving dinner. We kick ass. I didn't know it was Uncle Vito who kidnapped me. No wonder his her

said he knew me.”

nothing “Ava.”

“This is good news, Luke.” I swiped my hand on my forehead. “Sh
better.” “Ava, Vito Zano is not a good guy,” Luke told me.

“Maybe not, but he’d never hurt me. He loves me and he reall
e about Sissy. He was always saying to me he had wished Sissy had married h
a meet nephew, Ren. Ren is a good guy and he’s even hotter than Dom.”

d your Luke’s face grew dark. “Ren Zano isn’t a good guy either. Ar
would torture his grandmother if he felt it served a purpose.”

earlier “Oh, Luke, seriously.”

“Seriously.”

ad you “I’ve played euchre with the man. Have you played euchre w
man?”

“No, I’ve been in a vacant warehouse staring at two men with bull
in their foreheads. Hits ordered by Vito.”

I stopped smiling.

He watched the smile fade and his eyes moved to mine.

“Shit,” he said quietly. “I don’t know what’s more disturbing, you
ay and euchre with Vito Zano on Thanksgiving or thinkin’ Lorenzo Zano is
than Dominic Vincetti.”

thought “Dom’s a mean, cheating, scum-of-the-earth, rat-bastard, but that
stop him from being hot.”

always Luke stared at me a beat then dropped to his side, taking me with l
: ass. Ithe while saying, “And you think I’m nuts?”

nchman

“You *are* nuts.”

His hands slid up my back and his chin tipped down to look at me.
“Goin’ out. Do I have to cuff you to the bed?”

“No!” I pulled back, but his arms went tighter. “I’ve got a shed
work to do and with all this nonsense, I’m way behind. You cuff me
to the bed, I’ll miss a deadline and lose a client.”

His eyes narrowed on me. “Can I trust you not to do anything stupid?”
“Of course.”

Without hesitation, he asked, “Can I trust you not to lie to me about
doin’ anything stupid?”

“Luke!”

His hand went into my hair, his head slanted, and he kissed me, deep.
Then he did it again, hotter and deeper. When I’d pulled his tee shirt
down, he was running his hands up the muscles of his back and pushing
myself full frontal into him, his lips detached.

I stared at him in a total and complete Luke Lip Fog.

“That’s how I like it,” he muttered against my mouth.

He moved up to kiss my nose then he was gone.
“Hotter.”

doesn’t

him, all

“You *are* nuts.”

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“Luke!”

His hand went into my hair, his head slanted, and he kissed me, hot and deep. Then he did it again, hotter and deeper. When I’d pulled his tee out of his cargos and was running my hands up the muscles of his back and pressing myself full frontal into him, his lips detached.

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THAT DIDN'T GO TOO GOOD

After Luke left, I had, what I found out much later, was a very stupid

After that, I had what Luke would consider a very stupid idea (I didn't know about it, which I was not about to tell him).

I had to admit, the way it turned out, if he had known about it and given me his opinion, he would have been right.



SEE, I figured if I took care of myself then I wouldn't get so hot and bothered all the time when Luke kissed me. I hadn't had an orgasm in a while, so I thought if I had one then no way would Luke affect me so much. I was so oblivious, unmoved and I could resist him.

Not to mention, after Luke's wakeup call and his recent kiss, I was turned on.

So I lay in his bed and waited for a while to make certain he would come back. Then I unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans and slid my hands inside.

What I did not know was that was when, not far away, a guy named [redacted] sitting in the surveillance room at Nightingale Investigations, leaned forward and flipped *off* the switch that activated the cameras in Luke's loft, the

just called him and told him to switch *on*.



AS I MENTIONED, it had been a while, and it was helped by the fact that I was in Luke's bed, so my self-gratification didn't take long to achieve.

After, as I was lying in bed, pleased with myself (very pleased), a knock came to me.

A way out of this mess.

I had an idea. Uncle Vito.

If I got to Uncle Vito first, before Luke, taking Sissy with me, and told him what was happening with Dom, he'd deal with it. He'd even probably help Sissy out in the divorce. He was Italian, he was Catholic, but I thought Dom was a dickhead (like everybody else). And since he loved Sissy and me, if we double-teamed him we couldn't go wrong.

That way I wouldn't owe Luke and I could move out of his house.

All my problems solved!

I don't think this is a good idea, Good Ava commented, wringing her hands.

I think it's a GREAT idea, call Sissy right now! Bad Ava yelled, jumping up and down with excitement.

I called Sissy.

"Hey," she said.

"Yo. Listen, you know who kidnapped me?"

"Mr. Zano," she answered.

"Vito Zano," I said.

"Uncle Vito?" She sounded shocked as if there were five thousand miles between them.

Zanos” in Denver. However, I didn’t blame her. I would have been s
too, if at the time I knew Uncle Vito kidnapped me. He loved me. “W
at I was you that?” she asked.

“Luke.”

thought “I don’t believe it. Uncle Vito wouldn’t kidnap you. He loves you.
See!

“I have a plan,” I said then I told her the plan.

“I’m in,” she agreed immediately, as bestest best friends do.

nd told “We have to hurry. We have to get there before he meets with Luk

robably “Come get me. I’ll be ready.”

he also

ed both



I WAS in the Range Rover, just blowing out of Luke’s parking garage
my phone rang.

It said, SHIRLEEN CALLING.

ing her I flipped it open and put it to my ear. “Yo.”

umping “Yo mama. I called this morning early ’cause I *know* these boys li
mornin’ piece of ass. You didn’t answer. Please tell me you didn’t l
another fifty bucks,” Shirleen begged.

“I didn’t.”

“All right, girl.” She sounded pleased. “You got to hold ou
tomorrow, then you and Luke can do the nasty. It *has* to be tomorrow.”

“Shirleen, Luke and I are *never* going to do the nasty.”

“Unh-hunh.” Now she sounded like she didn’t believe me.

I rolled my eyes and came to a stop at a red light.

nd “Mr.

shocked “He there now?” she asked.

Who told “No, I’m on my way to pick up Sissy.”

“He let you out?” Now she sounded surprised.

“Not exactly.”

”

“Oh Lord.” Now she sounded worried. “What’re you and Sissy p
to do? Daisy’s over and we’re gonna watch a *Days of Our Lives* ma
Now that I got a day job, I got to DVR *Days of Our Lives*. I watch the
week solid every Sunday afternoon. It’s a ritual. You and Sissy coul
e.” over, we got popcorn.”

“Sissy and I are going to talk to Vito Zano.”

Silence.

So, when “Shirleen?”

“Girl, why in *the* hell are you and Sissy goin’ to talk to Vito Zano’
she sounded kind of mad.

“He’s Dom’s uncle. Sissy and I both know him. We’re going to a
ke their to help us out. He loves us. He’s Uncle Vito.”

lose me “Uncle Vito my ass. Are you crazy?” Now she sounded like she th
was crazy.

“Relax, Shirleen, I have it all figured out.”

it until “Shee-it, girl. You’re cracked.”

”

She took the phone away from her ear and I heard her talking to
then I heard Daisy screech, “*Is she crazy?*”

Jeez.

Shirleen came back to me. “Tell me what chance I got of talkin’ ;

of this fool idea.”

“Zip,” I informed her.

“Tell me where Sissy’s stayin’. We’ll meet you there.”

“Shirleen, there’s no need.”

“There’s a need. There’s so much of a need I’m missin’ my *Days* ritual. Tell me the address.”

“Shirleen—”

“Tell me.” Now she sounded like she wasn’t going to take no answer.

I told her.



SISSY, Shirleen, Daisy and I rolled up to Uncle Vito’s house in Englewood. He lived in what looked like your normal, average, everyday neighborhood. It wasn’t until you got inside and saw the Picasso scribble framed on the wall and swam in his indoor pool in the back room that you found out he was loaded.

We all trooped up to the house and knocked on the door. Uncle Vito’s wife, Aunt Angela, opened the door.

“Sissy! Ava! What a wonderful surprise!” she cried and gave us big hugs.

Uncle Vito was nearly bald, very round and about an inch taller than me. Aunt Angela was slim, trim, stylish and disappeared once a year to some exotic location where she came out looking five years younger. Her forehead never needed Botox city.

Still, she was sweet.

you out

“Aunt Angela, these are our friends Daisy and Shirleen,” Sissy introduced.

as we walked into the foyer and Angela greeted Daisy and Shirleen.

She was such a premier hostess, she seemed not to have any real reaction to Daisy and Shirleen. Not that there was any reaction to be had from them, except Daisy was wearing skintight faded jeans with silver rivets on the sides, pink platform boots and a baby-blue V-necked shirt that showed much cleavage most mothers would cover their children's eyes at the sight of her.

Then again, we found out quickly that Aunt Angela knew Daisy and Shirleen for they had moved in the same social circles.

They gave each other cheek kisses that came nowhere near the cheeks.

"Come in, come in. Can I get you coffee? I have some cannolis from Pasquini's," Aunt Angela offered.

"That sounds good," Shirleen said.

I gave Shirleen a look and then turned back to Aunt Angela.

"Sorry, Aunt Angela. We're here to see Uncle Vito, it's important."

She looked at me and said, "Vito's just about to head out to a meeting with Vito's

brother.

My gaze swung to Sissy, screaming mutely, *Do something!*

Sissy to the rescue.

"We have to see him before he goes. It's important," Sissy told her.

Her voice lowered. "It's about Dom."

Aunt Angela's mouth got tight as she looked at Sissy. Angela thought Dom was a dickhead.

Angela made a decision and said, "Come through to the family room. I'll introduce you to Vito."

She led us to the family room and then hot-footed it out.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t have a cannoli and a coffee while I wait about,” Shirleen grouched.

“We don’t have time,” I told her.

“Have you ever *had* a cannoli from Pasquini’s? There’s *always* tin cannoli from Pasquini’s.”

In my fatty fatty four-eyed days I’d practically lived at Pasquini’s. They more cannolis, chocolate candles, napoleons and profiteroles at Pasquini’s than the entire population of Denver.

I decided not to answer. Luckily, I didn’t have to. Uncle Vito walked in from the kitchen. He threw out his arms toward Sissy and me. “Sissy! Ava! Congratulate your Uncle Vito a hug.”

Okay, so I was a little weirded out that Luke told me Uncle Vito had ordered hits where guys ended up with bullets in their brains. Not to mention he’d kidnapped me a couple of days earlier. Still, if Sissy and Dom didn’t want to go, I’d likely not be invited to the huge family Thanksgiving dinner again. Anyway, if he was probably one of the last times I’d ever see him. Anyway, if he was the one who could order a hit, it was probably not prudent to dis him on a hunch. With Sissy, I moved forward for a big Uncle Vito hug.

“How’re my girls?” he asked, leaning back and dropping his arms.

“Not good, Uncle Vito,” Sissy answered.

Vito’s eyes came directly to me.

“Eek!”

“What’d I do?”

“What’s Dom done now?” he asked.

Oh, okay, freakout cancelled. I was always telling on Dom to Uncle Vito. He knew I'd give him the truth.

Sissy and I looked at each other. Vito moved into the room. We knew that he knew both Shirleen and Daisy. With Daisy, it was understandable for Aunt Angela knew her. Shirleen was a wildcard.

Shirleen had also morphed into a badass Shirleen I'd never seen before. Her eyes were sharp, her face was serious and she didn't look like someone you messed with. She certainly didn't look like someone who had just been talking about cannolis.

It was also clear Vito took her seriously. You could see this, but it wasn't spoken. I found this intriguing, but decided not to ask. I had more important things on my mind.

We all sat and Sissy and I told our stories about Dom. We both discussed how we avoided Vito kidnapping me because that was likely not a topic for conversation.

When we were done, Uncle Vito said, "That boy. I told my sister about her time and again. Now, listen to you two."

Sissy and I looked at each other again.

"I'll handle it," he finished.

Yippee!

"Really?" I asked.

"You won't have any troubles with Dominic anymore," he assured me.

"That's great," Sissy replied. "Thanks, Uncle Vito."

"I need to have a talk with Dominic myself. When we have our conversation, also tell him to get home, take care of his wife, treat her right, give her love."

le Vito. babies, keep her happy,” Vito said to Sissy.

Uh-oh.

found His eyes turned to me. “As for you, I’ll talk to Lorenzo. He’s a good
dable if but he needs to settle down and he likes you. You’re with Lorenzo, I
won’t get any ideas. I’ll get him to give you a call.”

before. Uh-oh.

someone “Uncle Vito, we were, um...hoping you’d help Sissy out with
st been divorce,” I shared.

wasn’t “Vincettis and Zanos don’t divorce. Marriage is life,” Vito replied.
finality.

important This was not good.

secretly “But—” I started.

r polite “Listen to your Uncle Vito, Ava. Angela and me have been married
thirty-three happy years. You gotta work at it. I know what I’m talking
r. Told We just gotta worry about gettin’ you settled. I like you with Lorenzo
happy things.”

Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh.

Vito grinned huge. “You’re unhappy. All attitude. You need
Lorenzo will put a smile on that pretty face.”

No, no, no.

me. “Big wedding and lotsa beautiful babies,” Uncle Vito went on.

Oh...my...*God*.

hat, I’ll *I told you I didn’t think this was a good idea,* Good Ava repeated
arms crossed.

r some

Oo, lots of Ren's babies. That means we'd have to sleep with Ren!
Ren's HOT! Bad Ava gushed, arms crossed, rubbing her hands up an
od boy, her biceps with glee.

Dominic "I don't think—" I began.

"It's settled. I got a meeting." He got up and looked at Sissy. "I
care of Dominic." He looked at me. "Lorenzo will take care of you." I
ith her clapped his hands together, held them out in front of him and walked
the room.

ed with "That didn't go too good, did it?" Shirleen asked.

"Sugar, you can say *that* again," Daisy answered.



"REN ZANO CALLS you and asks you out on a date, Luke Stark is gon
a shit hemorrhage. He's gonna lose his motherfuckin' *mind*," Shirle
married from the back of my Range Rover.
' about.

o. I see I figured she was not wrong.

"Maybe we should take Ava to Wyoming. Maybe we should
Zip's Gun Emporium and load up on weapons and *then* take
Wyoming. Hole up in a cabin somewhere and shoot at anything that r
a man. Daisy suggested, sitting beside Shirleen.

"I ain't shootin' at Luke Stark. First, that boy is fine. Second, if I
he'd beat the shit out of me," Shirleen said.

I glanced at Sissy. She had her fingers to her temples and was rub
circles.

anded, "This is unprecedented. A Bad Boy pursuing a Rock Chic
competition on his ass," Daisy noted. "I'm not thinkin' good though

lots and not gettin' good vibes, I'm not seein' good things. We gotta get Ava
d down here now. Luke is gonna blow his top. Blow...his...top. *Comprende?*"

"Would you two stop talking? You're freaking me out," I told them

"Girl, better to be freaked out then cuffed to a bed for the next
'll take Which is exactly where you're gonna be when Luke finds o
Then he orchestrated this fiasco," Shirleen told me.

I out of Ee-yikes!

I stopped at a red light. "Maybe this is a moot point. Maybe Ren
call me. Have you thought that maybe Ren's not interested in me?" I
somewhat hysterically and also loudly.

"He's interested in you." Sissy said quietly.

na have My head jerked to her. "What?"

en said "Ren's interested in you," she repeated.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"He told Tony, Tony told Carla, Carla told me."

stop by "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, beginning to sound more hy
Ava to
noves," and definitely louder.

"I don't know. Maybe because you'd sworn off men, stating you'd
missed, never, never, *never* get involved with another one again. I like Ren.
good guy. You can be a bitch to guys. Ren doesn't deserve that. He d
a woman who hasn't vowed fidelity to her vibrators."

bing in I had to ask, why me?

k with It was on this thought that we were bumped from behind. Not a big
its, I'm but we all jerked forward and snapped back.

I looked in the rearview mirror. It was another SUV. I couldn't

1 out of make because it was too close. The person driving it was a man. He had
hair, but that was about all I could make out before he started to reverse

1. “We’ve been rear-ended,” Shirleen stated the obvious.

month. I watched him reverse thinking that was weird then he came f
ut you again.

“Holy crap. He’s gonna—” I started to say.

BAM!

1 won’t He rear-ended us again, this time a lot more than a bump. Ev
asked, jerked forward harder and snapped back.

Shit!

“What the hell?” Daisy asked.

I watched as he reversed. I looked forward and the light turned g
slammed the Range Rover in gear and I put the pedal to the floor.

“Oh my God! What’s going on?” Sissy cried, looking behind her.

“I don’t know. Is everyone buckled in?” I asked.

sterical “Do you know that guy?” Daisy was looking to our rear as well.

l never, demon. “No. Now, I asked, is everyone buckled in?” I shouted, driving

He’s a “I’m in,” Shirleen answered.

eserves “Me too,” Daisy said.

“Yes,” Sissy added.

g bump, I saw the light in front of us turn red.

“Shit!” I shouted as I braked, looked in the rearview mirror and
tell the SUV behind us wasn’t slowing. “Brace!” I yelled.

ad dark We had a split second to brace, then, *BANG!*

e. “*What’s going on?*” Sissy screeched.

“Go! Go, go, go!” Shirleen shouted.

forward The guy behind us was reversing again.

“I can’t. It’s red,” I pointed out.

“Lay on your horn, girl, and *go!*” Shirleen yelled.

everyone The guy started coming again. I laid on my horn and went. As I the intersection, cars screeched and swerved. To avoid one, I pulled a l the heavy, three-lane traffic on Hampden Avenue.

“Don’t stop, just go, keep honking and drive,” Daisy advised.

I did as I was told, weaving in and out of traffic. I went fast. Cars l green. I swerved out of my way, threw me gestures, and the whole time th followed me.

“I can’t shake him!” I cried.

“Keep drivin’,” Shirleen told me.

“I’ve done this before, I got experience. Go to a police station,” like a said.

“I can’t!” I yelled.

“Why not?” Sissy screeched.

“If I go to a police station then Luke will know I’ve been out at freak.”

“Better Luke freaks than we die,” Shirleen put in.

saw the Easy for her to say, she wasn’t facing “payment” and “punis tonight.

Hell and damnation.

“Hold on!” I shouted, and then I drove faster, weaved more and overpass to I-25, at the last minute I swung a huge, tight, very illegal u

It was not good at all to swing a huge, tight u-ie on a highway over an SUV.

SUVs rolled easily. Very easily.

entered
left into We teetered on two wheels, visions of us flipping over the overpa
the busy highway below flying through my head. Every last one
screamed at the top of our lungs. We slammed back down on four whe
I motored.

onked,
ie SUV The SUV following us missed the u-ie and I kept driving
madwoman, bent over the wheel, eyes glaring at the road.

I drove this way for a while then Sissy said quietly from beside me
you’re kind of scaring me.”

I slowed.

’ Daisy “I think we lost him,” Daisy murmured, looking behind her.

“Shee-it,” Shirleen breathed.

“I need cookies,” I declared.



rd he’ll I DROPPED A SHAKING SISSY OFF. She wandered into her dad’s house
dazed.

Shirleen and Daisy followed me to Luke’s. I went in and they dro
Daisy behind the wheel of my Range Rover.

hment” The back of the Range Rover was damaged. Shirleen and Dais
taking it to “a friend” so he would fix it, thus hiding the evidence fro

that I'd been out, doing stupid shit and getting into trouble.

on the I went up to the loft, directly to my computer, flipped it on and decided to work and not think about any of this.

pass in I had no idea who this new person was who was after me and I wanted to pretend it didn't happen. I was going to find a happy place in my life and live there forever. I was going to forget about hot guy, macho man, Stark wanting to get in my pants, about Dominic Dickhead being Uncle Vito ordering people to be murdered and me to be kidnapped, the upcoming call from Ren Zano, which would lead to a big wedding and babies.

like a I had walked into Nightingale Investigations on a Thursday. Sunday and my life wasn't just pretty fucking complicated. It was completely out of control.

, "Ava, I managed to quit shaking. I did this, not with cookies, because of a very thorough search of Luke's kitchen I found that Sandra Whoever Was hadn't stocked Luke's cupboard with cookies, only healthy eating which didn't do anything to stop the shakes. I did it by alternately working on tidying Luke's loft and drinking Diet Coke liberally mixed with splash of Sailor Jerry.

I finally was able to focus and was coming close to finishing my damn looking project when I heard the elevator doors slide open. I turned in my chair and walked in silently, eyes on me.

ove off, Or, I should say, his dangerously shining, dark-blue eyes were on me. Uh-oh.

y were I slowly stood and turned to face him. He walked directly to the circular bar and dropped a pair of cuffs and what looked like a weird

it.

ided to I stared at the cuffs and the weapon, thinking upsetting thoughts.

He rounded the bar and came into the kitchen area. He stopped
s going palm on the counter and leaned into it. The whole time he did this, he l
ind and eyes on me.

n Luke “Hey,” I said, trying for innocent and casual. “You have
a jerk, afternoon?”

and the “Come here,” he replied, and he did *not* use his soft, gentle, affec
id lotsa voice.

Eek!

It was “Everything okay?” I asked, still clinging to innocent and casual w
pletely had.

after a “Come here,” he repeated.
er-She- Okay, innocent and casual weren’t working.

ig crap, “What’s going on?”

orking, “Ava, if you make me say it again...”

shes of I went silent.

He moved, just slightly, but it was enough to make me jump. Thi
headline him smile. Not a Sexy Luke Smile, a Dangerous Luke Smile.

r. Luke “Luke, tell me what’s going on!” I demanded, beginning to freak o

ne. This was not smart. He bit his bottom lip with his teeth and looke
from me. When his eyes came back to me, my body went still.

Oh dear, Good Ava muttered.

e semi- *Holy SHIT!* Bad Ava exploded.
gun on

One could say I knew Luke pretty well. I hadn't been around him for a long time, but I had watched him grow up (with avid interest). His mother put a few friends with my mom. He and I had shared some laughs and some moments. I kept his

Still, you didn't have to know Luke to know that grown up, tough as a good macho man Luke was barely controlling what appeared to be a very

emotional "Was it good?" he asked.

I blinked, not expecting that question, not even understanding it.

"What?" I asked back.

"When you touched yourself, was it good?"

My mouth dropped open and my lungs seized.

Ho-ly crap.

"How did you—?" I breathed.

"Cameras," he told me and my body jerked. My eyes swung around the loft, but Luke started speaking again and they went back to him. "You see them. I had the place wired, surveillance put in, so when I was with you, the boys could watch out for you. When I'm not here, I'm monitoring the loft."

Ho-ly *crap*.

"Did they see—?"

He

"Jack turned it off. He knew I'd break his neck if he watched you. He gave you some time. Apparently too much time. By the time he turned the cameras, you were gone."

I was certain I was going to die. I actually *wanted* to die. The very

im in a the Nightingale Investigations men knowing what I'd done was mortif
om was "Where'd you go?" Luke asked, breaking me out of thoughts of h
intense to off myself.

"I spent some time with Sissy," I told him immediately, and that v
gh guy, total lie.

y scary "And Shirleen and Daisy?" Luke pressed.

I didn't know how he knew this, but I thought it was safe to say,
yes."

"Spent some time being pursued by a dark-blue SUV down Ha
Avenue? Your back bumper completely fucked-up? Losing him after
rolling onto I-25?"

Holy crap!

How did he know this shit? It was just bizarre.

I kept my mouth shut. I thought that was the sensible way to go.

und the Luke didn't. "It was reported to the police by about two doze
1 won't drivers. In detail, with license plates and descriptions of the people
i't here vehicles."

they're Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

"Luke—"

"Come here," he said quietly, and his voice was not affectionate,
lethal.

do that. "I don't think I want to," I told him.

rned on "That may be the smartest decision you've made today," he said ba

Okay. Hang on a second.

idea of

ying. Firstly, he was not the boss of me. Secondly, I was a free woman. I can do what I wanted, when I wanted, where I wanted, with whom I wanted. I didn't need his permission for one goddamn thing. Thirdly, no one asked me to be Mr. Over-Protective. He'd given himself that role. He even put cameras in his house, cameras he didn't tell *me* about, which was a serious invasion of privacy beyond making me move in with him, sleep beside him and could go on (and on). Fourthly, he was not the boss of me.

“Um... I'd had enough.

“You're not the boss of me,” I told him.

“Ava, I'll give you one last chance to get your sweet ass over here.

“No!” I snapped. “I'm not going to be freaked out by you. I'm not going to be pushed around by you. And I'm not going to be told what to do while I'm alive. I'm breathing. So are Sissy, Daisy and Shirleen. I don't know what happened and I don't care. I'm ignoring everything, including you and your buddies watch me when I didn't know they were doing it. I'm ignoring *everything*. I'm going to live my life and let all this shit blow over.”

“You haven't clued in yet but this shit is not gonna blow over. What about the guy in the SUV?”

“I have no idea. I've never seen him before. Maybe he had road rage. Maybe I pulled out in front of him and didn't notice it. Who cares?”

“I care.”

“Well I don't!” I snapped.

“Why are you all of a sudden the focus of some seriously scary shit?”

“How should I know?”

“Maybe because it's happening to you?”

I could “Well, I don’t know!” I yelled. “I don’t even want to know!”

anted. I He glared at me. I glared back.

ed him We were locked in another Luke vs. Ava Glare of the Century
cameras when my phone rang. I was kind of glad it did because I was about
vision of down from the glare and this gave me an excuse.
the list

To save face, I made a “huh” sound, grabbed my phone from th
flipped it open and put it to my ear. “Yo.”

“Ava?”

“Yes?”

”

“It’s Ren.”

it going

Oh *fuck*.

by you.

My eyes snapped to Luke. “Hey,” I said.

w what

“Hey, Uncle Vito told me about Dom. You okay?”

having

gnoring

“Yeah.”

“You okay after Uncle Vito sent his goons after you?”

ho was

I blinked in surprise at his question and turned away from Luke. “V

d rage.

“Santo and Lucky are idiots. They were supposed to be cool, tel
was Vito who wanted to see you. Not scare you half to death and se
running through traffic on Broadway.”

Wow.

That was news.

t?”

“Sorry about that,” he went on, like he apologized for m
kidnappings every day.

I moved away slowly and went to the window at the side of the l

the while I was very conscious of Luke watching me.

“Um, that’s okay.”

Contest Did I just tell Ren it was okay that his uncle had me kidnapped? N
to back was nuts.

“Listen, Ava, don’t worry about Dom. I’ll take care of him,” he
e desk, me.

Oh no.

My eyes went back to Luke. He was still leaning on the count
watching me and now his eyes were narrowed.

I looked away again.

“I think someone’s already working on that,” I told him.

“I know. You got Stark doing it. Tell him to back off. We want
care of this in the family.”

Oh shit.

No way was I going to tell Luke that Ren Zano was going to take
Dom for me and he could back off. No way in hell.
What?”

I would never have expected my life could get more complicat
there it was.
I you it
and you

“Ren,” I said softly and stupidly, for the minute I uttered his name,
in the room changed and *not* in a good way. It took all my efforts to k
eyes looking out the window and ignore the scary air.

“I’ll take you out to dinner tomorrow night, apologize properly for
mistaken shit.”

“I’m busy,” I said immediately.
oft. All

“Tuesday.”

I felt Luke get close rather than seeing him do it. I felt this, because maybe that not-good air in the room started pressing on me.

“Erm...” I mumbled, too focused on the scary air to come up with another excuse to avoid a date with Ren.

“I’ll take you to Carmine’s on Penn. You love it there.”

I did love it there and I thought it was kind of sweet there, still remembered. We’d all gone out, Sissy and Dom, Noah and me, and for one of his women, I forgot her name (Ren had a lot of women). We had a good time and the food was orgasmic.

“Seven o’clock. I’ll pick you up at your place. See you then.”

Before I could say a word, he disconnected.

Okay, there were a lot of not-good things happening in my life at that moment, but this was *seriously* not good.

I flipped my phone closed and turned.

I was right, Luke got close. Real close.

And I was also right about the not-good air.

If Luke had been barely controlling fury before, he was visibly losing the battle with controlling rage now.

Eek.

all this

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Eek.

TWELVE



PINS AND NEEDLES

Luke's hand came up to rest on my neck, his thumb under my jaw.

“Why is Ren Zano phoning you?” he asked softly.

I needed to make a split-second decision and I made it.

I wasn't going to live in fear of tough guy, macho man Luke St. was nuts and he was a badass, but he wasn't going to hurt me. Sure, the way he behaved and nearly all of the brutally honest shit that came his mouth was shocking, but he would never hurt me. Maybe he would take me to the bed again or do some other macho man shit, but I could handle it.

I was in control of my mind and my body. Okay, the last one wasn't really true but I did have a pretty magnificent orgasm not too long ago and I should be topped up.

I wasn't his woman. It was time to stop acting like I was.

“He says you should back off from Dom. He'll take care of it,” I told him, instantly going back on my pledge never to tell him that, ever.

Luke's fingers tensed at my neck. “That it?”

I took hold of my liberated woman and shared further. “He's taking out to dinner on Tuesday to apologize for everything.”

I felt Luke's body go still as he stared at me. “You're tellin' me yo

a date with Zano while you were standing in my living room?”

I was *not* going to think “Eek!”

“It isn’t a date. I don’t date. I’ve sworn off men. This is an a dinner.”

Luke stared at me, one beat, then two. Then surprisingly he drop hand from my neck and walked away. I watched as he lifted his hand shoulder blades, pulled off his tee and dropped it to the floor (incie this annoyed me, considering I’d spent ten minutes that afternoon ga his clothes and throwing them in the laundry hamper in the utility a was tucked behind the bathroom). Then he sat on the bed and yanked boots. He stood and started to unbuckle his pants.

ark. He

Oh crap.

most of

e out of

ild cuff

lle that.

wasn’t

go, so I

I turned and sat back down at the desk, ignoring what his action mean to me. I heard drawers opening and closing then rustling. When the elevator doors slide open, I twisted in my chair and saw Luke wa the elevator, wearing running clothes (all black, except his shoes elevator doors closed and he was gone.

Weird.

Way weird.

ld him,

I took a deep breath, got back to work and tried not to wonder about (and failed).

ing me

u made

About an hour later he came back. I watched from my chair as he directly to the bathroom without a word to me. I heard the shower r while I closed down my files and shut down the computer. I decided t away from Sailor Jerry because I needed to be drunk for whatever wa to happen next like I needed a hole in the head. I found a box of

Whoever-She-Was's peppermint tea and was boiling the kettle when she came out of the shower, wearing nothing but a silvery-gray towel around her hips.

mpology Seriously, he was worse than Captain Kirk. Luke hardly ever had ped his on.

s to his I looked away from his body, bit my bottom lip and watched the kettle boil. I felt him behind me and tensed. My hair was swept off my shoulders and his lips touched my neck.

rea that Um.

off his What?

His arm slid around my waist and he pulled me into his body.

"You want to order Chinese or pizza?" he asked.

s might I blinked at the kettle.

I heard What was happening? Where was Pissed-Off Luke? He spoke calmly into the phone. He was completely calm, normal, un-pissed off.

s). The "You have tons of food in your fridge. You don't eat it, it'll go bad." He told him.

"You wanna cook?" he asked.

ut Luke "I could cook," I answered.

"Works for me," he said and let me go.

walked Holy cramoily.

running What was going on?

o move I made tea. Luke put on black sweatpants with a thick line of dark stripes running up the sides and a black tee with a black insignia you could see from Sandra

n Luke see on the front that looked like a set of wings. I made dinner, Sandra
and his and happy life with Luke healthy living options of salmon fillets, t
and cous cous. I brought the food to the couch where Luke was watchi
I sat down and we both ate silently. Then I took the plates back to the
and did the dishes. When I was done, I came back and sat on the couch
This was freaking me out. He didn't carry me around, making
statements about how he was going to fuck me, how I belonged
demanding I not go out with Ren. He seemed relaxed and mellow. I
like it and I didn't trust it one bit.

I started to watch the game, my mind sliding from thought to
when Luke's arm came out and pulled me against his side. He was sl
into the couch, feet up on the coffee table. I decided not to poke the s
tiger by struggling. I slouched pressed next to him and put feet up
coffee table by his.

After a while I could take it no more. I wanted to allow myself to
to Luke, pressed to his side, in a happy, pretend world of what it could
bad," I with Luke. Instead, I was freaking out wondering what he was playing

I got up announcing I was going to bed. Luke let me go without a
went to the bathroom, got ready for bed, spent some time trying to d
the Triumph tee was the way to go (I went for it, it was snuggly) and
out of the bathroom.

Hmm.

Conundrum.

I should sleep on the couch, make a statement. But Luke was w
the game on the couch. I figured I could move to the couch later and
bed.

Half an hour later, Luke switched off the TV and I heard him moving around the loft. He turned off the lamp and he took off his clothes (pulling the TV off the wall, dropping them to the floor, argh!). The bed moved and he got in.

I tensed. He didn't touch me.

I kept tense. He still didn't touch me.

This made me tenser.

My mind whirled.

Maybe he'd given up. Maybe he thought I wasn't worth the effort.

I didn't know what to think of that. I should have been relieved, but I couldn't admit I was not.

You really messed things up this time. Good Ava sounded angry.

That's okay. Ren's taking you out to dinner on Tuesday and I'll be there. Bianchi said he was a GOD in bed. Bad Ava was moving on to new ground.

We don't want Ren, we want Luke. We've ALWAYS wanted Luke! Ava snapped at Bad Ava.

We'll take what we can get. Ren Zano is hardly sloppy seconds, thank you very much. Bad Ava informed Good Ava.

I forced my body to relax and my mind to go blank. I was drifting off to sleep when Luke tagged me around the waist, turning me to my back.

"What are you doing?" I asked, finding myself instantly alert.

He didn't answer. He covered me with his body and before I knew it, his hands were in the Triumph tee and it was up and over my head. He pulled it off. He stopped it when my arms were up, the tee bunched up around my elbows.

I was taking this as a sign he hadn't given up.

moving “What are you doing?” I screeched.

robably He twisted his torso, nabbed something off the nightstand and can to me. I heard a clink and realized what was happening.

“No you don’t!” I bucked, twisted, struggled against his heavy wei tried to shove off the tee.

Luke “helped” and the tee was gone in a flash. Wordlessly, he sei wrists, slapped a bracelet on one and then, without apparent effc clearly with a good deal of experience working with struggling peop other, and I was cuffed to the bed.

ut I had I stilled, a tremor of fear (and excitement, I had to admit) ran thro and I glared at him in the dimly lit dark.

“Uncuff me,” I demanded.

Theresa

ame.

He ignored my demand and declared, “Now, payment.”

, Good

Ho-ly *shit*.

at man

Definitely not giving up. His mouth came to my neck and ran the of it. A shiver shuddered through me.

g off to At my ear he said, “We’ll save punishment for later. Coupla da informed me conversationally before his lips moved along my jaw the mouth. “You gave me a fuckin’ great idea.”

Uh-oh.

w it his

I didn’t think that *I* would think it was a great idea.

e didn’t

He went on, proving me irrevocably correct. “I’m thinkin’ I’ll

l at my while you make yourself come.”

Oh...my...*God*.

Me and my bright ideas. I was *such* a dork!

“Get off!” I cried.

He kissed me. I bucked and twisted, these being the only options
He didn’t budge.

I tore my mouth from his. “Seriously, Luke, this is *not* cool.”

His hands ran down my sides and I couldn’t help it. My body tr
zed mybecause his hands on me felt nice. I knew he felt it. He had to have felt

Hell and damnation.

“No?” he asked, sounding satisfied.

Yep, he felt it.

“Go to hell!” I snapped.

He touched his mouth to mine, then he moved lower, his mouth
neck, my throat. Then lower, spending some time at my breasts. Ther
at my belly. By the time his tongue traced the top edge of my panties
like I hadn’t had an orgasm a few hours ago. It was like I hadn’t had
lengthten years.

He went lower and my legs opened immediately in invitation.
Damn it all to hell.

He kissed me over my panties. I moaned and lifted my hips, mo
ready for him. His hands slid under my ass and that was it. All v
vibrators and swearing off men were history.

This was quite simply hot. His mouth moved on me over my pant
watchit felt good. Even better, it felt naughty and slightly pervy not being
touch him. I wanted to touch him, needed to put my hands to his
encouragement, keep him there and not let him stop. Not being abl
that, having no control over the situation, was sexy as all hell.

He moved away and I made a sound of protest low in my throat. only moved to pull my panties down my legs. Then he was back and the target immediately.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, bucking now to get closer to his mouth.

I was out of control moaning and panting. I couldn't help it and dic

It was better than that morning. It was better than my self-grati that afternoon (*far* better). It was better than anything I'd ever had.

It was exquisite.

I was there, *right there* and I gasped, “Luke.”

Then his cell rang. His mouth stilled. Then his head came up.

Oh no. No, no, no, no, *no*. Not again.

“No!” I cried aloud.

He moved up and over me.

“Fuck,” he muttered, sounding pissed and full of regret at the same

It was the regret that penetrated my pre-orgasm fog.

I stared at him.

“Go back. Don't stop,” I whispered.

He kept his body on me but reached to the nightstand.

“Luke, please,” I begged, and I didn't care what I sounded like, t not going to happen to me again.

“Sorry, babe. That's Lee's tone,” Luke whispered, hand at my jaw, able to running along my lower lip.

One thing you could say, he did sound sorry. *Very* sorry. But I did that he sounded sorry. I didn't care at all.

But he He flipped open the phone. “Yeah?”
l he hit This was *not* happening.
He listened for a few beats then said, “I’ll be there in ten.”
What?
In’t try. He flipped the phone shut.
fication “You have got to be kidding me,” I breathed, half still turned c
totally pissed off, not just at him, but at myself.
“Lee’s workin’. He’s in a situation where he needs backup. The b
call are busy with somethin’ else. I gotta go,” Luke told me.
I glared at him, not knowing what to think.
He looked at me, likely sensing my mental battle to decide how I f
he’d leave me in this state to go do backup for Lee so he said softly, “I
I’d leave, Ava, but Lee needs a man at his back. He knows you’re h
wouldn’t call unless it was important. I have to go.”
: time.
Fuck *that*.
I kept glaring at him. He ignored the glare, touched my mouth v
and moved away.
Then things, already bad, got worse.
He pulled the covers over my body, but left me cuffed to the bed
his was he got up and started dressing. In stunned, angry silence, I watched h
on his pants then tug on his shirt. He sat on the edge of the bed to pu
, thumb boots.
n’t care Finally I called, “Luke?”
“Yeah?”

“Did you forget something?” I asked.

“What?”

“Uncuff me.”

He tugged on his second boot, twisted toward me and put his lips on my jaw. “Quick, three things,” he said there.

on, half I got the feeling that these three things weren’t going to be good
My body, already solid with fury, felt like it was going to shatter in a
pieces.
toys on

He lifted his head but kept his face close to mine, his hand at my neck over the covers. “One,” he started. “Leavin’ you cuffed means you can’t do anything stupid.”

felt that
No way
One, two, three, four...

ere and “Two,” he continued. “I like thinkin’ of you cuffed naked to my bed.
Five, six, seven, eight...

with his “Three,” he went on. “This won’t take long and we’ll finish when you’re
back.”

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...

Nope, it wasn’t going to work.

l before “You leave me cuffed, I’ll never speak to you again,” I told him.

im pull “Babe,” now he sounded amused, “that’s a good thing. You got a
t on his on you.”

Then, to my utter disbelief, he was gone.



LUKE HAD BEEN WRONG.

It *did* take long.

So long, I had time to let it penetrate that Luke was off somewhere the man at Lee's back during a "situation."

s to my I didn't want to care, but I got worried. Then I got scared. The longer I took for him to come back, the more scared I became. I should have been scared about being cuffed to a bed if something happened to Luke, and I'm a million who knew how long it would take for someone to find me, if ever (I'm in my state, forgotten about the cameras). Instead, I was just scared for Luke.

ly belly Then I got angry. Angry at Luke for leaving me the way I was, and I can't do him for having a scary-as-shit job and switching my anger to Lee for a moment at all.

Finally, tiredness overwhelmed me. I was forced to roll to my side into a somewhat comfortable position and I fell into a fitful sleep.

d." I woke up when the bed moved and I felt hands working efficiently on my wrists. Then I was free. I pulled my arms down and pins and needles and when I get them viciously.

I bent my elbows and circled my hands at my wrists. Luke pulled me to a sitting position in the bed, moved his body so his legs were around his front pressed against my back. Both of his hands worked at my arms, fingers pressing in, forcing out the angry tingles.

mouth "Babe," he said softly against my neck.

I was silent, and even just awakened, absolutely furious.

"It took longer than I expected," he continued.

No kidding, I thought, but kept my mouth shut.

"I got away as soon as I could," he told me.

Rat-bastard, I thought.

e being “Christ, Ava, I’m sorry.”

I don’t care. Go to hell. I hate you. I kept my silence.

onger it The pins and needles subsided and I leaned forward, pulling awa
re been his hands.

id thus, His arms went around my waist and kept me there, his mouth at my

had, in “Ava,” he said against my skin.

uke. I jerked my neck away from him.

ngry at “Shit,” he muttered and moved away from me.

existing I scrambled and got my panties and the Triumph tee (let us not f
; find a was naked as a jaybird). I noticed he’d come straight to the bed fully-

to release me and now he was taking off his clothes. I tugged on my st
y at my walked directly to my suitcases. I rummaged through them, found

ttacked wanted and went to the bathroom. I yanked off the Triumph tee and p
pair of pajama pants striped in yellow, green and pink and a fitted

matching pink. I walked out, threw the Triumph tee on the bed, n
l me up looking to see where Luke was. I grabbed a pillow and stomped to the

nd me, I threw the pillow down, lay on the couch, tucked myself in a b
ms, his wrapped my arms around my knees. I’d barely got in this position

Luke was there, lifting me up and carrying me to the bed.

I didn’t struggle and I didn’t say a word.

He put me in bed. I scooted as far away from him as I could and
He yanked me to him, my back to his front, and held me close.

I didn’t struggle against that either.

“I’m thinkin’ you givin’ up my tee isn’t a good sign,” he said i

hair.

He was so right.

I didn't answer.

ly from I was giving him the Ava Barlow Silent Treatment. I was famous
silent treatment. Once I didn't talk to Noah for a week after he'd don
y neck. stupid thing to piss me off. It drove him crazy and in the end he begged
talk to him. This was one of the very few happy memories I had a
cleaned me out. I was figuring, cuffing me naked to the bed and going
do backup during some dangerous situation, not to mention leaving m
during my second on-the-verge-of-having-a-Lucas-Stark-induced-org
orget, Ione day, was worth at least twenty-seven years of the Ava Barlow
clothedTreatment.

uff and Luke just held tight. I stayed tense. After a while, I felt his body
what Irelax into me as he fell asleep.

ut on a I didn't fall asleep. I needed advice, and not from Good Ava a
l tee in Ava. I needed someone to talk to about my life and what I should do
ot even people kidnapping me, rear-ending me and pursuing me in car chase
couch. busy streets. I had Luke thinking we were together and what we had
all and“fuckuva lot more” than nothing.

before I couldn't talk to Sissy. She wanted me with Luke. I couldn't talk
mom. She was shit at advice and usually didn't spend much time li
before she turned the conversation to herself. I couldn't talk to my
settled.because I tried not to talk to my sisters if I could help it. I couldn't
Uncle Vito because he was scary. I couldn't talk to Mrs. Stark beca
also wanted me with Luke.

nto my I could have talked to my dad. He was a great listener and even b

advice.

I felt trapped, scared, sad, and because of all that, tears slid out corners of my eyes.

I pressed my lips together. Luke's arm went tight around me
buried his face in my hair.

"Babe," he said softly, and I knew he wasn't asleep and he knew
after he crying.

Hell and damnation.

I kept silent but took a deep, broken breath to control the tears. When
heard the breath, his arm went even tighter, but he didn't say anything

Silent

After a while, I fell asleep.



SOMETIME IN THE middle of the night, Luke moved me, rolling under
situating me at his other side.

I tried to turn my back to him, but he didn't allow that. He caught
behind my knee and hooked it over his waist.

I didn't struggle nor did I say a word.

Luke's hand ran from my knee, up my thigh, over my ass, halting
hip. "Ava babe, you awake?"

I told him I was by pressing my forehead to his throat but also to
even so I wasn't speaking to him by keeping silent.

"Jesus, you could bring a man to his knees," he muttered, but I
use she didn't sound angry. It sounded resigned, as if he knew this was to be I

Worse, it sounded like he didn't really mind. Worse than that, I found
moved me in such a profound way, it was so big I couldn't bury it. I

carry it with me and that I didn't like *at all*.

It took a while but I fell back to sleep.



I WOKE up in the same position as ever when I was in bed with Luke immediately remembered I was in the throes of my Silent Treatment.

Without a word and without looking at him, I rolled away. I threw my legs over the side, went directly to the kitchen to nab a diet, got my stuff, went to the bathroom. I didn't come out until I was dressed and ready for the day.

When I got out of the bathroom, the bed was empty. Luke was in the kitchen making coffee, chest bare (of course), wearing his sweatpants from last night.

I went about the business of making myself toast and calling Sissy to come and take me to the gym (she decided to come with me). I acted as if Luke didn't exist.

I was wiping my hands on a kitchen towel after rinsing my plate. Luke tagged me around the waist, backed me against the opposite wall and moved in, hands on the counter on either side of me.

I tilted my head back to look up at him (silently).

"How long you gonna keep this up?" he asked.

I just stared at him.

His hands moved from the counter to either side of my neck, then to both hands stroking my jaw. This felt nice and the warm look in his eyes was so killer, my dedication to the Silent Treatment took a direct hit.

Sucking it up, I recovered.

He kept talking. “I fucked up, Ava. I apologized. Not much more to do.”

I kept staring at him.

One thumb slid along my lower lip and he watched it go then he came to mine.

Gently he said, “Someone apologizes and they mean it, you accept. Doesn’t say much about you if you don’t.”

I swallowed because he sounded disappointed in me and I never Luke to be disappointed in me. In fact, I spent six years of my growing life twisting myself into pretzels so that I would make him anything disappointed in me. Not to mention an entire year of my adult life changing my appearance to make sure, when he saw me again, he would be disappointed in that either.

It wasn’t like a slap in the face, but it didn’t feel good either.

Right after I had that thought, I got angry because I wasn’t the one who cuffed me to his bed and left me there way longer than expected with nothing to do but worry and freak out. I didn’t want or ask to get kidnapped, manhandled, ordered about, taken to the verge of orgasm twice to wanting. In fact, I’d made it perfectly clear I *didn’t* want any of those things.

Furthermore, he had a scary job where he got called late at night to do scary things. And that scary job or the old “doing crazy shit” one got him a vicious scar slicing across his belly, because he sure as hell didn’t want when he left the neighborhood (I would have noticed, or his mom would have told my mom). I wasn’t going to ask about it because I *really* didn’t know. Even if I wasn’t sworn off men, I didn’t know if I could handle talking with who Luke had become. But I had to remind myself, I was sworn

the I can men.

I just kept staring. The buzzer went. Sissy.

I slid away from him, grabbed my workout bag and headed
his eyes elevator.

When I got in, hit the button and turned, he was leaning against
shoulder arms crossed on his (bare) chest, eyes on me.

The doors slid shut.

wanted



ving up I SPENT the rest of the day seeking advice.

ing but

Sissy (next to me on a stair machine in the gym):

anging

“I’ve already told you what I think about Luke. In regards to Ren,

dn’t be

him you’re with Luke, he’ll back off. In regards to scary guy trying to
down, just talk to Luke, he’ll take care of it. Simple.”

Okay. No.

ne who

Next!

nothing

shot at,

be left

hings.

Riley (after my workout and I cornered him, even though he still
pissed off at me, which I might add, if Luke lost Riley as my friend I
another ten years onto his Ava Barlow Silent Treatment Sentence):

it to do

him that

have it

ld have

“Jesus, Ava, what the fuck?” he breathed when I shared most of th
leaving out all of the sex stuff and Luke’s brutally honest proclamation

Then his face went gentle and I saw for the first time that Luke wa
Riley wanted to fuck me.

want to

Jeez.

k being

orn off

What was going on? How on earth did this happen?

“Do you want to stay with me?” Riley asked.

Hell no!

“Thanks, Riles. That’s sweet of you, but I can’t,” I said softly.

to the Next!

Shirleen, at Fortnum’s (where Sissy and I went after the gym to get the bar, Tex’s unbelievably divine coffees):

“Child, tune out your head and follow your heart.” Her tawny eyes were gone soft.

Following my heart meant holding on to Luke and never letting go. I was, until he got tired of me and scraped me off, or he got filled with anger and killed in a gunfight.

just tell Not gonna happen.

to run us “What are you doing here? I thought you had a day job?” I asked Shirleen.

She was relaxed in one of the couches at the front of Fortnum’s where the espresso counter was.

looked “I’m pickin’ up orders for the boys in the surveillance room,” she said, sliding back another gulp of her cappuccino.

I hoped “the boys” weren’t hankering too much for their coffee. I thought the looks of Shirleen they were going to wait awhile.

is. Next!

is right. Tex (while handing me my skinny vanilla latte):

“Go on vacation...”

Hmm. This had merit.

“With Luke,” he finished.

I did not *think* so.

Next!

The Rock Chicks:

t one of Jet: “Don’t fight it.”

Next!

yes had Ally: “I don’t get it. Luke’s hot.”

Next!

o. That bullets his SUV?”
Indy: “Do you want me to talk to Lee about this guy who chased

No!

Next!

I asked Daisy (over the phone while Sissy was dropping me back at Luke’s
ere the be.”
“Sugar, take it one minute at a time. Life will lead you where you

re said, That was what I was afraid of.

By the She went on, “And don’t worry about whoever is after you. When
the Rock Chicks finds trouble, every one of the Hot Boy Brigade k
Whoever-it-is will have to take ’em down one by one to get to you an
just not gonna happen.”

Eek!

Next!

Jules (after Sissy dropped me off, I had a shower, picked up
newest clothing additions from the floor, started a load of his laundry
at my computer to research all-inclusive vacations in Jamaica):

“Give him time, Ava. There’s more to Luke than you know.”

“I’ve known him since I was eight!”

“I know, but you want the truth?”

No, I did *not* want the truth.

She gave it to me anyway. “I don’t think you know who he is now did, there would be no question.”

Shit.



you in

I FINISHED MY DEADLINE PROJECT, e-mailed it off and was work clearing all my other projects in order to send them in well ahead of dates, which would cause client-wide strokes as I always worked right deadline.

s):

I had a plan. I intended to clear my workload and disappear to Jamaica a month, taking Sissy with me. By the time we got back, all the mach in my life, undoubtedly needing to give *someone* the business, would moved on to a new girl and I’d be off the hook. Then it would be back me and my vibrators.

The elevator doors slid open and I knew it was Luke just because that’s might have been a long time since I’d seen him, but my Sixth Luke was instinctual and kicked in immediately, like riding a bike.

And anyway, these days I’d been getting lots of practice.

I ignored his presence, kept my back to the room and kept c Luke’s through holiday getaway packages.

I heard his keys hit the bar and then he came up behind me.

“Goin’ on vacation?” he asked.

I stayed silent and kept clicking. He waited a beat before he pulled the chair out at least four feet, me still in it.

My head shot up to look at him. My mouth opened and I almost said “Hey!” but I just stopped myself.

If you He bent low, took a wrist and threw me over his shoulder. It took control, but I didn’t struggle and stayed completely limp. He carried the bed, tossed me on it and followed me down. He settled part at n part on top of me, and his hand came to my jaw.

ing on “You don’t want to talk, Ava, we’ll do something else. We don’t talk to fuck.”
the due

it up to Uh-oh.

Escape!

aica for I pulled out from under him and rolled away. He caught me and l
ho men me back.

ld have I glared at him. He ignored the glare and his face (and I might
κ to just fantastic mouth) started to come closer.

“You scared me,” I blurted in a whisper, do not ask me why. He s
ause. It twenty-six years, three hundred and sixty-four days left on his
e Sense Treatment Sentence.

His head stopped moving and he looked from my mouth to my eye

Go on, Ava, share. Pour out your heart, Good Ava said quietly in a

licking *Quiet! Shut down, Ava. He’ll just use it to hurt you eventually.* B
was sounding desperate.

“You were gone a long time. I was worried something happened t
Now why did I say that? Why was I talking at all?

led my Still in a quiet voice, I kept sharing, unable to stop myself. “I don’t
you anymore. I don’t know who you are, what you do. But I know th
t cried, on your belly isn’t from an appendectomy.”

Oh...my...*God*.

a lot of Someone shut me up.

l me to He rolled me to my side facing him and both his arms came around
y side, he said, “Ava.”

“No, Luke. I thought I was protecting myself against all things men
have to last night, I’m protecting myself from something a lot scarier. I’m not
those women who can hack that kind of life. I don’t want any part of it

“So this is your new excuse?” he asked. Instead of being accusatory
voice was soft, gentle, affectionate.

brought “It’s not an excuse, Luke. I figure you’ll screw me over or leave r
way or another, and I’ll end up alone. I’m alone now and I’m happy
add his Why go through the pain of losing someone again?”

“Someone you care about,” he said.

still had “What?”

Silent “Go through the pain of losing someone you care about.”

Whoa.

s. Whoa, whoa, whoa.

ny ear. We were *not* going to go *there*.

ad Ava Time to change the subject.

o you.” “What’s the scar from?”

“Bullet to the gut,” he shared without hesitation.

't know I closed my eyes tight, visions of Luke with a gaping, bloody wound scar his belly danced unhappily through my head. I didn't like the vision scared the shit right out of me so I opened my eyes again.

"When?" I asked.

"Last summer."

d me as "How?"

"Babe," he said softly and with a hint of regret. "I can't tell you that. Aftercases we work are confidential."

t one of "Right," I said.

.."
"I'm good at what I do."

ory, his "I'm sure you are."

ne, one
with it.
His hands drifted up my back, pulling me closer. "You're hanging this to hold me back. You're a lot stronger than you're sayin' and you it," he told me.

"How did Vance feel when he was trying to staunch the blood pouring out of Jules?" Luke's body went still at my soft words and I knew wrong to use this against him, but I kept at it. "I get the impression from you and Jules that you two are close. You were there. How did you see seeing her lying there bleeding?"

His face changed. To my shock he let me see the pain slice through it hurt like hell to watch.

Then he said, "Quiet, Ava."

"You *want* me to go through that?"

One of his hands slid up my neck into my hair, twisting it gently fist.

ound at “You wanna know what I want?” he asked.

s. They Um. No. I definitely didn’t want to know what he wanted.

Before I could get a word in, he told me. “I want the old you to
back and make me laugh. I want the new you to toss your attitude arou
make me hard. I liked comin’ home tonight to you, even knowin’ yo
pissed at me. I liked leavin’ last night for work, knowin’ you were in r
I might like it for a week or I might like it for a lot longer. I can’t ma
promises. All I know is, I want you now and you want me, even thou
won’t admit it. And I’m gonna do whatever it takes to give us what w
for as long as it lasts until however it ends.”

“You never listen to me,” I told him, beginning to get angry be
was right. If his latest speech was anything to go by, he didn’t.

l’ on to “I listen to you,” he said.

u know “Then you don’t hear me.”

pouring “Ava, I hear you.” He was beginning to sound impatient.

it was I stared at him. He stared at me. This went on for a while.

m both He sighed and touched his lips to mine then said, “I’ll take
ou feel, dinner.”

“I don’t want dinner,” I shot back.

h it and His eyes started to melt. “All right. I’m hungry, but I’m happy
somethin’ else.”

Ee-yikes!

“I’ve just realized, I’m hungry. Let’s go to dinner.”

y in his He gave me a half-grin.

We went to dinner.

o come
ind and
u were
ny bed.
ake any
igh you
ve want

cause I

you to

r to eat

THIRTEEN



SOLID

It was the middle of the night again when Luke rolled, taking me on top of him, settling me on the other side of the bed.

“Why do you do that?” I mumbled sleepily.

I was about to fall back to sleep, feeling his hand tug the back of my shirt and pull it over his hip when he murmured, voice husky, “You’re on the wrong side of the bed.”

I cuddled into him, sliding into dreamland. “Then I’ll sleep on this side.”

I was so out of it, I didn’t realize all that my words said nor what I meant when, upon hearing them, Luke’s arms went tight around me pulling me into his body.

“This side’s the wrong side too,” he told me.

That got my attention because it made no sense.

I tilted my head back and looked at him in the dark. “What?”

“I can’t sleep on one side too long. The wound still gives me some trouble.”

For some reason, I felt imaginary pain in my own belly at his words.

To hide my reaction, I stated the obvious, “Then just roll over.”

“If I roll over, you won’t be in arm’s reach.”

I blinked, then sleepy or not, I started to get angry. “Luke, I’m not to sneak out of your bed in the middle of the night and do something stupid.”

“That’s not why I want you in reach.”

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Stop right there.

Time to go to sleep.

over the

I dipped my chin and closed my eyes.

Then, because I had Barlow Bitch Blood pumping through my veins, I muttered, “You do that with all your women, they’ll think you’re nuts.”

my knee

“I’ve never done it with another woman.”

on the

Really.

side.”

Stop.

it meant

Time to nap for fifty years.

me deep

“Babe?”

“Yeah?”

“If you’re awake...”

I cuddled into him again. “Very sleepy,” I whispered, feigning a heavy voice.

pain.”

I felt his body start shaking with silent laughter, and somehow when he was laughing I fell back to sleep.

s.



MY EYES OPENED and I saw a wall of chest.

My first thought was, *Crap, Luke’s not in the shower.*

it going Okay, so that was actually my second thought. My first thought was “stupid.” *Hmm. Yum.*

Last night Luke and I walked from his loft to Wynkoop’s Brewpub for beer and dinner. During dinner, he took a call that made his mouth tight and his eyes move to me. I had an Eek Moment, thinking he’d forgotten about my visit to Uncle Vito through his varied tough guy, macho, bounty hunting, private eye sources.

Relief flooded through me when he got off the phone and said, “Babe, something’s come up. After dinner I gotta meet Hector. I don’t know how late I’ll be.”

” Therefore the mouth tightening meant, for Luke, him missing an opportunity to “give me the business,” and for me relief that I’d dodged a bullet again.

“That’s okay,” I told him breezily.

He gave me a half-grin, totally knowing my thoughts.

He had walked me home and left me in his loft after giving me a heavy kiss that left me in a Luke Lip Fog.

Looking at my face, he said, “If you take care of yourself again, I owe me.”

sleepy All righty then, I could scratch *that* off my list of Things to Do While Luke’s Away.

While he I wasn’t big on watching TV so I’d putzed around his loft all day. I spent my time calling Sissy to chew over the latest Luke episode, doing Luke’s laundry and tidying his magazines and mail into neat piles. I did the extent of putting notes on top: TO BE OPENED, DEAL WITH THIS, THIS TO BE FILED, etc.

ht was, What could I say? I was an organizer.

 Then I went to bed. Later, Luke woke me up by shifting me and
ery andhad our scary chat.

outh go Now, morning.

und out Ee-yikes.

o man,
 I tried to slide away without him noticing. He rolled and his arm
around me.

“Sorry
t know “Babe,” he said, sounding very awake.

 Foiled!

another I looked up at him and he had his chin dipped toward me so I looki
ged thein his eyes.

 “Hey,” I mumbled.

 “Hey,” he replied.

 “I need to brush my teeth.”

hot and His arms got tighter. “Later.”

 “No. Now. I can’t face the day without brushing my teeth.”

, you’ll “Your day can start later,” he said, his eyes turning inky and hi
sliding between my legs to rest at the heart of my special girl parts.

) While “Luke—”

 His mouth came to mine, his eyes still open, so I kept mine op
night. Icaptivated. Then he pressed his hard boy part into my belly.

ig more Wow.

s to the “I’m not waitin’ to get inside you any longer, Ava. This is hap
) NEEDS
now.”

Before I could say a word, he kissed me. It became very clear we had quite intent on *this happening now*.

I wore the Triumph tee to bed and it was gone within seconds. T hands were on me, all over me, all the while his mouth on mine. It did long for me to fall into a Luke Lip Fog, and fall I did, headlong.

In fact, he was so serious it didn't take long for me to surp is came dedication to the cause to the point where I tried to shove him on his get more of him. He stayed firm, mouth at my neck, hand trailing dc belly, his destination clear.

I planted a foot in the bed and heaved, rolling him to his ba ed right dislodging his hand.

“Babe...”

He thought I was going to move away.

I didn't.

Instead I straddled him, bending over to use my mouth on him. I lips against his neck using my tongue, my teeth. I went down his running my nails through his chest hair and over his nipples while my is thigh explored. I went lower to his abs, then lower and stopped. I sat up ast thighs and got my first full look of all that was Luke.

Yowza.

en too, *Nice.*

So nice, he should be cast in bronze.

I reached down and wrapped my hand around him, my half-mast opening his inky ones, my thumb moving over the tip.

I stroked.

he was Then I was done.

He knifed up, sliced an arm around my back, lifted me clean off his feet when his was in the air for a moment before I was on my back. He tore my shirt, didn't takedown my legs, settled between them and that was it.

It was going to happen. I was going to do the nasty with Lucas Stass and I could not *fucking* wait.

His lips on mine, both our eyes open, his fingers went between my breasts. When he touched me I did a happy gasp against his mouth and I smiled.

“Dripping,” he said against my lips.

Then he kissed me, his hand went away from between my legs. His hands went to my hips, he positioned, lifting his head. I saw as his lips went molten when he watched my tongue wet my lips in anticipation.

Then the buzzer went.

No! My brain shouted.

But whoever was out there was serious. They didn't take their first bite until the buzzer.

“Ignore it,” Luke muttered.

“What if it's someone needing backup?”

“Fuck 'em.”

Yippee!

He lifted my hips and he was right there, I could feel him and I was on him more than my next breath. The buzzer died, I lifted my mouth to his and that's when we heard the scream.

We both froze.

m and I Then it came again.

panties “Ava!”

My blood turned to ice.

rk. “That’s Sissy,” I breathed, but Luke was already off me, off the
grabbing his cargoes.

ry legs. I rolled to the side, nabbed the Triumph tee and pulled it over my
felt his then I hopped into my panties. By the time I did this, Luke was
clothed and headed to a door at the side of the loft. I saw that he was
a gun in the back waistband of his pants.

Both of “Luke,” I called as he unlocked the door.

his eyes My voice, I could hear was filled with fear.

He turned to me. “Stay here. Lock yourself in. Don’t go anywhere.
care what you hear.”

I ran to him, he went out the door and I watched as he went down
iger offescape.

I closed the door and ran to the drawer where I found a bunch of
my search for cookies the night before. I grabbed a key ring full, ran
the door and found the right key on the third go. I locked the door, took
keys to the bar, ran to my suitcases and grabbed my jeans, pulling them

Then I didn’t know what to do.

wanted Sissy, my bestest best friend was out there, screaming my name.

o press I put my hands to my forehead, fingers sifting into my hair. I shook
heels of my palms in and I stood solid, listening.

“Luke, get to her, please, Luke, get to her,” I whispered to no one.

Breathe, Ava, in, out, in, out, Good Ava spoke quietly in my ear.

Snap out of it, girl. Go to the bathroom, brush your teeth, get your glasses, put your bra on. Be ready for anything, Bad Ava advised.

I listened to both of them. Breathing deeply in and out, I went about the business of being ready for anything to the point of putting on a bra, applying deodorant, changing into my Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers t-shirt, and putting on flip-flops.

I'd flipped the switch to a fresh pot of coffee (don't ask me, I wasn't already thinking clearly), when the elevator doors slid open. Luke and Sissy came and I rushed to them. Sissy was bleeding from the nose and shaking violently.

Luke looked like Luke. Once I ascertained that he was okay, it was all about Sissy.

I put my arm around her waist and the minute I did she started crying. "Shh, Sissy, shh."

I sat her on a barstool and Luke went to the phone. I ran to the bathroom, grabbed a wet washcloth and carried it into the other room.

"I got a woman bleeding in my loft. Where the fuck is Bobby?" I snapped into the phone as I stopped by Sissy and whispered to her, while I ran my fingers around the wrist of her hand at her nose and pulling it away from her face.

There was blood everywhere and I gently wiped at it, comforting her by whispering in a soft soothing voice as great, shaking sobs tore through her.

"Calm, Sis. Calm, honey. You're safe. We're here. No one can hurt you here. Let's get you cleaned up and see about your nose."

"He...he punched me, Ava. Right in the nose," Sissy told me.

"Who, honey?" I asked, wiping.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before. He wa
et your big.”

My eyes slid to Luke. He had a fist to his hip, head bowed and
out the listening to the phone at his ear.

ora and “Do you think it’s broken?” she asked.

tee and My eyes came back to Sissy. “I don’t know, Sis. Wait until Luke
the phone, he’ll look at it.”

wasn’t Hearing his name, Luke’s head swung around and his eyes came to

came in “Right. Out,” he said.

sibly. He beeped the phone off and walked to us, the whole time his eyes

was all “Can you look at her nose?” I asked, shocked to find my voice s
normal, not shaky and hysterical like I felt inside. “She’s worri
ng. broken.”

Luke’s eyes stayed on me a beat. They were intense. Partly angry
hroom, hyper-alert and partly something else. Then they turned to Sissy

watched his always-hard face grow slightly soft. I was holding the wa
” Luketo her nose but pulled it away as Luke put his hand to her forehead,
rapping pressing it back. He looked at Sissy’s nose and then turned back to me

7. “She’s okay. We’ll take her to the hospital to make sure.”

stantly I nodded.

her. “Darius will be here in five minutes with an Explorer. He’ll take
urt you the hospital. I’ll follow later,” Luke went on.

I nodded again.

He took the washcloth from me and gave it to Sissy. “Head back
pressure. Ava and I need to talk. You okay with that?”

-was so This time Sissy nodded.

I followed him to the utility recess behind the bathroom, and once he washed he turned to me.

“I had a man on her. That man’s off the radar,” he told me.

He was standing close and I had my head tilted back to look at him. I made no sound or other physical reaction to this statement. Internally, however, my lungs forgot how to work.

“Darius will take you to the hospital. He’ll also stick around. Matt’s on duty, but he’s right now gettin’ a call. He’ll relieve Darius. We’re gonna find Bobby. You don’t leave that hospital unless it’s with me or one of the boys. We can’t get Matt, you’ll get Jack or Ike. Jack’s white, light hair, six two, built like a Mack truck. You’re concerned about his injury, it’s you ask him what he saw you doin’ on the monitors Sunday. Only you and him know about that. Ike’s light-skinned black, bald, about two feet taller than you and has a tattoo up the left side of his neck. You can’t get to a safe place and call the police, got me?”

I nodded but asked, “You had a man on her?”

“Why did you think I let you leave the loft on your own yesterday? I knew you were covered. Bobby followed you two all morning.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You weren’t speakin’ to me, remember?”

Oh yeah. Right. I forgot about that.

Moving on.

“Do you think Bobby’s okay?” I asked.

“Gonna find out.”

I nodded.

When he didn't say more, I asked, “Anything else?”

“Yeah, show me your hands.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Babe, lift up your hands.”

I lifted my hands, palms up.

His eyes dropped down to them and he whispered, “Solid.”

“What?”

His hands closed over mine and he gave them a jerk so I fell into his arms, hands up between our bodies.

“You're solid. You aren't even shakin'.”

I stared at him, not knowing what he was talking about, and he took my hand away, wrapped it behind my neck, brought me to him and kissed my nose.

He pulled back and looked me in the eyes. “Proud of you, Ava. I know you're happy heat spread through me at his words before his eyes went ultrabright and he continued, “Not one of those women who can hack this kind of shit. Bullshit.”

He said it in his soft, gentle, affectionate voice and I knew I had screwed myself royally.

I couldn't have exactly run around like a raving lunatic, not with me bleeding and crying. Still, I should have at least affected a minor hiss to save my own hide.

Shit.



DARIUS WAS A QUIET, handsome, black guy with twists in his hair.

I figured the Nightingale Investigations job application form had a question “Are you hot? Yes. No. If you answered no, please see me in the building.”

He took us to Presbyterian/St. Luke’s and we found out Sissy didn’t have a broken nose.

Darius had been relieved by Matt by the time Sissy was done. Luke had not arrived and I had not had word from him. Matt ushered us to the car, our Black Explorer and we belted in, me in the back.

Matt turned to Sissy. “Where do you want to go?”

I leaned forward and gave her an around-the-seat hug. “You want to go back to your dad’s?” I asked softly. “I’ll give him a call at work.”

I saw her head shake. “I need coffee.”

I was thinking more along the vein of cookies, but I had no say. I was the one who got punched in the nose by a huge stranger.

I let Sissy go and turned to Matt. “Fortnum’s.”

of life?

He grinned. “Gotcha.”

Matt took us to Fortnum’s and stuck around. I figured he did this because he was told to. He seemed wired though, like he needed to do something

that I didn’t ask, but I guessed he was anxious to find out about Bobby. Then I didn’t even know who Bobby was and I was anxious to find out about

my fit to

When we walked in, Tex took one look at Sissy and his eyes didn’t leave her.

Then he said to the two customers in line, “Stand back. VIPs come first.” When they didn’t move fast enough (even though they moved), he threw the espresso filter at them and boomed, “*Back!*”

They jumped out of the way and Sissy and I went to the front of the store. We got our coffees, sat on the couch in front of the store window.

Rock Chicks crowded around. Indy, Ally, Daisy, Jet and Roxie were all there. “What on earth happened, sugar?” Daisy asked, taking in Sissy’s swollen nose and blackening eyes.

“I’m so stupid,” Sissy whispered.

I was sitting next to her on the couch and I slid my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into me.

“Tell us,” I urged.

She looked at me and then at the girls.

She took a deep breath and said, “My day’s Wednesday.”

Everyone looked at each other. Then our eyes went to Sissy.

“What, honey?” I asked.

She looked at me. “In the Ava and Luke do the business pool. My day’s tomorrow. I knew you didn’t do it yesterday. But men like morning meetings. I thought I’d come by early, before anything could happen, take you to the gym. Keep you busy all day. I was protecting my fifty bucks.”

Oh, for God’s sake.

I just stopped myself from doing an eye roll when she continued, trying to be funny. I was going to tease you about it,” she whispered to me. “It didn’t mean anything—”

I interrupted her softly, “I know.”

in' in." She nodded and went on, glancing around the Rock Chicks. pointedbuzzing up when some big guy came up to me, saw which buzzer pressing and asked if I was you. I said no, I was Sissy Vincetti." She he line. her head and looked like she was going to cry again as her eyes moved and the to me. "I'm so stupid. I shouldn't have told him my name. Why did ll there. that?"

swollen I shook my head too, mainly because I didn't know why she did that. I squeezed her shoulder as she took a calming breath.

She carried on, "The minute I said my name, he grabbed me. Didn't say a word, just grabbed me. I started struggling. He pulled me out of the building and I saw he was taking me to the SUV from Sunday. That's when I screamed and he punched me in the nose. Then I called your name and almost had me in the car when Luke got there. He took one look at Luke and ran, leaving his car and everything. Luke told me to wait in the building and took off after him. A few minutes later, Luke came back and we went to the loft. You know the rest."

All the Rock Chicks looked at one another.

My day's "I hope Vance doesn't hear that some guy hit you. If he does, that's a cookie. I fucked," Ally said.

It to the "Yeah, Vance isn't a big fan of that kind of thing," Jet put in.

"Who is?" Daisy asked.

Jet gave Daisy a look. "I'm just saying, Vance is *really* not a big fan of that kind of thing."

It to me. "I "You can say that again," Roxie muttered.

Sissy turned to me. "Which one is Vance again?"

“I was My purse rang before I could answer Sissy. I pulled out my
r I was flipped it open and put it to my ear.

e shook “Yo.”

ed back “She okay?” Luke asked.

id I do I really wanted to smile when I heard his voice, but stopped myself
time.

at, and “Her nose isn’t broken,” I told him.

’t say a “I know that. Is she okay?” Luke asked again.

Luke’s I had to admit, I liked not only that he asked the question, but
when I knew to ask it.

me. He I looked at Sissy and said, “Yeah, she’s hanging in there. You
ike and Bobby?”

ing and “Not yet, we’re still lookin’.”

it up to Shit.

Luke went on, “You get her story?”

I was beginning to realize that I couldn’t live in a pretend world
it guy’s happiness and ignore everything that was going on around me. It was
thing when it was happening to me, it was quite another when
happening to Sissy. Luke had been right again, this shit was not going

I got up with my latte, walked to the book counter, leaned a hip against
; fan of and told him Sissy’s story. I finished on, “Do you know what’s going on

“I’m piecin’ it together, but none of what I’ve got is leadin’ back to

“What do you have?”

“I’ll tell you when I get home tonight.”

phone, It was then I remembered I had a date with Ren that night.

Oh crap.

Why was my life so complicated?

“Erm, Luke?”

f just in “Babe, I gotta go,” he sounded distracted.

“No, Luke, wait.”

“What?” Now he sounded impatient.

Not a good way to start.

that he “Um, I have plans tonight. I’ll be...out.”

Silence.

ou find I took this silence as Luke remembering my plans.

Then he said, his voice quiet and lethal, “You come to me when done.”

Ee-yikes.

orld of Luke kept talking, his voice quieter and more lethal. “He touch
Ava, there’ll be trouble.”

was one Yep, he remembered my plans.

it was “I’m sworn off men, remember?” I told him.

gainst it I heard muffled movement and I should have realized that I
on?” somewhere he couldn’t talk and he was seeking privacy. I should ha
o you.” realized that this was one of the many warning signs Luke gave me
rocking my world. Instead, like a dork, I just stood there waiting for
talk.

Then, still in the ultra-quiet, lethal voice, he said, “I keep hearin’ t

coming from you and then the minute I get my mouth or hands on you, somethin' different happens. Ava, you're the hottest fuckin' piece I've ever touched. I find out that heat isn't just for me, I'm still takin' my fill. Zee, I'll have you when I'm done."

I felt pressure crawling up my throat because what he said was just so nice.

I was, of course, forgetting that tough guy Luke Stark was simply what he considered were the ground rules for "his woman" going to a dinner alone with another man. The fact that he wasn't throwing a shit fit was practically a miracle.

Still.

"Lucas Stark, you better watch your mouth," I hissed.

you're "You come to me when you're done," he repeated.

I did not *think* so. "I'm staying the night with Sissy and her dad."

