

A close-up photograph of a man's face and upper torso, wearing a light-colored, possibly white or light blue, button-down shirt. The background is a dark, teal-colored gradient with horizontal motion blur lines, suggesting a sense of movement or tension. The overall mood is dramatic and romantic.

A TORN
BETWEEN
TWO LOVERS
NOVELLA

Help her choose...

RAW

JO DAVIS

National Bestselling Author of the
Sugarland Blue Series

MM
Inter
Mix

Help her choose . . .

Are you **#TeamGrayson** or **#TeamJoaquin**? Your vote will decide who wins Anna's heart!

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Raw



Torn Between Two Lovers

#1

J o D a v i s



InterMix Books, New York

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RAW

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1

Anna Claire sipped her dirty martini and observed the restaurant from her soothing, darkened corner. From back here, nobody could see her slip off her Pradas under the table, stretching her aching feet.

But even if they did get a glimpse, no one would breathe a word. Floor Fifty-Five was her fourth restaurant and the culmination of her dreams. At the first two restaurants she'd utilized her business degree, managing them for other owners, and had done well. The

third, a small upscale café in Brooklyn, was her first success as an owner herself, and she'd enjoyed it for several years before selling and going for broke.

This place was her domain, her baby. Every stick of furniture, every glass, every fork, knife, and spoon, belonged to her. The staff moved as efficiently as a well-oiled machine under her ownership and also the direction of her brilliant head chef, Ethan Collingsworth. They respected her and were quite terrified of Ethan's wrath, an arrangement that suited her just fine.

She didn't need to be bosom buddies with her employees to be a success. Quite the opposite had proven true in her previous business experience. She

merely needed intelligence, persistence, and lots of money.

Anna had plenty of all three.

Which didn't explain why she was sitting alone in a corner booth of her own high-end New York establishment, feeling sort of down when by all rights she should be basking in the glow of two years of hard work come to fruition, from conception to success.

Soft laughter and a tinkling of glasses drew her attention toward a table on the far side of the main dining room. A group of four was having some sort of celebratory gathering, and they looked happy as they toasted with champagne. At ease and on top of the world. A promotion perhaps, or the landing of a

big account. An engagement or a pregnancy. Whatever the occasion, Anna couldn't help but feel proud they'd chosen her restaurant for their celebration. On the way to her own table, Anna had welcomed them and told them so.

But as she watched, a sense of melancholy stole over her. Nobody had ever really celebrated *Anna's* accomplishments. Even her mother, whom she loved and knew loved her in return. It hurt that her own mother didn't get her, didn't understand what drove Anna to succeed, especially in the restaurant business. Margaret Claire was set in her ways and her thinking and never minced words. Like many parents,

she had the power to make her daughter bleed from hundreds of tiny invisible cuts, even if she didn't realize it.

“You're not wearing that out to dinner with Mark, are you?”

Anna frowned at her mother.

“What's wrong with nice jeans and a blouse?”

“Well, jeans don't do anything for your figure, you know that.”

She'd won that round. But had she, in the long run?

Her mother stared at her incredulously. “Let me get this straight—you worked hard to make that little café of yours a success, and now you're going to just throw it away? Spend a ton of money to open a fancy restaurant

in New York City?” The older woman sighed. “Honey, you were doing well as a manager, and then you went out on a limb with the café and did all right. But this? I don’t understand why you need to take a risk this big.”

Anna’s heart froze. Was she kidding? “This restaurant has been my goal for as long as I can remember! You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said!”

So unbending, her mother. Such a product of her own upbringing as the daughter of a steelworker and a teacher. Anna’s grandparents were good, salt-of-the-earth people who worked hard and loved harder. But the fact remained that they were also narrow-minded in their views of what

equaled success—and that typically involved punching a clock nine-to-five and earning a retirement after forty years or so of working for someone else.

She tried again. “Mom, did it ever occur to you that employees have to work for somebody? Someone intelligent who knows their business? And that the boss might as well be me?”

Margaret Claire had just stared at her daughter as though she’d spoken in tongues and sacrificed a chicken in the front yard.

To this day, not much had changed. But maybe, with her mother’s upcoming visit and the five-star New York

treatment Anna had planned, the woman's eyes would finally, at long last, be opened. She'd see her daughter as a successful woman in her own right and be proud.

“Miss Claire?”

Anna snapped to the present and blinked at the man standing in front of her table. She'd expected to see one of her waiters, but instead was greeted by a tall man dressed in kitchen whites. In the dim lighting it took her a moment to focus on his features.

He was a big man, fit and broad-shouldered, and she could only guess at the muscles hiding under the drab required uniform. His short golden-brown hair was mussed in that sexy just-

rolled-out-of-bed look that turned her on when a man knew how to pull it off—and this one did. Full lips quirked upward, and she found herself wondering, not for the first time, how he would taste. Brows that were a bit darker than his hair arched over expressive blue eyes that conveyed a very male interest he couldn't quite hide, or hadn't bothered to, from day one.

The last idea intrigued her in spite of herself—what kind of man would hit on his boss? One who was either very stupid or very confident.

Anna had always found confident men to be extremely sexy.

“Mr. James? What can I do for you?” She made it a point to know the name of

every single employee, so his came effortlessly—and the question emerged more flirtatiously than she'd intended.

Grayson James, the new prep chef, was one rung on the ladder above the janitor of this building. At age thirty-three, he was a bit long in the tooth if he hoped to make head chef one day, but he'd come highly recommended from Le Cordon Bleu, one of the most prestigious cooking schools around. That and his letters of recommendation from the senior partners at his former law firm had been enough for Anna. She'd hired him on the spot, despite a few reservations Ethan had voiced.

Who was she to hold back someone determined to follow his dream?

“Chef sent me to see if you wanted anything special for your dinner,” he said in a smooth, deep voice.

A radio voice, her mother would say if she were here. Anna toyed with her martini glass, trying to ignore the warmth that pooled in her middle at the sound and traveled south. The man was an employee, and she had no business drooling over him, much less playing this flirtatious cat and mouse game with him for the past few weeks. But she supposed what he didn't know wouldn't hurt anyone.

She cocked her head, lips curving upward. “I highly doubt Ethan did any such thing.”

He made a face. “Busted. But how

else was I supposed to get away to talk to the most beautiful woman in the whole place?”

Pleasure curled through her insides. “You’ve got a big, steely pair, Mr. James. I like that.”

Something hungry, predatory, flared in his eyes, and he leaned over slightly. His voice was husky as he parried her thrust. “Do you? That’s good, because I happen to like a woman who knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to grab it.”

“I’m afraid of very little,” she said, eyeing him with appreciation and not bothering to hide it.

“And yet I sense you’re holding back with me.”

“I’m careful in every aspect of my

life. A little common sense is a good thing.”

“Not when it interferes with the fun of living, I think. I guess I’ll have to make it my mission to loosen you up, boss lady.” Her brows shot up, but he didn’t wait for a response. “Would you like to order something?”

You. Naked. On a platter with an apple in your mouth. “What’s Ethan’s special tonight?”

“The duck over a bed of sautéed greens with a mushroom wine sauce drizzled on top.”

“Sounds fantastic. I’ll have that.”

“Wise choice.” The man actually winked at her and grinned. “Ethan does get testy when the patrons don’t follow

his recommendations.”

Damn the man for having the most alluring dimple on the left side of his mouth.

“Everything he creates is beyond compare. Our diners can’t go wrong no matter what they order.”

“True. I’ll let him know your choice.”
He waved a hand at her glass.

“Another?”

She debated, then nodded. “I think I will.”

He laughed. “So long as you’re able to walk at the end of the evening, that’s fine.”

She barely managed to keep her mouth from falling open at his forwardness. If any other employee had made that

remark, she would've reprimanded him. When it came to Gray, however, she couldn't be upset when his playfulness was edged with genuine concern.

“Thanks, but I'll be fine. I won't be behind the wheel, and I only live five blocks away.”

“But you could stagger in front of a tour bus,” he said innocently. “Then who would sign my paychecks?”

Opening her mouth to retort that he wouldn't have to worry about that if he were no longer working here, she was shocked when he turned his back and simply walked away. The arrogant bastard just left her sitting there, his carriage and attitude screaming that he wasn't the least bit intimidated by her

position as owner. Any of the others, save Ethan, would bow, scrape, and stammer in her presence. But not this man.

That damned confidence she couldn't resist. Somehow, in the space of a couple of weeks, the prep chef had homed in on her weakness and fileted it like a sea bass in Ethan's kitchen.

The second drink and her duck were delivered with a flourish, but with no further sign of Mr. James. It surprised her to realize she was disappointed. That small exchange had left her feeling more charged than she had in a while. Almost like she'd been awakened from a deep sleep.

Her meal had never tasted better, and

she wondered whether a certain sexy prep chef had anything to do with that. Thoughts of him replayed in her head as she ate, and by the time she was ready to leave she found her eyes straying toward the doors to the kitchen. Was she really so eager to get another glimpse of the man? *You're the boss. Just go in there and check on things. You don't need an excuse.*

When she was finished, she did just that. But only because she needed to close her office and retrieve her purse, she told herself. Mr. James was hard at work chopping vegetables when she walked through, and he barely acknowledged her with a nod. There was no cocky grin this time, no heat in

his gaze. No familiarity. But then she caught Ethan observing him and not bothering to hide it, so that made sense. The chef was his boss as well, and was much more stern and scary than Anna. No way would anyone in his right mind invite a tongue-lashing from him.

Grayson James, on the other hand, could give me a tongue-lashing of a different sort. A very welcome one.

Good God! Annoyed with herself, she went through some paperwork, studied some orders for fresh meat and vegetables. Then she left twenty minutes later, locking her office and passing through the kitchen without letting her attention stray to the object of her fantasies, and took the elevator down to

the lobby.

“Good night, Joel,” she called to the guard on duty. The heavysset, middle-aged man waved and spared a smile for her as always.

Fatigue dragged at her as she pushed through the revolving door, and she suddenly wished she'd called a cab. But that was ridiculous for a mere five-block walk, even this late at night. At least the city never really slept, and there were cops on almost every corner this close to Times Square. These days, there probably wasn't a safer city in the United States for a pedestrian.

That's what she told herself, anyway, as the bright lights of her restaurant's block gave way to the lengthening

shadows of a residential area with fewer people about. Though she was tired, her senses were on alert for any movement. Any person who didn't belong.

So she was jolted with terror when a hand grabbed her arm and yanked her into an alley between two apartment buildings. "Hey!" she yelled. "Stop!"

Another shriek was abruptly cut off by a palm clapped over her mouth as she was pulled backward, farther into the darkness. The hand was covered by a ragged glove with the fingers cut out, and they were digging into her cheek.

Every horror story she'd ever heard about women being abducted and assaulted flashed through her mind, and she exploded in movement, fighting him

like a wildcat. Twisting and bucking, she managed to make him lose his grip for a moment—just long enough to sink her teeth into the side of his hand as hard as she could through the glove’s material.

“Ahhh! Fuck!” Jerking his hand away, he shoved her back into the side of the nearest building, then spun her around and pushed her face-first into the brick before she could glimpse his features or clothing. “Scream or bite me again and I’ll snap your pretty neck! Got it?”

She nodded, heart slamming against her rib cage. “Wh-what do you want? Money? It’s in my purse.”

“And where’s your purse?”

She jerked her head as much as she

could in the direction they'd come.

“Over there. I dropped it.”

“Hmm. Maybe I'll go back for that,” he said in a low voice. “But I'm thinking the real prize is right here in my hands. Begging for a piece of this.” As emphasis, he ground his groin into her ass.

“Y-you don't want to do this,” she said, breathless with fear. “Someone will come and you'll be caught. Just take the money and go.”

“Nobody's coming. Why can't I have both?”

“People live here. You don't want to risk jail.”

“As if guys like me care about getting sent to Club Fed. Three squares a day,

exercise, reading, and TV. Hell, I could even study for a trade, which is more than I get on the street.”

“Please,” she begged as his hand began to creep under the hem of her blouse. “Don’t—”

Just then, the man’s weight vanished from her back. Before she could register why, she heard a vicious curse and the sounds of flesh hitting flesh. Spinning around, she spotted two men bouncing off the wall and into some garbage cans, sending the receptacles flying and causing a loud clatter. In the dim light, she could barely make out a large man punching a slightly smaller man. The more slightly built one was dressed in a hoodie, the bigger one in jeans and a T-

shirt.

She had to do something. Get help before her rescuer got hurt.

Just as she was about to turn and run, the attacker shoved the bigger man away from him and fled. He was fast, booking it down the alley and skidding around the corner. Gone, just like that. The bigger man stood under a sliver of moonlight, chest heaving, his tense stance suggesting he was tempted to give chase. Instead, he faced her and took a couple of tentative steps.

“Ma’am? Are you all right?”

His voice was so familiar, but she was badly shaken. She could hardly think straight as she replied, “I feel sick.”

“Here, let me help you.” Taking her gently by the hand, he led her out of the alley. Then he stooped to grab her purse on the way and handed it to her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Tears pricked her eyes, a testament to how frightened she’d been. She hadn’t cried in years, since she’d finally learned to swallow being a disappointment to her mother.

Her rescuer urged her back onto the sidewalk, under a street lamp. Then he turned to speak and stopped, his mouth hanging open. “Anna! I mean, Miss Claire,” he corrected himself. “My God, I can’t believe it’s you. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I—Mr. James,” she stammered in surprise. “Yes, I think so.”

As if to reassure himself, he stepped close and took her hands in his, rubbing them as though to ward off a chill. Then he turned her a bit and inspected her from every angle.

She gave a watery laugh. “Really, I’m fine.” Except for the nausea, which threatened to upset her dinner.

“You don’t look fine,” he replied, eyeing her with a concerned frown. “Just to be sure, I’m going to walk you the rest of the way home.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary.”

He shook his head. “I insist. Which way?”

“No, I mean it’s really not necessary

because I live there.” She pointed to the building on the corner.

“You’re kidding! That’s where I live, too.” He smiled. “Then it’s definitely no trouble at all to see you safely to your door.”

“I don’t—”

“Please? For my peace of mind?”

He looked so handsome, so worried, she had to smile back. “Fine. That would be nice, thanks.”

“First, though, we should file a report. I should’ve thought right away of calling the police.”

She considered that, then blew out a breath. “I think that’ll be a waste of time. I’m not hurt, and he didn’t take anything. I didn’t even get a look at him, so my

input isn't going to help much.”

“Are you sure? They can at least have it on record.”

“No. Really, I just want to get home.”

He hesitated, then relented. “I can understand that. Come on.”

Tucking her hand in his arm, he escorted her the rest of the way to their building and inside. As they crossed the spacious lobby, she briefly wondered how a lowly prep chef could afford to live in a neighborhood like this, where the apartments were so expensive. Then she remembered that he'd been a hotshot attorney of some kind, so that made sense. He'd probably socked away plenty before changing careers.

As they stepped into the elevator, his

finger hovered over the number panel.

“Which floor?”

“Six.”

He smiled again, a blinding slash of white that made her knees a little weak.

“What do you know.”

