

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

J. ROSE ALLISTER

NATURE'S
ON THE HUNT **BOUNTY**

Nature's Bounty

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When Nature Antillean, aka Nate the Crate, poses as a male stripper to arrest a sexy-as-hell fugitive, he has no intention of taking his disguise all the way—until he meets her. Lydia Franklin is more than eager to take her gorgeous strip-o-gram for a wild ride, considering how desperately life on the run sucks. The resulting encounter is explosive, but ends

with Lydia handcuffed and Nate honor-bound to take her to jail. The fireworks aren't over yet, however, for Nate discovers he's now a victim of the same setup that got Lydia accused of a crime she didn't commit.

With both of them declared fugitives, Nate must work with the woman he swore to bring to justice in order to defeat the plot and reclaim their lives. His hot body and stellar moves give Lydia plenty of motivation for teaming up in

more ways than one, but she knows that the criminal he hopes to protect her from is one she must face – alone.

*A Romantica® contemporary erotic
romance from Ellora's Cave*

NATURE'S BOUNTY

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Chapter One

Sitting on her suitcase did nothing to help Lydia jam in the rest of the belongings she had hoped to fit inside.

“You’re not listening to me, Ly,” Valerie said over the cell phone while Lydia bounced up and down on the case lying on her bed. “And don’t say ‘mm-hm’. I hate it when you pretend to be listening when you’re really ignoring me.”

The latch on her case still refused to close. “Then you should know better than to talk to me

when I'm busy trying to leave town."

"This isn't funny."

"I'm not laughing. And I really should get going."

"Listen to me. You can't up and leave this way. Running is the absolute worst thing you can do right now."

"Actually, going to jail would be the worst thing. I'm not going to stick around while my boss slides me into a six-by-six cell. I'll spend the next ten years with some tattooed bitch who wants to be my husband."

"You don't know that's going to

happen.”

“You’re right, because I’m getting out of here until I figure out a way out of this. Look, if it’s the bail money you helped front for me, I told you I’d pay you back.”

“It’s not the money! I’m worried for you. As soon as you don’t show up for your court appearance, they’ll think you’re guilty. Then it won’t matter if you’re innocent or not.”

Lydia hopped off her uncooperative suitcase with a sigh and started yanking clothes out of it. “What do you mean ‘if’ I’m innocent? I was framed.”

“Sorry. I mean they won’t care that you *are* innocent. Running is as good as saying you did it.”

“I didn’t steal a damn thing from FTI aside from an occasional pencil over the years. But no one’s going to believe me, Val. Not when Andrew’s covered all his bases.”

“They’ll catch you eventually. There’s no way you can get out of facing that day in court.”

“And before I have that day, I want to turn this around where it belongs.”

With that, Lydia sank down on her bed and ran a hand through her hair. She glanced around her room,

which resembled the aftermath of a hurricane. Clothes, shoes and underwear had been thrown every which way while she decided what to leave behind and what to take for her new life on the run. Now *there* was a fashion collection she'd never seen hit the runway.

“For the well-dressed fugitive,” she muttered, holding up her white slacks. “A stunning piece that will take you straight from the bail bond office to a long road trip.”

“What was that?” Valerie asked.

“Nothing. So, will it be okay for Angel to hang out with you a while longer?”

“The beast can stay as long as necessary.” There was a pause. “She misses you, you know. Sometimes she wanders from room to room, meowing as if she’s calling for you.”

Maybe it was stupid to let that be the thing that undid her, but Lydia’s eyes watered up nonetheless. The tears blurred her view of the room she’d just redecorated in creams and powder blue. Had she known she was about to be slapped with a phony embezzlement charge, she could have saved the money to help bankroll her escape plan.

“You’re just trying to hit me in the soft spot,” she said shakily. “The only time that black ball of fluff ever meows for me is when I’m dishing up her dinner.”

“Don’t go, Lydia.” Valerie’s voice had softened to a gentle pleading. “Come over and visit the beast. You haven’t seen her since you got arrested. We’ll sit and talk this through. There’s got to be a better way.”

“You know there isn’t.” She stood. “I’m going, and I’m staying away until I’m one hundred percent certain I can prove my innocence. Then I want to see that

son of a bitch pay for making me take his fall.”

She wandered to the closet, where she kicked off her heels and rummaged for a pair of flats. They would be easier for the long drive across state lines. A few of them, considering her rapidly unfolding plan.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Do you need money?”

An odd laugh bubbled out of her. “That’s an ironic question, considering the nice chunk Andrew conveniently transferred to my bank account. I can’t touch any of

it, of course.”

“Hence why I’m asking. They froze you out, didn’t they?”

“Yes, but remember who you’re talking to.” She tiptoed up and grabbed the hatbox off her closet shelf. She tugged off the lid and was reassured to see a few tightly rubber-banded rolls of bills. “You know I keep an emergency stash.”

“True. You’ve always been paranoid about losing access to money in the bank. I guess you were right all along.”

Lydia started stuffing money into her green leather shoulder bag. “I figured it would be a major

power outage or zombie apocalypse, not because I had to go on the lam.”

“So there’s absolutely no way I can talk you out of this?”

“Not unless you’re the cops calling to say this was all just a big misunderstanding.”

Lydia heard a heavy sigh. “When will you leave?”

“As soon as I’m finished packing, probably. Oh, and I won’t have this number for much longer. I’m going to make a detour and ditch this cell phone with the GPS on.”

“You’re starting to sound like a

wizedened criminal now. It's scaring me."

"I'm scaring myself. But this is the number I put on my bond paperwork, and once they know I've skipped out, I'm betting they can trace it. So I'll make it that much harder for them by pointing them in the wrong direction."

Now Valerie was starting to sound a little panicked. "But how will I know you're okay if I can't call you?"

"I'll get one of those prepaid phones and call you when I'm situated. And I'm not going to tell you where I'm going, either. The

less you know, the better off you'll be if anyone asks." She hesitated. "And they probably will. I'm really sorry about that, Val. I hate the thought of you getting grilled because of me."

The other woman snorted. "They can torture me and I won't talk. But I already know where you're going. There's only one logical place. Just do me a favor when you get there."

"Anything, unless you're going to tell me to turn myself in."

"Grab the bottle at the back of the top shelf. It's the good stuff. Open it on your birthday."

Her birthday. Hell, with everything going on, she'd almost forgotten it was next week.

"I will," Lydia said. "And the first drink goes in the drink for those who can't be there with us. I mean me."

"Damn right. Pour that first glass right into the Pacific, Ly. In memory of much better times."

"It'll be really weird staying at the old place alone."

"I know. And don't worry about Angel or me. We'll both be fine."

They clicked off the call, and Lydia walked to the window. Her eyes scanned the lush, mountainous

Colorado landscape that was currently painted in dusky shades of twilight. "I will miss this view," she said.

She wasn't exactly going to a slum, but it wouldn't be home. How long would she have to stay on the run? Would she have a home to come back to? A sofa to curl up on with the cat who was probably wondering what the hell happened to its owner?

Things would work out somehow. They had to. But first, she had to get some distance from this place and think of a plan. Before Andrew played any more

wild cards against her rapidly unraveling life.

Just the thought of how he'd violated her quiet, unassuming existence sent her to the bathroom, where she stripped down and flipped on the shower. She'd already bathed the second she'd returned from the dingy, nasty jail. Nevertheless, she twisted her hair into a bun and stepped under the hot spray. One more for the road to wash away the past few days.

While she showered, she went over every detail of her plan again. The detour down to New Mexico was regrettable, since she'd rather

make a beeline straight through to California. Still, better to put in the extra effort to throw authorities off her scent. She would deliberately rent a motel room in New Mexico with her credit card and ditch the cell phone in the vicinity. The trail would end there. Afterward, she would have to live off her wits and sparing amounts of cash.

“Damn you, Andrew Waller, you fucking prick,” she said as she climbed out and toweled herself dry.

He thought he'd won, punishing her for having the nerve to discover his scheme. But she still had a trick

up her sleeve, one that was inside the manila envelope that had been the first thing she'd packed. Once she was out of Colorado, her first stop would be to make copies of the documents Andrew may or may not have realized she'd taken. One copy would get stashed in New Mexico, another somewhere closer to her destination. The originals she'd keep with her while she decided how to use them.

“So that's it, then,” she said to her weary but determined reflection in the mirror when she finished scrubbing herself raw a short while later. “You can do this.

You can beat the bastard at his own game without spending one more night in a stinking jail.”

Standing there naked, she broke down in tears. After allowing herself a good cry, she found her way to her bed and curled up in her fluffy blue robe. She needed to get started, she knew. But she'd allow herself a few hours to indulge in her new pillow-top mattress and soft sheets. Before first light, she would be on the road.

She would be a fugitive.

* * * * *

Five more minutes. Then Nate would have to decide how he wanted to play this.

He scanned the room again while he sat at the bar, his attention focused on the front door and one of the bright-red booths in the back. The place was considered upscale, with a bar that was polished to a bright gleam and modern art on the walls that seemed to be a giant step up from the typical paint-by-numbers or neon-sign fare of other establishments. The clientele dressed and smelled better than a lot of the dives Nate had cased too. Still, even with shinier packaging,

the place was what it was—a place for folks to unwind, escape from their lives, or hook up with other lonely souls looking to unwind or escape from their lives.

He'd been told the woman he sought stopped in at the Red Apple Lounge every weeknight at six, and she sat in the same booth. Even better, the woman he was truly after sometimes met her there. But that would be too much to hope for, the way his luck had been running. This was strictly a fact-finding mission, the kind that either netted feast or famine and typically the latter. Questioning

friends, relatives and known associates of a bond jumper often earned him hostility, denial and bullshit, but sometimes he managed to find someone the jumper had pissed off along their road to crime. They were all too happy to spill whatever they could in order to get even. On the other hand, those who'd been fucked over had often been cut out of the loop, so their information was not always up to date.

Which type this Valerie Ariman would turn out to be was anyone's guess.

A grizzled voice cut into his

thoughts. "Nate? Nature fucking Antillean. I don't believe it."

Nate turned and saw Benny Shatofski grinning his trademark grin. "Last I checked, my middle name was Jason, not Fucking." Nate stuck out his hand in greeting.

Benny shook the offered hand. "Then I guess times have changed, stud. Too bad."

Benny wasn't much taller standing up than Nate was sitting down, but to be fair, Nate was currently boosted up on a bar stool. Benny's wiry hair was grayer and his leathery skin more wrinkled than the last time Nate had seen

him, but he still had the same hawk eyes and the gold tooth in front, a memento after a skip had knocked his out.

“How’s it hanging, Benny?”

“Long and strong, same as always.” Benny plopped onto the stool beside Nate, a move that effectively cutoff his view of the rear booth. “I was just talking to Joe about you the other day.”

Nate glanced at the door again. Three minutes. “And saying nothing good, I suppose.”

“I was saying I hadn’t seen Nate the Crate in ages. Heard you left the game.”

Nate met the older man's eyes.
"You heard right."

"Yeah? So why does my gut tell me you're working right now? Or do old habits just die hard?"

"Some old habits can get people killed."

"The way I heard it, what happened wasn't your fault."

Already, the conversation was twisting his gut. He took a sip of his beer to settle it. "I'm sure that was a great comfort to the victim's family."

Benny ordered a long neck and pulled off his black leather gloves. "We don't exactly sell daisies at the

airport, you know. You ask me, all the pretty names they use for us these days are a bunch of shit. Bond enforcement, surety agents, bail fugitive investigators.” He snorted. “It all sounds so professional, doesn’t it? When you and I both know the truth.”

“Which is?”

“You can’t sugar coat what we do. We’re bounty hunters. We collar bad guys for money. Oh, it might not be quite the same as the Old West with six-shooters and wanted posters, but we’re not as far off that dusty trail as some like to think.”

“Your point being?”

“In a job like this, shit happens. Someone’s eventually going to get hurt. I’m not saying it isn’t fucked and sucked, but it’s a risk we take.”

“The risk I signed up for involved my own neck or maybe the occasional neck of a criminal. Not an innocent bystander.”

“You didn’t pull the trigger. Don’t let that shit eat at you, or you can’t do the job.”

“I’m not doing the job anymore.” In theory.

Benny cocked his head at him. “Okay, fine. You’re not on the job. Then would you mind telling me

why you've had your radar dialed up to a hundred while you've been scanning the joint?"

Nate leaned his forearms on the bar. "So maybe Asa talked me into one last favor. *One*. Then I'm out."

A flash of gold accompanied Benny's grin. "Of course he did."

"I only agreed because my cut of the bond will be big enough to see me through figuring out the next chapter of my life."

Benny grunted. "Big bonds mean big crime. Which means big danger."

"Nope, strictly white collar. Some chick got caught ripping off

her boss, then skipped out on a two-fifty bond.”

“Ouch. A quarter-mil must have had Asa spitting bullets.”

“And worse. In any case, she hasn’t done a half-bad job of covering her tracks.”

Benny arched a shaggy eyebrow. “You sound impressed rather than annoyed. Pros always give me gas.”

“She’s no pro. Still, her credit card trail dead-ended, so now I’m canvassing known associates.” Nate straightened up when a brunette with an upswept hairdo and a tight skirt swished her way over to the booth in the rear. “One of whom

just showed up.”

“You know the bitch has probably left the country. By now she’s sipping Mai Tais on a beach in Cabo.”

Nate watched the woman, who appeared to be strung as tight as a piano wire, chew nervously on a manicured thumbnail while she pressed her cell phone to her ear. She spoke in hushed, worried tones.

Benny slid a glance over where Nate was looking. “You want some backup? Women are trouble in high heels. And you’ve got the wild look of a man who hasn’t been laid in far

too long.”

Didn't he know it.

“No thanks, Benny. I think my luck might be about to change.”

“Watch your ass.”

Nate grabbed his beer and sauntered casually to the next booth over. When she sat with her back to him in the adjoining seat, he almost wanted to cheer. Personally, he'd have opted to sit facing the door so guys like him couldn't get the drop.

A drink server wearing a bowtie and half-apron strode up and greeted the woman by name. Valerie ordered the house special,

an apple martini, while Nate slid noiselessly into the seat behind her. The server left to put in her order, and she went back to her call. Meanwhile, Nate punched up a few buttons on his own cell phone and set it close enough to her to record the conversation he hoped might involve a certain missing bail skip.

He wasn't disappointed.

He twisted around enough to notice Valerie shrug off her coat, and her perfume wafted over the back of the booth while he did his best to appear to the casual observer that he was innocently sipping his beer, not stalking the

woman whose conversation he was eavesdropping on.

“No,” Valerie was saying to her caller. “No one has contacted me about you yet. It’s making me nervous. Although I suppose I should be grateful.”

Bingo, he thought. He slipped a hand inside his sport jacket and pulled out a small notepad and pen.

While Valerie listened to a response he couldn’t make out, he flipped open the pad and jotted down the date, time and location.

“Don’t worry about Angel. She’s fine.”

He frowned and wrote the name

down. Who was Angel?

“She hates catnip, by the way. I tried bribing her with it to get her in the cage. I’ve never heard of a cat who doesn’t like catnip.”

He scratched out the name. Okay, so Angel was a pet. And Valerie was a good enough friend to cat-sit while its master skipped town.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do?” Valerie went on.

More talk followed that he couldn’t make out. Clearly there was a female voice on the other end, and there was no doubt in Nate’s mind that the voice

belonged to his bond jumper, Lydia Jane Franklin. But Nate couldn't make out more than an occasional word or an "uh-huh".

"But is that enough evidence to turn this around? And what if you lose the documents?"

Valerie shook her head to whatever answer came to that, and another waft of intense perfume hit him. "I just can't imagine what you're going through, Ly. I'm sorry I can't be there with you."

Where's *there*, he urged in his head. *Just say where*. Still, he probably wouldn't get any more. Now that he knew she had the

inside scoop, however, he would just have to see how much he could wring out of her using the direct approach.

“The day after tomorrow is your birthday. You remember our agreement, right? Good. Make sure you do it. And you know what? I’m going to send you a special present.”

Nate heard the “What? No!” through the phone as clear as day.

“Trust me, you’ll want this gift,” Valerie said. “Consider it a little nod to old times.” There was a pause, and she sighed. “I miss you too. I can’t wait until this

nightmare is over. And it will be. It has to work out.”

She clicked off the call without saying more about Lydia's location, but if she was planning to “send” a gift, she obviously knew the address. So which way should he play this, as the good cop or bad cop? Not that he was either, strictly speaking. But once he identified himself, he could either intimidate the information out of her with the usual threats about aiding and abetting charges or he could play the white knight and make a plea to her better judgment. Or he could do neither and dial up his

surveillance mode, tail Valerie around while she hit the post office with her conveniently addressed birthday gift.

He was still extrapolating likely outcomes for each option when Valerie started talking on her phone. She wasn't placing a call, however. She was using the voice-activated help.

"What male stripper services are near Venice Beach, California?" she asked.

That stopped Nate short. His pulse sped up while he started scribbling notes.

The electronic voice was kind

enough to respond out loud, and Valerie instructed it to dial the number for Hot and Ready Exotic Male Dancers. He shook his head while she spoke to the service and haggled price on a birthday strip-ogram and private lap dance. From what he'd heard about male strippers, plenty were willing to celebrate special occasions with more than dancing. Special present, indeed. His cock stirred in interest at the thought of a birthday poke, and he shifted uncomfortably while he listened to Valerie debate costume choices.

“No, definitely not a cop,” she

said, and Nate stifled a laugh. Lydia probably wouldn't appreciate the humor of a fake cop at the door. "I guess let's just go with the businessman. She's a sucker for a hot guy in a suit."

He glanced down at himself and smirked, but not because he happened to be wearing a suit. To his utter delight, Valerie went on to not only spit out her credit card information, but the exact address in Venice Beach where she wanted the stripper to deliver his "package".

Holy fucking grail. In all his years tracking down fugitives, he had

never gleaned this much info from a casual eavesdrop. Maybe after all the shit he'd been through, fate had decided to give him a break.

He drained his beer while she finished and hung up, and then he slid out of the booth. With a subtle nod to Benny, he walked out. He didn't even need to interact with Valerie now. He had all he needed and more. Venice Beach was a good day's drive from Colorado Springs. If he left now, he could hopefully have Lydia in custody by late the following night. She'd celebrate her birthday cuffed in his backseat. The stripper Valerie had just dropped a

bundle on would never get the chance to grind his dick against Lydia at all. Too bad for her. And the guy, for that matter, if the mug shot Nate had seen was any indication.

Nate got in his car and opened the Lydia Franklin file while he typed in the first number on his cell phone's speed dial.

"A-1 Bail Bonds," said a rushed voice. "Open twenty-four hours a day."

"Asa, it's me, Nate."

"What's up? Got something for me already?"

"She crossed state lines, all right.

I'm headed out again."

"You said the trail went dead in New Mexico."

"That's not where she landed. I'm leaving for California in a few hours."

"You're sure this time?"

"Positive."

"And you're not taking a team?"

"I made my conditions clear."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"You said this was a cake job, and I'm taking you at your word. No team, no guns. Just an easy pickup. That was the deal."

“You’re one ballsy son of a bitch. Or else a really stupid one. But you can trace skips faster than anyone I’ve ever dealt with. I swear, it’s like you’re magnetized to bond jumpers. And I ain’t about to bend over and eat two-fifty.”

Nate pulled out the photo of Lydia, which was stapled to his authorization papers. Despite the typical haggard appearance mug shots brought out in people, there was delicateness in her features, a soft curve to her nose and cheeks that matched her wispy blonde hair. Pale eyes stared out at him with an undeniable intelligence

that could definitely have pulled off the crime she'd been accused of. Still, there was a haunted look in those glassy eyes, as though she had just seen a horror she never knew existed. And if there was one thing most all criminals knew long before their capture, it was horror.

“Give me a couple days,” he said. “I’ll be in touch when I have her.”

