

# BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

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## Chapter One

Sandra rubbed her hands together vigorously, letting the soap cut through the remnants of the massage oil.

Fat old prick.

The cheap bastard probably wouldn't even pay her, not that she expected it. That's what she got for agreeing to do a private appointment with a new client. At the time it seemed like a dream come true. Edgar Williams' secretary had said her boss was desperate, had even offered to pay twice her fee.

Of course, for what he seemed to believe a massage therapist did for a living, her price was a steal. She could still feel his fat, hairy fingers gripping her ass. Why on earth would a man like that think money could possibly be enough to make her have sex with him? She'd rather be eaten by a snake!

The pipes made a moaning noise as she shut off the faucets, and she wrinkled her nose. For a couple of lawyers, Edgar and his partner didn't seem to make much. Their office was nothing more than an old, converted house, and it was a dump. She grabbed at the towel to wipe her hands and shuddered as her fingers hit crust. *Yuck*. She wiped them on her jeans instead, then turned and opened the door.

"I'm out of here. You should be ashamed of yourself, Williams," she declared as she stalked out of the bathroom into the office. "I have every intention of reporting you to the Better Business Bureau—"

Her voice cut off abruptly as she took in the scene before her.

Edgar stood frozen, facing a tall shadow of a man. Neither spoke.

"What's going on here?" she asked. The shadow stepped forward into the light. He was big, a man who had clearly spent a lot of time lifting weights. The clothes he wore fit poorly, as if they made for a smaller man. His long, black hair was pulled back in a ponytail and his face seemed chiseled in ice. His arm moved, catching her eye.

Something glinted in his hand. *Shit*. It was a knife.

"You aren't supposed to be here," he said to her slowly, his voice so low she strained to hear it. "I'm sorry you have to be a part of this." Her eyes flew to his face, meeting a cold gaze. What the hell?

"Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you, too," he continued, watching her closely. "I'm here for Edgar, and I hardly figured he'd have a piece like you around. What should I do with you?"

Her heart seemed to stop beating.

“I don’t even know this guy,” she whispered. “Just let me go. I won’t tell anyone anything. I don’t want to be a part of this.”

“How stupid do you think I am?” he asked softly, eyes slipping down her still form. “You’ll scream bloody murder if I let you go. You’ll have to, or they might pin his death on you. In fact, I think I like that idea. You’re a masseuse, right? I thought guys had to go to special parlors to find women like you. A call girl is the perfect murder suspect.”

His mouth twisted, giving the word “masseuse” an ugly connotation. She stiffened.

“I’m a licensed massage therapist,” she said. “I went to school for a long time to learn my craft, and I’ve helped heal a lot of suffering people.”

“Shut up, bitch, nobody cares,” Edgar muttered. “Sean, you don’t have to kill anyone. I’m willing to work with you. We can make things right between us.”

“It’s too late for you Edgar,” Sean said. “I’m touched by your concern for your girlfriend, though.”

“I’m not his girlfriend,” Sandra said firmly. She edged slowly into the room, trying to control the shaking of her legs. Sean stepped toward her, eyes trailing across her body once more.

“I could use some of that *licensed healing*,” he said, the words sounding dirty. He dropped one hand slowly to his crotch, and cupped himself. Her eyes followed his hand, noticing a large, long ridge beneath his pants. Edgar shot her a glance and sidled to one side of the room. Maybe he had an idea? Not likely, but she couldn’t bring herself to give him away by following him with her eyes.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked, letting her voice go soft. She straightened her shoulders, pushing her breasts out. If Edgar needed a distraction to help rescue them, she was ready and willing to help out. Thankfully her T-shirt had a scoop neckline. Now if only she had some more cleavage...

“Not right away,” Sean murmured, running his hand slowly up and down the length of his erection. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Edgar slip through the door. What was he doing? He was supposed to thump the bad guy over the head while she distracted him, not run away. “Not before I’m done with you. I haven’t had a woman in a hell of a long time. You look just like a ripe peach to me, all soft and filled with juices.”

A bolt of lightning flashed, followed by a loud clap of thunder. Edgar bolted down the hallway.

“Edgar, you bastard!” she screamed. Sean spun around, giving out a mighty bellow of anger. Sandra looked around desperately for some kind of weapon. The closest thing she could see was a wooden chair. She picked it up and brought it crashing down across the back of his head. He staggered to one side and she pushed past him out the door. She could hear his muttered curses as she ran down the hall, through the living room that masqueraded as a waiting room, and out the front door. There was no sign of Edgar. She jetted across the wet pavement toward her aging hatchback and fumbled in her jeans pocket for the keys. Where were they?

Fuck.

She’d left them inside.

A noise came from behind; he was coming. She needed to get *away*.

She took off down the street, passing boarded-up houses and small, closed businesses. Nine at night, and the entire block had shut down. Why had she agreed to an evening appointment in this part of town? It was a cesspit, dangerous for a woman alone.

She could hear his footsteps thudding behind her. Damn, he was fast.

Lightning flashed again; rain burst from the sky, hitting the pavement in splatters. Within seconds she felt it soaking her hair and her T-shirt. She slipped and almost went down, but managed to flail her arms and pull herself back upright.

He was gaining on her. She wouldn't be able to outrun him.

She turned a corner and a light called to her from a storefront diner? She put on an extra burst of speed and started toward it. Not fast enough. His fingers caught the back of her T-shirt, ripping at it viciously. She almost went down, but she managed to keep to her feet, somehow tried to keep moving. Maybe she could rip the shirt and get away...

He jerked back on the fabric. Hard. She choked, falling backwards, hitting the ground with such force that she couldn't breathe. He rolled onto her, roughly covering her mouth with his hand.

"You aren't getting away just yet, little girl," he said, his voice low and menacing. "I've worked too hard for this to let you fuck it up. Edgar will keep his mouth shut, he'll be too scared not to. You're another story."

Oh, she was scared all right. She choked back a sob, wishing desperately that she hadn't taken the appointment. What had she been thinking?

He lay on top of her for several tense seconds as her pulse pounded in her ears. Her chest heaved against his, the hard points of her nipples flattened against his muscles. Nothing about him gave even an inch of space. She opened her mouth, gasping against his hand for air. She couldn't get a deep breath. One small part of her mind registered he wasn't breathing hard at all. Bastard.

"I'm going to let you up slowly," he said, whispered in her ear. His breath seemed hot, menacing. "You need to keep your mouth shut. If you don't, I'll kill you. If you do exactly what I say, you may have a chance to live. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head, her gaze darting toward the diner. Why didn't anyone see her? Sure, it was dark and wet, but they were right in the middle of the street. Didn't they realize she needed help?

"Look at me," he said. "Convince me that you understand."

She turned her eyes toward him, getting a good look at the man for the first time. Pale blue eyes met her gaze, so pale they seemed unnatural. *Witch eyes*, she thought, shuddering. They bore through her without a trace of warmth, two orbs of ice penetrating her soul.

"Are you going to make any noise?" he asked slowly.

She shook her head as well as she could, meaning it. She had no doubt that he'd kill her if she didn't obey. Not that he'd enjoy it, she thought. Killing her would be no more than swatting a fly to him. He wouldn't think twice about it.

"You keep quiet and stay next to me," he said. "If we run into anyone, you agree with everything I say."

She nodded, and then he leaned up on one arm. The movement pushed his hips down into her, and to

her horror she felt something press against her. That same bulge she'd seen before, only much bigger. He wanted her.

Her startled gaze flew to his face again.

"If you're good, I'll keep you around for a while," he said slowly. "You might have all kinds of uses."

With that he let her go, pushing himself to his feet and then pulling her up roughly beside him. He grabbed her upper arm and marched her down the street toward Edgar's office. As they walked, a van pulled up next to them, and for one shining moment hope filled her heart. Then the door slid open, and a black man with eyes as dead as her captor's looked at them.

"Who the hell is she?" he asked.

"She's my new toy," the man said. "She fucked up my little visit with Eddie-boy, and now she's seen too much."

"Why is she still alive?" the man asked as casually as if they were discussing a sick plant. "Valzar isn't going to like this."

"Why do you think she's still alive? Look at her," Sean replied, jerking his head in the general direction of her breasts. "I could use the services of a pro right now, and she's feeling motivated to stay alive. We'll work something out."

The man shrugged, apparently indifferent to her fate.

"So long as she can't ID us when this is all over," he said. "Oh, we got Edgar for you. He's in a dumpster about a block the other direction."

"Thanks."

Sean pushed her into the van and hopped up after her. She lurched against the other man, and he pushed her back into a seat. His touch held no kindness.

"Let's go," Sean said, thumping the back of the seat before him. The van swerved out into the street, tires squealing across the wet pavement. Sandra sank back into the seat, wishing with all her might that Sean and his friends had gotten to Edgar long before she'd ever heard of the asshole.

## Chapter Two

Sean collapsed on the seat next to the hooker. He was exhausted, soaked and had missed out on getting personal revenge against the man he hated more than anyone on earth. He'd waited years for that revenge. It was revenge for his fallen men, too, although they would never know about it. They had died to feed Williams' greed, along with the hostage they were trying to rescue.

Now he wanted to howl, to punch out with his fists and kill. He forced the feelings back, maintaining his frozen exterior. He had to stay calm, had to escape. Because of her, he'd lost the chance to kill Williams. He wanted to hate her, but she smelled too good, even wet and muddy. It had been five years, two months, and ten days since he'd touched a woman.

He wanted desperately to touch this one.

His old friend Del sat in the seat next to them, carefully ignoring their guest. His silence spoke volumes. She was a liability; she could link all of them to Williams. He should have killed her.

Del was right, of course. She *was* a liability. He really couldn't afford to let her live, but he'd be damned if he wanted to kill her just yet. Or at all, really. A pro like her would understand, they would come to an arrangement, he told himself. Hell, she might like South America. He sure did.

He reached between his legs, adjusting his pants to a more comfortable position. His cock throbbed. He could almost feel her squirming beneath him on the ground, feel her soft breasts pushing against his chest as she gasped for air. Her belly had given way to him so easily, and he knew instinctively that her legs would have cradled him to perfection. She was a whore—she *knew* how to touch a man in all the right places. He couldn't wait to get his hands on her.

She shivered beside him. Probably cold, he thought, and scared. Sean wrapped one arm around her shoulder, pulling her stiff body against his. She didn't want to be touched—he could feel the fear radiating from her. But she was so soft and small next to him, like a little rabbit. He wanted to squeeze her. Sean lifted her onto his lap, pulling her head to his chest.

“We'll work something out,” he repeated softly, trying to calm her fears.

Beside him Del gave a snort of disgust.

“You can sit up front if you like,” Sean said, giving Del a pointed look. Del shook his head slowly, but leveraged his large frame up. He stood, bracing himself against the seatbacks as he moved forward and dropped down into the broad passenger-side chair.

Sean ignored him, turning back to his newfound treasure instead.

Her little ass was tight and warm against him, and he could feel himself swelling even larger. He closed his eyes, and his hands clutched her body almost spasmodically. Hot. Female. His.

She moaned and gave a whimper of protest.

“Don't worry, I'll be a better customer than Edgar Williams,” he said, not wanting to think about those fat hands touching her. It was better to imagine she wasn't a whore, that she was his woman, and he could do whatever he wanted with her. Of course, he *could* do whatever he wanted with her, he reflected, so long as he paid her enough. Once upon a time, the thought might have bothered him, perhaps even disgusted him.

Now it just made him harder.

He knew they'd arrive at the airstrip soon, but he couldn't help himself. He had to touch her. He grasped her small waist, lifting her and repositioning her so that she straddled his lap, facing him. He lifted his hips, pressing his erection up into the juncture of her thighs.

Damn, that was good.

She moaned once more, and he opened his eyes to look at her face.

Her eyes were large and brown in her face, pixie eyes, he thought with bitter bemusement. Not the kind of eyes you should find on a working girl. She had pale skin with a smattering of freckles across her nose, and she bit her lip nervously as she searched his face. The gesture drew his attention to her lips, and he

studied them thoughtfully. They were full, slightly chapped. He imagined kissing them, knowing full well she'd probably bite him if he tried. At least he hoped she would. He liked a woman with a little spark. She didn't seem to have much fight left in her at the moment, but she'd sure given him a run for his money earlier. He'd actually thought for a moment that she might get away from him.

He wondered what she was thinking, and then decided he didn't care. She was sexy as hell. He looked lower, and realized that if they had more light he'd probably be able to see right through her wet shirt. As it was, he could see the faint outline of her bra. It must be black, he realized, to stand out like that. He closed his eyes, imagining her rounded, pouty breasts draped in wisps of black lace. He groaned and rocked her forward over his cock.

He didn't want to think about how many men she'd had; he wanted to think about the soft, warm spot between her legs. He wanted to thrust up into her so hard she screamed. He imagined doing it, and his hips bucked up at her again. The friction of their clothes rubbing felt almost painful to his sensitive flesh, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. Grasping her hips firmly in his hands, he lifted her slightly and then rubbed her down the length of his cock. He did it again, repeating the motion until he thought he'd die. Tension spiraled down toward his groin, building with each motion until he thought he might burst right out of his pants.

Or worse yet, burst in them.

He reached down, determined to free his length from the imprisoning cloth. She could touch him, wrap her fingers around him and massage him right there. It would be amazing, the most perfect sensation he could imagine.

Let her earn her keep; they all had to do their part.

But even as he wormed his hand between them, the van came to a stop and Del turned to look at him with a toothy, humorless grin.

"You're lucky," he said, "Valzar's come up in the world. He's got a private jet with a bedroom. I suggest you wait until you're on board before doing anything else. We're not out of the woods yet, you know."

Sean nodded, knowing Del was right. He'd already wasted precious time hunting Williams; his deal for protection and cover from the CIA wasn't worth a damn if he didn't even make it out of the country. The locals were still trying to catch him. Hell, he was kind of surprised they weren't waiting for him at the airstrip. For once, though, his luck seemed to be holding. The door on the side of the van slid open, and a dark-skinned man in a loose shirt and jeans smiled at him.

"I see you haven't changed, *amigo*," Valzar said in his soft, lightly accented voice. "Always a girl in tow. Let's board the plane—we've been waiting for you. It hasn't occurred to your stupid *gringo* prison guards to shut down the airspace around here, but they'll figure it out soon enough. Let's leave before they think of it."

Sean smiled, unexpectedly pleased to see Valzar. Damn, he'd missed the man.

"Out," he said, pushing the woman off his lap and ahead of him as he jumped down onto the tarmac. In the distance he could see Valzar's plane—small, sleek and fast.

"You've come up in the world, friend," he said, giving the man a hug. The woman stood next to them awkwardly; he didn't bother watching her. Del eyed her coldly, fingering his gun.

Valzar took his arm and started walking him toward the plane. Del followed, pushing the woman along

beside them. His little bird wouldn't get away while Del stood guard.

"You're a lucky man, Sean," Valzar said. "Deals like this one don't come along very often. We all thought you were long lost."

"I thought I might be, too," Sean said. He'd been out of his prison cell less than four hours, but already it seemed like some kind of horrible dream.

He'd rather die than go back.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked, nodding toward the plane. "I know you must have paid them to help me escape, not to mention the tab for that little beauty."

"When I heard that an opportunity was coming, I couldn't resist," Valzar said, shrugging with Latin elegance. "Don't worry about the money. We're partners, remember? You still have plenty of cash lying around, you know. I've been taking good care of it for you."

"I didn't expect that," Sean said, shaking his head. "We always said that if one of us got caught, the other shouldn't look back. That was the plan."

"Fuck the plan," Valzar said, grinning broadly. "I enjoyed tricking the *gringo* prison guards. It was worth it just to see their stupid pig faces on the television set while we waited. They still have no idea what hit them."

"How many men escaped?" Sean asked.

"Couple hundred?" Valzar said, giving another fluid shrug. "They probably aren't even sure that you're gone yet. There's still plenty of confusion at the prison. They're rioting, you know."

"How did you arrange that?" Sean asked, almost afraid to hear the answer. Valzar had always been ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted.

"I didn't have to," Valzar said. "Our mutual friends took care of everything. All they want in return is some consideration down the line, which I was planning to give them anyway."

Sean nodded, not wanting the details. The less he knew about CIA operations the better.

"How long will it take us to get out of U.S. airspace?" he asked. "Will that be a problem?"

"You've been in prison a long time, *amigo*," Valzar said, flashing his playboy's grin. "I guess you haven't heard. I have diplomatic immunity now. This plane belongs to my government. If they try to stop us, they'll create an international incident."

## Chapter Three

Sandra watched closely as the two men walked ahead of her, talking in what seemed like friendly enough tones. Del marched next to her, face sullen. Her eyes darted around, looking for ways to escape. The rain was falling harder now, and she wondered for a moment if it would be too dangerous for the plane to take off.

Of course not, she realized in disgust. These were men who weren't afraid to commit murder and kidnapping. Why would they let the weather stop them?

Of course, the weather might serve her purpose. If she found just the right moment to break away, the darkness might provide enough cover to escape. She stole a look at Del, who seemed to be ignoring her. Lightning flashed again, and a thunderclap hit so hard the very ground seemed to shake beneath their feet. It was her shot.

She took off running as fast as she could, deliberately heading for the darkness along the side of the runway. There were no buildings there, only a few lonely-looking crop-dusters tethered with worn ropes. Beyond them were trees and cover. If she could just make it that far she'd at least have a chance to escape.

She heard Del shouting behind her. It took him a couple seconds to register her escape, and then something made a cracking noise.

Shots.

Holy Mother, he was shooting his gun at her! She'd thought she was already going as fast she could run, but suddenly she found more speed. The noise cracked again, and then once more. She heard more shouts from behind, and then a thudding sound. Holes appeared in one of the planes ahead of her and she gulped, terrified. She made it past the first of the planes, ducking behind it and pausing for a moment to catch her breath and clutch her side.

Big mistake.

Her captor, the one they called Sean, was right behind her, all but plowing her over when he came barreling around the plane. She lurched away from him and took off again, ignoring the terrible stitch in her side. Why hadn't she signed up for that aerobics class? She'd been meaning to do it for weeks now. Mom had been right, laziness really *would* be the death of her.

The pavement beneath her feet abruptly disappeared, and her feet sank into sandy gravel. It threw her off and she fell forward, hard, hands hitting the ground with enough force to tear off the skin. She heard him coming. She crawled forward, trying to push herself to her feet. Moving was hard, she'd knocked the breath right out of her lungs when she fell.

He hit her with the force of a train, slamming her into the ground as he came down. He was hard, wet, angry, and for one moment she wondered if he'd kill her right on the spot. Instead he just held her there, panting hard and muttering under his breath.

"That was stupid, girl," he said roughly. "Very stupid. You made me look bad in front of my friends and they aren't the kind of people to forget something like that. Neither am I, for that matter. You'll be sorry you did this."

She had no doubt he told the truth. She was sorry already. Her legs were already cramping, and she knew she'd ache in the morning. If she survived to see the morning.

"I'll do what you say," she muttered quickly. "Please don't kill me. All I want is to live. Please."