“You, too?” She blinked at him.

“Yep. I’m curious, though. How is it that the boss lady missed the fact that I live in her building, on the same floor?”

She shrugged. “I make it a point to memorize names and faces, because I like my employees to feel as if they matter to me—and they do. But my manager, Jeff Wilson, does all of the hiring paperwork and tax forms, and he collects the employee information sheets we keep on file. If I need to know

specific information about one of you, I can look it up.”

“I met Mr. Wilson, but I don’t see him around much,” he mused. “He doesn’t take a very active role on the floor.”

“Because that’s not what I hired him to do. He does most of the paperwork, ads, and marketing.”

“So you can be among the people, which is what you enjoy most.”

“Yes.”

“And yet . . .” The elevator arrived at their floor, and they got off.

She stopped and faced him. “What?”

“I don’t know if I should say.” His gaze settled on hers, assessing.

“You can speak freely. You *did* just save my life.” She grinned in

encouragement.

He relaxed some. “It’s just that you seem very reserved most of the time. Aloof. It’s interesting to hear you say that you enjoy being around your staff and guests when you don’t really show it.”

She stared at him in surprise. “I don’t? But . . . I speak to people all day. I ask them how they’re doing, if their meals are excellent, what they’re celebrating. Things like that.”

“What about the staff?”

“What about them?” She started to feel defensive. “I ask them if they need anything, what I can do to help them. I inquire about any incidents that may have occurred, how the kitchen has been

running, check on the special reservations to make sure the staff is prepared.”

“Yes, you do. You’re a good boss,” he allowed.

“Why thank you,” she said dryly, giving him a droll look. “I’m so glad you approve.”

He ignored her sarcasm. “But when was the last time you actually *talked* to any of them?”

“What the hell do you mean? I just told you I talk all day!”

“When’s the last time you asked one of them anything personal?”

“Personal?” She was at a complete loss. “Like what?”

“Jesus.” He pinched the bridge of his

nose, then dropped his hand and regarded her in part amusement, part exasperation. “You know Brandon, the waiter?”

“Brandon Gates. Of course I do.”

“Right. But did you know his pet iguana died yesterday?”

Obviously one of them had been dropped on his head. And it wasn't *her*.

“So? As long as Ethan didn't serve it in the soup, what does that have to do with me?”

The bastard actually laughed. An honest-to-God laugh that made his eyes crinkle and her toes curl. Made her insides warm in the most pleasant way.

“Christ, you're so uptight, you squeak when you walk.”

“What?” She gaped at him. “Listen, Mr. James—”

“I saved your life, as you pointed out,” he murmured, moving closer. Reaching out, he gently touched her face with the rough pads of his fingers. “I believe we’ve moved on to first names, Anna.”

Her breath caught in her chest, nerves dancing at his touch. The hunger in his eyes, his nearness, torched all of her arguments to dust. At five-eight she wasn’t a short woman, but the top of her head barely reached his chin. That was a secret thrill of hers—a big, tall man surrounding her. Pressing her down, covering her lips with his.

He was so close, their mouths almost

meeting. Then he stepped back, and it took her a moment to adjust. To realize he wasn't going to kiss her after all. Flushing, she attempted to cover her embarrassment by fishing in her purse for the keys to her apartment. Finding them, she gave him a smile she didn't feel.

“Well, Gray, I should get home.”

She turned and started down the hallway, and he kept pace beside her, apparently not ready to relinquish his role as her protector. Suddenly her ordered world had been unbalanced, not just by the attack but by Gray's nearness, and she wondered if that's what he had intended.

At her door, she unlocked it and faced

him. “Thank you for saving me. I can’t imagine what might’ve happened if you hadn’t been walking home right behind me.”

The idea made her feel sick again.

“I’m glad I was there.” A shadow passed over his face and was gone. “Let me come in? You’ve had a shock, and I want to see you settled before I leave.”

Settled. That would be the very last thing she would feel if she allowed him inside, of that there was no doubt. Some force that obliterated reason and good sense had her opening the door anyway, stepping aside to welcome him to her home.

“Nice place,” he commented.

“I imagine it’s the same as yours.”

“Just the floor plan.” Looking around, he appeared impressed. “I definitely don’t have your sense of style.”

“I can’t claim much credit, except for the colors. I picked those and then hired a decorator.”

“I like the browns with the deep red accents. It fits you.”

Curious, she studied him as she set her purse on the bar. “How so?”

“The browns are subtle, understated, and strong. Alone, they might be boring to the eye, and then *bam*—the red is exciting. Just like those flashes of your true personality when you let them out, as you did in the hallway a few minutes ago.”

“Seriously?” A laugh escaped before

she could help it. “You are so full of shit.”

“And like now,” he said, looking smug. “*Miss Claire* would never have said that, but *Anna* sure did. I obviously know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or frightened by the armchair psychoanalysis.”

“Flattered—what else?” Gesturing toward the couch, he ordered, “Sit down. What do you want to drink? Wine? Something stronger?”

Amused, she did as he said—for the moment. “Isn’t that my line? This *is* my apartment.”

“You can offer one to me some other time.” He disappeared into the kitchen

and began to rummage around as his voice drifted to her. “You know, sometime when you haven’t been attacked by a mugger.”

The image caused her to shiver, and she unwillingly began to relive the encounter. “I’ll just have some water. Get whatever you want for yourself.”

In moments he was back, the sofa dipping as he sat beside her and twisted the tops off two bottles, handing her one. “I don’t often drink this late at night. Gives me insomnia.”

“Hmm.” There was something odd about that man in the alley.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked in concern.

“He talked too much.”

“What?”

“The mugger.” Anna lifted her gaze to see Gray studying her, brows furrowed. “He was all talk. He never did much except push me around and scare me. Isn’t that weird?”

Gray leaned forward. “What else?”

“He smelled nice, like he had on his best cologne. And . . .”

“And?”

She gasped. “The man wasn’t armed! He didn’t have anything in his hands.”

“Are you sure? Could be it happened so fast, you missed a small knife or something in his grasp.”

“No, I’m positive. The mugger wasn’t armed, he spoke articulately, and he smelled nice. Something is off about the

whole thing.”

“That is strange,” he said thoughtfully. “You should be more careful from now on. In fact, I’ll be walking you home for a while. Just in case.”

In case the man returns. Fear overrode the inner whispering that it was smart to keep a distance from this sexy man, no matter how much she wanted him. “All right.”

Their eyes met, and a strange flutter of butterfly wings took off in her stomach. Gray was looking at her as though she were the answer to every question he had, and it was wonderful. Confusing. Arousing.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said with reverence, touching her face with the

pads of his fingers.

“I don’t remember the last time anyone told me that.”

“You deserve to hear that every single day, because it’s true.”

“Thank you.” Drawn to him, she reached up and traced his lips with one finger. “You’re a very handsome man yourself.”

“I wasn’t fishing.”

“I didn’t think you were.” She paused. “Why me?”

His face registered surprise. “Why am I interested in you?”

“Yes.”

“Besides your beauty, you’re smart, successful. Kind. I think you need to unwind a lot, and I want to help you do

that.”

God, he smelled good. Woodsy and manly, and it made her body ache to be touched. Completed. “Then help me, Gray.”

For a few moments he didn't speak. His hand covered hers and waited, giving her time to voice an objection. When it didn't come, he leaned over and closed the distance between them. Brought their lips together, parted hers with his tongue.

His kiss was liquid fire. Slowly, he licked her mouth, his sensual exploration sparking an electrical storm throughout her body. All thoughts of why it was a bad idea to see an employee blew to dust. Pushing into him, she sought more.

Needed more from this man. It had been far too long since she'd come alive this way.

All too soon, the kiss was over and Gray moved back. Confused, she tried to pull herself together.

“Will you be okay tonight?”

Only if you stay. But of course she wouldn't say the words.

“Yes, I'll be fine.” She forced a smile. “Go on, get some rest. You're on the late shift again tomorrow.”

Rising, he looked down at her. He didn't seem eager to go—more like resigned that it was for the best. And it was.

“Give me your cell phone.”

“Why?”

“So I can program my number in for you.”

“Oh. Okay.” Fishing around in her purse, she found the device and handed it over. He punched a long series of buttons, then he handed it back.

“Here you go. Call me if you need anything at all, Anna.”

Her name on his lips, the intensity of his gaze, made her feel like a wounded antelope in the sights of a lion. The thing was, she didn't want to escape.

“I will.”

With that promise extracted, he gave her a wicked half smile and walked out the door, shutting it softly behind him. Following him, she looked up and then stood gazing at the colors in her living

room, trying to see them—and herself—
through his eyes.

Brown for steadiness and strength, red
for excitement. Being alive.

Somehow, it seemed he'd taken all of
the red with him when he left.

Grayson closed the door behind him and stood in the middle of his sparsely furnished apartment, frustration and guilt riding him hard.

As he'd started getting to know Anna Claire over the past few weeks, he'd slowly come to realize she was nothing like he'd first assumed. He'd thought she was too straitlaced and wondered that she hadn't snapped like a brittle twig. Maybe a little stuck-up, too. But she wasn't.

She was driven, determined, smart,

and sexy. Kind to her employees and patrons, yet aloof to the former, perhaps because she was their boss. The woman was complicated, and yet he felt he was coming to understand what made her tick. She needed to have some fun, enjoy life a little.

He intended to help her along in that area.

A knock at the door interrupted his musings. He had a sneaking suspicion who would be on the other side, and he was right.

“You took a hell of a risk,” he growled. “Don’t you ever use your brain?”

Simon King strolled inside, halting in the center of the room, and faced him

wearing a grin. “I changed clothes, and nobody saw me come here. It’s not like she got a good look at me anyhow.”

Gray rolled his eyes. “She knows something is off, you idiot. Once she calmed down and had time to pull herself together, she said you were too articulate and you smelled good. And it didn’t escape her notice that you weren’t armed.”

The cocky grin slid off his face.
Good.

“Shit. I didn’t expect her to be so aware of those kinds of details. Most women wouldn’t be when they’re scared.”

“Anna’s not most women, Simon.” He sighed.

“Yeah? Well, at least we accomplished our goal,” his partner pointed out. “You got invited into the lioness’s den. The question is, did you get a free pass to go back?”

“Most likely. She’s a tough one, but I think this was the edge I needed.”

Simon considered that. Thankfully, he didn’t mention just how far Gray might still have to go to capture their prey.

“Did you get the trace put on her cell phone?” he asked instead.

“Yeah. I’ll get the rest in place next time I go over there.”

“Which will be when?”

“Hopefully tomorrow.”

“It would be quicker if you just broke in and did the job.”

“And more risky, too, in a building like this with all the apartment doors facing one hallway and no access from the outside. No, being invited in is a much better scenario.”

“All right. It’s your call.” Simon paused. “Who do you like for this, partner? Honestly?”

Gray rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s the million-dollar question.”

“Make that multimillion. Literally.”

And that’s why he and his partner were on this case, and why Gray had infiltrated the staff of Floor Fifty-Five. Several of Anna’s employees were running drugs, using the restaurant as a cover and base of operations. His job was to learn the names of everyone

involved, how and where they were hiding the drugs—and whether Anna was in on the scheme.

God, he really hoped not.

Lowering himself into an easy chair, he answered, “I’m the low man there, so working my way into confidences is proving harder than I expected.”

“Whoever’s behind this is mob-connected, my friend. They’re going to be suspicious of anyone new, and it will take too long to earn their trust, so forget making buddies. Just find the evidence and get out.”

“Can’t argue there. But I am working my way through the employee list. I’ve been able to eliminate some people and I have a few names for our list of

suspects.”

Simon took out his iPhone and opened the notepad feature. “Ready when you are.”

Grayson recited what he knew as his partner typed notes into his phone. When they were done, Simon asked, “Anything else?”

“Not at the moment. I have to tell you, my gut says Anna’s not involved.”

“You sure that’s not your dick doing the talking?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, he laughed. “Not at all.”

“That’s what I figured.” His partner shook his head. “Be careful, okay?”

“I wouldn’t be anything less.”

But after Simon left, he couldn’t help

but think *careful* wasn't going to be a word that applied at all where Anna was concerned.

Damn the man, she couldn't stop thinking about him.

At the restaurant, she was worthless. She was walking around in such a fog that she barely spoke to the diners or her staff that afternoon. Sensing her distraction, some of the employees cut her curious glances, but mostly stayed out of her way. A few even looked at her with trepidation, as though she might be angry about something. But no one asked

her if something was wrong. Not one of them reached out. As Gray had pointed out, she didn't talk to her staff about personal matters—so they didn't talk to her, either.

Guilt assailed her, and she decided to take action. Test the waters, show them she was human. What could it hurt?

Walking toward the bar, she spotted Brandon waiting for a drink order. As she headed toward him, she racked her brain to recall what sort of pet Gray said he'd lost. It was something unusual. A snake? A gerbil? No, a lizard of some kind.

Stopping in front of Brandon, she said, "Can I have a word with you?"

Blinking at her, he nodded and

swallowed hard, eyes widening. “Sure. I mean, yes, ma’am! I . . . Did I do something wrong? Is this about the Jacksons’ order? I swear I told Chef medium rare, and the steak looked fine to me, but—”

“It’s not about the steak. You handled that situation just fine.” Giving him a sympathetic look, she said, “I just wanted to express my condolences for the loss of your gecko.”

“Um . . . thanks?” He was now staring at her as though she’d sprouted a third eye. “He was an iguana, though.”

“Oh, right.” She nodded gravely. “I’m sure he was a good companion, and I know how hard it is to lose a member of the family. If there’s anything I can do,

let me know.”

“That’s really awesome of you, Miss Claire. Thanks.”

“Anna, please.”

“Okay.” The boy cleared his throat, still looking shell-shocked.

“Well, carry on.”

As she left, she was feeling pretty good until she heard Steve, the bartender, ask, “What the heck was that all about?”

Rounding the corner, Anna stopped to listen. She really shouldn’t, but curiosity won.

“Uh, she said she was sorry Freddie died.”

“No shit?” Steve said, incredulous.
“My grandmother passed last month and

she didn't say a friggin' thing."

"Maybe she didn't know," Brandon replied in her defense. "Cut her a break; she's nice."

"Yeah, I guess. A little stuck-up, but in a nice way."

"That doesn't even make sense, buttwipe."

"It does to me."

Unfortunately, it did to Anna as well. Perfect sense. This was exactly what Gray had been trying to tell her last night. She was a good boss, but she was disconnected from her people. Case in point, Freddie the iguana. One kind word and two staff members were flummoxed.

That had to change. Now that she'd

started to turn over a new leaf, she had to keep going.

She was on a roll, having complimented one surprised waiter on his new haircut and showing interest in another one's college studies, when her cell phone buzzed. Retrieving it from the pocket of her jacket, she peered at the screen and groaned.

“No way. What lousy timing.”

Punching the button, she resigned herself to being annoyed by her mother in some new and creative way. “Hello.”

“Anna Marie, I was starting to wonder if you'd fallen off the face of the earth! I haven't heard from you in two weeks.”

Repressing a sigh, she managed to

keep her tone even. “I haven’t heard from you, either, Mom. Been busy?”

