

CRU

SOUTHSIDE

The

ENFORCER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

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THE ENFORCER

A STEAMY DADDY DOM ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

CLUB SOUTHSIDE



DELTA JAMES

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*Dedicated to My Two Best Friends:
Renee and Chris, without whom none of what
I do would be possible and to the Girls,
who bring joy to my life
every single day*

*And to Diet Coke—
Without Which This
Book Would Not Exist!*

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PROLOGUE



Chicago had a new lifestyle club that put the others to shame. The famous—or infamous, depending upon your point of view—Baker Street in London had branched out to Chicago. Like Baker Street in the U.K., Club Southside was the American headquarters for the covert operations group known around the world as Cerberus.

CHAPTER 1



BROCK

A Farmhouse Outside *Zurich, Switzerland*

Brock Wickersham stood just inside the torture chamber where they'd done a number on Miley. He had two automatic rifles: one in his hands and the other strapped across his back. He was a solid wall of muscle; close to six and a half feet tall and carrying a physique that spoke of hours in the gym and an active lifestyle. His eyes quickly found the target of his op. She looked like shit.

"Damn. I bet Seth a hundred bucks you'd have taken them down and all we'd find was bits of them to bury," he said lightly. The reality was there'd been no betting pool—Miley was too dear to all of them.

"You need to leave me here. Get the package and get out," she managed to rasp.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen. I'm not going back to Charleston or Chicago or wherever it is billionaires go to hang out and fret about their wives without you."

"I'm not his wife... yet," she groaned.

"Yet being the operative word, baby girl."

"Don't call me that. I don't like it," she snapped.

"Half-dead and still as snarly as ever. Damon's going to have his hands full. He's also going to throw a fit."

“Probably. So instead of Chicago or Charleston, how about you and I run off to Tuscany?”

“No can do. When Damon took us all to his club for cigars and whiskey—finest bourbon I think I ever had—he made us promise we wouldn’t let you get yourself killed.”

“I did not try to get myself killed.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t try not to, and therein lies the issue. I suspect your husband...”

“Fiancé,” she corrected.

Brock managed to chuckle as he found the keys and unlocked the manacles, catching her before she crumpled to the ground. She pushed at him ineffectively. She had to be in bad shape to think she could take him down. Even under the best of circumstances, Miley was no match for Brock, and they both knew it.

“You know, you’re really going to need to get used to calling that Dom of yours ‘husband.’ I’m pretty damn sure he’s going to insist on it.”

“If I’m dead I don’t have to do anything. Go, Brock; save yourself.”

“Like that’s going to happen. Try not to scream. I don’t think you’re going to enjoy it when I toss you over my shoulder in the same way you do when Damon does it.”

“There’s too many of them, Brock. I won’t be responsible for you getting killed.”

“Neither of us is gonna die today. I don’t think any of them are left. Let’s go, baby girl.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“Tell you what, you live through this, and you can punch me in the nose.”

“Works for me,” she said through gritted teeth.

Miley managed not to cry out as he tossed her over his shoulder. He hadn’t been joking; if Damon discovered the way she’d risked herself, he’d tie a knot in her tail and not in a way

she'd enjoy. Rumor was that Damon was negotiating with Robert Fitzwallace, the man who'd founded Cerberus, to join their ranks and become Miley's permanent partner.

He felt her go limp and knew she'd finally let go and fallen unconscious. That was probably best, as she had to be in pain. All he needed to do was grab the package and get it, Miley, and himself to the chopper. He snatched the package from where it had been left and exited the room. They were just rounding the last corner to sprint to the chopper when the door to his left burst open. Brock spun on his heel, brought the P90 up to bear and fired. *I guess I didn't get them all* he mused as he put down the last two bad guys.

The sound of the chopper's rotors whirling away when he finally made it to the clearing was almost as sweet as the sound of a woman's sigh when she'd been thoroughly pleased and sated... almost.



Club Southside/

Cerberus Headquarters

Chicago, Illinois

“Damon and the medical staff say Miley would be dead if it weren't for you,” said Seth.

Brock leaned back in his chair and rubbed the back of his neck. *I need a haircut.* “I didn't do anything the rest of you wouldn't have done. I'm just glad we found her in time. That whole op was one big SNAFU after another. How the hell did we get such bad intel?”

Seth shook his head. “I don't know, and this isn't the first time. Royce and King are stymied. The sources are the same good sources we've always had, but something is wrong.

Brock sat forward. “Do you think we've been hacked?”

“Doubtful. The Cerberus System is one of, if not the, most secure systems in the world.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything...”

“Quit playing word games with me, Seth,” growled Brock.

“Easy, big guy. I’m on your side, or rather, we’re all on the same side. I don’t think it’s the system...”

Brock sat back. “But you do think we have a mole.”

“I don’t want to think it, nor do King, Royce, or Fitz, but I can’t believe we’ve had this run of fucked up ops in the past six months.”

“So do you think it’s some of the new guys?”

Seth shook his head. “Not necessarily. It could be someone’s gotten to somebody, or someone is getting greedy. Shit!” Seth’s fist pounded the conference table in frustration. “Sully and Nina are triple checking the system, but I think all of us are leaning towards a mole in Cerberus.”

“When I think about it, it could be as simple as someone working in admin or even someone working for the club. We don’t discuss sensitive matters, but if someone was trained and trying to put something together, I don’t know that they couldn’t. Have you guys spotted a pattern?”

“Not so much a pattern, but the same kinds of—as you said—SNAFUs. So far, our operatives have been good enough to spot it like you did. Miley said she thought something was off, but decided she was just feeling Damon’s influence.”

Seth chuckled, as did Brock. Miley had always been hell on wheels, but Damon was managing to keep her in line. It wasn’t easy and it was often loud and raucous, but it was fun to watch.

“Do you think it might be a good idea to take a look at some of the new hires?”

“I think,” said Seth, “that I don’t want to think any of our people is a mole, but that isn’t going to fix anything, and

Miley's op could have been a disaster if you hadn't figured it out and moved in as swiftly as you did. Damon said something about moving you down to Charleston."

"Is Fitz serious about opening another office down there?" Seth nodded. "I'd hate to lose Miley. I like working with her, and Damon's been good for her, but I don't know that I'd fit in down there. I like it here in Chicago. If Fitz says go, I'll go, but it wouldn't be my choice."

"This is all too annoying. What do you say I take you out for a steak dinner somewhere expensive. We can order a great bottle of wine..."

"Call it bourbon, and you've got yourself a deal."

"Samantha's on a book tour. I'll call King and he can meet us."

"Sounds good."

A few moments later they were headed down to the lobby. Once the elevator doors opened, Brock's eyes locked on hers like a missile locking on its target. It was always like this when he saw her. It was as if everything else somehow melted away and only she was left standing. Brock snorted and shook his head. This was all getting a bit much. She had no interest in the lifestyle; besides, getting involved with an employee who was as vanilla as they came was a disaster in the making.

"Alicia, what are you still doing here?" asked Seth.

"Getting the debriefing reports organized and sorted so I can send them to Sully. He needs to have them in the morning. If I wait until tomorrow morning, Chicago time, it'll be afternoon London time. I don't want to hold him up."

"Everybody was supposed to have their monthlies in by noon today so you wouldn't get stuck working late," said Seth. "Who was late?"

Alicia laughed. She had a lovely laugh. A lovely laugh that went with the rest of the package. She wore the frumpiest clothes that Brock was sure hid a spectacularly curvy body and wore her hair in a messy bun that Brock longed to take down. He could feel his groin tightening the way it always did when

he encountered or even thought about Alicia. He'd had many a fantasy about having the curvaceous beauty under his lash or just under him. It took nothing for him to imagine what it would feel like to have her legs hooked over his shoulders as he devoured her pussy before working his way up her gorgeous body and sinking balls deep into her soft, wet heat.

"Who do you think?" she teased Seth.

"King and Royce. They are the worst about paperwork. Go on home, I'll take care of it."

"It's fine, Seth. They have a lot to do, and both were very apologetic. Besides, I won't be much longer. I'll work off the clock."

"That's not an issue; you're exempt, remember? But that doesn't mean people should take advantage of you. Best decision we ever made was creating the Office Manager position for you. By the way, how's Amber working out?" asked Seth.

Alicia lowered her voice, although there was no way anyone in the club could overhear her. A lot of soundproofing and thick walls made sure of that.

"I think we need to talk about her. I know the Doms like her, but I think there may be some issues with her."

Brock knew Seth valued Alicia's opinion. To him, the blonde bombshell they'd hired to be the hostess over on the Club Southside area of the building was nothing to write home about. She was fairly useless, and in his opinion, she wasn't working out. She had a fake smile to go along with all of her other fake parts. Alicia might be right about some of the Doms, but Brock didn't care for her, and neither did some of the more discerning men.

"That problem might take care of itself," Brock observed.

"How so?" asked Seth.

"I don't think Amber thought she'd be a hostess for long," answered Alicia quietly.

The girl had to learn to speak up for herself. It was easy for people to overlook Alicia; but if you paid attention, you discovered how smart, insightful, and kind she was.

“What the hell did she think she would be?” Seth could be clueless when he tried.

“Some rich Dom’s well-kept sub. I think she thought she could sashay in here and snag herself a rich sugar daddy Dom,” answered Brock, “and then wrap him around her finger so she could top from the bottom.”

Seth snorted, “If she wanted a rich sugar daddy, she should have gone to Charleston and gone to work for the Carriage House.”

“Like Miley would let that happen. She can’t stand Amber.”

“She isn’t that bad,” said Alicia.

“Isn’t she?” challenged Brock. “Keep in mind before you answer that on the other side of that door is one of the best lifestyle clubs in the country, and we have an extensive dungeon.”

“I’m not a submissive,” she answered primly.

Brock didn’t believe it, not even for an instant. He’d bet every dime to his name that Alicia was as submissive as they came, and not just sexually. He figured her objection was that she didn’t understand that submissive didn’t mean doormat. It took a strong woman to submit to her man. Hell, Miley was the toughest broad he’d ever known—and he used the term ‘broad’ as a compliment—and she was every inch Damon’s submissive and happy to be so.

He gave Alicia a look that sent every sub in the club running and most of the Doms.

She laughed again. “Okay, so maybe she is that bad, but the Doms really do like her...”

“How about the other subs?” asked Seth.

“Hmm, that’s more of a mixed bag. Some really like her...”

“Those she favors,” said Brock, “and the ones she doesn’t can’t stand her, but most are too afraid of her to speak up. We need to get Miley to give classes on what it really means to be a submissive.”

“If she’s a problem, Alicia, talk to her; but if you don’t think she’s good for the club, we’ll let her go.”

“I’d like to give her a little more time.”

“Keep me informed,” said Seth, heading toward the door. “Come on, big guy, King said he’d get us a table.”

Brock started to follow him, but then turned back. “Alicia, why don’t you come with us? Afterwards, I’ll walk you back and either see you home or help you get your work done.”

“Thanks, Brock, but no. I don’t have much longer, and I have plans.”

“What kind of plans?” he asked, not liking to think she might have a date.

“Really hot ones,” she teased. “You know, like laundry, cleaning, making a grocery list—all those glamorous things. Besides, someone needs to hold down the fort for a bit longer. But you two go ahead. Tell King I said hi and tell him to tell Samantha that I love the new book. I’m one of her ARC readers, you know.”

Her words made sense, but Brock had a sneaky feeling that there was more to Alicia than she let on. He couldn’t say for sure that she was lying, but he was sure there were things she wasn’t saying; things she didn’t want any of them to know. If she read Samantha’s books, she knew a lot about the lifestyle and had to be aware she was submissive.

“So, when does the new person start here at Cerberus?” Brock asked. “You shouldn’t be doing all the work.”

“I don’t mind. I’m kind of picky about who I want.”

“Brock is right. Your new job is more than just a clerical assistant. You’ve taken on training staff and acting as the liaison when the rest of us are out in the field. If you hadn’t

alerted Brock and pinged Miley's cell phone, well, I don't want to think about what might have happened."

Brock nodded. "You facilitate a lot of the interagency support and have shown yourself to be talented in critical research. Sully keeps threatening to steal you, and then Nigel and Royce threaten to kill him, then Fitz has to get involved—it's a big mess."

"Yeah, but we have her, and possession is nine-tenths of the law."

"But if she wanted to go to London," started Brock.

"Oh, I don't. I love it here in Chicago, and I love working with you guys. Go on. I'll be fine."

Reluctantly Brock turned back to head out the door. He'd spent a lot of time talking to Alicia over the past couple of months and felt like he was really beginning to get to know her. He was glad to hear she wasn't interested in London.

He liked talking to her. In fact, lately, he'd spent more time talking to her than playing in the club. He was still available for discipline sessions for those who needed it, but lately there had been no sexual component whatsoever—not even a blow job.

Shaking his head, Brock acknowledged that he'd like to do a whole lot more to and with her, but he didn't think that could ever happen. For now, he was content to do without, but he wasn't sure he could settle for a lifetime of vanilla sex.

Brock followed Seth out onto the dark street, vowing that he'd find out more about Alicia. What he had yet to figure out was, would it be for Cerberus or himself?

CHAPTER 2



ALICIA

Alicia watched as Brock turned away from her and followed Seth out into the dark of the early evening. It seemed Brock always turned away, but who could blame him. He was gorgeous: tall and brawny with dreamy hair and eyes a girl could fall into and never come out. And that voice—the one the other girls called his ‘Dom voice.’ That just made her want to curl up in his lap and stay there forever.

But girls like her didn’t end up in the laps of guys like Brock—not for an evening, much less a lifetime. Besides, she had more baggage than just the extra pounds she carried around. No, men like Brock went after girls like... well, Amber. Maybe not ones as conniving as Amber, but certainly the ones that looked like her.

The dance music was drumming through from the other side of the wall—the Club Southside section of the building. Sometimes Alicia thought it got so loud that it seemed the very walls vibrated. She’d told Seth and Brock a little white lie. All her reports were already finished, collated and sent to Sully in London.

Waiting to be sure Seth and Brock were gone, Alicia walked to the front doors that led into the Cerberus portion of the building and locked them, setting the alarm for her side from behind the reception desk.

Alicia needed to get next door; she’d asked one of the subs to cover the reception desk for the club. Amber was late... again. She slipped through the door between the two parts of the building.

“Thanks, Carla. I appreciate you watching the desk.”

“It’s not a problem, Alicia, but you can’t just keep covering for Amber.”

“I know, but she was my first hire on my own, and I’d like to make sure that there isn’t something I can do to make this work out for all of us.”

“Good luck with that,” said Carla. “Mind a piece of advice?”

Alicia wasn’t a fool. Carla was the head of human resources for a large financial firm in the city.

“I’d love to hear anything you have to say.”

“Well, first, hiring somebody is always a crap shoot, and Amber is the perfect example.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll bet she had a great resume.” Alicia nodded. “Terrific references?” Again, Alicia nodded. “And she gave the perfect answers to all your questions and was so friendly and personable...”

“Exactly. Where did I go wrong, if I did?”

“Some people can present themselves as the absolute perfect candidate and turn out to be the worst employees. It’s all an act. Others can be the absolute worst interview because they’re nervous and turn out to be superstars. It’s a crap shoot. I think you lost with Amber. Finish this before she gets to the end of her probation period and then throw the dice again.” Carla squeezed her arm. “But for god’s sake, don’t blame yourself.”

Alicia released the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “Thanks, Carla. Coming from you, that makes me feel so much better.”

“Glad I could help. If she doesn’t show, let the other subs know. We’ll cover her shift.”

“You’re paid members...”

“And it’s our club, and we want to enjoy it. Amber makes that very difficult. You work too hard. Everyone says so—on both sides of the wall. Why don’t you come and play on our side?”

“Oh, no,” Alicia said, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. “I’m not a submissive or a Domme, and besides nobody needs to see my chubby body squeezed into a corset and thong. Not a sight for the faint of heart.”

Carla shook her head. “You’d better hope none of the Doms hear you talk like that. Besides, there’s nothing a corset likes better than a woman with curves. They take the stuff you don’t like and reshape it into the parts you like best. I’ll bet if we dressed you up and did your hair and makeup, you’d be fighting them off with a stick. I’m serious. If you’re still here when I leave, I’m telling Seth... no, Brock. I think he might be the club’s best disciplinarian.”

Giving her arm another squeeze, Carla headed through the door that led to the inner sanctum of Club Southside: the lounge, the dressing rooms, and the dungeon itself. Walking behind the desk, Alicia found the mess Amber had left. Tamping down her temper, Alicia began to straighten things up again. About half an hour after her start time, Amber breezed in. That was the only way to describe it. She came through the door like the whole world had been waiting for her.

“Hi, Alicia. Sorry I’m late,” drawled Amber.

Alicia didn’t believe for even a second that Amber was sorry. “Amber, this is the fifth time since you started that you haven’t shown up on time for work, and you only started last week.”

“Is it? I didn’t know you were counting.”

“Of course, I am. For one thing, I have to cover when you’re not here, and I have things to do after work...”

“You? What could you possibly have to do that is anywhere near this exciting?”

If only she knew. “It doesn’t matter if it’s exciting. I have things to do, and when you don’t show up *on time*, it takes away from the time I have to do them.”

Amber sniffed. “Well, sometimes the L runs late...” she started as she removed her coat and moved to hang it on the coat rack.

“Then take an earlier train. If I can’t depend on you to be here on time, I’m going to have to look for someone else.”

Amber glanced at her as if she’d grown a second head. “That’s not going to happen,” said Amber with a snort. “I’ve already got several of the Doms looking me over...”

“According to the subs, most of them are wondering how long I’m going to put up with you. I don’t want to let you go. Just be on time, okay?”

Alicia could tell Amber didn’t believe her—either that there were those who didn’t care for her, or that she’d done anything wrong. She was one of those women who men couldn’t help looking at. She was tall, blonde, with perfect hair, perfect teeth, and the perfect size eight wardrobe. The problem was anyone looking closely could see most of all that perfection was fake. Her hair was dyed, her teeth were capped, her smile was fake, and that perfect set of boobs came from implants.

Alicia looked down. She could see what Amber saw—a rather shlumpy woman in a pencil skirt that was at least two sizes too big for her, an ill-fitting sweater and non-descript flats. She had mousy brown hair and a frame that carried a few too many extra pounds. Alicia was aware of the picture she presented—although she often wondered why Brock couldn’t see past it, but even though he was one of Cerberus’ best operatives, he was, after all, just a guy. Alicia had a reason for dressing like this: it was camouflage. No one gave her a second glance, and that was just the way she wanted it.

There was a part of her that desperately wanted to play at Club Southside, but she knew she never would. For one thing, members at Club Southside—for the most part—didn’t play. They lived the lifestyle, and as she’d said to Brock, she wasn’t

a sub. She couldn't afford to be, even though there was a part of her she hid, even from herself, who longed to be.

The Doms were all good-looking, but more than that, they were good to the subs. A Dom, or Domme, didn't get out of line more than once. If the infraction was serious enough, they were tossed out on their ear. If given a second chance, they were watched with an eagle eye and could lose their privileges at any time.

The last thing Alicia needed to do, however, was call attention to herself. The club's rules clearly stated subs were required to wear fet wear anywhere outside the submissives' salon. Once they walked through those doors that led from the building's lobby into the club itself, members were expected to dress appropriately. Fet wear for subs in the dungeon and the lounge. Leathers for Doms or fet wear for Dommes on the dungeon floor, although they could be in street wear in the lounge.

Alicia loved working for Cerberus and loved hanging around the club and all the employees. Okay, maybe not Amber, but she'd come with good references, and they really needed someone to act as a receptionist or hostess for the club.

Gathering her things together, Alicia raced out the door to catch the L. If she got lucky, she could make it to her own little slice of heaven: the Majestic, a burlesque club in the heart of the Chicago Blues neighborhood. Once inside, she could throw away her cares, metamorphosize and unleash her alter ego, Sonata Royale. Alicia ran up the stairs to the elevated platform and barely managed to get onto the train before the doors closed behind her, almost catching the hem of her frumpy skirt.

She moved to the back of the train where no one could sneak up behind her, and she could see everything. She'd almost been caught unawares once and had never let her guard down again. If she was too tired to be vigilant, she didn't go out. It was that simple. Even though she'd had a long day and the confrontation with Amber had been draining, she could feel her soul coming back online. Alicia settled in. Wedging her body into the corner and pulling out her make-up bag from

her hobo purse, she began to transform herself into one of the headliners at the club.

As the L pulled into the station closest to the club, Alicia glanced at her watch and grinned. It would seem luck was with her. She was the last one to step off the train, almost getting her hem caught again. She glanced around. Perusing the crowd and seeing no one familiar or that looked like a threat, she headed to the stairs, trotting down them to the street.

Luckily the Majestic was just across the well-lit street, and one of the bouncers was waiting outside the alley, keeping watch for the entertainers.

“Miss Sonata,” he said, tipping his imaginary cap.

“Hey, Dewey. It’s cold out tonight. You should have on a scarf. I’ll have them bring you out a coffee—you like it with lots of cream and just a smidge of sugar, right?”

“You always remember. Thanks, I’d appreciate that.”

Stopping just long enough to remove her alpaca wool scarf and wrap it around his neck, she opened the employees’ entrance door and headed inside. “Sammy, can you get Dewey a coffee—lots of cream...”

“I know, just a smidge of sugar. I swear, you spoil the bouncers.”

“No. I just make sure they know I appreciate them watching out for us entertainers. Put it on my tab.”

Sammy gave her a little salute and went to do as she asked. She nicked into the dressing room, opening her locker to grab her chic, black wig cut in a Roaring Twenties bob. She pulled on her wig cap and placed the wig on her head, fussing with it until it fit and looked just right. After touching up her makeup to be effective under the stage lights, she shimmied into the red and black lace can-can dress with the red and black detachable feather train.

“Sonata, Bobby wants to know if you’re doing *Fever*?”

“Absolutely. I think I’ve finally perfected my routine,” called Alicia.

“That’s a shame,” said Scarlett Champagne—not her real name. “The men always go nuts when you wear that black leather corset and thong and do *My Heart Belongs to Daddy*.”

Alicia shrugged. She knew it didn’t really make sense that she couldn’t see herself in fet wear at the club but was completely comfortable wearing something similar when she was on stage. All she knew was that when she took on her burlesque role as Sonata Royale, she felt beautiful, confident and unafraid. She lived for those moments. She knew they were a fantasy, but they felt real to her.

“Fortunately for me,” said Alicia, “they don’t get to choose.” She moved in front of the full-length mirror. “Scarlett, can you cinch me up?”

Scarlett came over to help. That was a nice thing about the Majestic. Everyone, for the most part, looked after each other. “I have to say,” she said, pulling on the laces, “as much as I love you in that corset and thong, this new costume is gorgeous!”

Alicia grinned at her in the mirror as Scarlett tied off the lacings in the back of the dress. She reached into the front of the dress to adjust her boobs so they looked their best. Slipping into her heels, she strode onto the stage as soon as the curtains closed. It was funny how just donning her burlesque girl persona influenced everything, even the way she moved—maybe especially the way she moved.

“You ready, honey?” asked Bobby. He called all the girls ‘honey.’

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she replied, shaking her shoulders and her arms all the way to her hands as if to banish the last of her nerves.

“Next up,” said Bobby, “is one of the Majestic’s best. She’s debuting a new number and I have to say the outfit is *va-va-voom*. Let’s give a big round of applause to Sonata Royale doing *Fever*.”

There was a wild round of applause while the live band started the introduction and Alicia struck a pose. She loved it

here—not so much the Majestic or Chicago—but the stage. Here she didn't have to be Alicia Rennault or even Alicia Jennings. Here she could be Sonata Royale. Here she didn't have to be afraid. Here she could remember what it was like to be free. Here she could indulge in her fantasy world.

Alicia let everything slip away as she gave herself over to the music. When she heard the subs talking about subspace, she felt she knew what that was. Even though she'd never played in the club, she hit it every single night she performed. As she finished the lyrics to the provocative song, she blew a kiss to the audience. The routine had gone perfectly, and the bouncers were having trouble controlling the mostly male crowd. It was such an adrenaline rush.

Striking her final mark, the music ended, and the curtain began to fall. She felt as if she wanted the night to never end. She wanted to stay on stage forever.

“Alicia!” called someone from the back of the audience. Someone she couldn't see.

She had long ago schooled herself not to react to her name. No one at The Majestic knew her as anything other than Sonata. No one other than the man from her past whom she'd prayed she would never see again.

“Alicia!” the same voice called again.

She waited until the curtain was completely down, grabbed her feathered train from the stage and rushed into the wings, peeking out to see if she could see who might have been calling to her. It couldn't be him. It just couldn't. She'd taken such care. She was so certain she'd eluded him.

At first, no one she saw as she studied the audience even looked vaguely familiar. Maybe she'd imagined it. Maybe no one had called her name, or perhaps there was another Alicia. After all, it wasn't an uncommon name. Just as she'd begun to convince herself she had imagined hearing someone call her name, she spotted him.

Shit! He's found me! Instantly, Alicia was back in that terrible place she'd last seen him. Back when she'd sworn he'd

never do that to her again. Back in that time when she had been afraid of her own shadow. Back when she had first dreamed of a new life and done what she had to.

Alicia hurried off stage, stuffed everything that would fit into her bag and rushed out the stage door, hurrying down the alley and slamming into something tall and rock solid. She started to fight, and two strong hands encompassed her upper arms, shaking her lightly until she looked up.

Brock. What the hell was he doing here?

CHAPTER 3



BROCK

*B*rock fell in step alongside Seth. “You ever going to tell her how you feel about her?” asked Seth, casually—only Seth rarely did anything without a reason for it.

Best to shut him down. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know good and well who and what I’m talking about. I’ve grown tired of watching you quietly moon over Alicia for months.”

“You’re nuts.”

Seth laughed. “Am I? Then so is everyone else at the Chicago branch of Cerberus. And before you deny it, according to Miley there are any number of subs who have asked for and received discipline from you without providing you with any kind of sexual release. In fact, one of them even said you were very clear on the matter.”

“I don’t know what they’re complaining about. They asked me for a discipline session, and I provided them with one.”

“Let me be clear. They weren’t complaining. They were expressing disappointment. Why don’t you go back and see if you can’t get Alicia to change her mind and come with us? Maybe King and I can help you get things moving in the right direction.”

Brock couldn’t help but roll his eyes and was glad to know it was too dark for Seth to see. “I think this is where I bow out.

You and King playing matchmaker is enough to make me vomit. See you in the morning,” he said, walking away.

“You’re no fun at all,” Seth called after him. “Killjoy.”

Without looking back, Brock waved Seth off and kept walking. Seth wasn’t wrong. He was wildly attracted to Alicia and had been from almost the first time he met her. But she’d made it perfectly clear that she had no interest in the lifestyle. Sometimes he wondered if she had much interest in life. Word around the office and the club was that she worked and went home and that was it. Occasionally she talked about spending an afternoon at a museum or down on Navy Pier, but that was the extent of it.

Maybe if he went back and she was still there, he could ask her for a drink. He’d thought about asking her several times if she wanted to grab a drink and maybe a quick meal in the lounge. The problem was if she didn’t even have a passing interest in the lifestyle, it would shock the hell out of her. Somehow, he couldn’t see her managing to ignore some of what went on even in the lounge. Doms and Dommies might be allowed street clothes, but subs were required to wear fet wear and some of the couples used it as an adjunct area of the dungeon without much difference in what went on.

On more than one occasion he’d wondered what it might be like to have Alicia dressed in a corset and boy shorts, micromini, or thong, either at his feet or curled up in his lap, coming down from the high of subspace. His groin tightened at the thought. It did every single time he allowed himself to think of her as anything other than a colleague.

He entered the building through the Cerberus entrance, using his keycard to bypass the alarm. He was a little surprised to find the offices dark and Alicia not there. He checked the security tapes behind the reception desk and saw that she’d gone through the door into the club. That was odd. Why would she do that? Switching the system, he was able to hear and see what went down next door.

He overheard the conversation and confrontation between Alicia and the new hire, Amber. He’d already learned to avoid

Amber and hearing her speak so condescendingly to Alicia annoyed the hell out of him. Alicia was doing nothing wrong, and in fact, seemed to be handling things in a polite, professional, but firm manner. He didn't want to undermine Alicia, but on the other hand, she didn't need to put up with Amber's bullshit.

Brock watched as she scooped up her coat and left the building. He watched on the security camera as her demeanor changed the instant she stepped outside, and she thought no one could see her. She glanced around as if checking to see if she was being watched or followed. *Good girl*. He wondered about where she might be heading and the change that had come over her.