"Oh, you'll live," he said, his voice rough. "After the hassle you've given me, I'll be damned if I'll let you go this easy. You owe me now."

She didn't respond to the patently illogical statement, knowing that arguing with him was foolish. If he said she was the problem, she'd accept responsibility. Whatever it took to keep him happy was good



enough for her. He pushed himself up slowly and reached one hand down to her. She took it with resignation; she was beat. Whatever chances she might have to get away were over for the moment. Now she needed to conserve her strength.

He pulled her to her feet and marched her along next to him, one hand wrapped firmly around her upper arm. It hurt and she knew she'd have bruises there the next day. Then again, she probably have bruises all over.

They walked in silence back through the parked planes. Del sat on the tarmac near the jet, clutching his jaw and giving her a look of such hatred that she shivered. How had he gotten hurt? The other man, Valzar, watched her with cool speculation in his eyes, as if she were some sort of strange and exotic bird he was considering eating.

She didn't like that look at all.

Sean stayed silent, marching her past both of them toward the jet. She was freezing cold now, and covered in mud, but nobody seemed to notice or care. They reached the foot of a small flight of steps leading to the open hatch of the jet. Sean pushed her up ahead of him, and she stumbled. One of her shoes was gone, she realized. She was walking half barefoot through the rain and she hadn't even noticed. Her toe throbbed, and she wondered if she were bleeding.

They entered the plane and he pushed her toward the back. Along each side were comfortable loungers. Nobody was in them. He kept her moving until they reached the end of the hall where a narrow door awaited them.

"Through that door," he said roughly. "We'll be able to get cleaned up in there. I'm sure Valzar doesn't want us getting mud all over his pretty airplane."

She opened the door, finding herself in a surprisingly spacious room. A large bed stood against one wall, as well as several chairs and a closet. Another door, just past the bed, seemed to lead into a bathroom.

"We'll shower in there later," he said coolly, letting go of her arm for the first time. "We'll be taking off in a couple minutes, and until we're in the air, we shouldn't be moving around the cabin. Take off your clothes."

She stood frozen, unable to process his words.

"I said take off your clothes," he said again, opening the buttons of his own shirt. His fingers revealed a well-muscled chest covered in springy black hair. It was broad and finely muscled. She gaped at him, hardly believing this was real. Was he going to rape her like this? It seemed so... *sudden*. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts.

"Do you want me to take off your clothes for you?" he asked coldly. "I don't want you getting mud all over the plane, and you'll do that if you don't get that stuff off right now."

"Oh," she said, turning away and blushing. She started pulling the shirt over her head, and then froze. He'd stopped moving behind her. She turned to find him watching her.

"Take them off."

She pulled her wet T-shirt up slowly, wishing desperately that she'd worn a plain white bra. Why had she gone with black that morning? What had she been thinking? The shirt was gone all too soon, and she reached down to unzip her jeans.

They were soaking wet, and the zipper stuck.

She turned away from him once more, working at it and feeling her breath come in short puffs. Then she felt the warmth of his body behind her; she froze. His hands reached around her, grasping the zipper in firm fingers. He worked it down slowly, and then reached his hands into the waist of her jeans to slide them down. His touch was almost gentle, a complete contrast with his tone of voice. She felt fingers graze her flesh as he pushed the wet fabric lower, across her hipbones and down the side of her thighs. The jeans clung to her, but he slid them down with the same strength he'd used to capture her earlier. She had no doubt in that moment that he'd be able to rip them off if he wanted.

As her jeans moved lower, he knelt behind her. She felt his hot breath on her back as he dropped down, could feel the start of surprise he gave as her red thong panties came into view.

Oh Lord. She'd only worn them because she needed to do laundry. They'd been a gift from Matt, the idiot who'd dumped her two months ago for a grad student. He'd said she bored him. Oh, to go back to those boring days again... And to think she used to wish for a little more excitement in her life!

Sean stopped moving as the thong came into view, his breath hitting the small of her back in short, sharp puffs. He was seeing her bare ass in a way only a lover should see it, she thought miserably. Then he started moving again, sliding his hand within the jeans down to her knees.

"You can get it from here," he said roughly. She nodded, unsure of what to say, waiting for him to step back.

He didn't move.

She tried to kick her feet free of the fabric but she kept getting tangled. With a sinking feeling, she realized she was going to have to bend over and pull the jeans off. She did so slowly, wondering if the blush she could feel in her face extended all the way down her body. He had to be getting quite the view of her ass. Matt had always said it was her best feature, usually in conjunction with some kind of a comment about how her brains weren't worth a damn. Sean didn't say anything, though. He didn't touch her, either, and then she was free from the heavy fabric. She stepped forward turning slowly to face him.

"What now?" she asked, afraid to hear the answer. From the feel of his erection earlier, she had a pretty good idea what his plans were. She thought about fighting him, refusing his touch, but dismissed the idea with frightening ease. She wanted to live. If that meant accommodating him sexually, so be it. She wasn't some shrinking Victorian flower, she knew what it meant to do *it*. Hell, it couldn't be worse than Matt's drunken caresses and stinking breath.

"Get in the bed," he said, jerking his head in that direction. "You're freezing and you need to warm up. It's the best we can do for now."

"What about the sheets, won't they get wet?" she asked, and then wondered why she bothered. This was a kidnapping, not a decorating show. To hell with the sheets.

"They'll be fine," he said in a bemused tone of voice, apparently sharing her thoughts. "We can change them later. Right now I just want to get warmed up."

She turned away from him and walked slowly toward the bed. They would have sex now, she was certain of it. Maybe she could make a break past him and run out the door?

The plane's engines powered up, and she heard a thudding noise. The doors had closed. Too late. They would land eventually—she'd try to escape then. The key was to stay alive long enough to take

advantage of whatever opportunities might come down the line. Staying alive meant sex.

“Come on, move,” he said roughly. “We’ll be taking off soon, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She smothered an absurdly inappropriate laugh, and climbed into the bed before pulling the sheets and covers up around her. The fabric was slippery, and very smooth. Any other time she might have taken a moment to simply enjoy the texture of the silk, but not now. He walked across the tiny cabin all too quickly, pulling off his shirt as he moved. He stood beside bed and unzipped his pants slowly, watching her with an intensity that frightened her. She tried not to watch, tried not to see those fingers pull down the zipper slowly and steadily, but she couldn’t help herself.

He was so finely built that at any other time she’d probably be breathless by now. He was the kind of guy who never looked at women like her. Six-pack abs, a tight waist. . . For a moment her breath caught, and she was overwhelmed with sheer appreciation for his figure.

Then he started pulling his pants down.

He wasn’t wearing any underwear.

Nothing.

His penis sprang into view, fully erect and pulsing with dark red arousal. He dropped the pants down, kicking them off, then leaned over the bed toward her. His face lowered towards hers, and he whispered in her ear.

“I won’t hurt you, but you have to accommodate me,” he said softly. “I’ve been without a woman for a long, long time, and if I don’t feel you next to me pretty soon I’m going to die. Understand?”

She nodded her head, although she wasn’t quite sure what he meant by “accommodate.” For all she knew he was some sick bastard who got off on telling women they were safe and then killing them.

She wanted to believe him, though. Desperately.

He pulled the covers down and slowly slid in next to her. The plane lurched; she felt panic rising in her chest. He was too close to her, his heat was all around her and she could smell him. Slightly sweaty, male, damp.

She couldn’t take it anymore. Throwing off the covers, she tried to roll out of the bed. He was on her in a flash, pulling her into his arms and wrapping his legs around hers. She struggled for a moment then fell limp against him.

His naked cock pulsed against the flesh of her stomach. Groaning, he pumped his hips into her softness and she gave a little moan of fright.

“Don’t tempt me too much,” he said tightly. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I can’t guarantee what I’ll do if you keep wiggling around like that.”

She froze. The heat of his erection burned through her. It was too much.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she asked with a panicky voice. “I don’t deserve this. I was just doing my job.”

It seemed to be the wrong question.

“Funny, I was just doing my job, too, and I ended up in jail for five years,” he muttered. “Do you know

what it feels like to go without fucking for five years? I want to slam into you so hard it makes my head hurt. Do what I say, and that won't happen to you. At least not tonight."

Had she heard him right? Everything was happening so fast, it felt like she was spinning.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked. "Tell me exactly what I can do keep you happy."

"For one thing, I want you to lay in this damn bed and stop trying to run away," he said, loosening his hold on her. He didn't let her go completely, but he no longer squeezed her.

"I want you to hold me and make me come. It doesn't have to be in your prissy little body, although why you're so uptight, I don't understand. If you can let Edgar fuck you, I sure as shit don't understand why you don't let me."

His harsh words cut through her, and she had to hold back a sniff. She felt like crying. *Don't be a wimp*, she told herself sharply. Be strong, be brave. Survive and move forward.

"I can touch you," she said slowly. "Will you let me move?"

He held her for a moment longer, then let her slide out of his arms.

"Can we turn the light off?" she asked, looking around the brightly lit cabin with distaste.

"So you can pretend I'm someone else?" he asked, his face twisted with dark humor. "I don't care if you imagine that, but I do want to see you. It's been too long for me."

She nodded, and looked around again. What was she supposed to do?

"You can start by touching me," he said, as if reading her mind. "Rub my chest."

She reached out with one hand, laying the fingers flat between his nipples. The plane shuddered again; they were starting their taxi down the runway.

"Is it safe to fly like this?" she asked hesitantly.

"Well, it's against FAA regulations to fly without a seatbelt," he said in a low voice. "But I'm relatively certain they won't be inspecting us, so don't worry about it."

Her breath caught, and she realized he'd made a joke. What kind of kidnapper made jokes?

"What if we hit turbulence?" she asked.

"I'll hold you," he said. "Trust me, I'd enjoy it. Now do your thing."

She moved her hand lightly on his chest, unsure of what should come next. He gave her a look of impatience, then grabbed her hand and pulled it over his right nipple.

"Let your hand drift back and forth," he said. "Play with it. And smile while you're doing it."

She did as he told her, allowing her fingers to brush back and forth across his taut skin. The nipple was hard and nubby, and as she let her fingers graze across it, she could see goose bumps rising on his flesh.

She kept moving her hand as his head fell back and his eyes closed. The plane stopped, and then the engines started making a different noise. Louder. They were going to take off. No sooner had she thought it then the plane started moving again. They were going very fast, and the force of their

acceleration pushed her down into the bed. He reached out and took her into his arms once more, anchoring her.

“I don’t want you falling out of bed and hurting yourself,” he said, and she felt absurdly grateful for the small comfort. She could tell the instant they left the ground, felt the pull of gravity that crushed her into his embrace. The entire cabin tilted sharply and they were in the air. He pulled her more closely into his arms, turning her to face him. His legs tangled with hers, and his hands reached down to cup her bottom. Without understanding quite how it happened, she suddenly found his cock slipping between her legs. It pressed at the entrance to her womb, but the sheer fabric of her panties kept him out.

“I thought you weren’t going to come in me,” she gasped, trying to pull away. The plane lurched, throwing her onto him. He rolled to his back, taking her with him.

“Touch me,” he muttered, his voice harsh. “Touch me and I won’t come in you.”

She reached a hand down, worming it in between them. Her earlier shyness melted away. She wanted to touch him, to get him off as fast as she could. She didn’t think those scraps of red lace would keep him out much longer. Her knees slipped to either side of his hips, supporting her as she raised her pelvis.

He pulled his body back from hers a bit as she reached down, giving her access to his groin. Her hand found his penis. It was long, hard and smooth. She wrapped her fingers around it, her grasp slipping from the moisture leaking from his tip. *It’s just another way to give a massage*, she told herself, knowing it was a blatant lie.

This was no legitimate massage.

He gasped as her fingers took him firmly, and she slid her hand down his length slowly. His entire body was rigid and hard, a study in tension and arousal.

“Again,” he muttered. She did as he said, looking up at his face while she did. His eyes closed, his head tilted back. The cords in his neck were taut, and she realized just how much control it was taking for him not to move. She slid her hand down his shaft again, and felt hope for the first time. He seemed almost concerned for her comfort.

His cock was stiff, quivering beneath her hand.

“That’s just right,” he whispered, and her breath caught. His voice was low, husky, and filled with a longing that gave her chills. A twinge of sensation caught her between her thighs, and her nipples peaked beneath the black bra.

Oh, this just kept getting more and more complicated.

## Chapter Four

Her touch was almost more than he could bear.

Five long years he’d spent imagining what it would be like to have a woman’s hand on his body. Years spent closing his eyes, lying back on his bunk and stroking himself when he could bear the loneliness no longer.

Five years of hatred and waiting, lifting weights in the yard and plotting his escape.

Five years knowing everything he'd worked so hard for could be stolen at any moment.

It overwhelmed him.

He suddenly thrust against her hand powerfully. She gasped. Skittish as all hell, and afraid, too. He knew he should care, knew he shouldn't take her, but he'd be damned if he'd stop now. Taking care of men like him was her job. She might say she wasn't that kind of masseuse, but he knew better. Williams wasn't the kind of man who would go for a straight massage. Her nimble fingers slid up and down his cock, cupping and squeezing him in a way that made him want to explode on the spot. Back and forth across his flesh, skin tightening with every motion.

He shifted, and trying not to imagine what it would feel like to push her back, thrust his knee between her legs, and fuck her hard. *She's a whore, she expects it*, his cock whispered greedily. *Don't push her too hard*, his brain cautioned. *She'll break*.

Her fingers came closer and closer to the head of his cock with every stroke. The little ridge of skin that defined it twitched as she edged toward it; then her fingers grazed his most sensitive spot.

"Not there," he muttered, and she stilled. "If you touch me there I'll come off like a rocket, and I want to enjoy this a little longer."

She started moving again and he made himself focus on more than just the feel of her hot skin rubbing him. The smell of her hair, wet with just a trace of floral scent. Shampoo?

It was better than any perfume he'd imagined in the joint.

Her breasts formed taut peaks against his chest as if aroused, burning into him like hot pokers. He knew it was probably from the cold, but that didn't matter to his hungry body. If only she were wet for him, too. His hand reached down automatically, he wanted to check. He felt her breath catch as she realized what he was doing and he stopped.

He wasn't going to touch her there. If he touched her, he'd fuck her. He didn't want her screaming and crying, didn't want to hurt her.

So instead he forced his hand back, took a deep breath and spoke.

"You can start moving again," he said gruffly.

Her fingers flexed around his taut flesh and he grunted. The tension in his body leapt back to where it'd been just seconds before; he wasn't going to last long. Her strong hand moved up and down, and without thinking he pushed against her. Her fingers tightened again, and she squeezed him. He thrust once more, and this time her fingers squeezed in time with his movements. They fell into a rhythm, him thrusting his hips and her fingers caressing him. The blood sped through his body, pounding in his ears, making his breathing grow harsh.

Tension curled inward in his body and he grew harder. His balls tightened, gathering for his release, and then he exploded in her hand. His seed blew out with explosive force and he grunted, thrusting into her hand as she pumped him dry. For one second darkness took over his vision, the sheer animal pleasure of his orgasm more than he could comprehend. He lay there, sucking air into his lungs and sweating, for what seemed like eternity. She stayed next to him, frozen, her hand still cupping his softening cock. For a moment he wondered if she was trying to harden him again, but then he realized the truth.

She was afraid to move her hand without permission.

“You can let go,” he grunted. She pulled away instantly, rolling as far away from him across the bed as she could.

Absently, he noted that the plane had leveled off.

“We can take a shower now,” he said, and he heard her breath catch.

“Together?” she asked breathlessly.

“No, you can go by yourself,” he said slowly. An image of her body, dripping with warm, wet water entered his head and he almost moaned aloud.

She’d only taken the edge off so far.

“Alone,” he replied. “But don’t take a long time. I might change my mind.”

“I’ll go fast,” she said, voice fervent. She rolled out of the bed, trying to take the sheet with her as a cover.

“Leave it,” he said shortly. Watching her was half the joy; he wasn’t going to give it up that easily.

She stood quickly and crossed her arms across her barely covered breasts. He wondered if she had any idea how sexy she looked. Her hair hung down around her shoulders in scraggly lines, and the little red thong she wore hardly covered a thing. Her hands and the lace-bound breasts they covered were more of a taunt than anything.

He felt himself stir once more as she moved quickly past the side of the bed to the small bathroom, lurching as she walked. The air was fairly smooth, especially considering what a storm raged outside, but he could still feel the motion of the plane around them. He heard the shower come on and imagined her in there. Her fingers were probably sticky with his seed. He’d be willing to bet she’d wash it off first, eager to remove any trace of his touch from her body. There were splashes of it on her belly as well, and he thought about her hands rubbing against the creamy flesh as she cleaned it off.

Did she have any idea how soft and smooth her skin was?

He was willing to bet she didn’t.

She probably took her flesh for granted, never thinking twice about what a treat it would be for a man like him. Of course, he wouldn’t have had any idea either before he went into the joint. Nobody could. He rolled on to his back, crossing his hands behind his head and looking up at the cabin ceiling. They were still over the States, but he doubted he had anything to worry about. Not in a plane like this. Trust Valzar to get appointed as a diplomat. What the hell were they thinking? That was certainly putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

He heard the water shut off, and he smiled with bitter amusement.

She didn’t want him joining her.

A moment later the door opened and she came back into the room, a white towel clutched around her body.

“I thought you might like to shower next,” she said, sidling back into the room.

“You were afraid I’d come in there,” he said, watching her coolly. She probably thought holding the towel tight to her body provided cover. Instead it simply teased him with her curves.

His cock stirred to life.

“Although it’d be nice if you offered to wash me,” he said slowly. She froze, eyes cutting through him. “Perhaps another time. I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate what you’ve done for me already.”

She simply looked at him, eyes haunted.

He rolled out of the bed abruptly, coming to his feet in one smooth motion. She jumped back and he laughed.

“I’m just going to shower,” he said, looking at her pointedly. “Trust me, when I decide to fuck you, you’ll know it.”

She didn’t reply, and he laughed again. Her fear should have made him sick. Instead it simply awakened his hunter’s instinct. He considered making her fears come true but decided against it.

There would be plenty of time when they landed.

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched in a daze as he stalked into the bathroom.

When he was gone she could hardly imagine he’d been there. He was too unreal, too scary. It reminded her of the one time she’d tried drugs during college. Intense, scary, almost unbelievable when it ended. Only the pictures her friends had taken of her dancing wildly in a club were enough to convince her she’d really been that crazed girl.

Her gaze drifted across the room, coming to rest on the door. No point in trying to run. Even if they weren’t in the air, that outside cabin was filled with his friends. She wasn’t sure about Valzar, but she’d bet every last penny she had that Del wanted her dead, assuming he was on the plane. She had no way of knowing who might be out there. The cold reality of the situation was that as long as Sean wanted her, she was his.

It was the best way to stay alive.

She thought of the heroines in romance novels, fighting bravely to preserve their precious virginity.

Fuck that.

She’d do whatever it took to keep alive, including blowing every man on the plane.