“Don’t deflect,” Margaret scolded. “I wanted to make sure we’re still on for next weekend. My flight arrives Friday at noon, and I leave on Sunday morning.”

“I thought you were coming on Saturday?”

“Nope. We said Friday, it’s written right here. Unless you don’t have time for your mother, and then I guess I can cancel—”

“Friday is fine, Mom,” she said, cutting off the impending pity party midstream. “I must’ve misunderstood, but we’re good.” *No, I didn’t. It was planned for Saturday. Talking to her is like conversing with a brick wall. I*

must get my communication skills from her.

“Well, if you’re sure . . .”

The hesitation in her mother’s voice made her feel like crap. “Absolutely. It’ll be great to catch up. Girl time, you know?”

“Yes, it will,” Margaret enthused, good cheer restored. “That is, if I’m not taking you away from a date or anything. Are you seeing anyone?”

Here we go. “No time, you know that.”

“Huh. It’s a good thing I was a lot more open to dating when I met your father, or you wouldn’t even be here.”

“You lucked out. Daddy loved you, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer,”

she said, momentarily overwhelmed by what a good man he was and how very much they both missed him. “They don’t make men like that anymore.”

“You have to look around, sweetie. He’s out there somewhere.”

I doubt that. “Maybe.” Just then, a loud crash resounded from the direction of the kitchen. “Hey, I’ve got to go. I’ll call before you leave next Friday.”

“Okay. Love you, baby.”

“Love you, too.”

Hanging up, she heaved a sigh. Between her mother, Gray’s pursuit, and the restaurant, she was on her way to developing a headache. She headed for the kitchen to see what disaster had befallen them, hurrying when she heard

the yelling. Stepping inside, she drew up short, and took in the scene. Flour was everywhere—on the floor, the counter, and all over her head chef.

“ . . . the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Ethan screamed into Gray’s face. “You imbecile! Did you get your certification from a box of cereal? Did it come with a plastic toy inside, too?”

Gray’s hands clenched into fists at his sides, and his body was tense. Lines of strain were etched around his mouth, his lips pressed into a grim line. Anna didn’t know him well, but she could tell that it was very, very difficult for an alpha male like Gray to stand there and take what Ethan was dishing out. But take it he did, and he managed to keep

his tone respectful, if just barely.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said, looking the head chef right in the eye. “The container slipped out of my hands. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re goddamned right it won’t! Because if it does, you’ll be lucky to get a recommendation from me as a fry cook at McDonald’s!”

“Yes, sir.”

Anna started forward, then stopped. As much as she wanted to intervene, rush to Gray’s rescue, under no circumstances could she undermine Ethan’s authority by reprimanding him in front of his staff. And they *were* his by unwritten rule, even though she was the owner of the establishment.

“And the cost of the flour is coming out of your paycheck! Fucking clean this shit up!”

“Right away.”

“Of all the idiotic fucking . . .” Ethan turned back to the pan on the stove, continuing to grumble to himself.

Shooting Gray looks ranging from sympathy to silent support, the others slowly returned to their tasks. None risked the chef’s wrath by helping him when he grabbed a broom and dustpan and started sweeping. A pang of feeling swept through Anna, something more than sympathy. Whatever it was stirred in her breast, and in a way, it hurt.

Walking over, she addressed the angry prep chef. “I’d like to see you in

my office when you're done."

He paused in his sweeping, gripping the broom handle tightly. "If you're going to fire me, I'd prefer you do it now."

"Whether you're fired is Ethan's decision," she said, well aware that the others were hanging on their every word. "He's given you another chance, and that's good enough for me. This is about something else."

"All right," he said with a nod, expression relieved. "I'll be there as soon as I'm done."

Giving him an encouraging smile, she patted him on the arm. "See you soon."

In the office, she booted up her laptop and tried to busy herself studying profit

and loss reports from Jeff. The numbers kept blurring on the screen as she remembered last night. Gray's strength as he fought off her attacker. His caring afterward.

He was so handsome, his blue eyes studying her in concern. His streaked brown hair sticking in every direction. Those lips that knew how to deliver a toe-curling kiss.

“Miss Claire?”

Gray stood in the doorway, practically filling the space. For one insane moment, she wanted to rip off those drab kitchen whites and see if his big body was as delectable naked as it had appeared last night in his jeans and T-shirt.

“Anna, remember?”

His full lips hitched upward. “I figured that didn’t apply here at work.”

“It applies to you, no matter where we are.”

“I take it you’re not planning to chew me out?” he drawled, moving inside and closing the door behind him.

“I don’t think there’s anything of your ass left to chew,” she teased. His gaze grew hungry, and she knew he was about to make an off-color comment, so she rushed on. “I just wanted to thank you again for last night.”

“You already did, so it’s not necessary. I’m sure you’d do the same for me if I found myself in dire need of your ninja skills.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “You’d better hope that never becomes an issue. My ninja skills are sadly lacking.”

Closing the distance between them, he moved around her desk and said, “Want to tell me why you really called me in here? Could it be because you missed me?”

He was so close, she had to look up at him from her chair. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him not to be ridiculous. Then his hand covered hers and he knelt beside her chair, leaned close, and brought their lips together gently.

Pure heaven. This man kissed like nobody she’d ever met, his lips exerting just the right amount of pressure, his

tongue seeking hers. She explored him in return, tasting a hint of coffee and cinnamon. Delicious.

Common sense struggled to reassert itself and she pushed him back, breaking the kiss. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“You said *shouldn’t*, not *can’t*. That’s pretty telling.” He appeared smug.

“I’m your boss, Gray.”

“Only on paper. You said yourself that Ethan has the final word where I’m concerned. Or anyone in his kitchen, for that matter.”

“How do you think the rest of my staff would react if they found out I was seeing one of them?”

“Why would you care? They answer to you, not the other way around.” He

paused. “Do you have a policy prohibiting employees from seeing each other socially?”

“No, of course not.”

“Dating?”

“No,” she admitted.

“And if you found out some of them were dating right now, what would you do?” he pressed.

“Nothing.” She sighed. “As long as they kept the lovey-dovey stuff away from the customers and didn’t let it distract them at work, I wouldn’t say anything.”

“There you go,” he said with a wicked grin. “You’re not breaking your own rule because there isn’t one, and you’re not setting a double standard. So

live a little. All work and no play makes Anna a sad girl.”

“Now you sound like my mother.”

“She must be a smart woman.”

“You can judge for yourself. She’s arriving for a visit next Friday.”

“You bringing her here, to the restaurant?”

She nodded. “It’ll be her first time in New York since we opened. I’m rolling out the red carpet.” For all the good it would do where her mom was concerned. But one could hope.

“Good for you both. Maybe I’ll get to meet her while she’s here.” He seemed genuine. He stood. “I get off in an hour. What do you say we go for a walk, then I buy us a bottle of wine to share at your

place.”

“Why not yours?”

“That’s fine with me. It’s just that my place is sort of bare. I’m afraid it’s a typical bachelor pad, without much furniture or ambiance.”

Hesitating, she wondered if she was really going to do this. In the next instant, she told herself to stop overthinking it.

“My place it is.”

That smile of his could melt her all the way to her toes. He seemed pretty pleased with himself as he sauntered to the door.

“One hour. Can’t wait.” Then he was gone.

One hour never passed so slowly.

As Gray worked, he wrestled with his conscience. The case was coming along, but he needed to get into Anna's apartment to plant those bugs. He needed time with Anna, too. Investigating her was his job.

The problem was, she was already much more than that to him. He could develop feelings for this woman, might be already. All day he'd thought about whether he should call someone else in to take his place, but there just wasn't time.

Gray kept his eyes and ears open as he chopped. He closely watched the people on his hot list, which included

three waiters, a couple of dishwashers, and one of the line cooks. He'd begun to take note of silent cues they gave one another. A nod here and there, or a hand signal. Sometimes a whispered word, so brief it would've gone totally unnoticed if Gray had been simply another coworker.

Their body language differed from the everyday interaction among the staff. Their movements were too precise, too planned. At times it was like they were executing a well-choreographed dance. Gray had discovered that one of the waiters seemed to be a messenger. After a series of signals, he would either text or make a call from an alcove near the men's restroom.

Once the pattern emerged, Gray was surprised and impressed by how very simple and effective their operation was. If Gray and Simon hadn't traced a mob boss's key associate to Floor Fifty-Five, the setup could've operated for years without attracting attention.

Now he had to figure out where the cocaine was being stored and how they were moving it through the restaurant and out to their buyers. He had a theory, but no proof. Yet.

When his shift ended, he headed for Anna's office. Through her half-open door he observed her unnoticed for a minute. Sitting at her desk, the gorgeous brunette was leaning over some papers, frowning as if she'd rather be anywhere

else. He could fix that.

“Ready to quit?”

Straightening, she brushed her hair back from her face, but the long tresses tumbled down again, falling well past her shoulders. Big brown eyes were raised to his, the fatigue vanishing to be replaced by happiness the second she saw him.

“I am *so* ready. Let me shut down.”

Closing out of the program on her laptop, she took it and locked it in a cabinet behind her desk. Gray made a mental note to get to the computer one night soon, after closing, and download the information from the hard drive.

After tidying the papers and grabbing her purse, she faced him. “Ready.”

Walking out with her, he wondered if anyone would comment about his accompanying her. Ethan shot him a scowl, but everyone else went about their business. As they stepped into the elevator, he decided to probe her past a bit.

“You mentioned your mother coming to visit. What about your dad?”

Sadness shadowed her expression. “Dad passed away several years ago. My mom was heartbroken and has never remarried, though she’s had men interested. She’s still a good-looking woman at sixty-one.”

“Good genes must run in the family.”

She returned his smile. “Thanks. Same with yours.” Before he could reply, she

asked, “What about your parents? Do they live in New York?”

Bittersweet memories assailed him, and a touch of regret. “No. They were from Alabama. Mom died of an aneurism four years ago, and Dad last year of a heart attack.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. My dad and I had been at odds for the past several years, and I never got the chance to make things right.”

As they stepped out of the elevator, she surprised him by linking their fingers. It might’ve been nothing more than a gesture of comfort, but he liked her small, soft hand in his much bigger one. She called good night to the night

watchman, and they strolled into the evening.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I could eat. You must be starving after working all afternoon.”

“Yeah. Surrounded by food every day and not one morsel can we sneak into our mouths without Ethan ripping us a new one.”

She snickered. “That’s what I pay him the big bucks for—to be my food nazi.”

“Well, he’s doing a damned fine job.” He liked this. Just being with Anna, talking. Enjoying her closeness. “Want to grab a slice of pizza from that place on the next block?”

“Ooh, I love their pizza! The family who owns it makes everything from

scratch, and the food is fantastic.”

“They’re one of my favorites, too. Let’s do it.”

They ended up sharing a whole pie, pigging out. Or rather, he ate most of it while listening to Anna talk about growing up with a set of parents who only saw things in black and white and no siblings to take the heat off. According to Anna, she and her mother were as polar opposite as mother and daughter could be, sometimes a source of friction between them. She loved her mother, though, and was looking forward to her visit from Baltimore in spite of all that.

After they were done eating, they strolled casually along, this time with

Anna pumping him about his nonexistent time at the law firm and why he decided to become a prep chef. The conversation was uncomfortable to say the least—for once in his career, he hated lying to a potential suspect, even for the greater good of busting a drug ring.

“I just got tired of the strain, the pressure to claw my way to the top and stay there.” He shrugged. “Cooking has always been a passion of mine, so I went for it.”

A greater lie had never passed his lips. Gray couldn't fix Hamburger Helper without reading the directions three times. Le Cordon Bleu had been thrilled to get rid of him when his crash course for the undercover job was done.

Thankfully, Anna seemed to accept his story without question, and he was able to relax again. The conversation swung to more innocuous topics, like Anna's being a cat lover but not having much time for a pet.

“I think you should go for it. Cats don't need a lot of attention like dogs do.”

She smiled, kept talking. He wasn't aware of much more than her lithe body next to his, the way her round, tight rear end looked sensational in her black pants, how her classy, high-heeled boots made her legs seem a mile long.

Around the corner from home, they stopped to buy a bottle of red wine. Arriving at her apartment door, he could

hardly contain his excitement when she turned to him and smiled.

“Ready to relax at my place for a while?”

“I’d love nothing better than to spend more time with you.”

And among all the lies he’d told tonight, that was the one big truth he hoped she would remember when the shit hit the fan.

She knew what she wanted tonight, and there was no turning back from her decision.

It had been far too long since she'd let a man into her apartment. Her life. Whether Gray was Mr. Right or Mr. Right Now remained to be seen. But the attraction was undeniable.

What a mild word, *attraction*. In truth, she'd been on a slow burn all evening that had become a fire. She wanted this man to put it out—again and again.

Taking the wine from him, she went into the kitchen, set the bottle on the counter, and retrieved two glasses. She was reaching for the electric bottle opener when a hard male body pressed into her from behind and strong arms wrapped themselves around her waist. His lips nuzzled at her neck and jaw, peppering her with kisses that made gooseflesh break out all over her.

“What do you say we save the wine for later?”

Long fingers worked under the edge of her blouse, skimmed her belly. Then traveled upward to tease at the lacy cup of her bra and the swell of one breast. Abandoning the wine, she relaxed into him, loving his hands on her skin.

“What do you want? Tell me,” he murmured.

“Everything. It’s been too long.”

“We can’t have that.” Warm breath tickled her ear. “You’ll have everything, then. Whatever your heart desires.”

“I don’t think my heart has much to do with it.”

“I’m betting you’re wrong,” he said with a low chuckle. “But one issue at a time.”

The catch on her bra was released and his hands cupped her freed breasts, weighing them. Making a pleased sound in his chest, he took each nipple between a thumb and forefinger and rolled them, exerting just the right amount of pressure to send little shocks through her nerve

endings and make her arch into him even more.

“God, that’s so good.”

“We’re only getting warmed up,” he promised.

Those marvelous hands went to the button on her pants, and soon they and her panties were sliding down her hips to her ankles. She stepped out of them and spread her legs at his whispered urging, a thrill going through her when he knelt on the floor behind her. There was something decidedly naughty about being spread for him, half-naked, while he was still fully clothed and ready to have his way with her.

Then all thinking stopped and she could only feel. His fingers dipped

between her legs, rubbed the smooth skin of her folds. Delved between them to collect her moisture and spread it around.

“So wet. So pretty. Let me taste?”

That he asked was sexy. He wasn't simply taking, he was giving her what she wanted.

“Please . . .”

His tongue was a supernova on her sensitized skin. She was so ready to be taken and devoured, she almost came from that alone. But she managed to hold back as he licked her pussy, exploring every crease, increasing the heat in her body. The want.

Then his tongue pushed into her channel, fucking her, and was soon

joined by two fingers. Working in tandem, they nearly drove her crazy, and she widened her stance, whimpering for more.

“Greedy baby. You taste so fine. I’m going to eat you until you come, and then I’m going to fuck you until you come a second time. Until you can’t stand.”