You never really know about people. In the past, he'd always thought her introspective and a bit standoffish. He didn't blame her. Those who worked for Cerberus were a lot to take. All of the men were Doms and ex-military, and they worked in security and private black ops. To say they reveled in adrenaline, sex, and dominance would be putting it mildly.

Brock couldn't get over the change in her demeanor. She seemed to stand straighter, and her movements were far more confident and purposeful. Sometimes at Cerberus she reminded him of a deer, something to protect; but watching her now, he was reminded more of a female jaguar. Not as sleek as a leopard, but far more powerful. It was as if he was seeing an entirely different woman.

It tweaked his curiosity. He could hear his mother say, 'curiosity killed the cat.' While that might be true, it was also true that 'satisfaction brought it back.' He turned away from the monitors and headed back out the door. Maybe he'd go get that drink with Seth and King after all. Once on the street, he turned to make his way to the bar, but suddenly changed his mind and turned to follow Alicia.

Should he just catch up with her and ask her what she was up to? That seemed rude and absolutely none of his business. It might even piss her off to the point she quit working for Cerberus and if she did that, Seth and King would have his head on a platter. It had taken them forever to find Alicia and

she truly was a gem. It was probably best to leave it alone and go have that drink, but something he didn't want to name compelled him to act differently.

Spinning on his heel he moved in to follow her, and to do so surreptitiously. If she didn't know he'd followed her, she'd have nothing to be pissed about and he'd be able to gather information—information that he had to admit he wanted just for himself. Alicia was becoming something of an enigma to him. And for a guy who made a living figuring out complex paradoxes, she was far too tempting a mystery.

Brock was able to get her back in sight fairly quickly, and noted the change in demeanor he'd noticed when she left the building became more pronounced the more distance she put between herself and her job.

She trotted up the stairs to the raised platform of the L with an almost unbridled joy. It was as if each stair she took lifted her out of her dull little life. Brock sprinted to the other end and was able to make it to the top and use a support pillar to hide his presence while still being able to observe her. By the time she reached the top of the stairs, she was almost gleeful. It was a startling transformation.

He only barely managed to get off the train at the same stop she did. It seemed to him that she'd waited until the last second to depart the train. She stopped and perused the crowd. He was afraid she'd seen him and breathed easier as she made her way back down to street level.

At the foot of the stairs, she stopped again, glanced around, and then made it across the street. From an alley entrance a guy who looked to be a bouncer called out to her, using two fingers in a mock, jaunty little salute.

“Miss Sonata,” he said in greeting.

Sonata? Who the hell was Sonata?

“Hey, Dewey,” she called back. Well, that answered that—sort of. “It's cold out tonight. You should have on a scarf. I'll have them bring you out a coffee—you like it with lots of cream and just a smidge of sugar, right?”

“You always remember. Thanks, I’d appreciate that.”

Dewey was right in that Alicia always did remember details like that, as well as people’s birthdays and anniversaries. She stopped long enough to remove her scarf and wrap it around his neck. It was nothing, just a kind gesture, but it made Brock angry. Who was this guy that he warranted that kind of caring? He realized if it had been a member of Cerberus, it probably wouldn’t have bothered him. His inner voice snorted. Okay, maybe not bothered him as much.

Alicia breezed past Dewey as a couple of other women did the same. The bouncer waved them past with a smile. When a couple of men tried to do the same, Dewey redirected them past the alley and down the street where they turned the corner. Keeping to the shadows, Brock followed. When he crossed the street, he could see a sign over a grand entrance that read, ‘The Majestic.’

He watched as numerous people made their way inside. They were a curious group. Although it was predominantly men, there were a number of women, as well, and everyone was dressed for a nice evening out. Curiosity thoroughly piqued, Brock followed them inside.

“What is this place?” Brock asked in an aggressive tone.

The ticket taker looked askance, but then relaxed and smiled. “The Majestic is the home of Chicago’s best burlesque show.”

“It’s a strip club?” Brock asked, now more shocked than angry.

“Not at all. While burlesque shares a few similarities to exotic dancing, those similarities are only superficial. For one thing, you’re not going to see a lot of nudity and the intent of each club couldn’t be more different. Exotic dancers dance for a living. It’s how they put food on the table and pay their bills. Burlesque dancers for the most part don’t get paid, although here at the Majestic they do. I think most of them put that money back into their costumes and creating new acts. More important than the money, they do it for love of the art.”

Brock wasn't sure he bought the guy's explanation but paid his money for a ticket to enter anyway. He stopped as he entered the doors. He suddenly understood how Alice had felt falling through the rabbit hole into Wonderland. The place was dominated by a center stage surrounded by tables with chairs and some booths. There was a bar at the back with several bartenders busily making drinks.

He stood at the back where he could observe without being seen, listening to everything: conversations between patrons and staff, and different songs played by a live band. Scanning the room, he found the band at the foot of the stage and off to one side. They seemed to switch between a variety of different musical types: jazz, rock, blues and even big band. The performances included bawdy songs, dirty jokes, and risqué dances. The latter were comprised of beautiful women in fabulous costumes who combined true artistry with sensual movements. And the costumes were incredible. Maybe he'd suggest to King that they offer lessons at the club and have a monthly performance.

He watched several performances, but then the curtains opened to reveal a gorgeous woman with curves in all the right spots, amazing tits and hips a man could use to hold her in place as he pounded into her. She was dressed in a red and black lace dress with a black, feathered train that looked like it had come from the *Moulin Rouge*. It took him a moment to realize it was Alicia underneath a black wig in the style of a Roaring Twenties bob and artfully done stage makeup.

If his cock hardened at the sight of Alicia in her frumpy clothes and messy bun, it was nothing compared to the almost immediate hard-on that throbbed against the fly of his jeans. She was stunning, and he'd never wanted to fuck any woman as much as he wanted to fuck her. She had struck a pose and was waiting. There was no trace of nervousness or embarrassment. This was a woman in charge of herself and her audience.

Working at Cerberus, while she was confident in her role, he often thought of her as meek and mild. But standing on the stage, she was the embodiment of female empowerment—a

woman that a man like him wanted to dominate. In that moment, she had reminded him of Miley: an Amazon warrior of the first order. Her clothing at work was ill-fitting, schlumpy and non-descript. It did nothing for what was now revealed as a female form of curves and beauty. She was, in a word, magnificent. Brock had never been so enraptured by a woman. It was weird, and he wasn't quite sure how he felt about it, but he kind of liked it.

“Next up,” said the bandleader and master-of-ceremonies, “is one of the Majestic’s best. She’s debuting a new number and I have to say the outfit is *va-va-va-voom*. Let’s give a big round of applause to Sonata Royale doing *Fever*.”

There was a wild round of applause as the band began to play the introduction of a song Peggy Lee had made famous. Watching her was a bit like watching Mikhail Baryshnikov at the height of his talent. There was grace and power in her movements—a grace and power that came from within. She shimmied across the stage, provocative, sensual, flirtatious, and totally in command of herself, her audience, and the stage. The performers who came before were nothing compared to Alicia.

Striking her final mark, the music ended, and the curtain began to fall as someone from the back of the audience called, “Alicia!”

Did anyone other than himself know her real name? The man hadn't called her by her stage persona's name. He'd called her Alicia. Brock noticed a small tremor of fear ripple through her body. What the hell was that about? Who was this guy, and what did he want with Alicia? More importantly, why was she frightened of him?

“Alicia!” the same voice called again.

Brock needed to get backstage but watched as the beefy bouncers deterred the man who had called to Alicia. Not that he didn't think he could take the guy or the bouncers in a fight, but not wanting to take the time, he spun on his heel and dashed back out the front entrance, sprinting to the alleyway where Dewey was no longer at his post. Brock spotted the

entertainer's entrance and planted himself just outside it, effectively blocking the alley.

Alicia rushed out the stage door a moment later, almost in a panic. She scurried down the alley and slammed into him. Brock unfolded his arms as she knocked herself back. Taking hold of her upper arms, he steadied her and made sure she didn't injure herself. She began to struggle until he shook her upper arms, shaking her lightly until she looked up.

"I think, little girl, you and I need to have a talk," he rumbled.

A glimmer of recognition passed through her face right before she went completely loose and became a dead weight in his hands. She'd fainted.

CHAPTER 4



ALICIA

Slowly Alicia became aware of her surroundings. She vaguely remembered hearing him call her name and knowing she had to get out of there with all due speed. She'd stuffed everything she could into her bag, pulled on her coat and rushed out without changing. Her plan was to sprint to the L and get away. She hadn't counted on slamming into something tall, rock solid and decidedly male. Brock.

He caught her, steadying her as she looked up at him and did the only rational thing she could. She fainted, knowing he would never let her fall.

As recognition began to blow away the cobwebs, she realized she was backstage at the Majestic. In fact, she was in the dressing room surrounded by Scarlett, Dewey, Bobby, and Brock.

"Hey, sweetie. Welcome back. I loosened your laces so you could breathe. Did I lace you in too tight?" said Scarlett.

Alicia laid her hand on Scarlett's arm. "No. I just had a fright and then was a little shocked to find Brock in the alley."

Dewey straightened up. "The only reason he's in here is because he caught you when you fainted. I can make him leave."

Brock snorted. Dewey wouldn't have a prayer against Brock, and Brock knew it. Alicia suspected Dewey knew that as well. It was sweet and typical of Dewey to offer, but she needed to de-escalate this situation.

“Dewey, it’s fine. I’m okay, everybody. I just forgot to eat, and I made Scarlett cinch me tighter than normal.”

Another snort from Brock. She might be able to persuade the others, but he damn well knew that she was lying through her teeth. For one thing she’d ordered lunch for everyone in the office, including herself, and he’d seen her eating it. He also was an experienced Dom and he would have been able to tell if her laces were too tight.

She looked up at his face and watched as a myriad of expressions crossed it—concern, anger, curiosity. They seemed to circulate, cycling through again and again. Surreptitiously, she tried to look around the room to ensure the man who had called her and was the instigator of the nightmare that had become her life wasn’t present.

The only time—only time—she wasn’t looking over her shoulder was when she was on stage. She was able to relax at Cerberus, only because she knew the people who worked there would protect her, but then they’d know her secret. She didn’t want that. It was only at Cerberus and the Majestic that she felt as if maybe, just maybe, she’d be able to reclaim her life and be happy again. Happy? She’d be happy if she managed to get to a place of normalcy and at peace. A life without fear—was that too much to ask for?

Alicia could see the moment Brock took charge. Of course, he would take charge—he was a Dom.

“Bobby, you need to get back to the band and keep the show going. Scarlett, can you get Sonata a glass of water and maybe a little snack?” Bobby and Scarlett scurried away to do his bidding. “Dewey, make sure the bouncers know to keep a sharp eye out...”

“Why?” asked Dewey. “Who are you, and what do you know?”

Dewey was trying to take over; he didn’t have a prayer. Alicia had seen the way other men gave way to Brock’s leadership.

“Brock Wickersham, Cerberus. What I know,” Brock said, lowering his voice, “is some guy out in the audience knows Sonata’s real name. I’m worried he may be some kind of obsessed fan.”

Dewey paled and then nodded. “Sorry. I didn’t recognize you.”

Brock smiled and extended his hand. “No need for you to know. I’m the only one here and I may need you and your team’s assistance. Can I count on you, Dewey?”

Alicia knew that the Cerberus team was respected and admired, not just in Chicago or the United Kingdom, but worldwide. They were known for their tenacity and ability to get the job done.

Dewey took Brock’s hand and shook it. “You bet you can. My guys and I are at your service.”

“Any chance you have security footage that records who comes and goes?”

“We offer our patrons anonymity...”

“We do the same, although we call it confidentiality, but we record when they enter or leave our premises. That’s standard security measures, and what your clients don’t know won’t hurt them.”

Alicia would have bet money Brock wouldn’t be any good at ‘wink-wink-Bob’s your uncle,’ but she’d have been wrong.

“I’ll get you what I can,” Dewey assured him.

“Good man.” Dewey hurried off; Brock crossed his muscular arms across his chest and scowled. “Let’s try again. I think you and I need to have a little talk, but for now, let me assure you, the man who called to you has left the building. I watched him go. Talk to me, Alicia. You can’t possibly think we wouldn’t protect you. Whatever it is, Cerberus can handle it. You’ve seen the debriefing reports. You know what we’re capable of.”

Alicia did know, and a part of her relaxed, but only fractionally before her entire being tensed again. She wanted

to cry but wasn't sure if it was from fear or outrage. She had done nothing to deserve this bullshit and now after starting to find her footing again and create a life, she was going to have to leave—not just the Majestic, not just Chicago, but Cerberus and Brock.

“I'm fine, Brock,” she protested weakly as she tried to swing her legs over the side of the fainting couch they kept in the back. She could feel herself swaying; Brock's arms took hold of hers and steadied her.

“I don't think so, little girl,” he rumbled in a voice she'd heard him use on subs to great effect.

“No, really. I don't want to bother you.”

“It's not a bother.”

“You should finish watching the show.”

“I didn't come for the show, Alicia, and you know it. Since you've convinced your friends you haven't eaten, and I know for a fact you didn't have dinner...”

“You don't know that. I could have had something back here.”

He folded his arms again. She wondered if he had any idea how that made her insides squirm, especially her nether regions. To say she found Brock ridiculously sexy was the understatement of the century. He arched his eyebrow and she gulped.

“Okay, so maybe I didn't.” Alicia knew she needed to give Brock some reason for her behavior that would make sense to him, but allow her to slip back to her apartment, grab her go bag, and leave. “Look, Brock, the guy in the audience is a guy I used to know before I came to Chicago. He saw me do a routine in St. Louis, and now he's a little obsessed. When I found out Cerberus was looking for someone, I applied, got hired, and moved. I thought the problem was solved. I'll give him a call. If it's an issue, I'll let Seth know.”

It wasn't the truth, but it was the best she could think of on the spur of the moment. It was also close enough to the truth

that she figured while Brock and the others might ask a few questions, they'd let it go.

“You’re lying, or at least not telling me the whole truth, but you will before it’s over. As I said, since you didn’t have dinner, I’m going to take you to a nice little diner. They have great food, and it is absolutely one-hundred percent safe. Dewey?”

“Sir?” answered Dewey as he scrambled backstage.

“I’m taking Sonata out of here. We’re going to go have dinner. Cerberus is putting her under our protection. I hope I can rely on you for any assistance we might need from the Majestic.”

“Absolutely. I’m rounding up the video you requested.”

“We won’t need that until morning. I’ll have Seth give you a call and the two of you can coordinate.”

“This isn’t necessary, Brock. I feel fine. I think it would be best...”

“I think it would be best if you let your friends take care of you. Dewey, can you let Bobby know to take Sonata off the schedule until further notice?”

“Brock,” she protested. He turned and leveled his scowl at her, and she held up her hands in defeat. “Okay.”

“Good girl. Everything will be all right.” He turned and extended his hand to her. “Sonata?”

Not knowing what else to do and knowing Brock was capable of fighting his way past anybody and everybody at the Majestic, she placed her hand in his. He led her outside and hailed a cab. Once inside, Brock directed the cabby to Elmo’s. The diner was a Chicago institution. There wasn’t a cabby in the city who didn’t know where it was. In addition, it was said that Elmo enforced his safe conduct zone with lethal efficiency.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Elmo’s,” she said, knowing it was an innocuous and inane thing to say.

He nodded. “It’s a great place to go. It is absolutely safe, and the food is excellent—not fancy, but really good.”

They arrived at Elmo’s. Brock paid the cabby and said, “Can I get you to stay here until we come back out?”

“Sure enough,” answered the cabby.

Brock walked her inside, nodded to the hostess, grabbed a menu, and headed to a booth in the back. He ushered her onto the bench seat and then slid in beside her, handing her the menu.

“Don’t you need to look at it?” she asked.

“Nope. I’m going to have Elmo’s Special, which is just Joe’s Special with a side of thick cut, perfectly cooked bacon.”

Alicia put the menu down. “That meatloaf sounds delicious.” Thinking of her diet, she said, “I’ll just have a salad with dressing on the side.”

Brock turned and looked at her but said nothing.

When the waitress came to the table, she looked at Brock. “Hey, big guy. Want your usual?”

He nodded. “That would be great. Alicia will have the meatloaf.”

“I said salad.”

“I heard you.” He looked at the waitress. “She’ll have the meatloaf.”

The waitress grinned. “Gotcha. I’ll bring you a French press for your coffee.”

When the waitress turned to walk away, Alicia noticed Brock watching her hips and buttocks as she did so. She was irrationally angry and could swear it was tinged with the color of jealousy.

“I thought you Doms believed in focusing on the woman you’re with.”

“You’d better hope I don’t decide to really focus on you.”

“I think maybe you should let me leave,” she said stubbornly.

“I think you should sit there, behave yourself, and eat your meatloaf. It is really good.”

Alicia had decided to refuse what was being offered, when the waitress returned with a French press with coffee, corn muffins, and biscuits. She set them down and headed over to help the next table, where four uniformed cops were sitting.

“That’s not good,” said Brock quietly, unzipping his leather motorcycle jacket and ensuring his gun was available. “If I tell you to get down, you do it. No questions, just move until I tell you something else.” He pulled out his phone and sent a quick text.

“What’s wrong with four cops?”

“They aren’t cops.”

“How do you know?”

“Chicago PD has silver tone buttons and accessories. Those guys are wearing uniforms with brass. Whatever the hell it is that’s going on with you will have to wait until we get back to Cerberus.”

“I’m not going back to Cerberus...”

The four men suddenly kicked back from the table and turned toward another customer who was sitting at the bar. A man beside the customer knocked him to the ground, shielding him with his body.

“Down, Alicia,” Brock commanded as he drew his gun and placed himself between her and the gunmen.

A dishwasher and a man dressed like a fry cook exploded from the kitchen, guns drawn and opening fire on the gunmen. A chaotic volley of gunfire was exchanged between the four fake police officers, the man shielding their target, and the two members of Elmo’s staff. It was fast, efficient, and deadly.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Elmo’s two gunmen went back into the kitchen, and a cleaning crew came out to pick up the bodies.

“I got your food to-go,” said the waitress. “It’s on the house, and Elmo sends his regrets for the inconvenience.”

“No problem,” said Brock as he got to his feet, helped Alicia to hers, and handed her the to-go bag. He reached into his back pocket, removed his wallet, and handed the waitress a fifty-dollar bill.

“Elmo said no charge.”

“Tell him I said thanks. The fifty is for you—your tip.”

The waitress’ smile went from ear to ear. “Thanks, Brock.”

“You’re welcome. Come along, Alicia.”

He walked her back to the waiting cab.

“Did you know something was going to happen?”

Brock shrugged. “I figured something was up as soon as they came in. Can you take us to Club Southside?”

“Sure can,” said the cabby. “You one of them Cerberus boys?”

Brock chuckled. “Guilty as charged.”

“I’d like to go home,” said Alicia.

“And I’d like it if you’d tell me who that guy really is and why he’s after you. I suspect neither of us is going to get what we want. If he knows you were at the Majestic, he most likely knows where you live. One of the secure suites up on the third floor will be much safer until we sort this out.”

Not having a better idea or an answer that would satisfy Brock, Alicia stared out the window of the cab as it sped through the night. Brock was probably right. Cerberus would be safer than her place. She could stay the night, get some sleep, and come up with a better plan. It beat the hell out of just running off into the night, trying to figure out her next move.

CHAPTER 5



BROCK

“Do you have any interest in telling me what’s really going on?” Brock asked, watching her carefully.

She turned away from the window to regard him coolly. “Not particularly,” she said and turned back to stare out into the darkness.

Brock chuckled. She was trying to play it cool, but her body language spoke of tension and fear.

“You know, that might work if you didn’t work for one of the most premier black ops security firms in the world. Obviously, Seth missed something in the background check, but when I tell him that, he’s going to go over everything with a fine-tooth comb. You might as well tell me.”

Alicia twisted in her seat and leaned forward. “I do not want to go to Cerberus. If you’re going to take me there, I’d like you to stop this cab and let me get out.”

The driver looked up into the rearview mirror to silently ask Brock what he wanted him to do.

“Lock the doors and proceed to Cerberus.”

“That is kidnapping, Brock, and you can’t do that. It’s illegal, and I will call the police.”

“With what? I saw your mobile phone lying on the little table beside the fainting couch. I picked it up, by the way, and it’s in my pocket,” he said, pulling her phone from his pocket, taunting her with it.

“You don’t know that it’s mine.”

“The abalone shell case was kind of a giveaway; plus, the contact you listed as ‘work’ is the main number for Cerberus.”

Alicia reached across to try and snatch her phone away. “Give me that.”

Brock held it out of reach. “No way.”

Sitting back, Alicia glared at both Brock and the driver. “Let me out, or I’m going to call the police.”

Brock caught the driver’s eye in the rearview mirror. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t.”

Alicia growled in frustration and annoyance and sat back against the seat with a flounce. He didn’t have the heart to tell her it was kind of cute and incredibly sexy. His groin tightened. He was beginning to have all kinds of erotic fantasies about the woman sitting across the cab from him. He didn’t normally have sexy thoughts about the women he worked with. He’d been able to keep those thoughts at bay where Alicia was concerned until he’d seen her as Sonata Royale.

Sonata Royale was the woman he’d always believed lurked beneath the dowdy and oversized clothes. He’d always known that the woman she showed to the world at large was not the complete picture. Now that she had revealed more of who she was, he wanted to know how the puzzle pieces fit together. More than that, he wanted to know how her brain worked, and if she truly believed she wasn’t a submissive, or if she knew but feared exposing that part of herself to those she worked with.

The driver pulled up to the door, and Brock helped Alicia out. She snatched her arm away from him as he was paying the cabbie. He finished paying the man and retrieved Alicia.

“You cannot keep me here against my wishes,” she snarled as she struggled to break free.

Brock simply continued to hold her upper arm and guided her back into the Cerberus lobby using his security key card to get them in and resetting the alarm before half leading, half

dragging her across the polished marble floors and into the elevator to take her up to the third floor.

“Let’s eat in the conference room, and you can tell me what’s really going on,”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Well, then, it will be a quiet, peaceful dinner.”

“I don’t like meatloaf,” she said with the cutest pout—one that was hard to reconcile with the siren who had taken the stage.

“Bullshit. You and I have had a couple of conversations about meatloaf recipes and how you like to make more than one so you have leftovers for sandwiches, which, by the way, was a great idea.”

“Maybe I was lying to you.”

“Maybe,” he chuckled, “but I doubt it.”

The elevator doors opened up on the third floor, and Brock directed her into the conference room. Alicia took the two containers over to the built-in pantry and put both in the microwaves to reheat. She opened the drawer in the cabinet to pull out real cutlery and add the plastic versions to the slots assigned to them. The team always used real silverware when they brought in food but saved the plastic versions for when they had to be on a stakeout.

She opened the fridge. “Are you on the clock or off?”

He smiled at her. She knew him so well. “You tell me—are you going to settle into the safe room or wait until you think I’m asleep to make your escape?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” she answered honestly.

“Good enough. But for the record, you can try to leave before I think it’s safe for you to do so, but you won’t succeed, and I’ll have one of the Moody Tongue Sliced Nectarine IPAs.”

“Do they really have nectarines in them?”

“That’s what they say,” he said, nodding. “It has an auburn color, and you can catch the faintest hint of golden nectarines in the taste and a whiff of white peaches—at least that’s what they told me at the tasting event I went to.”

“What do you say?” she asked, pulling the meals out of the microwaves.

He shrugged. “I just say it tastes good.”

He watched as she smothered a smile. She wasn’t nearly as angry as she wanted him to think she was, which made sense. Alicia was practical and smart. If she was half as afraid of the man who’d called to her as he thought she was, she knew that staying here was the safest bet. What worried him was that she might be so frightened that she just wanted to bolt.

Setting his plate before him, she said, “That looks really good.”

“I’m willing to swap if you’d like, or we can split them.”

“Is the meatloaf really good?”

“It’s delicious, but I really like Elmo’s special as well. If you want, eat the meatloaf and take a bite of mine to see if you like it.”

Alicia nodded. “That sounds like an excellent plan.” She reached out and took a bite of the delicious concoction, putting it in her mouth and sighing. “Oh, that is good. Can I change my mind and give you half of mine for half of yours?”

“You can do anything you want, baby girl.” Brock realized what he’d said the instant it left his mouth. Too late. “I’m sorry. That was inappropriate.”

She shook her head. “No need. I know you. I know who you are.”

“Which is more than I can say about you. Want to tell me about Sonata Royale, who that guy was, and why you were so afraid of him?”

“I told you...”

“I know, he’s an ex-boyfriend who won’t take a hint. I might buy that explanation as being part of it, but it doesn’t explain the fear I saw, nor does it explain Sonata.”

“Sonata is... well, she’s my alter ego.” Alicia sat back and relaxed as she took a bite of the meatloaf. “Hmm. That is good.”

“You were telling me about Sonata? By the way, you have an amazing voice.”

“Thanks. I don’t really talk about the burlesque thing. I try to keep that life far away from my real life.”

“Alicia, I think you know me and Cerberus, and you know we’ll get to the bottom of this...”

“What if I tell you it’s none of your business, and quit?”

Brock shook his head. “You are far too professional to leave us in the lurch, and you being frightened of someone makes it my, or at least Cerberus’, business.”

“Can we talk about something else? Anything else? I’m tired, and I’m getting a headache.”

“Okay. Tell me about how you got interested in burlesque—not about Sonata if you don’t want to, but just in general.”

“I was looking for a way to get some exercise—maybe lose a little weight and get in shape—and I’m not very graceful or coordinated...”

“That’s not what it looked like when you were on that stage. You had every guy in the room mesmerized. Me included, which is why I missed the guy who hollered at you.” He lifted his hand to ward off her objection. “I’m not talking about that, just saying you were so incredible up on the stage that I was totally focused on you.”

She blushed. “Thanks. Keep in mind you are looking at years of practice. I just kind of fell in love with it. I liked the music, the costumes, and how everybody seems to leave their real lives at the door.”

“I don’t know what you used to look like, but I have to say if that costume was any indication, you accomplished your

goals. You looked amazing. When the feather train came off, a lot of eyes popped out of guys' heads, mine included. The subs at the club have got nothing on you."

"Thanks, but the vamp you saw on stage is a character named Sonata, and she has very little to do with me."

"In other words, you're done talking."

Alicia grinned at him. "Pretty much."

They finished their dinner and cleaned up, heading out of the conference rooms and toward the secure suites. "You've seen both suites. Do you have a preference?"

"I've always liked the one with the round window."

Brock grinned. "That's fine. I like that one, too. I'm a sucker for an odd-shaped window. I'm not sure if you know, but the bath is built to be a panic room. If the alarm goes off, or one of us tells you to get in there, or even if something spooks you, you get in there, lock the door, and hit the red button. It'll alert the team and the cops that there's trouble."

Alicia waited for Brock to open the door and flip on the light. "This is gorgeous."

She was right. The place was set up for VIP clients of Cerberus. It was enormous with a king-sized bed and a bath containing a huge tub and large separate shower. There was a walk-in closet, which housed all kinds of toys and implements as well as sweatsuits and sleepwear in several sizes.

The round window was enormous, with an inviting window seat that looked out over Lake Michigan. There was also a large St. Andrew's cross constructed within a wheel. If someone wanted to, it could be rolled in front of the window and secured in place. It was difficult not to wonder what Alicia might look like strapped to the cross waiting for his discipline or pleasure. One thing was for sure: if she was his sub, she'd be facing at the very least a trip over his knee.

The window on the other side of the massive support structure of the building was equally sized, but not round and not set up for play. It had a cozy, reading nook kind of feel with a recliner and floor lamp. There was a basket set beside it

with a pillow and a throw. Perfect, in his opinion, for aftercare or just a little bit of snuggling.

“I think you know the windows are bullet and tornado proof. Even if someone wanted to climb up the side or drop down from the roof, they couldn’t get in.” He chuckled. “King always likes to say that we aren’t sure if even a missile could shatter them.”

“I’m going to say this again: none of this is necessary. I just wasn’t expecting my ex, and we didn’t part amicably...”

Brock laid his finger on her lips—the same lips he’d been wanting to crush with his own for the longest time and way before this evening.

“Don’t, Alicia. I know you’re not telling me everything. There’s a whole lot more to this story than you’re willing to say.” The softness in her body and eyes fled like a deer bounding away to safety. Why didn’t she understand that he and Cerberus were safety?

“Brock, I...”

“I know, baby girl. I can give you some time to come round to knowing you need to tell me what’s going on. But I can’t wait forever. You should know, though, that you’re a terrible liar, so it’s best not to try.”