The thought was so overwhelming that she sat down on the bed, letting the towel fall the floor. She really was prepared to do whatever it took to stay alive. It was as if a switch turned within her head. Suddenly she felt lighter, freer. The old inhibitions fell away as everything stood out with stark clarity in her mind.

Staying alive was all that mattered.

The shower stopped running as a burst of turbulence hit the plane. He gave a muffled grunt from the bathroom, and she fell back on the bed, bemused. He was strong, the other men respected him. Even



Valzar, their leader, listened to him. As long as she kept him happy, he would protect her. Eventually she'd find a way to escape. All she had to do was make him want her...

He came out of the bathroom. Mentally she poured herself a shot of vodka, drank it back and sat up.

"We didn't exactly finish before, did we?" she asked, hoping her voice was sultry and sophisticated. He froze, eyes searching her face. A slow, curious smile came over his features.

"No, I guess we didn't finish," he said.

Sandra sat back, spreading her legs across the silk sheets. Her breasts thrust forward as she leaned back on her hands.

"I think we need to come to an understanding," she said softly. "I don't know what's going on here and I don't care. All I care about is me. If you take good care of me, I'll take very good care of you."

He didn't react at first, and she flushed nervously. Would he notice? She hoped not. She wanted him to see her as a sophisticated woman of the world. If he took her offer at face value, he'd be less careful.

"I suppose we could do that," he said slowly. "Although I think we should make things clear from the start. It sounds to me like you're a professional?"

"Yes," she said, hoping her smile wasn't slipping. "You were right about that before. I'm a professional, and I don't make it my business to pry into the personal affairs of the men I serve."

"So why weren't you more accommodating before?" he asked softly.

"Because you startled me," she said, trying to look up at him through her eyelashes. "Even a professional can get spooked when her new client tries to kill her old client."

His face grew thoughtful, and she bit the inside of her lip. She shouldn't have reminded him that she knew about the murder. Big mistake.

"Enough about that," she said quickly. Pushing herself forward, she stood and strolled slowly toward him. "Why don't you turn those lights down and come over here?" she asked softly. "I like to work with my hands, and you strike me as being very...tense."

He watched her without moving, and she thought he'd seen through her for sure. Then he turned and walked across the room to the light switch, turning it off. A dim glow—emergency lights?—came from the corners of the room. Not bright enough to keep a person from sleeping, but enough that she could see the outline of his form as he came toward her.

Lord, he was big.

His bulk came from muscles, too. She realized with a start that if he really *was* a client of hers, she'd be thrilled. There was nothing she loved more than going to work on a body that was well put together. She could tell just from watching him move where his trouble spots would be... Tension in the shoulders, of course, and perhaps in the lower arms. His thighs. There would be tension there, too, although not the kind she could easily massage away. She backed slowly around the bed, beckoning him to follow her. Instead, he crawled on to the silken sheets like some great predatory cat. She met him halfway across the bed with a smile. He reached for her, but she raised one hand and planted it in the middle of his chest.

"This is what I do best," she said firmly. "Let me do my work and I'll guarantee you won't regret it."

He hesitated before allowed her to roll him on to his belly.

She knelt beside him and closed her eyes, formulating her strategy. He was just like any other massage client, she reminded herself. The only difference was that this massage would be more sensual.

She knew how to do it.

She'd had dreams about giving a massage like this, private fantasies about taking one of her clients and changing his entire worldview in an hour. She couldn't *do* such a thing, of course, even if she had a client she wanted to do it *to*. It wasn't right; it wasn't professional.

Professional ethics hadn't been created for situations like this, however.

She stretched out her fingers and touched him.

His flesh was cooler than she'd expected and still slightly damp from the shower. She started at the back on his neck, slowly running her fingers down along the smooth line of his back, gaining a feel for how he was built. She'd underestimated just how muscular he was; thank goodness she wasn't doing a deep tissue massage. It might kill her fingers to work with those muscles. After a few experimental strokes she allowed herself to move more aggressively. Not too hard yet, she was still warming him up, but hard enough that she could feel his strength.

In the darkness it was easy to imagine this was nothing more than a dream. It was easy to let her fingers wander, and before long, she noticed that she wasn't following her regular routine. Rather than moving across his flesh systematically, seeking out every muscle group and testing it for tension, she found herself following his contours. She leaned over, breathing deeply of his scent. A tendril of desire whispered its way up across her spine.

She shook her head, denying it. She didn't want him; it was the fantasy.

But as she moved down his back to his tight butt, she knew it was more than fantasy. He shifted restlessly as she massaged the globes of his ass, parting his legs ever so slightly. She thought about his scrotum down there, waiting for her touch, and without thinking she let her hand drift between his legs. The skin there was smooth and soft. He moaned as her fingers danced across the tender skin. He lifted his hips slightly and she cupped the sac in her hand. His testicles, those same tight balls that had shot their seed over her just half an hour earlier, slid between her fingers. She played with them, and secretly acknowledged that she liked the power touching him made her feel.

That's what it was, she realized suddenly. This new touching gave her power, a kind of control over her situation she hadn't had before. Like millions of women before her, she could control a man using her body. It wasn't something she would normally have considered a good thing, but now it was priceless. That power could save her life.

His hips lifted ever so slightly, and she realized he was rubbing the smooth silk sheets with his penis. She removed her hand, and placed it firmly in the center of his back. She pushed him down, stilling his motion.

"All in good time," she said quietly, then traced her tongue across the small of his back. She worked down the backs of his thighs, letting go of her massage technique and using feminine instinct to guide her touch. Here he was definitely tense. She could feel his arousal in every bit of skin, every wiry hair her fingers grazed. Massage wouldn't help that. She started down again, moving toward the back of his knees. He seemed especially sensitive there. She kissed him once, twice, tracing the skin with her tongue, wiggling it back and forth to tickle him.

“No more of that,” he muttered after a moment. She considered ignoring him, but stopped herself. Instinct might tell her to continue, but she wasn’t so sure of her hold on him that she felt it safe to disobey. Better to do as he said. She took deep breaths for several moments, and then muttered, “All right.”

She started back down his legs until she reached his feet. Then she knelt at the end of the bed, taking them into her lap and rubbing first one and then the other between her strong fingers. He actually shuddered in pleasure, giving a mighty stretch. Once again she was reminded of a giant cat, something one might find in a jungle. Something that ate only that which it caught, killing without mercy. She shivered and dropped his feet.

“Why don’t you roll over now?” she said, trying to keep her voice strong. She wanted to whisper, she wanted to run away, but that wasn’t going to happen. She’d already dealt herself the hand she needed to win; now she just had to play it.

He did as she said, and in the dim light of the room she could see his erection jutting above his flat belly. That monster was going to be in her body. As she shook her head, trying to rid herself of the imagery, he tilted his head up at her.

“Second thoughts?” he asked with a challenge in his voice.

“No,” she said, and to prove him wrong she started crawling up his body with one knee on either side of him. “I’m just getting started.”

## Chapter Five

Her words sent a shiver racing down his spine.

Fuck, this was better than his fantasies in the joint. She slithered up his body so smoothly he hardly knew what hit him, and everything about her screamed *female*. His senses, already attuned to her, leapt to life and screamed at him to take her, roll her over and thrust into her body with every last bit of his strength.

Instead he stilled himself, allowing her the freedom to continue her exploration. He’d been dreaming about this moment for years. He wanted to savor her, like he’d savor a fine whiskey.

He couldn’t stop himself from running his hands up her arms, though. He could feel the fine strength in her. These were the arms of a woman who worked out, who kept herself in good shape. He couldn’t help but admire that about her. He cupped her breasts, squeezing them softly, flicking the nipples with his fingers. They perked up, and he looked into her eyes to see surprise there.

Apparently she wasn’t used to being attracted to her clients. He felt a moment of smug satisfaction. He’d gotten through to her, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

She leaned forward, resting her weight against his hands. She straddled him, one knee resting on either side of his upper thighs, and the soft flesh of her belly brushed the head of his cock.

“Touch me there,” he commanded, and she gave a low laugh. The kind of laugh only a woman in control could give. For a second he wondered if he should be concerned, but he wiped the thought away. He controlled her, whatever she might think. That was the way it would be between them.

She pulled back, and took one of his hands in each of her own.

“Put these down,” she said, giving him a sly smile. “I don’t like to work on someone unless they’re totally still.”

“That must be kind of hard sometimes,” he replied softly. “Do all your clients do what you say?”

“If they want me to keep them as clients,” she said lightly. “I’m very picky about who I’ll work on.”

He rolled his eyes, but let his hands fall back as she asked. He had plenty of time to play with her. Apparently she had some kind of kinky specialty; he might as well take advantage of it.

“Do your worst,” he said, closing his eyes. An image of her strong, slender hands wrapped around his throat drifted through his mind. He shook his head, willing the image away. She didn’t have half his strength; he could easily defend himself. After all, where was she going to run? They were on a plane, and there was no escape from his friends up front.

Her fingers came to rest on his chest, digging into the muscles. He tried to think back to the last time he’d been touched like this. There had been that whore two nights before he’d been caught, but she didn’t have this woman’s talent. She was definitely higher class than the average call girl. Although what was up with her clothing? He’d never seen a hooker dressed like that before...

Her fingers made their way down his chest, coming ever closer to his stomach and the jutting length of his erection. Every touch, every gentle nudge, brought him a little closer to the edge. Each time, though, she seemed to back off. Why was she so bound and determined to hold him back?

She gripped the tops of his thighs and started sliding down and away from him. This was too much.

“Enough,” he said, his voice harsh with need. He sat up abruptly, reaching down and pulling her across his body. “Enough of this teasing, I want to fuck. You can stay on top or be on the bottom, I don’t care.”

She stilled, and for a moment her expression clouded. He almost wondered if she was going to say something, but then a strange, strained smile stole across her face.

“I’ll stay on top,” she said, her voice soft and thready. “I’d really rather be on top.”

“Fine,” he said, and pulled her hard against his chest. He fell back across the bed, grasping her head firmly in his hands. He pulled her close for a kiss, hands gripping her face so she couldn’t escape, and then his mouth took hers.

She tasted sweet. Her mouth was soft, *too* soft for a whore. No woman should taste like that unless she was meant for just one man, he thought almost angrily. He pushed his tongue into her mouth forcefully, wanting to wipe that taste of innocence away. She was too sweet, too nice to touch. It wasn’t right.

She sank into his kiss, and before he realized what he was doing he’d rolled her under him. His legs thrust between hers, spreading them apart. Still kissing her deeply, he drove into her, amazed at how tight she was. She gasped into his mouth, and her entire body stiffened around his. He’d hurt her, had pushed in too fast. He pulled away from the kiss, burying his head in her hair and breathing deeply.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “It’s been so long. You have no idea how good you feel.”

He felt her flex her muscles around him experimentally and groaned. How was he supposed hold back when she felt like that?

“If you keep doing that I won’t be able to control myself.”

She stilled, and he took several deep, harsh breaths. Blood roared in his ears, and Sean fought to slow the pounding of his heart, fought to control the need to take her. An eternity passed, then he took control again.

He pulled back, sliding out of her with a slick wetness that belied her tension. However tight she might be, she still wanted him. Her juices were flowing thick. He slowly pushed back in. It was easier this time. Following his instincts, he tilted his hips back and pulled out once more. This time he could feel himself rub against her clit as he slid home. She moaned, deep and low, and he did it again. Within moments her arms came up around him, and he felt her hips lift to meet his. He smiled into her hair, feeling pleased for some strange reason. Pro or not, she was definitely enjoying this.

He moved faster, taking deep, long breaths each time, pacing himself as he listened to her breathing. She gasped with every thrust, and he felt her legs come up around his hips to clench him close. That was more like it.

Faster and faster he moved, the pressure building up inside his body with each thrust. It was so much better than he’d remembered, this falling into a woman’s warm body. He had to stop several times to regain his control.

She was slick and hot now. There could be no doubt how much she wanted him. With a smile of satisfaction, he slid in and out of her body with new purpose. He was going to come soon, and he wanted her to come with him. As his flesh slapped against hers, he could feel her release start to overcome her. He moaned as little twinges deep in her body danced along his length and. She started to curl up into him as if her life depended on his touch.

Then it hit her.

Her entire body went tense as her vaginal muscles gripped him with such force that it should have been painful; instead it was amazing and wonderful. He thrust again, forcing his cock past the rigid layers of muscle, each delicious touch tantalizing and torturing until he reached his limit. Sean exploded into her body.

He grunted, and his hips spasmed violently as he shot his seed. All thought ceased as pleasure rushed through him and he squeezed her until she cried out in protest. Slowly he came down, taking in deep breaths and collapsing on to her body. He felt something pushing at him, and he realized it was her hands. Why was she pushing him away?

Sean rolled off her and she turned away from him quickly. Her shoulders shuddered, and he realized she was crying. What the hell? He touched her back hesitantly, suddenly out of his realm. He liked whores because they didn’t cry. Or if they did, he dismissed them. What was going on here?

She shook her head as he rubbed her shoulder, then she sat up, wiping the tears away from her face. Her skin was blotchy and her nose ran. Not pretty crying, certainly not done for effect. He opened his mouth to speak and she cut him off with one raised hand. He bit back his question, trying to figure out what to do next.

“Can we please just get some rest?” she asked softly, wiping the back of her hand across her face once more.

He nodded his head hesitantly, utterly confused. She rolled into a small ball facing away from him, pulling up the silken sheets to her chin. Sean watched her for another moment in puzzled silence, then turned

away and rolled off the bed. They had a long flight ahead of them, maybe she was right. Sleep would be good. He was far more relaxed now than he'd been in months. Safer, too.

He walked across the room, allowing himself to enjoy the feeling of the plush carpet between his toes. Casually he flicked off the dim emergency lights and then returned to the bed. He hadn't lost his sense of direction in prison, he noted wryly. If anything he was even more attuned to moving without being seen after spending five years in shared cells.

He made it back to the bed and crawled in. Her crying had died down, leaving only the occasional muffled hiccup in its wake. Definitely not crying to get attention.

He lay there in the darkness for what seemed like hours until she fell asleep. Then he curled himself around her, pulling her into the circle of his arms, and letting his head rest against the soft mass of her hair. Damn, she smelled good. His cock stirred in interest, but he stayed still.

There would be plenty of time to play with her more when they arrived in San Beneficio. Hopefully she'd stop crying, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sandra came awake slowly, unsure of where she was. The bed was soft and comfortable, but there was a strange humming noise all around her. The floor dropped, then came back up beneath her, and she realized she must be on a plane.

But what kind of plane had a bed?

A soft snore drifted into her consciousness, and startling her awake. She wasn't alone. Memories of the night before filled her mind. She looked around the room, startled that it could be real. Where was she, and how could she escape?

She turned to look at the big man sleeping beside her. His long, dark hair spilled across the pillow, hiding his face from her. She shifted, feeling sticky between her thighs.

Shit.

She'd had sex with him and they hadn't used any protection. Visions of HIV filled her head, followed by the thought of a black haired baby. Or worse yet, a black-haired baby with HIV.

She clutched one hand to her stomach and moaned in horror. How had this happened to her?

He shifted and she stilled. The last thing she needed was for him to wake up. The longer he slept, the happier she'd be. Moving carefully so as not to disturb the bed, she slid out from between the sheets and walked back toward the tiny bathroom. Dark humor pierced her cloud of unhappiness as she noted that even rich people had to make due with small bathrooms on airplanes. Still, it was a very expensive plane. She had no doubt that her mysterious captor and his friends had money.

She stepped into the tiny shower and cleaned herself quickly, trying to rub herself free of the residue of his touch. She scrubbed extra hard at her breasts and between her legs, punishing her traitorous flesh for enjoying his attentions so much. When she'd decided to martyr her virtue to stay alive, she hadn't counted on enjoying it. Sean was definitely the best lover she'd ever had, and she didn't like that one bit. It wasn't fair.

Life is not fair, Sandra reminded herself as she stepped out of the shower. She pulled out a plush towel out of a cupboard and dried herself off, noticing a stack of thick terrycloth bathrobes above the towels. Just what she needed. Concealing, comfortable, and utterly unsexy.

She pulled on the robe and walked back out into the bedroom. It was light outside, but the shades drawn over the windows kept things dim. She stood for a moment, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Before she could see anything, he spoke.

“Feeling better?” he asked slowly, and the sound sent a tingle rushing down her spine. Sternly she reminded herself he was the bad guy. Bad guys shouldn’t have voices like that—it wasn’t fair.

“Yes, thank you,” she said. As her eyes adjusted she made her way over to a chair, then sat down in it as demurely as possible.

He leaned forward in the bed, covers falling to his waist, and she made herself look away.

“You want to come back to bed?” he asked. “We’ve still got a while before we land, and I could use another roll.”

She closed her eyes against the surge of longing his words lit in her. This wasn’t right.

“Do I have to?” she asked bluntly. He looked startled.

“Why should you care?” he asked. “You’ll get paid, I already promised you that. I guess my promises don’t mean very much to you, do they?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll do what it takes to survive,” she said slowly. “But I’m concerned about health and safety. We didn’t use protection last night. Do you realize that I could already be pregnant? Not to mention AIDS.”

He froze, peering at her closely through the darkness.

“You aren’t on the pill?” he asked quickly. “I don’t have AIDS, so I’m not worried about that. Unless you have it?”

She pondered telling him she did, but figured that might set him off.

“No, I’m clean,” she said slowly. “But I’m not on the pill.”

“Is that really wise for someone in your profession?”

She gave a brief, harsh laugh. She hadn’t had sex since Matt, and here Sean thought she did this every day. It would be funny if it wasn’t so damn pathetic. She couldn’t say that to him, of course. Safety lay in making him believe she was a professional who knew how to take money and keep her mouth shut.

“I prefer to use condoms,” she said simply, looking down at her folded hands. “It’s just always seemed a lot smarter to me. Protects against disease, you know.”

He nodded his head, eyes filled with a speculative look.

“Sure,” he said. “I have no problem with that.”

Silence fell between them. There was a knock at the door.

“Yes?” he asked, his voice sharp and businesslike.

The door opened a crack, and Valzar stuck his head in.

“I know you’re busy,” he said in accented tones. “But I think you should come out and see me. I’ve got some good news for you.”

Sean nodded and slid out of bed, apparently unconcerned by his nudity.

“Stay here,” he told her with a trace of humor in his voice. “Valzar, you got any clothing in here I can use?”

“In the drawer,” Valzar said, nodding his head toward the built-in dresser. “I brought some just for you. I’ll be out front.”

With that he closed the door behind him and the room fell silent again. Sean pulled on his clothes and left without a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valzar sat in one of the large, comfortable-looking chairs, a laptop computer propped open in front of him. He looked like a businessman, flying to some important meeting, but he was no ordinary businessman. Sean marveled again at his friend’s ingenuity. How had he wangled diplomatic immunity?

“Good news,” Valzar said, flashing Sean a grin. “Did you know you’re dead?”

“Already?” Sean asked. “They move fast. How did it happen?”

“Well, according to our friends at the CIA, you stole a small plane from the airport and disappeared soon afterward. The wreckage will be found outside Fort Wiconda in about three days, and your body will be recovered. They’re not too happy about the fact that you took a hostage, by the way.”