He hung up and stared at the photo. No, he wouldn't want a woman like that on the other end of his weapon. At least, not the one he used to carry around in a shoulder holster. The weapon

Benny had correctly guessed hadn't seen much action lately was another matter. He'd be all too happy to point that one her direction. Under different circumstances, of course.

Said weapon pulsed between his legs. Maybe later he would indulge a little fantasy about meeting her under other such circumstances. His right hand might then bring him some relief before hitting the road. Too bad she wouldn't get her relief before he caught up with her.

A smile touched his lips. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to let her have one last birthday fantasy. The

more he thought about it, the more he realized that Valerie hadn't just unwittingly handed Nate the location of his fugitive, but a way to get in the door without the typical strong-arm methods or weapons.

Yes, it could work. It could really fucking work.

He pulled out of the Red Apple Lounge parking lot with a tight smile. He'd spent a fair amount of his time as a bounty hunter devising ways to blend and be totally nondescript in a crowd. This would be the exact opposite of any disguise he'd done. But hell, if it worked as good as he suspected,

maybe by the time his hot little blonde was in handcuffs, he would have discovered a new career path.

He laughed out loud and turned into traffic, mentally sanding the rough edges off his plan all the way to Citadel Mall.

Chapter Two

A persistent breeze whipped Lydia's hair and played chase with the skirt of her gauzy white dress while she stood at the water's edge. She stared out over the glittering Pacific Ocean, in touch with something powerful and magnificent without truly being part of it.

Her sandals were in her hand, allowing the cool, foamy edge of the surf to run up and over her toes. The salty air was rich with the smell of beach life and nearby food vendors, and she closed her eyes

while she breathed it in. The aroma brought back memories with a bittersweet tang as distinct and familiar as the sea breeze around her.

Laughter floated on the air behind her, triggering an image of her first time to the apartment that had been purchased as a coming-of-age gift for a good friend. At eighteen, life had seemed eternal and clung to such promise. Four friends had come here that year, swearing to do so again every year for the rest of their lives. Four friends, four years. Which, as it turned out, had been the “rest of

their lives” for two of them.

Lydia glanced down at the soda bottle in her hand, swirling the brown fluid inside that disguised the alcohol she'd added. Tipping the glass, she let a series of generous spills of liquid escape with the retreating ocean. “This one is for you, Tiff. Another for Beverly. And one for Val. You're still my best friend. The only one of us I've got left.”

One gulp remained, and she tossed it back and let the burn sear out the prickle of tears threatening to overtake her. What would she have done if she'd have known

back then that she would be standing alone on the beach one day as a fugitive? That two of her friends would be gone, and the one remaining hadn't been any more willing to return to Venice Beach than Lydia had been, even after Tiffany's father had insisted the apartment be kept as is for their use whenever they wished. It was a memoriam she hadn't had the heart for. What would she have done at eighteen if she'd been able to glimpse the path that lay ahead?

"I would have had another drink," Lydia said to no one, and she trudged up the beach and

tossed away her empty soda bottle in the first available trash bin. The Venice boardwalk was teeming with the usual assortment of beach bimbos, bikers, skaters, tourists and bohemians. Down the walk, the weekly drum circle was just beginning. Crowds had formed around the drummers, barring them from her view, but she stopped to listen anyway. She felt the driving beat thrum through her core and closed her eyes, willing it to drive away spirits from the past, along with the future that grew more frightening every time she let herself dwell on it.

She wandered closer and joined in the impromptu dance that several hippie-types had begun along with the regular dancers. She swayed her body in tune to the beat of many different drums. It was mesmerizing, that ancient beat. Some claimed the drum circle to be soul-reviving, but her motions failed to so much as lift her mood. It was her birthday, and twenty-nine was thus far turning into nothing to celebrate. She had forbidden herself from spending her birthday obsessing over her current drama, but what else was left?

The more the crowds swelled out of curiosity around the drum circle, the more profoundly alone and empty she felt.

“I’m not drunk enough for this,” she whispered. “Not nearly drunk enough.”

She stuffed her feet back into her sandals and headed for the row of tall and eclectically colorful apartment buildings overlooking the beach. At least getting sauced enough to survive the rest of her birthday wouldn’t prove too difficult. Unlike Valerie, Lydia had learned a hard lesson about drinking when Tiffany and Beverly

had died in a car wreck not five miles up the Pacific Coast Highway. The tragedy had left Lydia with little taste for the hard stuff. Valerie, on the other hand, hadn't applied the cautionary tale to herself.

In any case, since Lydia rarely drank anymore, she was maybe a glass and a half away from a buzz strong enough to drive away her melancholy for a few hours. Or so she hoped. Considering how damn horny booze got her, a man in her bed for some wildly casual sex would have completed that picture nicely. But despite all the beach

bodies on display around her, the beachfront party pad hadn't come pre-stocked with hot guys. Finding one out on the boardwalk would involve a certain amount of social acumen she just didn't have in her. So, the poor fugitive would just have to drown her sorrows alone, until the morning dawned and it was time to resume her regularly scheduled freaking out and trying to decide what to do about the evidence she had on Andrew.

The open bottle of good stuff called to her from the kitchen counter, and she headed back inside. It might not be a solution,

but even a temporary reprieve from the drastic plunge her life had taken sounded good at the moment. Comforting. And now that she'd observed the tradition of offering the first drink to the drink, she intended to take every bit of what little comfort she could find.

* * * * *

Weekend parking near the Venice Beach waterfront was a bitch and a half, and Nate swore viciously as he circled the neighborhood. He'd been at it for twenty minutes and couldn't find a thing closer than three blocks from

his destination. Oh, it was tempting to double park while he did the job, but something told him to play it more low key.

He spied a tight, but doable spot not two buildings from the address, and his hopes shot up. A tiny Mazda convertible whipped into the vacancy, and laughing bikini babes tumbled out of it.

Nate felt a surge of road rage. "Damn it!"

Maybe he was just grouchy after a long drive with a mere two hours' sleep since discovering Lydia's whereabouts. Or maybe he was on edge because he was about to walk

into a capture situation without the reassuring weight of his sidearm or a team watching his back. But he'd sworn to do this job without either, and that was what he intended to do.

After settling on a paid parking garage up the street, he pulled in and stretched his cramped muscles as he got out of the car. The smell of city with a vague hint of ocean met his nostrils as he pulled on the suit jacket he'd carefully laid out in the backseat. He stuffed a pair of handcuffs and his badge into the coat pocket.

A cool sea breeze wafted

through the garage, mussing the hair he was trying to run a comb through. After grabbing the duffel and the bunch of balloons he'd picked up to lend an authentic touch to his ploy, he locked the car and made his way through the dimly lit structure.

Assuming his address information was correct, and there was no reason to think otherwise, he'd have Lydia in hand within the hour. He had every confidence that his ploy would get him in her front door. Getting out again with a captive who would likely be less than cooperative wasn't nearly as

fun a thought. He'd have to cart her all the way back here, possibly with her making a scene. There was the occasional concerned citizen who mistook a bounty hunt for a kidnapping. He'd followed procedure and notified local law enforcement of his intent to capture, so he was covered should a question arise about him taking custody of a woman against her will. Assuming he had a chance to produce his badge and authorization before some excitable, would-be hero intervened by waving around his constitutionally guaranteed right to

bear arms.

He sighed as he thought of the bikini-babe sports car. Yes, a nice, cozy parking spot right by the seashell-pink apartment building would have been far preferable. Still, it wasn't as if he'd never had to park creatively to avoid detection before. He'd manage somehow.

The wind caught hold of his balloons, and they led the way up the street. Maybe buying them had been overkill, but a woman hiding out alone wasn't likely going to throw open her door for a strange guy, not even one claiming to be a

stripper. And after his impromptu research, he realized he wasn't willing to go the distance with his disguise.

At a quick motel stop on the way for a shower, catnap and marathon hand job, his Google crash course on male strippers had been quite the eye-opener. For one thing, those guys shaved their body hair from neck to nuts and beyond, something he had no intention of doing for a simple capture. And in the absence of any other convincing props, a guy in a suit read more to him like FBI than bump-and-grind. So balloons it was.

Not shaving wouldn't really matter, anyway. Since he was in a business suit, she wouldn't be seeing much of his body. The idea was to pose as a stripper convincingly enough for her to let him in the door, not to actually whirl his shirt over his head and leg hump a bond jumper. Not even one who looked as sexy and vulnerable in a mug shot as Lydia did.

Women are trouble in high heels.

Benny had been absolutely right on that one, and as Nate made the trek up the Pacific Coast Highway, he sternly shook off thoughts of just how much trouble he'd conjured

between him and his quarry during his last masturbation fantasy. While he was reluctant to admit it even to himself, part of that fantasy had involved the handcuffs tucked in his pocket.

“Fuck, you need to get laid,” he muttered.

This was exactly why he'd developed a strict policy about the hows and whens of his sex life. Rule One, no sex while actively on the job. Rule Two, enjoy a wild ride to celebrate every successful capture. This allowed him to blow off enough sexual steam to bring him back around to Rule One for the

next job. It was a policy that had settled into an important part of his routine. In his heyday, this meant he got around to Rule Two as much as twice a week, or at worst, every couple of months. Then his luck had plummeted, three big bounties in a row had slipped through his fingers, and the price for the last capture had been a curious neighbor's life. That hadn't counted as a reason to celebrate. No Rule Two for him for longer than he wanted to think about.

Tribal-type drumming was audible in the near distance, somewhere out by the ocean that

he caught glimpses of between the tall, closely set apartment buildings. The scent of marijuana hit him too, but it failed to distract him from the depressing math he was doing. It should be the furthest thing from his mind as he approached the building, but the calculations took place anyway. Eight months, two weeks and three days. That had been his last celebratory fuck. It hadn't been all that great, either. He'd bumped into an ex who was up for a quick recap of their sexual highlights, but neither he nor Debbie had really been into it. It had been an easy and convenient

hookup, but not memorable.

Why was he thinking about sex again? Okay, so he was a guy, and his brain was automatically hardwired to shoot off random tit and pussy images at least every sixty-two-point-two seconds. The fact that he was dwelling on the subject, however, was another matter. Now was hardly the time for distractions.

A group of beachgoers walked past, and a giggling blonde thumped his balloons on the way. "Happy birthday, whoever," she said merrily.

He was two buildings down

from the Seashell Apartments now. He stopped and verified the address plastered on the side. "Focus," he muttered to himself while he reset his gears and stared at the pink building. "Rule One." It was game time.

Lydia was allegedly staying in unit 314, and he ran through the same quick mental check he always performed before approaching the suspected location of a skip. This time, however, the checkmarks lined up in a different set of columns.

Gun,	no.	Handcuffs,	check.
Backup,	no.	Badge	and

authorization papers, check. Balloons and thong underwear, check, and annoying as hell to boot. Not to mention the latter was completely unnecessary, but since the rest of his alleged “costume” wasn’t very stripper-like, he figured the requisite cock pouch with dental floss up his crack would make it more legit. After all, what if she wanted to check before letting him in?

Okay, so it had been a stupid impulse, but Nate was nothing if not a master of details when it came to his disguises. He might have stopped short at a full-body

shave, but he didn't know of many bond agents who would walk along Venice Beach with a suit, a satin thong and a handful of pink balloons. That was dedication.

He ducked inside the building where he was greeted by a strong whiff of damp, musty carpet while he checked out the surroundings. No doubt the humidity made it tough to keep things smelling dry and fresh at the beachfront. The bottom floor of the Seashell Apartments consisted of a row of mailboxes, a fire exit staircase, a back door leading out to the boardwalk and beach beyond, and a

small elevator. The walls were pink, though more muted than the coral shade on the exterior.

Before heading upstairs, he wandered out the back door and glanced up the side of the building.

“Fire escapes,” he said, ticking it off on his mental checklist of potential exit points if the perp decided to run. He’d just have to make sure she didn’t get the chance.

After his architectural curiosity was satisfied, he went back inside and punched the elevator button. He waited an eternity for a loudly whirring piece of ancient history to

reach the ground floor. The dingy elevator car creaked when he got in, and it was barely large enough for Nate and his balloons. He actually hesitated before getting in. No telling how many more trips the relic had left in it.

“Oh well, who wants to live forever?” he muttered as he got in and pressed the third-floor button.

The car groaned upward as if in physical pain, but he somehow made it upstairs in one piece. The third floor smelled better than the lobby, and it was strangely quieter up above the noise out on the boardwalk. The source of the tribal

music was closer here, but it was muffled by the walls of the apartments on either side of him. Apartment 314 was on the right, meaning his jumper had the benefit of an ocean view. Benny hadn't been far off about Lydia sitting on a beach sipping mai tais.

Thin, but serviceable gray carpet muffled his steps while he slipped over to the stairwell. While yanking thong floss out of his ass, he stuck his head through the doorway. The stairs were concrete and descended out of view of the floor above. Bullets whizzing up or down in a firefight would have a harder time

finding their targets. Not that he was planning on getting in a shootout, especially since he was unarmed. But it was an automatic observation that had become a bleak reality in his line of work.

A window in the stairwell showed night was approaching. Nate typically preferred to collar skips late, in the middle of the night. Fugitive brains were fuzzy with sleep and reaction times were slower then, except for tweakers who considered three a.m. their personal noontime. Occasionally, daytime retrievals were best, however, and a stripper service

sure as hell wouldn't be delivering balloons and ball sacs in the wee hours. Valerie's requested delivery time had been eight o'clock, and Nate stepped out of the elevator at six-thirty to make sure he would avoid bumping into the real deal. If everything went to plan, Lydia would be on her way back to Colorado by the time her real birthday present showed up.

He closed the stairwell door and stopped in front of the door marked 314. As always, he paused and listened for a moment, trying to get a feel for the place and what he might find inside. He heard

nothing, not even the dull drone of a television. Hopefully, Lydia hadn't taken off, but it was possible. Maybe she didn't want to spend her birthday hiding out alone. If Valerie hadn't called her to make sure she would be around for her "special gift", Lydia wouldn't have any reason to stick around besides the sheer common sense of being a fugitive. Well, he'd find out soon enough whether the balloons and thong had been for nothing.

He rehearsed his mental script one final time before he knocked on the door. The sharp rap sounded a little more like his typical I've-

come-to-collar-you knock than he would have liked, and he winced at the sound. Normally he'd be shouting her name through the door. Instead, he stayed quiet and obeyed the instinctive urge to step aside from the door for a moment in case a bullet whizzed through in reply. When nothing splintered the wood, he moved back in place. No doubt stripper services didn't lurk out of peephole range like creepy stalkers.

The silence after his knock lasted almost long enough for him to think she had either gone out or decided not to answer. He was

pondering the next move when he heard a woman's voice from close behind the door.

"Yes?" she asked cautiously.

Big mistake, lady, he thought to himself. In another incarnation, that would have been enough to put his foot through the door.

"Lydia Franklin?" he called in what he hoped was a friendly, nonthreatening tone.

Another pause.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

Maybe he was kidding himself, thinking he could play himself off

as an innocent stripper boy. But then, any bail skip with half an ounce of brains would act paranoid at an unexpected visitor, no matter who was doing the knocking.

“I’m Antoine from Hot and Ready Exotic. Valerie sent me to deliver a very special birthday present to Lydia.”

Nate had no idea how a real stripper would handle a nervous Nellie at the door, and the long delay made him wonder if he’d blown it. There was a quick—very quick—shadow across the peephole, and he pasted on his best I’m-a-hot-guy-you-want-to-let-in

smile.

In his head, old tapes played that featured him training a gun at the doorway while it was kicked or battered in. Shouts and commands and chaos would all feed the adrenaline surge that would accompany his forcible entry. The adrenaline surge was definitely on board, but the rest faded into memory while he waited, silent and smiling while she gave him the once-over through the peephole.

“Wait,” she commanded sternly, and he heard her move away.

It had to be her. He knew it. Patience began to waver with his

target acquired, but he stood by and waited. He heard her talking soon after, quietly at first. He stiffened, wondering who else was in the apartment. Then came a cry of surprise that startled him into even higher alert, followed by an easy laugh. Suddenly, he heard her flipping door locks, and the door yanked open. It was Lydia all right, all five-foot-seven-inches of sexy blonde. She had a cell phone pressed to her ear and a seductive, welcoming grin on her face that was the exact opposite of the expression bond jumpers normally wore upon seeing him.

Mother of God, but the mug shot he'd thought was fairly decent hadn't done the woman a single bit of justice. The California Beach Girl version of Lydia Franklin took every male chromosome in his body to DEFCON 1. Her feathery blonde hair fell in careless layers to spill over her shoulders, and the silken strands were the only thing obscuring the view of a baby-blue bikini and long-legged, pinup-worthy body that a *Sports Illustrated* model would have envied. Round, high tits strained against the shimmery fabric, and his cock promptly began twitching most

inconveniently in its stripper pouch. To make matters worse, her aquamarine eyes were studying him every bit as greedily as he was eyeing her. In any other place – *any* other place – he would have been on her in a hot minute. That included the post office, the supermarket or a coat closet during Sunday School.

“Well, hello there,” she said, licking her lips to punctuate the seductive greeting. A particularly dirty thought cropped up while he watched her tongue moisten those plump lips.

He just stood there, holding his

bag and balloons.

“Oh my, Val,” she said into the phone, “you have no idea how completely and utterly you have outdone yourself.”

Her eyes did things to him he could barely describe while they slid over every inch. His spine tingled under that gaze, and damn if her nipples didn't stand up and salute after her visual tour. Something lower on his body began saluting as well.

She laughed at whatever response she got on the other end. “Have I told you that you are my absolute best friend in the whole

world?”

There was no mistaking the sloppy rush to the words, a slur that told him she had started celebrating her birthday quite some time before he had arrived. That could either make his job easier or more complicated, depending on a number of factors. Drunks were unreliable at best, and quite often, they kept on going even after they got knocked down.

His quarry clicked off the call after kisses and thanks, and she opened the door wider. “So, do you have more for my birthday than just a ripe, round bunch of

balloons?”

If she only knew what all he had. Starting with a ridiculously ill-timed boner and ending with the handcuffs in his pocket. Two things which, at the moment, didn't necessarily strike him as mutually exclusive. This was bad. All kinds of bad.

“Oh yeah,” he said, going for a fuck-me tone while he met her gaze straight on, although the stab of heat in his stomach made him wish he hadn't. “There's a whole lot more to this gift than meets the eye.”

A delicate eyebrow lifted.

“Good, because I definitely approve of what’s meeting my eye.”

She reached out and ran her hands over his chest, and he stiffened without thinking. That probably wasn’t what strippers did when handled by a hot female customer. Fortunately, Lydia didn’t seem to care about that, but when she gave his shirt an aggressive tug and nothing happened, she pulled back with a frown.

“What’s this?” she asked. “You’re not wearing standard-issue stripper wear. Where’s the Velcro, stud?”

He gave a nonchalant shrug. “I

believe in offering authenticity with my costumes.”

“And I believe in easy-on, easy-off.” She winked. “But I appreciate the dedication to my entertainment.” However, she glanced suspiciously at his duffel. “What’s in the bag?”

And what was with the twenty questions? Why wouldn’t she let him inside? Maybe she wasn’t totally buying his act, despite calling her friend to confirm that she had, in fact, hired a stripper.

Then again, he didn’t have to keep the game going. She’d opened the door, and that was good

enough. He could just drop the charade right now and force his way in, but something told him to play this one cool. Win the fly over with honey rather than vinegar.

He offered a slow grin while he unzipped the bag and held it open. "A change of clothes and a portable stereo. You know, for the music I need to do my routine."

With a smile, she reached over and took the balloon strands from him. "Here. Why don't you let me pull your strings?"

She turned her back on him then, and his heart lurched as she sauntered away carrying her pretty

pink balloons like a naughty girl. Below a slender back and perfectly curved waist lay the hottest, roundest bare ass he had ever beheld, courtesy of the surprise thong on her bikini bottom. He wasn't the only one flossing his crack, and what it did for her sent a throb of need through his already pulsing dick. Fuck yes, she was a very naughty girl. One in desperate need of a spanking.