"You do, it'll be embarrassing for you when I drag your ass out of here."

ies you My heart stopped.

"You wouldn't dare," I breathed.

"Try me."

I wasn't going to try him. No way. He'd do it and I knew it.

he was "You're a jerk," I snapped.

ve also "Tonight, you're mine."

before Disconnect.

him to Argh!

hat line I turned back to the Rock Chicks and they were all looking at me.

on you, Finally Roxie said to Sissy, “Doesn’t seem like Wednesday’s look
ve ever good.”

ano can “Lee’s got today, he’s going to be bummed,” Indy said.

just not “I got in on the pool late, my day’s Friday,” Jet put in. “The way
going, I’m thinking of buying a KitchenAid mixer to match my blende

’ giving “Oh! I love those!” Daisy exclaimed, turning to Jet. “Which co
gonna get?”

out to I looked to the ceiling as the Rock Chicks discussed Jet’s forth
he-man KitchenAid appliance purchase.

Then I thought, *my life sucks.*

there.”

Finally Roxie said to Sissy, “Doesn’t seem like Wednesday’s looking too good.”

“Lee’s got today, he’s going to be bummed,” Indy said.

“I got in on the pool late, my day’s Friday,” Jet put in. “The way this is going, I’m thinking of buying a KitchenAid mixer to match my blender.”

“Oh! I love those!” Daisy exclaimed, turning to Jet. “Which color you gonna get?”

I looked to the ceiling as the Rock Chicks discussed Jet’s forthcoming KitchenAid appliance purchase.

Then I thought, *my life sucks*.

FOURTEEN



YOU MISSED IT AGAIN, BABE

After I got off the phone with Luke, I planned my day carefully.

I hung with the Rock Chicks, Tex and Matt at Fortnuu afternoon and I made a call to Shirleen. Duke, Indy's second-in-come came in, and even though I hadn't seen him in months, I smiled at h yelled, "Hey, Duke!" he scowled at me and disappeared in the books.

"What's that all about?" I asked Indy.

"He's not a big fan of the 'during' part of a Badass Mothe Courtship. He prefers the 'after,'" Indy explained.

I couldn't say I blamed him.

Detective Jimmy Marker stopped by at Luke's request. Sissy and him about the car chase and the recent kidnapping attempt and I to opportunity to explain that my first kidnapping was a "misunderstand news that made him stare at me hard.

He gave me a lecture about talking to the cops next time I nearly my car over onto I-25 while being pursued by a bad guy. Then he an carried on a loud conversation about "how these boys need to get thei examined." Then Detective Marker left.

Matt and I dropped Sissy at her dad's and we both stayed while Si:

her dad the latest story. Then we stayed while Sissy's dad hit the road and left after he calmed down.

Sissy walked us to the door and gave Matt a look. Matt correctly interpreted this look and stepped outside of hearing distance.

I turned to Sissy. "What?"

"Remember when you pretended not to care when you didn't have to go to the senior prom?"

Oh no, where was she going with this?

"Yeah."

"Well, tonight you're going out with one of the hottest guys we know, and then you're going home to *the* hottest guy ever. How's that for you?" She gave me a big smile, so pleased for me she didn't seem to remember she had punched in the face that day for the first time in her life (and hopefully the last).

I shook my head. "You're a dork."

"And you're a knockout."

I shoved her shoulder. She shoved mine back.

After a few more shoves, Matt and I left.

"Matt took me to Luke's loft and I held my breath until the elevator slid open and we saw Luke wasn't there. As the place was under surveillance, Matt didn't stick around. He was itching to get into the search for Bobby and Duke spent a few moments sending good vibes to Bobby and encouraging the Nightingale Boys to find him, and fast. Then I called Shirly and she scheduled."

"Shee-it," she answered instead of saying hello. "You still go"

of. Wethis?”

“Yes,” I told her.

orrectly She sighed. “I’ll be there in ten.”

I’d called her from Fortnum’s, and as she was my Rock Chick and Motherfucker Courtship Mentor, she was bound by Rock Chick Law e a dateme (yes, it was weird, but at that point it worked for me).

She picked me up in her Lincoln Navigator (seriously, Lee had to employees well if his receptionist had a Navigator) and took me to my She hung out watching TV while I got ready for my date with Ren.

ow and Halfway dressed, my phone rang.

is?” She I looked at it, scared to death it would be Luke. It said, DOM CALLI

she got What the hell?

ally the “Yes?” I answered.

“Ava, don’t hang up,” Dom said quickly.

“You’re a dickhead,” I told him.

“Our last thing didn’t go too well...”

I wanted to shout “Ya think?” but he kept talking.

or doors “I’m sorry about that but, Ava, you gotta listen to me. There’
illance, serious shit goin’ down. You and me, we gotta get out of town. Yo
meet me at—”

obby. I “Fuck that, Dom. You’re nuts.”

ribes to “No, this is some serious shit.”

leen as “Yes, it’s *your* serious shit. Keep me out of it,” I snapped.

anna do “That’s what I’m tryin’ to do,” he snapped back.

“Can you please tell me why I’m *in* it?”

“They’re tryin’ to get to me.”

“No kidding. They’re trying so hard, they nearly kidnapped Sis Badass morning. Punched her in the nose, blood everywhere. We thought to help broken. She was a mess.”

Silence.

pay his “Dom?”

y place. “What’d you just say?”

“Some big guy in a dark-blue SUV *punched* your wife in the no morning while trying to kidnap her.”

NG. Silence again.

I was losing patience, and time, quickly.

“Dom! I don’t have time for this.”

“He hit Sissy?” Dom asked quietly.

Something about the way he said it made my mind still.

“Yeah,” I told him.

“He’s got at least a foot and probably a hundred pounds on her.”

s some “Do you know this guy?” I asked, but he ignored my question.

u gotta “And he *hit* her?” Dom was sounding a bit scary.

“Dom, tell me, who is this guy?”

Dom still wasn’t listening. “You say her nose isn’t broken?”

“She’s fine. It’s swollen, her eyes are black, but she’s okay.”

Was I reassuring Dominic Vincetti about his wife’s well-being?
me who’d stepped into an alternate universe?

“I’ll call her,” Dom told me.

Oh no.

Sissy this “Dom, don’t,” I said.

it was “Later.”

Disconnect.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I looked at my alarm clock on the nightstand and it was already 10 o’clock. I wanted to call Sissy, but I didn’t have time. As it was I ran through my final preparations.

I had decided to go gung ho for the night. I was telling myself this was an in-your-face to Luke after his last tough guy speech. I was telling myself this was for me. That even though I had sworn off men, it didn’t mean I couldn’t look cute.

I was wearing a black skirt, so tight it fit like a glove and cupped my ass. Its hem hit me at the top of the knees and had a front slit that went up to my thigh. I topped it with a black, ultra-wide, low scoop-necked, long-sleeved stretchy T-shirt that also fit like a glove and had a long hem so it came well over the waistband of the skirt and gathered around my waist. I wore tons of silver bangles and charm bracelets on my right wrist and hoop earrings, but didn’t add rings and necklaces (in the latter area I was going to let my cleavage do the work). I finished with pointy-toed, pencil-heel backed, black pumps. I left my hair long and wild, had done my makeup, and “Drama!” and spritzed with my expensive perfume.

I walked into my living room and Shirleen was lazing back on my sofa eating yogurt out of a container. Her eyes bugged out when she saw me.

“Girl,” she muttered low. “You are playin’ with fire.”

“I’m just going out to dinner.”

“And I’m just sayin’, you best pop by here before you go back to change your clothes, wash your face and hope he never finds out you out with another man wearin’ that outfit.”

“It’ll all be fine,” I assured her.

“Yeah, that’s what you said about our visit to Uncle Vito. No plannin’ your weddin’ to his nephew.”

This, I had to admit, was true.

There came a knock at the door.

Shirleen looked to the heavens.

“Here we go,” she said as if warning God to brace.

I went to the door and opened it. Ren stood there.

Ren was just like Dom in the tall, lean-hipped, broad-shouldered dark hair departments. Ren’s hair had no wave like Dom’s did, though his eyes were a fantastic espresso color, and even though I pretty much knew he knew he was hot, he didn’t strut like his cousin. He was just...cool. Yumalicious cool.

He was wearing a well-cut, dark-brown suit, a light-brown shirt and a muscular throat was on show. I’d always loved his throat. There was something about it that made you just want to *taste* it.

“Ava,” he said.

My eyes went from his throat to his face. “Hey, Ren.”

He was looking in my eyes. Then he did a body sweep and his gaze came back to mine.

When it did and I caught the hungry look in his eye, I had to stop from putting my hand to the door to hold myself up.

o Luke, Boy was I screwed.

u went



CARMINE'S on Penn had a cozy atmosphere, was always packed to the brim. They had white paper over the tables so you could draw on it with crayons they provided and didn't have menus. Their dishes were listed on blackboards on the wall, but none of the items made any sense unless you'd been there before. The waiters explained the dishes then wrote your order in crayon on the white paper on your table.

I didn't need the waiters to explain the dishes. I knew exactly what I wanted. I just hoped it was what Ren wanted because the food was family style.

Ren and I had chitchatted on the ride there in his black Jaguar (sleek, thick, sleek ride, totally super-fly). He valet parked and we were seated at a round table *à deux*. We chitchatted before ordering and chitchatted while eating those delicious garlicky rolls.

Way Ren was easy to talk to. He might have been hot as well as way cool, but there was something mellow about him, laidback, and he gave the impression that he gave a shit about what you said.

Our big bowl of caesar salad was put on the table when Ren asked, "how are you doin'?"

Considering we were into the salad stage, I didn't figure this was an opening remark.

I looked at him and tried to judge how safe he was. Luke had the new light on the Vincetti-Zano family. Still, I'd spent a lot of time with

myself When they took in Sissy, they took me in and they were always really
me. There were a lot of them I liked and one of the ones I liked the m
Ren.

“Do you know what’s been happening?” I asked.

ie gills, He sat back ignoring the salad, eyes serious. “Tell me.”

ns they I served up the salad and told him. Then I told him more while eat
ards on salad. Then I told him some more while eating a second serving of the

n there While I talked, I could feel Ren’s laidback mood slipping into sor
yon on a lot scarier.

The big salad bowl was taken away and I just stopped myself
what I nabbing one last crouton as the server took it when Ren asked, “Why
served you call me?”

I looked at him a little surprised. We knew each other, but weren’t
eriously close. He wasn’t like a bestest best friend who you called when you
a cozy great fingernail polish or when you got kidnapped, especially wh
ting the family was doing the kidnapping.

“Why would I call you?” I asked back.

ool, but
ression “This is family business.”

“I’m not family.”

ed, “So
“Sissy’s family.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

was an He sat back and said with finality, “I’ll take care of it.”

I leaned forward.

rown a
h them. Time to get down to business.

nice to “What, exactly, are you gonna take care of?” I asked.

ost was “Don’t worry about it,” he returned casually, and I could tell he wa
to move on to another subject.

I didn’t think so.

“Well, considering the fact that for some bizarre reason I’m invol
ting the can’t help but worry about it.”

salad. He just looked at me.

nething “Why am I involved?” I went on.

“Because Dom’s a dickhead,” he answered.

lf from I couldn’t argue with that either, but still. “That doesn’t give me
/ didn’t go on, Ren.”

My hand was resting on the table and Ren put his over mine. I lo
exactly his hand and noticed it was nice, strong and well-veined. His hand didn
found a like the hand of a man who wore a suit.

hen his

I looked back to him, shrugging off thoughts of his hand, when he
speaking.

“Dom’s been talkin’ about you a lot. I won’t repeat it and I’m s
have to tell you this because I know it’s gonna piss you off, but he’s
pretty clear he’s moved on from Sissy, and even more clear who he’d
move on to.”

At this news, my fingers curled in and fisted angrily under his
twisted his hand so that our palms were facing and his fingers were l
mine. I was hoping that Luke didn’t have cameras installed in Ca
because I was pretty certain if he saw Ren and I holding hands, esp
like that, there’d be hell to pay, and I’d be the one paying.

Ren kept talking. “He has some troubles with some not-so-good
is ready Fucked with the business, fucked with the family. Vito’s pissed, but
trying to sort it out because Dom’s family. In the meantime,
disappeared. They want Dom and are tryin’ to flush him out, so I
that’s why they’ve gone after you. And today, finding Sissy available,
olved, I

I gently pulled my hand away and sat back, looking to the floor at
of the table as I vowed quintuple-revenge against Dickhead Dom.

“You’ll be safe,” Ren was saying and I looked at him.

Laidback Ren was history, his eyes were sharp and he even looked
I’d seen a lot of Ren’s looks, but this was a new one, and I had to admit
a lot to if it made me a freak, it was hot.

“I’ll assign Santo to you and Lucky to Sissy,” he finished.

I blinked at him as our family-style meal was served. Ren let me
I’t look Chicken Montana with asparagus, sun dried tomatoes and Gorgonzola
I’d let the healthy living mojo have the night off.

started “What do you mean, assign—?” I began to ask.

Ren interrupted me, “Bodyguards. Santo and Lucky will look after
sorry to two.”

made it Oh shit. This was not good.

I like to “No, really, that isn’t necessary. I’m covered.”

and he Ren’s eyes caught mine. “By Stark?”

aced in Hmm.

mine’s He seemed very interested, his eyes no longer angry, but still sharp
pecially very alert.

“Um...yeah,” I answered.

d guys. Ren went in for a direct hit. “You seein’ him?”

ut he’s Well there we were, the moment of truth.

Dom’s Was I seeing Luke Stark?

suspect Was I seeing Luke Stark?

her.”
the side Crap.

“Kind of,” I hedged.

The tips of Ren’s lips went up slightly and I knew he found this an

l angry. “Stark doesn’t strike me as a guy who would ‘kind of’ be seein’ a
it, even like you.”

“What’s that mean?”

Why did I ask? Why, why, why?

ie pick. “A man like that has a woman like you, there’s nothing ‘kind of
a sauce.it.”

“Do you know Luke?”

“I know him. Not well, but I know him.”

ter you “If you don’t know him well then how would you know? He m
perfectly happy with having a relationship that’s not exclusive. In t
might do it all the time.”

Just ask Sandra Whoever-She-Was, she’d tell you, I thought, but
say.

“I bet he does, just not with a woman like you,” Ren said.

arp and “What’s that mean?”

I did it again! Why?

He leaned toward me. “Ava, you should know Stark and me do

along. We don't because we find ourselves on opposite sides of the lot of the time. We also don't get along because we're a lot alike. The know a man like that doesn't 'kind of' see a woman like you be wouldn't 'kind of' see a woman like you. A man like that gets ho woman like you, all ass, legs, hair and attitude, protecting a soft spot y just about see but she won't let you touch...*fuck.*" His voice lower sexy way and he leaned in further. His eyes got that hungry look again using. found I was having trouble breathing. "A man like that gets hold of a woman like you, it automatically becomes exclusive."

Holy cramoly.

I decided I didn't want to know any more and started spooning Chicken Montana.

I also decided that, even though I couldn't stay in my pretend happy about for very long, there were certain times I was going to go visit.

This was one of those times.

"Ava," Ren called.

I looked at him.

He still had that hungry look, but it had intensified. Chicken Montana fact, he off the spoon and plopped on the white paper as my belly did a plunge

"Do you understand what I just said to you?" he asked softly. did not

"I'm in my pretend happy place," I told him.

He leaned back and smiled and I had to admit it was *hot*.

It was also predatory.

I was so screwed.

on't get



fence a
before I
cause I
ld of a
you can
ed in a
n and I
woman

FOR SOME REASON, when Ren and I left the restaurant and I told him to take me to Luke's, Ren found this amusing.

Discovering that Ren found this amusing, I found I needed a
Therefore I asked Ren to detour to King Soopers so we could buy cool

Ren found this even more amusing.

While we were at King Soopers, I bought a whole bunch of other
probably because I was stalling about going back to Luke's. Ren seemed
to care even a little bit that we were grocery shopping at ten o'clock
with our end destination being Luke's.

up the
the warning signs. When Ren parked outside of Luke's and I got out
went for the bags, Ren came around to help me.

Not good.

"I've got it," I said, struggling with five bags, two of which contained
cookies.

"I'll carry them."

Oh no. No, no, no, *no*!

ana slid
Ren was *not* walking into Luke's loft with me.

He took the bags away from me firmly and started to walk to the
building.

Crap!

Ren was walking into Luke's loft with me.

Alert! Alert! Danger! Danger!

"Ren, really," I said, catching up and beginning to sound desperate

he had He turned to me and I stopped dead at the look in his eye. “I’m sure you’re safe in the building, Ava.”

ookies. And that, apparently, was that.

ies. I couldn’t exactly get in a rip roarin’ on the sidewalk with him, n Luke (maybe) upstairs. I had to be cool, calm and composed. I’d sw or stuff, men. It was my decision and I was sticking to it.

ned not So what? One hot guy who wanted to get in my pants was orchest at nightfaceoff with another one. It didn’t touch me. I was immune. I was rem

I’m a little scared. Good Ava was trembling, holding close to my r
1’t read *I can’t WAIT to see what happens!* Bad Ava was tremblin
out and excitement.

I called the elevator and then used my key to the button to Luke’
The whole time, even if I was immune and removed, I hoped that Lu
ntainedout doing scary shit (but not too scary) and not at home.

The elevator doors slid open and all hopes were dashed.

The loft was softly lit, Tom Petty was singing “American Girl”
stereo and Luke was standing behind the semi-circle bar, phone to his

His head snapped up when we entered. His eyes did a body scan
Luke’s his mouth tightened then his eyes moved to Ren and his jaw clenched.

Shit.

I turned immediately to Ren.

“I’ll take them now,” I said, grabbing the bags. “Thanks for helpin
I went on, as if it was all my idea.

He let me take the bags. Luckily cookies didn’t weigh that n
cookie form. Their weight multiplied significantly once they’d pr

makin' themselves onto your ass.

Ren smiled down at me. "Nice night, Ava," he said softly.

Don't touch me, don't touch me, don't touch me, I thought.

not with "Thanks for dinner," I replied.

orn off His hand came up, I held my breath and he tucked my hair behind

All the while he did this, he was looking into my eyes, his carrying th
rating a that made me feel like I was going to pass out.

oved. He walked into the elevator, turned, his eyes moved to Luke then
eck. me, he smiled and the doors slid closed.

g with Alone again with Luke.

Shit.

s floor. I walked into the loft not looking at Luke and planning my defense

ike was He'd mostly touched my hair, *not* me. I was going to argue th
didn't count.

I put the bags on the counter at the back wall not looking at Lu
on the heard Luke say into the phone, "Call me when you have an update
ear. condition."

of me, At his words, I turned to him woodenly and heard him beep the
off. My eyes moved to his and I wished they didn't.

He was *way* pissed off. Super pissed. Ultra-pissed.

Still, I had to know. "Bobby?" I asked.

ig me," "Found him," Luke answered. "Fractured skull, major head trauma

I closed my eyes and opened them again. "Is he going to be okay?"

uch in "We'll know more tomorrow."
ccessed

“I’m sorry, Luke,” I said quietly, meaning every word.

“You didn’t smash him in the head.”

This was true. I still felt like shit. Bobby got hurt looking after Si me.

my ear. “I don’t know what to say,” I told him.

that look “Nothin’ to say.”

He was likely right about that.

back to “You wanna tell me why you brought Ren Zano to my loft?” he asked.

His voice had changed from matter-of-fact to lethal and I tried to find an immune and removed zone (and failed).

I turned away from him and started to unload cookies. “I told him about my troubles. He wanted to make sure I got in safely.” I tried to pretend that I was nothing when I knew it was anything but.

“Ava, turn around and look at me.”

like and Not gonna happen.

on his “I’m putting away the groceries. Some of it has to get in the freezer. Like the three containers of ice cream.

phone “Ava, turn around.”

“Luke, no. I know you’re angry, but you’re just going to have to get over it.” I shoved the ice cream in the freezer and slammed the door, all the while avoiding his eyes. “We just had dinner. We talked. Nothing more. That’s all.” The end.”

I started unloading cookies. Double Stuff Oreos, Chips Ahoy, Butter, regular Milanos, Mint Milanos, orange-flavored Milanos...

“You stood right in front of me, wearin’ a fuck-me skirt and shoes, and let him touch you,” Luke said to my back.

ssy and All right. Enough.

I whirled on Luke.

“He touched my *hair*.” There, I used that as my defense. It didn’t good, but I was going to go with it. “He just took me out to a nice d could hardly bean him with a grocery bag full of cookies for touch hair!” I snapped.

ked.

That was when Luke moved.

find my

One second, he was three feet away, the next second he was on m should say, I was in his arms and he was giving me an angry, shut- n about kiss.

l it was

Then (I swear I couldn’t help it) my mouth opened under his. My touched his fantastic lips, his mouth opened, my tongue slid inside . kiss exploded.

In fact, it kind of felt like *everything* exploded.
reezer.”

After that we were all over each other. My hands pulled his tee ou cargoes and up. His mouth disengaged and he took over, yanking the and throwing it aside. His hands went to my ribcage then up, over my get overone hand pulling down my shirt and one of the cups of my bra, expos e whileto him. I did a swift half-shocked, half-turned-on intake of breath . hat’s it.hands slid around my back, pressing in, arching it. His head came do his mouth closed around my nipple and he sucked deep.

Nutter I gasped then moaned, shock gone, now only turned on. My han to his head, holding him to me when he did the same to the other side.

uck-me His lips started gliding up my chest and I went for his buckle, yanking it, losing patience, wanting a feel of him *now*. I gave up and slid myself down his hard crotch. When I did, his mouth came back to mine, kissing hotter, deeper than before and pushing me into the back counter. He pulled his mouth from mine, leaned to the side, did an arm swipe at the counter and the cookies went flying.

inner. I He captured my lips again, his hands going down, tugging my skin on my hips then yanking down my panties. I shimmied out of them and he picked me up, hands at my ass, and planted me on the counter. He spread my legs and moved his hips between them, all the while his lips on mine, his tongue in my mouth.

Ava-up His hand went between my legs, hit dead on the target and it felt like my back arched, my head dropping back, losing contact with his lips. His tongue went down my neck, my chest, back to my nipple as his hand moved up and the other hand rolled on the target while a finger slid inside.

“Luke!” I gasped, close, oh so close.

I was nearly there and I knew it was going to be good.

it of his Upon hearing my gasp, his hand and mouth instantly went away. I let out a small cry of protest as his other hand fisted in my hair.

tee off breasts, “No you don’t,” he growled and picked me up, one hand at my waist and the other one still in my hair. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and he carried me to the bed with his face buried in my neck, his tongue sliding down my shivers sliding straight from the skin under my ear on a no-fail trajectory to my special girl parts. He set me on my feet beside the bed and released me.

ls went At that point, it was all go, go, go. Not because I thought we were interrupted but because I wanted him inside me and I wasn’t going to stop.

king at one fucking second longer.

My hands went back to the buckle of his pants. As I worked it, I got my tiptoe and my mouth went to his neck, tasting him with my tongue. He tore his great, he smelled great, everything about Luke was *great*. I got the zipper and free, undid the button and slid down the zip as he unzipped my skirt back and shoved it down so it fell at my feet.

My mouth now at his throat and working my way around, he pulled his shirt up, foiling my plan to stick my hand down his pants. Without a care he leaned back, lifted my arms and he whipped it over my head. He picked me up, hands at my ass again. My legs went around his hips and he put me on the bed, planted me in it and covered me with his body.

Now we were getting somewhere.

During this maneuver, wanting to be ready for anything, I slid his hand over his tight ass. I dipped my chin and looked at him, my eyes hooded and molten. His hands went to my hips, lifted them. I felt him there, and I knew mine, without hesitation he slammed inside me, burying himself to the hilt.

I closed my eyes, arched my neck and breathed, "Yes."

He felt good, he felt hot, he felt hard.

He felt *right*.

I lifted my knees and pressed them against his sides as he drove in and again and again, hard, hot and totally out of control. While he slid into me, he kissed me. When I started panting, his mouth went to my neck. I lifted my head and pressed my lips to where his neck met his shoulder, wrapping my arms tight around his back, my legs around his hips like I would never going to let go.

I was there, *right* there when I heard him say, his voice hoarse, "Ah"

I dropped my head back and tried to focus on him but couldn't be
hit me. I came and it was toe-curling, world-tilting *amazing*.

I didn't know it but when I came, I gasped Luke's name and shortl
I smiled.

And he watched the whole thing.



LUKE ROLLED TO HIS SIDE, taking me with him. Still inside me, h
behind my knee to keep my leg wrapped around his hip.

I'd just done the nasty with Lucas Stark.

I'd played the scenario in my head dozens of times, *hundreds* of
and never, not once, was it as good as what just happened.

Shit.

I was so screwed.

Luke gently slid out of me, tugged at the bottom of the comfor
pulled it over my body. Then he rolled over on his back and bucked h
pulling up his cargoes. He moved away and I watched as he silently sa
edge of the bed. He put his elbows to his knees, forehead in the heel
hands in a masculine position of defeated reflection.

I stared and felt my throat close as if in slow motion.

Of course.

Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes Ava Barlow had just done the nasty with ul
tough guy, macho man Lucas Stark, which meant Lucas Stark just g
business to Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes.

He must be mortified.

I rolled, taking the comforter with me. All I could think of was es

cause it had to get out of there, get away from him. Wyoming wasn't far enough. I had to buy myself onto one of those spaceships that they let rich people fly after, ride on and never, *ever* come back to earth.

I neared the end of the bed. I was still wearing my pointy-toed, heeled sling backs and they kept catching on the covers hampering movement. I was just about to crawl over the footboard when he tagged my hand with an arm around my waist and I landed on my back. He pinned one of my body with his and looked at my face. I saw, somewhat surprised, his eyes were still ink.

"Where you goin'?" he asked, voice soft, slightly husky and very soft times, "I'm going to spend the night with Sissy and her dad," I told him quietly, slightly husky and very scared.

I watched in total shock as he gave me a sexy half-grin then touched my mouth with his. His mouth moved away, but his face didn't and I kept looking in my eyes.

"You missed it again, babe," he said in his gentle, affectionate voice. "What?" I whispered, transfixed by his inky eyes and caught up in his voice.

He lifted his head a bit and shook it. His hand came up and he slid his fingers through my hair at my temple. He watched his hand's movement and his eyes came back to mine.

"I'm not gonna clue you in this time, Ava. This time you're gonna have to figure it out for yourself. One thing I'm gonna tell you is that you goin' *anywhere*."

The way he said it, I knew he didn't just mean tonight. I

ough. I Guess he wasn't mortified by giving the business to Fatty Fatty
e take aEyes.

Seriously, I was screwed.

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Guess he wasn't mortified by giving the business to Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes.

Seriously, I was screwed.

FIFTEEN



TOGETHER IN A WAY YOU CAN'T DEN

In the dead of the night, Luke tugged me over the top of him to his side. I started to settle into him face-to-face, but with pressure at my waist, he rolled me so my back was to him and he leaned in so we were bent at the waist.

I didn't say a word. I didn't mind this new position. It was nice.

And anyway, I was tired.

I started to fall asleep again when his arms wrapped around me. His hands went north and one went south.

I sucked in breath and came awake when one of his fingers hit between my legs, and the thumb and finger on his other hand did a little nipple roll.

Um...*wow*.

"Luke?" My voice sounded sleepy and quiet.

"Quiet, Ava," Luke murmured into the back of my neck, and he pressed his lips there.

For some reason, I snuggled my ass into his crotch, feeling him against me. He did another roll at the target and I made a small noise in my throat as heat shot through me.

His body shifted, and I kid you not, he slid inside me.

Oh...my...*God*.

None of my lovers had been adventurous, weirdly not even Dave, maniac. He might have been a perv, but he wasn't imaginative. I'd been cuffed to a bed and I'd never done it in any position but the top sellers (him on top, me on top).

Y This was nice. Very nice, ultra-nice. Moaning, panting with mouth is other nice. His hands kept at me as he moved inside me and I pressed in hip, he wanting more.

t at the "Luke," I breathed, nearly there.

His hand went away from my nipple, came to my jaw. His thumb across my opened lower lip and I came. Hard.

Minutes later his arms tensed. He drove into me one last time, his One of in the crook of my neck, where I heard (with deep satisfaction, I admit) his low groan.

e target Moments after he finished, his arms came around me tight, one delicious waist, the other one slashed diagonally across my torso. He stayed inside and his mouth moved up my neck.

"Wow," I whispered, somehow moved by the experience, feeling some strange reason, it was the most intimate moment with another being I'd had in my life.

in I felt I felt a movement of his lips at my neck and I was pretty certain I smiled. Then I snuggled my behind into him and I heard him groan. I smiled to myself in the dark, and believe it or not, wrapped tight in my arms, Luke still inside me, I immediately fell back to sleep.



I WAS in my usual morning position, tucked into Luke's side, arm around his abs, leg thrown over his thighs, when Luke woke me by tilting up and kissing me.

Then he rolled me to my back. Then his mouth moved down my neck. Then it was between my legs.

After he made me finish, he came up over me and he finished.

All of this was done without a word.

When it was over, Luke stayed where he was, his bodyweight pushing me into the bed. One of my legs was bent, foot on the bed, inside pressed against his hip. The other leg wrapped around his thigh, my hands around him, hands idly sliding across his skin and muscle.

His face was buried in my neck, his mouth moving there with no purpose or intent. Just a post doing-the-nasty affectionate touch. A sexy post doing-the-nasty affectionate touch.

My hands slid up his back.

"I have to brush my teeth," I whispered.

His head came up and he looked down at me, eyes dark. He stared for one beat, two, then three, then more. I didn't know why he kept looking at me. What I did know was that his face looked less hard than normal human with satisfaction, partly with something else I couldn't decipher.

Okay, to be perfectly honest, I didn't *want* to decipher.

Goddamn.

Finally I said softly, "Luke."

He gave me a half-grin, and even in a lying position I felt my body wobble.

und his There I was, lying in bed, Luke on top of me, still inside me, my
ny chinwrapped around him.

Hell and damnation.

y body. How did I let this happen?

What happened to my vow?

How was I ever going to go back to my vibrators now?

I took my arms from around him and shoved his shoulders. “Get of
ressing The grin turned full fledged. He bent his head, touched my lips v
e thigh and rolled off.

y arms I hightailed to the bathroom.

urpose Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

ing the Now how was I going to get out of *this* mess?

I couldn’t just get on a spaceship and float around the earth. That
close. I needed to beam to another galaxy. Since Star Trek technology
possible in the non-TV realm, I decided I needed to find a plastic surgeon
have my face altered so I was unrecognizable *and* move to Guadala
d at me good measure.

king at Then I realized I was naked in the bathroom and had nothing with
. Partly put on.

I was *such* a dork.

A black zip-up sweatshirt was hanging on the back of the door ar
on it like a starving man at a feast. I zipped it on and looked in the mirror

7 knees *I’m happy*, Good Ava told me, grinning like a loon. *This is what*
ALWAYS wanted.

y limbs Bad Ava had her arms crossed. She was scowling and she was silent. But I knew what she was thinking.

I did my morning business and walked out of the bathroom. Luke (and looking *fine* by the way), was heading toward it as I walked (he nabbed me at the waist, pulled me in for a quick, hard kiss then let me go) and I went into the bathroom.

if.” I stared at the door in a mini Luke Lip Fog for a few beats. Then I pulled off my underwear, pulled them on and wondered what to do.

with his I needed to get out of there and soon. I needed to find a quiet place to hide my head explode. I needed to shove all this down, bury it, forget it happened.

Bad Ava’s unspoken advice was the only thing I could think of. I needed to find a way out before this all turned to shit. Like it always turned to

Always.

was too Instead of doing any of that, I went to the kitchen, nabbed a diet coke, wasn’t the cookies, put away the forgotten-in-the-sex-a-thon-last-night groceries and started to make toast.

jara for Luke came out when I slid down the lever on the toaster. I saw him moving around, but I stared at the toaster as if I was certain it was going to animate and start dancing around like all the stuff in the Beast’s house in Disney movie and I didn’t want to miss the show.

He came up behind me, wrapped his arms around me and touched my neck. This felt good. Sweet, nice, intimate and wonderful.

ror. Ava. Bad Ava’s sharp voice was a warning.

t we’ve What? Good Ava asked innocently. *As far as I’m concerned, Luke holds us all day.*

rangelly Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“You want toast?” I asked, not moving my eyes from the toaster.

, naked He moved closer. I pressed against the counter. Luke pressed again

out. He “Yeah,” he said against my neck.

go and “Okay, I need to get the butter.”

I found He let me go. I got the butter and put it on the counter. I did all without looking at him.

re to let I was going for a knife when he moved in again, getting in front
pened. He pressed my bottom to the counter, this time full frontal, arms
needed around me. I tilted my head back to look at him. He was smiling down
shit. amused about something.

“What’s funny?” I asked, not thinking anything was funny, at all whole universe.

, tidied “I don’t know yet,” he answered.

ies and I stared at him, blank faced.

I heard Then I asked, “What?”

: would “Just waitin’ to see what you’re gonna say next.”

e in that “Why does that make you smile?”

“‘Cause I’m thinkin’ whatever it is, it’s gonna be good.”

his lips “Why?”

“You’ve had a full ten minutes to think about how you’re gonna of this now that you and me are together in a way you can’t deny. I’m *could* forward to hearin’ what you’ve come up with.”

My blank look turned into a glare.

One, two, three, four, five, six...there, temper under control.

I took a deep breath and I blurted out the first thing that came
ist me. “Simple. We stop seeing each other immediately.”

He burst into laughter, his arms got tighter and his face went i
neck. He laughed into my neck for what seemed like a long time as r
went stiffer and stiffer in his arms.
of this

“I wasn’t being funny,” I pointed out what *I* thought was the obvio

His head came up and he looked at me, still grinning. “Babe,
of me. hilarious.”
sliding

1 at me, “It’s just sex. We’re not ‘together in a way you can’t deny,’” I told

“Ava, after I made you come, you fell asleep with my cock insi
, in the That’s about as together as two people can get.”

I did do that.

Shit!

“It’s just sex,” I pushed it.

His face got closer, but he didn’t look any less amused.

“It isn’t just sex and you know it,” he returned, his voice soft,
affectionate.

He was right. It wasn’t.

And he was using The Voice a lot these days.

get out Crap!

lookin’ Then I hit on a plan. It was a stupid plan, but it was all I could c
with at the time. I knew he’d never go for it, but at least it was somethi

“We’ll be fuck buddies,” I told him.

His grin disappeared, his chin jerked down and his brows drew to me, “Come again?”

“Fuck buddies. You know, like they talked about on *Sex and the City*. Guys you know that you sleep with. Just sex. No entanglement, just mind-blowing sex.”

The grin came back as his face relaxed. “Mind-blowing sex?”

Oops.

I probably shouldn’t have used that adjective.

“Or, you know, good sex,” I tried to cover.

His body started shaking with laughter.

I started getting angry again. “Luke!” I snapped.

His hands pulled the sweatshirt up over my behind and went in, across the skin of my back.

“I could do fuck buddies,” he said, and I blinked.

I thought he’d say no. In fact, I was certain he’d say no. That was suggested it.

“You could?” I asked.

“Yeah.” His hands started moving up my back (taking the sweatshirt, by the way).

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

Okay, *now* what had I gotten myself into? I’d just become fuck buddies with Luke Stark.

Worse than that, it was my idea!

together. *I like that idea, I think it's fab.* Bad Ava had lost her warning voice and now sounded dreamy.

the City. *I hate it. It stinks.* Good Ava had lost her happy vibe and now sounded pissed.

“With rules,” Luke said.

Uh-oh. Here we go.

“Fuck buddies don't have rules. It's like being in a fight club. The rule of fuck buddies is...there are no rules.”

I was making this up as I went along. I had no idea if fuck buddies had rules. I'd never had a fuck buddy. I'd never even *wanted* one.

Hell, I didn't want one now!

sliding Especially not Luke.

The inky went out of his eyes and they got scary shiny. “We're not having rules.”

so why I thought, considering his scary shiny eyes, it was probably best I listen to his rules.

“What are the rules?” I asked on a sigh.

to flirt with “First, we're the kind of fuck buddies who spend time together fuckin'.”

“Luke, that defeats the purpose of fuck buddies.”

Again, I was making it up.

buddies He ignored me. “Second, we're exclusive fuck buddies. No one touches you while I'm fuckin' you.”

That one wouldn't be hard.

ibe and “Let’s go back to the first one,” I said.

“Ava, that’s the deal, no discussion.”

ounded “What kind of time would we spend together?”

“Ava—”

“No, I want to know.”

His eyes dropped to my mouth and his arms wrapped around me
he first fingers were resting on the sides of my breasts.

Then he muttered, “Maybe we’ll just fuck.”

lies had I felt my knees wobble as my lungs expanded.

“I could spend time not fucking,” I blurted.

He grinned.

Foiled again!

gonna I glared.

at least He caught the glare and his body started shaking with laughter again.

“Honestly, I hate you,” I told him.

“No,” his mouth came to mine, his eyes not leaving my own, “you

her not Against my will, I started sliding into a fog. My head tilted back
his slanted and he started to kiss me when the buzzer went. He disengaged
from my lips, but kissed my nose and walked away.

In another fog, I watched him move. He’d put on another
sweatpants, these black with three black-on-black stripes up the sides.

ne else Not surprisingly, his chest was bare.

I noticed, not for the first time but with my Luke Sense significantly
honed after our sex-a-thon, that he moved well. He moved like he

absolute command of every centimeter of muscle, sinew and bone body, and there were a lot of them. I sighed at the sight, and even I admit it was a contented sound.

Damn it all to hell.

He picked up the door phone and said, “Yeah?” Three seconds later eyes cut to me.

so his

Whatever it was, I knew by the look of him was not good.

He listened for another couple of seconds, then without a word down the phone. I watched him walk back to me, and since he had that look on his face, as if he didn’t know whether to laugh or yell, I didn’t know the way he moved, just his expression. I was waiting for him to decide

He came into the kitchen and leaned his hips against the counter opposite me, putting his palms on it at his sides.

in.

“Santo Mancini wants you to know he’s ready, just in case you were somewhere,” he told me calmly, neither laughing nor yelling, which was a relief.

don’t.”

I stared at him.

further,

“Who?” I asked.

engaged

“Santo Mancini.”

“Who’s Santo...?”

pair of

Oh shit. Ren’s bodyguard.

ly more

Again, I wanted someone to tell me, why me? My life was so complicated, I couldn’t even keep track of all the fucked-up shit that was happening.

was in

His voice started sliding into the “going to yell” zone. “You were

in his me why the guy who kidnapped you a few days ago is buzzin' up to
had totellin' me he's waitin' for you downstairs?"

No, I actually didn't want to tell him.

"Um..."

ter, his "Ava," he said low.

What the hell? I'd tell him.

"Well, I told Ren what was happening and he kind of arranged for
he put and me to have bodyguards."

a funny He stared at me a beat then his head dropped, and he might have
t watch staring at his feet, or he might have closed his eyes. I couldn't see what
and it didn't matter, really. He was in another masculine position
pposite reflection, this time likely wondering what in *the* hell he'd gotten himself
when he got mixed up with me.

anna go I thought it best to carry on with breakfast. The toast in the toaster
I was along since come up and wouldn't be hot anymore so the butter wouldn't
I hated non-melted butter on toast. I decided to let Luke have the non-
butter ones, exchanged toast for bread and pressed down the lever.

"Ava," Luke called from behind me.

I turned. He was now sitting on the counter, eyes on me.

"Come here," he demanded softly.

Don't ask me why, but for some reason, I went. He opened his legs
was so walked between them. He closed his thighs against my sides, wrapped
that was around the back of my neck as I tilted my head back to look at him
face came close.

anna tell "You're lucky," he told me.

the loft “I am?” I asked.

“Yeah. You’re lucky I’ve fucked you. You’re lucky it was mind-blowing. You’re lucky I think it’s fuckin’ sweet as hell that you would nestle in my arms and fall asleep with me inside you. You’re lucky I like you movin’ around my kitchen wearin’ my sweatshirt. You didn’t have all that, babe, I got you, I would likely be pretty fuckin’ pissed Zano assigned one of his top guys to be your bodyguard.”

or Sissy “Well, I didn’t—” I started to say in my own defense (really, I didn’t want wasn’t my idea for Ren to give me a bodyguard), but Luke’s lips touched mine and I stopped talking.

ich one “Don’t try your luck,” he warned.

tion of I thought about trying my luck. I did this while looking in Luke’s eyes.

elf into I decided not to try my luck.

ster had “You want toast or what?” I asked, kind of bitchy.

l’t melt. He did a half-grin. His hand slid in my hair and he gave me the toast. The toast meant to give me five minutes before.

In the end, my toast had non-melted butter too.



LUKE and I went to the hospital to see Bobby.

Santo Mancini followed us in a black Volvo. Glancing out through the window of the Porsche, I noticed he was one of my kidnappers. The driver was a hand.

Well, at least it wasn’t the other guy. I didn’t think the other guy was his. I didn’t want to see him.

My phone rang on the way to the hospital. It said, Sissy calling.

I flipped it open and put it to my ear. “Yo,” I greeted.

“Some big, beefy guy is here,” Sissy informed me, sounding lowering. breathless. “Says his name is Lucky and he’s my bodyguard. He does into me like one of the hot guys. I just screamed in his face and closed the door around outside, standing by his car. What do I do?”

otta tell Damn, damn, damn.

hugs to “Ren set it up,” I told her. “He’s not one of the Hot Bunch. He’s Ren’s um...people.”

idn’t, it “Oh. So he’s okay?” Sissy sounded less panicked.

ouched That was a question I couldn’t answer.

“I think so,” I said.

yes. “Did they find the Hot Bunch guy that was missing?” she asked.

I bit my lip and watched Luke drive for a few beats.

“Ava?” Sissy called in my ear.

kiss he “Luke and I are going to visit him at the hospital now.”

Silence then quietly she said, “Shit.”

She could say that again.

“Dom’s a dickhead,” she whispered. “He started all this and someone is in the hospital. Someone we don’t even *know*.”

ie back “Did Dom call you?” I asked, remembering my conversation with
iver. last night.

ly liked “Yes, like, five times,” she said, now sounding pissy. “I didn’t answer.
Shoo.

At least that crisis was averted.

“Well, don’t answer if he calls again. We have to talk. I’ll call you

kind of we get done at the hospital.”

It didn't look like “I want to know everything. What a date with Ren is like. How Luke feels. How he's when you got home. *Everything*. I'll meet you at Fortnum's,” she replied.

There was something about Sissy calling Luke's loft “home” that made me feel like I was being thrown out. I didn't feel like freaking out in Luke's Porsche with Luke and Sissy (again, or ever really). I needed to freak out privately with lots of cookies available.

“Sounds good,” I said instead.

I was about to say good-bye when I heard her call, “Ava?”

“What?”

“Did Luke give you the business?” she asked.

I looked at Luke again. He was driving. Calm, casual, practiced, and in control of the road, seemingly oblivious to our conversation.

I looked away.

“Yeah,” I answered quietly.

She screamed so loud I had to pull the phone away from my ear. I glanced at Luke when I heard him chuckle.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.



h Dom

I STOOD outside Bobby's hospital room, facing the wall, forehead against it.

Just a minute before, I saw that Bobby was a big guy and looked like a younger Tex, except less crazy. Though how would I know if Bobby was less crazy, considering he was lying in a hospital bed in a coma? I couldn't help but feel the blame that Big Bobby was lying in a hospital bed.

Still, I vowed sextuple revenge against Dominic Dickhead.

ike was I felt a strong hand slide under my hair and rest at the back of my head. then, “Babe.”

freaked I straightened, turned and looked at Luke, but he didn’t take his eyes in it away. Lee had been with Bobby when we got there and now he was sitting by Luke, but his eyes were on me.

“What’s in that head of yours?” Luke asked quietly.

“I just vowed sextuple revenge against Dickhead Dominic Vincent,” I told him.

One side of Luke’s lips went up. Lee’s eyes did an amused crinkle.

“And I feel it’s my fault,” I went on.

eyes on Luke’s grin faded and so did Lee’s eye crinkle.

“If I hadn’t walked into your office—” I started to continue.

“Quiet, Ava,” Luke ordered softly.

Lee spoke more words. “Ava, most of the time my men volunteer for their Rock Chick assignments and do them on their own time. Bobby did it on his own time, a favor to Luke. He knew what he was doing and he wanted to do it. It isn’t your fault that some shithead brought you trouble. Don’t put it on your shoulders, it doesn’t belong there. What happened to Bobby is resting on the shoulders of the guy who hit him in the head with a baseball bat.”

Well, that was honest, succinct, to the point and made sense.

I like a Still.

actually I closed my eyes and Luke turned me into his body by putting pressure on my neck. I put my hands to his waist and rested my forehead on his chest. tal bed. “Later,” I heard Lee say to Luke.

“Yeah,” Luke replied.

After some time slid by, I lifted my head and looked at Luke.

“I need cookies,” I told him.

His face got that almost-soft, still-hard look, his eyes going warm
bent his head to kiss my nose.



SISSY HAD SPREAD the word and by the time Luke and I (and Silent Sarcetti,” Ito Fortnum’s, everyone had congregated. Everyone being Indy, Ally, Jet, Roxie, Shirleen, Sissy (and Silent Lucky, her bodyguard and kidnapper), Tod and Stevie.

The minute Luke and I (and Silent Santo) walked in, all eyes swun

“Babe,” Luke muttered, sounding amused.

I turned to him, my back to the Rock Chicks (and gay guys). “Don me here. Take me to Australia. Now.”

He looked down at me. “Don’t think I’ll find Dom Vincetti in Aus
A shiver slid through me as Luke got close and his hand went to n
thumb stroking my cheek, and fuck buddies or not, it was nice. “I don
you leavin’ here, not even with Mancini. You gotta go somewhere, y
me.”

I nodded. Not because I was giving in to Luke’s tough guy, maci
demand, but because I didn’t want to be kidnapped again.

He kissed my nose then he was gone.

No sooner had the door closed behind him when Tod squealed,
get over here. Spill. We want *details*.”

Again, I had to ask, why me?

I walked to the Rock Chicks and flopped on the couch by Shirlee peeled away and got me a skinny vanilla latte. When my coffee arrived I sipped and told them about Dom calling, Ren's date and Luke giving business.

and he

I didn't go into detail.

Shirleen narrowed her eyes on me. "Girl, so far I've lost a hundred dollars on you. I gotta get *some*thin' outta that hundred. I want it blow-by-blow. Don't give it, I'll cuff you to somethin' my damn self."

I stared at Shirleen. She looked serious, as in *seriously* serious. I wanted Shirleen to cuff me to something so I sighed and gave them a blow-by-blow.

When I was done, Sissy said, "Oh my."

Indy said, "Holy crap."

Roxie said, "Wow."

Ally said, "Righteous."

Stevie said, "Lordy."

I said, "I know."

"Oowee," Shirleen said, getting off the couch and pulling her blouse and out at her chest. "I need to go home and get me a cold shower before I get back to work. Child," she said to me. "You did good. You held out. They got nailed. You're a real Rock Chick now."

Everyone watched her leave, but it was probably only me who was watching. "Girlie, the first time, wishing I wasn't a Rock Chick."

"My favorite part is the cookie swipe," Tod shared with the congregation.

"The cookie swipe was good," Roxie agreed.

n. Ally “That ain’t *my* favorite part,” Daisy put in.

rived, I “Mine either,” Ally concurred.

me the “I can’t believe you’re fuck buddies with Luke Stark.” Sissy’s to
accusing and she was glaring at me.

Obviously fuck buddies wasn’t where she thought this was headi
d bucks likely had visions of wearing a bridesmaid’s dress and was plann
w. You bachelorette party.

“I can’t believe it either,” Indy put in, but she didn’t sound accusi
I didn’t sounded amused.

low-by- “I wish I was fuck buddies with Luke Stark,” Tod told everyone ar
scowl from Stevie.

“Me too.” Ally’s voice sounded far away.

“Ally!” Roxie and Jet cried in unison.

Ally snapped back into the room. “I’m just saying.” She looked at
“Has Hank ever done a cookie swipe?”

Roxie looked away. “No,” she mumbled, obviously liking the id
cookie swipe.

ouse in “Eddie?” Ally’s gaze had moved to Jet.

ore I go “We did it against the wall once.” She hesitated. “Or twice,” she s
ien you low voice then her voice got lower. “Or maybe four times.”

Everyone stared at her.

vas, for Daisy gave a tinkly-bell laugh. “The wall is good.”

gation. “So what now?” Jet asked, moving attention away from wall se
Eddie.

I shook my head because I didn't know what now.

What I knew was that I'd always, since I was eight, wanted Luke to want me to be his girl then his girlfriend and now I was "his woman."

I'd had the best night and morning of sex in my whole fucking life. I liked moving around in Luke's kitchen wearing his sweatshirt. She liked kissing him while he sat on the counter, probably more than he liked it.

I knew Luke was right. I was lucky, but not for the reasons he said. I felt lucky. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

I also knew I was screwed.

Because worse than never getting what you always wanted was having it and losing it.

"Uh-oh, I don't like the look on your face," Tod said to me.

"What?" I asked, knowing exactly what he meant.

"I'm thinkin' we're not in the straightaway here, am I wrong, Roxie?" Daisy put in.

She was not wrong. "I need more coffee," I declared to the conversation from me, mainly because I could take no more. I needed and quiet and alone time, something I hadn't had in days.

Everyone looked at everyone else.

I got up and went to the coffee counter. "Set me up, Tex."

He stared at me.

"Darlin'..." he started, and I just knew he was going to impart some piece of wisdom on me that I couldn't cope with, not then, not ever.

"Set me *up*, Tex," I repeated.

Tex ignored my demand and said, "He won't let you do it."

Whoa.

Stark to Whoa, whoa, whoa.

I knew I was *not* having this conversation.

I knew “Set me up,” I repeated.

virt and “He’ll wear you down.”

.
l. And I “Set me up.”

“He’ll get through whatever defenses you put up.”

“Set me up.”

aving it “He won’t give up.”

“Tex! Set me up!” I shouted.

Duke walked up beside Tex all the while watching me.

Tex turned to Duke. “Tell it to her straight, brother.”

sugar?” Duke shook his head. “Not yet my time. I’ll lay the honesty on her
the time’s right.”

deflect Tex nodded as if he understood this completely. I didn’t v
d peaceunderstand it. I wanted to get to a phonebook and start calling
surgeons to get quotes on a total face makeover.

“Can I *please* have some coffee?” I snapped.

Santo walked up beside me and said his first words of the morning

“I don’t get it. I thought you were Ren’s woman.”

ne sage Someone! Please tell me!

Why me?

er when

vant to
plastic

; to me.



MILANO INTERRUPTUS

After the Rock Chicks made plans to go see Stella Gunn's gig that night (Stella was a friend and The Premier Rock Chick, on account she was lead singer and lead guitar in a kickass local cover band called "The Moon Gypsies"), Sissy took off with Lucky to inspect her house. She was delaying it due to grieving her Stephen Kilborn pottery.

I got a call from Jules saying she'd be over around lunchtime to help me get dirt on Luke firsthand. She warned she was bringing May.

I decided to hang at Fortnum's because it seemed safe. I wasn't a fan of moving up to move from the "Kidnapping and Getting Nailed Portion" of my experience to the "Chick in Trouble Experience" to the "Shot At or Car Bombed Portion" of my experience yet.

I was standing behind the book counter when I saw Jules and May. I gave them a smile as my phone rang. Seeing as I was on edge (and a little of an ultimate dork), I jumped, knocked over a can of pens, a pot of paper and unfortunately, a jar of pink and purple bouncy balls, which seemed like a weird item to have at a bookstore, but who was I to say? Indy had been a bit crazy.

They went all over the floor, balls bouncing everywhere. I dropped my hands and knees, fumbling with my ringing phone and scooping up

pens and clips.

I put my phone to my ear.

“Yo,” I greeted.

A low laugh then, “Ava.”

It was Ren.

I froze on all fours then said stupidly, “Yo, Ren.”

“Hey,” he replied softly.

he next

Ren, too, had a sexy soft voice.

t of she

he Blue

Crap.

'd been

near the

ill fired

y Rock

on” just

ay walk

and the

r clips,

emed a

always

l to my

p balls,

Where were these guys during my senior prom, I ask you? No

answer that, I knew. They were nowhere near Fatty Fatty Four-Eye

were dating Skinny, Easy Cindy Too Much Lip Gloss.

“Hi,” I said, and my voice sounded too high.

“Babe.” I heard from what seemed like far away.

I jerked, dropped the phone from my ear and it clattered to the floor

I did not want Luke to see me on all fours on the floor. It had

somewhat chilly outside so I was wearing jeans, a pale pink thermal

faded brown tee that had pink script on the front that said SAH-WEEET

my boobs and I was wearing pale-pink Croc Mary Jane’s. I wasn’t f

my ass or anything. Still, it wasn’t the best position to get caught in b

Stark.

I looked behind me, grabbing for the phone, but Luke wasn’t the

slowly lifted up and, eyes peering over the counter, I saw him and fr

was standing a few feet inside the front door facing Jules, body close to

Ultra-close.

He had his hand up to her jaw, like he had with me just hours ago, thumb stroking her cheekbone. Worse, his face wasn't semi-soft, still was all-soft, totally soft in a way I'd never seen him look before *in my*

He was smiling at her, his eyes warm. *Ultra-warm.*

He hadn't called me "babe." He didn't even know I was there.

He'd called Jules "babe."

What's THAT all about? Bad Ava demanded.

Don't jump to conclusions, Good Ava warned.

I jerked back down to all fours and started breathing deep, feeling like I needed to. They were feelings. In fact, the worst feelings *ever*.

Shit.

Shit, shit, *shit!*

I heard Ren's voice coming from my phone on the floor. I grabbed it and flipped it shut and my mind screamed, *Escape!*

I listened to my mind, thinking at that point it knew what the hell it was talking about.

I started motoring, cell in my hand, scrambling on all fours, slicing through bouncy balls and pens as I went, crawling down the side aisle of books. I ran the length of the store perpendicular to the eight rows of fiction.

I stopped at row four when I saw movement at my side. I stopped and my head whirled around.

Jet and Eddie were making out in the M-N-O section. Eddie was pressed against the books, one of his arms around her, hand under her chin. The other hand up on the shelves by her head. It looked like they were

minutes away from bookshelf sex.

before, They broke off kissing but didn't move away from each other, as hard. It of their gazes swung to me on all fours on the floor. Jet's mouth c life. open. Eddie's brows went up.

"Erm...sorry," I mumbled.

I gained my feet and ran through the front section into the middle where there were more books and a big table topped with dozens of cartons filled with old vinyl, through that room and to the back room was more books.

ing bad I went to a corner (Women's Studies) and started hyperventilating.

Get out of here, now! Bad Ava screeched.

Go talk to Luke! Good Ava cried.

I didn't listen to either of them.

obed it, All I could think was that I knew Jules and Luke were close. I c by the way she talked about him and the way he talked about her. I about the pain that moved through his face when he thought of see l it was bleeding on the floor and I didn't get it at the time.

Now I got it.

ling on I'd never seen that in Luke, that vulnerability, not outside of what s ks that showed whenever I was around him after he was in a rip roarin' with l I got to Never for one of his girlfriends, never for anyone, not even me. whipped

had Jet He'd never looked at me with a full-on soft look. Not when my d or shirt, not when he saw one of my sisters be bitchy to me, not even when ere two inside me.

I leaned against the bookshelves.

He was in love with her. He would, of course, be in love with her and both looked like a movie star. And I was just Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes, the girl who dropped the street holding on to a screaming crush.

Okay, so I wasn't really Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes anymore, but...I was worse, I always would be.

My phone rang in my hand and I jumped. The display said, REN CALLED. I flipped it open and put it at my ear.

"Hey," I greeted breathlessly.

"What the fuck?" Ren clipped into my ear. "Are you okay?"

No! I thought.

"Yeah," I replied, but that one word didn't even convince me.

"Ava—"

I closed my eyes and blurted in a whisper, "I need to get out of here."

"Where are you?" Ren asked, now he was sounding concerned.

"Fortnum's."

"Where's Santo?"

"I don't know."

"Fuck," he snapped. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be there in ten."

"No! Ren, no."

Santo walked into the back room, his head swung around and he caught mine. Then he walked to me.

"Santo's right here," I told Ren.

"Come to me," Ren ordered.

er. She “What?” I asked.

I across “Have Santo bring you to me.”

My heart stuttered. “Ren—”

IS. “Do it. I’ll be waiting.”

Disconnect.

ALLING. I stared at Santo, my mind racing, my heart beating so strong I it’d jump out of my chest. That was my only thought. My mind didn’t have the capacity to process any more.

Then Santo’s phone rang, he flipped it open, listened for five seconds, said, “Right.” He flipped it shut and looked back to me. “We’re going to get Ren,” he stated firmly.

I just kept staring at him. Then, I didn’t know why, I nodded my head.

e.” We walked through the books, the vinyl and down the center aisle to the front room. Luke was walking toward us. His eyes were warm when he caught mine then, immediately, they went on alert. I looked away and he approached him and went to move by him. He caught my upper arm. I was up short and lifted my eyes to his.

“What’s happening?” he asked, brows drawn.

“I have to be somewhere,” I told him.

His gaze moved from me to Santo. I pulled my arm from his hand and his eyes kept walking (albeit a lot faster), Santo following.

I was at the passenger door to the Volvo when I heard the scuffle. I turned and saw Luke holding Santo back with a hand at his chest. He gave a barely a movement of his arm but Santo fell back several paces. Luke looked to me and advanced, pinning me against the Volvo.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asked, his voice low and lethal.

“Nothing, Luke. I have to be somewhere. I’ll see you later at the
replied, my voice small, my eyes skidding away from his.

I tried to slide away but he got even closer, his hand went to my jaw
thumb splayed on my cheekbone and I looked at him.

thought “Babe,” he murmured, eyes warm on mine.

It hurt At that word, pain sliced through me. Against my will and to my
mortification, I felt tears well in my eyes. He saw them and got ultra-

close His face softened but not completely.

Not even close.

And that hurt even more.

“Talk to me,” he whispered in his gentle, affectionate voice.

I jerked my face from his hand, slid out from in front of him and
they got in the car.

Santo jumped behind the wheel and we took off.

I didn’t look back.



REN’S OFFICES were a lot like Lee Nightingale’s, except the wood was
and instead of a cowboy motif there was a lot of fancy glass and modern

Also, he didn’t have a black lady receptionist with a huge African
messy desk. He had an ultra-gorgeous blonde receptionist with an obse-

turned tidy desk.

Her head snapped up when she saw us enter and her eyes narrowed
in immediate and unconcealed hate, which I thought was kind of

Considering the fact that I was freaking out, I didn’t have time to cor-

bitchy receptionist.

loft,” I “Ren’s expecting you,” she told Santo, and she didn’t sound
about it.

aw, his “Yeah, Dawn, I know,” Santo muttered, sounding like he thought s
a bitch too and leading me into an open doorway and down a hall
stopped and so did I. He knocked on a door and when we heard Ren
us in he opened it.

ry total

a-close. Ren was already moving around his desk. His office was huge
desk was not obsessively tidy. It was covered with papers and files in
that it looked like he was really busy.

I walked in with Santo, saw Ren give a jerk of the chin, and wi
word Santo took off.

Ren stopped in front of me, put his hand to my neck tilting my
quickly with a gentle thumb in the soft spot between my jaws, and he looked
eyes.

“Jesus, Ava,” he murmured, and I knew at his words that I was cle
hiding my emotional freakout, which was kind of a bummer.

I stared at him then started blabbing. “I need quiet space. I need
darker, alone. No bodyguards. No tough guys. No imminent threat of kidnapp
m art. car bombs. I need to think. I need to get my head together. I haven
) and alone for days. I need to be alone.” Before I could stop myself, I lear
ssively him and put my hand on his (it must be said, rock-hard) abs. “Ren,
can you arrange that for me?”

l on me He watched me for a beat, his eyes scanning my face.

weird. Then he said softly, “Yeah, honey, I can arrange that for you.”
ifront a

I sagged into him.

pleased “Let’s go,” he finished.

I felt relief flood through me. So much, I didn’t notice he took my hand and held it as we walked out of his office, down the hall, through the reception area, to the parking garage and to his Jag. I did, however, call Dawn glaring at me.

We drove through downtown where his offices were and I wordlessly out the window. My phone rang. I looked at it, saw it said CALLING and flipped it open.

Then I flipped it shut. I opened it again and turned it off.

I knew Ren watched this and I didn’t care. I was beyond caring. A lot of things.

He took me to a house in Cheesman Park, a big, old, graceful cottage expertly parallel parked in front (and I had to admit I was impressed, never parallel park) and walked me to the door. Inside it was a big, wide front room, side dining room to the back and left, kitchen on the side behind a wall, lots of windows with some stained glass. A split staircase in the middle where Ren led me up and to a bedroom.

Ho-ly crap.

I halted and turned to him.

“Ren—” I started.

He gave me a gentle shove inside but took a step back, hand on doorknob.

“If you need anything, call,” he said.

Then he left, closing the door behind him. I stared at the door then

and looked at the room.

More big windows, hardwood floors, dark wood furniture with a tall, four high, spiked posts, wine-colored sheets and comforter.

I sighed. Nothing for it.

I threw myself on the bed, bounced a couple of times and curleed ball.

You're just latching onto this to protect yourself, Good Ava accused my ear.

Yippee! We're in Ren's bed! Bad Ava yelled.

You need to talk to Luke, Good Ava advised.

You need to touch yourself in Ren's bed. Mm, yum, Bad Ava advised.

Good Ava glared around my neck at Bad Ava. *Stop talking about I*

me. He

Bad Ava glared back. *Ren called us "honey," we've been around with LOTS of other women. He's never called ANY of them "honey" did to us.*

I could

house-
die other
, sunny

Good Ava had no comment because Bad Ava was right.

I closed my eyes tight and decided instead of sorting through rampaging thoughts, I was going to try to think nothing at all.

That didn't work so I started to sort through my rampaging thoughts.

In the end, I realized I had two choices.

Be sloppy seconds to Jules for as long as it lasted, and who knew how long it would last? Jules was with Vance. Very with him, no way Luke going to get in there. He might need sloppy seconds for a good, long while his sexual appetite last night was anything to go by.

I turned

Or I could get the hell out and fast.

big bed, Since I couldn't get the hell out and fast, which was my preferred (considering my life was totally fucked up, and Luke had made it c wasn't done with me), I'd have to take the first.

l into a At least until I got my sextuple revenge against Dominic Dickhea I was off to Jamaica for the longest vacation in history.

used in On that unhappy thought, I slipped into a wee nap.

I woke up when the bed moved. I saw a thigh and looked up. R sitting on the bed looking down at me. *His* face was totally soft *and* ge

Wow.

ed. "I didn't mean to wake you," he said quietly.

Ren! I got up on an elbow. "That's okay," I replied, my voice still

nd Ren "What time is it?"

like he "After five. You hungry?"

I had missed lunch. I still wasn't hungry.

"Yeah," I lied.

gh my He took my hand, helped me out of his bed and we went downstai made spaghetti while I watched and drank red wine. Considering ts. coasting on the dregs of morning toast (with unmelted butter), the re hit my head like a shot.

ow how Therefore by the time we sat down at his dining room table with b ke was (delicious, it must be said, Ren could cook) spaghetti, I had had two while if of wine and was working on my third. I wasn't quite drunk, but I w talkative mood.

Unfortunately, Ren asked what was happening. So, seeing as I f

talking, I told him.

choice Everything.

clear he From Luke moving into the house across the street, me being Fatt
Four-Eyes (that last part, Ren knew; I met him pre-weight loss and he
d. Then nice to me then too), having a crush on Luke since time began, all the
the cookie swipe. Though I just said we did the business. I didn't
detail, thank goodness. His eyes got a little scary just hearing the "we
business" part.

en was

He listened without comment to all of this.

ntle.

When I was done he asked, "Did you get your head together?"

I nodded.

sleepy. "What'd you decide?" He seemed very interested in my answer.

Yikes.

I sat back and took a sip of wine. This was going to be the hard part.

"I need you to take me back to Luke's," I told him in a quiet don't
out-on-me voice.

rs. Ren His mouth got tight, but to my surprise, without a word or a freak
; I was nodded.

ed wine That said a lot about him. All of it good.

Hell and damnation.

owls of We did the dishes and he took me back to Luke's. He walked me
glasses building and when the elevator doors slid open, his hand came to rest
as in before I could walk in.

He brought me close, his face dipped to mine and I saw the hunger
felt like in his eyes. This time it was more intense because I could see it was r

with anger or frustration. Or both. I figured whatever he was going to say was going to complicate my complicated life significantly.

My Fatty I was not wrong.

'd been He started talking and I vowed that if I ever got caught in a marriage again, I would choose a man who was *not* a straight-talker.

go into "After he gets done with you, screwin' with your head while he's
did the your body when he knows you have serious feelings for him. Or you go
with bein' with a guy who would do that. Done with a guy who's thinking
someone else when he fucks you. When you decide you wanna be with
who's thinkin' of nothin' but you when he fucks you, Ava, you call me

Ho-ly *shit!*

What did I do with *that?*

I just stared. I couldn't do anything else.

t. "Do you understand me?" he asked.

t-freak- At that, I just nodded.

I understood him.

out, he Ee-yikes but I understood him.

"Good," he said, and he sounded pissed off.

Even pissed off, he still brushed his lips against mine. I registered
lip brush felt nice while he walked away.

into the I shrugged off the lip brush, got in the elevator and used the key to
my neckfloor. I did my now familiar holding-of-the-breath-until-the-doors-slit
to-Luke's-loft and I let it out on a gush when they did.

ry look He was sitting at a stool in front of the bar, the kitchen garbage can
ningledfeet in front of him, sorting through one of the piles I made for him (

say was most of it in the garbage, I might add) and eating one of my Milano c
He was still in his Tom Petty mood. I knew this because Tom was
“Mary Jane’s Last Dance” on the stereo.

1 pickle His head swung around when I walked in.

I opened my mouth to say “Hey” when he spoke.

fuckin’ “Where the fuck have you been?” he bit off.

et done Hmm.

1kin’ of Someone was in a bad mood.

h a guy It was about to get worse. I knew it would because I was going to
2.” get worse.

And I did it on purpose.

Barlow Bitch Blood was pumping so watch out!

“At Ren’s,” I answered.

The air in the room went scary as I walked in, got close to Luke,
phone down on the bar and grabbed the bag of Milanos. I shoved my
the bag, studiously avoiding the scary air and Luke’s gaze and nal
cookie.

“Ava.”

that the I looked at him. He was in his controlling-fury mode, I knew it w
look.

Luke’s “Yeah?” I asked, sounding unconcerned and a little surprised at
d-open-that I could pull it off.

“You wanna tell me what you did at Zano’s?”

n a few Not really.

{tossing

ookies. Still, I answered, “I needed space to get my head together. He ga
sing me. I spent the afternoon at his place, alone, and took a nap. When
home from work, he made me dinner and brought me back here.”

I’d gone from lying through my teeth every other second to being
when it was definitely not good for me. I should have stuck with lying
though all this was perfectly innocent, I could tell Luke didn’t like it,
bit.

“Now that you answered that question, you wanna tell me w
couldn’t get your head together and take a nap here?”
make it

I shrugged, being Queen of Calm. Barlow Bitch Blood was app
latent. I’d lived twenty-nine years hardly ever being a bitch. Now
coming out in spades.

“Okay, then you wanna tell me what your drama was at
Fortnum’s?”

put my I was starting to bite into my cookie, I took it out of my mouth a
hand in (back to lying), “I didn’t have a drama.”

bbing a “Then what was that?”

“It wasn’t a drama.”

“Eddie said he saw you crawling on all fours.”

with one Jeez!

myself This was so annoying. Luke had sources everywhere.

“I dropped a contact,” I lied.

Luke glared at me and then said, “Ava,” in a very low, very lethal v

“I told you, I had somewhere to go. I had to meet Ren so he cou
me out.”

ve it to “When did Ren Zano become the one who helped you out?”

he got “Yesterday, at dinner,” I told him breezily, shaking my cookie in for effect.

honest *Not* a good answer. I knew this because the scary air started pressin

g. Even Surprisingly he let it go and asked instead, “Where did you sleep?”

not one

Again I was about to bite into my cookie, but stopped and asked, “

hy you “At Zano’s, where did you sleep?”

Uh-oh.

arently Before I could fight back the Barlow Bitch Pull, it popped out it was mouth. “In his bed.”

Eek!

out at Red alert! Red alert! Scary air hitting danger zone! Evacuate the p immediately!

nd said Then Luke growled in a voice so low, I barely heard him, “You’ve be fuckin’ shittin’ me.”

“Luke, it was no big deal. He wasn’t there,” I decided to go l breezy.

I was standing a few feet in front of him, between him and the g can.

He leaned in but kept his seat. I leaned back. I did this mainly beca intensity was kind of scaring me.

voice. “You wanna call Zano right now? Ask him, shoe’s on the other f fucked you three times, you fell asleep with his cock inside you, l d help would feel about you takin’ a nap in *my* bed?”

It was then I saw his point.

the air Then again, if it was Ren fucking me, he would have been fucki
Not some fill-in until he sorted out his feelings for another woman.

ing in. On that thought, I lost interest in my Milano and threw it back in t
, I put the bag on the counter and sifted my fingers through my hair,
What?”my hands on top of my head.

My eyes moved back to Luke.

He was holding his body perfectly still and I got the impression
doing that so he wouldn't strangle me.
of my

Time to defuse the situation.

I controlled the Barlow Bitch Pull and took a deep breath.

remises “Luke,” I began softly. “Give me a break. It's not like, in my li
ever been in this situation. I've no fucking idea what I'm doing.”

e got to “What you do is you let me sort it out for you. That's why you c
the fuckin' office in the first goddamn place,” he clipped, no less an
my soft voice.

back to I dropped my hands and looked at him direct in the eyes.

garbage “That's not the situation I'm talking about,” I said, voice still soft.

“Give me a clue.”

use his Nope, no less angry. I looked away, closed my eyes tight and lic
lips.

foot, he Could I do this? No, I couldn't do it. Still, I did it so I guess I *could*

how *he* I looked back at him and on another deep breath, I admitted, “You
Luke. You know that most of the time I couldn't get a guy to look
Much less a hot guy. Now I have four. Four, all after I'd sworn off

don't know what to do." My voice went ultra-quiet, barely even a whisper. Even so there was an accusation to it. "You know. You, of all people, know me."

That was when his body unstuck. Before I knew what he was about, he leaned forward, his arm snagging me around my waist, and he pulled me around the garbage bin and to him, between his legs, our torsos tight together. His other arm closed around my upper back, pinning me against him.

"I'll tell you what to do," Luke stated. "You come to me when you need someone to sort shit out. I'll take care of you. You come to me when you need someone to take care of it. I'll also tell you what *not* to do. You don't have sex with another man. You don't sleep in his bed, I don't care that he's in love with you. You don't leave me standin' on the sidewalk while you're off with a guy who, days earlier, kidnapped you and threatened to blow my fuckin' head off. You don't—"

"Okay, I get it," I broke in quietly.

His arms tightened and he gave me a mini shake. "You better get your ass home, I'm not goin' through the last six hours again."

I looked at the piles of stuff on the bar. I had left him several, now only one. I had come home and he was sitting, sorting through them, eating a cookie.

I looked back at him, confused.

"Organizing your paperwork?" I asked.

He stared at me a second as if three identical noses had just popped out of my face then his head dropped back. I could almost hear him asking for patience from the divine. His chin came back down so he could look at me. "I mean worryin' where the fuck you were and if you were even a man. I considerin' the last look I had of you, you had tears in your eyes."

whisper. Oh. That.

know.” “I’m over that,” I lied, so not over it and so never going to tell him out, he wasn’t over. Not in a million years. “It was a girl thing,” I lied again for a little measure.

together. In my experience, men hated to talk about “girl things.” I was even the brutally honest ones would shy way the hell away from a discussion of a “girl thing.”

nothing’. He stared at me and I got the impression he totally knew I was lying. Finally, and thankfully, he decided to let it go.

not in it “Zano fed you?” he asked.

take off “Yeah,” I answered.

with your “Good. Now I can fuck you.”

My knees did a little wobble.

it, Ava. “We didn’t have dessert,” I stalled.

His head (and I must remind you his fantastic mouth) started moving toward mine.

and “Glad he left that to me,” he said before he kissed me.



IT WASN’T LIKE last night where it was all go, go, go or shocking-but tilting surprise or all about Luke giving then taking.

This time Luke went slow and we took turns. He let me touch him, stroke him, take him in my mouth, and I liked it, a lot. He unbelievable body, and let me tell you, it was fun as hell to explore.

When he was through letting me, he flipped me over, spread my legs, and settled between them. I felt one of his knees come up for better leverage.

was certain he was going to slam into me again. I was ready for it. I w
and I stared at him in a fog, my body burning, nearly begging for it.

He didn't slam into me. Instead, I felt him right there ready to
inside, when his hands came up to either side of my face. Slowly, cer
by centimeter he slid inside me, watching my face the whole time. I
parted and I held my breath as he slowly filled me until he was buried

I waited for him to move.

g. He didn't. He just kept watching me.

"Luke," I whispered, pressing my hips into him.

"Be still, Ava," he ordered then his mouth came to mine and he
"Do you feel that?"

Yeah, I felt it. It felt *great*.

"Yeah," I told him.

I felt him smile against my mouth, but he muttered, "You don't fee

coming "I feel it."

"Then you don't get it."

I *wanted* to get it, but he wasn't moving.

I licked my lips, and since my lips were close to his lips, I licked l
-world-too.

His eyes went molten and he moved, slowly at first then faste
n, taste harder until we both came, breathing heavy in each other's mouths. It
had an first time in my life that I climaxed with a partner at the same tin

thought the other sex was mind-blowing, I was wrong. Reaching orgas
egs and Luke was mind-blowing, mind-altering and world-tilting all at the sam

ge and I I was so screwed.

anted it After, his mouth at the skin behind my ear, he murmured, “You e
away from me with tears in your eyes again, Ava, I’ll hunt you down.

o come understand?”

itimeter I didn’t move. This wasn’t sweet, after sex talk. His voice was l
My lipshusky, but he was being perfectly serious.

deep. “Do you understand?” he pushed.

