

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
M.S. PARKER



A NOVEL

PURE
Pleasures

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Pure Pleasures

A Novel

By M.S. Parker

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Book Description

I knew I'd done the right thing by leaving him. He deserved someone who could give him everything he wanted, and that couldn't be me. I'd been broken far too long.

When twenty-two year-old Jenna Lang leave the man she loves because she can't give him children, she believes she's making the right choice. As much as it breaks her heart, she wants him to move on and be happy. She tries to do the same, but she knows that, without Rylan, she'll never have her happy ending.

Don't miss *Pure Pleasures*, the final installment in M.S. Parker's dark and emotional *Pleasures* series.

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Chapter 1

I'd done a lot of difficult things in my life, some by force, some by choice, but this had been the hardest. I'd survived thirteen years of abuse so horrific that it made some of the most hardened members of law enforcement blanch. I'd practically raised myself after being passed from one foster home to another. I'd testified before grand juries, reliving my abuse. I'd nearly been raped and killed again not too long ago, then I'd given up justice to protect the innocent.

None of that compared to walking out of that house.

The cab driver didn't say a word after I told him to take me to a hotel, and I was grateful. I was sure he had his suspicions about why I'd had him pick me up by the road, but I didn't feel the need to explain myself. I really didn't care what the man thought of me. It was clear where I was coming from. Ever since that magazine article declared twenty-eight year-old Rylan Archer, billionaire CEO of Archer Enterprises, one of the country's most eligible bachelors, his house outside Fort Collins, Colorado, wasn't exactly a secret. A young woman coming out of the house early in the morning, well, it didn't take a genius to figure out what I'd been doing there.

I smothered a half-laugh. No, it didn't take a genius because even a genius would never have guessed why I was really there. Sure, I looked a lot more normal than I had when Rylan and I first met, but it was still clear that I was so far from Rylan's league I shouldn't have even been able to see his dog house let alone his mansion. My hair was back to my natural ebony color rather than the bright blue it had been a few weeks ago, and I'd taken out my eyebrow and bellybutton piercings, but I still had scars, tattoos and multiple ear piercings. I continued to dress in the clothes I liked, ones that didn't exactly fit in with Rylan's rich world or his social-climbing parents.

But he'd chosen me despite my appearance. He'd loved me before I'd told him the truth about my past and he still loved me after. He'd heard disgusting details that had made seasoned cops turn away from me, and he

loved me anyway. Wanted me. He'd protected me, shared his life with me. His home.

Our home.

I choked back a sob.

It had been our home for a day. Not even that. We were supposed to have spent today unpacking the few things I was bringing from my apartment. He'd promised to make love to me in every room, making new memories that would be just the beginning of our new life together. It was a new year, a year that he'd thought we'd be spending together. Up until last night, I'd thought it too.

Last night.

I crossed my arms tighter across my chest. I could feel the crack in my heart and knew that it was going to shatter soon. I'd heard people talk about the pain of a broken heart after a break-up and I'd always thought they were being melodramatic. Surely the loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend, especially someone who hadn't been around long, couldn't be that bad. Especially when compared to what I'd already gone through in my life.

I hadn't known shit.

I could barely breathe and every beat of my heart felt like glass being shoved through my ribcage. I'd endured physical pain so bad that I'd thrown up, passed out...this was worse. Not because what I had gone through wasn't bad, but because I'd been hurt so much that I knew physical pain eventually ended. When my mother had poured hot grease on my side, it had been excruciating. But I had healed. I had healed from it all. Some things had taken surgeries and some things would never be the same, but my physical injuries had disappeared with the passage of time.

I didn't believe my heart would ever recover.

I'd never been in love before, never even had a crush before, and when I'd fallen, I'd fallen hard. I'd tried not to. Really, I had. I'd told myself that I couldn't trust him. That men only lied and hurt. That he would use me and leave me. I'd told myself that he was too good for me and he'd eventually see it. Once I'd known I loved him, I'd still tried to guard my heart, reminding myself that it wouldn't last.

Except it wasn't Rylan who'd walked away this morning. It was me. I'd been the one who'd taken those steps. The one who was now going to hide,

torn between wanting him to come after me and wanting him to forget.

All because of that damned Suzette.

I took a slow breath to keep myself from crying. It wasn't Suzette's fault, not really. Certainly, she could have been more tactful about it, but she'd spoken the truth. I supposed, if I wanted to be angry at someone for not being truthful, Rylan should've been my first choice. He'd said it didn't matter.

I couldn't be mad at Rylan though. He'd only ever wanted to protect me, take care of me. I was sure he'd meant it when he said he didn't care that I couldn't have children. That the people who'd abused me had hurt me so badly that I'd never be able to get pregnant, let alone carry a child.

But as soon as Suzette had told me how all Rylan had ever wanted was a family, I'd known the truth. He hadn't wanted to hurt me, so he'd convinced himself he was okay with it. Maybe he'd stay that way for a while. A year, maybe two. But then he'd start to see his friends with families, if they didn't have them already. He'd find himself watching commercials for baby things, listening to his parents when they started making comments to his sister about being grandparents.

He'd leave me, and if I was lucky, he wouldn't resent me first. We could part on good enough terms that I could keep my job.

Instead, I'd decided that I wouldn't put him through that. I'd given myself a final night. And then I'd woken this morning, written a note and left it with my Christmas present. I'd not go home...

Home.

Once, that word had meant fear and pain. Then it hadn't existed. As an adult on my own, I'd worked hard and made a place of my own. A home that had been, if not perfect, good enough for me to sleep at night without fear.

I blow out a breath. That home had been taken away from me too, the night Christophe Constantine had broken in. I shudder at the memory... the fear, the loss of hope I'd felt in those terrible moments.

But I'd survived that too, and I hadn't had to survive it alone. Rylan had been there for me and had offered me a home. A real one. With someone I not only loved, but trusted and made me feel safe.

Now I had nothing.

I did, however, have enough money to stay at a hotel for a while. Rylan

would come to my apartment, but he wouldn't stay long. I'd be able to go back in a while, finish out my lease.

I closed my eyes and slowly counted to ten. I didn't want to think about what was to come. It was hard enough to think about the next second, the next minute. The future had returned to what it had been all those years ago, before I'd been rescued. Bleak darkness. Black. Nothingness.

“Miss?”

The cab driver's voice came through before the hole I was digging for myself could get too bad.

“Will this do?”

I opened my eyes and looked out the window. It was a nice hotel, well within my budget, and not the kind of place that rented by the hour. It would do. I thanked him, paid him and headed inside with the little I'd brought with me.

Ten minutes later, I was checked in and curled up on the bed, finally giving in to my tears and my pain.

Chapter 2

I knew better than to struggle and I lay limp as my mother tied my wrists and ankles to the loops she'd sewn into my mattress. I was older now than I had been when she'd first done it and I had an idea that I could possibly rip them out, get free. What was the point though? I was almost thirteen and knew how the world worked. Even if I did manage to escape, I had nowhere to go. As my mother repeatedly reminded me, I'd be out on the streets, forced to fuck strangers for money to eat. At least here, I had a bed, such as it was, and food, when Mom remembered to get it. And she was careful about the men using protection because she didn't want me catching some disease or, as of last month, getting pregnant. On the streets, I wouldn't always have the option.

I stared up at the ceiling, focusing on the little cracks in the plaster rather than the fact that I was naked and spread out for whatever was going to happen next. It was harder to concentrate when I felt fingers on me. More than two hands and at least one belonged to a woman. I could feel the bite of her nails.

They were talking, but I didn't pay attention. Unless they were talking directly to me, there wasn't a point. It wasn't like I was going to remember faces or figure out who they were. Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. I knew I'd been raped by at least one doctor, a couple cops, a judge and a politician or two over the years, though I knew the numbers had to be much higher. Not that it mattered. No one would believe me if I accused them. I'd given up hope of rescue and justice years ago. All I had left was a primal instinct of self-preservation demanding I stay alive, and even that was fading again. I didn't think I'd be able to pull myself out this time.

I made a small pained sound when the first man climbed on top of me, but nothing more. I turned my head so I wouldn't have to see his face and tried to go somewhere else. It didn't work this time. I was aware of everything. The hairs on his chest rubbing against me. The pain inside me,

though it wasn't much. I didn't have a lot of feeling there anymore. The things that had been done to me were finally starting to take their toll on my body.

The second man was gentle and I hated that more. It was like they thought it would seem less like rape if they were nice about it. At least the men who were rough behaved like they knew what they were doing and had accepted it. They were animals, but the other were hypocrites. I preferred the animals.

This one finished himself off and I could feel the drops of his cum splattering on my stomach. As soon as he moved, another took his place. I lost count after a while and it didn't hurt at all anymore. My body was as numb as my mind and only the rhythmic movement of my body under theirs told me that they were still going.

I saw a shadow move and then my arms were free. Little pins and needles began shooting up and down my arms as my ankles were released next. I started to sit up, ready to shower and go to sleep, but a slap across the face made me stop. I wasn't done yet.

A man stretched out on the mattress next to me and I climbed on top of him. When I felt a hand on my back, I whimpered, but leaned forward obediently. Even my desensitized body felt what happened next. I bit my lip to keep from screaming, but I couldn't stop the tears. They were involuntary, the automatic reaction to being split in two, and they kept coming as one man after another took their second turn.

I couldn't stop the scream when a third man joined in and I felt something inside me tear...

I jerked awake, heart pounding. The room was dark, unfamiliar, and I could feel the panic closing in. I fumbled for a lamp next to the bed, my befuddled brain insisting that one had to be there, no matter where I was. With my throat closing and my chest tightening, gray spots danced in front of my eyes and I fought to keep from passing out. I had to see where I was.

The light came on and I saw the generic color scheme, the basic furniture. Right, a hotel. I flopped back onto the bed. The room wasn't tiny, but it was small enough for me to see that I was alone. I stared at the ceiling, trying to remember how to breathe.

My arms wrapped around my middle. I'd get through this. I'd done it before. They were only nightmares, memories. They couldn't hurt me. I was safe. Honestly, I was safer now than I had been at my apartment, I told

myself. Christophe was out on bail until his plea deal was finished, but he'd never find me here. I'd used cash and an alias.

I kept talking to myself, but the panic attack didn't subside. If anything, it seemed to take a stronger hold. The hotel room swam in front of me. I didn't want to pass out. Sometimes, I had nightmares in that deep darkness, and I didn't want another one.

I'd gotten spoiled, having Rylan there to hold me, to tell me everything was okay. His arms around me, his voice pulling me back from the brink.

Tears burned at my eyelids even though I'd thought I'd cried myself dry. He'd told me that he'd be my anchor, that I could hold onto him, even in my sleep and he'd help me get through my nightmares. Thinking of him, though, didn't bring comfort now. It just made things worse.

I rolled out of bed and headed for the mini-bar. It would've been cheaper just to go to a liquor store or grocery store, but I didn't feel like going out. I wasn't even sure what time it was. All I knew was I needed something that was going to help me relax. I didn't like using alcohol to do that, but at the moment, it seemed better than the alternative of just staying up and having to deal with the pain sober.

I drained three little bottles and the muscles in my chest relaxed enough that I could actually breathe. I crawled back into bed, knowing I was going to wake up with a nasty hangover and not caring. Better a hangover than those dreams.

I left the light on as I closed my eyes and waited for sleep or unconsciousness. I didn't care which one. As long as oblivion came with it. I didn't want to think anymore. What would be the point? I was smart, but brains didn't necessarily mean anything. After all, they hadn't done anything for me before. I'd had to rely on someone else to save me.

I snorted a laugh even though it was far from funny. It was all well and good to say you didn't need a man rescuing you, but I'd proven that to be a big fat lie. Granted, Lily hadn't been a man, but there had been men on the team that had come in and saved me. I'd told myself I'd only needed help because I'd been a child, but recent events were proving that wasn't true. I was just weak. I'd tried to fight against Christophe, but Rylan had come in to rescue me. On my own, I was pretty much useless.

Rylan looked down at me with an expression of disgust on his face. I wanted to look away, to cover myself up, but I couldn't move. I was held tight

between the men fucking me and could do nothing but pray that Rylan would turn away. He didn't though.

“Suzette and Zeke were right. You're just a filthy little whore, aren't you, Jenna?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of cash. He dropped it next to me and unzipped his pants. He didn't wait for the others to be done, shoving himself inside me...

“No!” The word was still on my lips as I woke. I winced at the sharp pain in my head, but it was a welcome reminder that it had only been a dream. Rylan hadn't done that. He hadn't been there. And he wouldn't have done it even if he had been. I'd heard the anger in his voice when I talked about being abused. He wanted to kill the men who'd hurt me. I hadn't left him because I hadn't believed that he loved me. I'd left because I'd known he loved me.

Exhausted emotionally and physically, I drifted in and out of sleep. Sometimes I managed an hour or so without nightmares, but they always came eventually. Some were memories of my past. My mother hitting me, burning me. The man who'd like to hunt me. Individual men, faceless when they raped me, their perversion feeling almost normal when compared to other things I'd been forced to do. Christophe making me watch those videos.

Worse were the ones my mind made up entirely. Most starred Rylan. Sometimes he was joining in the abuse, but more often, he was happy, married to someone else, a father to beautiful children. In my dreams, he'd forgotten me until I approached and then he would send me away, not wanting me to contaminate the precious life he'd created. There were dreams where I'd married Rylan and we had a family. Those were the worst of all, because I'd be happy in the dream and then wake up to feel the loss all over again.

At some point, I realized that I'd slept almost the entire weekend away. It was late Sunday night and I hadn't taken a single moment to think about what I was going to do tomorrow. I knew what I wanted to do. Sleep. Try to find even a few minutes of peace. I could feel the darkness tugging at me, promising relief. Even though I knew it was a lie, I wanted it.

Growing up, I'd never allowed myself to think much of the future because I'd known that if I'd seen it, the black stretching outward, endless days of pain and misery, I'd either go mad or I'd kill myself. When I'd started

Lang Tech Consulting, I'd allowed myself to see a positive future, but only in my work. With Rylan, however, I'd been unable to stop myself from thinking about a future with him because he'd seen one with me.

Now there was nothing. I could start Lang Tech Consulting back up again. My clients had been sad to see me go. I didn't really want to do that though. As much as I'd fought against working at Archer Enterprises, I'd ended up enjoying the job. The people, for the most part, were polite and let me do my own thing.

I couldn't go back though. I knew people had started to put two and two together regarding Rylan and I, and they'd soon figure out I broke up with him. I didn't want to be there when all of that shit hit the fan. There'd be blame and gossip and all of the things that made me prefer computers to actual people.

And then there'd be him. I couldn't face Rylan again. I couldn't bear to see how badly I'd hurt him. Or worse, if I hadn't hurt him at all. I'd told myself that I knew he loved me, but I couldn't stop myself from wondering just how deep that love actually went. Of course, there was always the problem of what I'd do if he tried to get me back. It had taken all my strength to leave. I was a strong person, but I didn't think I could walk away from him again. One look, one touch, and I'd be his. It would've been so much easier if I didn't love him or if he'd done something horrible, but none of that was true. All I had to hold onto was that I was giving him the chance to find the happiness he deserved.

When Sunday turned into Monday, I made up my mind about what I had to do. I didn't like the idea, but I knew it was the right thing for everyone involved.

I waited until six o'clock and went downstairs. I knew how good Rylan was with a computer. If I sent the email from my phone, he'd be able to find me. The cab driver gave me an odd look when I asked to be taken to the local library, but he didn't argue. It wasn't open yet, but I'd made friends with the security guard a while back and he'd sometimes let me in early. I handed him a cup of coffee and he unlocked the door. I promised to be in and out in just a couple minutes. It didn't take long and, by six-thirty, I'd sent my resignation to Rylan's personal and business emails. Even if he did track the origin of the email here, he'd never find me. And that was a pretty big if. Another reason I'd wanted to use the library's computers was that I'd used them before and hidden a nice little re-routing program to my log-in that made it seem like I

was working from other parts of the country.

I was numb as I went back to the hotel. It was done. I'd cut all ties with Rylan and now I'd make sure I stayed out of his way, at least until he'd moved on. I could leave Fort Collins, I supposed, make a new start somewhere else. I wasn't quite ready to do that yet, but if I had to, I would. Seattle might be a good place to disappear to.

I pushed the thought aside. I wasn't there yet. Right now, all I wanted to do was sleep and not think.

Chapter 3

I had the driver stop at a drug store before going to the hotel and I was glad I had. I'd never been fond of taking sleeping pills since they made me sleep so deeply that I wasn't aware of my surroundings, but at the moment, they were better than the alternative of alcohol. At least the sleeping pills wouldn't give me a hangover. Plus, once I checked my room to make sure no one else was inside, I could bolt and lock the door and feel as safe as I did anywhere else – more than I did in my apartment. I ignored the little voice in the back of my head that said I'd be even safer with Rylan. That wasn't an option anymore.

For the next few days, I slept. I woke periodically to eat something or use the bathroom, but I didn't bother showering or changing my clothes. I turned down maid service and tried not to think. It was harder than one would imagine, even with the sleeping pills.

I'd never been the kind of person who could do things like stare at a television for hours, watching mindlessly. I always had to be doing something. Work. Reading. Anything to keep my mind busy. My therapist had mentioned once that, because my IQ was so high, my brain needed more than one thing to focus on or it got bored and I got distracted.

So I slept, and half-slept, and my mind followed whatever little trail it wanted to. Sometimes into the past, sometimes into the future. Always bleak and hopeless. I tried not to think about Rylan and our time together. That hurt too much. But I wasn't strong enough to resist it, especially when I was in that place half-way between sleep and awake. That was when he came to me.

I could see him clear as day. His dark hair. Those blue-violet eyes that darkened to almost purple when he wanted me. I could picture the Celtic cross that ran the length of his spine and across his shoulders, the way his muscles rippled beneath the tattooed skin. Strong jaw, lightly stubbled before he shaved. High cheekbones that emphasized his amazing eyes. He was the perfect combination of rugged and, well, pretty.

And then there was the way he looked at me, like I was something precious, to be protected. I could feel his fingertips caressing my face, almost as if he was afraid I'd break. His mouth gentle on mine. Then, firm and demanding. His body moving above me, behind me, inside me. He'd known what I needed, and had always put me first. He wanted to dominate me, but he'd been cautious, always making sure I was okay.

I could still hear his voice saying my name, calling me *love*. He'd worshipped my body, made it come alive, but he'd done so much more than that. He'd given me back my heart, my soul, and I'd given them right back to him. I'd submitted to him, let him fulfill fantasies that I'd never admitted, ones that I knew he wanted but would never ask because he'd known they were triggers for me. He'd told me about the BDSM lifestyle and offered to walk away from it for me.

Each time those things came back to me, whether in fragments or whole memories, my heart would break again. I missed him more than I'd ever thought I could miss someone. I missed the feel of him, and not just during sex. The safety I felt when in his arms. The warmth of his voice. His smile.

To make matters worse, he'd been calling me since Monday morning. And texting. And sending emails. By Tuesday, I'd turned off my phone. I didn't have anyone else who'd be calling me since I hadn't bothered to try contacting former clients yet.

I hadn't answered any of the attempts at contact, but I hadn't been able to stop myself from listening to the voicemails, reading the messages and emails. Yet another reason I'd turned off my phone. I wasn't sure which would've been worse, if he hadn't tried to contact me at all or hearing the pain in his voice, seeing it in his words.

“Jenna, love, please don't do this. Tell me how to fix it. If things were moving too fast, you moving in here, it's okay. I can step back. We can go as slow as you need to. Just, please, talk to me.”

“Was it something my parents or Suzette said? We don't have to go back again. I'll make sure they know that they're not welcome until they can accept you. I won't lose you over their ignorance. Call me. I love you.”

“Did I hurt you? Please, talk to me. I'm so sorry if I did something...Just tell me what it was. You know I'd never hurt you on purpose. Please, love. I need you.”

Gradually, I could hear the anger under the hurt, read it between the

lines.

“You're quitting? What's going on? I thought things were good between us. I mean, we hadn't even been arguing. Was it because I didn't immediately tell off my parents for being rude? I told you that I'd choose you over them and I meant it.”

“I can't fix things if you don't tell me what happened. Talk to me, Jenna. You promised me, after the Lara thing, that you'd talk to me when you were upset. What the hell did I do wrong?”

Then came the voicemail that had made me decide to stop listening.

“When I said I loved you, I meant it, and I asked you not to say it back out of obligation. I truly believed you meant it that night, and every time since. If you didn't love me, you could've just said so. I would've understood and waited, or bowed out. It would've been kinder. Or was it that you didn't know until...is there someone else? Have you fallen in love with someone else and didn't know how to tell me? Do you love him or is he just a game to you? Was I?”

It was killing me, knowing that he thought this was his fault, that he'd done something wrong. That he was doubting my love for him. Better that than the alternative though. Even if I told him the truth, he'd insist it didn't matter and he'd be angry with Suzette for what she'd said to me. I couldn't drive a wedge between him and his family. With me out of the way, they'd mend things. Rylan's life would go back to normal. He'd be able to return to how things were before he met me and he'd be happy again.

That annoying little voice in the back of my head spoke up, reminding me of what he'd said after the Lara incident, how he'd sworn off relationships, not wanting to risk his heart until he'd found someone worth the risk. Guilt settled in my stomach, a heavy lump that weighed down every part of me. He'd trusted me with his heart and I'd violated that trust. After what Lara had done to him...my actions were reprehensible. But I had to believe that he would find someone truly worthy of him, someone who could give him everything I couldn't.

All of these thoughts and more swirled around and around in my head every day, pulling me down further and further into the darkness. After what I'd gone through as a child, I'd struggled with depression, and I'd thought I'd finally beaten it. I hadn't had a bout of it in a few years, not since moving out here. I'd believed that I'd left it behind in Florida, along with my real name

and everything else that had symbolized who I'd been.

Now, I saw that it had always been there, lurking below the surface, just waiting for something like this to happen so that it could break through and swallow me. It was like drowning, or at least what I'd always imagined drowning would feel like. Struggling to keep my head above water, desperate for air, arms and legs fighting against the current until it was just too much. Giving up was so much easier than trying to stay afloat.

By Thursday evening, I knew I had to make a choice. I was at the turning point. I could give in and let myself wallow here until I finally ended things, or I could keep fighting. I didn't want to fight. I'd been fighting my whole life, even when I hadn't realized it. I'd tried to kill myself before, but I'd survived and kept fighting a bit longer. Even when I wished I'd die, I hadn't pursued the idea. I supposed I could still snap out of this on my own, but I also knew that if I gave in to it, there was a chance I'd never come back.

I fumbled with my phone, turning it on before I realized I'd made a choice. My heart thumped painfully against my ribcage when I saw that Rylan's calls had finally stopped. I ignored the couple messages he'd left yesterday and went to my contacts list. I hadn't dialed this number in a long time and I hoped it was still good since it wasn't her office line.

“Hello?” A vaguely familiar voice answered on the second ring.

“Dr. MacLeod, it's Jenna Lang.” My voice sounded weaker than I liked, but I pressed on. “I need to see you.”

Chapter 4

When I'd gotten accepted to Colorado State University, I hadn't turned eighteen yet and I'd prepared myself for a fight with the court system to let me graduate early and leave Florida. Instead, I'd gotten a surprise. The only person I had even a small sense of trust in since Lily had died had been my court-appointed psychologist, Regina MacLeod, and that had mostly been because Lily had trusted her. When I'd told Dr. MacLeod about what I wanted to do and my fears that I wouldn't be allowed, she'd simply smiled and said to let her take care of it. At our next session, she'd told me that she'd worked it all out. Her son had moved to Denver a few years before and he'd been asking her to join him for some time. Moving her practice to Fort Collins would be a good compromise. The court had agreed to emancipate me if I would continue twice-weekly meetings with Dr. MacLeod until I turned eighteen. My last session had been the day after my eighteenth birthday. I'd seen her at least once a week almost every week for five years, and then I'd stopped going.

I'd checked in with her every so often the first couple years, but even that had stopped. I hadn't wanted any reminders of my past, and Dr. MacLeod was that. Going to see her again would bring up memories that I'd rather stayed forgotten, but she was the only person I could talk to now that...I shook my head. If I'd still had Rylan, I wouldn't have needed Dr. MacLeod in the first place. I would've had myself under control, dealing with things the way I had been for the past four years. Granted, the thing with Christophe had stirred things up again, as well as adding a new set of nightmarish memories, but I could handle them, especially with Rylan as my anchor, my support. Losing him, however, was threatening to pull me down into the dark and keep me there.

It had taken everything I'd had to pull myself together enough to shower and dress. The only other clean clothes I had were from the bag I'd taken with me to Rylan's – sweatpants and a sweatshirt to wear while we were moving

things. What I'd worn the last few days had been from the little I'd left at the house the last time I'd been there. The majority of my clothes were in boxes at my apartment. I'd need to get some things tomorrow or find somewhere to wash what I had. I'd worry about that tomorrow though. First things first.

I walked into Dr. MacLeod's office more than a little nervous. It looked the same as it had the last time I'd been there. Professional, but comforting at the same time. Her office in Florida had been the same way. I'd thought she'd hired an interior decorator there, but this office was so similar I'd come to believe she'd done it herself. One of the reasons I respected Dr. MacLeod was that she didn't have an arrogant bone in her body. Case in point, she was currently standing on one of the chairs in her waiting room, her short silver hair a mess, and she was attempting to swat at something on the ceiling.

"Dr. MacLeod." For the first time since I'd met Rylan's family, I felt like smiling.

"Jenna." She beamed at me and climbed down from the chair. "Apparently, a spider has made its home on my ceiling and Carolyn's too frightened to squash it."

"That's not what I said." A rather stout woman spoke up from behind the receptionist's desk. "I said, I can't get my fat ass up in that chair so I can reach it." She glared at Dr. MacLeod for a moment before giving me a polite smile. "Carolyn Chisom. I don't believe we've met before."

"No." I shook my head. "The last time I was here, Denise was the receptionist."

"I took over for Denise two years ago," Carolyn said. "She decided to stay home with her kids."

"Well, Carolyn, I wasn't able to get rid of our guest, so I suppose we'll just have to wait until he decides to come down and join us." Dr. MacLeod smoothed down her hair and opened the door to her office. "Jenna."

I stepped inside and sat down in the same chair I'd used the last time I was here. It was still comfortable, but I could feel a bit of a sag to it, a reminder of how long it had been since I'd last been here.

"I'm glad to see you." Dr. MacLeod took her usual seat. "Though I'd hoped that your absence over the last four years meant that you were living a full and uncomplicated life."

I gave her a half smile. "I was doing okay. Able to handle things on my

own.”

“And then?”

I took a deep breath. “I'm not quite sure where to start.”

“Why don't you start with what made you call me?”

Right. Another reason I'd grown to like Dr. MacLeod. She didn't beat around the bush. I preferred straightforward, especially when it came to things like this. It didn't exactly make answering her question easier, but I appreciated her approach.

“I'm depressed and I knew if I didn't talk to someone, I was going to make a really stupid decision.”

She raised an eyebrow, but didn't push it. I knew if I said 'suicide' or 'kill myself,' she'd be obligated to determine if my threat was real and, if so, commit me for a psych evaluation. I know she suspected what I meant, but she'd let me say it the way I wanted.

“The future has never been bright for me,” I continued. “You know that. But I was doing good. Working, putting the past behind me...” My voice trailed off and I looked down at my hands.

“What happened?” The doctor's voice was gentle, but I knew I couldn't ignore her question.

It was harder than I'd imagined to get the words out. “I fell in love.”

Slowly, I told her the story, starting at the beginning. I didn't give her the gory details of my sex life before Rylan, but I didn't hide the fact that I'd had a hell of a lot of one night stands. I was honest about how Rylan was my boss and how I felt about Zeke, Rylan's best friend. I knew she wouldn't judge me on any of it. That wasn't what she did and it wasn't while I was here. I left in all of the important parts, even the ones that didn't make me look very good. When I finally finished, I felt like a weight had been lifted from me. I still hurt and the future still looked dim, but I thought that maybe, I could keep going.

“Why did you decide not to talk to Rylan about what his sister said?”

I frowned, though I wasn't surprised. I'd known she was going to ask that. “Because he'd say he didn't care that I can't have children.”

“And you think he's lying?”

“Yes .No.” I paused to get my thoughts in order. “Not exactly. But I

think he'll convince himself that he doesn't care.”

“And you're worried that he'll resent you.” She didn't make it a question.

“It's best to just break things off now,” I said.

“Shouldn't you let him make that choice?”

I didn't really like the advice that Dr. MacLeod had given me, but at least I'd talked things through, and that had helped. I could still feel the darkness at the edge of my mind, but there was only a shadow over me now. Unlike before, I didn't feel the need to continue to go back to the doctor. I'd dealt with my past and I was feeling more like myself now that I'd talked to her. I'd promised that if I needed her again, I'd call, but I was hoping it wouldn't come to that.

I squared my shoulders and raised my chin. My heart was still broken and I had a feeling I'd cry myself to sleep more than once over the next few weeks, but I was ready to move on. The first step was figuring out what I was going to do next.

I needed to go back to my apartment to get some clothes and I needed to figure out what I wanted to do for work. I hadn't exactly been thinking about work other than a vague idea that I'd return to my previous business. Now, however, I wasn't so sure that would be the best idea. If I kept working in security or any sort of tech support, the chances of me not running into Rylan were low. After all, the first time we'd had sex had been at a tech conference that we'd attended separately.

I couldn't take seeing him again, not like that. I'd never be able to concentrate. I needed to find something else to do. Keeping busy was usually a good way to get my mind off things. I'd go back to the hotel and start making a list of what I needed to do, including a second list of possible jobs.

The cab was halfway to the hotel when my phone rang. I swore as I dug into my pocket for it. I'd forgotten to turn it back off after calling Dr. MacLeod last night. I'd almost hit the reject button when I saw that it wasn't Rylan calling. I had a moment of sadness that he'd stopped trying to reach me and then answered the phone.

“Agent Matthews,” I said.

Raymond Matthews had been the FBI agent who'd come to Archer Enterprises to ask for my permission to give Christophe a deal that would allow the FBI to go after several other pedophiles. I hadn't particularly liked him at first since he hadn't been the most sympathetic of people, but he was genuine in his desire to help.

“Miss Lang.”

“I'm really hoping you aren't calling to tell me that Christophe is going to go free without any penalty.” My voice sounded dry, but my heart began to race at the thought of Christophe roaming free with only a restraining order in place to keep him away from me and Rylan.

“No, they're still working on his deal and he's still out on bail.” He paused, and then continued, “You haven't seen him, have you?”

“No.” I involuntarily looked out the window as the taxi pulled up in front of the hotel. There were a couple people outside, but none of them were Christophe and none of them even looked twice at me. With regular hair and clothes, there wasn't much about me to attract attention.

“What I'm actually calling about, Miss Lang, is a job offer.”

“What?” I had to have misheard him. The FBI didn't offer jobs to people like me.

“I have a job proposal for you,” he said. “I'd prefer to give you the details in person.”

“You do remember that the last time we saw each other, I needed to sign a paper because I'd done some illegal things in my past, right?” I kept my tone light.

“I remember,” he said. He almost sounded amused. “I also remember that the paper you signed gave you immunity.”

“From prosecution, not from vetting for a federal job.”

He laughed, a rusty noise, like he didn't do it very often. “Trust me, Miss Lang. I wouldn't come to you with this unless my superiors had already approved it.”

Now I was curious. What would be so important that the director of the FBI would be willing to overlook a criminal past as well as my own rather unorthodox appearance? Granted, I at least had normal-colored hair now, but I was still far from what a federal agent should look like.

“When do you want to see me?”

“Monday morning, if at all possible. I'm supposed to head back to DC for a debriefing on Tuesday. I'll come down to the police station in Fort Collins rather than making you come to Denver.”