Brock left her standing there and headed down to a small set of sleeping quarters close to the elevator. Sometimes if one of the operatives needed a place to stay, they’d use one of the other rooms—either one of the secure suites on this floor or one of the playrooms on the second. But Brock wanted to be close to the elevator as a first or last—depending on your point of view—line of defense. If someone was coming off that elevator, Brock meant to stop them. Conversely, if Alicia tried to leave, he would be in a better position to stop her.

He double-checked the security system and locked down the elevator. Going through the non-descript door, which looked more like a janitor’s closet than a place to sleep, he debated about how undressed he should get. She’d indicated she was staying, but he wasn’t sure he believed her.

Toeing off his boots, Brock opened the gun safe in the wall and withdrew a SIG Sauer P226 E2, checking to ensure it was loaded and a bullet was in the chamber. He sent a quick message to King, giving him a brief rundown of the night's events. Setting the gun on the side table, Brock shucked off his jeans and sweater, opting to get down to his boxer briefs before stretching out on the oversized twin bed.



Brock wasn't sure how long he was asleep, but when the alarm went off, he came awake immediately, reaching for his loaded SIG. He figured it was most likely Alicia, but he wasn't taking any chances.

Throwing open the door, he burst into the hallway in his skivvies just as Alicia was using her security code to unlock the elevator. He wrapped his muscular arm around her waist and hauled her in close, hoping she wouldn't notice or at least comment on the morning wood he was displaying. He normally woke with wood, but being this near Alicia made his cock hungry. Again, he wished they were a couple, and she was his submissive. Nothing like turning her backside a pretty shade of pink before shoving his cock inside her and making her scream his name as she orgasmed.

"Put me down," she said with controlled anger. He'd never thought of her as having a temper, but then he'd never thought of her as Sonata Royale.

"I don't think so. Give me a minute to get dressed and we'll go down for breakfast."

"The chef isn't on duty. He doesn't come in until eleven."

"No worries. I'm not a bad cook and I know you aren't, either. I'm willing to bet we can find something to eat."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not much." He placed her directly opposite the janitor-closet sleeping quarters.

“I didn’t know that was in there. I always thought it was like a broom closet or maybe an armory, but not some place to sleep.”

“Well, now you know. You stay.” He backed into the room and got dressed without ever closing the door. “All right, baby girl, how about you and I go downstairs and get some breakfast?”

CHAPTER 6



ALICIA

Alicia had a restless night, due mostly to highly erotic dreams about Brock. When he'd called her baby girl in that deep, melodious voice, she'd thought she was going to melt into a gooey puddle. Her nipples had come to attention and her pussy had softened and ripened for him in a way she'd never known. She was fairly sure she'd only barely resisted the instinct and inclination to sink to her knees and offer him her submission—not that he wanted it, but god, he was dreamy. If a woman could have a wet dream, he was hers.

Her plan had been to slip away from Cerberus and then out of Chicago, but she'd overslept. She was fairly sure that she had because for the first time in a long time, she'd felt safe. She knew down to the marrow of her bones that here inside these walls or within Brock's strong embrace, she would be safe.

Last night he'd semi-threatened that she wouldn't like it if he focused on her. He couldn't have been more wrong. She would have given her eye teeth to have Brock Wickersham focus on her, and not necessarily in a private way. After he'd left her, she'd wandered over to the St. Andrew's cross, touching it reverently. She wondered what it might be like to be bound naked to it, feeling Brock's flogger lay marks and weals across her major muscle groups.

In her dreams there were so many things he would do to her, including having her sit at his feet after turning her backside a bright shade of pink. He was the club's main disciplinarian and Alicia had never known a woman who

didn't want to make that connection permanent. More than one sub had tried to get him to collar her or at least be in an exclusive relationship, but they had all failed.

Brock was what was known as a 'Daddy Dom,' and if he'd called her 'kitten' or 'princess' it wouldn't have had near the effect as having him call her 'baby girl.' It had all but made her toes curl, and when she'd glanced at the big, overstuffed recliner in the room, she'd wanted nothing more than to be wrapped in a blanket, cuddled up in his lap. But that was meant for other girls. For one thing, she was too big, and for another, she had way too much baggage and some of that baggage was dangerous, if not downright lethal.

She shouldn't have been surprised to find Kingston Coltraine, the head of Cerberus in Chicago, already in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Alicia," he said, dipping what appeared to be thick-cut brioche bread in an egg mixture.

"I take it we're having French toast?" asked Brock.

"Alicia likes it, and considering she doesn't really want to be here, I figured it was the least I could do. Brock, why don't you look after the bacon, and Alicia, see what kind of accompaniments you can find—stuff like juice, butter, syrup, berries."

Both Brock and King looked at home in the kitchen. In addition to the bacon, Brock cut off slices of Iberico ham, adding it to a pan to warm and sear it. The smells in the kitchen made her belly rumble with hunger.

"You do know the chef is going to have your head for using the Iberico again, don't you?" laughed King.

"I don't think he'll be nearly as mad as when Miley and I made ham and cheese sandwiches."

"You made ham and cheese sandwiches with Iberico ham?" said Alicia in an astonished voice. "That's sacrilegious."

"No it isn't, it's delicious," said Brock, with a devilish grin.

Why was it so many people thought him dour or angry looking? Alicia didn't think he was at all. He had a gorgeous symmetrical face and when he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkled, and he had the cutest dimples. They seemed childish and out of place on the hard planes of his masculine face.

She couldn't decide if she was relieved or sad that he hadn't called her 'baby girl' again. She knew he didn't think about her like that, but it had been lovely to fantasize. Then again, she had felt his hard length against her back when he'd pulled her up next to him. In response to his pulsing cock, her pussy had responded by getting wet, warm, and soft. He'd have had no trouble bending her over the conference room table and pounding away in her.

Sitting down to breakfast, she could almost pretend like this was just a regular day and they were having a breakfast meeting. It had happened before, but usually they called in the chef to prepare their meal.

"Want to tell us about your psycho ex-boyfriend stalker?" asked King without preliminaries.

Feeling as though she'd been lured in and taken completely by surprise, Alicia blurted out, "Did Brock tell you that? It simply isn't true. We broke up, and he didn't take it well."

"Who didn't take it well?" asked Brock, taking a bite of the French toast. "This is amazing, King, what did you do differently?"

"I added a little bourbon to the egg mixture."

"Damn, that's good. Alicia?"

"What?" she asked, suddenly understanding how a rabbit must feel when two lethal predators were circling.

"Your psycho-stalker," answered King. "What's his name? It'll be easier to track him down and put the fear of God into him if we know his name."

"You don't need to know his name," she stammered.

“Technically,” drawled Brock, “she is correct. I can identify the creep. We can start hunting him down and when we find him, we can beat the shit out of him and then ask him his name.”

King nodded. “That’s not a half-bad plan.”

“That is not a good plan by any stretch of the imagination,” protested Alicia. “Seth and Fitzwallace would never approve.”

Both men laughed. “Baby girl,” started Brock, drawing an intrigued look from King, “if you really believe that, you haven’t been paying attention.”

“Brock’s right. You’re a member of the Cerberus team—the Cerberus family, if you will—and we don’t let psycho ex-boyfriends frighten or hurt a member of our team. This bastard is going down, and he’s going down before he gets a chance to hurt you.”

“I didn’t expect to see him last night. It spooked me, but I’m fine now. I can deal with him.”

“Who?” asked Brock.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “I am not going to be so easily tricked into giving you his name. I’ve got it covered.”

“Do you believe her?” asked King.

“Nope,” came the answer from Brock.

“Neither do I. She’s not a particularly good liar, is she?”

Alicia slammed her hand down on the table. “Do not talk about me like I’m not in the room. Frankly, you have no idea how good a liar I am.”

“Now, that, I believe,” said King.

“Hey,” said Brock. “Don’t be talking to her like that.”

King sat back, looking surprised. “So that’s how it is, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Then you get her on board,” he said before turning to Alicia. “You know us better than most people. Being family buys you a certain leeway, but as of now and until Brock says otherwise, you are under Cerberus’ protection. We take care of our own. Brock will take lead, and you answer to him.”

Alicia wasn’t sure whether she wanted to feel immense relief or intense anger. They couldn’t just come in and take over her life. And what was that little byplay between King and Brock when Brock had called her ‘baby girl’?

“Now that I think about it,” said King, “we do need the psycho ex’s name for a restraining order.”

“I am not giving it to you. Besides...” she said quickly trying to de-escalate the situation and deflect their attention from the lack of a name. She sure as hell wasn’t going to supply his real one. “...I already have one.”

“One what?” said Brock, leaning back in his chair, crossing his massive arms over his brawny chest, and arching his eyebrow at her.

She thanked whatever god ruled over these things that he hadn’t called her ‘baby girl’ again. She was pretty sure there would have been nothing left of her but goo. She had to think quickly. What was he asking her?

Better to go with the truth. “I’m sorry. I must be more tired than I thought. What were we talking about?”

“You said you already had one when King mentioned a restraining order... damn!” Brock swore as King laughed.

“Round one to Alicia.” He turned to her. “You’d completely forgotten about lying about that, but now he’s told you what it was you lied about. Good one. Brock is tough. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone who could get him to give up anything, and he’s been tortured by experts. Well done, Alicia.”

“Thanks, I think?”

“I wouldn’t get too used to it. He’s tough to trip up.”

“If I agree to this...” Both men laughed. “*If* I agree to this, I want to be able to continue to work. I want a nice, normal routine. Besides, the last time I took a three-day weekend, I came back to the disaster you guys had made of my desk. And I want to go get some of my things from my apartment.”

“No can do—at least about going to your place. There’s no way you leave this building without an armed escort and only then if we deem it’s safe. King, I’m going to have Alicia make up a list and then I’ll send over a couple of the boys.”

King’s demeanor changed and he suddenly seemed to take more of an interest. “Do you want to take her to one of the safehouses?”

“No, she’s right about the disaster we made of her desk; besides, I think giving her something to do will be beneficial.”

“So, you want her to stay here?”

“Again,” Alicia said, raising her hand, “I’m right here in the room. Don’t you think that where I stay is my decision?”

“No,” they said in unison. King typed out a text.

“I think she might be better off at my place. That way we’re not here twenty-four/seven. Seth installed that uber high security system, and we could rotate out a couple of people if it looks like we need it.” He looked at Alicia, sliding a pen and paper to her. “You need to put together a list of what you want from your place.”

“What if I refuse to?” she asked, mimicking his folded arms across his chest.

“I don’t think I ever realized how much like Samantha she is,” said King, his eyes growing warm with thoughts of his wife.

“You have no idea. As for you, I’m telling you to put together a list, or you’ll end up hanging out at my place in one of my shirts and not being able to come to work.”

“You’re a jackass, you know that?”

King watched them verbally spar, clearly enjoying himself, then looked down—alarm flashing across his face.

“What is it?” asked Brock.

“We need to move her out of here, and that additional security team at your place starts now.”

“What about my things?”

“Make a list. We’ll send someone out to buy you what you need.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“I sent a couple of our guys to your place. They arrived right behind the fire department.”

“The fire department?” she asked.

King nodded. “It appears that someone ransacked your place and when they couldn’t find what they were looking for, they set it on fire. I’m afraid they think it’s a complete loss.”

Alicia felt as though she was going to vomit. Brock was immediately at her side, and she clutched at his hand.

“Take deep, slow breaths, baby girl, and don’t worry. King is right. You’re family, and this bastard just fucked with the wrong family.”

“I’m going to have two more of our guys head to your place. The two I sent to Alicia’s will come back and report to Seth, and you and I are going to take her to your place.”

Brock nodded. “Come on, Alicia, we’ll go down to the secure parking area and get you to my place.”

“I thought Cerberus would be more secure.”

“Not really,” explained Brock. “He’ll look for you here, and there are people going in and out of the building all day. My place has the same kind of glass.”

She looked up at him, feeling tears well in her eyes. “Does it have a leather recliner and a soft blanket?”

He kissed her forehead. “Not only does it have that, but there’s a fireplace, and the recliner rocks. You’ll be fine.” He turned to King. “We need to nail this motherfucker.”

“Agreed. Operation Protect Alicia is underway.”

CHAPTER 7



BROCK

“Operation Protect Alicia?” she asked. “Is that the best you can do? Can’t it have a cooler name? If for no other reason than I’d like to keep this as quiet as possible. I know some people are going to have to know, but I don’t need everyone knowing my business.”

Again, with the pouty mouth. The images that flashed before his eyes as to what he’d really like to have that mouth doing had nothing to do with pouting. He could practically feel his cock sliding in and out of her mouth as he pressed deep, trying to hit that velvety spot at the back of her throat before pumping his cum into her belly.

“How about Operation Masquerade or Operation Cabaret?” Brock asked, trying to sound innocent.

Alicia shot him a glance that fulfilled all of the requirements for looks that could kill. King looked between the two of them and shook his head.

“Suddenly I feel out of my depth. You two name it whatever you like. I’m going up to my office and getting the team in place. I’m going to assume you want Royce in charge of the roving team and Seth on the tech angle.”

Brock nodded. “Right. There’s plenty of parking inside the fenced yard off the alley in the back. The front is pretty private with the wall, and the iron gate out there is pretty substantial and locked. They can stage out of the back—there’s a separate guest house out there. Royce knows the basic layout.”

“Sounds good. We’ll try to keep it as low-key as possible,” King said as he pushed back from the table. “As for you, Alicia, keep in mind that you are now under Cerberus’ protection. That means following orders and telling us what we need to know. Whoever this guy is? He isn’t going to get to you. And if that means putting him down and hiding the body, we can do that.”

Brock had to smile at Alicia’s face when she realized King wasn’t joking. She watched him leave and then turned to stare at Brock incredulously. “Tell me he’s not serious about that last part.”

“I would, but unlike someone else in the room, I don’t lie to or mislead friends.”

“I’m the client. Aren’t I supposed to tell you what’s acceptable? By the way, I can’t afford Cerberus.”

“First off, you’re family, and family never gets charged. Second, no, you are not in charge; I am. You need to get that through your pretty little head right now. Shit. Hmmm; I’m not sure that sounded quite how I meant it.”

“I know what you meant, and I know I should be grateful, but you don’t know what you’re up against, and I don’t want anyone hurt.”

“I don’t know because you won’t tell me.” He took her hands in his, rubbing his thumbs along the backs of them.

“I can’t,” she said, pulling away. “I need to go to work. I have a lot to do.”

“So do I,” he said nodding, accepting that she wasn’t ready to talk. They put the dishes in the sink and headed back to the lobby of Cerberus. “You can move around the Cerberus side of the building, but don’t go over to the club side or leave the building. I’m headed upstairs.”

“Brock,” she called as he headed to the elevator. He stopped to look at her and waited. She shook her head. “Nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Me, too. You do know we’re the best at what we do, and we will find out—one way or another.”

“I know. I just think it would be best for everyone if I got my things together and left.”

“Well, given that whoever it is torched your place and had no compunction about burning down an entire apartment building, I’d say the only one who it would be best for is your psycho ex, but hey, what do I know?”

He pushed the button for the third floor and saw the hurt expression that registered in her eyes, wishing he could bite back the words he’d said to put it there. But damn it, she was choosing to withhold vital information. And by withholding it, Alicia was making this far more difficult than it needed to be. Brock understood that whatever and whoever had scared her so badly was causing her to make bad decisions, but didn’t she know she could trust the people she worked with? That they would have her back and do whatever it took to keep her safe?

Seth called to him. “What’s up with Alicia? King is grumpy, muttering something about brats and being generally uncommunicative. Is Samantha on another book tour?”

“I’m not sure.” King was often in a bad mood when separated from his wife. “But he’s probably grumbling about Alicia.”

“I thought when you didn’t join us at the bar that maybe you’d finally worked up the courage to ask her out, and the two of you had finally gotten together.”

“You make it sound like a done deal...”

“Oh my god, you two have been mooning over and then avoiding each other since she came to work here.”

“We have not.”

Seth chuckled. “Okay, but just so you know, there’s a big enough betting pool going on that Baker Street is in on it, and we’re talking serious money.”

Brock sat down, leaned back in the chair, and groaned. “Oh god, just tell me Fitzwallace isn’t involved.”

“Oh, it’s worse than that. Rhiannon and Miley are both in.”

Just what he needed, Cerberus' two best snipers and arguably two of the most notorious subs in the organization in on a betting pool where he was one of the targets.

“Seriously, what’s going on?”

Brock filled him in, ending with, “The worst thing is, I’m sure she knows who it is.”

“That may or may not be the worst thing. The worst thing could be that she isn’t telling us because she doesn’t want anyone to get hurt. However, the most interesting thing is you saying Alicia does burlesque. Did you actually see her perform? Was she any good? Did she have a great costume? Did it show off the figure we think is there?”

Sometimes Seth could revert to a teenage boy, but Brock knew it was only an illusion. It was something he did to deflect people from realizing just how smart he was and how much he cared. Had it been anyone else asking those questions, Brock might have taken offense, but obviously Seth had figured out that Brock had feelings for Alicia.

“Yes, I saw her perform. I had to look twice to recognize it was her. Everything about her had changed. Yes, the costume was gorgeous. She was classy and sensual. She made the music come alive with her dancing and singing. She did a rendition of *Fever* that was mind-blowing. But it was more than that; it was as if the Alicia we know is a pale imitation of the woman she truly is. She owned that stage... and she knew it.”

“Knowing his name and who he is or was to her would help. You said she seemed frightened?”

“More than that. She was panicky and bolted from backstage without a lot of her things.”

“Hmm,” Seth said. “I can’t imagine what it must take to do that to Alicia. She’s usually pretty unflappable. I don’t guess I have to tell you, but the more we know, the better we can protect her. And you need to get a handle on your feelings.”

“I haven’t done anything inappropriate...”

“Maybe not, but I’ll bet you’ve had plenty of inappropriate thoughts where she’s concerned, and my best guess is she feels the same.”

“Do you really think so?”

Seth nodded. “I know she’s talked to Camille a couple of times. Royce says she’s very closed-mouth about it. I just think sometimes the women you have to work the hardest for are the ones that are most worth having.”

Brock thought about it for a moment. “I think you could be right.”

He spent the rest of the day focusing on the security footage from both the club and the Majestic. He thought he spotted the same body type as the guy who’d scared Alicia, but he couldn’t be sure. He took screen captures to give to Seth. Glancing at his watch, he realized they should probably head out.

He spotted Camille, Royce’s wife, handing several bundles to Alicia as he stepped out of the elevator.

“I got you some basic pieces. Take a look at them and let me know the ones you want to keep and then we can build from there.”

Alicia was holding up a sweater. “This isn’t my normal size.”

“Not the one you usually wear, but the secret is out on the great figure you’ve been hiding from everyone.”

Again with the lethal eyes: Alicia was shooting daggers at him with hers.

Camille caught the silent exchange. “He’s a guy and a Dom. They’re like that, and it is not meant in a bad way. But let me know what works and what doesn’t, and if you really don’t like what I picked, I’ll take it all back and buy the sizes you tell me to.”

Alicia shook her head. “No, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Brock crossed the lobby and joined them. “Let me take those packages. Are you ready to leave?”

“I thought you guys would all go have a drink and maybe dinner. You tend to do that.”

“You were always welcome to join us.”

Alicia said nothing, retrieved her purse and stood up. “I’m ready to leave. I really don’t want to impose. I can stay upstairs or go to a hotel.”

“We’ve got my place all set up. If you wanted different accommodations, you should have said something earlier. If it’s me you object to, I can ask Seth to take over.”

“No, that isn’t it at all. I just hate feeling like everyone is being inconvenienced by me. It’s really nothing...”

“Then tell me his name,” offered Brock. Alicia shook her head and waited. “All right then, let’s head down to my Range Rover and head home. The boys are already there and have swept the entire house.”

He escorted her down the back stairs where one of the team had swept not only the parking lot but Brock’s vehicle for explosives.

“You’re good to go,” said the tech.

“Thanks,” he said, opening the door for Alicia. “In you go. Don’t forget to buckle your seat belt...”

“I’m not a child, Brock.”

“No, you’re not, but I’ve seen you drive away from the office without your seat belt in place.”

She locked the restraint in place. “Why doesn’t it surprise me you like to see a woman belted in?”

He placed the packages in the back of the Range Rover and slid into the driver’s seat, buckling his belt. “Baby girl, the day I put you in restraints will be the day you ask me to and not before. I can’t believe that after all this time you haven’t figured out that everything that goes on at the club is consensual.”

“It’s hard for me to believe any woman wants to have her ass beat.”

Brock chuckled. “You’d be surprised. For some it’s a turn-on and allows them to let go of their inhibitions and indulge themselves. For others, it gives them a release from the pressures of their daily lives and helps them find peace, and for others it gives them the structure and discipline they feel they need for a myriad of reasons.”

“What do you get out of it?”

“Among other things, the feeling that I’m helping someone I care about. I may not be in love with any of the subs I discipline, but I do care for them. Someday I hope to find the right partner who needs that release as much as I need to give it to her. Have you ever thought of playing at the club?”

She nodded. “To be honest, I have. It’s funny to me that people go into the club tense and unhappy, and most seem to leave in a much better frame of mind.”

“Anytime you’d like a tour, let me know. Even if the club is closed, I have keys, and I’d be happy to show you around.”

Alicia looked at him, searching his face, but for what, he wasn’t sure. He had the distinct feeling that things were changing between them, and the biggest barrier wasn’t the lifestyle but whatever was going on in her life. Brock knew for him to solve the mystery of Alicia, he’d need to solve the puzzle of who and what she really was.

CHAPTER 8



BROCK

*B*rock turned into the alley and followed it up to his house, opening the door to the detached garage with the remote. As they pulled in, Royce walked over to greet them.

“The great thing about having Royce in charge of the team is that it allows me to focus solely on protecting you, and he lives next door.” As the garage door closed, Royce opened her door.

“I understand Camille went shopping for you,” he said with a grin.

Alicia shook her head and returned his smile. “You’re responsible for the smaller sizes.”

“Guilty as charged. You don’t need to hide. We’ll find this guy and put a stop to whatever is going on. Come on, baby girl,” Brock said as he grabbed her packages and offered her his hand.

“You keep calling me that,” she said as he led her across the pavers through the backyard and up the steps into the kitchen of his greystone.

“Is that a problem? It slipped out, and you didn’t object. I can stop doing it if it bothers you.”

“On the contrary, I kind of like it,” she said with a smile. “Your home is gorgeous.”

“Thank you. I bought it sight unseen, and it was kind of a wreck, which I did know. I worked on opening the space up,

making the rooms larger and giving them more light. Just like at Cerberus, all three and a half baths are panic rooms.”

“Who bought here first, you or Royce?”

“Royce. Camille entered the picture and re-did the whole thing. When I went to their holiday party, I fell in love with what she’d done. When this place came on the market, they went over and took a look and sent me video and pictures. When I say, ‘kind of a wreck,’ I mean an incredible wreck, but I could see the potential. So, I bought it, renovated the guest house at the back and went to work on this place. After all the construction was done, I had an interior designer come in and do her thing.”

Brock grilled a piece of salmon while Alicia made a salad and got out some artisan bread and made garlic toast. After eating their meal, they headed into the front room where Brock turned on the TV, settling in for the evening.

As he watched the hockey game he’d recorded over the weekend, he kept an eye on Alicia who seemed to become more fidgety and unsettled as the evening wore on. She wandered around—touching things, picking them up and setting them back down.

“What’s bothering you, Alicia?”

“Nothing really. I’m just not used to sitting around, but I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Brock shook his head, turned off the television, and said, “You need to learn to ask for what you want. I may not say yes, but I might, or I might have a compromise. How often do you perform at the Majestic?”

“Five or six nights a week. I usually take Sundays off.”

“Do you need that much extra money? I can talk to Seth about a raise...”

She laughed. He realized it wasn’t something she did very often. “You have no idea how much Cerberus pays me. I am more than well-compensated. Seth and I have weird arguments over it. He thinks he doesn’t pay me enough, and I think he pays me way too much. No, I do burlesque because like you

said about the subs, it takes me out of my regular life. When I'm on stage, I'm not just Alicia Jennings, I become Sonata Royale, and for a few hours, I can live the life and be the person I want to be. I don't suppose we could go to the Majestic, could we?"

"Not a chance, but I think I might have something that's close. Why don't you go change into something Camille got for you—something Sonata would wear when not on stage."

One thing he was learning about Alicia: when she felt safe, she was up for an adventure and was quick to change. When she came down the stairs, Brock felt as if all of the air had gone out of the room. If he'd thought she was sexy in her frumpy clothes or those of her burlesque costume, he wasn't at all prepared for the bohemian chic outfit she'd created in no time at all. The slouchy cardigan was there, but in a color that complemented her complexion, eyes, and hair. It was teamed with a pair of jeans with holes and shredded places and a skimpy tank top that made the most of Alicia's figure.

"Is it too much?" she asked, concerned.

He shook his head. "No, baby girl. I wouldn't change a thing. I let Royce know we were going out. A couple of our guys will be there, so it's safe."

It didn't take long before they were at a karaoke bar on the fringes of the city. The Uptown Loop was a place where the gang from Cerberus had, on more than one occasion, brought the house down with their antics and choice of songs.

Alicia sat forward. "I've never done karaoke."

"From what I saw last night, you'll be a knockout."

They went in and found a booth that had a solid back and gave Brock a good view of the entire place. He made note of where their people were and put on the discreet comm unit one of the team had passed to him surreptitiously. They registered Sonata in the queue and waited for her turn.

"Next up, we have Sonata. If this is the same Sonata I've seen perform over at the burlesque bar, we are all in for a real treat. Come on up, Sonata."

With a little push Alicia walked toward the stage—with each step he watched as Alicia fell away and Sonata emerged—much like a butterfly from a cocoon. She had preselected her song and when she took up the mic, she pulled an antique chair on stage, turned the back to the audience and sat down straddling it and facing them. The familiar notes of a popular song from the movie *Dirty Dancing* started. It was Patrick Swayze’s *She’s Like the Wind*—only she changed the pronoun to male.

Brock was sure his heart stopped beating, or maybe it only began to beat in sync with hers. Everything seemed to fall away, and it felt as though she was singing just to him, and they were the only people in the room. When the music ended, there was a moment of silence before the place burst into wild applause. He saw two of the team move closer, but nothing happened, other than Alicia leaving the stage smiling and waving to people.

“Thank you,” she said, sitting down.

“No. Thank you. You were amazing.”

“That’s one of my favorite songs. It’s a love song, and yet there is a loneliness there I can identify with.”

“You don’t have to be lonely, baby girl. Talk to me.”

She shook her head and drained her IPA. She seemed a little light-headed. Not outright drunk, but a little buzzed. “No. I’m tired; I’d like to go home, but then I remember I don’t have a home anymore.”

He led her through the crowd. The confident woman who had left the stage now sought shelter under his arm, her arms wrapped around him and allowing him to fend off would-be fans.

It was really the first time she’d said anything about the studio apartment that her psycho ex, if that’s what he truly was—Brock was beginning to doubt that—had destroyed. She didn’t seem overly attached to it, and he made a mental note to have Seth try to trace how long she’d been there.

He helped her into the Range Rover, smiling as she put on the seat belt without being reminded.

“About you not having a home. You’re right that psycho destroyed it, but he can’t destroy mine. So, I do have a home, and you will always be welcome there,” he said softly.

“Will I?” she asked. “I wonder...”

“About what?”

“About whether when this is over—however that happens—if you’ll still feel the same.”

“You don’t need to wonder, Alicia. You will always be safe with me. Always.”

“I know you believe that, but my experience with ‘always’ usually isn’t.”

He pulled into the garage. He turned off the vehicle and turned to her. “Obviously I don’t know everything that’s going on with you. You need to know that normally Cerberus will not take on a case unless the client gives full disclosure. We’re here for you because we consider you to be part of the family, and we protect and care for family. When you’re ready to tell us what’s really going on, we’ll fix whatever it is.”

She looked down at her hands which were clasped and in her lap. “Is it just ‘us?’ When you call me ‘baby girl,’ is it you, or the team?”

He chuckled softly, taking her chin in his hand and making her look at him. “Baby girl, there is no one else at Cerberus who is going to call you that. And for the record, I’ve never called anyone at Cerberus or anywhere else by that name.”

“What about the subs you discipline and play with?”

“Princess or brat if they’re acting out. Good girl, if they aren’t. A session usually starts with one of the first two and ends with the last one. Come on, let’s go inside.”