His rumbled threat was an aphrodisiac to her senses. He played her like an instrument, laving her slit, and when he edged in farther to torture her clit, she began to come unraveled.

“Oh, God!”

“You like that? Me too, honey.”

Latching on to the tiny bud, he suckled relentlessly. The buildup of her impending release made her feel like a

balloon, stretching, ready to pop.

Gripping the countertop, she cried out as she finally exploded in wave after wave of pleasure. He ate her as she rode out the tide. Never had she felt anything so incredibly erotic.

Then he stood, wiped his face on a nearby hand towel. She heard his zipper, felt his hard, silky length rubbing on the crack of her ass.

“Protection?” she asked, some sense returning.

“Yes, absolutely.”

There was movement behind her as he dug into his pocket and produced the square packet they needed. Then some crinkling noises as he opened the foil and the sounds of his quickly sheathing

himself.

Gripping one of her hips, he guided the head of his cock to her dripping sex and began to push inside. They needed no lube. She was still so hot for him, even after the shattering orgasm, that she opened for her lover like a flower. His cock slid deeper, filling her fully, and at last he was seated to the balls.

“Fuck me,” she moaned. “Please.”

Needing no further encouragement, he began to thrust. Fingers digging into her hips, he powered his cock home, so deep and hard he was almost lifting her off her feet. She loved it and leaned over the counter, pushing out her ass as far as possible to give him the best angle.

Groaning in pleasure, he slammed into

her channel faster, their flesh slapping in decadent rhythm. All too soon she felt her orgasm building again and never wanted this to end. She wanted him to go on fucking her all night. Until they collapsed from exhaustion.

Shattering, she stiffened with a cry, pulsing around his shaft. With a shout, he thrust deep and shuddered hard, shivering over her until his own release was complete. They stayed together for a few seconds, Gray kissing her shoulder repeatedly and whispering endearments into her skin. She enjoyed being connected to him, and in the afterglow, it felt like more than sex had occurred.

He pulled out, leaving her physically empty but satisfied in a way she hadn't

been in ages. Maybe never. After giving him a kiss, she went into the living room and plucked a tissue from the box on an end table and brought it to him. He rolled the condom in it and tossed it in the garbage.

“Stay?” she asked. Suddenly his answer meant the world. His grin was all the reassurance she needed.

“I’d love to. Shower first?”

“You bet.”

She took him by the hand and led him to her shower, where they played for some time. The water ran cold and the wine went untouched that night.

Anna couldn’t remember when she’d been happier. Gray had been right. It was past time to live a little—and that’s

exactly what she planned to do.

He was having the best damned dream of his life.

Warmth pooled in his groin, and he stirred with a groan. Lips surrounded him, enveloping his cock. Taking him deep, sucking.

Gradually Gray awoke, but the sensation intensified. He wasn't dreaming, then. His eyes popped open, his vision adjusting to the strange bedroom bathed in shadow. His eyes traveled south, and he stiffened even harder at the sight that greeted him.

Anna was crouched between his legs, sucking his cock. Naked, awash in moonlight, with her dark hair falling around her shoulders, she was a goddess of the night owning his body. And she could have all of him. Whatever she wanted, he'd gladly give.

She took him down her throat, then pulled back. Again and again, until he was almost mindless with lust. Next she licked down the length of his shaft to his balls and laved them, too. One, then the other, bathing them with her tongue, heightening his arousal to painful levels.

“God, that’s so good.” He sucked in a breath. “I’m going to come if you keep that up.”

“Not yet.” Her grin was barely visible

in the darkness. “Do you have another condom?”

“In my jeans pocket.”

She moved off the bed, rummaged around, and was back in a few seconds, holding up her prize. Deftly, she unwrapped the package and gloved him up. Then she blew his mind by straddling his lap, placing the head between the folds of her pussy.

“I’m going to ride you.” She pinched one of his nipples, and he bucked into her.

“Shit, yes!”

Sinking onto his length, she began to move. Up and down, rubbing her clit along his cock and squeezing his rod. Sucking in a deep breath, he fought not to

shoot too soon. It was a losing endeavor with her bouncing in his lap, breasts jiggling, sweet sex gripping him tight. Urging him over the edge.

Unable to hold back any longer, he came with a hoarse shout, filling the latex with his release. Above him she cried out, spasms rocking her slender body until finally she draped over his chest.

A wave of emotion swept over him as he brushed the damp hair from her face. The feeling scared him. He had no business bedding a potential suspect, much less falling for her. The sex had been mind-blowing, yet wrong on so many levels. He was supposed to think of her as a mark, a means to furthering

his investigation, and he just couldn't.

He hoped like hell she would forgive him for this and for what he was about to do. He prayed she'd understand that his actions now were simply to clear her of any wrongdoing, and for no other reason.

Easing Anna off him and to her side, he spooned her from behind until her breathing evened out. Satisfied she was in a deep sleep, he slipped from the bed. First, he disposed of the condom and cleaned up in the bathroom, then dressed as quietly as possible before heading out of her apartment.

Making sure to leave her door unlocked so he could get back in, he hurried the few doors to his apartment and grabbed a small cloth bag from his

nightstand drawer. After pouring the tiny items inside into his hand, he made his way back to her place in record time.

Once there, he undressed again in case she awoke. It would be easier to cover his actions that way. Sneaking around her apartment, he did what he'd originally come here to do—and felt like a complete piece of shit for it the whole time. When he was finished, he retrieved his iPhone from his jeans, went into the living room, and sent a text.

Everything is in place here.

From Simon, he received, *We're good on this end.*

This sucks.

I know, bro. Hang tight.

He'd try. For now, that's all he could

do.

Anna awoke to a handsome face smiling into hers. Despite her grogginess, she couldn't help but smile back. "Hey, there."

"Hey, gorgeous." He kissed her nose. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby," she said. "Never better." Her muscles were pleasantly sore in all the right places, too.

"Want to get cleaned up and go eat some breakfast?"

"I'm not sure I have time. I need to go in to the office and go over some

paperwork, check on a few orders, and
—”

“Anna,” he interrupted. His expression was amused. “It’s not even nine in the morning and you’re already wound tighter than a spring. You really have to learn to let go of that tension or you’re going to have real health problems later in life.”

“Why thanks, doc,” she said dryly. “What cure do you suggest?”

“Food, for a start. Then we’re going to play hooky for the day.”

He sounded so sure of himself, she laughed. “Oh, really? You think the boss will let you get away with that?”

That earned her a grin. “Oh, I know she will. She likes me.”

“Maybe she does,” she teased. “So, assuming you can charm your boss into playing hooky, how exactly do you plan to spend the day?”

Now he showed all the enthusiasm of a little kid. “I want you to show me New York City.”

“For real?”

“Yes! Why not? I’ve been here for months and I haven’t taken in the city yet. There’s a certain pulse to the atmosphere, a cool vibe I want to be a part of. I want to take in the history and the excitement, but I guess I haven’t because it’s more fun to do it with someone special.”

She thought for a minute, weighing the merits of taking a day off. Finally, she

gave in. “How can I say no to that? What do you want to see?”

“Everything. Come on, let’s go.”

After a fun shower that involved soap in interesting places, they got dressed and headed out. Their first stop was a small corner café that served an appetizing breakfast. They dug in to their food, and she marveled at the sheer amount the man could pack away. She could barely finish her eggs and bacon, but Gray ate that plus pancakes and enough syrup to put anyone into a sugar coma.

They chatted companionably, and she found herself drawn to him more and more. She learned that in addition to his parents being dead, he had no brothers

or sisters. Although he hadn't cared much about his lack of siblings as a younger man, now he felt the loneliness of having no family. In that at least they had something in common—when her mother passed, she'd be alone, too.

When they were finished with breakfast, he paid the bill despite her protest, then took her by the hand. “Come on, let's grab a cab to the ferry. I want to see the Statue of Liberty up close.”

“That's a sight everyone must take in at least once in their lifetime,” she agreed. “It's awe-inspiring.”

After waiting in line for a while, they finally made it onto a boat. Anna stood by Gray next to the rail and looked over

the harbor, enjoying the view of both the ocean and the man at her side. There was something freeing about gazing over the sea, leaning into his warmth as his arm went around her and pulled her into his side.

She felt protected. Wanted. Cherished. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but she liked feeling that way. It was a first.

“How many times have you been out here?” he asked.

“Just once before.”

“With a boyfriend?”

She smiled at his blatant fishing. “By myself, actually.”

“That sounds lonely.”

“A little, maybe.” She shrugged. “I

hadn't really thought about it.”

That was a lie, and from the lift of his brow, he smelled it a mile off. Instead of calling her on it, however, he posed another question. “Have you dated a lot?”

She shook her head. “No. I haven't had a ton of time the past few years. You?”

“Same. But I'm finding that I may have put my priorities in the wrong order.”

The statement was so obvious, as was the pointed look he gave her, she didn't know what to do with it. She was pleased and a bit scared at the same time. In the end, his closeness, their intimacy, won her over, and she replied,

“Maybe I have, too.”

His hand engulfed hers as he pulled her back against his front and they watched the statue grow larger. How many people had made this journey and hoped that it signified the start of a better life, the culmination of dreams and everlasting happiness? There was something special about sharing this with him. Magical. That feeling remained with her throughout their tour around Lady Liberty, then as they went on to Ellis Island.

Perhaps this was the start of her true happiness, too.

After walking through the museum at Ellis Island, they were tired and ready for a drink and a late lunch. The ferry

ride back seemed longer than the trip out, and by the time they reached the mainland again and hailed a cab, they were ravenous.

Anna suggested they go to Mesa Grill, one of her favorite places. In minutes, they were sipping on a couple of the restaurant's famous margaritas and recounting their day. As Gray enthused over his favorite parts of the ferry ride, Anna couldn't help but notice how sexy he looked, even windblown. Truthfully, he was more stunning like this, with his hair tousled, eyes shining from the excitement of being together.

They talked for a while about growing up. Once their food arrived, he took a bite and regarded her thoughtfully.

“You mentioned some tension before between you and your mom. You guys don’t get along?”

“It’s not that,” she said. “Mom doesn’t get me. Never has. My choices would never be hers, and that baffles her about me. Plus, she tends to say what she thinks without realizing that sometimes she’s hurting my feelings.”

“That’s not so unusual for parents. But you love her, I can tell by your tone.”

“With all my heart. Even when I could strangle her, she’s my one constant. And she does love me, even if she has the tact of a bulldozer sometimes.”

He laughed, causing attractive lines to crinkle at the corners of his eyes. “She sounds like quite a character.”

“You have no idea.” Margaret would probably eat Gray for lunch.

Just then, his phone buzzed, interrupting their conversation. He glanced at the display. “I’m sorry. I have to take this.”

“No problem.”

She watched curiously as he rose, answering at the same time. She couldn’t help but wonder who he was talking to and why, but it was none of her business. He wasn’t gone but five minutes or so, and then was back wearing a smile.

“Sorry about that.”

“Anything wrong?”

“Not at all. It’s just that . . . I wanted to get in one or two more sights today, but there’s somewhere I need to go after

this.”

“Oh.” Disappointment stabbed her, unexpected and unwelcome. “That’s okay, we can do more another day. I can just take a cab and you can go from here.”

“You misunderstand. I want you to go with me. In fact, I need you there, because my errand involves you.”

She stared at him in confusion.

“Really?” Happiness bloomed again.

“Do I get to know what we’re doing?”

“Nope. It’s a surprise.”

“I’m not good with surprises. I’m too nosy.”

“Well, then, you’ll learn.”

He wouldn’t budge on giving her even a tiny hint, and that ate at her for the rest

of their meal. When they were finished, Anna picked up the check this time, ignoring his objections. They hailed a cab, and Gray gave the driver an address a few blocks from their apartment building.

It turned out to be another apartment, not quite as nice as hers and Gray's. He ushered her up a set of steps and knocked on the door, waiting. She was completely mystified as to what they could possibly be doing here, and a sliver of trepidation snaked down her spine. It fled, though, when an attractive middle-aged woman opened the door with a big smile.

“You must be Gray?”

“Yes, ma'am. I spoke to you on the

phone about your ad.”

Ad? The woman led them inside, and Anna glanced around, waiting for an explanation. It wasn't long in coming.

“Come back this way,” the woman said. “I'm afraid there's only one left, but he's a cutie. Had his first shots and worming, and he's litter-trained already.”

“We'll have a look,” Gray replied.

What on earth? He couldn't be up to what she was thinking . . .

In the small kitchen, the woman bent over a cardboard box, reached inside, and came up with a tiny fuzz ball of a kitten. “This is him. Six weeks old and ready for someone to love him. Want to hold him?” she asked Anna.

Instinctively, she reached for the kitten, gathered his delicate body in her hands. He peered up at her with big green eyes and let out a squeak—and she fell instantly in love. “Oh my God,” she breathed. “What a precious baby.”

He was, too. His fur was charcoal gray from nose to tail, with not a speck of other color in between. A fluffy little face gazed at her in what could only be described as mutual adoration, and she knew she was sunk.

“Gray, I can’t take care of a kitten.” The statement didn’t carry much conviction.

“Tell that to him,” he said, pointing to the cat. From his smirk, he was obviously pleased with himself.

“I don’t know the first thing about pets.”

“It’s not that hard. Food, water, a clean bed, and love.” He shrugged.

“That’s all.”

“I’m gone for hours sometimes.”

“So you won’t work as many late hours, knowing you’ve got someone waiting for your attention.”

She shot him a look that was supposed to be a glare, but didn’t quite make it.

“I’m thinking there was an ulterior motive in there.”

“So? It’s working, isn’t it?”

Yes, it was. Now that she was holding her very own kitten against her chest, there was no way she was leaving without him. She could swear they’d

already imprinted on each other.

“What do you think? Do you want him?” the woman prodded.

“Yes,” she heard herself say. “I’ll take him. How much?”

“Just the cost of the shots, plus kitten food you can take with you. Babies are cute, but I’m not letting my cat have any more of them. Got her fixed.” She named a reasonable figure, and in less than ten minutes Gray had paid the lady and they were on the street with one wide-eyed kitten and a few pet supplies.

“Now what?” she asked, cradling her newest family member.

“We need a litter box. Let’s pick one up on the way home. That way you’ll be set.”

As a cab moved up the street toward them, she looked into Gray's handsome face. "Thank you. He's beautiful."

Leaning in, she thanked him more thoroughly with a lingering kiss that ended when the cab came to a stop and the kitten began to squirm between them. Laughing, they got into the car and were on their way.

"What will you name him?"

She studied his coloring. "Sterling, I think."

"It fits. Great name." Putting an arm around her, he kissed her.

It wasn't until later that night, snuggled on the sofa against Gray, with Sterling in a little ball on her lap, that the enormity of this day—this moment—

really hit.

She was in so much trouble here. With this man, she could have a life. Complete with pets, laughter, love. The whole nine yards.

And as scary as it seemed, it was fantastic, too.

She never wanted this to end.

“You want me to meet your mother?”

Gray stared at Anna and tried to swallow the sudden surge of panic that threatened to explode in his chest. “I’ve never done the parent thing before.”

Disappointment shadowed her

happiness, and she worried her bottom lip. “Too much, too soon?”