“Oh really?” Sean asked, dropped into the chair across from Valzar. “I suppose it complicates things on their end?”

“That’s the gist of this message,” Valzar replied with a quick smile. “Apparently they’re doing some fast work to trace her down and get enough information to fake her death believably. They said that it would have been a lot easier if you’d just killed her. At least then they’d have a body. I can see their point.”

He shot Sean a pointed look. Sean sighed, and then closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“I didn’t want to kill her,” he said. “There’s been too much killing already, and she didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

“You’ve always been soft,” Valzar said, his face growing serious. “But your little toy is going to get us in trouble. She’s the only one who knows you aren’t dead, and that’s going to cause serious problems. You can’t let her go home and you can’t trust her. What are you going to do with her, keep her forever?”

Sean shook his head, knowing Valzar was right. But when he thought about closing those brown, pixie eyes forever, he couldn’t do it. Not now. Maybe later.



“She’s my problem, not yours,” he said finally. “She can’t tell anyone anything as long as she’s with me; you have nothing to fear from her.”

Valzar nodded his head.

“That’s certainly true,” he said. “But I’m worried about you. I’ve gone to a lot of trouble to save your sorry hide, and I’d hate to see you blow it for a woman.”

“I’m a big boy,” Sean replied. “I can take care of her when the time comes.”

## Chapter Six

Heat pressed down like a pillow, muffling her breath.

She couldn’t remember ever feeling such heat, and such punishing humidity. Thank God the car was air conditioned, Sandra thought grimly. Otherwise she’d be dead by now.

She and Sean sat in the backseat of a Lexus SUV, a far cry from her worn Honda. Valzar sat in the passenger seat, drumming his fingers idly against his leg. Their driver, a tall, dark-featured man with a scarred lip, drove in silence. In fact, she hadn’t heard him say a single word since he’d picked them up at the airport. She hadn’t seen Del.

She wanted to ask where they were going, but judging from the looks Valzar had given her before, conversation wasn’t a good idea. He seemed to take her presence as a personal insult, so instead of talking she watched out the window as they drove. She was pretty sure they were in South America. The accents and climate told her that much. They had landed on a small airstrip in the mountains. Now they were traveling through dense jungle, and she could only see the road ahead. Trees and foliage surrounded them on both sides, making the way nearly passable.

“Almost there,” Valzar said from the front seat. “You can stay as long as you like, of course. When you’re ready to discuss your future and other options, let me know. I’ve got some ideas we can look into.”

Even as he spoke, they came around a bend in the road into a clearing. Perched on a hillside before them was a white, stucco-covered villa four times the size her parents’ house had been. Two wings extended to either side, accented gracefully by the explosion of tropical flowers from the well-manicured bushes.

“It’s paradise,” she said softly, then blushed as both men turned to her. Sean smiled; Valzar’s expression was more difficult to read.

“We’re hundreds of miles from the nearest town,” Valzar said. “This jungle is filled with animals that would love to kill and eat you. Don’t think for one moment that there’s any way for you to get away unless we send a plane for you.”

She bit her lip and looked away. Sean nudged her and grinned.

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “I promised you that already.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, friend,” Valzar said tightly.

They fell silent. The driver turned off the large SUV, unlocking the doors with a click. Sean opened his and stepped out, pulling her behind him, and the heat hit her like a wall. The house seemed further away. They walked toward it quickly, but she could already feel the sweat running down her back and pooling between her breasts. It didn't help that she wore oversized men's clothing; that had been all they had on the plane. The legs were far too long for her, and she only had one shoe. She watched her step carefully, expecting some kind of poisonous tropical bug to run out and bite her, but nothing happened.

They entered the house and another wave of cool air conditioning washed over her. She all but moaned with pleasure. They were in a large entry hall. It held a high ceiling adorned with a giant chandelier. The floor was tiled with cool, brown stones, and a broad staircase opened into the center of the room before them. Halfway up it split into two opposing staircases. They led to an open, galleried second floor.

"Nice," Sean said shortly, casting a glance at Valzar. "Do I want to know who this place belongs to?"

"My family," Valzar said, sketching a short, mocking bow. "My father has always believed that wise men should have a nice, secure place to wait out a revolution. It's come in handy over the years. We have a skeleton staff here. They'll see to all your needs. They're very discreet, of course."

Someone coughed, and she noticed a man dressed in khaki pants and a white shirt standing off to one side. Valzar nodded at him, and he stepped forward.

"I'm Eduardo," he said in softly accented tones. "I run the household here, as well as being in charge of security. If you need anything at all, please just let me know."

"Thank you," Sean said.

"Eduardo has been with our family for more than 20 years," Valzar said. "He does far more for us than simply run the household."

"I understand," Sean said, and his eyes took on a new look. Sadness? It was hard to know. She could tell that something was going on here, but she had no idea what it might be.

"I trust that Eduardo isn't so zealous in doing his duty that he won't check with me before doing me any favors?" Sean asked pointedly. "I would take that as a personal insult, no matter how good the intentions were."

"I respect your right to handle your own affairs, *Senor*," Eduardo said. He shot her a look Sandra didn't like one bit. "The situation is fully under your jurisdiction. I'm simply available should you need any help."

Shit, they were talking about her. About *killing* her. She shivered, and edged closer to Sean without thinking. He wrapped one arm around her, comforting her, and Valzar shot her another sharp look. She was tired of all these men looking at her, judging her. All she wanted was to go home.

"*Senorita*, Maria will show you to your room," Eduardo said smoothly, nodding at a young woman who seemed to appear out of nowhere. She was pretty, with dark hair and flashing eyes. Her lips were red and pouting, and her maid's uniform did nothing to hide her lush figure.

"Please come with me," she said. "I have a room prepared for you in the guest quarters."

"She'll stay in the same room as me," Sean said, looking down at her proprietarily. "She's mine."

Rosa's mouth tightened, but she nodded and gestured toward the stairs. "Please come with me, *Senorita*."

Sandra didn't want to leave Sean, but he dropped his arm and nodded for her to go. She didn't trust these people, and it occurred to her that she probably shouldn't trust him, either. Sean was her enemy, the man originally responsible for kidnapping her, but now she longed for his presence. He seemed so much safer, so much less frightening than all these other people. What was that called? Stockholm Syndrome? She'd heard of it before but never dreamt she'd experience it for herself.

Something so unnatural shouldn't feel so right—it wasn't fair.

Slowly she followed the maid up the stairs, unconsciously noting the quality of workmanship that had gone into creating the villa. Everything was made of solid wood or tile, all of which bore the signs of hand-workmanship. Large paintings hung on the walls, including portraits of strong, menacing-looking Spaniards and delicate white beauties. Family portraits? Valzar's people went back a long way; he must be some kind of aristocrat. Definitely old money.

They came to the top of the stairs and she followed her guide through the gallery. As they left the entrance hall and started down a hallway, she realized the house was even larger than she'd initially thought. The hall was bordered by rooms for a few meters, but as they turned a corner one wall fell away, revealing an open courtyard. Hot air hit her again, but it wasn't as bad as outside. How did they do that?

The house enclosed the entire courtyard, all of which seemed to open either on to the gallery above or the courtyard itself on the lower levels. There was a large, luxurious swimming pool, as well as immaculately sculpted gardens and several fountains. Even a fake stream had been cleverly designed to run through the grounds, and in the distance, she could hear the chirping of birds. It was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen in her life.

Rosa seemed hardly to notice. She abruptly stopped in front of two large, wooden doors, then opened them and nodded toward the cool, dark interior. Sandra walked in and the doors closed behind her. She whirled, expecting to see Rosa behind her. Instead, she heard a *snicking* sound and realized the maid had locked her in.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll be leaving in the morning," Valzar said. He and Sean sat in a tastefully decorated study, a room more likely to be found in a British hunt club than the jungles of the Amazon. "You can reach me any time with Eduardo's help. We have a full communications center here, including subscriptions to all the mainstream news services, as well as more specific researching tools. I've prepared a file of financial information for you. You'll want to know how much money you have, I'm sure, and you'll need to make decisions as to what you'll be doing with yourself."

"Thanks," Sean said, nodding his head in appreciation. He reached out to take the file Valzar handed to him, flipping through it. Right on top was a passport. He opened it up, discovered a worn picture of himself. Next to it was a name, Joe McMurray, Irish national.

"It looks good," he said slowly. "As always, I'm impressed with how thorough you are. You always think of everything, Valzar."

"Thank you," his friend said, smiling briefly. "I've got more for you, though. Here's some information our friends have come up with on your girl. Fresh off the fax."

He handed another file to Sean, and then sat back. Sean took it and flipped it open. The fax transmission was grainy, but there was no mistaking his little toy in the picture. She smiled broadly at the camera. Probably a driver's license photo. He scanned the accompanying information quickly.

Sandra Vicars, 27 years old, single. Residence: 1536 N. Welby, Apt. #6, Danforth, Texas. Five feet, six inches in height, 135 pounds. Next of kin listed as an aunt in New York. Occupation: massage therapist.

He flipped the page, moving on to the next sheet, absorbing the information quickly. Her parents were dead, her only brother in prison for drug trafficking, 18 years left to go on a federal charge. She had worked at a sports health clinic for five years before starting her own practice, a bad move since the economy had been down for quite a while. Now her bank accounts were all but empty and her practice seemed to be languishing. No criminal history, no suspicions of prostitution.

That caught his eye fast enough.

"It says here she's a massage therapist with no history of prostitution," he said slowly. "She told me she's a working girl. How do you figure that?"

"Keep reading," Valzar said slowly. Sean nodded, eyes quickly covering the page. She was well liked by her neighbors, all of whom were horrified that she'd be taken hostage by a dangerous escaped felon. The press was already hard at work digging up her background for their stories, and the sports clinic where she'd worked was offering a 10,000 reward for information leading to her whereabouts. Her former fiancé, a man who had broken up with her nearly nine months back, was devastated, and had already made a public appearance on one of the local television stations to beg for her return.

"This isn't good," Sean said, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "I thought she was a pro, someone who would be easy to buy off. That's not going to happen with a woman like this. She'll never understand."

"I know," Valzar said slowly, shaking his head. "I can see you're attached to her, although I can't fathom why. Perhaps it's because you've been without a woman for so long? It doesn't matter, though. You have to get rid of her. I brought in Rosa for you, she can see to all your needs. I'll take care of the Vicars woman."

"No," Sean said, a wave of anger washing over him. The thought of Valzar touching his little toy made his head hurt, and he had to restrain himself from reaching across and hitting the man. "She's mine and I'll be damned if I'll let you touch her. It's not open for discussion."

"Have it your way," Valzar replied, one eyebrow raised and a knowing expression on his face. "She's not a threat to me, it's your ass on the line. Our CIA friends don't like to be embarrassed, and I can assure you that they don't like loose ends."

He handed another sheaf of papers to Sean, then stood and walked over to the full bar that took up the far end of the room.

"Drink?" he asked. Sean nodded his head.

"Scotch," he said, reading the new information restlessly. It was the rough draft of a newspaper article about his escape. Dangerous criminal, riot, hostage, etc. He skipped down toward the end, and read about his own death with a sense of grim satisfaction. His hostage had been identified as Sandra Vicars, and her burned body had been discovered with his in the plane wreckage. By the next morning, every one of her friends in Texas would read about it in their newspapers. Somebody would inform the aunt, and Sandra Vicar's small estate would go into probate.

The former fiancé would have to find a new way to get on TV.

Valzar returned with a small glass of amber fluid, handing it to Sean. He drained the drink in one smooth motion, enjoying the way it burned down his throat. Damn, it was good to be out of prison.

“I need to be leaving soon,” Valzar said. “Is there anything that you need from me before I go?”

Sean shook his head, lost in thought.

“No, everything you’ve done for me is wonderful,” he said. “I can never thank you enough. I’ll let you know when I decide what my next step is.”

“Sounds good,” Valzar said. He stood, and Sean started to follow him. He waved him off.

“No, sit and relax,” he said. “I want you to enjoy yourself for now. It’s been far too long since you’ve had any privacy and space. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

With that he turned and left the room, leaving Sean alone with his thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sandra sat quietly in the room, unsure what to do with herself. She’d explored a bit, discovering that their bedroom was attached to a large, lovely balcony overlooking a private courtyard. There was a spacious bathroom complete with a whirlpool tub and shower for two.

It was nicer than anything she’d ever seen. What kind of money did it take to maintain a place like this out in the middle of nowhere, and how had it been earned? She shuddered to think. She stood and walked over to the balcony, looking out at the small courtyard. She could climb down easily enough, but there was no point. Even if she managed to get away from the house, she had no doubt the jungle would kill her. She didn’t even like camping back home; a jungle trek was completely out of the question as far as she was concerned. She’d last about ten minutes, if that.

No, her salvation lay in convincing Sean to let her go, making him believe she was no threat at all. In all honesty, she wasn’t. If she could magically transport herself home right now she wouldn’t call the police. Hell, no. She was more of afraid of him than anything else, and if he didn’t get her, his friend Valzar would.

She had to make peace with him.

The door opened behind her, and she started. It was Rosa, her face cool and hostile.

“I have clothing here for you,” she said. “You are probably too fat for it, but it’s the best I could do.”

She dumped a pile of fabric rudely on the bed and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Whatever else Rosa might be, she certainly wasn’t a potential ally.

She walked over to the clothing and sifted through it, discovering several light, simple cotton blouses and long flowing skirts in bright colors. No bra and underwear, but she could wash out the ones she wore. Not wearing underwear might turn him on... anything she could do to keep him interested was a good thing.

She pulled off her oversized, male clothing and pulled on the fresh garments. The light cotton blouse had

a loose, wide neckline that dipped low. She looked in the mirror, noting that her breasts filled it out nicely, and thankful that they were small enough that she could get away with not wearing a bra. Her nipples formed pert peaks underneath the fabric, and she imagined she could see just a hint of color through the thin cotton. She pulled on the skirt next, enjoying the swirl of it around her ankles. The thin cotton might be enveloping, but she had no doubt direct sunlight would render it nearly transparent. Normally she would have been embarrassed to wear something like this, but now she put her shoulders back and shook out her hair. There was power in being female, a power that she needed to tap into and use to the best of her ability. This clothing was perfect.

She went into the bathroom and had started to rinse out her bra when she heard the door open again. She walked back out and saw Sean standing there. He looked at her with darkened eyes, a thoughtful, calculating expression on his face.

“Hello,” she said softly, smiling at him. Things seemed less strange with him in the room. He was her link to reality, the reason she was there.

“Rosa gave me some new clothing,” she said unnecessarily. His eyes flickered across her figure, pausing at her breasts, and she thrust them out toward him.

“I like it,” she said, walking toward him, allowing her hips to swing as she moved. “It’s cool and comfortable.”

He stayed silent, so she sashayed closer, resting one hand on his chest.

“You seem tired,” she said. “Do you want to come to bed and rest? I’d be happy to give you a massage.”

“How about a blow job?” he asked, his eyes boring into hers. “That’s more along the lines of what I’d like.”

He seemed distant, almost angry, but she nodded her head and gave a hesitant smile. She could do this, nothing to worry about. She reached for the waistband of his pants, unfastening them carefully. He wore boxers, plain white ones. What now? He didn’t do anything to help her, and she pulled back hesitantly.

“Where do you want me to do it?” she asked softly. “There’s got to be a better place than right here in the middle of the room.”

“Why do you care?” he asked, all but snarling. “I thought you were a professional. Don’t tell me you’re uncomfortable giving me a simple blowjob. Drop to your knees and do it.”

She nodded, and wished for the thousandth time that she hadn’t taken the private appointment with Edgar. Then she gave herself a mental shake. No time for regrets.

Sandra dropped to her knees, grasping the fabric of his pants to steady herself as she swayed. Kneeling, she could see the bulge of his penis beneath the boxers. She took a deep breath, reached both hands up and grasped the waistband. She had done this with Matt, she reminded herself, and at least this guy wasn’t lying to her like her fiancé had.

Slowly the boxers came down. His penis bobbed before her, an angry red giant that seemed far too large for her mouth to accommodate. She licked her lips nervously and shot him a quick glance. He still stared at her with that strange, angry expression on his face, as if she’d disappointed him. What did he want from her?

It was too scary to imagine what was going through his head, so she turned her attention back to the task

at hand. She reached out, tracing the edge of the head with one finger. He didn't respond, although his erection bobbed under her touch. She let her hand fall lower, grasping the smooth, silky shaft with gentle force. Then she leaned her head forward and delicately touched her tongue to the very tip of his length.

He shuddered, and she took it as a sign of encouragement. Sticking her tongue out further, she swirled it around the head a couple times, allowing her saliva to run out and lubricate his flesh before closing her mouth around the tip. He shuddered, one hand coming to rest on the back of her head, giving an ever-so-slight pressure as he pulled her closer to him. She opened her mouth further, allowing his hard length to come into her.

At first it seemed he was so large he would choke her, and she hadn't even gotten more than a few inches past the head. But after a moment her mouth relaxed and opened further, and he pushed in deeper. She laved her tongue along his length, then pulled back her head and let some of him come free. Time to start the rhythm that drove men crazy. She'd done it for Matt, and he'd always said she was a good little cocksucker, she thought in disgust. Of course, he'd never said anything so foul to her face. He'd waited until they had broken up, and then shared the story of their last time together with all of his friends. Sean might be a kidnapper, but so far he was more of a gentleman than that asshole.

She pushed the horrible thought out of her head, preferring to focus on the task at hand. She found that if she rubbed her hand up and down along his shaft as she sucked at him, he seemed to appreciate it. He still said nothing, but his hand tightened on her hair. She could feel the first drops of his seed in her mouth now, just a little salty taste of what was to come. She had always hated the taste of a man's semen, but his wasn't that bad. Almost sweet in a way, and very pleasant. Without thinking she sucked harder, as if to pull more of the juice from him.

He grunted and she swallowed more of his cock. It had gotten to the point where she actually wanted him in her. She could feel her breasts swelling, and knew there was moisture building between her legs. What kind of slut was she? The kind who wants to stay alive, her brain told her firmly. The kind who knows that having sex to survive would be more palatable if she could bring herself to enjoy it. There were worse fates than being forced to make love to a man who was incredibly handsome, and more than a little attractive to her. Her situation might be precarious, but she still had a few chances left. She needed to make the most of the fragile bond he'd formed with her.

She sucked him in deeper, wrapping one arm around his waist to support herself. Unconsciously she dug her fingers into the taut muscle of his ass, and he seemed to like the sensation. His cock surged within her mouth and more of his fluid seeped out of his slit.

With every thrust she tried to massage him with her tongue, and each time he pulled out she used suction to hold him as long as she could. Back and forth, in and out. Her hand worked furiously, rubbing along his length and taking care of the parts that her mouth couldn't reach. She felt his other hand grip the back of her head and knew he was getting close.

Then he shifted, letting his legs stand apart a bit, giving her better access. She used the opportunity to reach between his buttocks, allowing her fingers to play with the tightened skin of his scrotum. His balls pulled up close to his body as he neared ejaculation. She suctioned harder, working him as hard as she could, driving him closer to orgasm even as her fingers plucked at his balls, pulling on them lightly.