Maybe this was the out I'd been looking for. If nothing else, it was worth a shot. “I'll be there at eight.”

“I'll see you then.”

Chapter 5

I was hoping that Rylan had missed enough work Monday looking for me that he had to work today even though it was Saturday. Or maybe he was working to stop himself from thinking about me. Either way, I hoped he wasn't staking out my apartment. That actually sounded a bit creepier when I thought of it like that.

He wasn't there, so it didn't matter anyway. A part of me was a bit hurt that he seemed to have given up so easily, but that was a good thing. At least that's what I told myself. If he wasn't looking for me anymore, that meant he'd accepted that I didn't want to see him or talk to him. I hoped that meant he'd move on quickly. It was excruciatingly painful to think of Rylan with someone else, enough to make my eyes swim with tears and my lungs constrict painfully, but I knew I'd done the right thing.

I walked into my apartment, the pain in my heart increasing until I could barely breathe. All of my things were in boxes. Not that there were many of them. I owned enough clothes, but not in excess. My kitchen things were going to go in storage until I decided where I wanted to donate them. Everything was clearly marked. I hadn't wanted us to take more time than necessary cleaning out things here. I'd wanted to be home...

I closed my eyes and began counting, focusing on each agonizing beat of my heart. As my breathing eased, I opened my eyes and walked over to the box of my clothes. I couldn't resist a quick glance into my bedroom. My bedroom suite was still there. I couldn't tell if I was happy or disappointed. Glad that I still had it, but sad that he hadn't still had the movers take it. I knew what it meant. He didn't believe I would be coming back to him.

I let the pain wash over me, through me, and then I let it go. I opened one of the boxes and began to take out some of the clothes. I moved quickly, not wanting to be here any longer than necessary. There were too many memories. Memories of before; when my life had been simple. Memories of Christophe. Of Rylan. There were too many ghosts here for me to linger.

I repacked one of the other boxes so that I had a mix of clothing types and picked that one up. I'd asked the cab to wait for me, not wanting to have to walk, take a bus or try to flag down another cab with my arms full. Yet another reason why I wanted to do this quickly.

I put the box on the seat next to me and asked the driver to take me back to the hotel. I'd called my landlord on the way in and let him know that I wasn't sure if I'd be moving or not. I promised to let him know as soon as I did if I was staying or going. Fortunately, I still had some time left on my lease and enough money for a couple of weeks in the hotel and to pay my rent.

By the time I took my box upstairs to my room and unpacked my clothes into the dresser, I was exhausted. It was barely noon, but all I wanted to do was sleep. I knew it was a symptom of my lingering depression, but I couldn't fight it anymore. Maybe if I had something else to do, I could force myself into activity, but there wasn't anything else I needed to do. Exercise and practicing my self-defense was usually a good way to try to keep things at bay, but I didn't want to leave my room again. Not with Christophe and Rylan both out there.

I glanced at the bottle of sleeping pills, debated for a second and then took one of them. Not enough to knock me out, but enough to make me feel drowsy. I stretched out on the bed and waited for sleep to claim me.

I smiled at him as I walked through the door. He'd left a trail of rose petals from the front door all the way to the playroom, the scent filling the house. The playroom was lit with candles, all carefully placed so that the room glowed. The bed had been remade with red silk sheets. It was like something out of a dream or a romance novel.

Rylan stood next to the bed, clothed only in shadows. I could see the outline of his muscular body, those broad shoulders and narrow waist. I let my eyes drop lower and appreciate the long, thick shaft curving up to his flat stomach. My pussy throbbed at the sight of him and I stepped further into the room and shut the door behind me.

“Show me.” His voice was low, husky.

I obediently untied my robe and let it slide from my shoulders, revealing what I was wearing beneath. I wasn't entirely sure why I'd been wearing lingerie and a robe when I'd come into the house, but I wasn't about to waste time thinking right now. I just wanted to see the expression on Rylan's face

when he saw what I was wearing.

The panties were sheer, wide enough in front to cover the essentials and only a strip in the back, leaving my ass bare. The bra was low cut, barely covering my nipples, which were tight and pointed. The straps were done like a halter-top, lace tied behind my neck. My stockings ended just above my knee, attached to a pair of garters around my thighs.

To finish things out, I wore a pair of high heels, almost too high for me to walk comfortably, but I managed it – slowly, gracefully – swaying my hips as I walked.

Rylan let out a whistle, but all he said was, “Kneel.”

I did as I was told, my stomach tightening at the authority in his voice. He walked over to me and cupped my chin, raising my face so that we could look at each other.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“You,” I said. “Always you.”

He brushed his thumb across my bottom lip and I darted my tongue out to flick it against the pad of his thumb. He made a low sound.

“Open.”

I opened my mouth and he slid his cock between my lips. The weight of it was heavy on my tongue, the taste of him making me wet. He put his hand on my head and looked down at me for permission. My eyes gave it to him. I didn't need a safe word. I trusted him.

He rocked his hips, slowly at first, and then faster. I relaxed my throat, letting him use my mouth as he wanted. I kept my hands clasped behind my back, but my fingers itched to touch him, to cup his balls, caress them. To feel his tight ass under my hands. Digging my nails in and holding him to me, my lips stretched wide around his base as I took all of him. And then he was coming and I was swallowing, savoring every drop as I worked my tongue around his softening shaft.

He gripped my arms and pulled me to my feet. His mouth covered mine, his tongue thoroughly exploring my mouth, tasting himself. He lowered me to the bed, his lips moving from mine to move across my jaw and down my neck. His fingers were at the back of my neck and then the bra loosened, allowing him to hook his finger in the cups, pulling them down under my breasts. He cupped one in each hand before his fingers went to my nipples, skillfully

manipulating them. Twisting, pulling. Pain mixed with pleasure as he began to alternate between the breasts, sucking and nibbling until my entire body felt like it was on fire.

I spread my legs as one hand slid down between them. He chuckled as he cupped my pussy.

“You're soaked, love,” he murmured against my mouth. “Is that for me?”

“Only you,” I breathed, arching up into his touch. My eyes were closed, every sensation like electricity racing across my nerves, a not-quite-painful prickle that only he could give me. I'd never felt anything like it before. None of my previous lovers had ever been able to make me feel like this.

“What do you want, love?”

“You.” I squirmed against his hand, but he didn't give me the friction I needed. “Please, I need you.”

I whimpered as a finger slipped under the wet fabric, teasing me even as his mouth latched onto my nipple again. He sucked hard, drawing a cry from me that turned into a wail as he shoved his finger inside. He crooked it, pressing against that spot inside me and I came. Using mouth and hand, he coaxed every last bit of pleasure from me before he moved up above me.

He pulled my arms above my head, pinning them there with a hand wrapped around my wrists. His grip tightened until I gasped and he captured the sound with his mouth, a bruising kiss that made my lips throb and my body tighten.

I started to reach for him, but found myself bound, the chill of metal against my skin. The handcuffs were loose enough that I could manipulate the release catch if I needed to, but I didn't even consider it.

“Rylan,” I protested as he moved off of me. He paused by the side of the bed, raising an eyebrow in a question I knew all too well. I nodded. The game would continue.

He walked over to one of the chests of toys and began rummaging around inside. When he picked up a small, thin dildo, barely the size of one of his fingers, my heart skipped a beat. We'd talked about it, but never done it. He knew how brutally I'd been used and had never wanted to risk making me feel that way again. He held it up and waited for me to nod again.

He kissed my knee, my thigh, as he slid off my panties and tossed them

aside. His free hand slowly slid up and down my leg as he settled. I shivered as his thumb brushed over my clit, then moaned as I felt his finger slide inside. A moment later, it withdrew and trailed further down. Coated with my own juices, his finger eased into my ass, gently stretching until he knew I was ready. I could smell the cinnamon-scented lube he'd used on the dildo and I closed my eyes, focusing on that. It didn't exactly hurt as he slid it into place, but the burn and stretch was both familiar and unfamiliar. He moved slowly, thumb still moving across my clit so that the sensations mingled and created a totally different kind of burn.

“Ready?” he asked.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He would stop, I knew, if I asked it, but I could see the desire in his eyes. Not just desire for me, but for my pleasure. He wanted this for me as much as for himself. He knew my body, knew what I needed almost better than I did. Sometimes there wasn't even an 'almost' there.

“I trust you.”

He swallowed hard and I could see his emotions blazing in his eyes. My trust meant as much to him as my love, I knew, because he understood that I didn't give either easily.

He leaned over me, his mouth soft against mine. It was a chaste kiss, but it burned a path down through me, a gentler sort of heat that strengthened rather than tempered what was already there. His eyes locked on mine as he entered me. He took his time, allowing us both to enjoy the feel of something new. The dildo wasn't big enough to make this too tight, but it was enough to change the way he rubbed against me.

I closed my eyes, the sensations too much as my muscles twitched, squeezing both of the shafts inside me. Rylan cursed and stilled. I could feel his thighs shaking against mine and knew he was fighting for control. A surge of love went through me. The fact that I could make a man like him come undone...and I knew it wasn't only my body that did it to him.

“Open your eyes.” The words were rough, almost harsh.

I did as I was told, looking up at that face I loved so much. I didn't love him for his beauty. That was only a bonus. I loved him for his mind, his heart, his soul, the things that made him so different from anyone else I'd ever met.

I stared into those near-purple depths as he began to move. His strokes were hard and deep, but not fast. My body moved with him, the rhythm of our

love-making an unconscious thing, as it had always been. We were one body, engaged in the sort of ancient dance that billions had done before us and would do again after we were long forgotten.

My hands were suddenly free though I didn't remember working the clasps and I buried my hands in his hair, pulling his face down to mine. We didn't kiss, only rested our foreheads together as we chased the release that would, for a few glorious moments, defy the laws of physics and make us a single entity. And that was what I'd always wanted, what I'd craved. I'd experienced the physical pleasure of an orgasm from other sexual encounters, but with Rylan, it was different. Pure, somehow, as if being in love changed the very nature of things.

I hovered on the edge, fighting my body to hold on a little bit longer. I pressed my lips against his ear. "Come with me, my love."

When it hit us, I found myself swept under the wave, gasping and shaking, unable to breathe or think. It was too much. I had lost myself and was adrift, unable to find my way back. And then he was there, his arms tight around me, our bodies joined.

"I'm here," he whispered fiercely. "I have you and I'm never letting go. I've got you."

I woke with tears still streaming down my cheeks.

Chapter 6

I studied my reflection with a critical eye. I was paler than usual, but it was winter, so I doubted anyone would think anything of it. I'd managed to hide the dark circles under my eyes with make-up and even though my clothes felt a bit loose, I hadn't lost enough weight for it to really be noticeable to anyone. I'd chosen one of my few conservative outfits: black dress pants, a plain white blouse and a black jacket. I'd always thought that it made me look like some sort of government agent, so I supposed it was my best bet. I didn't, however, have any decent shoes to wear, not in this kind of weather anyway. It had been snowing on and off all week and all of Fort Collins was blanketed in at least six inches of the stuff. No way was I wearing anything other than boots.

As I headed downstairs, I rubbed my palms against my pant legs. I wasn't sure why I was nervous. I was only meeting with Agent Matthews. It wasn't like I was being taken in for questioning or even having to face Christophe. It was only a job interview.

Right. I snorted a laugh, earning a disapproving look from the woman standing next to me at the bus stop. I ignored her. A job interview with the FBI. It still didn't seem real.

The bus dropped me off across the street from the police station and I gave myself a moment to steady my nerves before crossing and heading inside. The officer at the desk gave me a polite smile and pointed me towards the office Agent Matthews was using. I had to admit, it was an advantage to having changed my appearance. If I'd come in with my usual dress and blue hair, I doubted I would've been sent straight back on my own.

“Miss Lang.” Agent Matthews stood as I entered the room and held out his hand. I shook it and he motioned for me to have a seat. “Thank you for coming in.”

“I have to admit,” I said as I sat. “I hadn't seen this coming.”

He grinned, leaning back in his chair. "Trust me, I hadn't either."

"Then where did this come from?"

"You told the ADA that you'd hacked into some government systems to erase your previous identity as well as damaging any files containing your name or image," he began. "So I decided to take a closer look at you."

I folded my hands on my lap and hoped that the agent couldn't see how hard I was gripping them together.

"Now, I'm no computer expert, but I had one of my guys who is look into it. From what he tells me, you're not just good, Miss Lang. You're exceptional."

I didn't know how to respond so I settled for a simple. "Thank you."

"I also see why you need the immunity." He had a half-smile on his face. "If you wanted to, you could do some serious damage to national security."

I shrugged, neither admitting nor denying it. He was right, of course, but I wasn't dumb enough to say it.

"We could really use someone with your skill set in our cyber-crimes division."

I started to say that I didn't want to track down hackers and terrorists, no matter how much that might be a good thing, but he held up a hand and I let him finish.

"Specifically, I want you to work with a sub-division of cyber-crimes, one specifically formed to track down and stop child pornography." He paused to give me a moment to absorb that and then kept going. "Technology is always a few steps ahead of the law and we're working to catch up. Part of the problem is that we're constantly reacting to things rather than going on the offensive. We don't have anyone who can keep up with these guys, so we're always trailing behind, picking up the pieces and hoping we get lucky once in a while and manage to catch someone."

That didn't surprise me. The people who ran sites like that, who distributed films, they were usually smart. The dumb ones got caught because they screwed up. Men like Christophe could give us names of some of the higher ups, but I didn't doubt they'd be gone before the FBI got to them. Lily had told me that the man who'd run a lot of that stuff for my mom had gotten away.

“So that's what you want me for,” I said. “To find these guys faster than they realize it.”

Agent Matthews nodded. “We need you to track these guys, find out where they are. If possible, find where the kids are so they can't be used as leverage for lower sentences.”

“And your bosses are aware of my...past?” I asked.

He nodded. “Once I explained to them what you'd managed to do, they were definitely willing to overlook previous offenses to get you on our side.”

“Does that mean if I decline the offer, you're going to pursue a case against me?” It wasn't that I didn't trust the government, but I knew there were a lot of people who were willing to do whatever it took to get what they wanted. Since they wanted me, I needed to know the lengths to which the FBI would go.

“No.” His voice was firm. “I don't work like that.”

My estimation of Agent Matthews went up even more. “What if your bosses decide they'll do it without you?”

He gave me a half-grin. “I trust you're good enough not to have left tracks.”

“I am.”

“Then all they have is a hypothetical statement that I made based on what I'd heard you tell the ADA after signing the immunity agreement. I'm pretty sure a half-decent lawyer would be able to get that thrown out without a problem.”

“You do know that a lot of the restrictions in place are the reasons why people like that are able to get away,” I said.

“I know.” A flash of anger went through his dark eyes. “Laws meant to protect the innocent have become the same ones that the guilty hide behind.” He looked at me. “That's why we need you. You're good enough to work within the system and still get results.”

Not as good as the results I could get outside the system, I thought, but he was right. I was still faster than most, if not all, the techs the FBI had working for them. I might've had confidence issues in some areas, but this wasn't one of them.

“Does that mean I'd be working from the field office in Denver?” I

asked. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

“If you want. Or you could go to DC and work with the main task force there.”

“What about freelancing?” I nearly blurted the question out and wasn't sure why. “It's not like I'd be going on raids or anything, just doing the computer work. I wouldn't have to relocate that way.”

Agent Matthews studied me for a moment, and I knew what he was thinking. He knew something was going on with Rylan and me, or at least he'd known it when it had been true. The thing was, I knew I should've jumped at the chance to move. Denver was still near the mountains, which I loved. DC was back on the East Coast, but north enough not to feel like Florida. Either one would be far enough from Rylan that I wouldn't risk a random run-in, or him finding me...*if* he started searching again. It'd be a fresh start, something that I should have wanted. That I did want.

But I wasn't ready to say good-bye to Fort Collins yet. Sure, I had things to work through here, but this had been the first place I'd ever chosen to be. At the moment, the city itself was the closest thing to a home that I had.

“I'm sure I can convince my bosses to set up a freelance agreement, at least for a few months. Call it a trial period. We can feel each other out and see how we all work together.”

“That sounds good,” I said. “As for Denver or DC...I'll think about it.”

Chapter 7

After my interview with Agent Matthews, I headed over to a small grocery to stock up on some food. I hadn't had much left in the apartment to begin with and even though I hadn't had an appetite over the past week, I'd managed to finish it all anyway. I didn't know if I was going to go back to my apartment or not, but I'd need food either way. By the time I finished, it was almost noon and I took a cab back to the hotel, not wanting to have to deal with my bags on a bus.

My arms were full enough that I didn't see the figure waiting by my door until I was a couple feet away. I caught my breath as I looked up, seeing only the outline of a tall, muscular body at first. Then the rest of it registered as he stepped out of the shadows and I saw light brown hair and eyes the color of moss. It would have been a handsome face if it hadn't been scowling at me.

“Zeke.” I tried not to sound unwelcoming, but it wasn't easy.

Zeke Wesson was one of Rylan's oldest friends and, like Rylan's family, didn't like me. In fact, I was pretty sure he hated me. I'd tried to be polite to him, for Rylan's sake, but Zeke had made it almost impossible. Our last confrontation had been at Christmas when he'd come into the house while Rylan had been visiting his family. If Rylan hadn't come back when he did, I suspected things would've gotten physical. Zeke had me backed up against a wall, getting in my face, and I'd almost had a panic attack.

I was especially glad now that I hadn't told Rylan what had happened. At least he had his family and friends to stand with him through this. I would've felt even worse about what had happened if I'd ruined things between Zeke and him, even though I knew Zeke was probably reinforcing all of the negative things Rylan's family was already telling him.

I'd just never expected Zeke to be helping Rylan find me.

“Excuse me,” I said as I stepped past him to get to the door. I half-expected him to grab my arm, but he didn't. He did, however, follow me into

the hotel room without an invitation.

I set the bags down on the small table in the corner of the room and took off my coat. I left the boots on even though they were dripping snow and water onto the carpet. I was only average height and the boots didn't give me more than an inch or so, but I remembered what I'd been wearing the last time I'd seen Zeke – sexy lingerie under a robe, an outfit meant for a romantic day with Rylan – and I refused to let myself feel anything close to vulnerable. Bare feet wouldn't help with that, so I kept the boots on.

“How'd you find me?” I had a million other questions that I wanted to ask, but that was the one I needed the answer for first. Mostly because I wanted to make sure it wouldn't happen again if I needed to move.

“That's what you're going to ask me? Really?” He laughed, a bitter, brittle sound. “You don't want to know how Rylan is?”

“I do,” I said quietly. I set my jaw. I couldn't show weakness, especially not to Zeke. “But I need to know how you found me first.”

“Rylan hacked your credit card to try to find you.”

Of course he had. I'd known he could do it, so I'd made sure I was only using cash. Fortunately, I kept a decent amount on hand for any electronics I might need that had been obtained in less than legal ways.

“I figured a girl like you would be using cash,” Zeke sneered at me.

“A poor girl or a smart one?” I snapped. “Though I suppose not smart enough since you found me.” I didn't add what I thought of his intelligence, but it was implied.

“He's spent the entire week trying to find you. Making calls, looking online, going to your apartment. He said if he didn't find you soon, he would hack the phone company and try to ping your phone.”

Shit.

I'd taken Agent Matthew's call here and I'd called Dr. MacLeod. I needed to change hotels and buy a burner cell. If Rylan was going to those kinds of lengths to find me, maybe I should take the Denver or DC offer, leave Fort Collins and not look back.

“Fortunately, I found you first.”

“You're not going to tell him where I am, are you?”

Zeke laughed again. “Are you kidding me? I don't want him anywhere

near you. That's why I told him I'd check out a couple hotels on foot. I called off work and started asking people if they'd seen anyone matching your description. Imagine my surprise when I found you here, under an alias, paying in cash." He glanced towards the bed. "You working out of here too? You charge by the hour or take it a full night at a time?"

"You're an ass, Zeke." It felt good to finally say it.

"You walked out on Rylan after everything he's given you and I'm the ass?" He glared at me. "You've got some nerve, bitch."

My hands curled into fists, but I pushed down my temper. I wasn't going to let him bait me. "I didn't take anything of his," I said. I swallowed hard at the memory of the gift I'd left behind, a beautiful silver and sapphire necklace with matching earrings. Beautiful – and expensive. If it had only been beautiful, I would've taken it with me.

"Whatever." Zeke rolled his eyes.

He really did act like a spoiled child at times. "What do you want, Zeke?" I tried not to sound as tired as I felt.

"I want to know if you're going to keep fucking with his head."

I frowned. "Is he okay?"

"Okay?" He snorted. "Are you fucking kidding me? No, he's not okay. Called me as soon as he got your note. Two fucking lines." He glared at me, eyes bright with dislike strong enough to be called hatred. "I tried talking sense into him, but he wouldn't hear it."

Every word was like a needle shoved into my flesh, but I didn't stop him. I needed to hear it, needed to know, even if it hurt.

"I told him you weren't worth it, but he just kept going on and on about how much he loved you and how he needed you. Bullshit." He practically spat out the last word. "You took advantage of him, used him, and then left when you realized he wasn't going to make you rich."

"So which is it, Zeke? Did I fuck him for money or leave because he didn't give me any? I seem to recall you accusing me of both." My nails were biting into my palms, but I ignored the physical pain. The emotional was worse.

"You know, I hate seeing Rylan like this, broken-hearted over some bitch. I've seen it before, when Lara turned out to be a lesbian. But he got

over her. He'll get over you too.”

I tried not to let him see how much that statement hurt. “I suppose he will.”

“But you're not making it easy for him.”

I almost laughed at that, but I could see that Zeke was serious.

“I thought he'd give up after a couple days. Take the hint when you didn't answer his calls and texts.” He took a step towards me. “Then you send an email quitting your job, leaving him in the lurch there. I tried telling him that it was just more proof of how little you cared for him.”

My chest tightened. Rylan couldn't believe that. He had to know how much I loved him. Had to believe that I hadn't left because I didn't love him.

“But he's stubborn. Won't believe that's the case. He keeps pointing out that you left that fucking necklace behind. Said that if all you'd cared about was money, you would've taken it with you.”

Which was exactly why I hadn't taken it. I would never have sold it, but no one would've believed it. I couldn't even say it now because Zeke would call me a liar. I didn't feel the need to say it though. It didn't matter what he thought of me, not anymore.

“Rylan will get over you,” Zeke repeated. “But not for a long time, and not without a fight.”

I'd known that, of course, but hearing it said made it hit home. This wasn't going to go away. I'd been hoping that his not calling anymore, not being at my apartment, had meant that he'd given up. He'd sulk and be depressed for a bit, but he'd get over it, get over me. What Zeke was saying, though, made it sound like Rylan hadn't given up. He'd just changed tactics.

“I'm not coming back,” I said softly. The words hurt coming out, but I knew they had to be said. “That's why you came, isn't it? You needed to know if I was going to go back to him.”

“That's one reason,” he admitted. “And I'm glad you're not. But that's not all of it.” He took another step towards me.

My stomach tightened. Damn him. “What else could you possibly want?”

“I know my friend,” he said. “Better than anyone. Better than you certainly.”

He gave me a look that said he was waiting for me to contradict him, but I didn't say a word, just waited for him to tell me what he wanted. I was suddenly very tired and all I wanted was this to be over. All of it.

“You said you loved him,” he said. “Not quite sure I believe that, but if you do, or if you just want to make a break of it, you have to show him what the rest of us already know.”

“What's that?” The words were choked, but I managed to get them out.

“That you don't really care about anyone but yourself.” His lips twisted around into what almost looked like a smile. “That he should move on.”

“I want him to move on,” I said.

“Me, too,” he said. “And I have a simple solution.”

I was almost afraid to ask. “What's that?”

“We fuck.”

Chapter 8

When I'd seen Zeke standing in front of my door, I'd imagined a lot of things. That Rylan had sent him here to get me. That he would tell me to stay away even though I'd already made that decision. I'd imagined him screaming at me, calling me names – which he had. I even thought he might try to pay me off. Violence was even possibly an option. There were two things I'd never thought I'd hear coming out of Zeke's mouth, however. One was him saying that he actually thought I was good enough for Rylan, which I knew would never happen. The other was anything along the lines of the words that now hung in the air between us.

We fuck.

I was still staring at him, trying to wrap my head around two words that I'd heard before, but never imagine used in the context of Zeke and myself. Him telling me to go fuck myself, yes. Him wanting to fuck me, not so much. In fact, not at all.

“Are you stoned?” I asked when I found my voice. “Or maybe drunk?”

“It's the best way to convince him to move on. I tell him I came over here and you seduced me.”

“And you don't think he'll be a little annoyed that, when you found me, you slept with me rather than telling him where I was?” I still wasn't entirely sure I was comprehending what he was saying. I had to have misunderstood.

“He won't be pissed at me, if that's what you're thinking,” he said. After a moment's pause, he added, “Or, at least not as much as he'll be pissed at you.”

I narrowed my eyes, studying his face. I could read people pretty well and I was usually very good at figuring out what people wanted. I might've found it difficult to trust people with good intentions, especially when they were directed towards me, but when it came to sex, I was rarely wrong about what someone wanted. I'd seen lust for me displayed in all sorts of different

ways. Denied. Overt. Hidden behind other things.

I'd gotten absolutely none of that from Zeke. I'd felt jealousy coming off of him in waves. Rage. Hatred. All sorts of passionate emotions. But I'd never sensed any sort of lust directed at me. His negative emotions had never seemed to hide desire. Or at least that's what I'd thought until he'd just propositioned me. As I looked again, however, I knew my first impressions had been right.

Zeke didn't want me.

Which meant he genuinely believed that the best way to make sure Rylan didn't continue looking for me was for the two of us to sleep together.

The worst part of it was, I was pretty sure he was right. I'd tried to convince myself that Rylan would move on because there was no way he felt as strongly for me as I did for him. That he'd forget about me soon enough. The thing was, even if he did fall out of love with me, I did know Rylan, despite what Zeke had said. He was a man of honor, a man who wanted to protect people. Protect me. It didn't matter that I'd left. He'd come for me because he'd want to make sure I was okay. He knew me and knew that I wasn't the woman Zeke and his family thought I was.

Unless I did something so horrible that it violated his trust and proved that I was, indeed, that other girl. I'd told him I was broken, but I had to show him.

But there was no way in this life I was going to have sex with Zeke Wesson.

“Um, no.” I shook my head.

“No?”

“I'm not sleeping with you.”

A flash of what I thought was relief crossed his face, then disappeared. “Well, then I think you should leave. Move away. And make sure he knows you've left the state, so he stops looking for you.”

“I might,” I said. “But I haven't decided yet. There are other factors I have to consider. What about you?”

“Me?”

“Why don't you just tell him that you caught me having sex with someone else?” I hated the thought of him telling Rylan that, but if it meant

Rylan got to live the life he deserved, it would be worth it.

“Because he'd never believe me,” Zeke said. “He'd say I was lying because I didn't want the two of you together.”

“No.” I shook my head. “He'd know that you were trying to make him angry at me and stop looking, but he'd think it was because you didn't want him hurting. He doesn't know how you feel about me.”

He couldn't hide his surprise.

“Come on, Zeke. It's just the two of us. No reason to pretend that you haven't been hiding your real feelings from Rylan.”

“My real feelings?” His eyes narrowed.

I rolled my eyes. “Skip past all the shit and just tell me what you're thinking. If Rylan won't believe that you found me with someone else, what's your bright idea now since there's no way we're having sex?”

“I tell him we did,” he said.

“What makes you think he'll believe that if he wouldn't believe the other?”

Zeke gave me a wry grin that actually didn't have his usual anger in it. I could almost see what Rylan saw in him. Almost. There was still something a little wild in his eyes. “Because you're going to give me some information that only someone who slept with you would know.”

I balked at the idea of having to share intimate details of my sex life with Zeke, but after a moment, I realized that wasn't what he meant. He didn't want to hear about my likes and dislikes. He just needed something that would convince Rylan that I'd been naked.

“And you're willing to risk your friendship with Rylan like this?” I asked.

Zeke's expression hardened. “If it means he moves on and stops mooning over you, I'll do it, and damn the consequences to me.”

I almost frowned, trying to figure out what exactly was going on with him, but I pushed it aside. He wasn't my concern. Even though I wasn't with Rylan anymore, wasn't planning on being with him again, he was still my concern, and I would do whatever it took to make sure he got the life he wanted.

“All right,” I said. I didn't let myself think too deeply about what I was

doing. That would be for later, when I was alone and could curl up in bed and cry.

“All right?” Zeke asked.

He sounded like he didn't quite believe me and I realized that he'd thought I was going to come up with an excuse. He still didn't believe that I wasn't going to try to get Rylan back.

“I have a scar,” I said. I put my hand on my side, over where the scar was. “It's a burn from when I was a kid. Hot grease.”

Zeke nodded. “Unlikely I would've seen it before, but he might not take just that. You could be in a bra and I'd see it.”

He was right.

“Do you...shave?” His eyes flicked down and then back up again, his ears turning red.

I could feel the heat rising to my face and I wanted to slap him, but I could see the embarrassment in his expression. He wasn't asking to hurt me or anything like that, which I supposed was something in itself. He genuinely thought he needed to know.

“Not completely.” I forced myself to answer. It wasn't the first time I'd had to talk to someone about things like that, and if it would help Rylan, I'd bear it. “Trimmed, but not shaved.” I tucked some hair behind my ear. “And this is my natural color.”

He nodded. “I'm hoping it wouldn't come to that question, but I don't think the scar will be enough.”

“I have a tattoo,” I said. “Here, on my right hipbone. It's a lily. It's not like my scars or other tattoos that you could've seen depending on what I was wearing. The lily barely shows when I wear lingerie.”

Zeke's ears were bright red now and I felt slightly smug. He wanted to act all cool and in control, but this wasn't like before, when he'd had me in places where I wasn't comfortable. I could handle talking about my body and sex like this.

“That should do it,” he said. He met my eyes only for a second and then looked away. “You really mean it, don't you? You're not going back to him?”

“No.” My already broken heart shattered even more with the admission. “If you don't mind, I think I'd like to be alone now.”

He nodded without a caustic remark, which surprised me, but I didn't say anything. If he was going to be preoccupied with what he planned to say to Rylan, that was fine with me. He walked out, not saying anything else. I counted to ten after the door closed and let go of everything I was holding together.

I crumbled to the floor as a sob escaped. I pressed my hand to my mouth, afraid that if I made any loud sound, I would scream and not stop screaming. The last thing I needed was someone to think I was being hurt and send someone busting in here. I was hurting, but not because of anyone else. It was me. All my fault. And there was nothing the cops or a hospital could do about it.

I squeezed my eyes closed as I drew my knees up to my chest. I pressed my face against my knees to muffle my sobs and tried not to think about what would happen when Zeke got back to Rylan.

As much as I'd told myself that Rylan didn't care that much, I knew better. He was hurting now, but he still believed in me. The lie would crush him, and that hurt me more than I could say. Almost more than I could bear.

I could see it all. The way his face would fall. The pain in his eyes. How Zeke would apologize over and over again. Rylan would forgive him, of course, because he wouldn't want to lose me and Zeke in the same day. They'd go out to some strip club or something. Get Rylan a lap dance...

I lay on the floor, images flashing through my mind as I cried, one after another, each worse than the last. I hadn't planned on going back to Rylan, but I'd always thought I'd at least leave him with decent memories. He'd be hurt, but believe that I was just scared. Now, all of that was gone.

I was alone and I knew I'd stay that way. The future held nothing for me.

Chapter 9

Monday was definitely not my best day or night, but I did eventually manage to pull myself together enough to get off the floor, shower and get into bed. I slept late on Tuesday, but I at least didn't stay in bed after I woke up. I got up and made myself eat something. Then I made the call.