He opened her door and led her inside. They’d barely made it inside the door when she turned and wrapped her arms around him, lifting her face to his for a kiss. Lifting her up, he didn’t even have to tell her to wrap her legs around his waist.

He locked his hands under her ass to support her and moved to one of the two large wingbacks.

Settling her on his lap, Brock moved his hand from her knee up her thigh, trailing his fingers and feeling the rough denim, until he encountered a hole or a shredded section. Alicia hitched her breath as she leaned her head so that it drifted down to his shoulder. He slid his hand up along her torso, tugging the tank top out of her jeans, unbuttoning the top button and sliding the zipper down.

His hand moved under the tank to come up and palm her breast over the lacy bra she was wearing. Her nipples perked up and hardened immediately, and he was pretty sure he could smell an uptick in her arousal. In fact, he was even more sure if the two of them hadn't both been wearing jeans and underwear of some sort, he would have felt a telltale wetness leaking from her pussy. When she moaned and didn't move away, Brock let his fingers trail down to the elastic of her panties.

"I'm going to put my hand in your panties and touch you in a way I've been wanting to for a long, long time, baby girl."

"Where is that?" she asked in a sultry tone.

He grinned. "All the princess parts you keep hidden from the world, even when you're Sonata Royale. I'm going to find your clit and then I'm going to tease and tug on it until you decide that keeping secrets from Daddy is a bad idea. Spread your legs, baby girl."

She snuggled closer and did as he asked. His hand moved between the lace-trimmed panties and her soft skin. He moved his hand down and found her clit was engorged and begging to be pleased.

"Why does this feel so good?" she murmured.

"Because you know you're safe. Because whatever it is that has frightened you can't get you here. You can just take refuge in me and let me pleasure you. You can let me have control. I'll bet you haven't felt safe enough to do that in..."

"Forever," she finished.

“Right. But right here and right now, you can just let go and let me take care of my baby girl the way I want to and the way you want me to. You do want me to, don’t you, Alicia?”

“Baby girl. I like it when you call me baby girl.”

He chuckled. “Then baby girl it is. Although I reserve the right to call you brat when you’re being one.”

She laughed softly. “Every time King calls Samantha a brat, you can see how connected they are.”

“That’s the thing about D/s couples. They often carry the intimacy and connection they share in the bedroom out into the real world. Doing the work we do, it can help.”

“Because most of the time, things aren’t completely in your control.”

“Not always, but we always have contingency plans,” he assured her as his fingers circled her clit, stopping every once in a while to press or tug it.

“Is seducing me one of those contingencies?”

“No, baby girl, keeping you safe is the primary directive. Seducing you is a part of a whole other plan.”

He continued to play with her clit until she was breathing heavily and moaning. He kissed her deeply and with restrained passion, his tongue sliding along hers to explore and taste. Taste. He tasted the IPA in her mouth and remembered he’d thought she might be a little tipsy. He withdrew his hand, despite her protestation.

When she took it and put it back under her tank top and placed it on her bra, he traced the tops of her generous breasts and down her side. He found a scar and traced it. This was no little nick. This had come from something bad—most likely an attack of some kind.

The intoxication he’d been feeling, not so much from the beer but from the woman who was cuddled up to him, sobered. There was so much she needed to tell them. There was so much more they needed to know about one another. He wondered if she was really ready for what he wanted from her.

Knowing what he wanted, he knew he couldn't just have a one-night stand, or a scene or even a brief affair. No, what he wanted required talking when they were both completely clear-headed, on the same page, and with a contract in place.

He might not have that tonight, but by god, he'd have one in the morning.

CHAPTER 9



ALICIA

*B*rock was kissing her, their tongues dancing as his fingers played with her clit—pressing, circling, and tugging on it. He'd take her just to the edge of pain or the precipice of ecstasy and then pull back. It was a delicious, wicked game, and Alicia had never felt so alive or so amazingly, fearlessly out of control. It was far more intoxicating than the one beer she'd had to settle her nerves.

When he withdrew his hand, Alicia took it and guided it back under her tank top and up to her bra. She really wanted him to push her bra out of the way and treat her nipples to the same kind of play he'd given her clit. If he'd pressed down on it one more time she would have had an explosive orgasm, and she was pretty sure he knew that.

His hand moved along the tops of her breasts, and she was enjoying the way his fingers moved independent of one another, teasing and tempting. When he trailed the back of his hand down her torso, she knew the moment he hit the scar. Brock's hand flipped over, and his fingers probed the scar. Normally, she figured if it turned them off, so be it, but with Brock it would only bring more questions. Questions she wasn't prepared to answer.

"Want to tell me how you got this?" he asked, gently touching the puckered skin.

She pushed his hand away. "Not particularly."

"Alicia, you can't keep pushing me away."

"Sure I can; just watch me."

She tried to get up, and his arms clamped around her like a vice. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Fine. We can sit here all night until your legs go numb from my sitting on them.”

“I don’t think I like your attitude, baby girl.”

No, she told herself. She was not going to go all soft and gooey and tell him everything. She had begun to believe that maybe, just maybe, she had carved out a new life for herself—one where she could be happy and safe. One where her past no longer mattered. But she should have known better. She didn’t get a happily ever after. She shook her head. She’d actually believed him. What a fool.

“I don’t much care. Let me go. In the morning, we can make other arrangements. I know Cerberus is a badass black ops group and has lots of friends in high places, but you don’t run the world, and you don’t run me. Now let go.”

“Alicia, calm down. I don’t think we’re ready to go any further. We need to talk.”

“So let’s talk.”

“I think you’ve had too much to drink. I make it a habit never to play or take advantage of the women I play with when there is any doubt in my mind that they’re inebriated or not in full control of their faculties.”

“I don’t want to calm down. In fact, I was having a lovely time, and then you found something ugly, and all play stopped. So much for accepting a woman’s body the way it is. I suspect you’ve got more than your fair share of scars. So, since play has stopped, you wouldn’t happen to have a vibrator or some other toy I can use to get off, would you?”

She could hear the ugly words and tone coming out of her mouth but couldn’t seem to stop them. It seemed her choice was tears or ugly. Right now, she preferred ugly. She didn’t want Brock to see how deeply his rejection had hurt her. She should have known. Every other woman at Cerberus and the club was gorgeous and practically perfect, she was sure. Brock

just didn't know how to deal with someone who was as far away from perfect as she was. And now he wouldn't have to.

“Baby girl, the kind of toys I'd like to use on you have nothing to do with bringing you to orgasm.”

Alicia shoved at his arms, and this time they gave way. Why did it make her want to cry even more that he obviously didn't want to hold her? It didn't matter. He'd shown his true colors, and it was best that she knew that now. She was overreacting and she knew it, but she couldn't seem to stop. Something about Brock made her feel deliciously out of control, and that she couldn't allow. Standing up, she headed up the stairs to her room.

Once inside, she took off her clothes, folding them neatly on top of the dresser. She hadn't unpacked any of the other things Camille had picked up. She'd take them back in the morning. If Camille wouldn't buy the size she wanted, she'd just do without and wear the same thing to work until she could get away and find some place to start over again.

Tears welled in her eyes and threatened to fall. Maybe if she'd been one of those pretty criers, she might have just thrown herself on the bed and let it all out—fear, anger, tension. Instead, she walked into the shower, turning on the rainfall showerhead, and sighed. Stepping under the water, she leaned against the tile wall so that the water pelted her back, hoping between the shower and the heater/fan she'd turned on, no one would hear her.

Did he really believe she was drunk? She knew she was a lightweight, but there was no way she was incapacitated. Where did he get off thinking she was drunk? She was in complete control of her faculties. No, that had just been a handy excuse for realizing she wasn't perfect. She'd felt the hard-on pressed against her, but apparently, he was happy with his hand.

After Brock found out they didn't know as much about her as they thought and was concerned that she was in danger, Alicia had always planned to lull Cerberus into a false sense of complacency and then slip away, but damn, she had really

wanted a night or two or three with Brock. She could have carried that memory with her for the rest of whatever time she had left, but so be it.

Alicia closed her eyes, letting her fingers trail down her body the way his had done. If she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, she could almost imagine they were his. His hands had been roughly textured—not those of a metrosexual guy who got manicures—but they'd felt so right. Every whorl and callus had brought something new and exciting to his fondling.

She used one hand for support as she leaned against the back wall, feeling her tears starting to fall and wash away with the warm, steamy water. She used the other to cup first one breast and then the other, using her thumb to flick her nipples before pinching and tugging at them. It felt so good—not as good as Brock, but that was never going to happen. She let her hand drift down to her nether region as she leaned her head back and allowed the shower to further stimulate her nipples. She imagined it was his mouth that was wet and hot, encompassing them and sucking hard.

Her hand found her clit. She needed this; she'd needed him, but that wasn't happening. She moved her hand from her engorged clit down to her wet pussy. She fantasized that it was his hand and that he was standing behind her with his hard cock pressed against her. What might it have been like to be impaled on his cock with her legs wrapped around him as he carried her up the stairs and to his bed?

That had never been a possibility, but she had a book in her Kindle that had a scene just like that. She'd re-read the book many a time, but that scene she had practically worn out. The hero had just claimed the woman as his mate, and she was distraught and desperate as she clung to him. There had been a happily ever after for her, but then her wolf-shifter mate had been fated to her. How lovely might that be?

It didn't matter. She reached up to one of the handheld body sprays, spread her labia and let the hot water finish the job Brock and her own hand had started. Once she'd come, she

washed herself clean, dried off, and then went to bed. Curling up in a ball, she hugged the pillow and cried herself to sleep.



The morning dawned far too early. She'd almost convinced herself that she could grab a few hours of sleep—sleep which she had to admit that even with all the hurt and turmoil had been relatively peaceful, with none of the nightmares she'd become accustomed to. When the alarm went off, she groaned, rolled out of bed, and stumbled into the bath.

One look in the mirror and she could see while the sleep had done her mind and body some good, the crying had left her eyes red and swollen. If he noticed, which she doubted he would, she would tell him she had allergies. There was no fucking way she'd let him know she'd cried her eyes out.

She washed her face, applied minimal make-up, leaving as much unused as possible, and put the cosmetics in with the unpacked clothes to be returned. She made her way downstairs, putting the bags by the door. Alicia wasn't sure if she was glad to see Royce and Camille or not. Maybe it was a good thing. She could use them to deflect Brock, she could give the things she wanted to return to Camille, and if she was lucky, she could talk Royce into giving her a ride to work.

“Good morning, everyone,” said Alicia. “Camille, I'm so glad you're here. I really appreciate all the time and trouble you spent getting these things, but I'm not going to need them.” She handed Camille the three large shopping bags. “I kept the makeup I needed and the outfit I had on last night.”

“I can get you a different style or size,” offered Camille.

“It isn't that. I just don't want them.”

“Baby girl...”

“Please don't call me that. It's inappropriate and inaccurate.” She hated how prim and proper she sounded but she didn't care.

“Camille went to a lot of trouble...” Brock started.

“It was no trouble,” said Camille trying to defuse things.

“Camille, what is the rule about coming between Doms and their subs, especially when said sub seems determined to brat her way out of whatever situation she’s put herself in?”

Alicia turned on Royce. “I am not a brat. There is no situation. And I sure as hell am not Brock’s or anyone else’s sub. So, I’m going to take a wild guess that you wouldn’t be willing to give me a ride into the office.”

Royce sat back. “That would be a correct assumption.”

“Fine. Brock, I’ll be in the Range Rover. I’m ready to leave when you are.”

“I need you to calm down, have some breakfast, and talk to me.”

“I could not care less what you need. Like I said, I’ll be waiting. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t make me late to work.”

Before anyone could say anything else, Alicia made her grand exit out of his greystone and walked to the garage, letting herself in and slipping into the passenger’s seat. It didn’t take long for Brock to join her. They rode to the office in absolute silence. She managed to get out of the Range Rover before Brock could make it around to her side. Catching up with her, he took hold of her upper arm and ushered her up the stairs.

“Let go,” she snarled as she snatched her arm away when they reached the lobby.

She watched him go to the elevator and punch the button to go up. Taking a deep breath, she exhaled slowly and went to work. Fortunately, her job was busy and varied and always kept her hopping.

Alicia had just sat down after making another cup of coffee when she heard the elevator doors open and looked up to see Brock walking—no stalking—across the floor. She kept her back turned as she heard several other people exit the elevator. Whatever had brought Brock to her desk, they’d all come to

watch. She supposed they were like a family—one she would miss when she left. Brock most of all.

He slammed down a document on the desk in front of her. “Sign it.”

“That’s not the way to get her to do it,” said Miley, one of the few female Cerberus operatives and a sniper of rare skill.

“I don’t know; it worked fairly well with you,” said Damon, Miley’s fiancé.

“Yeah, but you’re a billionaire and great in the sack.”

She heard Damon’s hand connect with what she guessed was Miley’s backside.

“I find punching them in the nuts tends to make them get their head out of their ass,” offered Miley.

Another sharper smack. Miley started to *oomph*, but it mutated into a low, throaty laugh. Alicia looked up to see Miley walking backwards, dragging Damon by his tie. His hands were low on her hips, and Miley didn’t appear the least bit afraid.

“Come on, lover,” she purred at him, “let’s go work this out in the dungeon.”

Alicia shook her head, smiling. Miley was her personal hero. Alicia was sure Miley would never have allowed her life to devolve the way Alicia’s had.

“Sign it,” growled Brock.

“Punch him in the nuts,” called Miley as she and Damon disappeared into the Club Southside portion of the building.

“Try it, baby girl, and I’ll make sure you never sit down comfortably again.”

Alicia hated the way her body tingled in response to his threat. She’d never thought she’d respond that way to someone else offering her physical violence but working at Cerberus and getting to know some of the women, she’d begun to understand and accept there was a difference between someone hitting you and consensual discipline.

But she didn't say any of that. Instead, she picked up the document and without reading it and looking directly up at him, she tore the contract into pieces and threw them into his face.

"I told you not to call me that. Seth, back this asshole off, or I'll file a hostile workplace suit so fast it'll make your head spin." She turned away from Brock and looked directly at Seth. "And if you're going to continue to provide protection to me, I want someone else assigned to my case, and I will move into one of the rooms on the third floor."

"The hell you will," said Brock, angrily.

Curiously, Brock's anger didn't frighten her in the least. It aroused the hell out of her, and she was glad she'd opted for her old baggy clothes.

"No can do, Alicia," said Seth. "Damon is right. Cardinal rule, especially between Doms, is no Dom comes between a Dom and his sub, unless he believes the sub may be in danger."

"He just threatened to beat me."

"No. What he did was warn you to settle down and behave and the consequences for not doing so. Personally, I'd back off a little until both of you cool off."

"She needs to eat lunch," said Brock.

"I'm not hungry."

"Bullshit."

Brock was angry—really angry, and she wasn't afraid. It was kind of a revelation.

"Alicia, Seth is right. We both need to calm down. Why don't we go down to the lounge and get some lunch. I'm sure the chef will prepare something. We need to talk."

"No. I don't want to go downstairs, I don't want to talk to you, and I don't want to put the chef out. This is his prep period. If it will make you go away, I'll order something in. Anybody else want Italian?"

“Italian sounds good,” said Seth. “How about I go order us something and have it delivered upstairs?”

“I can go, Seth,” she said obstinately, trying not to enjoy how unafraid she was of Brock.

“Gino’s delivers, and that’s where we always order. You said their cacio e pepe was the best you’d ever tasted,” said Brock, running his hand through his hair. Taking a deep breath, he said, “Seth, can you give us a minute?”

“I can give you all the time you need. Cacio e pepe all right with you, Alicia?”

“No, thanks. I think I’ll have their seafood lasagna.”

“Got it. Brock?”

“I think I’ll try the cacio e pepe.”

“Okay,” said Seth. “I’ll go order lunch.”

When the elevator doors closed, he stood over her with his arms crossed. Alicia was pretty sure he took that stance to intimidate people, but all it did for her was turn her on.

He put his hands on her desk—they were really sexy hands, especially now when she knew what they felt like on her skin—and leaned down.

“I’m not sure what happened last night or this morning, but tonight you and I are going to have a talk. We can either do that over dinner, or we can do that with you draped over my knee getting your first taste of discipline. I will email you the contract as soon as I get back upstairs. I suggest you read and sign it before you come up to the conference room.”

She watched him stalk back to the elevator, appreciating the fine way he moved and his even finer ass. The man was absolutely gorgeous.

She raised her chin defiantly. “And if I don’t?”

“We can start that discussion this afternoon.”

CHAPTER 10



BROCK

*B*rock entered the conference room to find a grinning Seth. “I guess our mousy little office manager isn’t quite so mousy.”

“I never thought she was mousy, and I don’t want you saying it, either,” growled Brock.

He supposed he could see where some might think her a little mousy. He’d been wrong. She’d been more than happy to go toe-to-toe with him and slug it out verbally. There had been absolutely no sign of fear in her. Most people were intimidated by his size and mass, but not Alicia. And most subs quaked if he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. She’d simply ignored him.

He wasn’t lying to Seth when he said he’d never thought of her as mousy. He’d thought of her more as a lovely deer—perhaps an impala, but this afternoon, down in the lobby, he had seen her for what she was—a lioness with teeth, claws, and an impressive roar of her own. Perhaps he’d been treating her too softly. Although he had to admit, she’d curled up in his lap and seemed to enjoy being stroked.

He was trying to figure out why things had gone so wrong, so quickly. Last night he would have gladly taken her to bed and fucked her long and hard with no D/s involved, but he sensed that Alicia longed for what he could provide her in the right relationship. Certainly, they should at least explore that. A contract would provide the structure for that kind of thing.

“Hello in there,” said Seth, breaking Brock’s reverie. “I’m going to assume you’d pretty much dismember anybody trying to take over this case.” Brock glared at him. “Right, but you need to put the caveman on a leash and bring out the Daddy Dom. I don’t think caveman will work for you. I think she’ll take Miley’s advice and kick your nuts up around your teeth. But you need to get a handle on her and bring her in line. It’ll be much harder to keep her in line if she’s bound and determined to handle this on her own.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, asshole.”

Among the operatives at Cerberus, asshole was a term of endearment—or when in the United Kingdom, arsehole.

Alicia arrived upstairs, holding two large bags of Italian food. She laid out the food, her face crinkling in confusion. “There are four entrée containers.”

“That’s because Brock insisted I order the cacio e pepe as well. He seemed to recall that you once told him the red sauce they have there was too acidic for you.”

“Thanks. Brock’s right. I love their red sauce, but it always upsets my stomach.”

Peace offering accepted. That was a good thing. Another good thing was the papers she was holding in her hand. At the very least, it meant she’d printed them out and had probably taken a look at them.

The three of them ate lunch, talking about various topics including the status of certain cases, the status of Miley and Damon—they were a committed couple, but Damon did not like being in Charleston while Miley was based in Chicago and often had assignments that took her outside the country. There had been some talk about Cerberus opening a branch in Charleston with Miley in charge. Both Fitz and Damon had loved the idea; Miley loathed it, and the plans for a Charleston office were put on hold.

“You really think he’ll leave Charleston?” asked Alicia.

Seth nodded. “I actually think Fitz is trying to recruit him for something up here, and Miley loves Chicago. I overheard

Damon telling Royce there's a member of his club... Viktor something or other... who has expressed an interest in buying a piece or all of Carriage House."

"That's Damon's club down there, right?"

"That's right," answered Brock. "Besides, Damon has black ops experience and if they worked as a team that would give a whole new dimension to what we can do."

"That makes even more sense than what I was thinking," said Seth.

"Were you thinking that with Knox Industries, Fitz might be thinking some kind of hardware installations?" she asked.

"While his company can certainly supply any kind of system we might need and has been for years, I think Brock has hit on the most likely scenario. I think Damon will jump at the opportunity, and Miley will be pissed."

"Why? She adores him."

Brock nodded. "She does. But brats aren't always the best critical thinkers when the adrenaline gets going. Don't get me wrong, Miley is as good as they come and better than most, but she also takes unnecessary risks with her own life, although never with the team."

"So, he thinks with Damon as her Dom he can protect her? Isn't that just a bit condescending?"

"Maybe, but Fitz doesn't see it that way. I told you Cerberus likes to think of those who work here as family. Miley can be a bit reckless. Damon tends to keep that side of her in check, and she'll listen to Damon when she won't listen to anyone else."

"So, you're not being condescending when you call me baby girl?"

"Not at all," interjected Seth, "and if it bugs you, you can list it as a hard or soft limit in that contract."

"How do you know there are hard and soft limits listed?"

“It’s a D/s contract. There are always hard and soft limits,” he chuckled.

“And this is where you suddenly remember you have something to do in your office that requires your full attention,” said Brock.

“You’re mean,” Seth faux whined. “It was just getting to the good part.”

“Out,” growled Brock as Alicia laughed quietly. Once Seth had collected the remainder of his food and left them alone, Brock continued. “Let me state first, I handled last night badly and did little to try and fix it this morning. You should be able to expect better from me.”

“You aren’t perfect, Brock; nobody is. I was disappointed last night when we didn’t end up having sex, but I certainly could have behaved differently. It’s interesting because I really was mad at you even this morning. I felt like you touched the scar, and it repulsed you...”

“Repulsed? Hell, no. I’ve got plenty of scars. Intrigued, curious even, but never repulsed.”

“I realize that now.”

“Did you read the contract?” She nodded. “Do you have any questions or revisions?”

“No,” she said, handing it to him.

“You signed it?”

“Didn’t you want me to?”

“Of course I did, but baby girl, you don’t sign contracts until they’re finished out and we haven’t gone over your hard and soft limits.”

“But you covered that by indicating an Exhibit A to be attached and included as part of the entire agreement. I thought the contract spelled out the agreement in principle and as such I found it perfectly agreeable. I didn’t know how agreeable until I read it. In case you missed it, I can have a terrible temper. Most times I can control it, but if I’m feeling rejected

at all—like last night—it can get the better of me. Maybe you can work on that with me.”

Agreement in principle? “I can certainly work with you around that. But you’re not the only one with a temper. The only reason I stopped last night is that I wasn’t sure how intoxicated you were, and I’m uncomfortable entering into a sexual relationship...” He flipped through the agreement to check that she hadn’t crossed that out and took a sigh of relief, causing her to laugh.

“What would you have done if I had lined through it?”

Lined through it? Another quasi-legal term. Seth had been doing a deep dive into Alicia’s background and wasn’t finding anything other than those things she had told them to begin with.

“I would have been disappointed, but I would have respected your wishes and even if you had refused to sign, I would still have protected you to the best of my ability.”

She nodded. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Baby girl, you can ask for anything. Whether or not I say yes is another matter entirely.”

“Can we go for a walk—maybe to Navy Pier? Last night and being at odds with you this morning has left my nerves a bit jangly. I think a walk in the sunshine down on the Pier would help.”

He smiled at her. She really was the most interesting puzzle. “Let me get a detail together and we can head out.”

“One other thing?”

“Sure.”

“Is there any chance Camille hasn’t returned those things?”

Brock laughed. “You should know that despite my dour demeanor and rumors to the contrary, I’m rather an optimistic guy. The bags are all out by my desk. I was hoping you’d at least sign the contract and that maybe down the road, I could get you to wear something that allowed me to show off just how gorgeous you are.”

She squirmed. “I don’t know how to react when you say things like that.”

He leaned over, framing her face in his hands. His mouth hovered over hers for only a moment before coming down on hers. His lips moved across hers, encouraging them to part and allow his tongue to drag across her lower lip before delving inside.

Brock worked on her mouth as one hand came around her head to fist her silky hair, tugging at it ever so slightly. The slight nip of pain seemed to do something for both of them. She leaned into him, relaxing against him. The gorgeous kitten he’d held in his lap last night was back—so was his raging hard-on.

Reluctantly he broke off the kiss. “I’m pulling away because if I don’t get some breathing space, I’m going to have you bent over this conference room table with your skirt rucked up around your hips and your panties ripped off so I can have at you.”

For a moment her eyes registered shock, and then they flared with arousal and need. “You’ve had worse ideas,” she all but purred.

He shook his head, trying to clear the image from his mind. “I never realized what a brat you could be. Come on, we’ll get a couple of guys and head down to Navy Pier.”



They wandered around Navy Pier, grabbing ice cream cones and people-watching. It was relaxing and normal, something he rarely allowed himself. He was always industrious and either working or working out. His only vice was watching hockey on Sunday mornings. If he would be good for her, he had a feeling she would be just as good for him.

“I’ve really enjoyed watching you perform on stage. Have you ever thought of doing it professionally?”

“Not really. I think that would take the enjoyment out of it for me.”

“I thought your choice of songs last night was interesting. Everybody else was doing upbeat, rock and roll kinds of songs, and you chose a ballad and had those of us in the audience eating out of your hand.”

“It’s funny. I never cared for the movie and never really found him all that sexy—he’s too lean for my taste, but that song always spoke to me. I kind of feel that way sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t, baby girl. The rest of us are working hard to get into your league. How’d you get started?”

“My father was a preacher. A real fire and brimstone, pounding the Bible kind of preacher, but he never preached hate. In fact, the only things he truly hated were hate, hypocrisy, and cowardice. Like most preacher’s kids, we argued over his religion, and I found myself with a conflict of interest between what I believed and what he preached. It reached the point that I knew I had to leave. I’m not sure they’ve ever forgiven me, even though I still love them deeply.”

Brock stopped her, turned her to face him and frowned. “I thought you said your parents were dead.”

The deer in the headlights look was back. “Loved,” she corrected herself. “I loved them deeply. No chance of reconciliation.”

“Why not?”

“They’re dead, so not much use in trying to have that conversation.”

“Baby girl, I don’t like being lied to, especially by you. Fair warning—there will be consequences for that in the future.” He watched as a small tremor went through her body. “That wasn’t fear, was it?”

Before he could pursue that line of thought, he heard a woman cry out and saw a man wrestling with her to get her purse. Where was the team? He spotted them, but they had dropped back to give him and Alicia some privacy. Every

instinct clamored for him to go after the mugger. The need to protect was ingrained in his DNA. With the team closer to Alicia than the escaping thief, Brock sprinted after him. He was closing in when his focus was shattered by the scream that came from where he'd left Alicia.

As his mind registered that, it also appeared that the victim of the mugging was nowhere to be seen. What he could see was Alicia struggling with a man who was trying desperately to drag her away. Brock turned back, pulling his SIG as his men did the same, all closing in on Alicia.

The man holding her could see his ruse hadn't worked and he was about to be taken into custody. He pulled out his own gun and struck Alicia in the temple before letting her go and running away. Alicia slid to the ground and appeared to be dazed.

Brock reached her first and gathered her close. "It's going to be all right, baby girl, Daddy's got you." He looked at an approaching team member. "Call 9-1-1 and get the paramedics and the police. Then call Cerberus and tell Seth what's happened. I'll either be at the hospital or back at home with Alicia."

The next few minutes were something of a blur, but the paramedics arrived, followed closely by Royce and then the police. Alicia never lost consciousness but seemed unsteady. The paramedics determined that she was good to go as long as someone was with her.

"No worry about that," said Brock. "Tell Seth I'll write a full report from home. The team can fill the cops in on what happened, and if they need me, they can call. You'll find the things Camille bought Alicia by my desk. If you could bring them home with you tonight, I'd appreciate it."

Royce nodded. Brock stood up and helped Alicia to her feet before swinging her up in his arms to carry her towards the waiting Cerberus SUV.

"You and I are going home, baby girl. And then you and I are going to have a long talk about what the hell is going on,

and this time I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

“What if you can’t handle the truth?” she asked, playfully.

“I wouldn’t go there if I were you. I’m not Tom Cruise, and you sure as hell aren’t Jack Nicholson.”

CHAPTER 11



ALICIA

Her head was pounding. She had a goose egg and a splitting headache. It probably didn't matter. The scar hadn't bothered him. Once they arrived home, he took her upstairs.

"Strip," he commanded.

She felt herself bristle. Was Brock the same as Ewan? Did he expect to just issue orders and she'd comply? She'd had enough of that before she left him.

"In case you missed it; I just got almost mugged. I'm not exactly in the mood."

Brock rolled his eyes. "Neither am I. I want to make sure the paramedics didn't miss anything. Once I'm assured about that, you're going to slip into one of my t-shirts, and we're going to go downstairs and sit on the couch."

She managed to smile at him. He was kind and understanding. He helped her out of her things, including her bra and panties. He wadded them all up and tossed them in the trash. She quirked her eyebrow at him.

"Don't start with me, baby girl. This is going to go a lot faster and easier if you just accept my help and that I'm the one in charge."