He gave a startled groan above her and his fingers tightened in her hair to the point of pain. She ignored it, putting everything she had into sucking him. He started to thrust into her harder and she felt the skin of his cock harden almost beyond imagining.

With a harsh cry, he shot his seed into her mouth, all but choking her. The salty, sweet fluid tasted better

than any she'd had before, and she found herself swallowing it without feeling sick as she had so often with Matt. Burst after burst of his essence filled her and she sucked it down greedily.

Finally it stopped. She took a moment to lick around his cock, cleaning it up, and then sat back on her heels. His hands were gone from her head, and when she looked up at him he seemed lost in thought.

"We have to talk," he said after a moment. He wiped his forehead and she noticed a bead of sweat making its way down his temple. "Let's go out on the balcony. It's a lovely place to sit and visit."

Absently wiping her mouth against her sleeve, she accepted the hand up he offered. His fingers were hard, filled with strength, and once again she sensed that tension in him. Whatever was bothering him, sex hadn't taken the edge off. When they were sitting comfortably in the two chairs on either side of the small table on their balcony, he turned to look at her.

"I know who you are, Sandra Vicars," he said softly. "And I know you're not a whore, even though you're doing your best to act like one. Now I need to figure out what to do with you. Valzar wants me to kill you, says I need to do it for my own safety. What other options do you have for me?"

## Chapter Seven

She froze, completely unable to think of anything to say. How had he figured it out? She could only think of one way.

"Am I really that crappy in the sack?" she asked.

His face froze and he made a sudden choking noise.

"I can't believe you just asked that," he said. "Of all the things you have to worry about right now..."

She bit her lip, realizing he was absolutely right. She wasn't thinking at all. She didn't want to think, it was too scary.

"If you just let me go, I promise I won't tell anyone about you," she said. "Honestly, I don't care if they catch you at all. I just want to get out of this alive. Is that so hard for you to believe?"

"I can't let you go," he said slowly.

"You don't trust me, I can understand that," she said, feeling herself grow hysterical. "But I honestly don't know anything about you. I don't even know what country we're in. I don't care; I just want to go home!"

She cut herself off abruptly. She needed to calm down, think clearly. This was her big chance to make a case for herself and she couldn't afford to blow it. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them, peering directly into his.

"Please, let me go," she said softly.

He shook his head slowly, and she thought she saw genuine sadness there. It puzzled her.

"I can't let you go, Sandra," he said slowly. "You're already dead."



She cocked her head at him, and then moaned as his words sank in.

“You’re going to kill me right now?” she asked, and something inside snapped. It was too much. She stood abruptly, the chair she’d been sitting in falling to the floor behind her with a loud clanging noise. Fury filled her. It was time to fight back.

“Fuck you,” she said in a cold voice. “I hope they catch you and kill you. I hope that they stick you in an electric chair and fry you, and if I had the chance I’d push that needle plunger down myself.”

“They don’t use a needle in the electric chair,” he said reasonably, standing and reaching out toward her. Sandra stumbled back, desperate to get away from him. She wouldn’t go down easy. She balled her fist up and slammed it into his stomach with as much force as she could muster. Pain seared through her clenched hand. She shook it, hissing and trying to catch her breath. Apparently unfazed by her attack, he grabbed her upper arms and shook her.

“Settle down and listen to me,” he said. She responded by lunging forward and biting into the solid muscle of his chest with every bit of strength she had. Her teeth struck deep and true, and she shook her head like a rabid dog, worrying at his flesh. She brought her knee up to attack his groin, but the motion threw her off balance and he managed to block her attack.

“Stop it,” he roared. “Listen to me, I’m not going to hurt you. Please let me explain, and stop biting me.”

The words filtered through to her enraged consciousness. Slowly she let up on her attack. Her jaws held him so tightly she had to will them open, the muscles not responding at first. Then she was free, though she noted with some satisfaction that his shirt was rapidly turning red from blood.

Her teeth had hit home.

Good.

Let him feel some of the pain he’d caused her.

“Calm down,” he said again. She must have looked like a madwoman, and for a moment, hysterical laughter hovered right on the edge of her throat. She swallowed it back with no little difficulty. Listening and staying calm was the key to survival.

“What?” she asked after a long pause, her words sounding harsh and forced even to her.

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said. “I said you’re dead already because according to the newspapers in the United States, your body was found this morning, along with mine. Everyone thinks that we were killed together when our plane crashed. If you go back now, they’ll know I’m not dead.”

His words sank in slowly, and she shook her head.

“You can’t just *do* that,” she said. “I don’t know what bodies you’re talking about, but they’ll realize that it’s not me. I have dental records. They’ll figure it out.”

“No they won’t,” he said. “The people who would be figuring it out, the investigators, are the ones who planted the evidence. Sandra Vicars is dead, and she’ll be buried within a few days. Your family has been notified, as have your neighbors.”

She shook her head slowly, willing his words to go away.

“I don’t want that to happen,” she said slowly. “I was doing something with my life. It isn’t fair for you to

simply step in and say that I can't go back. You shouldn't be able to take all that away from me."

"It's too late for that," he said softly. "It's already gone. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I'm sorry for what I did. I won't go back, though. I've already been in jail too long for that. I'm done with that forever. I'm dead, too, and I'm starting life over as a new man."

"Does that mean you'll be giving back all the lovely money you earned in your old life?" she asked caustically. "Because this place doesn't come cheap, I'm relatively certain of that. If you don't kill me now, when do you plan to do it? After you finished fucking me?"

"That's what I originally planned," he said slowly, his eyes boring into hers with cruel honesty. "Then I decided I'd pay you off. Whores expect that. I figured I'd give you enough money to set yourself up some place new and we'd both go on our ways. But I somehow doubt that you'll be willing to do that."

She shook her head, thinking.

"Yes, I would," she said suddenly. "If it means I get to live, I'll do it in a heartbeat. Please, let me do it."

"I might let you do that, but I doubt that Valzar would," he said. "He doesn't like to leave loose ends lying about, and you're definitely a loose end. He's already offered to take care of you for me."

"Yes, I kind of picked upon that," she said softly. To her disgust, she could feel moisture welling up in her eyes. She would not cry, not now. She needed to stay strong, to think things through. To convince him that he could trust her. It was her only shot.

"What if I just stay with you for now?" she asked, trying not to sound too coy. "Do we really have to figure all these things out right now? Can't we just have fun?"

He assessed her coolly, nodding his head.

"We can do that."

"Good," she said brightly. "I saw that there was a swimming pool in the other courtyard. Would you like to go swimming?"

"No."

"What do you want to do?"

"Why don't we take a nap?" he asked, raising his hands to cup her head. He wiped at her cheeks with his large, strong thumbs, and she felt moisture there. Damn, she'd cried after all. "You seem worn out."

"I don't think I can sleep," she said honestly. "This has been too much for me—my mind just races trying to figure everything out."

He pulled her against his muscled chest with surprising tenderness.

"You don't have to get everything figured out right now," he said. "You can just relax. Sandra, I promise you, if you do as I say you won't get hurt. But you're going to have to trust me."

Fat chance, she thought to herself, but she nodded her head against him. He saw her as helpless, as dependent on him for survival. While that might be true, there was no reason for her to give up that easily. As long as she was alive, she could fight.

He released her and reached down with one arm behind her knees. Before she quite understood how

he'd done it, she was in his arms, being carried across the room as if she were as light as a feather. He laid her down on the bed very gently, lowering himself beside her. He reached around her with one arm, spooning her and tucking her against his body.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said. "I'm going to take care of you. I'm not quite sure what we'll do just yet, but I'll find a way for you to stay safe. As long as you're with me, nobody will be able to touch you."

His words shouldn't have been as comforting as they were. He was her enemy, her captor. If it weren't for him, she wouldn't be stuck in this situation. But her traitorous body didn't seem to see things that way, and every particle of her being reveled in being held so close. He was big and strong, warm and safe. She felt so comfortable.

He nuzzled the back of her neck through her hair as his hand wormed its way up beneath her clothing to her breast. He cupped her, squeezing slightly, and her nipple hardened. It seemed unfair that it should feel so good. She felt secure with him touching her, happier than was decent under the circumstances.

His hand burrowed through her hair, and his lips became more insistent. She rolled over into his arms and gave herself up in the comfort of the moment. Life was short—she wanted to feel good.

He responded quickly, rolling her beneath him, and for one brief moment they forgot about the future.

## Chapter Eight

Sean stared at the fax, eyes failing to focus.

Why now?

Life had been so perfect. He and Sandra had fallen into a blissful routine. Every morning they'd go swimming, followed by a breakfast on the terrace. In the afternoons they'd hike or read, or perhaps even watch a movie. Their dinners were magnificent, celebrations of wine and desire that seemed to go on for hours. Sometimes he'd take her right on the table, other times he'd slowly seduce her over the course of the evening, then whisk her away to their bedroom for nights of wild lovemaking.

It would all come to an end now.

The fax was from Valzar. He needed the safe house for someone else. He didn't give any details, and Sean didn't want to know them. He'd been there for a full month—it was past time for him to start pulling his life together.

It was too easy to relax here, nothing seemed very real to him. That kind of relaxation was dangerous.

The fax made a pointed reference to Sandra, too, Valzar offering once more to help Sean with his little liability. Sean leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes and trying to think.

Why had he brought her with him?

He'd told himself at the time that it was because she'd seen him, could identify him to the police. It was a valid concern, but they could have worked around it. More bodies could have been found in that plane

crash. The real reason he'd taken her was because he wanted her; he could admit that to himself. He'd seen her, wanted her and decided to take her. He hadn't cared about the consequences. All he'd cared about was getting her under him in bed.

Valzar had lost patience with his little obsession, though. And he was right. They couldn't just stay here in the jungle forever, pretending they were on some kind of bizarre vacation. He could see the questions and the fear in her eyes sometimes, and he knew that it was always in the back of her mind. What would happen to her? Would he grow tired of her? Would he kill her?

Killing her wasn't an option—he'd realized that long ago. He simply wouldn't allow it to happen. She was too special, too beautiful. He wouldn't let anyone hurt her.

At the same time, he didn't know what to do with her. Even if he set her up in a new town with new money, he wasn't entirely sure Valzar wouldn't go after her. His friend was very loyal and very thorough. He'd only held off this long because Sean was actually *with* the woman.

He had to keep her with him. There was no other option. Otherwise, she'd never be safe.

How it would work he couldn't imagine. He had some ideas of what he wanted to do, but he wasn't sure if she'd be interested. Hell, no matter what he did, he'd have to watch her like a hawk. If she got away her life would be forfeit, and he couldn't allow that to happen.

He'd simply have to find a way to keep her with him all the time. It would be easiest on a boat, he'd decided weeks earlier. Hell, he'd always liked the idea of living on a boat. There was one waiting for him in the Cayman Islands already, along with his money. Valzar had invested it well, spreading it around the world with a diversity and thoroughness that was frightening. Financially, Sean was doing better than any time in his life.

He'd always wanted a sailboat, and now he could have his dream. He and Sandra could sail the seas together, exploring exotic ports, swimming in warm waters. All he had to do was convince her to go with him. And watch her every moment of every day when they were in port to make sure she didn't run off.

Of course, none of that changed his central problem—he wasn't entirely sure he could live without her.

That's what scared him the most.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sandra lay out by the pool, paging idly through one of the books she'd found in the library. It was surprising to her how many different English language volumes there were. Of course, the selections were a little out of date. Whoever the reader was, they hadn't been coming here for a while. She suspected there was astory behind that, but she didn't want to ask anyone. Rosa was hostile at the best of times, so light conversation wasn't really an option.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the maid stalked out on to the patio, a grim look on her face.

"You're getting fatter," she said bluntly. "I was doing your laundry, and your shirt is all stretched out."

Sandra rolled to one side and looked up her.

"It got stretched when Sean pulled it off me," she said sweetly, unwilling to admit how much she enjoyed

the disgusted look on Rosa's face.

Rosa glared at her, and then spoke abruptly.

"Senor Sean wants to see you inside," she said, a smug look stealing across her face. "Senor Valzar needs the house for someone else and Senor Sean has to leave. You know what that means for you?"

Rosa's cold eyes glinted, and she drew one finger across her throat menacingly.

"If I'm lucky, he may even let me do it," she added. With a flip of her hips she turned and left the patio. Sandra felt frozen. She'd put off thinking about this for weeks now.

It had been so easy to just pretend she was on vacation, to simply fall back and relax into the glory that was her time with Sean. And it *was* glorious. She could hardly believe how little she missed her old life. After all, aside from her neighbors and a few friends, she didn't have anyone waiting for her at home. Her brother was in jail, long lost to her even before he'd been sentenced. Her Aunt and Uncle, the only other close relatives she had left, had never been close to her. They were cold people, and had always disapproved of her parents. In fact, she couldn't remember seeing them since the funeral.

It was been easy to put all that out of her mind, along with her bills and her tiny apartment. The only living things that needed her were the houseplants, and she had no doubt that her kindly neighbors had divided those between them. It had been depressingly easy for her to drop out of sight. Twenty-seven years old, and nothing of value to show for it.

She shook her head, and stood up. That wasn't true. Her life had value. She'd helped hundreds of people at the sports clinic, and had been building a clientele that included many elderly people who had been soothed by her touch. She had healing hands, and she knew how to use them. She had something of value to offer the world.

She pulled a swim cover-up over the string bikini she wore. It, along with an entire tropical wardrobe, had arrived just days after they'd reached the villa. She had no idea how he'd done it, but Sean had arranged for her to get everything she could possibly need.

She walked slowly toward the house. She needed to talk to Sean, to find out what was really going on. It was too easy to listen to Rosa, and too easy fall into the trap of fear. Yes, her situation was tenuous, but against all rational thought, she found she trusted Sean. He had been good to her, and she knew he got as much pleasure from her company as she did from his. It was time for them to talk.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for coming in," Sean said. She'd found him in the study, his face serious. She'd tied her cover-up around her waist sarong-style. He liked it on her—she knew that from past experience. He'd told her once that nothing was sexier than a woman in a bikini with just a little fabric draped around her hips. She figured it wouldn't hurt to remind him of that when they had their little talk about the future. If ever a time to pull out the big ammo had existed, this was it.

She sat down across from him, deliberately crossing her legs so the fabric fell open. She could feel her nipples coming to attention beneath the thin fabric of her bikini top. The air conditioning always did that when she first came into the house, and she saw his eyes darting there before returning to her face.

“I got some bad news this morning,” he said slowly. She nodded her head.

“Rosa told me.”

He grimaced, and then shook his head.

“Rosa isn’t exactly a reliable source of information,” he said.

“No, I try not to pay too much attention to her,” Sandra replied. “But it can be kind of hard to feel secure when the only thing I know for sure is that I’m already dead.”

“Well, that is a good point,” he said dryly. For some bizarre reason she felt a giggle crawling up her throat. She bit it back, knowing it was just tension.

“So, what now?” she asked, laying their central dilemma out on the table.

“I have a plan,” he replied. “I’ve always wanted to live on a boat. A sailboat, to be exact. I’ve purchased one in the Cayman Islands. I’d like you to join me on it.”

He sat back, seemingly relaxed. She tried to think, unsure of what response to give. A boat could be good...

“I’d like that,” she said slowly. “I think we could have a good time on a boat.”

It seemed like such an inane statement. Her entire life depended on this man’s decisions and all she could think to say was *I think we could have a good time on a boat?*

But she couldn’t say what she was *really* thinking. A boat might make it easier to escape. She could even kill him and dump his body overboard. Of course, she didn’t have a clue as to how to run a boat by herself. But she could watch him. She could learn.

“How big of a boat?” she asked, wondering if she’d have to deal with a crew as well.

“Fifty feet,” he said. “Sailboat. We’ll have two crewmembers to start with. They’ll be teaching us how to sail it.”

“When do we leave?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“What about documents? Won’t I need a passport?”

“That’s not a problem,” he replied, handing her a manila folder filled with documents. “You have a whole new identity now. Your name is Shannon Bradley, although I think I’ll call you Shan. Seems to fit your personality better.”

“It sounds like you’ve got everything figured out,” she said slowly. She didn’t ask what Valzar thought of the new arrangement, or what he expected to have happen to her long-term. It was a good enough sign that he’d gotten her a passport. Sean must plan on keeping her around for a while at least.

“I’ll pack my clothes,” she said reassuringly, willing him to understand. “I want to make this work, Sean. I’m very highly motivated.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She was highly motivated. He knew that already. In such a short time she had become an important part of his life, yet at heart he knew she was so good to him because she was afraid.

Despite the nice clothing, despite the long nights of making love in the cool air of the villa, Sandra was fucking him to stay alive. Simple, and not particularly pretty. She didn't care about him at all and he couldn't blame her for it in the least.

It was a terrifying thing to realize that your happiness depended on someone else. Especially when it was someone else who had little or no reason to care for you. He'd seen the calculations behind her eyes when she'd asked about the boat. She tried to hide her feelings from him but she wasn't accustomed to deceiving those around her. She was an innocent, a child compared to him in a thousand little ways. She had no concept of what a man like him could do to another person.

He supposed he should feel guilty, but if he allowed himself to feel guilt over everything he'd done wrong over the years, he'd have killed himself by now. God help him, he would keep her by his side whether she liked it or not. The commitment was made and the plans were already well underway. All he had to do was follow through. She'd be his forever, and if having her was less sweet for her lack of cooperation, then so be it. Having her was worth any price.

## Chapter Nine

Valzar waited for them on the dock when they arrived in the Caymans two days later. He was dressed in an immaculate white linen suit, his eyes shielded by dark glasses. With his black hair slicked back and hands tucked in his pockets, he was the picture of a Latin playboy.

Once again, looks were deceiving. He was all business as he shook Sean's...no, Joe's hand. She repeated the new name to herself again and again. He was Joe and she was Shannon. That was her new reality and she had to get used to it.

"I see you haven't decided to take care of your little liability yet," he said as soon as they came close. He looked over her coolly, but this time he seemed less hostile. More bemused, and perhaps a bit curious.

"I find that I enjoy her company a great deal," Sean said. "You have no idea what it's like to have a companion who isn't always asking for things."

"That's certainly true," Valzar said, and he gave a rusty laugh that startled her. "My women tend to be fairly high maintenance. Always some new jewel or toy. Speaking of toys, I think you'll enjoy the boat. I had some special modifications made in the interests of meeting your needs."

Together they stepped into the boat, Sean turning to help Sandra. It wasn't large, but still bigger than she'd expected. There was a wide, flat deck broken by a cockpit that thrust up out of it, sort of like a small house. They walked over to the hatch and she stepped in, stumbling at first. Valzar and Sean caught

her at the same time, their strong hands pulling at the fabric of her blouse and nearly choking her.

“You need to be careful,” Valzar said, his tone low and silky. “It doesn’t have steps; it’s more of a ladder. You’ll do better to go down backwards.”