Agent Matthews didn't really seemed surprised to hear from me and I wondered if he'd already known I wasn't working at Archer Enterprises anymore. He was FBI, so I wouldn't have exactly put it past him to have checked up on my current employment. Since he didn't mention it, however, I wasn't going to press the issue. I didn't want to talk about it, especially my reasons for leaving.

“My bosses said they were fine with you working freelance for a bit to see how you fit in,” he said. “You'll need to come by for your company computer and passwords, but billing and things like that can be done online.”

I almost asked him why bother with a company computer or passwords since I could get into the servers with relatively little difficulty, but I figured it probably wasn't the best time to point out flaws in FBI security. Or remind him that I could get into it anytime I wanted. While I wished I could've just stayed at Archer Enterprises, I knew that was a dream and this was a real. A solid job, with a paycheck and benefits. And I'd be helping people, kids like me.

“Can I come in tomorrow?” I asked. “I'd like to get started as soon as possible.”

“You'll have to come to Denver,” he said. “I won't be back to Fort Collins until next week. Things are still in flux with Christophe's case and my boss wants me starting on some paperwork.” He paused, and then added, to my surprise, “Plus my kid's got a ballet recital on Friday.”

“Married?” I hadn't seen a wedding ring, but that didn't always matter.

“Divorced.” He didn't sound bitter about it. “Two kids. Seven and

twelve. A boy and a girl. I'm away a lot, so when I can get to one of Abby's soccer matches or one of Steven's recitals, I do my best."

My estimation of Agent Matthews went up again. Not many men, especially men in an occupation like his, would even admit to his son being involved in ballet, much less say it without a hint of apology or embarrassment. I could excuse the gruff exterior if it covered a good heart, and his obviously did.

"I can come to Denver," I said. "Mid-morning okay?"

"That'd be great. It'll give me enough time to get your things together, including your first assignment."

My stomach flipped and I regretted having eaten my meager breakfast.

"We want you to take a look at our imaging software," he said. "We try to use it to focus on specific images and find everything we can, one child at a time. You can imagine how time consuming that is."

I could. "You want me to improve it?"

"As much as possible," he said. "For the last couple years, we've been trying to find ways to not only arrest the perpetrators and rescue the kids, but to also start cleaning up the mess online." His voice softened. "I know you understand, better than anyone, what it's like knowing this shit's out there."

"I do," I said softly.

"You'd mentioned doing some damage to the online videos made of you," he said. "That's the kind of thing we're looking for. That's why we need someone like you. We're struggling to keep up with technology, but we're losing."

"I'll see what I can do to level the playing field," I said.

For the first time since I'd left Rylan, I felt a purely positive emotion. Even if this was all the work I did for the FBI – being able to improve their software and give them the means to hit these perverts, hard – I'd be making a difference. I'd be giving others hope that what they went through wasn't going to be some easy thing to find online, that their pain and humiliation meant something and we were going to do our best to erase as much of it as we could.

I spent the rest of the day writing out my old virus program as well as my image search program. Even though I had them on my laptop, I wanted to

see them in a different way. Sometimes, for me, having them spread out on a table or floor allowed me to see things in a different light. I knew both of them worked, but they would need to be tweaked if they'd fit into the parameters of what the FBI could use.

By evening, I was satisfied that I had a pretty good idea of what to do, and I'd decided that I needed to go back to my apartment. I was sure Zeke'd had enough time to tell Rylan what we'd supposedly done, and for Rylan to accept it. That meant my apartment was safe. Relatively speaking, anyway. Christophe was still out there, but I did have a restraining order in place. And new locks. Besides, I couldn't live in fear of every nutcase who'd seen my movies. Sleep was going to be hard enough once I settled back into a routine.

The next morning, I checked out, took a cab back to my apartment and left a note for the landlord, saying I'd be staying a bit longer. I still wasn't sure if I wanted to renew my lease, but by the time I had to make that decision, I'd most likely know if I wanted to move to Denver or DC to work with the FBI.

The bus ride from Fort Collins to Denver wasn't exactly fun, especially in the lovely winter weather we were currently experiencing, but I reminded myself that it was better than having to drive myself in this shit. I knew how to drive, of course, but that had pretty much all been done in Florida. While I knew, in theory, how to drive in the snow, I wasn't looking forward to putting it into practice.

The thought made me remember what Rylan had said about how he'd worry about me driving in bad weather. I pushed the thought aside and turned my attention back to the notebook I kept in my bag. I was always using it to jot down ideas and coding. Now, I used it as a distraction. I reviewed the information I had written down, crossing out what didn't work or wasn't a viable idea. I made notes as I considered each concept, deciding what should be kept or thrown out. I usually did this every few weeks, but I'd been so preoccupied with everything that had gone on that it'd been months since I'd last gone through it. That was good since it gave me plenty to do. By the time I reached Denver, I was about three-quarters of the way through.

Picking things up went smoothly. Agent Matthews had it all laid out for me already. There were sheafs of paperwork for me to sign and initial, outlining my job description, compensation, benefits, termination policies and confidentiality agreements. Basically, most of the same stuff I'd been signing with most of my big clients, except with the power of the US

government behind it. There was also a government-issued laptop with significantly less to offer than my own electronics. That was okay since I'd do most of my coding work on my own computer. Their laptop would be used to actually run the program. Finally, there was a folder with my first assignment outlined. I didn't linger, but I did take the time to thank Agent Matthews for all he'd done and renew my promise to think about moving. I'd seen that clause in my contract as well, the agreement to change things should I decide to move from being freelance to working on site.

I took my copies, the laptop and the file and headed back out to catch my bus back to my apartment. I put that work aside and finished up with my own notebook before going back to more thoroughly read everything I'd signed. I'd skimmed it all with the same practiced ease that I'd used on other clients' paperwork, but I wanted to go over each word. It wasn't because I thought Agent Matthews would screw me over, but rather because I wanted to make sure of the changes in my contract should I decide to change the nature of my relationship with the FBI.

When I arrived back at my apartment, I didn't get to work right away. I needed to put things away, unpack everything so that I didn't have a reminder of what I'd given up. It was harder than I'd anticipated. Putting each item back in its place was another reminder that I was here, alone. By the time I finished, the last thing I wanted to do was work, but it was better than the alternative. I'd slept enough over the past week. It was time to move on.

I sat on my couch, opened the new laptop and began the tediously mind-numbing process of setting up my passwords. I went through the programs, checking out each one to make sure they all worked properly and then sent off an email to Agent Matthews, assuring him that everything was in working order.

I shut down the computer and picked up the file. With a glance at the clock, I stretched out on the couch and began to read. I'd finish it off and then head to bed, hopefully too tired to think or dream.

The fist to the back of my head came as a surprise more than as pain. It didn't feel good, obviously, but I was pretty sure it had hurt the other person more than me. Judging by the swearing behind me, I was right. I turned around, my fist clenching around the strap of my book bag.

The boy cradling his hand had dark hair and a wide, unfriendly mouth. I thought his name was Edwin, but I'd only been here for a couple weeks and none of the kids were very friendly.

“Leave me alone,” I said firmly. I wasn't very big for a thirteen year-old or a girl, but I'd survived a hell of a lot worse than some teenage bully.

“You're a whore!” Edwin shouted, injured hand forgotten as he apparently remembered the reason for his attack. “My dad got arrested because of you!”

Shit.

Lily had come yesterday and told me that someone had leaked my name to the press and that she was going to figure out who it was. It had been six months since she'd rescued me and I'd finally been settled in a group home in a different school district from where I'd gone before. I'd thought I'd been safe. I should have known better.

“You ruined my family!” Edwin charged at me and I sidestepped, letting him run past while I took off in the opposite direction.

I didn't know who Edwin's father was, but I knew the police had spent the last few months arresting various people in the videos my mother had made. My only part in that had been testifying in front of a grand jury about the videos en masse, saying that they had been made without my consent, that I was underage at the time – still was, but that hadn't been the point – and that the men involved had known both. The only name I'd been able to give had been that of my 'doctor' and he'd been arrested not long after my statement had been taken. All I could figure was that Edwin's dad had been one of the men in the videos.

I wasn't about to try to explain to Edwin, however, that his dad was a child molester and rapist. Somehow, I doubted that would do any good.

I could hear Edwin behind me and, suddenly, my throat began to close up, my chest tighten until I was gasping for breath. The memory of the huntsman came over me and I stumbled. I felt my knees hit the ground with a jolt, my palms scraping across the cement. I was vaguely aware of my head hitting the sidewalk with a thud, but I couldn't see anything but the memory.

I heard Edwin catch up to me, felt him kicking and hitting. Felt a hand grabbing at my breast. I couldn't do anything to stop it. I was frozen, helpless, caught in a memory even worse than the violence being done to me now. I heard voices and Edwin was suddenly gone, but it didn't matter. I was trapped and I always would be. I couldn't run far or fast enough to get away.

I woke suddenly and it took a minute for me to remember where I was. I'd curled up into a ball at some point and my muscles were clenched and

stiff. I winced as I stretched back out on the couch, knocking my file to the floor. I didn't pick it up yet, still processing my dream.

I hadn't thought of Edwin in a long time. He hadn't been the first or the last to bully me or call me names because of what had happened. Kids tended to be either overwhelmingly kind or overwhelmingly cruel. Unfortunately, most of my encounters had been with the latter. Edwin had, however, been the only one whose father I'd sent to jail. I'd pestered Lily until she'd revealed to me which one Edwin's dad had been and I didn't feel so bad anymore. He hadn't been the worst, but he'd certainly been bad enough.

I'd been pulled out of that school shortly after the incident because even though Edwin had been suspended for what he'd done, he'd be back and everyone had agreed that it'd be best if I wasn't there when it happened. I'd ended up with a concussion, three cracked ribs and more bruises than I'd been able to count, but I'd been the one who'd had to leave.

That had been the moment I'd truly understood that, even though I'd been the victim, there would always be those who'd blame me for what had happened. And that, no matter what anyone told me, a part of me would always blame myself.

I picked up the folder. I wouldn't be getting anymore sleep tonight. I supposed I might as well do something useful.

Chapter 10

I'd completely forgotten that Friday was Valentine's Day until I decided that I needed to burn off some excess energy on a run. The moment I stepped outside the apartment building, I'd been assaulted by the sight of pink balloons and red roses and those stupid heart-shaped boxes of candy. Couples were everywhere I looked. Strolling across the CSU campus. Holding hands as they waited at the bus stop. Kissing while they stood on the sidewalk.

I took my normal route through the Colorado State campus, grateful for the ever vigilant grounds crew who kept the sidewalks well-salted. Before I was halfway through, however, I realized that a run wasn't going to work. I needed to hit something.

I tried not to look at the flyers posted up all around campus. Valentine's Day dinners, parties, sales. A couple anti-Valentine's parties. Singles parties. It was pretty much pointless unless I spent the entire run staring at my tennis shoes, and that was a surefire way to run straight into someone or something. So I kept my head up and tried not to think about the fact that the man I wanted to be with today was most likely with someone else.

I tried to comfort myself by pretending that he could possibly just be out drinking with Zeke and would go home alone and drunk. I knew better though. Rylan was gorgeous and Zeke would try to encourage him to get over me as quickly as possible, which meant, drunk or not, Rylan's best friend would most likely be pushing him at any woman he could find. And if Rylan was hurt or indifferent, he might go through with it.

As I rounded back on my apartment, I made a decision and ran past my building. Energy wasn't the only thing I needed to burn off. Beneath all the hurt and pain I'd been dealing with was anger. I'd kept it there, bubbling below the surface, and all of this romantic shit going on had brought it to a boil. I needed to hit something before I snapped and took things out on a person.

Not surprisingly, the gym was fairly empty, a clear reminder that most people were out with their significant others tonight, but at least there weren't any decorations or flyers for romantic dates or singles' parties. I headed for the locker room and exchanged my sweats for a pair of shorts. When I came back out, the only person left was the owner, Roger, and he was sitting in his office, half-asleep from the looks of it.

I didn't bother with a warm-up. The run had been enough for that. I ignored the small bag and went straight for the big one, not bothering with finesse. I pummeled the bag, reveling in the stinging pain going through my knuckles. They'd be bruised tomorrow, most likely, but I didn't care. I wanted to feel something physical rather than this emotional shit I'd been dealing with.

Sweat poured down my face and I wiped it with my arm and kept going. I could feel my hair coming loose from my ponytail and the strands stuck to my forehead and cheeks. My muscles began to burn and I hit harder. I wanted to wear myself out tonight. I'd finished off the sleeping pills I'd bought and I didn't want to go back for more. I didn't want to rely on them anymore than I wanted to rely on a person. I'd beaten back the demons before and I'd do it again. And compared to everything else, what had happened with Rylan was nothing.

I winced as I hit the bag even harder and a shock of pain vibrated up my arm. No thinking about Rylan or anyone else. I had a new job and I was moving on.

By the time I finished and headed to the shower, I'd almost convinced myself. I had to change back into my sweats so showering was pointless, but I didn't want to go back out in the cold as I was, so I took the time to clean off, promising myself a long, hot bath and maybe some quality fantasy time to finish things off. That last one I wasn't too sure about because I definitely didn't want to risk Rylan creeping into my thoughts again, especially not then.

I debated whether or not to get a cab or head to the bus stop, but in the end, I decided to walk. It wasn't far and a cool down would probably be good. If I sat down right away, there was always the possibility of my muscles stiffening.

I walked at a leisurely pace, letting my mind wander, afraid that if I tried to focus on one thing, I'd be locked onto something I'd rather not think about. I made my way around the few people who were out and about, ignoring the

fact that they were mostly couples. I was paying so little attention that I almost didn't hear someone call my name.

“Jenna!”

I sighed as I recognized the voice. I turned, a fake smile already in place. “Emmaline.”

“I'm surprised to see you.” She smiled at me, but the look in her turquoise eyes was anything but friendly. “I thought you'd moved.”

I blinked. Was that what Rylan had been telling people? “No, I'm still in Fort Collins. For now.” I added the last bit almost as an afterthought. I hadn't yet decided for sure if I was going to move or not, but I was sure I could count on Emmaline to make sure Rylan heard that I was thinking about it.

“Couldn't handle the pressure?” Her grin widened. “I can understand that. Not everyone's cut out to work at Archer Enterprises.”

“It was good seeing you, Emmaline,” I lied. “If you'll excuse me...” I made as if to step around her.

“Hot date tonight?” she asked. “Not as hot as mine, I'm sure, but not many guys are as hot as Rylan, wouldn't you agree?”

I stopped, my heart turning to ice. I didn't look at her, unsure if I could control my expression enough to keep her from seeing how much her words had cut me. Rylan had taken Emmaline out on Valentine's Day. I didn't want to believe it. Surely he couldn't have gotten over me that quickly. And even if he had, I didn't think he would've gone for Emmaline. He wasn't attracted to her...or was he? Had he been thinking about her when we'd been together...I gave myself a mental shake. I wasn't going to think that. My memories of my time with Rylan were all I had. I wasn't about to spoil them with speculation.

“Is that the real reason you left?” Emmaline asked, her voice full of venom. “Made a pass at the boss and he rejected you? Probably even dyed your hair because you thought it might make him see you as something other than a freak.”

I started to turn towards her, unsure of what I would say, but certain that she wouldn't like it. Before I could open my mouth, however, I heard a sharp intake of breath from my other side and knew who it was before I even looked that way.

Rylan stood in the doorway of a little restaurant. He held a purse in his hand and, as I watched, Emmaline walked over to him and took the purse.

She shot me a smug look as she wrapped her arm around Rylan's. I saw him start to speak and knew I didn't want to hear what he had to say.

“Excuse me,” I muttered as I walked past them without a second glance at either of them. I felt sick to my stomach. This was what I'd wanted, I told myself, for him to move on. I'd just never thought he'd move on with her. It wasn't my business though. He was free to do whatever he wanted with whoever he wanted.

Chapter 11

By late afternoon the next day, I knew I couldn't concentrate on my work. I kept seeing Rylan with Emmaline. The smug smile on her face and the way she'd been practically preening. The shock on Rylan's face when he'd seen me. And then had come my overactive imagination – or maybe not so overactive since I had nothing to tell me that my thoughts were out of line. I'd seen him kissing her, cupping the back of her head, hand tightening on her waist. They'd go back to his place, of course. Sometimes I saw them in the playroom, Rylan tying Emmaline up, a pleased look on his face when he realized he didn't have to be worried about her freaking out. Worse were the images of him taking her into his bedroom, his bed, making love to her slow and sweet.

He'd moved on, that much was obvious. I closed my laptop with a little more force than necessary and leaned back on the couch with a sigh. Why was I sitting here, alone, throwing myself into work, while he was most likely with Emmaline again? Maybe with someone else. He hadn't exactly been monogamous before we'd started our relationship. It didn't matter. He wasn't with me.

So why the hell was I sitting around my apartment on a Saturday, wondering how I was going to make it through the weekend without wanting to pull my hair out? Work most likely would've been the answer, but I didn't want to work. I wanted to show Rylan that I could move on too, even if he never knew it.

I stood and went into my bedroom. Black miniskirt, tight silver halter top that made my light gray eyes look almost silver themselves. Knee high, heeled leather boots. Black silk panties and matching strapless bra. Once I'd dressed, I went to the mirror and began on the make-up. I'd worn very little when I'd been with Rylan, but I applied it now like I had before. Heavy eye shadow and eyeliner. Lipstick and a touch of rouge. After a moment, I reached into my jewelry box and pulled out my eyebrow ring. The hole hadn't

closed up yet and it went back into place easily. The bellybutton one was a bit tight, but there wasn't any blood, so I figured I was good there too.

I looked in the mirror for the full effect. Aside from the hair, I looked like the same person I'd been before I'd met Rylan. That was fine with me. Perfect, actually. I wanted to be that person again. Safe behind my piercings and clothes, behind my attitude. I could dye the hair again, and I would as soon as I decided what color I wanted it to be. I'd never have to think of that dark-haired girl again, never have to talk about my experiences. I would be only Jenna, loner, computer tech. No relationships, no attachments.

I swallowed hard and shoved down all of the emotions that wanted to make themselves known. I'd been fine before and I'd be fine again. I didn't need to be happy. Content was more than I'd ever counted on.

Fort Collins wasn't exactly a party school, but there were a couple of clubs and I caught a bus to the one furthest from my apartment. I paid the cover charge and stepped inside, letting the pulsing music and flashing lights wash over me. It had been a while, but I was confident I could slip back into my old skin.

I made my way down to the dance floor. I didn't want a drink, not wanting to risk doing something stupid. Fucking a random stranger wasn't exactly the smartest thing to do, but doing it too drunk to be in control was definitely stupid.

I started to dance alone, hands above my head, body moving to the rhythm of the music. My hips swayed and I let the music carry me. My eyes stayed open, however. The press of bodies around me wasn't too much for me to handle, especially not moving like this, but I had no one around I trusted enough to watch my back if I closed my eyes. I didn't want to remember that there was only one person I trusted that much to begin with.

I caught a glimpse of a figure turned towards me, a flash of white teeth. A distraction, excellent. The young man who made his way over to me looked like he was probably my age or a bit younger. Probably a CSU student. He was taller than me, but not by a lot, maybe a hair under six feet. His body was lean, but he didn't have that gangly look of a kid who hadn't quite grown into himself.

“Chad,” he yelled above the music. Or it might've been Brad or Thad, but I didn't really care enough to ask again.

“Jenna,” I shouted back.

He grinned and nodded, though I was willing to bet he called me Jen or Jenny at some point tonight, if he remembered my name at all. We began to dance together, learning the rhythm of the other's body. He didn't touch me, but our bodies were close, separated by less than an inch, the heat between us easily felt.

“Want a drink?” he asked, jerking his thumb towards the bar in case I hadn't been able to hear his question.

I shook my head. I always got my own drinks, and I never left my glass unattended. Again, I knew where the stupid line was. After two more songs, I was ready for something and gave Chad / Brad / Thad a smile before heading towards the bar. As I'd hoped, he followed. I got a bottle of water and settled on a chair, waiting while he ordered.

We didn't do much small talk, though I did make sure to clarify that his name was indeed Chad, and then he asked me back to his place. He was a CSU student but had off-campus housing in an apartment building just a couple blocks from the club.

“Perfect,” I said, standing back up again. “Let's go.”

He led the way and it was cold enough that I didn't have to worry about him trying to hold hands or anything romantic while we walked. Both of us kept our hands tucked into our pockets and I wished I'd worn a longer skirt or at least some stockings. The few inches of leg between my boots and the hem of my skirt were freezing by the time we reached Chad's building.

He was on the second floor, so we took the stairs, the climb warming me slightly as we paused in front of his door. With the thaw came the butterflies in my stomach. I frowned. There was no reason for me to be nervous. I'd done things like this dozens of times before.

“Just toss your coat wherever,” he said as we stepped inside.

I hung my coat over the back of a nearby chair as I looked around the apartment. It was smaller than mine, but not by much, and clearly a bachelor pad. Clothes and empty beer cans cluttered the floor and furniture. Everything except the electronics looked second-hand. His television and massive gaming system were clearly brand new.

“You want something to drink?” he asked. “I mean, I don't have much, but I've got beer.”

“No thank you.” I walked over to the couch, but didn't sit down. My

nerves were strung tight and I just wanted to get this over with.

I supposed that was a good attitude to have since that's how I'd always felt before. Sex was an itch to scratch, not a connection to be made. I'd let myself forget that over the last few months. It was time I remembered again. I might not have been aroused, but I needed to remind myself of how this should be.

His eyes darkened. They were hazel, I saw. His hair brown. Lighter than I'd originally thought. Not that I'd particularly been paying attention. He had the right build and a place we could be alone. That was good enough.

“Eager to get to it, are you?” He walked over to me and I could smell the sweat and alcohol from the club. It wasn't exactly unpleasant, but I couldn't help but compare it to the memory of Rylan's scent.

I didn't want to think about Rylan, and I didn't want to hear Chad talk anymore.

I reached up and grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him down until our mouths touched. I felt a moment of surprise and then he kissed me back. His hands went around my waist as he pushed his tongue between my lips. I opened my mouth and slid my tongue alongside his. I could taste the tequila he'd drank earlier.

I felt his hand pull up the back of my shirt, the heat of his fingers against my bare skin. I should have felt something. A tingle, at least a pleasurable sensation. All I felt was fingers on skin. It was almost clinical.

His hand slid higher and I felt him fiddling with my bra clasp. I shifted without thinking about it, and he ran his hand around my side, cupping my breast over my bra. His fingers tightened almost painfully, and not in the good kind of way. He ground his hips against me and I could feel his cock hardening. He didn't feel particularly big or small, but it didn't do anything for me.

In fact, none of this was doing anything. He wasn't a bad kisser, but there was none of the physical thrill that should have come with it. He was a bit rough, but nothing that should have turned me off. I knew what the problem was. I didn't want his hands, his mouth. I wanted someone else's touch and nothing else was going to arouse me. I'd thought I could force myself through it; that I could find physical pleasure without any heart behind it and that would break the hold Rylan had on me.

I should have known better.

With a sigh, I stepped back. Chad frowned at me as I straightened my shirt.

“You want to go back to the bedroom?” he asked. “I’ve got condoms out here too, but the couch is a bit small.”

I shook my head. “No. I'm sorry, Chad, but I think I'm just going to go.”

I took a step towards my coat and he grabbed my arm.

“Come on, babe. I'll be good to you.”

I tried to pull away and his grip tightened.

“You can't just walk away.” His expression was hard. “Not after you get me all worked up like that. Dancing the way you were. Kissing me.”

“Let me go.”

“I don't think so.” He gave my arm a yank. “We're going to have some fun. Then you can go.”

I wasn't about to argue with him about it. I knew better than to try to talk to him anymore. I didn't let myself panic either. I took a beat to collect myself and then I twisted around, pushing against his thumb to break his grip. I caught a flash of surprise on his face, quickly followed by anger. I knew what was coming next and acted before he could. My hand closed around his and I yanked his thumb back.

“Fuck!” he yelped.

I ignored him and twisted his arm so that I was able to put the right amount of pressure on his thumb.

“You bitch!”

He started to swing his other hand. Without releasing him, I blocked the attempt and jabbed him in the throat. He coughed, gagged and then gasped. I bent his thumb further and he went down on his knees, still making noises.

“I'm going to go now,” I said calmly. “And if you come after me, I'll make sure you regret it. Are we clear?”

He nodded, glaring up at me. I waited a moment longer, then released his hand and backed towards the door, not taking my eyes off of him. Like I'd said, not entirely stupid. I grabbed my coat and pulled it on as I headed out into the hallway. So much for my night back to normal...

Chapter 12

I was still working from my apartment, but now I was moving on to specific cases. I'd spent Sunday finishing tweaking my programs so I could use them, and on Monday, Agent Matthews had given me a call. His bosses had been impressed that I'd managed to get two complex programs done so quickly, even though he'd explained to them that it had only been adapting things I'd already written. Now they wanted to see things in action.

He sent me an encoded file and that was that.

There'd been pictures in the file, along with as much information as the FBI had on the kids in the pictures. I pulled up each of the pictures, cropping what I needed so that I only had bits and pieces. I could have just highlighted the specific parts of the photos, but I didn't want the full images on my desktop. I'd purposefully tried to keep from seeing more than the pieces I needed, but I knew what was there, even if I didn't see the details.

I chose the little blonde girl's face first. She wasn't smiling, but she didn't look scared. Not yet. I knew that meant she hadn't been born into this. She was probably four or five. By then, I'd known too much. She still looked innocent and unsuspecting.

I swallowed hard as I put the picture into the program. Even if I hadn't seen the pictures in the file that were of the same girl, older, I would've known this photo was at least six or seven years old. She hadn't been innocent for long.

I let the program run, finding all of the places the blonde girl had pictures posted. While it ran, I read through the file. The FBI had found the girl last year. Harmony. She'd been kidnapped and was now with her family again. Her kidnappers were in prison, but they hadn't rolled on their distributors.

A note in the file said that my job was to record all of the places where Harmony's files were found before using my other program to clean things

up. I could tell that Agent Matthews didn't entirely understand what I'd done to the files I'd found of myself, but he didn't seem to care, so long as it did the job.

It was true what people said, that once something was on the internet, it was out there forever, but I'd designed a program to...help with that. It pulled specified files into the various internet pockets where only people with some computer skills could find them. And when they were found, a virus would be released, tracing back to the person who'd watched or downloaded the files. Those perverts would be in for a rude awakening when the virus sent all of their personal information to the secure email account I'd set up. I supposed leaving the files out with the virus would've given more opportunities to catch the sick freaks who watched this shit, but I wasn't about to put these kids through the pain and humiliation of having these videos out there for anyone to see. Besides, if my programs worked as well as I thought they were going to, the FBI was still going to have their hands full.

As files came in, I began to collect the information I needed, entering it into the spreadsheet Agent Matthews had given me. It was tedious work, but not bad. The URLs weren't obvious sounding, so it was easy to tell myself that I was just making a spreadsheet of random websites. Harder was the image recognition part. Most of what they pulled in were thumbnails that looked innocent enough, but there were some that were graphic enough to make my stomach twist painfully.

On Wednesday, things got worse.

As I was going through my spreadsheet list, something caught my eye. My heart began to pound. I read it again, hoping that I'd read it wrong. I hadn't. I pulled up my web browser and pasted the URL. I didn't want to go to the website, but I needed to; I had to know.

My chest tightened as the page opened, but I forced myself to keep looking. The site wasn't identical to other ones I'd seen, but it was close. Whoever had designed this site had used a similar format to the sites I'd found my videos on years ago.

Bile rose in my throat and I choked it back. How had that happened? The people who'd been arrested in connection with my case had all been arrested. It had been less than ten years. None of them should've been out yet.

Unless they'd cut a deal.

I looked at my screen. I'd told myself I wouldn't do it. I'd put all of that

behind me. I didn't want to know anything else about my past.

But I had to know.

I'd told Lily that I hadn't wanted to know the specifics of what happened with my mom and the others. I'd just been grateful that I hadn't needed to testify again and that I could put things behind me.

Now, however, I wished I would've asked. I could've kept an eye on things, prevented more kids from being hurt...

I shook my head. No, I couldn't think like that. I didn't even know if my hunch was right.

I pulled up the FBI server and typed in my password. I knew the name of one of the men who'd been arrested. He'd been my mother's boyfriend slash pimp slash drug dealer at the time. And, of course, I knew her name. Both the one she used in public as well as the one she use in 'business'. But, if I was honest, I didn't actually know if either of those names were real. Aliases were common in the business and I wasn't even sure if my mother had ever given me her real name. Even the name on my birth certificate might've been fake. I was pretty sure the doctor's name was.

I'd erased my name from pretty much all government systems, but I hadn't erased the files. I couldn't risk anyone getting out because their criminal files couldn't be found. I'd also tagged the files so I could find them easily if I needed to. I took another slow breath and then typed in the commands.

A few moments later, a rectangular box popped up on my screen.

Access Denied.

I frowned. My file was closed? I tried again and got the same result.

I tried using the name of the man who'd been living with us when I'd been rescued. His file came up and was short. He'd died in prison two months into his fifteen year sentence. Child molesters weren't exactly popular in prison. Or, rather, they were, but not in a good way.

There was a link from his account to one under my mother's name or at least the alias she'd used. I clicked it and it pulled up a small file that stated my mother had also died in prison. I wasn't surprised that I didn't feel anything about her being dead. I'd never given her life a second thought after I'd been taken away.

What I did find weird was the file itself. It didn't look right. As someone who'd spent a decent amount of time inside various government systems, I knew what I was talking about. The file was too clean, too succinct. I knew it wasn't a good idea, but I had to dig deeper. Something was wrong here and I had a very bad feeling about what it was.

I leaned forward, my other work forgotten. I followed the trail, digging through various files. It was buried deep. Whoever had done this had done it well. They were good. Just not as good as me.

One little problem.

It was above my security clearance. Access Denied.

I could hack it, I knew. Hack my file and my mom's file. I had absolutely no doubt that I could do it. The question was, should I do it? I could do it without being detected, but the chances of me not having any questions was slim. If I had questions, I'd have to go to Agent Matthews, and he'd want to know how I'd found whatever it was that I was going to find. I seriously doubted my newfound bosses would be pleased with my snooping.

If this had just been a one-off job, I might've considered saying the hell with it, but this was going to be long-term. At least, that was the way I was forcing myself to look at it. I was helping people, using my talents for good. And I didn't want to lose that.

My only option was to ask Agent Matthews about what the files said. I doubted he'd tell me, not even if I told him what I suspected. And I wasn't even sure what I suspected, not really. It was just this feeling, really, a feeling that I'd stumbled on something big...and bad.

Chapter 13

My mother was still alive.

She smiled down at me, her face unchanged by the years. Her eyes were cold, like pools of cloudy ice. I remembered that cold, remembered it well enough that I felt the child inside me for the first time in a long time. She was shivering, whimpering, curled up in a ball and begging not to be hurt. I wanted to protect that little girl, but I couldn't move.

“There you are,” Mom said. “Hiding from me were you? I think you'll need to be punished for that.”

“I'm not a child anymore!” The words would've sounded more convincing if my voice hadn't been shaking.

“Doesn't matter,” she said. “I can find a use for you.” She looked behind her and I could see shapes behind her. “You remember them don't you? Remember all of them? What they did to you?” She smiled. “Are you ready to be hunted again?”

I woke with a cry trapped in my throat, my heart racing. I ran my hands over my face and through my hair. I didn't have to reach over to turn on the light. I'd left it on every night since I'd found the files. I'd known the nightmares would come, and I hadn't been wrong. Every night since, I'd hadn't gotten more than an hour or so of sleep before I'd wake up, terrified. Some were real memories. Times when I'd tried turning to my mother when I was being raped, only to see her looking bored or worse, laughing. Once or twice, I'd seen her with one of her 'boyfriends', fucking in the corner while I was laying there, crying. Those memories were bad, but the nightmares that weren't real were worse. In some, I'd never been rescued. The last few years had just been a dream and I was still in that hell, being used and abused in even more vile ways. In other nightmares, she'd come back to claim me, telling me that she owned me. No one would rescue me this time.