“No, I was just surprised, that’s all.” He smiled at her to cover his discomfort. “This thing between us is still new, and I didn’t want to push you too hard.”

“Liar,” she stated, incredulous. “You’ve done nothing *but* push since you first laid eyes on me. But I know meeting Mom is different, so never mind.”

“No, wait. I didn’t say I didn’t want to meet her,” he said, laying a hand over hers. “The answer is yes—we’re on. I’d love to have dinner with you and your mom when you treat her here at the restaurant.”

Her smile blinded him—and infused

him with horrible guilt. The past few days had been the best of his life, spending every minute he could with his lover, falling more and more for her each second. He wanted something real with Anna, but not like this. Not surrounded by lies and subterfuge, pretending to be someone he wasn't. But he didn't see a way out of his mess until the investigation was over.

“Beware,” she warned him. “My mother is sort of overwhelming.”

“I'll consider myself forewarned.” He stood, needing to get out of her office, put a bit of distance between himself and the source of both his guilt and joy. “I have to close tonight, so I don't know if you'll want to wait for me. If you don't,

call a cab or I'll worry about your walking home alone with that mugger still on the loose."

Gray, you're a manipulative bastard.

She gave a shiver. "I'll wait for you, if that's all right."

"I'm glad." He paused at the door. "See you in a while."

"Okay."

His shift went slowly, the clock moving as if mired in molasses. He hated this fucking fake job and couldn't imagine why anyone would want to work for a screaming prima donna like Ethan. Every day he felt like he was trapped in one of those hellacious reality shows, like that one where the chef shrieked at his underlings constantly and

turned so red, Gray was surprised he hadn't had a stroke by now.

In Gray's *real* job, if a madman screamed in his face while Gray was wielding a paring knife, said nutcase would get the knife planted between his ribs.

That grim thought made him smile. Unfortunately, it also earned Ethan's eagle eye.

“What's so fucking funny? Do you find celery to be humorous?”

Everyone in the kitchen gave the chef, and Gray, a wide berth and a wary eye as they continued to scurry about their tasks like mice.

Do not stick the blade in his neck and thrust. You won't look good in

prison orange. His grip tightened on the handle. “No, Chef.”

“Then why are you standing there smiling instead of chopping, dickweed?” he bellowed. “Are you thinking about what else you can fuck up? New and creative ways to piss me off? Maybe you’d like to throw something else all over the floor so I can fire your stupid ass?”

Yes, actually, I would. Please, as God is my witness, fire me, asshole. “No, Chef.” He paused. “I was just thinking how you remind me of that guy on cable. The chef who yells a lot but is brilliant. You know, the best at what he does. You’re awesome, like him, and you should have your own show.”

Ethan blinked at him, not having a clue what to do with the compliment. Probably he'd never received one in his life. A couple of quiet snickers came from somewhere in the kitchen, and the chef whipped his head around, futilely searching for the sources. Unable to spot the offenders, he turned his scowl back to Gray. A lot of his steam had vanished, however.

“Yeah? Well, just do your job, shithead. And wipe the smile off your face.”

“Yes, sir.” *Shove it up your airtight asshole, sir.*

An hour before closing, things had died down considerably. Ethan went home, thank God, leaving cleanup and

prep for the next day to the lowlifes. Peace and quiet reigned, and Gray took care of his station dutifully, cursing every dreaded minute. At least when he found a special woman to marry him, he'd be damned good at assisting in the kitchen. *See, there's a bright side.*

He was so caught up in his musings that he didn't notice that two of the kitchen staff he'd had under watch had left the area several minutes ago, as had become their habit. Their stations weren't clean, which meant they'd probably be back and were still around here somewhere. He had to find them and see what they were up to now.

Slipping his hand into his dress whites, he reassured himself that his

mini camera was still in place and ready for action. Quickly, he sent a text message to Simon that he was going to look for them.

He was almost out of the kitchen when another worker called out, “You leave without putting your shit in order and Ethan’s going to shove you in the oven like the witch in Hansel and Gretel and bake you, man.” A laugh followed that prediction.

Gray gave the kid an icy glare. “I’m heading to the john. I’ll be back.”

Christ, he hoped the guy didn’t say anything to the two missing subjects if they returned before Gray did. That’s all he needed, to end up floating in New York Harbor.

Keeping an eye out for Anna and other staff members, he eased down the hallway that led to the dining room. A quick look around revealed only Brandon, changing the tablecloths and doing setups for the next day. The kid didn't see him, so he turned and went back down the hallway in the opposite direction.

Quickly, he checked the men's room, which was empty, as was the large walk-in freezer. Then the stairwell, listening carefully for voices. Nothing. Once he'd searched every inch of the floor, he stopped to think.

Unless Hernandez and Keene had left the building entirely, the most logical place to go was down. Floor Fifty-Five

occupied the entire top floor of the building. The other floors were various offices for businesses. None of those floors were vacant and would be a good place for two criminals to meet.

That left one area—the basement. He didn't really expect to find anything there, either, but in the interest of being thorough, he'd check it out.

Pausing, Gray considered his options. He had three, the first two of them less than palpable. One, he could take the noisy service elevator. If there were suspects down there, his actions would alert everyone that he was coming. Like *that* wouldn't earn him a bullet to the head in two seconds flat.

Second, he could walk down all fifty-

five flights of steps, sneak up, and get his pictures. If he didn't expire of heart failure first. Not going to happen.

That left his third and best option. Satisfied with a course of action, he took the regular elevator to the lobby, then descended the stairs the rest of the way to the basement. Then he removed the small camera from his pocket and listened.

At first he didn't hear a thing except for the strange pops and creaks of water in pipes, the air-conditioning units, and other noises echoing in the big basement. Those sounds served to hide his footsteps as he moved deeper into the bowels of the building.

He was glad for the backup pistol

strapped to his ankle, the one he couldn't wear when he was with Anna outside work, for obvious reasons. But he wouldn't blow his cover by drawing it unless he had no other option.

Then, beyond the regular noises, the faint sound of murmuring voices reached him. Keeping cover behind some crates, he moved as close as he dared, making sure he could get shots of Hernandez and Keene speaking with a man Gray recognized all too well.

Manuel "Manny" Delacruz. Brother to Gray's most elusive nemesis, casino and hotel mogul Joaquin Delacruz. The Delacruz brothers had been under suspicion for years of various criminal activities—drug running, prostitution,

and gambling infractions, for starters. Joaquin in particular was ruthless, letting nothing and nobody stand in the way of what he desired. The bastard had mocked Gray at every turn.

“When is the wedding?” Manny asked.

Wedding? Frowning, Gray snapped some photos of the meeting.

“Sunday afternoon,” Keene answered. “We’ll have both catering vans ready to go at ten.”

Hernandez chuckled. “One for the real event, one for the buyer.”

“Good,” Manny said, pleased, and jerked a thumb at some heavy wooden crates behind him. “Get those empanadas ready to roll, right?” They

all shared a laugh at his lame attempt at humor.

The realization hit Gray like a bolt of lightning—they were using the restaurant’s new catering service to transport the blow and disguising it as pastries. Why the hell didn’t he catch on sooner? It made perfect sense. He only wished he had a recorder with him, but the pics and his testimony would have to do. Now he could alert Simon, and his partner could set up the sting.

Their next exchange sharpened his focus again.

“What about Joaquin?” Hernandez asked, and their humor died.

“What about him?” Manny’s voice was cool.

“He still doesn’t know about this, does he?”

“No, and he won’t,” Manny snapped. “Not unless you want your tongue removed from your head. My big brother’s misguided attempts to go legit are going to get us killed, and I’m not going to allow that. Got it?”

“Sure, Manny,” Keene stammered.

Their leader pinned the other man with his onyx gaze. “And keep your boss lady and her chef in the dark if you want to continue breathing. They’re both too sharp for their own good.”

“No way will we say a word.”

With that statement, Gray was sure Anna was innocent, as was Ethan. Manny’s statement wasn’t definitive

proof, but it went a long way toward easing his mind in regard to the beautiful restaurateur. He also figured Keene had just signed his and Hernandez's death warrants by acting like a stuttering fool—unless they wound up getting busted first.

Gray was about to turn when his shoe connected with something small and round, perhaps a screw. The tinkling of metal skittering across the concrete floor, echoing through the basement, caused his heart to lurch into his throat. All three of the men froze, then scattered to begin searching the area. When none of them headed in his direction, he hurried back to the stairwell as fast as he could without making more noise.

Inside, he removed his shoes, cradled them to prevent the clattering sound, and took off up the stairs in his socked feet. In the lobby, he put his shoes on again and took the elevator back to the restaurant, then pushed into the restroom. Since that's where he'd said he was going, he wanted to be seen leaving from there, if he was spotted at all.

A glance at his watch showed he was pushing his time. Anna would be waiting for him, and he still hadn't finished cleaning his station. Heaving a deep sigh, he pushed open the restroom door to leave again—and came face-to-face with Keene. Who, he noted, was not sweating and had obviously taken the elevator back up also. Thank God their

search of the basement had delayed them in getting back up here.

“Hey, man. Miss Claire said she’s been looking for you,” Keene said, eyeballing him suspiciously. “Where’ve you been?”

“In here.” Smiling sheepishly, which he didn’t have to fake, he waved in the direction of the toilets. “I’m kind of sick, so don’t get too close.” His flushed face would give credence to the lie.

The other man grimaced in disgust and took a step back. “Oh. Well, see ya.”

“Yeah.” *See ya in prison, fucktard.*

As he watched Keene walk away, the narrowness of his escape settled into his bones. He’d fucked up and alerted them that there was a possible witness. With

any luck they would be satisfied at finding no one and wouldn't alter their plans to move the coke on Sunday.

Moving fast, he plugged a port from the camera into his iPhone. Then he sent Simon the pictures he'd taken, along with another message.

Pay dirt. Manny D heading this one. J doesn't know.

Simon: No shit?! Can't believe that. Me 2. M said J's going legit. WTF? Blow being moved from basement of building on Sunday. Disguised as catering.

Simon: Shoulda fucking thought it. Yeah. Call you later with deets.

No sooner had Gray returned the camera, cord, and phone to his pocket

than he heard a sweet voice call out,
“There you are.”

Anna was coming toward him, obviously ready to go. Her purse was slung over one shoulder, and she appeared concerned. “Where have you been?”

“Men’s room. Sorry I disappeared.”

“Oh. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Ready?”

“When you are.”

He hadn’t finished his station, but screw it. He had tomorrow off, so Ethan could fire him for all he cared. By Sunday, with any luck, Gray wouldn’t be darkening the door of the kitchen ever again.

Gray felt stupid walking home in his

whites, but he hadn't brought clothes to change this time. When they arrived back at their apartments, he turned to Anna. "Come to my place for a bit? I want to get out of the monkey suit."

A hungry light entered her gorgeous brown eyes. "Not as much as I want you out of it."

They wasted no time shedding their clothes. Right there in his foyer he pressed her back to the closed door and attacked her mouth. Groaning in pleasure, she gave back as good as she got. Aggressive. Exciting. No other woman did it for him like she did.

"God, you turn me on."

"Fuck me, Gray. Make me forget my own name."

He couldn't speak for her, but he certainly forgot his. Especially when he lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist. When he sank his cock deep and buried himself to the hilt.

He fucked her against the door, every stroke like sinking into heaven. Too soon, his balls drew up tight and the familiar tingling began at the base of his spine. He was helpless to resist the explosion of his release as he continued to thrust through it. And only when the warmth oozed along his cock did he realize his mistake.

He hadn't worn a condom.

"Jesus Christ," he croaked. "Anna."

"Mmm?" She kissed his neck.

"I didn't use protection. I'm so sorry."

Shame engulfed him as she froze, drew back, and stared into his eyes.

“I—I didn’t think of it, either.” She swallowed hard. “You’re clean, right?”

“Yes! I’m totally healthy. You?”

“Yes. I have papers to prove it.”

“Me too. But I trust you.” That was true, he realized. In every respect.

Too bad he had to finish his investigation.

“I trust you, too,” Anna said quietly.

You shouldn’t, about some things.

But he couldn’t confess. Not yet. Taking her in his arms, he carried her to his bed. Snuggled her against his chest, his heart brimming with his love for her.

“Comfortable?” he asked as he settled her with her head resting on his

shoulder.

“Very. You make a good pillow.”

He loved her warmth against his side. She felt so right there, he never wanted her to leave. “I aim to please.”

“That you do.” She toyed with the light sprinkling of his chest hair, gave him a kiss above his nipple. “Thank you for everything these past few days. I don’t remember when I’ve had so much fun with someone I care about. And Sterling is such a doll, I can’t imagine what I ever did without him.”

“He’s a cutie,” he said with a smile, thinking about the kitten. And her ecstatic reaction to the ball of fluff. “I’m glad you like him.”

“I adore him. I’m kind of crazy about

the man who gave him to me, too.”

“Same here,” he said quietly. “I’m crazy about his owner.”

“Oh! I should get home.” Her voice was worried. “He’s been alone too long, the poor baby.”

“Why don’t I go get him, bring him here for tonight? Then you can stay here all warm and cozy.”

“And naked.”

“That, too.”

“Okay, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. I’ll just need your key.”

She yawned. “In my purse, side pocket.”

That had almost been too easy. She trusted him with the key to her place, to go in alone. A guilty woman would

never have offered him or anyone unrestricted access to her home. More proof of what he already knew, but he had to follow the case to the conclusion.

Please, let us survive what's to come.

Anna's mother arrived Friday, a force of nature all on her own.

Refusing Anna's offer to pick her up at the airport, she'd hailed a cab. Anna let her mother in and was immediately wrapped in a strong hug.

"I've missed you, baby! Let me look at you!" Pulling back, she studied her daughter critically. "Have you lost weight, Anna Marie? Are you eating?"

She couldn't help but laugh. "I own a five-star restaurant. Of course I'm eating. But I have to watch it or I'd be as

big as a house.”

“Hmph. More meat on the bones is always healthier, my grandmother always said.”

“That’s not what you told me before, when you were always on me about my figure.”

“When you were *twelve*, honey. I don’t think I harped more than any other parent does at a preteen who snacks too much.”

Her mother was right. “Well, your lectures paid off. I’ll be sure to eat plenty of good things tonight. Here, let me put your suitcase in the guest room.”

Taking the handle, she rolled the luggage down the hall and put it in the room across from her own. When she

returned, her mother was running her hand over the sofa, the tables. Anna expected her to make a critical remark to join the one about the lack of pounds on her frame.

“Your place is beautiful,” Margaret said thoughtfully. Then she smiled. “Care to show me the rest?”

Pleased, she gave her mother a short tour. “It’s not that big, but it’s a prime location. I was lucky to find a place so close to the restaurant.”

“I’ll bet.” For the next few minutes, Margaret oohed and aahed over the furnishings, the layout, and Anna’s small touches. She met Sterling as well and was instantly charmed by the small ball of fuzz. When they were done, Anna led

them to the living room, where they sat on the sofa to catch up before Gray came to get them for dinner.