He followed her inside, taking a quick inventory of the place before shutting the door. The digs were small and cozy, furnished in wild colors and professional decorator

touches, although everything seemed almost as dated as the building itself. Considering the ocean-front location, the place probably cost a small fortune. Her bank account had been frozen, so he idly wondered how she was funding this little vacation. But then, his interest in checking out the place wasn't to assess decor and property values. He was scanning carefully for signs that she wasn't alone.

The front door opened right into a small dining area. He stood beside a simple wooden table and glimpsed the cracker-box-sized

kitchen to the right. No one was there or in the living room just ahead. A bottle of expensive-looking booze sat on a dark, kidney-shaped coffee table, and only one glass sat beside it. That was an encouraging sign, but he would ask anyway.

She wandered toward the living room, stopping to tie her balloons to the back of a dining room chair. He barely managed to take his gaze off her ass long enough to notice the fantastic view out the living room window. Bright-purple drapes had been thrown wide to showcase the ocean, which spread

out before them like a massive ink blot. At this hour, it looked like a dark and fathomless stain against the azure-blue sky of deepening twilight. It was majestic, eternal and unspeakably beautiful. But he couldn't give half a shit about it. He was busy scoping out the fire escape window, which was conveniently open.

He tensed, poised for action when she started moving in the direction of the fire escape. A dark-green couch sat in front of the coffee table, and she stopped there with her back still to him while she picked up the glass on the table.

Nate cleared his throat and glanced toward the single hallway. "The request was made for a private show," he finally managed while his eyes snapped right back to the hot ass he was thinking more and more about bending over his knee. "Is there anyone else here that will be joining the party?"

"You are the party," she said over her shoulder, tossing back the last bit of booze in her glass. "That's about as private as it gets, don't you think? Just you and me."

Do it now. Identify yourself and grab the cuffs. Better yet, get out the cuffs while her back is turned and then

identify yourself.

He reached quietly for his pocket.

“Tell me something, Antoine,” she said, setting the empty glass down and fiddling with the narrow strings at the back of her swimsuit. “Do any of your clients ever strip for you? Outside the bedroom, of course.” The drunken slur made the last part sound like, “Aside the bear rum, uh cores.”

His hand was halfway in his pocket when she yanked the strings on her top and whirled on him suddenly. Nate froze while she held the bikini top out in front of

her like a prize before tossing it to the floor.

The way his eyes were bugging out must have looked comical, but how the fuck could he help it? Oh glory, but were her tits magnificent, even rounder and fuller now that they were no longer constrained by scraps of fabric. Her nipples were pink and firm, pointing slightly upward as if urging his mouth down to taste them. His erection stiffened rapidly, thick and long enough to feel the tip shove rudely through the edge of his G-string.

Lydia sidled up to him while glancing at the hand still stuffed in

the duffel bag. "I'm sure Valerie paid you well for a hot, sexy routine, and you had to drag that radio up here and all. But since it's been one hell of a lousy birthday and a crappy dating year in general, why don't we skip the opening ceremonies and go straight for the gold?"

She took the bag from him and dropped it carefully to the neutral-toned carpet. Nate's hand jerked out of his pocket, and he caught the metallic clink of the cuffs. Lydia seemed too intent on him to notice.

As she closed the distance between them, his stare redirected

from her breasts to her heavy-lidded bedroom eyes. He fell right into their smoldering depths. Without breaking eye contact, she went straight for the kill and grabbed him through his slacks. Her touch was firm and demanding as she groped him, and she let out an appreciative-sounding moan.

“Feels like this party has already started,” she said thickly, and he felt her fumbling clumsily with his fly.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as Nate felt reason slipping away. *Stop her, you idiot! Push her away and identify yourself. Identify yourself*

now.

That's when he heard his zipper open, and her hand snaked right inside his G-string. Her gasp wasn't the only one in response to her warm fingers curling around his throbbing dick.

"God," she said, "please tell me this is part of the special birthday package."

She sank to her knees in front of him while he tried to cling to what little flotsam of morals he had left. Jesus, he wasn't more than ten steps in the door and the sexiest woman alive was seducing him. If he let her, she'd probably fuck him

where he stood. He could bend her right over the table beside them and ram his cock inside her, thong and all.

Or, he could stop thinking with his tool and do what he'd come there for. He should bend her over the table while he cuffed her hands behind her back, not so he could give his dick what it so desperately wanted.

She yanked the pouch aside, and the second his cock sprang free, wet, hot lips closed over the swollen head. The moan he let out was equal parts lust and anger at himself, and while his hands

automatically grabbed for her head to pull her off, her skilled mouth and wicked tongue drove him to do something quite different. His fingers threaded into her hair while he thrust deeper in her mouth, cursing under his breath with each press of his hips. This was wrong, so very, incredibly wrong. But it had been so very, incredibly long since he'd felt anything this good.

His slacks were still on while she mouth-fucked him, but her hands kept tugging on his belt until the buckle came free. His pants slid down around his knees, and he shook his head in a futile attempt to

deny what was happening. He couldn't do this, no matter how bad she obviously wanted it. No matter that she was apparently in the same boat as he was romance-wise. And that this was probably the last sex she'd get outside prison dykes and the occasional twisted guard.

With a growl, he yanked himself away and pulled her to her feet. "Facedown on the table," he commanded, and he bent her over until her tits and the side of her face was pressed flat against the whitewashed wood. "Hands behind your back."

He went through practiced

motions, pulling her wrists together and holding them firmly at the small of her back while he used his legs and feet to spread hers wider. If he hadn't completely lost his mind, this would be the time to admit who he was and cuff her while simultaneously frisking her. But there was no place on her almost-naked body to conceal any weapons, unless she had something dangerous buried in her pussy. Something he was highly inclined to investigate.

Two distinctly different parts of his personality went to war, fighting for the right to dominate

the situation. The bounty hunter had Lydia right where he wanted her, and all he needed to do was finish restraining her while informing her of his identity and authorization to take her back to Colorado. The horny-as-hell, deviant male in him also had Lydia right where he wanted her, however. And all *he* needed to do was give in to what she was so fucking hot for that he couldn't stand it. He couldn't have both. At least, he didn't think so. Thinking wasn't going so well for him at the moment.

A mantra was playing in his

head to the tune of *handcuffs-handcuffs-handcuffs*, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out which of the two warring factions wanted her restrained more.

She wiggled her ass, which was nicely spread for him given the position of her parted thighs, and she let out a sexy moan. "Please tell me you stashed about a hundred condoms in that bag of yours."

His cock jumped in response. Fuck. What a naughty vixen, weakening his resolve.

Nate shoved her wrists together higher on her back, holding them tightly in one hand while he reared

back with the other.

“First things first,” he said, and he brought his palm down across that soft, tight ass.

She let out a squeal and wriggled harder. “What was that for?”

“I believe the birthday girl needs a good spanking.”

“Oh yes,” she said, and his hand lashed out again.

“Have you been good this year, Lydia?” he asked in a mocking tone. “Or am I right in suspecting you’ve been very, very bad?”

“No, I’m good,” she cooed.

“Bullshit.” He swatted her again.

“You don’t think I can be very good?”

“No, I don’t.” The slapping sound was louder this time, and she cried out. A hot flush of pink spread over her butt cheeks when he delivered the next blow. “I think you’ve been incredibly bad,” he said. “You were on your knees for me, sucking my cock before I could even do the job I came here for.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, not sounding the least bit convincing. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you do your job.”

Fuck no, she hadn't.

"To be honest, I'm not exactly sure what to do about that right now," he said.

"You should take pity on a girl who's all alone on her birthday with a wet, throbbing pussy. You should fuck her right on this table."

As soon as she said it, he knew that was exactly what he was going to do. And that he was going to regret the hell out of it when he was finished. Too bad he didn't give a damn.

"Please, Antoine," she said, sticking her ass out toward him. "If you don't believe how wet I am, see

for yourself.”

God, he wanted to check with every one of his fingers, followed by his tongue. But his balls were so heavy and aching for him to take her that he couldn't wait.

“I'm not going to touch your pussy with anything except my cock,” he said. “Right now.”

He let her go and she flipped over, scooting her ass up onto the dining table. He didn't need to finger-fuck her to know she was soaked. He could see the dark, wet stain on her bikini bottoms.

“Take those off,” he ordered.

Two tugs on the hip strings

eliminated the last bit of clothing on her incredible body. Her pussy hair was trimmed close, and the triangle over her pubic bone had been shaved into a narrow rectangle. He was rethinking his decision not to stick his face between her thighs when she propped herself on her elbows and gazed at his red cock.

“Oh my God,” she said in awe. “What kind of condoms did you bring? Any ribbed ones?”

Condoms? Yeah. Apparently, Lydia believed male strippers were required to keep a ready supply, and from what Nate had read, she

was probably right. A little detail he hadn't considered and wouldn't have figured was necessary even if he had.

He dug into his wallet for the two foil packages he kept there, and he took a quick look to make sure they weren't past the expiration date. He ripped one open with his teeth and started rolling it on.

She watched him with a curious expression. "You seem a little out of practice with that for a stripper."

He got the damn thing on despite his general impatience and somewhat quivering hands. Then

he pushed himself between her legs. "I'm new to the job."

Lydia grabbed hold of his sheathed dick and put it right where he'd been dying to stick it. "Hopefully you're not new to fucking."

He pushed himself inside with one long, hard thrust, and he grunted like a damn animal when he did it. She gasped and tipped her head back. "Jesus, I guess you're not new to that. Not at all."

Nate grabbed her hips and plunged into her again, reveling in her tight, slick fit. She took hold of his shirt, and this time, she yanked

the front of it hard enough to send three buttons flying.

“I can pay for that,” she said breathlessly.

He'd pay for this too. Later. His mouth quirked upward. “It's deductible.”

Grabbing his tie, she pulled him toward her and kissed him hard. He caught the strong tang of alcohol on her, along with the heady, sweet taste of willing, aroused female. He gave her his tongue, exploring her mouth while he fucked her. She held on to his tie with one hand while the other slipped inside his shirt, and her

nails dragging across his chest drove a hoarse moan from his lips.

Aside from the ruined half of his white shirt and the pants around his ankles, he was fucking a naked woman while still completely dressed himself. He hadn't even managed to get his jacket off. That was a first, one of several for the day.

Breaking off the kiss, he let go of her hips and tugged her hair back, exposing her long, slender throat. He ran his tongue down the length of it and found one of her breasts, flicking the hard, long nipple with his tongue and then biting down

gently.

“Oh God, Antoine,” she cried loudly. “Harder. Bite me. *Fuck* me.”

She was such a wild bitch, bucking her hips like a crazed woman while she used his tie to hold him in place against her tits. He took her ass in both hands and lifted her right off the table, pegging her as deep as his cock would go. She grabbed his shoulders and hung on desperately for the ride, her breast jiggling in his mouth while her whimpers and moans grew louder and more fevered.

“Lay me down,” she said in a

broken whisper. "Fuck me on the table."

He did as she asked, pounding into her while her tits bounced violently and her hair hung over the far edge of the table. He could see her fantastic body much better this way anyway, and the incredibly erotic expression on her face while her head rolled back and forth turned his temporary madness into full-blown insanity.

She bit her lip and arched suddenly, and her legs wrapped tight around his back.

"I'm coming," she called out, a wholly unnecessary declaration in

light of the scream that followed.

Her orgasm happened just in time, because condom or not, the sensations she aroused in him proved too much to handle. He tossed his head back while he growled out his climax, digging his fingers into her creamy thighs while he spent his cum inside the rubber. Her pussy walls contracted around him relentlessly, milking out more spasms of ecstasy until he couldn't shoot off another drop. And that was that.

Nate had done it. He'd fucked a woman he was sworn to bring to jail. That fact floated somewhere up

above his orgasm, although he wasn't quite ready to face it yet.

He pulled out of her, but before he could back away, she sat up and put her arms around him. "Thank you," she said, pressing her face to his chest. "You have no idea how bad I needed that."

He stood there blinking with her clutched to him. "Actually, I think I have a pretty fair idea."

"No, you don't. You can't."

Now she sounded as if she was pleading, almost distraught. When she pulled her head back to look at him, he was surprised to see his dirty little vixen had tears in her

eyes.

“It’s been such a bad year,” she said while he gaped at her. “All I wanted was to do the right thing. But my boss did something really terrible. What I mean to say is, it was so nice to lose myself for a few minutes. Thanks for that.”

The bounty hunter returned at that moment, delivering a swift mental kick to the groin that doused the aftermath of incredible sex. Whatever look was on his face must have registered high on Lydia’s shit-o-meter, because her eyes widened in horror and she slid off the table.

“Wow, I am so sorry,” she said in a rush while she picked up the bottom to her bathing suit and tied the strings back together. “I know sex is just a fun job perk to you, and that’s fine. Really. Please don’t think I’m one of those needy chicks.” She put the bikini bottoms back on and sniffed. “That’s what I get for hitting the good booze. Shit, I hope I didn’t freak you out.”

Oh, he was well past freaked out and onto wondering which circle of hell he would land in for screwing a captive before she even realized she’d been caught. Probably just one level higher than fucking her

after she knew she'd been caught.

"It's okay," he managed.

He pulled off the spent condom and headed for the adjacent kitchen to find a paper towel. Lydia kept up her nervous babble.

"I understand if you want to go," she said, looking around the floor and finally heading over to snatch up the rest of her swimsuit. "You certainly performed above and beyond the call of duty."

He swallowed. Wasn't that the ironic truth?

When he returned from tossing the condom, he found her tying the rest of her bikini on and adjusting

her breasts until they sat in the cups to her apparent satisfaction.

She sighed loudly. "But I wish you'd stay a little while. God, I can't believe I cried after the best fuck I've had in ages." She shook her head. "I'm so embarrassed. Please let me make it up to you with a drink. My way of saying sorry I made a complete ass of myself."

That made two of them. One drink wouldn't be nearly enough. At this point, he was ready to guzzle the whole damn bottle.

"Don't worry it about it," he managed.

“Does that mean you’ll stay?” she asked.

He nodded numbly. “I’m not going anywhere.” Not without her.

Her smile set something loose in his chest. “Good. Help yourself to that drink if you want. I have to run to the bathroom.”

Nate considered coming out with the truth right then, but he stopped himself. She might as well pee now. They had a long drive ahead of them.

In his career, it was pretty much a given that the people he encountered weren’t exactly grateful to him for hauling them

back to jail, but a whole new level of fuck-you dynamics was about to play out. He swallowed while he watched her flounce toward the hallway. She stopped there and turned. "By the way, I'd love to see the actual job you came here to do, if you want to show me when I get back."

He pasted on a smile and took a moment to study her face as it looked right then. She wore the glow of a woman who had just been fucked hard and happily. It was an expression he wouldn't see from her again. And considering he'd broken Rule One in a whole

new and perverted sense, he wouldn't be seeing it from anyone else. Not for a while. He deserved punishment.

She pointed to his torn shirt and skewed tie. "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but while you're twelve kinds of fucking hot as hell, a guy in a business suit wouldn't have been my first choice for a fantasy striptease. Not anymore. So if you have a different routine in your bag of tricks, bring it on." She snorted and disappeared through a door at the edge of the hallway.

Nate dragged a hand through his hair and let out a sigh. The

ironic turn in conversation would have been damn funny if he hadn't just stuffed his tool in the wrong box. Even while he was busy berating himself, however, part of his brain was busy registering the fact that she'd called him "twelve kinds of fucking hot as hell".

"Right back at you," he muttered.

Once the door closed behind her, the bounty hunter set to work. He slipped over to the bathroom door to listen and make sure the bathroom story wasn't some ruse so she could grab a gun or escape a third-story bathroom window. He

heard the toilet lid lift and the sound of peeing.

The single bedroom was visible from here, as was the double bed. The bedding was short enough to see clearly underneath, and he bent down to make sure no one was hiding there. Probably something he should have done before fucking the hell out of a woman with his back turned to the hallway, but should-have-dones were piling up in a long list.

He slipped inside a room that was sparsely furnished in a psychedelic orange-and-green color scheme.

“Groovy,” he whispered.

There was a small closet with a closed door, which didn't make him happy. How many times had he dragged jumpers or their housemates out of a closet?

Grabbing a letter opener from the top of a bright-green dresser, he moved in utter silence across the room and then yanked open the closet door. It was almost empty and devoid of any hidden suspects.

He heard the toilet flush just as he was tiptoeing back up the hall. He shucked his jacket, shirt and tie on the way and traded them for a black t-shirt he pulled from the

duffel bag. He took out his badge, which was hanging from a beaded chain, and put it around his neck. Then he managed to extract the handcuffs that should have come out instead of his cock. He was twirling them around his finger when she finally emerged from the bathroom.

Lydia's hair had been pulled up into a high ponytail, and from the length of time he'd heard the sink running, he'd be willing to wager she'd brushed her teeth as well.

She stopped and cocked her head at the change in his attire. "I'd say it's a definite costume

improvement, but I'm not entirely sure what you're supposed to be now."

He stopped spinning the handcuffs. "Come over here and find out."

She wandered closer and eyed him up and down. His body tingled on high alert while she came toward him. The front door was on her left and the fire escape on her right. If she tried to run now, she'd most likely turn tail and head back down the hallway, right into a dead end. Which was why he had chosen this exact spot.

He counted until she was four

steps away, then three. "I'm a surety agent."

Confusion crossed her features. "What the heck is that?"

"You know, a bounty hunter."

Her eyes actually lit up eagerly at this news. Another first. "Ooh, I think I like the sound of that."

"I'm glad to hear it." He stepped closer and held out the badge hanging over his chest. "Turn around and get on your knees. Hands on the back of your head."

Her eyebrows lifted, but not only did she obey, she did it with a smile on her beautiful face. Holy shit, maybe he was onto something

with this ploy. Not that he would be hunting down any more jumpers after this. Figures he'd get the perfect angle just in time for the last job.

“Aren't you going to play some music or something for this routine?” she asked.

His day had gotten so damn weird.

He went into restraining maneuvers, guiding her facedown easy while he put a knee to her back. When he was cuffing one of the wrists that were still on top of her head, that's when she finally got squirrely about the whole thing.

“Wait,” she said, struggling against him. “You know what? Stop. I don’t actually want to get handcuffed. I have bad memories of that.”

“I’ll bet you do.” He pulled the cuffed hand down behind her back and brought the other one around to join it.

“Don’t! I mean it, Antoine. Stop.”

“I thought you were so eager to see the job I came here to do?” He held the badge in front of her face. “And my name’s Nate, actually. I’m a real bounty hunter. And you, Lydia Franklin, are under arrest for

violating the terms of your bail.”

She was struggling wildly now, but with her hands cuffed behind her and his weight on her back, there wasn't much she could do. “Like hell! What are you talking about?”

“You failed to appear in court. I'm authorized to bring you back to Colorado.”

“No. *No!* You bastard.”

There was the reaction he knew was coming. The one he dealt with every time it came to this moment in his job.

“This can't be true,” she went on, trying to buck him off her.

“Valerie *hired* you to strip for me. She told me so. She wouldn’t do this to me.”

He growled and leaned on her harder. “Stop fighting me, or I’ll have to put you in a hold you definitely won’t like.”

“Fuck you,” she said. “Get the hell off me, you sick freak. You’re lying about this.”

“I have the paperwork from your bondsman if you need proof. It includes a clause you signed stating you were aware he could use any means necessary to reclaim you. *Any* means, Ms. Franklin. And that’s just what I did.”

When she started fighting harder, he jammed her cuffed hands high on her back.

“Ouch!” She followed that with several expletives. “You’re breaking my arms!”

“Settle the fuck down or you’re going to get hurt. Don’t be stupid, Lydia. Cooperate nicely and you won’t add any more charges to the ones you’ve already got stacked against you.”

“Cooperate? What, I suppose you mean let you fuck me again? You told me you were a stripper! You had *sex* with me. Isn’t that illegal?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "I'm not a peace officer, and you were more than willing. *A lot* more." He got up off her back, but kept his hold on her. "Get up slowly now." He pulled gently, using techniques he'd learned to guide her in the direction he wanted.