There was nothing I could do about the dreams. They came when they

came and I'd wake up eventually. Once awake, I could only wait for the panic to pass, my body to relax again and I'd try to sleep, knowing that I'd be woken in a few hours in much the same manner.

It was Saturday night, or early Sunday morning, I wasn't sure which, and I hadn't had a decent night's sleep all week. Even a liberal amount of make-up couldn't hide the deep purple half-circles under my eyes. The fact that my skin was naturally pale just made it worse. I didn't care though. No one was seeing me. I hadn't left the apartment all week. That might have been a problem if I'd been eating normally since I would've run out of food quite a bit ago. I hadn't been eating much though and it was starting to show.

I'd always had an athletic build, with a bit of curves, but I could tell I'd lost some of the softness to my body. My clothes felt like they were hanging on me and every time I stood, I got dizzy. I knew it wasn't healthy, but every time I tried to eat, I could barely choke anything down. What I did manage to get down never wanted to stay. My stomach would flip and churn, threatening to empty.

Of course, it wasn't only the dreams. Work was a problem too. Not the job itself. My programs were working exactly the way they were supposed to and the people at the FBI were thrilled with the results. According to Agent Matthews, the information I'd already provided had gone into two cases that were being prosecuted right now. There were at least three other open cases, as well as two new ones opening up. I'd also managed to use my image finder program for four different kids at varying ages. Every picture or video file of them had been tagged and hidden.

I'd done good work and I knew it.

I'd also spent a good deal of time struggling with flashbacks.

They weren't the same as my nightmares. Those were sometimes based on reality, but they always had a surreal quality to them. Time moved differently, disjointed, sometimes skipping from one place to another. A lot of times I even knew that I was dreaming. It didn't always make it better or easier, but most of the time, it was there, even if only subconsciously. And I always woke up.

The flashbacks were like my panic attacks, happening when I was awake. There was no strange, surreal nature to them. They were more than memories too, images flashing in front of my eyes. It was more like I was there, reliving the moment. I was that little girl again. I felt the pain, the

humiliation, all in real time. The biggest difference was that I couldn't wake up. Like my panic attacks, all I could do was ride them out.

Sometimes it was the look on a victim's face, sometimes it was whatever activity was being shown in the picture. Either way, the flashback would hit me and I'd be out for a while. When I'd come to, my hands would be shaking and the metallic taste of fear would be in my throat, but I'd push through. I couldn't let anyone know how much this job was affecting me. I couldn't risk them trying to send me to some shrink who'd tell me to stop what I was doing. Dr. MacLeod might've seen the good in it, but I knew she'd take the flashbacks as signs that I needed to take it slow. I didn't want to ease into it. I needed it. All of it. As bad as this was, it left me little time to think about anything else. And thinking about anything else was the last thing I wanted to do.

I was hovering at the edge of that pit, had been ever since Dr. MacLeod had helped me climb out. I'd stayed there though, never venturing far from it. The darkness had its claws in me and it didn't want to let go. I felt like I was treading water, barely keeping my head above the waves. I'd get pulled down and wonder if this was the last time, if I'd be able to get free again. I knew, eventually, I'd get too tired and it'd just be easier to give up. Knowing that I was helping people was the only thing that kept me going.

I stared up at the ceiling and tried to think of something else. It was too early for me to get up and try and start work. I needed to try to get back to sleep, but I wasn't sure that would be possible if I kept going over the past in my head. Even if I did manage it, I was sure my thoughts wouldn't lead to any sort of good dream. At the moment, I was willing to settle for no dreams at all, mostly because I wasn't sure what would even constitute a good dream anymore. Anything I dreamed that could be considered good immediately became painful when I woke up and remembered the truth. Better to think of something safe.

I was going to ask permission to repaint the apartment, I decided. If I went with neutral colors, maybe a nice eggshell with smoky gray trim, I didn't think the landlord would mind. I had no doubt that he was just as eager to move past what had happened here as I was. He was already having a hard enough time keeping tenants as they put together the news story about Christophe and my apartment.

I pulled back from that train of thought. Back to the apartment. Painting would give me a chance to thoroughly clean things. I knew a cleaning crew

had been through, but I knew I'd feel better if I did it myself. I could take it room by room. Clean, get rid of any junk I didn't need, paint, maybe even rearrange furniture. I'd kept things in the same place since I'd moved in, enjoying the luxury of stability, but now I was thinking that maybe I should try a different arrangement. If nothing else, it might help me not to see...the past whenever I walked out of my bedroom.

Maybe I'd even do some redecorating all the way around. New curtains. New linens. I was far from rich, but I was thrifty. I was sure I could manage it within a decent budget. And it wasn't like I needed to do it all at once either. I could spread things out over several months. I wasn't going anywhere soon. I'd told my landlord that I wasn't sure if I'd want to stay after my lease was up, but I was starting to lean towards doing just that. I'd take it one month at a time, I thought. I was pretty sure I could get my landlord to agree to that. It wouldn't be easy for him to find someone else to take my apartment if word got out. Not putting me under a long term lease would at least guarantee him a tenant for a while.

I'd need to go shopping for clothes too, I reluctantly admitted. Even though I was working from home, Agent Matthews had made it clear that there would be times when I'd be expected to come into the Denver office for debriefings and meetings. I'd need to have a few more proper business outfits if that was going to be the case. Winter shoes especially.

As I'd hoped, the monotony of my thoughts began to lull me to sleep and I felt a wave of relief as I finally slipped under.

“You didn't think I'd forgotten you, did you?”

I froze at the sound of his voice. It was like every part of me had turned to ice. My heart, my blood, my muscles. I wanted to run, but I couldn't even blink or turn. Not that I wanted to turn. If I did, I knew I'd see him and if I saw him, it would be real and not just a nightmare. It wasn't the most logical of reasoning, but it was all I had at the moment.

“You should've known I would come back for you. We belong together, after all. I'm your Prince Charming.”

“Prince Charming doesn't exist.” I forced the words from between clenched teeth. “There's no such thing as true love and the only fairytales that ever come true are the violent ones.”

“We belong together,” he repeated.

A hand touched my shoulder, slid down my arm, and I realized that I

was naked. I wanted to slap the hand away, but I still couldn't move. He cupped my breast, squeezing it, fingers playing with my nipple.

"Don't," I protested, but my voice sounded weak.

"No one's going to save you this time, my little Snow White." His breath was hot against my ear.

"Rylan," I whimpered.

"He's not here. He left you, remember? He didn't want you anymore."

"No!" I sat up, the echo of the word still ringing in my ears. I hoped I hadn't woken anyone else up by shouting, but that wasn't the thought at the forefront of my mind.

I reached over into the nightstand drawer and pulled out a butcher knife, clutching it against me. I'd been sleeping with it nearby ever since I'd come back. If Christophe tried to finish what he'd started before, he was in for a rude awakening. I didn't need anyone to save me. I could save myself.

Even this statement couldn't stop the painful longing in my chest, the way my body ached. I didn't want to feel like this, but nothing I could do would stop it. I missed Rylan and I wanted him back. I knew I couldn't have him, and that just made the hole in my heart worse.

How could anyone want this? If being in love meant this sort of agony, why would anyone want it? Things had been so much easier before I'd met him. I'd been happier than I'd believed I could be.

The thing was, no matter how awful I felt, I knew, if I was given the choice to go back and change things, I wouldn't do it. Not even to spare both Rylan and me the pain. I wouldn't choose to live without having been in love with him. If that made me a fool, so be it.

I put the knife back in the drawer and climbed out of bed. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep again. I'd just have another nightmare. At least awake I could do some work and try to save a few more kids from their nightmares.

Chapter 14

I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't spend one more day not knowing. Monday morning, I called the Fort Collins Police Department and asked if Agent Matthews had come back from Denver. I was going to talk to him either way, but I was glad when the cop I spoke with said the agent was back. I hadn't wanted a long bus ride into Denver to think of what I was going to say.

He didn't look surprised to see me when I arrived, so I figured the cop I'd talked to had told him I'd called. That was fine. He was going to get enough of a surprise when I told him why I was here. My coming didn't have to be a surprise at all.

“Is something wrong, Miss Lang?” he asked as he gestured towards the chair across the table from where he'd been sitting.

There were papers spread across the desk and I assumed they were for Christophe's case. I wasn't interested in them, however. I had something else on my mind.

“One of the URLs for a site I found last week, I recognized it.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Okay.”

I continued, “My mom used to use that URL for videos of me.”

“Unfortunately, URLs resell all the time. Certain names tend to be picked back up for the same purpose.”

I shook my head. “I'm not stupid, Agent Matthews. I know that. I checked the site though. It's still being run the same way.”

“Did you make a note of this in your case file?” he asked. “I can make it a top priority.”

“That's not why I'm here,” I interrupted before he could go any further. “I tried to pull up my case file to make sure I was remembering things

correctly.” That wasn't entirely true, but that wasn't the part that mattered anyway.

“How did you find it?” he asked, more curious than annoyed. “I thought you erased any record of yourself. Wasn't that the reason for the immunity agreement?”

“It was,” I said. “But I didn't want anyone getting out on a technicality about how they couldn't find the case file. I just took my name out. Everything else stayed the same. And I tagged the file so I could find it again if I needed to.”

“Clever,” he said.

“I try.” I leaned forward slightly. “But, again, not why I'm here. Though I did find it interesting that access to my own file was denied.”

“Considering what you'd done the last time you'd gotten to it, could you blame us for being a bit wary?”

He had a point. “True,” I conceded. “But I'd like to know why my mom's file's the same way.”

He blinked, his mask breaking for a mere fraction of a moment before solidifying again. “I didn't think it was.”

“I don't mean the fake one that says she died in prison,” I said. “Hypothetically, let's say a person has seen a fair bit of less than legal work, it might be safe to presume that such a person would be able to tell the difference between a real and a fake document.”

“I would say.” Agent Matthews chose his words carefully. “Such a person might not want to know the truth.”

“Let's drop the bullshit, Agent Matthews,” I said. “I found my mother's real file and it was above my security clearance. What's going on?”

“I'm surprised you didn't just hack into it. I know you're more than capable.”

“Of course I am,” I said dismissively. I wasn't bragging. Both Agent Matthews and I knew it was true. “But I'm trying very hard not to break the law.” I paused, and then added, “But I can't make any promises if I don't get answers.”

He was quiet for a moment and I got the distinct impression that he was sizing me up, trying to figure out exactly how determined I was. I let him. I

didn't have any doubt that he'd see I wasn't playing around.

“All right,” he said with a sigh. He opened his laptop. “I don't have the physical file here, but I can pull up the electronic one and tell you what you want to know.”

“You mean you don't know?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I purposefully didn't look her up so I'd be able to honestly tell you that I didn't know if you ever asked.” He gave me a wry smile. “I'd gotten the impression that you were good at reading people.”

“I am,” I said, smiling back. “So that was probably a smart move.”

There were a few minutes of silence, save for the tapping of keys, and then he cleared his throat. “Case file for Anna Newbury.”

My chest constricted. I'd been right. I hadn't known her real name.

“Also known as Helena King or Helen Kingston.”

The first had been what she'd called herself, the second had been the name on my birth certificate. Even that had been a lie.

“Do you want me to read off any of the details about her life?” Agent Matthews asked. “Arrests? Children?”

I shook my head. “I know she had six kids under the name Helen Kingston. I don't want to know who they are though.”

“She's had ten others total,” he said quietly. “Six before you, under that alias; four after, under two other names. One of those was born under her real name shortly after she was arrested.”

Ten. I had ten half-brothers and sisters out there. Four born after me.

I frowned as I finished processing what he'd said. “One under her real name right after she was arrested. Want to explain to me how she managed to have three more under another name after that?”

“Your mother cut a deal with the prosecutors for the names of the men who'd been involved in the making and distributing of the films, as well as quite a few of the names of the men who'd...” His voice trailed off.

“I figured she'd sell them out,” I said, not making him finish his sentence. “But she couldn't have gotten off scot free. Not after what she'd done. What she let them do...” I saw the reluctance on his face and knew there was more. “What?”

“She told the prosecutors that none of it had been her fault. That the men involved had forced her to let them use you. They'd raped, beaten and threatened her. Gotten her hooked on drugs. She said she'd never wanted to hurt you.”

My hand automatically went to my side even though I couldn't feel the scar tissue under my sweater. “She said that? What about my grand jury testimony? I don't remember it word for word, but I'm pretty sure I was clear about my mother's role in all of this.” My voice was harsh, but I didn't apologize for it. I was having a hard enough time thinking clearly at the moment.

“She told the prosecutors that you'd been confused, that you didn't know what you were saying. She said that, of course, it would seem like she was a part of it but you were a child and didn't understand that it was the men who'd forced her to do those things.”

“I was thirteen by the time I got out of there. Hardly a child.” My teeth were clenched together so tightly that my jaw ached.

“I know,” he said. “And I think the prosecutors knew it too. They just wanted the information she had and they knew she wouldn't give it without getting what she wanted.”

“And what was that?” I almost didn't want to know.

“A walk,” he said. “They managed to get her to agree to a couple months, but probation after that. And she had to agree not to try to get custody of you or any of her children back.”

“At least there was that,” I muttered. Then I remembered what he'd said before. “You said she had three other kids under a new alias.”

“She said that some of the men she'd testified against had threatened her, so the DA agreed to put her into witness protection.”

“You mean to tell me that after torturing, abusing and pimping me out for thirteen years, my mother only had to serve a couple months in jail and then got a whole new life?” My hands clenched into fists. “She had three kids and some house with a white picket fence?”

“I don't know about the house or the fence,” Agent Matthews said. “But yes, your mother got an entirely new identity. It does look like she was persuaded by her handler to give her children up for adoption.”

“Should've sterilized her.” I was surprised at the bitterness in my voice.

I'd truly thought I was beyond caring about my mother. But it wasn't that, I realized. I wasn't angry for me. I was angry that she'd almost had three new victims and the only thing that had stopped her was a US Marshal who actually had some common sense.

"I'm sorry, Jenna." Agent Matthews looked at me. There was no pity on his face, only sympathy, and it helped keep my temper in check.

"So she's still alive," I said.

"She is."

"Which means she could be the one working that site," I finally said what I'd been thinking from the first moment I'd seen the URL. "She could be back in the business."

"She doesn't have her kids," Agent Matthews reminded me.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "She's resourceful. She'd find a way." I could feel my stomach rebelling, threatening to bring back the half a grapefruit I'd had for breakfast.

"I can have her handler check in on her," Agent Matthews said. "I'm sure they'd be able to find out if she was doing something illegal. She's not on probation anymore, but any illegal activity would require the marshals getting involved and could void her agreement with them."

"Have them check," I said. "But I doubt they'll find anything. She's smarter than people give her credit for. Probably why no one caught her for thirteen years." I stood.

"Jenna," Agent Matthews said. "I really am sorry."

"It's okay," I said. "I'm used to it."

I left before he could tell me anything else. My head was already swimming with truths and lies, one chasing the other in random loops until nothing made sense anymore. One particular thought was screaming the loudest.

If this was what really happened when we brought in the bad guys, then what was the point to any of it? We never made a difference, no matter what we did.

Chapter 15

Despite my depressing thought that nothing I was doing was making a difference, I still kept doing it. I let myself fall into a routine, waking up each morning, forcing down coffee for a caffeine fix and then getting straight to work. I worked through lunch, maybe grabbing something to eat at some point, and then stopped in the evening so I could get some real food. Another hour or so at work and then down to the gym to work out. Exhausting myself physically seemed to work fairly well in keeping me from dreaming. Well, for the most part. Instead of several dreams a night, I was down to just one or two...but even wearing myself out didn't do anything for the flashbacks.

The ones for the past couple days had been the worst. I was working on a case where the child being exploited hadn't been kidnapped or anything like that. This was a little girl being sold to the highest online bidder who would direct whatever it was they wanted to be done to her. At least, she'd been a little girl about ten years ago. I had ten years of photos to go through, each one worse than the last, but all necessary.

I didn't know if it was because she was dark-haired like me or if it was the content of the pictures, but I'd spent too much time experiencing flashbacks of some of the worst memories of my life.

"Come here, baby."

He held out his hand and I went to him. I had to go to him. I knew what would happen if I didn't, and it would be worse than what was coming. It was always worse to resist.

"You've been a naughty little girl and Daddy needs to punish you."

The baby-doll dress I was wearing was so thin that everything underneath was visible and I shivered as the man pulled me onto his lap. He bent me over his knees and pulled up the bottom of the dress.

I shivered as the memory washed over me. It wasn't as bad as the flashback, but it was bad enough. The flashback had kept going through him

spanking me and then his hand had moved lower...

I shook my head to clear it. That hadn't been the first flashback, or the worst, but it still wasn't pleasant. Other ones had come through too, harsher, worse pieces of my past. Ones that had left me shaking and gasping for air. Some that I hadn't even thought of in years.

I stood up and ran my hands through my hair. I needed a break. I'd been working nearly non-stop for ten days. And when I hadn't been working, I'd been at the gym. Maybe what I needed right now was some fresh air. It was the first week of March and an absolutely beautiful day. The sun was out, no clouds in the blue sky. The wind was gentle, but cool. It wasn't a warm day, but as soon as I stepped outside, I could smell spring coming.

I didn't want to go for a run. I wanted to walk, to feel the sun on my face and breathe the fresh air. I headed for the campus, walking along the familiar path, over the bridge and across. Years ago, there'd been a flood here, or so I'd heard. The entire campus had been trashed, the glass front of the Lory Student Center shattered. One of my professors had lived in the city when it happened and told my class about it.

I tried to imagine it as I walked, seeing the campus under several feet of water, too deep to walk. It was strange to think about, to imagine the city after such a disaster. It had been the first place I'd really considered home, more or less. That was what was holding me back, I had to admit. Denver and DC were both great cities and a solid job with the FBI should've been exactly what I wanted. But no matter what had happened here, Fort Collins was home.

Then again, I thought, Denver and Washington could both offer me a new start. Maybe that's what I needed, a new beginning, somewhere fresh. Denver would be too close, too much like Fort Collins. DC would be a better bet. Further away. There, no one would know me except Agent Matthews, and even he would stay in Denver.

That had appeal. Being unknown, being a nameless, faceless member of a crowd. An agent who worked in the tech department wasn't someone who got a lot of attention. Maybe it'd be nice not to get attention for once. I'd tried to protect myself by building up a shield, tough exterior. Tattoos, piercings and hair. Maybe instead of that, I should try to disappear. Keep the dark hair, lose all of the piercings. Put on a black suit and become just another agent.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I almost didn't see the newspaper

sitting on the bench, edges fluttering in the wind. Almost.

“Billionaire CEO Rylan Archer With Runner-Up for Miss Colorado.”

I stopped and stared at the headline, reading it again. Then I saw the picture underneath it. Rylan in a tux, smiling, and a tall, beautiful blonde standing next to him, her arm looped through his.

I picked up the paper and continued my walk back to my apartment. I was barely aware of where I was going, my eyes fixed on the picture. There was an article underneath, but I wasn't going to read it yet. I didn't want to read it at all, but my curiosity couldn't let it go.

I didn't remember getting back home, but I was suddenly there and sitting on the couch, the paper in front of me.

I read the caption under the picture first. “CEO of Archer Enterprises, Rylan Archer, attends the American Cancer Society charity ball with Miss Colorado runner-up Juliet Markus.”

Juliet Markus. A nice name for a pretty face.

An unscarred face. Unmarked body. Whole and healthy.

Everything that I wasn't. And everything Rylan deserved.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes and I fought them back. I wasn't going to cry. Not over this.

I turned my attention to the article, but it didn't really contain any additional information. The headline and picture seemed to be only to coerce people into reading the accompanying article. It mentioned Rylan and his date, but only because they were among the most well-known and wealthiest of the guests. He hadn't been interviewed and nothing was said about his relationship with Juliet.

That hadn't taken him long at all, I thought as I carefully folded the paper and set it on the coffee table. He'd gone from Emmaline to Juliet in just two weeks. I supposed I should've been grateful for it. At least he wasn't dating Emmaline.

It was small comfort, but at least it was something. Rylan was moving on and it wasn't all stupid choices. Juliet seemed like she would be a good choice. I looked at my laptop. This was a bad idea, but I needed to know.

I pulled up my internet browser and typed in her name. Since she'd just been made runner-up this past year, there was plenty online about her. She

was about my age, born and raised in Colorado. Went to CSU, majoring in sociology and minoring in political science. Wholesome family with parents who'd been high school sweethearts and an older brother who was a doctor. She volunteered for Habitat for Humanity as well as at the local hospital. She'd helped do fund-raising for natural disasters and worked with underprivileged youth in Denver.

She was fucking perfect.

I closed my laptop and pulled my feet up onto the couch. I pulled my knees up to my chest and closed my eyes. I'd once been forced to watch some sci-fi slash horror flick where a thing burst out of some guy's chest. I felt like that was what was about to happen to me. Or that it had already happened. My heart ripped from my chest, lungs too. All that was left was a gaping hole.

This was what I'd wanted, I reminded myself. Rylan to be happy and for him to find a woman who could give him what he wanted. I was sure Juliet would be a great mother. And if he didn't get serious with her, someone else would come along. His family would make sure he chose better this next time. Suzette would, if no one else did. And Zeke. I didn't know exactly what his problem was with me, not entirely. I knew he didn't like me, but I didn't know if it was personal for only me or if anyone who dated Rylan would be subject to the same treatment, but I was going to hope for the best and choose to believe that Zeke would finally support one of Rylan's choices.

I didn't want to think about Rylan with someone else, but I forced myself to. I had to get used to it, especially since I was still in Fort Collins. We hadn't been apart that long and I'd already seen him with two women. If I fell apart every time it happened, I was going to have a problem.

He was with someone else. A better choice. I kept telling myself that over and over again, like pressing on a bruise until the pain was just another part of me. It didn't go away or even lessen, but I accepted it, pulled it into myself. I was strong enough to handle it. I'd handled other things worse than this. I could take it. I had to, because the alternative wasn't anything good.

Chapter 16

I needed to go grocery shopping or I was going to be reduced to eating baking soda and drinking tap water. I hadn't been eating much, but I'd known even then I'd eventually run out. I'd pretty much stuck to the apartment and the gym, with only an occasional walk, but I'd stuck mostly to the campus. Some because I liked it, but some because I'd known that it was the place I'd be the least likely to run into Rylan.

I headed to the usual store where I did my grocery shopping and tried to focus on my list without being distracted by constantly looking over my shoulder for Rylan. I didn't even know if he did his own shopping or where he went for it. I allowed myself a sad smile. It hurt to admit that there had been so many things that I hadn't known about him. Simple things that I'd never know.

I pushed the sadness aside before it could become something else. I didn't think it'd be entirely appropriate for me to have a crying fit in the middle of the store.

I turned down an aisle and made a small sound. Short dark brown hair, tall, slender...Suzette Dougall, Rylan's twenty-one year-old half-sister, was standing at the end of the aisle, a serious expression on her face.

Shit. I didn't want to be here, especially not with Suzette. I didn't want to talk to her. I started to turn to go, but had to stop when a man with a grocery cart and a very unhappy toddler blocked the way. He looked frazzled enough that I didn't want to bother him by asking him to move. I glanced back down the aisle and found Suzette looking at me with those sharp hazel eyes of hers. She was pretty, or would've been if she hadn't been scowling at me.

Then she smiled, a harsh, brittle smile, and began walking towards me.
Fuck.

There was nowhere I could go that it wouldn't look like I was running. I wanted to run, but despite everything, there was still a bit of steel left in me. I

gave Suzette a fake smile and prepared myself for a conversation I didn't want to have.

“Jenna.”

I watched her gaze move over me, taking in everything about my appearance. She probably intended to analyze everything later, decide what to report back to Rylan, what he should know.

“How've you been?”

Now there was a loaded question. I could answer honestly, let her know just how badly I'd been hurt by what I'd done. I wouldn't though. I wasn't about to let anyone know that, especially not the person who'd been responsible for giving me the information that had led to my decision.

“I'm working with the FBI now,” I said. “Using my talents to do some good.”

Let her read into that what she would. In fact, I was pretty sure this entire conversation would be going through whatever filter she saw through. The filter that had told her that, no matter how much Rylan and I loved each other, I wasn't worthy of him.

“Rylan's doing very well,” she said, even though I hadn't asked.

There was an edge to her voice that made me think she'd been storing all of this up for when she'd finally seen me again.

“He's moved on from you,” she continued without waiting for me to respond. “Didn't take him long either. Granted, he did go out with a few women who weren't much better than you, but those were just typical rebound dates.”

A few women. I swallowed hard. I thought Emmaline had been the only one. She had to be one of the women who weren't much better than me. I couldn't see Suzette being happy with Rylan dating someone like Emmaline. Suzette would see right through Emmaline.

“But his head's on straight now,” she said with a smug smile. “Dating models, high society women. I doubt it'll be long until he finds someone truly worth his attention.”

I didn't need her to state the obvious, that I wasn't one of the women worthy of his attention. I knew she loved her brother and I reminded myself of that as my insides twisted.

“I'm glad he's doing well.” To my surprise, I actually managed to keep my voice even. “He deserves to be happy.”

“Yes,” Suzette said firmly. “He does.”

My throat started to close up and I could feel the tears threatening again. Without another word, I stepped past Suzette and made my way down the aisle. I wasn't going to cry. Not here, not at home. I was done crying over Rylan. I wasn't entirely sure how long that would last, but I was going to keep telling myself it until, one day, it was true.

I finished my shopping and put away my groceries in a fog. I wasn't even sure I'd put everything in their normal places. I showered mechanically and went to bed. I'd known Rylan was moving on, but it was one thing to observe a couple things and make my own deductions. It was something else entirely to hear it stated so baldly.

I closed my eyes and wondered what nightmare I'd be treated to first.

His mouth was soft against mine, gentle. The heat of his hands warmed my cold face and I leaned into the kiss. I wanted to feel his body pressed against mine. His skin burned where I touched him and he parted my lips with his tongue. I ran my hands up his chest and then down his back, fingers tracing along his tattoo. I wasn't sure when we'd lost our clothes, only that there was nothing between us now.

He ran his hand down my spine to take hold of my ass, pulling me more tightly to him so that I could feel his erection, urgent, against my stomach. He pulled my bottom lip into his mouth, sucking and worrying at it with his teeth. I made a small sound in the back of my throat and he released my now-swollen lip. His mouth made its way across my jaw, teeth and lips working together. He pulled my earlobe into his mouth, treating it with the same care he had my lip. I moved my body against his, nails scratching at his back.

“I'm going to tie you up now,” he said in my ear.

I nodded. My body was on fire, aching for him. One hand slid between us and cupped my pussy. His finger teased along the outside of my folds and then slipped inside. My knees felt weak as he lightly rubbed my clit for a moment before sliding down to dip inside.

“Mmm. So wet for me, baby.”

My eyes closed, focusing on the sensation of his finger moving inside me. Of course I was wet for him. I wanted him all the time. Just thinking about

him turned me on.

“You'd do anything I asked, wouldn't you?” He licked the top of my ear. “Spread your legs in public, let me finger you until you came, not caring who was watching.”

I started to frown. What was he saying?

“Get down on your knees and suck me off under a table at a restaurant.” He added a second finger. “I bet you'd even let me share you with my friends.”

I stiffened and tried to pull away, but the arm around my waist tightened, keeping me in place as his fingers continued their steady in and out motion.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Should Zeke join us?”

I was still shaking my head when I found myself tied to the bed, arms and legs spread wide. I tried to speak, but my mouth was gagged. I tugged at the restraints, but they were tied tight. I couldn't get free.

“Why don't you keep her occupied while I sample what else is out there?”

I realized now that Rylan was standing at the end of the bed, his hand moving slowly over his cock. Next to him was Zeke, also naked. His eyes were dark, his expression unsmiling.

“Do whatever you want to her,” Rylan continued. “She's done it all before. And don't worry about protection. She can't get pregnant.”

Tears began to stream down my face. Why was he saying these things? I didn't understand.

“Who are you going to fuck first?” Zeke asked, his tone casual, as if this were the kind of thing he and Rylan did all the time.

“I'm thinking Emmaline,” Rylan said.

The room brightened and now I could see behind the men. The room was crowded with naked women. I recognized Emmaline, Lara and Juliet. The others were nameless pretty faces with great bodies.

Zeke crawled up on the bed as Rylan stretched out his hand to Emmaline. I wanted to look away, but I found that I couldn't turn my head or close my eyes. Zeke's hands were on me as Rylan bent Emmaline over the bed and began to fuck her. Her eyes were practically glowing as she gave me a

smug smile.

“She can give me what I want,” Rylan said. “All of these women can. Why would I want you when I can have them?”

One after another, I was forced to watch as he took them. Sometimes he tied them up, taunting me with how much better it was to have a woman who wouldn't freak out about the things he liked. Other times, he told Zeke what to do to me while he did the same thing to the woman beneath him. They all laughed when I cried and tried to beg them to stop.

Then Suzette walked in, beautiful in an elegant evening gown. She walked towards the bed, ignoring the decadence around her. The jewels she wore glittered as she approached.

“See,” she said. “I told you he'd gotten over you.” She gestured towards the crowd of women. “And aren't these women so much better than you? None of them whored themselves out. They aren't broken. They can give him a family.” She crouched down so that our faces were only inches apart. “You don't deserve him. You deserve this.”

A hand buried itself in my hair and yanked my head back as Zeke slammed into me. I screamed, the sound muffled by the gag, and no one tried to help me. They watched and they laughed and I remembered who I really was...

My pillow was wet with tears when I woke, the echo of laughter still in my ears. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the last vestiges of my nightmare. I wiped at my cheeks, but they were dry now. The details of things were slipping away, but I knew the gist of what had happened.

It wasn't real, I reminded myself. Not a memory of any kind. Rylan would never do anything like that. Even Zeke and Suzette, as much as they disliked me, never would have been involved in anything remotely that cruel. Zeke may have had a bad temper, but what had happened in my nightmare wasn't that kind of violence. I knew the difference.

Still, I began to shiver and pulled my blankets more tightly around me. I'd spent enough time with Dr. MacLeod to know that while, sometimes, a dream is just a dream, other times, it's the subconscious telling us to deal with things that we'd rather not face. I knew which this had been.

Chapter 17

I'd behaved myself and not hacked into either my or my mother's files. I trusted that what Agent Matthews had told me was true. I didn't, however, stop looking into that website I'd found. It was the weekend, so I doubted anyone was going to get around to shutting things down before Monday, no matter what kind of priority Agent Matthews put on it, which meant I had two days to find something that would either prove or disprove my suspicions.

Saturday night, I managed to break through the last level of encryption and find what I was looking for. An address. The person who'd set up the site had been good, rerouting things so that the IP address didn't show its true location. I was just better. Once I had the address, the rest was easy. A bit of digging into county records and I had a nice little pile of evidence to take to Agent Matthews.

When I walked into the police station on Monday morning, I had a paper file as well as a flash drive with all of the same information. I'd made copies of both and had the originals on my laptop back home. I wasn't about to risk someone accidentally losing my work or the evidence mysteriously disappearing simply because WITSEC was involved. I didn't know how trustworthy any of them were. It was hard enough trusting Agent Matthews with this information.

“Great work this week,” Agent Matthews said as he motioned for me to sit. “My bosses are quite impressed with how well your software is working. They'd really like to sit down and talk to you about allowing other agents to use it.”

“I'm sure I can work out some sort of arrangement,” I said. “I'm not looking to sell my programs outright, but I'd have no problem allowing them to be used, for a small fee, of course.”