She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and slowly climbed down into the darkened interior of the ship’s cabin. Her eyes took a moment to adjust, and then she was able to see around her. It was lovely. Everything was done in natural woods and brass.

She was in a small galley, everything tucked away neatly against one wall. A little table curved against another wall. The men joined her, and she shuffled forward uncertainly. It was cramped with all of them in the same small space.

“Go on through the door,” Valzar said, nodding to an opening just past the table. She opened the door before her and stepped into another room, this one dominated by a king-size bed. Small doors flanked either side of the cabin.

“The head is through there,” Valzar said, nodding toward one of them. “This will be your room. There’s another small one behind the galley, where the crew sleeps. I’ve stocked it with everything you’ll need, and I’m sure you’ll be very comfortable.”

“What’s that other door lead to?” she asked, and then bit her tongue. The last thing she should be doing was opening conversations with Valzar. The man was a snake, and he would swallow her whole given half the chance. She knew it instinctively.

“That’s the communications room,” he said. “Normally it would be another sleeping cabin, but I’ve had it converted. You will not be in that room.”

“Please don’t take that tone with her,” Sean said in a cool voice. “You’re a good friend Valzar, but you’re overstepping your boundaries here.”

Valzar bristled at his tone.

Sandra pressed back against the wall, wishing herself invisible. They were like two large, caged cats, both filled with coiled tension and seeming to take up far more space than was available in the small cabin. The moment passed, and Valzar nodded his head at Sean.

“I see how it is,” he said. “You’ve made your choices. I’ll respect them. Just don’t forget that I warned you.”

“I won’t forget,” Sean said, his voice equally chilly. “You’ve done many things for me, but this is something I choose to do for myself.”

“I’m sorry,” Valzar said. “I’d hoped we could go back into business together, but I can see now that that isn’t going to happen. I won’t allow her to destroy me, too.”

“I don’t plan on destroying anyone,” she said suddenly, and then clapped one hand across her mouth. She’d done it again. Why the hell couldn’t she keep her mouth shut? Both men looked at her, startled. “I’m just trying to stay alive and make my way in the world like anyone else. Destroying either of you isn’t part of my plan. I have no idea how I’d go about it for one thing. Heck, I don’t think I’d want to. At least not in Sean’s case.”

They looked at her a moment longer, then turned away.



“Wait for us here,” Sean said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “Valzar and I need to go over the communications equipment.”

She nodded her head, feeling as if it was all some surreal dream. They treated her as if she didn’t exist in her own right, as if she weren’t a full human being capable of making her own choices. Neither of them seemed to realize she was more than a doll.

It was extremely frustrating.

The men disappeared behind the door, Valzar having keyed in a series of numbers to the small, electronic lock. She turned, surveying the room once more. This time she noticed more details. There was an inlaid headboard with shelves at the top of the bed, seemingly built right into the structure of the boat. There were several small portholes lining the cabin walls, barely large enough to let in the light, but it would be enough to let the inhabitants tell if it were light or dark.

Behind her, flanking the opposite wall from the bathroom, were drawers and what appeared to be a small closet, all made of the same smooth, highly-polished wood that most of the interior featured. She opened one of the drawers, and was only slightly surprised to find it already full of women’s clothing. She pulled out a lacy black bra and checked the size.

They’d definitely been ordered for her, she noted. Valzar and Sean were nothing if not thorough.

She turned and left the cabin, feeling a bit rebellious. She passed quickly through the galley and then climbed up the ladder-like stairs. On the deck were two large, tough-looking men in suits similar to Valzar’s. One of them nodded his head at her, his eyes drifting down her body in an appreciative if distant manner. She didn’t bother saying anything to them. They were there to keep her from running away, she understood that. She wondered if they would also be the crewmembers. It seemed odd, as they were hardly dressed for sailing.

The boat rocked slightly as someone stepped on board, and she turned to see a small, scrawny man with a scar running across his cheek hopping over to the deck. He carried a black rucksack and wore only a pair of shorts. The two men in suits bristled.

“Don’t worry,” he said, nodding at them in a friendly manner. “Valzar sent me. I’m one of the new crewmembers. The other’s on his way.”

The suits still looked skeptical, as did Sandra. This man hardly looked strong enough to work, let alone run a sailboat as big as this one.

“Oh, I know what I’m doing,” he said, giving her a crooked smile and spitting briskly into the water. “I grew up in these islands, lived my entire life on the water. Have my own boat, too. Only came out because Valzar begged me to help his good friend *Joe*.”

She cocked her head, trying to imagine Valzar begging anyone.

“Call me Skip,” he said, moving quickly across the deck and reaching out one hand to her. She took it, and he leaned in close to whisper in her ear. His voice was hardly friendly and harmless now.

“Valzar’s told me all about you, chippie,” he said in low tones. “I have a great deal of respect for our mutual friend, and don’t think for one moment I’d hesitate to slit your throat if I thought he was in trouble.”

He leaned back, all smiles again.

“We understand each other?” he asked, his tone friendly once more. She nodded her head quickly, feeling faint. Valzar’s presence hung around her like a dark shadow. The man wanted her dead, and she had no doubt that given enough time he’d find a way to make it happen.

Skip nodded to the men in suits and walked quickly over to the hatch. Within seconds he was out of sight, and she stood on the deck once more, looking at the boats around her and wondering if anyone on them could help her.

She thought about screaming, jumping off the ship into the water and making for a friendly face. But none of the boats around appeared to have anyone on board, and the two men in suits had their eyes glued to her. She wrapped both arms around her body, a part of her wishing they were still at the villa. At least there she’d *known* she was trapped. She’d hate it, but in another way it had been strangely comforting. There had been no hope of escape, and that meant she didn’t have to worry about it. All she had to do was lie back, relax and enjoy the bizarre situation in which she’d found herself. It was a place out of time, out of space.

Now she was back in the real world. There were other people around her, places she could run. There were probably even policemen in the harbor, if she could just think of a way to contact them.

Of course, given the way things had gone for her so far, they were on Valzar’s payroll, too. *Everybody* seemed to work for that man.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later Valzar was gone, and they were slowly motoring out of the harbor. She sat up on the bow, watching idly as they passed a variety of other vessels, occasionally waving to a friendly face on another boat.

Sean came and sat down beside her. Surprisingly, he wore a ragged pair of cutoffs and nothing else. He cocked one eye at her startled expression.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen you look so... casual,” she said after a moment.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this relaxed,” he replied, leaning his head back against rise of the boat’s cabin “Do you realize that we don’t have to do anything?”

“Well, we have to leave to sail the boat,” she said.

“Yes, but we don’t have to do it right now.”

“How long will the crew be with us?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” he said, reaching one arm around her shoulders to pull her close. “Why, do you dislike them already?”

She looked back to where Skip sat at the wheel. Their second crewmember, a youngish man named Jose, scampered about, checking ropes and tightening things.

“No, I don’t like them,” she said. “Did you know that Skip threatened me?”

“I’m not surprised,” Sean, dropping his head to kiss the top of hers. “We already knew how protective Valzar is.”

“I think he’s jealous of me,” she said suddenly. “He wants you to work with him again, and he thinks that I’m the reason you’re not. Is that true?”

He stayed silent, rubbing the top of her head with his fingers instead.

“It is true,” she said softly. “You can let me go, Sean. I don’t want to hurt you. I want you to go on with your life, and I want to do the same.”

Once again he didn’t reply. Instead, he reached down and tilted her head up toward his. His lips dropped down, kissing her softly on the mouth, and then straying across her cheek. His hands started a restless crawl across her body, reaching down and grasping her hips, turning and pulling her until she straddled him. She could feel the length of his erection through her shorts. Liquid fire jetted through her and she melted against him. Why was he able to do this to her so easily?

“Don’t,” she whispered nervously.

“Why not?” He asked, his tone bemused.

“Because they’ll see us,” she said, her voice tense, eyes darting across the horizon at the other boats.

“I don’t care if they see us,” he said softly into her ear. His clever fingers slid her zipper down, even though her hands batted at him, trying to stop him. He took no notice.

“I care,” she hissed back. “And I’ll bet they care, too. Why should they have to put up with that? You’re sick.”

His hands were inside her shorts now, cupping the curve of her buttocks, rubbing her back and forth against his cock. She shuddered in need, and then took a deep breath before pushing at his shoulders hard to catch his attention.

“I’m not going to do this,” she said firmly. “It’s simply not going to happen.”

He cocked his head at her then lifted his hands.

“You win,” he said.

She sniffed, pulling herself free and sitting beside him on the deck. Her pants were still loose, but she couldn’t quite figure out how to fasten them without sitting up on her knees, and that would give the two men behind them too much of a show.

They sat together quietly for a time. The sun started to lower in the far horizon when he reached over and pulled her into his lap again, this time facing away from him.

She started to fuss, but his hands came up and stilled her.

“Just sit and enjoy the moment,” he said softly. His strong fingers rubbed her shoulders, easing the tension of the moment. She relaxed, and it seemed entirely natural when his hand drifted down her shoulders until it cupped her breast, rubbing absently at her nipple through the soft cotton fabric of her shirt. She leaned back against him, enjoying the sensation. For some reason it didn’t seem as threatening as before... perhaps because they were out of the harbor. She could feel the bulge of his erection growing beneath her bottom, but he wasn’t intent on rubbing it against her this time. He seemed more inclined to simply be

close to her, enjoying her presence and the touch of her body.

She felt each breath he took against her back, his muscular chest swelling and falling in time. She let her head loll back against him, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it washed over her with a gentleness that hadn't been present in the jungle.

His hands left her breasts, moving slowly down her body to her stomach to loosen her shirt. His finger slipped under it with deceptive ease, and then started rubbing the soft skin of her belly. It felt so good. She knew she should make him stop, but she couldn't seem to make herself move. Just breathing had become an effort.

Gently, the fingers of one hand slipped beneath her panties. She tried drawing her legs together. Before she got far, his knees came up between hers, and his legs levered hers apart with a gentleness that belied the firmness of his touch. She found herself draped across him, butt in his lap, legs sprawled across his, and she knew in that instant that no matter what he did to her, she wouldn't try to stop him. It simply felt too good.

She shivered when his fingers grazed against her clit. He knew how to touch her, knew how sensitive the little nub was. So sensitive that it was almost painful at times, but his hands were soft. Back and forth, squeezing and working, his fingers slipped across her clit, their way eased by the flood of moisture seeping out of her. When his hand dropped lower, his fingers slid into her opening with a gentleness that was almost embarrassing. So much for her earlier protests. At that moment she didn't care who might see them, all she wanted was to make sure he kept touching her.

Then he pulled his hand away, and she gave a little whimper of protest.

"Wait," he whispered in her ear, and then he wrapped one arm around her waist and lifted her body ever so slightly. His hand dipped down behind her. Then it came back around and he pushed her legs together a bit, pulling her shorts down from behind. When they were around her upper thighs, he brought her back over his lap.

"Just hold still," he said, and she could feel the hot length of his cock against her ass. He lifted her body, and to her surprise, his cock slid neatly into her vagina.

He was big, and he'd always filled her completely, but this time was different. Perhaps it was the strange position, or the fact that her legs were nearly closed, but he seemed to be larger somehow. She could feel every delicious inch of him coming into her, a slow slide from behind that almost made her gasp several times. His hands came around front again, and this time he reached up inside her shirt to work her nipples. She hadn't worn a bra, leaving her breasts completely exposed to his touch. His fingers sought out the stiff little peaks, massaging and pulling on them as he slid into her waiting body with slow determination. She tried to move, tried to wiggle her hips, but he clamped down on her, pinning her to his body with his hands.

"You do what I tell you," he said softly. "I'm in control here."

She nodded her head, a secret thrill running through her. After long seconds of slowly sinking, she reached bottom. She felt his belly against her ass, and unable to control herself, she squeezed him once with her internal muscles. His hips bucked up involuntarily, and he gave a muffled groan.

Not completely in control, she thought wickedly.

He head still lolled back against his shoulder, arms at her sides and her breasts being worked by his hands. He cocked his hips a bit, and then whispered, "Touch me."

She nodded her head, knowing instinctively what he was asking. She flexed herself within, and felt an answering twitch from him. One of his hands left her breasts and drifted down, fingers diving between her legs to the tiny nubbin of her clit. As he plucked at it, and then rubbed her firmly, she arched her back and gasped. Inside she clenched him once more, wringing a moan of satisfaction from him.

“That’s what I want.”

She nodded her head against him, and squeezed him again. She supposed she should try and do some kind of steady rhythm, but that seemed impossible. There was a tension within her, spiraling out with every tantalizing rub of his fingers, and she could only respond by clutching him tighter. Every few seconds she forced herself to release, concerned she might be hurting him, but he never said a word. Instead his fingers worked her, rubbing in small circles while pushing with just enough pressure to drive her mad.

Tiny twinges built in her body, and suddenly she was filled with a sense of terrible energy. She couldn’t move, couldn’t shake it, even though she desperately needed to. She shifted restlessly, clenching and unclenching as his fingers continued their slow, terrible torture of her body.

She was close to the edge. She shivered in tension, and with every breath she clutched at his cock, the solid pressure and presence driving her crazy. She wanted him to move, *needed* him to move. She wanted him to push her forward on the deck and pound into her, crushing her with his weight and filling her with his seed. She wanted that terrible tension to ease, and she’d do anything to make it happen.

She moaned out loud, and he gave a long, low chuckle. His fingers stopped moving, and he whispered in her ear once more.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to fuck me,” she said, each word a gasp. “Oh Sean, I need it so bad. Please.”

He laughed, wrapping one arm firmly around her waist and holding her to him as he shifted. As if he’d read her mind, he lowered her before him face first to the deck. Somehow he managed to pull the shorts off her completely, although she had no clue how. She found herself on her hands and knees on the prow of the boat, speared by his cock and poised on the edge of insanity.

“Do it now,” she demanded, her voice hoarse with frustration. His hands gripped her hips, pulled back, and then slammed forward into her with a force that nearly dropped her.

He was huge. He pushed her delicate tissues open, a marauder set on taking her for his own. Eyes closed, it was easy to imagine she was on an old sailing ship, prisoner to a pirate’s lust and subject to his every whim. Again and again he pummeled her, each stroke bringing her closer to the edge. His fingers reached around her, dancing cleverly across the center of her desire, and then she exploded into a thousand pieces. She felt her limbs give way, and he lifted her by the waist, torso dangling forward. He swung her around, laying her face down across the top of the cabin, arms spread out before her and knees braced on the deck. He started thrusting into her again, and her sensitive flesh cried out for relief. It was too much, she couldn’t take any more. Again and again he thrust into her, and she hovered desperately on the brink of another orgasm.

He rode her hard, never giving an inch. Her muscles clenched and unclenched, grasping at him as if she could hold him into her body if she just tried hard enough. Each time he pulled away from her before slamming into her again.

Finally, right on the edge of her orgasm, her head lolled to one side and her eyes drifted open. Standing

before her were both of the crewmen, their faces intent. To her horror, Skip rubbed an enormous erection through his pants. Jose stood behind the smaller man, arms wrapped around him, nuzzling his neck. The two men must be lovers.

She wanted to scream at them, to wilt in shame at being seen this way, but all she could do was focus on breathing. She closed her eyes again, pretending they weren't there. Sean thrust into her one more time and she was done.

Starbursts exploded behind her eyes, and every bit of her seemed to cease for one brief, shining moment. She could hear Sean crying out behind her as his seed burst forth into her body. He shuddered against her, and then collapsed over her, sucking in deep breaths of air.

Gradually she became aware again of the rocking of the boat, and the soft sighing of the wind as it whispered through the empty rigging. Sean lifted himself, and then pulled her back into his lap, cradling her and kissing her face softly. She felt tears building up and welling out of her eyes, and then it washed over her. Everything that had happened, from her kidnapping to this strange new existence hit her at once. She missed her old life, that was true—but what scared her the most was she'd just allowed herself to be fucked by the man who'd captured her, in front of his crew, and all she could think was how much she wanted it to happen again.

What had come over her, what kind of person was she deep down inside?

She sobbed quietly in his arms for what had to be an hour, and he simply held her, rubbing the top of her head and giving her small kisses on her face. Then he led her slowly around the deck to the ladder, taking her down into the cabin. She realized later that she still wasn't wearing her shorts, and that the two other men had seen everything.

It doesn't really matter, though, she told herself that night as she looked in the mirror. Once two men watch you fuck doggy style on a boat deck, a little casual nudity isn't all that serious in comparison.

## Chapter Ten

No one should be enjoying life as much as this, she thought in disgust. There was something vaguely obscene about how pleasant it had been over the past week. Much like her time at the villa, she found herself falling into a sensuous routine on board the boat. The only thing that made it less than perfect was the fact that Skip and Jose were still with them. She and Sean had a much better understanding of how to sail the boat, but Sean still didn't want to get rid of the two men. She wished he would—they frightened her. She knew they still had a lot to learn, but surely there were better people out there to teach them.

They had gone ashore three times, and each time she and Sean stuck together. At first she'd had some dim idea of escape, but it was pretty clear that wouldn't happen any time soon. For one thing, she didn't have any money. For another, she was terrified of Skip. Her earlier fantasies of killing the crew and taking over the boat had been ludicrous. She didn't want to kill anyone, even if she could.

She knew Sean would be able to find her if she ran, but that didn't scare her. He wouldn't hurt her. If Skip found her, though, she'd be finished. He'd gut her without thinking, using that long, wickedly sharp knife he kept in his belt. Where the hell had Valzar found a man like that?

Every time he looked at her, he had a smug, smirking look in his eyes. As if he knew all about her, and wasn't particularly impressed. She supposed part of it was in her head—after all, it was hard to feel friendly toward a man who'd spied on you during sex. But she wasn't imagining the entire thing. He watched her closely, and his looks weren't friendly. She felt sorry for Jose. Skip wasn't the kind of man she'd wish on anyone, and couldn't help but think that sharing his bed wasn't the kindest of fates. Still, the young man didn't seem to be unhappy. He did all that Skip asked of him cheerfully, and each night they disappeared to their tiny cabin near the engine compartment without comment.

Despite this, though, things were good. Skip wouldn't be around forever.

She'd made a decision, too. She wasn't going to leave Sean. She didn't like everything that he did, but she'd realized something a while back. She wanted to be with him. Regardless of "Stockholm Syndrome," she knew her feelings for him were real. She hadn't left anything behind that was so important to her. Living with Sean was good, and she wanted it to continue.

Once she made that decision things got a little easier.

The days blended into each other, and she spent her mornings lazing on the deck, occasionally dipping in for a swim when they weren't under sail. Much of the time they spent anchored off small islands, many of them almost untouched by the tourist trade. She had always been a strong swimmer, and practicing in the warm Caribbean waters only made her better. So when, on the spur of the moment one evening, he asked her to swim to shore with him, she didn't think twice. She simply pulled off her sarong revealing the two-piece swimsuit underneath and dove in.

They played as they swam, him catching up to her and ducking her under, and her pulling him down with her. He was stronger, of course, but in the water he was still vulnerable. They raced the last hundred yards to the beach, wading up out of the water laughing and gasping for air. She ran to a coconut tree beyond the water line and tagged it.