“So, tell me more about this man of yours,” her mother insisted. “He must be special if he’s taking *both* of us out.”

“He is special.” She couldn’t keep the enthusiasm out of her voice. “I really like him, Mom. He makes me feel things I haven’t felt in a long time.”

“Love?”

The word caused a shiver, and not in a bad way. “Maybe. It’s soon, but who knows? He’s exciting, and so sexy.”

“Does he treat you right?”

“Yes, he does. And he walks me home every night after work.” At her mother’s curious look, she added, “He’s one of

my prep chefs.”

Surprise morphed on the other woman’s face, then she hooted with laughter. “Hot damn! He’s exciting, sexy, and you’re the boss of him, so to speak. The best of both worlds.”

“True, but he’s no pushover. Wait until you meet him.”

“I’ll do that.”

“What about you? Dating anyone?”

Her mother was still a pretty lady. Though she was smaller in stature than Anna, it was from her that Anna had inherited her brunet hair, brown eyes, and general facial features. She wore her hair shorter than her daughter, cropped at the collar and feathered in a flattering style around her face.

Her mother flushed. “Nobody special. I’ve been to dinner a couple of times with a man from church, but it’s not serious.”

Anna gaped at her. “Which is why you’re blushing like a teenager? Spill it!”

After a few undecided seconds, she relented. “His name is Bruce, and he’s three years older than me. A widower with two grown children and three grandkids. He’s a retired high school principal.”

Her mother’s soft tone, her mannerisms, said more than words possibly could. “If he makes you happy, go for it. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, baby. I am rather fond of

him,” she admitted. “And I lied—he is sort of special.”

They spent the next few minutes reminiscing, until a knock on the door interrupted their talk. “That must be Gray.”

Hurrying to the door, she opened it to find Gray dressed to kill in a tailored black suit that set off his gold-streaked brown hair. He was holding two bouquets of flowers—one sporting white buds, one with red. The red ones he handed to Anna, and gave her a searing kiss. Right in front of her mother. Who, Anna noted when she was released, had risen from her seat and was staring at Gray.

“Hello,” he said warmly, crossing to

her. “I’m Grayson James, or just Gray. Anna’s told me so much about you.”

Taking Margaret’s hand, he kissed it in an old-fashioned gesture, then handed her the white roses. Anna swore that her mother nearly swooned.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she said, beaming. “Anna, do you have a couple of vases for these?”

“Of course.” Walking up to Gray, she kissed him again. “Thank you from me, too.”

The heat in his eyes said she could thank him later—after Mom was tucked in bed.

Margaret monopolized Gray’s attention while Anna put the flowers in water and set them on the dining table. In

fact, the older woman was flirting shamelessly, while grilling the poor man like a drill sergeant. To his credit, Gray answered her multitude of questions easily, not appearing bothered in the least. It was a relief to see them getting along so well.

After talking a bit more, her mother freshened up and changed for dinner. Then they headed down to the street, where Gray had ordered them a cab. He insisted there was no way he was making Margaret walk five blocks when she was dressed so beautifully.

Pleased, her mother leaned over at the first moment Anna's lover's attention was elsewhere and whispered, "He's a keeper."

She couldn't agree more.

Dinner was a lush affair, her staff pulling out all the stops to make sure they all received the royal treatment, though Gray's presence did garner some envious glances. She had reserved their best table and ordered a rare bottle of wine, and they dined on the most delicious meals Ethan had ever created. He'd outdone himself.

A couple of times Anna saw Gray's attention stray as he looked toward the kitchen, but she figured he was thinking of work, probably relieved to be free of Ethan for the night, and soon forgot about it.

"This is wonderful," her mother enthused, waving her fork at the sea bass

on her plate. “What is in this delicious sauce?”

Anna started to answer, but looked to her lover instead. “Gray can answer that even better than I can, since he’s working side by side with Ethan. Does he use white wine or just cream and butter?”

She couldn’t be certain in the dim lighting, but she could’ve sworn his face paled. He blinked at her for a couple of seconds before answering.

“Cream and butter.”

“Really?” Her mother frowned at her plate. “I thought I tasted a hint of white wine. And is that a hint of oregano?”

“Oh, there’s a touch of both, I’m sure.” He stood. “Will you excuse me,

ladies? I need to hit the facility.”

“How odd,” Margaret remarked as he strode away. “Why did he seem so nervous?”

“I’m not sure.” A strange disquiet settled over her, but she managed to shake it off. She was so caught up in the fun of the evening and talking with her mother, she wasn’t sure how long Gray had been gone when he returned.

“You seem quite fond of my daughter,” Margaret said bluntly after they’d eaten.

Gray’s gaze dropped to his plate, and a small smile graced his lips. “Anna is a wonderful woman, and I’m so thankful she came into my life.”

Margaret nodded and fell quiet.

All in all, the evening was a success. They wound down over dessert and coffee, and finally her mother started to wilt.

“I’m so sorry. I’m afraid packing, traveling, and the fantastic meal have caught up with me.” She smiled at her daughter. “But I want to say you’ve done well for yourself, baby. I’m proud of you.”

Margaret meant what she said, always. Nothing her mother had ever told her meant as much as those words did at that exact moment. Finally, her mother *got* it. She’d seen Anna’s world and appreciated it. Even though this orbit wasn’t her own, wasn’t the safe nine-to-five career path she would’ve

chosen, she was proud of Anna.

It was with a profound sense of satisfaction that Anna got into the cab with Gray and her mother to return home. Anna let her mother inside, then said, "I'll just be a minute." She shut the door again and walked Gray to his apartment. At his door, Gray kissed her.

"Come over, after she's asleep?"

"I will," she said, grinning. "But just for a while."

"See you later," he whispered.

Anna went back and kicked off her shoes, eyeing her mother. She was surprised to see the other woman hadn't gone to bed yet.

"So, what do you think about Gray? Do you like him?"

“He’s a very handsome man,” Margaret said, smiling. “Very polite and charming.” But her eyes were troubled, setting off alarm bells in Anna’s head. Since when did her mother *ever* hesitate to say exactly what she thought?

“What is it?”

The older woman shook her head. “I don’t know, sweetie. It’s just a feeling.”

“What kind of feeling? Come on, you’ve never held back in my entire life, so don’t start now,” she said in exasperation.

“It’s just . . .” Uncharacteristically, she seemed to measure her words before she spoke. “I like a man who’ll look me in the eye. And he did that all evening, except for one part of the conversation.”

Anna frowned. “Which part?”

Margaret hesitated. “When he said how wonderful you are and how glad he is that you came into his life. He didn’t look me in the eye once. In fact, he was talking to his plate.”

“You think he was lying? That he doesn’t think I’m wonderful and isn’t glad to have met me?” A surge of irritation crept into her tone.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” Her mother blew out a deep breath. “And that’s not all that bothered me.”

Anna crossed her arms over her chest. It was a defensive posture, but she couldn’t help it. She had finally found a man she adored, was falling for, and it was typical, vintage Margaret to find

fault. “What else?”

“Didn’t you notice how he kept looking around the restaurant, watching everyone around us like a hawk?”

She blinked. “No, I didn’t notice.” But now that she thought about it . . .

“And then there was the question you asked about the sauce on my fish. He didn’t seem to know how to answer the question.”

“He’s a prep chef,” she said in his defense. “He isn’t the one who makes the sauce.” *But he should still know*, an inner voice argued.

“Like I said, it’s just a feeling. But I’ve been around the block a few times, and my intuition is telling me that man is hiding something, Anna.” Moving to her

daughter, she took her face in her hands. “You’re my child, my baby. As much as I annoy you sometimes, it’s my job to look out for you. Always has been, always will be, until I draw my last breath. I know you’ll do what you want, but I’m asking you to be careful. Okay?”

Like magic, her irritation evaporated. Love for her mom surged in her chest and she hugged the other woman close, seeking the comfort only a mother can give. “I will. I promise.”

Margaret Claire was a smart woman. But she had to be wrong about Gray.

Gray had barely changed into sweats when Simon called his cell. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Anna’s mother made you, partner.”

“What?” Fear gripped his heart.

“What did she say?”

“The old lady just told Anna that you’re hiding something. She caught you surveying the restaurant, says you didn’t look her in the eye or some shit. And she caught that you didn’t know how to make some kind of sauce that was on her food, and that made her suspicious. No telling what else she homed in on. The woman is sharp.”

“And now Anna is compromised. Fuck!”

“That’s right. So if you’re going to

take a look at her laptop and search her files at work, you gotta do it by tomorrow night. The sting is set for Sunday.”

They were out of time.

“All right. I’m taking Anna and her mother out tomorrow night. After we get back, I’ll make up an excuse as to why she can’t come to my place afterward, then get into her office after closing.”

“Sounds good. Be careful.”

“Always.”

Hanging up, Gray pounded his fist on the table. He wasn’t ready for Anna to learn the truth just yet.

And probably kick him to the curb.

The next day, around ten in the morning, the phone rang and Anna went to answer. Spotting Gray's number, she smiled as she thought about their tryst after her mother had gone to bed. She'd felt like a naughty teenager sneaking across the hall and meeting her lover for a midnight rendezvous that had nearly melted his sheets.

“Hey, sexy,” she said. “Ready for the musical?”

Gray had gotten the three of them tickets to see the matinee of *Wicked* at the Gershwin Theatre on 51st Street. It was a generous gesture that had further charmed her mother, despite her

concerns.

“You bet, sweetheart. I’ll be over soon, and then we’ll find a place to eat before the show.”

Gray hailed a cab and took them to lunch, making much over the fact that he had two beautiful women on his arm, much to her mother’s delight. Then they went to the show and had a great time. Anna had seen *Wicked* before, but Gray and her mother hadn’t, and it was always fun to watch it with people who hadn’t been. Anna always found herself wishing she’d been the writer to come up with the brilliant premise for the show—what if the Wicked Witch was simply misunderstood? A victim of misplaced hatred and circumstance?

Margaret was enthralled and didn't take her eyes off the stage the entire time, and Gray seemed to enjoy it, too. When the cast came out for their bow, the older woman stood and applauded furiously.

“That was the best show I've ever seen! Are there any more musicals as good as this one?”

The lights came up and Anna grinned. “*Jersey Boys* is great, but you're going home tomorrow.”

“Well, damn. Next time, maybe?”

“You bet.”

Inroads had been made between her and her mom, a connection established between the three of them. It was a great feeling. They walked a few blocks at a

leisurely pace so as not to tire her mother. Then they found an Italian restaurant in Times Square and ate until they thought they'd pop. After more shopping, the sun was going down, and they were all ready to drop.

Margaret put her arm through her daughter's. "Thank you for the best weekend I've had in a long time."

"It's been fun, hasn't it? Thanks for coming, and don't make it so long next time."

"I won't." She gave Anna a sly look. "You'll have to fly home and have a long weekend sometime soon. Meet Bruce."

"I'll do that."

Gray grew quiet on the cab ride home,

but Anna attributed that to being tired. It had been a long day for all of them. But when her mother disappeared inside Anna's apartment, he didn't follow, but hovered in the hallway.

"Everything all right?" she asked, taking his hand. "You still want me to come over after my mother goes to sleep?"

"I'd love nothing more, but I can't tonight. I'm sorry."

Disappointment deflated some of her happiness. "Why not? What's wrong?"

"I'm not feeling so good. Might be coming down with some sort of stomach bug," he said with regret. "I just need some rest. But I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

There was a strange catch in his voice that made her pause. Made her feel weird inside. Not like he was going to call off their budding relationship, but something else. Her mother's words came back to haunt her, and she found herself wondering if he was telling her the truth now.

“I can come over and check on you later, if you want.”

“No, I don't want you or your mom to catch whatever I've got. I'll be fine.”

Her mood dipped even further. “All right. I hope you feel better, and I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, honey.”

He didn't sound particularly sick. Sad, but not ill. What did she know,

though? He would probably go right to bed and pull the covers over his head.

By the time she went inside her apartment, Anna's feet were killing her. In the foyer, she toed off her heels and gathered them up, then started for her bedroom as her mom did the same. Entering the room, she flipped on the light as Sterling howled for attention. She picked him up and loved on him some, scratching under his chin and behind his ears before setting him down again. She must've been more exhausted than she thought, because she had never tripped over the bedside rug before. But this time her foot caught the edge, and she couldn't stop her fall.

Anna hit the floor with a thud,

smacking her knee and elbow. “Shit. What a klutz.”

She was about to get up when she spotted something stuck to the side of the wooden bed frame. It was small and round, about the size of a pea. Lying on her stomach, she reached out and scraped at it with her fingernail.

With some prying, it came off in her hand, and she studied it with growing trepidation. The side that had been stuck to the bed was sticky, and the other . . . Jesus, it looked like a tiny microphone or transmitter. The impact of what she was holding in her hand hit, and she sucked in a breath.

It was a listening device. Her apartment had been bugged.

And there was only one person besides her mother who'd been inside lately—Gray. *I even gave him a key!*

Shaking, she conducted a search and found one in the bathroom, one in the living room under the coffee table, and one in the kitchen behind the coffeemaker. Those were all she found, but that didn't mean there weren't more.

Why would anyone do this? Who would think she had something to hide that they needed to know about? Was Gray responsible? She didn't want to believe that.

Heartsick, she debated waking her mom, then decided against it. Doing so would just upset her and ruin a nice visit. Best to pretend she hadn't found

them, then contact someone—the police?—after her mother went home. After searching for a good place to stash the devices, she put them in a desk drawer and shut it. Nobody would run across them there, and she'd deal with them later.

What about Gray, though? It was getting late, but she decided to go over on the pretext of checking to see if he was feeling better. She'd talk to him, gauge his reaction. She didn't know what to say, but she'd work that out later. She had to know if he had planted the bugs.

Unfortunately, Gray didn't answer his door. She knocked again, and nothing. Had he lied to her about being sick?

That certainly made him seem guilty.

But of what? Was he some kind of corporate spy? Her heart seized as she considered something awful—what if he worked for a competing restaurant and had been hired to sabotage her business? What if he was stealing Ethan's recipes and selling them? To an outsider that might sound ridiculous, but high-end restaurants were a big investment. There were millions to be made and lost. She could be ruined by a rival getting a hold of their recipes.

With that thought, she realized there was one logical place he might be. Pulse racing, she phoned the lobby of her restaurant's building and waited.

“MerTower Building, Joel speaking.”

Thank God her favorite security guard had answered. “Joel, this is Anna Claire.”

“Hey, Anna,” he greeted her cheerfully. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you remember the man who’s been walking out with me in the evenings? His name is Grayson James.”

“The big fellow with the light brown hair?” he asked. “Sure.”

“Can you tell me if you’ve seen him come in tonight?”

“Oh, sure. He got here about twenty minutes ago. Said he had some things to do for you tonight while you were visiting with your mother.”

Another lie.

“Is there a problem?” the guard asked,

worried.

“No, no. I just need to speak to him, but I’ll come up there in person. No worries.”

“Must be a late night for a lot of your employees,” the guard mused.

She frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“There’s been a couple of other workers come in tonight. One of them is called Keene, but I don’t recall the other one’s name.”