“You're going to charge the US government to use your programs?”

I wasn't sure if he was amused or annoyed. "I wrote them long before the FBI asked me to use them. They're mine. I didn't use anything of the FBI's in their design."

He shrugged. "I'll pass that along."

"And you can tell them they can contact me directly, if you're not comfortable being the go-between." I set the file and the flash drive on the table. "I sent you the week's reports, but I wanted to bring these in person. I've been working on it off the clock."

He took the file and opened it.

"As you can see, the website I found leads back to the address where my mother's been staying for the last eight years." My fingers were twisting together so tightly that my knuckles were turning white. "I've been able to link her recent activity to six different child pornography sites, all run by different men. I have their names and addresses too. I don't know whose kids they're using, but at least one of them used images I recently scrubbed."

Agent Matthews didn't say anything for several minutes as he read through my information. "You obtained these names and addresses without a warrant," he said.

"Didn't need one," I said, stretching the truth a bit. "Even though I wasn't doing this on company time, I made sure that I did things by the book. Once I found the physical address where the IP was located, I just used public county records to see who lived there. I did the same for the others."

He looked at me, his expression unreadable. "Why didn't you do it on company time?"

"Because there was a chance the marshals would get involved and shut me down before I could find anything out." I leaned forward slightly. "Maybe this is a sting operation and I'm wrong. It's possible, but my gut is telling me that's not the case."

"You really think your mother would risk being kicked out of the program?"

"I think she's a junkie who knows how to make fast money," I said. "And I think eight years is a long time to go without a fix, especially if she never wanted to stop in the first place."

"You do know that she's been given random drug tests over the years? Staying clean is part of the program."

“I know that she was smart enough to convince the DA that she was a victim,” I said. “I don't want that happening again. She needs to be in prison.”

“I can open a case,” he said. “But I can't make any promises.”

My mouth flattened into a thin line. “She got a second chance based on manipulation and lies. Look what she's done with it. If she waited a year before getting back into it, I'll be shocked.”

“The thing is, Jenna...” His use of my first name made my temper flare. He was trying to placate me. “The connections you have here, those guys are the bigger fish and we both know if your mom flips on them, she's going to come out ahead.”

“There's enough evidence in those files that you shouldn't need my mother's testimony.” I fought to keep my voice calm.

“I'll do what I can,” he said. “But it's out of my hands when it comes to deals. The federal prosecutor will be the one to have the final say.” He hesitated, and then added, “And based on how things went with Christophe Constantine, I wouldn't count on anything.”

I immediately went from hot to cold. “What about Christophe?”

Agent Matthews looked distinctly uncomfortable, which only made me feel worse. “The prosecutor called me this morning to tell me that the deal's done. I can head back to Denver by the end of the week.”

“What sort of deal?” My lips felt numb, like they'd been shot full of Novocain or something.

“You won't need to testify,” he began.

“Just tell me.” The words came out a bit harder than I'd planned, but Agent Matthews didn't seem offended.

“For his testimony, Christophe is getting no jail time, minimum probation and witness protection after the trials.”

I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach.

“He gets to stay out on bail until he testifies, and because he'll be given a new name, he won't be registered as a sex offender.”

“You promised.” I spoke in barely a whisper. “You said you'd make sure he couldn't hurt anyone else; that he'd at least be on the registry so people could know.”

“I'm sorry, Jenna.” He sighed. “I didn't realize how badly Matthew St. Clair wanted to take down the guys Christophe had information on. I trusted the bastard to do the right thing.”

“And I trusted you.” I looked at the file I'd spent the weekend putting together. “She's going to get away with it again, you know.”

“The marshals told me that they were putting Christophe under more strict supervision than their usual witnesses,” Agent Matthews said suddenly. He ran his hand over his face. “I'm sorry I talked you into letting us take over the case. If we'd stayed out of it, Christophe probably wouldn't even be out on bail and he'd be serving the max for all of his crimes. Instead, he basically gets a walk on everything.”

I had no doubt that Agent Matthews was right. Rylan had made it clear to the local authorities that he'd wanted Christophe prosecuted with everything they could find. He would've pushed until he was sure we were safe; I was safe. He'd understood why I'd agreed, and hadn't pushed it, but now I wished he had. I wished I would've thought it through more, maybe gotten some things in writing.

It was too late now though. I pushed back the regrets. Dwelling on it wouldn't do anyone any good. Besides, I thought grimly, Christophe would slip up. Pedophiles always did. I just hoped it was something small and no one else got hurt because of it. As for my mother...

“I'll do my best to see that your mother's prosecuted for real this time,” Agent Matthews said. “I'll even take in your grand jury testimony against Christophe.”

“How's that going to help?” I asked. I'd felt so good about the case I'd put together and now I was seeing it fall apart.

“You're consistent,” he said. “Showing the prosecutor that your original grand jury testimony against your mother matches what you said about her recently should convince him that her statements about you being confused were lies.”

“Will that even make a difference?” I asked.

My previous feeling of helplessness was returning. What good was doing all this work if it was just going to be used to flip people? I knew they were trying to cut the head off of the snake, but in trying to get to the top, they were letting go all of the little people, and those would be the ones to step in and fill the void once arrests were finally made. Like that

mythological creature, the hydra, where multiple heads would grow back when one was cut off. It was a never-ending, never winning, battle.

“I don't know if it will or not,” Agent Matthews admitted. “But it's the best we can do.”

I nodded and stood up. “Thank you.”

I walked out before he could say anything else. The best he could do. The worst part was, I knew he was telling the truth. The prosecutor would look at the evidence I'd gathered and, to make his case stronger, would choose who he saw as the weakest link, the least offensive one, and that would be who got a deal. And I knew who would look that way. It wouldn't matter that she'd been arrested before, or that she was violating her WITSEC agreement. He would see what she wanted him to see. A poor woman, an addict who was exploited by perverts into giving them what they wanted. She'd use her previous arrest as proof that she was susceptible to such manipulation and intimidation. She'd cry and swear that she never wanted to hurt anyone.

And the moron would most likely buy her story and cut another deal.

I blinked against the bright sunlight as I stepped outside. It was still morning and I had work to do, but tonight, I was going out. Not to the gym or anything like that. I was heading to a club to dance and drink and flirt. I didn't think I was ready to hook up yet, not after the last disastrous attempt, but I could have a bit of fun anyway. And, right now, I could seriously use a bit of fun.

Chapter 18

I left off the eyebrow and belly button piercings. I hadn't been wearing them much anyway. I kept the make-up light as well. A little heavier than what I wore to meet Agent Matthews, but not even close to what I'd worn before. I wasn't going back to the way I had been, but I wasn't going to go the total opposite either. I'd pick a place about halfway in-between, I decided. The clothes were still fitted to show off my body, but I went for comfortable but stylish shoes rather than heeled boots. When I looked in the mirror this time, I felt pretty good. Not great and not like I was completely back to myself, but I was getting there, and that was progress.

I didn't go back to the club I'd tried the last time. I wasn't looking for a random hook-up and I didn't want to risk running into Chad. I doubted he'd be feeling too friendly towards me and a confrontation was the last thing I needed at the moment. I just wanted to forget, but not to lose myself in a man. There wouldn't be another man in my life anytime soon.

I smiled as I walked into the club. I'd always liked this club better. The music was loud, but more than just a beat. The lights were flashing, but more hypnotically than the nearly overwhelming pulsing of the previous club. I made my way over to the bar. I didn't want to get drunk, but something to take the edge off would be nice.

The bartender gave me a once-over as he poured my drink and I could see the appreciation in his eyes. Surprisingly, he didn't hit on me, though I suspected that was more because it was too early in his shift to try to find someone to go home with. Too bad. He was cute and I might've enjoyed a bit of flirting. I didn't want to get him in trouble with his boss, so I left him alone and surveyed the crowd as I sipped my drink.

The place wasn't nearly as crowded tonight as it would be on the weekend, which was another reason I'd wanted to come out on a Monday night. I'd always preferred slower nights. Enough men to choose from, but I didn't have to risk a panic attack from too many people.

“Can I ask you to dance?” A man's voice came from my right.

I half-turned towards him. He was tall and lean with dark hair and eyes, skin the color of creamed coffee. He had the kind of long eyelashes that girls would envy. All in all, a quite beautiful man. He still couldn't hold a candle to Rylan, but I thought he might be a good distraction.

“I might be up for a dance or two,” I said. I took his hand and let him lead me onto the dance floor.

His hand stayed in mine as we began to dance, but he kept a respectful distance between our bodies. I smiled at him, letting myself relax and move with the music. Halfway through the song, he leaned down to speak in my ear.

“I have a confession to make.”

I looked up at him, wondering if I should yank my hand away from his or if I should wait. The conversation could be something innocent, like some sort of clichéd pick-up line about how beautiful he thought I was or how much he wanted me in bed.

“I'm gay.”

I blinked, startled by the admission. Not exactly what I'd been thinking.

He grinned. “You looked like you wanted to have fun, but not like you were looking for a hook-up. I wanted to dance, but I didn't want to give the wrong impression.” He gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry I wasn't upfront with you.”

“Not a problem.” I was actually relieved. Hot guy to dance with, but absolutely no chance of there being a sexual misunderstanding.

“So we're good?” He raised an eyebrow and looked around. “I'm sure there are plenty of men who'd love to be in my place.”

“I'm having fun,” I said truthfully. “Are you?”

He reached out and put his hands on my waist. “I am.”

I liked the way his body moved with mine. If I'd been looking for a sexual partner, I might've been disappointed that this guy was off the table, but as it was, I was enjoying myself. I wasn't going to second-guess myself.

I turned, letting him pull me back against him. My ass fit firmly against him, confirming his sexuality as our grinding bodies provided very little physical response, and what he was having was easily explained by friction. I

didn't know of any man who'd be able to keep himself from getting an erection dancing this way with a woman, and, not to sound arrogant, especially me.

“You're a really good dancer,” he said, his breath hot against my neck.

“Thank you,” I said. “Right back at you.”

We danced through another half dozen songs before I had to cry off and head for the bar again. I was thirsty, this time for water. He smiled at me and moved on to another partner. I smiled back and watched him go.

I leaned back against the bar and drained a bottle of water. It wasn't until I finished it that I realized I was smiling. Actually smiling, and not just in response to someone else doing it. It took me a moment to place my current emotion and when I did, I was surprised. I felt good. Not great. Not whole or happy or even content, but good, and that was enough for now.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled and I immediately stiffened. Someone was watching me.

I looked around, trying to be discreet about it. Anyone looking would've thought I was simply scanning the crowd, looking for someone new to dance with. The thing was, I couldn't see anyone giving me more than a glance, either filled with admiration or jealousy. Still, I felt uneasy, like there were eyes in the shadows.

I shook it off, reminding myself that it was a natural reaction to have after finding out that the man who'd tried to assault me was essentially going to walk free. I was surprised I hadn't felt it before.

I tried to shake the feeling, searching the crowd, trying to find someone else to dance with. Someone else to take my mind off of things. I could still end the night feeling good for once.

And then it all went to hell because I saw *him*.

For a brief moment, I thought I was mistaken, that the play of light and shadows had made me see things, but I'd been right. Those broad shoulders and that narrow waist. Dark hair. I couldn't see the color of his eyes from where I was standing, but I knew them. Knew what they would look like when they were lit up with happiness, dancing with laughter. I knew what they would look like blazing with passion, dark with anger. I knew him and it hurt.

I wanted to turn away before he saw me, but I'd lingered too long and I

watched his expression change. First, surprise and recognition, then hurt. His eyes flicked to my left and right, and I knew he was trying to determine if I was here alone. When his gaze returned to me, I saw the determination that meant he wasn't going to stop until he got what he wanted. Not for the first time, I felt that focus on me, only this time, I didn't want it.

He began to walk towards me, never taking his eyes off of me. I'd been hunted before, knew what it was like to feel the difference between predator and prey. This was different. I'd never felt like I was torn between wanting to be caught and wanting to run away. I wanted to feel him wrap his arms around me, pull me tight against his chest so that I could hear his heart beating, that slow, steady thumping that was my anchor.

What if that wasn't why he was coming over, though? What if that look of sheer stubbornness was because he felt like he needed to tell me himself that it was over and he'd moved on? The kind of man he was, I could see him feeling as if that was something he needed to do.

I was dealing, but I could feel how fragile the walls were that I'd put back up. Strangers couldn't get through them. Zeke and Suzette could crack them. One word from Rylan, however, and my defenses would crumble. It wouldn't matter what he wanted to say. A kind word or a cruel one would be equally dangerous.

Still, I couldn't move. The bar was at my back, but it was more Rylan's gaze that held me in place than any sort of physical trap. My heart was in my throat, blood rushing in my ears so that I almost couldn't hear the music. I couldn't see anyone but him. Everyone else was faceless, nameless, and he was the only thing that was real. I could feel my body reaching for his. Not in the physical sense, but something deeper, something I couldn't explain.

Movement at the corner of my eye caught my attention, and a beautiful blonde stepped between Rylan and me. Her dress was white, glowing under the lights. It barely covered her ass and the glimpse I got of the front revealed cleavage that was far too ample for her slender frame to be real. She tossed back her hair and went straight for Rylan. I didn't have to see her face to know her intentions.

As she reached him, Rylan's eyes moved from me to her and I found that I could move again. Still, I stood and waited, wanting to see what he would do. His face was impossible to read, but when she pressed her body against his, he didn't step back and that was enough for me.

The dark-haired man next to me at the bar had been checking me out since I'd first come over and he smiled as I turned to him. I jerked my head towards the dance floor and the smile widened.

I took his hand and pulled him after me, intentionally taking a path that would let us pass near enough to Rylan and his blonde that he couldn't help but see us. I didn't look at him though. I wanted him to think that I didn't care. He could flirt with whoever he wanted to. I could too.

As we reached an open spot, I turned around, wrapping my arms around the man's neck. His hands came down on my hips as I began to move. I could feel eyes on me and hoped that at least one pair belonged to Rylan. The ache in my chest had a vindictive little streak and I was feeding it. He should have stayed away. Instead, he was flaunting his freedom. Intentional or not, I wanted him to know that I'd moved on as much as he had.

My partner was definitely enjoying my decision. His cock was hard against my hip as he pulled me closer. I let him do it, molding my body against his. I was starting to reconsider the whole 'no sex tonight' intent with which I'd started off the evening. He was cute and it would serve Rylan right to watch me walk out with this guy, knowing exactly what we were going to do.

Even as I imagined what Rylan's face would look like, a wave of guilt washed over me. Guilt for wanting to hurt Rylan even though I'd wanted him to move on. That's what I wanted. A wave of guilt washed over me as I thought about how I was using the man I was dancing with to get back at someone who didn't deserve it. He might've been the kind of guy who didn't really care if I was using him or not, but I did. Hooking up with a guy for the sole purpose of physical satisfaction was one thing. Doing it to hurt someone else was another. I wasn't that kind of person. At least, I didn't want to be.

I gave my dance partner a smile and gestured towards the bathrooms. He smiled and nodded, not missing a beat as he released me. I was pretty sure he thought I was coming back, but he wouldn't miss me long. There were at least a dozen other women who'd gladly take my place. I wasn't going to worry about that though. My goal at the moment was to get out of here without having to explain myself to that guy or see Rylan again. There had to be a back door somewhere.

Chapter 19

I'd come here often enough to know that the hallway where the bathrooms were located didn't come to a dead end but rather a T. I'd never bothered to venture past the ladies' room, but I'd heard plenty of people talking about what went on in that corridor. I may have been into what some people would consider kinky sex, but I'd never been an exhibitionist...not by choice anyway. I had no problem going back to a college dorm where there was always a possibility of a roommate accidentally coming in, but I wasn't about to fuck someone in a hallway. If some people got their kicks doing it though, who was I to judge?

Tonight, however, I was going to head down to that hallway and find out if there was an exit on either end. It would most likely be an emergency exit and would probably sound an alarm, but on the off chance that I could use it, I was going to try. As much as I'd enjoyed the beginning of the night, I didn't want to go out there again. Not if it meant I'd possibly run into my recent dance partner or, worse, Rylan and his...friend.

The hallway was dark, shadowed, but I could make out figures, bodies moving together and for a moment, I was in the past again.

I didn't know who the other girl was. The man had brought her with him. Mom had told him he wouldn't get a discount just because he wasn't using me the whole time. That was fine, he'd said. He wanted me to watch first; watch so I'd know what he was going to do to me.

The girl was a bit older than me, maybe twelve or so, and it was clear she'd been with this man for a long time. He might've even been her father. There wasn't much of a resemblance, but I knew that didn't mean much of anything.

He made her undress and I could see the bruises on her pale skin. She was thin, her hair limp and straggly. If she was his daughter, he most likely wasn't sending her to school. Someone would've noticed something.

I didn't want to watch when he started touching her, but the first time I looked away, I saw my mother raise her hand in warning. I looked back, but tried not to see. I tried to find that place inside me where I went most of the time I was being hurt, but I couldn't get there, dragged back by the sounds the girl was making. She wasn't loud, and I thought that was most likely the problem. He seemed almost annoyed that she wasn't crying or screaming, merely grunting and groaning, almost involuntary noises. That, I thought, was why he wanted me. He thought what he was doing to her would hurt me because I was someone new. I wondered what lie my mother had told him since I'd been treated to far worse than what the girl was receiving.

I shook my head as the flashback faded. My palms were sweating, but I'd at least managed to stay on my feet and not attract any attention. I hadn't thought of that girl in years. By the time I'd gotten out, I'd forgotten all about her. Had she been rescued too? Or had she succumbed to the same fate so many others like us had and died?

I pushed thoughts of the girl aside. I could revisit her fate later. Right now, I needed to get out. There were other memories waiting to come forward. I could feel them at the back of my brain, pushing, trying to make themselves known.

I started to turn away from the two couples to my right when another flashback hit me.

I sat in the corner, knees pulled to my chest. I'd been wearing my Snow White dress for a week and it was stained and filthy. I hadn't eaten anything in a while and my stomach hurt. I was only six, but that wasn't anything new to me. Neither was the pain in other parts of my body. It was summer and that meant more movies. We'd made four this week and I'd lost count of how many men had hurt me.

When the last of those had left, other men had come, but they hadn't been interested in me. I rocked back and forth, wishing I could put my hands over my ears, but when I'd tried that, I'd missed something my mother had told me to do and she'd hit me. If my face hadn't already been swollen and bruised, I might've taken the chance of a blow or two, but I wasn't going to, and that meant I heard every moan and curse.

The three men who'd brought bags of stuff for Mom were taking turns with her just like the other men had done with me. She didn't seem to mind though. Her noises were happy and she kept asking them to do more. Sometimes, she told me to watch because I would be doing some of these

things soon. When I saw her between two men, one below her and one above her, my stomach turned and I was glad I hadn't eaten. I didn't want to think about when I would have to do that.

I rested my head against the wall as I heard one of the men groan. I knew that sound. He was done. I hoped the other two would finish soon and leave. Mom wouldn't feed me, but she would use what the men had brought and I could go to the kitchen and try to find something to eat.

“Watch!” My mother snapped. “Learn something.”

Reluctantly, I looked back at the bodies on the bed and tried to think of something else. Anything but what was happening.

I came to with the wall against my back. I heard a low whimpering sound and realized it was me. I took a slow breath and pressed my hands flat against the wall. I didn't even want to think about what kind of shit I could be touching, focusing instead on the solid feel of the wall, the pounding music.

I was here. This was real. The rest was in the past. It couldn't hurt me anymore.

I pushed myself off the wall, forcing back the rest of the memories. I needed to go the other way and see if there was an exit down there. After a few steps, the world became more firm and some of my tension faded away. I still had plenty, but at least I could breathe without it feeling like my lungs were being squeezed.

The hallway appeared to be blissfully empty and, in the darkness, I could see a faint red glow high on the wall. High enough to be an exit sign. It seemed like it was around another corner, maybe a short alcove. I walked faster. As I turned, I processed several things at once.

One, there was indeed an exit and it didn't say emergency only. Two, I wasn't alone. And, three, the pair were totally involved in what they were doing and hadn't noticed me.

One man was facing the wall, his face turned away from me. His pants were around his knees and I caught a glimpse of a firm ass as the man behind him moved. The one in the back was my first dance partner. The one in the front was tall and muscular, with lighter hair, but I couldn't tell what shade.

The man being fucked moaned. “Harder, baby.”

My heart leaped into my throat and I took a step backward. I had to be hearing things. The music was little more than thumping white noise, but I

tried telling myself that was why I thought I recognized the voice.

He let out a hiss as the man in the back slammed into him.

“Is that what you want?” My former dance partner asked.

I watched, unable to look away, as the man in back reached around and, I assumed, grabbed the other man's cock.

“Faster,” he gasped. “We gotta come soon. My friend's waiting.”

I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle a noise. The man had turned his head slightly when he'd spoken and his profile confirmed my suspicions. I backed away slowly, praying he wouldn't see me. He already hated me. If he knew that I knew...

Fuck.

I hurried down the hallway and turned back towards the restrooms. I ducked into the women's restroom, thankful there wasn't the usual line. I locked myself in a stall and only then did I let myself think about what I'd seen.

Zeke. Rylan's best friend. Being fucked. By a man.

Oh shit.

I didn't care that he was gay and I doubted Rylan would, but Zeke obviously cared. Rylan had said that Zeke and Suzette had dated and hadn't mentioned anything about Zeke being gay.

I frowned. Actually, Rylan had said that he'd hated listening to the two of them having sex. Maybe Zeke was bisexual. Again, not that it mattered. I was pretty sure he was hiding it either way. I'd never heard Rylan talk about Zeke dating guys, and he had mentioned the two of them double-dating with women.

Was that what this whole thing was about? My eyes widened. Was that why Zeke hated me? Did Zeke treat me the way he did because he was jealous? Not that I'd been cutting into his time with Rylan, but that Rylan wanted me in a way he didn't want Zeke?

Pieces were starting to fall into place. It didn't make a difference in what had happened, of course, but things at least made sense. I rubbed my temples. I was getting a headache. While I finally understood things, I suddenly realized that I didn't want to know it. I didn't want to be a part of it anymore.

And I wasn't. The happiness of Rylan and his friends and family was no

longer my concern.

Chapter 20

I ran my hands through my hair. I'd been trying to resist the impulse all morning, but it was too strong now.

Since I'd returned to my apartment after my revolutionary trip to the club, I'd been haunted. Not by what I'd discovered about Zeke, but by the flashback I'd had of the other girl. I hadn't given her a second thought since that day, not even when I'd been giving names and descriptions to Lily, but it hadn't been from malice. I simply hadn't remembered her. It shouldn't have been surprising that I'd forgotten. At least three or four years had passed from that event until I was rescued. There had been too many faces to remember. Lily had told me more than once that I couldn't expect myself to remember them all. I'd accepted that, but now, I had to make up for the one I'd forgotten.

I could find her again. At least, I thought I could. But doing it would mean doing something I'd told myself I'd never do. I'd never considered that I might break that promise because I'd been certain there would never be anything that could make me look at the things my mother had made me do. Now, I was going to put myself through hell on the off chance I could find a needle in a filthy haystack.

I found the files easily enough, hidden exactly where I'd left them. There were multiple copies of most of them, each one tagged with my little virus. Fortunately for me, my backdoor was still in place and I made my way through the originals, searching by the year the files were uploaded.

I knew approximately how old I'd been, so at least I didn't have to go through everything, but what I did have to see was bad enough. Each picture brought back a memory and, with some, I was able to move on, knowing it wasn't right. With others, the memory hit too hard and I was forced to wait it out. I knew Dr. MacLeod would've said this was a bad idea, and after a couple hours, I was inclined to agree.

By mid-afternoon, I was sick to my stomach, shaking and seriously contemplating getting completely and totally pass-out drunk. And then, I saw it. A single picture of her, the girl from my flashback. She was naked, frightened, and watching what the man was doing to me.

I captured her image and backed out of my files. I knew this wouldn't be the only one of her, but it was the only one connected to me, so I could use it to find the rest of her. Find out who she was and where she was. Save her.

While my programs were running, I headed into the bathroom. I hadn't been out doing anything, but I felt dirty enough to need a shower. I made the water as hot as I dared, letting it turn my skin a lovely shade of pink. I barely felt the heat though.

When I came back into the living room, it looked like the programs had finished running. I should've felt good about it. The fact that it hadn't taken that long to run meant that there wasn't much to find. I was hoping that meant she'd been freed, but the feeling in the pit of my stomach said that probably wasn't the case.

I tightened the belt of my robe and went to the kitchen to get myself some ice cream. Alcohol to numb things might've been nice, but I wanted to keep a clear head. Comfort food would have to do. I sat on the couch and started looking through the pictures my program had found. There weren't any videos, so I at least didn't need to go through the nightmare of listening to her again. The pictures were bad enough.

I sorted through them until I found one where the man's face was clear enough for me to run it through my program. A quarter of an hour and several scoops of ice cream later, a few more pictures came up, giving me younger images of the girl. I kept going, methodically going through as many ages as possible until I finally hit a wall with her.

I didn't hit it with him though. I managed to get a better image of the man, one good enough to give me a driver's license with a name and address. Max O'Neal. Florida address, but I'd known that. It was an old license, and a moment later, I saw why.

The search had pinged something in the FBI's own system. Max O'Neal had a file.

I read through it once and then made myself read it again. I felt numb and needed the repetition for things to sink in. Once they did, I set my ice cream aside. I wasn't hungry anymore. In fact, what I had eaten was sitting

like a lump in my stomach.

Max O'Neal had been arrested not long after the first picture I'd found had been uploaded. Arrested for and convicted of child pornography and the sexual abuse of his eleven year-old step-daughter, Pearl, over a six year period. Pearl's mother had died three years before the arrest, so afterwards, Pearl had gone to live with an elderly aunt, her only living relative.

For a while anyway. Max had traded up, offering the names of men with whom he'd exchanged kiddie porn. He'd been given five years, but had been paroled in half that time. He'd checked in with his parole officer once and then disappeared. No one knew where he'd gone until someone realized they hadn't seen old Mrs. Kopp and called the police to come check.

What they'd found had been a bloodbath. Mrs. Kopp had been beaten to death with a crowbar and Pearl was nowhere to be found. Her body was found two weeks later. Among other things, her tongue had been cut out. Her step-father turned himself in, distraught over what he'd done. He'd hung himself three days later, leaving a suicide note that clearly detailed everything he'd done as well as the betrayal he'd felt when his daughter had testified against him.

I knew it wasn't my fault. I'd still been with my mother when all this had happened, so it really didn't matter that I hadn't remembered to tell Lily about her. In fact, I was a bit surprised that Max hadn't sold out my mom. Then again, he hadn't been a regular. As far as I could remember, that one time had been it. He might not have even known my mother's name. Or he could've been afraid of some of the guys who hung around with Mom.

I wiped at my cheeks absently. I didn't know why I was crying. I hadn't known Pearl. Hadn't even known her name until now. We'd shared some horrors for a couple hours one day years ago. She hadn't been a friend or an enemy. But I was mourning her all the same. Mourning because the people who were supposed to help her hadn't done it, and now I was one of those people. I hadn't been in a position to help Pearl, but I was in one now where I could help kids like us.

Except I wasn't. Agent Matthews tried to make me feel like I was doing good, but I'd seen firsthand how these things worked. I'd followed up on some of the cases I'd provided evidence for. At least two of them were already in the first stages of a deal. I understood the need for cutting deals, but I was starting to feel like that's all the FBI were doing. They'd arrest the abusers, then make deals for other pedophiles or distributors.

I wasn't sure I could be a part of that. I'd been doubting the good of what I was doing, but Pearl was the last straw. My programs could find the information, find the people and the kids. I could shut down sites, tag videos and pictures to spread my virus, even without the FBI.

And maybe I could do something more alone than I could do while employed by a government agency.

I looked at the stack of files. Was I crazy? I'd have to be to do what I was thinking, right? This was a good job and if I gave it up, it'd be the second good job I'd given up in three months. Not exactly something potential employers would consider a positive work history.

Then again, I could still go back to self-employment, and I'd still have the time to help people.

I picked up the phone before I could talk myself out of it. I might regret it tomorrow, but it was the right thing to do.

"Agent Matthews," I said when he answered.

"Miss Lang." He sounded surprised. "Is something wrong?"

"No," I said. "Well, maybe."

"That sounds ominous," he said carefully. "How can I help?"

"That's the thing," I said. "I know you have a job to do, but I don't feel like I'm helping anyone."

"You are," he cut in quickly. "You've contributed quite a bit of evidence for us, not to mention helping get pictures and videos tagged."

"But the people who are responsible aren't getting what they deserve." I didn't let him go any further. "And I just don't feel like I can be a part of that anymore."

"Jenna..."

"I'm not going to give you details so I'm not putting you in an awkward position," I said. "But I'm going to keep working on finding people, and I'll send you information if I think you can use it. Anonymous tips, of course."

He was silent for a moment. "There's no point in me trying to talk you out of this, is there?" he asked with a sigh.

"No," I said.

"And it'd be pointless of me to remind you that your immunity

agreement doesn't cover future acts.”

“It would be,” I said. “But I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“If you change your mind, your job will be waiting.” He sounded resigned, but not angry. I knew he understood.

“Thank you, Agent Matthews,” I said sincerely. “For everything.”

“I just wish I could've done more,” he said quietly before ending the call.

I set the phone aside and looked back at my laptop. With that done, I was no longer employed by the government. Whatever I did now, I was doing as a private citizen, with all of the pros and cons that involved.

This, at least, was an easy choice for me to make.

I pulled up everything I had, including all of the information on my mother and on Christophe. It would take a little time to make sure I covered my tracks, as well as to ensure the maximum impact from what I was about to do, but in a few hours, it would all be worth it.

Every pedophile I'd found would have all of their personal information exposed. Names, jobs, addresses. For once, the victims would be protected and the perverts would be the ones to pay the price. I couldn't get justice for Pearl, but I was going to do what I could to make sure others didn't suffer the same fate.

And I was going to make sure my mother and Christophe never hurt anyone else again.

Chapter 21

The silk caressed my bare skin, whispering around my thighs as I slowly walked towards him. He spent so much time taking care of me, making sure I was happy, that I was safe. It was my turn to do the same for him. He'd insisted that he didn't need it, that loving me was all he wanted, but I'd told him the truth. That I wanted to do this. I needed to. I had to know that he needed me as badly as I needed him.

He sat on the couch and I paused for a moment to admire him. He'd just come in from work and still wore his dress pants and shirt. The tie and jacket hung over the arm of the couch and his shoes were by the front door. He'd undone the top two buttons of his shirt and his hair was tousled from pulling off his tie. His eyes were fixed on me, a smoldering shade that reminded me of the sky on a hot summer's night.

He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I knew that went beyond the physical. He had an amazing heart and mind. Smart, sweet and strong. If I'd ever dreamed of a prince coming to rescue me, I would've made him exactly like Rylan. He was the only man I'd ever really wanted and the only one I ever would want.

I knew people would say that I was being foolish, that after a while, anyone would get bored with the same person, that it was natural to want to look elsewhere. I didn't accept that. What I felt for Rylan was deeper than anything I'd ever felt before. Sometimes, I thought it'd be too much, that I wouldn't be able to contain it all. It was like some sort of hot, liquid energy pulsing under my skin and if I wasn't careful, it would burst out and set everything around me on fire.

Napalm.

That was what it was like, I thought. It burns and consumes, unable to be quenched.

He shifted on the couch, the movement pulling me away from my

thoughts and back to the reality of him. I started walking again, one foot in front of the other to make my hips sway. As I went, I worked loose the belt to the robe and let the sides fall open. I smiled as I saw Rylan swallow hard. The soft material brushed against my breasts and legs as it moved with me. I didn't look down, but I knew it was revealing my body in small strips, playing with the shadows to hide as much as it showed.