"I win!" she called, although touching the tree hadn't been part of the original race. In response he growled, running toward her with a look of mock menace. She squealed, and ran down the beach. He followed, catching her up in his arms within a few yards and tossing her around as if she weighed nothing.

She clutched his neck, steadying herself, and before long they were both in the sand, laughing and giggling like children.

Sean's face stilled, and he leaned over and kissed her suddenly. It was a quick kiss, hard and full of intent. Humor faded, and he looked down into her eyes, pinning her beneath him with his body.

"I love you," he said suddenly. "I don't know how I was lucky enough to find you, but I love you."

"Thank you," she said softly, not quite ready to say the words back to him. "I wish I'd found you earlier."

"Me too," he said. "Although you'd have had a hard time visiting me. They didn't let anyone in to see me most of the time, let alone women."

She stilled, and a shadow crossed her face. She didn't like being reminded of his past, of who he was. She didn't like thinking of him in Edgar's office and the pool of blood flowing across the floor.

"Will you tell me why you did it?"

"Did what?" he asked.

“Why you had Edgar killed,” she said softly.

“Are you sure you want to know?”

She thought of saying no for a moment. It was easier to pretend he hadn't planned a man's death, easier to imagine this was just some wonderful dream free of context and consequences. But it wasn't. If she wanted to be with this man and to truly love him, she needed to understand what he had done.

“I want to know,” she said softly. “If you don't tell me, I won't ever understand and maybe there's a part of me that won't trust you.”

“What if my explanation makes you trust me less?”

“I don't know,” she said softly, trying to be as honest as possible. “I guess we'll take that as it comes. What I do know is that if we aren't honest with each other, we don't have a chance.”

He nodded his head slowly, and then rolled off her to lie in the sand next to her. She snuggled into his side as he cradled her with his arm.

“Well, I started out in the Special Forces,” he said slowly. “I did that for several years, and then some friends of mine and I decided to go freelance.”

“Freelance?” she asked, unsure what he meant.

“We started hiring ourselves out to the highest bidder,” he said. “At first we thought we'd be fighting. You know, fearless mercenaries and all that. And we did do some fighting. But what we mostly ended up doing was training other people how to fight.”

“I see,” she said.

“No, I doubt that you do,” he said with a bitter laugh. “But I'll keep telling you anyway. I met Valzar around this time, by the way. He and his family go way back, descended from *Conquistadores*. They've owned and sold people for generations, controlling entire countries. They're always working on some new deal, some new angle. Half the things that happen down here they have a finger in, legitimate and illegitimate.”

“He's not a very nice man,” she said softly.

“No, he isn't,” Sean replied with a harsh laugh. “Although he's a damn good man to have at your back. I hooked up with Valzar because I wanted to get into a new field, hostage rescue, and he had the money. I was tired of teaching peasants how to fight. I knew that whatever I taught them probably wouldn't save their lives, not as long as the guerrillas and the government refused to even consider peace. It's always the peasants who get caught in the middle of these wars. With Valzar's backing, I started contracting with several large insurance companies who offer kidnapping insurance to foreign businessmen.”

“I've never heard of insurance like that,” she said. “It sounds like a different world.”

“That world is all around us,” he said softly. “It's just that most people don't have the background to notice it. That's the difference between people like me and people like you. I notice things.”

She didn't say anything, knowing he was probably right. She hadn't had a clue something was wrong at Edgar's until she'd walked out of the bathroom. She'd be willing to bet Sean wouldn't have been fooled like that.



“So, Valzar and I started our little business, contracting with these companies and bringing in a nice revenue stream. Most of the time we’d just pocket the profits, and even the occasional hostage situation wasn’t too bad. Ninety percent of the time we’d manage to negotiate a ransom for our hostages and get them out safe.”

“What about the rest of the time?” she asked.

“We’d go in after them,” he said, his voice going lower. “Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. It’s a messy business.”

She nodded her head, as if she knew what he was talking about.

“So, how did you end up in prison?”

“I ended up in prison because I murdered a man in the United States where I could get caught.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t.

“Why did you kill him?” she asked finally.

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it matters,” she said.

“I murdered him because he got six of my men killed, not to mention two hostages,” he said, his face emotionless. “Their lives were worth 25,000 to him. I learned later that he blew all of it in Vegas the next weekend. That’s why I killed him.”

She stayed silent for a moment, and then shook her head. “I don’t understand,” she said softly. “Will you tell me the whole story?”

“Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I think if I don’t, I’ll always question what happened.”

“You can’t just trust me?” he asked. She looked at him sadly, and then shook her head.

“No, I don’t think that I can,” she replied. “I wish I could, but you’ve never given me the chance to make any decisions for myself. If you won’t trust me, how can I ever trust you?”

He rolled to his back, and put both hands behind his head. She did the same, looking up at the stars and marveling at how bright they seemed. She’d never seen anything quite like it. If only life wasn’t so complicated, she could spend her time with him simply enjoying the life they were leading. But she couldn’t just do that, she needed to learn what was really going on, and he was the only one who could tell her. As much as she wanted to turn her brain off, it wasn’t happening. She had to know.

“Well, I told you I did contracting with insurance firms,” he said. “I was negotiating a hostage release in Sinaloa, up in the mountains. There were two businessmen who’d been snatched off the street in Mazatlan by drug dealers, and I suspect there was more going on between them than a simple ransom demand. Anyway, it was complicated by the fact that one of them had ties to the CIA.”

He paused took a breath, and she drank that in. What a strange world he lived in. Who had ties to the CIA in real life? It sounded like a movie...

“When they heard about the situation, they sent an advisor down to work with me. Someone in his office

had a big mouth, because they told a co-worker, who just happened to be a drinking buddy of Edgar's, about the situation.

"Now I suppose that any human being with a scrap of decency would have pity on hostages, but not this guy. He decided that information on our operation might be worth something to someone. Edgar found him a buyer. We'd made arrangements for the exchange at a little airfield outside El Quelite. When we arrived the kidnapers were waiting. We were poised to do the exchange, and then they struck."

"Who?" she asked, breathless.

"A rival cartel," he said softly. "Edgar and his pal sold us out to them. They swooped in, killed everyone in sight and took the money. Only five of us got out alive."

She stayed quiet, unsure of how to respond.

"When I recovered from my wounds, I started investigating what happened," he said, his voice growing hard. "I found out about Edgar from one of the drug dealers, and when I came up to the States, I found him and his friend. I watched those bastards for weeks, waiting for just the right moment. I waited until they went out drinking one night and ambushed them in the parking lot. I killed the CIA leak first, but I underestimated Edgar—he pulled a gun on me and shot me. I woke up handcuffed to a hospital bed."

"What did he tell the police?" she asked softly.

"He said he thought it was a random act of violence, that I'd been trying to mug them," Sean said softly. "I didn't bother contradicting him. I figured that I'd do better pretending it was a crime of opportunity rather than a hit. They're a little too excited about the death penalty in Texas to take chances. They offered me a plea bargain and I took it."

"And Edgar just got away with it?" she asked softly.

"Until I got back to him," Sean said with dark satisfaction. "He killed my men, Sandra. He deserved to die."

"Why did you get caught in the first place?" she asked softly. "I've seen you in action. I wouldn't have thought a man like Edgar could get the drop on you."

"Honestly?" he said, his voice still toneless. "I lost my cool. I'd intended to follow them for a while, learn their habits and make it a clean hit. Instead I lost my temper. When I saw them drinking and laughing together I couldn't stand it. I had to get them. And I had to do it right then."

"I guess I can understand that," she said softly. "The world probably is better off without him. Did you ever consider going to the police with the entire story? I mean, before you decided to kill them yourself?"

He gave a quick bark of laughter.

"No, that was never an option," he said softly. "Not with the CIA involved. They don't like any kind of publicity, and they'll do whatever it takes to keep information on their little mistakes from coming out. They preferred to let me handle things, and when I finally found a way out of prison, they were more than happy to assist in my disappearance. They owed me, you see."

"Yes, I can see that," she said. She rolled over toward him, running one finger along the bridge of his nose. In the moonlight he was little more than a stark profile beside her, cool and almost untouchable.

She let her finger trail down the smooth curve of his throat, then trace along his chest until she reached his

stomach. She laid her hand flat, watching his chest rise and fall, and wondered how she had ever met up with this strange and terrifying man. She knew then, right there in the moonlight, that he was worthy of her love. She was glad Edgar was dead. He'd deserved what Sean had done, no questions asked. She just wished he'd been able to get to him sooner, that he hadn't wasted five years of his life in jail.

"I love you," she said suddenly, realizing it was true. He froze, a profound stillness coming over him. Even his breathing seemed to stop, and then his hand came up over hers and clenched it tight.

He started to reply, but was cut off abruptly as a booming explosion tore through the night.

He rolled over her suddenly, one hand covering her mouth. He pushed her head down into the sand, his body covering and protecting hers. A second explosion ripped through the darkness, and then silence drifted back over them.

"I'm going to let you look up," he whispered in her ear. "Don't say anything and don't move, or they might find us."

She nodded her head, and he shifted his weight. She rolled over and looked out across the water. A mass of fire lit up the night where their boat had been moored.

"Skip and Jose were on there," she whispered numbly. "We have to get help!"

"They're dead," Sean said softly. "There's no way they could have survived that. We're supposed to be dead, too."

She looked at him blankly.

"Why else would someone blow up the boat?" he asked. "They wanted to kill us, Sandra. The good news is that they probably think they succeeded. We just have to keep it that way."

## Chapter Eleven

Sandra trudged through the underbrush doggedly, ignoring the insects buzzing around her painfully exposed flesh.

She felt like a boiled lobster.

The hot sun tore into her pale skin ruthlessly, and she cursed the skimpy bikini she'd worn for their midnight swim. Still, she struggled forward, refusing to complain. Whining wouldn't do either of them any good.

The night had seemed endless. Sean had insisted that they remain still and out of sight until morning, and even then they'd spent a few more hours hiding. He'd gone out looking around a few times and had spotted two men watching the remains of the boat. They'd left a few hours later, climbing into a jeep and driving off down the sandy beach.

She'd thought they should stay and wait for help. After all, there couldn't be that many midnight explosions on the island. Someone was sure to notice eventually. Sean nixed that idea immediately, telling her it was too dangerous. Whoever rescued them would probably talk about it to someone else, and then

the attackers would learn they were still alive.

So here they were, trudging through the jungle in the direction Sean insisted would lead them to a village. She had no idea what they would do when they arrived. After all, it couldn't be too often that white tourists in bathing suits appeared out of the jungle asking for a phone, but he seemed to know what he was doing. She certainly had no clue, so she was content to let him lead her.

Surprisingly, they reached the village after only an hour of walking.

She'd expected them to go right in, but he'd installed her in the bushes and went by himself. Ten minutes later he was back wearing a loose pair of cotton pants held up with a rope and a faded, button-up shirt. When he handed her a ratty T-shirt and oversized jeans, she'd never been so happy to see anything in her life.

"Where did you get these?" she asked.

"I traded my watch for them," he said. "The farmer said he'd give us a ride into a town with a phone, too."

"Won't he tell people about us?" she asked.

"Probably," he said. "Although I've asked him not to. The people in this village are very close-mouthed, they don't like outsiders."

"How do you know that?"

"I research every place we go," Sean replied. "It isn't an accident that we came to this particular island. You never know when you might need a bolt-hole, and a small village like this one can be a great place to lose yourself. I promised him more money if he gets us out of here without anyone seeing us."

She nodded her head, amazed at how he managed to pull these things off. He handed her a small pair of sandals made from braided rope and she slid them on her feet. He reached down, pulled her up, and they were off. Twenty minutes later they crouched beside a narrow, one lane track. After what seemed like hours, they heard the sound of a sputtering engine. Sean stood up and waved as he recognized the farmer, who drove a pickup that had to be at least thirty years old. The cab was tiny, but she felt so happy to be on her way to civilization that she didn't mind sitting awkwardly on Sean's lap.

Two hours later, after bumping across the road and hitting her head on the roof of the truck every two or three minutes, she had a blinding headache. She hardly even noticed when they pulled out of the jungle into a small village. She did notice, however, when the truck passed through the village and hit a paved road. Their surroundings grew steadily more modern until they reached what could only be a tourist area, several hundred feet of beachfront lined with graciously aging hotels. Twenty years earlier this place had been a real hot spot.

The truck pulled to a halt in front of one of the buildings. With Sean's muttered thanks to their driver in a language she didn't understand, they were left standing in front of the hotel as two startled doormen looked around for their bags.

Sean had her sit in the lobby, and half an hour later he came back and escorted her up to a well-appointed suite, possibly the best the hotel had to offer. She collapsed on the bed, utterly exhausted, and barely paid attention as he went into the other room to talk on the phone. After a while he joined her, pulling her into his arms and kissing the back of her neck softly as they fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning she found herself alone. She considering calling down to the desk and asking for him, but she didn't want to do anything to draw attention to herself. After all, someone had tried to kill them. The last thing she needed was to call down and ask for him by name, especially if he hadn't used his real name. She didn't even know what names they were using. Was he Sean or Joe?

Instead she took a long, hot bath and tried to calm her thoughts. She seemed to be getting used to this life on the run, she realized wryly. The things that would have driven her crazy just a few months ago, the uncertainty, the fear she managed to push to the back of her mind. For the first time in her life she was living for the day, not of the future. Refreshing in a way. Zen.

She snickered at the thought as she toweled off and pulled on a fluffy bathrobe. She walked into the main room. There was a shadow, a man talking on the phone. Her heart leapt. Sean? No, Valzar.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

He dropped the receiver back in the cradle, and then turned to her.

"I'm here to take you away," he said, eyes watching her without expression.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Sean won't like this and you know it."

"I'm here because Sean asked me to come," he said softly. If she hadn't known better, she might have said he had pity written on his face.

"That's not true," she replied. "Sean doesn't trust you. He wouldn't leave me alone with you."

"Yes, I'm afraid it is," he said. He walked toward her, and she clutched the robe more tightly to her chest, backing away from him. He smiled, but there was no happiness in his expression.

"For reasons I still don't understand, he cares for you," Valzar said. "He's worried. Last night scared him, made him realize that his enemies are still out there. He needs to be alone, *chica*. You're his weakness."

She shook her head, denying it.

"I'm not his weakness, you are," she said bitterly. "You're the one who got him into this, and for all I know you're the one trying to kill him. You need to leave us alone."

"You need to realize what kind of man you've been sleeping with," Valzar said. "Sean is not the kind of man who can settle down, who can afford a family. None of us are. Sean needs to be free so he can do his work."

"Sean's tired of his work," she said, her voice cold. "He's been out of your business for five years—all he wants is to sit back and enjoy his freedom. Why can't you just let him do that?"

"I'm not the one he has to protect," Valzar said, his voice gentle. "You are. He sent me here because he wants me to spirit you away, to make you disappear. He wants you to be safe. You've made him desperate, and desperate men do foolish things."

"You've made no secret of the fact that you want me dead," she said. "Why should I trust you now? This

is some kind of game you're playing, and I won't be your pawn in it."

"There's a spy in my organization," Valzar said softly. "It's the only way they could have found the two of you. That means they knew I want you dead. I'm the perfect person to make you disappear. That's why Sean asked me to help, because it's my fault. I owe him more than I can repay."

"You're full of shit."

He stepped closer to her, invading her space. He smelled warm and male, and for an instant she could imagine that some women would find him very attractive. Fools who weren't smart enough to realize the man didn't have a soul.

"I'm not full of anything but the desire to help my friend," he said, touching her shoulder. She stiffened. "He has asked me to help you, and I'm going to do that, regardless of what I think should be done with you. I've given him my oath."

"You can't force me to do anything," she said.

"Yes, I can," he said. "You can come easily, or I can have my men inject you with a sedative and take you out while you're unconscious. I don't care either way."

They glared at each other for long, tense moments, and then she let her gaze fall. She wasn't going to win this way.

"All right," she said quietly, disgusted by the submission she could hear in her voice. "Let me go get dressed."

## Chapter Twelve

Five stories was a long way to fall. Just looking over the edge of the balcony made her dizzy, but she thought she had several minutes before Valzar came into the bedroom to check on her. She'd be damned if she'd go with him quietly. Somewhere out there Sean was fighting for his life, and she wasn't going to leave him to do it alone. Fuck Valzar.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she swung her leg over the railing and set it firmly on the ledge. She figured she had no more than seven minutes at the most before he became suspicious. Clutching the side of the building, she slid one foot forward and then followed it with the other until she reached the next balcony. She climbed over the rail with relief, and tried the door. Locked, naturally. Taking another deep breath she crossed the balcony and stepped back out on to the ledge. There weren't any more balconies on this side of the hotel, but she wasn't far from the corner and she hoped that there was something around it.

Luck was with her.

When she reached the corner and peeked around, she could see the roof of the building next door. There was a narrow gap separating the two hotels, and not far below she could see a metal fire escape. If she could get around the corner, she'd be able to jump on to the fire escape and climb down.

Easier said than done.

The gap between the buildings wasn't that wide, but the roof was a good six feet below her. She had never been particularly athletic. Visions of broken limbs danced through her head, but then she reminded herself what was at stake.

Her future with Sean.

Damn, she was tired of other people making decisions for her. If staying with Sean meant risking her life, that was her decision to make. He had no right to send her away with Valzar, none at all. She needed to get out and find him and explain that little fact to him.

She'd finally had enough.

Taking a deep breath, she whispered a prayer and launched herself across toward the other roof. She hit with a thump, rolling several times before coming to a stop. There were scrapes on her hands and she was sure she'd be sore after a while, but she none of that mattered. She'd done it.

Sandra pulled herself up, all too aware of how visible she must be. She crawled over to the edge of the roof, looking for the fire escape. For the first time she wondered why the other hotel didn't have one. The thought was rather chilling. If there had been a fire, she'd have been out of luck... Even more chilling was the state of the fire escape she needed to use now. It was rusty, and seemed to sag away from the building in several places. She reached out and pushed on it gingerly and it made a creaking noise.

Good Lord.

She reminded herself once more why she was doing this. She was tired of being passive, tired of other people telling her what to do. This time it was going to be about *her*, and *her* needs. She needed to be with Sean, and she was damned if she let him get away. Screw everyone else.

She reached one leg over the side and tested the fire escape. It seemed to hold the weight she put on it. She lowered herself gingerly off the roof and onto the rickety contraption. It made a creaking, moaning noise, but nothing else happened.

I can do this, she told herself.

Down she went, trying not to imagine what it would feel like to plunge four stories. She didn't think about whether anyone could see her, about whether Valzar had goons posted all around the buildings. All she could think about was climbing. One foot down, then another. Step after step, rung after rung, until she was on solid ground. She looked around and realized that nobody watched her. She'd done it. She was free.

She found her way along the side of the building until she reached the alley running behind it. She moved down the alley as quickly as she could, wondering what to do next. She had no idea. For all she knew Sean wasn't even on the island any longer. How was she going to find him, and how would she convince him to allow her to stay with him? She had no money, no papers. Officially she didn't exist.