With some difficulty, he maneuvered her to the couch, where she plopped down and favored him with a glare. Much as he expected, the expression he'd memorized earlier was long gone. This version of Lydia was red-faced, panting and pissed beyond belief.

All her resistance had shaken one of her tits completely out of her bikini top, and the other one was attempting an escape as well.

“So, you’re a *real* bounty hunter,” she said with a note of sarcasm. “Or is this just a side job when you’re not doing private shows on the stripper circuit?”

He sighed. “The stripper thing was a cover story so you’d let me in.”

“How resourceful.”

“Would you rather I have busted down the door with a team of guys waving their guns around?”

She laughed without the

slightest hint of amusement on her face. “As opposed to you waving your cock around? Not a lot of difference there, from where I sit.”

Unlike most of his perps, he deserved every bit of venom she was throwing his way. Still, he couldn't help feeling a jolt of amusement at her sharp sarcasm. Most skips didn't have enough wit, let alone humor, during an arrest to manage such a feat.

She lifted her chin. “Tell me, *Nate*, do you always capture fugitives by fucking them first to subdue them?”

“No, I usually prefer to hold a

cloth in front of their face and say, 'Gee, does this smell like chloroform to you?'"

He knelt on the couch beside her, trapping her legs with one of his knees so she couldn't kick him. He pulled back hard on her ponytail so she couldn't bite or head butt him while he tugged the fabric of her suit into place.

"Leave me alone," she said, jerking her torso wildly. "Get your perverted hands off me. I'll scream!"

"Do you want me to drag you out in public with your breasts hanging out?"

She sniffed haughtily, but she stopped wiggling around while he finished covering the luscious breasts he'd had in his mouth not long before. Yes, he was going to hell for this. But despite her scathing glower, part of him still believed it had been worth it.

He got up off the couch, leaving her sitting there on her cuffed hands, and regarded her for a moment while he tried to picture driving back to Colorado with her wearing nothing but two skimpy pieces of fabric. One of which had been soaked with her pussy juices when she'd been begging him to

fuck her. And she *had* begged for it, hadn't she? Let her shoot murderous, accusing glares at him all she wanted. There was no way he was taking the fall for this one.

"Come on," he said, and he helped her to her feet. "Let's go to your bedroom."

"You *must* be joking," she said with a deadpan expression that almost made him laugh.

"I can take you back just like this, but all things considered, I think we'd both prefer it if you had some clothes on."

She glared a moment longer and then nodded silently before leading

him down the hall. It was the right thing to do, allowing her modesty. Still, on the way he couldn't help but consider the downside to his belated chivalry. Not only would he be unable to turn his back while she stripped down, he'd actually have to help.

Chapter Three

A sick twist in Lydia's stomach hit her halfway between the bathroom and her bedroom.

"Wait, please," she said. "I'm going to be sick."

She didn't even wait for her bastard captor to answer. Instead, she yanked on the arm he had in a tight grip while she changed course and bolted for the bathroom. He followed her without missing a beat, and she didn't even make it onto her knees in front of the toilet before she started retching. Nate—

if that was his real name – held her ponytail back in an oddly helpful gesture while her stomach gave up the “good stuff” to the porcelain gods.

When she was finished, she headed to the sink without a word and suffered the indignity of having him help her rinse out her mouth. Her cheeks burned while she used some mouthwash to swish and spit the sour taste that matched the overall tone her life had taken. Maybe she shouldn't bother. Let him deal with vomit breath all the way back to Colorado.

“Are you feeling better now?”

he asked calmly.

She looked up into the mirror, where she ignored her pale, bedraggled reflection to glare at his cool, still-too-handsome face. "No. I am so far from better that I can't even begin to describe it." Her voice was thready and a little hoarse from the bile that had burned its way up and out of her throat. "Let's just say I thought getting arrested was the most humiliating experience of my life. But getting drunk, spreading my legs for a stranger, and then vomiting my guts out in front of him has become a new all-time

low.”

In truth, though, she did feel a little less drunk. That was something, at least. The room wasn't spinning, and her head hadn't yet started pounding from the inevitable hangover in the morning. At this point, she was in the eye of the alcohol storm. And a personal storm to boot.

As they headed for the bedroom, the handcuffs behind her dug into her wrists as a painful reminder that the recent past had just caught up with her future. She'd always loved the bedroom at the beach house, with its bright and

cheery oranges and lime greens. But now, it was in complete discord with the situation.

Nate sat her on the bed, which was covered in a motif of orange blossoms, and stepped back.

“Now get out and let me change,” she said, and she snarled at him in disgust when he shook his head.

“That’s not going to happen, sorry.”

“Why not? Didn’t you get enough of a sick thrill pegging me before you slapped on the cuffs?”

She had the satisfaction of seeing him wince. So, the

underhanded prick had a whiff of a conscience. Imagine that.

“I’m not leaving you alone,” he said, “and in case it hasn’t occurred to you, I highly doubt you’d be able to Houdini your way into a change of clothes with your hands cuffed behind your back.”

Her eyes widened. “So you think you’re going to dress me too? No way.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. But since that bikini shows off your entire ass, I have to insist you at least put some pants on.”

“Funny, because I seem to remember you insisting the exact

opposite thing a short while ago.”

He glanced around without answering, and she took that opportunity to regard him with new eyes. So, he was a bounty hunter, not a stripper. She'd been right when the sudden knock on her door had sent her into a panic. In her defense, he certainly had the right equipment for a stripper. He was fuck-me-now gorgeous, with the lustrous, caramel-colored hair of a movie star and the erotic, pale-green eyes of a god. Even before he'd stripped down to his t-shirt, she'd felt his hard muscles and powerful arms through a suit that

made him look downright fuckable. And why did he have to smell so damn good? Even now, his scent filled the room, taunting her with memories of what she'd just let him do to her. One would think a bounty hunter would smell like a beer-bellied hobo, not a male cologne model.

There had been a couple of odd clues, of course. He was hairier than most strippers she'd seen, not that she was some big expert on the subject. Still, she'd been around enough for a reasonable comparison. Those guys not only waxed their bodies, but oiled

themselves until they gleamed. She'd discovered the fun of cleaning oil-stained clothing after a close encounter. But when she had torn Nate's shirt open, she had found a masculine and quite appealing mat of hair on his unoiled chest.

Then there'd been the condom thing. While she'd never actually fucked a male dancer herself, she'd attended parties where the guest of honor had received a rather wild interpretation of a lap dance. The men offering them brought a rather colorful assortment of rubbers along on the job. Which was pretty

disgusting, now that she thought about it.

She watched him head for the lime-colored dresser, noticing how the tight, black fabric of his t-shirt stretched over his biceps, chest and a narrow waist that was definitely stripper-worthy. And Valerie had confirmed everything, so of course she'd fallen for his trick.

W h y *had* Valerie said that? Maybe the bail bond office had threatened her with jail if she didn't cooperate. Hell, there'd probably never been a stripper at all. It had all just been a ploy for Nate to mix business and pleasure

in one blow. And what a blow it had been. The size of his cock and the way he used it, well, that was something she would *not* let herself think about again until she was reporting this entire incident to the authorities. Cop or not, surely bounty hunters had some code of ethics they were supposed to follow? How many other women had he used this stripper ruse on to gain access to their homes and their pussies, no less?

Another stab of greasy nausea shot through her stomach at the thought, but it thankfully passed.

Meanwhile, Nate was busy

yanking open dresser drawers. "All these are empty."

She rolled her eyes. "How very perceptive of you. With brains like that, no wonder you went into detective work."

Nate moved over to the closet, shoving open the louvered doors to reveal a neat, but modest row of clothing she had organized in order of type and color. What a dope. Then again, she'd had a ton of nervous energy on her hands, some of which she'd just expended in a heated rush of passion with the man who was rooting around in her wardrobe. With his back partly

turned.

She glanced at the door that was several feet away from where he was standing.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said, shoving hangers around. Did the man have eyes behind his head? “Whatever you think you can do to escape, it won’t work. I’d be on you before you could make it five feet.”

“Gee, doesn’t that sound familiar?”

“I mean it, Lydia. Stay where you are. I don’t want to have to get rough with you.”

“It seemed to me you enjoyed getting rough when you were busy

slapping me around on the table.”

“Yeah, like you hated it.” He ignored the middle finger she managed to flip at him despite the cuffs and went back to riffling through her clothes. “Don’t you have any jeans in here?”

“I don’t like jeans.”

He tugged a pair of white slacks out of her closet, but she shook her head. “Not the white ones,” she said. “Get the black jogging pants on the end. And I have sneakers down below.”

“You don’t own jeans, but you wear sneakers?”

“Don’t judge me. I do happen to

go running, you know.”

“I noticed. Right across state lines.” Nate grabbed the requested items and tossed them on the bed. “But not fast enough to keep me from catching you.” He put his hands on his hips. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d just assume we skip underwear and put these on over the bikini.”

“How noble.”

“Here’s how we’re going to do this,” he said. “Turn over and lie flat on your stomach. I’ll do the work.”

The temptation to latch onto that comment fell away as quickly

as it came, and she snapped her mouth shut.

When she didn't move, he took a step closer. "*Now*, or you can go naked for all I care."

She flipped over, which wasn't as easy as it sounded with her hands cuffed. He climbed on top of her, straddling her backward. In this position, her butt was practically in his face, and she held back a moan of disgust at the thought of how eagerly she'd bent over the dining room table while he'd spanked her.

It took some doing, but he tugged on her stretchy jogging

pants and went to work on her shoes.

“Look,” he said while she suffered through his feeble attempts at dressing her. “I’m sorry for what happened out there. I admit I gave into a very male opportunity. But let’s not pretend you didn’t put it out there. You wanted it as bad as I did.”

“I thought you were my birthday gift,” she said bitterly. “Not a curse sent straight from hell.”

It took a few tries, but he got her shoes on and stood. “Go ahead and turn around now, slowly,” he said.

She heard him blow out a breath. "I'll help you sit up."

Again, things easier said than done, but she managed. He kept right on talking while she did. "I should have told you who I was right away, I admit it. I was about to, you know, when you were taking that last drink. Before I could get out my badge and cuffs, you turned around half naked and started groping me. What was I supposed to do?"

He actually wore a guilty expression when she was again facing him. "I suppose stopping to tell me the truth was out of the

question.”

Something flashed in his eyes. “You stuck my cock in your mouth, lady. I may be a duly appointed representative of your bond agency, but I’m not a saint. You wanted it bad enough to get on your knees and take it. I just went along with the offer. End of story.”

Her mouth fell open. “End of story, except for the part where you fuck a girl and then take her to jail as if nothing happened.”

“Yeah, well, they don’t call me Nate the Crate for nothing.”

A less-than-polite cackle came out. “Nate the Crate? As in,

wooden and stiff with a bunch of holes where substance should be?”

“No, as in strong and unyielding while I’m carting in the goods.” He leaned closer. “Goods meaning you, by the way.”

“Yeah, you’re a real dream come true. Fuck ‘em and book ‘em.”

“I said I’m sorry about that. I’m just doing my job. And regardless of that look you’re giving me, consensual sex is not illegal for bounty hunters. I’m not the one who broke the law here.”

“I didn’t break the law. I’m innocent.”

A laugh whooped out of him.

“Sure you are. Okay, let’s have you stand up and turn around.”

She stayed in place. “You have no right to judge my guilt. You don’t know a thing about me.”

In a flash, he was beside her and had hauled her upright. “Lydia Franklin, age twenty-nine. Single white female, blonde-blue, five-foot-seven, one-hundred-twenty-two pounds.”

She sneered at him. “*One-nineteen.*”

“Arrested on the fifth of May for embezzling funds from your employer. Bonded out and jumped bail sometime thereafter, my guess

would be within twenty-four hours of release.” He shook his head. “And even without knowing all that, let me just say that the fact that you fucked a stripper you had in your apartment for less than sixty seconds doesn’t exactly paint you as an innocent.”

“Or you as a man of ethics.”

“Ethics is a dodgy word in my line of work.” He had her by the arm and steered her toward the door. “Let’s go.”

Her thoughts whirred a mile a minute. Apparently, a sure-fire cure for intoxication was getting jumped by a bounty hunter. She

felt a lot clearer now than when he'd first waltzed in with balloons and a hidden agenda. But sobering up wasn't getting her any closer to finding a way out of this. Maybe she needed more time to think.

She dug her heels in at the bedroom door. "I suppose you're right about the clothes," she said. "I should probably put on a shirt before we go."

He huffed out a sigh. "Pick something out. We might as well bring a jacket along too. It'll be a lot colder once we leave sunny California."

"How am I supposed to put a

shirt on over these cuffs?" she asked, wagging her fingers behind her when he stopped her in front of the closet.

"Let me worry about that. Just hurry up."

She rolled her eyes and nodded to the section of blouses on the far end. "That one. The short-sleeved pink sweater. My jacket is hanging out by the front door."

He grabbed the sweater and they went out to the living room. There, he started the whole facedown-on-the-floor routine all over again. Once he'd straddled her ass, something she tried very hard

not to dwell on, she heard him fiddling with the cuffs. The tension gave way, and then her arms were free. Sort of. The cuffs were still clamped around one wrist, and he held both hands in place with his.

“Easy while I get the shirt over your head,” he said. “Just relax.”

S u r e , *relax* with a sexual maverick sitting on her back controlling her every movement. Something he did just as surely now as when he'd given her the ride of a lifetime on the table.

Her emotions were already churning in all sorts of varied and wild directions when the scene

exploded into complete pandemonium. The front door crashed inward, and from her position on the floor, she saw two pairs of booted, male feet come charging in.

“Freeze! Don’t move!” voices shouted.

While Lydia did just that without even a conscious effort to obey, Nate did the opposite. He rolled off her back and wound up standing between her and the coffee table. She looked up and saw his hands were in the air. He was staring wide-eyed at the invaders, but he somehow seemed a lot more

casual about it than she felt.

“It’s all right,” Nate called, and she glanced up to see that he had dropped his hands and was pointing toward the dining table. “I’m a bond agent with a fugitive in custody. The documentation is in that gray bag over there.”

“Get down!” one of the men said to him. “Get your fucking hands on top of your head.”

Lydia’s heart was drumming wildly in her chest as she lay there, frozen. Both men wore some kind of bulletproof vests with *Bail Enforcement* printed in yellow across the front. Both had badges

around their necks that were similar to Nate's. More important, both had guns pointed at her and Nate.

"I didn't call for backup," Nate said. "This is my arrest. Why are you here?"

"Get your damn hands back in the air where I can see them, Nate," the larger and scarier man said. "I'm not going to say it again."

Nate stiffened and gave him an odd look. He glanced down at her, and there was something weighted in his expression when their eyes met.

He raised his hands again.

“Okay, I get it. Clearly the guy with the bigger weapon gets to be in charge. Let’s everyone just keep our heads cool.”

She wasn’t sure how, but she knew he was going to do something crazy about a split second before he made a move. With his foot, he lifted the coffee table, grabbed it, and in a smooth motion, hurled it at the two men. It hit one of them dead on, and a gunshot went off.

In a single beat of Lydia’s racing heart, Nate followed the table across the room. The pop of the gun was so much louder than she

expected, rattling her skull and dulling the sounds of the scuffle between Nate and the man he'd just stunned the hell out of. Her hands flew over her ears as she fought to control the swell of panic.

Why the hell was he fighting these guys? Weren't they all on the same side?

Lydia pushed herself upright on her knees as the second guy, a hard-looking blond who clearly meant business, came straight for her.

"Stay on the ground!" he shouted at her, the gun trained on her most unnervingly. She froze, but her eyes flicked over to where

Nate flashed out with a punch that sent the other guy to the floor. He sprawled out on his back and stayed there.

What exactly possessed her in that moment, she wasn't sure. Her mind was screaming at her to do exactly what the scary man with the gun told her. But the devil inside whispered that if she let him get a hold of her, it would be very, very bad.

“What the hell,” she whispered.

Lydia reached up and yanked her bikini cups aside, spilling her breasts into view. The ridiculous move rewarded her with a brief

halt in his advance, and his gun hand wavered for just a second while he stared at her tits. It was a momentary reprieve that wouldn't have gained her a thing if not for the man coming up quietly behind him. She glanced over in time to see Nate swing the remaining half of the coffee table. The blond guy whipped around and saw it as well, exactly two seconds after it was too late to react.

The table connected with the man's upper half and sent him reeling back into the wall, where he knocked his head hard. He slid to the floor, clearly dazed.

“The guy with the bigger weapon,” Nate said, dropping the remains of the table. He had a wild gleam in his eye when he turned to Lydia and held out his hand. A gun that he’d apparently relieved the other intruder of was in his other one.

“Come on,” he said.

“What for?”

“No time to sit around wondering how to get your security deposit back. We’re getting out of here.”

“We are?”

She took his hand and he promptly yanked her upright. He

half dragged her to the window, and she pulled back when she realized what he had in mind.

“Out there?”

“They might have a guy posted on the front exit. Hurry up.”

He helped her out the window onto a fire escape that seemed rickety and utterly terrifying from the third floor. The handcuff still fastened to her wrist dangled wildly while she grabbed the ladder and started descending. Nate was right behind her, but they didn't make it far before they heard a shout.

“They went out the fire escape!”

“Double time,” Nate called down to her.

Her limbs ached, and the threatened hangover headache was pounding in full force ahead of schedule, but she somehow made it to the ground without either landing in a gunman’s clutches or falling and breaking her neck. The drop from the bottom ladder jarred her a little, however, making her doubly grateful that Nate had also managed to get her good sneakers on before their unexpected guests had arrived.

Nate landed beside her with ease and jerked his head toward the

beach. "This way. I hope you weren't lying about being a runner."

"Why should I come with you?"

"I'm helping you escape, obviously."

"No, you're not. You're making sure you're the one who gets the bounty for my capture."

"We don't have time to argue. And I have a gun now, by the way." He pointed to his waistband, which had the gun tucked into it.

She let out a grunt of frustration. "Damn it."

He grabbed her hand and they

took off at a full jog along the boardwalk, dodging startled tourists, hippies and dog walkers who were all out for an evening stroll along the beach. Her breasts were still exposed and bouncing crazily as she ran like hell, and she frantically tried to stuff them back where they belonged while Nate pulled her along.

He suddenly veered off the boardwalk through the grass, cutting up between two buildings and heading for the street.

“Where are we going?” she asked, out of breath. Her legs burned, and so did her chest. Sure,

she went for a morning jog a few times a week, but not at a dead run with no warmup.

“My car.”

They darted through evening traffic as they crossed Pacific and headed up a side street.

“Where the hell did you park, back in Colorado Springs?”

By the time they made it to a parking garage and ducked inside, her legs were ready to give out. When they finally stopped beside a blue Ford with Colorado tags, she slumped hard against the trunk and fought to catch her breath.

Nate stood by the driver's door,

constantly checking behind him while he pulled out his cell phone and started fiddling with the buttons.

She eyed him warily. "Don't you think you should get us out of here before calling your mother to tell her you'll be late for curfew?"

"My fucking keys are back at your place," he said, swiping his finger across the phone screen. "They're in the duffel bag."

"And I'm supposed to stand around while you call a cab?"

He shot her a quick glance and then pointed the phone at the car door. The lock clicked, and he

tugged the door open with a smug grin.

Lydia's jaw fell open. "How did you do that?"

"I have an app that unlocks the door." He fished in his pants pocket for a moment and came up with a key that he did happen to have. "Turn around and let me deal with those cuffs."

Her brain was so fried that she didn't stop to think why she had to turn around for him to take them off. It didn't dawn on her until she found both wrists behind her again with the cuffs locked back in place.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

she shouted, her voice bouncing off the concrete walls. "I thought we were on the same team now?"

Nate took her by the upper arm and led her around the car, where he pulled open the passenger door. "Get in. Watch your head."

Since he pushed her down by the head, she had little choice as she got in the front seat. He did the knee-on-legs, ponytail-grab maneuver while he buckled her into the seat belt. Then he held up some kind of nylon strap that he fished out from near her lower legs.