I decided it was best to nod. I was unable to process this after a b
orgasm when Luke was still on top of me, when Luke was, at that m
my whole world.

asked, Mouth still at my ear, he said in The Voice, “I’m bein’ patient, ba
pretty soon you’re gonna have to let me in.”

No way in hell. He was already in as far as he was going to get, l
and figuratively.

l it.” “Don’t call me babe,” I said to take the post-sex conversation awa
me letting him in.

I meant it this time in a way I didn’t mean it before. I didn’t want
call me “babe” and Jules “babe.” It made it less special.

In fact, it made it not special at all.

his lips, His head came up and he looked down at me. His eyes searched r
and then he dropped to his side, taking me with him.

er, then When we were face-to-face and he had my leg wrapped around l
was the he asked, “What’s this now?”

ne. If I “Nothing, just don’t call me babe. I don’t like it,” I lied.

sm with I had really loved it before, if I was honest with myself. Now, I hat

e time. His fingers sifted through the hair at the side of my head. He k

ever runhand at the back and twisted my hair in his fist.

Do you “You mean it,” he said.

“Yeah,” I told him.

ow and “I’m not even close, am I?” he asked, what I thought bizarrely.

“Close to what?”

“To gettin’ through to you.”

ig time

Whoa.

oment,

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

ibe, but Stop right there.

Or, wait. Maybe, not.

literally “No, Luke. You’re not. I tried to tell you, but you won’t listen to

pressed closer to him and lied through my goddamn teeth. “You’re

ay from going to get close. Trust me, it’s not gonna happen.”

“It’ll happen.”

him to “It won’t.”

“Yeah, it will.” He sounded sure of himself.

Holy cramoly!

ny face Why me? What did I do?

I dipped my chin and tried to pull away, but his arms got tight. I st
his hip, a bit, just in case he wasn’t in the mood to overpower me. I found, as e
was very much in the mood to overpower me.

Tom Petty (obviously Luke had Greatest Hits on random) started
ed it. “Learning to Fly.” I gave up the struggle and listened to Tom.

cept his After a few minutes, I asked to Luke’s throat, “You want so

cream?”

I tilted my head back to look at him.

He tipped his chin down to look at me and answered, “Yeah.”

He let me go and put on his sweatpants. I put on my underwear and zip up sweatshirt.

We ate ice cream out of the tub, two spoons. Luke holding the tub dipping in while we sat on his kitchen counter.

And I realized on the third spoonful of peanut butter cup ice cream I was sitting on the countertop in my pretend happy place.

And I was going to stay there.

For now.

me,” I

e never

ruggled

ever, he

singing

me ice

cream?”

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For now.

SEVENTEEN



MISSED YOU

Seeing as I had a three-hour nap that afternoon, Luke fell asleep before I did.

I spent some time trying to fall asleep, but I couldn't. So, carefully slipping out from under his arm (we were spooning, his face in my hair, his arms around my waist) and I got up.

The Triumph tee was in the laundry so I went to the dresser where it took me to get it that first night, opened the drawer, grabbed whatever top and put it on. I slid on my panties, my glasses then shrugged on a sweatshirt and zipped it up.

I went to the floor-to-almost-ceiling window, sat down on the floor with my back to it, knees to my chest, the side of my shoulder to the window. I pulled the tee and sweatshirt over my knees and hugged them, staring at his view.

Luke was on the fourth of five floors in a LoDo loft. I couldn't see the mountains, but I could see LoDo, its lights and brick buildings. There were still some people milling about on the streets though it was way late.

I rested my temple against the cold window and lost myself in thought.

I wondered what Marilyn and Sofia would think if they knew I was with Luke (they were never going to know, I would never hear the end of it).

it was over). I wondered for the gazillionth time where my dad might wonder how the Rockies were doing in spring training.

I heard a movement and my head jerked away from the window and settled behind me wearing his sweatpants. It was just plain old weird for a big guy like him to be so quiet.

Without a word, he settled with his legs around me, wrapped his arms around my chest, pressed his front against my back and rested his chin on my shoulder.

before I

I felt a shiver slide through me, not from cold.

y, I slid

“Did I wake you?” I asked in a whisper, like he was still sleeping.

his arm

“Yeah,” he told me.

“Sorry.”

here he

His arms got tighter.

was on

“You can go back to sleep,” I offered.

on the

“Prefer you were with me, babe.”

r beside

Luke’s

I closed my eyes and wondered if he would also prefer to be with me sitting on the floor in the dark by his window. I figured he would.

.

I mentally pushed away those thoughts and told him, “I can’t sleep now. I need a nap.”

see the

“I’ll wait.”

re were

I was afraid he would say that.

ight.

as with doing.

it when

After a while, I slid into my pretend happy place. Sitting on the floor with my head on his chest and his arms around me.

ht be. Ithe dark with Luke, his arms around me.

I slid in so deep, I whispered, “I wonder where my dad is.”

is Luke His arms got tighter and his head shifted, his chin moving my hair
l how a the way so he could bury his face in my neck.

Mouth at my ear, he said, “You don’t have to wonder.”

is arms My body went still. “Why not?”

on my “You want, I’ll find him for you.”

Oh...my...*God*.

“Really?” I whispered so low it was barely audible.

“Yeah.”

Then it hit me. “What would I owe you for that?”

He kissed my neck and his chin went back to my shoulder. “I want
that for free.”

I tried to put the brakes on it, tried to call “whoa,” but I couldn’t
body relaxed into his. His chin came up as he took my weight and the
h Jules, my head went to rest on his shoulder.

After a while I said, “I don’t want you to find him for me. I don’t
ep. The another man fucking up my life.”

“Your call,” he replied softly.

I didn’t say any more. We sat there for a good, long while. I
moved, pulling away, standing up. I looked at him as he leaned down,
he was an arm around my waist, one at the back of my knees. He lifted me
carried me to bed.

floor in Once there he set me in it and followed me down, stretching out

me. He took off my glasses and put them on the nightstand. Then he unzipped the sweatshirt and I pulled it off, throwing it on the floor by the door. Then he lifted the tee over my head and threw it aside. Luke, I was le
r out of liked sleeping naked. He would tolerate panties, but that was about it. as I liked the feel of his skin against mine, I didn't mind. He pulled r his body, settled me on his other side and yanked the covers over turned to me, hooking his hand behind my knee to wrap it around his h

“You could have put me in bed on this side,” I told him.

“That’s not as fun.”

I smiled in the dark.

“You’re nuts.” Finally feeling sleepy, I cuddled closer.

His arm closed around my waist and he pulled me deep into him, could do didn't respond.

When I was inches away from dreamland, I heard him call, “Ava.”

1't. My I was too close to sleep to respond. I just pressed closer.

back of And I was sure I fell asleep, because I swear the next thing he sa

“Missed you.”

1't need And I knew that had to be a dream.



I WAS SITTING at my desk at the loft trying to get some work done. Si
hen he lying on Luke's couch, preparing to see Stella and The Blue Moon (putting by listening to the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club singing “Ain't N up and Way,” one of Stella and her band's coolest covers. The crowd always wild when Stella sang that, but her signature song was “Ghostriders : beside Sky.” She ended every gig with “Ghostriders” and people always went

hen he It was early afternoon and I was beginning to feel like a Rock
he bed. Fraud. Nothing bad had happened to me in a while outside of find
arning, Luke was in love with Jules, something that I didn't even tell Sissy
Seeing because I knew she would give me Good Ava-esque advice. But no
ne overbeat up, kidnapped, shot at or cuffed to a sink.

us. He The morning had been relatively normal. That was, if you didn't
lip. Luke waking up in an energetic mood. Luke's energetic mood translated
us having sex, during which he gave me the business in three different
positions. One I'd done before, one I'd heard of but never done and
didn't even know was possible.

If you asked me which was my favorite, I couldn't tell you. I like
all. A lot.
, but he

He'd left me facedown and drained in bed while he showered. I fell
doze, but eventually felt the sheet slide down to my hips then Luke's
at the small of my back, sliding up my spine to my neck.

id was, "Gotta get to work, babe," he said there.
"Mm," I mumbled.

I felt him smile against my neck before his hands rolled me and held
me up until I was sitting and my chest was pressed against his. His hair
into my hair and twisted.

ssy was "Luke, I'm still sleepy," I protested, not sleepy at all. I was speaking
Gypsies good way.
o Easy

ys went "I want a kiss before I go," he demanded before he kissed me, not
s in the me a choice in the matter. Not that I would have said no.

: nuts. It wasn't hot, hard and deep. It was hot, soft and sweet.

Chick When he was done I stared at him in a new kind of Luke Lip Fog.
ing out “I always want a kiss before I go to work, Ava,” he told me quietly
y about “Okay,” I agreed.
getting

I would have agreed to anything at that point, too much in a fog to
words and their meaning penetrate.

So in a fog, still in my pretend happy place and having been gi
ted into business rather successfully (these were my excuses and I was goin
fferent them), I lifted my hand to his cheek. I let my thumb trail the sharp edg
d one I’
tache that grew down the side of his mouth, my eyes so focused on w
my thumb’s progress (and studying his mustache and mouth) that I
d them the look on his face when I did this.

It was really too bad I missed the look on his face.

Before I could catch it, he kissed me again. This time it *was* hot, h
mouth deep. In a true blue Luke Lip Fog, he put me back in bed, covered me
then he was gone.

Later, Sissy and Lucky came over and we headed to the gym
joining our party at the entrance to Luke’s building.

I thought it prudent, so as not to earn another Luke Confrontation
d went would be forced to bare part of my soul, to phone him the minute we
in the car.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“Going to the gym,” I told him.

“I’ll send a man over.”

“No, I mean I’m on my way with Sissy right now.”

Silence.

“Lucky and Santo are with us.”

“Babe,” was all he said before he disconnected, and I will note, he stopped calling me “babe.”

Argh!

At the gym Riley was in a better mood, back to the old Riley, most even though he looked askance at the two, beefy, suited Italian Americans following me and I around the weight machines. I was relieved until he caught up with me on my way to the locker room.

“You okay?” Riley asked.

His eyes slid to Santo, who was standing three feet away before he turned back to me.

I nodded.

“That guy, Luke, he still in the picture?”

I nodded again.

Riley’s jaw clenched.

Then he asked, “The minute he’s out of the picture, you’ll tell me?”

Oh jeez. Here we go again.

I decided just to nod.

Riley walked away and I thanked my lucky stars he was not a tough, macho man, brutally honest, straight-talker.

Santo got close.

“You’re hot, but this is ridiculous,” he told me, his eyes on me as he departed back.

Santo was not wrong.

On the way back to Luke's loft, I called him again.

I hadn't "Yeah?" he answered.

"We're gonna hit King Soopers and then back to your loft. Don't Santo and Lucky are still with us."

stly. He Silence but no disconnect.

g Sissy I forged ahead through the scary silence. "You need anything fr
with me store?"

"No."

"Any word about Bobby?"

coming "He's out of the coma. Talking, but functions are slow. They're v
about brain damage. Can't know 'til the brain swelling goes down."

"Shit," I whispered.

"He'll be okay."

"What if he's not?"

"Then he'll be okay. Me and Lee will take care of him."

"

I felt a weird whoosh of warmth spread through me. This was said of-fact but I knew he meant it, and for some reason I had the urge to h and then kiss him all over.

gh guy, Before I could share that thought (luckily), Luke said, "Vance sa and the Rock Chicks are goin' to a gig tonight."

"Stella and The Blue Moon Gypsies," I confirmed.

Riley's "I want you protected. Not Zano's thug, one of Lee's boys."

"Luke." I used his name as a protest.

"Shit happens too frequently when the Rock Chicks do the town. I

shot at while performing with a drag queen. Jet's sister caused pandemonium on her opening night at a strip club. Roxie was held hostage at a party. Jules took down three bitches when one of 'em insulted Stevie.
worry, you covered."

I sighed because he wasn't wrong. I'd heard all these stories.

"All right."
om the

"You get separated from your man, you stick close to Jules. No people can mess with Jules."

This time I felt a not-so-weird pain slice through my belly. There denying the respect in his voice.

worried "All right," I said, but my voice (damn it all to hell) betrayed sounded small and hurt.

"Babe?" He heard and read my voice.

"Later," I said.

"Babe." His voice went low and I knew he wanted me to share.

"We're at King Soopers, gotta go." I shut it down, not about to sha matter-

ug him "Jesus, Ava," he said, his voice strangely part curt, part amused, found dealing with me frustrating, but he found that frustration enj

ys you "It's a good thing your sweet body and the fuckin' things you don know you're doin' give you away or you'd be a serious pain in the ass.

I had no idea what he meant (okay, I knew what part of it mean still snapped, "I'm so sure!")

"Later," he replied, now fully amused. Then he disconnected.

Santo was driving, Lucky in the passenger seat, Sissy and me in the ndy got I looked at Sissy when I flipped the phone closed and she was grinning

noniumeyes shiny happy.

society “You are so not fuck buddies,” she declared.

I want Santo and Lucky glanced at each other.

Argh!

We’d trolled through King Soopers and I bought some f
supplement the anti-healthy living mojo provisions that I bought wi
t many Sandra’s supplies were running low.

Sissy and I carried them up to Luke’s loft (Santo and Lucky
was no downstairs) and put them away. We gabbed while I did laundry and c
the sheets on the bed and she swept the floors.

me. It Then I went to work and Sissy went to the stereo.

I was finishing up a marketing leaflet for a client when we heard “
shouted from outside.

My eyes swung to Sissy and found hers on me.

“Sisssss-eeeeeee!”

re. “Holy crap,” Sissy breathed and ran to the window.

like he I nabbed my phone and followed her.

oyable. “Sissy, I know you’re up there!”

’t even I made it to Sissy at the window, flipped open my phone at the sar
,” and hit the green button.

t) but I I looked down and saw Dom standing in the middle of the street, s
traffic. Santo and Lucky were approaching him, but he dodged them, i
around in the street while he shouted. “Sisssss-eeeeeee!”

ie back. “Holy shit, he’s like Stanley Kowalski without the rain and with tv
g at me,

chasing him,” I breathed.

“Babe,” Luke said in my ear, making me jump.

“Dom’s here,” I told him.

“We’re on it. Stay in the loft.”

ood to Disconnect.

th Ren. I flipped the phone shut and watched as Dom kept yelling for Si:
Santo and Lucky kept trying to catch him.

stayed All of a sudden, Sissy whispered, “I have to go to him.” And th
hanged started to take off.

My stomach plummeted.

“Sis, no!” I yelled and ran after her.

‘Sissy!’” Catching up, I threw my arms around her waist trying to hold her
We started stand-up wrestling then we fell to the floor with a so
painful thud. Sissy was so determined to get to Dom, and I was so dete
she would not, we immediately started lying-down wrestling, rolling
on the floor, each of us trying to get the upper hand. All the wh
honked and people were shouting outside, including Dom.

“Ava, he’s my husband!” she screamed, still struggling.

ne time “I know! Let Luke deal with it,” I told her, trying to capture her ha

Then we both froze as we heard gunfire. Three shots...bang, bang,

topping And let me tell you, it was a terrifying noise.

running I rolled off her. She and I got up and ran back to the window. We
there just in time to see the blue SUV peeling away, its front end d:
vo guys from rear-ending me. No sign of Dom. Santo was running to the
Lucky running into the building and a Black Explorer was in pursuit.

I ran to my cell, which I'd dropped in the Sissy Wrestling Mat
phoned Luke.

I heard the connect, and before he could say a word I scr
"Gunshots!"

"I know, babe. Stay in the loft. Buzz Lucky up now. I want him w
until I can get a man on you. Got me?"

"Yeah."

"Stay calm. Darius and Hector are in pursuit. They've reported
Sissy Vincetti's okay. They didn't hit him."

"Okay."

"You good?"

"I'm good." And I sounded good, calm and rational after my
"gunshots" squeal, which was way weird because I was *not* good.
Dom but I didn't want people shooting at him, especially not with S
hearing distance.

"Solid," he said in a soft voice then he disconnected.

Shit!

I did it again, exposing my strong woman-in-a-crisis.

When was I going to learn?

bang! I told Sissy Dom was okay (for now, though I didn't share tha
Luke was going to call when they knew something and I buzzed Lucky

While we waited, Lucky called Ren. Sissy paced. I went to Luke's
room to take the clothes out of the dryer, switch them with the clothe
washer and throw some more clothes in to wash. While I was there I ti
the utility room. Seriously, how Luke could find anything was a n

ch, and There was stuff all over the place and it appeared he hadn't done since the beginning of time.

eeched, I was putting away the last newly cleaned pair of Luke's socks w
elevator doors opened. I expected to see one of the Hot Bunch, but
with you Luke walked in with a guy who looked a lot like Eddie Chavez,
rougher around the edges.

He may have looked rough, but you could tell it was because he
that way. And I had to admit, looking at him, I liked it that way too.
in. Tell

Yum.

"Dom," Sissy breathed, pulling me out of my mini perv for Rou
Guy, and I shut Luke's sock drawer.

She was in a state and I found myself wishing that Dom was a bet
and deserved this kind of devotion.
I hated

Why Dom was out in the street screaming her name, who knew?
clear he didn't like the idea of someone hitting her, but I wasn't a big
"better a husband loves and protects his wife, especially when sh
bestest best friend, late than never." I felt more that a husband shou
and protect his wife *always*. Not after she got punched in the face by
burly, bad guy while in the throes of a kidnap attempt.

Nevertheless, seeing as this was Sissy, I walked over to her to
it part).moral support.

up. "They got him," Luke announced, and Sissy pursed her lips to
s utilitytaking a deep breath through her nose at the same time and noddec
s in thewent on, "The police got the boys who grabbed him." Luke's gaze m
died upLucky. "Hector and Darius handed Vincetti over to Santo. Santo is
mystery.him to Vito."

laundry It was Lucky's turn to nod and he started to walk toward Sissy.

"No." Luke stopped Lucky's progress on that one word, mainly because when the was said in a tone where you could tell he really meant it, and Luke instead the kind of guy you ignored when he really meant something, even except were a beefy henchman. "Hector's taking Sissy to the police station needs to ID the guy who punched her."

liked it "Vito wants her," Lucky returned, and I looked at Lucky then at Luke in an effort to understand why Vito would want Sissy.

Luke was blank-faced so I couldn't read him. Lucky was always blank-faced.

"She needs to ID the guy," Luke repeated still in his firm tone, before moving to Sissy. "You'll go with Hector."

She nodded at Luke and I put my arm around her shoulders.

"I'll go with you," I promised.

Luke's gaze swung to me.

"A minute," he said to me (I will note, he did not ask).

Then he walked to the utility room without waiting for me to respond. Since I wanted to know what was going on, I squeezed Sissy reassuringly then followed Luke.

When I got to the utility room, Luke was looking around like he'd stepped off our world onto another planet. His eyes came to me, and considering the borderline scary and definitely crazy situation we'd found ourselves in, his eyes were amused.

"Babe," he said, as if that one word spoke volumes.

"What?" I asked, because that one word didn't speak volumes.

Like a flash, his hand came out and nabbed me behind my neck, cause it me a jerk forward so I slammed into his body. He bent his head and wasn't me. Not a hot and hard, open-mouthed tongue fest, but it was hard if you communicated something that I did not quite get.

on. She He let me go but kept his hand at my neck, and his eyes on mine ultra-warm.

Luke in "What?" I asked again when he didn't speak, but this time I asked softly.

is blank- "I'll get into 'what' later. Tonight, after the gig, when you're home and naked."

his eyes Ho-ly shit!

"Right now, we got a problem," he went on.

His eyes became serious and he certainly sounded like we had a problem so much so I let the "drunk and naked" comment go.

"What?" I asked (again!).

"At the meet with Vito on Sunday, Vito, Lee and I agreed if we respond. Vincetti before the bad guys find him, we hand him over to Vito."

his arm him, we handed him over to Vito. Problem is these bad guys are bad

The two Darius and Hector just nailed are foot soldiers, two of dozer is a big problem for Vito, an ongoing problem, because no matter what

ce he'd offers, they don't feel like negotiating and they got a lot of men to throw

id even Losing two is not going to deter them. What they want is simple

irrently Vincetti. To make this problem disappear, Vito needs to make Vito disappear, and that's what he's gonna do."

My mouth dropped open, my heart stuttered to a halt and I stared.

giving Then I whispered, "Uncle Vito is going to make his own nephew
I kissed with the fishes?"

I and it Luke's lips pressed together, but even so, they were still twitching
something was very, very funny and he didn't want to laugh out loud.

ie were When he got himself under control, he said, "I don't think they s
anymore, Ava, if they ever did outside the movies."

asked it Oh well. So I didn't talk wiseguy. Sue me.

I leaned in.

ly, drunk "What you're saying is, they're going to whack him." I w
whispering.

Luke shook his head, let my neck go but his hand slid to my jaw
where Vincetti's goin', he'll still be breathin'. Your problem is, Vito v
roblem, send Sissy with him."

All my body systems froze solid.

No!

we get No, no, no!

We got No!

d guys. "That can't happen," I declared when my mouth was moving again

is. This "Vito's determined, says marriage is life. Wants them back together

at Vito I'd heard that before.

ow at it. "But Dom's a dickhead," I replied, sounding slightly desperate (V
le, just Vincetti was). "He's mean to her. He doesn't let her serve leftovers. He tells h
to wear. He doesn't know what a woman should wear! One time he t
to put on these pink Capri pants with this purple gypsy shirt. Apart the
kickass items of clothing. Together she looked like a fool. I know it

w sleep stupid, but it's not. It's bossy and not in the tough guy, kinda sexy, bossy way that you're bossy. It's just plain old mean bossy. He's a jerk!"

ng like Oops.

Did I just tell Luke his tough guy, bossy ways were "kinda sexy?"

say that His face was coming closer to mine. His hand had flexed on my jaw, and he had a full-on grin happening, so I guessed I had.

"I take that back!" I cried, a bit loud and sounding like a third grade girl. My head stopped its descent, but his grin didn't go away. "I don't know what I'm saying. I'm just freaked out. I don't want Sissy to go back to Dom."

Lucky for me, Luke decided to let it go. "I know that, babe, but Mom says you two wrestling when Vincetti was out on the street. You were trying to stop her from getting to him. You have to talk to her, give her the go-ahead because Sissy might not agree."

Unfortunately, Luke was right. She might not.

I closed my eyes. With my eyes closed, I felt Luke kiss my nose.

Just as an aside, a closed-eyes-you're-about-to-lose-your-best-friend-to-Uncle-Vito-oblivion Luke Nose Kiss was very, very sweet.

I opened my eyes again and saw his face was partly soft, but his eyes were fully warm, like he knew what losing Sissy would mean to me. It caused another warm whoosh to power through me.

"You've got to go to the police station to talk to her," Luke informed me softly. "Find out what she wants to do. She decides she wants to divorce, we'll take care of her, put her in the safe room until Vito cools it and then we'll get her out of the picture. She decides she wants to go with him, we'll deliver her safely to Vito."

sounds

Sissy way I needed more information. Tons more.

“What does ‘disappearing’ mean?” I asked. “Is she going to be gone from everyone, her dad, her mom? And if so, for how long? Will she come back? Will she phone? What do I tell them? Can we visit her? Are we in another state, another country, another *continent*?”

“Right now, disappearing at all is Sissy’s decision. We delay a lot here, babe, Vito’s gonna cotton on to what we’re doing and it will be his decision.”

I decided I didn’t need any more information.

“Time to go,” I said abruptly, turning on my heel and walking into another room. “Sissy, let’s go ID some bad guys,” I announced, heading through the loft, sparing Lucky a glance. “Lucky, later.”

“Vito says—” Lucky began, but Sissy and Hector were already in the elevator.

Hector had tagged the button and the doors were sliding open.

I joined them and we moved into the elevator as Lucky started to follow our way. He was too late. Luke had already moved to block the path between Lucky and us.

The doors started closing, Luke looked over his shoulder at us, for some bizarre, unhinged, insane reason, I mouthed, “I owe you.”

I just caught his sexy half-grin and the so-ultra-warm-it-was-hot look in his eyes before the doors closed.

Hell and damnation.

Now I was screwing myself!



“ARE YOU MAD AT ME?” Sissy asked.

I looked at Hector. He was standing three feet away talking to Hector. We were at the police station and Sissy had just ID'd a bad guy.

On the way over I told Sissy about what she was up against with Vito. I told her Luke would keep her safe if she didn't want to "disappear." Vito also told her that I wanted her to take Luke up on his offer. Then I told her Vito's *really* wanted her to take Luke up on his offer and I didn't even care. It meant I owed him.

Sissy nodded but she didn't say anything. We rolled into the station. It took forever for them to sort out the lineup and Sissy had ID'd a bad guy.

Then she turned to Hector and demanded, "Take me to Dom."

I sucked in breath and wished there was something to bang my head against: a wall, a floor, a very hard rock.

Sissy took my hand. "I know you think I'm crazy, but there are times when you aren't there when he can be really sweet. A lot of times, Ava and I just stopped myself from rolling my eyes. "I know, you've told me that before." And she had.

"He's not perfect."

She could say that again.

I kept my lips zipped.

"I love him," she said quietly.

Shit.

"Don't be mad at me," she went on.

I unzipped my lips.

“He kissed me,” I reminded her.

nk. We She looked away.

“In your kitchen,” I continued.

1 Uncle She sighed.

pear.” I “While you were in the house.” I kept at it.

ld her I She looked back at me but she didn’t reply.

are if it I went for the killer diller. “Sissy, his crazy shit got Big Bobby in
police coma.”

D’d the She moved, just slightly, but I caught it, like a flinch.

Then she said, ultra-quiet, “Ava, honey, you don’t get it. I’m never
find my Luke. Some hot guy who calls me a knockout, chases me like
ad on: a greatest thing since sliced bread and shields me from bullets with his b

I didn’t want to say anything, but that last part wasn’t exactly fun.

e times She kept going. “Dom’s the closest thing I’m going to get. I’m in
d.” nine and going to be divorced. That’s just sad. I’m just sad.”

me that “Shut up,” I broke in, beginning to get pissed. “You’re not sad.”

“I’m sad.”

“You’re sweet and funny and loyal and everyone loves you.”

“I’m sad.”

“You’re beautiful. You look like a happy, pretty human fairy.”

“I do not. I’m not beautiful. I’m not happy-pretty. I’m just Sissy.
have a shit name. What kind of name is Sissy? Ava’s the name of a kn
Sissy’s the name of a sad, twenty-nine-year-old, silly-fairy divorcée.”

Before I could retort, Hector got close.

“In an effort to speed things up, since Santo and Lucky both just left the building...” Hector said his first words since we had been with them. Okay, maybe second. When we arrived at the station, he said, “This was my first time back to the Nightingale Investigations offices after I turned to Sissy. “You’re right. Your friend’s a knockout. Lotta guys go for the tits, ass and attitude. Lotta guys also go for the sweet, pretty women that they gotta protect who don’t realize they’re all that. My brother’s lived on one. You’re another one. You don’t think you’re all that, which makes you even more all that. Trust me, you’re pretty. You’re your own brand. You’re gonna find a good man who appreciates that and you shouldn’t waste your time on some asshole who doesn’t. Does that help?”

I’m gonna Both Sissy and I were staring at Hector, speechless.

I’m the “Well?” he demanded, sounding impatient.

body.” “I think I’ll go to the safe room,” Sissy breathed, still staring at Hector. Yippee!

twenty- “I’m gonna kiss you all over,” I told Hector.

His eyes cut to me and I immediately regretted my words, because he looked like he was happy to take me up on that offer.

Guess Hector was all about tits, ass and attitude.

Eek! Not another one.

“Let’s go,” I announced, ignoring Hector’s happy to be kissed and happy to look at me.

I even I grabbed Sissy’s hand and we started motoring.
knockout.



HECTOR TOOK Sissy to the safe room at the offices and I went with them. It was my first time back to the Nightingale Investigations offices after I

entered and last crazy adventure there.

th him. We arrived and Shirleen was on the phone, handset in the crook
ay.” He neck, peering into a hand-held mirror, plucking her eyebrows.

go for She dropped the mirror and the tweezers upon seeing us. “Dorothe
ney feel go, my girl’s here with her girl. We gotta lock old Sissy down so the
n’ with don’t get her. Long story, I’ll tell you later.” Then she hung up and
kes you around the desk to Sissy and me and she told us, “I was getting v
of hot. Nothing was happening. I thought maybe I got the bum Rock Chick.
’t waste got you guys wrestling on tape and you should see it. It was great. Yo
down, *whomp*, and neither of you even noticed, just kept right on wres

I turned to Sissy (who was, by the way, looking pale). “Um, fo
mention, Luke’s got the loft wired with cameras so the boys can keep
ctor. on me.”

Sissy went paler.

Shirleen was walking with us as we followed Hector. “I put clear
ause he on the bed and when I found out that we might have a girl coming
went out and bought that movie *300* to add to the library in the safe
That movie is great. I’ve watched it at least ten times. Hot, white l
leather jockey shorts and red capes. And sandals! How those boys ca
sandals hot, I do not know, but those boys kicked *ass* in those sandals
all over everywhere. Heads flyin’ off. Have you seen it?” she asked Sissy.

Sissy shook her head and Shirleen linked her arm through Sissy’s.

“We’ll watch it together, like, right now. Part of my job des
includes lookin’ after the prison...I mean, our guests. Lee won’t
hem. It watch a little leather jockey shorts action.”

ny first Hector had disappeared behind a door. Shirleen pulled ahead

dragging Sissy with her, clearly keen on getting to her movie. Sissy
of her over her shoulder, her face kind of scared. I smiled at her and waved
and Shirleen disappeared in the door where Hector had gone.

a, gotta At that moment another door opened and Luke was there. He lo
Italians me, gave me a grin and I stopped.

d raced “Hey,” I said when he made it to me.

worried. “I see she made the right decision,” he replied.

But we “Yeah.”

ou went His grin went into a full-fledged smile and not only because he was
tling.” my bestest best friend was not going to disappear.

orgot to “So, this means you owe me again,” he noted.

an eye Uh-oh.

“Actually I owe Hector more than I owe you. She was going to go
Dom, but he talked her out of it,” I tried.

over, I He shook his head, clearly not agreeing with me.

e room. Foiled!

boys in I knew it was a long shot, but he never gave me anything.

n make “Tonight, I call this marker or your punishment marker. Your c
. Blood Luke stated.

“Luke,” I said softly, not about to let him call *any* markers and de
not letting him call the punishment one.

cription I was never going to touch myself while Luke watched. I’d already
mind I way past my sexual adventure boundary.

of me, Okay, sure, one could argue that I liked leaping over that bounc

looked fact, this morning, about a nanosecond after Luke flipped me into the
l as she position and slid inside me, I decided that I was never going to have
any other position but that one ever again. Until he did the third
oked at course.

Still.

“Babe.” Clearly, Luke was not about to be denied, and I could see
the amused look on his face he knew my thoughts.

I crossed my arms on my chest. He gave me a half-grin.

s happy “Lucas Stark, don’t you think that you—”

He interrupted me. “Don’t you have a gig to get to?”

I looked at my watch. It was well past six o’clock. We were me
My Brother’s Bar at seven for dinner and drinks before we went to
and I had at least an hour’s worth of Rock-Chick-On-The-Town prep
back to do to my face, hair and wardrobe.

“I need to get home, like, now!” I exclaimed, bouncing in my Croc

Luke’s body shifted. His arm curved around my shoulders and he
me down the hall, murmuring, “Let’s get you home.”

choice,” “Bye, Sissy!” I shouted.

“Enjoy Stella,” she shouted back.

finitely “Bye, Shirleen!” I shouted.

“Don’t get shot at!” Shirleen shouted back.

ly gone “Bye, Hot Bunch Boys!” I shouted.

No answer.

lary. In “Hot Bunch Boys?” Luke asked, pushing through the door into rec

second His arm moved from around my shoulders to curl around my neck.

sex in Oops.

one, of In the immortal words of Britney Spears (or whoever wrote that s
her), I did it again.

Prudently, I decided after that to keep my mouth shut.

near by Luke let it go. We got in his Porsche and he took me “home.”

Which, by the way, was the loft.

eting at
the gig
work to

s.

walked

option.

His arm moved from around my shoulders to curl around my neck.

Oops.

In the immortal words of Britney Spears (or whoever wrote that song for her), I did it again.

Prudently, I decided after that to keep my mouth shut.

Luke let it go. We got in his Porsche and he took me “home.”

Which, by the way, was the loft.

EIGHTEEN



FIGHT

We were listening to Stella and The Blue Moon Gypsies playing “J by The Allman Brothers Band. Indy, Ally, Jules, Daisy, Roxie, J were up front, right at the stage, shaking our booties like the crazy Chicks we were.

Luke had taken me back to the loft, and the minute the elevator opened I flew into my getting-ready-to-rock preparation. Mace can while I was in the bathroom laying on my Rock Makeup.

Before he left to do “Secret Luke Things in the Night” (his p activities, I will note he didn’t share with me, but then again I didn probably because I didn’t want to know), Luke walked into the bathroo

He grabbed my hips, twirled me around, pressed me back against t and laid a hot and heavy one on me.

When he lifted his head, I asked, or more like mouthed, but with sound coming out, “What was that for?”

He framed my face with his hands, which for Luke was a weird t do (a *sweet* weird thing, but weird nonetheless) and stared at me, a look on his face that made my stomach feel funny, but in a good scary good way.

What he didn't do was answer. He simply kissed my nose and with Mace.

I decided it was best for my peace of mind not to think about what Luke's mind when he touched and kissed me like that. It was even better for my peace of mind not to think about what *I* felt when Luke touched and kissed me like that.

Instead, I focused on rock 'n' roll—my constant, my touchstone, the only thing other than Sissy that could get me through anything.

I pulled on my supremely faded jeans and a thick tan belt, the kind that was tooled with flowers and vines that had been painted. I topped this with a fitted, chambray cowgirl shirt, complete with pearl snap buttons at the pockets, down the front and four up the cuffs. I wore this over a white top and finished the outfit off with tons of silver and my fawn suede cowboy boots.

It was cowboy chic, not rock 'n' roll chic, but I was in Denver and Denverites swung both ways.

Mace wasn't Mr. Talkative. In fact he was actually kind of brooding like all of the Hot Bunch, this character trait worked for him (in a big way). I did find out that his name wasn't actually Mace. His name was Kai and he was from Hawaii and he wasn't talkative. I found out the last bit of the first two bits took me a gazillion questions to get out of him so eventually I gave up.

The girls (and Mace) did dinner then we all went to the gig at Hideaway on Broadway. A strange way. A

Santo had disappeared, which I decided to take as a good sign that the guys were no longer after me. However, I wondered what this

left me regarding my tenure at Luke's loft since, if the bad guys weren't a
anymore I wouldn't need to stay with Luke anymore.

was on Another thought to put on the list to consider later.

letter for We sent word to Stella that we were there, but other than that we
ied and bother her pre-gig. As always, she'd have a drink with us during a break

Stella and the Gypsies came out only fifteen minutes late (the
he only usually half an hour late or more).

They looked pissed off but ready to rock.

leather This wasn't unusual, either. The band fought all the time. The
with a constantly in danger of breaking up, but somehow, likely using all of
e breast and vinegar she had (which was a lot) Stella kept them together. She v
ite tank the mother of a dysfunctional family and I knew, because she told me,
cowboy all her energy. If she wasn't practicing guitar or the band wasn't rehe
she was caught up in some band member's mess. She did this beca
ver and Gypsies played so well together they were worth the struggle. She a
this because she cared about them, from what I knew, probably mo
dy, but they deserved.

way). I Stella started the set with serious head-bouncing energy, includ
Mason, guitar riffs and piano of The Doobie Brothers' "China Grove," and
because give herself a breather before she slammed straight into Molly Ha
ntually "Flirtin' with Disaster."

She didn't make us wait for the famous "black" portion of her
erman's starting with Ram Jam's "Black Betty," sliding straight into The
Crowes' "Kickin' My Heart Around," taking it easy a bit for the D
the bad "Black Water" and Alannah Myles's "Black Velvet" then twanging t
meant the Black Rebel's "Ain't No Easy Way."

fter me She gave us a break from screaming out lyrics and bouncing around lunatics by slowing it down with The Marshall Tucker Band's "Car See," one of the few songs she didn't sing herself but handed off to her player, Buzz.

It was after that Stella and the Gypsies started the "Jessica" jam.

Stella didn't often pull out "Jessica," but when she did the crowd went up. This was no exception and the Rock Chicks at the front were acting like it was our last meal.

Stella was rocking into Melissa Etheridge's "Bring Me Some Water When I'm Dying" when Mace and I peeled off from the rest of the Rock Chicks for a break, getting Fat Tire orders from the girls before we went to the bar.

I was standing amongst the crush at the bar when I looked up at Mace and noticed his eyes were locked on Stella. I followed his eyes to the stage and watched for a few seconds while she rasped out Etheridge's lyrics.

Stella was definitely Rock Chick Hot. Tall, built and wearing low-rise faded Levi's with a heavily tooled and riveted black belt with a large buckle that was a wide set of wings. She had on a faded black, fitted t-shirt with the American flag mostly peeled but still discernible on the front and faded black cowboy boots. She had long, thick, dark-brown hair that she held off her face just at the top with a clip at the back and she wore more silver at her neck, ears and fingers than I did.

"You like Stella?" I screamed at Mace over the music and his eyes were on me.

His face was closed and I knew right off he wasn't going to answer and I was not invited to question him further.

Before I could push this, because I felt the need to be ornery as well

and like at a rock gig and something about Mace invited being ornery just to
it You could get a rise out of him (not to mention Mace was staring at a fr
ier bass mine like he wanted to carry her to a deserted island, build a hut out o
fronds and never leave), I felt his body go tense.

His eyes focused on something and he stepped close to me. Real cl
d ate it I turned and my mouth dropped open when I saw Ren had mate
g like it out of nowhere, right in front of me. He was real close too. Ultra-cl
his eyes were on Mace.

Water” I looked over my shoulder. “It’s okay Mace, I know him,” I shoute
verage Mace’s eyes didn’t leave Ren, nor did he move away from me,
answered in an unhappy voice. “I know.”

ace and Ee-yikes!

age and I stood there, the meat in a hot guy sandwich. Normally one woul
a moment like this, but the bad vibes flowing weren’t conducive to sav

7 slung, I looked back to Ren.

kickass “Hey, Ren,” I greeted, trying to be cool.

ee with “Where’s Sissy?” Ren replied, shattering my always tenuous h
inished cool.
air that

re even Uh-oh.

I stared at him. He was a Zano and Uncle Vito wanted Sissy. I
s cut to want Ren to turn into a bad guy. I didn’t want Ren to be the man V
after Sissy to make her “disappear.” That would mean that Ren was
wer me wrong side (read: not my side) and that would suck.

I decided it was best not to answer.

re were Mace got closer, so much closer I could feel the heat of his body

see if I back.

friend of “Back away,” he warned Ren.

of palm Ren didn’t move. Not good.

ose. Ren ignored Mace and asked me, “Does Stark have her safe?”

rialized I kept my mouth shut, but my heart was beating double-time.

ose, but *I’ll be really disappointed if Ren turns out to be a bad guy, Goose,* but
said.

d. *I won’t, Bad Ava returned. Bad guys are HOT.*

but he Ren’s hand came to the side of my neck and his face came to mine
Mace against my back and Mace’s hand came to my waist, his
pressing in.

EEK!

d savor “Both you boys, move back,” I ordered, using a tone I hoped we
roaring. obeyed without question.

Neither moved.

ould on There you go, guess they questioned my tone.

I had visions of being crushed in a hot guy sandwich, splodges
squirting out the sides like too much mayo.

I didn’t I didn’t want to be Ava mayo splodge so I snapped, “Move back!”

ito sent Ren stayed in my face, his intensity scaring me, but what scared me
on the was that he didn’t seem at all worried about Mace. Mace was
frightening a tough guy, macho man as Luke, but he was no slouch,
broody was definitely scary.

7 at my Ren started talking to me. “Ava, if Stark doesn’t have Sissy safe, t

to keep her safe. A lot of shit is going down with Dom. Part of it is wants her back.”

I closed my eyes in despair. I was worried about that.

Ren went on when I opened my eyes again, “I’m talking to Dom Vito. When I work it out with them, I’ll tell you. If Stark can’t keep her you gotta let me know so that I can.”

I felt my heart stutter.

“What?” I asked stupidly, staring him in the eyes.

“If Stark isn’t hiding her, tell him to hide her and keep her hidden. If Stark isn’t willing to do that then I will. I’m workin’ on Vito and I’ll take care of her around.”

He got even closer, so much closer his forehead came to rest on mine, and when he did this I sucked in breath.

It felt weird because it felt nice and sweet and I knew it shouldn’t. I was supposed to be sworn off men. Secondly (yes, I knew that was contradictory to my first point but I was ignoring that fact), I was supposed to be with Luke in an exclusive fuck buddies arrangement so I shouldn’t be thinking anything about Ren felt nice and sweet.

“Ava, honey,” Ren said softly, breaking into my thoughts, and since I was so close I could hear him over the music. “What I’m tellin’ you is you don’t have anything to worry about, and neither does Sissy.”

My tension melted and I found myself in the position (again) to kiss another hot guy all over for taking care of my friend, though I’d learned my lesson not to share.

When my tension left me, I felt Mace move slightly away, his

that he disappearing from my waist.

“Ren,” I said softly as my way of saying thanks, and his face lost intensity.

“Dom doesn’t deserve her,” Ren said back, and at his words and to her safe, he said them, like he really meant them, I moved into him.

I couldn’t help it. I agreed with what he said. I believed he wanted Sissy safe and I was happy he was a good guy. There weren’t a lot of like this world, but I was beginning to think Ren was an exception to that rule. Now, by my count, there was one, maybe two if you counted Luke (the jury was still out on him), or maybe about a dozen if you counted Bunch, Tex and Duke.

It was on that thought when Stella started to sing Hank Williams’ ‘Lonesome I Could Cry’ and all eyes turned to her.

Stella was in rare form that night. It was like she was intent on giving performance of a lifetime, as if the King of the World had stepped in her set and she had to impress him or have her head chopped off. She never pulled out “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” and when she audience became transfixed as it was right then, and I was no exception.

Even though I was stuck by the heart-wrenching lyrics and the way delivered them, I could swear her eyes were on Mace. It was as if she singing right to him, and somehow, in a weird way I didn’t get, that it even more poignant.

Hmm.

Another thought to ponder at a later time and peck over with the the Rock Chicks.

I was so lost in Stella and what was going on with her and Mace (t

something was *definitely* going on with her and Mace, not to mention some song) I didn't pay much attention when Ren moved around to my back. I didn't notice his arms going around my waist and him pulling me into his chest. I also noticed his chin resting on my shoulder, his cheek pressing against mine. Further, I noticed his body felt warm and hard, and he smelled really good. A hint of spicy, expensive cologne mixed with Hot Guy—and the comfort of all of that was heady stuff.

I also noticed that Mace didn't see Ren move. He was staring at Stella like he was never going to stop watching her. The song was so beautiful, and Stella sang it with such emotion, it felt good having his arms around me. I crossed my arms over Ren's at my waist and melted into his torso.

Then, as it was with that song, especially the way Stella sang it, Ren seemed somehow to stand alone, even in the massive crowd, while Stella's singing and Hank's lyrics wash over us.

Therefore it was a shock when I felt Ren go rock-solid, not to mention the same moment the air went dangerously electric. I turned my head to see what was causing the tension and I saw Luke standing close, wearing his customary black with the addition of a killer black leather motorcycle jacket. His face was stony, his eyes so focused on Ren they didn't even flicker for an instant.

Uh-oh.

I straightened in Ren's arms, blinking rapidly at Luke and trying to ignore one of the feelings coursing through me. The most prevalent of them included a bit of fear and a helluva lot of panic.

"Outside," Luke growled to Ren, his voice a low, angry rumble.

ion the Ho-ly *shit*.

k. I did Ren moved from me as panic took firm hold. I tore my eyes away
body. I Luke to look at Ren and he was grinning like he was very happy
st mine, something.

ood—a Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

ination “Rock Chicks!” I shouted toward the stage and Daisy was the one
who heard me, but a load of people gave me pissy looks for shouting
t Stella Stella’s “Lonesome.”

sad, so Daisy looked away from Stella to me. I pointed at Ren and Luke
; strong away as I jumped up and down, following the boys and motioning with
ed back gestures that could only describe, “Danger! Danger! The end of the v
nigh!”

en and I Daisy’s eyes moved from me to Mace, who was trying to block me
we let departing Ren and Luke. She cottoned on quickly to the situation and
tagging Rock Chicks.

ntion at I was multitasking, communicating with the Rock Chicks and fo
l to see Luke and Ren, when I hit something solid and stopped to look up at M
ing his

jacket. “Mace, you have to get out of my way,” I told him.

κ to me “You’re stayin’ in here,” Mace replied.

Ha!

As if!

o catch I wasn’t going to stand inside Herman’s drinking a beer and liste
f these Stella while Luke and Ren ripped each other apart.

“No way! I’ve got to stop them!” I cried.

Mace shook his head.

I didn't have time for this. Luke and Ren were going to tear each other apart in shreds in the parking lot, all on account of me being a big dork.

When was I going to learn? When, when, when? If one of them got hurt...shit!

"Out of my way," I snapped.

I dodged to the left, to the right, back to the left then ran around him during his right, giving him a wide berth and looking like a lunatic because he wouldn't give chase. He just watched me while he turned in a slow semi-circle, moving and shaking his head.

I didn't worry about looking like a lunatic. I took off out the door. In this world, the whole Rock Chick posse was on my heels.

I hit the parking lot and saw them. Luke had taken off his jacket and tossed it, to them the act of tossing it on the hood of his Porsche when we got there. He started rolling up the sleeves of his jean shirt.

"Lookin' forward to this," Ren said low as I stopped, the Rock Chick posse gathering around me.

"What's goin' on?" Daisy asked from beside me.

I ignored her.

"This is crazy. Luke, let me—" I started but Luke's eyes cut to me and I froze in mid-speak at his look.

His eyes sliced to Mace. "Keep her back."

Before I could react, I felt an iron arm clamp around my waist and grabbed hold of me. I leaned into it with all my bodyweight and tried to pull his arm away with my hands, but I was held fast. I was beginning to panic if Riley wasn't leading me down the garden path with his scowl.

other to “workouts” and “strength training.”

“Shit, I don’t think this is good,” Jet whispered from somewhere and I looked her way.

She was pale and staring at Luke and Ren. I did a scan and noticed the Rock Chicks were pale.

him on “No, this is not good,” Roxie agreed.

e didn’t “No, this is really, *really* not good,” Indy put in.

le, still They were not wrong.

I decided to try another tactic and looked to Ren. “Ren, please, do this. This is crazy. Someone’s going to get hurt. Just go, I’ll call you later.”

“Boys, listen to Ava, stand down,” Ally threw in.

nd was Ren ignored Ally and me.

Ren was “Ava told me about you,” he said to Luke.

Chick Uh-oh.

I went still and stopped struggling against Mace’s arm so I could focus my attention on freaking about what was going to come out of Ren’s mouth next. I had told him about Luke under the influence of three glasses of wine and a major flip out. I hadn’t expected he’d ever have the opportunity to share, and even if he did, I never expected him actually to share.

“Ren,” I said, but it came out breathy and quiet and I knew he didn’t hear me.

s Mace I looked to Luke who was silent and watching, his body looking relaxed and prepared at the same time.

wonder “Ren, please. Don’t,” I went on, sounding louder, but not louder because to my horror, Ren continued.

“I get a good shot in maybe I’ll knock some fuckin’ sense into you
e close maybe you’ll be thinkin’ of Ava when you fuck her, not some other
piece you can’t have.”

that all The Rock Chicks collectively sucked in breath at Ren’s words
their gazes swung in my direction.

Oh shit.

Luke’s eyes sliced to me and my breath left my lungs in a whoosh.

His eyes were cold, hard, furious and lastly and most frighte
on’t do disbelieving. Somehow his look made him seem like he’d already suf
iter.” blow before a punch had been thrown and that blow had been deliv
me.

I wanted to say something, anything to take that look off his fac
didn’t have a chance. Luke looked back to Ren and it began.

At first I didn’t move, I watched in shocked, horrified fascination.

It was brutal, powerful, and in a weird way, beautiful and eve
d focus inspiring. Luke and Ren knew what they were doing. They were stron
; mouth light on their feet and so angry neither of them was holding anything b
of wine

Then the sound of flesh thudding against flesh, again and again anc
mity to got through to me.

“*Stop it!*” I screamed, my voice not sounding like my own, it came
n’t hear a screech.

They kept going.

ig both “*Stop it!*” I shrieked again, unable to think of something better to s

enough, Luke’s fist smashed into Ren’s mouth and Ren’s lip opened up
flying, and Ally started to scream “stop” with me.

u. Then Then I saw Ren throw a punch that Luke didn't dodge and I watched
: man's open on Luke's cheek.

At that I started struggling like a she-cat and screaming like a banshee
and all not using words, just yelling. I pressed my back against Mace's body
my feet clean up in the air to power kick out of his arms.

This didn't work so I planted my feet and leaned forward, trying
him with me or break the contact.

mingly, Neither of these worked so I yelled at the top of my lungs. "God
ffered a *stop it!*"

ered by Of course, they did not stop.

I used the move I used with Luke at Sissy and Dom's and elbowed
e, but I in the side with all my might. I added an additional touch at the same
and kicked him in the shin with the heavy heel of my cowboy boot
worked. His arm loosened just enough for me to get away.

n awe- Even though both Daisy and Jules made a grab for me, shouting a
ig, fast, the same time to stay back, I evaded them and ran straight into the fire
ack. as Luke reared back for a punch. I didn't have a chance to dodge he
l again, elbow slammed into my forehead and stars exploded in my eyes. I went
two steps and then down, hard on my ass.

e out as "Stop!" Daisy screamed, running forward. She got low next
holding her arm out to the boys as if to shield me from them. "Stop
now," she snapped but they'd already stopped.

ay. Luke was moving to me and I was shaking my head because
swear I saw two of him.

, blood "Sugar, you okay?" Daisy asked as the Rock Chicks lost patience
holding back and took their positions.

ed a cut I put my hand to my forehead but didn't answer.

"Ava, talk to me," Daisy urged.

anshee, "Is she all right?" Jet got low beside me.

, lifting "Holy crap, Ava, say something, honey." Indy got down next to Daisy.

to take "I'm fine, I think." My other hand came up to my forehead and I touched it gently.

lammit, "You fucking guys!" Ally snapped from somewhere else.

I couldn't see her, but then I couldn't see much of anything because I was staring at my lap and blinking a lot. I looked up and saw she was in my line of face, blocking him from approaching me.

d Mace "Why didn't you have a pissing contest?" Ally went on, getting wiser in time to Ren. "Look at Ava, she's on her ass in a parking lot!"

st. This "Well," I whispered to Indy, Ally and Jet. "Now I have something to write to my mom about."

it me at Jules materialized at my feet as the girls looked at each other and responded to my lame effort to make light of the moment.

ght just Jules wasn't laughing either. She was looking at me in a funny way for obvious reasons I couldn't hold her eyes so I looked back at my lap. It was time to hear Roxie throw down. My head came up again and I saw her quickly approaching Luke in order to get in his face, and I could hear her high-heeled boots hitting the pavement in an unmistakable pissed-off staccato.

I could "Seriously!" she snapped. "It's okay if you make each other bleed, but what did you think Ava would do? Just stand there and watch you bleed out? Other to a pulp? Men! I don't get it!" she shouted to the sky, throwing

hands out to her sides.

“I’m okay,” I said, pushing unsteadily to my feet with Jet and helping me.

Once I got to my feet, I watched as Luke set Roxie aside and he by picking her up by her upper arms and literally *setting her aside*.

Then he was there. I could see his black T-shirt in front of my face

“Look at me,” he ordered, and he definitely used a tone that one obey without question. Because even though I didn’t want them to, n lifted to his.

He stared at me closely. I still felt a little funny, a bit woozy, but ev noticed the cut on his cheekbone, blood streaming from it, and it m stomach churn.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded, staring at his cut and all the blood and wondering when I learn my lesson.

Repeat after me.

No men. No men. *No men.*

The second I nodded, before I could ask if Luke or Ren were ok could throw an insane, out-of-control hissy fit of my own, Luke to hand and started toward the Porsche. I looked back at the Rock Chic they were watching me, all except Ally, who was kind of angrily blood with a tissue from Ren’s face, all the while giving him lip, w deserved. Next time I talked to him I was going to verbally *kick his ass*.

Without thinking (I really should have thought), I got in the pa side of the Porsche, Luke holding the door open for me and then slam

shut behind me. He nabbed his jacket off the hood and shrugged it on.
I Daisy behind the wheel, and with no further ado we took off like a shot.

It was then that being dazed by a tough guy, macho man elbow
did this forehead wore off and I remembered Luke was angry. I remember
because he drove like he was angry. He drove like he wanted to t
straight to the gates of hell and he wanted me to get there yesterday.

I was angry too, but not angry or stupid enough to go up against t
of fury rolling off Luke.
ny eyes

“Luke, please slow down,” I said while I chanced a glance at him.

I saw his jaw clench but felt the car slow.
ven so I

I decided that was all I should say for now. I didn’t want to s
conversation we were inevitably going to have in the Porsche with
Luke at the wheel. Instead, I planned my defense for whatever was g
come next.
I’d ever

One thing that was sure and certain, and the blood proved it
mention Luke told me straight how he felt on several occasions) Lu
not the kind of guy who liked to walk into a bar and see his woman in
man’s arms.

How I was going to get out of Luke finding out that I told Ren abc
he felt about Jules, I didn’t know, but I was going to have to come t
something.
wiping

He parked in the garage and wordlessly we went up to the loft
wasn’t thinking clearly. It was the first time two guys had fought o
both getting bloody in the process. I again found myself in a situation
didn’t know what to do and I was beginning to get a little sick of
clueless.
ssenger
ming it

He slid Sure, one could say, considering I was practically living with
shouldn't have relaxed into Ren and let him hold me during one
7 to the sweetest, saddest songs ever written.

red this But on the other hand, it was one of the sweetest, saddest son
ake me written.

It was lame, but I was going to use that as my defense.

he heat Then there was the fact Luke had a thing for Jules. It wasn't n
Luke was with me when he felt strongly for another woman, but I p
shouldn't have told that to Ren. However, who would have ever thoug
million years Ren would have shared.

tart the However, Ren shared.

Angry I was going to give in on that point and would likely have to ap
going to even though that would suck.

But I did have the whole fistfight thing to throw in his face. Being
(not to guy, macho man was one thing, getting in fights in bar parking lo
ke was something else. Who did that kind of thing? It was juvenile and to
another whole tough guy thing a shade too far.

The doors to the elevator opened, we walked in and Luke flipped
out how lights.

up with I turned to him to say something, I didn't know what, when he
walked to the bed, picked up the lamp on the bedside table, yanked t
. I still out with one vicious tug and threw it with a savage side arm throw ac
ver me, room.

where I I watched it sail then smash against the semi-circular bar, its
feeling flying.

Luke, I All righty then.

of the One thing I knew, I wasn't going to bring up my Sweetest, Sadde
Ever Written Defense.

gs ever He turned to me. I took one look at him and saw he was so
controlling-fury mode that it wasn't funny.

"Luke," I started, in order to try to defuse the situation, and I was g
ice thatdo it by shifting the focus and seeing to his cut. Priorities first, and blc
robablypretty much always a priority. "We need to clean that cut."

ght in a "Pack," he responded.

I blinked.

"What?" I asked.

ologize, "Pack. Now."

Then, without another word, he shrugged off his jacket, tossed it
a tough bed, walked by me and into the bathroom.

ots was I turned in a half-circle, my eyes and body following him. I watch
ook the turn on the bathroom light, nab a washcloth and then he started to cl
cut.

l on the Something was happening to my throat. I couldn't quite understar
it was, but I was kind of thinking it was panic mingled with fear aga
calmly time significantly magnified.

he cord I went to the bathroom door.

ross the "Luke, I..." I started and then trailed off because I didn't know
pieces say.

Further, he didn't even glance at me.

It was then I realized there really wasn't anything to say.

Bottom line, now he knew that I knew he was in love with Jules.
st Song was up and obviously we were over.

I didn't understand why he was so angry about it, but I'd think ab
beyond later, when Dom was gone and Sissy was with me and we had lots and
tequila, which always helped women understand how men's minds wo

going to And this, I told myself, was a good thing. Not the angry part, the ji
rod was up part.

I told myself this but I wasn't very convincing.

I turned away from the door (by the way, he never looked at me
like I ceased to exist, which made my throat feel all the funnier) and
my luggage.

I'd been keeping my things pretty tidy. I just had some stuff
laundry room, the bathroom and a few things on the nightstand.
on the

I went to the laundry room and separated my clothes in the dry
Luke's. This activity made my throat stop feeling funny and start
ied him tight. I hurried as fast as I could, taking my clothes back to my lugga
ean his shoving it all in without folding it, which was hard to do. I didn't like
but this was definitely not the time to be obsessively tidy.

I grabbed my toiletries bag and went into the bathroom. I wal
in, this Luke, who at this point was putting those little white strips on his cut
the edges together. I pulled back the shower door to get my shamp
conditioner.

what to Just like he'd done to me, I tried to ignore him.

This became hard when I'd nabbed my stuff, shoved it into t
turned back around and Luke was standing dead center of the bathroc
planted, arms crossed on his chest.

The jig Clearly, Luke was done ignoring me.

“Which one?” he asked.

out that I shook my head because I wasn’t following.

l lots of “Which one did you convince yourself I was thinkin’ of when
rked. fuckin’ you? Was it Roxie?”

g being I stared at him, my tight throat getting even tighter because
guessing.

Why on earth was he guessing?

, it was No time to dwell on that without tequila.

went to Time to move on, fast.

in the “I’ll, um...” I stopped, deciding to ignore his question and get
er from packing so I could get out, get to the store, buy an enormous amount
feeling that had no healthy living mojo whatsoever, go home and start the
age and process of getting over Luke (which I assumed would take me approx
to iron, one hundred and fifty years, therefore, I had to get started, pronto)
and pick me up.” making this decision, I started speaking again. “Give someone a call t

ked by I leaned to the side, reached to get my toothbrush and his hand sl
to hold fingers wrapping around my wrist and he yanked on it, bringing me c
him.

oo and My head tilted back and I looked at him. I was beginning to
beginning to let all those things I wasn’t thinking of, all those thi
buried, seep into my head, and they were overpowering.

he bag, I wanted to be angry. It wasn’t *me* who was in love with someone
m, feet wasn’t *me* who had a fight in a bar parking lot like a testosterone-fuele

However, for some reason I was having trouble holding on to anything and instead felt something far, far worse.

“Which one?” he repeated.

I was he was
“Luke, let me go,” I said quietly, mainly because my throat was even more and I couldn’t get more than a quiet sound out of my mouth. I swallowed as I felt the tears hit the backs of my eyes and I looked down at his fingers wrapped around my wrist. When he didn’t release me, I repeated, “Please, let go.”

“Look at me,” he returned, his tone low and vibrating with fury.

“Please let me go,” I whispered again, and I felt the wetness in my eyes start to spill over just as he used my wrist to give me another yank.

on with of food painful
I really didn’t want to cry, but I didn’t have a choice. It was either let my throat close completely, making me suffocate, which, I know, is painful and distracting, or I could cry. Crying, which, I know, might not be a bad thing.

imately). After
His fingers were beginning to get painful and I continued in a whisper. “You’re hurting me.”

o come
He let my wrist go immediately, tore the bag out of my other hand, and threw it in the sink. Then he advanced, pushing me back against the wall, his body coming in close, his heat hitting me.

loser to
I kept my face down and to the side and pressed my lips together to control my thoughts and tears. His anger filled the room but it didn’t frighten me. All I could think was getting out, slicing off this part of my life, and starting over as soon as possible.

“Look at me, Ava,” Luke pressed. “Which one?”

else. It
“Step back, Luke,” I said in a small voice, but he just pushed close to me like an idiot.

ger and “I’ll take you to Zano myself the minute you fuckin’ answer me.”

I flinched as uncontrolled pain sliced through me at Luke offering me to Ren. I hated the idea that he was so through with me that he was closing to hand me off to another man.

mouth. I But there it was.

n at his “Move away, please,” I begged.

peated, He pressed even closer, his body now full frontal with mine, and looking at his shoulder.

ny eyes “You didn’t feel it at all, did you, Ava?” he asked, and I could tell sound of his voice that this was an important question.

I didn’t know what he was talking about and I wasn’t going to ask.

that or I lifted my hands to his waist, grabbed fistfuls of his tee and thought pressing my bodyweight into his to move him back. The tears were streaming down my face and I was going to make sob noises soon, I just knew I didn’t want him to see me cry, but I really didn’t want him to hear me sob noise.

nd and “Move away,” I repeated.

vall, his “Who the fuck was it that you told Zano I was thinkin’ of when fuckin’ you?” He was back to his original topic, which was and was relief, considering I knew what he was talking about this time, but I didn’t didn’t wish to participate in the discussion.

my life “Move away.”

“Answer me.”

r. That was when I lost it, mainly because I couldn’t take any more actually surprising I’d lasted this long.

I looked up at him, not caring that he could see me cry.

to take I had to get out.

s ready Now.

I felt the sad desperation start to subside and anger start to take and I held fast to the anger.

“Luke, move away!” I snapped, but unfortunately my voice hit d I wasthe end.

“*Answer me!*” Luke thundered, and I’d had enough.

l by the “Jules!” I yelled in his face. “Jules! All right?” I shoved at his sh he didn’t move an inch (per usual). Of course, it was then that I m humiliating sob sound in my throat, but I powered through it. “I hea pushed, call her ‘babe.’ I saw you standing close, holding her face, strok eamingcheek, *just like you do to me*. You were looking at her, like...like...”

ew it. I I couldn’t say it and I didn’t have to. It finally hit me that he couldn make ame pinned to the wall, not for another second, not one more fucking se

“Move, the fuck, back! *Right now!*” I screamed.

He didn’t move. Instead he stared at me, straight in the eyes w n I wasscary, fury-unleashed look.

is not a Then his gaze wandered, down the tracks of tears and sor t I still happened. Just like when he was angry at me when he thought I was y his chain and he ended up declaring I was his. At first it flickered in h and then his face began to soften, the fury melting, the electricity slid of the room, and I had the distinct feeling I was in more trouble than ev

. It was It was too late for me. I didn’t care what was happening with Luke done. I’d buy more whatever it was I’d leave behind in his loft. I was g

Immediately.

With a mighty, superhuman push, I moved Luke back an inch, and from in front of him and ran from the room. I kicked the lid closed on and bent double to zip it, but didn't even get my hands on it before it lifted in the air.

Controlled on Foiled.

Always, always, foiled. Even when it mattered the most.

Luke settled me in his arms, carrying me like a groom carrying his bride over the threshold.

I was still crying, pushing against his shoulders, kicking my legs and struggling like the bride from hell.

My struggle didn't last long. He planted a knee in the bed, dropped it, and before I could move an inch, he covered my body with his.

I can't hold Shit!

"Get off!" I shoved at his shoulders, arching my back, bucking my

It was like I didn't move. His face was in my face and one of his hands came to my jaw. I jerked my head away and looked anywhere but at him.

"Did you tell Zano I was thinkin' of Jules when I fucked you?" His voice was quieter, softer, and even though his complete change in tone took me by surprise, I still kept my face averted.

I decided to answer his question. As far as I was concerned, the sooner this conversation was over, the better.

"Ren came up with that on his own. I just told him you were in love with someone else."

"Ava, I'm not in love with Jules."

Bullshit, I thought but did not say and kept looking away.

slid out “Fine, great, sorry for the misunderstanding. Now if you’ll get
my bagging home.”

e I was “Babe, look at me.” Now he was using his gentle, affectionate voice
had to bite my lip.

The tears were still coming, but they were subsiding. The Voice
make them come back full strength, I knew it.

is bride “Please get off,” I repeated. “I need to go home.”

His weight settled full on me and his hands came to frame my
ngs and forcing me to look at him.

I was too caught up in my drama to notice the look on his face
l me on focused on the next second, which would take me to the next second
next, which would eventually take me home, where I could be safe,
my vows to my vibrators and never leave my house ever again.

hips. “Jules is pregnant, Ava.”

s hands In a flash, thoughts of vibrators and a lifetime of being a hermit f
m. the window and my eyes focused on his.

is voice “What?” I asked.

me off “Vance told me yesterday morning. It’s early. She doesn’t want an
know until she’s further along. Vance didn’t agree. He’s fuckin’
sooner himself. He told everyone but Shirleen.”

I realized I wasn’t breathing. Then I realized I forgot how.

ve with Luke kept talking. “That’s why I was standin’ close to her, touch
face. She’s got no blood family left and Vance isn’t close to his. I
been through a lot and they both want this. I’m happy for them. Tl

good thing.”

up, I’m Okay. It was official.

I was The A-Number-One Dork of All Time.

ce and I *I told you that you should have talked to him,* Good Ava admonish
Bad Ava was silent.

ould Good Ava looked around my neck at Bad Ava. *Nothing to say?*

Bad Ava looked around my neck at Good Ava. Then she put her th
her nose and wiggled her fingers at her.

my face I let out my breath and my eyes slid to the side.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

3. I just Luke’s thumb slid across my wet cheekbone. “Babe, please look at
and the It was the “please” that got me and my eyes slid back to his.

, renew “I’m guessin’ that was the drama yesterday, why you needed to g
head together.”

lew out I didn’t answer. I didn’t need to. It was obvious.

He continued, “What I want to know is why you came back to
night, considerin’ you thought I was in love with Jules.”

yone to I forgot how to breathe again.

beside Oh...my...*God*.

I’d given it all away. I didn’t even mean to but I did. I didn’t exp
to find out I thought he was in love with Jules.

ing her Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

They’ve I bucked my hips a bit, a tester to see if he was off guard (he wasn’t

his is a While I did this, his face came closer, his lips came to mine and I

“That’s what I thought.”

“Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop right there.”

Shit! Did I say that aloud?

ed. I did.

Hell and damnation.

I was going to have to go with it.

umb to His head came up an inch.

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go,” I told him. “Bad guys were all
remember?”

That wasn’t bad, it was even the truth.

me.” “You could have stayed with Zano,” Luke replied.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

get your He was right. I could have.

Why hadn’t I thought of that?

I started to think of something else, a lie, a fib, anything. Luke
me last started moving like he was laughing and I knew he read my face.

I didn’t think this was funny. Not even a little bit.

“Please get off me. I need to go home,” I whispered.

The amusement faded from his eyes when he heard my tone, but he
ect him move his body from mine. Instead, his finger traced my hairline. He
watched this and then they came back to mine.

“Beautiful, I told you that you were going to have to clue in yours
t). tonight I’m gonna give you a little help.”

he said, This did not sound good.

I didn't want any help. I wanted this to be over. It was much better now than over later when he left me because he was bored or done with me, or whatever. Or worse, when I had to identify his bullet-ridden body at the morgue.

"First..." he started, interrupting my thoughts.

Oh no! It had multiple parts.

"I'm gonna fuck you until you feel it. Until I know you feel it. 'It's not what we have between us. I thought I was gettin' through last night after me, talkin' about your dad, and today, you callin' me when there was trouble when nothin' was happening at all. We'll see if that took, but either way, we gonna get through to you, I don't care what it takes."

Okay, maybe lying wasn't the way to go, maybe begging was.

"Luke, please, please, just let me go home."

His hand came back to my jaw, his thumb sliding along my lower lip, but he ignored my pleas.

"The second part you gotta get, babe, is that I'm not lettin' you touch my body not lettin' you push me away and I'm not giving up. I'm gonna keep vouching until I piece together what your dad and those assholes tore from your body. I'm gonna keep at you until you let me in. I'm not gonna stop until you tell me you're mine, until it comes straight from your mouth, preferably with your eyes deep inside you and you're lookin' at me like you look at me when I'm making your eyes to makin' you come."

Against my will, I felt my insides melt as his fingers sifted into the side of my head. His eyes got ultra-warm and his mouth came to my lips, but

"I love it when I make you come," he muttered against my lips, his fingers sliding all the way through my hair then down my back as his arm

er to be around me. “Every time, you say my name and you smile this unbel
ne with sexy little smile.”

ody at a Oh crap.

I didn’t want to believe I did that, but I could believe I did that. I
this was Luke we were talking about, which would have been enou
there was also the fact that I’d never climaxed as hard as I did when
:’ being with Luke and that would make anyone smile.

ht, you Then he said what sounded like a vow to a sacred quest. A sexy, n
uble or day vow, but a scary one for me because Luke was the kind of guy y
ay, I’m knew would find the Holy Grail. I was pretty certain he’d make old L
look like a putz.

“Ava, babe, I’m tellin’ you, you’re gonna admit you belong
because *you belong to me.*”

lip, and Ee-yikes!

I tried one more time. “Luke, please, let me go home.”

go. I’m His lips brushed mine then he lifted his head.

vorking I noticed his eyes had gone ink right before he smiled.

ou. I’m “No fuckin’ way.”

tell me Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

ien I’m
m close

e hair at
ine.

is hand
closed

around me. “Every time, you say my name and you smile this unbelievably sexy little smile.”

Oh crap.

I didn’t want to believe I did that, but I could believe I did that. I mean, this was Luke we were talking about, which would have been enough, but there was also the fact that I’d never climaxed as hard as I did when I was with Luke and that would make anyone smile.

Then he said what sounded like a vow to a sacred quest. A sexy, modern-day vow, but a scary one for me because Luke was the kind of guy you just knew would find the Holy Grail. I was pretty certain he’d make old Lancelot look like a putz.

“Ava, babe, I’m tellin’ you, you’re gonna admit you belong to me because *you belong to me.*”

Ee-yikes!

I tried one more time. “Luke, please, let me go home.”

His lips brushed mine then he lifted his head.

I noticed his eyes had gone ink right before he smiled.

“No fuckin’ way.”

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

NINETEEN



CORNERED

He kissed me.

I tried not to let it penetrate, but he was good with his mouth. I was an amazing kisser and my melty insides intensified.

Unfortunately, my outsides turned melty too and my body relaxed into his. He felt it and rolled, taking me with him so I was on top.

Something about this cut through the Luke Lip Fog, reminding me I was still in escape mode. I lifted my knees like I was going to straddle him. Instead, I broke my lips from his, pushed up swiftly and started to get out of bed.

I got one foot on the floor before he tagged me. Twisting me, I fell into his lap and one of his arms closed around me tight. I struggled, of course, but since he wasn't paying attention I thought I had a chance. Still, he managed to hold me to him, which was *way* annoying. He wasn't paying attention because he had the drawer of the nightstand open and he was rummaging through it. I was too busy trying to get away to notice what he was doing until the clink of handcuffs.

I stilled, my head jerked around, and I shouted, "No!"

That was when I really started to struggle. I didn't want to be cu

the bed, not ever again.

I pulled away, gained my feet and ran to the elevator, slapping the stopping and realizing too late that it sucked Luke had an elevator. cool until you had to make a quick exit. If you had to make a quick exit were screwed.

Foiled...fucking...again.

I whirled to face him while I waited for the elevator and watched he approached me, shoving the cuffs into his back pocket.

He was "I'm leaving," I told him.

"No you're not," he replied, calm as could be.

I understood "I am. You can't keep me here," I went on, not calm at all.

"Yes, I can."

He said I was "I didn't want to admit it, but I was pretty sure he could.

He told me "Shit!

exit the

He got up close just as the elevator doors opened. I had started back when he moved, faster than I'd seen anyone move before. One second I was heading backward toward the elevator, the next second I was against the wall by the side of the elevator.

managed "Once again, I had to ask.

attention "Why me?

I heard "Luke, don't!" I shouted, sounding desperate and not caring at all. "Please don't cuff me to the bed again."

He moved away an inch, and with a quick tug at my shirt, the cuffs pulled down the front unsnapped all the way up.

Shit again!

button, I moved out the inch he moved away, but he pressed me back to t
It was with his body while his hand went inside my shirt at my midriff and th
xit, you up my side, sending happy tingles in its wake.

His lips came to mine, his eyes open and not leaving my own.

“Relax, beautiful, I’m not cuffing you to the bed,” he said before h
d as he came around, and he slid the shirt off my shoulder and down my arm.

“I’m not going to relax. I’m going to go home,” I told him
wriggled my arm to get away from his hand.

Unfortunately, this also had the effect of assisting my shirt to fall
side.

“You aren’t goin’ home,” Luke replied, and I had to admit to the
private place, buried deep down where I buried everything else, that I
when he talked against my mouth.

edging
cond, I
pinned
“I have to go home,” I went on, still sounding desperate, still not
and searching for an excuse, *any* excuse. “I have to check my mail an
my plants.”

The last part was a lie. I didn’t have any plants. The first part wa
too. I never got any good mail.

lymore.
buttons
His head came up and he grinned at me, and let me tell you, the g
good. It was unlike any grin he’d given me. It was sexy and warm ar
was something about his face, something I’d never noticed before, bu
too freaked out to put my finger on it.

“You can water them tomorrow,” he told me.

“Tomorrow will be too late, they’re really thirsty,” I returned.

I lifted both my hands and pushed against his shoulders. This, pe
he wall had no effect, but I still kept at it.

ren slid “They die, I’ll buy you new plants,” he replied.

“I don’t want new plants. I like the plants I have,” I lied again.

“Then we’ll go tonight, after I make love to you.”

his hand I stopped pushing, my heart stopped beating, my lungs stopped w
my knees wobbled and I stared at him.

while I “What did you say?” I whispered.

His mouth came to mine again. He brushed his lips there and th
off one trailed down my cheek to my ear. I tried not to do it, but this made me

“I’ll take you home tonight after I’m done with you. You can wat
secret, plants and we’ll sleep at your place.”

loved it My heart kicked in as did my lungs, but I didn’t resume the struggl

He didn’t repeat what I wanted him to repeat, the “make love t
t caring part. He’d always called it “fucking.” He’d *never* called it “making lov
d water

Still, I was pretty certain he said it.

as a lie, For my safety and for my sanity I had to try one last time.

I took my hands from his shoulders and moved my head back sc
rin was fully pressed against the wall. His head came up when I did this. I pla
id there hands on either side of his neck and looked into his eyes.

it I was “Luke,” I said softly. “Please, let me go home.”