Alicia decided she'd had enough excitement and arguments for the day. She stood slowly as Brock circled her, reaching out to gently touch an emerging bruise here and there. When he got round to the scar, he traced it with his

finger tip. Normally she didn't like being touched there and shied away, but something about the reverent way in which he touched it made her shiver with desire.

Brock moved in from behind, his body barely a whisper from hers. As he ran his finger down the ugly, puckered scar again, he murmured in her ear, "He did that to you, didn't he?" She nodded. "He'd better hope someone catches up to him before I do. If I get to him first, I'll kill him."

It wasn't said with anger or even much emotion. Just a simple statement of fact. She supposed that she should feel concern for Ewan's safety, but she didn't. In fact, she kind of hoped Brock found him first. The scar wasn't even the worst of what Ewan had done, not by a long shot. Her body started to tremble as the horror of her marriage flooded her with memories she thought she'd long ago forgotten. They threatened to overwhelm her.

Brock's hand came up to cup her breast, squeezing it gently and thumbing her rigid nipple. "At some point I'm going to want to put these gorgeous things in clamps," he whispered as his other hand came up to treat her other breast with the same affection. Alicia shivered again, but this time it was pure arousal. "That's my good baby girl. I don't want you to ever shy away from me, and I sure as hell don't want you thinking about him."

"Yes, Sir," she answered as she leaned back against his strength and closed her eyes.

"I know most of the Doms you've seen prefer that their women call them Sir or Master. I prefer Daddy."

As he continued to stroke her body, allowing his hands to gently explore her curves, it occurred to her that for some reason, that was a far better term. "Yes, Daddy," she purred.

"Good girl," he said as he whispered kisses all along her shoulders and neck.

He moved away and she mourned the loss not only of his touch, but of the close proximity of his presence. Brock walked to the dresser and withdrew a large t-shirt from a

drawer. Returning to her, he slipped it over her head, scooped her up in his arms and carried her downstairs. He set her down and sat on the couch with his legs spread slightly. It was easy to see his arousal matched her own.

“Do you trust Daddy, baby girl?” She nodded. “I need you to say it out loud.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Do you know what a safeword is?”

“Yes, but I know some of the girls use the stoplight system. I’d prefer just to use that.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“When you signed the contract, I was very specific that you were agreeing to my discipline. That’s a non-negotiable for me.”

“So, you’re going to spank me? For what? I almost got kidnapped.”

“You did, but you’re fine, and you’re relaxed and safe. You’re going to accept my discipline for not telling Daddy and the people he works for the whole truth as you know it about what’s going on. Then when your gorgeous ass has a nice pink tint to it, you’re going to curl up in Daddy’s lap and tell him everything. Do you understand?”

Alicia had never thought of a spanking as something that would turn her on or that she would agree to, especially given her past relationship with Ewan, but she had been afraid of Ewan. She wasn’t afraid of Brock, and the guys at Cerberus needed to understand, so that when she left, they would know it was her not them. And Brock was owed the right to discipline her even if he never made love to her. At least they’d have this moment in time—however brief it might prove to be.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl.” He extended his hand to her and guided her over his lap.

Alicia stared at the floor while the grandfather clock by the fireplace ticked the minutes away. She was laid out over his thighs as he raised the t-shirt up to her shoulders, baring her ass for him. He rubbed his hand over her rounded globes.

“So pretty,” he murmured.

His cock was hard and throbbed against her belly. His fingertips traced lazy circles across her ass, encouraging her to relax and accept. His one hand left her backside as the other one wrapped around her waist, securing her in place. Holy shit. She was about to get spanked. That big, rough hand was about to light up her backside.

Her entire body went on high alert not knowing what to expect. And then it knew. The sound of his hand smacking her ass came just before the sting of pain and flare of arousal that accompanied it. Tears formed within her closed eyes.

“You’ve been withholding the truth, baby girl. That’s not good for you or for us. This spanking will settle things between us for your past transgressions.”

Another slap of her buttocks cracked across the other cheek. He smacked her a third time, igniting a sweet, lingering burn all along her skin and thrumming through her veins. If Brock could do this to other women, she could understand why they adored him.

Another set of harsh smacks to her backside sparked more pain than sting as he continued to give her the discipline he thought she was due, and somehow she trusted him to do just that. She had to admit, those at Cerberus had deserved better than lies and deceit from her. Tears welled and then began to fall as over and over he laid into her ass.

She lost count of the number of times he spanked her. She didn’t care. The tears that were now falling freely were a release—not just for today or not being completely honest with him, but from all the pain and horror of her life before Cerberus. The fear that had been her constant companion for the last number of years began to dissipate completely as Brock disciplined her.

Finally, his hand stilled and lightly rubbed her stinging backside. God, that had hurt, but she was so incredibly relaxed. Her body sagged and her legs parted ever so slightly of their own accord. Her backside felt hot, and she was pretty sure it was a bright pink, if not red. There were other parts of her nether region that were not only heated and red; they were wet as well.

Biting back a sound that was half-cry and half-moan, Alicia sighed as he ran his finger down the seam of her ass, past her puckered entrance and down to that soft, wet place made just for the hard length that pressed against her.

Brock turned her over, drawing her up so that she was sitting in his lap. The scratchy denim of his jeans against her softness was not something she'd ever experienced. He trailed his fingers up her inner thigh from her knee. He cradled her against his chest as he lazily caressed her thighs.

“Daddy went easy on you this time as he knows you're not used to being disciplined, but if I have to discipline you for withholding vital information or outright lying to me again, I'll blister your backside, and sitting comfortably will be a thing of the past. Clear?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl.” It amazed her how two little words could make her feel warm all over.

“Can I get some Tylenol or something? My head hurts.”

“Let me call the doctor and see if that's okay.”

“Brock, I can decide whether or not I need to see or talk to a doctor.”

He kissed the side of her head. “And Daddy can decide whether or not you need to go back over his knee.”

When she said nothing, he went to retrieve his phone. There was a part of her that wanted to protest, but her aching backside reminded her the man had a wicked hand when he wanted to use it. She could hear him talking to someone on the phone, and then he came back with water and a bottle of Tylenol.

As lovely as the buzz was from Brock spanking her, which had come as a total shock, reality was starting to rear its very ugly head. At the Pier she had tried to dissuade them from calling the police, but they had. Although that probably didn't matter. After all, she was sure the attack at Navy Pier wasn't random—either it had been Ewan, or it had been someone he hired. She hadn't gotten a good look at her attacker, so she couldn't say for sure.

As lovely as being here was and as safe as Brock made her feel, perhaps it was time to move on. But moving on might have to wait until tomorrow. When he'd rejoined her on the couch, he'd arranged their bodies so she was using him as a pillow. For a man full of muscles and hard planes, he was surprisingly comfortable.

His phone buzzed, and Brock leaned forward to answer it.

“Brock?” Seth's voice came over the phone. “Where are you?”

“We're down in the living room. Why?”

“Turn on your TV. I found something you need to see. I'll stream it to your television.”

“Can he do that?” asked Alicia.

“He can. He's tapped into all of our cable and internet stuff.”

Brock grabbed the remote and booted up the large television over the mantle.

“This is from four years ago,” said Seth as a video of a newscast began to play.

“Today, fire department investigators revealed that the cause of the fire they had been called to contain at the bottom of the ravine was the result of a horrific automobile accident. Investigators found a late model SUV that crashed through the railings on the Portsmouth Bridge where it hurtled to the bottom of the gorge and apparently burst into flames.

A closer inspection revealed the remains of a body which was burned beyond identification. The SUV is registered to

Ewan and Alicia Rennault. Mr. Rennault has reported his wife is missing, and both police and fire department officials are presuming the victim of the single car motor vehicle accident is Mrs. Rennault.”

“Is Alicia there with you?” asked Seth.

“She is, and given the look on her face, my guess is we’ve found out what she’s been hiding.”

“I can explain,” said Alicia, feeling as though the bottom had just dropped out of her life and she was in freefall.

“I wish you would,” said Brock, who had pulled away.

Alicia did the same, feeling more alone in her life than she ever had. Before coming to Chicago and joining Cerberus, she’d been alone, but she’d rarely been lonely as it had been so long since she’d had any friends.

“Obviously the body isn’t me. Ewan Rennault is a sadistic bastard who made my life a living nightmare. He beat me bloody on a regular basis...”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

She laughed bitterly. “He *was* the police. There was nowhere for me to go. The one and only time I tried to go up the food chain to get to someone else, he almost killed me. That’s when I made my mind up that Alicia Rennault had to die.”

CHAPTER 12



BROCK

“*Y*ou’re married?” he asked, a bit stunned.

He was trying not to feel betrayed, but it was hard not to. He was pretty sure he’d been falling for Alicia. He’d begun to imagine a future with her. She was married, though, and hadn’t said a word. He was glad they hadn’t had sex. Even what they’d done last night was out of line for him if the woman was married.

“Not as far as I’m concerned. What happened to the guy who wanted to kill whoever gave me the scar on my side?”

He didn’t respond. She laughed bitterly and continued, “The first time I had to apply extra makeup to cover the bruises he left from using me as a punching bag, he quit being my husband. When he beat me up so badly after I spoke with an attorney that I ended up in the hospital, I decided if I was going to live, I had to get away from him. And if I was going to do that, I needed to fake my own death.”

There was a pause where no one said anything, and the silence between them was painful.

“Alicia, honey,” said Seth. “You did the right thing. I know that may sound weird from a guy who gets off on using a flogger on women or binding them in elaborate rope patterns, but any man who inflicts any kind of damage on a woman she doesn’t want is no man at all. He ought to have his balls cut off with a dull spoon and have them shoved down his throat so that he chokes on them.”

That at least made her smile, but where did Seth get off comforting his woman? The answer was clear: because he hadn't done it himself. Okay, so maybe she should have told them. Maybe she should have learned during her time with Cerberus that they could be trusted and would protect her. But in all honesty, she'd only begun to understand the lifestyle in the past six months or so. Before that, she may have grasped that it was consensual, but still didn't understand what either side of the slash got from it.

But still, she should have known he would never touch a married woman sexually without her husband's consent. In fact, he wasn't even inclined to play with or discipline married women without coming to an understanding with her husband.

"We need to put a plan together to have Alicia's husband arrested," said Brock.

"Do we know for certain he was behind the attack this afternoon?" asked Seth.

"We know he was at the Majestic—that was him, wasn't it?"

"It was," she said quietly.

"The problem is, the California police don't have jurisdiction in Illinois. The only thing he's done here—that we can prove—is call to her from the back of the Majestic."

Alicia stood up and walked away from the couch. "You don't get it. Neither of you. I faked my death. I had a friend who worked at the county hospital. He was a good guy the firm I worked for used as an expert witness a couple of times."

"You were a lawyer?" asked Brock.

"No, a paralegal. I saved money from what Ewan gave me for groceries and took small bills from his wallet when he was passed out and hid them all over the house and our garden. When I'd saved up enough, I had my friend let me know when the morgue got a Jane Doe that might pass for me."

She shook her head. "We stuffed that poor woman into the back of my SUV. It was awful and the stench was horrific. I don't care who she was or what she'd done to end up on the

streets; she deserved to be treated with more respect, but I didn't have time to do that. I packed a bag and then removed some essentials, dragged her up to the front seat, and rigged the accelerator with a stick to send it careening through the railing and into the ravine. I stood and watched it hit bottom and explode into flames.”

Brock felt like he wanted to throw up. She had been put through hell and the first time since he'd known her that she really needed him, he'd balked. Thank god for Seth. He'd have to thank him someday.

“As far as the law is concerned, Alicia Rennault is dead.”

“Why didn't he have them run dental records or something?” asked Brock.

“My guess is he wanted to collect on the life insurance. If I'm alive, he will not only feel humiliated, he'll have to give that money back, and Ewan is not about to suffer either.”

“But if we can prove...”

“You won't be able to prove anything. Trust me, over the years I tried so many times to go through proper channels to find someone, anyone, who would or could help me. And in the end, there was no one. Each time I tried, he beat me worse than the time before. Half of the cops didn't care, and the other half felt sorry for him that he was married to a crazy woman. At one point he even had me committed. He wanted them to perform a lobotomy—they refused.”

“For the record, baby girl, I'm back to wanting to kill him. She's right Seth; having him arrested will have little to no effect.”

“But this time, she'll have us backing her.”

Alicia shook her head. “No. He'll drag all of you through the mud.”

Brock got up and closed the distance between them. “That's what washing machines were made for. Trust me, Sully and Nina will have a field day with destroying his life.”

“I didn't have a choice...”

“Not then, but you do now,” said Seth. “The big guy is going to hate me for saying this, but you have a choice: stand and fight with Cerberus at your back or run. We can move you to a safehouse. You’ll have to walk away again...”

“No, she won’t. Alicia can run if that’s what she wants, but this time she won’t be alone.”

“What are you saying, Brock?”

“I’ll go with you. I may have failed you earlier, but I swear to you that won’t happen again.”

“You didn’t fail me. I lied to you; you were shocked.”

“Nope. I failed you. I know you well enough to know that if you were hiding a marriage, there was a damn good reason. I didn’t wait for you to explain, I just got all judgmental and shit. I hate when I do that, and I know better. Seth said you had two choices; you don’t. You have three. I’m the third choice, baby girl. Choose me. We’ll run some place he can never find us until Cerberus can put an end to him, but rise or fall, choose me.”

He watched as a myriad of emotions played across her face until he saw the one he wanted—a mixture of hope and stubbornness. She nodded.

“Seth? We’ll try it your way and take this bastard down out in the open, but get Nina working on some false identification documents. I want to be ready to run if it goes south. I’m going to gather the team and head back to the office. If this guy is as psycho as I think he is, we’re not safe here, and neither is anyone else. We’ll be staying in the big suite on the third floor.”

“That sounds like the start of an excellent plan. Alicia, we’re going to need you to tell us everything. I’ll get on the phone to Nina and JJ. Nina will take care of the documentation, but nobody knows more than JJ about getting women out of bad situations and hiding them.”

Brock nodded. “Sounds good. Just have them leave the clothes Camille bought for Alicia up in our room. I’m going to want added security...”

“Brock, this is too much. I can’t just ask all of you to uproot your lives.”

“You didn’t ask, baby girl. Your family—your chosen family—has got your back. Your soon-to-be-ex has no idea how bad things are about to get for him.” He took her hands in his. “I know I let you down...”

“No. We let each other down, but we don’t have to let that define the rest of our lives.”

“Hey, Brock?”

Seth really knew how to kill a mood. “What do you want?”

“I was just going to ask you if you knew how come all the women we fall for are so much smarter and understanding than we are?”

Brock chuckled. “I don’t know, but they are. But given the level of stupid we’ve been known to display...” Alicia stomped on his foot. “Ouch! What was that for?”

“I know you Doms don’t let your subs speak badly about themselves. So, if I don’t get to talk badly about me, you don’t get to talk badly about the man I think I’m falling for.”

Brock clicked off the feed from Cerberus. The last thing he needed was for Seth to put his two cents in.

“Fair enough, but the dowdy clothes and trying to downplay just how gorgeous you are is off the table. The next time Ewan Rennault gets a gander at you, I want him to see that you will no longer hide your light under a bushel. He’s going to know just how spectacular you are and what a fool he was to ever have harmed you. And then I’m going to kill him, so it won’t really matter.”

“That would almost be funny if I didn’t half-believe you were serious.”

“Baby girl, trust me when I tell you, there’s no half. If he gives me a glimmer of an excuse to drop him, I will.”

She stood up on her tiptoes, wrapped her arms around him, and kissed his mouth before saying, “Yes, Daddy. And if we have to run because there’s a murder charge hanging over your

beautiful head, I will still choose you, and we will run together. Rise or fall, we do it together.”

Energized, Brock got on the phone with Royce, gathering the team together to get them back to Cerberus. Ewan Rennault may think he had the upper hand, but he didn't. The big fist of Cerberus was about to come down, and they wouldn't be bothering with a velvet glove.

CHAPTER 13



ALICIA

Alicia was surprised at the speed and precision with which the team moved. She shouldn't have been; they'd all been special forces, and most had been in the same units. Brock hustled her into the back seat of one of the Cerberus SUVs instead of his Range Rover.

"First chance I get, the Range Rover's getting heavily tinted bullet-proof glass."

She leaned forward and put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm fine, Brock, and I even have my seatbelt on." She looked at Camille, who was sitting next to her with a calm demeanor. "Not that I'm not happy to see you..."

"The team decided that this is one of the few times being neighbors with Brock could be an issue," Camille said. "If the asshole..." Royce growled from up front. "Well, he is. If the asshole who used to beat you is as whacko as they think, he might come after us as well, so we'll be neighbors up on the third floor."

"I'm sorry that my melodrama is leaching out all over the place."

"Not to worry. As I'm sure you've heard, Cerberus is family. King cancelled Samantha's book tour. She was pissed until he told her why. She's on a Cerberus plane as we speak." Camille reached over and took Alicia's hand. "Don't let this bother you. It's par for the course. The guys tend to circle the wagons and keep us womenfolk safe, except for Miley who can outshoot the lot of them."

“I hope you know I really did love the things you picked out. They were exactly what I’d have bought.”

“I understand. I just got you the basics. Maybe we can while away our time spending our Doms’ money doing some online shopping.”

“You are so screwed,” Royce said to Brock.

He glanced in the rearview mirror, catching her eye. “I am perfectly okay with that.”

Alicia leaned back and talked to Camille about all kinds of things that had nothing to do with their current situation—just normal, everyday things that she’d never been able to talk about before, as her life hadn’t been normal for a long while.

Once they were inside Cerberus’ secure parking lot under the building, they took the armor-plated freight elevator that only went from the third floor to the parking lot and the basement below.

“Is there really an armory complete with Stinger missiles in the basement?” she asked Brock.

He chuckled. “Not only is there an armory that would make the military drool, but there are also a couple of rendition cells where we can question bad guys who aren’t quite as forthcoming as we might like them to be.”

She glanced back and looked at Camille. “He’s talking about torture, isn’t he?”

“Basically, yes,” answered Camille.

“Camille, that’s enough,” snapped Royce.

“No way. She’s one of us now. Hey, do you really do burlesque?”

“Yep.”

“Think you could give some classes? I’ll bet the rest of the girls would love it, and maybe we can talk you into giving them at the club.”

It hit her in that moment that everything was going to be fine. That she had a family she could count on, and that

maybe, just maybe, there was a happily ever after in the works for her.



Kingston Coltraine was pissed. He was not having a good day. Instead of flying out this afternoon to join his wife on her book tour, he was in the office.

“He’s not mad at you, baby girl,” Brock whispered to her, laying his hand on her knee under the conference room table.

She believed him, but it didn’t seem to help the jiggling of her knee beneath the table. She’d been on the run for four years. She’d actually begun to think she might be safe, and now Ewan was here and people she cared deeply about were having to cancel plans and change their lives just because of her. Maybe that happily ever after was still out of reach. Maybe she’d never get one.

“I wouldn’t like what you’re thinking, would I?” Brock said in a clearly audible voice.

King looked up, “Why, what’s she thinking?”

“That this is somehow her fault.”

“What is it with women who have been victimized deciding it’s all their fault and somehow they’re omnipotent and should have figured it all out so none of us will be inconvenienced?”

“That’s not fair, King,” said Alicia. “But you can’t deny if I’d been straight up with you guys that this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Yes, but not for the reason you think.”

“You don’t know what I think.” She glanced at Brock to see if he was pissed. He wasn’t. In fact, he seemed amused.

“Tell him,” he said, encouragingly.

“I think if you’d known I had this hanging over my head...” she started to trail off.

“Go on, Alicia,” said King, “tell me.”

“Don’t do it,” said Miley. “It’s a sucker play Doms use to get you to admit all kinds of stupid shit. The fact is, if you take a breath and think, you’ll know the only difference you might have made if you’d told us everything to start with, is we’d have gotten rid of this asshole sooner. Seriously, Alicia, you should have told me. I would have taken care of the problem.”

Seth chuckled. “The scary part is, she isn’t joking. She is also right, not about the sneaky Dom part—okay she’s right about that, as well, but still, however we got here, here we are. We deal with what’s in front of us. We’ll figure it out, take care of the problem and then get on with our lives.”

“Don’t you think that you’ve paid for whatever it is you think you did?” asked Brock gently. “Seriously, baby girl, you didn’t know Rennault was a psycho. If you had, you wouldn’t have let him get within ten feet of you. But guys like him are great con men. You’re not the first woman to get conned, and unfortunately, you won’t be the last. We’ll just take them down, one man at a time.”

She shook her head. “I know you’re right. I guess I just want to say that I’m sorry about not trusting you guys sooner. I should have believed in the character of the people I work with, and I didn’t. I won’t make that mistake again, either.”

“Good girl. Why don’t you tell them how you got us to where we are?”

“I told Brock, after Ewan...”

“Call him the psycho or Rennault,” said Miley. “It gives you some distance and makes it easier to kill someone.”

“Will you think of Damon as Knox the day he pisses you off to the point you decide to take him out?” asked King with an evil grin.

“Oh, hell no. I’ll think of him as my ultimate paycheck. I’ve seen the will. I inherit everything.”

“Does Damon know you feel this way?”

Miley rolled her eyes. “Yes, and he’s told me if he ever makes me so unhappy that I want to put a bullet in his brain, I should just do it, and he will forgive me.”

“And didn’t you feel like a nasty bitch for even thinking about it?” laughed Seth.

“I did. And it’s all his fault. I love the sonofabitch so much that if I even allow myself to consider a life without him, I can’t breathe.”

“Ahh, how the mighty have fallen,” teased Royce, which prompted Miley to draw a knife no one had known she had and land it on the table right in front of him. “I thought he told you no sharp, pointy objects.”

“Only where he’s concerned. The rest of you bastards are on your own.”

Alicia turned to Brock. “Are all the ops meetings like this?”

“No,” he scoffed. “This one is rather tame. I suspect they’re all putting on their best manners for your sake. Now if the lot of you are done clowning around, maybe we can learn something from Alicia.”

Smiling, she said, “I don’t know why I’m smiling...” She rolled her eyes. “You guys did that deliberately. Okay, so the day Rennault put me in the hospital for even talking to a lawyer, I decided that nobody was going to save me, except me. I started saving and hiding money.” She laughed. “Mostly I hid it in mason jars in the backyard, in my garden, and any place I could think of. Once I had enough saved, I arranged to get a corpse from the morgue that was my height and build, and I sent her off the bridge and into the ravine.”

“Alicia’s thought was he’d opt for collecting the insurance money,” said Seth. “Which he did.”

“I know what I did was illegal...”

“Committing pseudocide isn’t technically illegal. Some of the ancillary steps involved are low level, misdemeanor kind of things—all of which we can deal with. We need to know

everything you did, so we can deal with it. Anybody see anything to be concerned about?"

"How did you get the body, and can it be traced back to your friend? I mean I understand how you got it..." King started.

"He just told me it was there. I made sure he wasn't on duty. I checked into the morgue and got it released to a small funeral home outside town. Their security was minimal at best."

"But why did they let you have it?"

"I told them I was her sister. Told a story about how she'd been estranged, and I'd finally found her, only it was too late." King nodded. "I'd been researching and training how best to get away. When I got the call from my friend, after Rennault left, I went to pick up groceries and left a note on the fridge in case he came back—he had a habit of doing that. Instead of the grocery store, I went to the funeral home, arranged for an immediate pick up and then waited until the driver went inside the funeral home and snatched the body."

"In broad daylight?" asked Royce.

She nodded. "I was desperate. I knew they parked out back, didn't lock their vehicles and were pretty lackadaisical about their security. I muscled her into the back of my SUV and headed for a tall bridge with a deep ravine."

She shuddered at the memory, but Brock's steadying hand quieted the tremor.

"Then like I said, I drove it to a spot I'd picked out both for its height and its isolation, took a few things with me, rigged the accelerator with a stick I knew would be incinerated and sent the corpse and the SUV through the railing. I watched as it sailed down, hit the ground, and exploded into flames. I figured the vehicle's VIN would match the DMV records and unless Rennault wanted DNA or dental records matched, I was effectively dead. Knowing Rennault, I figured he'd want the insurance money as soon as possible."

"How'd you get off the bridge?" asked Miley.

“I’d trained for that as well. I hiked through the wilderness until I was two towns away and jimmied the lock on the gas station restroom. I cut and dyed my hair, cleaned up my mess and then hiked to a truck stop where I hitched a ride with a woman trucker.” She smiled, remembering the woman’s kindness. “She didn’t ask me any questions, but she knew. She gave me all the cash she had, maxed out her ATM withdrawals, bought my dinner and an open fare bus pass in her name. We even kind of looked alike so she gave me her driver’s license. From there I just started making my way as far away from him as I could. I figured bigger cities would be easier to hide in. I finally ended up here in Chicago with you guys.”

“You should tell Samantha your story. She’d have a field day turning it into a best seller,” said King. “You showed amazing resilience and courage. Not many people—male or female—could have done that.”

“So how do you think he found you?” asked Brock.

“I don’t know. I’ve been so careful.”

“I think I do. You are quite a hit at the Majestic. They’ve done some local and online publicity that showed a photo of you...”

“I told them they couldn’t do that,” she said angrily.

“Well, they did. My guess is somebody spotted that photo and either told Rennault or the insurance company—a lot of them will pay a percentage of the payout if someone tips them off to a fraud. If the insurance company can prove that it was, they can take that money back. At the end of the day,” said Seth, “it doesn’t really matter. He’s found you. Brock says you’ve chosen to make your stand here with us.”

She nodded.

“But only if you’re all on board,” said Brock. “Otherwise, JJ has a plane waiting, and Nina has the necessary documents for us to start a new life somewhere Rennault will never find us.”

“And Fitz would fire the lot of us,” said King. “No, together we make our stand. We’re going to need to act carefully as Rennault is in law enforcement. Seth had Sully do some sleuthing. There is no evidence of any kind of abuse—no hospital records, no police reports, nothing. We’re going to start digging into Rennault’s past.”

“The guy’s too slick,” said Seth. “He’s been too careful about covering his tracks. I find it hard to believe that this is his first rodeo. I want to make sure Ewan Rennault is really Ewan Rennault. Sully and I are both looking for past complaints or convictions, how he got here both in terms of transportation and time off. Since he’s got the insurance money, you showing back up alive means he’d have to give that back. I hate to say this...”

“But he doesn’t want me back; he wants me dead.”

Brock took her hand. “His end goal doesn’t really matter. The mission remains the same, protect you and make this motherfucker pay.”

“Not that Brock feels strongly about this,” said Seth with an evil grin. “Brock will act as point man. You can go into your suite if you like.”

“Considering the mess you guys made of my desk last time I took a day off, I’d rather go downstairs to work.”

The rest of the team looked at Brock. “She isn’t wrong. We’ll make sure there’s extra protection in the lobby. She’ll be happier if she has something to do.”

Seth shook his head. “You guys and your hard-working females. I just want a girl who wants to spend my money and take care of all my considerable sexual needs.”

Everyone, including Alicia, groaned. That’s what Seth always said, and not one of them believed it. For the next few hours, Alicia was able to focus on her job, knowing that while there might be a threat, she was in the best and safest place she’d ever been.

CHAPTER 14



BROCK

*B*rock re-entered the team conference room.

“How’s she doing?” asked King. “I can’t even imagine what this must be like for her.”

“She’s doing better than I expected, especially given I got all pissy about her being married and not telling me.”

“Exactly how did you expect her to start that conversation? Oh Brock, by the way I married a psycho and finally figured out how to escape...”

Brock growled, cutting Seth off. “Like I said, I fucked up. I think we’re in a good place now.”

“You are,” said Royce, “at least according to Camille, and she tends to be right about these things.”

“I just talked to Sully,” said Seth. “He’s started looking at the records surrounding her death. Pretty much the locals glossed it over and buried her. That was fine and dandy until about two months ago.”

“What happened?” asked Brock.

“Her death certificate has been flagged and the body is scheduled for exhumation.”

“Why?”

“According to the vital records office, the insurance company put in a request. So, Sully did a little more digging. It seems someone claimed to have seen Alicia in a recent internet posting. The original insurance investigator, a local

guy, hadn't been completely convinced but couldn't find anything to stop the payment. When they got a tip from the guy who saw Alicia's picture, they felt it was credible enough that they petitioned to have the body exhumed. Rennault tried to fight it, but the judge ruled in the company's favor."

"What's our next step?" asked Royce.

"I think we need to go out there and nose around," said Brock, "and I want a team and Alicia with me. I'm worried that if I go off without her..."

"She'll decide to save us from herself."

"Something like that, but I also think there might be people willing to stand up for her; people who saw something and will be able to help us deflect the things she did to save herself."