"This is in case you're thinking of getting creative with your feet,"

he said, and he buckled it firmly across her lower legs. "So sit still and enjoy the ride."

He shut her in while she sat there, fuming and tugging at the cuffs behind her. When he leaned into the driver's side, she shot him a vicious glare.

"What, you're not stuffing me in the backseat with a cage between us? That's what the cops did when they arrested me. Wrongfully, I might add."

He reached in to flip a switch, and she heard the trunk pop open. "And have you behind me where I can't see what you're up to? I'd

rather not get kicked in the head, thanks.”

Then he disappeared again. After a minute of rooting around, the trunk slammed and he climbed in beside her.

When he stuck a key in the ignition, she frowned. “I thought you said you left your keys behind?”

“I keep a spare set in the trunk.”

The engine fired up, and he wasted no time putting the car in reverse and executing a rapid get-the-hell-out maneuver.

“You *lock* up your spare keys?” she asked while he whipped

around the corner. “Do you not see the flaw in that plan?”

“Did you not see how easily I got around it?”

He glanced nervously into the rearview mirror, and she took a peek at her side mirror as well. No one was running after them, yelling and pointing, and there were no suspicious cars behind them, either. Maybe they were home free.

She glanced at his profile while he focused on traffic. “And what if you’d lost your cell phone too, Einstein? What then?”

“I have a lock pick set in my wallet. Or I could break the

window and hotwire the car." He turned and gave her a quick, annoyingly sexy grin. "I'm a man of many talents."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Stripping apparently not being one."

"Why, are you disappointed that you missed that part of the show?"

"You wish. You made a terrible stripper, just so you know."

"Good enough for you to let me in the door. Among other things."

"I should have tied those balloons to your nuts and floated you off over the ocean." The cuffs dug into her skin, and she tried

shifting in her seat to take the pressure off. "Putting on handcuffs isn't among your talents, either. These are breaking my wrist."

"Just be happy I don't use the zip-tie kind," he said, craning his neck as they approached a line of businesses up ahead. "I don't like them. They get damn tight and can't be adjusted once they're on. I'd have to cut you out of them and hope your skin didn't come off as well."

"I know," she said, staring out the window. "I was recently treated to the fab new age of plastic police restraints."

“Some things are better old school.” He nodded up ahead. “Is there an ATM in that shopping center?”

“How should I know? Do I look like Google Maps?”

“You live here now.”

“I was *hiding* here now. I didn’t exactly get out much.”

They turned into a line of chain stores and small restaurants, and Nate cruised through the parking lot until he found what he sought. He managed to use the walk-up cash machine without taking his eyes off Lydia, who made faces at him until he came back.

“I’ll say this much for you,” he said when he pulled out of their spot. “I can’t say I’ve had a skip who was more entertaining.”

“Why, don’t you always do a fuck-’em-and-suck-’em before dragging helpless captives down the fire escape?”

“Helpless, my ass.”

“You never did answer me about why you fought those guys. They’re bounty hunters too, right? Isn’t there honor among thieves and all that?”

The look he gave her sent a chill through her, and not the good kind she’d felt when she’d thought he

was her birthday present.

“That’s the problem,” he said. “I don’t think they were bounty hunters. Not at all.”

Nate pulled out his phone while he felt Lydia’s eyes burning through him. “What do you mean, they weren’t bounty hunters? They had on all that gear that said so.”

“I’m not the only guy who can put on a costume. Now be quiet a minute.”

He ran through the whole scenario again, from the minute they kicked in her door to the way they had targeted *him*. As though

he, not the bond jumper, were the actual threat.

He dialed Asa's number and waited for him to pick up.

"There's a whole lot of something fucked going on," Nate said. "This was supposed to be a cake job. Go out easy with a decent severance, you told me." He glanced at Lydia in time to catch the look of disgust. "Instead it's turned into a clusterfuck. I should raise my fee."

"What do you mean?" Asa asked. "You didn't get her?"

"What I got was a pair of wannabe cowboys rammed up my

ass. What the hell's going on, Ace? Who were those assholes who just crashed my farewell tour?"

"You're not making any sense. What assholes?"

"A couple phony bond agents just broke down the door where the jumper was holed up. They tried to put a bullet in my parade."

He heard Asa swear. "They showed up there?"

"Yeah. And who's 'they'? Do you know those guys?"

"I'm sorry, man. It wasn't supposed to go down like that. They must have followed you there."

Nate, who was still staring at Lydia, frowned. She frowned back, even though he was reasonably certain she couldn't hear the other end of the conversation.

“What wasn't supposed to go down like that?” he asked.

Asa paused for a moment.

“God damn it, Ace.”

“They were going to do it nice and clean and quiet once you got back over the state line. They swore it.”

An ugly tingle crawled up Nate's spine. “Do what? You better tell me exactly what the fuck is going on.”

“Did they take the girl?”

“No.” He paused. “I have her.” As soon as he said it, he wondered whether he should have. He’d known Asa for years and worked for him almost as long. It never would have occurred to him not to trust the man.

“Where are you now?”

Nate shook his head. “Uh-uh. First, you tell me who the freak jobs were and why they’re here.”

“I can’t, not over the phone.” Asa sighed. “Look, just get here as fast as you can. I’ll tell you everything then. I promise.”

“No deal. Tell me now.”

The man lowered his voice. "Not over the airwaves. I'm guessing it'll take you about twenty hours and change to get here. Don't be late."

He clicked off the call. Nate swore and dropped the phone in his lap.

"What is it?" Lydia asked. "What's wrong?"

"He played me," Nate said, looking out the rear windshield for anything suspicious. "I don't know how or why, but he played me. Damn it!"

"So those men really aren't bounty hunters?"

Nate shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Then who are they?"

"No idea. But I'm sure as hell not going to waltz into the bail bonds office to find out. Asa's far too eager for me to do that."

"Asa's my bail bond guy."

"Yeah." He started the car again and drove off.

"So we're not going back to Colorado?"

"Not yet."

"Wait." She started wriggling in her seat, a motion that shook her full breasts back and forth until he

had full-color memories and images in his head that he shouldn't be thinking about. "You're supposed to take me back. Stop."

He put on the brake and glared at her. "*You* stop. Quit fidgeting around or else I'll hogtie you in the back seat."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me. Spare car keys aren't the only thing I've got stocked in my trunk." She settled down, and with a satisfied nod, he drove off again. "Are you really in that big a hurry to go back to jail?"

"No, seeing as how I'm innocent."

He snorted. "Funny, I hear the same thing from pretty much every skip I collar."

"Except it's the truth this time."

"Uh-huh."

"I have proof. Copies are sitting in two different states in case the original got lost or stolen." She sighed. "And since that's back at the beach house, I'd say it's gone. And as for you, I may not be anxious for my boss to succeed in framing me, but that doesn't mean I want to be a hostage in some game of yours. This is kidnapping."

He shot her a glare. "I'm not a kidnapper. I was duly authorized to

bring you in.”

“Yeah, by a guy you apparently think is up to no good.”

Nate set his mouth in a grim line and got on the highway. “It just doesn’t make sense. Why would he screw me over? He posted your bond. Getting you back sooner than later is in his best interest. That’s why he pulled me out of my brand-new retirement. He needed my expert nose to track you fast.”

He merged into traffic and stomped on the pedal.

“You were retired?”

“Barely. My last job didn’t go so well. It spun out of control.”

She grunted. "So far, this one doesn't seem to be much better."

Nate curled his lip while he changed lanes to stick to the I-10 East. "Considering someone wound up dead the last time, I'd say we're still ahead of the game."

There was silence for a moment. "I'm sorry," she said somberly. "Was it someone you knew?"

He tightened his grip on the wheel. "An innocent bystander. He got caught in the crossfire when gunfire broke out."

"That's terrible. So you just quit, even though it wasn't your fault?"

"Not my fault? I ducked, and he

caught a bullet meant for me.”

“That doesn’t make it your fault.”

“So everyone says, but I decided to hang up my hat anyway. I just didn’t have the stomach for it anymore. Then Asa talked me into one last job. You.”

“Lucky me.” She flinched at his glare. “Maybe you just aren’t as retired as you thought. Maybe deep down, you know you can still work for the public good. Not in my case, of course.”

“The only reason I did it was because my cut of the bond amount would see me through another

year. Even so, there were two conditions. One, I wanted a quiet capture. No team of macho mean stirring up a shit storm. Two, minimal force. No guns. Since you were a first-time offender wanted for a white-collar deal, it seemed more likely I'd get my wish."

"But Asa obviously didn't trust that I'd be taken that easily, so he sent backup and guns that you didn't want."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think that's it."

"What, then?"

The glow of red brakes lit up the dark road ahead, and he slowed

down. He'd forgotten what a bitch Southern California traffic could be. "He didn't send them as backup. He told me they weren't supposed to be there." When they'd stopped in the row of cars, he looked over at her. "They were supposed to jump us quietly after we got back over the state line."

Her eyes widened. "Why?"

"He won't tell me. Says we have to meet face-to-face first." His eyes narrowed. "Except I highly doubt it's so he can explain. He's after something, and I think it's sitting right next to me." He gave her a pointed look.

“Well, obviously he’s after me. That’s his business, right? Tracking down fools like me who try to run away from lying, unscrupulous bosses.”

“Then he could have just let me do my job. You’d have been in his hands tomorrow.” He felt a jab of unexpected irritation at the thought of her in another man’s hands—in any capacity.

“Maybe those other guys tried to get me away from you because they want your cut of the reward. Whoever hands me over gets the money, right?”

“It doesn’t quite work that way.

This isn't the old days where anyone could capture guys on wanted posters to get the gold. Bond enforcers don't go around stepping on one another's toes because we aren't all given the same assignments. We're hired to do a specific job, and we do it. Asa trusted I could do this one, or he wouldn't have brought me out of retirement."

She shifted in her seat, obviously uncomfortable. "You're right. It doesn't make sense."

Traffic crept forward again. "He wanted me," he muttered to himself. "*Me* in particular. He knew

I could find you fast." He glanced at her. "It's a talent."

"I'll admit it bruised my ego a little. I thought I did pretty good throwing you guys off the trail."

"I have my ways."

The words sank in.

"My ways," he repeated. "My conditions. That's why he wanted me. He knew I could find you fast, but he also knew I'd do it alone and unarmed. The last time we talked, he made sure of it."

"So?"

"That would make it easier to intercept you afterward."

“Intercept me for what?”

“Good question.” He blew out a breath as the freeway resumed normal speed. He pressed the button for the window, took one final look at his phone, and chucked it into the freeway’s concrete center divider. “Shit. I liked that phone.”

“What did you do that for?”

“Same reason you apparently dumped yours in New Mexico. So people like me couldn’t follow you.”

“So they’re following us now?”

“*Now*, they can’t.” He gave her a hard look. “But I have an ugly

feeling both of us are about to be officially declared fugitives.”

“And neither of us deserves to be.”

Plans began swirling in his head and clicking into place, although the plans of what he couldn't do seemed much clearer than what to do instead.

“Someone wants to find you,” he said, as much to her as to himself, “but not to send you back to jail. Why? There's something else going on.” He glanced at her. “I suppose I need to temporarily revoke my policy never to listen to crap about innocent bond skips. I

think it's about time I heard your side of the story."

She stared at him then, ironically silent.

"Isn't that what you want?" he asked. "For the bounty hunter to hear your case and take your side?"

"I'm not sure it'll make a difference. Andrew seems to have this whole thing locked up tight. That was my boss. Andrew Waller, CEO of FTI. Or as I've recently renamed it, Fucking Thief Incorporated."

"An hour ago, it wouldn't have made a difference. But now I really need to hear what wasn't in the file

I read about your case.”

Lydia sucked in a deep breath, which pushed out her already impossible-to-ignore chest. He rerouted his thoughts quickly.

“The short version,” she began slowly, “is that this started six months ago when I accidentally ran across a discrepancy in the accounting logs at my company. I told Andrew right away. I was thanked most vigorously for my ‘sharp eye and dedication’. Before long, it was clear that was just a brush-off. That’s when I got suspicious that the ‘mistake’ in the books was something more.” She

let out a frustrated growl. "I should have kept my nose out of it. But I couldn't let it alone. I started staying late and nosing around through files. It took some doing, but I finally pieced it together." She shook her head and looked at him. "Andrew was siphoning funds into offshore accounts."

"What did you do?"

"I should have acted immediately, but I was scared. I wasn't sure who to tell. And as it turned out, I didn't get the chance. I woke up to a knock on my door." She leaned her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes.

“I had this bad feeling before I even answered. Sort of the same way I felt when you first showed up.”

He felt a strange twitch in his stomach at that, but he didn't answer.

“That's when it dawned on me that maybe I hadn't been as sly as I'd thought. There are security cameras in the building that picked up my every suspicious move, something that looked really bad for me when the accusations were turned.”

“So you weren't stealing, you were trying to prove your CEO was.”

“Exactly. But he found out and twisted it around so I’d take the fall. While it wasn’t quite the same as the gun-toting jackholes who busted into the beach house, I was put into cuffs and hauled away for a crime I didn’t commit.” She gave a tight smile. “But not before I managed to smuggle out evidence that he was the one behind it all along.”

Nate hadn’t had a chance to reply before she jolted upright. “That’s what this is about. He knows I have the documents, but not where they are now, how many copies I’ve made, or what I intend

to do with them. He wants to get a hold of me first, before the cops do. Maybe he wants to work a deal.”

Nate sat quiet for a while, nodding while he thought this through. If she was telling the truth, this was all making a new sort of sense. “If you’re right, the copy you had at the beach house will have been destroyed by now.”

“Lucky for me, I have two more copies. One in each state I drove through on my way here.”

“New Mexico?”

Lydia nodded. “Santa Fe and Flagstaff.” She hesitated. “So does this mean you believe me?”

“Until a better explanation comes along, I’m not sure I have a choice. I’m not going back until I know ‘gun-toting jackholes’, as you so eloquently put it, won’t be waiting there to send either of us into permanent retirement of the really bad kind.”

“I suppose as alliances go, I’ve heard better.”

He arched a brow at her. “And believe it or not, I feel an obligation to protect the fugitives in my custody. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Something lit in her eyes then, a jolt that punched through his

middle.

“Then since we’re partners in not-crime,” she said, “can we please pull over so I can get out of these cuffs? At this point, I think the marks are going to be permanent.”

He took a moment to weigh the insanity of what he was about to say. Was he really about to do this?

“Fair enough. For the time being.”

“Thanks.”

On a whim he added, “Stick with me, Lydia. Don’t run off on your own. I’ll help us figure a way out of this.”

She nodded. "I trust you. Which, considering this hours-old relationship was founded on your giant lie, probably says a lot about my issues with men."

That twisted the corner of his mouth upward. "We'll turn off the road up ahead. I want to make a stop. The cuffs will come off then."

"What's there?"

"I need to gas up the tank, and we have some shopping to do before we head to Arizona."

"Good. I could use some aspirin when we get there. Apparently, my hangover has arrived." She moaned. "I didn't even get the

usual six hours of pleasure buzz out of it.”

He reached over her. “No need to wait. I’ve got painkillers in the glove box. Along with a bottle of water.”

“Thank God. Then I take back the mean stuff I said about you a few minutes ago.”

“You didn’t say anything mean.”

“I was thinking it in my head.”

The mood in the car shifted when he leaned over into her personal space. When he held the pills out in his hand, her lips feathered his palm and sent a

charge up his arm. He recognized the glimmer of fire in her piercing blue eyes, but it wasn't merely the chemistry that had failed to dim between them. She was, for the time being, no longer a law-breaking captive he was returning to justice. They were a team, two magnetic opposites clutching to one another in a common cause. He just hoped his instinct to trust her didn't turn out to be a mistake, like his instinct to fuck her on a dining room table.

Although, as he took another sidelong glance, he started thinking that particular decision hadn't been

such a mistake, after all. And judging by the way her gaze slid over him in return, maybe she was thinking pretty much the exact same thing.

Chapter Four

Sometime later, Lydia had the satisfaction of seeing Nate's eyes widen when she walked up to him with the tags still fluttering on the outfit she was trying on. He gaped at her in almost as stunned a fashion as when she'd followed the drunken whim to pull off her bikini top.

She stopped beside the display laptops he was poking around and lifted her arms. "Well, what do you think?"

The way his eyes raked over her

made her feel downright caressed, and it made her skin tingle.

“I thought you don’t wear jeans,” he said.

Lydia shrugged. “I don’t like jeans.” But admittedly, these were stretchy enough to be almost comfortable, and they fit like a soft, sensual glove. More important, her ass and hips looked fucking great in them.

He eyed her curves again. “Well, jeans definitely like you.”

Her stomach heated. “Thanks. I just figured these would be a smarter fashion choice for a wanted fugitive on the run.”

Nate's head whipped back and forth at that. "Do you want to say that a little louder?" he asked in a sharp whisper. "I don't think the security guard napping in housewares heard you."

"The place is practically empty. I thought these big box stores stayed open twenty-four hours because they're so popular? Besides, you didn't comment on my top."

When his eyes fixated on her chest, he looked annoyed rather than appreciative. "Don't they have some baggy t-shirts or something? I thought I saw some over in the men's department."

“Why, what’s wrong with this?” She held out the front of the long-sleeved top she’d selected. The thin, knit fabric was soft and very clingy, and it was patterned in a subdued, floral palette. The neck was slashed quite low, and she’d left the front ties hanging flirtatiously loose.

“The point to getting you some clothes was for you to cover up.” He waved his hand up and down at her ensemble. “Not to, uh, accentuate things.”

“Why, Nathan Antillean,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes in a gesture of innocence, “I do believe that was a compliment.”

“My name isn’t Nathan.”

“Nate’s short for Nathan, isn’t it?”

“No.” He paused and shot her an unconvincing scowl. “It’s short for Nature, if you must know.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Nature? As in Mother? *Nature* Antillean?”

“Long story.”

“I take it your parents were hippies, and you were conceived at Woodstock.”

His eyes rolled. “I was born on a camping trip.”

“Oh.” She gave a shrug. “Cool. But back to the wardrobe

discussion, I don't do baggy men's shirts. More importantly, this shirt is on sale."

"Then maybe I like it better."

"From the way you were staring when I walked up, I'd say you like it just fine." He opened his mouth to answer, but she cut him off. "Anyway, what are you doing over here? I thought you said you were going to grab a throwaway cell phone, not shop for a new computer."

He held up a phone he'd set down on the shelf in front of him. It was a smart phone that appeared to be permanently encased in stiff

plastic packaging. "I need to *use* a computer, not buy one," he said with another glance over the top of the shelves they stood in front of. They were facing the electronics department's service desk, and the clerk there had his back to them while he fiddled with his red uniform vest.

"Can't you check your Facebook later?" She stood on tiptoe to peer over his shoulder. "Ooh, does that model come with a Blu-ray player?"

"I found a WiFi connection nearby," he said. "I'm going to use it to check something that is similar

to Facebook, if you're a guy like me looking for people like you."

"Sounds kinky. And what's that supposed to mean, 'people like me'?"

"Criminals."

She let out an exasperated growl. "I thought we recently established that I am not, in fact, a criminal?"

"You jumped bail and left the state. So you are, 'in fact', a wanted felon. For that if nothing else."

"And you don't have a laptop stuffed in the trunk next to the spare keys and prisoner hogtie devices?"

He glanced at her. "As a matter of fact, I do. But I can't risk using it. There's a chance our location could be tracked if I turn it on."

A heavysset woman in a housecoat pushed a cart up their aisle, and Nate clicked up a demo window to hide whatever it was that he was doing. He switched back the minute the woman turned the corner.

He was typing furiously while keeping one eye trained on the clerk, who was completely ignoring them. Lydia stopped watching what he was doing and started staring at him with a whole other

sort of interest. Nate in profile was a fascinating study in male architecture. His long lashes flicked up and down while he shot glances over the lid of the laptop, and his broad shoulders were squared and proud even though he was a lot taller than the level of his workspace. There was no arguing how gorgeous he was, whether he was holding pink balloons, bending Lydia over a table, or offering her his hand in the middle of an escape from rogue gunmen.