He dropped his forehead to mine just like Ren had done.

With Luke, it was different. It was better, so much better it wasn’t
In fact it was so *not* funny it was world-tiltingly not funny. He cam

r usual, close, his nose rested along the side of mine and he took that opportunity to run his tongue along my bottom lip.

There were only two words to describe the feeling this whole moment gave me and those words were, *Oh my*.

I felt my eyelids get heavy as my knees got weak. I saw his infectious smile and I knew that he knew that he had me.

Damn.

“Babe, I told you I’ll take you home.” His face shifted and his eyes came to mine. “Later,” he said there, right before he kissed me.

shiver.



LUKE and I had wall sex.

I’d never had sex pressed against the wall, and let me tell you, wall sex was very, very good. In fact, wall sex was so good, it was my new favorite position. In fact, it was so good, I couldn’t believe that Eddie and I had only done it four times. They’d been together months!

After wall sex, as promised, we got dressed and Luke took me home.

This freaked me out since we were going to my place so I could show it was plants that I didn’t own. The whole way there I tried to figure out how to get my outfit of the new mess I made for myself and decided that I was just going to have to wing it.

First, I tried to get him to leave me at the door by barring his way. When that was becoming his custom, he just leaned down, and his hands at my feet picked me up.

I should have known I wouldn’t succeed at barring him from my room, but I told myself at least I wasn’t a quitter.

unity to As was becoming *my* custom, my legs went around his hips and my
went to his shoulders (by the way, this was Wall Sex Position, but in c
maneuver He stepped in, kicking the door shut behind him, ignoring my hands p
against his shoulders. He turned and locked the door (still ignori
ky eyes pressing hands) and walked us up my stairs.

I gave up on the shoulder press and tried another strategy.

“I have to see to my plants,” I told him.

mouth I decided I’d *pretend* I had plants, maybe get him to wait for me
bedroom and hope he didn’t follow me around while I watered m
existent plants.

“You don’t have any plants,” Luke returned.

vall sex Shit, shit, *shit*. Did he know *everything*?

favorite I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re annoying,” I told him when h
Jet had the turn at the top of the landing toward my bedroom.

“At least you aren’t tellin’ me you hate me anymore.”

to my Hell and damnation!

I forgot my own kill line.

d water I made a frustrated noise in the back of my throat.

v to get Luke chuckled. Yes, he actually chuckled.

oing to “Okay, *now* I hate you,” I told him, sounding bitchy.

, but as We’d made it to the side of my bed and he let me go in a way that
ass, hebody slid down his hard one until my feet hit the floor. This felt nice
ultra-nice.

house, “No you don’t,” he replied on a grin, his gaze scanning my face
knew he could see I liked the body slide. I powered past the body sl

y hands you knew I didn't have any plants, why'd you bring me home?"

lothes). "Two reasons," he answered. Then he bent his head and touched
ressing softly to mine. The lip touch was ultra-nice too, might I add. He co
ing my speaking when his head came back up. "One, because I've wanted
you in your bed since that night we spent here. Two, because it amuse
watch you when you're cornered."

My body got stiff, also for two reasons. One, because he was l
using the word "fuck," and two, because he thought it was amusing to
e in the me when I was cornered.
ly non-

"That isn't nice," I snapped.

His arms were around me and they tightened, bringing me c
watched as his face got serious.

Uh-oh.
ie made

I wasn't getting a good feeling about his serious face.

"We should be straight about somethin', beautiful."

Oh shit.

Luke was straight enough about everything. I wasn't sure I coul
with him being straight about being straight.

Before I could stop him (not that I could stop him), he kept talking

"To get through to you, I don't intend to be nice. I intend to ke
cornered. You try to get out of that corner, I'm gonna push you back
my soft gonna keep you pinned there until you give me what I want. You
e, as in gonna like hearin' this, but I gotta tell you, I think you're damned sex
you're bitchy. I've also decided to think it's adorable rather than
, and I annoying as hell when you're lyin' to me and yourself about what we
ide. "If

I decided this mainly because you're incredibly sweet when you fight it, not to mention you're a shit liar and I find that hilarious. Continued this is how you act when you're cornered, babe, you gotta know, I'm almost every minute of this, even the parts when I'm pissed at you or for you, and I'm not gonna be sorry that I am."

Yep, I was right. I couldn't cope with him being straight about straight.

I decided not to tell him I hated him again as this had no effect.

Instead, I glared.

After scorching him with a good long glare (well, I liked to think loser. I scorching him, but if I wasn't mistaken, his lips started twitching toward), I pulled out of his arms, walked to my dresser, got a nightgown, stomped down the hall to the bathroom.

I took out my contacts, cleaned and moisturized my face with travel bottles I kept in the bathroom closet and changed into the nightgown. The nightgown was a Christmas present from my mom. I'd never worn it because it was ugly as all get out. It was white with little flowers and a dowdy, high-necked and old-maidish, just where I was sure my mom would have I was headed.

When I was done, I stomped back to the bedroom.

The lights were out, the blinds still up and the streetlights filtered in. I'm through the windows.

Luke, of course, was on his back in bed, hands behind his head, and Zen.

Argh!

forget to I dumped my clothes on the wicker laundry hamper then I walked
siderin' the door.

njoyin' Before I reached it, I heard Luke say, "You get near the couch
fightin' fuckin' futon, there'll be consequences."

I turned to him and felt my hold on my temper slip.

t being This wasn't surprising. I'd had a rough night, a tough day and a kil
week. I didn't have any control of my life. None, zip, nada, and Lu
scaring the shit out of me. Not in a way where I feared for my safe
way where I feared for my heart.

of it as And that was worse.

ward the My temper-hold slipped so much, my hands went to my hips, r
wn and came out and the Barlow Bitch Blood started to flash through my veins:

el-sized, "You were straight, Luke, so I'll be straight too, and this time I w
to listen," I told him, voice chockfull of attitude. "I've had a pretty hec
m. The what with Dom's *Streetcar Named Desire* antics and you fighting w
: before in a parking lot, though I still cannot *believe* you fought in the parking
s on it, bar. And ended up bloody in the process! Then throwing a light acr
thought room, for God's sake. I mean, who does that? Now you're going to
go out and buy a new lamp and that was a nice lamp. And I want to
who's going to clean it up? Not me, I'll tell you that right now. Nex
ered in throw a lamp, *I'll* clean it up. New rule, the person that throws th
cleans it up."

relaxed I took a deep breath, mainly because I'd run out of oxygen, and
going.

"Not to mention all your straight talk. No one talks like you. It
And you should know it freaks me way the hell out."

back to I watched as Luke threw the covers back and got out of bed. For the first time, I took this as the warning sign it was, but I was pissed off enough to hold my stance even as he walked toward me, his naked and (even though he was fuzzy without my contacts in, it must be said) magnificent body illuminated by the streetlights.

I ignored the thrill of fear and the thrill of something else entirely, I let my spine and kept ranting.

“So I’m out of patience with all this,” I told him in my best bitchy voice. In a tilted my head back to squint at him when he stopped within a few inches of me. I lifted my finger and started poking him in the chest repeatedly to my point. “Get it through that skull of yours, Lucas Stark. We’re buddies, end of story. Nothing more. Furthermore,” I went on, warning my theme and still poking him. “I’m going to warn you that if you know what you’re cornered, *you’ll* have to face the consequences.”

I had no idea what consequences he would face, but I thought it sounded good.

I stopped ranting and Luke just looked at me.

Finally, he asked, “You through?”

I thought about it a second then said, “Yeah.”

His hand shot up and his fingers wrapped around my wrist. I thought he’d jerk me to him, but instead he lifted my hand, his thumb sliding across my palm to open my fist and he brought my hand to his mouth.

I watched in fascinated silence as he kissed my palm, and I felt a definite knee wobble, his tongue touching me there.

Ho-ly *crap*.

the first That was nice.

h that I Just as quickly as I lost control of my temper, I lost control again
ough he time it was my temper that slid away.

it body When he took my hand from his mouth, he used my wrist to pull
toward him slowly.

running As I moved toward him, he asked me, “You wanna do it against the wall
again?”

tone. I I blinked to try to clear the Luke Palm-Tongue-Touch Fog, and
ches of though I seriously liked wall sex, I answered, “No, absolutely not.”

o make “The floor?” Luke asked, still pulling me to him, and I felt my
re fuck brush against his chest just as I felt my stomach pitch deliciously.

ning to “I’m sleeping on the futon,” I persevered, valiantly ignoring my stomach
eep me

In turn, he ignored my declaration and asked in a soft, sexy voice
ounded “wanna take a bath together?”

Hmm, taking a bath with Luke. Wow, I figured that would be nice. My
skin all wet, soapy and slippery.

Get a hold of yourself, girl! neither Good Ava nor Bad Ava said.
this came direct from my brain.

I shook my head sharply to clear it and stomped my foot on the floor.
ght he’d

“No!” I snapped.
oss my

I was nearly full frontal with him when his other hand came up
with a with a short, Grandma ruffle at my high collar.

“You buy this?” he asked, changing the subject, and I found myself
blinking in confusion again.

“No. Mom bought it for me for Christmas.”

“You like it?” he went on.

n. This For some reason, I answered honestly, “Not particularly.”

Before I knew what he was about his hand fisted on the collar. He pulled a rough yank and the material tore from collar to waist.

I sucked in a stunned breath and stood stock-still as his other hand went to the tear and he used both hands to rip it again, straight to the hem.

“We’ll fuck in your bed then,” he finished calmly, sliding the material over my shoulders and it fell on the floor at my feet.

Then his fingers hooked into my panties and he slid them down until my breasts joined the torn nightgown on the floor.

I didn’t make a move or a noise. I couldn’t.

My stomach. I was in shock.

3, “You He picked me up and still I didn’t move to resist, mainly because I was in the throes of such a huge freakout it had to be the hugest freakout I’ve ever experienced. In fact, it might have been the hugest freakout in the history of the world.

Instead Luke Stark, the boy from across the street, just literally tore my nightgown off.

or. “You just...” I cleared my throat and I didn’t care what that became. “tore my mom’s nightgown right off me.”

to toy He set me in bed and followed me down. “The nightgown was ruined, hell and your mother was makin’ a point,” he said as he pulled the covers over us. I tried to sit up, but he shifted me into his arms, pulling me down. We were on our sides, face-to-face. “I see your mother hasn’t changed.

He was right, she hadn’t changed, but he still *ripped a nightgown*

body.

“I think you may just be crazy,” I blurted. “People don’t act like they don’t handcuff people to themselves or to beds. They don’t use parking lots. They don’t carry people around everywhere. *They don’t take clothes off women’s bodies.*” When I finished, my voice was pitched an octave higher than normal.

“I only carry you around because you’re always tryin’ to get some things I don’t want you to be or doin’ somethin’ I don’t want you to do.”

I pushed against his chest but his arms just got tighter. “That’s not making it any better!” Now I was kind of shouting. “In fact, that’s making it worse!”

“You scared of me?” he asked, still calm as could be.

“No,” I snapped, and in a way it was the truth.

I wasn’t scared of him because he tore a nightgown off my body. I was scared of him for other reasons, reasons I wasn’t about to share.

“You feel cornered?”

“Fuck yes!” Now I was yelling and *totally* telling the truth.

I saw the white of his teeth flash.

“Good,” he murmured.

Then he kissed me. It was long, hot, heavy, and even though he’d kissed me an against-the-wall orgasm less than an hour ago, I started to get my legs up again.

Shit!

”

When his lips detached, I thought he was going to take things off my back. Instead, he turned me so my back was to his front. His arms came around

tight and I felt his lips at the back of my neck for a quick kiss before he buried his face in my hair.

I thought we might have spoon sex, and I had to admit I wasn't looking forward to it, but as the moments slid by he just held me.

I told myself it was being in my own bed again that made the tension out of my body so that I relaxed into him. I told myself it was not his voice where his arms around me, his breath against my neck and the fact that he was Stark, the man I'd loved since I could remember.

I was beginning to fall into dreamland when his hand came and cupped my breast. I lost any drowsiness I had and held my breath though his thumb idly stroked the inside curve from nipple to chest, clear this was just an affectionate touch and he wasn't taking it anywhere.

"I'm guessin' from your behavior you didn't feel it when I fuck against the wall," he noted softly to the back of my head.

Whatever "it" was, I didn't feel it. I also didn't share this. I kept silent.

He accepted my silence and just held me, stroking my breast.

After a while, he spoke again. "You wanna tell me why you're standing in Zano's arms?"

EEK!

No, I most certainly did *not* want to tell him, mainly because I don't really know myself. Therefore, I kept my silence.

He waited then his voice came again. "All right, we'll let that go. I maybe you wanna tell me why you didn't call me after my dad's funeral."

Any relaxation I felt left my body in an instant and it went solid further. I kept silent.

fore he Luke waited again. His thumb stilled then he sighed.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

kind of I bit my lip as his hand moved away from my breast and both h
wrapped around my midriff, pulling me deeper into him as I felt h
on flowmove, his mouth coming to my ear.

varmth, “This starts to go bad, Ava, what we have, we’ll talk about it. We’
as Luke on it. I’m not your dad. I’m not one day just gonna up and leave you.”

“You already did, for eight years.”

up and Oh no. Did that just come out of my mouth?

1. Even And did it sound like an accusation?

, it was “Babe,” he murmured before he buried his face in the side of my n
ere.

ed you The murmur was soft, gentle and affectionate, and there wa
sounded almost like a growl running through it and his obvious e
ent. made me tremble.

Yep, it just came out of my mouth. Over and over, I kept giving
away.
u were

Time to go back to silence.

Luke didn’t feel like silence. He turned me to face him again and
fight it. I wouldn’t win anyway.
I didn’t

Once he got me in position, as a defense mechanism I buried my
his throat. I didn’t want to look at him and I didn’t want him looking
Instead, didn’t want to have this conversation either, but I wasn’t going to
al.”

Resistance would just make it last longer and I needed to sleep, to
I also night over with and take up the fight again tomorrow. He eventually
leave. He had a job, even if he didn’t need it. When I was alone ag

figure out what was next for me. I was still leaning toward plastic surgery creating my own disappearance in the depths of Mexico.

is arms “Jules asked me once why I was working for Lee,” Luke
is head interrupting my thoughts.

I licked my lips and then pressed them together. I didn’t want
ll work about Jules, but I wasn’t about to share that.

“I didn’t tell her,” he went on.

This I found surprising.

“She didn’t have the right to know,” Luke continued.

This I also found surprising.

eck. “You have the right to know,” he finished.

s what Oh...my...*God*.

emotion My body went still at the meaning behind his words and he kept talking.

“I was recruited by an organization. I can’t tell you who, no one
myself but Lee, Mace and Monty, and I’m sorry, babe, but it has to stay that way.

My body stayed still. I stayed silent and he kept going.

“They trained me and sent me on assignments, mostly out of the country.
I didn’t make a shitload of money and was good at what I did, but I wasn’t proud of it.

The minute my contract was up, I got out. On one of the assignments
face in met Monty. He tracked me down when I got out and he and Lee talked

at me. I went back to working. What I do now is local, it’s a helluva lot less risky and
) resist. proud of it.”

get this I couldn’t believe he was telling me this. I didn’t even want to know
I had to. On the one hand, it scared me. On the other hand, I was moved that he

shared with me, I’d share.

ery and I kept silent.

“Beautiful, you listenin’ to me?” he asked.

shared, I stayed silent but I nodded. I had to nod. Even if I didn’t want
having a heart-to-heart with Luke, I knew through to my soul it would
to talk out of line if I didn’t acknowledge his sharing.

His hand went up my back and twisted in my hair. With a gentle
pulled my head back so I was looking at him.

He started talking again, his voice such a low rumble I felt it against
skin. “During those eight years, Ava babe, I wasn’t someone you’d
know.”

I couldn’t stop myself. I didn’t even try. My hand went to his chest
my body pressed against his.

lking. “Luke,” I whispered.

knows I wanted to tell him there was nothing he could do, no one he could
/ay.” that I didn’t want to know, and I didn’t even care what scary shit he
who he did it for. That was how much he meant to me.

country. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t open myself up like that.

roud of Luke went on, “A few weeks after I left that life, my dad died. I
nents, I reconnect with you, then *you* left *me* for five years.”

ked me My heart lurched because there was definitely accusation in his tone.

and I’m I closed my eyes and tilted my head forward so my forehead was
on his chin.

ow this. He kissed me there and kept talking. “Ava, I need you to tell me what
at he’d didn’t pick up the phone.”

“I can’t.” My voice was so soft even I had trouble hearing it.

“You will,” he replied in a voice nearly as soft as mine and it m
shiver.

it to be Luke felt the shiver. His hand left my hair and his arms wrapped
be way^{me}.

I waited for him to say more but he didn't. Instead, he held me
tug he processed all he said, tied it in a bundle and buried it deep. He kept
me until the tension ebbed out of me again.

inst my And he kept holding me until I fell asleep.

want to



AS USUAL, sometime deep in the night, Luke pulled me over his body.

ek and Not as usual, he stopped when I was on top of him.

His hands went over my bottom, down the backs of my thighs
knees and then he pulled my legs up so I was straddling him. As h
ould be went between our bodies, my head came up.

did or “What’s going on?” I mumbled in a sleepy voice.

He didn't answer. Instead he did an ab curl, sitting up, taking n
him at the same time he guided himself inside me.

tried to “Oh my God,” I whispered at the shock and thrill of it.

One of his arms hooked around my waist, the other one went into
ie. and tilted my head down to his.

resting “I want you to feel it,” he told me, his voice husky.

The husky voice mixed with him filling me worked like a charm
hy you instantly way turned on and I started to move. His arm went from aro
waist, his hand slid down my arm, taking hold of my hand and pu
between our bodies.

ade me I kept moving, sliding up and down on top of him, my lips on his
brought our hands between us and his fingers pressed mine to wh
around joined.

I had to admit, I liked the feel of us. We felt sexy and hot and w
while I having my fingers touch our physical connection opened something
holding me, something I really wanted to stay closed.

“Luke,” I breathed.

“Quiet, beautiful. Just move.”

I did as he asked and moved, slowly, rhythmically. All the while
our hands between us, his other hand in my hair, tilting my head
slanted so my mouth was on his. Every once in a while, he’d kiss me,
touching his tongue to mine briefly and pulling away.

to my It didn’t take long before I felt it—what he was talking about, v
is hand wanted me to feel.

It was our connection. Not just our bodies but more. It was about
ne with it was about understanding, it was about the fact that we fit together
fact that everything was just simply *exactly* as it should be.

It was right.

my hair When I felt it, it overwhelmed me, shot straight through that oper
of me right to the soft, vulnerable spot I kept guarded, and even t
right.

The tears came to my eyes, spilling over silently, falling down my
l. I was but I kept moving.
und my

“There it is,” Luke whispered. His voice had gone from husky to h
illing it

“I can’t do this, Luke,” I whispered back.

is as he “You can.”

ere we I pulled my hand from his, but only so I could wrap both my arms around his shoulders and I kept moving. “I can’t.”

et, and “So you can’t. We’ll do it together. That’s the point, babe.”

inside I knew that. Now, I knew it.

“You don’t get it,” I told him, still moving.

“Tell me,” he replied gently, his hand sliding up my back making me tremble.

he held I slid down and stayed down so he completely filled me. I lay down, feeling of Luke deep inside me.

, softly, I took a moment to memorize it before I said, “This can’t go bad.”

what he “It won’t go bad.”

“It can’t.”

history, “Ava—”

and the “Luke, you have to know, it won’t be like the other guys. If it’s your turn, it’ll be worse.” My voice went softer, lower, barely a whisper. “If this goes on, it’ll destroy me.”

ied part His hand stilled on my back and I waited, holding my breath.

hat felt The moment of truth.

No man wanted that responsibility. I knew it, I’d seen it time and time again on the girls’ faces. They liked to be in the chase. Luke didn’t want me actually to be his. He wanted to *make* me belong to him. Once he did, I was like his property, easily disposed of. Admitting to him that he had that power over me, would be the ultimate turn off. Guys wanted girls they couldn’t have,

could win them and then destroy them. Guys didn't want girls who pinns tight them, loved them most of their life. That was just too easy.

His hand in my hair fisted.

"You sayin' you belong to me?" he asked. His voice had gone hoarse to gruff.

"No, I'm saying if this doesn't work out—"

ing me I didn't finish. He whipped me around so I was on my back, he top and he ground his hips into me.

ved the Ho-ly *shit* but that felt good.

"Luke," I breathed, my voice catching on his name as the slo started sprinting.

"Admit it, Ava, you were sayin' you belonged to me."

"No."

He pulled out, slammed back in and started grinding again.

ou, it'll Yes! My brain screamed.

es bad, "Do you feel it?" he asked.

I nodded and whispered, "I feel it."

"Then you belong to me."

"Luke."

gain. He pulled out and slammed back in again and my breath hitched. long to body jolted.

s lamp, "Say it," he demanded.

I knew I held on to my denial. "No."

so they He did a repeat of the pull and slam.

ned for “Say it.”

“No!” I shouted.

I lifted my head, pressed my lips to his and kissed him, sliding my tongue from his mouth.

That was when it went wild. He didn’t stop between the pull and just kept pounding into me again and again and again, and it must be loved every single mind-blowing stroke.

I lifted my legs at the knees, pressing them into his sides as my hands roamed, my nails scratched. I kissed, licked, and I may have gotten control and given him an actual junior high school love bite at the base of his neck.

With his hands at my ass lifting my hips to take his thrusts, I finished so close, I called his name, ready to finish.

And he stopped.

I’d arched my neck in preparation for climax, but my chin jerked back and I stared at him. “Don’t stop!” I shouted.

“Do you belong to me?” he asked.

Even in the throes of pre-orgasm, my mouth dropped open.

Then I snapped, “I hate you Lucas Stark!”

I saw his white grin.

l as my “Yeah,” he murmured. “You belong to me.”

Then he started moving again. And he didn’t stop this time.

And he left me believing that regular position sex definitely has its merits.



WE WERE FACE-TO-FACE, my hands pressed against his chest, my leg wrapped around his hip, his fingers stroking the back of my thigh.

tongue I had my eyes closed, and even though I'd come down from my
getting-what-was-between-us orgasm, my heart hadn't stopped beating
fast. In fact, it was pounding so hard I was certain Luke could hear it
slams,
said, I it.

"You scared?" he murmured.

7 hands Yep, he could feel it.

out of "Yes," I whispered, and do not ask me why I told him the truth.

e of his I was scared. I was scared out of my mind.

"Of me?" he asked.

ally got "Yes," I answered honestly again, and I actually started trembling.

He stopped stroking my leg. His fingers slid over my bottom, I
wrapped around my waist and he pulled me closer to the heat of him.

d down "Finally," he muttered, "I'm gettin' somewhere."

I was so screwed.

He certainly is getting somewhere and I like where he's getting
Ava said dreamily.

I don't think your fuck buddies idea is working, Bad Ava told me
huff.

I ignored Good Ava and Bad Ava and Luke held me tight until
tremors slid away.

had its Then I called, "Luke?"

"Yeah, babe?"

rapped “What was with the handcuffs?”

His arm got even tighter. “If I had to, I was gonna cuff you to me
y post-His head came up and he kissed my shoulder then he settled again a
ing tooquietly, “I didn’t have to.”

nd feel Hell and damnation.

I just kept giving myself away.

his arm

! Good

re on a

ntil the

“What was with the handcuffs?”

His arm got even tighter. “If I had to, I was gonna cuff you to me again.” His head came up and he kissed my shoulder then he settled again and said quietly, “I didn’t have to.”

Hell and damnation.

I just kept giving myself away.

TWENTY



STRAIGHTER

It had been a long and emotional night, so when I woke up, I still felt and thought I was dreaming. Either that or I was in my pretend place. Those were my excuses for what I did and I was going with them.

See, I woke up before Luke. I woke up happy (yes happy—morning, I hadn't had the chance to put my defenses up yet), warm after a night-of-mind-boggling, life-altering sex, relaxed, curled into his side. The first thing my eyes saw was the wall of his chest.

There were a lot of things about Luke I liked (read: pretty everything), but I liked his chest especially. So since I liked it so much, I was living a dream, I leaned down and kissed it.

I decided I also liked his neck, so once I was done kissing his chest, I shifted up and kissed his neck. Since I was at his neck, I saw that I had given him a hickey the night before, and even though that was silly, just and highly embarrassing, secretly I liked my mark on him so I kissed it too.

You also like his jaw, Good Ava reminded me.

She was right. I *did* like his jaw. Luke had a great, strong jaw.

So I kissed Luke's jaw.

You also like his..., Bad Ava started, but Good Ava threw her halo
Ava. It bonked off Bad Ava's head so Bad Ava snapped at Good Ava,

"Babe," Luke said, his voice husky with sleep, his arms coming
me.

I lifted my head to look at him, planting my hands on his chest,
closer to his face, and still in my dreamy, pretend happy place, I smi
whispered, "Good morning."

t asleep That's when I noticed his face. It was soft and his eyes were
l happy warm, inky and completely unguarded.

n. Whoa.

-it was Whoa, whoa, whoa.

id post- Stop right there.

de, and Before I could react, retreat or even take the moment to memor
look leveled at me, his hands came to my hair, pulling it off my shou
7 much bunch it the back of my head. One hand shifted my hair to his other ha
h and I the fingers of his free hand drifted down my back. His head came up
brushed his lips against mine.

chest, I He settled back into the pillows and his warm, unguarded eyes
. indeed my face as I lay there frozen.

uvenile Good Ava was twirling with delight, à la Maria in the mountain
ed that, beginning of *The Sound of Music*, while Bad Ava had her face in he
and was shaking her head.

Luke's eyes settled back on mine and he murmured, "Christ,
beautiful."

At his words my blood turned to ice. The pretend happy place aro

at Bad exploded and I found I was in the polar arctic, surrounded by snow
Hey! wasteland.

around What was I doing? What on earth was I doing? How had I let it
far?

moving No.

led and No, no, no.

This was wrong. It wasn't right, it was very, very *wrong*.

sleepy, What I was, and forever would be, was Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes.

What I was not was beautiful.

Without a word, I jerked away from him and rolled to a seated position
the side of the bed, nothing but escape on my mind. I had no idea where
going, but I was going there, and fast. I almost had my feet on the floor
ize that his arm sliced around my waist and I was yanked back, across his lap.

lders to “Where are you—?” he started, but I was struggling, out-of-
and and kicking and hitting, my fists connecting with his flesh.

and he I had struggled against Luke before, but not like this. It was like
life or death. And in a way it was life or death because what I just
roamed about Luke was just like dying, and all I knew was I had to get away.

“What the fuck?” Luke clipped, getting hold of my wrists and forcing
s at the back to the bed using his torso. My hips still in his lap and my legs
r hands he half-pinned me, pressing my wrists against the bed at the sides
head.

you're “*Get off me!*” I shrieked, desperate, panicked and out of my mind.

“Jesus,” he muttered, staring at my face.

und me I bucked and pushed against his hands at my wrists. “Get off!”

ow and “Ava, talk to me,” Luke demanded. “What the fuck’s going on?”

“Off!” I cried, my voice hitching as tears clogged my throat.

get this I choked them down and started fighting again. Surprisingly, I got free and somehow slid away, but he yanked me back, rolled full on top and caught my wrists again, jerking them over my head.

“Let me go,” I ordered.

“Talk to me.”

“Let...me...go!” I yelled and bucked viciously.

“Talk, dammit!” he barked in my face.

ition on I stilled at the fury in his voice and for some reason, talked.

re I was “This game...or whatever it is you’re playing with me...is bad e
or when, but don’t you ever lie to me, Lucas Stark.”

At that point, I was ignoring the fact that I lied freely to him.

-control But mine were fibs.

This was huge.

it was His body went solid and his fingers tightened on my wrists.
learned

“Woman, you better fuckin’ explain yourself,” he warned, an
ing my though a chill went through me at his tone, I forged ahead.

useless, “I know I’m a challenge, I know how you guys like that. You ev
of my me last night you were enjoying this.” I closed my eyes tight at the m
opened them again, and then went on, “I am *such* a dork. I should ha
given in right off so you could get your fill and get rid of me.”

I stopped talking and shook my head in disbelief, *at myself*, too ca
in my own drama to feel the dangerous, angry electricity emanatin

Luke and hitting the room.

I kept going.

a wrist “You have what you want, Luke. You like to be straight, okay
p of me straight. We’ll stop playing this game. You win. You and I both know
not going anywhere, no matter how much I fight it. Take what you want
then leave me alone when you’re done with me, but in the meantime
fucking lie to me.”

When I was done, he spoke and his words came through his teeth
got a lot to go over here, babe. We’ll start with when you thought *I*
you.”

I didn’t make him wait for an answer. “You just called me beautiful
enough, both know that isn’t true. You want *me* to clue in? *You* clue in, Luke.
I’ve had a crush on you since I first saw you. I wish it wasn’t true,
fact of the matter is I’m a sure thing. You don’t have to lie and tell
beautiful.”

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ shittin’ me.” He was still talking through
teeth.

d even “Oh yeah? And why’s that? Luke, you’ve *seen* me. You’ve known
since I was eight years old.”

ren told “Yeah, I have, and you’ve been beautiful since you were eight years
memory, My eyes went instantly wide and my mouth dropped open.
ave just snapped it shut.

I couldn’t believe he was still playing that game.

ught up “Fuck off!” I yelled and bucked again.

g from Luke didn’t go anywhere. He just stared at me.

If it was possible, he sounded even angrier when he said, “She really did a number on you, didn’t they?”

“Who?”

“That mother and those fuckin’ sisters of yours.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Oh please,” I said, and then made a noise that sounded like “foof.”

“Do I have to drag you in front of a mirror?”

“I know what I look like, Luke,” I snapped.

“Doesn’t sound like it to me, babe.”

I bucked again. “Get off.”

“Hello? Luke didn’t move. “My ma said it, your dad said it. Jesus, even but she said it. You were always the prettiest one of that fuckin’ cat’s den. You know I’m you think they were all so goddamn mean to you?”

“Hardly,” I snapped. “I was fat and ugly. I had bad hair and thick glasses, for God’s sake.”

“You were never more than chubby, babe, not until you grew old. They had plenty of time to get under your skin. And you had beautiful fantastic eyes and the best fuckin’ smile I’d ever seen in my life. You’re old.” do.”

I stopped struggling and stared at him, mainly because he sounded meant it, and I couldn’t believe that. Even though I couldn’t believe *nothing* about him was suggesting he was feeding me a line.

He went on, “Worse for them, you were smarter, funnier and more popular. People liked to be around you.”

Ho-ly *crap*.

it, they He sounded like he meant that too.

“My dad used to say that the man who got you would be the luckiest unluckiest man alive because he’d have you for a lifetime, but he’d also to put up with them.”

All of a sudden, I was finding it hard to breathe.

” “Your dad said that about...about...*me*?” I asked breathlessly.

“It was the only thing he and I ever agreed about.”

Okay, it was then I totally forgot how to breathe.

“Now let’s talk about the rest of the shit that came out of your mouth.”
Luke continued.

my dad Uh-oh.

Why do I wasn’t even finished dealing with all he’d just said. I didn’t want into me blurting out that I’d had a crush on him since forever, I was thing and that he’d won.

I wore I was *such a fucking* dork!

ler, and Immediately, I said, “I need to brush my teeth.”

ul hair, His eyes narrowed.

ou still “No fuckin’ way,” he clipped.

“I need quiet space,” I tried.

like he He shook his head.
ieve it,

“Luke, you told me any time I needed something—”

l nicer. “Quiet, Ava.”

I decided from his deathly tone it was prudent that I be quiet.

Luke stared at me while I mentally zipped my lips and then he

talking.

“I’ve been straight with you since the beginning. Something, I might not have you haven’t been with me. But I’ll be even straighter ’cause it’s obvious we are just not fuckin’ gettin’ it.”

Oh no, not this again. Luke being “straighter.”

Ee-yikes.

“I want this...” he said and he let go of my wrists. His finger touched my forehead then slid across it and down the side of my face. “And I want this...” He fell to the side, his hand moved down my body and I sucked my breath when he cupped me between my legs. His hand stayed there a moment before it glided down the inside of my thigh, pushing it open so he could get on top of me again, settling between my legs. “I’m not stupid. I know my heart’s involved in this, and I’ve never, not once in all the time you’ve been with me, given you the idea that I won’t handle it with care.”

Oh...my...*God*.

Someone, shoot me, kidnap me, cuff me to a sink, anyone! My head screamed.

“Luke—” I interrupted.

“I’m talkin’,” he bit off.

I shut up.

“I don’t put up with the shit you’ve handed me the last week because you’re some fuckin’ piece I want to conquer. I put up with it because I liked you since you were eight years old. You made me laugh, you understood me. You looked out for me when no one else fuckin’ bothered and you acted like you thought I could move mountains and I started

someone who thought that about me because my dad sure as fuck didn't
ght add, "Please, stop," I whispered, because now I *really* needed quiet s
ous you order to process this latest episode with Luke, from waking to now. Al

He ignored me. "I never expected I'd want you in my bed, but I
knew I wanted you in my life. The fuckin' second you looked at my m
the office, though, I knew I would stop at nothin' to get you in my bec
hed me thought then too, that for the first time in my life I might do somethi
l I want my dad and I would be proud of, and that's bein' with you."

My throat went so tight, the breath I sucked in sounded ragged.

He didn't just say that.

Did he?

"Get this into your head, Ava. I'm not gonna do anything to fuck
known between us, but I'm also not gonna let *you* do anything to fuck it up eit

"Luke, I have to get out of here," I said, and it sounded like a de
plea, mainly because it was one.

"I told you once, you're not goin' *anywhere*. And now I'll tell y
rest too."

Oh shit.

There was more.

I didn't want to know the rest.

Unfortunatly, Luke was on a roll.

"This is the way it is for us right now. I know you fixed this place
I'm not givin' up the loft so we're gonna have to work somethin' ou
othered where we live, eat, sleep and fuck. We last, you're gonna have to give
needed Range Rover. They're dangerous because they roll easy and I don't l

't." drivin' it. We go the distance, we're havin' a small wedding. I'm not
pace in dancin'. And I want three kids, all boys, but if we have a girl she's no
l of it. until she's twenty-five, *especially* if she looks like you, got me?"

always I didn't answer. Couldn't answer. I'd lost the ability to speak.

mouth in His face got closer. "Do you still think I'm playin' games?"

l. And I I shook my head.

n' both One thing was for certain, Luke was not playing games.

And now I didn't know how to feel about *that*.

Great, like I needed something new to worry about.

He rolled off of me and onto his back, putting one hand to his forel

ck it up "Jesus Christ," he muttered to the ceiling. "All those times I sa
her." office laughing my ass off at stories of Lee, Eddie, Hank and Vance
should have fuckin' medals."

isperate I thought that was kind of insulting, not only to me but to my

you the However, I thought it best at that juncture not to share that opinion. In
pulled the comforter around my naked body, got up on an elbow to
him and decided, since he seemed to be done, to find some quiet s
soon as possible.

In order to do that, I asked softly, "Can I brush my teeth now?"

His eyes cut to me.

Eek!

up, but Maybe he wasn't done.

it about "No, Ava, you can't fuckin' brush your teeth."

up the All righty then. There you go, he wasn't done.
ike you

fuckin’ I shouldn’t have had to ask permission to brush my teeth, but I wa
t datin’ to give in on that considering the air hadn’t yet lost any of its dar
electricity. Not to mention Luke just announced he was already d
where we were going to live, what car was safe for me to drive, what
wedding and how many children we were going to have.

And all of this, I had to admit, made my stomach feel melty.

“Come here,” he ordered, voice gruff and still pissed off.

That made my stomach feel even more melty.

Even so, I hesitated.

read. “Are you still mad at me?” I asked.

t in the “Fuck yeah,” he answered.

e. They “Maybe I should give *you* some quiet space,” I told him, tryin
helpful, but with the ulterior motive that quiet space for Luke mean
friends. space for me.

stead, I His hand shot out and grabbed my forearm, giving it a yank. I
look at onto him and he rolled, taking me with him so I was on the bottom. T
pace as shifted his hips until my legs opened and he fell between.

It was at that moment, all hope of quiet space died.

“You caused it, you’re gonna help me work it out. And that’s
intend to do, by fuckin’ you so hard you’ll still feel me inside you eve
I’m gone.”

“Wow,” I whispered, yes, out loud.

His head bent, his lips came to mine and he muttered, “You better
believe it.”

And he did exactly what he said he would do.

s going And when he was done, it was so good I thought if we “w
1gerousdistance” (as Luke put it) pissing him off every morning might be the
ecidinggo.

kind of



I WAS SITTING on my wicker loveseat on my porch, my heels on th
finishing up a toasted sesame bagel with cream cheese, drinking a c
trying (and failing) to get my head together.

This was partly because everything that happened last night a
morning was too much to get together, and partly because, between n
I could still feel Luke even though he was gone. And let me tell you, i
nice feeling.

There was a chill in the air, but I had a space heater going. I
g to be thrown on some fleecy sweatpants, wooly socks and a hoodie, so
it quiet comfy, snugly warm even though I was feeling thoroughly fucke
literally and figuratively.

toppled Oo, I’m happy, Good Ava sighed.

Then he What I want to know is, Bad Ava asked, does this mean we’re no
to get to sleep with Ren?

Oh for crap’s sake.

what I Bad Ava was such a slut.

n when Luke was upstairs taking a shower while I was on the porch freakin

I was freaking out because I believed everything Luke said. He v
brutally honest to be lying. Which meant I had to rethink everything;
fuckin’ my life and who I was and that was an impossible task without cook
Sissy.

ent the What I did know was that I was someone special to Luke, and I
way to had been, just like he was and always had been to me. And that kno
made my world tilt so much, I was certain I was going to fall off.

“Babe.”

e edge, I looked to the side and Luke was standing in the door, fully c
liet and watching me.

nd this God, he was good-looking. Even with the angry cut on his ch
y legs, maybe especially with the angry cut on his cheek, he was unbelievably

it was a “Hey,” I said, thinking I’d not had nearly enough quiet space to po
that was tumbling around in my head.

’d also I needed at least an hour or maybe two hundred and seventeen of th

o I was He walked in, sat down beside me and rested an ankle on his o
d, both knee. He put his arm around my shoulders, pulled me into his side and
the top of my head.

“You okay?” he asked.

it going “No,” I answered, staring straight ahead through the window to m
“Are you okay?”

His arm got tighter. “I’m fuckin’ great.”

Well, he would be.

ing out. Not to be conceited or anything, but I got a little carried away
was too minutes ago and I knew Luke liked it. He’d got me so turned on, I ma
g about lie back and let me have my way with him for a good long while. If
ies and miss my guess, considering the low growl he made when it happer
assisted in his having an even more mind-blowing orgasm than the
gave me.

always And, I had to say, I was pretty proud of that.

wledge He plucked the soda out of my hand and set it aside. Then he pu
into his lap and turned me to him, his arms loose around me.

“Gotta say, babe,” he said in The Voice, but it was The Voice mix
lressed, a kind of sexy rumble. “You’re good with your mouth.”

See! I told you.

EEK, OR “When you aren’t usin’ it to speak,” he finished.

r hot. I glared at him. He grinned at me.

nder all I stopped glaring at him when I noticed his grin was like the gr
given me last night. It was sexy and warm, and in the light of day, I cc
nem. my finger on what was different.

pposite His face had lost its hardness. It was completely soft and unguarde

I kissed Oh.

Wow.

His hands came to either side of my head and he tilted it towa
y yard. close, closer, until our foreheads were touching and our noses were al
each other’s.

He looked me in the eyes. “We straight?” he asked softly.

I nodded.

y thirty “You cool with everything that’s gone down?”

ide him I shook my head.

I didn’t He touched his lips to mine. “You’ll get there.”

one he I didn’t share his positive attitude. He noted this on my face, I
because he chuckled. I ignored the chuckle and lifted my head away fr

His hands moved. One went to my neck, the other one sifted into the
lled me the side of my head, going through it, down my back, then his arm c
rest around my waist.

ed with I carefully touched my fingers just below his cut.

“Does it hurt?” I whispered, my eyes on the cut.

“No.”

“Do you think someone should look at it?”

“No.”

in he’d “Will it leave a scar?”

ould put “Doesn’t matter.”

d. My eyes moved to his and my hand opened on his face, cupping I
my thumb trailing down the side of his ’tache.

“It was the song,” I said quietly.

“Come again?” Luke asked.

rd him, I took in a breath, scared of sharing, not wanting another episo
ongside thinking, because he had bled for me and might even carry a scar
(even if it really was his own damned fault, it was also partially mine,
better) that he deserved an explanation.

“Ren had just told me if you weren’t keeping Sissy safe, he would
grateful to know he was a good guy, there aren’t many out there.”

When I saw Luke’s eyes turn intense and felt his body go still, I
on.

[knew,
om his. “Then Stella sang ‘I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.’ It’s a beautifu
Ren put his arms around me and I didn’t even think.”

hair at Luke's mouth got tight, which I took as a warning sign (finally came to learning) so I continued.

"Anyway, something weird was happening. It seemed like I was singing it to Mace. What with the song being so pretty and my mind on Stella—"

"Mace had a thing with Stella," Luke told me.

My gossip antennae perked up.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

his jaw, "None of my business. None of yours, either, unless Mace or Stella want to share."

One thing I knew for certain, Mace was never going to want to talk about Stella. That meant Stella's name was scratched on my list of people to call that day.

de, but "Babe."

for me My unfocused eyes refocused on Luke and he hadn't lost any intensity. I knew

"Let's get back to Zano."

l. I was "I still feel you," I blurted in an effort *not* to talk about Ren.

Luke just looked at me.

rushed Crap.

In for a penny...

il song. My thumb moved to trace his bottom lip and I watched it go, my mind on his fantastic mouth, and it hit me that I knew, intimately, how that mo

, I was on practically every part of me. That knowledge made my stomach feel
and my voice sound lower and kind of raspy when I spoke again.

he was “Between my legs,” I whispered, my gaze lifting from his mouth
n Maceeyes. “I still feel you.”

His eyes turned to ink, right before he muttered, “Jesus.”

“I really love your mouth,” I told him. Do *not* ask me why, I was h
moment.

“Ava.” Now *his* voice sounded lower and kind of raspy.

I took a deep breath and pulled back a bit, dropping my hand fr
face and purposefully breaking my moment before I said something
stupid.

la want

“Just thought you’d want to know,” I finished.

o share. Luke didn’t feel like having the moment broken. He brought me
at day. him and gave me a quick but hard kiss.

of his “Beautiful,” he started when he was done, his eyes on mine, a
intensity had changed to something that made me shiver in a good way
just demonstrated exactly why I would fight and bleed for you. Zano
that’s what I’ve got and he wants it and I’m not gonna let him anywhere
it. I’m askin’ you to help me with that and I’m askin’ you to help Zano
giving him mixed signals.”

Was I giving Ren mixed signals?

I *was* giving Ren mixed signals.

Shit!

eyes on “I’m such a dork,” I mumbled.

uth felt

Luke shook his head. “You’re beautiful, you’re sweet and you’re

l funny You're also bein' loyal to your friend and tryin' to take care of he
she's in a bad situation. You're dealin' with this at the same time
1 to his dealin' with a lot of other shit, internally and externally."

It must be said, I loved it that he understood. It made me feel all
snugly warm, but on the inside.

aving a This I didn't share.

His hand tightened on my neck and he brushed his mouth again
again. "Let me deal with the external shit. You just focus on sorting o
om his head. Deal?"

g ultra- I nodded.

He kissed my nose then his hand went away from my neck. H
went around me again and thankfully he changed the subject.

back to "The bad guys know they gotta work out their issues with Vito.
why Zano's called off Santo. You're in the clear, but I don't trust it ye
and his want you callin' in to me regularly."

y. "You I nodded again. I had enough dealing with the emotional trauma c
knows and the possibility of bearing him three sons. I didn't need to get kid
ere near again.

o by not "What are your plans for today?" he asked.

"Sort out my Range Rover. Go see Sissy. Workout. Shop for gr
Maybe Shirleen and I'll go see Bobby. And I need to go to your place
my stuff."

"No."

I looked down at him. "What?"

l funny. "Leave your stuff at my place, you can go there to unpack, but leav

r when “A lot of stuff I need is there.”

you’re “You’re goin’ to the store. Double up.”

Shit.

comfy, Doubling up on necessities between my house and Luke’s.

Okay, so maybe I needed *five* hundred and seventeen hours to complete all this shit.

st mine “Luke, maybe we have more talking to do.” I made a suggestion
ut your didn’t think was a suggestion, as such.

His arms became tight. He leaned in, kissed my neck, and then
taking me with him. He turned, set me back in the seat and put a hand
is arms seat on either side of me so his face was close to mine.

“Life’s too short. I’m through talkin’. This is happening, we both know
That’s we both feel it and you even admitted it. Ava babe, stop fighting it.”

t. I still I sighed, because in the heat of one of my many freakouts, I *did* admit

of Luke I was such a dork.

napped This meant I was with Luke Stark. I was Luke Stark’s girlfriend. I
was Luke Stark’s woman. There was a nuance of difference between
man’s girlfriend and a man’s woman, but that nuance was pretty
significant.

oceries. Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

and get This should have made me happy. In fact, everything that morning
have made me doing-cartwheels-of-joy ecstatic.

Instead, what I felt was scared. Shit scared to the depths of my soul.

I sighed again and told him, “I need my computer.”
re it.”

“I’ll get Matt or Jack to deal with it.”

“Luke.”

He leaned in and kissed me, hot and heavy, proving he was through talking.

pe with When done, he lifted up and lightly kissed my nose.

“Call in,” he ordered softly.

n that I He moved away as I watched, my stomach still melty, my heart throat.

got up I wanted to be excited. I wanted to think Good-Ava-twirling l on themountains-like-Maria thoughts, but all I could do was think about would feel like when he walked away for good.

know it, When he was at the door, he stopped and turned back to me.

“One more thing.”

mit it. Shit, I didn’t think I could handle one more thing.

“What?” I asked, deciding it was best to get it over with quickly.

Vorse, I “I’m gonna get serious shit about this hickey today, beautiful. Y being a me.”

fucking Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

He gave me his sexy half-grin and I knew he didn’t care, not even bit, about the shit he’d get or the hickey.

should “Lucas Stark, I do *not* owe you,” I shouted at his back, but he was

l.

“I’ll get Matt or Jack to deal with it.”

“Luke.”

He leaned in and kissed me, hot and heavy, proving he was indeed through talking.

When done, he lifted up and lightly kissed my nose.

“Call in,” he ordered softly.

He moved away as I watched, my stomach still melty, my heart in my throat.

I wanted to be excited. I wanted to think Good-Ava-twirling-in-the-mountains-like-Maria thoughts, but all I could do was think about what it would feel like when he walked away for good.

When he was at the door, he stopped and turned back to me.

“One more thing.”

Shit, I didn’t think I could handle one more thing.

“What?” I asked, deciding it was best to get it over with quickly.

“I’m gonna get serious shit about this hickey today, beautiful. You owe me.”

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

He gave me his sexy half-grin and I knew he didn’t care, not even a little bit, about the shit he’d get or the hickey.

“Lucas Stark, I do *not* owe you,” I shouted at his back, but he was gone.



EARNING RETRIBUTION

After Luke left, I made coffee and poured myself a cup, then I went to my phone and walked back to my porch.

First up, I called Shirleen.

“Oowee, girl!” Shirleen yelled in my ear. “You are workin’ on bein’ Premier Rock Chick, what with Luke Stark fightin’ in a parking lot over there. I heard there was blood. Was there blood? Oh wait...” She stopped to listen as she shouted, “Oowee!” again, but not in my ear, to someone in her office. She came back to me. “Luke just walked in. Girl, you *are* the Premier Rock Chick. Even with that nasty gash, that boy looks like the cat who got his cream. He musta got the cream if that hickey is anything to go by. Hickeys! I love it!”

Shit!

Why did I give Luke a hickey? Why? I was never going to live it down. Shirleen kept on in my ear. “Did he get his cream? If so, how many times? I want details.”

I wasn’t going to talk about Luke getting his cream, not any of the times he got it.

“Shirleen, I’m calling about Bobby. Any updates?”

“Fit as a fiddle, except that fractured skull. Functions coming back and two make four again. If all keeps goin’ good, they’re releasing tomorrow to finish recuperatin’ at home.”

“Thank God for that,” I said, and I meant it.

“Now, details,” Shirleen returned.

“No, now I want to know what’s up with my car.”

“Car’s bein’ delivered this mornin’, any time now.”

it to get “Do they expect payment on delivery or are they going to invoice me

“Luke’s taken care of it.”

I went silent.

ein’ the “Ava, you there?” Shirleen asked.

ver you.

“What do you mean Luke’s taken care of it?”

d and I

It was Shirleen’s turn to go silent.

e in the

Then she muttered, “Uh-oh.”

Premier

who just

“You say he’s there?” I asked.

o by. A

“Uh, yeah.”

“Can you please put him on the phone?”

own.

“Maybe you need to deep breathe,” Shirleen advised.

y times.

“Please put him on the phone.”

She sighed and put me on hold.

ie three

For some reason, of all the shit that had gone down between Luke and me, this was something I could not allow. I’d let him be a pretty pushy guy, macho man with me, but I could pay my own goddamned way.

“Yeah?” Luke said as greeting.

ck, two “It’s Ava,” I told him, sounding snippy.

n’ him “I know, beautiful,” he replied, sounding like he was smiling.

I ignored the melty feeling in my belly at his calling me “beautiful” because he sounded like he was smiling. I liked it even before I knew he meant it every way it could mean. It was *way* better than “babe.”

“Did you pay for the repairs on my Range Rover?” I asked him.

“Yeah.”

ne?” “Why?”

“Why not?” he answered.

I felt my hold on my temper slip. “Luke, it’s *my* car.”

“Ava, you’re *my* woman.”

I ignored the melty feeling that gave me too. “So?”

“So you’re my woman, I take care of you.”

“Luke—”

“This isn’t up for discussion.”

“It sure as hell is!”

“I’m thinkin’, as payback for the hickey, I want you in that pinhead thing tonight.”

Was he for real?

“Luke!”

ike and “Later.”

l, tough Disconnect.

Argh!

I fought the urge to throw my phone through the window, but it called Ally.

l” when “Hey,” she answered.

ant it in “Yo,” I said.

“You okay after last night?” Ally asked.

“I’m officially Luke’s woman after last night.”

“Yep, that’s the way since the dawn of time. Two men want th thing, they fight over it and winner takes all.”

“What with struggling with Iron Man Mace, I wasn’t keeping clos but it didn’t seem like anyone was winning.”

“Luke won when he behaved like a Neanderthal, elbowed you in tl and still, without a peep from you, you got in his car with him.”

Yikes.

I had to admit, that was true.

“What was that about Luke thinking about someone else when with you?” Ally asked.

k teddy Shit.

I knew I’d have to get into that.

“Luke explained I had the wrong end of the stick,” I told her.

“Well, chickie, just to warn you, the girls have been chewing over night and all morning. Roxie thinks you think it’s her. Jules is pretty you think it’s her. Who was it?”

“Jules,” I answered. “I saw them together and got the wrong impre

“That’s what I figured. Listen, Jules and Luke had a thing. It wa

Instead she thought Vance had broken up with her. Once she found out that
—”

My stomach plummeted.

“What?” I whispered, interrupting her.

Silence for a beat then, “Oh shit.”

“What did you say?” I asked.

the same “Ava—”

“What kind of ‘thing’ did Jules and Luke have?”

the track, “It was nothing.”

Oh...my...*God*.

the head “What kind of thing?” I repeated.

“It only lasted a couple of days.”

My heart was racing and I was pretty certain I was going to throw up

he was “Ava? You there?”

“I have to go.”

“Ava.”

“Later.”

I disconnected then I punched in Luke’s cell number.

that all “Babe,” he answered, sounding amused. “I want you to call in, but
certain don’t have to do it every five minutes.”

ssion.” I didn’t dillydally. “You had a thing with Jules when she thought
broke up with her.”

is brief, Silence, then he hissed, “*Fuck*.”

He didn’t deny it.

: Vance Shit!

I felt an ugly feeling slide through my body, a feeling I'd felt once in my life. It was the day my mom sat Marilyn, Sofia and I down, and crying and carrying on, she informed us Dad had left us.

I pulled myself together and said, "You forgot to mention that last
"Ava—"

I heard a knock at my front door. "My car's here. I have to go."

"Leave it, we have to talk."

"Life's too short, Luke. I'm through talking."

Then I disconnected.

I ran to the front door and got the keys to my car from a blonde wearing greasy blue coveralls. My phone rang while I did this, but I picked it up. It stopped when the answering machine kicked in. No one left a message.

I ran upstairs, got dressed and shoved clothes in my workout bag. My phone rang again while I did this, but I continued to ignore it.

Then I ran out to my Range Rover, tossed my bag in and took off.



I HAD a feeling Luke would come looking for me so I went to a different gym and paid for a day pass.

While working out I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt.

: Vance However, there was no denying that we'd had several hot and cold discussions about a variety of things and not once did he mention his "thing" with Jules, no matter how short.

Furthermore, not only was Roxie Luke's first guess about who I

he had feelings for, Roxie also thought that, and I wanted to know why
before After my workout, I showered, dressed, went and sat in the Range
d while and opened my phone.

I had seven missed calls. Two were from Luke, three from Ally, one
night.” Shirleen and the last one from Jules.

So, of course, I called Daisy.

“Sugar, everyone is lookin’ for you. Where are you?” she asked when
answered her phone.

“In my car, listen Daisy—”

She interrupted me. “Ally is freakin’ out. She let the cat out of
but, girl, it sounds a lot worse than what it was. Jules is upset. She was
a fuck guy to understand what happened—”
ignored

I interrupted right back. “I want to know about Roxie.”
I left a

“Roxie is freakin’ out too! She likes you with Luke, we all do. This
get weird, like it was weird for a while when Vance and Luke both were
ag. My

I didn’t want to hear about Vance and Luke and Jules, I wanted to talk
about Roxie.

“No, I want to know why Roxie thought it was her that I thought
I had a thing for.”
I went gym

“Pardon?” Daisy asked.

“Last night, when Luke and I were arguing about it, his first guess
was who Ren meant was Roxie. Ally told me Roxie thought I thought it was
I had a heavy Why would both of them think that?”
I had a

Silence.

“Daisy, please, tell me,” I begged.
I thought

7. “Sugar, I know you’re lookin’ for a way to protect your heart. But e Rover lookin’ in the wrong direction. I have to tell you, the best way to prote heart is to trust it to a man who’ll take care of it for you.”

ne from Right. Like such a man existed.

I did not *think* so.

hen she “Last night and this morning Luke and I talked a lot,” I told Dai said a lot of shit to me, all of it I wanted to believe. The problem declared he was through talking this morning and it seems there’s a lo out. I can’t trust my heart to a man who’d keep something fro Especially if it’s about people in his life, which will mean if I stay w the bag they’ll be people in my life. That means in the Rock Chick Hot Bun nts you I’ll be the chump, and I don’t want to be the chump. Can you und that?”

Daisy said softly, “I can understand that.”

s could “Please then, tell me.”
re—”

o know She sighed. “First off, you have to know these girls are not you girls. The Rock Chicks are special and the Hot Bunch know that.”

it Luke I kept silent and waited.

“Okay then,” she went on. “Luke threw down with Roxie when playin’ her bodyguard. It wasn’t a big deal. He just told her he was int if it didn’t work out with her and Hank.”

ss as to The news hit me like a blow.
vas her.

Strike one.

“Then he kind of fell for Jules when they were trainin’ and v together. That went a little further, because Luke went for it after ev

you're thought Vance broke up with her and then went out of town, so he kept your keepin' his eye on things. Nothin' came of it, mainly because Jules had already given her heart to Vance, but somethin' special grew out of Jules and Luke. Ava listen to me, it's somethin' sweet and special and innocent that grew out of it. Vance and Luke are friends and—"

Strike two.
Daisy. "He is, he left anyone?"

"Sugar," Daisy said softly, and she sounded disappointed. "Don't mess with him that."

"So let's play what if. What if Vance *had* broken up with Jules? How would Luke be now?"

"What if is a stupid game. He didn't break up with her, end of story. I knew where Luke would be now. I knew by his relentless, tough macho man pursuit of me. He "fell for Jules" as Daisy put it. If Vance had broken up with her, right now Jules would be in Luke's loft and I'd be contemplating when he would let his and Jules's daughter date if she liked Jules. Likely it'd be at age forty if she looked like Jules."

Then it hit me. Jules was pregnant. Hell, if she was with Luke she'd be pregnant with *his* baby.

"Oh my God," I whispered, almost certain I was going to puke.

"That doesn't sound good," Daisy mumbled.

"I have to go," I said again.

"Come over to my house, we'll talk," Daisy replied on a rush. "I'll bring everyone girls over—"

wasn't "Later, Daisy."

les had Yeah, much later...as in never. To cut off Luke, I had to cut off th
that for Chicks completely. And I liked the Rock Chicks a lot.

I totally And that was strike three.

"Wait!" I heard Daisy cry before I disconnected.

t, Indy, I tossed my cell into the passenger seat, put my hands on the s
wheel and rested my head on them.

be like *You think she should talk to him now? Hear his side of the story? I
to him explain about how he tried it on with half the Rock Chicks? I
broke it off with Sandra Whoever-She-Was without batting an eye? I
Where didn't mention any of this shit during his "straight talk?" Bad Ava
Good Ava.*

y." Good Ava didn't answer.

gh guy, She was too busy quietly crying.

nce had



re'd be I TURNED off my phone and went to a travel agent. I booked a last min
looked to an all-inclusive in St. Croix, leaving the next morning at oh-dark-thi

ould I went to a card shop, bought a card, paper and a pen and wrote
long note, explaining everything. Then I went to an Internet Café, e
my clients and told them I had a family emergency that would near
out of town for two weeks and I looked up the address for Nigh
Investigations on the web.

I posted the card to Sissy, care of Nightingale Investigations. Then
get the to the mall and bought a bunch of new stuff for my trip, including I
because mine was at Luke's.

Then I went home, scanned the street for Luke's Porsche or any of the Rock-Ford SUVs. Finding none there, I parked in my garage. I lugged them inside and took them upstairs. I was going to spend the night in a hotel before heading to the airport.

I dumped my shopping bags on the bed and rolled the suitcase back to the living room. Then I walked downstairs and arranged my purse and all the paperwork I needed for my trip, including my tickets, on the dining room table. After I went to the kitchen to get a drink, a heavy one. I was going to call a taxi and have it take me to the hotel so I could get as drunk as I liked.

How he And I was going to get *way* drunk.

How he I was mixing it, my back to the kitchen door, when two arms taunted around my waist.

Shit.

I hated it when Luke moved so quietly.

"Let me go," I whispered, and even to my ears my voice sounded like I was shouting.

"Not until I teach you a lesson."

My body went solid.

It did this not because it was Luke who was speaking.

It did this because it was Noah Dexter who was speaking.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.



I FOUGHT HIM.

I went I lost and got hurt doing it. So hurt, I lost consciousness for long enough for him to carry me downstairs to my creepy basement.

The fight had been ugly. I kicked, screamed, bit, punched, tugged,

y blacktumbled.

ny bags He mostly punched, and he was better at it.

el close Before getting knocked out I felt wetness on my face that I was was blood coming from a tear in my lip or from my nose, or both.

eside it. By the time I came to, I had something over my mouth, strong and
ork I'd and I knew it was tape. I licked it and pushed at it with my tongue
r that, I didn't move. He had me in the old coal room, the smallest, darkest
taxi to cramped, most creepy part of the basement, and he was taping my hands
over my head to a steel support pole.

I made a noise that was supposed to communicate "No!" but it
closed come out as much due to the tape.

I felt sick, my head was groggy, I felt dull pain in too many parts
body and I was scared out of my ever lovin' mind.

I got myself together enough to try to pull my body away from him
broken. my hands, but the tape held strong and tore at my skin. Before I could
anywhere, he moved around and pressed into me, moving from my head
starting to tape my arms to the beam. I kept pushing against him and tried to
kick at him but he just pressed deeper until my breastbone connected with
beam so hard I cried out under the tape.

"Sent some PI's after me, didn't you? You stupid fuck," he hissed
ear, his body still pressing into the back of mine, hands still wrapped
duct tape around and around my arms. "You should have left it alone
fuckin' redskin sniffin' me out. Someone finds you down here before
enough of thirst, you call them the fuck off. You hear me, Ava?"

I swallowed and it tasted like blood. Then I nodded.

ged and "Christ, I had to leave a mark I'd been workin' for months because

fuckin' shit.”

I closed my eyes and stopped pushing against him when he started certain my chest to the beam. I tested the tape at my hands but it held fast.

“And you’re fuckin’ Stark. I cannot believe you’re fuckin’ Luke sticky, Stark, but I saw it with my own eyes.”

e but it My body went still.

t, most He felt it. He stopped wrapping tape around me and laughed.

ds well “Yeah, I watched you, Ava. I watched you and I jacked off while I

t didn’t Oh...my...*God*.

Even though I really, *really* didn’t want him to, he explained, ‘ followin’ you, but you’re never fuckin’ alone. I knew you’d see Ste s of my went there, hopin’ to nab you in the bathroom or somethin’. I watche fight Zano for you, followed you and Stark home and broke into r taping across the street. Lucky for me you guys left the lights on. I watche uld get whole thing. I wish I’d had a camera.”

nds and I was breathing heavily through my nose. I couldn’t believe th ying to happening and I didn’t want to believe what he said.

with the “You were hot,” he whispered, pressing into my back in an d different way. His hand slid across my side to my breast, cupping it. ‘ l in my you against the wall. I thought you were a good girl. I knew you’d ing the fuck you against the wall, I would have stayed around longer.”

e. That Then for some reason his hand went still, his body went tight and h you die came up.

He hissed in my ear, “I have a gun, you make a fuckin’ noise, I blc brains out then I’ll shoot whoever’s up there, too.”

e of this

That was when I heard footfalls upstairs.

to tape “Ava,” Luke’s voice called from upstairs.

I closed my eyes and visions of a bloody, bullet-ridden Luke filled my fuckin’ head.

I opened my eyes again immediately to clear the visions.

“Let’s make this interesting,” Noah muttered, and then he moved a drop the tape but he came right back and he pressed his body into mine did it.” I heard Luke’s footsteps going up the stairs to the top floor just as Noah’s hand on my belt buckle.

“I been My body jerked but Noah hissed, “Not a sound or you’re both dead. I stopped my struggle before it started.

and Stark I could still hear Luke moving around the house and I stayed silent as Noah’s hands undid my pants and one slid inside while the other rolled up my shirt to cup my breast again. I could feel his fingers (not hitting target, by the way, he never did) pressing against me, his other finger was a nipple roll as I listened to Luke moving around the house.

Finally, after it threatened all day, I threw up but choked it back entirely before it made it to my mouth.

‘He did Throughout it all, silently I was crying.

let me I tried to ignore what was happening to me physically by chanting under my head, *don’t come down here, don’t come down here, don’t come down here*

his head Luke didn’t come down. Noah and I heard the front door slam and Luke was gone.

now your I felt both terrified and relieved by this.

“Fuck, now I have a hard-on,” Noah said in my ear, pressing his

against my ass, rubbing against me and his hands kept at me. “You did have a sweet ass,” he mumbled in my ear. “You do it doggie-style Stark as well as against the wall?”

led my

I had. That was one of the three positions of a few days ago.

I did not share. Not only because I couldn’t, as he had taped my closed, but also because it was none of his business and he was dry humping me against a steel pole that he had taped me to, the screaming, unbelievable, horrible, awful, maniac *jerk!*

as I felt

I heard him groan into my neck (luckily, as was usual with No. 1, it didn’t take very long) and he sagged against me when he was done.

ed,” and

I hate you, I thought, and this time I meant it with all my heart.

it, even

His hand swept across my ass.

he went

“Sweet,” he muttered.

ing the

Then he finished taping me to the pole. When he was done, my wrists, arms, chest, waist, knees and ankles were all taped to the bear. I couldn’t move, not even an inch.

k down

He got in my face. “Next time, Ava, if you don’t call off the Irish, I won’t be so nice.”

g in my
here.

I made an angry noise in my throat, but it was too late.

He was gone.

Before he left, he closed the door to the coal room and I heard him lock. The door had a padlock on the outside, don’t ask me why. I’d inherited it from the former owners and never removed it, but I also never locked it.

Now it was locking me in. Even if I was to get loose, I’d be locked in this creepy basement in a room completely devoid of light. But I was taped to my groin.

always hands to ankles to a steel pole, and I didn't know if I could get free
ble with blood in my mouth, the taste of vomit in my throat and had just been v
in a very-not-nice way. Even though I knew it could have been wor
didn't help much in the current situation.

mouth *Keep your head together, darling, Luke will come back looking f*
umping Good Ava whispered in my ear.

ievably *You're strong. You've been strong through a lot. Stay strong, gir*
too, shall pass, Bad Ava whispered in my other ear.

ah, this *I'm scared,* I told them.

So are we, Good Ava admitted.

But we'll make it, Bad Ava said. *We always do.*



FOR A VERY LONG TIME, I alternately hung there and fought against the
hands, Every once in a while I'd make progress, a little more movemen
n and I was exhausting and I wasn't getting very far. So I'd stop and rest an
on trying to get the tape off my mouth by rubbing it against my should
ndian, I This worked. I was able to pull off the tape, and it hurt, mainly be
also pulled against what I knew now was a tear on my lip. I also man
get my ankles far looser but couldn't get my feet free.

Eventually, having exhausted myself, I fell asleep tied to the beam.

I fix the I woke up when I heard a noise.

herited "Basement!" I meant to scream but it came out as a croak.

d it. I tried again.

d in my "Basement, basement, *basement!* I'm in the basement!"

ed from This came out a lot louder.

2. I had I heard fast footfalls on the stairs.

violated “Coal room, at the back, the room with the lock on the door!” I saw, that “There’s pull lights in each room. There’s a padlock. The key’s...”

I stopped shouting because I didn’t know where the key was or if *you* had the key.

Then I heard a gunshot.

3. *This*, The door came open and I winced as the light from a flashlight face.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Lee muttered.

“Thank you, God,” I said.

He moved forward, his hand going to the back of his jeans.

4. *tape*. “Hang on, honey,” Lee murmured. “I’ll have you free in a second.”

5. *t, but it didn’t sound very funny, which must have been why Lee didn’t laugh.*
d work

6. *er.* He put the flashlight in his armpit and he cut through the tape
cause it pocketknife, ripping it free. A couple of times I made pain sounds in the
aged to of my throat when he ripped tape off my skin, but I did my best to stay
them down.

When I was mostly loose, I drooped into him even though I tried to stand but my entire body was numb. He took my weight and kept working on the tape until I was free. When he was done, he straightened. He pulled me up into his arms, his going tight around me as pins and needles shot through my whole body.

To my horror, I started crying.

He stroked my hair with one hand and held me tighter with his other

“S-s-sorry. I’m a wuss,” I told him.

houted. “You’re fine.”

“I’ll have it together in a second,” I said.

ven if I “Ava, you’re fine.”

I nodded.

I started deep breathing and he kept stroking my hair. After a while
hit my the tears in check, wiped my face against his shirt and took one, last
breath.

“I gotta call Luke,” he said when I exhaled.

I nodded again.

“You know who did this to you?” Lee asked.

I answered immediately, “Noah.”

, and it I knew my answer surprised him by the way his body went still.

Then he pulled back, and even in the dark (he was holding his face
with a behind my back), I could tell he was looking at me.

he back His hand came to my neck and his thumb stroked my jaw.

wallow In an ultra-soft voice, he asked, “You wanna tell me why your jeans
undone?”

not to, I shook my head, his hand flexed against my neck, and I said with
g at the in my voice, “He kind of...*touched* me.”

ne fully The air in the room went static in a flash, and just as quickly I felt
ugh my with the fury rolling off Lee in waves, pounding against the wall
slamming back into the both of us.

er arm. “Let’s get you out of here,” he replied, his voice tight.

He started to move to pick me up, but I pulled away. "I'm okay can walk."

He nodded, guiding the way with the flashlight, holding my hand. He took me upstairs, to the bathroom and led me in.

Before he closed the door behind him, he said, "You need anything for me. I'll be right outside."

le I got
st, deep

I nodded again. He closed the door.

I stood at the sink, hands at the basin, avoiding looking in the mirror. I listened very carefully. Therefore, I heard him make the call.

"Vance, you with Luke?" Pause. "Okay, I found Ava. She was taking support in her basement. Dexter did it. I want you here. Mace, Ed, Hank, everyone you can get. She's in bad shape, been beaten up worse." He paused again. "Yeah, that's it. She was dressed but her pants undone. She says he touched her." I closed my eyes tight at hearing words coming from Lee. Somehow, hearing them made the whole thing more real. "I want the boys around when Luke finds out. I'll give you then I'm callin' Luke." Pause. "Yeah, out."

ans are
the wall in the hall. His head came up when the door opened.

a hitch "It wasn't as bad as you think," I told him.

"Ava, honey, get yourself cleaned up."

it move
lls and "I went into the hall and stood in front of him. "He didn't rape anything."

"Don't talk now. We'll talk later. You want me to help you clean up I was getting panicked. "Lee, don't tell Luke he touched me. It

now, I that bad.”

His hands came out and his fingers went into my waistband. Word. He pulled me to him and then did up the button on my pants that I’d forgotten about. After that, he cinched the belt.

This was so sweet, so gentle, I had to swallow down tears again.

I put my hand on his chest and leaned into him. “Lee, you tell Lulu you’re gonna go gonzo.”

Lee nodded. “He’s gonna go gonzo.”

“Please, he just, put his hand...and then put his other hand...” I said. “And then he took care of himself just using me to rub against.”

God, this was embarrassing.

As I was talking I’d been avoiding his eyes. When I was done, I looked at Lee.

Oops.

I was thinking that Lee didn’t think that was any better than being in pain. I was thinking that because the fury waves were pounding again and hard against which had been gentle, had turned hard as stone.

“You’re not gonna go gonzo, are you?” I whispered.

“I’m keepin’ a very fuckin’ loose hold on going gonzo, Ava.”

I swallowed again, this time at the anger vibrating in his tone.

“I don’t want you boys to get into any trouble for me,” I told him.

“Only person’s got trouble right now is Noah Dexter, or whatever fuckin’ guy’s name is.”

“Lee.”

His hand came up, his fingers wrapped around my head and the tl
dlessly, guy in a day (or a little more than one, I didn't know what time it wa
rgotten knew it was dark outside) leaned forward and put his forehead against

Lee's forehead lean was a lot different than Luke's or Ren's.

Lee's was scary.

ke, he's "You ask him to touch you like that?"

I shook my head, mainly because I couldn't find my voice.

"So he did it against your will."

topped. I nodded my head.

"A man doesn't put his hands on a woman like that against her
man doesn't put his hands on a woman *at all* against her will, but esp
oked at not like that. A man does that, that man earns retribution. Automatic.
does that to a woman I know, the woman of a friend of mine, a friend
and respect, that retribution turns ugly."

raped. I *Yikes* multiplied by about two thousand.

is face, "What are you gonna do?" I whispered.

"I'm gonna do whatever I have to do to protect Luke while h
whatever the fuck he wants to do."

"What if I don't want him to do it?"

His face lost some of its scary-stony quality and went slightly

"Sorry, honey. You're gonna have to let us work this out. It's a guy thi

ver that After he finished speaking, to my shock he kissed my forehead, le
and then flipped open his phone, hit a couple of buttons and put it to hi

"Get cleaned up," he murmured to me. Then his head came up,
eyes didn't leave mine when he said, "Luke. I found her."

bird hot
s, I just
mine.

will. A
pecially
A man
I I trust

re does

gentle.
ng.”
t me go
is ear.
but his

TWENTY-TWO



PRECIOUS CARGO

Since he lived so close, Tex was the first to arrive.

Lee sent him to help me clean up while Lee did whatever it was Lee was doing. My guess, searching my house for rope to fashion a noose.

Tex sat me on the toilet seat and cleaned up the blood, put Neosporin on my cut lip, took me downstairs and got me an ice pack for my swollen eye. He was mostly silent during his ministrations, but his mouth was tight and his eyes were shining with what could only be described as controlled hellfire.

For your information, I didn't look too bad, except for the blood on my shirt and rimming my nostrils, my torn lip, and my eye, which was bruising. In the grand scheme of things I decided to think of it as "not too bad."

Even so, after looking at myself, I transferred my sextuple revenge from Dom to Noah, the double-extra, loser, rat-bastard.

By the time we got downstairs, Lee had all the lights blazing. I suppose he did this for me since I'd been locked in a pitch-black room for hours. All I could think was that he was definitely on the very top of the Good Guy List.

Matt was the second to arrive. He took one look at me and his face turned red.

Lee said one word to him.

“Focus.”

Matt nodded his head once and then he focused. I could actually see him focus.

Hank and Roxie arrived next. Tears filled Roxie’s eyes when she saw me and she came right up to me and grabbed my hand, holding on tight.

“Thought she might need someone who’d been there,” Hank muttered to Lee.

Okay, so Hank just earned a place on my Good Guy List too, and for being so magnanimous, Matt’s angry red face earned him a place as well. Tex was already on it.

“How are you doing?” Roxie asked me, leading me to my couch.

“I’m fine. Everyone’s overreacting. This isn’t a big deal. I knew you was a jerk. He just proved it irrefutably,” I told her as we sat down.

She looked at Hank, but Hank, Lee, Matt and Tex were all looking at me.

“Seriously you guys, this isn’t a big deal. It isn’t as if this is a big surprise. He had already screwed me over once,” I announced.

The door opened. I held my breath thinking it would be Luke, but it was Vance.

Then I sucked in breath again when Vance got a look at me and his face went visibly tight.

I feared for my lamps because Vance looked like he definitely was going to throw one of them, or possibly all of them.

ace got Instead he looked at Lee and said something bizarre, “I call a shot
don’t even care if he’s conscious when I get my turn.”

At this, it was Roxie’s turn to go tight.

“Everyone’s got a fuckin’ shot on this one,” Tex said, sounding
see him off.

“Shit,” Hank muttered under his breath.

saw me “What are they talking about?” I whispered to Roxie as I set my
aside.

tered to “I’ll tell you later,” she answered quietly. “Do you want me to get
drink? Herbal tea or something?”

as I was “I’d love a Fat Tire,” I told her. “I’ll get it.” I got up and asked
ell. “Anyone want a beer?”