“That’s odd,” she said slowly.

“Is there a problem? Should I call the police?”

“No, that’s okay. I’m sure they have a good reason for being there.” Though she couldn’t think what. “Thank you so much, Joel.”

“My pleasure. See you soon.”

This time, Anna didn't go on foot. She hailed a cab and was at the building in record time. As she jogged into the lobby, Joel barely had time to wave before she was stepping into the elevator.

All the way up, her mind whirled with scenarios of what Gray could be up to. It was just after midnight. The restaurant was closed now, and all the employees would have gone home. If he was stealing from her, she was going to kick his ass from here to Times Square. She'd call the police and have him thrown in jail. She wasn't worried about facing him, either. If she had trouble, she'd call downstairs and alert Joel.

At the top floor, she stepped out and into the restaurant's lobby. Flipping on the lights, she walked quietly through the main dining room, then through the kitchen doors and down the adjacent hallway to her office.

The light was on, and the door was almost shut. Rustling came from inside, and her pulse pounded. When she peered through the slit in the door, she swore she felt her heart break in half.

Gray was there. Her laptop was out on the desk, open and running. Which meant he'd broken into her cabinet to get it out. There was a flash drive beside the machine that she knew wasn't hers—wrong color. The bastard was downloading her files? Why?

Her gaze went to the file cabinet where he stood, rifling through the one containing the employee records. Names, addresses, social security numbers. All sorts of sensitive information that an identity thief would have a field day with. Anger replaced her nerves, and she pushed open the door without giving her safety a thought.

When his gaze swung to where she stood, the look on his face was priceless. He stared at her, unmoving, file in hand.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” he said quietly.

“You have the gall,” she hissed, “to stand there going through my things and say that to me? So tell me what the fuck

you're doing. And make it good, before I call the cops."

Setting the file he was holding on top of the desk, he faced her squarely. It took him several moments to speak, and the words were rough as sandpaper. "Anna, I'm so sorry. This really isn't what it looks like, and before I tell you what's going on, I want you to know I never thought you were guilty of anything."

She glared at him. "I'm trying to make sense out of that, and nothing is coming to mind."

"Good. I'm glad, because that means you're not a part of what's going on," he said earnestly. "Everything I've found supports your innocence, which is what I ___"

“What the hell is going on here?” Her shout echoed off the walls.

Gray merely accepted her anger. Absorbed it.

“I’m an FBI agent,” he said quietly. And then he reached into his pocket, hauled out a black wallet, and showed her his badge. Her world tilted on its axis.

He might as well have said, *I’m an alien from a distant planet*. Her brain struggled to process this and assimilate it into information that made sense.

“Not a prep chef. An FBI agent.”

He nodded. “Agent Grayson James Sloane.”

“You went to Le Cordon Bleu.”

“An assignment from my director.

They gave me a crash course so I could go undercover here.”

“Does Ethan know?” She was starting to feel like a fool. If her head chef had known about this all along, she’d skewer him with his own butcher knife.

“No. Nobody did. I was hired blind.”

“And if you hadn’t gotten the job?”

“We’d have found another way to conduct our investigation.”

“Your investigation,” she repeated. Suddenly she felt far adrift from Gray. Like he was floating away on a strange tide and she couldn’t reach him any longer. “Which is what, exactly?”

He cleared his throat. “Do you know a man by the name of Manny Delacruz? Or his older brother, Joaquin?”

“No. Should I?”

“Not necessarily. The Delacruz brothers are crooked casino owners I’ve been after for years. Joaquin is a billionaire, but he’s got his fingers in just about every dirty pie you can imagine.”

“Which has *what* to do with me?”

“Manny planted some of his men here, in your employ. They’ve been using Floor Fifty-Five as the base of their drug running operation almost since you opened your doors.”

“What kind of drugs?” she asked. This could not be real.

“Cocaine.”

“How?” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t see how that’s

possible.”

“It’s really quite easy,” he said with a tired sigh. “They’re using your catering service and hauling the coke out wrapped up in empanada dough. Every time someone contracts your restaurant for their event, Manny’s men add on an extra van to make a ‘special delivery.’ Their scheme would’ve worked for years if Manny hadn’t been stupid enough to place a couple of his men here who were already on the FBI’s radar.”

“Have you found those responsible?”

“Yeah. We’re about to make a bust, so I want you to stay away from here for the next few days.”

Moving inside her office, she approached him. Some of the shock was

starting to wear off, and in its place came a sick feeling in her guts. “I’m grateful that these scumbags are going to be removed from my sight and put in prison. But that’s not the whole issue here, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” His beautiful eyes were begging her to understand. “I had to make sure you were innocent.”

“Did you, now?” Her voice was cold. Distant. She rounded the desk and moved into his space. “And did that entail planting the bugs I found in my apartment tonight? Ransacking my office for good measure?”

“It was my assignment,” he said hoarsely. “I had to make sure. I wanted your name cleared so we could be

together.”

“And was fucking me part of your *assignment*?” she spat.

His shattered expression spoke volumes. “*No*. It wasn’t like that. I mean, yes, I had to get close to you—”

“Close to me? You mean, lie to me, charm your way into my bed? Sweep my *mother* off her feet?” She gave a sad, broken laugh.

“I’ve had feelings for you since we first met. Don’t you remember that? I wanted you as a *man*, not an agent, and my feelings are real. I’m falling for you, Anna,” he said, voice cracking.

“Falling for me? I was falling for you, too, but you blew it apart! How am I supposed to ever trust you again?”

“Anna, I love—”

“Fuck you!” she shouted, shoving him.

Just then, the door to the office swung open and two men walked inside holding weapons. Men she instantly recognized as her employees Hernandez and Keene. The latter smirked, his smile ugly.

“Look what we have here. Good thing the old goat in the lobby is so observant, right?” He glanced at his partner.

“Helpful of him to let us know one of our friends was up here working late. Wonder why you’d be here this time of night, eh?”

Hernandez’s dark eyes glittered.

“Yeah. We’ve been watching you,” he said to Gray with a laugh. “You didn’t really think my buddy here bought that

story about your being in the restroom when you disappeared from the kitchen the other night, did you?”

Gray said nothing, jaw tensing, expression angry.

Keene picked up the thread. “Figured it was you who was snooping around the basement. Also figure you’re a fed.”

“You figured right,” Gray snarled.

Before Anna could register what was happening, Gray pushed her behind him while reaching for something at the waistband of his jeans. As she lost her footing and fell, she realized it was a gun.

Gray’s draw wasn’t fast enough. The men opened fire, and Gray jerked twice, grunting as the bullets hit his flesh. Anna

screamed in terror as crimson bloomed on his chest.

Falling backward, Gray returned fire, and the first man fell, blood smearing the door frame where his head had been. The second went down shooting back, and Gray took another hit. Lying on his side, the agent kept firing until the second man slumped to the floor as well, unmoving.

“Oh my God.” Scrambling to Gray, she took in his wounds frantically, not knowing what to do. There was so much blood soaking his chest and abdomen. She almost passed out from fear.

“Call 911,” he croaked.

“Okay. Just hang in there, do you hear me?”

“Not going anywhere.” He tried to smile, but it fell short.

She made the call and gave as much information as she could. Then, dropping the phone, she sat by him, clinging to his shirt. “Don’t you die on me. Understand?” Tears streamed down her face.

“I’ll do my best,” he whispered, searching her eyes. “I do love you. I hope one day you’ll forgive me.”

“Just get well, okay?” She couldn’t talk about that right now. Couldn’t think about anything beyond whether he’d survive.

His face twisted in agony. “Phone, in my pocket. Call my partner. Simon . . . King. Please.” He murmured a passcode

to his screensaver, which she memorized.

She fished in his jeans pocket. Grabbing the phone, she held it up. “I’ll call him just as soon as we get you out of here.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

“Forgive me, baby. Please . . .” His voice trailed off and his eyes closed. Then his body went slack, and she sobbed.

“Gray?” She shook him and yelled, “Gray? Please don’t go! Please!”

The NYPD arrived, assessing the situation and asking her a barrage of questions. The urgency mounted as they learned about the operation and that a

federal agent was down. Meanwhile, the paramedics arrived, and she was pushed out of the way so they could work on Gray. She didn't know medical terminology, but she caught enough to know his life was in danger. He'd taken three bullets, one each to the arm, chest, and abdomen. The last two were the worst, and the medics were worried.

In minutes they whisked him out, Anna following close behind. They wouldn't allow her to ride in the ambulance, so she hailed a cab on the street, glad the cops had let her go. This was a federal case, so this partner of Gray's would likely ride to the rescue. She hoped.

In the cab, she pulled up Gray's contacts and found his partner. The

phone rang twice before he picked up.

“Hey, man. You find anything new? We’ve got the raid all ready for tomorrow—”

“Simon?”

The man went silent for a few seconds. Then, tentatively, “This is Agent King. Who’s speaking?”

“I’m Anna Claire,” she said, another sob escaping. “Gray’s been shot. The ambulance just took him to Roosevelt Hospital.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

Then the line went dead.

At the hospital, she called her mother, who immediately took a cab to meet her daughter. The second Margaret walked in, Anna flew into her arms and cried

her soul out. Her mom guided her to some chairs where they sat, and she haltingly told her mother the story. Her mom just listened and held Anna, lending her support.

“What do you want to do about Gray?” Margaret asked gently. “Can you forgive him?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, the tears still rolling. “I want him to live, and I’m so afraid for him. But beyond that, I’m not sure.”

“Give it time,” was all Margaret said.

Simon King, when he arrived, wasn’t nearly so gentle or quiet. Gray’s partner fired questions at her left and right about what had happened in Anna’s office, and then made some calls, presumably to get

the mess cleaned up.

It was while Anna was watching Simon make the calls—listening to his voice—that the rest of the truth came to her, like a fog lifting.

“You,” she said, walking over to him as he hung up. He turned to face her, guilt already blooming on his face.

“You’re my so-called attacker.”

He looked away, then nodded. “I’m sorry about that. We needed a way for Gray to get close to you faster than he might have otherwise.”

“To his suspect, you mean,” she said coldly.

King didn’t have much more to add. With another mumbled apology, he took a seat on the opposite side of the waiting

room. Agents soon swarmed in to await the news on one of their own, but aside from the director asking her a bunch of questions, they left her alone. Fine by her.

It was hours before a doctor in scrubs came out and asked for the family of Agent Sloane. The agents gathered around, being his only family, and Anna hung toward the back.

“It was touch and go for a while, but barring complications, he should recover.”

A cheer went up, and Anna’s legs nearly buckled. Her mother took her arm, and Anna didn’t hear the rest of what the doctor said. Gray would survive. Nothing else mattered.

But their budding love was another story.

That he had planned a fake mugging so he could come to the rescue and get close to her was beyond despicable. It seemed to be the final nail in the coffin regarding any trust she might have regained in him.

“Sweetie, let’s get you home,” her mom said softly, touching her face. “You can’t do anything now, and you won’t be able to see him yet.”

“And you have a flight in the morning,” Anna remembered. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have called and woken you!”

“Bull! You’re my baby, and nothing is more important than you. And I’m not

leaving tomorrow. I won't go until I know you're all right."

In that moment, she'd never loved her mother's stubborn, unbending self more.

Reluctantly, she let Margaret lead her from the hospital.

Gray surfaced and knew nothing but pain. And in the midst of agony, he only wanted one person.

"Anna?"

"Shh, partner. It's me."

Turning his head, Gray focused on the figure next to him. "Simon?"

"Yep. Stop talking and get well,

okay?”

“Where’s Anna?”

“She can’t be here right now, but I’m sure she’ll come soon. Sleep, bro.”

He didn’t want to. But he was helpless against the tide that pulled him under.

Anna. Please, come back.

For two agonizing days, Anna debated going back to the hospital. She had to see Gray, but she didn't know what to say. How to move past how he'd played her. Even if it was in the name of the law.

Several of her employees had been arrested in the raid, including a waiter, some kitchen staff, and one of Ethan's sous-chefs. She was disheartened by the betrayals all around her, but glad they'd been caught. A load of cocaine with a street value of millions was seized from

the basement of the restaurant's building, and the FBI was enjoying some rare glory.

Except for the part where Gray had almost died.

She hadn't forgiven him yet. Didn't know if she ever could. Even if she did, she didn't know if a relationship with him could survive the taint.

“Sweetie, you're wearing a hole in the carpet. Why don't you go see him?”

Turning, she faced her mom. “I don't know what I'd say. I haven't forgiven him yet, but I still have feelings for him,” she said miserably.

Her mother was silent for a moment. Anna could tell she was chewing on something.

“What?” she prompted.

“What if you saw him, then got out of town for a while. You can tell him you need time to think.”

She stared at her mom. “And what? Just leave the restaurant and go on vacation?”

“Why not?” Warming to her idea, Margaret grabbed her hands. “God knows Ethan can handle the staff. I’ll take care of Sterling. Gray’s going to survive and he’s in good hands. You can’t be what he wants right now, so take some time to yourself. Then come back when you know.”

“I can’t ask him to hang around waiting for me to decide,” she protested. “It’s not fair to him.”

“Why not? You didn’t start this, and he didn’t have to go so far in doing his job to catch his bad guys. If he loves you as much as he claims, he’ll wait.”

“Do you hate him now?”

Her face softened. “No, baby. I don’t. Do you?”

“No. If I did, it wouldn’t hurt so much.” The damned tears welled again, and her lip quivered.

“Oh, honey.”

“I don’t know what to say to him.”

“Write it down,” her mother said suddenly. “Sit down and write him a letter. Deliver it in person, then go on your trip.”

Anna thought about that. Finally, she nodded. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“Good for you. I’ll help you make all the arrangements.”

Anna sat at her desk and struggled over the right words. About a half hour later, she had managed to compose a letter that told Gray how she felt. One she hoped gave her time to get her shit together and didn’t slam the door completely.

At the hospital, nerves assailed her as her shoes squeaked down the corridor, drawing closer to his room. To her relief, there was nobody there visiting him, no witnesses to their pain.

The air rushed out of her as she saw that Gray was asleep. His chest was rising and falling with every breath. He was so pale, his lashes fanned on his

cheeks. So handsome, and so vulnerable lying there after fighting to survive.

A wave of emotion, one she didn't want to name, nearly stole her strength. Moving to a chair, she sat and watched over him for the longest time, but he didn't wake. Maybe that was a sign. This was for the best. She had to go while she still could.

Removing the letter from her purse, she lay the envelope on the bedside table. Then she stood and kissed his slack lips.

And walked away.

Gray awoke so damned thirsty, he could hardly stand it. His mouth was dry as cotton.

It took him a few moments to get oriented. He'd been having a dream. A nice one, where Anna had come to see him, had kissed him. He could still feel the love lingering around him, almost as if it had been real.

Glancing at the table, he searched for his water glass. Instead, he spotted an envelope propped against the pitcher. On it was written his name.

Hand shaking, he took the envelope. With some effort, he managed to get it open. It took longer to actually be able to focus his blurry eyes on the words, and when he did, he wished he'd been blind.