My, how she had thrown herself at him the second they met! Damn alcohol. Even so, had she known he

wasn't really a stripper, no amount of booze would have compelled her to come on to him so blatantly. What must he have thought of her? The thought sent a flush of heat to her cheeks. She was embarrassed, it was true. But she couldn't drum up any remorse.

She wasn't sorry she'd fucked him. Not one damn bit. He'd responded to her so readily, and he'd upped her game to something far hotter than she'd ever gotten. So good that even now, she felt a dull throb stirring in her clit. Maybe alcohol wasn't the only thing that got her crazy horny. Life on the run

apparently got her bikini bottoms wet. Or maybe it was the man who'd spanked her and made her love it.

"This Wi-Fi is for shit," Nate said, glowering at the screen. "It's taking forever for the damn page to load." He glanced up and caught her staring. "What?"

She looked away in a hurry, just in time to spot trouble. "Uh-oh."

He followed her eyes and grunted. "Figures," he said under his breath. "When you want help, they're never anywhere to be found."

"Can I help you folks with

something?" asked the clerk who had finally waddled himself over.

Nate hid his page with the demo again, but before he could answer, Lydia launched into action.

"Why yes, thank you so much," she gushed. Nate looked at her as though springs had just shot out of her ears, but she ignored him. "I was just asking my boyfriend what he thought, and he agrees with me."

She wandered straight up to the guy to halt his advance on the commandeered laptop, and along the way she deliberately put a bounce in her step to give extra

jiggle to her breasts. She pointed to them as she stopped in front of the clerk, whose name badge read “Thaddeus”.

“I was just saying I think this shirt is a bit too snug in the chest,” she said, thrusting her boobs out for effect. “I know this isn’t your department, but I couldn’t find the salesgirl over in the women’s section. I don’t suppose you can help me figure out if you carry this top in a bigger size?”

To finish off, she peeled the blouse over her head. Before the fabric had even cleared her eyes, she could feel that Thaddeus’ had

glued themselves to the rounded flesh that was barely covered by her string bikini. She grabbed the tag on the shirt and held it out. "This one is a size small. I think I need at least a medium."

Several sounds that weren't exactly words came out of the man, and with a nod, he led her back to the service desk. He got on his phone there without once looking away from her tits. While he spoke in a rush to the clothing department, she glanced over her shoulder at Nate, who shook his head. She waggled her brows at him before turning back.

“We have several sizes in stock,” Thaddeus said. “I’ll show you.”

She thanked the clerk profusely while he walked her over to the clothing aisle. Lydia delayed him for as long as she dared to give Nate time to finish his web surfing. After she finally got rid of Thaddeus, she grabbed her jogging pants out of the dressing room she’d abandoned earlier and looped them over her arm while she made her way back.

Nate found her first, and he didn’t look happy. He clutched the packaged phone, a powder-blue ski jacket he’d picked out for her, and

some snack food.

“Let’s go,” he said stiffly.

“Why, you’re welcome for the ongoing use of my tits as a male distraction device,” she said as they headed for the checkout. “You know, I think that guy was about to ask for my number. I hope it was worth whatever you were looking for.”

“I found it.”

“And?”

He worked his jaw. “Asa officially fucked me hard. I’m wanted for aiding and abetting a felon.” He flicked her a hard glance. “Guess we *are* both fugitives

now.”

She swallowed and followed him to the nearest open register. “So what now?”

He didn’t answer right away. He grabbed several prepaid credit cards from a hook by the cashier and divided his goods into two piles. Nate pulled the sales tag right off the ass of Lydia’s jeans so the checker could scan it. He paid cash for the prepaid cards and used a credit card for the rest.

On the way to the car, he finally spoke. “We need that evidence of yours, and I need time to think.”

“Do you think we can come up

with a plan to deal with Andrew?"

"Right now, I figure your best bet will be to use the evidence to get your fair day in court. But I need to see the document first. And probably sleep on it as well." He stopped in front of the passenger door to his car, where he glanced at her and pulled the newly purchased top out of the bag. "Either way, as soon as I use my card to gas up the car, that's it. We go off the grid after that. You said the closest copy is in Flagstaff?"

She nodded and tugged the shirt back over her head.

"Then that's where we're

headed. It's more than an eight-hour drive going up the back way. That'll put us in while it's still dark. We'll hit up a motel and get some sleep before retrieving that evidence."

The word "motel" started two different alarms ringing in her head. She ignored the louder klaxons, which were blaring over the thought of her and Nate sleeping and showering together, and focused on the other issue instead.

"We can't do that if we're going off the grid," she said. "They can track you by watching your credit

card use. They'll know right where we are."

"Which is why I won't be using my card after the gas station. I don't care if they find out we stopped here to fuel up. It's where we go next that will be our little secret."

"Motels won't let you rent rooms without credit cards," she said. "Believe me, I tried. I couldn't find a single place between here and Colorado that would work with cash only."

Nate pulled open the door for her. "There are a few, but not enough to count on. That's why I

picked up these." He reached in the bag and showed her one of the prepaids.

"Those will work?"

"Yep. One of the many tricks I learned chasing down skips."

Her mouth fell open. "I never thought of that. I wound up sleeping in my car on the way."

He dropped the card back in the bag and gestured for her to get in the passenger seat. "Go figure that I picked up a few things in my twelve years of hunting that you didn't figure out in a week. I learned these tricks to outthink fugitives, though. Never figured I'd

be one.”

She felt a throb of guilt. It wasn't his fault that her boss was out to get her. But it was both of their problem now.

“We should probably stop and eat on the way,” she said when he got in beside her. “I'm starving.”

“Drive through only,” he said. “And road snacks.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You're going to be very bad for my figure.”

He actually cracked a smile as he started the car. “That sounds fair, since I was already very bad *to* your figure.”

The look on his face sparked something unexpected in her, and she leaned over without thinking and kissed him full on the lips. It started off as a quick brush, but she caved to the immediate and overwhelming desire to keep their mouths in contact. She took hold of his face while he tensed in apparent surprise, but his lips were pliable and willing when she prodded his mouth with her tongue.

A hot jab of lust revved up her erogenous zones when their tongues began an eager dance, and she flirted with the urge to climb on his lap. By the time she pulled

away, her heart was racing and Nate looked more hungry than dazed.

“What was that for?” he asked.

She wasn't entirely certain. “I guess that's my way of saying thanks.”

He blinked. “For what, exactly?”

“For doing all this. Believing me. And for not sounding disgusted just now when you brought up what you and my figure did earlier.”

He licked his lips, looking more as though he was trying to taste her on them rather than keep them moist.

“If this is the way we’re expressing our gratitude,” he said, “then let me just say this.”

His sudden grab was even more unexpected than her mad impulse, and her nipples tightened at the firm, almost demanding press of his mouth to hers. He gripped her upper arms almost painfully while he kissed her half senseless. His thumbs brushed the sides of her breasts, weakening every muscle in her body.

He pulled away and gave a smiling, satisfied nod while she reeled from the wash of happy tingles passing over her.

“So what was that one about?” she managed.

“Thanks for saving the day twice by flashing your incredible rack at a guy.”

“Check your math. I believe that would be three times.”

“Twice,” he repeated. “Once here and once so I could clock that goon back at your place.”

“You’re forgetting when I bared my breasts for *you*. If I hadn’t done that, I’m betting you’d have had me cuffed and out the door without a clue that those idiots were planning to jump us on the road. Might not have gone so well.”

“I suppose that’s a fair point.” His smile sobered, and he reached over to take her hand. “It’ll be okay, Lydia. We *will* find a way to dig out of this hole. Trust me.”

She just nodded, gaping at him in silence. There was something far more intimate in the way he touched her hand than the kisses they had just indulged. She laced her fingers through his, and they stayed that way while he drove them back to the highway and for a good while beyond.

Somewhere between California and Arizona, she came to a decision.

Nate had put himself out there for her, fighting off the men he could have simply handed her to. Because of his heroics, he was in almost as much trouble as she was. She couldn't allow that. His idea about using the evidence in court to gain her the upper hand was noble, but naïve. Andrew would find a way to cover his bases by the time it came down to it. She couldn't take the risk. She had to play this game the hard way.

Despite Nate's warnings that they should stick together, she knew she had to do the opposite. Once they made it to Flagstaff and

she caught a few hours' sleep, she would have to slip out and finish this alone.

* * * * *

Nate woke up to the tickle of a woman's hair trailing over his bare stomach. A hand that was not his own was exploring the hard, throbbing ridge inside his pants. He had been sleeping on his back with one arm flung over his head and the other curved protectively around the woman who was no longer sleeping peacefully at his side.

The naughty seductress was

back in force.

Lydia had pushed herself up on one arm, and she was leaning over him while she stroked his hard cock. When he stirred, she raised her head and gave him a guilty smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sounding no more remorseful than the last time she’d apologized while he had an erection. “I swore to myself I wasn’t going to do this. I was lying here watching you sleep, and I couldn’t help myself. All I could do was stare at your chest. It’s your own fault, you know, for not having a shirt on.”

“Now you know how I felt the first few hours we were together,” he said thickly. He rubbed sleep from his eyes, but when he went to lower his other arm, it wouldn’t budge.

He flinched and jerked his head up to find his wrist was cuffed to one of the spindles on the wooden headboard.

“What the hell is this?” he asked, tugging on the cuffs.

“Now you know how *I* felt the first few hours we were together. Some of it, anyway.”

“You stole my cuffs while I was sleeping.”

“Relax, Nate.” She winked at him and began pulling down his unzipped trousers. “You like kinky sex, don’t deny it. Or else that whole little scene back at the beach house would never have happened.”

He liked kinky sex just fine. But his fantasies about her and handcuffs hadn’t involved him being the one bound up. Maybe it wasn’t so bad, though. His dick sure wasn’t complaining. It jumped out and hit his belly stiffly when she tugged off his pants. And he still had one hand free, at least, in order to take advantage of the fact

that he wasn't the only one who no longer had any clothes on.

Lydia climbed on top of him without a stitch on. As unbelievably beautiful as she'd looked splayed out naked on the dining table, straddling him with her hair hanging down to partially obscure the gleam in her eyes turned her into a wicked goddess. Every curve and dip beckoned, driving him instantly insane.

She had his wallet in her hand, and it occurred to him that in another setting, the overall picture would be a lot more disturbing. But he knew what she had in mind.

“One left,” she said, tearing the foil packet with her teeth the way he’d done the night before.

“I knew there was something I forgot to pick up when we were out shopping,” he said and groaned out loud when she touched him to roll on the rubber.

He’d obviously slept through some interesting foreplay, because neither Lydia nor his pulsing cock seemed to need any warming up. She raised her ass up and sat down on him slowly, and he watched his dick disappear inch by inch inside her trimmed, already primed pussy. Her nipples were stiff and pink,

and her body went rigid while she speared herself on him.

He gazed at her in near disbelief when she began fucking him. Such beauty and animalistic, pornographic need didn't exist in women outside the triple-X-rated movies, did it? Maybe he was just dreaming. Maybe he was still back in the other motel room, the one where he'd only fantasized about doing the hot woman he was hunting down.

She pressed her hips against his pelvis and began to rock, and she let out a moan that stood the hair on his arms straight up. Jesus, the

woman could turn him on like no other. He reached for her with his free hand, and she bent down obligingly so he could grab a luscious, round tit and give it a squeeze.

“What is it about you that turns me into an insanely horny woman?” she asked, opening her mouth in a silent gasp when he pinched her hard nipple.

“Maybe the same thing that has me throwing every warning about trouble in high heels out the window.”

His frustration mounted as the restraint on his other wrist kept

him from pleasuring her other breast. Or gripping both her hips while she rode him. Or better yet, flipping her over and plunging into her with her legs draped on his shoulders. Still, he shoved his hips upward hard to meet hers, grunting with each thrust until he felt his balls begin pulling tight to his body.

“Nate,” she said, riding him faster. “I have a confession to make.”

“Now?”

“You’re the best I’ve ever had.”

“Stop talking and fuck me harder, woman,” he said with a wicked smile, remembering her

words to him when she'd been the one on her back. "Let me feel your nails on the chest you were busy staring at while I slept."

She dug in immediately, and he tensed with the exquisite pain-pleasure of her raking his skin. She pinched his nipples hard, then twisted them while she started picking up her entire torso and slamming her ass against him violently. Her tits practically jolted off her body as she fucked him wild, and he knew he was going to explode before she could come.

"Easy, baby," he told her through clenched teeth. "The idea

is to use me to get yourself off *before* you kill me.”

Lydia froze and gave a yell, and he realized she'd already gotten there. His toes curled as he took hold of her thigh and let go, joining her in a real gut-wrenching orgasm that seemed to blow off more than just sexual steam. For a moment, he was free of the whole bullshit scene. There was no fear that a battering ram would crash through the door at any moment, and men shouting and waving guns would pile in while he was shoved onto his face and handcuffed. In climax, it was just the two of them, a pair of

sexually compatible adults who were free to indulge any passion they wanted.

When his consciousness floated down to the bed a short time later, it wasn't only to discover good sex couldn't actually repair the hole fate had just ripped through his life. Lydia was already off him and tugging on the jeans that had given him an instant erection in the middle of a store. She put them on commando style, dropping her bikini bottoms on his bare, still-throbbing crotch.

"I'm not wearing those," he said, trying to scoot himself

upright.

“I should hope not. Consider them a little memento of the occasion.”

“Can I have the handcuff key now, please?” he asked while she pulled on her shirt and flipped her hair out of the back.

She put her shoes on without a word.

“Very funny,” he said. “Be a good girl, Ly, and take off the cuffs so I can shower.”

She whirled on him. “How do you know that nickname?”

“I heard it when I was

eavesdropping on your call with Valerie the day she hired the stripper." On the drive to Flagstaff, he had already told her how Valerie had inadvertently provided him with everything he needed to know about where Lydia was, as well as giving him the stripper idea.

She actually looked stricken at that. "Oh." There was a pause. "So there was actually a stripper."

"I told you there was. Is that disappointment I hear?"

When she grabbed for the jacket he'd bought her, he frowned. "What are you doing?"

She pulled on the ski coat and

turned, and this time, the guilt in her face and her voice were quite real. "I'm really sorry, Nate. I planned to be gone before you woke up." She gazed at his body longingly. "I just couldn't do it. I couldn't leave without fucking you one more time."

Now he was pulling hard on his wrist. "Leave? What the hell are you talking about? I thought we agreed we need to stay together?"

She shook her head and went to the door. "I can't let you be involved. It wouldn't be right."

"I already am involved. You leaving now won't change that."

“Those men nearly shot you because of me. If we stay together, you might get in harm’s way again.” She glanced at the floor. “I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you because of me.”

“A little late for that, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m going to fix it. I have to see Andrew.”

“Why? No, Ly. Don’t.”

“That’s the only way to stop this. I know I can work a deal with him. Then you’ll be free again, and hopefully I will too.”

She reached for the knob, and

desperation reared up in him. "Stop!" he called. "Do not go out that door. Let me help you, Lydia. Don't do something we'll both regret."

"Too late," she whispered, and she pulled open the door. Bright sunlight streamed in, meaning it was midmorning at least.

Lydia paused in the open doorway for a final look at him. "God, I really wish we could have met under better circumstances. Stay safe, Nature Antillean."

Then she was gone.

"God damn it," he said, shifting around to check the handcuffs.

They weren't loose, but she had neglected to secure them on his arm above the wrist bone.

Putting his thumb to his pinky, he used a twist and tug motion. It took some doing, but he managed to slip off the cuff. Resisting the urge to bolt after her stark naked, he grabbed his pants and barely tugged them on before running barefoot out the door. Their room was on the second floor, and by the time he hit the stair rail, he saw the taillights of his car headed out the driveway.

"She's stealing my fucking car," he said, racing back to the room

with his pants still flapped open. “Miss I’m-not-a-lawbreaker just committed grand theft auto.”

Which would be exactly what he would have to do in order to stop her.

He took quick stock of what Lydia had and hadn’t taken. She’d left with the new cell phone and some of the cash, not to mention the contents of his trunk. But she hadn’t left him entirely destitute. She hadn’t emptied all the cash from his wallet, and he still had a few of the prepaid cards. One of them had already been used to secure the motel room, though.

Nate stuffed what he had into his jacket pocket, except for the key to the room. He left that on the round table on his way out the door. He wouldn't be coming back.

Breaking into a car and hotwiring it was among his skill sets, but he'd only done it on his own cars. He'd never swiped someone else's. Anger and guilt mixed in his gut as he picked out an older, nondescript car that he was lucky enough to find had the back door unlocked.

"Add one more sin to the list of reasons why the cops want you," he muttered as he twisted wires

together to spark the engine to life.

He squealed out of the parking lot, hanging a right in the direction he'd seen her go. Why was she doing this? If she wanted to meet with the asshole boss on the sly, there was no reason not to let Nate help. It would have been much better to have him on her side. Not wanting him in danger was noble, but it was a weak excuse. Danger was a been-there-done-that deal already, and it had left him a wanted man. She was putting herself in a highly unsafe situation by not having someone to watch her back.

Nate spotted his car a few blocks away, and he zoomed up to follow her from a couple car lengths behind. She pulled off for gas, and he considered confronting her then and there. He could re-cuff her and strap her in for the ride, and then demand that she tell him where they were going. But somehow, he knew she would find a way around accepting his help. He'd have to give it to her without her knowing.

The Toyota he'd swiped had only a third of a tank of gas, so he couldn't follow her for long before fuel became a problem. Still, if his instincts were right, she wouldn't

be headed out of town just yet. He knew what her next stop would be after this.

She came out of the mini-mart with his new cell phone pressed to her ear. She looked worried as she spoke, not to mention guilty as hell. Her eyes flicked all around, as if she expected a SWAT team to jump her at any moment. Or maybe for Nate to pop up.

Judging from the look on her face when she hung up, he had a fair guess who she'd been talking to. She'd made contact with Andrew about a deal. Nate slipped out of the stolen car while she was

gassing up, and he kept a low profile while he picked out a blue Neon.

The ignition cap was trickier on this model, and he was still fucking with it when he saw Lydia hang up the pump nozzle and get in the car.

“Shit,” he said while she pulled away. Maybe he should have stowed away in the back while she’d gone inside.

A screwdriver in the glove compartment came in handy, and he popped the ignition with it and roared off to do his version of casual tailing in midmorning traffic. A glance at the dashboard

told Nate it was eleven a.m., and the gas gauge was encouragingly close to the Full mark. He wondered how long it would take Lydia to drive to wherever she'd hidden the evidence, which was somewhere in Flagstaff. He had no doubt that was her destination.

When she pulled up at a bus station, he parked and dashed inside the adjacent mini-mart for a caffeine boost and another disposable phone. This one was a cheap flip job with no bells and whistles, but he wanted it on hand just in case.

He was back behind the wheel

by the time Lydia emerged, clutching a manila envelope and a coffee to go. This was it. Nate wasn't entirely sure where she had arranged to meet the guy who had put a major cramp in Nate's life as well as hers, but he was fairly certain the meeting wouldn't take place in Arizona. They were most likely headed back to some point between here and the place where this odyssey had all begun. What the hell he would do, exactly, once he followed her there was another story. He had no weapon, save the screwdriver, no fun little spy gadgets, and little idea as to what

kind of muscle the guy had on hand.

Maybe Lydia was right about working a deal to make all this go away, but Nate doubted it. As she got on the highway, he stayed a couple of cars behind and spent a good half hour spitting out profanities while he fought to open the ass-cheap cell phone package and get the thing working. Another ten minutes was spent trying to pull the number he needed from his memory.

Several wrong numbers later, he heard a suspicious and familiar, "Yeah?"

“Benny, it’s me. Nate.”

“Nate? Is that you? Fuck, boy, word has it that you’ve landed yourself in ten kinds of shit.”