Roxie, Tex and the Hot Bunch were all looking at each other
ignored them and headed toward the kitchen. I could swear I saw Lee
v Noah crinkle in a sexy smile that didn’t quite involve his mouth when I passed
I didn’t know what that was about, but I wasn’t in the mood to ask.

at me. “Just me then,” I said as I hit the kitchen.

s a big When my head was in the fridge, I heard Roxie say, “Maybe s
denial.”

t it was “I’m not in denial,” I called into the other room.

“Damn,” Roxie whispered loudly.

is body I got myself a beer and walked back into the living room taking
pull. This somewhat hurt my lip (okay, so it hurt my lip a lot), but I pushed
through it.
nted to

When I hit the living room again, Lee came up to me and wrap

It and I arm around my shoulders curling me into his body.

It was then I saw that I got blood on his shirt where I had wiped my

“I got blood on your shirt,” I told him.

I pissed “Forget it,” he returned. “Look at me, Ava.”

My gaze lifted from his shoulder to his eyes. Close up I could see nice eyes, warm chocolate brown.

ice bag “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

It you a “You should go upstairs, lie down, talk to Roxie,” he suggested.

“I’m fine.”

loudly, Lee looked at Hank. “Maybe we should call Victim’s Assistance.”

“I’m *fine*,” I repeated, a lot louder and a lot snottier this time.

; but I Lee looked back at me.

’s eyes ed him. “Okay, honey. You’re fine,” he said this in the way all men speak when they’re dealing with a stubborn, unreasonable woman.

I just stopped myself from rolling my eyes.

he’s in Instead I offered, “I’ll clean your shirt. I’m good with stains. I can clean it out like a pro. If I didn’t go into graphic design, I was going to go into cleaning.”

The eye wrinkle came back. It was a lot better close up. In fact, positively magnetic.

a long lowered So that was why I was standing wrapped in Lee’s arm and staring like a lovesick puppy when the door opened and Luke walked in.

ped his Everyone, including me, looked at Luke.

Luke looked unhappy. Not, “oh, they’re out of my favorite do
y face. LaMar’s” unhappy but *a lot* worse.

“Hey,” I said.

Luke’s eyes never left me, even when he walked forward and eve
he had Lee’s arm dropped from around me. We lost eye contact only whe
pulled me into his arms and I had nowhere to put my face but aga
chest, but I chose the side of my face that wasn’t bruised and batter
held me close, but he didn’t hold me tight. He held me like you
newborn baby, gentle and with care.

Wow.

I forgot I was mad at him and on my way to St. Croix and I melt
him.

“I’m fine,” I repeated quietly.

“Babe,” was all he said.

k when “Let’s give them a minute,” I heard Hank tell the crowd.

Lee got close and I lifted my head up and looked at him. The eye
was gone, his face was totally serious, and I knew what h
n Shoutcommunicating.

nto dry I shook my head, but he nodded his. I knew this meant if I dic
Luke, he would.

, it was “I want it to come from me,” I told Lee.

That was when Luke’s arms got tight. Lee just nodded again, lo
; at him Luke, then he was gone.

I tilted my head back to look at Luke. If it was possible he appear
less happy. Then his hand came to cup the bruised side of my face.

nuts at “Jesus, Ava,” he muttered.

“Really, I’m fine. It’s not as bad as it looks.”

He bent his neck to rest his forehead against mine.

n when “You wanna share what that was about with Lee?” he asked quietly

n Luke “Not really,” I told him, and his body went still. “But I’m g
inst his anyway,” I whispered.

red. He

hold a I watched, fascinated, as he slowly closed his eyes, took in breath t
his nostrils and then opened his eyes on his exhale while his body
again.

ted into This moved me at the same time it shook me. This small thing sai
It said a lot about Luke, a lot about how he felt about me and a lot abo
much.

Even with all the drama I felt my stomach go melty and I really wa
kiss him.

Instead I broke out of his arms, put down my beer and came back t

crinkle Then I put my hands on either side of his neck and looked in h
ie was “First, you have to promise me you won’t throw any lamps.”

“Ava.”

ln’t tell

“Promise.”

His arms went around me.

“Promise,” he said.

oked at

“And...um.” My eyes slid away and his arms got a little tighter
slid back. “You have to promise you won’t *hurt* anyone, as in, may
ed even them or something.”

This time, his body went solid as a rock.

“Luke—”

“He touched you,” Luke interrupted me, and his voice was flat, de
y. the way he spoke freaked me out.

oing to “Luke,” I repeated.

“That’s why everyone’s here before me. Why I saw Eddie’s truck
throughup when I was walkin’ up to the house. Lee was preparing because h
relaxed—”

“Luke,” I said again.

id a lot. “*Fuck*,” Luke hissed, the dead, flat voice long gone, anger tal
out *how*place.

My hands went tight on his neck when I felt the air in the room g
nted todangerous as I realized Luke was preparing to go gonzo.

Time to tame the wild beast.

o him. “Look at me, Luke. Please look at me.”

is eyes. He looked at me, but only for a beat. Then he crushed me to him, h
pressing the air out of my body as he buried his face in my neck.

“*Fuck*,” he repeated against the skin of my neck. “Did he...?”

“No,” I whispered. “It wasn’t as bad as that.”

I put my arms around him and held on tight.

Then I said, “I don’t want you to do anything stupid. I don’t want
so theyget into trouble for me. Just call Vance off Noah. My face will heal ar
ybe killgo back to fighting all the time. It’ll be like it didn’t happen.”

His head came up. He pressed his temple against mine for a seco.

his mouth moved to mine and he kissed me gently on the lips. He li
head to look at me and I saw his eyes were not gonzo, they were tend
arm stayed around me while his other hand came up to my neck
ad, and thumb stroked my jaw.

“Tell me what happened,” he said using The Voice.

This time The Voice was tinged with a sweetness that, tied up with
pullin’ other emotions I was feeling, simply undid me.
e knew

Still I fought it.

“We’ll talk about it later. Maybe tomorrow,” I stalled.

king its “I need you to tell me now.”

“It wasn’t as bad as you probably think.”

o scary His face dipped closer to mine. “My beautiful Ava,” he whisper
my stomach got tight. “Please, tell me now.”

I couldn’t help it. He called me his beautiful Ava and he said “plea

I told him.

his arms Almost everything.

I left out the part about it happening while he was in the house. I
that could wait for later (read: never).

As I told him, he showed no reaction. He kept me close, his
stroking my jaw, his eyes never leaving mine.

: you to When I was done talking, he kept looking at me without saying a w

id we’ll “See,” I said. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“I’m gonna kill him,” Luke responded in a matter-of-fact voice th
nd then he was, indeed, going to kill Noah.

fted his It was my turn to go rock-solid. “Luke!”

er. One “He’s dead.”

and his I grabbed fistfuls of Luke’s tee at his sides. “Please don’t. Please, I happened to me, not you. I don’t want you to do anything gonzo.”

His thumb quit stroking and his fingers tightened at my neck.
1 all the Ava. It happened to you and you’re handlin’ it great, babe. You’re great,” he said.

He bent down and brushed his mouth against mine.

I closed my eyes and relaxed into him.

His head came up and I opened my eyes again.

“But that’s right now, beautiful. Later tonight, tomorrow, a week, and now, it’s gonna hit you. It’s gonna haunt you and I won’t be able to It’s done. And you’re mine. You’re mine to watch over, you’re mine care of, you’re mine to protect. I didn’t protect you. I gotta live with t it’ll make it a whole fuckuva lot easier to live with knowin’ he paid Someone hurt you, someone *touched* you,” he said this between his losing hold on his control for a moment. Then I watched him gain figured again before he went on, “And that someone is not gonna get the chance to hurt you, or any woman, again.”

thumb “I’m asking you, Luke, please leave it alone.”

word. “I’m telling you, beautiful, I can’t. It just isn’t in me.”

I burrowed deeper into him and shared what was really on my mind. “What if *you* get hurt? He said he had a gun.”

1at said “Only one’s gonna hurt is Dexter.” I opened my mouth to interrupt he kept talking. “Ava, beautiful, I won’t get hurt. You’ve got nothin’ to

about.” His mouth came to mine. “Nothin’ to worry about,” he repeated.

My arms went around him and he kissed me. It was light, gentle and
Luke. It hurt a little bit. When his mouth disengaged, his forehead came to
mine again, our noses side-by-side.

“Yeah, “You wanna sleep here tonight or at the loft?” he asked.

“The loft,” I answered.

“Then let’s get you home.”

He moved away from me, but put his arm around my shoulder. He
started moving to the door. I halted and looked up at him.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” I asked.

“No police. This is gonna be off the radar.”

A chill went up my spine.

Then I remembered something. “But Hank and Eddie are police.”

“And?”

“Aren’t they going to have an issue with this being ‘off the radar?’”

“Lotsa shit is off the radar that Hank and Eddie know about. The
ance to like it, but I suspect they don’t lose any sleep over it.”

All of a sudden I was tired and I didn’t want to talk about this any
wanted to sleep, and yes, I was happy to admit I wanted to sleep pre-
tight against Luke’s strong, warm, hard body, and I would have put
writing if he’d asked me.

7 mind.

“Let me get my purse,” I said.

His arm dropped and I got my purse. When I was close enough again
arm came back around my shoulders and we walked into the front yard
o worry

d. everyone was standing.

nd only “We’re going to the loft,” Luke told Lee.

rest on Lee nodded.

Luke looked at Tex. “You’ll lock down the house?”

Tex nodded.

Luke dug in his pocket and tossed Tex my keys. Then his eyes we
to Lee.

ers and “Meeting first thing,” Luke said.

Lee nodded again.

I glanced at Eddie, who was looking to the heavens.

Then I glanced at Hank, who was looking at me.

“Roxie will be over tomorrow,” Hank told me.

“Thank you,” I said, and looked at Roxie. “Thank you,” I repeated.

She smiled at me, came up and kissed my cheek. “Sleep well, hor
” see you tomorrow,” she whispered.

y don’t Luke pointed me to the Porsche, but I pulled away and walked to L

I didn’t say thank you to Lee. I just wrapped my arms around him,
more. I on my toes and kissed his cheek. I looked him in the eye a beat, ho
ssed up understood without me having to say it (and I was pretty certain he did
that in

I broke free and did the same to Tex. I didn’t break free from
easily, mainly because he engulfed me in a bear hug before letting me

“Thanks, everyone,” I said quietly to the crowd, feeling like a bi
ain, his but knowing at least a gesture should be made before Luke’s arm can
l where around my shoulders.

He took me to the Porsche and we were gone.



LUKE WAS RIGHT. It hit me and it hit me a lot sooner than I would have expected.

It hit me the minute he flipped the light switch in his loft.

Light filled the space and I felt panic seize me. I ran to the switch and turned it off. Then I flattened myself against the wall, protecting the wall with my body.

“Babe.” Luke was close, his voice gentle.

“He’s watching,” I whispered, terrified.

I’d forgotten to tell Luke one little, but important, thing.

Luke’s fingers slid under my hair to curl around the back of my head. “Ava, come away from the wall. Let’s get you changed and in bed.”

“We have to go to a hotel.”

“Ava.”

“He’s watching.”

“He’s not watching,” Luke said softly.

His hand dropped away from my neck, came around my waist and gently tried to pull me away from the wall. I resisted, he felt it and immediately stopped trying.

“I forgot to tell you something,” I shared.

I put my forehead against the wall and Luke’s body came close behind me. His arm went tight to hold me against him and his face came to rest against the back of mine.

“Tell me,” he urged.

“He followed us last night,” I whispered. “He broke in somewhere
ld have the street, next door, I don’t know. You don’t have any curtains, no
We left the lights on when we did it. He watched us have sex. I know I
he knew we did it against the wall. He—”

ch and Luke interrupted me, “We’re going to a hotel.”

switch Thank you, *God*.



LUKE CHECKED us into the kickass, cool-as-shit Hotel Monaco in Downtown
Denver. I’d never stayed there, but any hotel that had “The John
Suite” *and* “The Grace Slick Suite” *and* “The Miles Davis Suite” has
kickass, cool-as-shit, and it was.
y neck.

Then we went to bed.

We were lying side by side in each other’s arms. Luke was quietly
deciding how to dispose of Noah’s body once he killed him.

“Luke?” I called.

One of his hands slid up my back under my tee. He’d located the
washed Triumph tee for me and I was wearing it. This I found incredibly
and he sweet, but I was trying not to dwell on it.
instantly

“Yeah, babe,” he answered.

I tilted my head back to look at his blurry, shadowy face.

“Will you make love to me?” I asked in a small voice.

to my Don’t ask me why I asked this. I just knew, somewhere deep, I needed
the side

“Ava, I’m thinkin’ that’s not a good thing,” he replied softly. “Right
sleep is a good thing.”

I found his answer both disappointing and (probably hysterically), across

blinds. “Okay.” My voice was even smaller.

because There was a beat of silence before Luke muttered, “Shit.” He rolled me and his hand came up to the healthy side of my face. “This doesn’t well for my future,” he told me.

“What?”

“My inability to say no to you,” he said before touching his mine and his hand slid slowly down my neck, my side, my hip and then my bottom.

d to be “You say no to me all the time,” I told him, now feeling happy somewhere deep down inside.

I was happy that he was touching me, holding me, kissing me, taking; likely of me, and he didn’t find me dirty and repulsive.

“When have I said no to you?” Luke asked my neck where his hand moved.

newly- “You don’t say no, as such. You just haul me around until I’m where redibly want, doing what you want.”

I felt his mouth move and knew he was smiling against my neck. His hand cupped my ass and he pulled me against him, but he didn’t respond.

I didn’t mind. I wrapped my arms around him and held on tight.

Then he started to make love to me and it was exactly that. Slid. It was sweet and absolutely perfect. I forgot about everything. Being taped in the basement in the pitch dark and Noah touching me while Luke was home.

y) very It was perfect until Luke's hand moved down my belly and between my legs. His fingers hit the target, but instead of feeling the usual jolt of goodness, my body froze. I wrapped my hand around his wrist and pulled away.

it bode "No," I whispered. My body came unfrozen and all of a sudden I was shaking, and not the good kind of shaking. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I c

I tried to move away, feeling like an idiot, but Luke's hand pulled me back. He rolled off me and held me close.

en over "Ava, hold on to me."

His voice was rough, but he didn't sound angry that I stopped the sex when it was really getting good.

"I can't," I told him. "I need—"

ng care "Quiet, beautiful. Just hold on."

I did as I was told. I felt him hard against my belly and felt like I was having a haddork because I was the one who started it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and I was. I was so sorry that my voice broke in the middle of saying it.

"Quiet," he replied.

ck. His "I got you all worked up and—"

nd. "Babe, I'll survive."

"Luke."

ow and "Ava, I'm good. Just be quiet."

l in my I went quiet.

; in the We lay there for a while, silent, holding on. The shakes left me

een my eventually felt nothing in the world, nothing but our bed at Hotel M
of pure Luke and me in it.

ulled it Out of nowhere, something hit me.

A flashback.

1 I was Not of Noah beating me up and touching me where I didn't want
can't." but a flashback of Luke.

free of It was a flashback of when Luke took me for a ride on his
motorcycle when he was seventeen and I was thirteen.

His mom wasn't happy about the motorcycle, but she kept this to
e action (outside of telling my mom). His dad hated it and he didn't keep it to h
As usual he tore into Luke about it.

I loved the motorcycle, and after I heard Luke have a rip roarin' v
dad and Luke slammed out of the house heading to the garage, I ran o
a huge caught him. In my thirteen-year-old-girl usual blathering, dorky way
Luke I loved his motorcycle and I told him exactly how much.

roke in When I was done, Luke smiled at me, the dark look fading from h
I'd always loved it when I used to do that for him. It didn't happen a
it happened. Then he told me to hop on, and I was so excited I did
even thinking twice.

We rode for at least an hour and I thought I'd never forget that ride

When we got home, they were waiting for us in Luke's driveway.
Stark and my mom. Luke's dad yelled at him for taking a thirteen-y
out on a motorcycle without asking. My mom yelled at him because s
a bitch.

e and I Calm as could be, something that always pissed Luke's dad off (

tonaco, not because I saw it, but because I heard Mrs. Stark tell my mom at Luke just said to his dad, “I would never let anything happen to Ava. he turned to me, touched my nose and continued, using The Voice, “P cargo.”

him to, Why hadn’t I remembered that? How could I ever forget that?
Finally, realization dawned.

is new I belonged to Luke. I was Luke’s woman.

Hell, I had probably been born to be Luke’s woman, if you believe herself kind of shit.

himself. I wasn’t going to St. Croix and I didn’t care about Jules and Ro Luke trying it on with them. Just like Daisy said, I was using the excuse to guard my heart.

ver and Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

; I told Not only that, Luke didn’t go gonzo about Noah, probably because he asked him not to. He took me to a hotel when I freaked out at his lips. He made sure I had the Triumph tee. Lastly, he didn’t have a hissy fit, but he stopped the festivities right when they were getting to the point of no return and held me, just like I needed.

So not only did I belong to Luke, he was most definitely a Good Guy.
The warm melty feeling in my stomach could no longer be denied.

ay. Mr. Shit.

year-old This time my hand slid down his belly and my fingers wrapped around her waist.
she was him.

I knew, He sucked in breath then said, “Ava.”
“Quiet, Luke,” I replied.

out it), I rolled into him until he was on his back, climbed on top, guided
.” Then inside me and settled.

precious God, he felt nice.

I was chest to chest with him, my face pressed to his neck.

“I could sleep like this,” I whispered.

“I know,” he replied, and there was humor in his voice.

My head came up so I could smile at him in the dark.

ved that His hands slid up my back, one stopped midway to wrap around
other one kept going and went into my hair.

xie and “You mind movin’?” he asked.

t as an “I guess I could do that,” I answered, and I started moving,
savoring it, letting it build.

cause I I would kiss him, he would kiss me, our hands would roam, but it
oft. He if we had all the time in the world. Luke let me control it completely
when I even try to take over. When I was close, I slid my hand down his a
return, took his in mine then guided it between our bodies, straight to the target

uy. “Ava.” His voice was back to sounding rough, and my name in the
made my stomach turn (more) melty, mixed with a shiver going thro
body.

His fingers pressed and rolled, which made the melty stoma
shivery body intensify significantly.

around “Yes,” I breathed.

I kept moving, he kept pressing and rolling. We kept kissing in b
panting and eventually it hit me, and when it did it was slow, long ar
Seconds after mine was over, his hands went to my hips, holding me d

led him tight, and it hit him.

He kept me where I was by wrapping his arms around me.

I pressed my face in his neck.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Babe, I’d do just about anything for you, but you gotta know, there’s no sacrifice.”

Wow.

and the He would do just about anything for me?

Ho-ly *crap*.

After he said that, I couldn’t help myself. I nuzzled into him.

slowly, Then, because he said that, I took a huge risk and told him, “I’ve told you you’re a good guy.”

was as He pulled my hair away from my neck and replied, “About fuckin’
, didn’t



rm and I WOKE up and it was just dawn. The sunlight was still weak and
at. because I felt I was alone in bed.

at voice I sat up and looked around the room to find Luke sitting in an armchair
ugh my wearing his black cargos, shirtless (as usual), leaned forward with elbows
his knees, head in his hands.

ch and I could tell this was an unhappy position of masculine reflection.

For a second I got scared. Then I got out of bed, found the Triunfo shirt
and tugged it on. He watched me move toward him. When I got close, he
etweenpulled me into his lap and sat back in the chair. I felt a moment of relief
id *nice*.his unhappy masculine reflection didn’t include something that would
own onhe would never pull me into his lap again, so I let my body relax and

into him.

“Do you want to share what’s on your mind?” I asked.

“Don’t you have to brush your teeth?” he responded.

I smiled at him before I wrapped an arm around his abs, stuffing my hand into what was in his neck.

“I’d rather know what’s on your mind,” I returned quietly.

One of his arms was curled around my back, hand resting on my hip. His fingers of his other hand slid back and forth from knee to toe on my leg. My only thought was that I could wake up like this every morning of my life.

Then Luke spoke.

“What’s on my mind is that I’m responsible for what happened to you,” I decided.

All morning dewy softness flew out the window, my head jerked up at the time.” stared at him.

“What?” I asked, somewhat loudly.

I woke “I’m responsible,” he repeated.

I narrowed my eyes. Not because I was angry, but because I didn’t have my chair, my contacts in or glasses on and I was trying to focus so I could read the rows on (this didn’t work).

“How on earth are you responsible?” I asked.

“I went after him, he retaliated. That’s how I’m responsible.”

Oh, for goodness sakes.

“Luke, that’s just crazy.”

“It isn’t, Ava. I should have seen it coming and prepared, especially since the info started to come in on him.”

I settled

Uh-oh.

This didn't sound good.

"What info?"

ny face Luke didn't hesitate before sharing, "His name isn't Noah Dexter, he's got a record, he's wanted in two states and he's been connin' women, conned you, for a long time."

ip. The I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised by that, but I was surprised. I was surprised by that.

ny life. "I still don't see how that makes you responsible," I said.

"You didn't tell me about the jewelry," was Luke's strange reply.

you." "What about it?"

ip and I "It was worth over sixty-five K."

I sucked in breath at another demonstration of his freaky ability to do *everything*.

"How did you find that out?" I asked.

it have "Your aunt's will. The jewelry was worth over sixty-five K. I was surprised by that." his face appraised for the will, seven years ago."

"I'm not sure I'm following."

ny when "Dexter didn't steal five grand, he stole over seventy grand. That's a big difference. You were a larger mark than I first thought. This guy is a small-time con man. Far as we could tell, he was running two cons simultaneously. The one with you and some other woman, much older, disabled, in her early seventies. He got her jewelry, stole her car and cash, and emptied out her retirement account. Between the two of you, he pulled in over a hundred large."

“Holy shit,” I breathed, incapable of wrapping my mind around this. I was, however, able to septuple my vow of revenge against Noah. A disabled lady in her seventies? What a *jerk!*

“I underestimated him,” Luke went on, interrupting my mental like he “He gets caught, his picture hits the news, women come forward who report him and he’s fucked even more than he was fucked. He’s not going to be surprised by that happen and he would be desperate enough to do about anything to certain it doesn’t. Including fuckin’ with my woman, somethin’ not that people in Denver would have the balls to do.”

Okay, so, it was safe to say this was not good news. I felt like a bigger idiot now than I felt when Noah took off with my money.

Time to focus, and *not* on me being an idiot.

“Luke, you aren’t responsible,” I stated. “I’m responsible. I let him know life in the first place.”

“Lotta women do.”

“That doesn’t make it any better.”

“Probably not, but it’s the truth.”

There you go.

Time for a different tack.

“Okay then, you want to know how I felt when you first said you weren’t a going to go after him?”

Luke just looked at me.

“I felt happy,” I shared. “My stomach got melty. I was glad someone wanted to take care of me.”

s news. Silence.

I persevered, even though doing so scared the shit out of me. We
vulnerable territory here.

tirade. Way vulnerable.

o didn't "Last night, you were preparing to go gonzo. You didn't because I
onna let you. Last night you also said you can't say no to me. If I pushed it
o make didn't want you to go after him, *really* pushed it, would you have?"

a lot of More silence.

Shit.

m even It was going to have to be all or nothing.

I put my hands to his neck and moved so I was facing him.

Do it, say it, the time is right, Good Ava urged.

n in my *Don't! The time will NEVER be right!* Bad Ava yelled.

For once I listened to Good Ava, took a breath and bared it all.

Quietly, I said, "Yesterday, when I was in my freakout about Jules
said to me that I was trying to find ways to protect my heart but I was
wrong. She told me the best way to protect my heart was to trust
someone who will protect it for me."

More silence, but his body went completely still.

ou were "That's you. It's always been you," I whispered, my heart racing
scared as hell, but I forged ahead. "Please don't take responsibility for
being an asshole. I couldn't bear it if you did that."

omeone I'd barely stopped talking when, without a word, Luke got up, took
with him. He carried me to the bed and put me in it, coming down on
me.

“You belong to me,” he stated, his voice soft, his tone firm, his hands were in starting to roam.

I was pretty fucking happy he seemed to be delighted (in a Luke ‘course) with the news that I’d trusted him with my heart.

needed Still, I wasn’t ready to go there just yet.

t, that I “Take it back that you feel responsible,” I said instead.

“Tell me you belong to me,” he demanded.

“Take it back first,” I countered.

The roaming hands were getting serious so mine started to roam t because I didn’t want to be left out.

He kissed me gently then against my mouth he said, “I’ll wait. You say it when I’m inside you.”

“Seriously, you can be so annoying,” I told him.

“Babe,” he replied as he smiled against my mouth.

, Daisy For your information, a lot later, when he was deep inside me, I ga doing it what he wanted.

st it to I mean, this *was* Luke. I *was* his woman.

And I *did* belong to him.

For as long as I could remember.

}. I was
or Noah

ing me
1 top of

“You belong to me,” he stated, his voice soft, his tone firm, his hands starting to roam.

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“Take it back that you feel responsible,” I said instead.

“Tell me you belong to me,” he demanded.

“Take it back first,” I countered.

The roaming hands were getting serious so mine started to roam too, just because I didn’t want to be left out.

He kissed me gently then against my mouth he said, “I’ll wait. You can say it when I’m inside you.”

“Seriously, you can be so annoying,” I told him.

“Babe,” he replied as he smiled against my mouth.

For your information, a lot later, when he was deep inside me, I gave him what he wanted.

I mean, this *was* Luke. I *was* his woman.

And I *did* belong to him.

For as long as I could remember.

TWENTY-THREE



GONZO

Luke and I walked into the Nightingale Investigations offices and everyone was in the reception area waiting for us.

When I said everyone, I meant *everyone*.

Lee and Indy, Jet and Eddie, Hank and Roxie, Vance and Jules Ally, Daisy with a tall, dark-haired, handsome man I did not know sitting at her side, Shirleen, May, Tod and Stevie, Mace, Matt, Hector, Darius Duke, and some big black dude I'd never seen before in my life.

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

Luke's mouth got tight.

Everyone stared at me and I knew why.

I didn't look good.

I got a good look at myself in the hotel mirror that morning. My nose was torn and my eye was bruised and blackened and that didn't count what I couldn't see, and that was the headache to end all headaches. Not to mention these people talked. No way to keep a secret in this group. News spread like wildfire.

Shirleen was the first to break out of the group stare. She walked up to me and pulled me into a tight hug.

“Child,” she said low, a tremor running through her voice, a tremor communicated itself to my body.

“I’m fine,” I told her, putting my arms around her and giving a reassuring squeeze.

She just held on tight.

After a few beats she leaned back and looked at my face close up. I watched, sweet, soft, gentle Shirleen morphed into hard, angry, pissed off Shirleen.

“No one messes with *my* girl,” she declared quietly, eyes still staring at my face. She stepped back, let me go and looked towards the male corner of our audience. Then she repeated, “No one messes with *my* girl.”

This time she said it louder, angrier. It sounded like an order. Tension in the room, already high, climbed higher. Nobody seemed prepared to do a thing about it. In fact, they all seemed to be feeding off it.

Not good.

Before I could intervene, Shirleen looked at Darius.

“You got me, son?” she asked.

“I got you, Aunt Shirleen,” Darius replied, and my surprised gaze was between Shirleen and Darius.

I didn’t know they were related.

Shirleen, not quite done, looked at Lee.

“Do *you* got me?” she repeated.

“Shirleen, it’ll be taken care of,” Lee responded calmly, but his voice had a lethal edge.

“It better be,” she said, her voice low again, this time with scary menace.

nor that “It better fuckin’ be.”

EEK!

g her a Time to move on.

I looked at Indy, hoping to change the subject. “Who’s taking Fortnum’s?”

p. As I “Fortnum’s is closed for a staff meeting,” Duke answered my que-
sed-off his gravelly voice, his tone doing nothing to dissipate the scary atm
and therefore he foiled my attempt to change the subject.

canning “But, you can’t—” I started.

tingent “We can, we have, we’re not fuckin’ goin’ back until this shit is s
Tex threw down.

and the I felt weird. Moved, but scared, and kept my eyes on Indy.

repared “You can’t do that,” I said.

Indy just shook her head. “Jane, who’s one of my staff, Kitty Sue Lee’s mom, and Jet’s mom, Nancy, are at the store explaining things to customers. They’ll open in the afternoon when the crowds are small they can handle them. Until then...well, Ava, you know that no one
: swung with a Rock Chick, not ever, but especially not—”

“Indy,” Lee said low, interrupting her.

I could tell she had been working herself up to rant mode. At Lee’s she pulled in her bottom lip, bit it and kept quiet, but I knew it cost her

“I’m fine,” I repeated, not just to Indy, but to the entire assemblage

ice held Everyone just kept staring.

Yikes.

eaning.

“What I want to know,” Shirleen started, when no one seemed prepared to move, “is why you all are standin’ around like you don’t to do? You got shit to do. Serious shit. It’s time to fuckin’ get crackin’

care of The staring stopped. Folks started to move and I let my body relax.

stion in “Give me five,” Luke said to Lee, then took my hand and walked the door to the inner sanctum.

osphere He opened the door, guided me through and down the hall, directly kitchenette he’d taken me to (or more accurately, carried me) that first was at the offices.

sorted,” We went inside and he closed the door. He turned to me and he came to my jaw.

“You okay?” he asked. I nodded and he went on, “I had no fuckin’ we would walk into that, babe, if I knew—”

, who’s I realized he was pissed at the same time I realized that he would protected me from what just happened if he could have. And lastly, but of that, I realized Luke wasn’t just a Good Guy, he might be The Bachelor and messes *Ever*.

For this reason, I moved into him and put my arms around his waist. cool Luke, they just care. It feels nice.”

s voice, That was a partial lie. It felt scary and slightly humiliating that a people knew that Noah had his hand down my pants. Instead, I was trying focus on them rallying around me, which did, indeed, feel nice. More point, I wanted Luke to focus on it because he didn’t look happy unhappy Luke could be a frightening thing.

Luke’s thumb stroked my jaw and I watched as his anger ebbed. “All right beautiful. If you’re cool, I’m cool.”

d to be I smiled at him.
got shit Crisis averted.
.” Then he continued, “Before I meet with the boys, we gotta tall
somethin’.”
d me to Uh-oh.
Crisis maybe *not* averted.
y to the “Luke, I’m not sure I can handle talking about something.”
t time I He bent down to kiss my nose and said gently, “I know, Ava
is hand wouldn’t bring this up, not now, but it’s important.”
Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.
in’ idea “Okay,” I agreed but I didn’t mean it.
“Yesterday—” he began.
ld have Nope.
because I wasn’t going to talk about that. I’d already talked about it as mu
est Guywas going to talk about it.
“I don’t want to talk about yesterday,” I interrupted.
st. “It’s His other arm moved around me and his hand at my jaw slid into
to cup the back of my head. He brought me close so my body was
ll thoseagainst his.
ying to “We gotta talk about it.”
e to the “We’ll talk about it later.”
and an As in much later, a thousand years from now preferably.
l away. “Babe, I kept what happened with Jules and me—”
I went stiff.

“Jules and you *and* Roxie and you,” I corrected him.

His face went hard before he muttered, “Those fuckin’ women.”

k about “Someone had to tell me,” I shot back.

“I wanted to tell you,” he replied.

“Yeah? When?” I was beginning to get heated.

“When the time was right. Only so much someone can take, you
enough.”

babe. I “You said you were through talking.”

“Yeah, for then. Not for eternity.”

“You didn’t say that.”

“I didn’t say we were never talkin’ again either.”

This was true.

Shit!

ich as I His face got softer and I knew that he knew he had me.

Shit again!

“Luke—”

my hair “I don’t want to fight about this,” he stated.

pressed I glared because I was perfectly happy fighting about it.

He ignored my glare. “The point is how you responded.”

“I didn’t respond.”

“Yeah, that’s the point. You shut down, shut me out and then yo
plans to take off.”

“What?” I asked.

Surely he couldn't know I was headed to St. Croix. No one knew even Sissy, until her card came in the mail, of course.

He let me go, walked to a locker, opened it and pulled out some which I noticed at a glance were my tickets to St. Croix.

Ho-ly crap!

I'd had He knew I was headed to St. Croix.

"Where did you—?"

"I went to your house. Found these on the dining room table, new laptop and a bunch of shopping in your bedroom," he replied before I could ask my question.

He threw the tickets back in the locker and shut the door.

Hell and damnation.

I was beginning to realize it was not such a good thing my boyfriend was a private investigator. Although I had left that stuff out for anyone to see, still.

I was so exasperated at Luke knowing *everything*, I rolled my eyes at the ceiling and then said something stupid. There was no excuse for it. I should have protected the information with everything I had, taken it to my grave, kept it buried and never let it out, even under torture.

In my defense, I wasn't myself. Too much had happened to me with Dom, with Ren, with Noah, even with fucking Riley, and most especially with Luke.

He made That was why I didn't stop myself before saying, "I can't believe you were downstairs with Noah and he was demonstrating why he's the ultimate jerk, you were searching my house."

ew, not The air in the room instantly went thick with tension. My eyes flew
the ceiling to lock on Luke's and I realized my mortal mistake when I
papers, face had gone stony. Scary stony. Fury-unleashed stony.

Gonzo stony.

“What did you just say?” he asked through his teeth.

“Nothing,” I replied quickly.

“You didn't say nothin', you said somethin'.”

uggage “No, I meant—”

d finish He advanced. I retreated.

My back hit the door and he came up close. “He was in your house
I was in your house?”

Like I did the night before, hoping it would work again, I put my hand
and washed his neck to try to get through to him, calm him.

to see, “Luke, please, listen to me—”

“He touched you then, didn't he?”

s to the My eyes grew wide that he guessed this (how could he guess this
should unfortunately, my eyes told the truth for me.

r grave, It was then Luke went gonzo. No neck touch, soft voice and people
were going to help. No way.

re with He turned from me, and with a vicious blow and a ferocious growl
pecially punched the wall, his hand going clean through, drywall dust poofing
stared in horror as he pulled his hand out of the wall and then punched
while I again, leaving another hole.

ultimate He wasn't quite through. After wall punch two, he turned, walked
locker and punched *that*. His fist against the steel made a huge noise.

w from horrified stare turned part terrified, part amazed when the steel buck saw his the sides of the door bowed out. He hit it again, then again, and I c him.

“Luke!” I shouted, throwing my arms around him to stop him hurting himself. If he kept doing that he was going to crush his hand it! Please, stop!”

His arm sliced around my waist, lifting me clean off my feet, up t the air. He took three long strides and I landed on my ass on the cou the kitchenette. He closed in, coming between my legs, his hands, them bloody, moving to either side of my face. He held on and stared e while his face hard and angry, and my heart was beating like a jackhammer.

It was then the door opened. I looked over his shoulder and Lee, and Mace were there making the room seem even smaller.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” Lee asked.

Luke turned halfway to them. His eyes to the floor, he didn’t them. I noticed a muscle in his jaw was jumping and I took this as s?) and sign that he was trying to regain control. He took a hand away from n sliced it in a sweep, palm down and low, indicating nonverbally (an leading incorrectly) that he had himself in check.

“Tell me this shit didn’t just get worse,” Lee said.

owl, he “This shit just got worse,” Luke answered, his voice an angry g out. I “Give us a minute.”

ched it I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, Lee, Vance an had backed out and Lee was closing the door.

ed to a “Luke, listen to me,” I begged.
and my

led and He twisted back to face me and I caught my breath because his charged actions hadn't even touched his level of fury. He was still pushing the top edge of the red zone.

n from "Talk to me," he clipped, and it wasn't a request.

l. "Stop "Maybe—"

hrough "Ava, do not keep any more of this shit from me. Tell me what the hell happened, right *fucking now.*"

inter of My body went stiff. "Luke, you seem to keep forgetting, it happened to me. It didn't happen to you, it happened *to me* and I should—"

l at me, He framed my face with his hands again and got close. "It happened to you, babe, but at the same time, it happened to *us.*"

Vance

I pushed at his shoulders and yelled, "How dare you!"

He didn't move. Instead he kept talking.

look at "Last night, I put my hand between your legs and you froze. weren't you, if you didn't have the strength to sort your fuckin' head a good work through it, that could have had a whole different ending. my face, somethin' about you that you could work through it. Hell, it demonstrated likely of the reasons I want to be the one, the *only* one, who puts my hand between your legs. You were most other women we wouldn't have had last night. Most women would shut down and last night could have taken a growl. months, maybe never have happened at all. I was prepared to work through it with you. Lucky for me, you aren't most other women. That still does away the fact that it could have been a long road for both of us." He got closer. "Sex is sex, babe, with *anyone* else. With you, it isn't. It's a lot more. You know it. I know it. And he could have taken that away from me. After all these years we found it and he could have taken it away. I

d Mace

gonzo from you, but from me too. Do you understand?”

he very Tears filled my eyes, and before I could deep breathe they spilled
my cheeks.

I understood. I really understood. Furthermore, I understood I would
be dancing at my wedding because Luke declared he wasn't going to
he fuck with me and I would be bearing him three sons (or daughters, whatever)

And I wanted that, with everything that was me, but more, Luke wanted
ened to just as much as me.

Noah had put all that in jeopardy.

ened to It was then my tilted-world righted and for the first time in a long
maybe the first time in my life, I felt my feet planted firmly on the ground

I didn't answer but I didn't have to.

Luke watched me cry for a few beats and then said softly, “He’s
If you pay for those too.”

out and “What?” I asked in a shaky voice, trying hard to pull myself together

It says “Your tears.”

ites one At his words, I put my hands to his face and it was me who rested
between forehead against his at the same time a sob tore from my throat.

t night. So much for pulling myself together.

weeks, We stayed where we were, both holding on to each other while tears
rough it slid down my cheeks. Finally, I sucked in breath and managed,
n't take tremendous effort of will, to pull myself together.

fuckuva When I did, Luke's thumbs swiped at my cheeks and he whispered
rom us. me.”

Not just I closed my eyes slowly, and just as slowly I opened them.

Then, I told him. “He was taping me to the post. I already had taped down my mouth. He heard you come in and told me he had a gun. He told me if I made a sound, he’d blow my head off and then yours. I heard you call out, I couldn’t make a move to try and get away and he warned me again. We listened to you move around upstairs. He said he wanted to make it interesting and he touched me. You left, he’d got excited and he finished himself off. Then he finished taping me, told me to get you to make Vance back off and he wanted it

It was his turn to close his eyes.

“I could have stopped it,” he murmured.

I shook my head and my hands tightened. “He would have killed both.”

His eyes opened. “He’s a con man, not a killer.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know it.”

“You can’t know it.”

“I know it.”

“Luke—”

“I know it because I’m not a con man, but I am a killer.”

My breath froze in my lungs, but I still managed to breathe, “What are the tears?”

“That’s part of who I was. It isn’t who I am now, but it isn’t something you forget how to do.”

Panic filled me and oxygen came back into my lungs with a loud, “Tell whoosh.”

“Stop talking,” I begged on a whisper.

pe over “I’ve said it before, babe, but maybe you didn’t clue in.”
me if I “Stop talking.”
for me. “You gotta know who you’ve let in your bed.”
ened to “Stop.”
and he
Then he “You wanna end it now, you say the word and I’ll walk away. I
left.” goin’ after him, I’m still gonna make him pay. But I’ll be out of your l

“Stop talking!” Now my hands were gripping his head, lungs bur
hot I was finding it hard to breathe.

illed us “Say the word now. You don’t, I’m never letting you go.”

“Please, Luke, stop talking.”

“You gotta make the decision now, Ava.”

“Shut up,” I whispered.

“You can’t deny this and you can’t deal with this later, it has to b
I’m not gettin’ used to sharin’ my life with you and havin’ you take
me. You don’t say the word now and you can’t deal with it later a
think to leave, I’m warnin’ you, I’ll come after you.”

“*Shut up!*” This time, I shouted it.

?” “You make the decision, either I walk out and leave you in here
walk out together. We walk out together, that’s it. Things get tough, w
nothingit doesn’t matter. We deal. You don’t buy tickets to St. Croix, you doi
me the silent treatment. *We deal*. We walk out of here together and y
ourningthis, or anything else you can conjure up to shut me out, I’m tellin’ yo
it’s not gonna be good. In our scenario, we aren’t switchin’ roles
forced to live your mom’s life while you take off and live your dad’s.”

Oh...my...*God*.

He did *not* just say that.

“You didn’t just say that,” I whispered, letting go of his head, mine from his hands and leaning back.

“I said it. You know the worst in me, and I know it’s bad, but I’m still hidin’ anything. I’m givin’ you the chance to decide. You tell me to ife.” won’t like it, but I’ll do it.”

Okay, that was it. I’d had enough.

“You are *such* a jerk!” I snapped and gave him a shove that was s he rocked back at the shoulder.

I was too angry to realize I’d finally scored a physical push.

Instead, I kept ranting.

“You know, Lucas Stark, the reason I got contacts and lost weight because you hugged me at your dad’s funeral and later I overheard I and Sofia making fun of me, and *you*, because we looked stupid to e now. You, hot, handsome Luke hugging me, Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes. They s off on sight of us made them throw up a little. They said you had to be gay nd you me. I vowed, *vowed*,” I shouted the last word at the top of my lungs,

in a dramatic tizzy I could not control (and didn’t even try), “th e or we wouldn’t lay eyes on me again until I could be held by you, and if e fight, saw us no one would throw up a little or think we didn’t look right tog

I was on a roll. So on a roll, I didn’t notice the air in the room n’t give again. Nor did I notice the look and feel of Luke change.

I just kept right on yelling.

“And last night when you thought I was sorting through stuff in m u babe, so I’m I wasn’t. I was remembering that motorcycle ride you gave me, after

you got in serious shit with your dad and my mom and you call
pulling precious cargo. So I wasn't sorting through stuff in my head. *You* pulled
through last night and you didn't even know it, you big idiot."

I'm not I shoved him again, this time his shoulder didn't go back. I didn't
walk, I that either.

I just kept on raging.

"You told me that it felt good when we were growing up to
so hard, thought you could move mountains because you needed that. Well, you
what *I* grew up with! I couldn't have gotten through it without knowing
were across the street and you were the only person in my life who
shit. Other than Sissy, you were the *only person in my life who gave a*

"Ava—"

ght was "I'm talking now," I interrupted him, using a line he'd used on me.
Marilyn
together. I ignored the side of his mouth going up in one of his sexy half-gr
said the kept on going.

to hug "So I don't care who you were for eight years, it doesn't change w
caught are to me. So don't give me any ultimatums and don't threaten me. I a
at you I am, a big dork who makes mistakes and deals the best way I can. I'r
anyone to keep making mistakes and being a big dork because that's who I a
ether." can't deal with it, then you best walk out that door because that's the
change is."

I stopped talking and realized, first, that I was breathing heavy
second, that I had been shouting the whole time and it was likely ev
could hear.

y head,
r which Shit.

led me Oh well, fuck it. Now was not the time to be embarrassed for being
lled me Hell, there was never a time to be embarrassed for being me.

“You through?” Luke asked, cutting through my world-rocking ep
t notice of coming to terms with being a dork.

I thought about it.

“Yeah,” I replied.

know I “Your mother and sisters come to town often?”
u knew

ing you I blinked in confusion, not only at his change in subject, but at hi
gave a rational tone. Gonzo Luke was a memory.

shit!” “Not really,” I told him.

“But they come to town?”

“Sometimes.”

ins and “Do I have to be nice to them?”

I took in a breath.

who you It had happened. I’d lost control, opened up and let Luke see my sc
am who I’d told him everything, held nothing back.

n going And he was smiling at me.

m. You I felt something shift, then settle. The soft spot was still the
: way it vulnerable, but now that I showed it to him, I closed the door on it, lo
and handed Luke the key.

ly, and I felt goose bumps rise on my skin, but I ignored them and answe
everyone question in a quiet voice. “Probably.”

“That’s gonna be hard, babe.”

“You’re a tough guy, macho man. You can hack it.”

g me. His arms came around me and he slid me forward on the counter special girl parts were pressed against his hard boy parts. My arms lif closed around his neck.

iphany

“Fair warning. They say shit to you I don’t like, especially those sisters of yours, I may not be responsible for what comes out of my r Luke told me.

“I’m sensing that Marilyn and Sofia have earned a new title. That’ you’ve called them ‘those fuckin’ sisters of yours.’”

s calm,

He ignored my comment and the fact that I impersonated his dee and kept to his theme. “I’m not shittin’ you, Ava. I’m not gonna stand and listen to those bitches cuttin’ you down.”

Apparently, Luke took me giving him my key pretty fucking seriou

Daisy was right. The best way to guard your heart was to trust man to take care of it for you. Lucky for me, considering there weren’ around, I found myself a good man.

oft spot. Caught up in this new knowledge, I whispered, “Okay,” then forward and even with a cut lip, I kissed him hard.

His mouth opened over mine, his tongue slid inside and even with lip he kissed me back, making the hard kiss so hot I melted into him.

re, still

ocked it Oo, Good Ava breathed. *I feel so much better now.*

Weirdly enough, Bad Ava added, *I do too.*

ered his

You do? Good Ava asked.

Yeah, Bad Ava answered. *Go figure.*

Well, finally, Good Ava commented.

Still lots of fun to have, even if we are Luke’s woman, Bad Ava not

so my *I'm not thinking that's a good thing*, Good Ava leaned in and said
ted andear.

Bad Ava giggled and she sounded happy.

fuckin'



mouth," AFTER OUR MINI-POST-DRAMA make out session, Luke took me out
kitchenette, and in the hallway, the black guy I'd never met was tal
's twiceanother guy I'd never seen before and Shirleen.

"Shee-it," the black guy said when he saw us. "You white g
p voiceattitude. Far as I can see, these boys need to get their heads examined.
aroundup with that shit for about a fuckin' second."

Any normal person would politely pretend that they hadn't heard a
isly. I was learning quickly that I was not surrounded by normal
a goodanymore.

't many Since normal for me was a dad who would up and leave, a fading
queen of a mother who was so engrossed in her own life she for
leaneddaughters had one too and might need her help, and my two "fuckin'
who were mean as snakes, I figured not normal was not so bad.

th a cut Shirleen had different thoughts and turned on the black dude.

"Like black women don't have more attitude then ten of these
women," she declared, as if that was a good thing.

"Black women don't give you shit by yellin' at your ass for-fuckin'
They get fed up, they quit bitchin' and burn down your house or sti
with a knife. Makes it easier. Either way, you know it's time to get y
together and you just gotta call your insurance man."

"And you are?" I asked, before Shirleen could retort like she look
ed.

I in my she was preparing to do, big time.

“I’m Smithie,” he answered. “You dance?”

I blinked at him, stunned by his bizarre question. “Do I dance?”

“Smithie.” For some reason Luke’s voice was a low, warning rumble. Smithie’s eyes turned to him.

“What? You too? What’s fuckin’ wrong with strippin’? Daisy’s the best and everyone likes Daisy. Lottie strips, everyone likes Lottie.”

I was stuck on the “stripping” explanation to “do you dance?”

I’d put Then it dawned on me that Smithie must be the owner of the strip club where Jet worked as a cocktail waitress during her drama and where he’d put Lottie was currently a stripper (and the best one in the Rocky Mountain region if rumor could be believed).

“Now that Daisy’s with Marcus, she strip anymore?” Shirleen asked.

“No,” Smithie answered.

“Lottie got a man?” Shirleen carried on.

“No,” Smithie snapped, cottoning on to Shirleen’s point.

“Luke look like the type of boy who’d let men watch his woman take her clothes off while she’s dancin’ around on a stage with baby oil slathered over her body?” Shirleen pushed.

“All right, all right, fuck,” Smithie muttered. “Can’t a man ask a question? Nothin’ wrong with asking.”

I looked at Luke. “I think I need cookies.”

He gave me a half-grin and touched my nose.

What he did not do, I noticed, was charge out and buy me cookies.

I demoted him from The Best Man Ever to just The Best Man I Met. Superman would have charged out. Hell, he'd have flown to get Lane cookies. I was pretty sure of it.

ble and Luke's eyes moved to the other man who hadn't said anything. The man was huge, as in enormous. Every inch of him, as far as I could tell, was muscle.

stripped "Jack, you in on the meeting?" Luke asked him.

I sucked in breath.

ip club Jack.

er sister Jack was the guy in the surveillance room that saw me start to hand down my own pants.

Shit!

id. I stared at Jack. I thought Jack would ogle me, give me something, anything, to communicate, like a lecherous, icky *man*, knew what he knew.

Jack didn't even glance in my direction. He kept his eyes on Luke.

ake her "Brody and me are takin' shifts in surveillance," Jack told Luke. ered all than me, Lee's pullin' everyone off assignments until Dexter is found. Monty's goin' into the field."

recruit? Wow.

I didn't know who Monty was, but the way Jack said it I got the this was a big thing.

"Well!" Shirleen snapped. "What you all standin' around for? Shit, that dickhead's gonna be drinkin' piña fuckin' coladas in Mexico before pull your fingers out of your asses."

'd Ever I sucked in breath yet again and at the rate I was going I was g
get Loispass out. Still, I wasn't certain Luke would take to anyone, even
Shirleen, telling him he had his finger up his ass.

ie other I turned to him.

ell, was "Luke—" I started cautiously to try and tame the wild beast be
went gonzo again.

Luke's hard eyes moved from Shirleen to me. He wasn't happy w
but he also wasn't going to go gonzo.

I let out a breath then started a different (read: safer) subject. "I
put my sure I want Lee to—"

"Decision's made, babe," Luke cut me off to say. "Lee doesn'
change his mind. The sooner this is over, the sooner we can all focus c
a look. shit."

that he "Yeah, like the next one of you white bitches who tears into one c
boys lives. Who's up next, is it that Hawaiian guy?" Smithie asked.

"Far as I can tell, it's Ally. She's due," Shirleen countered. "Tl
"Other boyfriend of hers got himself into the FBI. He's off to DC. No way
d. Even Ally Nightingale is gonna leave Denver. Soon, she'll be a free agent."

"My money's on Hector," Jack threw in. "He's a wild man.
woman's gotta tame him before he gets himself killed."

feeling "I'll take that action," Shirleen said.

"Oh my God. This is cool," I breathed, excited to be in on the
it. That floor, *finally*, of one of these bets, especially when it wasn't one that ir
you all me.

Luke's hand came to the back of my neck. "Babe."

going to I turned to face him, lost in the excitement. “Who do you think it’s
a scarybe?”

“I don’t wish this shit on *anyone*,” was Luke’s answer.

As much as it killed the mood, I had to admit Luke had a point.

fore he “Lord!” Shirleen shouted, reaching the end of her tether. “Do *I* hav
out and whack this guy personally?”

with her, Yikes.

Luke sliced a killing glance at Shirleen before he pulled me into hi
I’m not pressure at my neck and kissed me softly.

“I want you to stay in the offices and I don’t want you to do a
’t often stupid,” he warned when he was done.

in other The knee weakening I experienced with his kiss vanished and I g
him. He gave me a half-grin, totally unaffected by the glare.

of these Then he was gone.

hat cop Jack peeled off and disappeared behind a door, but Smithie and S
in hell remained.

I looked at them.

. Some “Well?” Shirleen asked, as if she was expecting something.

And I knew what she was expecting. I also knew what I had to do.

I may have realized, finally, that I was Luke’s woman, that I belo
ground him and that he could be trusted with my heart, my body, my troubles
involved my vulnerabilities.

But I still was a Rock Chick.

“I need to talk to the girls,” I told Shirleen.

s gonna “Oh shit,” Smithie muttered. “Here we go.”

“Oowee, that’s what I’m talkin’ about,” Shirleen cried in glee.

Uh-oh, Good Ava murmured.

Yippee! Bad Ava hooted.

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Shirleen

nged to

and all

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Yippee! Bad Ava hooted.



VIBRATOR CEREMONY

Shirleen walked Smithie and I into what she called the “Down Room”

It was a big room. It had a couch, a TV, a treadmill, a weigh station, and a bunch of weights. It also was filled with Rock Chicks, Tod, Steve, and Duke.

When we walked in, everyone turned to stare.

“Hey,” I greeted.

Sissy came forward and gave me a big hug. I hugged her back. She stepped away and looked up at me. I braced in preparation for her to say something that would make me cry.

“I’m thinking you aren’t fuck buddies with Luke anymore,” she said with a grin.

Clearly my shouted diatribe in the kitchenette announcing my new relationship status with Luke superseded all my other dramas, including being duct taped to a steel support and then fondled by my current boyfriend.

I looked to the ceiling.

“I’m thinkin’ her vibrators are gonna get lonely,” Daisy noted.

I closed my eyes.

“I’m thinking we should have a vibrator ceremony. Maybe we stand around in the dead of night, carrying candles and chanting while we bury them in her back yard,” Ally added.

I made a low, frustrated sound in the back of my throat.

“I’m thinkin’ you bitches best stop talkin’ about vibrators. We got a bunch of wild men in the next room plannin’ a human hunt and you worrin’ about sex toys,” Smithie threw in, sounding exasperated.

“I.” I looked at Smithie and said with feeling, “Thank you.”

“Who brought him?” Tod whispered loudly to Indy.

“I did. I figured we needed all the help we could get,” Jet replied.

“He’s kind of a killjoy,” Tod went on. “I like the idea of a Vibrator Ceremony. After we’re done burying them, we could make canapés and champagne. It’s a lot more fun to talk about that than hunting down humans.”

“I pulled” Tod was not wrong.

“Nothing” “Oh for fuck’s sake!” Duke exploded.

“All right!” I shouted before I lost any more control. “Listen up.”

“I hid on a” All eyes turned back to me.

I took a deep breath.

“I elevated” Then I realized I didn’t have anything to say.

“Including” So, as any good Rock Chick would, I winged it.

“I can ex-”

“Let’s break this down. First, some guy hit Bobby in the head with a baseball bat. Seems everyone has forgotten that, but I haven’t. I don’t know Bobby and I know something’s gotta give with the guy who hit you with me?”

can all There were a couple of nods but mostly the Rock Chicks
nile sheconfused.

“Um, he’s kinda in jail,” Roxie reminded me. “Remember, Hec
Darius got him? Hank told me Bobby ID’d the guy from mug shots at
: a pack that he confessed.”

men are Oh. Yeah. I forgot the first part. The second part was good news.

I decided to forge ahead.

“Okay, that’s sorted,” I announced. “Then, second, last night v
good. For some reason it seems it was worse for Luke than it was for n

“That’s because you’re a steel magnolia, sugar,” Daisy chimed in.

/ibrator She got more nods than I did.

id drink “What the hell does that mean?” Tex asked.

mans.” “You seen the movie *Steel Magnolias*?” Daisy asked Tex.

“Fuck no,” Tex stated the obvious.

“Watch it, then you’ll understand,” Daisy went on.

“Will someone please tell me why we’re talkin’ about a fuckin
Roberts movie?” Duke put in.

“It wasn’t a Julia Roberts movie, it was a Dolly Parton movie,”
snapped back.

“It was really a Sally Field movie,” Jet said quietly.

with a “Oh pu-lease. Everyone knows Shirley MacLaine stole the whol
t evenshow,” Tod threw out.

Bobby. “Someone kill me,” Smithie begged.

“People!” I yelled.

looked Everyone quieted and turned back to me.

When I had their attention, I continued.

tor and “All right, so second point, part A. Luke’s off-the-scales pissed and
nd after none too happy either, which means Noah, my ex, is fucked. I don’t
that, I just don’t want anyone I care about doing something stupid
fucking up their life in order to make Noah pay. Which takes me to
I’m pissed, too. I mean, the guy beat me up, taped me to a post and
hand down my pants, but it’s worse! At the same time he was steal
was not auntie’s jewelry and all my money, he was conning a seventy-year
ne.” disabled lady out of her retirement fund and he stole her car!”

There were gasps all around.

Finally.

Now I was getting somewhere.

“Oh my God,” Sissy breathed.

“No shit?” Ally asked.

“No shit,” I told her. “That means we have to find him first and make
r’ Julia pay by turning him over to the proper authorities.”

“I know some proper authorities,” Roxie said.

’ Daisy “Me too,” Jet put in.

“Practically my whole family is proper authorities,” Indy added.

e damn “Right, they come in later. First we have to catch him,” I went
looked at Duke, Tex and Smithie. “Everyone with me?”

The girls, Tod and Stevie nodded.

Tex, Duke and Smithie did not.

Shit.

“Are you guys here as members of the Rock Chick gang or are you and Lee’s as informants for the Hot Bunch?” I asked them.

“Shit, woman,” Tex said, but I noted he didn’t answer my question.

“I’m being serious,” I told him, sounding just as serious as I was.

which was ultra-serious. “If you’re here as informants, take off now. If

not, you can stay. Either way, I don’t want you talking me out of the

crush on Lucas Stark began when I was eight years old. Now, twenty

years later, he’s mine. He just caved in a locker with his fist, for goodness

God knows what he’s going to do to Noah when he catches him. I

spending the next twenty to life visiting him in a penitentiary. Got me?

Tex, Duke and Smithie just stared at me.

“Got me?” I snapped.

Tex looked at Duke. “She’s got spunk,” he said.

“Where I come from, we call it sass,” Duke replied.

“Where I come from, we call it attitude,” Smithie put in.

“Oh, for the love of God, whatever you call it, are you in or out?”
clipped.

Smithie looked at me. “I don’t know about your firsts and second
and Bs. All I know is Jet told me a friend of hers got violated. I ain’t
with that shit. I don’t care *who* nails this motherfucker, I just wanna be
nailin’ him. So yeah, I’m fuckin’ in.”

“In,” Duke growled.

“Fuck yeah, I’m in,” Tex boomed.

I nodded to them. Once.

“All righty then, here’s my plan.”

And I told them my plan. It was kind of a shit plan, but luckily Inc and Jules had ideas to share and they were better than mine. In the end all right because instead of a half-assed plan, we had a pretty decent one.

When we were done, Tod raised his hand and I nodded to him.

“Can I just ask, after we find this guy, can we talk about the V ceremony. My Ceremony? I’m thinking of making us all kind of choir-like robes to wear but with sequins and some satin sashes as belts. Maybe in chartreuse.”

It was then I was wishing someone would shoot *me*.

”



THE GANG HANDED OUT ASSIGNMENTS. Everyone prepared to move on approached Jules.

“Hey,” I said.

“You hanging in there?” she asked, looking at me closely.

I nodded.

“Listen, I...um...” I started, but May came up to our group and I stopped.

” Jules “It’s okay. You can talk in front of May,” Jules told me.

“About *anything*?” I asked.

“Hon, if you mean about you freakin’ out yesterday about Luke sitting out with Jules on her couch while Vance was watchin’ on the monitor in the surveillance room, then yeah, you can talk about anything,” May put in.

My bugged out eyes swung to Jules.

“Vance was watching?” I breathed.

“Yeah, I didn’t know that. Neither did Luke. Vance installed cam

my house during my troubles and he was on duty in the surveillance room
ly, Ally night Luke and I...um..." Jules stopped then started again. "Ava, you
d, I felt know, it didn't go very far."

ie. "Vance was watching?" I breathed again. I didn't know Vance ve
(read: hardly at all), but I figured Vance was a lot like Luke. "Did he
/ibrator any lamps?" I asked.

o wear, I saw Jules relax before she grinned. "No, but he wasn't too happy.
"I'll bet," I said, thinking she got off easy.

"Did Luke throw a lamp?" May asked.

"Yeah, after he caught me with Ren," I told her.

it and I May looked at Jules. "Who acts like that?"

I thought this was a good question, but I didn't share. Instead
"Jules, listen, I don't want you in on this operation."

Both Jules and May looked at me. May's eyes narrowed. Jules
surprised.

opped. "Why? She's The Law. Right now, way I see it, she's the best thi
got goin' for you," May said.

I looked at Jules. "I can't explain it now, but I think Jules understan
makin' I saw the light dawn on Jules. It didn't dawn on May. Ther
s in the reckoned May wasn't in on the pregnancy news.

1. "You can't cut her out of the action just because she made out wi
boyfriend," May protested.

In any normal situation, a girl would be obligated to cut out anot
because she made out with her boyfriend.
ieras in

This, however, wasn't a normal situation.

om the Still.

have to I ignored May. It was up to Jules if she wanted to share that protecting her because she was pregnant. Instead, I looked for a compr

ry well “Can you be the information person? Operate a Command C
e throw People can check in with you. You can keep tabs on things, where peo
what they’ve learned. I don’t know, that kind of shit?” I asked.

.” Jules smiled. “I can do that.”

“Hang on a second, Jules can drop a guy twice her size. I don’t—
cut in.

“I’ll explain it later,” Jules interrupted her.

“But—” May went on.

I said, “May, I’ll explain it later,” Jules repeated.

May looked from Jules, to me, back to Jules.

looked “You’re keepin’ somethin’ from me,” she accused.

“I’ll explain later,” Jules said again.

ing you “Hon, you better explain later,” May snapped, really not happy to
of the loop, but she said no more and moved away.

nds.” Jules and I watched May retreat, then Jules turned to me. “It isn’t
efore I don’t want her to know. I just want to be further along before I tel
don’t want her to get all excited and then...it’s just that, I have a histo
th your if I lose it, I just want Vance and me...” Jules stopped and looked awa

I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

her girl She looked back at me and said quietly, “Thank you for keepi
secret. There aren’t many of those in this tribe.”

I'd noticed that.

I was Instead of answering, I pulled on her hand to bring her closer. I hugged her. I hugged her because I was happy for her and Vance. I hugged her because she obviously didn't think I was a screaming dork like I was the day before. Lastly, I hugged her because she was proof that Vance had good taste in women and he had settled on me, which said a lot about both of us.

"May" May "Is there gonna be lots of huggin' and carryin' on or we gonna get the shit done?" Tex boomed from somewhere close.

I sighed. So did Jules.

We broke our hug and I looked at Tex.

"Let's get this shit done," I declared.



INDY ALLY, Tod and Stevie went to go talk to Brody, a friend of their brother's. Apparently he was a computer genius and Lee's brother was going to pump him for any information he had on the investigation.

Jet, Roxie, Daisy and Smithie went to get provisions, including stuff like Tasers, pepper spray and handcuffs.

May and Jules went to Jules's house where we were all going to meet later.

Shirleen, Tex, Duke, Sissy and I went to my house so I could get the Range Rover.

We trooped in my front door, Duke first. He stopped dead, barely clearing the doorway from the entrance hall to the living room.

Shirleen slammed into his back, I slammed into Shirleen's back
and I slammed into me and Tex boomed, "What the fuck?" from the rear.

"What the fuck is right," Duke growled, staring into my living room
for my I looked around everyone in front of me and saw through the door
at Luke that Uncle Vito was sitting in my armchair.

It about Shit.

What was Uncle Vito doing there?
get this

I did *not* need this.

Time to run interference.

"Hey, Uncle Vito," I called, pushing my way through, even
Shirleen tried and failed to hold me back.

Duke was more successful. His arm wrapped around my upper chest
and he hauled me back against his body.

That was when things got worse.
hacker.

See, first, I forgot for a second (don't ask me how), about me
Noah Second, I didn't know that Ren was standing by the fireplace, nor did
n guns, that Dom was lounging full out on my couch.

The Zano Family took one look at me and the air in the room
to meet electric.

"Get her outta here," Duke rumbled, feeling the air and push
get my backwards.

Uncle Vito slowly stood and Dom came out of his lounge as S
clearing yanked me back. Unfortunately, Sissy was pushing forward. The
general confusion as we were bumped and shoved, but the confusion
sorted out quickly when Ren and Dom entered the equation.

Ren caught my arm and pulled me out of the fray and fully into the room. Dom caught Sissy and pulled her in.

I was more worried about Dom getting to Sissy. I was even more worried when the electricity ratcheted up to radioactivity when Dom got a look at the fading purple marks under Sissy's eyes.

"Dominic," Uncle Vito said in a low, warning tone as Dom prepared to go berserk.

"Look at me," I heard Ren order.

Oops.

I forgot Ren had hold of me.

I looked at him. I just had a chance to notice we had nearly identical lips (for some reason his looked sexier, which I found pretty fucking interesting) when the radioactivity in the room became highly unstable.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill him," Ren whispered.

"Lorenzo." Now Uncle Vito was saying Ren's name in a low, warning tone. I know

"We been at this half an hour and already things are out of control," Duke grumbled. I went

I ignored Duke and focused on Ren. "It's okay, Ren. Everything's fine." Ren's hands came to either side of my neck and his thumb gently rubbed into the underside of my chin. His eyes were on the tear on my lip. My face was tight.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill him," he repeated.

"Really, it's okay," I said. "Luke's looking for Noah. We're looking for Noah—"

e living Oops again.

Clearly I'd made an incorrect assumption because Ren's head gave
worriedHis eyes came to mine and they narrowed.

k at the I'd surprised him.

“Stark didn't do that to you?” Ren asked.

ared to It was my turn to have my head jerk.

“Of course not,” I snapped, sounding exasperated.

“*Dexter* did that to you?” Ren's voice was trembling with fury.

“What in *the* fuck?” Dom asked from somewhere else, but I knew
talking about me.

ical cut I didn't know what was worse than unstable radioactivity. Perhaps
unfair) the sun exploding, which had to be the power of what it felt like th
was preparing to do.

“You wanna step back?” All of a sudden Tex was at our side
varningwasn't asking a question.

Ren's body didn't move but his head turned. He didn't step back
.” Dukehands didn't move from me.

“No,” was all he said, but you could tell he meant it.

fine.” “Fair warnin'. You step back or I'll fuckin' make you step back
pressedboomed.

and his “Please, don't—” I started.

“Lorenzo, son, step back,” Uncle Vito demanded from behind Ren

Ren and Tex continued their staring contest.

ing for “Lorenzo, I want to hear what Ava has to say. I'm askin' you, step

Uncle Vito pressed.

a jerk. Ren's eyes came back to mine, then they dropped to my mouth.

One of his hands moved so his thumb could gently touch the cut on my

His gaze shifted to mine.

His eyes were troubled, anger warring with something else, softer, and quietly he said, "Honey."

This cut through me because I realized, right then, Ren didn't just fuck me.

he was Ren liked me.

Ren didn't just like me.

s it was He *liked* me.

e room "Ren," I said softly, and I sounded sad. Sad enough for him to und without me saying it that he didn't have a chance in the world.

and he He closed his eyes. This cut through me too. Deeper this time, bec was a good guy and he deserved to be happy. He had just picked the and his girl. Not that I could make him happy. I was kind of crazy, I had temper and I fibbed a lot. Luckily, Luke "enjoyed" that kind of thing.

Regardless, I lifted my hand to his cheek.

κ," Tex "Oh fuck," Shirleen said from somewhere behind me.

That was when the room exploded.

Mainly because, with his usual perfect timing, Luke walked in.

Worse!

Behind him came Lee and Vance.

back," And no one looked happy.

In a flash, Tex stepped back. Lee and Vance took positions, the
again. the exploding air pressed in and Luke came at us, eyes on Ren. Re
lip. still, preparing for attack.

Worse than parking-lot-fistfights-mayhem was about to ensue. I kn
nothing felt it and I had to stop it.

I pulled away from Ren and got between him and Luke.

want to “Luke—” I put my hands up.

Luke collided with them and halted. His eyes flashed to me and the
scorching.

“Get outta my way, babe.”

I scrambled for something, anything, to make Luke to calm down.

erstand “He just found out about Noah,” I said.

Luke went solid and his brows snapped together. “You told
ause he touched you?”

! wrong Oh fuck.

l a bad Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“*Touched* her?” Ren said low from behind my back.

Oh *fuck*.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, FUCK.

Luke’s eyes moved to Ren for a beat then they came back to
searched my face, then his gaze dropped to my hands on his chest an
for some reason, I felt his body relax.

I had a moment of relief before it was swept away.

Because for some ungodly reason Luke shared, totally open and l

heat of honest.

men went Luke looked at Ren as his arm slid around my waist, pulling me
side. “Yeah, he touched her. He beat the shit out of her. Duct taped her
view it, I steel support in her basement. Put his fuckin’ hand down her pants and
humped her. Then he left her in the dark for hours before we found her
Ee-yikes.

“You have *got* to be shittin’ me,” Dom snarled, and I peeked around
they were to look at Dom.

His arm was around Sissy’s neck and his face was red. Sissy’s face
pale, as, I suspected, so was mine.

Apparently Dom had forgotten that, days earlier, he’d stun-gunned
and tried it on with me in the back of his BMW.

him he However, even I had to admit that wasn’t as bad as what Noah did.

I shifted fully to Luke’s side and his arm curled around my
chanced a glance at Ren and saw he was studying his shoes, one of his
at the back of his neck, the other one at his waist. This was a dis-
position of masculine reflection and I figured Noah’s luck, already shown
run out.

But it was Uncle Vito who spoke next and his voice was Scary
capital “S.”

me. He “No one fucks with family.”

id then, Okay, so it was actually *now* when Noah’s luck ran out.

“I’m not family,” I protested.

Ren’s head came up. His hand at his neck dropped and his eyes locked
brutally mine.

“You’re family.” His voice was terse.

“I’m not,” I repeated.

“You’re family,” Dom snapped.

“No, really—” I started.

“Ava, Sissy is family, and since you’re Sissy’s family, like it or not, you’re family. It’s a roundabout way, that makes you a Zano. And no one fucks with a Zano.” Uncle Vito declared.

Hell and damnation.

“You get him, I want him,” Luke said, and I looked up at him.

It was then I realized why he shared. It was then I knew he trusted me. It was then I knew he could hack it if he shared. It was then I knew that he knew Ren did want to fuck me, but he had feelings for me, deep ones. It was then I realized Luke knew how *all* the Zanos felt about me. And finally, it was my neck. I realized Luke was using the Zanos to get what he wanted.

Payback on Noah.

It was actually really clever in a manipulative and annoying way.

“Hang on a second—” I started.

“Done,” Uncle Vito agreed.

My heart stopped beating and I looked from Uncle Vito to Luke at me again.

“Wait—” I started again.

Luke talked over me. “Ava’s activated the Rock Chicks,” Luke said, “and I’m shocked on me by informing my now not-so-secret plan to the Zanos (how did he know *everything*?). Ren, Dom and Uncle Vito looked at me, and Luke went to know enough to know I’m not gonna be able to control her, or any of

want him found before they find him.”

Uncle Vito looked to Lee. “Your brother and Chavez involved in tl

“Not officially,” Lee answered.

Uncle Vito smiled a scary smile. My heart clenched an unhappy cl

ot, in a Shit!

Zano,” “Everyone, can we just—” I started, yes *again*, then Luke interrupt

He turned to Tex and Duke. “You keep her protected. Something h
to her, I hold you responsible.”

“What the fuck you think we’re doin’ alignin’ ourselves with tl
d that I rather than the hunt?” Tex boomed, clearly affronted.

n’t just Luke ignored him and looked at Dom. “Your shit sorted?”

realized “Not exactly, but this takes precedence,” Dom answered.

then I “Damn straight,” Duke agreed.

“Once this is over, we need a family meeting,” Uncle Vito cut in
eyes moved between Sissy and me. “That’s why we came here. D
wants to talk to Sissy. Lorenzo doesn’t agree and I’ve allowed him in
meet. Ava, you want in and Sissy wants you there, you can be there, t
presiding.”

nd back I looked at Sissy. If anything she looked even paler. We both kn
Uncle Vito presiding meant Sissy was screwed.

“I want Ava there,” Sissy said.

urprised “Ava’s there, I’m there,” Luke announced.

e know Oh crap.

t on, “I “You’re not family.” Ren had clearly had enough.

f ’em. I

“Ava’s not anywhere near you unless I’m with her,” Luke replied.

his?” This made Ren smile.

Oh *fuck*.

ench. “Boys—” I started, yes, again, to be interrupted, yes, *again*.

This time, it was Uncle Vito.

ed me. “All right, I’m done with this,” he declared and his eyes came back
happens “I want you with Lorenzo. Not only do you look good together, you two
couple, that means you’ll be in the family officially and I don’t like
e girls Thanksgiving euchre partner. Anyway, you’d make a good mam
Lorenzo lotsa babies. You got the hips for it.”

Luke went still beside me at the very mention of Ren and my
babies” and the thought of Ren anywhere near my hips, but I was too
rolling my eyes to the ceiling to deal with Luke’s reaction.

Seriously, how much could a girl take?

and his Uncle Vito went on, “You got something serious going with Starl
Dominic now or we gotta have a different kind of family meeting.”

on the My eyes went away from the ceiling and moved to Uncle Vito. Th
oo. I’m went to Ren and I felt my face go soft.

ew that “Luke and I have something serious,” I said quietly.

“Fine. That’s done,” Uncle Vito replied, and even though he didn’t
happy, I could tell he was going to let it go.

Ren wasn’t so prepared to let it go.

“You fuck her over, you got trouble,” he said to Luke.

Luke didn’t respond.

“Yeah, we’re not goin’ through this Noah shit again,” Dom threw c

“Oh for goodness sake,” I snapped when Luke, who had again beside me, got tense and his gaze cut to Dom.

“Shut up, Dom,” Ren said before Luke could respond.

“I’m just sayin’—” Dom said to Ren.

“Yeah, right. You were just sayin’. Let’s talk about when you pu
back from goin’ after Dexter after he fucked Ava over. I nailed him th
shit wouldn’t have happened and Ava wouldn’t have got hurt,” R
a, giveback.

Ho-ly *crap*.

“lotsa Ren wanted to go after Noah when he fucked me over?

so busy That was huge.

Luke, already tense, went solid and my body copied his reaction.

“Well, I didn’t think—” Dom started.

“You never think,” Uncle Vito threw in. “You hadn’t talked I
outta that shit months ago, he’d be the one with his arm around Ava
en they right now and Angela would be callin’ Father Paolo about Catholic c
Uncle Vito looked at me. “You’re in the family officially, you go
Catholic. Just warnin’ you in case it don’t work out with you and Stark

I could feel Luke preparing to go gonzo when I heard Shirleen
would think this was fuckin’ hilarious, standin’ around chatting about
Catholic classes, but there’s a shithead out there and we’re givin’ him
of time to get away after he put his hand down my girl’s pants!”

When she stopped talking, she was shouting.

One thing you could count on, that was Shirleen bringing the m

down. hand.

relaxed “Luke,” Lee said, and he and Vance moved toward us.