They worked on making plans to get the team as well as Brock and Alicia out to the west coast.

"I just spoke to Damon," said Miley. "He thinks we ought to take our plane—do you know how much I love saying that?—and he'll come with me. He can make some excuse about making a grant or something to someone out there. He can also get us a nice place to stay where we can stage operations and keep our guys mostly out of sight."

"You don't have to go," said Brock. "I don't think there will be much need for a sniper on this one."

"You never know. And I would be dead if it weren't for you. There's no way I would have made it out of Switzerland. I won't forget that, and neither will Damon. No, if you and Alicia are going to beard the lion in the arena, Damon and I are coming."

"Thanks, Miley. I know Alicia really likes you."

Three hours later, one of the Knox Industries jets was winging its way to Stilton, California in San Mateo County.



ALICIA

“What do we know about Stilton?” asked Brock.

“Very affluent. Lots of old money,” said Seth, who was accompanying them. “It’s close to Stanford University. But it’s also a very small town. The town is home to a lot of the old, wealthy kind of families, but there aren’t a lot of new people moving in. From what I can tell, the old guard in town likes it that way.”

“Most of California started digitizing their records fifteen years or so ago. Stilton,” said Damon, who had Miley sitting in his lap, “resisted and has only started an initiative maybe five years ago. They cite lack of funding, but it’s a whole lot easier to get away with shit if your records aren’t digitized.”

“Why is that important?” asked Alicia.

“Because it means we’re going to have to search most everything by hand, and it isn’t hackable by Seth or Sully.”

“Do we know what we’re looking for?”

“No, but my guess is we’ll know it when we see it.”



Stilton, California

When they landed at the private airport, Damon had arranged for three SUVs to meet them and whisk them off to the winter home of a friend who owed Damon and didn’t ask questions. Luckily the place came with a chef and housekeeper who knew how to keep their mouths shut.

Exhausted, they made their way to the bedroom they would share. Alicia wanted to take a shower and when she came out, Brock was sound asleep. She’d come out naked and so grabbed one of his t-shirts to sleep in.

She grinned as she stared at his sleeping figure; this would be good blackmail material someday. She pulled off his shoes and managed to get him stripped down just to his underwear. His cock must have sensed it was her and not Brock getting

him undressed and made its presence known by tenting his boxer briefs. Resisting temptation and wanting to honor his feelings about her being a married woman, she turned off the light and cuddled up to him.

His arm came around her pulling her close. “Don’t think that I didn’t know what you were doing, baby girl. Much as I want to make love to you, I don’t want to be rushed and we’re both exhausted. Tomorrow and the next few days are going to be exhausting, and it’s important that everyone is at their sharpest.”

“I don’t think Damon agrees with your assessment. I’d be willing to bet a lot of money he’s having his way with Miley as we speak.”

“I wouldn’t take that bet, but I’ve seen Miley do her job with no sleep at all, and they can sleep in. I want to get the lay of the land tomorrow. Maybe we can just head out in the morning, and you can get me familiar with the place.”

“I can do that. Brock, I never expected to get involved with you, although I have had some of the dirtiest fantasies about you.”

He chuckled. “You’ll have to tell Daddy all about those naughty girl thoughts. Go to sleep, baby girl.”

Snuggling close to him, she didn’t even have time to say goodnight before she was fast asleep.

The sound of the waves and the smell of salt air roused Alicia from her deep and peaceful sleep. Rennault had found her, and yet, she’d never slept better. Knowing she was Brock’s ‘baby girl’ seemed to settle something deep inside her that she’d been at odds with for a long time. She was safe, and even though he hadn’t said it, she was pretty sure he was in love with her, which was good because she was most definitely in love with him.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” he said from the balcony. “Come on outside and have some coffee. They’re bringing us some breakfast.”

She rolled out of bed and stretched, realizing that when she did so, just the slightest bit of her lightly fuzzed sex showed. She knew from doing her reading that some Doms liked their subs totally bare; she'd need to ask Brock about that. Subs... she was Brock's sub, and she was perfectly okay with that.

"So, I have a couple of questions," she said.

"Ask away."

"Most often when I see Damon and Miley together, Miley is sitting in his lap."

Brock nodded. "They both find it soothing. You can always tell when Miley is in trouble as Damon makes her sit at his feet. The same is true of King and Royce, although I'm not sure Camille ever gets in trouble."

"So, if I want to sit in your lap, do I need to ask permission?"

The grin he gave her was as lecherous as they came. "I hereby give you permission to sit in my lap anytime you like."

"So, if we're sitting in the conference room at a meeting, you'd be okay with that?" she asked, sitting down in his lap.

"Okay? Given I'm the only guy in Chicago whose sub works there as well, and therefore the only one where it might come up, oh hell yeah, I'm okay with it. I have to tell you I spent some time in London, and I was always jealous of the guys whose women also worked for Cerberus. I sat through many meetings being jealous of the guys who had their women in their laps."

"Next question, can I just sleep in your t-shirt? I don't have anything remotely sexy, although Camille says when the dust settles, she'll take me shopping."

"Sorry, I don't want you sleeping in my t-shirt."

Trying not to sound dejected, she asked, "why not?"

"Don't pout, baby girl, or I'll give that mouth something better to do. As for why not, for the same reason you do not need to buy anything to sleep in or any panties. You'll sleep naked next to me, and you're forbidden to wear any panties."

A little shocked, she asked, “Why?”

“Mostly because Daddy gets to make the rules. But also because I like the idea of you sleeping naked next to me so I can have you anytime without having to get you naked. As for the panties, I want to be able to think about you sitting downstairs at your desk and knowing I can get to you easily. By the way, Seth said something about hiring a receptionist and giving you an office upstairs. Cerberus is growing and Chicago will be the hub in the States. You’ll need to coordinate stuff. Apparently, those plans were in the making before all this started.”

“Does that mean I can expect you to come ravage me during the day?”

Brock laughed. “Count on it. Thus, the reason for the no panties rule.”

“Last question for now. Do you want me bare below?”

“Yes, but don’t worry about it until we get back home. I have a question for you.”

“Fire away.”

“Do you like the greystone, because if you don’t...”

“I love your home. I think it’s gorgeous. I might want to personalize it a bit—it looks more like a picture in a magazine than your home...”

“You have carte blanche to do whatever you like.”

There was a discreet knock on the door, and the housekeeper delivered their meal.

“Thank you. In the future we’ll eat downstairs with everyone else,” said Alicia.

“Don’t think anything about it,” replied the housekeeper. “You all had a long flight, I suspect. Everyone appeared tired, and yet your men got organized and started their rounds. Now that I know how many of you there will be, I’ll make sure there’s always food prepared regardless of the time.”

After breakfast, they got dressed, and Alicia pulled on the jeans, tank top, and sweater Camille had purchased for her.

“Didn’t you bring anything else?” he asked.

“I did, but I really like this, and it makes me feel confident. But if you like I can change.”

“No, baby girl, you wear what makes you comfortable. If I want you in something specific, I’ll let you know. I need you to start wrapping your head around the idea of the club.”

She grinned and flung herself into his arms. “I was so hoping we’d go. I always wanted to, but I felt...”

“Like you had to stay hidden. No more hiding for you. I want my friends to meet Sonata Royale. My guess is you are far more like her than you are the quiet little office manager we thought we had.”

She nodded. “I am. I just had to hide her for so long.”

They headed down the stairs together and took two of the comm units. Brock showed her how to put it on and they went out and grabbed an SUV, then drove into town.

“How did burlesque enter your life?”

“I saw the movie with Cher and it fascinated me. So when I was looking for a way to exercise, I came across a burlesque studio that gave lessons for cash. Turns out I was good at it.”

“Damn good.”

They strolled into the records office and if anyone recognized Alicia, they kept it to themselves. They worked most of the morning without a break, combing through records.

“Oh my god!” exclaimed Alicia.

“What?” he asked, coming to her side.

“Remember you said we’d know it when we found it?” He nodded. “There’s a certificate of marriage about five years before mine. I never knew he was married before.”

Brock grinned at her. “Let’s go see if the psycho ever bothered with a divorce or what happened to her.”

“Yo, kiddies,” called Seth as he sauntered in carrying a thermal cooler. “I brought lunch and some goodies for the worker bees out there. Find anything?”

“Alicia just found a previous marriage certificate. We’re going to look for any record of a divorce or anything that might have happened to her.”

“Death certificates were the first thing digitized. What’s the name? I’ll search those records and also do a general search on the woman.”

“Janine Webster.”

Seth spelled it out and got to work. Each of them grabbed something to eat along with a cold soda and started trying to track down the elusive first Mrs. Rennault.

“We’re in luck,” called Seth. “She isn’t dead. In fact, she lives in one of the old money neighborhoods with her kids. They’re in middle school.”

“Can you keep looking in here?” asked Brock. “I want to take Alicia by the house and see if we can see anything.”

They headed out to the SUV, plugged the address into the nav unit, and drove to the woman’s home.

Brock parked two houses down on the other side of the street. It was a lovely street and there was a late model Mercedes in the driveway with the top down. Just as they were about to get out and approach the house, a private school bus drove down the street, stopping at various houses and letting kids off the bus.

“Must be nice to have money,” Alicia said.

“Do you recognize any of these names or houses?”

“No, and Ewan always said we didn’t have the money to live here and that he hated snobs.”

“That’s one way to keep your two wives from meeting.”

The school bus stopped in front of the driveway and let out two kids who appeared to be approximately eleven and thirteen. They ran up the driveway, tussling with each other as kids were inclined to do. The front door opened, and an attractive woman in her mid to late forties opened the door.

“Recognize her?”

“I don’t think so, but she does kind of look familiar.”

Brock glanced down at the copies of the records he brought with him and started jotting down numbers and making calculations.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Unless I’m wrong, and I don’t think I am, that’s the first Mrs. Rennault, and those are her kids, who Seth just messaged me have Ewan Rennault listed as the father.”

“Okay, so what does that mean?”

“It means—forgive me baby girl—but most likely the psycho either wants you dead so no one can prove you never died, and therefore he was never owed the insurance, or he doesn’t want the other Mrs. Rennault to know you exist.”

The comms crackled. “Forgive me, I’ve been listening in...” said Seth.

“He does that,” said Brock.

“And usually it’s a good thing I do. That house and the lavish lifestyle? They’re all in her name only. In other words, psycho boy isn’t entitled to any of it, and he sure as hell couldn’t beat on her. If any of this gets out, psycho boy is shit out of luck.”

“Did you find any divorce proceedings?”

“None whatsoever, but I did find some lovely photographs of the happy couple.”

Brock was grinning ear-to-ear.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“It means that his marriage to the first Mrs. Rennault invalidates any marriage you ever had. The whole thing was a sham. You were never married to him.”

CHAPTER 15



ALICIA

“*A* sham?” She couldn’t understand. She understood the words, but the implications of them were too much to comprehend. “My marriage wasn’t legal?”

“No. Isn’t that great?” Brock was so enthusiastic.

“No. It’s not. How could I have been so stupid?”

That seemed to clue him in that all was not right with her.

“Baby girl, you may have been a lot of things in this life, but you were never stupid. That sonofabitch lied to you, abused you, and took advantage of you. What’s worse is that I have to wonder, how many others knew?”

“I should have known...”

“How?” asked Brock, patiently. “Think about it. It took two of us knowing where to search, as well as the best hacker the world has ever known and a guy who can make technology jump through hoops to find this out. There’s no way a woman, any woman, in love says to herself, ‘oh hey, I’d better go through all the records to find out if this guy is married.’ Baby girl, Miley is the most non-trusting, suspicious woman of all time. I’m pretty damn sure she never asked Seth or Sully to run a background check on Damon.”

He had a point.

“I guess you’re right, but honestly, shouldn’t there have been a red flag of some sort?”

“He wouldn’t be a very good con man if he sent up any red flags.”

“Do you think he ever loved me?”

“I doubt it, but then I doubt he loved the first Mrs. Rennault. If he loves anyone at all, it’s himself. Every other person in his life, including those kids *if* they’re his, serve only one purpose and that is to be used and exploited by him. If he fathered those kids, then he’s already figuring out, grooming, and training them to be used by him somewhere down the line.”

“That’s terrible.”

“He’s terrible. He values nothing except those individuals and things that can get him what he wants. The worst part...”

“There’s a worse part?” she asked.

Brock nodded. “My guess is the worst part is he beat you up for no reason. He just beat you to beat you. He wasn’t jealous or possessive, just mean. He had to have another goal.”

“What goal could he possibly have other than to intimidate and frighten me?”

“I hate to say this, but to learn better how to use his fists and not leave a mark, to see how far he could push his law buddies before they took action, to make you run...”

“I did run, several times. He always found me and then beat me bloody.”

“I’m not trying to condone what he did, I need you to understand that this—all of it—was never about you. He had his own motives for what he did. As sick and twisted as they might have been, he never cared enough about you to make any effort. You were a means to an end. I don’t know what that end is, but it was never to keep you close.”

“So, I’m stupid, gullible, and worthless?”

“To him, yes. To me, you are none of those things. You mean everything to me.”

“I must be the perfect woman for you. You want to look after me as if I was a child.”

“Not at all. My need to protect is an integral part of who I am. My instincts to rise above and be a warrior are triggered by needing to ensure those around me are safe. But it’s not because I think of you, or anyone else, as less than me. Hell, I have an instinct to protect Miley and King and even Fitzwallace. None of those people need my protection, but they have it anyway. I want you to be happy and to be the best version of you that you can be.”

“But you like to be called Daddy...”

“As opposed to Sir or Master. The honorarium you use isn’t as important to me as your understanding that I want to nurture you in ways I don’t think you have been. I want you to feel confident and live every single minute of the time we’re given because we never know how long that will be. I want to encourage you, but to do so safely. I don’t think you’re gullible or stupid. I do think you have a kind and loving heart. I’ll bet you used to trust people until they proved untrustworthy...”

“I did before I married—or thought I married—Rennault.”

“And not being able to do that since you met him and then afterwards while you were running for your life has to have taken an enormous toll on you. I want to give that back to you. I want you to embrace life because you know I’ve got your back, and I will protect you as long as there is a breath in my body.”

Something settled with her, and she felt the shackles and shadows of her past falling away. “I love you.” She placed her hand on his mouth. “I’m not saying that to make you feel obligated in any way. I just wanted you to know that.”

“Baby girl, I think I started falling in love with you from the minute I walked into Cerberus, and you were sitting there.”

“That’s not true,” she laughed, “but it’s sweet nonetheless.”

“Careful. I don’t care much for being called a liar. Ask anyone at Cerberus. From the time you joined us, I quit having sex with the subs I discipline.” He laughed. “It really threw me at first, and I only got blow jobs anyway, but then I realized I only wanted to have sex with you.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he assured her. “I’ve been having an exclusive relationship with my hand for quite some time, but we’ll be breaking up in the very near future.”

Alicia unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned forward, her hand resting on his thigh. “How soon?” she whispered.

“Very soon. Now behave yourself.” He touched the comm unit. “Alicia and I are headed back to the house. I don’t want to be parked here too long. Any chance we can get some eyes on this place? I want to know where Mrs. Rennault goes and whether or not the psycho shows up.”

“We’re not far,” answered one of the team members. “Seth sent us to spell you. We’re entering the neighborhood now from the south.”

Brock started up the motor. “We’ll exit to the north to look for anything suspicious.”

“I thought stakeouts lasted forever.”

“Not if you have the manpower. You get tired. You get bored. You miss things. We always try to have teams revolving in and out. We also use a variety of vehicles so we’re harder to spot.”

They headed back to the house they were using as a headquarters and staging area and had dinner with Seth, Miley, and Damon.

As dinner was winding up, Seth said, “I need to talk to Miley and Brock alone. I know both of you can be trusted, but this is not associated with this case and is need-to-know only. In fact, part of what I’ll be doing is reading Miley in.”

“Reading someone in,” drawled Damon, “is Seth-speak for the person who doesn’t know anything about what he’s going

to talk about. Come on, let's you and I go grab some more from the cheese and fruit tray."

"Thanks, Damon," said Brock. "Very few men I'd trust with my baby girl."

"Thank you, Brock, I'm flattered."

"Don't be," said Miley. "He only trusts you because he knows I'd shoot your balls off if you were ever stupid enough to cheat on me. Hey, Alicia, want me to shoot the psycho's balls off?"

Alicia grinned. "I'm not sure even you could hit so small a target."

Brock chuckled. "She shoots; she scores."

Damon shook his head and escorted her out to the patio via a trip through the kitchen. They sat in comfortable chairs nibbling on the cheese and fruit they had picked up as well as a glass of wine for Damon and a bottle of water for her.

"Sure you don't want some of the wine?"

"I'm sure. The last time Brock and I started to get intimate he put the brakes on because he thought I might be intoxicated. I have plans for tonight; I'm not taking any chances." Damon chuckled. "This is your place, isn't it?"

Damon observed her. "Yes; how did you know?"

"It looks like you. Does the team know?"

"Fitz and Miley know, but that's it, although I suspect Brock may have figured it out."

"Why the secrecy?"

"People get funny around those who have a lot of money. Back in Charleston, Miley and I have to be Mr. and Mrs. Damon Knox..."

"I didn't think you were married."

"We haven't done the deed, but as I tell Miley, we are all but married so she needs to quit making that distinction. As I was saying we are Mr. and Mrs. Knox of Knox Industries. In

Chicago, I'm the plus one to a dangerous assassin. Out here, no one knows us. Even the people in town only know that some rich recluse bought the place. Here we just get to be Damon and Miley."

"You bought it for Miley."

He smiled at her. "You are incredibly smart. I can see why Fitzwallace wants to move you up in the business. But if you ever want to move to Charleston, I could use you at Knox Industries. I suspect if you stay in Chicago, Brock will find a hideaway for the two of you."

She looked around. "I doubt Brock and I will ever have this kind of money. I'm a little surprised he lives next door to Royce."

"Would it surprise you to know that Brock comes from money? A whole lot of it and very old."

"That's not true."

"Don't be angry at him."

"He should have told me."

Damon shrugged. "As I said, some people get intimidated by the thought of being very wealthy, and I don't know that he thinks of himself as rich. You two—much like Miley and I, King and Samantha, and Royce and Camille—have been on something of a whirlwind rollercoaster, although the two of you did know one another before everything started moving at warp speed. Money isn't important to him. He's always had it, and if he were to lose it, he'd just make more."

It made sense. Brock was, by far, the most comfortable around Damon. While the others liked him well enough, he was mostly Miley's plus one. Brock, however, seemed to genuinely enjoy Damon's company. Miley and Brock joined them.

"Come on, lover. Take me upstairs and rock my world," said Miley.

Damon turned to Alicia. "Subtlety is not Miley's strong suit." He stood up and without warning tossed Miley over his

shoulder. “It isn’t mine, either.”

Miley stretched her arms down to grab Damon’s ass, which resulted in his smacking her ass and making her laugh.

Brock shook his head. “She laughs a lot more since she’s been with him. Do you want to sit out here for a while?”

“No, Daddy, I want to go upstairs with you and have you, as Miley said, ‘rock my world.’”

“Can do,” he said, drawing her out of the chair and throwing her over his shoulder. Alicia squealed, which made Brock laugh.

Once upstairs, Brock set her down, closing the door firmly behind them. Alicia couldn’t remember a time she hadn’t been fantasizing about Brock. To her he was the be all and end all of hunky guys. He was tall, muscular, and there were times you could see what a lethal weapon he could be, but there was a gentleness about him that had drawn her like a moth to a flame. She stood facing him, her eyes sparking with arousal as heated passion surged through her veins.

Brock walked over to the comfortable settee by the fireplace, sitting down with his legs spread so she could see the evidence of his need and desire as he kicked off his boots.

“Go on, baby girl. Show me what Daddy’s getting.”

Alicia closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed. She wanted this to be real. She didn’t want to hide inside Sonata’s personality. She wanted to be Alicia—here, now, and with Brock. She slipped out of the cardigan she’d been wearing and let it slither to the floor.

“I think Daddy’s going to enjoy this.” He spoke in a lowered tone.

Her body responded with a slight tremor running through it. She grinned. So, he wanted to play? That she could do.

“You want me to dance, Daddy?” She saw the effect her sultry tone and the use of his preferred honorarium had on him—she could practically see his cock throbbing. “You want your baby girl to show you her princess parts?”

Brock gulped. “Where the fuck did you learn that kind of talk, baby girl?”

“I do a lot of reading,” she answered, shimmying out of her jeans and panties, which she tossed to him. “Last time for those.”

Slinking down to her knees, Alicia crawled across the floor to him. She could feel how the tank top gaped and allowed him to see the sexy lace bra beneath.

“Are you teasing Daddy, baby girl?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She reached the foot of the loveseat and remained on all fours. Slowly, she reached up with one hand and unbuttoned his jeans and his cock sprung free from his boxer briefs, thick and hard, pulsating with anticipation. She’d always found it curious that the men of Cerberus all wore button-fly jeans, and now she understood. In the same way the women all went without panties, the men wore the button-flies because they were just innately sexier.

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, she worried if she could actually handle his size. His cock was enormous, but it was also beautiful, with its pronounced veining and the way a drop of pre-cum dripped from the head.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve fantasized about having you do this,” he groaned as he watched her lick the head of his cock, savoring that first taste. Brock’s body shuddered as her tongue wrapped around the tip of his length and then licked the drop of pre-cum before it could fall.

“You like the taste of Daddy’s cock, don’t you, baby girl?”

She could feel the flush in her cheeks. She’d never been one to make love with the lights on—only in the dark. She had the distinct impression that she would need to get used to being fucked in all kinds of places, positions, and times of day. She’d never thought of herself as an overly sexual woman, but somehow with Brock, that had changed.

His hand came down to stroke her hair. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, baby girl. You want what Daddy has to give

you, which is good because you're going to get it a lot."

Alicia said nothing and then began to remove his jeans and boxer briefs. As she did so, Brock removed his shirt. He didn't seem to be afraid or embarrassed to be naked, at all. His muscles bulged and his entire body was ripped, from his sculpted pecs to his washboard abs to the sexy notches that directed her attention to his engorged cock.

"Take off the rest of your clothes, baby girl. Daddy wants to see you naked. Rock back onto your heels so you're kneeling, and keep your legs spread so Daddy can see his pussy weeping with need. And it is weeping, isn't it?"

Alicia didn't know what to say or do, so she did as she was told. He hadn't laid so much as a finger on her, but she wasn't actually sure he couldn't make her come just by talking to her. The broad grin on his face told her he liked what he saw. Her belly wasn't as flat as she'd like it to be, but she had good boobs and her nipples were at attention.

"You do know that pussy belongs to me now, don't you?" She nodded. "That pussy is mine and I will fuck it whenever I want to. I'll make it come whenever I want to. And I will touch it whenever I want to. Do you understand? God, you're beautiful. You have a gorgeous ass and amazing tits that will look so good in clamps. A lovely hourglass figure with a nipped-in waist and generous hips that I can take hold of when Daddy wants to pound into you. And then there's Daddy's crown jewel—that pretty, pink pussy that right now is all slick and shiny with my baby girl's honey. And Daddy's going to gorge himself on that sweet treat. Come to Daddy."

Alicia had never felt sexier or more desirable in her entire life. Even when she was dancing as Sonata Royale, she hadn't felt this empowered. And in this time and place, she wasn't Sonata. She was Alicia. She was Brock's baby girl. She moved back into position and felt his hand fist her hair as he guided her head to his cock.

"Open that pretty mouth for me," he crooned.

Alicia opened her mouth and wrapped her lips around his cock, working her throat to try and accommodate his size

while her tongue stroked and swirled all around him.

“Take it all, baby girl. Swallow Daddy’s cock.”

He forced more of it, working his way to the back of her throat and making her gag but holding her head in place. Alicia whimpered and then sighed when she relaxed. Having Brock take control and dominate her was the thing she’d been looking for all her life.

CHAPTER 16



BROCK

*B*rock watched as his cock disappeared into her mouth, only to reappear while she sucked and licked him. In the future, he'd spend a lazy afternoon teaching her exactly how he liked his cock sucked, but she was doing a damn fine job for now. Her throat muscles contracted around his throbbing shaft as he moved her head up and down. Alicia choked and gagged, struggling to breathe, but not once did she try to resist or retreat.

He started to worry that the depth of his need was making him too hard on her, but he could smell her arousal, her nipples looked as hard as diamonds and her skin was flushed with need. There would come a day her pretty bottom would be pink from his discipline, and she would be sucking his cock. He'd probably come down her throat on that day, but not tonight. Tonight was for plowing her pussy until he'd made her come several times and then filling her up with his seed. Fortunately, they'd already had the safe sex talk and she was on the pill, and neither of them were carrying anything.

Her head bobbed up and down, her eyes filled with lust and a new understanding of who she was. She was his, and she was quickly learning what they both wanted and needed from each other. He was certain Alicia had never allowed herself to admit that she wanted to be dominated, that she wanted to submit. Gripping her hair tighter, he guided her movements and forced her to take him deeper. She gagged again, choking around his cock, and he knew they would both remember this first time.

“You’re going to learn how Daddy likes his cock sucked, baby girl. You’re doing such a good job. Daddy’s going to want to use you all the time.”

She hummed, letting the vibrations reverberate along his length as her tongue slicked over the head of his cock. The way she gazed up at him told him she was ready—no, not just ready, but hungry for more.

“Such a good girl,” he said as he drew her head back, pulling his cock out of her mouth. Holding her away from him, he wrapped his hand around his length and began to stroke, moving it up and down with a steady rhythm.

“Please, Daddy,” she whispered.

Brock leaned down, fisted her hair, and pulled her face toward his cock. She didn’t resist, instead opened her mouth wide, and took him all the way to the root as he thrust in.

“That’s Daddy’s good baby girl. Show Daddy how much you want his cock.”

Brock praised her, running his fingers through her hair. She moaned in response, her body trembling as she continued to suck his length. He knew that this was only the beginning of the power exchange dynamic that would exist between them. He was certain she understood that he would dominate, and she would submit. The idea of her sitting at his feet in the lounge while he petted her head and smoked a cigar made his cock swell.

“That’s it, baby girl. Take it all, and don’t forget how much you please Daddy, and that he treasures your gift of submission.”

Alicia moaned and continued to suck his cock, her pupils dilated with arousal and submission, making his heart pound. With each long, sweeping pass, he could see that she was beginning to understand that she belonged to him, body and soul. And that he belonged to her in the same way. She continued to suck him off, as he held her hair tightly in his grasp. Brock groaned in appreciation as her lips moved up and

down his shaft, her tongue tracing the veins, tasting his precum.

“God, you give good head, baby girl. Daddy’s going to need you to stop.”

She whimpered as he withdrew and started to lean forward to take him back in.

“Don’t do it,” he said sternly. “Daddy would prefer not to have to punish you. Can you be Daddy’s good girl?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whispered, her eyes never leaving his cock.

Reaching out his hand, he took hold of hers. “Up you get.”

He stood and then led her around to the back of the chesterfield loveseat, bending her over and forcing her legs apart. Parting her soft, wet folds with his fingers, he slipped two of them inside her drenched pussy.

“You like pleasing Daddy, don’t you baby girl?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He began to stroke her pussy, loving how her tight walls sucked at his fingers. He fucked her with them until her hips were dancing in rhythm to each movement of his hand. When she moaned, he smiled and began to trace the seam of her ass with his finger. “When we get back to Chicago, Daddy’s going to train your little rosebud to take him there.”

Her body shuddered, but he knew it was from need and not fear or disgust. He continued to tease and tantalize her until he used his thumb to press down firmly on her clit. Just like the ignition button in a car, Alicia’s body came to life, exploding in an orgasm that seemed to overwhelm her. He let her writhe and ride out the wave as her pussy spasmed around his fingers.

“Such a good girl for Daddy. Do you want Daddy’s big hard cock in your pretty pussy?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she moaned.

The feel of her pussy clenching around his fingers was exquisite—his cock would only be more so. She started to

whimper when he removed his fingers from her depths, but the sound was cut short when he shoved his cock deep into her wet pussy, groaning as he finally sank into her. She cried out, her body reacting automatically to his possession and climaxing a second time.

“Good girl,” he crooned as he grasped her hips tightly, thrusting into her with a force that made her cry out.

Somewhere inside, he thought he ought to treat her more gently, but he needed this. He needed her. Her body shook underneath him, but accepted each thrust, her moans growing louder and more desperate. Her pussy tightened around his cock, milking it. His eyes rolled back in pleasure.