“Twelve kinds. That’s why I’m calling.” He blew out a breath. “I hate to ask, but I need someone to watch my back while I’m watching someone else’s. I need your help. A shitload of it.”

Chapter Five

Lydia got out in front of the address she'd been given and closed her car door. Nate's car door, rather. Another wave of guilt washed on top of her anxiety. As she looked at the building jutting up against the night sky, she wondered what Nate was doing right then. He would be long out of the handcuffs by now. If nothing else, the maid would have come by and discovered him. If he'd been smart, he'd stayed put at the motel to lie low until this was all over. She hoped he was doing exactly

that, and that he wasn't hating her too much in the process.

No doubt he was pissed as hell at her for stealing from him, but she had every intention of giving him the car back after this was done. Hopefully he realized she had no choice, and that she had to do this without him. If Nate had come along loaded for bear, Andrew would know they'd teamed up. He might be a lot less likely to make a deal with her if he knew she'd already told others the truth.

The office building was abandoned, but it wasn't locked. She clutched the envelope in her

hand as she entered, wondering why it hadn't dawned on her to bring a flashlight. It was pitch black inside.

Blinking furiously against the darkness, she took a few tentative steps on shaky legs. A bright beam of light pierced the night, hitting her square in the face.

"That's far enough," a man said, and she knew the voice all too well. "Did you bring what I want?"

"You can see I have it in my hand," she said, squinting her eyes against the glare. Trying to peer past the flashlight beam did no good. Everything else was still

shrouded.

“Then let’s take our meeting somewhere with a little better lighting, shall we?”

Her arms were grabbed suddenly by men who appeared on either side of her. They “escorted” her along the path where their own wildly bobbing flashlight beams were trained. A door popped open, and ambient light from a single lamp spilled from the room. Lydia was taken inside, where Andrew sat on the edge of a small desk that the banker’s lamp was on. The room had little else in the way of office decor except for an unused

waste bin and papers strewn everywhere. There weren't even any chairs.

The men stood on either side of her and she glanced at them. They weren't the same goons who had broken into her Venice hideaway, and she wasn't certain whether she was relieved or disturbed by that fact. She was in no hurry to see those two again, but the question of how many brutes Andrew had on the bad-guy payroll sat heavily on her.

“Check her,” Andrew said.

Both men turned, and one grabbed the envelope and held her

arms behind her back while the other ran his hands over her.

“Hey!” she shouted when he literally squeezed each breast, hefting and prodding into her cleavage. “*Hey!* What the hell is this about? Can’t you guys get a real date?”

“Relax,” Andrew said. “I’m just making sure we can talk freely. I’m sure you had something similar done when you were booked into jail.”

With that, her shirt was yanked up, and her bikini top was searched inside and out. For a final insult, one of the men stuffed his hand

down her pants. She struggled and spit curse words at him.

“Don’t fight him,” Andrew said. “Unlike my other friends, these men are gentlemen. They won’t pull out their weapons unless they have to. Let’s not make it necessary.”

She gritted her teeth while the guy proceeded to very intimately, though roughly, probe her entire crack from her clit to her ass. When he pulled away, there was a sick gleam of satisfaction on the asshole’s face.

“Yeah, a real fucking gentleman,” she said. She yanked

her arm hard, and the other man let go.

“Sorry that was necessary,” Andrew said, “but things with you haven’t exactly gone as expected.”

She snorted. “Yeah, well, working at your company didn’t quite line up with my five-year plan either.”

“I have to say, your little jaunt to California came as quite a surprise.” He nodded to the guy with the envelope, who stepped forward and handed it over. “That wasn’t part of the plan at all. I’m afraid you made matters a lot worse for yourself.”

“You’re the one who made matters worse for me,” she said as he opened the envelope.

“On the contrary. I was just trying to make an important point about the consequences of corporate snooping.” He peered inside the envelope and shook his head. “Oh dear. Yes, this little piece of paper would have been quite inconvenient to explain away.” He glanced at her. “You were supposed to sit in jail overnight until I could pay you a visit, explain how this was going to work, and then drop the charges when I was assured of your cooperation. Instead, you

somehow managed to post bail despite a frozen bank account and then skipped out of state.” He wagged a finger at her.

“I always keep rainy-day money. You never know when some criminal is going to come along and spoil your parade.” She cocked her head. “Out of curiosity’s sake, just *how* were you going to say this would work before I ruined your little plan?”

He held up the envelope. “You were going to hand over the evidence you stole and go away quietly in exchange for me dropping the charges against you.

Should at any point you decide to change your mind, you would go to jail for embezzling.”

“Which you yourself are actually guilty of.”

“But with all trails now conveniently pointed to you,” he said, lifting the envelope, “this was the only remaining evidence of any, shall we say, questionable bookkeeping with my name attached.”

He stood and straightened his suit jacket. “That deal is still on the table. We part ways professionally, of course, and in lieu of severance, you can keep twenty percent of the

money that was funneled into your account to help sell your embezzlement. I'll drop the charges against you. All I need is your silence and any copies you made of this bank statement."

"I made two copies when I left town," she said, nodding to the envelope. "Two copies are there. The original was in the beach house when your testosterone convention showed up, so I assume you already have that one."

He gave her a tiny smile. "I do, in fact." He tore the envelope in half and pulled a lighter from his chest pocket. He lit the corner of

the papers and dropped the burning evidence into the metal waste bin nearby.

“Speaking of testosterone,” he added, watching the flames climb, “my associates were highly pissed off about the man who attacked them.”

Acrid smoke curled up from the trash bin. “Attacked them? That’s a load of crap. He was defending us. I don’t suppose you plan on paying for the damage? That place is owned by someone dear to me. He said I could use it whenever I wanted, not trash the joint.”

“Consider it the price for doing

business poorly.” He glanced over at the burning trash. The flames were higher, but still contained.

“I know you left with Nate Antillean,” he went on. “Do tell, where is he now?”

She lifted her chin. “I have no idea.”

“And yet you pulled up in front of this building in a car registered to him. The same car my guys followed to California.”

“Yeah, that.” She shrugged. “I sort of borrowed that car without permission after I escaped from him.”

He looked unconvinced. “Is that

so?"

She glowered back at him. "Yeah, that's so. Look, I wasn't about to let that bounty hunter drag me back to jail, and I sure as hell didn't want him to know about this little tea party of ours. So I left him handcuffed in a motel room two states away."

"My, you really have taken to the criminal life, haven't you?"

"I did what I had to in order to survive. Now, about this deal, does it include letting Nate off the hook as well? Just because I screwed him over doesn't mean I want him declared a fugitive for helping me

get away from *your* bastard henchmen.”

He shook his head. “I told you, this entire incident went way off the map. I can drop the original charges I arranged to have brought against you, but anything you or your friend did after that is totally out of my hands.”

“He’s not my friend. He’s just an asshole bounty hunter.” While she spat out the words, she really hoped her face looked stoic enough to be convincing.

“I understand my men waited quite some time outside your apartment for him to bring you

out." He paused. "After delivering balloons to you. Birthday gift?"

She felt her face go hot. "The idiot didn't even have a gun. He wanted to use minimal force in my capture, so he waited until I opened the door for him and let my guard down. And after you, I'm sure you can understand how that took a while. I don't trust men in suits."

There was a look on his face that suggested he knew more about the ruse Nate used to get inside, but she held his steely, narrowed gaze steadily.

"Really brave of your muscle heads, by the way," she went on,

“charging in on an innocent woman and an unarmed man.”

“Not so unarmed, from the way I hear it.” He smiled slowly. “Or innocent.”

“Fine, whatever. Are you going to agree to this deal or not?”

“I told you, the deal’s still on the table.” He glanced at the burning bank statements. “As for the extras you’re trying to include, I’m afraid that’s impossible. I control FTI, not the entire police force.”

“And yet you somehow knew enough to have Nate followed. You must have some influence.”

He shrugged. “I may have found

out that your bond agent is willing to do favors for the right price. I'm sure you can understand, what with his bonds running out on him. How's a man to earn a living?"

"So you made him your bitch."

"I merely made sure he chose the right man for the job of finding you, and he fed me certain information as to your whereabouts when it came along."

Her heart pounded. So, Nate had been right. Asa had deliberately picked him to track her down because he knew Nate wouldn't use a gun. He hadn't, however, apparently counted on

Nate being just as effective a fighter without one.

“Because you wanted to get to me first, obviously.”

“I wanted a chance to discuss my offer privately before you found your way back to jail.” He paused. “Something you seem intent on doing.”

She sniffed. “You stole from your own coffers, blamed it on the help, and then talked the law into helping you. Now you’ve screwed another guy’s future just for helping me. I’m hardly the bigger bad here.”

He laughed. “I may have been

the one diverting funds for personal use, but you were the one who went on to commit additional crimes. You and your bounty hunter.”

“Because you gave us no choice. So do we have a deal? Surely you can swing one more favor to make this all go away.”

He cocked his head at her. “Why does it matter to you whether he gets arrested? If he’s just some asshole bounty hunter, you should be happy to see him pay for trying to take you to jail.”

“I want to walk away with a clean conscience. The guy was just

doing his job.”

“And then some.” He eyed her for a long moment before glancing up at his men. “Let’s double the guard outside, shall we? Just in case anyone happens to be skulking around doing their *jobs*.” He nodded to the guy on her right. “Check in with Art.”

The man got on his radio while the other one went out the door.

“I told you, he’s not here,” she said. “I stole his car and left him stranded in Arizona. He knows nothing about this meeting.”

“Are you sure about that?” Andrew asked.

“All clear,” came the return report on the radio.

She shot Andrew a smug look. “See? You’re wasting time. Let’s finish this deal and get the hell out of here. The sooner we ‘part ways professionally’, as you put it, the better I’ll like it.”

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll call the attorney first thing in the morning. The embezzlement charges will be dropped after my discovering that the entire incident was due to an unfortunate accounting error. Once your account is unfrozen, the money shifted there will be removed. Twenty percent will be

diverted to you in a separate account as your fee for keeping quiet about the bank statement you stole.”

“And my other request?”

He shook his head. “There truly is nothing I can do about any other charges. You had no prior record, however. Get yourself a good lawyer. I’m sure he can talk the jail time down to a minimum.”

She curled her lip at him. “You just used ‘good’ and ‘lawyer’ in the same sentence. That’s funny.”

“It’s your own fault that you broke the law by running. If you’d have stayed put, this would all be

behind us.”

So, she would still be a fugitive, and so would Nate. And if he was so inclined to press charges, she was a car thief as well.

“Fine,” she said.

The radio crackled to life. “I have movement out here,” said someone on the other end. The message was broken up by a weak signal, but then she heard, “Hey, you! Stop right there.”

The goon beside her flinched, but Andrew shook his head. “You stay here.” He shot Lydia a glance. “She supposedly escaped a bounty hunter. Keep an eye on her. Feel

free to watch from the point of your gun if she does anything stupid.”

He stalked over and snatched the radio from the other man’s hand. “Five, what’s going on?”

Silence followed for a while before the answer came. “Negative. Some homeless drunk was trying to get in the back door.”

Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he regarded Lydia. “And does this drunk in *any* way fit the description of Nate Antillean?”

She stiffened. It couldn’t be. No way could he have gotten to her so fast. Even if he’d escaped the cuffs,

how would he have been able to find her?

That's when she thought of the smart phone tucked in her jacket pocket.

"Negative," came the reply. "It's some old, short guy who needs a bath in something other than booze."

"Get rid of him. We're almost ready to leave."

He turned and headed for the smoldering trash bin. His back was still turned when the ceiling somehow caved in. Something large and dark dropped down behind the man guarding Lydia,

and he was suddenly pushed to the floor. She jumped aside, startled and wide-eyed, at the sight of the gun that appeared beside her. Her hands flew up in automatic surrender, a pose she was becoming far too used to these days. While the commotion didn't allow her to register the voice shouting commands at Andrew, a glance upward along the gun arm showed her who was pointing it.

“Nate,” she whispered.

This was a very different man, however, from the one who had handed her balloons or even cuffed her back at the apartment. He had

on his badge, along with a flak vest and a highly focused, determined expression that left no doubt that he meant deadly business.

Cops burst into the room in a scene similar to the one that had resulted in broken furniture and a mad dash down a fire escape back in Venice. Andrew's hands were on his head as he sank to the paper-littered floor. Lydia did the same, but she wasn't the focus of attention. One officer stood over her, his gun pointed at her head, while the rest dealt with her former employer.

Nate had used a nylon tie to cuff

the man who'd all but finger-fucked Lydia, and he yanked the guy's gun from a belt holster before sticking it away in his own waistband. He never looked her way as he jerked the man upright and led him out of her line of sight. No doubt he was thoroughly pissed at her for what she'd done to him. At least it appeared that he was working with the police, rather than running from them. Maybe that meant he wasn't a fugitive anymore. At least one of them would have a life again. Considering her recent actions, he was the one most deserving of it.

“You lying little bitch,” Andrew said as his hands were zip-tied behind his back. “I thought you might have been trying to play me for a fool.” He jerked his head toward the waste bin. “But what you thought you had on me is gone now. As is your chance to make a deal.”

“I said I made two copies when I left town,” she said. “Which I did. I just forgot to mention the copies I made on the way back here.”

His nostrils flared as he was hauled to his feet. A cop was trying to read him Miranda rights, but he wasn't listening. His eyes stared

daggers at Lydia, who also stood.

“My lawyers will see to it those statements are seen as frauds you created to cover your ass. You’ve achieved nothing.”

“Except acquiring your confession,” Nate said as he stalked back into the room. Her eyes shifted to him, but he was staring Andrew down.

“She wasn’t wired.” Andrew gave him a dirty smile. “We made certain of that quite thoroughly.”

“I was.” Nate pulled a small tape recorder from his vest pocket, along with a tiny cell phone. “And the PD was listening in on an open

phone line while I was hiding right over your head.”

Only after Andrew and his henchman were led from the room did Nate finally meet her searching eyes, and when he did, the jolt all but obliterated the adrenaline still coursing through her system. Even with a hard edge to his expression, he was still too fucking gorgeous for her not to feel the stark, chemical effects of it.

“I suppose you tracked me by the cell phone I took,” she said.

He nodded as he kept staring at her. “Among other tricks. I told you, I have ways.” He sighed.

“You’re not hurt. I’m glad.”

“I was felt up, anally probed, and aggravated beyond belief. But no, I’m not hurt.” Just the part of her heart that was busy shouting at her for fucking up a good thing with Nate. Not that he probably thought they ever had a thing in the first place.

She let her eyes slide over him, down to his badge and back up to his penetrating green eyes. “And you’re not a fugitive anymore. I’m glad.”

With a sigh, he reached out with a finger and stroked a strand of hair away from her face. Her pulse sped

up at his gentle touch. "You still are," he said. "A recaptured fugitive."

Her hands were zip-tied behind her back, and she nodded sadly. "I may have been innocent of embezzling, but I still broke the law. Even that bastard Andrew knew there was no way around that other than jail."

"There is one other way." He stepped closer, searching her face. "In light of the evidence we just gathered, he'll be the one charged with embezzling, along with blackmail and a few other things. But that still leaves you with some

serious legal problems, unless you cooperate like I just did.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“There’s one last bad-guy loose end. The DA will drop the remaining charges against you if you’ll help tie it up. I know that might sound crazy, but that’s where we’re at.”

A flicker of hope joined in a funny dance with the butterflies his proximity stirred in her stomach. “I think we’ve established I’m willing to do some pretty crazy things,” she said. She flicked a deliberate glance at his crotch, which looked snug

and very grabbable in a pair of tight black jeans. “So count me in. What’s the plan?”

“I’ll explain in the car.” He took her by the arm, and the look he seared her with sent a flutter of purely sexual interest through her. “That would be *my* car, by the way. If it’s all the same to you, I’m taking it – and you – back.”

* * * * *

It was all Nate could do to keep nervous tension from exploding right through his skin as Lydia disappeared inside A-1 Bail Bonds. She had been all too eager to do her

part of the plan, and he'd been happy enough about it when he'd talked her through it on the way over. Now he wasn't so sure. Not because she hadn't proven herself capable of keeping her wits in tense situations, but because he couldn't go in there with her.

He picked up the two-way radio and said, "She's inside. I've lost visual."

"Copy that," came the reply. "No audio yet."

"Will you stop drumming that steering wheel?" Benny asked from beside him. "I swear, you're worse than an expectant father. She's got

the spirit, that one. She'll be fine."

They were sitting in Benny's black junker since Nate's car was too recognizable. The car smelled just as ripe as its owner, who was still dressed in his drunken hobo disguise from casing out the office building they'd tracked Lydia to. Now they were just down the street from Asa's place. Around the corner sat an unmarked van full of officers and surveillance equipment. All were waiting for Lydia to either get what they came for or give the panic signal to send in the brigade.

"Ace is always packing when

he's in the office," Nate said. "He keeps a shotgun beneath the counter."

"Which you already said ain't loaded most of the time. It's just for show."

"What if he heard the news already?"

"We haven't given him a chance. Waller and his crew are too busy getting booked to tip anyone off, and the cops kept it off the wire."

"Are you sure?"

"I've been monitoring the broadband ever since I contacted them with your offer to help bring

in Andrew Waller in exchange for calling off the fugitive mark.”

“What if this doesn’t work?” Nate asked, just as her voice came over the receiver.

“It will. Now shut up and listen.”

The audio wasn’t great, so Benny dialed up the volume. Since Lydia had a knack for getting her tits ogled or outright searched, the wire she wore had been hidden lower down, inside the waistband of her jeans. It wasn’t the optimal location for sound, but the equipment was sensitive enough that he could still hear the shock in

Asa's voice over seeing her.

"I don't believe it," he said. "A lotta people are looking for you, little lady, and here you come waltzing right in my front door. What's in the pretty flowered box?"

The sound that followed made Nate's blood run cold. "He racked the gun. He's got it pointed at her, I'll bet."

"Sit tight, cowboy," Benny whispered.

"There's no need for the shotgun," Lydia said. "This is just my rainy-day hatbox. It's where I got the money I gave you to make bail. And there's more where that

came from. I just need your help.”

“I already helped you, and you screwed me. Now you’re going back to jail.”

“Just listen to me. I know you and Andrew were in on that little visit his asshole friends paid me.”

“Bullshit. Stop right there and put the box on the floor. Lift the lid slow and easy and back up, hands in the air.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s everyone just keep our heads cool.”

Nate managed a tiny smirk at the reference from their encounter back in Venice. There was silence for a moment, except for the

adrenaline-fed pounding of Nate's heart.

"Don't bother denying you and Andrew were partners in this," she said after a minute. "He told me everything."

"Right. You, Andrew and Nate Antillean all sat around having tea and crumpets while you discussed his entire scheme."

She snorted. "Nate? Don't make me laugh. I wasn't sure whether to be grateful or insulted that you sent that jackass after me."

Nate glowered at the smirk Benny shot him.

"Yeah? Speaking of which, back

away from the door. Keep your hands up.”

Benny and Nate slumped down in their seats so they couldn't be seen in case Asa had gone to check the window.

“And one more thing,” Asa said after a pause. “Lift your shirt up.”

“I knew it,” Nate said. “I just fucking knew it. She can't go five minutes without some guy getting an eyeful of her tits.”

“What are you,” Lydia asked, “some kind of pervert?”

“I'm looking for a wire, sweetheart. Not a hard-on.”

“Fine.”

There was a rustling sound, and then a male wolf whistle. “Then again, the hard-on wins.”

“Get a life.”

“Okay, so what did happen to Natey boy? Last I heard, he had you with him.”

“Then you obviously haven’t heard the latest. I slipped my cuffs and used them on him before helping myself to his car. Here’s a little tip for you, Asa. Next time you want a felon captured, send someone with a little more firepower than half a brain.”

Benny straightened up in his

seat. "Ouch. She burned you."

Nate scowled. "I told her to make it sound realistic."

"A little too realistic."

Asa was laughing. "Fair enough. I suppose I underestimated you. But then, I had my reasons." There was shuffling. "And now I see that your box might be worth helping you out, depending on the favor. Unmarked bills?"