Thankfully, I figured this meant the latest drama was at an end.

“Right,” Luke muttered, and tore his angry gaze away from Uncle and looked at me. “I came by to tell you not to do anything stupid because I know you’re gonna do somethin’ stupid.”

en, this “I am so sure,” I snapped, unable to stop myself.

en shot He curled me so I was facing his body. “Whatever the day brings, I’ll be there at the end of it, we’re together. Got me?”

That took the wind out of my sails, mainly because I liked what he was saying.

“Well then, okay.” I still sounded kinda bitchy, but my heart wasn’t in it.

“I don’t like what you’re doin’, but enough time has been wasted so I’m not gonna argue about it,” Luke told me.

I nodded.

Lorenzo “You wanna stay at the hotel again?” he asked.

’s neck I shook my head. “I think we should stay here. I don’t want to be a burden on the shoulders of my own house.”

It was his turn to nod. His face started to get soft and his eyes warmed. “I’m glad you’re relieved he understood. Then he bent his head and touched his moustache. “I’ll stay here, I’ll stay here.”

fuckin’ “Stay close to Tex, Duke or Jules,” he said, face still close.

plenty “Jules isn’t, um...working in the field during this operation. I mentioned, my eyes slid to Vance. I bit the uninjured part of my lip. “You...erm...know why. Jules and I decided to stay here in charge of Command Central.”

The angry went out of Luke's face and body.

"Ava babe," was all he said, but he said it in The Voice and my wobbled.

le Vito "Luke," Lee pressed, still standing close and breaking the moment.

cause I Luke didn't look at Lee as he said to me, "Gotta go."

I nodded again.

"Stay safe," he finished.

babe, at Then he touched his mouth to mine and was gone.

said. Vance stopped at me before he took off. I held my breath as, blank but eyes intense, he reached out, took a lock of my hair and tugged it.

t in it. Then he was gone, too.

so there I let out my breath.

Dom led Sissy to my side, his eyes on my closed front door.

"You give Stark that hickey?" Dom asked me.

Oh shit, not the hickey again.

: scared I turned to glare at him, but he just grinned at me.

"Nice," he said, nodding slowly.

m and I That was when Sissy pulled out from his arm and punched his mouth to stomach.

"Now that's what *I* call nice," Tex boomed.

ion," I I burst out laughing.

lip and "The family meeting is gonna be interesting," Duke noted, a huge she's in on his face as he looked at a doubled over Dom. Sissy stood beside hands on hips, wearing the Sissy Glare.

Ren ignored this.

y knees He approached, pulled me into his arms and held on tight.

“Been wanting to do this since you walked in,” he said quietly in n

I sighed, deep and huge, mainly because I just realized that Re
good hugs.

After a while, I told his neck in a soft voice, “You know, you sh
be hugging me.”

“I know and I don’t give a fuck,” Ren replied.

k-faced Oh well, Luke was gone, just this once.

My arms went around him and I squeezed.

“You’re a good guy,” I whispered.

“Yeah. Too good. I wanted to give you time after Dexter. You need
shouldn’t have given it. I should have moved in.”

He was right. He should have moved in. However, if he had I w
have had my chance with Luke. There was no way to tell if Ren and I
have been better or worse so there was no reason to dwell.

“Could I talk you into handing Noah over to the police if you catch
I queried.

1 in the Ren’s head came up. He looked me in the eyes then he shook his h

“You’re going to hand him over to Luke?” I asked.

Still silent, Ren nodded.

“Men,” I sighed.

e smile
de him, Ren’s hand came up and he touched the cut on my lip. His eyes go
angry for a brief flash before he hid it.

“Be safe, Ava,” he said gently and finished, “Be happy.” Then he
away and nodded to Dom. “Let’s go.”

ly ear. “Sissy—” Dom started.

m gave “Save it for the family meeting,” Sissy snapped.

“Sis, baby,” Dom tried again.

ouldn’t “Save it!” Sissy repeated, this time on a hiss.

“Save it, Dominic. Yeesh, you give me heartburn,” Uncle Vito bit
patting his heart with his hand. “Been givin’ me heartburn for years. L
when you’re head of this family, beware, it comes with heartburn. No
go.”

EEK.

ded it. I Ren’s future included Head of the Zano Family. Thoughts of
pressed slacks and flouncy blouses doing lunch with the ladies in b
Botox injections paraded through my head. I had to admit, I was pretty
ouldn’t had dodged *that* bullet.

[would

“Don’t even think about it,” Ren muttered, close and bent low to

1 him?” “I become head of the family, first order of business is have Dom wha
no heartburn. Second, buy a house on St. John where we would live
the year, drinking rum for breakfast and fucking under the stars.”

ead.

His head came up. I blinked at him. He smiled at me and it was a
sexy smile.

My heart started racing.

Uncle Vito led the way and then *they* were gone.

ot scary “Now, can we get to the business of findin’ this jerk-off?” Tex
impatiently, looking like he was about ready to come out of his skin.

He pulled “You okay?” Sissy asked, voice filled with concern.

No, I wasn't okay. All of a sudden, my mind was filled with having Ren under a warm, balmy, tropical, starry night and they were thoughts.

If Luke knew, he'd have a shit fit.

“Yeah,” I lied, taking in her pale face. “You okay?”

She spoke in, “Yeah,” she lied back.

Renzo, We looked at each other a beat then, even though there was nothing, let's say definitely nothing happy about our situation, just because we'd survived yet again, we grinned.

me in
between
y glad I

my ear.
cked so
for half

n ultra-

κ asked

“You okay?” Sissy asked, voice filled with concern.

No, I wasn't okay. All of a sudden, my mind was filled with having sex with Ren under a warm, balmy, tropical, starry night and they were happy thoughts.

If Luke knew, he'd have a shit fit.

“Yeah,” I lied, taking in her pale face. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she lied back.

We looked at each other a beat then, even though there was nothing funny and definitely nothing happy about our situation, just because we'd survived yet again, we grinned.



BARLOW BITCHES FROM HELL

“S hee-it, Kumar, you had the left bower? Why didn’t you take the trick with that motherfucker?” Tex boomed across my dining table at poor Mr. Kumar who was *not* getting the hang of euchre.

Uncle Vito, who was sitting across from me, chuckled and wink had won five games in a row as partners.

“I don’t understand this bower business,” Mr. Kumar complained can a jack be higher than an ace? How can only one card of a different the same as another suit? Then jacks are just jacks when they are color? Then it all changes on the next deal of the cards? This game confusing.”

Shirleen walked into the dining room from my kitchen carrying iced tea. “Of course it’s confusing. First off, you’re only playing with deck. Any card game that you play with half a deck has to be half-asse

Uncle Vito and Tex cut their eyes to Shirleen.

Uh-oh.

“Euchre is the *only* card game worth a shit. It ain’t half-asse declared.

“Give me poker any time,” Shirleen retorted.

“I know poker,” Mr. Kumar put in hopefully.

“Poker is a common game,” Uncle Vito threw down.

Shirleen’s eyes narrowed.

Hell and damnation.

“I’m going to bed,” I announced, getting up from the table.

“You can’t go to bed, it’s best out of eleven,” Tex protested.

I stared at Tex. “In the beginning, it was best out of three, then
second five, then it was seven, then nine, now eleven?”
g room

“We have to win *one*,” Tex told me.

ed. We I looked at the ceiling.

“Girl, get outta my way. I’m gonna kick the shit outta this
business. Kumar, you be Vito’s partner. Tex and I are gonna whup
euchre ass.” Shirleen shoved me out of the way and pulled Mr. Kuma
his chair.
another

is too I took my opportunity and headed toward the stairs.

“Don’t be too loud. I can’t sleep with noise,” I said over my shoulder.

a fresh “Only sound you’ll be hearin’ is Vito goin’ *down*,” Shirleen informed
half aback.

d.” I just stopped myself from laughing before I walked up the stairs.

No way Uncle Vito was going down in euchre. Tex might be from
Indiana, in his words “the spiritual home of euchre,” but nobody beats
l,” Tex Vito.

Nobody.

Even if he was saddled with Mr. Kumar as his partner.

I got ready for bed.

Well, today wasn't as fun as I thought it would be, Bad Ava grouse

Are we giving up? Good Ava asked hopefully.

“No,” I told the mirror as I slathered on moisturizer.

Oh poo, Good Ava snapped.

Yippee! Bad Ava yelled.

Needless to say, the Rock Chicks operation was a bust.

Lee had gotten to Brody first, therefore when the Rock interrogated him, Brody hadn't talked under threat of certain torture (read: losing his “bodacious” job).

So we started by going to Noah's old apartment, but he was long gone. We spread out, “canvassing the neighborhood” (as Indy called it), knocking on some doors, but only one person was home and they didn't do anything.

Jules at the Command Central made some calls and found out who the landlord of the property was. She called him and asked about Noah, but he had no forwarding address.

We trekked back to my place. I dug out my address book and called Noah's friends (there were two), but neither of them had the same numbers.

Then we swung by several of the places Noah used to hang out, but no one had seen him in months and no one knew where he was now.

Out of options, Indy, Roxie, Jet and Jules promised to “pump” the streets for information and I went home with Tex as bodyguard and Shirl's company. Uncle Vito came over to see how I was doing and not long

arrived Mr. Kumar showed up for the same reason.

d. Euchre ensued. The rest was history.

I put on a Kelly-green camisole and a pair of chocolate-brown, dra
pajama shorts with big green polka dots and got under my covers.

I picked up the phone and called Luke.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“Hey,” I said.

Chicks “I hear the Rock Chicks called off the bad guy search for the night.

om Lee “We’re not giving up,” I told him.

“Run out of leads?”

g gone. We had. Or, more to the point, we never had any leads and we just
nockedof ideas.

t know Still, he didn’t have to sound so happy about it.

“We’ll get more leads tomorrow.”

who the I heard his soft laugh.

ut there Jerk.

d all of “Since you aren’t here, I’m taking it you haven’t found him yet ei

phone^{noted.}

“I’ll get him.”

but no The way he said that gave me a shiver up my spine.

New subject.

eir men “Are you hunting all night or are you coming to my place?”

een for “I’ll be there.”

after he “When?”

“Soon.”

“When’s soon?”

wstring “Soon is soon.”

“Luke.”

“Babe.”

Silence.

Stalemate.

”
I broke the silence. “All righty then, just wake me up when y
home.”

“Why?”

ran out “I want to know you’re safe.”

“You want me to fuck you.”

For goodness sake.

So he was right. He didn’t have to point it out.

“Who’s full of himself tonight?” I asked.

“Someone’s gonna be full of me tonight.” He used The Voice
ther,” I edge was smooth as velvet.

That got a belly melt.

“I’m tired,” I told him, ignoring the belly melt and The Voice. “I’r
to sleep.”

“Sweet dreams.”

I could hear the smile in his voice before I heard the disconnect.

Then I heard Tex boom, “Shee-it, Shirleen.”

I turned off the light and settled under the covers with a smile on my face. Funnily enough, I didn't feel scared at all of my house.



I FELT my body roll and it wasn't me rolling it.

Then I felt hands roaming.

"Hey," I said sleepily as Luke's 'tache hit my neck, his lips coming to rest on my neck.

"Babe, you want me to fuck you when I get home, it's a good idea. You get to go to bed with so many clothes on," Luke told my neck.

"It's just a camisole and shorts."

His hands went into the camisole. Up, and then it was gone.

"It's just shorts," I corrected.

I felt him smile against my mouth before he kissed me.

"Was anyone here when you got here?" I asked when our lips discovered each other.

"Tex, watchin' a movie. Shirleen was crashed on the couch. The only person who left when I got in."

and its I felt warmth spread through me and it didn't all have to do with hands and mouth.

"They're good people." I was talking to his throat at the same time as I was discovering the fact that he was naked.

I took advantage and ran the tips of my fingers over his tight ass.

"The best," Luke replied, then his hand came under my chin, tilted my head up and he kissed me again.

After he kissed me, I wasn't in the mood to talk anymore.

my face. So we didn't.



MY BODY WAS ROLLED, my torso pulled up and I opened my eyes and shifted me into his lap.

He was fully dressed and either it was a gray day (not many of them in Denver) or it was early dawn. I guessed (correctly) it was early dawn.

“What’s going on?” My voice was scratchy with sleep.

“I want a kiss before I go,” Luke replied.

I squinted at him. “Where are you going?”

“Shit to do.”

I came fully awake.

I did not *think* so.

Time to try a new tactic in order to save Luke from doing something that could land him in prison.

I cuddled into him and slid my arms around his waist.

“Stay here with me.” I was working the sleepy voice, hoping it would have an effect.

His hand went up my back and into my hair, twisting it gently in his grip.

I thought I was getting somewhere, but he said, “Sorry, babe.”

Shit.

“I’ll make you breakfast,” I tried again.

He shook his head.

“I do a great frittata with bacon and cheese.”

He gave me a sexy half-grin, but kept shaking his head.

“Pancakes?”

More shaking of his head.

is Luke “Waffles?” I kept going.

Now it was his body shaking, with laughter.

hose in
Crap.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

Time to pull out all the stops.

I pressed close and put my lips to his neck and ran them up the side of his face until my mouth was at his ear.

“I’ll do my punishment,” I whispered and his body went still.

Now I knew I was getting somewhere.

ing that I pulled his tee out of his cargos, slid my hands inside and up the side of his back. My mouth moved around, lips on his jaw until they were on his lips. Our eyes caught. We were ultra-close and I saw his were ink.

Yep, definitely getting somewhere.

: would “You can watch,” I said low, my heart beating fast, half hoping he would say no, half excited about the possibility that he would say yes.

is fist. “Fuck,” he muttered, and I was pretty certain I had him.

That was why I smiled.

He saw the smile. His eyes went molten and he repositioned me so I was straddling him.

I sucked in breath, thinking he was taking me up on my offer and I was wanting to touch myself while straddling his lap. At the same time my pretty fucking turned on about the idea of touching myself while straddling his lap.

his lap.

One of his hands cupped my ass, the other one stayed in my hair, tilted my head down to his.

“Babe,” he said.

“Yeah?” I breathed.

“You scared?” he asked softly.

I licked my lips and nodded.

de until “But you’d do it anyway?”

I nodded again.

“Would you do it even if you weren’t tryin’ to manipulate me into doin’ somethin’ you don’t want me to do?”

nuscles He knew my game.

against I wasn’t surprised. First, he knew everything. Second, I was being obvious.

I thought about it a beat. Then, a bit more hesitantly, I nodded again.

o would His eyes dropped to my mouth and he muttered, “My beautiful Ava.”

A tremor shot through my body at his words and he kissed me, hard, wet and very, very nice.

o I was When he stopped kissing me, I was deep in a Luke Lip Fog and he slid from my ass up my spine.

and not “Tonight,” he whispered. “I want you right here, but with my cock in you, while you make yourself come. Right now, beautiful, as much as you want me, I’m gonna find Dexter.”

adding That cut through The Fog.

“Luke.”

air and “I know you think you’re protectin’ me, but I told you, this is som
gotta do.”

“Luke.”

He ignored me and carried on, “My woman is sittin’ in my lap with
lip and a black eye. This is not just about revenge. It’s about se
message.”

My body started getting tight.

“Luke.”

nto not His arms moved to wrap around me. “Beautiful, I want everythi
offered this morning, but I can’t enjoy it until I know you’ll be safe.
do puts you out there. Anyone who thinks to fuck with you has
understand there’ll be consequences. What I’m doin’ will make you sa

3 pretty

“You can’t guarantee that.”

n. “I can sure as fuck try.”

a.” My body finished getting tight and I glared at him.

d, long, “This is who I am,” he told me.

“I don’t like it,” I retorted.

is hand He half-grinned again. “Yeah, you do.”

How unbelievably arrogant.

κ inside “No, I don’t,” I snapped.

; it kills The grin went full fledged. “Babe.”

I tried to pull away. His arms went tight.

“Let me go,” I bit out.

“Not gonna happen.”

ethin’ I I went back to glaring and Luke burst out laughing.

“One thing’s certain, life with you is never gonna be boring,” he in
me.

h a torn He said that like he wasn’t sure it was a good thing, but he was
ndin’ aforward to it anyway.

If I wasn’t naked, I would have put my hands on my hips. Instead
to pull away again.

His hand went back into my hair. He tilted my head down and he
ng youme. I fought it for a few beats, lost the fight and kissed him back.

What I When he stopped kissing me, he was back to grinning. “Try not
got toanything today that’ll get you in trouble.”

fe.” “You try not to do anything that will get you incarcerated,” I shot b

He laughed again (the nerve!), touched his lips to mine, shifted m
then he was gone.

I know you don’t like it but I think he’s sweet for wanting to pro
Good Ava shared.

It isn’t sweet, it’s HOT, Bad Ava chimed in.

Yeesh, Bad Ava thought everything was hot.

I crawled under the covers and fell back to sleep.



THE PHONE RINGING woke me up.

I rolled and nabbed it off the nightstand.

“Yo,” I muttered.

“Babe.”

Obviously, it was Luke.

formed I got up on an elbow. “Please tell me you aren’t calling from a station.”

looking He laughed like what I said was extremely funny (which I thought *not*) then said again, “Babe.”

, I tried “What?”

“Ma called. She showed up at the loft again, wants to take us to breakfast. I told her I couldn’t go, but she could take you. She’s heading to you now.”

it to do I shot into a sitting position.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

ack. “She’ll be there soon.”

ie aside “I can’t go to breakfast with Mrs. Stark. The girls and I have plans.

“You gotta go. She’s lookin’ forward to it.”

tect us, Shit!

I knew what he was doing. He was stopping me from searching for Dex like I had tried to do with him earlier that morning.

And he was better at it.

“I cannot believe you,” I snapped.

“Ava babe, you were sleeping. If you were all fired up to find Dex you would be hunting. It’s just breakfast. You and the girls can go after when you’re done with Ma.”

“Call her back, tell her I have plans.”

“Can’t. She would be disappointed. I don’t like to disappoint her and the impression she wants time just with you.”

the police Mrs. Stark wanted time just with me? This was not good. In fact, it freaked me way the hell out.

“Call her back,” I repeated, then I heard a knock on my door. “I cried. “She’s already here.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” he told me as I jumped out of bed and searched for my clothes.

“Impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible.”

“No, Luke, mark my words. *This* is impossible. I’m seriously pissed at you.”

“Ava.”

“I pulled on my panties the phone in the crook of my neck. “You’re not even speaking to me right now. Get ready. Once we’re off the phone, the episode bought you at least forty-eight hours of the Ava Barlow Treatment.”

“Jesus, you’re cute when you’re pissed,” he said, and he sounded like he meant it.

Argh!

Without another word I yanked the phone from my ear, pressed the button and threw it on the bed. Then I pulled on my camisole and Dexter shorts, rammed my glasses on my nose and ran downstairs.

I threw open the door and stared. Mom, Marilyn and Sofia were sitting on my doorstep.

nd I get What...the...*fuck*?

“Oh my God!” Mom shrieked. “What happened to your face?”

ict, this Shit.

“Mom—” I started.

Shit!” I “Did Lucas Stark do that to you?” Marilyn asked, staring at me
opened my screen door.

started “Of course not,” I replied, pissed that she would think that and h
sinking feeling that she invoked Luke’s name.

They knew.

“How did your face get like that?” Sofia asked, pushing in
issued at Marilyn, all of them shoving forward, all of them carrying suitcases.

Okay, it was so official, it could be written on a tablet of stone.

My life *sucked*.

e lucky “What are you guys doing here?” I asked, trailing them into the
one this room.

r Silent “Ava, don’t change the subject. How did your face get like that?
snapped.

like he We were standing in my living room. They had dropped their ba
they were all staring at me. All of them looked glamorous, dressed
nines with glossy two hundred dollar hair styles, designer clothes, ha
the off that cost the moon and stars and faces made up as if they had just b
pajama session at the MAC counter.

Hell and damnation.

tanding “I have a situation,” I said, sounding like it was nothing. “I’m sc
out.”

Me, Luke and half of Denver.

“Now,” I continued, sticking to my earlier theme. “What are you here?”

“Josie Stark called, said she had breakfast with you and Luke and as she you two were seeing each other,” Mom told me, sounding put out. “So it looked serious.”

aving a Ee-yikes.

Mrs. Stark thought it was serious.

It was, of course, serious. However, a week ago, it wasn't supposed

behind “She was pleased as punch,” Mom went on, now sounding extremely out, which, for my mom, was a very bad thing. “What I want to know am I hearing this from Josie Stark? Why didn't my own daughter tell news?”

e living “Mom—”

“Are you dating Luke?” Marilyn asked before I could formulate an answer to Mom.

” Mom “Marilyn—” I started again.

ags and “I cannot believe *you're* dating Luke,” Sofia put in and she sounded incredulous.

indbags Bitch.

ought a I felt my temper rise at the same time I felt like a knife had been pushed into my gut. My eyes moved to Sofia and as usual I tried to hide that. Though it wouldn't matter if she saw the hurt, she didn't care and nothing would.

orting it “Ava. Answer me,” Mom demanded before I could say anything to

My eyes moved back to Mom. “Why are you here? Why didn’t you do anything?”

“We had to see it with our own eyes,” Marilyn informed me, sounding like me being with Luke was akin to finding a vision of the Virgin Mary. She said your morning coffee.

I was saved from having to answer by the phone ringing at the same time we heard a, “Yoo hoo,” called from the front door.

Luke’s mom had arrived.

Saved by Super Mom Stark.

I fought the urge to grab Mrs. Stark and run screaming from the house.

Instead, I walked to the phone and tagged it.

“Yo,” I said into the phone, turning and giving a lame wave to Mrs. Stark who was staring at my family in genteel shock. Then her eyes hit me and she saw my face, the genteel went out of the shock and she stared at me with an unhidden concern.

“Yo, girl. We’re pickin’ you up in twenty minutes,” Shirleen said into the phone. “Ally got Brody shitfaced last night and got some info outta him. We’ve got a battle plan.”

“Um, I have a situation here,” I mumbled, walking into the dining room with the phone as I watched Mrs. Stark greeting my mom and sisters. Mrs. Stark hugs them, if you asked my opinion, they did not deserve it.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Stark didn’t discriminate, not even against the Bitches.

Shirleen’s voice was sharp. “What kind of situation?”

“My mom and sisters showed up unexpectedly and Luke arranged to meet them at the house.”

you just to go to breakfast with his mom. They're all here and I don't think I
away."

sounding Silence.

Mary in "Shirleen?"

"Shit, that boy is good," she told me, sounding impressed.

ne time He was, and it pissed me off.

"Yeah, and it bought him forty-eight hours of Ava Barlow
Treatment," I informed her.

"Not sure that's good retaliation. Luke don't talk much," Shirleen
use. He might not talk much to other people, but the shit he said to me
my world.

. Stark, "I have to go," I told her.

ne. She "No problem. We'll move on the leads we got and we'll keep in to
ne with "I'm missing all the fun," I complained, sounding like Bad Ava.

l in my "You find a way to ditch 'em, let me know. I'll come get you."

We got "Thanks, Shirleen."

"No reason to thank me. I haven't had this much fun in months. La

g room Disconnect.

rs with I turned toward the living room.

rve. "We're all going to breakfast," Marilyn announced, a bitchy smile
t Superface.

Marilyn had two smiles, fake-sugar-sweet and bitchy. She most
bitchy with me. It was clear she was looking forward to this and I did
for me that as a good sign.

can get “Yeah, that way you can tell all of us what’s going on with y
Luke,” Sofia chimed in.

I looked for an excuse and my eyes caught their suitcases.

“Why don’t you check into a hotel first? Then we’ll make it bru
suggested, thinking that would buy me time to come up with an ex
ditch them.

Silent “We’re staying with you,” Mom said, foiling my plan.

I stared.

noted. “Yeah, we have it all figured out,” Sofia told me. “Mom can sl
rocked your futon and Marilyn and I’ll sleep in your bed. You can sleep
couch.”

Of course, I’d get the couch in my own damned house.

uch.” I didn’t have the time, or the energy, to fight the fight. I
reinforcements. Macho man with a great mustache and tig
reinforcements.

“I need to take a shower,” I said.

ter.” “We’ll wait,” Mom replied.

I looked at Mrs. Stark. She was smiling at me and I could swear s
trying to communicate that it was all going to be okay.

She was so wrong.

on her I ran upstairs, straight to my bedroom. I closed the door, nabl
phone and called Luke.

ly used “Yeah?” he answered.

n’t take “Luke—” I began.

ou and “I thought you weren’t speakin’ to me.” He sounded like he was sn
“My mom and sisters are here.”

Silence for a beat then, smile gone from his voice, he asked,
inch,” I again?”

cuse to “Your mom told my mom that we were together and it looked s
My mom gathered the Barlow Bitches from Hell and they all came,
words, to ‘see for themselves.’”

“Why the fuck would they do that?”

leep on “I don’t know!” I cried, but quietly so my family wouldn’t hear. “
on the the Barlow Bitches from Hell. Why do they do anything?”

“You sound agitated,” Luke pointed out the obvious.

“*Did you hear me?*” I squealed then sucked in a controlling breath
needed I went on more quietly. “*My mom and sisters are here to see for thei*
ht as that we’re *serious.*”

“Babe, calm down.”

“Calm is not an option. I need cookies. I need tequila. I need
drenched in tequila. I can barely cope with my family when my li
he was complicated to the point of insanity. But, may I remind you, my
complicated to the point of insanity!”

My voice was again rising.

ced the He was quiet for a moment then he said, using The Voice, “Ava, y
handle it.”

I took a deep breath and replied, hating that I had to admit it, but
line, I had to admit it. “I want to say I can, Luke, but I can’t. They’re g
chew me up and spit me out. They always do.”

ning. “Is Ma there?”

“Yes.”

“Come “She’ll look after you.”

“Luke, even Super Mom Stark is no match for the Barlow Super I serious. You know that.”

in their Another moment of silence then, “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

I went still and stared at the wall. “What did you just say?”

“Hang on, I’ll be there in fifteen.”

They’re I kept staring at the wall, completely unable to comprehend the f Luke was going to drop the hunt for Noah and come to my rescue.

“Seriously?” I asked.

before “A coupla hours ago I told you no one fucks with you. I meant
mselves fucks with you.”

Oh...my...God.

“Luke—”

cookies “See you in fifteen.”
fe isn’t

life is Disconnect.

I love him, Good Ava told me.

We are SO going to touch ourselves tonight while he’s inside us, B
you can promised.

There was no time to contemplate payback for Luke’s
bottom demonstration of why he was *The Best Guy Ever*. I ran to the bat
going to brushed my teeth, washed my face, put in my contacts, took a quick s
pulled a comb through my wet hair and slathered peony-scented lotion.

body.

I was rushing back to my room when I heard the front door of Sofia, Marilyn and Mom all cried at the same exact time with the same sickly-sweet girlie voices. “Luke!”

Yuck!

I yanked on jeans, a tight black tee that said HARLEY-DA MOTORCYCLES on the front in brown with a sage-green horseshoe arc of words and sparkly green sequins on the letters. I added a kickass black and black flip-flops. Because I was unable to do anything but, I acted that massive dose of silver at ears, neck, throat and fingers.

Then I ran downstairs.

The women were sitting drinking coffee and gazing at a still-snooze Luke (all but Mrs. Stark) like he was a god fallen to earth. Marilyn, Sofia’s looks had the added dimension of openly showing they wanted his clothes off.

I will repeat, my life sucked!

I walked into the room and Luke’s eyes cut to me.

“Hey,” I greeted.

His eyes dropped to my chest as I approached him. When I was within reaching distance, his arm slid around my waist and he curled me in his side.

“Harleys are sweet, babe, but we’re a Triumph family.”
Holy *crap*.
Did he just say that?
I looked at him. His eyes were warm and affectionate.

Yep, he just said that.

He kissed my neck, lifted his head, stared in my eyes and murmured exactly what I needed to hear.
“You smell like flowers.”

“Peonies,” I told him.

He gave me a half-grin. “Nice,” he murmured, using The Voice and a velvet edge.

My knees wobbled.

“Oh my God,” Marilyn breathed, which was quite a task considering her mouth was hanging open.

“This is lovely,” Mrs. Stark cut in, jumping from the couch, nearly giddy with happiness. “Now we can all go to breakfast.”

“Why does Luke have a gash on his face?” Sofia asked. “Is it the same reason Ava has a black eye?”

“We’ll talk about it at breakfast,” Mrs. Stark said firmly, happy grin fading fast.

“Ma, I can’t go to breakfast,” Luke told her and my heart clenched.
Shit.

So much for Luke coming to my rescue.

“Oh no! Why not?” Mom asked.

“I thought, you coming by—” Sofia started, but Luke interrupted her by pinning her with a look that would make Satan himself shudder in the fiery depths of hell.

“I came by for Ava because she’s too sweet to tell you what I’m not telling you.”

Uh-oh.

mured, I had the feeling Luke was in the mood to be brutally honest.

“Luke—” I started, but he kept talking.

“You’ll have breakfast and then Ava’s got some shit she’s gotta
with the I’ll answer your questions right now. Yeah, Ava and I are togeth
serious, it’s headin’ somewhere important and anything else is none
business. You don’t like that, too bad. You get breakfast with her the
gotta take off. During breakfast, you’ll be nice to her. I hear a
ing her different, you answer to me. Is that clear?”

looking Yep, Luke was in the mood to be brutally honest.

“How did this happen? When did it happen? How *could* it ha
ie same Marilyn asked.

She was, in the face of the impossible fact of a Luke and Av
ddiness apparently Triumph motorcycles) togetherness, incapable of being cl
understood Luke’s threat.

“It happened because she’s Ava,” Luke answered like that was
reason needed and my knees wobbled again at the same time my thr
tight.

“That would be why I’d think it *couldn’t* happen,” Sofia said un
breath, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

her. He My body got stiff, but Luke’s body got preparing-for-gonzo tense
river in then I realized my “fuckin’ sisters” weren’t just bitches. They werer
smart either.

i gonna “Sofia,” Mom muttered before Luke could retort.

“Sofia,” Mrs. Stark cut in at the same time as my mom, and she s

pissy, something I'd never heard from her before. "What on earth matter with you?"

I looked at Mrs. Stark and blinked. She looked unhappy. Not unhappy but nearly Lucas Stark Gonzo Unhappy. No do. So

er, it's Wow, definitely pissy and then some.

of your "Goodness me, we all know they've had something special for years in she's fact like you didn't grow up and see it like everyone on the block doing nothing Weinberg said years ago they would make a sweet couple, and when

Maggie Regan a few days ago, she said she knew it would happen all. It's not just me who thinks this is hardly surprising. I just wish it hadn't happen?" so long."

Mrs. Stark took a deep breath then her eyes moved to her son and continued.

ear she "As for you, we are not a Triumph or Harley-Davidson family. I'm telling you, Lucas, motorcycles are dangerous. You're going to give all the stroke, riding around on those things. Now that you've got Ava, you coat got think before you race around in your Porsche and on those bikes."

"He's got a Porsche?" Marilyn breathed.

der her "You've got bikes? Plural?" I asked, staring up at Luke.

"What's with the suitcases?" Luke asked, ignoring Marilyn and questions, his eyes on the bags, his mind on a topic he obviously thought slightly more pressing than the varied options for transport that he owned.

"We're staying here," Mom informed Luke.

Luke's mouth went tight.

ounded "Ava's sleeping on the couch," Marilyn shared.

is the At that, Luke's entire face went tight and he looked at Mom
choices, either I put you women in a hotel or Ava and me go to a hotel

lot just Mom stared at Luke. "But—"

Luke cut in. "I don't have a lot of time. The one thing I know is, A
sleepin' on the fuckin' couch. You have to choose. Now."

rs. You "Lucas, language," Mrs. Stark put in, and I was pretty certain a hy
d. Mrs.giggle was going to burst forth at Mrs. Stark chiding her son for his lar

n I told "Choose," Luke clipped, and at his tone my giggle died an early de
l along.

't taken "I'm not sure," Mom said, and I could tell she desperately wanted
Luke up on the offer of a free ride, but thought it might appear ru
greedy in front of Mrs. Stark.

and she Luke could tell too.

I keep "You stay here. Ava and me will go to a hotel." He looked down a
e me a get things taken care of, I'll take everyone to dinner tonight. I don't a
need to don't, I'll arrange for your family to have a nice dinner and you do w
gotta do."

"But we came here to see you and Ava," Mom protested.

"Ava has shit to do," Luke replied.

nd my "We came all this way," Marilyn added.

ght was "Yeah, and you didn't tell Ava you were comin'. And I'll repeat,
ied. shit to do."

"But—" Marilyn kept going.

"Take a close look at your sister then take a look at me. Does it lc
we got time to drop everything because you hit town with no notice?"

Ho-ly *crap*, but Luke didn't take any shit. I was impressed more

. “Two was normally impressed.

.” “What’s going on?” Mom asked, eyes narrowing on Luke.

Luke looked at the ceiling. I tore my gaze away from him and looked at Mom.

“I told you,” I answered. “I have a little bit of trouble. Luke is helping and we both are trying to sort it out.”

“What kind of trouble?” Mom pushed.

“How many kinds of trouble get you a cut lip and a black eye?” Mom asked, aiming his angry stare at Mom. “There’s only one kind of trouble and it’s a bad kind,” he finished.

“I’m her mother!” Mom, it was clear, had just lost patience. “Why don’t you know what’s going on? Not only is her face all banged up, but she’s not me. “I know you, of all people. I mean, that George boy I can see Ava with, but you and you—” Luke looked at me, not knowing George, and I felt the knife that you plunged in my belly twisting.

George was serious history. Pre-weight loss, pre-Rick-Dave-and-I was a sweet guy, but a geek and so not in Luke’s league it was sad.

The fact that Mom still thought I was out of Luke’s league hurt like hell. I’d worked hard to be a Barlow Bombshell, but that was totally lost. For the past week, four seriously hot guys had been after me like I was the best thing since sliced bread, but in my head that evaporated. Mom told me doing the impossible—landing Luke—was bigger news than me getting “all banged up,” and that was killer.

“George?” Luke asked me.

“Her first boyfriend,” Marilyn answered helpfully.

More than I

“He wasn’t my first boyfriend,” I mumbled, even though he kind of

“You and George were cute together. He was all snugly soft. Perked at you,” Sofia threw in.

“Snugly soft is right,” Marilyn said.

“The soft is right. Dough boy,” Sofia giggled.

“This is unbelievable,” Luke growled low, watching the Barlow Bitch Byplay with an angry gaze. I could tell his control was slipping.” Luke couldn’t do a thing about it.

“Didn’t he pop your cherry?” Marilyn put in and my stomach plus as my lungs seized.

“Luke went totally still.

“Here we go.

“They had warmed up and were ready to throw down.

“Marilyn!” Mom snapped, not protecting me, more embarrassed that Luke and Mrs. Stark could hear.

“Well, he did,” Sofia told Mom.

“That’s no reason to share,” Mom continued.

“I knew the minute it happened,” Marilyn stated, so into the Super Bitch Fest she ignored Mom, Luke’s scary anger filling the room was the Stark’s horrified, furious gaze and me. “He always followed her around thought little puppy. After he nailed her it got worse.”

“She probably popped his cherry too,” Sofia told Marilyn, and the now holding a conversation like no one else was in the room.

“Can you imagine?” Marilyn bugged her eyes out at Sofia at the thought of Dough Boy George and Fatty Fatty Four-Eyes fumbling

f was. popping each other's cherries.

fect for I was back to wanting to run screaming from the house, except I c
seem to get my limbs to move.

“Quiet,” Luke said, softly but lethally, and all eyes turned to him.

“Lucas—” Mrs. Stark began, but Luke kept talking.

7 Super “Your sister is standin’ in front of you with a busted lip and a bla
g and Iher man at her side, and you bitches are talkin’ about...whatever the fu
you’re talkin’ about,” Luke said, his voice vibrating with anger.

nnmeted “Did you just call us bitches?” Marilyn asked, her eyes wide a
voice filled with offended surprise.

“You act like a bitch, I’ll call you a bitch, and you’re actin’ like a
bitch,” Luke answered.

“Oh my God,” Sofia breathed.

ed that “He’s kind of a straight-talker,” I put in quietly.

“You were men, I would teach you some manners. Though grov
you never had any, so I don’t imagine you’ll start now,” Luke carr
“Difference is, back then I wasn’t in the position to say what I’m goi
now. Back...the fuck...down. Ava tells me any more of that shit y
Barlow treated us to goes down, you’re both out on your asses and you aren’t
n, Mrs. back. Your sister is a memory for you and you two cease to exist for
d like a that understood?”

Marilyn and Sofia stared at him.

ey were “*Is that understood?*” Luke barked.

re very They jumped at his tone then nodded, as anyone would.

around Ho-ly *shit*.

Luke looked at my Mom. “It’s up to Ava what she wants to tell you couldn’t her troubles. She doesn’t feel like sharin’, that’s her choice. You’ll do it. I hear you don’t, it’s not gonna make me happy.”

“But—” Mom cut in.

She looked confused, shell-shocked and as if she didn’t know how to react. Luke leaned forward a bit at the waist and thankfully Mom went quiet. “Take your daughter to breakfast,” Luke ordered in a low warning tone that said he was, quite simply, done. Then he looked at me. “But she doesn’t go your way, beautiful, you call me. I’ll send someone to get you and her.”

“Okay,” I whispered, but I had a feeling breakfast was going to be a fuckin’ way.

His arm got tight and his voice got quiet as he ordered, “Walk me to the car.”

Without looking back, we walked to the Porsche. He turned and pulled me up against it, pulling me between his legs and into his arms. “Your fuckin’ sisters,” he swore, his eyes on my house, and I couldn’t say I was still angry.

I leaned into him, putting my hands on his chest. He took in a breath and looked down at me.

“You’re like a flower that grew through a crack in the sidewalk,” he said to me.

I didn’t say a word. I couldn’t. I’d forgotten how to speak.

“I want you checkin’ in,” he demanded.

“Okay,” I said, finding my voice.

“We would stay at the loft tonight, but—”

u about “I know,” I cut him off.

al with “After this shit is over, I’ll have blinds put in.”

 “Okay,” I repeated.

 “You gonna be able to get through breakfast?”

to feel. I nodded and told him. “I think I owe you again.”

iet. “Yeah. You’re rackin’ up quite a debt.” He bent his head and touc

ng tone lips, then his body relaxed and his face went soft. “I like it,” he mutter

reakfast For some crazy reason, tears started to fill my eyes and Luke saw t

ou.” “Babe.”

go my I put my hands to either side of his neck. “Thank you.”

e to my His arms went tight and his forehead came to mine. “You just p

this particular debt.”

leaned At that announcement, I melted into him.

 “You still owe me,” he went on.

l tell he I smiled because I didn’t mind, not one bit.

 “I think I like it that you protect me,” I confided. Don’t ask me wh

ath and did.

 It was a good thing to do.

he told “Ava,” he whispered, his face soft, his eyes ultra-warm, his arms

even tighter.

 “No one’s done that, not like that. Not even Dad.”

 “Beautiful—”

 “Thank you, Luke.”

 “You already said that.”

“I wanted you to know I meant it.”

One of his arms stayed wrapped around my waist, the other hand s my hair and his mouth came to mine.

“You’re clear,” he said against my lips.

“Clear?”

hed my “You just cleared all your debt.”

ed. Oh...my...*God*.

hem. “Really?” I asked.

He nodded.

He *was* The Best Guy *Ever*.

aid off “You’re still makin’ yourself come while I’m inside you tonight.”

Oh yeah, I was definitely going to be doing that *and* I was forward to it.

I licked my lips, which meant I licked his lips, and his eyes went in

“Fuck, you’re somethin’ else,” he muttered, and I could tell he me y, I just in a good way—a *very* good way—and happy vibes shot through me.

“You don’t think I’m weak and spineless for not standing up sisters?”

getting “Been wanting to say a few things to them for years, so no. I’m glad you gave me the opportunity.”

I love you, I thought, but did not say.

Something shifted on his face as I thought this, but whatever it couldn’t read it. Whatever it was, it was profound, it was raw and beautiful.

I could swear he guessed my thoughts and he liked them.

slid into My knees gave out and he took my weight without a word said to
us.

After a few beats, my voice sounding husky, I said, “You better go
“Yeah. Be safe, be smart and don’t let them give you any shit.”

“Okay,” I said again. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” I told him

“Babe.” He gave me a half-grin, thankfully breaking the moment
before he touched his lips to mine.

I pressed in, my arms sliding around his neck, and his lip touch
into a full-on make out session.

He let me go, set me on my jelly legs, rounded the car, got in and
gone.
looking

I walked back into my house and when I got into the living room
everyone had been watching.

ok.
Mrs. Stark was smiling at me, huge and happy.

and this Surprisingly, my mom was too.

to my Marilyn and Sofia looked jealous as all hell.

That made *me* smile.

fuckin’ “All righty then,” I declared. “Breakfast.”

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it was

I could swear he guessed my thoughts and he liked them.

My knees gave out and he took my weight without a word said between us.

After a few beats, my voice sounding husky, I said, “You better go.”

“Yeah. Be safe, be smart and don’t let them give you any shit.”

“Okay,” I said again. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” I told him.

“Babe.” He gave me a half-grin, thankfully breaking the moment, right before he touched his lips to mine.

I pressed in, my arms sliding around his neck, and his lip touch turned into a full-on make out session.

He let me go, set me on my jelly legs, rounded the car, got in and he was gone.

I walked back into my house and when I got into the living room I knew everyone had been watching.

Mrs. Stark was smiling at me, huge and happy.

Surprisingly, my mom was too.

Marilyn and Sofia looked jealous as all hell.

That made *me* smile.

“All righty then,” I declared. “Breakfast.”



MANIPULATE A MACHO MAN UNDERWEAR

Breakfast went my way because Marilyn and Sofia were mostly probably half afraid to say anything, half pouting. Mom was silent first, but she didn't seem to be pouting, she seemed to be thinking. Most part, Mrs. Stark and I gabbed and giggled, then Mom joined surprisingly I had a great time.

While we were on our last cup of coffee I excused myself and Shirleen to come and get me. I went back to the table and we left the restaurant (again, Le Peep in Cherry Creek and granola pancakes, with bacon this time). I gave out hugs to Marilyn and Sofia (you could tell their hearts weren't in it, but then again, neither was mine) and Mrs. Stark (her heart was definitely in it). Marilyn and Sofia wandered away as I gave the house key to Mom.

"I'm worried about you," she told me.

This statement startled me and my eyes caught hers. She was genuinely concerned and this rocked me, mainly because I'd never seen that look on Mom's face before.

"I'm fine," I told her.

She shook her head then put her arms around me. I went stiff because

hug seemed genuine too.

“Ava, I want you to know, I didn’t mention George because because of the reasons Marilyn and Sofia thought I did,” she whispered in my ear. “I mentioned him because he was steady, he cared about you and you would never leave you.”

Erm...*what?* My mom cared?

About *me?*

Ho-ly *shit.*

I was silent,

and she was too, at

least for the

moment in and

then I called

out the

hell and damnation.

“From what I saw today, Luke’s the same way. More,” she said

and her hands squeezed my arms. “It’s obvious he’s cut up about what’s

going on with you. I’m glad. Not that he’s cut up, but because you

have my

man who cares that much. I’m happy for you, sweetie.”

Oh...my...*God.*

I couldn’t help myself. I pulled her in my arms and held on tight

and she deep breathed. She did the same thing.

“We let go and she touched my face, then said, “I hope Luke gets

sorted so we can have a nice family dinner tonight. I’ll talk with Mari

Sofia. It’ll be okay.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I replied, and maybe for the first time in my life,

it.

...well, She kissed my cheek and then walked to Mrs. Stark, who was
d in myaway but wiping her face and I knew she had heard. I stood and wat
and hethey went to their cars. Mom and Mrs. Stark stood beside Mrs. Stark
and it looked like they were settling in for a chat.

I left them to it and went to the local Starbucks, where I had arran
Shirleen to come and get me, and I got myself a skinny vanilla latte. I c
I would think about this latest life revelation later when I had Sis
cookies drenched in tequila.

Or, better yet, Luke, a warm bed and a dark room.

That thought made me smile as I walked out of Starbucks.

for a bit

ked me

Shirleen's Navigator was at the curb. Tex was in the passenger s
he jumped out when he saw me.

quietly

atever's

need a

"Hey, Tex, did you win any euchre...?" I stopped talking w
snatched my cup right out of my hand and threw it in a trash bin.

"This family don't *do* Starbucks," he boomed then turned and sho
Shirleen. "The girl needs coffee! Fortnum's! Now!"

Eek!



while I

ets this

lyn and

I meant

THE ROCK CHICKS all met at Fortnum's except Indy and Ally, who w
to some prison to interview one of Noah's friends who'd managed to
a five-year state accommodated stay.

Ally hadn't gotten "some" info out of Brody. He sang like a canar
the influence of Red Bull and vodka (ee-yikes!).

Unfortunately, Lee and the Hot Bunch knew that Brody wasn't

discreet so they hadn't shared much. What they did share was that looking tracked down both of Noah's buddies. One was in prison, the other checked as Brody didn't have information on.

's Audi Ally also learned that Noah had a gazillion aliases, but the name born with was Walter Ellis. He was wanted in Nevada and California for he'd been on the con practically since babyhood. For a percentage of the decided Noah's informant (now wiling away his days fashioning license plates and likely shivs) would troll legal records, pointing Noah in the direction of malpractice payoffs and highish stakes inheritances. Nothing too big to fly under radar, but nothing too small that wouldn't be worth the effort.

Lastly, Brody shared the name of the lady who Noah had conned and was conning me.

Her name was Winnie Conrad, she was seventy-two and had her operation go bad when she was sixty-six, which took away the use of her legs. After a years-long battle, she got a payoff for the botched operation which enabled her to buy a decent, handicapped accessible house in a quiet neighborhood, as well as augmenting her meager retirement money allowed her to live, and pay taxes and utilities, in a nicer neighborhood.

Noah got his hands on what was left of the payoff, which set her scraping by, but somehow she had managed to keep her place.

Jules had done some research from Command Central and discovered Mrs. Conrad's address in Aurora.

Shirleen informed me that the Rock Chicks worked hard on my behalf pumping their men for information. This didn't work, but apparently they had fun trying. Also, they'd all had fun sharing their escapades over coffee. I was at breakfast. I didn't find any of that hard to believe, but I was

they'd missed I'd missed out on the gossip.

Tex made me a skinny vanilla latte to replace the one he threw out
hit the road. Jet, Roxie, Smithie, Duke, Tod and Stevie took off to Noah
he was neighborhood to knock on some doors. Tex, Daisy, Shirleen, Sissy and
nia and off to pay a visit to Winnie.

We pulled up to Winnie's and saw she was sitting in a wheelchair
porch enjoying the sunny, warm day. She was a round black lady
recently set, dressed in her Sunday best. She had likely just got home
church. She was drinking an iced tea.

We trundled up and she stared, but then again anyone would stare
and I had black eyes (Sissy's was fading, but mine still looked

Shirleen's Afro seemed to have grown two inches in the last week.
a spinehair rivaled Shirleen's in size and volume, she had five-inch, shiny
of her platform go-aheads on her feet and her body was encased in skintight
eration, with enough rhinestones to supply Celine Dion's wardrobe technician
decent emergency mending on a concert tour. And finally there was Terrence
which looked like a recently reformed serial killer (and that was being nice).

We were undoubtedly not the popular choice for Sunday visitors.

"It's all right, Mrs. Conrad. We may look crazy but we ain't gonna
you," Shirleen assured her as we hit the porch.

Winnie didn't look like she believed Shirleen.

"How do you know my name?" she asked.

"We're lookin' for Walter Ellis, AKA Noah Dexter, but I think you
him as Jeremiah Levine," Shirleen answered.

Winnie sucked in breath. Her kindly face got hard then she m
"Jeremiah?"

“Yeah. You know who we’re talkin’ about?” Tex asked.

and we Winnie looked at Tex then her eyes scanned all of us. “What no
h’s old Jeremiah? I had some boys come talk to me earlier this week about
d I took don’t know anything and I don’t want to know anything. Good ridd
bad rubbish, I say. I haven’t seen him in months and I like it that way.’

on her I couldn’t blame her.

ly, hair Shirleen grabbed me and pulled me forward. “See this girl here?”

ie from Winnie nodded, her eyes wide as she looked at me.

“Well, while Jeremiah was rippin’ you off, he was also rippin’
a. Sissy girl, Ava. Stole her money and her dead auntie’s jewelry. A little wh
angry). she got herself a man who found out this little piece of ugly history. F
Daisy’s kinda man who doesn’t like that shit much and went lookin’ for p
white, Jeremiah felt the heat, got angry, and a coupla days ago, took it out c
t denim You get what I’m sayin’ to you?” Shirleen asked.

ian for The wary hardness went out of Winnie’s face. It went soft as she g
x, who me.

“Oh honey,” she whispered.

na hurt “I’m fine,” I told her, smiling just to prove my point.

“You don’t look fine to me,” Winnie said, and I could see the cor
her eyes.

“No, really,” I promised quietly.

u knew I got closer and knelt down by her chair.

She looked down at me. “Was it your man who came by earl
uttered, week?”

“Probably,” I said.

“Which one was he, the Native American or the one with the mustache?” she asked.

“The mustache,” I answered.

She smiled and reached out a hand to me. I took it and she squeezed my hand.

“He’s cute. Drives a Porsche, looks good in it too,” she told me then, “He’s got a great mustache. Most men would look all kinds of foolish with that mustache, but he works it real fine. *Real* fine. Seems a good whole lot better than Jeremiah.”

She had that right. *All* of it.

“Right now, he’s also kind of angry,” I fibbed. It wasn’t exactly the most significant understatement. “After Noah...or, sorry, Jeremiah’s payback up a couple of days ago, Luke’s payback turned to retribution. I’m trying to find Jeremiah before Luke does and turn him in to the police so Luke doesn’t do anything gonzo and get himself into trouble.”

She shook her head and squeezed my hand again. “Seems to me Jeremiah could use someone to help him out with his retribution, but I’d hate to see you get yourself into trouble. I’d like to help, but like I said, I haven’t seen Jeremiah in months.”

“You have an address? Phone number? Did you meet any of his friends?” Daisy asked. “Did he say anything to you that might help us find him?”

Winnie let go of my hand and looked at Daisy. I stood up and walked away.

“Like I told those boys that came lookin’ for him, I don’t know anything about him.” My family tried to find him after he...” Winnie stopped talking and walked away and I could tell she was embarrassed.

tache?" I kind of understood how she felt, but I was a white woman
somewhat hefty inheritance that Noah luckily couldn't figure out
steal. She was an elderly, disabled black lady living in Aurora, Colora
d. a penthouse on Central Park in NYC. You could tell she wasn't
rolling in it. What Noah got from her probably cut deep into whatever
en went life living-in-a-wheelchair safety net she had.

ol with This pissed me off so much, for a moment I considered calling
sort. A Noah chase and letting Luke do whatever Luke was going to do.
realized it could mean I wouldn't get to process all my life's complica
a warm bed with Luke lying next to me, so instead I vowed octuple
y a lie, against Noah, rat-bastard.

beat me "This is beginning to tick me off," I announced, crossing my arms
ying to chest. "We're not getting anywhere. We keep running into dead en
e won't they're dead ends that the Hot Bunch moved through days ago. We'r
going to catch up. Luke's gonna find Noah and I'm not altogether
remiah Eddie and Hank are going to keep this whole thing off the radar whe
our man turns up with a cap busted in his ass."

l't seen "Sugar, Luke ain't gonna be aimin' at Noah's ass," Daisy told me.

riends? "Listen to you, 'a cap busted in his ass.' You're cute," Shirleen
can see why Luke likes you. Outside of the fact you got a great ass,
Luke strikes me as an ass man."

stepped She was wrong. Luke didn't discriminate.

anything. He was a whole package man.

looked "I have an idea," Sissy threw in, and everyone looked at her. "Yo
and Jules lure your boys home somehow. I don't know, pretend you
flu or food poisoning or something. We'll assign each one of you a

with a The minute they get close to you in bed, you give the high sign. We’
how to out of a closet, stun gun them and cuff them to the bed. Then we ca
do, *not* searching and maybe talk Eddie and Hank into helping us on acc
exactly they’re cops and will want to do this lawful like.”

end-of- This was a terrible plan, but I did allow myself a moment to think o
cuffed to a bed.

off the It was an intriguing thought.

Then I “I ain’t cuffin’ Luke to no bed,” Tex boomed, tearing me away fr
tions in: intriguing thoughts. “Fuck, I’m not cuffin’ Lee or Vance to a bed
revenge Those boys would lose their badass motherfucker minds. I got a gi
and fifteen cats. I get tortured and killed, who’s gonna take care of Nai
; on my my kitties?”

ids, but I stared at Tex. Tex didn’t strike me as the type of guy who had “I
e never much less actually used the word.

certain “I’m checkin’ in to Command Central, see if Jules’s got anythin
n Noah Shirleen announced, walking off the porch and around the house all th
flipping open her cell.

I turned to Winnie and crouched beside her again. “You doing
said. “I After...erm, Noah—”

that is. Winnie shook her head but said, “Got a large, big-hearted family. I
takin’ good care of me.”

I smiled at her again, reached out and gave her another hand s

Then I pulled a pen and a stray receipt out of my purse and wrote my
u, Indy home and cell numbers on it and handed it to her.

’ve got “Your family just got larger. You need anything, even if i
buddy, company, call me.”

ll jump She took the piece of paper and looked at it then she looked at n
an keepgot your auntie’s jewelry?”

ount of I nodded. “The jewelry didn’t mean much, wasn’t my style, but
Ella meant the world to me and it was hers and she wanted me to have
of Luke not to think about it but it sucks that it’s gone.”

“Maybe you should let your man do what he’s gotta do,” she sugge

I stared at her thinking maybe she didn’t just get back from church
rom my Bible said an eye for an eye, but it also went on about forgiveness
either. divine. Nothing like mixed messages.

rlfriend Still, even though Luke looked the part of a kickass angel of venge
ncy and couldn’t be totally sure he was God’s chosen tool to send Noah stra
hell.

kitties,” “The thought had crossed my mind,” I admitted. Winnie grinne
went on, “Problem is, Luke moved in across the street when I was
’ new,” which is about the time I fell in love with him. He was always hot, eve
e while he was twelve, but I was fat, had glasses and mousy hair. Didn’t ma
liked me all the same even back then. It took us a while to hook up a
; okay? not anxious to get unhooked.”

It was her turn to nod. “I can see your point.”

They’re I got closer. “I’m a little worried Noah, or Jeremiah, or whoever I
getting kind of desperate. Who knows what he’ll do, but if he finds ou
squeeze. all looked you up—”

/ name, “I’ll give my grandchildren a call,” she interrupted me. “They’ll l
eye on me.”

t’s just “Could you check in with me just to set my mind at ease?” I asked.

ne. “He Her grin went ultra-warm. “Be happy to.”

I gave her another hand squeeze just as we heard the deep Auntiethrumming from a moving vehicle on the street. A shiny, dark-blue it. I try model Lexus with gold trim pulled up in front of the house, seriously l assaulting the quiet neighborhood. The rap cut off and four young uested. women of varying shapes and sizes, but all dressed and made up as ch. The were just about to stroll into a club, rolled out of the Lexus.

s being “Uh-oh,” Daisy muttered as she stared at the girls heading up the w I stood up as Sissy asked, “Uh-oh, what?”

enance, I The leader of the pack was short, round and had her black hair in eight ringlets that were bouncing around her head and face. She wore fire-red lipstick and it looked good on her.

d and I Daisy was moving behind Tex and I didn’t get a good feeling a s eight, Daisy was not the kind of woman who hid without good reason and n when relish finding out what her good reason might be.

tter, he “What’s going on?” I whispered toward Daisy.

and I’m “You! Bitch! I see you!” The ringlet girl was clickety-clacking high-heeled, bronze, peek-a-boo toe pumps and she was pointing at Da

What now?

ne is, is “Think you can stun gun me *twice* then walk away?” Miss t we’ve demanded.

Stun gun? Twice?

keep an Uh-oh was wrong.

Eek! was more like it.

I looked at Daisy and Daisy was done trying to hide behind T

came out in full view and she'd morphed straight to Attitude.

“I didn't stun gun you!” she shouted back. “Indy did, but only after he charged her and that time I wasn't even there. Then Jet did it, but on the way out you called Ally a bee-atch and punched me, so I had to take you down.”

Eekity, eek, eek, eek.

“Olivia Conrad,” Winnie waded in. “What you thinkin' waltzin' up on the porch, all attitude? These are my friends.”

“Ain't no friends of yours, Big Momma,” Olivia answered, having just arrived on the porch looking ready for action.

“What's going on?” I asked, and Olivia's eyes swung to me and then back to the engine-big.

“Shit, girl, what happened to yo' face?” she asked, forgetting her face when confronted with the busted up vision of me.

“Noah Dexter beat me up,” I told her.

“Noah who?”

“You know him as Jeremiah Levine,” I explained.

At my words, Olivia, already ready to blow, pushed the lever and engaged the rocket launchers.

“*That no-good motherfucker beat you up?*” she screeched, and I was pretty certain my eardrums were close to bleeding.

“Duct taped her to a steel post in her basement,” Daisy shared, the most ultra-generous with information. “Once he'd taped her, he stuck his dick down her pants, dry humped her and then left her in a basement coal room for hours before one of our boys found her.”

She Shit.

Olivia's eyes bugged out and all her girls sucked in breath.

“*What?*” she shrieked and the windows on Winnie's house shook.

“You didn't tell me that last part,” Winnie Conrad said from behind her voice sounding not sweet old lady who goes to church on Sunday.

“Well—” I began, turning to Winnie, but I was interrupted.

Olivia turned to Daisy. “What's this got to do with you, bitch?”

“Olivia, girl, watch your mouth,” Winnie put in, but Daisy was having Winnie.

“She's a Rock Chick and I'm a Rock Chick. Rock Chicks look each other. We're after Jeremiah, Noah, whoever the hell. And don't bitch, *comprende?*” Daisy answered, her own rocket launchers fired blazing, ready to roar.

“I hear what you're sayin', lookin' out for your girl but no one disrespect me,” Olivia shot back.

“You punched me in the face. What'd you expect me to do?” Daisy shot her bullet.

“I wasn't aimin' at you. It was a mistake. You got in the way when I was aimin' at your *other* girl. What'd you expect *me* to do?” Olivia retaliated.

“I expect you to get over it. It all started when Indy was stun-gunned during a bar brawl and she was protectin' her man by stun gunnin' you and you got all attitude,” Daisy carried on.

“What? She got a right to protect her man and I got no right to disrespect mine?” Olivia asked what I thought was a valid question.

“Your man had skipped bond. Indy's man's a bounty hunter. So don't come me like your man ain't worth your troubles. Not that I judge what he

do to make a livin'. I just judge the motherfuckers stupid enough caught," Daisy retorted.

ide me, Hmm, I didn't think that was the right thing to say.

it all. "Tell me you did *not* just say that," Olivia demanded, her head b her ringlets bouncing.

Yep, I was right, that wasn't the right thing to say.

ignored "Sugar, I said it," Daisy replied.

Everyone tensed.

out for Time to de-escalate the hostilities.

call me I went for the sympathy tactic.

up and "Listen," I put in. "I think Mrs. Conrad and I have been through without a catfight between my girls and her girls on her porch. Ev respects please, help us out and stand down."

"We don't got time for this silly-ass girlie shit anyway," Tex b sy fired "We got a dickhead on the loose."

The Rock Chick Posse and the Pissed-Off Black Women Posse tu n I was glare at Tex.

ed. Shit.

ied you Foiled again by Tex being a lunatic.

ur man "Don't look at me!" Tex shouted, if it could be believed, soundir louder. "Jee-zus, huggin' and cryin' and badass motherfucker showdc protect livin' rooms and takin' a break from the action to have Sunday breakfa your man's mother, what the fuck? We gonna take a side trip to the m unds to or do we want to find this fuckin' guy?"

's gotta "Actually, I could use a side trip to the mall," Sissy put in. "I didn

to get enough clothes with me from Wyoming and I don't want to go back home. It depresses me."

"What's wrong with your house?" one of Olivia's girls asked.

obbing, "Drive by, AK-47 through the living room. It's a mess. All my dust."

I stared as all of Olivia's girls nodded, accepting this as if Sissy had her house had been accidentally flooded by the normal, everyday annoying occurrence of blocked pipes.

"I could go to the mall too," Daisy added. "Marcus is takin' me dinner tonight and I don't have a thing to wear."

A thought hit me and I said, "I need thirty minutes in the lingerie store. Luke and I have special plans tonight."

Tex looked to the heavens. "Lord, forgive me for what I'm about to do."

oomed. "What are you about to do?" Sissy asked.

"Wring all you all's necks," Tex boomed back.

turned to "We take Tod and Stevie to the mall with us, we'd be in and out in minutes. Those boys don't fuck around at the mall. They got, like, a different kind of gay-dar," Daisy told Tex. "It's the kind that they can hone in on the best outfit, pair of shoes, or whatever you need, find your size without askin' and feed you the shit in your dressing room without you having to leave it. They don't spare your feelin's either. If it don't look good, they'll snatch it from you and find you somethin' else. They could do it at the Olympics, they're so good."

all next Tex scowled at Daisy, completely unimpressed.

't bring "We have no leads. It wouldn't hurt, a quick stop to the mall,

to my pointed out and I couldn't stop my smile.

Sissy going head-to-head with Tex meant the old Sissy I knew was
Three weeks ago, Sissy probably wouldn't have had the gumption
pottery, "boo" to Tex.

"What're you grinnin' about?" Tex demanded, his scowl now directed
ad said me. "A second ago, you were thinking of cuffin' Luke to the bed to get
lay but of him in this hunt."

"Luke?" Olivia cut in, staring at me. "Big Momma told me Luke
out to paid her a visit this week. We talkin' 'bout Stark here?"

"Yeah," I told her.

Her eyes got big again. "You seein' Stark?"

My smile grew wide. "Yeah."

"Shee-it, girl. I seen him around. I seen him lots. That boy is *fin*
boy's ass, hon-nee, that ass could win awards. You sure bounced back
Jeremiah all right. Good for you," Olivia smiled back.

"Are we goin' to the mall or what?" Daisy asked.

"I could go to the mall," Olivia said.

The Rock Chick party stared at her.

"I could join the hunt for Jeremiah, too. Wouldn't mind takin' t
down," Olivia went on and then turned to her girls. "He's the one sto
ey just Big Momma."

"Rat-bastard," one of her girls muttered.

"That's what I'm saying," I muttered back and got a bunch of big
grins.

"Sissy
Shirleen, who'd missed all the action, and not only didn't look l

cared but didn't bother to ask, hoofed up to us.

is back. "We got a situation," she announced and everyone's eyes swung to say "Smithie's cornered in someone's yard by a couple of German Shepherds. Any of you good with dogs?"

ected at Crap!

t ahead *This just keeps getting better all the time*, Bad Ava took that opportunity to chime in.

e Stark *Oo, puppies! I love puppies!* Good Ava exclaimed.

"I'm good with dogs," Sissy said.

"Right, let's go." Shirleen didn't waste any time. She waved at us and took off toward her Navigator.

Everyone followed suit, except I leaned over and gave Winnie a pat on the cheek and Olivia gave her a big hug finished with a kiss on the top of her head from behind.

"Be safe," Winnie called after us as we walked through her yard.

"We goin' to find Jeremiah after this dog business?" Olivia asked, following us.

"Yeah, after the mall," I told her.

hat boy Daisy pulled up short and gave Olivia a look. "We good?"

le from Olivia shrugged. "I'm over it. The man took Big Momma's money and almost lost her house. Fuck that. This hunt takes priority."

"I hear you," Daisy replied.

, white I could swear I heard Tex growling to the heavens.

ike she "Can I ride with you?" Sissy asked Olivia. "I'm thinking, once I get to the mall."

my stupid, cheating husband, I'm going to get a Lexus. I've never
to her. one, but they're sweet. I'd like to experience the ride."

pherds. "Get yo' skinny white ass in there," Olivia answered, which Sissy
a yes.

Olivia, her posse and Sissy all scrunched into the Lexus, the res
portunity shoved into the Navigator. Shirleen pulled out and Olivia tailed us.

"Let me get this straight," Tex boomed from the passenger seat
Dexter has got Lee and his boys, Ava and the girls, the Zano family a
crazy black women after him. Indy and Ally are at a prison on a fool's
'cause that boy ain't gonna talk. Smithie's pinned in a yard by dogs, a
Winnie we do a dog rescue, we're goin' to a lingerie department?"

kiss on "That's right," Daisy replied.

o of her He blew out a huge sigh.

"Shee-it," he muttered (but it still came out as a boom).



asked, SHIRLEEN HADN'T GOTTEN the story exactly right.

Smithie wasn't cornered by two German Shepherds. Smithie was t
two German Shepherds.

By the time we got there, Smithie was perched on a stout limb twe
up and the two dogs were at the trunk, snarling and barking so vic
ey, she white slobber was lapping at their doggie lips.

Sissy valiantly tried cooing at them. One of the dogs broke o
snarling, and chased her to where we all were standing behind a t
chain-link fence at the side of the house. She rushed through the gate
divorcethrew it closed behind her.

been in Luckily, the dog preferred Smithie-meat, likely noticing that Sissy
 have as much juice on her bones, and ran back to the tree.

took as “Motherfuckers!” Smithie yelled at us. “Do somethin’! I been up
 hour.”

st of us “That isn’t true. He’s only been up there half an hour. Forty-five n
 tops,” Stevie corrected.

. “Now “Anyone tried to stun gun the dogs?” Daisy asked.

nd four “You wanna walk up to one of those dogs and stun gun it? I don
errand,so,” Tod put in.

nd after “We should have brought Tasers,” Roxie said.

 “Indy and Ally have the Tasers,” Jet reminded her.

 “Maybe we should call the fire department,” I suggested.

 “You wanna explain to the fire department why a black man v
connection to the owners of this house is in their yard?” Duke asked.

 “Why *is* he in the yard?” I asked Duke.

reed by “Search me. I was down the block, not gettin’ shit about Dexter
way, when I got the call from Roxie,” Duke answered.

lve feet “I think he said he heard something and thought the owners we
iously, here. He came around to talk to them and got caught by the dogs. Th
 can’t really be sure since he was yelling the story and cursing a lot w
told it, so I didn’t follow,” Roxie put in.

ff, still “Why don’t we go buy a few steaks and bring them back? Lure th
en-foot away,” a voice said from behind us and my body got tense when I rec
and Jet it.

 I turned stiffly to look, hoping that I was hearing things, and not th

didn't Good Ava and Bad Ava nonsense, not even caring that it would mean I
finally lost what was left of my mind, and everyone turned with me.

here an Mrs. Stark and my mom were standing behind our tribe. It had been
Stark with the steak idea.

minutes, For the second time that day, I had to ask, what...the...*fuck*?

"What are you doing here?" I screeched.

't *think* Yes, I screeched, totally unable to control the shrill in my tone. I couldn't
I was done. This was too much. I could take no more.

"Who are they?" one of Olivia's girls (earlier she had been introduced as Rhonda) asked.

with no *"Hello. I'm Josie Stark, Luke's mom. And this is Christine Barlow's
mom. Pleased to meet you."* Super Mom Stark came forward and
shaking hands and bestowing warm smiles on everyone as if she was
church mixer.

Everyone shook her hand, but they all continued to stare at her.

by the *"You're Luke's mom?"* Shirleen asked, staring wide-eyed with wonder
Mrs. Stark.

re back I wasn't surprised at her reaction. Luke seemed more the type to emerge
rough I fully formed out of a pit of blistering lava, not spring from the loins
while he woman with a conservative hairstyle, low-heeled, faultlessly-shined
colored pumps and sporting a short-handled, matching-bone-colored
two steps up from a granny bag.

the dogs *"Sure am,"* Mrs. Stark stated proudly.
ognized

"I love this!" Daisy squealed and then giggled her tinkly-bell giggles.

the usual Jet, Roxie and Shirleen were grinning at each other huge and I fear

n I had were about to join in on the giggles.

“Um...” I cut in before hilarity could ensue. “Again, can I ask, when Mrs. Stark was here?”

Mom and Mrs. Stark were warily looking Tex top to toe, obviously not certain what to make of him.

Mom tore her eyes away from Tex first. “Well, Josie and I were worried about you. We’re both worried about you. So we sent Marilyn and Sofia to the mall. We decided to follow you. Make sure you were okay.”

“What?” I asked, even though I heard her answer. I just didn’t believe it.

“I know it’s none of my business,” Mrs. Stark, obviously not hearing or deciding not to answer, turned to Olivia. “But you’re a pretty girl. Your lipsticks are perfect. It’s the perfect color for you. You have a lovely grand girl like you, well, she shouldn’t be out with a boy who has bounty after him. I don’t know you, but I’m a mother and I’m pretty good at people up, and one look at you, I know you could do better.”

Mom looked at me. “We listened at the side of Mrs. Conrad’s house. We were wrapped up in things, didn’t see us.” Her eyes got soft. “Ava, she had no idea. Your troubles.”

Fuck.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“I’m fine, Mom, honest. I’m over it,” I assured her and turned attention back to Super Mom Stark. I wasn’t certain Olivia Conrad was the kind of girl who liked anyone getting into her business, especially in my class, white Super Moms. I thought that might be more pressing than Mom finding out I was conned, beaten up and violated.

total jerk. I would deal with Mom later. “Mrs. Stark—” I started.

“That Louis, he was no good,” Rhonda told Olivia, I thought unwi
was always sayin’ you should cut him loose.”

“Mm-hmm,” Olivia’s other two girls, Tamika and Camille, mu
their affirmation in unison.

“Well, I loved him,” Olivia defended herself.

“You loved his big dick,” Camille put it then she looked sheepi
Super Mom Stark. “Sorry, but it’s true.”

“Sex is not love,” Mrs. Stark declared sagely.

“If it’s good nookie then it’s close enough,” Shirleen muttered un
ing me breath.

I stared at them, stunned speechless at the fact that Mrs. Stark see
I like I be intent on holding an impromptu woman’s talk show on a stranger’
dma. A hunters The dogs were barking, Smithie was up a tree and Tex looked like the
t sizing guy *no one* wanted loitering around the neighborhood. I was pretty ce
was dumb luck that the police hadn’t already descended on our party.

I was also pretty certain that dumb luck wasn’t going to hold out.

Before I could intervene, Duke did.

“Time for the honesty,” he growled, looking, scarily enough, at me

“I’ll say, brother,” Tex boomed, crossing his arms on his chest a
glaring at me.

Before I could run away or will my body to spontaneously combus
was the walked up and stared at me, straight in the eye.

“I know you’re tryin’ to protect Luke and I’m okay with that ’ca
at this care about him and he’s a good man. He deserves to have a good
ed by a

carin' about him. I'm not okay with standin' out in the bright sunshi
sely. "I the neighbors watchin' and a black man in a tree. I'm not sure I v
explain to Luke Stark why his mother's been fingerprinted. I'm
rmured unsure of my desire to explain to him why I let his woman get finger
What I am sure of is that *you* don't want to explain it to him either."

"Duke—" I began but he kept talking.

ishly at "I don't disagree with what he's doin'. Someone put their hands
wife Dolores, hell would get paid and I'd be the one huntin' down the
who'd be payin' it. You got a whole bunch a people caught in the
here and your shit is so far south we're hangin' onto a pole by our fing
der her Pretty soon we're gonna have some angry badasses descending if t
doesn't get sorted and fast. Girl, I'm tellin' it to you straight, give
med toghost. You got no idea what you're doin'. Sort this shit out and sor
s lawn.now."

kind of My eyes bugged out. "What am I supposed to do?"

ertain it "You know what you gotta do," Duke's gravelly voice rumbled lov

I did know what I had to do. And I knew I had to do it fast.
because I didn't feel like getting fingerprinted. Also, the fingerprint
would likely stain Mrs. Stark's bone-colored handbag.

! Hell and damnation.

nd also With a heavy sigh, I pulled my phone from my purse and flipped :

I scrolled down my phonebook, found the name I needed, pressed th
t, Dukebutton and put it to my ear. It rang twice as I walked several feet away

"Yeah?" Luke answered.

ise you "Luke?"

woman

ne with “Beautiful, I wanna say I have time to talk but I’m doin’ so
want to important.”

equally I wanted to know what important something he was doing, but I
printed. was up a tree. I didn’t have time to ask.

“I’m sorry. I wouldn’t call, but I’ve got a situation.”

Silence for a beat then, “Talk to me.”

on my “Well...” I started then stopped, mainly because I didn’t know w
jackass begin.

middle “Ava.” Luke sounded impatient.
ernails.

his shit “See, the thing is...” I started then stopped again, and before Luk
up the say anything I rushed on, deciding to let it all hang out. “We went
t it out Winnie Conrad. She’s a nice lady, but she didn’t have much for us. Th

is, her granddaughter, Olivia, showed up while we were talking with
and apparently somewhere along the line, both Indy and Jet had stun-

Olivia and Daisy got in a catfight with her. She wasn’t so happy seeing
N. at her grandma’s place and there was kind of a mini incident. Then she

Mainly out who I was, what happened to me and that we were after Noah
ing ink decided to join the hunt, after we go to the mall and get Smithie ou
tree that is.”

I heard noise as his hand covered the mouthpiece of the phone.
it open. heard words and they were indistinguishable, but even though I c
e green make out what he was saying, I could tell whatever it was, it wasn’t ha

Then he came back to me. “Let’s talk about why Smithie’s in a tree

“That’s why I’m calling. Two German Shepherds have treed hi
stranger’s back yard. He was canvassing Noah’s old neighborhood. I
clear about how that happened, but the dogs aren’t happy and we ca

methin' him down."

"Call the fire department."

Smithie "He's in a stranger's yard and we don't have a good story about wh

"Call the fire department."

"Luke, he's in a stranger's back yard. He's a black man in a str
back yard. And there are, like, twelve of the now-extended Rock Chic
here to hanging out beside the house. We don't have time for me to describe
outfit and you've seen Tex. I'm not sure the fire department is going to
slide."

"Ava, call the fire department. I'll call Eddie. Smithie won't ha
trouble."
e could
to visit

"I'm not quite done with my story."

Winnie Silence.