“That’s it, baby girl,” he grunted, his voice hoarse. “Take my cock, swallow it whole with that greedy pussy of yours. You belong to me now.”

Her body trembled, but she didn’t resist. Her eyes were closed, and her face was alight with desire and intense pleasure. Tears welled in her eyes, but her pussy continued to grip his cock, pulling him deeper into her.

“You’re mine, baby girl,” he growled, his voice low and commanding. “You belong to me.”

Her only response was a moan as her body bucked under him, her pussy clenching around his cock. Her moans filled the room, her body trembling with every thrust. He could feel her pulse pounding against his shaft, and he knew she was close to a third orgasm.

“Do you want it? Do you want Daddy’s cum, baby girl?” he asked, his voice low and demanding.

“Yes, Daddy,” she whimpered back, her breath too rapid for much more.

“Then you come one more time for Daddy; come for me while I fill you up,” he ordered, knowing she was on the razor’s edge.

It wasn’t her gasp of surprise that told him when she tipped over, it was the way her pussy gulped around him, undulating against his cock until he couldn’t hold back anymore. It was

her orgasm that triggered his own, and he coated her womb with his seed, flooding her as he came harder than he ever had in his life. Alicia continued to writhe beneath him, but he held her hips tight to his, making sure she took every last drop he had to give her.

He stood there, shaking from the force of his orgasm, watching her as she came down from her own high. If she hadn't hit subspace, she'd been damn close. When he'd caught his breath, he pulled out and took her in his arms, cradling her against his chest as she clung to him, sighing softly.

"It's okay, baby girl. Daddy's here."

He kissed her forehead and then brushed his lips over hers, lifting her up in his arms and carrying her out onto the private balcony, where he sat in one of the outdoor rockers. He settled her in his lap and rocked her until she was asleep.

Alicia slept more peacefully than he had ever seen before. She clung to him all night and was like a warm soft kitten next to his hard body. When the morning started to wake her, he rolled her gently onto her back, parting her legs and sliding his hard cock into her.

"Oooh, Daddy, that feels so good."

He chuckled as he began to thrust harder, feeling her body catch his rhythm. They had a lot to do this morning, so this wouldn't be the amazing, long session they'd had the night before. As he pounded into her, he could feel the rush of her climax and allowed himself to topple into the abyss with her.

When she'd come down, he smiled at her. "Good morning, baby girl."

Rolling off the bed, he scooped her up and strode into the bath with her where they took a shower, washing each other's bodies with a combination of discovery, reverence, and a kind of soothing arousal.

As they were getting dressed, Brock said, "I think we need to go and speak to the first Mrs. Rennault."

"I can come?" she asked.

“Apparently fairly easily and frequently,” he teased.

She blushed. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Yes, I do. But I figure I either let you ride along, or I’ll end up having to discipline you when I get back. While that can be kinky and fun, we need to focus on figuring out just what the hell is going on.”

She wrapped both of her arms around his, rose up on her tiptoes, and kissed his cheek. “Last night was amazing and so was this morning. Having you push up into me is a lovely way to start the day. And I do appreciate you understanding that I need to see firsthand.”

“Part of my job is letting you experience all that you need or want to, but doing so safely.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she purred before nipping his shoulder and dancing away from him. She was going to be a handful, and he looked forward to every minute they were given.

Sitting down to breakfast, Brock took the napkin at her place, shook it out and placed it in her lap.

“This is the part where he pees on your leg, so all the other alpha males know you’re taken. Ouch!” Miley said, glaring at Damon as she said the last. “It’s true, and you know it.”

Damon smiled sweetly at her. “If you can’t keep that mouth of yours in check, I have a ball gag with your name on it. It was a gift from Fitz.”

Everyone laughed, and Miley flushed, although whether from embarrassment or anger was hard to tell.

Alicia looked at Miley. “I’m new to all of this. Was that Damon peeing on your leg?”

The table exploded with laughter.

“You catch on fast, girlfriend,” quipped Miley.

After breakfast, Brock and Alicia headed out, returning to the neighborhood and pulling up in the driveway to block the Mercedes.

“Ready?” he asked, placing his hand on her thigh. “You don’t have to do this. You can lock the car, and you’ll be safe.”

She leaned in and kissed him. “I’m fine, and I will never be safer than when I’m with you. I love you.”

“I love you more, baby girl.”

They walked up to the front door, ringing the bell. The woman opened the door, her smiling face going pale. She very obviously recognized Alicia. She immediately tried to shut the door but was prevented from doing so by Brock’s foot.

“Mrs. Rennault? We need to talk.”

He leaned his hand on the door, and the woman let go, backing up with a look of terror on her face.

CHAPTER 17



BROCK

*B*rock smiled pleasantly as the woman backed away from the door. He'd been prepared for shock and disbelief, but no, this woman knew precisely who Alicia was and therefore had known what was happening to her and had done nothing.

"I can see you recognize Alicia. That should make this go far more smoothly than I'd anticipated. So much easier to deal with lies and deceit than recrimination and tears, don't you think? We need to have a little chat."

"I have no interest in speaking with you," the woman said, raising her chin.

Brock nodded. "I can understand that, but you either talk to me here and now or I go to the federal authorities, and you talk with us there."

"You aren't with the FBI."

"You're right," said Alicia. "This is so much worse for you. Brock here is with Cerberus—the leading black ops security firm in the world. I'm not sure if he means FBI, CIA, NSA or some other alphabet agency I've never heard of. But I can assure you that sitting in your living room having coffee and an honest little chit chat here is as good as it gets for you."

She took the woman by the elbow and steered her into the massive living room. Alicia could see it was meant to impress. It was entirely Ewan's taste and devoid completely of any life or joy. Brock seemed to be holding back and letting her take the lead now that he'd gotten them in the door.

“Is that the kitchen through there?” Alicia asked, pointing toward the door.

“Yes, but I’m not getting you any coffee,” the woman replied.

“That’s all right, Janine. It’s Janine, right? Janine Webster before you married Ewan?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Like I said, we’re with Cerberus. Finding out things is kind of our business. Brock, I think you scared Janine just a little. Why don’t you go see if you can get her a cup of coffee.”

“Sure thing, Alicia. You want anything?”

“If she’s got some chilled bottled water and maybe a snack, that would be great.”

He dropped a kiss on her head and headed into the kitchen. It didn’t take long to make a mess of things before coming back out with a mug of coffee for Janine, a bottle of water for Alicia, and a bottled Frappuccino for himself.

“I love these things. The guys give me shit when I order one, so I don’t do it when they’re around.”

“That’s because they’re all intimidated by your muscles, so they try to make fun of you.” She turned to Janine. “They call him the Enforcer of the group. Miley—she’s one of my best friends—is a sniper, but when it comes to one-on-one, Brock is our go-to guy.”

Brock handed out the drinks, walked over to the sofa next to Alicia and sort of flopped down. “You wore me out last night, baby girl.”

She beamed at him. “I had the best time. Did I tell you that was the best sex I ever had? I’ve never come so many times.”

“I didn’t make you sore, did I?”

“A little, but only in the best way.”

The look on Janine’s face was priceless. She was absolutely appalled. In fact, she looked as though she was

going to vomit. Brock had to admit, he'd almost pay to see that. Janine Webster/Rennault was one of those 'perfect' women—dressed impeccably in pastel colors, artfully applied makeup, not a hair out of place and sitting in her perfectly white living room. The kitchen had been more of the same. Brock wondered where the children played.

“You two do realize you’re on an open channel, right?” said Seth. “Don’t get me wrong, though, I’m thinking the two of you should take this show on the road.”

“I only wish there was video,” said Miley, laughing.

“So, Janine,” said Brock. “You don’t mind if I call you Janine, do you? I mean it would get confusing if I called you Mrs. Rennault, as for a number of years, Alicia thought she was the only Mrs. Rennault. Tell me, Janine, did that bastard beat you, too? By the way, where is he hiding out? We know he left Chicago after he tried to kidnap Alicia. That was a good idea on his part, as the cops and the FBI are looking for him.”

“I’m not answering any questions without a lawyer.”

“That’s probably best,” soothed Alicia.

“No, it’s not,” argued Brock. “She needs to help us if she ever wants to see that sonofabitch again. Or the outside of a prison cell, for that matter. I want to know why the two of you targeted Alicia.”

“I had nothing to do with it,” Janine stammered.

“That is complete and utter bullshit,” said Brock. “Even if you didn’t know about it beforehand, you sure as hell knew about it after the fact, and that can land you in almost as much trouble as if you had known all along. Say, do you have any siblings or living parents? I only ask because you might want to call them.”

“Why?”

“Well with you and the asshole in prison, someone’s going to need to look after those two cute kids of yours. Are they Ewan’s? I kind of doubt it. Alicia said he was kind of a dud in the stud department, if you know what I mean. Anyway, if you don’t have someone you can appoint as a legal guardian,

they'll go into foster care, and according to one of my colleagues, the California foster care system sucks."

"No. You can't do that..."

"Sure, I can," said Brock agreeably. "What did the two of you want? Just the insurance money? It seems like a lot of work for just half a million. I know I wouldn't do it for that." He turned to Alicia. "Did I mention I have money? Lots and lots of money?"

"No, but then, I was far more interested in that lethal weapon you keep in your pants."

"Yeah, you did seem real fond of it last night what with all the moaning and screaming. By the way, that's the best sex I ever had, too."

He turned back to Janine. "So, what was the end game? Our friend Seth just thinks Ewan is a psycho sonofabitch and likes beating on women. Since you control the purse strings, he couldn't beat on you, so he found Alicia. Did you watch? Are you as sick as he is?"

"I'm not going to answer any of your questions. Now get out, or I'll call the police."

"Yeah, I'm not going to let that happen." He stood up, pulling a set of plastic zip ties out of his back pocket. "I figured you were going to be difficult, so let's get you up. I'm going to take you into custody. Baby, go get the ball gag out of the glove compartment, will you?"

"Sure. Seth said to remind you that the rendition cells we keep in Afghanistan are all full, but he thinks there's one in China."

"I never said anything like that," sputtered Seth.

"I'm warning you. The two of you need to leave before my husband gets home. You have no idea who you're dealing with. His colleagues will put you in jail," said Janine.

"Baby, she thinks you're arresting her and going to take her to the people he works with."

“Seriously?” Brock asked, sounding seriously deranged, but in a fun sort of way. He turned back to Janine. “You think I’m taking you to the cops? That’s cute!”

Janine threw a pillow at Brock and made a mad dash for the door, but running in stilettos was difficult at best. Brock caught and subdued her easily, slipping the zip ties around her wrists. “See baby girl, that’s why I don’t think you should wear stilettos.”

“But Miley wears them.”

“Yeah, but Miley is a mutant freak.”

“Watch it!” Miley growled.

“Want me to get the ball gag?” asked Alicia.

“Nah, Janine’s not going to scream, are you Janine? She doesn’t want her high-falutin’ neighbors to know there’s anything wrong.”

Grabbing her upper arm, Brock headed for the door. They opened it to find a small group of local police with weapons drawn.

“Let her go, Wickersham,” said one.

“Alicia, get behind me. Directly behind me.”

“I said, let her go.”

Alicia slid past by Janine and Brock. “Gentlemen, let’s be reasonable. I’m from around these parts. I know that you guys aren’t inherently corrupt, and my guess is that there are some of you to whom I turned for help that regret not doing so.”

Several of the men couldn’t meet her eyes and stubbed the toes of their boots along the ground as they lowered their guns.

“That’s what I thought. You don’t need to feel guilty. I’m alive and fine. I think Ewan and Janine here probably didn’t tell you that I’m alive and that they’ve known for at least several weeks.”

“I don’t know either of these people,” said Janine.

“Janine, the jig is up. We have a recording of everything that was said, so it’s probably best if you retain legal counsel and make the best deal you can. We both know Ewan’s going to throw you under the bus the first chance he gets.”

“As for the rest of you,” said Brock. “You should know that I’m with Cerberus. I can tell by the way the color drained out of your faces that you know who we are and our reputation. Alicia and I are not here alone. Why don’t we all just chalk this unfortunate incident up to a lousy morning and call it a day.”

“He was kidnapping me. He was going to use some kind of torture device on me,” hissed Janine.

“That’s not true,” said Alicia. “He was going to use a ball gag on you. It won’t hurt you. It’ll make you drool a lot, but it won’t hurt you.” A number of the cops smiled sheepishly. “I can see by your faces that several of you would have paid good money to see that. I wanted to know why Janine and Ewan chose me for their little scam and exactly what they were planning. I guess none of us is getting what we want this morning.”

She brushed past them, followed closely by Brock. “You were brilliant,” he said, walking directly behind her. She wondered why until his hand connected with her backside. “But the next time I tell you to get directly behind me? You get there and stay there until told otherwise. Got it?”

“Yes, Daddy. I’m sorry. I just thought I could de-escalate the situation...”

“And you did, but you do what you’re told, or you don’t go out in the field again.”

Once inside the SUV, they watched the cops cut Janine loose and escort her back inside the house. Just before she disappeared through the door, she glanced back over her shoulder and smirked at them. She thought she and Ewan had them beat. She was wrong.

“You look troubled,” Alicia said.

Brock nodded. "I am. How did those cops know we were there? There's no way the neighbors called, and I didn't see any obvious visual or listening devices. Seth? Can you check it out?"

"Yeah, I've got one of the drones with me. I'll do a fly-by tonight and see if I can pick up anything. Meanwhile, does anyone know where the psycho pseudo-ex has gone?"

"No," said Brock. "And that's a problem for me."

Brock pulled away from the curb and started to drive back to Damon's place. He switched channels on the comm unit so only Seth and Alicia could hear him, tapping his earpiece twice and flashed Alicia three fingers. Alicia had to pull the thing off to adjust it to a secure channel, but once she had it, she popped it back in her ear.

"Yeah, Brock," said Seth.

"That mole thing? I think it just got worse."

"You think both Ewan and Janine know," said Alicia.

"I'm afraid so. I think Ewan has known where you were for a while now. I think in trying to flush you out, he came upon some sensitive information and sold it to the highest bidder," said Brock.

"Shit," snarled Seth.

CHAPTER 18



ALICIA

They were headed back to Damon's when Alicia was suddenly struck by what she feared Brock would see as a whim, but it had flitted across her brain and wouldn't let go.

"Brock, can we go back to the vital records office?"

"I don't think we need to rub their noses in it."

"I don't think so, either. In fact, I'd be happy to just try and slip in the back. The fewer people who know what we're doing, the better I'll like it."

"What's going on in that beautiful brain of yours?"

"What if I'm not the first one?"

Brock glanced at her. "What do you mean? Not the first one what?"

"Not the first woman he and Janine have done this to. Seth, are you still there?"

"Yeah, baby girl..."

Brock growled and Seth laughed.

"Seth? Knock it off," said Alicia. "I wouldn't provoke him. He's not a happy camper. He wanted to get some answers from Janine, and we got shut down."

"Good point. My apologies, Brock. No offense meant to you or your girl. So, Alicia, what can I help you with?"

“I asked Brock to take us back to the records office. Didn’t you tell me that the death certificates were the first thing digitized?”

“Yeah. Who are we looking for?”

“We’ll do a hand search but see if you can find any death certificates for someone named Rennault. Someone other than me.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Seth.

“What if I’m not the first? What if they’ve done this before?”

“Do you think she was really in on it or just turned a blind eye?”

“At first, I thought she just didn’t care,” said Alicia, “but then I saw the smirk she gave us. Something that kept bugging me was how Ewan came up with this scam? I know I don’t believe he’s as smart as he thinks he is. I’m just not certain he’s even as smart as we think he is.”

“You think she’s the brains behind this?”

“Actually, that makes some sense,” said Seth. “I’ve been tracking Janine Webster Rennault. There’s some mental instability and some question as to how her parents died.”

“But why?” asked Alicia.

“Money,” said Brock and Seth in unison.

“There’s also some real irregularities and instability in her finances. It takes a lot of money to keep up appearances in a town like Stilton.”

“Well done, baby girl,” said Brock.

She knew there were some who wouldn’t like it if he called her that and wouldn’t like the way it made her feel, but Alicia didn’t care. All Alicia knew was he made her feel safe and happy to be alive, and she was pretty sure he felt the same way.

They parked in the back of the building and waited until one of the employees came out the back door. They managed

to slip into the archived records and started searching.

“I think I found it,” said Brock. “There’s a bunch of other stuff, and frankly this looks like some guy’s cold case file. There is another dead Mrs. Rennault. You were right; this isn’t the first time they’ve done this.”

They jotted down the information and left the records office undetected. They gave the information they found to Seth and went to make a sandwich. They returned to the office in the house where Seth had set up shop.

“Joanna Reynolds was married, or at least everyone thought she was, to Ewan Webster. Apparently, he was using his first wife’s maiden name. I think Brock is right; this is somebody’s cold case. The minute I started to tap into some of the info, I had someone chasing me down. Well, chasing cybernetically, anyways. I set up an electronic trap and got a message to the person. She’s willing to meet with us tonight.”

“Does she know who we are or why we’ve contacted her?” asked Brock.

Seth nodded. “I told her we were Cerberus. I don’t think she would have agreed to meet with us if it hadn’t been for that and for recognizing Alicia.”

“Did she know what was happening when it was happening?”

“I don’t think so. I think she knew the other victim. Curiously, she knows Alicia as Sonata Royale. It wasn’t until she saw Alicia that she agreed to meet with us.”

“She agreed to meet with the three of us when she was the only one?” asked Alicia.

“Yes. Actually, she agreed to meet with you on a memorial bench down on the beach. And before Brock tears my head off, Miley has already taken up a position where she’s got a perfect visual and sights on the bench. Damon is hidden up in the headland where he can’t be seen, but he can see everything. Brock is to go with you but stay back. She only wants to talk to Alicia, but understands that if the big guy can’t keep her safe, we won’t risk her.”

“I don’t like it,” growled Brock.

“I’ll be safe, Brock. I promise. Miley will have my back, as will you and Damon.”

Brock turned to Seth. “What are you going to be doing?”

“Earlier today, she sent me a boobytrapped encoded file. If we try to download or decipher it without the key, it’ll self-destruct. If she likes what Alicia has to say, she’ll send a short burst transition with the key code.” He looked at Brock. “Your call.”

“Don’t I have anything to say about it?” asked Alicia.

“No,” said Brock and Seth in unison.

“Do you two practice that? You may not like it,” explained Seth, “but where Doms and the safety of their subs are concerned, Doms have veto power. If you want to see Miley go nuclear, ask her about it sometime.”



In the late afternoon sun, Brock accompanied Alicia down to a deserted beach. It was nothing but open coastline as far as the eye could see. Both Miley and Damon were in place and Brock stopped about two hundred yards back. Alicia approached the woman by herself—Alicia may have appeared to be alone, but she was anything but that.

She came around the front of the bench. “I’m Alicia.”

“No, you’re Sonata Royale. I saw you at the Majestic. Your routine was by far the best.”

“Do I know you?” The woman’s face was vaguely familiar, as was her angular frame.

“From a thousand years ago.”

“Rosemary?” Alicia said, recognition kicking in. “Rosemary Reynolds?”

“You remember me.”

“Of course I do. You were the first person to teach me burlesque.”

She nodded. “I was afraid he’d found you through me. I should have done something.”

“It doesn’t matter. If he finds out you helped me...”

“It won’t matter. I’m dying.” She waved off Alicia’s sympathy. “I’ve had a good life, except for my great-niece.”

“Joanna?”

Rosemary nodded. “That bastard conned her into marrying him. He verbally and physically abused her, but with Joanna, it was more mental and emotional. She had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She was even hospitalized for a short time. By the time I got wind of anything out of the ordinary, she was gone. It was supposed to be suicide. I don’t believe it. Even if I could make myself believe...”

“You think he drove her to it.”

Joanna nodded. “The man I spoke to today told me he’d done the same thing to you but more physical than anything else. I suppose he realized you were stronger than Joanna.”

“Abuse is abuse. Why would he go after her?”

“Because she was an heiress with a sizeable life insurance policy. When he tried to inherit, I began asking questions and raising doubts. Finally, I settled. I let him get the insurance money, but the inheritance stayed with the family. I understand from the man I spoke to...”

“That’s Seth.”

She smiled, her eyes warm with the remembrance of days gone by. “Seth. Yes, that’s it. Seth said you were going to bring Rennault down. I didn’t believe it, but when I saw you, I knew it was my chance to give you what I’ve collected all these years. It isn’t much and I’ve had to hide in Europe, but maybe you can make him pay.”

“That’s the plan. And I have a friend named Miley who says if we can’t do it legally, she’ll shoot his balls off and we can watch him bleed out.”

“Oh, I think I’d like Miley.”

“I think you would, too.”

“I’ve sent the code to Seth.”

“Alicia?”

Brock’s ability to move like a wraith startled both her and Joanna. “Seth wants us to bring Joanna back to the house. Damon is arranging hospice care.”

“That isn’t necessary,” protested Joanna. “The airlines are kind to old, frail women.”

“But the California sunshine and sea breezes will be better. Besides, Seth wants to pick your brain about your encryption code.”

Joanna cackled. “It is rather brilliant, if I do say so myself.”

“Let us help you back to the SUV. You’ll be comfortable at Damon’s.”

“That wouldn’t be Damon Knox, would it?” she asked.

“It would,” said Alicia, helping her up. “Do you know him?”

“Not to speak to, but he’s a rather dashing fellow. Good looking. I hear he’s getting married.”

“Yes, to my friend Miley.”

Joanna cackled again. “Maybe I will go with you. Damon’s house sounds like much more fun than a tiny cell in an abbey on the Isle of Skye.”

They returned to Damon’s home. He had people waiting to turn one of the rooms into a lovely sitting room with a hospital bed and a spectacular view of the ocean. Damon’s housekeeper and the nurse helped Rosemary to her room. They all looked at Damon, who had been all smiles and charm until Rosemary exited the room. His expression turned grim.

“I know how I know her—she helped when I finally got away from Ewan and introduced me to burlesque—but how do

you know her?”

He chuckled. “She used to frequent the club a long, long time ago. She’s Viktor Romanov’s great aunt. He’s very fond of her. She’s English, and she was one of the Jackdaws during World War II. She disappeared about ten years ago. At first, he was turning over every stone, but then he stopped. I always thought she must have contacted him. I’m going to ask her if I can tell him.”

“I wondered if you were the mysterious owner,” said Seth.

“I am, but I’d appreciate it if it stays between the five of us. Sometimes Miley just needs peace and some place she can rest.”

Both Brock and Seth nodded. Alicia reached out and laid her hand on him. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“The physician I spoke to said Rosemary doesn’t have long. She’s just shy of her one hundredth birthday. It’s October 31st. He said he thought Rosemary would go when the veil was the thinnest.”

Alicia smiled sadly. “That sounds like her. If she’s still with us, I’d like to come out for her birthday.”

“That would be very kind, Alicia. I’ll let Rosemary know; Viktor too if Rosemary says it’s okay.”

“Speaking of someone who needs rest, I’m going to take Alicia upstairs so she can get hers.”

They got to their room, and Brock helped her undress and into one of his t-shirts before drawing her out onto the balcony and taking her in his lap.

“Hold me,” she said quietly.

“Always, baby girl.”

“It could have been me—Rosemary’s great-niece. It would have been so easy...”

“I know,” he soothed.

“I think that’s why she helped me and dozens of others.”

He nodded. “She couldn’t save her great-niece, so she saved the rest of you.”

“I want to go home, Brock.”

“I’m sure Damon will let us stay here until...”

“No, this isn’t my home. My home is with you in Chicago. I want to go home and live in our greystone, work at Cerberus, and dance at the Majestic. I don’t need to hide anymore. It’s all out in the open, and I have you to protect me. And I love performing.”

He nodded. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“You’ll teach the others at the club who want to learn burlesque, and that you’ll give a monthly performance at the club—just you and the other subs.”

“Can we bring Bobby and the band?”

He chuckled. “Whatever you want, baby girl. If it’s within my power, it’s yours.”

“You really don’t mind that I can’t wear stilettos?”

“Nope. I like you barefoot...”

“There are other choices...”

“Not on the dungeon floor or in the lounge of Club Southside, there aren’t.”

“I’ll lead a revolt...”

“You might want to talk to JJ about that. She tried it, and those who participated couldn’t sit down for a week.”

“Barefoot it is, then.”

“I like the way you think.”

“I don’t want him to get away with this. I don’t want him to do this to another woman. Do you think I’m just running away?”

“Not at all. Seth, Miley, Damon, and the team will still be here. Rennault won’t get away with this. He’s gone to ground,

but he'll surface again, and when he does, we'll be ready. Seth is already working on something.”

The following morning Damon's plane took off, headed into the sunrise...

Alicia and Brock were going home.

CHAPTER 19



BROCK

Cerberus Headquarters *Chicago, Illinois*

“What’s the latest on Rosemary Reynolds?” asked Brock.

Seth grinned. “She’s hanging in there. Damon says they think she’s getting a little stronger. She loves being out in the courtyard that overlooks the sea. Miley said no one’s seen hide nor hair of Rennault, and the legal wife is protesting her innocence. Since he’s technically the only one who did anything illegal—bigamy, insurance fraud—she’s in the clear.”

“But we know better. Alicia’s right; that bitch is up to her neck in it,” said Brock.

“Damon and Miley really want to bring him to justice for the death of Rosemary’s great-niece. Viktor has been brought up-to-speed, and he’s looking for his pound of flesh. Damon says they’ll keep trying even if Rosemary passes before they get it done. There is no statute of limitations on murder, so they don’t have to have it done by a certain date. I understand King and Samantha are going to go out there. Samantha wants to base a character on Rosemary and her exploits.”

“So much for Damon having a quiet place for Miley.”

“I don’t know that Miley wants a quiet place,” laughed Seth. “Quiet is not one of Miley’s strongest attributes unless she’s stalking someone.”

Brock nodded. “But part of being a Dom is ensuring your sub gets what she needs even when she doesn’t think she wants it.”

“Speaking from personal experience, are we?” teased Seth.

Royce joined them in the conference room. “Gentlemen? Brock, Camille says Sonata Royale is performing tonight. Do you think that’s wise?”

“It might be a mistake, but Alicia loves to perform and much as I’d like to, I can’t keep her swaddled in bubble wrap—although, come to think of it, that might be fun. We’ve got a unit that will be patrolling, and a lot of us in the audience will be armed, so there is that. She should be safe.”

There was a knock on the door, and Alicia joined them, bringing homemade cinnamon rolls. Brock was having to work out harder to keep from packing on the pounds. One of his favorite ways to get in some good cardio, though, was fucking the beautiful woman who was responsible for all the delicious treats.

“I just wanted to thank all of you, not just for what you did for me initially, but for all your support. It means the world to me. Seth, did you get the video equipment installed?”

“What video equipment?” asked Brock, scowling at Seth.

“Rosemary really wanted to see the show. I asked Seth if he could arrange to record it and live stream it back to California.”



The Majestic

Chicago, Illinois

Alicia put on the costume Brock had had custom-made for her and came out for inspection, twirling on her tippy toes. The costume was drop-dead gorgeous. It allowed her a lot of freedom of movement and made the most of her figure. He

also happened to know there was absolutely nothing on under it. He meant to make the most of that sometime this evening.

It was one piece, purple and black with a corseted back and numerous layers of black tulle that started on the sides, just below the small of her back and then ruffled across her backside. Instead of making her feel self-conscious about the ‘junk in her trunk,’ it made the most out of it.

Instead of the short, black bob, Alicia had chosen instead a simple updo that she could let down with just the pull of a few hairpins.

“If Bobby thought that red number was va-va-va-voom, wait until he gets a load of this one. You look stunning, baby girl.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” she said, giving him a kiss. Around their friends, in the club or at the Majestic, she liked calling him ‘Daddy.’ It felt right, and she knew it pleased him.

“You two are just too cute for words,” said Scarlett Champagne.

“But you have to admit, she is the jewel in the Majestic’s crown.”

“Yes, she is.”

Scarlett left them.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You seem worried.”

He thought about sharing that he wasn’t at all sure about this evening’s performance and decided she didn’t need to hear it. Tonight was important to her, and the Majestic had made a big deal out of her return to the stage.

“It’s nothing, I promise.” He leaned in close. “I’m going to have so much fun unwrapping my baby girl tonight.”

“Say the word, and we’ll skip the performance and go home. Get a driver, and I’ll let you have a sneak peek in the back of the car.”

He’d quickly discovered that Alicia’s libido matched his own. Not only was she always willing, but she often initiated

scenes, asking for what she wanted. For a woman who had avoided Club Southside like the plague, she had embraced the lifestyle and had proven to be something of an exhibitionist.