I stopped just before my knees touched his. He started to reach for me and I shook my head. I fully intended to enjoy myself, but right now, it was all about him. I ran my foot along his calf and then settled it next to his knee on the couch. The position made the robe fall away from my right side, exposing me more completely.

I didn't say a word as I trailed my fingers over my thigh and across my stomach. His eyes followed the movement and he drew in a sharp breath when my hand dropped lower, fingers combing through the thin layer of black curls that I kept neatly trimmed. My own eyelids fluttered as I slid a finger between my folds. I was hot and slick already, desperate for him. I was always desperate for him. Even when he was inside me, it wasn't enough, not until we reached that point when we were no longer two bodies but as close to one as was possible.

My clit throbbed as I lightly touched it and I moaned, pressing harder. I felt his hand close around my ankle, strong fingers solid against my skin. He didn't touch me anywhere else, but his thumb moved in slow circles and I found my fingers matching his movement. My free hand rose to my breast, sliding under the robe to cup the mound. I squeezed it as my stomach began to tighten, my fingers unerringly finding my nipple. The sensitive flesh hardened as I began to roll it between my thumb and forefinger.

My head fell back as I used my fingers to spread my lips. My palm rubbed against my clit as I moved my hand lower, penetrating my pussy with my middle finger. I heard Rylan groan as I began to work my finger in and out. I was nearly dripping, but still tight. My fingers twisted my nipple, pulling at it until I was shuddering as I came. I pressed my hand against me, riding out my climax even as Rylan's fingers tightened on my ankle.

My legs were shaky as I put down my foot. I started to raise my hand, but Rylan reached out and grabbed my wrist. His eyes locked with mine as he drew my hand to his mouth and slid my fingers inside. His tongue rasped against my skin as he cleaned off my hand, then moved down to lick my palm.

I stepped closer and he parted his legs so I could stand between them. I

leaned down, taking his face between my hands as I claimed his mouth. I kissed him slowly, exploring his mouth, tasting myself. His hands slid up my thighs to palm my ass. When he started to sit forward, I ended the kiss and gently pressed him back. He gave me a puzzled look, but didn't argue.

I went to my knees between his legs and he swore softly. I pushed his hands away when he made a move to undo his pants and set about doing it myself. I tugged his pants and underwear down together, freeing his cock from its confines in one move. It curved up against his flat stomach, thick and swollen. A drop of pre-cum glistened at its tip and he hissed when I darted my tongue out to taste it.

I teased him with my fingertips and nails, keeping my touch feather-light as I moved down his shaft and back up again. Over and over I repeated the movement, smiling as he hit his hands against the couch and swore. When I went further down and began to caress his balls, he cursed me, then begged for something he couldn't quite put a name to.

When I took the tip of him between my lips, his hips jerked and I could feel him fighting for control. I didn't give him the chance though. I dropped my head and took another couple inches, maneuvering my tongue around his soft flesh. I took his balls in one hand and held the base of him in the other. His fingers curled in my hair and I could feel the tension radiating through him. I looked up at him and saw the question in his eyes. When I felt his hands start to push me down, I knew he'd seen my answer.

I let him take control. At first, he moved me, lowering my head until my lips brushed against my hand, then pulling me up until only the head remained. I kept my breaths slow and steady, waiting for the twinge of panic, but it never came. All I felt was the heat of arousal spreading through me as he changed what he was doing. He held my head still and began to raise his hips, thrusting into my mouth, first with care, and then faster. I took him all, let his cock stretch my mouth until my jaw ached, felt him nudging at the back of my throat. When I felt his balls start to tighten, I released them and slid my hand beneath him. The moment my finger teased against his asshole, his entire body jerked, then stiffened.

I swallowed as he came in my mouth, not spilling a single drop. His hands dropped from my head and I let his cock fall from between my lips, still half-hard. That was good, because I was far from done with him. Aside from the sound of his breathing, Rylan was silent, watching me. I smiled as I climbed up onto the couch, rubbing my body against his as I went. I felt his

cock twitch and my smile widened. He definitely had another round in him.

I stood on the couch, one foot on either side of his lap, then leaned forward so that my knees were resting against his shoulders. I ran my fingers through his hair, then used it to tilt his head up to look at me. Slowly, I inched forward, keeping my eyes on his until his mouth was right where I wanted it.

“Yes,” I moaned as he ran his tongue along my slit.

He reached up and grabbed my hips, fingers digging into my ass as he held me in place. I put my hands on the wall for balance and was immediately glad I had as his tongue began to move over and around my swollen clit. I closed my eyes as he coaxed me towards another orgasm. Every pass of his tongue sent another wave of pleasure washing over me, fuel for the coming fire. My hips moved in small, circular motions, wanting him everywhere at once. It was tongue and lips and teeth and so much sensation that I thought I was going to explode.

And then I did, crying out his name. My legs buckled and he slid me down his body until I was settled in his lap. I rested against his chest for a moment, limbs limp as my nerves sung. There it was, that steady heartbeat that kept me grounded. Even fast, it wasn't erratic and I clung to that sound.

His hands were under the robe on my back, fingers moving up and down my spine in a soothing motion. I could feel his cock under me, hardening as I shifted my weight on his lap.

When I could move again, I rose up on my knees. He was ready again and I began to slide down on him. I groaned as he stretched me, thigh muscles quivering as I forced myself to go slow. His hands were on my waist and I could feel him holding back. Even taking my time, I needed a moment when I finally came to rest with him deep inside me. I slid my hands under his shirt, nails raking across his hard abs and then up to his nipples. He swore when I teased them and then again when I began a gentle rocking motion.

My entire body was one throbbing mess of nerves, each one raw and waiting for the next climax. I braced myself against his chest and began to ride him. I used everything that I'd learned, taunting him with changing speed, squeezing him, grinding down so that my clit rubbed against him. I kept expecting my muscles to start burning, but they didn't. Electricity raced from cell to cell, invigorating me, driving me. I wanted him to feel it too. I needed him to feel what he did to me.

I gathered him in my arms, pulling him up until I could rest my forehead against his. The cotton of his shirt created the most delicious friction against my nipples and I writhed against him. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I didn't have the words for. All I could do was show him.

I took his mouth, pouring everything I was feeling into that kiss, into the way my body moved with his. And as he exploded inside me, he whispered against my lips how much he loved me, how he would always be there to protect me and keep me safe.

I smoothed his hair back from his face and told him that I would do the same. He smiled at me and shook his head.

“No, my love,” he said. “That's my job. And nothing will keep me from it.” He leaned forward and gently pressed his lips against mine...

My eyes opened and I could still feel the ghost of his kiss on my mouth. My eyes burned with tears, and for a moment, I let myself believe that I didn't know why.

But I did know.

Rylan protected me, made me feel safe, and I would always be grateful for that. But it was time for me to do the same for him. I hadn't been holding out hope for us to get back together, but I'd still been clinging to the memory of him for strength, and I couldn't do that anymore. I needed to do what was best for him and completely let him go.

I pressed my face against my pillow and let myself have one final cry over Rylan Archer.

Chapter 22

I was pleasantly surprised at how well I felt the next morning. I'd fully expected Thursday to be just as miserable as the rest of my days had been since leaving Rylan. Instead, I'd fallen back asleep after my decision and managed several hours of dreamless sleep. When I'd woken, I felt better. Not great, but good enough to feel like there was actually a chance for a positive life after all.

I spent Thursday wondering why the FBI hadn't come after me for releasing the information as well as collecting more. The best I could figure, Agent Matthews had kept things quiet regarding my resignation and the FBI was too busy with their many cases to worry about some pedophiles' names getting leaked. Granted, it wasn't like any of them could find proof of what I'd done, but it wouldn't take a genius for anyone who knew about me to figure it out. Since that probably only meant Agent Matthews and his bosses, I was safe for a while. I doubted his bosses did any hands-on work.

And I intended to use my time wisely.

I worked all through Thursday and picked up where I'd left off on Friday. I ate at my laptop, losing myself in the logistics of it all. Since I didn't have to record information for evidence, I was able to avoid triggering flashbacks for the most part, and even the few that came through weren't as intense as they'd been before. I wondered if it also made a difference that I felt like I was actually doing something about the problem rather than just gathering paperwork. Whatever reason, I was grateful for it.

Despite the fact that it was easier than it had been before, the work was still emotionally draining. I'd released half a dozen names and pulled in nearly a hundred files, which was great, but I knew I couldn't keep up that pace for long. I'd still heard nothing from Agent Matthews and since it was Friday, I'd still have the whole weekend to work without worrying about the FBI making things difficult.

I'd earned a night off.

I wasn't going to a club again and even though the thought of sitting here with a movie and some ice cream was highly appealing, I had something else in mind. It had been nearly a week since I'd been to the gym. That, I thought, was what I should consider my relaxation time. I'd spent too long using sex as a stress reliever and as recreation. I'd automatically thought that to relax, I needed find a club or find a guy to fuck. After Rylan, I didn't know it that would ever be an option again.

Without that, I supposed I only had one other choice, at least if I went with the Freudian way of looking at things.

Violence.

I ate a light meal, changed my clothes and then headed downstairs. It was quite nice for mid-March, and surprisingly not raining, so I decided against the bus and started to jog. It was light enough that I chose to take the long way and headed on my usual path through the campus.

I was partway through when I felt a familiar prickle up my spine. I was going slow enough that I risked a look over my shoulder, but there was no one there. Still, I picked up the pace. Jogging had been a good warm up, I told myself, but I should go a bit faster. It had nothing to do with the fact that I was starting to feel like someone was watching me.

By the time I reached the gym, my skin was crawling and a light mist was falling. I hadn't seen anyone following me or even staring, but the feeling was there all the same. I headed straight back for the locker room and shoved my bag into my locker. I'd brought clothes to wear home if I decided to take the bus back home or leave here for me to use at a later time. I shook out my ponytail, then pulled my hair back again, smoothing it down before heading back out.

I exchanged polite smiles with a couple women who were heading back towards the locker room and then nodded at a guy walking from the speed bag over to the small sparring ring in the far corner. I knew them by sight, but hadn't ever talked to any of them. This wasn't the kind of gym where people went to make friends or hook up. There were almost a dozen others working out and I looked at each one. They were all regulars, people I'd seen before. No one was watching me.

My shoulders relaxed and I rolled my neck, shook out my arms and legs. The closest open bag was between two large, muscular men, both with more

ink than visible skin. They both spent a lot of time here, and neither one even looked at me as I stepped between them. It was odd, I thought. I was wearing a tank top and shorts, standing only a few feet from two men who were a lot bigger than me, and I felt better than I had running outside in pants and a hoodie.

I flexed my fingers against the tape I'd put on them and bounced on my toes. After the first couple hits, the last of my nerves fell away and I let myself get into the rhythm of hitting and kicking. I could feel the movement of others around me, but no one bothered me.

By the time I finished, both the guys had left and a woman had taking the bag on the right. She was even bigger than the guys had been, easily six two and had a set of massive shoulders that had originally made me think she was a man.

She gave me a sideways glance, a half smile and then went back to beating the shit out of the bag. I was pretty confident in my ability to take on most guys, especially after I'd taken down that one asshole. This woman, however...let's just say I was glad she wasn't trying to come after me.

I sighed as I walked back to the locker room. I was glad I'd decided to do this instead of a night on the couch. While not the same as sex, there was something to be said for the physical benefits of exercise. I was almost smiling as I stepped into the shower stall. As the water washed away the sweat, I closed my eyes and let myself not think about anything. It was nice.

I dressed in the clothes I'd brought with me, but as I stepped out into the cool almost-spring night, I decided against the bus. I wasn't going to run or jog, but a walk seemed like a good way to end the night. My muscles were a bit sore and a walk was a good way to cool down.

I'd gone only a block when that feeling came back. I shivered and looked around. It was dark now, the streets well-lit, but unable to completely dispel the shadows. Shadows that seemed to move even as I looked at them.

I wasn't alone on the streets. It was the start of the weekend, and the first decent night we'd had, so there were plenty of CSU students out, mostly in groups, but I spotted a few here and there walking by themselves. I was willing to bet at least a couple of them were heading for the library. I'd spent my fair share of time in the library during college. Most people assumed by looking at me, or by knowing my sexual history, that I'd spent most of my years in college partying, but that hadn't been the case.

A sound behind me made me jump and turn around, my body automatically shifting into my self-defense stance. A sheepish-looking kid was picking himself up from where he'd knocked over some garbage cans. He grinned at me and grabbed his skateboard, going a few more steps before hopping on it again.

As he skated away, I began to laugh. I shook my head and walked on. I seriously needed to relax, and I was pretty sure that meant I needed to get back to work that paid. I could still do my whole online vigilante thing, but I couldn't keep inundating myself with it. I would end up driving myself crazy, thinking I was being followed, jumping at small noises. I'd lived in fear before and I wasn't going to do it anymore.

I was almost home and thinking that maybe a hot bath and some ice cream would be the perfect way to head into the weekend. Maybe a good book. There were a couple I'd been meaning to read...

Something slapped over my face and I gasped. A sickly sweet smell filled my nostrils and I felt someone grab me around the waist. I tried to fight back, but none of my limbs would obey. And then I realized that the lights weren't going out, but rather everything else was going dark.

My final thought was...

Chapter 23

There were hands on me, touching me, hurting me. The smell of chloroform was thick and I coughed, gagged. I tried to remember what happened. I knew I'd been drugged. Mom usually used pills, either grinding them up and putting them in my food, or forcing me to swallow them. Sometimes she did it so I would relax, so I wouldn't fight. This was different though. She'd used chloroform.

In nearly thirteen years, she'd only used it twice before, and both times had been at the request of the same client. He'd wanted me completely pliant. Fake sleeping didn't do it for him. I could pretend to sleep and not react, but there were always little twitches, things that were nearly impossible to prevent. Knocked out, however, I wasn't even aware of what was happening until I started to stir.

Like now.

He was panting in my ear, spit running down my cheek.

I was on my stomach. I could feel the scratchy sheet on my face now.

Could hear him talking, babbling, about how good I felt, how precious I was...

Reality began to seep into my dreams, into my memories. Chloroform. I remembered that. The smell wasn't something a person was likely to forget. And I was tied down, but I was on my back, not my stomach. I tried focusing on the things that were different. Not that it made things less frightening because knowing I'd been kidnapped wasn't a good thing, but it did help not to have both my current situation and my memories in my head.

There weren't hands on me, no hot breath or words in my ear. I didn't know where I was or if I was alone, but at least no one was touching me. I counted that among the only positive things about this situation. I went through the others. I wasn't naked, definitely a good thing. No one had done anything other than knock me out and tie me up, and when compared to

everything else I'd been through, that actually wasn't too bad. Other than a slight headache, I wasn't in any pain. The restraints around my wrists weren't chafing yet, so I either hadn't been struggling very much or I hadn't been here very long. I was leaning towards something halfway between the two.

Now that I'd assessed those things, it was time to focus on my surroundings, see if I could figure out who'd took me, where and why. The where was more important than the who or why, especially since I was pretty sure I already knew those two things. With Christophe out on bail, it was the explanation that made the most sense.

My chest began to tighten and my heart started to race. I turned my thoughts away from what was happening and focused on trying to keep my breathing slow and lower my pulse. When I was sure I wasn't going to have a panic attack, I turned my attention back to my surroundings.

The place was chilly. Not cold like I was in a basement or outside, more like what I'd felt the times I'd been in abandoned buildings. The sounds seemed to support that too. Creaking, a hint of wind even though I couldn't feel it. I could smell the damp; something musty too. I didn't know exactly where I was, but that at least gave me an idea of what to expect when I finally opened my eyes.

I didn't want to do it. The irony of the girl who couldn't trust enough to close her eyes during sex now not wanting to open them for fear of what she'd see wasn't lost on me. It was that thought that brought me back to myself, reminded me that I wasn't that scared little girl anymore. I had survived that and I would survive this too.

I opened my eyes. At first, all I saw was darkness and I blinked my eyes against it. After a few seconds, black turned to gray and I could see shapes and outlines. I looked around. I wasn't gagged, but I also wasn't stupid enough to yell. I supposed that was one good thing about having the past I did. I knew how to handle these things better than others might have. Well, once I got the initial panic out of the way.

Screaming could attract someone to come rescue me, but it also could bring the kidnapper – Christophe, my mind insisted – and it could result in violence that could've been otherwise prevented. I wasn't going to give in to whatever this guy – Christophe – wanted, but I was going to save my strength and fight when it was time. So I kept my mouth shut and tried to gather as much information as I could.

Which turned out to be not very much at all. I was on a bed, but I didn't see a bed frame. Other shapes could've been a dresser and some boxes, but I couldn't really tell more than that. Something, however, felt very familiar about the room. I looked up but couldn't make out the ceiling. There weren't any windows and I didn't see anything that made me think windows had been boarded up. Probably a basement then. I'd spent enough time in one to know the feel.

A figure stirred in the shadows and I heard a creaking sound. Stairs, I thought. I strained to see more than a faint outline, anything that would either confirm or disprove my suspicions. The figure was tall and lean, but it didn't move with any real grace. In fact, there was a familiar slouching way he walked. Because it was a he, and a he I knew.

He reached up and pulled a cord, turning on a light with a click. The dim bulb didn't flood the room with light, but it did offer enough for me to see the jet-black hair and dark chocolate brown eyes that I'd once considered pleasantly attractive. Now, they just sent my heart racing. I'd known Christophe had been the one who'd taken me, but knowing it and seeing him again were two totally different things.

He smiled at me, a tender, soft smile that frightened me more than his anger would have. He was looking at me the same way he'd looked at me before, like I was going to be his prom date or something.

“Do you like it?” he asked, his voice quiet.

I'd been so busy staring at him that I hadn't even noticed anything else about the room.

Like the fact that it was my room. My old basement room from back when I'd lived with my mom. It wasn't the same room. I knew that. My old room was in Florida, if the house hadn't been torn down by now. And I knew I wasn't in Florida. For one thing, I hadn't been gone long enough. For another, it wasn't hot and humid, and even in March, it wouldn't be this cool in Florida.

It wasn't my room, but someone had gone to a lot of work to make it look that way. I looked back at Christophe. I couldn't believe he'd gone to all this trouble to recreate an entire room from old videos.

And then it hit me.

In Florida, there'd been a camera on a tripod against the wall directly across from the bed. We hadn't used handhelds or anything like that. Just one

camera, and its position had never changed.

So how the hell did Christophe know that there'd been a bookshelf behind the camera? A bookshelf where I'd kept dried flowers like the ones that were there now.

“You've gotten old.”

Every muscle in my body froze and it even felt like my heart had stopped as a second figure stepped out of the shadows.

Once dark hair that was mostly gray now. Ice blue eyes. An average build that had softened and sagged since I'd last seen her. Her face was more wrinkled, her skin leathery. But I recognized her. I would know her anywhere.

“Mom.” My voice cracked on the word, horror trying to choke me.

“Hey, there, baby girl. It's been a long time.” She walked over to my side and looked down at me. Her eyes were as hard as I remembered.

I was struck by the strangest sense that I'd been here before. It was more than *deja vu*. No, this was more like an eerie sense of doubling. Like I was both a child and an adult. The mother I saw and the one I remembered. Like two pictures laying, one over the other, both transparent enough to see the one beneath.

I shook my head and the sensation disappeared. I was me again. Jenna Lang. Not *that* girl.

“Your friend here tells me you've built quite the life for yourself since I've been gone.” She fingered a lock of my hair, frowning, causing the lines between her eyes to grow thick. “Though he said you had, I believe, blue hair.” She shot an unfriendly look at Christophe.

“She did,” he insisted, his voice as grumpy as a child. “She changed it.”

“Back to your real color.” She turned back to me. “No matter how many airs you put on, baby girl, you're still nothing but a little whore, aren't you?”

My temper began to burn away my fear. “I was never a whore.” I didn't struggle against the restraints – not yet – but I wasn't going to listen to her without saying something. “I was a child.”

Her eyes narrowed. “An ungrateful little brat. I put food on the table. Clothes on your back. All I expect from you was to do what you were told.”

I laughed, a sharp bark of sound. I couldn't help it. The fact that she

sincerely didn't understand how completely fucked up her statement was made it even more ludicrous. And then something that I'd never even considered before hit me and the laugh died in my throat. I looked up at her and, for the first time in my life, felt something other than hate and anger towards her. It wasn't sympathy or even pity, but an understanding that if I was right, there was a reason for her behavior. Not an excuse, but at least an explanation.

“How old were you?” I asked softly. I saw something flash across her eyes. “How old were you when you were molested for the first time?”

I'd known she'd been fourteen when she'd started working as a prostitute to pay for drugs. At least, that's how old she'd been when she'd been arrested the first time and had my half-brother. I'd never stopped to think about who she'd been before that.

“Eight,” she said. Her voice was flat. “You come by being a whore naturally.”

“That wasn't your fault,” I said, trying to get through to her. I could feel a bit of desperation trying to creep in. “You were just a kid. And with me, it was what you knew. I forgive you for it.” I wasn't sure that was entirely true, but I knew it might be the only way to get through to her. “You can still make it right. Let me go.”

This time, it was my mom who laughed. “You might've fallen for all that psychobabble bullshit, but not me. I know exactly what I'm doing.”

“Helen, come on, this is a waste of time,” Christophe spoke up.

I'd almost forgotten about him, but now he came back in focus and the full reality of my situation crashed into me. My mom hadn't done this to me alone. She'd had help.

“How did the two of you...?” I let the question trail off.

“Someone dumped quite a bit of nasty evidence about me and Christophe onto the internet.” Mom's lips twisted into a half-smile. “I had to leave the nice life I'd built behind and run or go to jail. Just as I was getting ready to go, there's a knock at my door and who should be there but Mr. Constantine, another victim of this nasty snitch.”

“I have to thank you,” Christophe said, looking from my eyes to my lips and then lower. “If you hadn't revealed all of that personal information, I never would've found Helen.”

My stomach flipped and I could feel what was left of my most recent meal churning. I had done this. I'd brought them together. It was my fault.

No. I could almost hear Lily's voice in my head. None of this was my fault. I didn't deserve this, no matter what my mother had gone through in her own childhood.

“I know what he wants.” I jerked my head towards Christophe, but kept my eyes on my mother. “But what's in it for you? You said yourself that I'd gotten old. The men you know don't want someone like me.”

“Oh, I know that. But you're going to give me a whole new market. Christophe is going to get to live out his fantasies with you, and then you're going to start paying me back for everything you did. The two of you are going to recreate those same scenes with this cute little girl I found in the supermarket yesterday.”

“Over my dead body.” I yanked at my restraints, barely feeling the bite of the cloth.

Mom looked at me for a minute and I held her gaze. I could see her trying to figure me out, wondering how much of that scared little girl was left. I was wondering the same thing when she finally spoke.

“We'll see.”

Chapter 24

I knew I couldn't let either Christophe or my mother see how much the thought of him touching me freaked me out. I knew that look on my mother's face, the one she wore when she was going to punish me for doing something bad. Refusing to do what she said when I was six was what had earned me the six-inch scar on my side. Now, I could only imagine what she was going to do to me, but I wasn't entirely sure it could be worse than what Christophe wanted to do.

“I see you took out some of your piercings.” Her finger touched my eyebrow. “That's good. We want you looking as pure as possible.” She frowned as she touched the tattoo on my right wrist. “We're going to have to cover those up.”

“She has one on her back too,” Christophe said. “Angel wings.”

Mom rolled her eyes. “Seriously? You think you're some sort of saint or something?”

“Or something.” I gave her a tight smile and twisted my arms, trying to pull free. “I wouldn't bother trying to break me. It won't work.”

Both her eyebrows went up at that, the side of her mouth lifting in a slight smile. “Everyone has a breaking point.” Her voice was emotionless. Void. Completely vacant.

I didn't bother to answer. I wasn't going to give in and help her hurt some innocent child, but I knew that what was coming would be bad.

“Let's get her out of those clothes,” she said to Christophe. “We won't put her dress on her just yet though. Don't want to ruin it.”

Christophe pulled out a knife and came towards me. It took everything I had to not try to pull away, and even then I couldn't keep from flinching when his fingers brushed against my stomach. He smiled as he slid the blade under my shirt, letting the dull side touch my skin. I swallowed hard,

determined not to let him see how badly I was shaking inside. The material gave way with a soft ripping sound and goosebumps broke out across my skin as it was exposed to the air.

Once my shirt was in pieces, he moved on to the pants. The thought flashed into my head that I should've taken jeans with me to the gym. I doubted he could've gotten through that with his little knife. Not that it would've stopped him, I had to admit. He would've just found another way to get me out of my clothes.

It took only a few minutes for me to be reduced to just my bra and panties. Plain gray cotton, nothing special, but it was enough to spark some lust in Christophe's eyes.

“Step back.”

I thought he was going to tell my mother to go to hell and do whatever he wanted to me. Instead, he listened and moved away from the mattress.

“Give me the knife.” She held out her hand.

Shit.

I felt the cold metal and a slight pressure against my side, but no pain. The scar tissue she was poking with the knife didn't have much in the way of working nerves. It had gone deep enough that she'd really have to start getting through layers of muscle if she wanted it to hurt.

“What's this?” She poked my hip with the knife and I caught my breath.

I didn't even have to look to know what she meant. The one side of my panties had fallen down on my hip. “A lily,” I said.

“Since we're going to cover up the tattoos anyway, might as well be smart about this.”

I clenched my teeth as pain lanced through me. I didn't look, but I could feel the blade cutting through the center of the flower. I didn't make a sound though. I wasn't going to give either of them the satisfaction.

“How long do you think you can stay quiet?” she asked, her face coming closer to mine. “You must've already figured out that no one's close enough to hear you, but there is someone I want to hear you scream.”

The girl.

“Who is she?” I asked, proud of myself for my steady voice. My hip hurt and I could feel blood, hot and sticky, but it was easily pushed aside. “The

girl. Who is she?”

My mother shrugged. “Someone whose mother should've been paying more attention to her than the cute cashier.”

“Have you...?” I couldn't bring myself to answer the question.

Mom smiled. “Don't you worry. I'll make sure you're the one holding her down when he pops her cherry.”

I let my anger and revulsion show, masking the relief I felt that the girl hadn't been hurt. At least not as badly as she would be if I didn't get out of here. If it had been only me, I still would've fought, but knowing that there was another girl out there, one who was going to suffer if I didn't manage to get free, it gave me an extra reserve of strength that I might not have been able to get to otherwise.

“We don't want to damage that pretty little face,” Mom said thoughtfully.

She drove her fist into my side, hitting the scar tissue hard enough to make me gasp for air. A second punch got a small pained sound, but I didn't say a word.

“I have a better idea,” Christophe said. “What about her hands?”

My head jerked up at that one. My hands? I needed my hands. To work. To fight back. I struggled against my restraints, but they were as tight as ever.

Mom walked over to the left-hand side of the mattress. I tried clenching my hands into fists. She grabbed my thumb and yanked it back. I made a noise as pain shot through my arm, then screamed as she twisted and I heard the bone crack. Tears welled up in my eyes as she pulled my fingers away from my palm. The knife burned across my palm as she cut. The pain was there, but dull compared to my thumb. I couldn't move it at all and I wondered if she'd managed to dislocate it as well.

“Are you ready to be a good girl and do as you're told?”

Her question cut through the haze of pain and I remembered why she was doing this. Some of it might've been punishment, but most of it was still about the end results.

“Go to hell,” I spoke through gritted teeth.

She didn't say anything, but grabbed my index finger. She jerked it sideways and this time I was prepared. Bile rose in my throat and I

swallowed it along with my scream. Black spots danced in front of my eyes and I focused on the pain, letting it keep me awake. I sagged back against the bed, closing my eyes in the hopes that she'd think I passed out. I felt her step away from the bed and almost breathed a sigh of relief.

“What do you think?” I heard her on the other side now, talking to Christophe.

I didn't bother trying to pay attention to his response. Something had changed. The cut on my palm was bleeding profusely, soaking both my wrist and the fabric around it. And with my thumb broken, my hand was more pliable than it had been. It was going to hurt like hell, but I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could get one hand free.

I bit my bottom lip as I slowly pulled my hand down. I couldn't pull too hard or too fast and risk my mother or Christophe hearing. It was agonizing and, for a moment, I didn't think it would work. Then I felt a slip and the cloth began to move over my thumb. By the time my hand was free, my arm was shaking and I tasted blood where I'd broken through the skin of my lip, but my hand was free.

I risked opening my eyes and, for what was probably the first time in my life, saw that some stroke of good luck had been bestowed on me. Mom had left the knife on the bed next to me. I grabbed it, wincing as I managed to grasp the hilt.

A thump came from upstairs.

“I'll go check on her,” Mom said. “You stay here. And don't do anything stupid.”

While he was watching her walk up the stairs, I rolled onto my side and managed to cut through the thin strip of cotton holding my right hand. As Christophe turned back towards me, I switched the knife to my right hand, tucking it under my arm at an awkward, but safe angle.

A smile curved his lips as he walked towards me. I was only going to have one shot at this, I knew. I remembered asking my self-defense instructor about using a knife. He'd been surprised, but hadn't asked any questions. There was a kidney shot if I was behind someone...or if they were on top of me. I didn't want to wait for that, plus he could easily have enough time to shout in the few seconds it took for him to go into shock and die. There was his heart, but it was a difficult one at best, what with the ribcage and all. Plus, again, shouting. The same went for a stomach wound. If I was going to have

the time to cut my feet free before my mom realized what I'd done, I needed to take Christophe out as quickly and quietly as possible.

I had to kill him.

I didn't have the luxury of trying to knock him out. Not like this.

That meant his throat was my best bet. I couldn't exactly slit it, but I knew where the main artery was. A stab to the center of his throat to keep him from yelling and then yanking the knife to the side and through the artery would do it. The question was, could I?

A moment later, he was leaning over me and I decided that I could.

I brought my arm up even as he was closing his eyes, preparing to kiss me. They opened instantly when the blade struck home. It was harder than I'd thought to cut through the skin and muscle, but adrenaline was racing through my veins and in just a couple seconds, I was covered with blood as it spurted from his neck. I shoved him back and let him fall to the floor as I quickly cut my feet free.

When this was all over, I had a feeling I was going to go to pieces, but that wasn't right now. I had more important things to do before I could give myself that privilege. I had a little girl to save.

I heard the basement door open and I ducked underneath the stairs. The back of the stairs were open and, as my mother's feet came into view, I made a decision.

The knife flashed out, slicing cleanly through the back of her ankle. She screamed, more in anger than pain I thought, and I shoved at her other foot with my injured hand. The pain cleared my head as she fell and I hurried around to the bottom of the stairs. She was crumpled in a heap, not moving, blood running down her temple from where she must've hit her head.

I didn't know if she was dead or alive, but it didn't matter. Upstairs, there was a little girl who needed rescued. Everything else would have to wait. I put my hand on my hip, hissing at the pain when I pressed against the cut there. I didn't pull my hand away though. Last time, Lily had rescued me from my mother. It was my turn now.

Chapter 25

“How is she?” I asked for what must've been a dozen times. If someone didn't answer me soon, I was going to rip this fucking IV out of my arm and go find her myself.

“The girl is fine, Miss Lang.” The doctor sounded exasperated, but I didn't really care. “Her parents are here, and that's all I can share with you. Will you please let me give you some pain killers so I can set your fingers?”

I nodded. That was all I needed to know.

I'd found the girl easily enough. Aside from the fact that I'd been able to hear her crying, there'd been only one room in the trashed house that'd had a closed door. She'd screamed when I'd managed to break the door, and I couldn't blame her. I'd been in my underwear, covered with blood and nursing a hand with a finger and thumb sticking out at a weird angles.