"Of course. That's a good part of my life savings, I'll have you know. Never trust everything to the bank."

"Smart cookie. So what's this favor of yours?"

“After I escaped, I contacted Andrew to work out a deal. Turns out that was why he had guys after me anyway. Only, he can’t make all of it go away now since I sort of left town. And on top of that, by now I’ve got a pissed-off bounty hunter out there wanting my head on a platter for stealing his car.”

“You could say that. He called me a little while ago, actually.”

“He did?”

Benny and Nate exchanged glances.

“He was pissed and a half, that’s for sure. Said you gave him the slip.”

“You just told me you heard I was still with him.”

“I wasn’t sure I believed him. I wanted to hear it from you.”

“Smart shithole,” Benny whispered.

“Then again, it wasn’t completely unthinkable,” Asa was saying. “Truth is, you’re right about Nate. He’s been off his game for a while. Screwed the pooch on his last few bounties. It’s past time he hung it up for good.”

Nate gritted his teeth. “I’m not through yet, you bastard,” he muttered.

“I’ll say,” she said. “I’m hardly

an expert, and I managed to get away. Although I suppose I should be grateful he's so useless."

Okay, Nate thought. He'd heard just about enough of her realism.

"So why come to me?" Asa was asking. "What do you want?"

"After hearing Andrew's story about how you were responsible for all of this, I knew I had to come to you. I need to make this go away."

"He told you I was responsible for all of what?"

"This whole thing. He told me it was your idea to frame me for the theft in the first place."

“That’s a fucking lie.”

“Don’t be mad. It makes sense. I mean, this way, you got the fee for posting my bond, plus what he paid you. In exchange, you made sure he got what he wanted. I’m just saying I want in. I’ll pay you so I get what I want.”

Asa’s tone went up three levels’ worth of honked off. “This is a load of bullshit. I had nothing to do with his plan to keep you quiet.”

“Don’t piss him off too bad,” Nate warned silently.

“Not the way he tells it. And wow, it does seem that you know all about what he did to me.”

“He came to me, bitch. Offered to sweeten the bond amount if I helped him grab you before the cops could. He had the manpower, but not a bloodhound to track your scent. So I sent Nate. His prime might be past, but he still has his uncanny instincts for finding people. And he won't use guns or shit anymore, so I figured it'd be easy for Andrew's guys to take you off his hands.”

“So I'm supposed to believe you only helped Andrew after the fact, without knowing upfront that he was guilty.”

“Of course I knew he was guilty.”

Innocent people don't go around paying off guys like me to work around the system. But that doesn't mean I suggested he frame you in the first place. He did that to save his own neck. I helped him find you so he could offer you the deal. Now he's trying to turn it all around on me? Thankless prick."

"Join the club. He's good at that."

"So what is it that you think I'm going to do for you now?"

"You're going to make all this go away. I need your help to wipe the slate clean."

That was the cue. With any luck,

Lydia was well away from the door.

The two-way crackled to life.

“We’re moving in,” came the voice.

“Copy,” Nate said. “We got enough on him?”

“More than enough.”

“Ready, partner?” Benny asked, checking the ammo on his handgun and shoving the clip back in.

Nate smiled at him. “Let’s stick something where Asa’s sun don’t shine.”

The van roared up just as Benny and Nate were crossing the street. Cops in riot gear tumbled out like

clowns from a Volkswagen, and all were amazingly light-footed while they gestured at Nate to hang back.

“Like hell I will,” he said, coming up behind them. He had no jurisdiction in this, of course, other than his participation in getting the charges against him dropped. But he wasn’t going to sit around while Lydia was in the middle of a takedown.

The men burst into the office with the usual shouting and whirlwind of activity, but Nate couldn’t get close enough to see. Anxiety throbbed through his body, and when a slightly shell-shocked

but smiling Lydia was hustled outside, the victory high he'd long forgotten flooded through him.

"Hi," she said, red-cheeked and breathless after she was deposited in front of him. "How'd I do?"

"Fantastic," he said with a grin.

"You were a natural," Benny added. "Pissed him off just enough to get him to spill without losing control of the situation."

"I hope I got him to say enough," she said, hugging herself. "God, I'm shivering."

"Adrenaline," Nate said and pulled her to him and rubbed her arms vigorously.

“He said plenty,” Benny told her, shooting Nate a suspicious look at the way he was holding her. “Enough to get him on obstruction of justice, conspiracy and attempted kidnapping, maybe even racketeering. Turns out this wasn’t the first time he’s used his business to work around the system.”

“Speak of the devil,” Nate said grimly as Asa was escorted out in cuffs.

Nate let go of Lydia and stepped right in front of Asa when they reached the sidewalk. “Hiya, Ace. Good to see the cuff on the other foot, so to speak.”

“You.” Asa gave him a furious glower. “After all the jobs I shunted your way, this is how you thank me?”

“And I’m really hoping none of those other jobs involved your special brand of bullshit.”

The grin Asa shot him twisted his stomach. “Guess you’ll never know, will you?”

Nate’s nostrils flared. “I wonder what it means that I’m so far out of my prime and yet still good enough to collar you?”

He turned and walked back to where Lydia and Benny stood against the brick building,

watching.

“That felt good,” Nate said. “Although I’d have preferred to punctuate my last sentence with a fist in his face.”

“You were right, you know,” Benny said. “You’re more than good enough to collar that asshole.”

“Maybe so.” Nate glanced at Lydia, and a pleasant jolt went through him when their eyes met. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

She shrugged. “Couldn’t be better. In fact, I feel sort of happy-buzzed, if that makes sense.” She glanced over to where Asa was being loaded into a police car.

“Does that mean I’m some kind of sadistic bitch?”

Benny laughed. “Bitten by the bounty hunter bug’s more like it.”

She turned to Nate, and his heart skipped at the look on her face. “Thank you, Nate. Without you, I wouldn’t be walking away from this free to live my life.”

He shrugged casually, but he swallowed when she took his hand and moved closer. “No, really,” she whispered. “You put yourself out there to get my life back, even after I ran out on you.”

“That’s exactly what you did when you confronted Waller and

tried to work me into your deal. It's only fair I returned the favor."

"It must have been quite a risk, contacting the police when you were a wanted man."

Nate glanced at Benny, who gave him a casual grin. "I couldn't have pulled it off without help. Benny told them my story and said I'd be willing to help them catch Andrew Waller in exchange for dropping charges. Benny's quite convincing when he wants to be."

"And a man of stellar disguises," Benny added, taking a deep bow. "Those guys working for Andrew didn't know what hit 'em."

“What hit them was your stench,” Nate said, eyeing the threadbare, dirt-encrusted army coat and stand-in-the-corner cargo pants. “Where the hell did you get that getup, anyway? Did you roll a real drunk for it?”

Benny shrugged. “A guy owed me a favor.”

“And a bath. But now I owe you the favor.”

“So do I,” Lydia added. “To both of you. I’d hug you,” she said to Benny as she eyed him up and down, “but well, you understand.”

“Save it for this lug over here.” He smiled at Nate. “He could use a

hug. He was a wreck while you were inside. He was practically wringing his hands and pacing back and forth across the back seat."

She flicked him a look. "Were you really that worried about me?"

"Benny's also really good at exaggerating." He let out a sigh of relief. "But I'm glad this is over."

With that, she grabbed him by the front of his jacket and pulled him to her lips. Benny cleared his throat and wandered off while Lydia almost kissed away his memory of why they were even standing there.

"What was that for?" he asked

when she pulled away.

“That was to thank you for not hating me, and for coming after me even after I was a complete ass and cuffed you to a bed.”

“I’ll buy that. And here.”

His kiss was almost rabid, and his cock began straining in his pants when he ravaged her mouth with his tongue. He pulled away and smiled at the glazed look in her eyes. “*That* was to remind you that as per our discussion on the way over, you will be subject to any sordid punishment I deem fit for leaving me naked, handcuffed and without a car.”

Her stare oozed of liquid sex, and Nate's heart skipped. Before he could start her punishment, however, he spotted a pair of cops headed their way.

"They'll want us to give our statements," he said. "It's going to be a long night."

"You have no idea," she said teasingly. "Where will this punishment of yours take place? Your dungeon or mine?"

"Mine. I forgot to mention that Andrew apparently had your place tossed hard after you left."

"Looking for the evidence, no doubt."

It was while they were headed to the police station later that Lydia turned to him abruptly. "Say, what kind of training do you need to get into this gig full-time?" She flashed him a wicked grin that prickled gooseflesh on his arms. "Seems I'm in the market for a new job."

Chapter Six

Eleven months later

“Open your legs a little more,” Nate said to Lydia. “Now bend your right knee. Just a little higher. Oh yeah, baby. That’s perfect.”

“Do you have any idea how perverted you sound right now?” Lydia asked, glancing around the essentially deserted alley. “I feel like I’ve just dialed a porno hotline.”

“And you look like something I’d hop on in a hot minute.” The sound of his voice in her ear sent a

shiver through her. "I have some damn fine memories of that bikini, you know."

"You're not the only one."

"It occurs to me that while I've made you scream in the passenger seat, across the gear knob, and laid out in back, I've never bent you over the hood of a car before."

She gave a private smile as she adjusted the Bluetooth headset and shifted the balloons in her hand. "And something tells me you're already cooking up an evil plan to remedy that oversight."

"About ten minutes after we're through here."

“Rule One, cowboy. Stand down.”

“Too late. I’m definitely standing up.”

She stopped talking and glanced around again. There was no sign of the skip yet, and she was beginning to feel beyond silly splayed out across the hood of the guy’s car. At least the hood was still warm. Even though it was early summer, the weather was a bit on the cool side for lounging around in a bikini. Then again, she wasn’t out here to work on her tan. They were on the job. The guy they were after was worth five grand. He’d skipped out

on bail and had been kind enough to celebrate by stopping in at the local watering hole before getting out of town.

“I still can’t believe you’re making me wear that old stripper thong,” Nate said in her headset. “It went straight up my ass as soon as I crouched down in the carport.”

“Welcome to the club,” she replied. “But that was our deal. Whenever I have to wear one on the job, so do you. Just be grateful I’m not wearing nipple clamps.”

There was a pause. “Okay, Benny just radioed. He made the guy ducking out the back door.

He's on your six, headed your way."

Her attention immediately shifted. "Copy that. Tits up and ready."

Lydia refined her pose, thrusting out her breasts while she clutched the bouquet of blue and white balloons. A minute later, she saw him. Sagging jeans, a gray t-shirt and a mass of frizzy brown hair that hadn't met a comb in a couple of days at least. He hadn't shaved since the mug shot on his file, either. He did look less droopy-eyed, especially once he caught sight of the bikini babe laid out

over his hood and smiling at him as though she'd just hit the jackpot.

He froze three feet from his car. "What the hell's all this?"

Still smiling, she slid off the hood like a slithering cobra. "Chris Chacon?"

His eyes were everywhere on her at once. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm Candy from Fantasy Girls Exotic Dance." She ran a hand over her breasts for effect, and he homed in on her cold-hardened nipples.

"You are one hot bitch. What can I do for you that involves taking my pants down?"

She kept her smile firmly in place. "A friend of yours sent me to help you celebrate your very special day." She held out the bouquet. "Here. Why don't you hang onto my balloons while I show you?"

That won a smile, and as he reached over to take them, she saw Nate and Benny slipping into position. "I don't get it," Chris said. "It ain't my birthday. What's the occasion? Who's the friend that hired you?"

"That would be me," Nate said from right behind him. He had his gun trained steadily at the guy's head. "I'm bond enforcement. And

the occasion is me arresting you for violating the terms of your bail. Hands up, Chris.”

Startled, Chris let go of the balloons and they floated skyward.

“Easy, boy,” Benny said, coming up in a smooth, sidestepping motion on the other side of the car. “Don’t move.”

“You missed your court date,” Nate added. “Turn around and put your hands flat on the hood.”

Lydia stepped out of the way while the men restrained the guy and searched him for weapons. She was treated to a nasty look from the guy when they spun him back

around, and she just gave him a little shrug and a smile. While the men got him ready and called it in, she went over to Nate's car, which was tucked away in the deserted carport and grabbed her ski jacket.

"Nice work, Bond Agent Franklin," Nate said after he helped Benny get the jumper into Benny's car. It was their partner's turn to play haul-'em-to-jail.

"Thanks, and same to you. But next time, maybe I'll try sucking a lollipop instead of holding the balloons. I always feel bad when they end up floating away. I heard it's bad for the environment.

Besides, I get hungry while we're waiting."

"I don't know, the balloons just seem to add that believable touch." He eyed her with a frown. "By the way, who gave you permission to cover up?"

"I'll have you know it's freezing out here," she said, zipping up the front of her ski jacket.

"I could see you were chilled all the way from my post. It's not that cold, by the way. It's a balmy sixty-seven degrees."

"Says the one of us who is not currently dressed in a string bikini and high heels."

He smiled. "Some Colorado native. One week as a California beach bunny and you're still a tenderfoot."

"Is that so?" She yanked off the jacket with a mock scowl. "Fine. Check me out until I catch cold, then."

He grabbed her around the waist. "Oh, I intend to warm you up plenty."

Her hands went straight down his back to cup his ass and squeeze through the deliciously tight jeans. "I see we've moved onto Rule Two. But right here in the alley?"

"No one's around. I warned you

before you had exactly ten minutes after the catch before I Rule Two'd you."

"Yeah? Not if I Rule Two you first."

With that, she grabbed his arm, bent it at the elbow, and put him in an arm bar maneuver she learned in bond enforcement training. She twisted his body in a smooth motion, controlling him until he was facing the hood of his car with the arm pushed up behind him.

"Very good," he said over his shoulder. "You're learning." In a flash, he reversed out of the hold, whirled on her and restrained her

in a similar way, only with her bent in half over the hood and him bent over her. "But I'm still faster," he whispered teasingly in her ear.

"Then show me how fast you can shut up and fuck me," she said, spreading her long, high-heeled legs wider apart while her torso was bent over the hood. "You know that alcohol isn't the only thing that gets me crazy damn horny these days."

"Tell me about it. You dig the thrill of the hunt as much as I do."

"Enough that I don't want to wait one more damn minute to feel your cock inside me."

The exertion of their maneuvers already had her breathing hard, and she was grinning like a fool. Damn right she dug hunting. The buzz she got off making a successful catch made her invariably and immediately want to climb on Nate and ride hard. Then again, so did a lot of other things. Like watching him read the morning paper.

He was holding her down with one arm while she heard him fumbling with his fly, and after a few moments, she felt his hot, hard shaft pressing into the cleft between her parted ass cheeks.

“You have the right to remain silent,” he said, and he tugged the wet thong of her bathing suit away from her slit. “But I highly recommend that you scream my name instead.”

“Don’t Mirandize me, bounty hunter. Just take me into your custody.”

Without even bothering to take her bottoms off, he slid his cock against her pussy and pushed his way in.

“Oh Nate,” she said, her body stiffening in pleasure as he sank in. “Oh yes.”

She flattened herself against the

hood as his wide, welcome hardness penetrated, and she reveled in the feel of hot metal against her body and his hotter cock inside her. She was warming up, all right, and fast approaching high gear.

“Jesus, you feel so damn good after a day’s work,” he said, shoving himself deeper.

They rode each other wildly, with her pushing her ass back to meet his thrusts and him driving his hips forward to ram against her. Her nipples strained against her bikini top, and she yanked the fabric away so she could feel the

bare, hard nubs drag over the car hood.

The fact that neither of them could wait to have each other made the urgency no less sweet for the lack of anticipation. True, the alley was part of an abandoned housing project, and no one was around. But being outside in the cool air while her hot, rugged bounty hunter lover fucked her made her feel so damn wicked, so dirty-good that she moaned and bucked against him. She was so wet for him. In truth, she'd felt the pool of moisture gathering between her legs the moment she'd seen him

take command of the fugitive. He looked so damn fine when he was in control of a capture, his biceps flexing while he maneuvered people to his will. Even the way he pointed his gun, which had taken time and convincing to bring him back around to, got her hot.

“I have to confess something,” he said with a desperate strain in his voice. “I think I love you so much now that I can’t fucking stand it.”

“That sounds painful. But I’d say you’re fucking while standing just brilliantly.”

“Actually, this isn’t working for

me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t see your face while I’m fucking you.”

He pulled out of her and yanked her upright, turning her to face him. His eyes were wild and dark with need, and his jaw was tight with the utmost seriousness while he grabbed her hips and set her up on the hood. It only took a few seconds, and he was blissfully back inside her.

“Much better,” he said, staring down at her. “Your expressions when I’m making you come drive me insane.” Despite the comment,

he pulled her close and held her while he pumped his hips.

She smiled. "I love you too."

Lydia tugged his shirt up high enough to bury her face against the soft hair on his chest and lick his hard, tiny nipple, something she'd learned made him crazy. He arched back and swore, and then fucked her double speed. She held onto his waist and took the ride, feeling the pressure building in her clit. The euphoria of victory and sexual chemistry fused together at the top of that climb and shattered. Nate joined her in climax soon after, and they clutched one another while

they finished.

Nate whispered tender, intimate words to her as they came down from orgasm, surprisingly so in light of the rough, graphic way they'd just been possessed to fuck one another. Both of them came to earth pretty suddenly soon after, and when they did, clothes and jackets found their way on just as fast. Lydia's face felt flushed, in part from the knowledge of how out of control they'd gotten right in an open alley.

"Wow," Nate said after they were both inside the car, staring out the window in a slight daze. "That

was, well, highly intense.”

“It seems we get more driven each time we bag a bad guy together.”

“Yeah.” He glanced at her. “Interesting career perks we’ve got.”

She grinned at him. “What can I say? We love our jobs.”

“And each other, apparently.” He gave her a smoldering look that actually put a new twitch into her still-pulsing pussy. “I’ll admit it’s damn arousing, the way you took to this business. Watching you work is so hot. And seeing your enthusiasm has made me look at

the job with fresh, new eyes.”

“Helping the justice system out with Andrew and Asa flipped a pretty wild switch in me, it’s true. The only thing that gets me going better than catching a bond jumper is having you inside me. And we don’t have a way to get paid for *that*.”

Nate gave her a mischievous look. “Bedroom webcam? You’re forever having to flash your tits around anyway. Might as well earn \$5.95 per minute doing it.”

“Ha-ha. I think I’ll stick with this, thanks. Unless you want to wax your chest and get a job as a

male stripper.”

“I’d rather save my male stripping for the bedroom.”

She leaned closer. “Or the car, alleyway, motel, bar bathroom, behind the bushes at the park...”

“Point taken.” He put an arm around her and pulled her into him. “I say we take a vacation. Think you can still borrow the Venice apartment?”

“Tiff’s dad was very understanding when I paid the damages. The offer’s still open anytime.”

“Then I say anytime starts now.” He revved the engine.

Lydia laughed. "Right now? What about packing?"

"I took the liberty. Have you not been with me long enough to know I come complete with a fully stocked trunk?"

She couldn't help but laugh at the sense of boyish fun in his expression. Something was up with him, she could tell. Part of her suspected she knew what, and the thought sped up her heartbeat. But she wasn't about to spoil the surprise by saying a damn thing.

She gave his arm a squeeze and buckled her seat belt. "Come on, cowboy. Let's take our bikini and

thong and head off the grid. Only this time, it'll be legal."

The End

About J. Rose Allister

I tend to dream up stories while either lying in bed at night, taking breaks from my desk at work, or sitting on my patio swing overlooking the pool where my kid goes swimming. It's exciting to watch a story unfold, especially when characters say or do the utterly unexpected!

Before I began writing novels, I wrote and co-wrote short pieces for stage skit competitions and short story contests, garnering a few wins for each. More recently, I consulted on a script for an amateur short

horror film, and have dabbled in video editing and special effects. When I'm not busy doing the bidding of my sexy, yet smart-aleck muse, I enjoy spending time with my family, reading, gardening, cooking and watching movies.

J. Rose welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email addresses on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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