Gray,

By the time you read this, I'll be on a plane. I need to get out of town for a while, get my head together. I know you'll think this is an attempt to hurt you like you hurt me, but that's not the case at all.

You were doing your job. I understand that. You had to catch the men involved in the drug ring, and I'm glad you did. In the end, you saved my business.

But it's the rest I can't put out of my mind. I was falling for you, hard. If I weren't, I wouldn't be so lost

at finding out you weren't who I thought. That I was just a suspect you needed information from, at least in the beginning. I know you fell for me, too, but you still played me. You went too far.

As for what happened in my office, seeing you kill two men frightened me. Worse, seeing you almost die—that terrified me more than anything. So much that I can't sleep. Even if I can forgive you, even if I can give us another chance, you're still Grayson Sloane, FBI agent. Your enemies will try

to kill you.

And one day, if one of them succeeds, I wouldn't survive losing you. Not like that. I don't have it in me to take that chance with my heart.

Maybe I'm a coward for cutting my losses, but I can't deal with all of this. I need time to think, and as hard as it is for me to say, I don't expect you to wait for me. I honestly hope you find what you're looking for.

Heal fast, please. I'm so glad you're going to be okay.
Love,

Anna

“I already found what I’m looking for,” he whispered. The letter fell from his hand, and his eyes burned. Inside, he was scraped raw and bleeding.

“And I won’t be okay until you come home.”

Anna was sprawled in a lounge on the white sand of Aruba, soaking up the Caribbean sun.

Too bad it couldn’t melt the chill inside.

Three days she’d been here, and she was no closer to an answer. She used the

time to relax and unwind from the stress of what had happened in New York. Stress from making the restaurant successful, too, pouring her heart and soul into the place. She hadn't realized how tightly wound she'd been from that alone.

Should she call Gray? She missed him. But would that solve anything, or just make things worse? She didn't know what to do.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?”

Shielding her eyes, she peered up at the man standing under her grass umbrella. Her mouth immediately went dry.

The man smiling down at her had tanned skin, natural, if she had her guess.

Raven hair was swept back from a face that would make Antonio Banderas weep from shame, and his teeth were a slash of white in his angular face. He was tall and wearing Speedo swim trunks that barely covered the essentials and left not one thing to the imagination.

More than being gorgeous, he was imposing. Even mostly naked, he had a commanding presence that suggested his question was a mere formality. He'd asked to sit next to her, but he clearly expected her assent. The old Anna would've bristled and snarled a rejection, but she'd come here to relax, after all. Who said she couldn't do that while talking with a sexy man?

And he was the most stunning man

she'd ever met—except for Gray.

Quickly, she pushed that name aside.

“Who’s asking?” she said, keeping her tone playful. Light.

His smile deepened, revealing grooves bracketing his mouth that she suddenly wanted to trace with her tongue. “I’m Joaquin,” he said. “And you?”

“I’m Anna.” She studied him, cocking her head.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just . . .” She shrugged. “I thought I’d heard that name before recently. It’s kind of unusual. So, what brings a man like you over here to talk to me?”

“I’ll confess: I’ve been watching you

since I arrived yesterday.” He took a seat without waiting for confirmation that he was welcome.

She arched a brow. “Oh? Stalking much?”

He shook his head ruefully. “No. It’s just that you have the saddest eyes I’ve seen in quite a while. I’d like to know if there’s anything I can do to change that.”

At first she thought he was kidding, or just hitting on her. But in the depths of his riveting black eyes, she read understanding. Sincerity.

“You seem like you really mean that.”

“I do,” he said quietly. Turning, he waved a hand at a bulky man she hadn’t noticed standing just behind them. “Get me and Anna something from the bar.

Something fruity with rum for her, Jack and Coke for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

She snorted a laugh, eyeing him.

“Really? You have a lackey to play fetch for you?”

“He’s my bodyguard. He does what I pay him to do.” Said as though it was quite normal to relax on the beach with a bodyguard.

In spite of herself, she was intrigued.

“Do you always take charge? What if I wanted something else to drink?”

“Do you?”

“Well, no. It was a rhetorical question.”

His lips quirked. “There you go. So tell me, Anna . . . can I help put a happy

smile back on your beautiful face?”

She studied the gorgeous man beside her and thought, *What could it hurt? Live a little, Anna.* That was her new mantra, the one that had been drilled into her head.

“I think perhaps I’ll let you try.”

His smile heated her inside, chasing away the chill. Their drinks arrived, and Joaquin handed her the fruity concoction. Then he raised his own plastic cup in a toast.

“That’s a start, Anna. A very good start.”

Gray was going home tomorrow. Thank God.

He was in bed, flipping through channels on the wall-mounted TV, when Simon strode in, a serious expression on his face. Whatever he had to say, it wasn't good. Gray sat up too fast and winced in pain. He had plenty more healing to do when he got out of here and had to move cautiously.

“Careful, partner.” Simon took a seat by the bed. “You could rip something.”

“Don't stall. Did you find out where Anna went?”

Simon blew out a breath. “Yeah. A resort in Aruba.”

“So what's with the face? You look like someone just died.”

“Someone might when you find out the rest.”

Dread seeped into his heart. “Lay it on me straight.”

“Joaquin Delacruz is in Aruba. He arrived at the resort two days after Anna got there.”

Anger burned inside him, but he kept it in check. Facts first. “Is he going after her because of me? Because I helped take down Manny?”

“I don’t know, man. What I do know is he’s getting awfully chummy with her, doing his best to get close. Real close.”

Anger swept into rage in a single heartbeat, and he shoved the covers off him. “If he touches her, I’m going to kill that motherfucker.”

“What are you doing?” Simon asked in alarm. “You can’t go after him. You’ll either set back your recovery or you’ll really kill each other.”

“That’s a chance I’ll have to take.” Standing, he fought off a wave of sickness and pain. “Get me my damned pants.”

“No. The only place you’re going is home, and even then you’re on bed rest. There’s no way you’ll be cleared to fly, much less out of the country, and you know it.”

The truth seeped in slowly, and it was killing him. Easing back into the bed, he clenched his fists in the sheets. “When I’m out of here, I’m going to take care of Delacruz for good. The question is, are

you with me? If not, stay the fuck out of my way.”

Simon’s jaw clenched. After a pause, he stated, “When you’re *healed*, I’m in. Somebody has to watch your stupid back.”

“Good enough.” That would have to do. For now.

Joaquin fucking Delacruz. Using Anna to get to Gray. To take their hatred to a whole new level.

Well, Gray would play the billionaire’s game. Just this one last time.

Joaquin, going legit? He didn’t believe that for a second. He was going to find the elusive proof he needed.

Then Gray would bury that son of a

bitch alive.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at Book 2
in the TORN BETWEEN TWO
LOVERS trilogy

RISKY

Available from InterMix November
2013

Beautiful Anna. She was only supposed to be a pawn in his long-running game with Agent Grayson Sloane.

Joaquin had come to Aruba to seduce and use her. But five minutes in her company and he couldn't go through with it. It didn't take him any time at all to learn just how big a blow Gray must have suffered to lose her, and that *he* wouldn't make the same mistakes if he could help it. He wanted Anna.

Slipping his tongue into her mouth, he relished her taste, the feel of her curves pressed into his body. She wasn't a delicate woman, but rather lush in all the right places, and only three inches or so shy of his own height. He adored that about her. He'd never been attracted to

frail women, and Anna was strong.
Inside as well as out.

Pulling back briefly, he broke the kiss and stroked one cheek, pushed a lock of dark hair from her face. Big brown eyes met his, and something stirred in him that he'd believed wasn't possible. For as long as he could recall, he'd needed no one but his family and close friends. He didn't *want* to need anyone else—because there was a grain of truth to the saying that once you were in his world, there was no getting out. His enemies had long memories, and some an even longer reach. Letting himself care about someone could be dangerous.

And yet he didn't want to think about that right now. Didn't want to let go. So

he kissed her again, slow and deep, with all the pent-up passion he'd been saving for months. Years. He'd been lonely forever, it seemed. Oh, he'd indulged in one-night stands here and there, but nothing compared to this—simply kissing Anna under the moonlight with the peaceful sound of the ever-moving ocean providing background music.

His cock plumped in his pants, growing with his desire. Heat was building rapidly between them, and he'd have her in bed in about five seconds if he wasn't careful. For once, he wanted to take his time—even if his dick wasn't quite on board with that plan just yet.

“Anna,” he said hoarsely. “God, what you do to me.”

“I’ve been wanting to do that all evening.”

Her confession made him swell inside. “Really? I would never have guessed.”

“I play my cards close to the vest these days.”

“Sometimes it’s worth taking a risk to reap the rewards, though.”

Hand in hand, they continued their stroll through the gardens and along the edge of the beach. The beauty of this night, being next to Anna, made him want to open up. Something he rarely did.

“When I was young, I wanted to be a fighter pilot,” he said quietly. “That was my dream.”

He didn’t look at her, but felt her

sudden attention. He'd be willing to bet the almighty Agent Sloane didn't have that written anywhere in his notes.

Surprise, Joaquin is human. We don't all get what we want in life, even if we have vaults of money.

She squeezed his hand. "Why didn't you go after it, if that's what you really wanted?"

"My father wouldn't even discuss it." He couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice. "Delacruz men don't leave the family business to go out in the world and do their own thing. Especially me, since I'm the oldest."

"I've heard of patriarchs who rule their families like that, but as much as I can empathize, I can't say I understand

what that must've been like. Why not just do it anyway? Would he have harmed you?"

"Not physically. No, his threats were designed to hit us where it really counted—with family. I could have survived on my own without a dime to my name, started fresh, but he knew the loss of my inheritance wasn't a big enough deterrent. He said he'd cut me off from my brothers and sister, and he would've done it."

"But they could have contacted you eventually."

"And in the interim, he would've been hard at work poisoning them against me. That wasn't a risk I was willing to take."

"You love your siblings so much, you

gave up everything for them,” she said softly. “And you claim you’re not a good man.”

“I’m not. But I do love them, even if my brothers have more of our father in them than could possibly be healthy.”

“You could hand the businesses over to them now,” she pointed out. “Then you’d be free to go anywhere in the world, do anything you wanted to do.”

He smiled sadly. “Manny’s already going to serve time for the operation at your restaurant. Even when he gets out, if I let them have the reins, he and Rio would be locked in a battle for control that I can guarantee would not end well. Manny has our father’s ruthless ambition, but little of his insight. Rio

thinks more like me when it comes to legitimizing our name, but he's the youngest and would be expected to defer to Manny's judgment."

"That's so archaic!"

"True, but that's the way it works."

"Not necessarily, if you decided to change it. If you handed things over to Rio while Manny is in prison, sort of took him under your wing and groomed him . . ."

Glancing at her, he laughed. "What could Manny do about it, right? Miss Claire, you do have a bit of an sly streak in you. But maybe that's why we get along so well, since I've already thought of that."

"Would Rio go for it?"

“I think he’d jump at the chance, but any plan I come up with will take time. Perhaps it’ll work, who knows?”

“Good. Nobody should feel as though they’re chained to a wall with absolutely no options.”

God, he liked this woman. Stopping, he pulled her close and stole a few more kisses. He couldn’t resist nibbling her jaw, then down to the soft skin at the curve of her neck and shoulder. There was no way she could miss the hard length of him pressed between them, aching to be freed.

“Would you come to my room?”

“Do you promise to behave yourself?” she asked breathlessly.

“Not in the slightest.”

“Then let’s go!”

Grabbing her hand again, he led her to his room and let them inside, trying not to act like an overeager teenager. That was easier said than done. She was far too tempting, filling his senses as she surprised him by pushing him into the door and devouring his mouth. Her hand slipped into the vee of his shirt and stroked his chest, making him groan in anticipation. A tactile person, he loved to be touched.

Especially by feminine hands, skimming, exploring, as Anna’s were doing now. Working at his buttons, she undid them and pushed the material apart, then continued mapping his skin. Her palms grazed his nipples and he

sucked in a sharp breath. One of his many erogenous zones. The pads of her fingers ghosted over the nubs, causing them—and his cock—to harden instantly.

“Damn, that feels good.”

She hummed in appreciation and slipped one hand to the waistband of his pants. “May I?”

“God, you don’t even have to ask.”

In the darkness, the moon’s light coming through the window, he could just see her lips turned up in apparent pleasure. She deftly unbuttoned the fastening and worked his zipper down with ease to expose his boxer briefs. Without a word, she went to work on those as well, inching the material down.

Over his hips, down his legs.

His cock bobbed between them, eager, hot, and hard. His balls were heavy between his legs, all of him aching. Responding to his unspoken plea, she cupped his sac in her hand, massaging it gently. Moaning, he spread his legs to provide her better access, and she kept kneading him with those small hands, one on his nipple, the other between his legs, driving him out of his mind.

“I think we should move this to my bed,” he said with an effort.

“Not yet.”

Dropping to her knees, she began to pump his shaft, squeezing it with just enough strength to cause that delicious

friction. His nerve endings fired, and he couldn't help but move his hips in time to her ministrations. Then she flicked out her tongue, licked off a drop of pre-cum that had seeped onto the tip. Her lips closed around the spongy head, and he was in pure heaven.

She sucked him down. Not all at once, but slowly. As though her goal was to cause him to die of a heart attack out of pure ecstasy. She damn near succeeded when the entire length was stuffed down her sweet throat and she started to suck, moving up and down on him while grabbing a double handful of his ass.

“Shit,” he breathed, tangling his fingers in her hair. “Anna, darling. This is going to be over before it really gets

started if you don't ease up.”

Gently, he extricated himself from her expert touch and helped her to her feet. Playfully, she licked her lips and then pouted.

“Just when I was getting my rhythm down, too.”

“We've got all night, beautiful.”

Kicking his pants and underwear aside, he felt only slightly ridiculous wearing nothing but his shirt as he led the way to his bedroom. But he soon forgot that as they stopped beside his bed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, very. I want this. I need you.”

How much of that need was Anna simply being on the rebound, he wasn't

certain. He *was* sure he didn't want to delve too deeply into that question, or someone was bound to get hurt. He needed this as well, and he was selfish enough to take the time he'd been granted and run with it.

Reverently, he bent, took the hem of her pretty sundress, and lifted it over her head, then tossed it onto a nearby armchair. She stood smiling at him in her bra and a flimsy scrap of lacy panties, and he quickly helped her off with those as well.

“You're exquisite.”

She ducked her head. “No one's ever called me that.”

“Only because there's not really a word in existence that can do justice to

your beauty, Anna. Since I'm only mortal, that's the best I can do . . . except for showing you what you do to me.”

“Then show me . . .”

Jo Davis is the author of the Sugarland Blue series, the popular Firefighters of Station Five series and, as J. D. Tyler, the sexy paranormal series Alpha Pack. *Primal Law*, the first book in that series, is the winner of the National Reader's Choice Award in Paranormal. She has also been a multiple finalist in the Colorado Romance Writers Award of Excellence, a finalist for the Booksellers' Best Award, has captured the HOLT Medallion Award of Merit, and has been a two-time nominee for the Australian Romance Readers Award in romantic suspense. She's had one book optioned for a major motion picture.

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