She walked down the narrow streets, wishing desperately that she'd paid better attention when they'd arrived. A small group of mixed-race children started tagging along after her. She ignored them at first, but it got harder a while. They swarmed around her, eyes filled with curiosity and mischief. What did they want?

"Yo' lady," one of the kids said, and she whirled. An English speaker!

"You wanna take my picture, lady?" the girl asked. She looked to be about ten years old, and her eyes gleamed with capitalistic fervor. "You give me dollah, lady, I let you take picture."

“I don’t have a dollar,” she said quickly. The girl rolled her eyes, and spoke quickly to the children around her in rapid Spanish patois.

“You lost, lady?” the girl asked after a moment.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Can you help me?”

The girl cocked her head, and another child spoke to her again. She nodded at him, and the other kids clapped their hands.

“We gonna help you, lady,” the girl said. “You look pretty sad all alone here. You gotta tell the people at the embassy that we’re good kids, though, that we help you.”

“There’s an embassy here?” she asked, suddenly filled with relief. She could get help!

“Little one,” the girl said. “You got papers?”

Sandra shook her head. The child shrugged, and then started walking.

“You come with me,” she called over her shoulder. The children seemed to think she needed their escort, because most of them started walking with her as she followed the girl. People watched as the strange little convoy moved down the street, and she wondered if it was foolish to allow such a spectacle to be made of her “escape.” But it wasn’t really as if she had much choice, she reminded herself. She had no idea where she was going or what she was doing. Hopefully they could give her some direction at the embassy. At the very least, they should be able to tell her where she was and give her access to a phone. She could call Valzar, and demand that he have Sean call her, she thought suddenly. If she called from the safety of the embassy, there wasn’t anything he could do to her. She could threaten to tell them everything if he didn’t put her in touch with Sean immediately.

She smiled, feeling rather pleased with herself. She had it all figured out.

After walking for 20 minutes the streets were getting noticeably cleaner, and then she saw an American flag in the distance. Her heart lifted, and she felt a burst of patriotic pride that she’d never felt before. How beautiful it was in the distance! In that building there were people who could help her — she would be completely safe with them. It was a wonderful feeling.

A few blocks from the lovely, gated complex the little girl turned into another alleyway.

“The embassy is over that way,” Sandra said, confused.

“You gotta go this way to get to gate,” the child replied. “Much faster.”

Sandra shook her head, but she girl had helped her so far. Within seconds they turned again and she found herself in an open courtyard. The children started giggling, and she realized something was very wrong.

She spun around, ready to go back toward the flag, but two large, armed men were already there, blocking her escape. Valzar strolled out of the shadows, shaking his finger at her disapprovingly.

“Now Sandra, that’s no way to behave,” he said. “If you keep this up, I’ll start to think you don’t like being around me. Wouldn’t that be a shame?”



## Chapter Thirteen

Wretched children, she thought darkly. How could she have trusted them? Their little eyes glowed as Valzar pulled a handful of bills out of his pocket. He'd given one to each child, patting them on the head as he did so, and spoke softly in their own language. She might have been impressed with his thoroughness if she wasn't so disgusted. Bastard.

He'd used her—she'd gone through all that stress for nothing. She was no better off than she'd been better.

"You do realize that I could tell Sean you died trying to escape," he said as he escorted her out of the alley into a waiting SUV. A driver and one of Valzar's thugs sat in the front. "Sean would never know the difference."

"Why would he care?" she asked softly.

"You're a fool if you don't know the answer to that question," Valzar said. "He's waiting for you to leave, Sandra. He wants you to be safe and he trusts me to make sure it happens. I've never known him to hold back his plans for anyone. He cares about you a great deal."

She sat passively beside him in the back seat as the car started moving.

"Do you ever do your own dirty work?" she asked bitterly, nodding her head at the man in the front seat. Valzar smiled briefly, his teeth gleaming in the darkness of the car. The tinted windows screened them completely from whoever might be waiting outside.

"Yes, I do my own dirty work," he said. "You'd probably be surprised at how much time and effort I put into running my little business empire. But that's not really something you need any further information on at this point."

She nodded her head, wishing she could kick him. She watched as they drove past the lines of buildings. Before long she there were more and more patches of green. Then they were turning off the paved road, entering the jungle she'd come to despise.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To a small airstrip," he replied. "Sean and I would prefer it if you didn't have to answer any awkward questions at the airport. This way you won't have to."

"How far do we have to go?"

"It will take at least an hour," he said. "Perhaps two. You might wish to try sleeping."

She nodded, doubting sleep was possible. Her heart pounded from the attempted escape. Smug bastard.

Valzar shrugged his shoulders, and she glanced quickly at the door. Locked, naturally. She waited until she was sure nobody watched and tried to push back the little button. Nothing. Clearly, they'd disabled the locks. Perhaps there was some other way to escape. She pretended to go to sleep, slowly counting

to a thousand. By the time she was done, the men around her seemed fully relaxed and settled into the drive. The bodyguard talked to the driver quietly, occasionally leaning forward to fiddle with the radio. She could see his gun, nestled between the seat and door in front of her. It wasn't a big gun, but she figured it would do the trick if she could get her hands on it.

Still pretending to be asleep, she slowly slumped forward. Moving very carefully, counting to a hundred between each little shift, she edged her hand forward and waited for her opportunity. The road was bumpy, barely a track through the brush at this point. When they hit the next big pothole, she lunged her hand forward and grabbed the gun. She jerked it back, and slid it under her leg, then squawked in pain.

"I hit my head," she said shrilly, and the men jumped. "This is insane. I need to go to the bathroom. You need to stop the car right now."

The driver looked in his mirror to Valzar, who nodded his head with a vaguely disgusted look.

"Go ahead," he said. "Stop the car."

They stopped right in the middle of the dirt road, and then the driver unlocked the door with a click.

"Get out and go," Valzar said. He nodded at the men, and said something in Spanish. The driver opened his door and stepped out. He strolled around to the front of the car, pulling out a package of cigarettes. The bodyguard joined him, while Valzar stepped out and stretched.

She slid out her own door with a whine, going behind the SUV, unfastened her jeans, and crouched as if to relieve herself. She took a moment to study the gun until she was sure how it worked. It was simple enough, exactly like she'd seen hundreds of times on TV and movies. She went over it once more, checking to make sure the safety was off, and then rose, ready to make her move.

She came up behind Valzar and raised the gun steadily.

"Be still and do what I say," she said quietly, her voice as cold as she could make it. She wanted him to *know* she'd shoot. He turned to her, a look of slight surprise on his face, followed by a slow smile.

"Well this is a surprise. I wonder if Sean has any idea how violent his little toy can be?"

"Be quiet," she snapped. "I'm not interested in listening to your bullshit. Have the driver toss you the keys, and then have them both walk away from the car."

"And if I don't?" he asked.

"I'll kill you and take your bodyguard hostage," she said. "I don't like you, and I'm not going to let you send me away from Sean. I'm feeling more than a little pissed at you right now. Don't test me, because you'll end up dead."

He studied her for a moment longer, and she let some of the hate she felt toward him show in her eyes. He'd offered to kill her more than once, threatened her continually. She'd do what had to be done.

He must have believed her, because within moments he held the SUV keys and the men were walking back toward town.

"Do you have a cell phone?" she asked. He nodded his head.

"I want you to get on the line and call Sean. I want you to tell him that he needs to meet us at the airfield."

“How do you know I can reach him?” he asked.

“You’d better hope you can,” she replied. “I’m going to get tired eventually, and when that happens, I’ll have to shoot you and make a run for it. If I let you go now, you’ll kill me, and believe me when I say that if I have to choose between my life and yours, you’ll lose.”

He nodded his head again, and reached into a pocket. She watched closely, half expecting him to come out with another weapon. What she’d do if he did, she didn’t know. She wouldn’t back down, though. It was too late for that.

His hand came out again with a small flip phone, and he flicked it open with a nonchalance that belied their situation.

“Sean, your woman has taken me hostage,” he said after a moment, speaking as casually as if describing an insect he’d found on his shoe. “She’s going to kill me if you don’t meet us at the airstrip.”

He looked at her and held the phone out.

“He wants to talk to you,” he said.

“Nope,” she answered, shaking her head. “I’ll give him two hours to get out there. If he doesn’t come, I’ll shoot you in the knee. It will get worse after that.”

He nodded slowly, and relayed the message to Sean. Then he closed the phone with a smooth click, and nodded toward their vehicle.

“Shall we?” he asked, his voice almost gallant.

“After you,” she replied mockingly. He gave her a slight bow and opened the door for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour and forty-five minutes later she was starting to sweat.

If Sean didn’t show up soon, she would have to shoot Valzar. She didn’t want to do it, couldn’t imagine inflicting that kind of damage on another human being. What did a man’s knee look like after a bullet tore through it? She was desperately afraid she’d find out in the next twenty minutes.

Holding him hostage was tiring. She knew he had men all around her, knew that they probably had guns. Every moment she expected to feel a sniper’s bullet hit her, but so far they were doing well. They were holed up in the tiny concrete block hut on the edge of the airstrip, and she felt relatively safe. It would be hard for anyone to get a clean shot at her, at least while she was inside. Of course, she’d had the element of surprise on her side when she’d brought him here. Leaving the shack would be much trickier, if not impossible.

Seven long minutes passed, and for the first time she began to seriously doubt that Sean would come. Valzar watched her, eyes following every nervous tick of her feet, monitoring the trembling of her hands with a calm that was creepy. Then his cell phone rang, the sudden noise making her jump. She nodded at him to answer it, and he did.

“It’s Sean,” he said softly. “He’s waiting outside.”

“Tell him to come in,” she said. “No weapons, please.”

He gave Sean the message, and she stood, directing him to join her with a wave of her gun. A moment later there was a knock on the door.

“You can come in,” she called. Sean stepped inside, looking at her with a strange expression on his face.

“This is a little extreme,” he said softly, gesturing toward her hostage.

“Oh really?” she asked caustically. “It seems pretty in line with everything that’s been happening around me lately. One more hostage situation isn’t much, all things considered.”

“What are you hoping to accomplish with this?”

“I’ve made a decision,” she said softly. She looked to Valzar, and then nodded her head toward the door. “You can go, asshole.”

Valzar’s expression didn’t change. He strolled out of the building without a second glance at her, although he shared a meaningful stare with Sean. What that meant she had no idea, and she didn’t care. They would be leaving soon anyway. Sean started toward her, and she waved the gun at him threateningly. He froze.

“Like I said,” she continued. “I’ve made a decision. I’m tired of you calling the shots in this relationship. I’m an adult and I can think for myself. We’re staying together whether you like it or not.”

“You do realize how ridiculous this is?” he asked softly. “You can’t take me hostage and force me to be in a relationship with you.”

“Oh really?” she asked softly, cocking her head at him. “Funny, because that seems to be exactly what you did with me.”

They both fell silent for a moment as he considered her words. Then he took a step toward her and reached for the gun. She shook it at him warningly, and he laughed.

“You aren’t going to shoot me,” he said. “I already know that. You just told me you want to be in a relationship with me.”

“Correction, I *am* in a relationship with you,” she said. “Remember? We’ve been living together for almost two months now. I don’t even have a home to go back to. You kidnapped me, made all the decisions for me, and then decided to get rid of me when things got tough. I hate to break it to you, but things don’t work that way in my world. We’re in this together, and don’t you think for one minute you’ll make it outta here without me. You won’t.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, his expression genuinely puzzled. “Valzar wasn’t going to hurt you. Even after you took him hostage he wouldn’t have hurt you. You belong to me, and he would never take anything of mine away without my permission, no matter what he says.”

“Listen to yourself!” she replied, disgusted. “That’s what you don’t get! I don’t *belong* to you. I’m a free human being, and I make my own decisions. You’re going to take me with you and we’re going to build a life for ourselves. We’ve come too far for you to try and weasel out of it.”

He seemed stunned for a moment, and then he shook his head.

“You silly fool,” he said. “Don’t you understand that I’m trying to protect you? There are people who

want me dead. They blew up my boat! If you stay with me, they'll kill you too."

"They think you're already dead," she said, rolling her eyes at him. "And even if they don't, we'll fight them together. I'm not some kind of doll who can't talk and think and act, you know. I have this gun and I'm willing to use it to protect what we have. Don't imagine for one moment I wouldn't. What kind of pansy do you think I am?"

He looked at her steadily for a moment, and then shook his head.

"I'm not going to change your mind, am I?"

"No," she said, shaking her head firmly. "You aren't. You can do this the easy way or the hard way, but it's going to end the same."

"Do you have any idea how much seeing you hold that gun is turning me on?"

His comment was so startling that she blinked, unsure of what to say. In that instant he struck, pulling the gun away from her and flinging it across the room. He twisted her arm up behind her, pulling her against his body. She'd gone from being completely in charge of the situation to helpless hostage in less than ten seconds. She felt the length of his body up and down her front, the unmistakable bulge of his erect cock pushing against her belly.

She looked up at him, tears welling up in her eyes as she realized she'd failed. He'd just been toying with her. She'd been easy prey for him, and all her thoughts of empowerment meant nothing.

She wanted to bash herself over the head in sheer disgust.

His eyes searched her face, the warmth she'd seen in them earlier completely gone. Instead there was a need, a desire so intense she could hardly fathom it. His mouth came down over hers, and his strong hands crushed her against his body.

Unable to stop herself, she followed his lead, pushing her body against him. She wanted to crawl into him, drink up his essence. The layers of clothing between them scratched at her and she wanted them gone. She needed his touch, *now*.

He felt the same. She could see it in his every move, feel it in the urgency of his hands against her body. He wasn't holding her arms prisoner any longer. She was free to hold him, and she wrapped them around his neck as he hoisted her in his arms. He carried her over to the low, metal desk, lips glued to hers. His tongue thrust in and out, giving her no chance to reciprocate. He wanted her and he was taking her. It was that simple.

Then he pulled his mouth away from hers. Of one mind, they scrabbled at their clothing. Her jeans came off and his came down, and then they were in each other's arms once more. He lifted her bottom to the desk, pulling it forward to the edge. His cock thrust into her. Hard.

His entry was harsh, no room for tenderness in his touch. He was taking her, claiming her, just as he'd claimed her initially. Again and again he thrust into her, and she pushed back, more aroused than she'd ever been in her life. If he was a stallion mounting her, she was the mare. She wanted him, needed him. When her orgasm hit, she clawed at him, gasping and bucking like a wild animal. Then he burst within her, shooting his seed high into her body. They collapsed together, spent, their heaving breath echoing through the small concrete hut.

"Wow," she said softly, unsure of what should happen next.

He gave a little laugh and leaned his forehead against hers, eyes closed for a moment. Then he opened them and looked directly into her face.

“What now?” he asked.

“I won’t let you leave me again,” she firmly. “I’ll hunt you, Sean. You don’t have the right to end this without me. We’re together now, and there’s no way you can deny that.”

“You’re right,” he said softly. “We are together now, and I don’t have the right to end it by myself.”

She pulled back, startled by his easy capitulation.

“How long do you think I would have lasted without you?” he asked, laughing lightly. “By the time I got the phone call from Valzar, I was about to call him. I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t live without you. I know it’s dangerous for you to be stay with me, but I’m not going to give you up.”

“I’m not going to give you up either,” she replied. “We’ll just take things as they come. We’ve been pretty lucky so far, you know.”

“Lucky?” he asked snorting. “How do you figure?”

“Well, neither of us has killed the other yet,” she said lightly. “Considering the circumstances, I’d say that’s pretty damn lucky. So now what?”

“Well, we have a plane waiting for us,” he said. “Valzar has a leak in his organization, so he’s not setting anything up for us this time. We’re hoping that whoever blew up the boat doesn’t realize we’re alive. They’re going to report that four bodies were found instead of two. If they believe the reports, we may be safe.”

“I don’t want to endanger anyone else,” she said seriously. “You know, it’s one thing for you and I to make a decision like this. Skip and Jose didn’t know what they were in for.”

“Yes, they did,” Sean said quietly. “There weren’t any secrets there. But I agree with you, I don’t want to see that happen again. From now on it’s just you and me.”

“So, I guess we go out now?” she asked, looking toward the door. “I would imagine some of the people out there are pretty pissed off at me right now. I hope you’ll stand between us...”

He laughed and dropped a kiss to her nose.

“Don’t worry,” he said quietly. “I’ll always be with you, whatever comes next. We’re in this together. Although I do have one concern.”

“What?” she asked, suddenly anxious.

“I think we should put our clothes back on first.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Valzar leaned back against the jeep casually, hands in his pocket. Sean and his woman were taxiing down the small, primitive runway in a little Cessna. Soon they’d be gone, and he had no idea if he’d ever hear from them again. It would probably be for the best if he didn’t.

There were serious flaws in his organization, leaks that needed to be plugged, sources that needed to be cut off. Two good men had died in that boat blast, and it was just dumb luck that Sean and Sandra were still alive.

He suspected that Rosa might have something to do with it, although he wasn't sure. He had a lot of suspicions. Now he just had to give his people enough rope to hang themselves. Then the entire house of cards would fall, and he could pick up the pieces of his organization and move forward.

The Cessna was in position now, and he could hear its engines roaring as Sean started his takeoff. The little plane charged down the runway, and then the wheels lifted off the ground. Up into the air it soared, smoothly sailing over the treetops until it was a speck in the distance. Then it was completely gone.

Something like sadness washed over him. Sean had been a good friend for many years, and he was sorry to see him go. He didn't like to admit it, but he felt something else, too. Envy. Envy touched with jealousy. Sandra was a woman willing to fight to the death for her man. When he'd first met her, he'd thought her weak, but he knew better now. She might be soft and subtle, but she was hardly weak. She was a tigress, and a worthy mate for his friend.

He turned away from the airstrip and nodded to his driver. For a man who had walked six miles through the jungle, he seemed surprisingly unfazed. The driver came around and opened the SUV door for him, and he got in, noting that the leather seats were as perfect and undisturbed as ever. The SUV had cost him nearly 100,000 when all was said and done, fully customized and capable of surviving a hail of bullets. This car was one of ten or twenty that he owned, spread out across the various countries and islands where he did his business. Like him, it was self-contained, holding everything he needed to survive and manage his empire.

For one brief moment he wondered what it would be like if he had met Sandra, if she had fallen in love with him instead of Sean. Of course, he had many women in his life. They fell all over him. After all, he was rich, powerful, relatively young and handsome.

He could snap his finger and have any woman he wanted.

But he knew deep down inside that none of them were interested in him. They liked his money, his power. They found him sexy because he was dangerous. They giggled with their girlfriends over him, and talked about him in hushed whispers. Briefly, he found himself wishing that he had a woman like Sandra, a woman who would risk her life to stay with him. A woman interested in more than his money and power.

His cell phone rang and he picked it up automatically. It was his lieutenant; they'd found one of the spies. All business now, Valzar listened closely to the man's words, his mind spinning through possibilities and planning his next step.

As the SUV pulled away from the airstrip, he didn't give a thought to the wish he'd made just seconds earlier. Like so many of his wishes in life, it hung in the air behind him, left behind.

Just another forgotten wish...