Brock had been by her side from the moment she left Cerberus and headed for the Majestic. They hadn't heard of any sightings of Ewan Rennault but considering the insurance company had filed charges and Damon had arranged for the exhumation of the body of Rosemary Reynolds's great-niece, he would be better off finding a country with no extradition treaty with the United States.

Earlier in the week, she begged off going for a drink with the rest of the crew in favor of decorating her new office. Once he was sure everyone was gone for the evening, Brock locked down the elevator on the third floor and entered her office, closing the door behind him.

"I thought you were going out with the boys," she said.

"Now why would any Daddy worth his salt want to go out with the boys when he has his own baby girl who needs to christen her new desk?"

Alicia was quick to arouse, and she'd caught his meaning immediately, her pupils dilating with need. Her teeth caught her bottom lip, and she chewed on it nervously, her breathing becoming thready and shallow.

"Turn around, baby girl. Hike your skirt up and bend over your new desk. Show Daddy his nice, wet pussy. And it is wet for Daddy, isn't it?" he commanded in a tone of voice he knew turned her on.

He caressed her naked ass, running his hands down over her hips and then bringing one hand up between her legs to play with her pussy and the copious amounts of honey she always produced. He parted her labia, and she felt him jerk open the buttons of his jeans.

"You're awfully wet, baby girl. Do you want Daddy to lick that all up and take you home, or would you rather take his cock here?"

He knew the answer to that question.

“I want Daddy’s cock. I’ve wanted Daddy’s cock all day.”

“You didn’t touch yourself, did you?”

“No, Daddy. You told me I wasn’t allowed. Only Daddy can touch my princess parts.”

His fingers circled her clit, teasing and taunting but not giving her enough to truly climax.

“That’s right, only Daddy can touch you. Only Daddy gives you pleasure. Only Daddy makes you come. Do you want Daddy to fuck you?”

“Yes, Daddy, please. Please fuck your baby girl. She needs you so bad.”

Brock chuckled, grabbed her hips and shoved his engorged cock all the way in until he was balls deep, rocking her up onto her toes. She held onto the edge of the desk while he fucked her hard, grunting and groaning as he did so, pounding into her until he drove her over the edge into a climax that made her cry out his name.

He didn’t have to always be gentle or careful with her. Sometimes they both needed the raw, primal connection that existed between them. He drove in and pulled back, holding her where he wanted her so the only effort that did any good was when she clamped down on him as he rode her.

Brock didn’t just fuck her, he possessed her—skin against skin, the slapping of flesh against flesh as he pounded into her. He fucked her until she’d come a second time, finally thrusting hard and deep, grinding against her as she came a third time and he let loose his control and emptied himself into her.

She’d turned around, dropped to her knees and sucked him clean before putting his cock back into his jeans and straightening her own clothes.

He shook his head, clearing it of the reverie. He needed to make sure she was safe.

“Are you ready to go onstage?”

“I am.”

“Are you going to do *Fever* again?”

“No. I’m going to do an old number that I re-choreographed. I thought this outfit suited it better than *Fever*.”

“What are you going to do?” He didn’t let on that he was a little disappointed. He really wanted to see her do *Fever* again.

“Sonata?” called the band leader from out front. “We’re ready for you.”

She stroked Brock’s jawline with the tip of her index finger. “I’m going to do *My Heart Belongs to Daddy*.”

She sauntered out before he could react. She was an incorrigible flirt and a tease, but the only one she was interested in was him. Most of the time she didn’t even notice when other men were trying to get her attention. No, his baby girl was most definitely a one-man woman.

Brock stayed in the wings on stage right. Royce was right across from him on stage left. Nobody was going anywhere without being seen. The crowd was amped up. They were all waiting for the return of Sonata Royale. He could feel the buzz in the air. It was really rather exciting, but he was the only guy going home to propose to the sexy performer. He knew some people thought it was too soon, but he knew better. The ring he had chosen had a rectangular, deep purple amethyst as the center stone with three rows of pavé diamonds on either side. Miley, Camille, and Samantha had all called it spectacular.

The stage went black, as it had done during rehearsal. The curtain slowly went up as the lights came on, the band struck up the tune and the woman on stage came forward to start the number. The only problem was, it wasn’t Alicia. It was an imposter.

“Royce,” he hollered, pointing at the woman dressed in a cheap knock-off of Alicia’s costume with her hair done up to look like Alicia’s. Realizing the ruse had been discovered, the woman turned and ran through the split in the backdrop and disappeared.

Tapping his comm, Brock raced back to her dressing room, calling, "Alicia is gone. I repeat, Alicia is gone."

He flung open the door, knowing what he would find: nothing. It was empty, and Alicia was nowhere to be found. He began searching the room for any clue while the team locked the building down and began to search for her.

CHAPTER 20



ALICIA

*B*rock walked her from her dressing room to the back of the stage where she waited for her number to get started. Giving her a last kiss for good luck, he moved off into the wings. He was on the right, and Royce was on the left. The Majestic was filled with Cerberus personnel. Some had come to see her perform, and others were working to ensure she was safe.

From behind her, the black curtain fluttered. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the curtain part, and Amber walked through the opening dressed exactly like Alicia. Only her costume and wig were cheap fakes, and Ewan Rennault was holding a gun to her head.

Alicia turned to call out or run, but Ewan said one word. “Don’t.” He waved his gun.

Granted, she didn’t care for Amber, and was in fact planning to fire her, but still she didn’t want the woman killed.

“Come with me, or she dies. Simple choice. What’s it going to be?” Ewan asked.

Alicia nodded. “Let her go, Ewan. It’s me you want.”

“It’s not you I want, it’s your money. Put your hands in front of you.”

She did as she was told, and Ewan zip-tied her hands together. Luckily, Miley had decided to take Alicia under her wing and teach her a few things about surviving a kidnapping.

“Look what I brought you, Daddy,” Amber said, holding up a ball gag.

Ewan secured the gag in Alicia’s mouth. “Show me your tits, baby.”

Without hesitating, Amber pulled down the top of her outfit to reveal her fake boobs with their very stiff nipples. She was as sick as Ewan. The bitch was turned on. Amber pulled the top back up and gave Ewan a kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll see you at the airport. I talked to Janine, so she and the kids are on the flight bound to Hawaii. What a dumb cunt. Even I know they can arrest your ass in Hawaii. We’re going to Costa Rica,” said Amber.

Poor, stupid Amber. She couldn’t tell her because of the ball gag, but even if she could, Alicia was pretty sure she wouldn’t have told her that Costa Rica had an extradition treaty with the United States.

“Did you get all the money transferred, baby?” Ewan asked.

“I did, Daddy, but why can’t I take some with me?” she mewled.

“Does Daddy need to take his belt to your ass and leave welts again?”

Amber grabbed the rounded globes of her perfect, and probably fake, ass. She danced back and forth from one foot to another.

“No Daddy, please. Your widdle girl will be a good girl,” Amber said in a sing-song voice.

“All right, then. As soon as I get rid of this snooty bitch, Daddy will meet you in the hotel in Costa Rica and we’ll have us a party.”

“I’m so excited. I wuv you, Daddy.”

Ewan dragged her out through one of the side entrances. The two men from Cerberus who’d been assigned to guard that exit were down, unconscious and bleeding.

“She really is a sick little bitch. She wanted to knife both of them. She has no idea what’s waiting for her in Costa Rica. Those cartel boys pay good for dumb, blonde, and able to take some discipline when they don’t behave. Just so you know—Janine and the kids aren’t headed for Hawaii. They’re flying to Dubai—no worries about extradition there.”

He shoved her into the trunk of a newer model sedan, and within minutes she was bouncing around. Alicia didn’t think they were going fast enough to be on the freeway, so that meant city streets. She needed to stay calm and assess the situation.

The first thing Alicia did was use what Miley had taught her about getting out of zip ties. She’d made sure Ewan zip-tied her hands in front and that she’d held her hands palms down, side-by-side in fists. Once she was in the trunk it was easy enough to slip them off. She reached up and unbuckled the ball gag.

Again, thanks to Miley, she looked for the taillight closest to her, punched it out and looked around to try and get her bearings. They were driving along one of the lakeside roads. That wasn’t necessarily good. A lot of those roads passed by areas that were fairly isolated. On the other hand, he probably wasn’t going to want to call attention to himself by speeding.

Okay, so her hands were free, she was fairly maneuverable, she knew kind of where she was. Now to get out of this trunk and get to safety. She spotted a small glow-in-the-dark rectangle where the trunk release should be. A lot of new model vehicles had trunk releases inside for safety. She grinned as she realized she could open the trunk from within. She needed to be strategic about when and where she made her move.

Just popping it open at random would alert Ewan that she was free. Unless there was someone around, all he’d have to do was stop the car, get out, run to the trunk, and shut it again. He would also most likely either knock her out or kill her—neither of which was ideal.

She cursed the dying light. Had it been earlier in the day, it might have been more effective when she'd stuck her hand through the missing taillight to attract attention.

But if Ewan could knock her out, she could do the same. She unlocked the trunk but kept it from flying open. When the asshole was in position, she could open it, with some force behind it, smacking him in the jaw or nose and either knocking him out or incapacitating him. If the gun was handy, she'd grab it and find help. If not, she'd run like hell, screaming her fool head off.

Either way, the next time Miley offered to shoot his balls off in a secluded location so they could watch him bleed out while they made s'mores and sang *Kumbaya* with the rest of the girls, she was going to take her up on it.

But for now, she held the trunk lid in place and waited.



Brock

Cerberus Headquarters

Chicago, Illinois

Trying to remain outwardly calm while he was frantic on the inside would be something Brock would never forget. Alicia had disappeared from under their noses. Miley tried reminding him that she and Alicia had gone through the protocols for being abducted, and Alicia was an excellent student.

Two of their men had been knifed and were in the hospital in surgery. The wounds were serious, but they were expected to recover.

The only lead they had was the dimwitted blonde who had been hired to act as hostess/receptionist over at the club. She'd been bebopping out to her car with blood all over her hands. She'd been happy as a pig in mud. Brock would have gladly throttled her, but she was their only lead. She'd demanded that they let her leave, and when they'd refused, she'd fallen into a

sullen silence, complete with a pouting lower lip. While it was adorable and sexy as hell on Alicia, it was downright revolting on Amber.

Brock paced back and forth in the bullpen outside the conference room. Normally he would be able to see inside, but given the toxic level of his anger, King had flipped a switch, and the shades had come down to conceal all that was going on.

Seth had, however, linked his comm unit into the conference room so he could at least hear what was going on.

“Amber, I’m going to need you to work with me,” said King in a kind tone of voice. “You need to tell me where Ewan Rennault has taken her.”

“None of you ever really liked me,” Amber whined. “My daddy said you’ll do anything to get that frigid bitch back. Have you seen her clothes? How she attracted that hunky Brock I’ll never know, although she has been dressing better since they came back from California. Don’t ever tell my daddy this, but if Brock had wanted to fuck me and make me his little girl, I’d have dropped my current daddy like a hot potato.”

The girl was dumb as a rock. No, that wasn’t right, she was dumber than a rock. She didn’t seem to quite grasp the seriousness of the situation.

“Please, boss, just let me put one round in her knee. She’ll talk then, or I’ll put another round in the other knee,” said Miley.

Amber gasped. Miley just might have brought home the point to Amber that she was in a lot of trouble.

“That’s enough, Miley. If you can’t play nice, you can leave the interrogation,” said King. “Now, Amber, honey, is your daddy your real daddy?”

“Eww. No. My old man was a drunk and used to pimp me out, until I slipped some rat poison in his whiskey. Ewan is my daddy who loves me and likes to fuck me. He bought me my new boobs. Aren’t they pretty?”

“How did you meet your daddy?”

“I was working in a strip club, and he said he recognized talent. He also said I was kind of the same size and shape as Alicia. I’m much prettier than her. I have blonde hair, great tits, and don’t weigh anything close to what she does. She needs to work out. I’ll bet that Brock gives her a good workout when he fucks her.”

“What happened next, Amber?”

How King maintained his cool was something Brock would never understand or be able to duplicate. That was probably why King was the brains, and Brock was part of the brawn.

“Well, he recognized Alicia’s picture from the snooty strip club where the girls don’t even get naked, and the guys don’t get lap dances. How’s a girl supposed to make money if she doesn’t give a guy a happy ending? Anyway, he said we could make a lot of money—millions he said—if we just made Alicia disappear, this time for good. When the insurance company started sniffing around, daddy decided we needed to make our move and make sure Alicia stayed dead. So, daddy made me get this job so I could be his spy.”

“Did you help anyone else while you were here?”

She nodded. “Yeah, a couple of times you guys weren’t good about clearing the cache on the copy machine. I just downloaded it, and daddy found buyers. He’s so smart about stuff like that. You guys should just accept that daddy thinks Alicia is a threat, and he has to eliminate threats. Why is she growling at me?”

“Just one bullet...” murmured Miley.

“Out, Miley.”

“King...”

“I said, out.”

Miley stormed out. “Well, what are you doing just standing there? We need to go find Alicia.”

“There will be no shooting of balls, no bonfire, no s’mores and no singing of *Kumbaya* with Alicia and the rest of the girls,” said Damon as he joined them.

Seth left the interrogation. “Dillon intervened and is liaising with the local cops...”

“In other words, he’s using a police scanner modified by you to listen in on their calls.”

“Whatever,” said Seth. “A driver called about a suspicious car driving along the lakeside. The guy thought it looked like a possible abduction. He thought it was a hand waving out of the trunk, but he couldn’t be sure.”

“Alicia,” Brock and Miley said in unison.

“Miley, you’re with me. Seth, get the location of that car, and get one of Damon’s drones to find it,” said Brock as he grabbed the keys to one of the SUVs and called for the elevator that went from the offices to the parking lot.

“Bye, babe. See you in a bit. Do me a favor and make reservations somewhere and ask Camille to bring Alicia something to change into. I gotta go; Brock might shoot the motherfucker before I do.”

“I’m calling dibs,” Brock called over his shoulder.

Black humor was standard operating procedure for Cerberus.

“Only if it’s handguns. If there are rifles involved, that sonofabitch is mine.”

“I thought you weren’t allowed to swear.”

“No, it’s okay. I negotiated a crisis exception.”

They were in the car and headed for the exit when Seth called. “I’ve verified the sighting. It’s a pretty good bet that it is Alicia, and we have a drone closing in. I’m pretty damn sure that’s your girl’s hand waving around for all it is worth. Go get ‘em.”

“Seriously, Brock,” said Miley, “let me take his tires out when he stops. We’ll be right on top of him and take him

down. No fuss. No muss. Alicia will be back in your arms in nothing flat.”

It made sense. Miley truly was the best shot at Cerberus. The last thing they wanted to do was something that would cause the car to crash. Shooting out one or two tires should do the trick.

“I’m depending on you, Miley.”

“I’ve got this.”

He knew she did. In the end, it was nothing as melodramatic as a car chase with Miley shooting out the tires and then shooting out Rennalt’s kneecaps as he tried to run away. No, he had stopped at a deserted gas station, ostensibly to relieve himself. He’d apparently stopped to pound on the trunk to try and frighten Alicia.

What he hadn’t counted on was that Alicia had lost her fear of him. When he came close enough, Alicia had sent the trunk lid flying upwards with enough force that it hit him in the chin and made him stagger back and drop to his knees, momentarily stunned.

Alicia was climbing out of the trunk when Brock and Miley arrived. Rennault was just getting to his feet as the SUV screeched to a halt. Rennault looked up to find Brock and Miley standing before him with their guns leveled.

“Give me a reason,” Miley said quietly. “Hell, give me half a reason.”

Rennault slowly sank back to his knees, putting his hands behind his head and locking his fingers together.

“Coward,” snarled Miley before turning to Brock. “Go get your girl. I’ve got this.”

Brock raced towards Alicia, who flung herself into his arms.

“Brock,” she cried, curling herself around him, trying to get as close to him as possible.

She didn’t seem satisfied to just be hugging him. Alicia jumped up, wrapping her legs around his waist, burying her

face in his neck, and holding on for dear life.

“Baby girl,” he said, taking her in his arms, holding her close, and swearing to himself he’d never let her go again.

Miley handcuffed Ewan and began to drag him behind her over to the SUV, touching the comm unit in her ear. “We have Alicia, and she looks fine. I can’t really tell because Brock won’t turn her loose long enough to find out.”

Alicia reached up, taking Brock’s comm unit. “Seth? Do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Tell Amber she’s fired. And from now on you and the other guys don’t get a say in who I hire for support staff.”

Seth was laughing as he said, “Will do.”



Several Weeks Later...

Brock and Alicia arrived in the office back from an extended stay at Damon and Miley’s home along the California coast. They sauntered into the office with their arms around each other—Alicia’s engagement ring sparkling on her finger for all to see.

Once the hospital had confirmed that Alicia was unharmed, she changed into the outfit Camille had brought with her, and then the entire group went to the restaurant to have dinner. Brock ordered champagne with their appetizer. When it arrived, he ensured everyone had a glass and then dropped to one knee.

“Alicia Jennings, in the sight of our closest friends, I am asking you to marry me.”

She’d thrown her arms around him, covered his face in kisses, and breathlessly told him yes. After slipping the ring on her finger, Brock, Alicia, and their friends enjoyed a spectacular evening. Damon had kindly offered to fly them out to California so Alicia could rest and recuperate.

They had returned the day before and this was their first day back in the office. They walked into the conference room for a staff meeting.

“You’re late,” growled King.

Brock glanced at his Rolex. “No. We’re right on time.”

“Wrong,” said King, trying to maintain a straight face. “If you aren’t at least ten minutes early then you’re late.”

Brock grinned at him, took his usual seat at the table, and pulled Alicia into his lap. “I got news for you, Boss, with my baby girl in my bed, I’ll never be ten minutes early again.”



Baker Street

London, England

“You sure you want to do this?” asked Fitz in his deep Scottish brogue as they watched the woman who kneeled naked in a classic submissive’s pose through the one-way mirror.

“Why wouldn’t I?” asked Seth.

Robert Fitzwallace, head of Cerberus, arched his eyebrow at the head of his Cybersecurity Division. “You watch Hope Pearson like a hungry dog looking at a bone.”

“I do not,” scoffed Seth, hoping the Scotsman might believe him. One look at Fitzwallace accompanied by a disgusted snort told Seth he was hoping in vain. “What’s she doing here, anyway?”

“Hope’s been a member of the club for years. It’s how she met Royce. I don’t think she felt comfortable playing at Club Southside after Royce and Camille got together. When she was promoted to Legal Attaché here at the Embassy in London, she started playing at Baker Street again.”

“What’s with the blindfold and the anonymity?”

Fitz shook his head. “Miley used to do the same thing. They hold non-traditional female roles in their regular lives. JJ tells me that they believe identifying as a submissive and needing something only a Dom can give them makes them look weak in the eyes of those they work with.”

“That is such bullshit. It takes a strong individual to recognize a need to submit and let loose of control if only for a little bit.”

“Aye, but you’re a Dom, which means you know how it is. That leads me back to my original question: are you sure you want to do this? I’ll tell you now, I think one of the reasons Royce broke things off with Hope is because he knew how you felt about her.”

“I didn’t have any feelings about her. She was Royce’s sub, and I don’t poach.”

“Nay, lad, you’re far too honorable to do that, but it doesn’t mean he didn’t notice the way you looked at her. I also think he believed if he got out of the way, the two of you might get together.”

It was Seth’s turn to snort. “Hope was never interested in me.”

“You keep telling yourself that, and you may miss the opportunity of a lifetime.”

The hairs on the back of Seth’s neck began to tickle. “What opportunity? What are you up to?”

“Never you mind. From the moment you knew Hope was in London and playing at Baker Street again, you’ve been angling to come for a visit. I’m handing her to you on a silver platter. The only thing that is left to be seen is whether you’re Dom enough to take it. Are you, or should I find someone else?”

“If she’s looking for a Shibari session, I’m the best one here. Besides you know I would never betray her confidence.”

“I’ll leave you to it then. Remember, she isn’t to know it’s you, so disguise your voice. Hope finds peace and solace in being bound. I expect you to give that to her.”

“And if she wants more?” Seth asked.

“There’s nothing to prevent you from going as far as either of you would like. Hope knows the score and you’re on the stoplight system.”

Seth nodded, picked up his kit which contained the rope he liked to use and headed toward the private playroom. Outside the door he took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, centering himself and entered the room. If Hope could find peace and solace in his ropes, he meant to give it to her.

Deciding that most women he knew loved a Scottish accent and doing a passable imitation of Fitz, he set his kit down quietly. “In case you couldn’t tell, you’re no longer alone.”

“Fitz?”

“Nay, lass. The Scotsman only plays with his wife. He said you were looking for a scene involving Shibari. I’ve considerable skill in the art, and I’d love to see your beautiful body bound in my ropes.”

Hope’s body shivered with desire. She was a beautiful woman. She reminded him of a taller version of a young Elizabeth Taylor—black hair, violet eyes and an hourglass figure that could keep a man enchanted forever. Seeing her naked, on her knees, with her hands resting on top of her slightly parted thighs was something he thought he’d remember for the rest of his life. Her nipples were erect and what he could see of her sex said she was already aroused.

He’d been secretly glad when Royce had pitched a hissy fit about finding Hope in bed with a man who turned out to be a Russian spy. Hope hadn’t known that at the time and she and Royce had never formalized their relationship nor asked for exclusivity on either side. Whether or not she had actually cheated was debatable. In Seth’s mind, Royce was just as much at fault for not declaring himself.

“Give me your hand, lass.” Hope obeyed and placed one hand in his. “I’m going to help you get to your feet.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said with a soft smile curling her lips.

He moved behind her, taking her arm with him—she offered him no resistance. “I’m going to position your arms in a U behind your back, forearms touching with your fingers pointed toward your opposing elbows.”

Gently he moved her hands into place. The position would arch her back slightly, pushing her breasts out. He bound her arms, using a double column tie and passing it around her waist. The room’s lighting was low and moody, which didn’t matter to her as she was blindfolded, but it seemed to put everything on soft focus, making her skin almost glow.

He’d always known that Hope found peace in being bound. Royce had done it for her, but it wasn’t something he particularly enjoyed. He might like seeing a woman bound in a role play, but he didn’t savor every knot he tied, connecting in a deeply intimate manner that when done right could send the one being bound into subspace.

Seth worked carefully. The rope he used was soft but would leave a pattern that would last for several hours once she was released from it. He secured an overhand knot in the front, ensuring it was snug. Between her breasts and the hollow of her throat, he tied another overhand knot. Each time he pulled a knot snug, he could feel his cock tightening that much more. He’d actually convinced himself that he hadn’t wanted her back then. He’d been wrong.

“Do you know how beautiful you are, lass?” he purred as he brought the rope over her shoulders and around her arms.

Slowly and methodically, he worked the ropes until she was wrapped in an intricate tortoiseshell pattern of his own design, passing the rope under her arms and back around to her front. Her nipples had been puckered before, now they were hard nubs just begging to be suckled.

Hope remained absolutely still as he continued to move the rope along her skin, letting his fingers linger here and there. He wanted it snug enough that it didn’t damage her circulatory system, but tight enough that she could feel it. With each knot, each wrap, he could feel Hope relax.

He wrapped her breasts in the rope so that only her areola and nipples were showing. Her breath hitched, and she shivered. He could see and smell the uptick in her arousal. Seth loved women, loved seeing them naked and willing, or naked and angry until his hands and mouth brought them pleasure long before he indulged himself.

People believed that the lifestyle was one sided where the Dom took from the sub, and she serviced him in any way he liked. There were relationships like that. But of all the best ones he knew, there was give and take on both sides and most of the Doms he respected were far more concerned about their sub's well-being than their own personal gratification.

He finished off the design and stepped back. "Lass, you are a masterpiece; absolutely beautiful."

"I feel amazing," she said, dreamily.

God the sound of Hope's voice when she was aroused was like hearing the angels sing, but only if said angels had deeply sultry, sensual voices.

"I'm going to move you to the wall. If you were mine, I'd take you downstairs so every man in the place could see how beautiful you are bound in my ropes." She started to stiffen. "You're not mine and I won't take you downstairs, but I'd like to help you achieve subspace."

She shook her head. "I can get close."

"Trust me for just a while longer. You can stop me at any time."

"All right," she said, nodding her head.

Seth backed Hope up to a place on the wall that had a bar she could grasp. "I want you to use that to steady yourself. If you start to fall or your knees start to buckle, I will catch you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to feast on the most intoxicating pussy I've ever smelled. Earlier tonight someone called me a hungry dog. He was wrong. I'm a starving man, and you're the feast I've been waiting for."

When her only response was another smile, he knelt before her. Seth allowed his hands to skim down her thighs as he nuzzled her with his nose before spreading her legs a little wider, seeing her engorged clit and the slick wet folds of her labia. He licked her in a single long pass up one side of her sex, across her clit, and then back down. He grinned as she grasped the bar to steady herself.

“Good lass,” he murmured as he nuzzled her clit, sucked it between his teeth and gave her a little nip, making her cry out.

Hope was primed and ripe—her body ready for whatever pleasure he wanted to give her. Her arousal was intoxicating, and he had to focus on her to keep himself from going into a frenzy. He wasn’t going to fuck her blindfolded, at least not tonight. But he would make her come. He would send her to subspace. Then afterwards he would cuddle her in a blanket, removing the blindfold and allowing her to ease back into reality.

It was a good plan.

Seth feasted on her sex, spearing her pussy with his tongue again and again, lapping up the honey she offered him. Forget ambrosia, this was the nectar of the gods. His tongue was coated in her juices as he worked her over, holding her firm and steady as he feasted on her essence.

Hope’s body shook and went stiff as she arched her back, shoving her pussy into his face. She moaned before sighing and relaxing.

“You were amazing, Hope.”

Seth would never be sure who realized he hadn’t used his accent first and had called her by name—Hope or him.

“Red! Red! Red! Get me out of these ropes,” she snarled.

“Hope, it’s all right.”

“It sure as hell isn’t. Whoever is monitoring this room, get me the fuck out of these bindings. I mean it, Seth. I know you have a knife. Cut me loose.”

Grabbing the knife he'd kept within arms' reach, he did exactly that. He cut her loose so that she was free within seconds. She ripped the blindfold from around her head.

"You bastard," she roared.

"Take it easy, Hope. You're not hurt. For fuck's sake, I just gave you an orgasm, and you were slipping into subspace."

Seth would never be sure what she might have said next, but obviously his touching her to try and calm her down was the wrong thing to do. They say you never hear the bullet that kills you. Seth now knew you never heard or saw the punch that would break your nose.



Seth and Hope will be back later this year in *The Player.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE



I hope you enjoyed reading *The Enforcer*. The next book is [The Player](#).



In the worlds of espionage and intelligence, where trust is a rare commodity, their love becomes the most dangerous secret of all.

This is Seth and Hope's story... more to come!

BONUS SCENE



Thank you again for reading *The Enforcer*. I am having so much fun writing this series. And can't wait to start the Carriage House series. The next book in Club Southside is Seth and Hope's story in *The Player*.

I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Brock and Alicia as a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

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Eastern Seaboard

High Stakes

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La Cosa Nostra

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Masters of Valor (spin off Masters of the Savoy)

Prophecy

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Deception

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Masters of the Savoy

Advance

Negotiation

Submission

Contract

Bound

Release

Ghost Cat Canyon

Determined

Untamed

Bold

Fearless

Strong

Fated Legacy (spin-off Tangled Vines)

Touch of Fate

Touch of Darkness

Touch of Light

Touch of Fire

Touch of Ice

Touch of Destiny

Tangled Vines (spin-off Wayward Mates)

Corked

Uncorked

Decanted

Breathe

Full Bodied

Late Harvest

Mulled Wine

Wayward Mates

In Vino Veritas

Brought to Heel

Marked and Mated

Mastering His Mate

Taking His Mate

Claimed and Mated

Claimed and Mastered

Hunted and Claimed

Captured and Claimed

Wayward Mates Box Set One

Wayward Mates Box Set Two

Alpha Lords

Warlord

Overlord

Wolflord

Fated

Dragonlord

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To Love a Thief

My Fair Thief

Charade

Carriage House (spinoff Club Southside)

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Club Southside (spinoff Mercenary Masters)

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Claiming Her Heart

Taming her Heart

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Crooked Creek Ranch

Taming His Cowgirl

Tamed on the Ranch

Co-writes

Masters of the Deep

Silent Predator

Fierce Predator

Savage Predator

Wicked Predator

Deadly Predator

ABOUT DELTA JAMES

Other books by Delta James: <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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