Once I'd shown her that I wasn't going to keep her there, she followed me outside. The house we'd been in had been outside the city far enough that I'd been worried someone would come after us before we found someone with a phone. Fortunately, a car had come by and the driver had been exceedingly kind, more than happy to call the police for us.

“Miss Lang?”

I wondered how long the doctor had been saying my name. “Sorry.”

“Are you cold?” he asked.

I shook my head. I wasn't cold. Not really. I did, however, seem to be shivering uncontrollably. I almost laughed. Why was I shivering? My head felt funny.

“Why don't you lie back?” The doctor asked. “Rest.”

I shook my head. “I want to go.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Howard,” a woman's voice came from the doorway.

“Are we able to speak with Miss Lang yet?”

Dr. Howard looked at me. “Are you feeling up to talking to the police?”

I wanted to say no. I'd never felt less like talking to the cops. But I knew I had to. I nodded.

“I gave her something for her hand,” Dr. Howard said. “So she might be a little groggy.”

“I'm fine.” The words were thick in my mouth. Everything felt a little blunted and blurred around the edges, but I could think. Well enough to answer questions. I wouldn't be doing any complex hacking anytime soon. I frowned as I looked down at my hand.

It was a mass of deep, throbbing pain. The cut along my palm had been deep enough to need stitches. My index finger had been broken and my thumb had indeed been dislocated as well as broken. Both were splinted and my entire hand was wrapped up. Any typing I'd be doing would be one-handed for a while.

“Miss Lang, I'm Detective McPhee.” The woman standing next to the hospital bed was tall and slender, with dark hair pulled back from her face. “Can you answer some questions for me?”

I looked up at her. “I can, but I think the FBI might try to take jurisdiction on this one.”

She didn't look too happy with that, but she kept it professional. “Can you tell me what happened?”

I took her through everything, starting with feeling like someone was watching me in the park. When I got to the part where I killed Christophe, my voice faltered, but I kept going. I didn't care if they arrested me for murder. Aside from the fact that I was pretty sure no jury would convict me, I'd done the right thing. I finished by telling her about escaping with the girl and calling the police. Then I waited for the multitude of questions I knew would follow.

Before Detective McPhee could say anything, however, I heard a familiar voice.

“Thank you for getting the preliminaries, Detective. I'll take it from here.”

“Agent Matthews.” I blinked. “I was wondering if you'd show up.”

“I've got this, Agent,” Detective McPhee said tightly. “The FBI doesn't have any reason to take this case.”

“Actually,” he said. “We do. Christophe Constantine was one of ours and, until recently, Miss Lang was employed by the FBI.” He walked around to the other side of my bed. “I've already spoken with FCPD. If I need your help, I'll ask.”

As the detective stalked out, I looked up at Agent Matthews. “Do I have to say that all over again?”

“No. I caught most of it,” he said. “I'll get a copy of her notes after she types them up.” He rubbed his hand over his face. “It's going to be a hell of a lot of paperwork, but I don't think the DA's going to press charges against you for Christophe's death.”

“My mom.” My good hand clenched and my injured one twitched as if it wanted to move too. “Did I...is she...?”

“She's alive,” Agent Matthews said. “She'll need surgery on her ankle and she has a nasty concussion, but she'll survive.”

“Good,” I said. When I saw the look of surprise on the agent's face, I explained. “Death would be too easy.” I gave Agent Matthews a hard look. “No deals this time. If she's not put away for good, I'll go to the press with everything.”

He opened his mouth and I thought, for a moment, he was going to say something about me releasing that information online, but he didn't.

“I'm following this through,” he said. “Don't worry. She's never getting out.”

“Thank you.” I shifted, grimacing as the hospital gown stuck to me. The nurses had wiped me off a bit, but there was still plenty of Christophe's blood on me. I wanted a shower.

Agent Matthews started towards the door but then stopped. “Do you need a ride home?”

“No.” A man's voice answered before I could. “She doesn't.”

I was pretty sure my heart had stopped and I knew I wasn't breathing. It had to be the drugs, right? The painkillers that were making my head a little fuzzy. And then he was there, at my side, and Agent Matthews was gone.

“Rylan.” His name came out in a breath of air.

“Jenna.”

A thrill went through me at the sound of my name. I'd never thought I'd hear him say it again. I forced it down. He was here because someone had told him what had happened. He was just looking out for me.

And then I let my eyes meet his and everything I'd tried to get rid of and suppress came bubbling back up, leaving me momentarily speechless. Rylan reached down and took my good hand, holding it tightly between both of his. After what felt like forever, I managed to look down.

“You don't have to be here.” I tried pulling my hand away, but he didn't let me go.

“Yes, I do.” His voice was firm. “Look at me, Jenna.”

Shit. He was using that tone. I swallowed hard and looked up.

“Zeke told me that the two of you slept together.”

Oh, fuck. I'd completely forgotten about that in light of everything else that had happened.

“And I know you told him to tell me about your tattoo to make it sound real.”

I kept my face carefully blank. “And how do you know we didn't?” There was no way he could know that. Unless, of course, he knew Zeke was gay, but I didn't think that was the case.

“Two reasons,” he said and held up a finger. “One, I know you, and there was no way you'd have sex with my best friend.” A twisted sort of smile crossed his face. “You would never hurt me like that.”

“And two?” The words were rough, strangled.

The twisted smile became a wry one. “And the idiot decided to elaborate about the various positions you'd used.” His fingers squeezed mine. “I know you, and it was obvious he didn't.” His voice softened. “Why did you have him lie?”

I decided it wasn't the best time to talk about the complicated mess that was Zeke's issues with me. I kept it simple. “Because I wanted you to think I'd moved on so you wouldn't feel guilty for doing the same thing.”

I had a moment to see something burn in his eyes and then his hands were cupping my face. His lips brushed across mine, gentle.

“I could never move on from you.”

Chapter 26

I didn't think I had the strength in me, but I somehow managed to find it. I pushed him away. Not that he went far. He merely dropped his hands from my face.

No, there was no merely about it.

His face was blank, guarded.

I had to tell him the truth. "You have to move on."

"Why?"

The word was clipped, full of something that had never been aimed at me before. Anger.

"You owe me that, Jenna." He raked his hands through his hair. "You just left. Without a word. Nothing. You didn't talk to me. You just fucked me and then snuck out. Left some vague note. Quit your job. Then you have my friend lie to me and say you two slept together. What the hell is going on?"

He was right. I did owe him.

"You lied to me." I didn't mean for it to come out as harshly as it had.

His head jerked up, his eyes wide. "What?"

"You told me that it was okay I couldn't have kids," I whispered. "That it didn't matter. But it does."

"Jenna—"

"I know, Rylan!" I snapped. I had a choice between anger and anguish. I chose the former. It was easier. "I know that you bought that house for the family you thought you'd have with Lara. You might've changed who you thought you'd marry, but the fact that you've kept that house all these years says that you haven't given up on having a family." I forced myself to look at him. "You deserve to be with someone who can give you what you want."

He came back over to the bed, his expression incredulous. “How can you not know?” He reached out and brushed hair away from my face. “You're what I want.”

“A family.” My eyes were burning. “You want a family.”

“Yes, Jenna, I want a family, but family isn't defined by DNA.”

My heart leaped and I tried to quash the hope that flared inside me. I couldn't hope or believe, because when I lost it again...I didn't think I could survive it.

“I don't care about the biology of it. We have options.” He took a slow breath. “And if you don't want children, that's okay too. Because as long as I have you, I have family. You're my family.”

I started to shake my head, then stopped. The medicine had done its job taking away most of the pain, but I was still a bit light-headed. “There are plenty of beautiful women out there who'd love to be your family.” I hadn't thought it was possible to hurt any more than I had before. “Women like Emmaline.”

“Emmaline?”

He sounded so surprised that I risked a glance. “She said you'd been seeing each other. And Suzette told me you'd been out with other women.”

“Friends of Suzette's,” he interrupted. “Women I took out on dates to keep my sister from bugging the hell out of me.”

My fingers twitched.

“And I took Emmaline out on Valentine's Day because I felt bad that she was alone.” He tried to make his tone light. “It wasn't like I had any other plans.”

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “You need to...mmmf.”

Whatever I was going to say was lost as Rylan covered my mouth with his. This was nothing like his previous kiss. This was passion and heat, a desire so fierce that if I'd had any breath left, it would've taken it away. Everything I'd been dealing with, everything I'd been feeling; it was all coming from him. His arms wrapped around me, crushing me to his chest. The scent of him made my chest tighten and I reached up to pull him closer.

I'd forgotten about my hand.

I groaned in pain and he immediately pulled back.

“I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean...”

“It's okay.” I gave him a soft smile despite the sudden flash of heartache. “I'm not holding you to anything.”

“You think I'm apologizing for kissing you?” He stared at me. “Dammit, Jenna, I thought you were smart.”

I blinked in surprise.

“The only time I was ever sorry for kissing you was that first time,” he said firmly. “And only because of how much it scared you.” He gripped my chin between his thumb and fingers. His voice was harsh. “I have never regretted one kiss, one touch, one moment with you. I've been through hell since you left me, but I would go through it all again for one more second.”

“Rylan.” My voice cracked. I tried to look away, but he kept his grip firm.

“Tell me,” he demanded. “Tell me you haven't missed me, that you haven't been miserable virtually every single minute we've been apart. Tell me that your body isn't burning right now, aching for me. Tell me that and I'll walk away. You'll never have to see me again.”

I couldn't do it. I couldn't lie. Not with him staring at me like that, not when I heard the sincerity in his voice.

“I can't.” I took a shuddering breath. “I can't say it because it isn't true.”

His body sagged in relief and he rested his forehead against mine. “Oh, love. You don't know how scared I was.”

“Scared?” I rested my injured hand on his shoulder and clutched the back of his neck with the other. I didn't understand. Rylan was the strongest man I knew. “What could you possibly be scared of?”

He laughed and there were tears in the sound. “Losing you. You're everything to me, Jenna. I love my family and my friends. I can exist for them, but I can only live for you. I don't want anyone else.”

“I don't either.” As I said the words, it was like I could breathe again. My heart beat in my chest, whole once again.

When the doctor came back in, Rylan and I were sitting next to each other on the bed, his arms around me, my head on his shoulder. I'd finished telling him everything that had happened and I was ready to go, but I didn't know my destination. Rylan's arms were strong and solid around me, his

words fresh in my ears, but I still doubted. I'd hurt him. Badly. I didn't know where things stood with him, and I didn't want to risk this, not yet.

“Miss Lang.” Dr. Howard sounded amused.

Rylan sat up, his face flushing. He stood and held out his hand. “Rylan Archer.”

“Mr. Archer.” The doctor shook Rylan's hand, the expression on his face saying he'd recognized Rylan's name. “I'm assuming you're this young lady's ride home?”

I swallowed hard and looked down at my hand. Home. My apartment was safe again now that Christophe was dead.

“I am.” He reached down and took my hand. “Is she okay to leave?”

The doctor started to hand me a small pill bottle, then smiled when he saw that my good hand was otherwise occupied. He handed it to Rylan and then a piece of paper. “Here's a sample. Those pills should get her through today, but you'll want to get the prescription filled.” Dr. Howard looked down at me. “Keep your hand dry and at least partially elevated. You'll want to make an appointment with your usual doctor and set things up to have those stitches removed in a few weeks.”

“And my fingers?” I asked. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer.

“It depends,” Dr. Howard said. “The X-rays appeared to show clean breaks, but I'm a little concerned about the way they were broken. You said they were...twisted?”

Rylan's hand tightened around mine.

I nodded.

“I'm going to refer you to a specialist,” Dr. Howard said. “I'm almost positive that they'll heal fine, but I'd rather not take any chances.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Is there anything else?”

“Not unless you have questions for me.” He held out his clipboard, then hesitated. “I didn't think to ask if you were left-handed.”

I shook my head as Rylan released my hand. A rush of heat went through me as he rested his hand on my thigh. I didn't ask him to move it though. I quickly signed the papers and handed them back.

It wasn't until the doctor walked out that something hit me. “Shit,” I said.

“My clothes...”

“I was in a bit of a rush,” Rylan interrupted. He had the same sheepish look on his face that he'd had when he'd shown me how he'd decorated the house for Christmas. Like he'd done something and wasn't entirely sure how I was going to respond. “But I brought you something.” He picked up a bag that I hadn't seen him bring in.

I smiled when I saw what was inside. A pair of his shorts and a t-shirt. Both way too big for me and exactly what I wanted to wear. Even if I was just going back to my apartment, at least I'd be able to have the scent of him around me when I fell asleep.

I changed quickly and reluctantly accepted the wheelchair. I didn't ask the question until we were in the car and heading away from the hospital.

“Where are you taking me?”

He looked over at me, startled. “Home. Unless...” His expression tightened. “I can take you back to your apartment if that's what you want.”

“I didn't want to assume...” The sentence trailed off.

“Do you love me?”

Now it was my turn to be surprised. “Yes.”

“Are you going to leave me again?”

My heart twisted painfully at the thought. “Not unless you want me to go.”

“Then it's settled,” he said matter-of-factly. “I'm taking you home.”

Chapter 27

Home. I'd never had one before. Not a real one. A place where I not only felt safe, but loved. My apartment had been the closest thing I'd had, but even there I'd been alone and never felt truly safe.

Here, I did.

As we walked into the house, Rylan made a quick call to the car service he sometimes used and asked for his usual driver. For a moment, I was puzzled, wondering where he intended to go. I relaxed as he asked Denny to come by the house for the prescription Dr. Howard had given me. I wasn't surprised when Denny didn't tell Rylan that he wasn't an errand boy. Besides the fact that Denny had always seemed like a nice guy, Rylan was one of those people who generally got what he wanted, even without being an ass about it.

"I'll wait for Denny," Rylan said. "Can you manage in the shower alone?"

I gave him the closest thing to a scathing look I could manage. I was exhausted. It was going to be a close thing for me to shower without passing out, but I wasn't about to admit it. I was partway up the stairs when something occurred to me. "I need to go back to my apartment."

Rylan stiffened.

"For clothes," I clarified. "I don't have anything to wear."

He grinned and walked up the stairs to stand on the one below me. "For now, you can wear my clothes." He leaned forward and gave me a soft kiss. "Or nothing. I'm fine with either one."

I smiled, barely feeling the twinge of pain in my bottom lip. "After the shower...?" I let the question hang, unfinished.

"My old bed is still in the guest room," he said. "I couldn't bring myself to put it back." A shadow passed over his face. "It would've been admitting

that you weren't coming back.”

“I am back.” I reached out with my good hand and placed my palm on his cheek. Whiskers rasped against my skin. He hadn't shaved today. “And until you ask me to leave, I'm not going anywhere.”

He covered my hand with his and turned his head to press his lips against my palm. “Then I hope you're ready to stay forever because I'm not letting you go.”

A thrill went through me, but I still cautioned myself to temper my hope. Forever was a long time, and people changed. I would take it though, however long I had with him. I kissed the tip of his nose, smiling as he chuckled.

“I need to get cleaned up,” I said.

I could feel his eyes on me as I walked up the stairs. Unlike before, when I'd felt someone watching me, there was no concern, no fear, only warmth and desire.

I took my time in the shower, more out of necessity than anything else. I'd wrapped my hand in one of the bathroom trash bags to prevent it from getting wet, but I could still only use my right hand to wash, and considering how much blood I still had to get off of me, it wasn't an easy task. When I stepped out onto the bathmat over a half hour later, however, I felt clean. The cut on my hip hadn't needed stitches, but I did need to replace the bandage, which took a little more skill to do one-handed. By the time I was finished, I was glad the damage had been done to my left hand. If it had been my right, I wasn't sure I would've been able to manage much of anything on my own.

I'd used the shower in the guest room, so when I came out, I was able to just toss my towels towards the laundry basket and crawl under the covers. I'd fully intended to wait until Rylan came to bed, but my body and mind clearly had other ideas. My last conscious thought was how good it felt to be back in this bed and then I went under.

When I woke up, it was dark but I didn't panic. I recognized the arms around me, the naked body warm against my back. Rylan had showered too. He smelled of soap and that other scent that was just him. His breathing was slow and even, telling me I'd been asleep long enough for him to have showered, come to bed and fallen asleep.

I slowly rolled over in his arms. I wanted to see his face. I'd done my best to memorize it, but a memory couldn't compare to the real thing. There

was enough light coming in through the crack between the curtains that I could just make out his features. Softened in sleep, I marveled at how young he looked. The worry lines that he'd accumulated over the last few months had smoothed out. Guilt stabbed me. They were my fault.

I didn't want to wake him, but I needed to touch him, almost more than I needed air. I traced his eyebrows with the tip of a finger and then down the straight line of his nose. As my finger ran along his bottom lip, he stirred, but didn't wake. He made a small sound and his hands tightened around me. His cock twitched against my thigh, sending a rush of arousal through me.

“There are so many things I wish I could say when you're awake,” I whispered as I ran my fingers down his cheek. “Tell you how you make me feel safe, how much I love you. How much I need you.” I pushed hair back from his face. “How hard it was for me to walk away and how selfish I am for not lying to you now so you would leave me.”

The thought of what would have happened if I'd lied, of being alone right now chilled me to the bone and I snuggled closer to him, welcoming the heat of his body. I rested my head against his chest. My fingers played across the hard muscles there.

“I swear,” I murmured. “I will do everything in my power to not make you regret giving me a second chance.”

“You don't have to do anything.” Rylan's voice was low.

I didn't look up at him, but I stiffened. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough,” he said. He kept one arm tight around my waist and reached down with the other hand to hook his finger under my chin and tilt my head up so we were looking at each other. “I'm only going to say this one time, so you need to listen.”

I nodded mutely. His touch wasn't harsh, but there was an edge to his tone that told me he was serious.

“No one is allowed to make the woman I love feel like she is less than everything to me. Not even the woman I love.”

He kissed me then, hard enough to make me whimper as his mouth pressed against my injured lip. He didn't stop though, one hand burying itself in my hair to cup the back of my head as he rolled us over until he was above me, taking his weight on his elbows even as I parted my legs so he could rest between them. He thrust his tongue into my mouth, his teeth bruising against

my lips. I made another sound, pain mixed with pleasure and I wasn't even sure which I was feeling at the moment.

My body was on fire every place we were touching, my nipples hardening as they rubbed against his chest. My bottom lip was throbbing in time with my heartbeat and Rylan sucked the injured flesh into his mouth, his tongue gently soothing it for a moment before releasing me from his kiss.

His eyes were fierce, nearly black in the dim light. "I never want to hear you talk that way about yourself again, do you understand me? Never." He rested on one elbow as he grabbed my good hand by the wrist and stretched it out above my head. "I love you and I won't have you thinking you don't deserve it."

His touch was gentle as he took my injured hand and moved it up to join the other. He lightly kissed my jaw and I tilted my head so that he could continue down my neck. I moaned as his teeth scraped against my throat.

"And if you ever say anything like that again, there will be...consequences." His voice dropped even further until the last word was nearly a growl. He bit the place on my neck where my pulse throbbed and I knew I was going to have a mark. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." The word came out in a hiss of air as one of his hands covered my breast.

He raised his head, the expression on his face softening. "You're everything to me, Jenna." The hand on my breast was caressing rather than squeezing. "I need you so badly that sometimes I feel like I can't even breathe."

"Me too," I confessed. I forced myself to admit the rest. "And it scares the hell out of me."

"I'll never hurt you, Jenna." He lightly touched the side of my face. "You don't have to be scared of me."

I laughed softly. "I'm not scared of you, Rylan. I'm scared of me." He frowned, confusion plain on his face. "I'm afraid I won't be strong enough."

"Then we'll be strong enough together," he said. "Because I won't lose you again."

His lips were gentle against mine this time. When he pulled away, he started to sit up.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He gave me a wry grin. “I need to...” He glanced down with a meaningful look in his eyes. “Take care of something. I’ll be right back.”

Instinctively, I crossed my arm over my breasts, turning my head away. I knew it was foolish to feel like he’d rejected me, but I couldn’t stop it.

“Hey, what is it?” His voice was so full of concern that I didn’t want to look at him. He didn’t give me a choice though, turning my head back with a firm hand.

“It’s nothing,” I said, hoping it was dark enough he couldn’t see the tears burning in my eyes.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“It’s nothing,” I insisted. “My emotions are just fucked up from the crazy day.” That was the truth, but I doubted if he’d accept it as the whole truth.

He didn’t.

I watched as his eyes moved from my face down to where my arm was covering my breasts as well as it could. Understanding dawned.

“You just had one of the worst possible days and you’re in pain. I’m not going to take advantage of you.” He moved my arm back up over my head and reached down to run his thumb over my nipple. “No matter how badly I want you right now.”

The part of me that always insisted I question everyone and everything was telling me that he was only saying what he thought I wanted to hear. I looked at his eyes, his desire clear. I ran my gaze down his body to where his cock was hard, curving up towards his stomach, swollen and ready.

I told that part of me to shut up. Rylan loved me and he wanted me. I was done sabotaging my own happiness because I thought I didn’t deserve it. I knew from experience that it wouldn’t be as simple as a single time telling those feelings to go away, but for tonight, that negative voice fell silent.

I smiled up at Rylan. “What if I want you to take advantage of me?” My smile widened as a shudder ran through him.

“Don’t, love.” He groaned. “If you’re not sure. I don’t think I could handle stopping.”

“Then don’t.” I reached down and put my hand between my legs, my fingers easily sliding between my lips. “Please, Rylan. I need you inside me.”

I wasn't sure which part broke his resolve, but it didn't matter because he was pulling my hand away, pinning it above my head as he eased his way inside.

“So fucking tight,” he said through gritted teeth. “It's been too long.”

I nodded, unable to speak. I was surprised I could even breathe. Every cell in my body was focused on the place where he was entering me. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to have him stretching me so wide, filling me. His fingers tightened around my wrist, just adding to the sensations coursing through me. Even the pain from my injuries had faded into the background, overshadowed by the intensity of everything else.

I'd thought he'd come to me the same way he'd kissed me, that fierce, rough claiming, but he didn't. He stopped for a moment when he'd gotten all the way inside, his breath hot against my cheek. When he began to move, his strokes were slow and steady. His muscles flexed against the insides of my thighs and I began to raise my hips to meet his thrusts. I wanted to touch him, but his grip on my wrist was firm and I was aware enough to know to keep my left hand immobile. All I could do was squeeze him inside me, use my legs around him to pull him deep and hard.

Another shudder ran through him and I knew he was close. I turned my head so that my lips were pressed against his ear. “Come for me, love. Come in me. I'm here and I'm not leaving.”

I felt tears hot against my neck as he cried out my name. He surged forward to bury himself deep as he came. I ground up against him, giving myself the extra friction I needed to join him in release. As he slumped down on me, he released my wrist and I wrapped my arms around him, letting the pleasure carry us, together. I closed my eyes, suddenly aware of the enormity of what I'd almost lost.

Never again, I promised myself. No matter how insecure I felt, I would never leave him again. We belonged together in a way that I couldn't explain. I didn't have to explain it though. It was enough that it existed and that we both felt it. Things wouldn't be easy, I knew that, but I also knew now that it didn't matter how hard they got because nothing was more real than what was between us.

I held him inside me even as we fell back asleep, secure in the knowledge that tomorrow was a new day and that we'd go into it together.

Chapter 28

The pain in my hand woke me up, but finding myself wrapped in Rylan's arms, my head on his chest, I found it difficult to want to move. Thanks to my past, I actually had a high tolerance for pain, but broken bones were never pleasant. I started to pull myself out from Rylan's embrace when I felt him move.

"Sorry," I murmured as I tried to sit up without jarring my hand.

"I was already awake," he said as he helped me sit. "Here." He held out a small white pill. Once I took it, he reached back to the bedside table and handed me a bottle of water.

I swallowed the medicine gratefully and gave him back the water. I sighed as I leaned back against the pillow, waiting for the pain killer to kick in.

"Yesterday," Rylan started to speak, hesitated and then continued. "I didn't actually ask you if you still wanted to move in here with me."

I looked over at him, surprised as much by his tone as I was by the words. "Do you love me?" I asked him the same question he'd asked me on the drive from the hospital.

"Yes. You know I do."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Of course not." He reached down and grasped my good hand.

I smiled at him, lifting our hands so that I could press my lips against the back of his. "Then I'm home."

He leaned forward and gently kissed me. "Good." He released my hand and climbed off of the bed. "Now, you stay right there and I'll go make you breakfast."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "It's a couple broken fingers and

some bruises. I'm not an invalid. We'll eat in the kitchen.”

He chuckled. “That's my girl.”

The words warmed me and did more for diminishing the pain in my hand than the pill had. I watched him walk into the bathroom, admiring the length of him, the muscles flexing under his tanned skin. Desire hit me hard, twisting all of those things low inside me. Not for the first time, I wondered if it would fade over time. Would there be a point where I could look at him and not want him?

I hoped not.

There was something soothing about sharing the morning rituals, like it was what we'd always been meant to do. We both dressed simply. Him in a pair of sweatpants, me in one of his shirts and a pair of boxers. As I brushed out my hair, he came up behind me and slid his arms around my waist, his hands moving under his shirt so that he could place his palms against bare skin.

“Have I mentioned recently how much I love seeing you in my clothes?” He nuzzled behind my ear. “Even more when I know you're not wearing anything underneath them.”

“Which reminds me,” I said, leaning back against his warm, broad chest. “We need to talk about getting my things moved over here. Specifically, my clothes.”

“Nope.” He shook his head. His reflection showed the laughter in his eyes. “I like this better.”

His hand slid down, moving underneath the elastic waistband. I sucked in air as his finger parted my folds.

“Easier access.”

I would've made a smart comment but I was having difficulty thinking with his finger rubbing my clit. The hand still around my waist moved up and he cupped my breast. It didn't take him long to bring me to orgasm and he held me there, his teeth and tongue teasing my ear as he whispered all of the things he wanted to do to me today. By the time he took a step back, I had to put my hand on the dresser to keep from falling and his sweatpants were doing little to conceal how much he'd enjoyed himself.

“Give me a minute,” I said as I waited for my legs to steady. “And I'll return the favor.”

To my surprise, he shook his head. “Breakfast first. Then, if you're feeling up to it, a trip to our playroom?”

Heat flooded through me at the last two words and my stomach clenched, both at the thought of food and at what would come next.

He made pancakes while I sat at the kitchen table and watched. We made small talk as we ate, discussing plans to have my things packed and brought here as well as my return to Archer Enterprises. We were just finishing up and getting ready to head into a completely different sort of conversation when we heard the front door open.

Rylan shrugged when I gave him a questioning look and got up to see who it was. I had a pretty good idea since I knew of at least two people who had keys and no problem walking in unannounced.

Rylan was partway to the hall when Zeke appeared. His light brown hair was a mess and he had dark circles under his eyes, like he hadn't slept for a couple days. He looked at Rylan and then at me.

“I went to get coffee this morning and there were some cops in line talking about how this girl had been kidnapped.”

I had the fleeting thought that I hoped he'd gotten decaf. Zeke looked wired and about ready to explode. Things had reached a breaking point for him.

“They're saying how she's this hero because she managed to get free and save some girl. Then they said the CEO of Archer Enterprises showed up in her hospital room and wasn't it so sweet.” He looked at Rylan again and I could see the pain in his eyes. “How could you?”

If I hadn't been sure of how Zeke felt about Rylan before, I would've been now.

“What are you talking about?” Rylan, however, appeared to be completely clueless. “You know how I feel about her.”

“She left you!” Zeke shouted. “She left and you still want her! I've been there for you! Through everything! Through Lara and all those women who didn't give a damn about you! Then you meet her and I tried to tell you she was the same as the rest, but you wouldn't listen. Not even after what she did.”

“I love her, Zeke.” Rylan still looked at a complete loss. “You're my best friend. I thought you'd understand.”

“I don't want to be your best friend!” Zeke's voice cracked and Rylan took a step back.

“He's in love with you,” I said softly. I stood and moved to stand next to Rylan. I didn't touch him, knowing it'd just make Zeke angrier, but I needed to get his attention away from Rylan. Something bad was going to happen. I could feel it.

“What?” Rylan looked at me, startled.

“Aren't you, Zeke?” I didn't answer Rylan.

“That's impossible,” Rylan said. “Zeke dated Suzette.”

“Because she's your sister, I'll bet.”

Zeke glared at me, confirming my suspicions.

“We've gone on double dates,” Rylan continued to protest. “We even hooked up with girls in the same room. He had sex...” His voice trailed off and I could see him processing things, things that he'd once found platonic, things he hadn't wanted to recognize for what they were.

“Rylan, I wanted to tell you.” Zeke was pleading now. “But I didn't want to lose you.”

“You're my best friend, Zeke,” Rylan said. “I don't care if you're gay. It doesn't change anything.”

Zeke looked at Rylan and then at me. His expression hardened. “No, it doesn't, does it? You love her. Not me.”

“Not like that, no,” Rylan's voice was gentle. “I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry.” Zeke laughed. “I've always been there for you. I picked you up when your heart was broken and who do you choose? Her.” He turned around, running his hand through his hair. “I thought about just ending it.”

I glanced at Rylan and saw that his face had drained of color.

“But then I thought, why should I do that? Let the bitch who hurt you get to have you?”

Rylan tensed and I put my hand on his arm, shaking my head. I didn't care what Zeke said about me. He was on the edge and one wrong move could push him over.

Zeke turned back towards me and that's when I saw the bulge under the back of his shirt. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but he was

already pulling out the gun and pointing it at me. His hand was shaking and I froze.

“Then I figured I'd just kill her.” He looked at Rylan. “But you'd never forgive me for that, would you?” His arm moved until he was pointing at Rylan. “So I thought, you can't hold grudges after death, right? So if I kill you and then me, we'll be together. Forever. Right? Leave her behind to suffer.”

I didn't even think about it. I just moved, two quick steps and I was between Rylan and the gun.

“Not him,” I said firmly. I felt Rylan try to move and Zeke's hand twitched.

“Jenna,” Rylan said.

I could hear the desperation in Rylan's voice, but I didn't look at him. I couldn't get distracted.

“If you have to kill someone, let it be me. Not him.” I kept my voice even. “If you love him, you can't kill him.”

“I love him,” Zeke said, his eyes filled with angry tears. “But I can't have him. Why should I let you?”

“I'm offering myself in his place, Zeke. He can't get mad at you for that.”

“Like hell,” Rylan muttered, his breathing was harsh and ragged behind me.

It didn't look like Zeke had heard him. There was a desperate light in Zeke's eyes, and I was hoping it meant I was getting through to him. At least enough that if he shot someone, it'd be me.

“If I'm out of the way, you won't lose him.” I took a step closer to Zeke, my heart pounding in my chest. I needed to be sure that if he fired, I was the only one getting hurt.

His hand began to shake and I knew I had to do something. I could keep trying to talk him down and hope he'd lower his gun before he accidentally pulled the trigger. Or, I could try to take the gun. I was close enough to reach him. I just didn't know which action would put Rylan in the least amount of danger.

Zeke's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched, the gun growing more steady. “You're trying to trick me.”

I took another step, putting myself less than a foot from the barrel of the gun.

“Jenna...”

I heard Rylan move behind me and knew he was trying to figure out a way to get me away from Zeke. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let Rylan risk his life. I continued to speak to Zeke in the same calm voice. “I'm not tricking you.” I spread my arms wide. “Go ahead.”

“No!”

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and Zeke shifted his attention. The gun started to move and I acted. I grabbed Zeke's wrist, twisting it and squeezing, hoping he'd drop the gun. He yanked his arm back, pulling me close, and for one full, eternal minute, we struggled, the gun between us. Rylan was there, reaching for us, and then, a muffled bang.

Our feet tangled and we fell. I could feel hot liquid soaking my shirt and wondered if I was in shock, if the vague sensation of heat was all I would feel until my brain processed what had happened. It had to be bad if I couldn't feel it. I'd read somewhere that people rarely felt an initial killing wound.