Or, more accurately, scary silence.
gunned

I continued, "See, my mom and I had a nice chat after breakfast,
tell you about that later. Anyway, your mom and my mom got worrie
my troubles and they decided to follow us. They're here too. You
thinks we should get steaks for the dogs, but she's also counseling O
her man troubles."
g Daisy
e found
so she
t of the

More silence.
Then I

I persevered.
ouldn't
ppy.

"So, not only do we need to get Smithie out of the tree without
getting arrested, someone needs to do something about the moms bec
far Olivia has been cool about the counseling. I think she's coming to
with her man troubles, but, you know, we don't know her very wel
an't get
e."
im in a
I'm not
an't get

mom has the best of intentions, but from what I've seen, Olivia carries some attitude. I don't know, she might turn at any moment. Not to worry." Tex is totally pissed because we have to swing by the mall—"

"Ava. Quiet."

He said it in the tone where I knew he meant it and if he had been angry's knew I wouldn't have had the words but a hard shut-Ava-up-kiss. ck gang

Daisy's Then he said, voice still low and angry, "Give the phone to Ma."

o let us "Okay," I agreed readily and didn't delay, but turned to the huddle Stark, Luke wants to talk to you."

ive any She smiled happily, looking like she didn't have a care in the world. She walked up to me.

She took my phone, put it to her ear, listened for about five seconds, smiled and said, "Of course. Be safe."

She handed the phone back to me. Her eyes giddy happy, she ignored my open-mouthed stare and she walked back to the huddle. but I'll

Then she said something truly frightening. d about

"Christine, we have to go. Luke says we need to make a reservation at Olivia's steakhouse. I'm thinking Buckhorn Exchange or Morton's. If we go to Morton's, we can dress up." ir mom

Slowly, with creeping dread, I put the phone to my ear. "Why is your mom making reservations for dinner?" mom

He ignored my question. "Lee's calling Eddie right now. Eddie was talking with Smithie. You go to the mall. I'll pick you up at your place at seven o'clock." anyone

My body got tight and I repeated, "Why is your mom making reservations for dinner?" o terms l. Your

1 throw “You can call off the Rock Chicks and tell Winnie’s granddaug
nentionstand down. We got Dexter in the holding room.”

My tight body went stone-still and my lungs evacuated all oxygen.

“Luke,” I whispered.

close I “After the mall, if you want, you can have Tex or Duke bring you
you got something to say, or do, to Dexter.”

“Luke—”

l. “Mrs. “You got two hours. You’re not here, we’re finishing with him.”

“Luke—”

ld, and “Two hours, babe.”

seconds, “Luke!” I cried, fear taking hold of me as oxygen burned a wake i
lungs.

He didn’t hear me, he had disconnected.

red my The tribe gathered around as I numbly flipped the phone shut. Siss
me better than anyone. She read my body language, got close and to
hand.

ion at a “The hunt’s off. The Hot Bunch got him,” I whispered and ev
et in at looked at each other.

is your “Well, that was no fun,” Olivia remarked. “Just a brother in a tree.
the mall works out. I need me a good top if I’m gonna find a decer

This season, there ain’t no good tops. I need cleavage. Cleavage v
will deal season. I can’t find cleavage anywhere.”

n.” “Sugar, you okay?” Daisy asked, eyes sharp on me.

vations No, I was not okay. I needed a new plan and I needed it fast.

ghter to I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath and then, as usual, I winged
I opened my eyes and looked at Duke.

“Eddie’s going to take care of Smithie,” I said and Duke nodded.
looked at Jet. “Can you call Indy and Ally, tell them it’s over?” Jet
here if too. Then I looked at Tod and Stevie. “I need an outfit for Morton
really good underwear. The outfit has to be the fuck-me outfit to end a
me outfits. The underwear has to be good-enough-to-manipulate-a-
man underwear. The kind he can’t say no to. Can you do that?”

“You betcha, girlie,” Tod told me on a huge smile.

My eyes went to Roxie. “I need the works and I need it fast. On
and Stevie get the clothes and shoes, can you do the works?”

into my She knew exactly what I was asking and answered, “Of course.”

I turned to Olivia. “Go to your grandma, I’m going to be calling
half an hour. If she agrees to my plan, you both have to be ready to roll

y knew “This mean I’m not goin’ to the mall?” Olivia asked.

ook my “I’ll take you to the mall tomorrow,” I told her.

everyone “Works for me,” she replied.

Finally I looked at Tex. “Luke says you’ll take me to the offices at
ready. Will you do that?”

at man. Tex’s gaze cut to Duke, then back to me. “No problem, darlin’.”

was last My eyes moved to Shirleen and I said simply, “I need you.”

Without hesitation Shirleen returned, “Whatever it is, I’m there.”

Sissy squeezed my hand. “You want me to come with you too?”

I turned to her. “No, I need you to babysit Marilyn and Sofia and

l it. you to come to dinner with us tonight. Can you do that?"

"Absolutely," she answered.

Then I That was when we heard sirens.

nodded "What the fuck!" Smithie shouted. "Where did you all go? Is n's and fuckin' there? I'm in a fuckin' tree. Jesus fuckin' Christ."

ll fuck- Tex got close and his huge hand settled on top of my head.

macho-

"Let's go," he said, the boom muted but still there.

I nodded.

ice Tod I looked back at the Rock Chicks as Tex, Shirleen and I headed Navigator. There were smiles, waves and chin lifts.

I waved back but didn't smile.

her in I was too busy freaking out about what I was going to do next.
l."

fter I'm

I want

you to come to dinner with us tonight. Can you do that?"

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OCTUPLE REVENGE

Tex drove his bronze El Camino into the parking garage under the Nightingale Investigations offices and I saw Olivia wheeling Winnie in her wheelchair around the side of her Lexus.

Tex parked and barely had the car shut off when he shot out, hauling Winnie over to Olivia. I followed as fast as I could, which wasn't very fast and a half inch, spiked heels.

"Shee-it, girl, you're about five foot two and wearin' pump shoes shouldn't be doin' transfers. It ain't safe. Get outta my way, I got to go," Tex boomed to Olivia and I watched with surprise as he pushed her aside and explained to Winnie, "Don't worry. Jet taught me how to do this. Nancy's girlfriend, Jet's mom, was still recoverin' from a stroke when she was together. She'd get tired, she'd need her chair."

Olivia and I stood back as Tex expertly transferred Winnie from her wheelchair to the chair.

"You're good at that," Winnie noted when she settled in.

"Nancy don't need her chair now," Tex shared. "But it ain't so easy if you forget how to do."

See, told you Tex was a good guy.

Winnie gave him a grin and patted his hand then looked at me ready?"

No. No, I was not ready. But I had to be ready. Luke had given me the option and I was going to take it.

Luckily, Daisy was right about Tod and Stevie knowing how to show off. Not only was I wearing the Fuck-Me Outfit of All Time, I had on Manipulator Macho Man Underwear that would make John Rambo forget that Vagina even existed.

Not to mention Indy and Ally showed up at Roxie's. Indy gave good advice and Jet was a dab hand at makeup—experience gleaned from her long ass working at a strip club. Daisy stepped in and did a cover up job of my eye in four awards. eye that was so good, if someone took a before and after photo, it would win awards.

s. You Therefore I was vamped out like nobody's business.

it," he Indy had curled my hair in tight banana curls then she ran her slim while he with-hair-gunk-fingers through it, shaking it all around so my head icy, my mass of sexy, wild, soft curls.

we got Jet had done my makeup sultry, giving me dark, smoky eyes, barel blusher and lots of lip gloss.

1 car to Tod and Stevie's Fuck-Me dress was a deep, forest green. It was sexy and fit like a glove from cleavage to hips. It stopped just above the knees on one side had a deep slit nearly up to my hip. The shoes were killer, methin', sex on heels. They were black with pointed toes, high, pencil-slim heels and a thin, complicated ankle strap that took me (and Roxie) minutes to figure out how to fasten.

But it was the underwear that made the outfit and you couldn't see

1. “You it. You just felt sexy wearing it. Way sexy. Off the charts sexy.

The undies were two-piece in a deep green, one shade down from me one A strapless bustier and skintight satin panties. The bustier was covered in black lace and the panties were also heavy on lace in all the right places. Not only that, the backs of the panties were cut high (not thong high, but close) so they showed a lot of ass. The back of the bustier was dipped low so it showed lots of cleavage. The underwear wasn’t the most comfortable thing I’d ever worn, but it was worth the hell. No pain, no gain.

Good hair “Yeah. I’m ready,” I answered Winnie.

Over days “She ain’t ready,” Olivia muttered.

My black I decided to ignore Olivia. I had to focus and I didn’t need no thinking. I could win.

We took the elevator up and went to the offices. Shirleen was behind the reception desk talking on the phone.

Red-up- When we walked in, her tawny eyes came to me, bugged straight ahead. I was a little nervous. She said, “Dorothea, I gotta go. My girl’s here and shit.. I don’t even know what to say. Words won’t describe it. I’ll get my phone, take a picture. You have *got* to see this.”

Shirleen hung up and dove under the desk, coming up with her bag and the same time digging out her phone.

See and “Shirleen, I don’t have time for pictures,” I told her.

Not totally “Girl, you want a photo record of this. Trust me,” she returned, pulling out her phone, dropping her bag on her desk and bleeping buttons, sticking out the side of her mouth. “Now how does this thing work?”

Even see “Give it to me,” Olivia ordered, sashaying toward Shirleen. “I

same phone. I take pictures all the time.”

I forest. I looked at Tex, beginning to feel desperate. By my calculations
ered inlike, a minute before Luke and the boys “finished” with Noah.

es. The “Will you go get Luke?” I asked Tex.

showed “Oh, Luke knows you’re here,” Shirleen informed me and the v
skin. said it gave me goose bumps, and not the good kind.

ut what As if he knew (which he probably did) that it was his cue, the doo
inner sanctum opened and Luke was there. A man I hadn’t yet met w
him, slightly older than any of the Hot Bunch. Blond military
piercing blue eyes and the standard issue, Nightingale Hottie tight-m
egativezero-body-fat body.

I didn’t have time to check out the latest member of the Hot Bunch
sittinghad eyes for Luke.

He was feeling the same way. He did a full body sweep, rocked b
t out ofhis heels and crossed his arms on his chest. Then he did a slight shak
.I don’thead like he couldn’t quite believe me, but one side of his mouth curle
, take a a half-grin as if he thought I was amusing.

Really not the reaction I was hoping for.

g at the “Hey,” I greeted.

“Shit, Luke, you don’t put a ring on her finger, I will,” the blond g

Now *that* was the reaction I was hoping for.

pulling “You got a wife and five kids,” Luke told him, but didn’t take his e
tongue me.

“Oh yeah, for a second I forgot,” the blond guy replied.

got the It was then I realized I wasn’t breathing so I forced the air out

lungs.

As I had, “Babe,” Luke said, still not moving from his position just inside the

“You wanna tell me why Mrs. Conrad and her granddaughter are here?”

I stopped breathing again.

“Shit!”

Get yourself together, girl! Bad Ava shouted.

“You made this plan, you have to carry it through. Be strong! Go encouraged.”

I started breathing again, mainly because I had no choice.

“I figured it’s not fair I get to have my word with Noah since he’s dirty on both Mrs. Conrad and me. I asked her if she wanted to say things and she did. So I invited her to the party. You don’t mind do you?”

The blond guy burst out laughing.

Luke did not.

“Yeah, I mind.” Luke, as normal, was brutally honest.

“Well, that’s not good,” I forged ahead. “Mrs. Conrad and Olivia came the way downtown from Aurora. It’s tough for Mrs. Conrad to get around here. It would suck if she made this trip for nothing.”

Luke tore his eyes from me, looked at Winnie, and without remembering said, “This is a closed party.”

“Luke!” I cried.

He was ruining my plan!

“Got it!” Shirleen yelled and everyone looked at her. She had her phone pointed facing our direction and a little picture of me was on the screen.

“That’s a good one too. That’s so good, I may make it my wallpaper.”

the room. “Shirleen, we’re in the middle of something here,” I told her.

?” “Oh yeah, sorry,” she mumbled.

She bent her head and started beeping more buttons on her cell
likely sending my photo to half of Denver.

I looked back at Luke.

and Ava “Can we talk privately?” I asked.

“Nothin’ you can’t say in front of Monty,” Luke replied.

My eyes moved to the blond guy. “So, you’re Monty.”

did the “That’s me,” he said.

for a few “I’m Ava,” I introduced myself, though he probably knew who
u?” “Still, I didn’t want to seem rude.

“I know that, darlin’. I manage the surveillance room. We monitor
loft and we monitor Fortnum’s. Seen a lot of you.”

My mouth dropped open. Monty smiled. I felt the heat hit m
ame allMonty’s smile got bigger.

ound. It “You monitor Fortnum’s too?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” Monty answered. “You can thank me later.”

orse he I blinked before I asked, very, very stupidly, “For what?”

“For not showin’ Luke the video of you crawlin’ on all fours dc
side book aisle.”

It was then Luke laughed.

her cell Okay, abort plan, time for a new plan.

is on it. I turned to Shirleen. “I’m done here. We can leave. I need c

STAT.”

“Girl, I did not traipse around town, droppin’ off Tex, goin’ to you to get your perfume—” Shirleen started.

phone, “My house is two blocks from Tex’s,” I cut in.

“So? Then you had me callin’ everyone and their brother,” Shirleen back.

“You just called Olivia!” My voice was rising.

“Well, I didn’t do all that for you to give up at the first hurdle. Shirleen finished.

Argh!

I was. I turned back to Luke.

“Can we *please* speak privately?” I tried again.

Luke’s He pressed his lips together. Not with anger, more like he was trying to stop them from twitching.

my face. Then he said, “You got five minutes.”

He motioned toward the door. I walked through it and stopped. He and I followed him to a door down the hall I’d never been through. We went in and I saw it was an office. Big desk, chairs in front, couch back wall. The same décor as the reception area. I stopped inside, closed the desk, and turned to Luke, who’d closed the door behind us.

own the “You can’t stop yourself, can you?” he asked before I could say anything.

“What?”

“Cleared your debt this morning, less than eight hours later, they’re back up again.”

bookies.

My eyes got wide. “What do I owe you for now?”

r house “Arrangin’ for Smithie to be taken out of a tree.”

Oh. That.

“That’s just one little thing,” I told him. “And you did that for I
en shot more than for me.”

“Smithie was in the tree because of you.”

That was kind of true.

t, girl,” Hell and damnation.

“What else do I owe you for?”

“The debt you bought for struttin’ in here dressed like a man eater.

“I’m not dressed as a man eater.”

His eyebrows went up.

ying to Okay, so I was dressed as a man eater.

“Why do I owe you for that?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Ava babe, I know the game you’re play
passed you’re gonna pay for playin’ it.”
before.

1 on the I crossed my arms on my chest. “And what game is that?”

e to the “The same game you played this mornin’. You don’t want me
somethin’ I want to do and you’re usin’ your sweet body to get it. As r
ything. I like the view, babe, the intent behind it pisses me off.”

His words angered me so much I looked around for something to t
e pilin’ him.

Before I could find anything, Luke demanded, “Ava, look at me.”

My eyes went to him, but I didn’t look at him. I *glared* at him.

He ignored my glare and went on, “We aren’t playin’ your game. I’ll take your word with Dexter, then—”

I interrupted him. “For your information, this dress is *not* for you, Noah.”
Smithie

That got a reaction.

At first I saw I surprised him, which surprised me because I didn’t think Luke *could* be surprised. Then the surprise faded fast and I saw he was off. I knew this because his eyes narrowed, his brows drew together, the air in the room started closing in because his ticked off energy was electrifying it.

” “Come again?” he said low, but I was too angry myself to be scared of him.

“See,” I started to explain. “I had vowed revenge against Dom. Every time Dom would do something jerky, I’d double it, triple it, whatever, I’d keep a running tally. Then once Noah hurt me, I transferred my revenge to him because he deserved it more. Then I started adding on whenever I’d find out he did something bad. I got up to octuple revenge.”
in’ and

I twisted, dropped my purse on the desk, came back around, lifted my hands and held my left pointer finger with my right hand and started counting down my plan.
e to do

such as “One, I walk in there looking *fine*. Not looking beat up and broken. I look looking *good*. That way, he sees what he gave up. He could have had a frown at he used me and threw me away. He might be too cold-blooded to care, but it’ll make *me* feel better.”

I added my middle finger to my hand.

“Two, I’m in there with you and he knows we’re together. You’re

You get than him, hotter than him, richer than him, everything more than him.
to rub his face in it.”

It’s for I added my ring finger.

“Three, I’ll say what I have to say. I don’t know what that is yet,
winging this as I go along. I’ll figure it out.”

’t think I kept adding fingers.

s ticked “Four, he has to see Winnie. He may be a snake, but he can’t be
and the that he won’t flinch when he’s confronted with yet another one of his v
zy was especially when she’s in a better place with good people around her no
what he did to her. Five, Winnie gets to have her say. Six is whatever
ared of going to do to him. I don’t have a seventh and eighth part of my rever
but I figure I might kick him. With these pointy shoes, that’ll hurt like-

. Every I stopped talking because one second Luke was three feet away, t
. I kept second he was using his hard body to back me up until my thighs hit t
to him and he was pressed in, full frontal.

find out “What are you doing?” I cried, grabbing his upper arms in order
stumble on my teetering heels.

l up my His hands were on me, his head bent and his lips went to my neck.

ounting “I’m gonna fuck you, right here on Lee’s desk.” His voice was low
but not with anger this time. With something entirely different, and a
ten, but slid across my skin. “The eighth part of your revenge is you walkin’ i
me, but with your face soft, satisfied and sexy as hell like it is after I ma
are, but come.”

Ho-ly *shit*.

My special girl parts went into full spasm.

e better

I want He was pulling up the skirt of my dress at the same time, stepping my plan.

“Luke! You’re going to mess up my makeup.”

but I’m My skirt was bunched around my hips and Luke’s hands were at m
“I don’t care.” His mouth glided up my neck to my jaw.

“Someone can walk in,” I kept at it.

so low His fingers were moving across lace and satin. His head came
victims, leaned back, looked at my hips and his body went still.

no matter “Jesus,” he muttered as he slid the skirt up higher so he could get
‘you’re look. Then his eyes lifted to mine and they were ink. “Those for
age yet, too?”
—”

he next “No!” I snapped, slapping at his hands. “You’re ruining my surpr
he desk you, which was supposed to be for later on tonight.”

At that he grinned. Not a sexy half-grin. An even sexier, full-on
smile.

not to “Stop smiling at me,” I bit out, shoving my skirt back down. “I’m
my revenge mojo here. I was all psyched up and you got all testoster
me. Or more testosterone than normal.”

again, “Ava.”

shiver I got my skirt in place and raised my eyes to his. His were still i
in there they were amused ink and I knew his intent.
ke you

“Don’t you kiss me, you’ll mess up my lip gloss,” I ordered. “Je
ten whole minutes on my lips and I don’t want her time wasted.”

His arms came around me and his face got close. “You’re cut
you’re bossy.”

all over I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

“Look at me, babe.”

I looked at him.

ly ass. “The eighth part of your revenge can be him rottin’ in prison for t
decade.”

I sucked in breath and stared at him.

up, he After a few beats, I whispered, “You’re not going to kill him?”

He shook his head.

a better I kept staring at him then something hit me. “Were you ever going
Dexter, him?”

ise, for His arms got tighter. “If I’d have seen him after I found out he t
you, or when I found out he did it while I was in your house, maybe
then, no.”

ly, white Oh...my...*God*.

“Why on earth didn’t you tell me?”

1 losing “Because you were in less danger traipsin’ around with the Rock
rone on Didn’t hurt that it served the added purpose of keepin’ your m
inventing ways to push me away.”

nk, but I should have known Luke wasn’t going to kill Noah. He was a go
Hell, he was *The Best Guy Ever*.

Still, I was annoyed.

at spent “I was worried to death you’d do something gonzo.”

e when His forehead came to mine. “Yeah, that’s what kept your m
inventing ways to push me away.”

I could just not believe him.

“You’re incredibly annoying,” I snapped, pulling my forehead away and putting my hands on his chest and pushing (which didn’t work, per usual). He ignored my comment and started his own topic. “I’m gonna kill you now.”

“You are not,” I said, but his lips were coming toward mine and I couldn’t tear my eyes from them. “Luke, my lip gloss!” I protested before his mouth hit mine.

In the end I had to repair my lip gloss and Luke had to wipe the application off his mouth with the back of his wrist.

Not to mention his kiss was so thorough, Luke was going to get his revenge, because even after shaky-handed lip gloss application, he was going to walk in to see Noah in the waning throes of a serious Luke Li



“WHO’S THAT?” I asked, staring at a guy I’d never seen in my life.

He was sitting on the side of the bed in the small, sparsely furnished room (read: bed only), secure room at the back of the offices, a room they called the Holding Room.

Hector and Vance were in with him. He had a fat lip, a swollen nose, and a swollen neck. He was holding his torso straight like bending would cause pain but other than that, he looked healthy as an ox.

And he was not Noah.

Luke had walked in the room in front of me. Tex wheeled Winnie into the room behind me. Monty was standing outside.

I stopped at Luke’s side, Tex and Winnie stopped at mine.

“Fuck,” the man said, his eyes on Winnie.

“What do you mean, who’s that?” Hector asked me.

“I mean, who’s this guy?” I turned to Luke. “I’ve never seen this
miss your life.”

“But, that’s Jeremiah,” Winnie told me.

I turned to stare at her, thinking she might be confused, but you could
rightly by the blistering look she was aiming at the guy she was far from confi

Wow.

“Okay,” I said to Winnie. “But it isn’t Noah.”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Luke said from beside me, and I turned
part of him.

“No,” I replied, and I watched his mouth get tight.

p Fog.

I looked back at the guy.

He had Noah’s loose description. He was stocky, his hair color
quite brown, not quite blond and he had blue eyes. But Noah was
slimmer and definitely cuter.

“I can’t believe this. I got all psyched up to confront Noah and I
guy?” I cried in exasperation.

I mean, really, what the hell?

Luke turned to Tex. “Get me Brody.”

“I don’t know where he—” Tex started.

Luke moved. It was a barely-there movement, but it made a
statement.

“Calm down, badass. I’ll find Brody,” Tex muttered and took off.

“Been waitin’ all day for this to come out,” Jeremiah said, g
through his fat lip. “The Nightingale Boys fuck up. It’s beautiful.
guy in gonna piss his pants laughing.”

Uh-oh.

All of a sudden I realized the seriousness of the matter. I felt the da
ould tell the air and I felt a freakout start to happen.

used. “Maybe you shouldn’t talk,” I advised him and I thought I wa
nice. A lot nicer than he deserved considering he was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah’s eyes slid to me and they were so cold, my freakout ma
back to to creepy proportions.

“Walt and I drew straws for you,” he told me, voice and smile oil
“Once we got a look at you, we both wanted a shot. I got the short
which meant I got Aunt Jemima here and Walt got a good taste of y
said you tasted sweet as cherry pie.”

was not Mrs. Conrad had gasped at the Aunt Jemima comment. I felt, rath
slightly saw, Luke go still. I was frozen to the spot from the minute he began to

get this “Ava, get Mrs. Conrad out of here,” Luke ordered, voice controlle
held an angry edge.

I still couldn’t move, but I could talk and I was pissed way the h
Pissed enough to disregard Luke’s order.

“You aren’t very smart, are you?” I asked Jeremiah.

“Smart enough to get her money, her car, not that she could use i
i chillywhole shitload of gold from you.”

“But not smart enough not to get caught and not smart enough to
you just fucked yourself by not keeping your mouth shut,” I returned.

grinning “Cherry Pie, been dyin’ for a good eye-ful of you and you gotta know Walt’s was worth it,” Jeremiah retorted, his eyes sliding the length of me and adding a long hot shower to my evening schedule.

“Ava, get out of here.” Luke’s voice had turned deadly.

anger in “You keep digging deeper,” I ignored Luke and said to Jeremiah.

“They can’t do dick,” Jeremiah taunted.

s being It was my turn to smile. He was so wrong.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with, do you?” I asked him.

ignified “Ava—” Luke began.

“Yeah,” Jeremiah broke in, standing and everyone in the room y slick. “Supposedly shit-hot PIs, but not shit-hot enough to know they got the t straw, guy.”

rou. He “Yes, I will give you that,” I allowed. “They should’ve known not to give a piece of my ‘cherry pie’ to a guy like you. It was lucky when y were deciding who would screw me over that Noah got the long st alking. least he was cute. You wouldn’t have gotten a first date.”

d but it The smile fled from his face.

hell off. I went on, “Anyway, fortune favors the bold and if these boys are bold else, they’re bold. They may have been looking for Noah, but they found which works just as well because Mrs. Conrad might have a few words to you.”

t, and a “I don’t give a shit what Aunt Jemima has to say,” Jeremiah snarled.

o know You would think I couldn’t move faster than three shit-hot PIs, especially wearing four and a half inch spiked heels.

But I could.

now, it I was on Jeremiah in a flash, hands on his shoulders, and lucky for
, and I slit in my skirt deep enough for my knee to connect pretty fucking hard
his gonads.

He dropped to his knees, hands to his crotch, a long groan escaping
mouth.

A steel-band-like arm wrapped around my waist and I was pulled
several feet, my body pressed tight against Luke's.

I ignored Luke and his arm and hissed to Jeremiah, "Be nice."

"Fuck you," Jeremiah moaned, and it didn't sound all that convinced,
probably since he had temporarily lost *that* particular ability.

I looked at Winnie.

"Mrs. Conrad?" I called, sounding sweet as sugar. "Do you have a
way I'd to say?"

Winnie's eyes were on Jeremiah, but she answered me, "I think
covered it."

There you go.

Time to move on.

I turned in Luke's arm and lifted my eyes to his. "I'm guessing you
and you, coming to dinner with the moms."

Luke just stared at me like I'd broken into a tap dance while singing
Bojangles."

"All righty then," I declared. "Don't worry about getting blood on
specially clothes. I'm really good at stain removal."

I leaned into him, hand at his chest, and gave him a quick lip touch
I pulled out of his arm, but lifted my hand to wipe the lip gloss off his

or me, a with my thumb.

rd with “Don’t be too late,” I whispered, and I watched one side of his mouth
up in a half-grin.

ing his Then, all business, I turned to Mrs. Conrad and grabbed her wheelchair.

“Welp, better go. We don’t want to be around when Luke’s met
ed backgonzo retribution. It might get messy and this is a new dress. Do you
go to dinner with my family and Luke’s mom? My treat,” I
conversationally as I wheeled Mrs. Conrad out of the room.

ancing, “That would be lovely. Would be a shame, we both got all dressed
had nowhere to go,” Mrs. Conrad replied, cool as could be, as if
wheeling through a park, not exiting what amounted to a cell.

nything “We’re having steaks,” I told her. “You like steak?”

“Girl, I love steak. Who doesn’t like steak?”

nk you “I like steak,” I agreed.

We passed a smiling Monty. We stopped outside the room and I turned
look in. Hector was already moving toward Jeremiah. Vance was with
me and he was wearing a very attractive shit-eating grin.

l’re not My eyes slid to Luke.

His were on me and my heart stuttered when I watched, fascinated
ing “Mr. winked.

Then I shut the door.



on your

“I’M AVA BARLOW. I’m staying with Lucas Stark. Can I have my room
please?” I asked the reception clerk at Hotel Monaco.

mouth He tapped on his computer, something came up and he read it, sr

me and gave me my keycard telling me the room number. I took it
outh go^{return smile and headed to the elevators.}

Dinner had been a blast. Marilyn and Sofia had opted out, still p
hair. Olivia, Shirleen and Winnie had opted in, and Sissy met us there v
ing out^{moms. We ate, moved the festivities to the Cruise Room, meeting Ir}
want to^{Jules. We drank martinis (of course, Jules didn't drink martinis, seeing}
asked^{was preggers), enough to get loose, not enough to get drunk and S}
dropped me off at the hotel.

I exited the elevators, found the room and let myself in with the ca
l up but^{The room was dimly lit with one lamp. Luke was in bed, on hi}
re were^{hands behind his head, chest bare, covers to his waist, looking Zen.}

“Hey,” I greeted, throwing my purse in a chair.

“Come here,” he replied softly and my knees got weak.

I told my knees to behave and asked, “How’s Jeremiah?”

“Incarcerated,” he informed me. “Hank got an anonymous tip, se
atching^{out. Uniforms picked him up, took him to the hospital to stitch him}
now he’s behind bars. Winnie needs to go in tomorrow to press charge
voice dropped low and he continued, “Now, come here.”

I took in a deep breath, let it out and walked to the bed.

When I made it to the side, Luke’s hands came from behind his h
did an ab curl, caught my waist and pulled me down on top of him.

When we had settled, his fingers sifted into the hair at the side of n
om key,^{and slid back, taking the weight with it and holding it behind my head.}

“I like your hair like this,” he murmured.

“Indy did it,” I shared.

with a His eyes came to mine. “We got plans tonight, you and me.”
outing. “I already had dinner with the moms.”
with the He gave me a half-grin. “I wasn’t talking about those plans.”
idy and I knew he wasn’t.
g as she Shit!
Shirleen “Babe, move your foot, your shoe is about to pierce the skin on my
Shit again!
rd. I moved my foot and muttered, “Sorry.”
s back, “Take ’em off,” he ordered.
“I can’t, the straps are too complicated. I have to wear them to bed
have to wear them until they fall apart. I’ll never—”
He flipped me on my back then his hand slid down my side, my
my ankle. Within thirty seconds he had both shoes off.
nt a car “How did you do that?” I asked, eyes wide, thinking the wonders of
up and would never cease.
es.” His He didn’t answer. His fingers found the zip at the side of my dress
tugged it down.
“Luke, I want to hear about Jeremiah,” I told him.
ead. He Zipper down, he slid the dress up, up, and then it was off. He tugged
aside, lifted up on his elbow and his head bent to look at me. One
ny headhands came back to my body, gliding across the bustier at my midriff.
“Jesus,” he muttered, eyes wide, face soft.
Okay, suffice it to say, he liked the underwear.
“Luke!” I cried. “Focus!”

His gaze moved to my face. He looked part amused, part impatient, part sexy as hell.

“We got him to talk,” he told me.

This didn’t surprise me.

“Do I have to get my stain removal gloves out?” I asked.

“Shin.” He shook his head. “Not a big fan of mess, babe.”

Thank God for that.

He kept talking, “Jeremiah, real name Kurt Reid. He’s been partner with Walt Ellis for five years. Worked Nevada with him, then Colorado. That’s linked. So much, Brody got the intel mixed up. Brody’s also got a r
l, then I tomorrow with Lee, eight o’clock.”

I had a brief moment to feel sorry for the unknown Brody before
leg, to went on.

“Sometimes they would do the con together, sometimes they hit different marks. With you and Winnie, they hit different marks. He knew all of Luke
you. Ellis, or Dexter, knew all about Winnie. They also have a safe house
ess and Durango. Reid says Ellis is there. Hector and Vance are on the road
checking it out.”

“So it’s close to over.”

“Babe, for you, it is over.”

I was cool with that. I probably had only one knee to the ’nads in
of his this lifetime and I’d given it to Kurt Reid.

I was cool with that too. Kurt Reid was a jerk.

“Okay,” I said to Luke.

He smiled at me. My stomach got melty.

ent and Then he moved. My panties were gone in the blink of an eye. He taking me with him, and before I knew it he was seated on the side of with me straddling his lap.

Ho-ly *shit*.

“Luke, we need to talk about a few things,” I tried to stall.

His head bent and his lips traced the lace above my breast.

“No talking,” he said there, not feeling in the mood for me to st
rs with truth be told I was even beginning to lose the mood.

ieir shit I stuck with it. “We have to talk. There’s lots to talk about.”

neeting His head dropped back and his hands went to my hips. He lifted shifted my hips forward and when he set me down again, he was inside

ie Luke Wow.

Nice.

ifferent “What did you want to talk about?” he asked as his hand slid do
l about arm, fingers curling around my wrist.

ouse in He brought my hand between us and pressed it in so my fingers
tonight target.

Ultra-nice.

“Ava.”

me for “What?”

“You wanted to talk.”

I did?

Shit, I did.

His fingers moved my fingers until my fingers took over. Then h

rolled, moved to my ass. The other one slid up my back and his neck be the bed hitting the skin above the lace again while his 'tache tickled it.

“Um—” I mumbled then moved, sliding slightly up and down, fingers rolled.

This was *hot*.

Ava, focus, Good Ava admonished.

all, and *Yeah, focus. Focus on how hot this is. Yum-mee, Bad Ava* cooed.

Yikes!

I had recruited the Rock Chicks for this operation and they had wo me up, hard on it I had to see it through. If I didn't, they might throw me ou e me. club.

So I persisted, “I just wanted to tell you I like my house. I like my Rover. And I don't think you should go to Vito's family meeting.”

own my His head dropped back again and he looked at me. His hand at m slid around and cupped my breast, thumb sliding across my nipple o lace, and that felt so good I made a little sound in my throat.
hit the

Between his thumb, my fingers and his hard boy part, I was losing the will to manipulate macho man Luke into doing what I wante

He started talking.

“We'll stay at your house while the blinds are being put up. O blinds are up, we'll try the loft for a while. We'll see how it goes an decide. Work for you?”

I moved up and down, not slightly this time, but more.

Then I ground into him and breathed, “Okay.”

is hand “The Range Rover's gotta go, babe. It's not safe.” His voice was g

nt, lipsrough.

“I like my car.” My voice was still breathy.

as my “We’ll get you another car. I’m thinkin’ Mustang.”

I liked Mustangs. Mustangs were super-fly.

“Okay,” I repeated.

My fingers pressed in. It felt good and I licked my lips as he watch

“Christ.” This time, his voice was definitely rough.

“The family meeting—” I went on.

rked so “You aren’t near Zano unless I’m with you.” The roughness had
t of the dimension now.

“Why?”

r Range “He wants this.” His thumb did another nipple swipe while h
y spine bucked and I bit my lip as heat shot through me. “And I’m not givin’
ver the chance to go for it.”

My other hand curled around his neck and I looked at him.

quickly “But,” I whispered and then slid my fingers to where we conne
d. only want this.” I dropped my forehead to his. “You don’t have to tru
Luke, but you can trust me.”

nce the At my words and my touch, his eyes went molten. His hand slid i
d we’ll hair, twisted and he kissed me, hard, hot and deep.

When his lips disengaged, he murmured, “You got it, beautiful.”

Yay! My mind screamed.

There it was. Proof positive.

growing Luke was *The Best Guy Ever*.

“Thank you,” I said softly.

Then I went back to focusing on my target, and while I did this I watched. It wasn't embarrassing. It was sexy and it was hot. After a while I was so sexy and hot I arched back, ready to let it happen, but he pulled forward again.

ed. “I want you looking at me,” he demanded, voice now hoarse.

I tried to look at him, but my eyes were half-closed. I was deep in a fog and couldn't focus.

l a new “Jesus,” he muttered. “I'm gonna come just watching you.”

I smiled and leaned forward, thinking to kiss him, but instead I gasped as my name just as I climaxed, hard, my mouth against his.

his hips I wasn't even close to finishing before he flipped me to my back. His arms wrapped around him as he lifted my hips and slammed into me. I arched and over again, prolonging my orgasm, and once the first one was over another one rolled in right after it. Luckily, the second one coincided with Luke's.

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I could live with that.

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TWO KINDS OF WOMEN

In the middle of the night I woke up, limbs tangled with Luke in his Nighttime Alpha Position.

I pressed into him. He fell to his back, I rolled over him and he carried me.

I settled on his other side, assuming Nighttime Beta Position, hooking my thigh around his hip.

His arms came around me.

“Babe,” he muttered, voice sexy-husky-drowsy.

“No pain tonight?” I whispered.

His arms got tight. “Not anymore.”

I cuddled closer to his warm, hard body then fell back to sleep.



WAKE UP CALL NUMBER ONE:

Luke, sliding the covers down my back while saying softly, “Ava t

“Sleepy,” I replied as I snagged his pillow and hugged it to my bod

I heard a chuckle. My torso was pulled up, I kept hold of the pillow chest as I was twisted, and the pillow and I hit something solid. I buried my face into Luke’s neck as I wrapped my arms around him (and the

and I mumbled, “Kiss me quick so I can go back to sleep.”

I didn’t really want him to kiss me quickly, but I did want to go to sleep.

The pillow was tugged. It slid out from between us, my breasts hit the floor, my chest and my eyes opened.

“I don’t want to just kiss you, beautiful. I wanna fuck you,” Luke said.

I lifted my head to see Luke, fresh from the shower, towel wrapped around his hips, cheeks cleanly shaven and droplets of moisture still on his shoulders. As if possessed by Bad Ava (and I probably was), I leaned forward and licked a drop off his collarbone.

Then Luke demonstrated the undeniable fact that days of being intermixed with fighting with me, lots of sex, parking lot fisticuffs and much sleep had absolutely no effect on him whatsoever. It was so energetic we ended up on the floor, having rolled there after a short wrestling match over who would get to put their mouth (me) or their fingers (and Luke) where (I lost).

After, he moved us to the bed, me on top, one of his arms locked around me, the other hand drawing patterns on the small of my back. He had lifted me and I was part straddling, part wrapped around his thigh, my head pressed into the space between his ear and jaw.

Then Sissy’s idea from yesterday popped into my head.

“I want to be a daddy.”

“Luke?”

“I want to be a daddy.”

“Yeah.”

“I want to be a daddy.”

“Do you keep handcuffs on you all the time?”

“I want to be a daddy.”

“No.”

“I want to be a daddy.”

“Most of the time?”

back to “Depends. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

nit bare The arm locked tighter and the hand stopped drawing and cupped r

“Why?” he pressed.

aid. I lifted up on my elbow and looked at him, feeling weirdly sh
trapped though I was sprawled on top of him naked after having energet
on his wrestling sex. “How would you feel about being, um...cuffed to the b
forward erm...letting me have my way with you?”

He half-grinned and I thought he liked the idea and it made m
hunting sensitive, post-orgasm, special girl parts tingle.

and not “I like to be the one in control, babe.”

energetic My eyes narrowed. I dropped down and started to roll, but he foi
; match escape plan and came with me. This meant both his arms went arou
mouth holding me to him, and his thigh was pressed deep between my legs.

around His hand fisted in my hair and tugged it back gently so I would
a knee him.

ny nose His face was not amused, it was soft. “I might not like that particul
Ava, but I do like that you’re up for adventure.”

“I’ve just decided it’s missionary position until the end of ti
retorted.

That’s when his face got amused.

“Bullshit,” he murmured.

He was right, it was bullshit.

Still.

“Are we gonna fight over how we have sex?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I replied, sounding bitchy.

ny ass. “So now that we don’t have anything to fight about, you’re in things?”

ly even “I’m not inventing things! You’re not being fair. How come you ic, part cuff me to the bed and I don’t get to do the same to you?”

ed and, “Because I’m stronger than you.”

This was true. This also didn’t make me happy so I scowled at him
ly very He got close, or, I should say, closer. “Make you a deal. Tonight bring the cuffs. Whoever manages to get the other cuffed to the bed play.”

iled my That was hardly a good deal for me.

nd me, “You just pointed out the obvious. You’re stronger than me.”

“Babe, you’re not using your imagination.”

look at *I have a good imagination*, Bad Ava reminded me, her voice d with anticipation.

ar idea, *Me too*, Good Ava surprised me, her voice sounding dreamy.

I smiled slowly.

ime,” I Then I said, “Deal.”

He touched his lips to mine, eyes open, and murmured, “Never in life could be this sweet.”

My stomach got melty.

“Really?” I whispered.

He rested his forehead against mine. “There are two kinds of women, the ones you go to bed with and the ones you wanna wake up with. Lots of the first, not many of the last. If a man’s lucky, he’ll find the last.”

venting He touched his mouth to mine again and I took that as a definite sign he was the last.

I get to Oh...my...*God*.

My whole body went melty.

“You got somethin’ you wanna say?” he asked softly.

He knew. He knew I loved him. And he wanted me to tell him.

ght, I’ll Eek!

gets to I shook my head.

“I’ll wait,” he said.

Then he kissed my nose and rolled off the bed. He dressed, went to the bathroom, watched, came back to me, sat on the bed, pulled me into his arms and kissed me long and deep.

ripping Then he was gone.

I cuddled into the pillows, smiled to myself and went back to sleep



WAKE UP CALL NUMBER TWO:

My phone in my purse, all the way across the room, started ringing

thought I pulled myself out of bed, ran across the room, nabbed my purse, yanked the phone out, flipping it open and putting it to my ear.

“Yo,” I greeted.

“Hi there, sweetie. Your sisters and I are going to breakfast. Do you

en. The us to come get you?”

s of the It was Mom.

I was definitely digging the New Mom. However, I’d rather have
e sign I extracted without Novocain than go to breakfast with my sisters.

Still, they were family.

“Okay,” I agreed. “But I need a change of clothes, can you bring so

“Sure thing. I’ll have Sofia go up and—”

“No!” I interrupted sharply. God only knew what horrors Sofia
drag out of my closet as payback for yesterday. “You pick,” I to
“Jeans, T-shirt, belt, flip-flops and bring some of my silver jewelry.”

“Which pieces of jewelry?”

“Any of them.”

while I “Can do. We’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

I kissed I told her my room number and we disconnected. Then I scrolled c
Luke and pressed the green button.

“Yeah?”

. “It’s me,” I said.

“Babe, your name comes up on the display,” he informed me, a s
his voice.

;. “Then why do you answer ‘yeah’ if you know it’s me?”

rse and “That’s how I answer the phone.”

“Well, you could say something else like ‘hello’ or ‘Ava’ c
‘babe.’”

ou want “You want me callin’ you ‘babe’ now?”

“It’s better than ‘yeah.’”

“Let’s see if I got this right. Now we’re arguing about how I answer a toothphone?”

Okay, he had a point.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“Dexter was wrong. You don’t taste like cherry pie. You taste a lot sweeter. If you didn’t, babe, you’d be a pain in the ass.”

“Did you just call me a pain in the ass?” I asked.

He sighed.

Time to move on.

“Where are we staying tonight?” I changed the subject.

“Your family gonna be in town?”

“I don’t know.”

“The hotel if they are, your place if they’re not.”

I looked at the bed. It had a padded headboard, no slats for cuffs.

“If we stay here or at my place, we can’t play our, um...game.”

“We’ll play another night.”

He didn’t sound too broken up about it.

“Lotsa games to play, babe,” he went on softly. “I’ll get creative.”

I felt my knees wobble.

If he hadn’t already *been* creative, I was looking forward to creativeness

“Okay. Did Vance and Hector get Noah?”

“No.”

My stomach clenched. What did he mean “no?”

wer the “No?” I asked.

“They didn’t go to Durango. Got a tip. He’s in town, they’re track and they’re close. I’m just about to go out to assist. I want you to stay hotel. This shouldn’t take long.”

uckuva “But I’m going to breakfast with my family.”

Silence for a beat then he told me, “I’ll get a man on you. Don’t leave room until he knocks on the door. You’ve met everyone now. It’ll be ours.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Luke!” I snapped.

“Promise me.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Last time you called me, beautiful, Smithie was up a tree.”

Shit!

I hated it when he was right. And he was right all the fucking time for with Kurt Reid, but that wasn’t his fault.

I gave in, “All right, I won’t do anything stupid.”

“Christ, you’re cute.” The smile was back in his voice.

“Am I cute or a pain in the ass?” I asked, the bitch in my voice.

e.

“Both. And you can be a bitch too, and for some fuckin’ insane reason like it all.”

What did you say to that?

I didn't have a chance to say anything. He disconnected.

I took a shower, and when I got out my phone was ringing and I padded to it wrapped in one of the hotel's robes. It said, UNKNOWN NUMBER, but I flipped it open anyway.

"Yo."

"We goin' to the mall or what?"

It was Olivia. How she got my number I didn't know, but it was no point now.

"We're going to the mall. I have to have breakfast with my sisters first."

"I could do breakfast," she invited herself, which I was realizing was not her way.

Olivia would definitely make breakfast with my sisters a better experience. Hell, Genghis Khan would make breakfast with my sisters a better experience.

"Meet us at Hotel Monaco as soon as you can get here," I told her.

except "I'll be there in fifteen minutes," she replied.

"Gotcha."

She disconnected, but I had another call coming in before I got the phone flipped shut, so I took it.

"Yo."

reason, I "Where are you?"

It was Riley and I remembered I was supposed to meet him at the mall that morning.

“Shit, Riley. I’m sorry. I forgot. My life’s a total—”

again. I He cut me off, “That guy still in the picture?”

UMBER, I sighed.

Then I said quietly, “That guy’s name is Luke, and yeah, he’s still in the picture. He’s probably gonna be in the picture for a while.”

Silence then, “Ava, I’m guessing that you guessed where I’m at work. Can’t say I’m thrilled that this Luke character shows up and you become a disaster.”

om and “Luke didn’t do it. He’s fixing it.”

“Fixing, not fixed, means he’s taking his fucking time.”

as kind “Riley, that isn’t fair. You don’t know what’s going on. It’s not good. He’s barely getting any sleep, he’s working so hard to fix it.”

better More silence then, “You sure about this guy, Ava?”

isters a I went back to speaking quietly. “Yeah, Riley. I’m sure.” Then for a bizarre reason I shared, “I’m in love with him.”

It was his turn to sigh. “You comin’ into the gym today?”

I closed my eyes because what he said meant we were going to be late and that was a relief.

phone I opened my eyes again “I have to go to breakfast with my family. Do you want to come?”

Now why did I ask that? He was hot. He wasn’t just the personal trainer at the gym, he part owned it. Marilyn and Sofia would be all over him.

he gym Luke told me not to do anything stupid and there I was doing stupid. I couldn’t even control it.

“Since you’re not here, got nothin’ on. I’ll be there,” Riley responded.
Crap.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

I in the “Um...I should warn you my sisters are kind of...how do I put it?”
Luke’s words. “Man eaters.”

ith this. “You’ll protect me,” he teased, and I drew in breath. The old Riley
our lifeback.

I told him where to meet us and flipped the phone shut just as a
came at the door.

I looked out the peephole and saw my mother standing there so I
od and the door and she shoved in. She was alone. I glanced out in the hall,
Marilyn and Sofia, so I shut the door behind her.

“This hotel is something else!” she cried, looking around. “Luke is
r some doing well. Really, *really* well. A Porsche and putting you up here?”

She wasn’t wrong. Hotel Monaco was super-fly.

“Where are Marilyn and Sofia?” I asked.

he okay She turned and stared at me, ignoring my question due to the fact
something just dawned on her. “Why *are* you here? Doesn’t Luke
ily. Do house where you can stay?”

“He’s having some work done on his loft,” I semi-fibbed. “I
trainer staying with me until you guys came.”

“Loft?”

d shit. I “Yeah, in LoDo.”

“Luke has a LoDo loft?” she breathed, eyes faraway happy.

led. Okay, so yes, it was true, a LoDo loft was quite something but enough was enough.

“Mother. Hello? Where are Marilyn and Sofia?”

’ I used She blinked and came back into the room. “They’re downstairs coffee.” She dumped a bag on the chair and continued, “There’s your coffee. Take your time, we’ll enjoy coffee and let you get ready. Just n
ley was downstairs when you’re done.”

’ I knock She came forward, kissed my cheek and left. The door hadn’t completely shut on Mom when my phone rang again.

opened I flipped it open. “Yo.”

but no “Hey, chickie. I heard the revenge gig was a bust.”

It was Ally.

must be “Um—”

“I know all about it. Brody fucked up. Lee came home last night happy camper. He’s not hip on looking like an asshole. Not to mention trades a lot on his reputation as a badass motherfucker who’s got it going. Brody fucking up means all the boys took a direct hit to their reps and
act that dis-fucking-pleased, let me tell you. He told Indy, she told me and
have a doin’ our best to keep it amongst the Rock Chicks.”

He was “That sounds like a good idea,” I agreed.

“How did Luke take it?” she asked.

“He wasn’t happy, but I was kind of more involved in the conversation with the guy they did get. He was the one who conned Winnie, a woman I would *not* believe, but he called her Aunt Jemima right when she was in the room.”

really, Silence then, "Please tell me you're lying."

"No. I wish I was."

"Holy crap! What a dick! What did Luke do when he said that?"

having "Nothing, he didn't get a chance. I got there first and kneed him
clothes.'nads."

meet us I heard a hoot and then, "Righteous!"

I smiled. "We're going to breakfast, want to come?"

pletely "Who's we?" she asked.

"Me, my mom, my sisters, Olivia, Riley and whoever Luke send
my bodyguard."

"Didn't you say your sisters are bitches?" she asked.

"Yes. Please say you can come. I need Bitch Buffers."

it not a "You got it. I'm at Fortnum's. Duke, Jane, Tex and Jet are here
tion he can hold down the fort. Daisy's here too. I'm sure she'll come with."

oin' on. "Thanks. We're meeting in the lobby of Hotel Monaco whenever y
l Lee is get here."

l we're "Be there soon as we can."

We disconnected and I flipped my phone shut. I opened the zipper
bag and saw that Mom didn't do too badly, though she didn't exactly
directions.

ersation There were jeans and a goodly amount of my silver to choose from
nd you instead of any old tee, she picked an army green, boat-necked, long-
s in the tee with tiny orange and hot pink flowers flowing from the hem at one
come up in a swirl on the midriff. She'd decided against flip-flops and
a pair of dark-brown suede shoes with a peekaboo notch in the toe,

thin, wedge heel and a thin strap around the ankle. As a finishing touch I threw in a matching brown suede belt with a heavy oval silver buckle.

Okay, so she wasn't exactly an Entirely New Mom, but she was a Somewhat New-ish Mom. She *had* put in the jeans. I wasn't going to complain in the

I got dressed, put on my silver, strapped on the shoes and went to the bathroom to do something with my hair. Mom had stocked me with hair products, travel-sized face stuff, loose powder, mascara, toothpaste, deodorant and perfume, most of which was probably hers because mine had scattered to the four corners (read: at Luke's and at Roxie's).

I did my best with what I had, considering the cut lip and black eye were still there (but finally fading) and was walking into the bedroom when the phone rang.

I flipped it open. "Yo."

"What's this about breakfast?"

It was Shirleen.

"Hey, Shirleen. Did Ally call you?"

"Fuck no. Luke told me before he took off. I'm in the lobby and I'm hungry. Matt's comin' up to your room. Get your ass in gear."

I couldn't help it, I started smiling. "All right, keep your pants on and I'll follow you down in a second."

"Be snappy."

Disconnect.

There was a knock on the door before I completely flipped the phone shut. I shoved it in the back pocket of my jeans as I walked to the door. The phone started ringing again, but I ignored it while I opened the door. I had a small smile on my face, a high,

1, Momgreeting for Matt on my face.

The problem was, it wasn't Matt knocking on the door.

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quibble.
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blusher,
ine was

It was Noah.
Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

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nd I'm

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phone
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greeting for Matt on my face.

The problem was, it wasn't Matt knocking on the door.

It was Noah.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*



CONVOY, CHAOS AND COOKIES

“My life sucks,” I told Noah.

He pulled a gun out of the pocket of his jacket and pointed it at me.

I stared at it.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said.

“Not even fuckin’ close,” Noah replied.

My cell in my back pocket quit ringing just as the phone in the room started ringing. I didn’t have a chance to do anything about it as Noah grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the room. The door closed behind us, shutting out the sound of the ringing phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Noah answered.

He didn’t know?

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” I snapped.

“I mean I don’t know, shut up. We’re takin’ a ride.”

We were walking toward the elevators, Noah’s hand on my arm pulling me in front of him. One elevator dinged and opened. Matt walked out

halted when he saw us. His body went tense and within a second Quick
Matt had a gun. I didn't even see where he got it. He just had it tra
Noah.

Eek!

"Let her go," Matt demanded, and any normal person would ob
mainly because he sounded scary, not to mention he had a gun.

This surprised me because I didn't think he had it in him to sou
scary. Sure, he was a hottie with a great body, but he didn't seem as ba
the rest of the boys. At his tone I realized I was wrong about tha
ed it at
wrong.

Noah had his gun pointed at my back. When he saw Matt's g
moved it to my temple.

Uh-oh.

"Back off," Noah demanded.

e room
s Noah
ind me,
Matt's eyes were at my temple. His mouth went tight, he took tw
back and we took two steps forward.

"Call the elevator," Noah ordered, and I suspected he was talking
mainly because he still had my arm in his hand and he shook me.

I tagged the elevator and it opened immediately.

Matt didn't take his eyes off us and I didn't take my eyes off him a
backed us into the elevator, all the while turned to face the doors.

Matt stood outside the doors, eyes on me and they were active, v
took as a good sign mainly because at that point I was holding on to a
pushingI could get.

out and The doors closed.

k Draw Shit!

ined on Noah took the gun from my head and put it to my back again.

 “Noah, this is a bad idea,” I told him.

 “I think you know by now, Ava, that my name is Walt,” he replied

ey him, “Okay then, Walt, this is a bad idea,” I repeated.

 “Got no leverage. They messed up Kurt. They messed him u

nd that Motherfuckers. They aren’t gonna mess me up. Fuck that. You’re tl

idass as leverage I got. They won’t come near me if I got you.”

it. Way I wasn’t certain that was true. “Noah, I mean Walt, I’ll talk to Lu

gun, he let me—”

 “Time to talk to Stark was after I taped you to a post.”

 “I tried. Luke didn’t feel like giving up. He’s not big on that l

thing. Maybe I can be more convincing this time.”

 “You had your chance.”

ro steps Shit a-fucking-gain.

; to me, The doors opened and we stepped out. Noah stopped, jerking me to

and he went still.

 I was looking at the floor. My eyes came up and I saw Ren, Sissy

is Noah and Uncle Vito standing there, looking like they were waiting

elevator.

 What the fuck?

which I “Hey, guys,” I said, trying to sound casual.

nything They all had their eyes on Noah.

 “Are we having the family meeting?” I asked, still trying to sound

“We were,” Dom replied. His eyes hadn’t left Noah.

“I’m kind of busy right now,” I told Dom.

At that, Ren’s body moved, but he halted when Noah put the gun to my temple.

“Move back,” Noah ordered.

None of them moved. They changed, but they didn’t move. Sissy went pale. Ren, Dom and Uncle Vito went solid.

“Move back!” Noah shouted, getting nervous, and people turned to look at me. Just then I heard a few audible gasps and a small scream when eyes hit us.

I didn’t think Noah getting nervous was a good sign so I said softly to the guys, please move back.”

“This ain’t a good idea, son,” Uncle Vito advised Noah.

“Move back,” Noah repeated.

“She’s a Zano,” Uncle Vito went on.

“She’s not a Zano,” Noah flashed back.

“She’s a Zano,” Ren said firmly.

For goodness sake, were we going to go through this again? *Now?*

“It’d really help me out, say, not to get my brains splattered across the Hotel Monaco lobby, if you guys would *step back!*” I shouted the last part.

“What’s the breakfast hold up?” Shirleen was trundling up. She stopped to a halt. My eyes went to her and hers were wide. “Shit! Is that Noah asking me?”

“My name is Walt,” Noah corrected.

“Whatever. You crazy, boy?” Shirleen asked, her gaze moving to Noah.

“Everyone, get out of our way!” Noah demanded, now not only
but losing patience and I guessed this was a *very* bad sign.

1 to my “Yeah, you’re crazy. Do you know you got a gun to the head c
Stark’s woman?” Shirleen informed him and then continued to sha
ain’t gonna like that much.”

7’s face “Shirleen—” I started.

“Ava...?”

9 stare. That was my mom.

Hell.

7, “You And.

Damnation!

Mom peeked around Shirleen.

“Ava!” she shrieked when she saw me.

“Mom, calm down,” I said.

“What’s happening...? Holy crap.” Marilyn had arrived, Sofia at h

Did I already mention my...life...*sucked*?

“Everyone, get fucking back!” Noah yelled.

ross the “That’s my sister,” Sofia told Noah.

part. “I don’t care, get fucking back,” Noah clipped.

skidded “*You have a gun pointed at my sister’s head!*” Sofia screamed.

h?” she “Take that gun away from her head right now, you jerk!” I
shouted.

“Guys, you aren’t helping,” I told them.

Noah. “This is outrageous. We’re in the lobby of a nice hotel. This kind c

nervous doesn't happen in the lobby of a nice hotel," my mother snapped. "No daughter anyway. Put the gun down."

of Luke "Ava, get rid of these people," Noah said in my ear.

re, "He "Folks, can we all just—" I began.

"Has anyone called Luke?" Mom asked. She was digging through her bag. "I'm calling Luke. Who has his number?"

I'll ask again. Why me? Why me? *Why me?*

"Please, everyone can you just—" I began again.

"Holy shit." That was Riley, who had come around Sofia's right side. She jerked to a stop at the sight of Noah and me. "*What the fuck are you c* Riley exploded, staring at Noah and looking not like a mild mannered personal trainer, but just like a badass motherfucker.

Even in my current circumstances, I was impressed.

"Do I know you?" Noah asked.

er side. "Yeah, you know me. I'm Ava's personal trainer. I was at her birthday party last year."

"Oh yeah. You ever finally get the nerve up to fuck her?" Noah sounded nasty.

There were gasps all around, but I heard a couple of growls. I suspected one came from Ren, the other one I knew came from Riley.

I was beginning to wish he'd just shoot me.

Marilyn Then we heard, "What the fuck!"

It was Ally. She'd rounded the other side of Ren and Daisy around the corner. side.

of thing

it to my Everyone stopped and stared at the new arrivals.

Ally looked normal. Jeans, kickass belt, cowboy boots and AC/DC tee.

She wasn't the reason everyone stared.

igh her Everyone stared because Daisy did not look normal. Daisy had the bottom of her platinum blonde hair in pigtails, the top teased out to maximum volume and she was wearing a baby-pink velour Juicy Couture tracksuit that was skintight. If that wasn't reason enough to stare, she had the top buttoned down to expose so much cleavage, the actual presence of the top being unnecessary except for the fact that it covered her nipples, thus stopping her from being arrested for indecent exposure.

ide and
loing?"
annered

"Well, I'll be goddamned," Daisy said, staring at Noah and me.

"What's the hold up?" We heard from the back. "The longer we wait for breakfast, the longer it'll take to get to the mall—"

irthday The person stopped speaking because she'd pushed her way to the front and we saw it was Olivia.

asked, "Muthafucka," she breathed when her eyes hit me.

"All right people!" I shouted. "Everyone move back. *Back!*" I screamed.

One I Everyone moved back except Ren and Dom, because somehow they disappeared, vanished, no longer in sight.

Crap!

ded her Noah moved us forward. My posse stayed close but moved back. This all the way across the lobby, everyone else in the hotel watching my progression in stunned silence as I heard the noise of faraway sirens.

When we hit the doors, Noah took the gun from my head, grabbed

hand and pulled us through. He ran down the sidewalk, taking me with
vintage stumbled, nearly falling on my high-heeled wedges and I cursed my
for her meddling into my wardrobe choices. Though flip-flops would
likely have been any better. I'd learned that lesson the hard way.

He didn't break stride and kept dragging me. I righted myself just
had the ran into traffic, straight to a car that was stopped at a light.
maximum

Noah pulled open the door, shoved the gun in the driver's face
suit that clipped, "Out."
zipped

"But...this is my car," the driver said, eyes wide, obviously not thinking
clearly, because all of a sudden on a sunny Denver day he found
staring at a gun.

Noah moved the gun to the side, pulling the trigger and drilling it
take on into the pavement.

I jumped, the driver jumped and then Noah pointed the gun at the
re front again.

"Out!" Noah shouted.

The driver got out.

Noah shoved me in first. I scrambled over to the passenger side and
w they got in behind me. Before I had myself settled, we took off on a square
tires, running the red light and making cars swerve and honk.

"Noah!" I yelled. "I mean, Walt! You're gonna kill us."

"Shut up!" Noah shouted.

We did I put my seatbelt on, which wasn't easy. Noah was driving erratically
ing our jerking the wheel back and forth, passing cars, speeding up then stopping
bed my and running red lights willy-nilly.

1 him. I Once I got my belt on, I turned to the front.
mother You would think I'd be scared. I wasn't scared.
ouldn't I was pissed way the hell off.
t as we I'd had *enough*.
ice and "This just cuts it," I grumbled. "I cannot believe you kidnapped me
and you charm your way into my pants. Then you steal my money and
Ella's jewelry, leave me high and dry and make me swear off men.
hinking My voice was beginning to rise. "I find myself a good guy, *the* best guy
and he wants to protect me and he goes after you. Instead of taking it
himself man, you take it out *on me*."
a round "Ava, shut up."
e driver "I will not shut up. You're a jerk. You dry humped me. What was
about?"
d Noah "You have a sweet ass," he said, as if that explained it.
ueal of "So? It isn't *your* sweet ass anymore. It's Luke's," I snapped. "I
tell your partner I tasted like cherry pie?"
d Noah "You do," he replied on a reminiscent grin.
ueal of I growled then bit off, "Men!"
The phone at my ass started ringing. I leaned forward and pulled it
"Don't answer that," Noah ordered.
"Fuck you," I shot back, saw the display said LUKE CALLING and
it open. "Yo."
atically, "Babe," Luke replied.
ing fast "I've been kidnapped again," I informed him.

“I know. I’m following.”

I turned my head to look around my seat and saw Luke’s Porsche
us. He was at the wheel talking to me on the phone. Next to him wa
Jag, Ren driving, Dom sitting beside him. I kept looking and saw
Mustang behind Ren, Daisy sitting beside Ally, more people in the
e. First, couldn’t really see, but I suspected they were my sisters. Olivia’s Lex
d Aunt beside Ally, Shirleen sitting next to her, what I reckoned was my mon
Then!” back. I couldn’t be certain, but I thought I saw Riley’s Pathfinder trail
ly ever, pack. They were all speeding and weaving, following Noah and m
t like a Speer Boulevard in a highish speed chase.

Fuck.

that all Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“You got a convoy,” Luke told me.

I turned forward. “I can see that.”

Did you “Get him to slow down,” Luke demanded.

“He isn’t exactly listening to me.”

“Ava, get off the phone,” Noah cut in.

I looked at Noah. “Be quiet, I’m talking to Luke.”

out. That was when we heard sirens. Not far away sirens. These were cl

“Fuck!” Noah snapped. “Get off the fuckin’ phone.”

flipped “Kiss my ass!” I yelled.

“Beautiful, not sure it’s a good idea to get him riled,” Luke said
ear.

“I don’t care if he’s riled,” I told Luke.

“I care if it means he’s gonna put a bullet in you,” Luke returned.

behind He had a point.

s Ren’s “He’s concentrating on driving,” I assured Luke.

Ally’s “Ava, I’m not gonna say it again, get off the *fucking* phone,”
back. I shouted.

us was “Glad to see I’m not the only man in your life who has to repeat hi
n in the Luke remarked.

ling the “I don’t think you’re funny,” I told Luke, even though I kind of did
e down

I heard his chuckle in my ear as Noah snapped, “I wasn’t being fur

“I’m not talking to you,” I told Noah.

A black Explorer pulled out from a road to our right. We shot by it
I saw Lee driving, Matt in the passenger seat. I didn’t have a chance to
my head around where they had come from. Instead I looked behind
saw that Luke and Ren also shot by Lee. The Explorer angled in to
Ally and Olivia, aided by a couple of squad cars.

“What’s happening?” I asked Luke, turning forward again.

“You buckled in?” Luke asked me.

“Yeah. What’s happening?”

lose. “Get him to slow down. If he doesn’t slow down, get him to buck
Luke replied.

“Luke, what’s happening?” I demanded.

l in my “Brace, babe, this ends here.”

Disconnect.

Oh shit.

Shittity, shit, shit, *shit!*

I flipped the phone closed. “Noah, slow down.”

“You should have told him to back off,” Noah returned.

” Noah “Noah, seriously, they have something planned. Slow down.”

He turned to me, lifted the gun to point at me and said, “Ava, for t
myself,” week, you’ve been nothing but a pain in my ass.”

I’d heard that before, kind of.

l. “Well, good,” I flashed back. “You deserve it.”

my.” He kept glancing back and forth to the road and me, gun rais
pointed at me. What with him driving like a freak, his inattention to t
him and did not make my situation any better.

to wrap “Noah, pay attention to the road.”

us and “Call him back and tell him to stand down,” Noah ordered.

cut off “This is Lucas Stark we’re talking about. He doesn’t stand d
explained.

“This is great, just great,” Noah grouched like it was all my fault.

“You could have taken off, gone to Argentina or something. You
have to beat me up and tape me to a post. That was like waving a red f
de up,” bull. Then you kidnap me? How stupid are you?” I snapped.

“Shut up.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Shut...up.”

“Noah, slow down or buckle up,” I told him, trying to be nice.

He was still driving like a maniac, swinging his eyes to the road

me. “Buckling up means takin’ the gun off you and how am I gonna
you if I put the gun down?”

I had no answer to that and I was done. If he shot me then, hopefu
survive. Jules got shot in the belly and chest and now she was hap
preggers. However, if Noah shot me, Luke would rip his head off. N
the past for future happiness and babies in his life because he’d be dead.

So I shrugged. “Suit yourself. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“You weren’t this fuckin’ irritating when I was bangin’ yo
informed me.

ed and “I liked you then. I thought you were a good guy. Now I know
he road slime,” I retorted.

He didn’t reply. I crossed my arms on my chest and then, up ahead
another black Explorer pull out in front of us. It didn’t turn. It pulled
intersection and stopped dead.

own,” I Ho-ly *shit!*

“*Noah!*” I screamed because he wasn’t watching, he had his eyes o

I saw two squad cars pull out and angle in at the front and back
I didn’t Explorer. They stopped too, blocking the intersection entirely.

lag at a “Look!” I managed to get out.

Noah looked, made a choking sound in his throat, took the gun
and slammed on the brakes at the last minute.

But we were going way too fast.

We rammed into the back of the Explorer and the front of a squad
the air was filled with the eerie, frightening sound of crunching st
and to breaking glass.

a shoot We barreled right through.

I didn't see much after that because I'd been thrown forward. The
illy, I'd popped out and I hit it, or it hit me, whatever. We kept going, slow
py and time, and only stopped when we crashed into something else with
lo hope bang and more crunching steel.

I sat there dazed for a second before I began fighting the air
managed to lean away from it, turned to look at Noah and immediat
ou," he filled my throat.

He was out of his seat, head and shoulders through the sh
you're windshield, waist and hips resting on the steering wheel and air b
wasn't moving but he was groaning, his eyes open, and bloc
d, I saw everywhere.

into the My door was pulled open, the air bag went "poof," it deflated
turned to see Luke.

"I think he's hurt," I whispered.

n me. Luke didn't respond and he didn't look at Noah. He unbuckled
c of the his hands started roaming, moving along my limbs, his indigo eyes so
my body, his face hard.

"She's good," he clipped. To whom I didn't know.

off me He shoved his arms in, one under my knees, one at my back and li
clear of the car. That was when I saw Matt.

I blinked as I looked around after Luke got me out of the c
hesitating as he carried me away. I heard sirens, I saw Hector and Va
car and Noah's side of the car and heard Lee say from somewhere, "Do your
eel and stabilize him, but get him loose."

Daisy, Ally, Mom, Marilyn, Sofia, Olivia and Shirleen were all
air bag forward. Riley was running up after them.

ver this “Back to your cars. Get outta here. *Go!*” Luke roared, and the
a loud started walking slowly backwards then turned and hoofed it to their car.

Riley stopped, eyes on me. He must have been assured at what
bag. I because he turned and hoofed it too.

ely bile Suddenly I was jostled. One second I was in Luke’s arms, the next
in Ren’s.

rattered “Take care of her,” Luke ordered.

ag. He Without hesitation, Ren moved, taking me to his Jag.

od was “I think I should—” I started but Ren interrupted me.

l and I “Quiet, honey,” he said softly. “Can you stand?”

I nodded. He put me on my feet and opened the passenger side door
in and he shut the door. Dom slid in the back. Ren rounded the front
angled behind the wheel. He just started the car when it happened.

me and
canning *Boom!*

I jumped and let out a little scream as the car Noah and I had
exploded.

fted me In a flash, Ren’s hand tagged the back of my neck and he pulled me
toward his lap, his torso landing on top of me. I heard, rather than saw
of car landing everywhere with sickening thuds, some of it hitting Ren
car, not making it bounce.

ance on
best to “Oh my God,” I whispered to Ren’s hard thigh.

After the thuds stopped, Ren came up, I came up and my hand
directly to the door handle as my eyes scanned the landscape. I stop

rushing attempt to exit the car and find Luke when what I saw penetrated my brain.

women There were pieces of burning car everywhere. There were also men of the Hot Bunch and uniformed officers all recovering from whatever he saw positions they'd assumed.

From what I could see, all were fine, no one injured. Hector and I had been shielded behind the wrecked Explorer, an unconscious Noah on the ground at their feet. Matt was coming out of a crouch behind the car. Lee, apparently protected by an invisible Badass Shield, was standing in the middle of the mayhem, staring at the burning remains of the car.

Luke, much like Lee, was standing smack in the chaos, pieces of fire all around him, and his eyes were on me.

I gave him what I hoped was a jaunty wink and a stupid half wave. He shook his head and half-grinned.

I dropped my hand and turned to Ren.

Then I said, "I need cookies."



"MISS BARLOW, I'm gonna have to repeat, next time you get kidnapped your house gets broken into or you get beaten up and violated, it's a real idea to call the police," Detective Jimmy Marker told me, sounding aggrieved.

I pulled out the Oreo I was dunking into milk Tex had given me, and its soggy goodness into my mouth and munched.

"Okay," I said, mouth full, hoping that I would not be experiencing those things anytime soon (read: ever again).

stunned I was in Fortnum's and so was most everyone else.

Duke, Tex and Indy were manning the espresso counter.

members Shirleen was standing guard beside the couch I was sitting on.

r safety Uncle Vito was sitting across from me.

Vance Sissy was on one side of me, Mom on the other. Sissy, by the way
missed the car chase, staying behind with Uncle Vito at the hotel.

h lying Marilyn and Sofia were at a table across the room. Sofia had been
a squad like, a lot. Apparently, her little sister having a near-death exp
simply bounced the bitch right out of her (good to know, not that I'd ever
s of the again). Marilyn was having trouble taking her eyes off me as if,
second, another bad guy was going to come in and spirit me away.

car on Riley was sitting at the table with them, elbows on knees, jaw
hands, eyes on me.

Daisy was sitting on the arm of the couch, Ally sitting on the other

Roxie and Jet were sitting on the book counter, Hank standing
Roxie, Eddie standing next to Jet.

Jules was sitting in the armchair next to Uncle Vito.

opped or Olivia was standing at the espresso counter, enjoying a cappuccino
al good Archway peanut butter cookie.

slightly Ren and Dom were standing just inside the door, talking in low
Santo and Lucky a few feet away.

popped Ren had ordered Santo and Lucky to bring me cookies and they ob
obeyed orders well. There were Oreos, Chips Ahoy, four different t
ing any Milanos and a plethora of other Pepperidge Farms choices, Nutter B
Pecan Sandies and a variety of Archway and Entenmanns on the coffe

in front of me.

Tod and Stevie would have been there, but they were flight attendants they were both flying. However, Indy was watching their choice of Chowleena, and Chowleena was sitting on the couch between me and panting. So I figured Tod and Stevie were there in spirit.

ay, had

Detective Marker rose from the armchair at the side of the couch.

crying,

“I got what I need,” he announced.

erience

I nodded as Indy came forward and handed me a fresh skinny

do that

latte. I set down my milk and took the latte. Then I sipped.

at any

Heaven.

r in his

“Who’s up next?” Detective Marker asked Indy, sounding resigned in his apparently deciding it was best to prepare for the next disaster.

one.

“I’m thinkin’ Mace,” Indy replied.

next to

“I got my money on Ally,” Shirleen put in.

Ally twisted to Shirleen. “Me?” Then swiftly (and weirdly), he sliced to Ren before they went back to Shirleen when she kept talking.

and an

“That blond boy’s headed to DC. You think you’ll escape that?”
“You’re a Nightingale,” Shirleen replied.

voices,

“Darius needs a woman,” Daisy threw in.

“Huh,” Shirleen grunted. “Darius would put up with this shit for second.”

viously

The doors flew open, the bell over them clattered and Smithie came

ypes of

“What’d I miss?” he yelled to no one in particular.

Butters,

“Ava, held at gunpoint. Kidnapping. Car chase. Car crash. Car explosion

ee table

It's over," Jet explained. "I missed it, too. I was working," she said, disappointed.

"Thank Christ for that," Eddie muttered.

"Amen," Hank added under his breath.

"Shee-it," Smithie said.

I reached for a cookie, found the variety too complex, and bit into it in indecision.

"Ava, give it up with the cookies," Riley told me.

My eyes moved to him, "But—"

He shook his head. I glared but sat back.

"What'll it be?" Tex boomed at Smithie.

"Latte with some of that butterscotch syrup," Smithie replied, walking.

Detective Marker moved to leave when the doors flew open again, the bell over them clattered, and three big guys I'd never seen before rushed into the store, guns raised and pointed at Dom.

The room went still.

"Ho-ly shit."

What now?

"Nobody move. Vincetti, you're comin' with us," one of them ordered.

No. This was not going to happen. I could take no more. I was going to put an end to this, right...fucking...now.

I stood.

"Not so fast," I snapped.

"Ava—" Ren started, eyes on me.

ounded I stomped up to the men with guns. They stared at me as I obviously taken aback by my bold behavior. I didn't care. I walked r to one and yanked the gun out of his hand.

“What the fuck?” he clipped, staring at me with his gun.

y lip in I twisted, tossed the gun five feet to Eddie who, at the last minut out of his frozen stupor (a stupor caused undoubtedly by my crazy actions) and caught it.

“Do you know there are three policemen in this room?” I asked.

The men looked around.

“No shit?” one mumbled.

“No shit,” I replied. “What’s your deal with Dom?” I demanded.

ing in. “He stole money from us,” one of the men said.

ain, the “So?” I asked.

ied into “A lot of money,” another one said.

“So?” I repeated.

“We want it back,” the one I took the gun from said.

I turned to Uncle Vito. “Can you give them back their money?”

“I already told ’em I’d pay ’em,” Uncle Vito replied.

ered. I turned back to the men. “Okay then, what’s the problem?”

oing to “The man we work for don’t like it when people steal from him,” t man said.

“Charge interest. Make it worth his while. This isn’t rocket scienc Yeesh,” I returned.

“That sounds like kind of a good idea,” the second man said.

did so, “Twenty-five percent,” the first man told Uncle Vito.

ight up “Ten percent,” Ren returned.

“Twenty,” the first man haggled.

“Ten,” Ren repeated.

e, came “Fifteen,” the first man tried again.

-as-shit

“Ten. You take it or you got war with the Zanos,” Ren told him.

The three men shifted, not liking this idea, but still not wanting up.

I sighed, heavy and huge.

Men!

“For goodness sake!” I snapped.

“We just want Vincetti,” the third man said.

“Dom’s a Zano,” Ren replied.

“We don’t want family trouble. Just cut him loose,” the second threw in.

Ren shook his head. They all looked at each other.

“All right, ten. Fuck,” the first man relented.

“Tell The Man he’ll have it in the hour,” Uncle Vito cut in.

Finally!

he first “While we’re here, we should get a coffee. I hear it’s good here”
second man told the first man.

e boys. The third man’s eyes were on Eddie. “You think I could have it
back?”

Eddie’s answer was to shove it in the back of his jeans, then he pu

badge out of his back pocket and clipped it on his belt.

“Shit,” the third man mumbled.

“What’ll it be?” Tex boomed.

The newest bad guys moved toward the espresso counter and some tension went out of the room. Not all of it, seeing as Detective Mar back down, obviously deciding not to leave. Hank, Eddie and Dul different, slightly more aggressive/defensive positions within the coffee to give

The door opened, the bell rang again and I turned around to see Vance, Matt, Lee and Hector striding in.

Luke’s eyes scanned me then they scanned the room then they stopped the cookies. After he got a good look at the cookies, his eyes cut back to

“Babe,” he said on a half-grin.

“If there’s any time that’s Cookie Time, *this* is Cookie Time,” I stated obvious.

“Why are Sid’s boys here?” Lee asked, standing by Luke.

“Who’s Sid?” I asked in return.

Lee’s head inclined toward the new bad guys.

“Oh, they were after Dom,” I replied.

“I know that. Why are they in my fiancée’s bookstore ordering coffee Lee went on.

“Ee-yikes.”

He sounded pretty unhappy.

“The situation is cool,” Dom put in.

Lee’s eyes moved to him and they were even less happy. I pulled his

Luke's arm slid around my shoulders and he pulled me into his arms. Without delay, I relaxed and put a hand to his abs, hooking my other hand in the middle back belt loop of his cargo pants.

"Ava settled it," Ren informed Lee. Then, done with this topic, he came to me. "You're okay?"

I nodded. "Thanks for the cookies."

He smiled and said quietly, "Anytime."

Luke got tense beside me at the very mention of Ren ever buying cookies again in this lifetime. Ren's eyes moved to Luke and I got tense.

They had a Badass Faceoff for several beats then Ren jerked his chin to me. Luke did the same. Ren's eyes came back to me. He gave me another look, this one softer, less cocky and very sweet.

"Take care of yourself, honey," he said.

Then *he*, weirdly, gave *Ally* a swift, unhappy look before he was gone.

"That's our cue," Uncle Vito stood.

"But we haven't sorted things out with Sissy," Dom protested.

"We'll do it tomorrow." Uncle Vito walked around the coffee table to give Sissy a kiss on the cheek.

"Hang on, my shit's sorted now. I want to talk to Sissy," Dom pushed.

"Piss off, Dom," Sissy said, standing and walking Uncle Vito to the door.

"Sis, baby," Dom cajoled, giving her one of his killer smiles.

Sissy shot him a look, clearly immune to Dominic Vincetti's killer smile.

This made *me* smile.

"Tomorrow, after Ava's recovered from the drama," Uncle Vito ordered.

is side. “Uncle Vito,” Dom said.

thumb “Tomorrow,” Vito snapped.

Dom turned to Sissy, the killer smile gone. His face, I was shocked
his gaze looked serious. “I fucked up. I admit it, all right? I fucked up. It won’t
again.”

Sissy kept on giving him the Sissy Glare.

Dom turned to me. “I fucked up, with my wife and with you. It was
ing mething to do.”

ie. “You got that right,” I told him.

hin and He turned back to Sissy and promised, “I can make it good betw
r smile, again.”

She continued with the Sissy Glare, and against my will, I began
sorry for him. He had a huge audience, but he seemed not to care. A
one. would be humiliated, except maybe a man who genuinely wanted her
back.

Wow.

ble and I couldn’t process this and didn’t try. Instead I looked at Sissy to ask
if she needed bestest best friend assistance and I saw she wasn’t looking
red. down.

e door. “Just think about that,” Dom urged quietly, and it sounded
sincerely wanted her to think about it and he wasn’t lying through his
are-jerks teeth.

smile. And somehow, I suspected he wasn’t.

Then he and Uncle Vito were gone.

dered. I watched as Sissy deflated right in front of me. All the bravado

right out of her.

“You okay?” I asked.

I to see, She shook her head.

happen “I think we’ve moved on to Tequila Time,” I said.

She nodded her head.

“My place!” Shirleen yelled. “I got tequila. I got rum. I got vodka
is a shitgot mixers. I even got popcorn. Someone should bring some tortilla ch
guacamole because I haven’t had breakfast and I’m definitely peckish.

“I’ll bring cashews,” Indy said.

veen us “I’ll bring the chips and it’ll only take a minute for me to mix
guac,” Jet put in.

to feel “I’ll bring turkey, swiss and rye. We’ll make sandwiches,” Roxie c

ny man “Fucking hell,” Hank muttered.

his wife

More offers were called as Luke curled me into his body. I looked
him and his face was soft.

“You goin’ to the party?” he asked.

scertain

acking

“How’s Noah?” I queried instead of answering.

like he

is men-

He hesitated, pulled his lip between his teeth then let it go and shook
head.

I did not take this as a good sign.

I sucked in air then breathed, “Is he dead?”

Luke shook his head again. “Broken neck. Bone pierced the
column. He’ll be paralyzed from the neck down for life.”

leaked I shut my eyes tight.

I really hated Noah. He conned me, stole from me, beat me up and Still, even after all that, being paralyzed was a high price to pay. This hard, and even though he was a jerk, I felt bad for him. Bad enough throat to get tight.

“Look at me, babe.”

“a and I
lips and
” I opened my eyes, caught his and told him, “I don’t feel like partyi
His other arm went around me and got tight. “I didn’t think so.”
“That sucks for Noah,” I whispered.

“It sucks for Noah,” Luke agreed.

up the “Why do I care?” I asked.

“Because you’re a good person,” he answered.

ffered. “Do you care?”

As usual, brutally honest, he replied, “Nope.”

ld up at I rested my forehead on his shoulder. His fingers slid up and
around my neck.

“It’s over,” I murmured.

“Yeah,” he said.

ook his My arms went around his waist and I pressed in close. His fingers
kneading the muscles at my neck.

“What do you want to do, beautiful?” he asked.

spinalat him. I thought about it. An idea came to me and I tilted my head back

“Do you have a bike?” I asked.

He watched my face. “Got three.”

l worse. Of course, he had three.
; hit me “Can we ride?” I requested.
for my Luke grinned. “Absolutely.”

ng.”

curled

started

to look

Of course, he had three.

“Can we ride?” I requested.

Luke grinned. “Absolutely.”

THIRTY



BLISS

The elevator doors opened and I flew through them.

“Late!” I shouted, running to the dining room table. “I’m late!” I repeated unnecessarily.

I threw the shopping bags I was carrying on the table and scanned the loft.

Luke was sitting in the recliner. He was tipped back, footrest up behind his head, watching the Rockies on the flat screen (even though I stopped to listen you could hear the damn game through the windows were that close to Coors Stadium). The new blinds were mostly closed around so as not to let the glare of the sun hit the TV.

Mace and Matt were sitting on the couch with their feet up on the table and hands curled around bottles of beer. Big Bobby, now recovered and back at work, had one of the new dining room tables (black lacquer, gray suede upholstered seat and back, sweeping line fucking ass) turned backwards and he was straddling it. Hank was sitting at the kitchen counter and he was holding a beer by its neck. Eddie’s head was in the fridge.

All the men had turned, eyes on me, as I ran across the loft to the dining

“Olivia came by, we got to talking and got behind on the decorations. Then Olivia, as she always does, invited herself to the party. *Then* I and Stevie decided everyone needed new outfits so, even though we had no money *at all*, we took a trip to the mall.” I stopped at the dresser, babbling and they were actually listening to me (which they probably were not). I looked over my shoulder at Luke. “I think I spent too much money.”

I heard a phone ringing and Hank moved to answer it as Luke’s eyes moved back to the dining room table. He took in the bags then his eyes moved back

late!” I “An outfit takes six bags?” he asked.

“I also bought shoes,” I told him as I heard another cell phone ring

ned the “An outfit and shoes take six bags?” Luke slightly amended his question.

I turned back to the dresser and started digging through it, half in a daze, hands “I might have bought some other stuff.”

1 if you “I’ll be there in fifteen,” I heard Hank say to his phone.

ws, we “I’ll pick it up on my way home,” I heard Eddie say to his.

osed all I found what I was looking for and snatched them out of the drawer with too much hurried energy. I managed to keep hold of the bra but my left pair of coffee-satin panties with black lace flew through the air, landing on the floor fully feet behind the couch.

3 chairs All the men’s eyes went to the panties.

es, kick My eyes went to the panties.

ting on I thought perhaps that was the perfect time for me to learn how to be invisible just as I heard Luke chuckle.

resser. “Time to go.” Big Bobby jumped up from his chair, swung it around and carried it back to the table.

orating. I saw Mace and Matt make a move to get up as I ran to the und
'od andsnatched them off the floor, balling them up in my fist and hiding th
no timethe bra with my arms.

on like “No, it’s okay. I’ll get ready in the bathroom,” I told them, pretty
) and I was blushing, considering my face was on fire. “Finish the game.”

“Gotta go anyway,” Eddie put in. “Jet needs me to pick up some
yes cutdrop it by Fortnum’s.”

to me. “Apparently Roxie’s new dress has a back zip that she can’t reach.
sounded partly amused, partly like he wasn’t intent on getting home to
. the dress, but rather the other way around.

estion. Little did he know that I knew her dress didn’t even have a
a panic. someone was about to get lucky.

On that thought, I smiled to myself. I ran to the bags, grabbed the
needed and ran to the bathroom.

“See you all there,” I called over my shoulder and slammed the
er with the bathroom.

avender I pulled off my clothes and jumped in the shower.

or five 

THE SIX WEEKS since my troubles finished hadn’t exactly been unevent

First up, we had the family meeting.

Uncle Vito surprisingly stayed quiet while Dom tried to talk Sis
becomegiving him another chance. Ren and I kept quiet too, even though I
really didn’t want to and I could see Ren felt the same way.

ind and In the end, we didn’t have to say anything. Sissy told Dom to go j
a lake and walked out of the room. I looked at the Zanos then gave o

ies and (yes, even one to Dom, mainly because he looked like his world just c
em and an end) and followed her.

It wasn't over. Not by half.

y sure I For the next month, Dom pursued Sissy like a man possessed. It a
that not only did the shot she took to the face wake up the protectiv
ice and blooded, Italian husband, but Sissy's bitchy attitude was turning him
time.

” Hank He ended up kidnapping her.

o zip up Which meant I ended up calling in Luke and the boys (again).

Luke and Vance found them in a condo in Vail, but he came ba
zip so Sissy.

“Why did you leave her there?” I demanded when he arrived at m
e ones I in the dead of night, woke me up and told me he found Sissy but did
her.

door to “Babe,” he said, sitting on the bed and taking off his boots.

I waited for him to say more. He didn't.

“Luke!” I snapped.

ful. He twisted, angled onto the bed, landed full on top of me and my
went out in a whoosh.

“They worked it out,” he told me after I'd sucked oxygen back i
sissy into lungs.

really, I narrowed my eyes at him. “She thinks he's scum.”

“They worked it out,” he repeated.

jump in
ut hugs

“I don't believe that.”

came to “Trust me, they worked it out.”

“How do you know? Did Sissy say that? Sometimes Dom can be—

“Babe, trust me. I wouldn’t leave her there if I didn’t think it was appeared thing.”

ve, hot- That shut me up because Luke really wouldn’t do that.

on. Big “Oh, all right,” I finally grumbled.

“Now.” His eyes were ink. “Let’s talk about what you owe me for her.”

I didn’t quibble. I’d learned that quick payback for the many time ck sans; in debt with Luke was definitely the way to go.

Anyway, every single time I was pretty certain I got more out of y place Luke did.

i’t have Second up, just as he promised, we had stayed at my place until the were put in at the loft then we moved to his.

We still weren’t sure which way to go. I liked my back porch and office. Luke liked the loft’s security and central location.

In the end, Luke told me to do what I had to do to make the lof r breath thus the dining room table (so Tex, Mr. Kumar, Uncle Vito and I cou euchre which we did, quite a bit) and a variety of girlie things for the nto my (but not too girlie—I bought all the KitchenAid appliances in black, in black or red). Luke had my furniture moved into storage and agency rent out my place. The plan was we’d keep both properties decided to move to my place later, we’d still have it to move to.

It was a decent compromise.

Even though I didn’t share it with Luke, I didn’t really care wh

lived, just as long as we ended the day and started a new one in the san

.” Last, the New Mom—and apparently the New Marilyn and Sofia
a good driving me up the flipping wall. They had let me into the Barlow Bo
Club, which meant daily phone calls, lots of unsolicited advice on eve
under the sun and constant getting into my (and Luke’s) business.

At first, I thought it was kind of cool.

finding Then I found it kind of annoying.

When I complained about it to Luke while lying full out on the
es I fell Luke on his back being Zen, me pressed into his side, not reading the
had propped on his chest, Luke said, “Gotta choose, babe. They are w
are. Either you’re in the club or you’re out.”

it than I sighed. He was right yet again.

e blinds In the club it was.

I got out of the shower, did the whole celebration preparation o
d funky (the peony-scented lotion, Luke’s favorite), hair (loose and wild,
favorite) and makeup (party time drama, no other choice—it was part
and turned to my shopping bags.

it mine, I’d brought in the shoes, but grabbed the wrong bag of clothes. M
uld play dress was still on the dining room table.

kitchen To save time, which was slipping away fast, I tugged off my robe,
the rest the undies and strapped on the shoes (Tod found them at Nords
had an metallic purple, high, spike-heeled, strappy sandals) and ran out to
. If we dress.

I stopped in mid-run. Luke was standing in the kitchen, head
muscular throat on display, finishing a beer.
ere we

ne bed. He had on a charcoal-gray suit, a shirt the same color, throat exp
—were the collar. I hadn't seen him in a suit since his father's funeral.

nbshell *Luke looks good,* Good Ava breathed, hand at her neck.

rything *No, Luke looks GOOD.* Bad Ava was fanning her face.

They were not wrong. Luke didn't look good.

Luke looked *good*.

"You look good," I told him.

couch,
book I His head came down, his gaze came to me and he went still.

ho they "Jesus," he muttered, eyes doing a body sweep.

I came unstuck from my Luke Looking Good Fog and ran to the
room table.

"I grabbed the wrong bag." I started sorting through bags ther
n body Luke, "Can you grab my perfume?"

Luke's He didn't grab my perfume. Instead, I felt his heat at my back. He
y time) forward and I had no choice but to lean with him. He did an arm sw
bags went flying and I felt his hand pressing in the middle of my back.

y party "Luke," I said, my eyes on the bags on the floor, my voice stunned

He pushed me down toward the table as the thumb of his othe
, put on hooked into my panties, yanking them down to just below my hips.

trom— Oh wow.

get the My special girlie parts quivered.

"Luke!" I gasped.

l back, He didn't answer. He kept me pressed to the table even though I
come up. His hand was moving at my bottom, I heard his belt cli

losed at zipper, then without warning, he slid inside me.

I stopped trying to rise and my arms, of their own volition, slid out in front of me, palms flat against the table, my bottom pushing Luke's hips.

"Luke." It came out a lot different this time.

His hand left my back and both went to my hips, holding me still. I moved.

My breath started coming heavy.

Like everything with Luke, this was *hot*.

dining I moved with him, made happy noises low in my throat, then he swept my panties down to my ankles, twisted me around and lifted me from the table. He pulled the panties, which were tangled at my shoes, free. I asked them aside and moved between my legs, lifted my hips and slid inside again, bending his torso over mine.

leaned I lifted my head. One of his hands stayed at my hip while he slid into me, the fingers of his other hand slid into my hair, and he kissed my lips long, deep, wet and lots of tongue.

"We're going to be late," I panted when his mouth disengaged.

er hand "Don't fuckin' care," he said back, his voice rough.

My hands came up. One curled around his neck, the other went to his chest, my thumb trailing his 'tache while my hooded eyes stayed locked on his mouth.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmured as my thumb moved to touch his bottom lip.

ink, his "I could live my life, you inside me," I whispered back.

He stopped stroking and ground in deep. Shivers slid through me straight

licked my lips. His eyes went molten and he kissed me again.

Mouth against mine, he admitted, “Got no control when it comes to
“Is that a bad thing?” I was getting close, my voice hitched in the
of the sentence and I was losing focus.

He didn’t answer my question.

Instead, eyes on mine, he muttered, “Give it to me, babe.”

“What?” I asked, but I didn’t wait for his answer.

It hit me. It was magnificent. I felt it rush through me as I said hi
lid out, softly and smiled.

“That’s just the way I like it,” Luke whispered against my smiling
, tossed while I came.

Then his lips pressed hard against mine, he drove into me one la
and he groaned into my mouth.

ammed



ed me, “I KNEW that was the dress for you girlie,” Tod told me. “Your man
there looking at you like he’s spent the last year at a males-only mona
the depths of a mountain range, inaccessible by cars and a treacherous
defying two week walk from civilization.”

I looked at Luke and Tod was right. Luke was looking at me.

However, Tod was wrong. Luke wasn’t looking like he wanted
was looking like he had already had me and he liked what I gave him.

My knees wobbled.

“We did it on the dining room table before we got here,” I told Tod

“Mm-hmm. Like I said, the dress,” Tod replied.

e and I My dress was pretty, though it was not me, but Stevie convince
could make it work. It was girly, floaty and lavender. It had twisted r
o you.” to make straps. It showed lots of chest, but not lots of cleavage. The
middle was cut on a slant, a wispy tear of material falling from it. It fit close
on a floaty slant at the hem, exposing one knee and a lot of leg on on
The back was low, just above my bra strap. It was demure on the face
but the way it clung and moved was seductive as all hell.

“I hadn’t even gotten my dress on yet. I was still in my undies,” I s

Tod turned to me, mouth open, then he looked back at Luke. “S
s name God, these boys should be locked up. It isn’t safe, men with the
testosterone coursing through their blood free to roam.”

; mouth Daisy came storming up to us. She was wearing an ice-blue,
hugging, strapless dress, the bodice held up by what could only be a m

ist time “Where are they?” she snapped.

“How should I know?” Tod asked.

“Did you call Indy?” Daisy shot back.

is over “No, I don’t want to disturb her,” Tod told her.
stery in

, death- “Why not?” Daisy’s voice was rising. “The *hors d’oeuvres* are
cold and I talked Tex into wearing a suit and I think he’s beginning
cranky.”

me. He Our eyes swung to Tex and it did appear he was getting cranky. W
this because cranky energy was emanating from him and he was fiddli
the tie knotted at his throat.

l. “I didn’t call her because this *is* a wedding, Daisy. I didn’t v
interrupt,” Tod explained.

“I cannot *believe* we weren’t invited,” Daisy groused.

“Daisy, girlie, we are invited. We’re here aren’t we? They just wanted a ceremony small,” Tod returned.

“I know, but still,” Daisy gave in, but still sounded put out.

Tod put his arm around her shoulders. “You did a good job on the decorations and I like the waiters you chose. You’ve got an eye for fine ass.”

I looked around Fortnum’s, which had been closed for a private party.

It had been transformed and somehow (you had to give Daisy credit as Head Party Planner she’d done a bang-up job), it was tasteful and elegant.

The normal coffee house furniture had been carted away and replaced with chairs covered in white linen as well as white wicker tables. Festive balloons and clear Christmas lights were everywhere, even lining the walls. The place was awash with white peonies in big glass vases. Hairdressers and waiters carrying trays filled with glasses of champagne or hot *hors d’oeuvre* were wandering around, and light classical music was playing.

We had done the decorating ourselves, and as a wedding gift, paid for the party, although everyone bought real gifts, just because.

Shirleen and Daisy sprung for the waiters and the furniture rental.

Stevie, Smithie, Tex and Duke got together and paid for the catering.

Jet, Ally and I bought all the flowers and decorations. Lee and I, of course, insisted on springing for the booze.

Luke materialized at my side, his lips coming to my neck, giving me an immediate and involuntary shiver just as Roxie, wearing a pale-pink necked front, slim skirt brushing the knees, back completely bare, rushed up and whispered with excitement, “They’re here.”

“They’re here!” Shirleen, in turquoise from head to foot (even her Afro had turquoise glitter sprayed in it) cried from across the room, bouncing up and down with excitement.

I turned to Luke and looked up at him.

“They’re here,” I breathed.

His eyes scanned my face for a beat then he put his forehead to mine close up, I watched his eyes smile.

By the way, it was fascinating to watch, let me tell you.

Jet moved around one side of the room, Ally the other. The carrying baskets of big, white tissue disks of confetti. Everyone massive handful then, en masse, we all closed in on the door, forming a white circle.

There was Tod and Stevie, Daisy and her husband Marcus, Smith and someone of his women LaTeasha, Olivia with Winnie sitting by her side, Tivoires Nancy, Jet and Eddie, Hank and Roxie, Big Bobby and his girlfriend

Matt and his girlfriend Daphne, Shirleen and Darius, Hector and some I hadn’t yet met, Mace (alone), Monty and his wife Gillian, three guys Zip, Heavy and Frank that I met when I arrived at the party, Duval. Tod, Dolores, Ally (alone too, just as Shirleen predicted, she’d broken up with her boyfriend when he had gone to FBI training), and Luke and me.

The doors opened and Jules’s Uncle Nick walked in beside a Native American lady. They smiled. Jet stuck her basket out, they grabbed a handful of confetti and assumed their positions in the circle.

All eyes moved back to the door.

May walked in, looking lovely in baby blue, complete with huge l

er wild was carrying a small bouquet made entirely of peonies so deep pink, nearly looked like velvet. She grinned, grabbed some confetti and took her place in the circle.

Two young boys walked in. I had met them a few times before, one skinny and white, one tall, filling out well and black. They went by the street names, Sniff and Roam. They looked uncomfortable in their suits (and, handsome), but even more uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the crowd. Their eyes found Luke and they walked straight to him, ignoring the bride and groom, and shoved through to stand behind Luke and me.

Indy and Lee walked in, Indy looking amazing in a mint-green dress that took a while to make. Lee was even more girly than mine. Lee had a pink rose pinned to his lapel, a semi-formal suit, it must be said, he looked hot in a suit too. They grabbed their confetti and just managed to get into position when the couple of honor walked in.

Everyone sucked in breath.

Jules's gleaming jet-black hair was down, slightly curled in ringlets, Carol, blonde waves falling around her shoulders. She wore an ivory silk sleeveless empire-waist, cross-over bodice with hint-of-cleavage vee. It fit snugly, named way down to her knees so you could clearly see the slight bump at her knees. She had on a pair of baby-blue high-heeled sandals, a wide leather strap across her French manicured toes, a soft, satin ribbon coming up from the sides of the shoe, wrapping around and tied in a bow at her ankles.

She was carrying an enormous bouquet of white peonies and robes. She looked like she was, quite simply, glowing. She had a diamond at her neck and a kind of chunky, cool as shit silver bracelet on her wrist, a gorgeous pink ring on her right hand, not to mention the huge rock on her left ring finger. She nestled now with a wedding band.

nk they Vance was at her side, white rose at his lapel, dark suit, dark sl
place in dark tie, his black hair pulled back in a ponytail. I didn't know w
masculine form of glowing was, but whatever it was, Vance looked it.

e short, "Congratulations!" Daisy shouted, breaking the silence.

oy their She jumped forward and threw her confetti.

its (but We all followed suit shouting and confetti flew so thick in th
crowd. seemed to be snowing. It drifted around slowly, floating softly as
confetti around the newlyweds.

ess that I saw the tears glimmering in Jules's eyes as she looked around
rel, and friends then she turned, Vance's arms closed around her and she sho
etti and face in his neck.

That was when I felt my throat close.

"Shit," Indy, standing close to me, muttered.

nassive Lee mumbled, "Honey," and slid his arms around her.

s dress, She pressed a red trying-not-to-cry face into his chest and wrap
; all the arms around his neck.

r belly. That was when I felt my throat begin to burn and I took a step ba
er strapsome reason needing to escape.

om the So I looked to escape as fast as my purple shoes would take me.

ses and I whirled and ran, dodging well-wishers and waiters, and made it h
d some down the middle aisle of books before an arm caught me at the wai
was turned to face Luke.

romise My head tilted back and my gaze met his. His face was soft, his ey
finger, searching. My eyes were filled with tears.

"Babe," he murmured. "Talk to me."

shirt and I shook my head and took a step back. Both his arms went around me that he pulled me close. Therefore, no retreat.

Eek!

“No running,” he said, voice soft but firm. “Talk.”

“I don’t think...” I started, then stopped.

the air it *Get it out, get it out, get it OUT, girl, Good Ava demanded.*

as it fell *Yeah, for goodness sake, let’s get this over with. I need more chances.*

Bad Ava sounded bored.

I sat her “Ava,” Luke said low when I didn’t start talking.

held her I cleared my throat, took a deep breath, straightened in his arms a straight out before I could stop myself, “I don’t think I’ve ever been happy.”

His head jerked back and I knew that was not what he was expecting to hear.

held her Then his face changed. He looked at me in a way he had never looked at me before and whatever was in his face made my lungs seize.

back, for His arms moved. One went low, very low, past my waist, his hand lower, pressing into my behind so my hips were fit snug into his. The other arm slid up my back so it was wrapped just under my shoulder blade and halfway felt his fingers against the side of my breast.

st and I “I’m scared,” I told him in a small voice, and I felt a shiver slide through my body. I also felt suddenly cold, so I pressed in close and put my head against his shoulders. I closed my eyes tight then opened them and whispered, “I’m scared to death. I’ve never been so scared in all my life.”

“Tell me, and I swear to God, I’ll make it so you won’t be scared.”

me and again,” he promised.

I blinked at him. “Tell you what?”

“You know what.”

“I don’t know what.” After I said it, I knew what and my body tensed.

“Babe, I’ve been waitin’ since that day your family breezed into town. That was when I knew that he knew all along. How he knew, I know. But then again, he knew everything.”

“Do I have to say it?” I asked quietly.

He gave me a half-grin and an arm squeeze. “Yeah, you have to say it.” I sighed.

He did another arm squeeze.

My hands slid up from his shoulders to his jaw and I looked him in the eyes.

Oh well, I had been waiting since I was eight. I had created extra daydreams about it. I had dreamed of it at night. I had written about it in my diary. I had hoped for a chance to do this for over a year. I had even prayed for it.

There was no reason to wait any longer. If I waited any longer I would be a serious wuss.

And there was one thing I knew about myself after the last couple of months.

“Luke, I was no wuss.”

“Lucas Stark,” I whispered, “I love you.”

I hadn't let my mind move forward past the actual saying of the words, I processed what I thought his response to my telling him I loved him would be.

However, even in my wildest imaginings it wasn't what I got.

He went His arms did another squeeze, this one so tight it crushed me to his chest. He kissed me. The kiss was so hot, so hard, so deep, it bruised my lips (I didn't mind). He told, I didn't really mind).

Then he let me go and I was in such a Luke Lip Fog that I went back on my feet, my hand curling around his upper arm to steady myself, but I didn't have to do that. Mainly because, all of a sudden, I was no longer on my feet. Instead, I was thrown over Luke's shoulder, his arm wrapped around the backs of my thighs. He turned and started walking back toward the party.

Oh...my...*God*.

He was not carrying me to the party! Was he?

"Luke!" I hissed. "Put me down."

He kept walking.

"Luke! Everyone is going to—"

Too late.

We hit the open area. People were chatting, laughing, glasses clinking. I'd be a

As Luke walked through, the chatting, laughing and clinking stopped and I looked around from my position hanging over Luke's back. My hands at this waist, my head lifted up and I saw everyone stare.

"You the man!" Sniff shouted at us and there were a few low laughs.

I decided, in that moment, I was going to *kill* Luke.

"We'll be back," I heard Luke say to someone, then he walked to the bar.

words to the door and I saw he was talking to Vance and Jules who would be watching us go. Vance wearing his shit-eating grin, Jules's eyes wide.

I gave them a lame wave.

him. He Jules burst out laughing.

ruth be Luke kept on walking.



ck on a I SUCKED back the last of my champagne, slammed the glass on the table. I didn't turn my head and shouted, "Waiter! Fill 'er up!"

ny feet. Luke, who was lounging next to me in one of the lovely little
and the covered chairs, had his arm draped on the back of mine. His hand
ty. around my neck, he twisted me toward his body and his mouth came
ear.

"How drunk are you?" he whispered.

I jerked my head back, gave him a glare and crossed my arms over my chest. Luke chuckled.

With his he-man, tough guy, macho man antics, he had bought himself an undefined period of the Ava Barlow Silent Treatment.

s were Okay, so he had whisked me back to the loft in his Porsche, dragged me in, made love to me slowly and told me he loved me right before I had my
second Luke-induced orgasm of the night, and that was all good. Very good.
glasses Super good.

ack, my *Ultra-good.*

is. Then he had taken us back to the party and I knew that everyone knew I had just been laid, and good. That meant I was embarrassed a second time that night by Luke.

through

re both The waiter came up with another glass of champagne.

“Thank you,” I said with feeling, smiling sweetly at him.

“Sugar, don’t you think you need to eat somethin’, considerin’ drinkin’ enough for all of us?” Daisy asked, sitting across from me.

“I’m not hungry,” I answered.

“She’s pissed off.” Shirleen, sitting beside me, smiled.

e table, “Damn straight,” I returned.

“Girl, I don’t know what you’re pissed about. A fine man carted m
e linen- give me the business, and good, if your face and hair was anything to
curled I’d be doin’ fuckin’ cartwheels,” Shirleen replied.

e to my Luke’s thumb started stroking my neck. I turned and glared at him
He burst out laughing.

He was so annoying!

on my I turned back to Shirleen. “You say that now. It happened to yo
might not say it. You might do what I’m doing. I think a sentence of a
self an week of Ava Barlow Silent Treatment is too nice. Maybe I’ll make it t

ged me “Silent Treatment!” Daisy cried then giggled her tinkly-bell giggle
you wanna get back at him, you cut off his water, *comprende?*”

had my Intrigued, I leaned toward Daisy. “Cut off his water?”
y good.

“No nookie. None, nada. No fingers, no mouths, no tongues, no ki:
nothin’. Complete cut off. Works for me every time,” Daisy replied.

: *totally* I sat back nodding somewhat drunkenly. “Daisy, you are the *shii*
for the that idea.”

Luke’s hand curled around my neck again. He twisted me tow
body and his mouth came back to my ear.

“You try to cut off access to that sweet body of yours, beautiful find yourself cuffed naked to my bed for a week.” He hesitated. “you’re two.”

Ee-yikes!

He lifted his head. Our eyes caught, we got into an Ava Barlow Lucas Stark Glare to the Death Contest, and per usual I lost.

I jerked away from him and gave him another good glower, but back to the table and shared, “I don’t think cutting off his water is work.”

Shirleen threw her head back and laughed.

I, personally, didn’t think anything was funny.

Roxie and Hank came up and Roxie collapsed in a chair while grabbed a couple of glasses of champagne.

Roxie looked up at Hank. “You’re next for Lee’s job.”

“What you mean, girl?” Shirleen asked.

“Lee was Vance’s best man, Hank’s Lee’s best man. Indy and I getting married in a few weeks,” Roxie explained.

Shirleen blew out a sigh. “Gonna be an expensive year for the friends Rock Chick. You all see Jet’s finger?”

Everyone turned to look at Jet’s finger. On it was a princess cut diamond with an unmistakable meaning.

“Oh my God!” I mini-screamed.

“She didn’t say anything to me.” Daisy’s voice was stunned and sounded upset.

“Eddie asked her a couple of days ago,” Roxie explained. “I only

, you'll because I dragged her into the bathroom and made her spill. She didn't
'Maybe to take any of the limelight from Jules."

Daisy rolled her eyes. "That's Jet's way. She's not big on attention

I felt a light touch on my shoulder. It wasn't a Luke Touch so I looked
down and to see Jules standing there. Her eyes were on Luke.

"Can I steal her?"

I turned Luke lifted his chin. I got up, Jules took my hand and we walked
; gonna She stopped and pulled me girlie close.

"You okay?" she asked.

God, she was so nice. Here it was, her wedding day, and she was
about me and my latest drama.

e Hank "Let's not talk about me. *Are you okay?*" I returned.

Her face got soft. Her eyes moved around the room until they
Vance and her hands went to her belly. I saw the solitaire there. The
her engagement ring was slim, the setting was plain, the diamond
Lee are magnificent. On her right hand was the super-fly silver band I knew (l
she told me) was the promise ring Vance had given her last Christmas.

nd of a "Bliss," she said.

I looked from her belly to her eyes.

iamond "What?" I asked.

"Bliss. For the first time in my life, I feel bliss." She got close. "Do
feel it? With Luke?"

nd she That was when I got close.

"I told him I loved him tonight," I shared.

y know

I don't want She nodded and her lips tipped up in a smile. "The fireman's hold door, right?"

." "Yeah. Why do these guys act like that?" I asked.

oked up She shrugged. "Who knows?" Her eyes went back to Vance. "That's what they do, though."

I grabbed her hand. "I'm so glad you're happy."

l away. Her tippy lips turned to a full-fledged smile just as Indy came near.

"Are you guys talking about the fireman's hold?" she asked softly.

"That was hot," Ally said, coming up beside me.

worried "I'll say. Luke's making the rest of the Hot Bunch look like amateurs." Roxie joined our group.

"They're gonna have to step it up," Ally said, and then we all giggled on the thought of the Hot Bunch "stepping it up."

band of If these boys stepped anything up, civilization would go back about fifty thousand years.

because Jet shoved in and her arm came around my waist.

"You okay, you know, after the fireman's hold?" she asked.

"Are *you* okay, after you got engaged a couple of days ago?" Jules

Everyone looked at Jet and her cheeks got pink.

Do you "I didn't want to steal your thunder," Jet said to Jules.

Jules grabbed her cheeks in each hand, pulled her forward and gave me a big old kiss, right on her forehead.

This started a bunch of sloppy girlie kissing, hugging and carrying. Daisy, Shirleen, May and Nancy joined in and it got sloppier and louder.

out the Finally Tex boomed, “Will someone change this crappy music? W
some goddamned rock ’n’ roll!”

The Rock Chicks all turned to stare at Tex. He tugged his tie off, t
nk God in a plate filled with half eaten *hors d’oeuvres* and aimed a scowl at us

This made the girl huddle burst into laughter.

Then someone put on some rock ’n’ roll.

My hand was tagged, pulled, and I moved in its direction, fo
Luke. Once he got me away from the gaggle of Rock Chicks, he tur
into his arms.

ateurs.” “Done bein’ mad at me?” he asked.

I glared, giving him his answer. He ignored the glare, bent his he
gged at nuzzled my neck.

“You may be mad at me, but you still love me,” he said close to
in time and he sounded pleased with himself.

He was right, as usual.

I didn’t share this.

His head came up and he rested his forehead against mine as h
cut in. came to my jaw, his thumb stroking my cheek.

“Babe, I’m not gonna let the woman I love telling me, finally, t
loves me slide by without a celebration.”

“You didn’t have to carry me out through a crowd of our friends
re her a like a caveman.”

ing on. He smiled at my broken silence.

er. “It’s who I am,” he said, quietly, honestly and without a hint of ren

ve need “It’s annoying,” I told him, but I had to admit, just to myself, I really mean it.

threw it “Yeah.” He said this like being annoying was an acceptable personality trait. Then, deciding to move on to a different subject, he asked, “I happy?”

I melted a little. I couldn’t help it. It was a nice party, these were following people and Jules and Vance were folks who deserved happiness.

ned me “She said this is bliss.”

His head slanted, his fingers splayed against my jaw, his thumb slipped my lower lip then his mouth came to mine.

ead and With his lips against my lips, I watched close up as his eyes went into my ear. Then he said, “She’s right.”

my ear,

The End

is hand

hat she

, acting

norse.

“It’s annoying,” I told him, but I had to admit, just to myself, I didn’t really mean it.

“Yeah.” He said this like being annoying was an acceptable personality trait. Then, deciding to move on to a different subject, he asked, “Is Jules happy?”

I melted a little. I couldn’t help it. It was a nice party, these were great people and Jules and Vance were folks who deserved happiness.

“She said this is bliss.”

His head slanted, his fingers splayed against my jaw, his thumb slid along my lower lip then his mouth came to mine.

With his lips against my lips, I watched close up as his eyes went ink.

Then he said, “She’s right.”

The End

Rock Chick

BONUS CHAPTER

ADDED
OCTOBER 1, 2023



BONUS CONTENT

HANKY-PANKY

Luke

Luke wasn't sure how he made it to the offices considering he furious he couldn't see straight.

This was why, the minute he hit reception at Nightingale Investig Mace came out of the door that led to the back offices.

The men of NI weren't a team.

They were brothers.

So they knew.

"Check it," Mace said low after taking one look at Luke and p himself between Luke and the door.

Luke halted and locked eyes with Mace.

The man was right. He needed to check it.

No.

What he needed to do was go out and run—*hard*—to burn emotion. He'd learned that dealing with his dad while growing up. Th only so much shouting you could do. Only so much shit you could eat

you hit your limit, you had two choices, and both were physical, but one would allow you to sleep at night.

He didn't need to come face-to-face with the man Lee had told him to in the office and go the wrong way of physical.

He needed to check it.

He took in breath through his nose.

Mace watched him and didn't move a muscle.

He took another breath. When he let it out, Mace relaxed.

The door behind Luke opened. He twisted and watched Vance walk in. Luke knew Lee was there as well as Mace and Monty. If they needed to lock him down, they'd have a time of it, but those men could do it.

So Vance didn't show for that.

Vance showed because he knew who was in Lee's office.

And as he'd noted, these men were his brothers.

Luke dipped his chin to Vance then turned back to Mace.

Mace opened the door for him.

Luke felt Mace and Vance at his back as he walked into Lee's office. They didn't go in.

He knew they'd stay close, though.

When Luke entered, Lee stood from sitting behind his desk, his eyes on Luke keen, alert.

Luke spared him a glance to let him know he had it under control.

Then he turned his attention to the man sitting in a chair in front of the desk. When

nly one And that control slipped.

He looked good. Tan. Healthy. Happy.

im was So much so, he appeared five, ten years younger than he really was
A total turnaround from the man Luke knew fourteen years ago.

Looked like life was good for Adrian Barlow after he walked out
family.

He watched Adrian slowly take his feet, his eyes widening as they
up Luke from boots to face, then a broad smile spread on his face.

k in. “Whoa. I mean, I knew you’d grow up to be something, but wo
eded to just...wow,” Adrian said, still smiling. “You’re not something.
something else.”

It was clearly positive what that “something else” meant, but Lu
zero fucks to give a compliment from the man who’d left Ava a b
kitten to fend for herself in a feral cat’s den.

“You wanna tell me why you’re here, Adrian?” he asked.

The man’s smile faltered, his gaze shot to Lee, back to Luke,
explained, “I saw a picture of you in the paper. Or, at least, a man
ice, but thought was you. It was grainy and you were in the background. So I c
check it out, and I was right. The caption didn’t have your name, but
you were a member of the Nightingale Investigations team.” He put hi
eyes on out to his sides. “So here I am.”

Luke knew that picture. It had been printed after Ava was in a c
collided with a police barricade, and they got her out before the
of Lee’s exploded.

The paper didn’t print the part about Ava, so Adrian didn’t know th

“That explains why you thought I was here,” he noted. “Not why here.”

Ava’s father’s face lost a little color, and he opened his mouth, but spoke again before he could say anything.

“Where you been Adrian?”

He asked, but he knew.

Ava said she didn’t want him looking for her dad, but after surviving Rock Chicks, and especially what his woman went through, Luke leaving anything to chance. Ava had taken enough knocks from her she wasn’t going to take any more. And if she had to, he was going what he could to soften the blow.

So he knew exactly where Adrian had been for fourteen years, and was a part—a small part but an important part—of why Luke was goddamned...*pissed*.

“Luke—” Adrian began.

“Nice tan. Livin’ it up while your wife tried to figure out how to raisin’ three girls after you left?” Luke pushed.

Color started to replace the pale, and Luke wasn’t sure if it said embarrassment or anger.

He had zero fucks to give to that too.

The words sounded tight when the man spoke, “You were always close to Ava.”

“Yeah,” Luke confirmed. “I was always close to Ava.”

“So I thought maybe...you still were.”

Luke didn’t reply to that, but he didn’t like where this was going.

you are He could guess this was where it was going, but he wouldn't let h
go there because he was hanging by a thread already. He didn't need t
it Luke it snap.

Adrian took in a visible deep breath and let it out saying, "List
haven't made what you feel about the decision I made all those year
secret—"

ing five Luke cut in, "Nope, I made that pretty plain a few seconds ago. B
wasn't more words on that if you want 'em."

family, Adrian's expression now turned hard. "No. I wanted to know if you
g to do help me find my daughter. Ava."

Yup.

ind that That was what he wouldn't let himself guess.

is so... Luke felt Lee shift.

He knew why. The energy in the room changed, not in a good way
was all coming from Luke.

o finish "I think I already have your answer," Adrian muttered. "So I'll be
I can find her myself."

it was "You aren't fuckin' findin' her, Adrian," Luke said between his te
words an unmistakable threat, and Adrian didn't miss it. Luke kno
when Adrian went completely still and stared at him. "Not intere
close to Marilyn and Sofia?" he asked.

"I thought I'd start with Ava."

"Strange choice, seein' as she was the one you fucked over the mo:
Adrian flinched.

Oh yeah.

is mind He knew it.

o make “Yeah,” Luke said low.

Another threat.

en, you So much of one, Lee murmured, “Luke.”

s ago a “I got it,” Luke replied to Lee without taking his eyes off Adrian.

ut I got “You don’t understand what it was like in that house,” Adrian
tersely.

u might He understood. He understood it even before he saw Adrian for t
time in a decade and a half, looking younger than his years,
untroubled. Being in that house with Christine, Marilyn and Sofia had
physical toll on him as well as a mental one. That had been obvious. I
them changed his life for the better. That was obvious too.

And Luke knew all of it, the man’s whole story, so he knew Adr
7, and itthe bad and found himself a whole load of good.

Still.

’ going. “I don’t give a fuck what it was like.”

“Luke—”

eth, the “Adrian,” he leaned toward the man, “*she needed you.*” He got a
ew that, it and leaned back. “Not just like every girl needs her
sted in Ava...*needed...you.* They shredded her after you left. Tore her to piec

Another flinch.

Fuck this guy.

st.”

“Is she okay?” Adrian asked after he recovered.

“She’s off limits to you, that’s what she is.”

It took some effort, but the man straightened his shoulders and declared, “She’s my daughter.”

“Yeah, but she’s *my* woman.”

The man’s mouth dropped open.

Then, like he couldn’t stop it, a smile bloomed on his face and a shared in his eyes before he mumbled to himself, “I knew it. I knew you two get together. She just had to get a little older. She loved you like crazy, you felt the same. But big brother love turns, I see, when the flow he first blooms.”

fit and taken a leaving “I’m not reminiscing with you, Adrian. I’m tellin’ you to go back you came from and leave this alone.”

The hard came back to his face. “That’s not your decision to make.

ian left “No. It isn’t. But a coupla months ago, when I asked her if she wanted to find you for her, she said no. So there you go.”

The man blanched and some of his vim and vigor leaked out. “S no?”

“She said no,” Luke confirmed.

lock on “Maybe, if she knows—” Adrian tried.

father. Luke cut him off. “Maybe if she knows you were here, talkin’ es.” she’d change her mind. Maybe if she knows, after half of her lifetime finally came lookin’ for her, she might have it in her heart to hear what I have to say. And I’ll tell her that, Adrian. She deserves to know. And tell her, I’ll also tell her you’ve been in Castle Rock the last fourteen Thirty fuckin’ miles away and nothing. Not a dollar to help her go to college. Not a birthday card so she knows she’s on your mind. Not

declared, "And you were thirty...miles...away."

His shit was degenerating, he knew it, Lee knew it, and that was what he said, "Luke, brother, maybe you need to take a walk."

Luke gave his head one curt shake. "Not until he promises he'll get back to his rock and wait. Wait until I talk with Ava. Wait until she tells me her decision." He said this to Lee, but again his eyes didn't leave Adrian, and he said his next to Adrian. "You don't hear from her, you know she's not talking to you and that's it. You don't try to find her. You don't try to talk to her. You also don't go after Marilyn or Sofia. Ava calls this shot for all the things she deserves that privilege after you left her to them, and they've done what they can to earn it back since you've been gone. But I suspect this isn't about Marilyn and Sofia. I suspect this is all about Ava."

The guilt on his face that showed clear he still didn't want anything to do with his two oldest, unless they eventually came with the package, answered that question.

That was one area where Luke didn't blame him. But he didn't share that with anyone. He kept laying it out.

"You do hear from her, listen to me now. When she sees you, she'll be there. You dick her over again, I'll be there. But my boys who are important to me, make sure I got it in check will not."

"Are you threatening me?" Adrian asked.

"I'm tellin' you, you broke her heart. That's in my safekeeping since you was then, but I fell down on the job when you left. I'm not gonna fall down again, Adrian. *That* is what I'm tellin' you."

They stared at each other.

Something bleak entered Adrian's eyes, which Luke also had zero reason to give, and then the man said, "Fair enough."

Luke moved out of the way of the door, a nonverbal cue for Adrian to crawl the hell out.

Adrian took it, but he also took his life in his hands when he stopped. He came abreast of Luke.

There, he said, "You're everything he feared you'd be. So much more than he was, it ate at him. In competition to see who had the biggest dick with his own son. Everyone knew the answer to that before you ever decided to rail at it, I'll never know. I also don't know what my girl is going to do. I deserve whatever it is. I'd like a chance to explain, but you're of Ava, you two are together. Fate shone on you when you moved across the from us. Not because Ava needed you. Because you needed Ava."

That's up to her. But I'm not leaving here without you knowing, I'm of Ava, you two are together. Fate shone on you when you moved across the from us. Not because Ava needed you. Because you needed Ava."

"Thanks for tellin' me something I already know," Luke bit out.

"And thanks for confirming you knew it," Adrian shot back.

With that, he left.

Lee gave it a beat then asked, "Want me to find something for throw?"

Luke angled his head from side to side, feeling the crack on the floor now. It was so tense.

Then he looked to Lee and said, "I'm good."

"You really gonna tell Ava he was here?"

"I really am. She deserves to know."

o fucks “She gonna take him back?”

“That I don’t know. All I know is, I’m gonna take her back, whatever she decides.”

Lee nodded.

ed after Luke didn’t.

It was quitting time.

h more He was headed home.

st balls

in grew

ier than

oing to

e right.

thrilled

e street



On the ride up the elevator to his loft, Luke braced.

Not because of what he had to talk to Ava about.

He always braced.

This was because he could walk into his loft, and she’d be sitting on the couch watching a movie. She could be watching Shirleen, watching movies that prominently featured half-naked men. She could be getting her hair done by Daisy, a do that would end up being a disaster. She could be watching something terrifying (but he’d still fuck her with it, he knew this because he’d seen it happen). She could be half-plastered and gabbing with Sissy on the couch. She could be getting totally smashed, so he’d either have to drive Sissy home or call her a cab. She could be watching Tom Petty. She could be watching Tom Petty to come and get her. She could be dabbing camo paint on her face because of some shit the Rock Chicks got themselves involved in.

It could be anything.

So bracing before was the way to go.

The doors opened up, he heard Tom Petty singing “Free Fallin’” and then his heart opened up.

Because his woman was in the kitchen, her eyes came right to her as soon as he appeared, and her face split into a happy smile.

Shit, she was a knockout. So fucking gorgeous, he was coming off like a hard-on when he was around her.

She was also hilarious and crazy and didn't take his shit.

And Adrian wasn't wrong. Luke wouldn't be the man he became if he hadn't been across the street, looking out for him on the not-rare occasions when his father got up in his face.

For starters, she taught him how to walk away rather than something he'd regret, something that would form him into a different person. She didn't know she did it, but she did.

She also taught him, if you give it just a little time, something good can slide in after the bad. Back then, it was her following him, coaxing him out of his shit mood and making him laugh.

Today, it was coming home to her.

"I'm cooking," she announced.

"I can smell," he said.

"No healthy living mojo tonight, honey. I scored a new client today. We're celebrating," she shared as he made his way to her.

"Fantastic," he muttered, getting smack in her space, sliding a hand on her hip to the small of her back and jerking her into his body.

When she collided, her tawny eyes fired in a way that also made him come off like a hard-on, and she put her hands to his pecs.

"I should get you a club so you can drag it around and everyone can see it," and warned of your neanderthal tendencies," she remarked.

aim the He smiled at her.

stantly She watched his lips do it, and she knew the score when she did this.
So he bent his head and took her mouth.

She was ass to the counter, he was between her legs, and her eyes
foggy just the way he liked them when he finally ended their
session.

sion his “Congrats on the new client,” he said.

“Thanks,” she breathed.

doing He smiled at her again, kissed her throat then pulled her off the counter
man.

“What’s for dinner?”

od will “Baked potatoes. I’m trying this new way of doing them. It’s supposed
n out of to create the perfect potato. Also filet mignon. And sauteed mushrooms
haricots verts. Oh! And rolls. To finish, I grabbed some napoleon
Pasquinis for dessert.”

“Jesus, with all that in my gut, I’m not gonna be able to function
tonight.”

today. She shot him a look. “I’ve got practice with over imbibing. I’ll take
Her saying that meant she absolutely would not. He’d find a way to

id from She pulled out a cast-iron grill pan and put it on the stove. “Will you
the steaks? We’re almost good to go.”

m fight “You got it, baby,” he murmured, turning to the steaks that were
on the counter, room temperature, salted and doused in Worcestershire

will be They both lived full lives, work and social.

But they had a lot of times like these.

Cooking together. Doing the dishes together. Walking down the street at night. Wynkoop's, hanging and sharing a couple of beers together.

They fought. This was him and Ava. Their spark never blinked out. It manifested itself in a variety of ways.

But he loved fighting with her, and not just because he loved her. He made up.

There was history. There was passion. There was fire. Even in the quietest times like now, it simmered below the surface, ready to blaze whenever a spark came about between them.

He loved it. Got off on it. Fed from it.

It was going to be a good life with her. No other woman existed who could give him that. What he needed to keep his shit in line. What he needed to be the man he wanted to be. What he needed to be the man he had to be for her.

But he waited until after she loaded him down with a gut busting amount of delicious food (and whatever recipe she found did not lie, those potatoes were the best he'd had). After they sorted out the kitchen. But she was on top." before she unearthed the napoleons when he guided her to the couch, she pulled her to straddle his lap.

"Oh boy. Looking at your face, I'm not thinking this is a lead in to a punky," she noted.

His brows went up.

Christ, his woman.

"Hanky-panky?"

"Sex," she explained something he already knew.

street to “I know, babe. But I fuck. *We* fuck. We do not engage in hanky-pa

“My word choice wasn’t a hit to your manhood, Luke.”

it and it “You referring to it as hanky-panky, I may never get it up aga
joked.

ow they She made a face and replied, “Oh my God. You’d turn into Lukez
take out half of Denver if you went even a day without getting the busi

ie quiet “Correct,” he confirmed, then advised. “Don’t forget that.”

ver that She rolled her eyes, but her lips were tipped up.

“Babe.”

ed who She stopped rolling her eyes, and he knew she’d read his change
needed when they landed on him.

o be for So her hands landed on him too, at both sides of his neck. “O
Luke. What’s the matter?”

amount Total concern. It was in her face, the line of her body, the feel of h
e baked everything about her.

t it was He gripped her hips harder where he had hold on her. Then he to
sat in it, hand and slid it along the side of her neck to curl it around the back.

“I got somethin’ to share.”

hanky- “Okay,” she whispered. “Are you okay?”

“I will be, once I tell you and I know you’re okay.”

Her head tipped to the side.

“Your dad showed at the offices today.”

Her head righted with a snap. “What?”

“Babe—”

nky.” “He just...showed up?”

“Ava babe—”

in,” he “At your office?”

He pulled her face closer to his. “Listen to me, beautiful. Please?”

illa and He could feel the soft pants of her breath, how her not getting enc
iness.” was making her body work, and he wished he hadn’t let Mace cool hir
before he confronted her father.

But now it was about his Ava.

“Breathe, baby,” he coaxed.

in tone She pulled in a shaky breath.

He waited for her to take the second one before he spoke again.

h God, “He wants to see you.”

“He wants to see me,” she parroted.

er gaze, “I got more you should know before you make your decision.”

“Oh hell,” she whispered.

ook one “I know you told me not to look for him, but first, I didn’t know
would hold. And if you wanted it, I wanted to be in a place to give it
And second, I wanted to be prepared if what happened today a
happened. So I found him.”

“You found him,” she again parroted.

“Yeah.”

“Where was he?”

He gripped her tighter and said, “Castle Rock.”

It took a second, but what he expected to happen did.

She exploded off his lap.

Luke followed her up and caught her before she went ass over the coffee table. But once he righted her, she tore out of his hold and, the coffee table, took two steps away.

ugh air
n down

He followed her.

She lifted a hand his way, stopped, and so did he.

“No, I’m okay. It’s okay,” she lied, and then she proved it a shouting, “*Castle Rock!*”

“I’m sorry, baby,” he said gently. “He’s been there the whole Fourteen years. He’s been living with a woman the last twelve.” He then gave it all to her. “She has two daughters. They were ten and when they met. He helped raise them.”

“Oh my God,” she mouthed.

And then she lost it.

He caught her before she went down and got her in bed, stretch with her and holding her close.

7 if that
to you.
actually

She had a lot to get out, and he was glad as fuck she did it, sobbing and hiccupping in his arms. It took a long time, but eventually wound down, sniffing, rubbing her face on his tee and burrowing into his body.

He tangled his fingers in her hair, bent his head and asked into the hers, “Okay?”

She nodded, but said, “I mean, not *okay* okay. Like, you know, I was essentially one town over, raising some other woman’s kids, while I suffered through. But I’m not going to cry or shout any more tonight.”

tipped her head back to look at him and added, "Though, I reserve the
ad over do so at a later date. Mostly the shouting part."

skirting He smiled at her.

She watched then shoved her face in his throat.

"What a jackass," she mumbled there.

He had a different term for it, but he didn't share.

lie by "Hate this, baby," he said quietly. "But I'm kinda not done."

She tipped her head back again. "Do I need to fortify before this
e time. eating the napoleons? Special note, I referred to them in plural so I me
paused, of them, Luke. I'll buy you a make-up one tomorrow."

thirteen He laughed softly, fell to his back and pulled her up on his chest.

"No. You're not eatin' my napoleon. But I gotta remind you that h
lookin' for me so he could find you."

"Yeah. Unless he had some investigative work he needed done
ing out care of his other family, the one he stuck around to raise, and someo
my name, so with the one of you plus the one of me making two,
ing and curious."

ally she "It wasn't that," Luke murmured, watching her closely.

into his She noticed and asked, "What?"

Luke pointed out the obvious. "He'd like to see you."

e top of "What'd you tell him?"

my dad "I told him I'd tell you what he wanted, and if he didn't hear from
e we all needed to take that as your answer and stay out of your life. I also told
it." She you went the other way, you wouldn't be seeing him without me there.

right to She narrowed her eyes on him. “Did you threaten him?”
She knew him down to his soul.
Therefore, he didn’t hesitate to reply, “Abso-fucking-lutely.”
“I kinda wish I saw that,” she muttered.
He gave her a shake. “Babe.”
She refocused on him and saw on his face he wanted an answer
need to decide now?”

next by “You can decide twenty years from now. I just wanna know yo
an bothright.”

“I’m fine, Luke.”

“My tee says different. It’s soaked, and I’m guessin’ half that is sn
ie came “Ugh,” she grunted.
He smiled at her.
to take Then he ran his fingers through the soft mass of thick hair on the
ne said her head and again cupped the back of her neck.
he got “I’m with you whatever you decide,” he told her.
“What would you do?” she asked.
He shook his head on the pillow. “I know what I’d do. But I’m i
and this has to be all you.”
“You wouldn’t see him,” she correctly guessed.
“I wouldn’t waste another fuckin’ second on the guy. But again, i
you, he you.”
him, if
” Something occurred to her. It lit in her gorgeous eyes before it ca
her pretty mouth, “How, exactly, did this conversation between you a

go? You know, aside from the threat?”

There was more than a hint of suspicion in that.

So yeah.

Down to his soul.

“We’ll just say we didn’t hug.”

. “Do I She tensed. “Oh my God, you gave him shit.”

Maybe she was crazier than he thought.

u’re all “Fuck yeah, baby. He left you. He hurt you. So I didn’t shake h
and clap him on the shoulder and congratulate him on his healthy tan.
him shit.”

ot.” Curiosity sparked. “Did he have a tan?”

“Ava babe,” he began carefully. “He looked healthy. Happy. He
from thrilled that I stood in the way of him getting to you. He was ev
thrilled when I told him I’d offered to find him for you, and you declin
side of

Her eyes widened. “You told him that?”

“Yeah. I did,” Luke affirmed. “He was happy we were together. I
he wants a chance to explain. He makes good money, lives in a nice h
an upper middleclass neighborhood with a pretty woman who loves
not you much, she doesn’t ask questions about why he won’t marry her, seeir
fell off her grid. Not *the* grid, but your mom’s grid, so she couldn’t fi
and he’s still married to her. He has not suffered. He went on to better
I’m not And regardless of what those two fuckin’ sisters of yours are like, how
nagging he had to endure from your mom, he made a family and tho
ime out had the right to just bow out. You’re unhappy, you walk away. You s
nd Dad new life. You find ways to establish boundaries with your ex-partner

won't fuck with your head. But you don't leave your children behind. I

"I think I've decided," she announced.

Luke took his hand from her neck so he could wrap both arms around her tight.

"What'd you decide?" he asked.

"I've decided I'm not going to decide right now. I think it might take twenty years. Or it might take two. Or it might take until after we're all dead. However long it takes, that's how long it's going to take. I'm not going to stress. I'll know when I know. Then he'll know when I know. I gave him my hand. I decide to see him. But now, I'm just going to...carry on."

Luke grinned. "That's my girl."

"You want your napoleon?"

was far
seven less
ed."

Yup.

That was his girl.

Drama...and onward.

He said He flipped her to her back. "Gotta work for it."

come in Her gaze heated and her words were breathy when she declared
him sotoy."

it' as he "You're gonna get somethin', but it isn't top."

nd him, "I thought men liked women riding them."

things. "I want you in the saddle, baby, I'll put you there. I'm in the
v much tonight."

ught he She gave a side eye to nothing, muttering, "Whatever."

set up a

so she "Babe?"

Ever.” She looked to him.

“Kiss me.”

and her Hungry joined the heat in her gaze.

And then she kissed him.

ght take



eat our

I'm not

ow if I

Luke woke when the nagging pain he felt in his gut meant it was
turn, and Ava didn't turn them.

Which meant he woke to an empty bed.

He didn't have to search for her. He knew where she was.

So he threw back the covers, padded through the loft and went to h

He settled on the floor behind her and surrounded her with his be
pulling her—curled thighs to tits, his tee stretched over her knees—
chest.

“I should have landed a fist in his face,” he growled into her ear.

, “I get

She turned her head to face him. “Why?”

“You can't sleep.”

“I can't sleep because I'm happy.”

Luke's head jerked.

saddle

Ava kept talking.

“You were the first boy I loved. You're the only man I've loved.
no idea what Dad showing would have done to me a couple of mont
when you weren't in my life. And okay, I didn't handle it with

decorum when you told me. But...whatever. In the end, I know the bl
softer because you delivered it, and you were there to hold me while I
also know you'll support whatever I decide whenever I make the de
She twisted in his arms and used her hands to cup his jaw. "I'm not sl
Luke, because I kinda don't care about Dad coming back. I've got eve
I need because I've got you. And after feeling his abandonment for l
life like a hole that's never filled, and now it's just gone, that's a lot fo
to deal with, and it isn't conducive to sleep."

time to Luke was dealing with a lot too.

And he had one particular way he worked that kind of feeling out
was about Ava.

So she was on her back and he was on top of her in half a second.

er. "I want you to fuck me, honey, but I'm not sure about doing the b
nt legs, on hardwood," she whispered.

into his So he was up, she was tossed over his shoulder, and he stalked to t

He threw her down on it, caught her ankles, flipped her to her bel
jacked her toward him and up to her knees at the edge of the bed.

"Luke," she breathed.

He yanked her panties to her thighs.

"Luke!"

He slid his fingers through her wet.

Soaked. Always. For him.

. I have He shoved his shorts over his ass and drilled in.

hs ago, Her head flew back.

smooth "Yes," she whispered.

ow was Oh yes.
dealt. I He fucked her in a way she'd never call it hanky-panky again.
cision." And after, once he'd cleaned her up, repositioned her panties, and
eeping, held close to him under the covers in their bed, was when he spoke.
rything "You were the first girl I loved and the only woman I've ever love
alf my Know it. And don't forget it."
or a girl "I won't, baby. I think you just drilled that in so deep, me forgetti
would be impossible."
when it "Good," he grunted. "Go to sleep."
"So bossy."
"As if you don't like it," he muttered.
usiness She pushed closer. "Oh, I like it. *All* of it."
Fuck.
he bed. His woman.
ly, then His Ava.
He held her tight, and finally she shut up and fell asleep.
Which meant so did he.

Oh yes.

He fucked her in a way she'd never call it hanky-panky again.

And after, once he'd cleaned her up, repositioned her panties, and had her held close to him under the covers in their bed, was when he spoke.

“You were the first girl I loved and the only woman I've ever loved, Ava. Know it. And don't forget it.”

“I won't, baby. I think you just drilled that in so deep, me forgetting that would be impossible.”

“Good,” he grunted. “Go to sleep.”

“So bossy.”

“As if you don't like it,” he muttered.

She pushed closer. “Oh, I like it. *All* of it.”

Fuck.

His woman.

His Ava.

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Which meant so did he.



KristenAshley.net
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Rock Chick ride continues with
Rock Chick Reckoning
the story of Mace and Stella.



LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCK CHICK RECKONING

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One night, Stella gets a call, late (again), from one of the members of her crazy band. She has to go play clean up (again) and runs into Mace (with a shed load of police) and ends up getting shot.

Mace finds he doesn't like it much that his ex-girlfriend got shot in front of him, but it's worse. A very bad man has thrown down the gauntlet and all the Rock Chicks are in the firing line.

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ROCK CHICK RECKONING



ROCK CHICK RECKONING

No One Got in the Way of Me and My Band

Stella

The phone rang.

My eyes opened and I looked at the clock.

Three thirty-seven.

In the morning.

I reached for the phone. “Hello?”

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

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

“Hey, Buzz, what’s up?” I asked.

His answer could be anything. He needed me to bail him out of jail. He needed me to give him a ride home because he was somewhere drunk and his skull and thankfully responsible enough to call someone. Unthai

that someone was always me. He was stuck on a billboard on 8th Precinct Earth, Wind & Fire's upcoming concert with no way to get down (don't

But I was guessing it had to do with Lindsey.

"It's Linnie," Buzz said.

I was right.

"Buzz, I don't—"

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

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

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

"No, I called you."

Yep, that's about right.

bring me to

roads of

to I was

imbling

On the

p.

jail. He

out of

unkfully,

Of course he'd call me. I was Stella Michelle Gunn, lead singer and guitarist of the Blue Moon Gypsies. I posted bond (mostly for Pong, the drummer, but for all of them on occasion). I soothed drunken and angry (again predominately Pong, but they all were good at getting drunk and angry). I counseled relationships on the brink of collapse (this was a strong suit—for your information, the parties concerned always broke up). I listened when the world just *did not* understand (and the world didn't understand much according to Leo, who played rhythm guitar and reformed the band in jail. He got stoned and reflective). I extricated not-so-horny-anymore saxophonist named Hugo from mini-orgies with gonzo groupies gone bad.

moting And apparently I was an emergency paramedic.

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

"But—"

"Now!" I snapped.

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

ght. I'm My first thought was Mace.

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

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

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

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

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

didn't Now it was just me.

regularly As always.

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

My third thought was to find my jeans.

I yanked off my nightgown and tugged on a pair of old Levi's
bra. I grabbed a capped-sleeved white blouse with red stitching at the
dangling tassels that you would expect a girl named Heidi to wear
yodeling in the mountains of Germany.

Just for your information, I loved that effing top.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

top and I knew what that meant.

r while One of the Nightingale Boys was there.

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

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

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

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

Mace was one of them.

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

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

Then I switched topics.

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

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

Lights I knew Luke. I'd met him when I dated Mace. I knew him now l
not just he was living with my friend, Ava Barlow.
l police

His eyes scanned the yard and stalled on me.

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

good. Luke was great.

I smiled at Luke.

The door opened again and Mace walked out.

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

My eyes did a sweep of all that was Mace.

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

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

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

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

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

because Luke hesitated.

Mace approached.

Bad luck. I would have preferred Luke to approach.

ike was Effing hell, but my luck sucked.

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

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

Looking a
look like
he was.
resting
ot from
sed me
k.
I didn't
mbered
gut and
ok a lot,
me and live with me until we both die at the same exact time, holding hands when we're one hundred and seven."

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

Juno sat, as always, obeying Mace without hesitation, but she was happy about it. Her tail swept the dirt, her tongue lolled, her life bright and full.

Mace got close and Juno butted his hand with her wet nose. She stretched to the max, but keeping her doggie-heiny to the ground.

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

Jealous of my own damn dog.

How far had I sunk?

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

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

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

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

e, Juno Something was not right.

rd food I looked back at Mace.

he took “Is Linnie okay?” I asked.

he door “Go home.”

Yep, something was not right.

“Is Linnie okay?” I repeated.

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

ened. Oh hell.

g, neck Something was *definitely* not right.

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

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

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

“I need to see Buzz,” I declared.

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

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

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

He didn't move his hand. In fact his fingers tightened. It didn't hurt, but it certainly made his meaning clear too.

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

He meant it.

This pissed me off.

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

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

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

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

Nunh-unh.

No way.

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

I leaned into him.

rt but it “Tell me what’s going on,” I demanded on a quiet hiss.

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

’ “What the fuck is going on?” I demanded on a not-at-all quiet shout.

 I felt, rather than saw, the eyes that turned to us.

 “Stella, lower your voice,” Mace ordered.

ife was That pissed me off more.

loading “I’m goin’ in there,” I told him.

re were “You aren’t goin’ in there,” he told me, and his hand stayed where

When I Effing hell.

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

ing my This caught him off guard, I saw it. His usually blank-but-brooding

abulous energy disappeared, and I saw his eyes flash in the dim illumination of Linda

nd Juno porch light.

), I was “I’m protecting you,” he answered, his voice low. The words seemed

g them from him as if he didn’t want to say them.

 There was the gut-kick feeling again and more fear started

 through my insides.

 “It isn’t your job to protect me anymore, Mace,” I reminded him.

ly heart watched the flash in his eyes again.

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

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

 Big time gut kick.

 Sheesh. He gave up easily.

 Oh well, so be it.

I started to move away.

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

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

“What?” I whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to get her fix. She'd started to bring these bad dudes to gigs. That was I drew the line.

st said. Now she was dead.

“Linnie,” I whispered.

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

herever “Kitten.” I heard as if from far away, so far away it was like a drea

ts why. It was Mace's voice calling me “Kitten,” his nickname for but the nickname I earned because he said I “purred” when I was content. No this purring happened post-orgasm, but there were other times too content a lot when I'd been with Mace.

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

y mind A touch, whisper-soft, slid across the small of my back and I shive

o years “Linnie,” I whispered again.

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

ot even Men like Luke didn't get scared.

uzz and I shook my head and jerked out of my daze.

o matter “I have to get to Buzz,” I announced.

s losing “Stella.”

ood, all I took off, walking swiftly across the yard.

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

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

Then gunshots rang out.

Indeedly Yes.

sed and *Gunshots.*

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

me, a For a second I stood frozen, not comprehending this drastic event. Then I felt a stinging burn in my hip and cried out, but for no reason. I was reason my hands went to my head, and unfortunately belatedly, I started to run for my effing life.

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

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

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

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

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

Juno woofed just to be part of the action. Not wanting to do n anything, just not wanting anyone to forget she was around. This v way.

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

around The wet on my hand was dark. Blood.

ne after I'd been shot.

Effing hell, I'd been *shot*.

turn of With a bullet. An honest-to-goodness bullet.

r some Jesus!

arted to "Um, Mace—" I started, trying not to sound panicky.

vn over "This is Jack." A voice filled the cab.

around "One second," Mace said to me in an undertone.

sed me Tod and Stevie. They were outside a gay club on Broadway. I lost
iped up with her in the middle of the call," Luke informed Jack, who I als
from my days as Mace's girlfriend. He was another Nightingale Ma
strong, tough, solid and scary.

He got I gasped at this news.

g and I Ava and the girls had been shot at? What was going on?

hit the "Copy that. I'm on it," Jack's voice replied.

nal turn "Someone just shot at Stella at the scene," Mace added.

They weren't shooting at me, were they? my brain asked.

Since I didn't actually utter the words, no one answered.

much of "Fuck," Jack snapped.

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

"Copy," Jack said.

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

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

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

ly, Indy, "Um, Mace—" I started again, thinking now the time was ripe to
the fact I was bleeding.

contact "Two seconds," Mace replied.

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

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

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

Luke hit a button on the console.

“Stark,” he answered.

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

“Goddamn it!” Luke clipped.

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

“Call Vance. Call Lee. We need a rendezvous point,” Luke demanded. “Call Louie and find out what the fuck is goin’ on with Ava.”

“Copy. Out,” Jack said.

Disconnect.

Luke took a turn without slowing so I went flying, and so did Juno. I became a tangle of furry limbs and not-furry-limbs. One leg was on the straight and narrow and my ass cheek was back on the seat again, I thought it best to buckle in.

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

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

Juno woofed a calm woof.

Good to know my dog was cool in a crisis, though it would have been better if I’d never needed that knowledge.

Mace was on the phone. “Ike,” he said. “Yeah. Call Matt and Sid’s made a move. We need confirmation on Ava and the girls. Ava r

efore he to Luke they were under fire and he lost contact. Louie's with them
were outside that gay club on Broadway." Pause. "Yeah, out."

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

shot out "Um, Mace—" I began yet again.

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

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

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

nce we "I'm okay," a woman's voice said.

blanket "Nick?" Mace asked.

lick the "He's okay too."

"Have you contacted Vance?" Mace went on.

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

For your information, it was just my bad luck that after one
Bobby. Nightingale Men broke up with me, one of my closest friends hooked
eported

1. They *the* Nightingale Man, Lee Nightingale. Her name was India “Indy” & I’d known her for years. Now she and her best friend Ally (a Nightingale herself, Lee’s sister), both close friends of mine, were mixed up with the Nightingale posse.

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

As I said, it was bad luck. What I didn’t say was it was super shielded on luck.

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

“Follow us,” Luke told Jules.

“Gotcha,” Jules replied.

Disconnect.

The dash phone started ringing immediately and Luke pressed a button

Without a greeting, Jack informed the cab, “Ava’s fine.”

I expelled a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Luke’s fear disappeared

“Louie returned fire, got the girls and boys in Daisy’s limo. Everyone safe, no one was hit. They’re headed to The Castle. Lee says that’s up with rendezvous.”

Savage. “Copy that. The others?” Luke asked.

tingale “Soon to be in transit but not good. Both Eddie and Hank got c
with the Both houses were hit by drive-bys after they were gone. AK-47s again
and Jet were sleeping. They’re okay. Lee’s just been in to get a vehicl
friends.picking them up and heading toward The Castle.”

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

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

itty bad “Fuckin’ Sid,” Luke clipped, breaking into my thoughts.

“Fuckin’ Sid,” Jack agreed.

l Luck, “Ike’s mobilizing Matt and Bobby,” Mace put in. “He was look
Ava. Now he needs an alternate assignment.”

“Copy that. I’ll call him,” Jack responded.

“Out,” Luke said and hit a button.

Silence.

utton. “War,” Mace declared.

“Fuck yeah,” Luke replied.

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

ryone’s Effing hell.

at’s the [Click here to purchase your copy of Rock Chick Reckoning](#)

allouts.

. Roxie

e. He's

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Ashley is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over 100 romance novels including the *Rock Chick*, *Colorado Mountain*, *Dream Team*, *Chaos*, *Unfinished Heroes*, *The 'Burg*, *Magdalene*, *Fantasyland*, *The Ghost and Reincarnation*, *The Rising*, *Dream Team* and *Honey* series with several standalone novels. She's a hybrid author, publishing titles independently and traditionally, her books have been translated in 15 languages and she's sold over five million books.

Kristen's novel, *Law Man*, won the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewer's Award for best Romantic Suspense, her independently published title *On* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* best Independent Content Contemporary Romance and her traditionally published title *Breathe* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* Contemporary Romance. Kristen's titles *Motorcycle Man*, *The Will*, and *Steady* (which won the Reader's Choice award from *Romance Reviews*) made the final rounds for Goodreads Choice Awards in the Romance category.

Kristen, born in Gary and raised in Brownsburg, Indiana, was a first-generation graduate of Purdue University. Since then, she has lived in Denver, the West Country of England, and she now resides in Phoenix. She worked as a charity executive for eighteen years prior to beginning her independent

publishing career. She now writes full-time.

Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To thank her readers and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to yourself, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, talk to your sister's back whether they're at your side as friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are.

The programs of the RC Nation include Rock Chick Rendezvous, where Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisters together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women

who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards, 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 at KristenAshley.net.



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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.



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