“Jenna.” Rylan's voice was frantic.

I felt his hands on my shoulders and he pulled me off of Zeke. I looked up at him, my heart twisting at the pain on his face.

My hand hurt.

The realization hit me. My hand hurt. There was a faint pain in my side, but nothing new, nothing sharp.

“I'm okay.”

Rylan pulled up my shirt, his hands moving over my stomach, looking for a wound.

“Rylan, I'm okay.” I put my good hand over one of his and the touch seemed to break through his panic. He looked at me. “I'm okay. It's not my blood.”

Shit. It wasn't my blood.

I saw the relief on Rylan's face immediately change into horror as he realized the same thing I did. I hadn't been the one who was shot.

As Rylan released me, I scrambled to my feet and headed for the phone.

Unlike most techies, Rylan still had a landline for emergencies. I dialed 911 as I came back over to kneel at Zeke's other side. Rylan's hands were pressed against Zeke's abdomen.

I barely heard myself giving the dispatcher the address. Zeke's face was pale, a sheen of sweat glistening on his skin. His mouth was moving as if he was trying to speak, but Rylan kept telling him to be quiet. I put the phone down, ignoring the dispatcher asking me to stay on the line. I reached across Zeke and put my hand over Rylan's. He glanced at me and then looked back down at his friend. He wrapped his hands around Zeke's.

"I'm sorry," Zeke said.

"Stop trying to talk," Rylan said sharply.

"No." Zeke grimaced. "Let me talk."

Rylan's lips flattened, but he stopped protesting.

"I'm sorry," Zeke said again. "Sorry I never told you. I've been in love with you for so long. I thought you'd see it one day. See that I was best for you. And then you met Jenna." He looked over at me. "I was jealous because he loves you in a way he never loved me. I'm sorry. Please, forgive me."

"We can talk about that later," Rylan said.

"Please," Zeke begged, looking back at his friend. "I can't die knowing you're mad at me."

"You're not going to die," Rylan said firmly.

"Rylan." Zeke's voice sounded weak. "Jenna, please." He spoke to me, but didn't take his eyes off Rylan.

"I forgive you," I said.

"I do too," Rylan said.

With my hands on his side, I could feel the relief go through his body. And then the tension went with it. Shit. I looked at Zeke's face and saw his eyes starting to close.

"Stay awake," I ordered. I wanted to shake him, but I couldn't take my hands away from where I was pressing against his wound. "Dammit, Zeke! You are not allowed to die, you hear me!"

Rylan leaned over his friend and grabbed his shoulders. "Zeke! Wake up, dammit! You don't get to do this!"

I could still feel the blood beneath my hands, but I wondered just how long it was going to last.

Chapter 29

I really thought Rylan was going to punch the police officer who told him he couldn't ride in the ambulance with Zeke, but then he'd seen me, covered with his friend's blood, hands shaking, and he'd realized I needed him. I never would've asked him to stay rather than go – who knew how bad Zeke was – but I was glad he'd made the decision to stay. Zeke would have doctors taking care of him. I was willing to admit, for the first time, that I needed someone to take care of me.

Right now, I was even more grateful for Rylan's presence than before. Detective McPhee had arrived shortly after the ambulance had left and wanted to take our statements separately. Rylan had threatened to call Agent Matthews and so now we were sitting at the kitchen table, giving Detective McPhee our joint statement. I was doing most of the talking. Rylan was holding my good hand, his grip firm, but I could tell that his thoughts were only half present. Zeke had been in and out of consciousness when the paramedics had taken him away, their expressions blank, telling us nothing about his condition.

“So, Miss Lang, for the second time in two days, you're involved in a violent altercation.” Detective McPhee gave me a disapproving look.

“If you take a look at my past, it's not exactly unusual.” My tone was sharp.

Rylan squeezed my hand and I knew he was telling me to ease up.

“Three people wanted to kill you and none of them managed to do it. That's quite exceptional.” Detective McPhee didn't seem fazed by my annoyed tone.

“She's an exceptional woman,” Rylan interjected, his voice polite, but with the kind of steel in it that he'd used to become one of the youngest and richest CEOs in the country. “And Zeke didn't come here to kill her. Well, not exactly anyway.”

“Still.” Detective McPhee raised an eyebrow.

I sighed. I was far too tired to deal with this. “Are you going to arrest me?”

“Excuse me?” She seemed surprised by my question.

“I'm tired and covered with blood for the second time in two days. My hand hurts and my boyfriend would like to go to the hospital and see how his friend is doing. If you're not going to arrest me, you have our statements. Before you ask, I'm not leaving Fort Collins anytime soon.”

The detective's mouth twitched. “No, Miss Lang. I'm not going to arrest you.” She glanced at Rylan. “And I have a feeling the DA will decline to press charges on this one as well.”

I didn't say anything to her implication that Rylan would make sure that was the case. Rylan did know the DA and I doubted the DA would want to prosecute me for any of the events that had happened over the past two days, even if he'd been inclined to make an example of me.

Detective McPhee started to say something else, but was interrupted by a shout from the front of the house.

“Rylan!”

His head jerked around, eyes wide. “Suzette!” he called back. He stood, releasing my hand. “That's my sister,” he said to the detective.

A moment later, Suzette was pushing her way past a pair of confused looking officers. She threw herself in her brother's arms.

“I'm okay,” he repeated the statement until I wasn't sure if he was trying to reassure Suzette or himself.

“What happened?” she asked as she stepped back.

Rylan glanced at me and I shrugged. He could tell her as much or as little as he wanted. I saw Suzette's eyes cut towards me, then widen as she saw the blood.

“It's not hers,” Rylan said. “It's Zeke's.”

“Zeke's?” Suzette's face paled. “What the hell happened here?”

Rylan told her, quickly, but without leaving anything out. I watched as myriad expressions crossed her face. Shock. Anger. Horror. Her eyes flicked over to me when Rylan started to describe how I'd stepped between him and

Zeke, how I'd told Zeke to shoot me instead of Rylan.

When he finished, I expected her to hug him again, to tell him how glad she was that he was okay. What I didn't expect was her to turn towards me, tears in her eyes and throw her arms around me. I stiffened out of instinct, but managed to return the hug while looking over her shoulder at an equally bewildered-looking Rylan.

“I'm so sorry.”

For the second time today, I was getting an apology I'd never expected.

Suzette released me and took a step back, wiping her cheeks. “I owe you such an apology, Jenna. I've treated you so badly.”

I looked at Rylan and he shrugged, clearly at a loss about what was going on.

“It's not an excuse, but everything...I love my brother, Jenna.” Suzette glanced at Rylan, but then turned back to me. “He does the whole protective older brother thing, but he needs someone to protect him too.”

Protect him? From me?

“You don't know what it was like when things with Lara...ended.” She was deliberately not looking at Rylan now. “I hated her for hurting Rylan that way. He's my brother,” she repeated fiercely. “My family. And I never wanted to see him hurt like that again.”

Pieces were starting to fall into place. Suzette didn't actually hate me. It wasn't personal. She wasn't done yet though and I kept my eyes on her as she continued.

“Since Lara, he'd never really dated anyone so I didn't worry. Then he met you.” She glanced at Rylan, but his face was blank. “I remembered how he'd been with Lara, what he looked like when he was in love. But when he looked at you...what I'd seen with Lara seemed like nothing, and I knew if you...losing you would kill him.”

My heart gave a painful thump and a flood of guilt went through me at what I'd put him through. Rylan crossed to my side and put his arm around me. I leaned into him and he kissed the top of my head.

“Is there a point to this?” he asked, his tone clearly saying he didn't appreciate what his sister was saying.

“It's not an excuse, but I just wanted to protect you. That's why I acted

the way I did. I wanted things to end before they got too serious.” She had the good grace to look embarrassed. “And then I saw you after she left.” She looked at me. “And I was furious at you for hurting him. Until I realized why you'd done it.” She shook her head. “I was an idiot, Jenna. Can you forgive me?” She looked at Rylan. “And you too. I'm sorry.”

“Forgiven.” I stepped out of Rylan's embrace to put my hand on Suzette's shoulders. “We do crazy things for the people we love.”

He came forward with me and pulled both of us into his arms. Despite everything that had happened, I felt a wave of peace wash over me. There were still things to do, issues to deal with, but for the moment, things were good.

Chapter 30

Once Suzette was convinced that we didn't hate her and that we really were okay, we told the cops we were going to be leaving. We both did a quick clean-up, put on clean clothes and grabbed a few necessities. As we walked out of the house, Rylan looked down at me and I knew what he was going to ask. He was torn between taking care of me and needing to see if Zeke was okay. I wasn't about to make him choose.

"Hospital first," I said as I climbed into the passenger's side seat.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "We can get a room first and I can go see Zeke after we get settled in."

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "He may not be my best friend, but I need to know how he is too."

I'd been trying not to think of it, trying not to think about what would happen if Zeke died. I wasn't worried about being arrested for it, but I was worried about what it would do to Rylan. And to us. We both knew it had been an accident, but would Rylan blame me if his friend died? Would Zeke's death accomplish what he'd wanted in life? Rylan choosing him over me?

"It wasn't your fault." Rylan interrupted my thoughts. "No matter what happens, we're in this together."

I turned so I could use my good hand to squeeze his arm. I appreciated his words, but they didn't completely ease my anxiety. I knew I wouldn't relax until I knew for sure that Zeke was going to be okay.

We made our way into the hospital and found ourselves talking to a stern-looking nurse.

"Are you family?" she asked.

"Yes," Rylan said firmly.

I could tell the nurse was skeptical, but she didn't push it. "Mr. Wesson

is resting right now. The bullet went clean through. He should be fine.”

Rylan grabbed my hand as a rush of relief nearly made me stagger.

“Can we see him?” he asked.

She raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly down the hall. A uniformed cop was already standing in front of the door.

“Aside from that,” she said. “Visiting hours are over. If you want to see him tomorrow though, you’ll have to talk to the police and get their permission.”

Rylan nodded. “Thank you, ma'am.”

The drive to the hotel was quiet, but as we headed up to our room, I spoke. “I’ll call Agent Matthews. I’m sure he can get us in to see Zeke tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to go,” Rylan said. “I can see him alone.”

I stopped partway into the room and turned towards him, putting my arms around his neck. His hands automatically went to my waist. I stood up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips firmly against his.

“No. We’re in it together.”

He smiled at me and lowered his head to give me a longer, much more thorough kiss. When we finally came apart, my pulse was racing and my face was flushed.

“What do you say we get cleaned up and spend the rest of the day in bed?” Rylan slid one hand lower and squeezed my ass.

I didn’t even have to think. I stepped away from him and pulled the shirt over my head, dropping it on the floor as I walked towards the bathroom. He followed, shedding his own clothes as he went.

We did indeed spend the remainder of the day in bed. We made love, slow and sweet. We fucked, hard and fast. We watched tv, laughed and slept. We ordered room service and answered the door wearing just a sheet. And we didn’t talk about what had happened or what we were going to do tomorrow. The only concession was when I made my call to Agent Matthews.

Monday morning, he called back to let me know that Rylan and I had permission to see Zeke if we still wanted to go. When Rylan looked at me for the answer, I had only one request.

An hour later, I was dressed in my own clothes and a couple boxes were in the trunk of Rylan's car. I didn't mind leaving a few things for movers, but I didn't feel comfortable going into the hospital again, and certainly not to see Zeke, without at least my underwear.

As we walked towards the cop, Rylan reached over and laced his fingers through mine. I didn't need him to say anything to know he was as nervous as I was. I squeezed his hand and followed him into the room.

Zeke was lying in bed, his skin still pale, but he looked better than he had the last time we'd seen him. His left hand was cuffed to the bed, but his right was free. I assumed because of the IV.

His eyes had been closed but as we moved closer, they opened. As soon as he saw Rylan, his entire face lit up for a moment before a mask slammed down. He smiled at both of us, but there was a timidity to it. Shame.

“Hey.” His voice was weak and I didn't think he was pretending. He'd lost a lot of blood yesterday.

“Hey.” Rylan and I walked over to Zeke's side, but neither of us touched him.

“I know I said it yesterday, but I wanted to say it again. This time when I know I'm not going to die,” Zeke said. “I'm so sorry. For everything.” He looked straight at me. “I'm sorry, Jenna.”

“I meant what I said yesterday,” I said. “I forgive you.”

“Me too,” Rylan said. His voice was thick with emotion.

“I wish I could give some sort of explanation as to why I went so crazy,” Zeke said. “I don't know. My head's just all messed up.” His eyes went wide. “I'm not trying to make excuses. What I did was inexcusable.”

“Jenna and I talked on our way over,” Rylan said. He was staring down at the handcuff around Zeke's wrist. “I told her that this wasn't you. That the guy who'd been by my side for years never would've done something like that.” He looked at Zeke at last. “We want you to get help, Zeke.”

“Ry?”

Surprising myself, I reached out my injured hand and put it on top of Zeke's. “We're going to talk to the DA about getting you a plea deal where you can get the help you need.”

“Why?” Zeke's voice cracked, his eyes shining with tears. “After what I

did. What I almost did. Why would you want to help me?"

"Because you're my best friend," Rylan said. "And I want that good-hearted, fun guy back."

"And I want to meet him," I added.

Zeke swallowed hard and rubbed at his eyes with the palm of his free hand. "Thank you." He looked at me. "Rylan's lucky to have you."

"Thanks." I smiled at him. I hadn't been entirely sure that this was the right thing to do, but I'd trusted Rylan when he'd said that Zeke's behavior had been different over the last six months or so. Now, I was glad I'd agreed to his idea.

A knock at the door interrupted us before things could get awkward. Detective McPhee gave Rylan and me a look that clearly said she didn't want us to be there.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to speak to Mr. Wesson."

"We were just leaving," Rylan said. He looked down at Zeke, but it was clear he didn't know what to say. They held each other's eyes for a few seconds and then Rylan walked away. I followed, our hands still clasped together.

We spent the next week getting our lives back together. First, there was the obvious cleaning that needed done in the kitchen. The men Rylan hired were excellent and by the time we came back on Wednesday, it was as if nothing had happened there. It was still a little strange to be in that room, so we tended not to linger, but it was slowly getting easier. Soon, I hoped neither of us would think about it at all.

We hired movers to pack and bring my things to the house, including my bedroom suite. We decorated the house together, shopping and staying up late to hang pictures and pack away things to be dealt with later. We also discussed where things were going to go for work. I hadn't been sure if going back to Archer Enterprises was the best thing to do, but Rylan had slowly talked me into it. But, he'd said, that he didn't want me to come back as an assistant or anything like that. He wanted me to be his partner.

I still hadn't decided how I felt about that. He'd taken the week off to give us the time to work things out, but I knew he needed an answer soon.

Not tonight though. Tonight, we were going to see his parents.

I hadn't spoken to or seen Suzette since she'd come to the house that day, but Rylan had talked to her twice and he assured me that she had told his father and her mother that she approved of us. I wasn't quite sure how much that really meant, but it was a comfort to know I wouldn't have to worry about being attacked by her.

While asking about some more background on his family, I'd also learned that I'd been mistaken the first time I'd met his parents. I'd thought of them as all having the last name Archer. I'd completely forgotten that Suzette and Rylan had different last names. Apparently, Rylan's mother, Theresa Ricin-Archer, had gone back to her maiden name, hyphenated as it was, after the divorce. She'd also insisted that Rylan's last name be changed from Dougall to Archer. Rylan didn't say why or how she'd managed to win that one, but she had. His stepmother's maiden name was indeed Golden, that much I'd known from her former modeling career, but she was now a Dougall as well. I was just glad I hadn't addressed any of them by their last name the last time we'd met. That night had ended badly enough as it was.

When Rylan and I walked into his father and stepmother's house, I could immediately tell something was different. Adam Dougall, a handsome defense attorney in his mid-sixties, greeted me with a kiss on the cheek. His wife, Lindsay, who was at least twenty years his junior, shook my hand without scowling at me. And, most surprising, was Theresa, Rylan's mother, who actually hugged me. I was starting to think that Suzette hadn't just told everyone that she was Team Jenna now. I had a feeling that she'd also shared at least one reason for her change of heart.

The dinner went better than I'd dared to hope. Rylan's stepmother still seemed to have some reservations about me, but Rylan's parents were much more open about accepting our relationship. I supposed knowing that I'd saved their son from being shot by Zeke had softened them. None of them seemed thrilled that I'd finished moving in, but at least we avoided all of the gold-digger accusations that had been such a memorable part of our previous dinner.

By the time Rylan and I made it back to the house, it was well past eight and I was feeling like the evening had been an overall success. A nice, quiet night on the couch watching a movie would be the perfect way to end things.

After trading in our dinner clothes for more comfortable attire, we headed back downstairs and settled on the couch. Instead of turning on the television, however, Rylan turned towards me, his expression serious.

“Are you happy?”

I gave him a puzzled look. “What?”

“Are you happy that you met me, or do you ever regret it?”

I reached out and pushed his hair back from his face, letting my fingers linger in the silky softness. “The only thing I regret was leaving instead of being honest with you. You not only make me happy, Rylan, you make me feel safe.” I tilted my head. “What about you? Are you happy?”

He smiled. “Jenna, you make me happier than I'd ever thought possible.” He took my good hand and raised it to his lips, lightly kissing my knuckles before releasing it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box.

My heart leaped into my throat and I told myself to calm down. It was probably my house key and he was making some romantic gesture about it.

“From the moment I saw you, I was drawn to you, helpless to keep myself from falling in love.”

I could hear my heart pounding in my chest.

“I fell in love with you, Jenna Lang. Your strength and intelligence. Your beauty and your heart. You are the singular most amazing woman I've known.”

He opened the box to reveal the most beautiful ring I'd ever seen. The band was silver and it was immediately clear why. A lovely diamond sat between two slightly smaller sapphires. It matched the necklace and earrings he'd given me for Christmas.

“I love the person you were, the woman you are and the woman you'll be.” He swallowed hard. “Rose Lenore Kingston, will you marry me?”

I stared at him. No one had called me Rose since I'd made her disappear. He was the only person here who knew my birth name. I'd given it to him for Christmas because it had been all I'd had. And I understood why he'd used it now. He was accepting my past along with my present. He didn't just want to marry Jenna, he wanted Rose as well.

“Yes.” The word was breathless. I put my hands on either side of his face. “Yes, my love, I'll marry you.”

“I love you,” he murmured the words against my mouth as he stretched us out on the couch. “My Jenna, my Rose.”

“Yours,” I agreed as I pulled him down for a kiss. “Always, yours.”

Chapter 31

The weather was absolutely perfect for the first week of June, especially for an outside wedding. Between the lake and the mountains, it looked like something out of a fairy tale. Rylan had wanted to get married as quickly as we'd gotten engaged, but I'd managed to make him wait a little over a year, telling him that I wanted to make sure every detail was perfect. That had only been part of the reason though. I'd known that everyone had already thought the two of us had been rushing things moving in together and getting engaged. I wanted people to have some time to get used to the idea.

Hell, I'd needed some time to get used to it myself.

I loved Rylan and I wanted to be with him forever. The idea of a ring and vows and all of that, though, was a bit intimidating. I'd been born Rose Lenore Kingston, then chosen to become Jenna Lang. Now I was going to change my name again and I needed some time to adjust.

I hadn't told Rylan yet because I'd just made the final decision, but I wasn't just going to be changing my last name. When I filled out the paperwork, I was going to be Jenna Rose Archer. A new name for the new person he'd helped me become.

With the prospect of a new life, I felt like I'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to come in and take away my happy ending. Things hadn't been perfect because nothing was perfect, but there'd been no big disasters. I was actually starting to believe that I was going to have the life I'd never thought I'd get.

I thought about the guests outside, sitting under the canopy, waiting for me to make my appearance. Agent Matthews was there. I knew his bosses suspected that a lot of his 'anonymous tips' were coming from me, but he never gave me up. He also never mentioned the fact that, over the last year, nearly a hundred pedophiles had been exposed online, their names and addresses published, their places of work alerted. More than half of them had

already been arrested and the rest were either on the run or vehemently denying the charges. More than one had attempted to bring a lawsuit against the person who'd revealed their identities, but without a suspect, nothing had been filed.

I'd taken Rylan up on his offer to become his partner at Archer Enterprises, but I was still getting used to the idea of being rich. I looked down at the elegant wedding dress Suzette had helped me pick out. It had taken Rylan nearly a month to convince me that I could spend whatever I wanted on the dress, and in the end, I'd had to insist that I not be told how much it cost.

At least Rylan's family was thoroughly convinced that I wasn't after him for his money. His stepmother still didn't entirely approve of me, especially since I'd refused to have my tattoos removed or plastic surgery done on my scars, but we'd all reached a place where I felt comfortable being a part of the family.

Family.

I let out a shaky breath. After today, I'd officially have a family. The woman who'd given birth to me was still in jail, and would remain there for the rest of her life, but I'd long since disowned her. Rylan's parents, his stepmother and his sister were my family. He also had a fairly big extended family, though they didn't live in the area. A lot of them had come in for the wedding though. I'd spent almost all of yesterday being introduced to aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents. I'd gone from being totally alone to having dozens of people I could call my family.

And I'd ended up with a good friend out of all of it too. Suzette was actually only a year younger than me and she was just as smart as her brother. After what had happened with Zeke, she'd spent the next few months trying to make things up to me. The more time we'd spent together, the more we'd seen how much we actually had in common and the better friends we'd become. Her being my maid of honor was as much for me as it was for Rylan. Actually, she was my only attendant. Rylan and I had decided on one each.

His was Zeke. After six months in a psychiatric facility, Zeke had been released on probation. He'd quit his job at his advertising agency before they could fire him and was now working at an LGBT center for at-risk youth while he went to school to become a licensed counselor. He'd also started dating and had even brought a gorgeous man as his date today.

I'd been a bit nervous when he'd first gotten out, unsure how he'd react to our engagement, but after just a couple hours, I'd seen the difference. According to Rylan, this was the Zeke he'd known his whole life. Not only had Rylan gotten his best friend back, but I'd gained another friend as well. It still felt a little strange to think of Zeke as a friend, but he was.

“Ready to go?” Suzette interrupted my thoughts.

I turned towards her and smiled nervously. I wasn't having second thoughts, but I wasn't looking forward to being the center of attention. At least, I reminded myself, the people who were here were all ones who supported Rylan and me. The small handful of people at Archer Enterprises who'd had a problem with my new position had all been politely asked to leave and given a nice severance package and a letter of recommendation.

Well, all but Emmaline, but she'd made things personal. I could still picture the furious expression on her face when I'd walked into the office with that ring. I'd ignored the few choice insults she'd thrown my way, but when she'd raised her hand like she was going to slap me, I'd had enough. She'd ended up being carried out of the building, kicking and screaming like a spoiled child having a tantrum.

Suzette adjusted my veil one last time and the two of us walked down the stairs and went out to the yard. I lifted my bouquet of white lilies to my nose – my tribute to the woman who had saved me.

As I stood at the end of the aisle, I was vaguely aware of Suzette walking, of the filled seats on either side – though both sides were technically the groom's since I only had Dr. MacLeod attending on my behalf – but they were all peripheral. I only had eyes for him.

He was wearing a black tux, tailored to show off his broad shoulders and muscular body. But as much as I loved his body, it was his face I couldn't look away from. I'd seen his expression, his eyes, filled with desire, with love, but I'd never seen him like this. I'd always thought of the words happiness and joy as being interchangeable and I knew now that I'd been wrong. Joyful was the only word to describe how he looked as his eyes met mine. It was beyond mere happiness. It was hope and a promise of a future.

I hadn't had anyone to walk me down the aisle, no parents to give me away, so as I reached the end of the aisle, Rylan reached out his hand and I took it. As my palm slid across his, it was as if everything else faded away and my nerves went too. We weren't saying anything that we hadn't already

said to each other. The people gathered here knew how Rylan and I felt about each other. This was merely a public declaration of what everyone already knew. Only death would part us.

Chapter 32

Two years ago, Rylan and I had gotten into a limo amidst a crowd of friends and family, and headed off to the airport. We'd spent two weeks in Europe. Paris, London, Rome, Venice – places I'd always dreamed of seeing, but had never imagined I would. Last year, for our one year anniversary, we'd taken a cruise to Alaska. Two days ago, we'd just gotten back from the Bahamas. The past three New Year's, we'd spent in the family cabin in the mountains.

Now, after over three years of being together and two years of marriage, things were about to change forever.

I stood in the doorway of one of the two rooms that had recently been redecorated. They used to be extra rooms, not really used for much of anything. Now, they had a purpose. This one had been painted a light lavender with dark purple trim. The other was dark green and gold. The kids had picked the colors out themselves, along with everything else in the rooms.

Diana was seven. Jeremiah was nine. And, come tomorrow, they'd be ours.

Last year, when Rylan and I had started discussing adoption, I'd been hesitant to suggest what I really wanted. Then Rylan had told me that he'd been thinking that we should adopt kids who'd been taken from situations like mine. Who better to understand what a child was going through than someone who'd been through it too?

A few months later, a brother and sister were among those rescued when a child pornography ring was busted. They had no other family and would most likely be split up if they were ever adopted, though the chances of that were slim. I knew from experience that older kids were harder to place to begin with, much less kids who'd been through what these two had.

We'd moved slowly, building up trust between us. Visitations, overnight

stays, family counseling. I'd shared some of my past with them, enough for them to know that I understood. I knew Rylan and I were in for years of dealing with issues beyond the normal parenting scope, but I had faith. I had seen it in the children's eyes, that longing for a real home and for safety. Rylan and I would give them that. The rest would be up to them.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Rylan said as he slid his arms around my waist. He pulled me back against him, tucking my head under his chin.

“Just thinking about Diana and Jeremiah, what they must be thinking tonight, knowing it's their last night in their group home.” I put my hands on Rylan's arms. “Excitement. Fear.”

“Fear?”

“That it won't last. That we'll send them back. That no one will want them.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“What about you?” I asked. “What have you been thinking about?”

“Two things,” he said. “One, I was thinking that we should have a huge picnic for the Fourth of July. Let the kids feel what it's like to be part of a big family who loves them.”

“That's a great idea,” I said. “And two?”

“I was thinking that it's probably going to be the last night in a long time that we'll be able to be as loud as we want wherever we want.” He bent his head to graze the top of my ear with his teeth. “And I want to hear you scream my name.”

Desire shot through me, setting my body on fire. I turned in Rylan's arms. “That sounds wonderful.” I reached up to wrap my arms around his neck. “Did you have someplace special in mind?”

“Well,” he said. “Since the playroom is soundproofed now, I was thinking we might want to go someplace that wasn't. Or more than one place.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow.

He grinned. “I was thinking maybe we start in the living room and make our way through the entire first floor. We do have all night, after all.”

“I love the way you think.” I stood on my tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss before stepping out of his arms. “Last one to the couch gets their ass

spanked.” I grinned at him as I pulled off my shirt and took off for the stairs.

I laughed as I heard a familiar growl behind me. I'd almost reached the bottom of the staircase when an arm went around my waist, grabbing me and lifting me off of the stairs. I struggled, still laughing, as Rylan threw me across his shoulder – when had he taken off his shirt? – and gave my ass a firm slap.

I barely felt it through my jeans, but it made me squirm anyway. Over the past three years, Rylan had slowly introduced me to more and more of the bdsm world. We'd worked through my various triggers until I rarely ever had to ask him to take things slow. Each breakthrough had been another triumph over my past, another proof to myself that I was stronger than what had been done to me.

He dropped me on the couch and yanked off his jeans before I was about to straighten myself out. The sight of him standing there naked made things low inside me throb. More than three years and I was still in awe of the sight of him. Those firm muscles, rock solid abs. The deep v-grooves at his hips that pointed straight down to his cock.

“I'm on the couch first,” I said with a grin. “You lose.”

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow.

His voice had gone to that deep place that hit all those buttons I'd never known until I'd met him. I shivered in anticipation.

“Strip.”

My jeans went first, followed by my bra and panties, so that within a matter of seconds, I was as naked as he was.

“Bend over.”

I didn't bother to argue that I had indeed reached the couch first. Every once in a while, Rylan would have me tie him up, spank him, do things to him, but he was always in charge. And I loved it. The freedom that came with giving myself over to him wholly was one of the most wonderful feelings in the world. I knew I was safe and that he'd take care of me.

I put my hands on the back of the couch and waited. A moment later, his hand came down on my ass.

“Ahh.” My eyelids fluttered as the sting melted into warmth. The second one did the same to the other cheek. I gave myself over to the sensations as

his hand came down again and again. He was being careful, I could tell, most likely to keep me from having any issues sitting tomorrow when the kids arrived, but it was enough to make my skin burn.

After a few minutes, I felt hands on my ass, but in a different position. These were cupping the firm muscle and, a moment later, I felt why.

“Fuck.”

My head fell forward as Rylan's tongue ran along my sensitive skin. He nudged my legs apart and began to lick every inch of me, dancing between my legs until my muscles were quivering and my breath was coming in gasps. Only then did he slide two fingers inside of me. I let out a sound somewhere between a moan and a yelp as he stretched me. Then his fingers pressed against that spot inside me and I came.

My knees began to buckle and I felt him behind me, his arm around my waist, as he removed his hand. The next thing I knew, I was stretched out on the couch and he was above me, his hand wrapped around my wrists. He held me tight as his other hand moved between us, getting himself into position.

“I'm going to make you scream,” he promised.

I'd learned never to doubt his promises.

He paused for a moment with just the tip inside me, then drove forward, burying himself inside me with one thrust. I did scream then, my back arching, hands struggling against his. I needed to scratch something, grab something. It was too much to take all at once, the pain and the pleasure, sensations so intense that I didn't think my body capable of handling it.

“That's my girl.” He kissed the side of my neck without losing a stroke.

He moved deep and hard, taking me to that edge and holding me there. His mouth moved over me, biting and sucking until I knew he'd left marks from my throat to my breasts. I moaned and writhed as he sucked on my nipples, teeth worrying at each one until they were swollen and throbbing. And still, he moved inside me, filling me, rubbing against all of the right places until I was a mass of raw nerves, begging for release.

“Scream my name.” His voice was breathless, but there was no doubt in his order. His fingers tightened around my wrists and he moved his hips, rubbing his cock against my g-spot and the base of it against my clit.

My orgasm hit me hard enough that, for a moment, everything went white. I could hear myself doing what he wanted and screaming his name, but

it sounded far away, as if my body and I were in two separate places. And then I was back, held in place by where Rylan and I were joined. My anchor. He thrust into me again and came with a groan, his face pressed against my breasts. He emptied himself inside me, his body shuddering. As he released my wrists, I wrapped my arms around him, holding him to me. I smoothed down his hair and kissed his forehead.

We lay together in silence as we came down, sweat cooling on our skin. It was nice, I thought, to be able to make love here and not have to worry about someone walking in. And it would be just as good in the kitchen or on the stairs, or wherever Rylan took me next. We enjoyed the freedom to do as we pleased here, but I felt no sadness that these moments would be few and far between as of tomorrow.

We would still have our bedroom and the playroom, still have time to make love and to fuck. To use our toys and do all of the things we currently enjoyed. But it would be different tomorrow, because it would no longer be just the two of us in this big house. We were going to have a family.

Rylan shifted, rolling us so that he was behind me, his body curled around mine. I put my hands on his arms as he wrapped them around my waist. It was funny, I thought, how far I'd come since the first time I'd woken up in this room. How far we'd both come. And we weren't done yet. In fact, I was pretty sure that the best was yet to come.

I smiled and snuggled back against Rylan, safe and loved. Yes, I decided. This was just the beginning, and for the first time in my life, I couldn't wait to see what was next.

- The End -

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Living in Southern California, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing on her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor or author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call for her to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading— oops, scratch that! She is always writing. ☺