

A photograph of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace on a bed. The woman is on top, leaning over the man, and they are kissing. She is wearing a black bikini top. The man is shirtless. The background shows a white bedsheet and a wooden headboard.

COSMO
RED-HOT
READS
FROM HARLEQUIN

NAKED SUSHI

JINA BACARR

A Delicious Mistake

One day I'm getting canned from my job as a computer programmer for having wild copy-room sex with a guy I thought was the new game designer. The next, I'm crashing my ex-boss's business lunch in a creative attempt to get my job back, and men are eating sushi off my naked body!

That's when I realize

- a) My ex-boss is hiding corporate secrets
- b) Hot copy-room guy is an undercover FBI agent

c) I would make a kick-ass spy!

Then Special Agent Hottie brings out his cuffs, and things get really interesting....



Sexy, contemporary romance stories for today's fun, fearless female.

Cosmo Red-Hot Reads from

Harlequin

www.Harlequin.com/Cosmo

Dedication

To Roberta Brown, who has always
been there for me.

Dear Reader,

I love James Bond, with his gadgets and his wild, sexy adventures. As a kid, I spent many afternoons in a dark movie theater, riding shotgun with the handsome spy in his Aston Martin. And the women in his life, oh, my! I'd never be Honey Ryder, but I had this fantasy about filling her bikini.

So I created Pepper O'Malley. She doesn't want to be a Bond girl; she wants to *be* James Bond. Agent 007 in high heels. Why not? Pepper is a crack computer programmer who just happens to wear glasses, but she can beat the boys at their own game. Like so many

girls who work in male-dominated fields, she has to work twice as hard and be twice as smart.

I know what Pepper is up against. I wrote a column called Sweet Savage Byte for a computer magazine, where I looked at the world of technology from a female point of view. I also worked for a video game company, wrote code and created audio/video. These experiences paved the way for me to write Pepper's adventures.

I had a blast writing the story of this girl-spy wannabe who ends up sporting not a bikini, but yellow pom-pom chrysanthemums and a banana leaf when

she becomes a naked sushi model to get her job back. She finds herself caught up in the world of corporate espionage with a sexy FBI agent and his hot chopsticks.

My story is sexy and fun but also explores the real-life challenges women face in the workplace. I love hearing from my readers. Follow me on Twitter, [@JinaBacarr](https://twitter.com/JinaBacarr), www.facebook.com/JinaBacarr.author and my website, www.jinabacarr.com.

Bon appétit!

Jina Bacarr

Jina Bacarr

Naked Sushi



Sexy, contemporary romance stories
for today's fun, fearless female.

**Cosmo Red-Hot Reads from
Harlequin**

www.Harlequin.com/Cosmo

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Epilogue

Chapter One

Naked and as helpless as a beached mermaid, I held my breath. I was about to get eaten by the sexiest man alive.

I knew taking off my clothes was not a smart career move. But did I listen?

Did I?

Out of work and desperate, I had no choice but to take this gig if I wanted to survive. So here I was, lying on a table nude except for a shiny pink thong, banana leaf and yellow pom-pom chrysanthemums, which covered my breasts.

A live sushi plate.

Rose petals lay scattered around me, and was that pickled ginger I smelled?

What if I sneezed?

It got worse when I saw the gorgeous man who got me fired from my computer job grabbing a sliver of red tuna off my belly, pinching me.

Ouch, that hurt.

He gave me the “sorry, babe” look that got me into trouble in the first place. Those smoldering dark eyes of his had led me into temptation. Self-assured and no doubt used to getting his own way, he oozed danger from every pore. I would have followed him to hell if he’d asked me.

He didn’t. Instead, he seduced me on

top of the copy machine at midnight. His tall, athletic body crushing mine against the glass, his hands everywhere. And every dark fantasy I ever had came true. An orgasm that kept coming. And coming...

I groaned.

God, look at that grin. He knew what I was thinking. He knew I wanted him even if I was majorly pissed at him.

Then he had the nerve to wipe his chopsticks across my midriff, leaving a trail of sticky white rice. His tongue flickered out as if he intended to lick the gummy rice off my bare skin.

Oh, yes, please!

I dared not move a muscle.

I couldn't believe I was lying here

naked, belly up, with raw fish spread out all over my body, even around my pubic area. Waiting for this guy to make his move. He appeared unconcerned by the fact I was at his mercy. I would have died if his sexy lips nibbled on me, lips that I imagined were both soft and rough, tender yet insistent in finding out what was underneath that crisp, brown banana leaf glued to my mound.

As if I was going to let *that* happen.

Phew. I smelled like raw fish, tasted like raw fish, and I had raw fish, cold and slimy, sliding down between my thighs, much to the delight of the salivating man breathing on me. I felt so vulnerable lying here, unable to move,

as I watched him licking his chops.

I stifled a groan in the back of my throat, imagining him pushing his probing finger into me, testing the moistness inside me, his touch arousing me before his mouth found the pleasure of my pinkness. Sucking on me, giving my swollen clit so much attention I could hardly stand it.

In my mind, he stroked me faster and harder, delicious sensations building inside me and the ache turning into an unrelenting agony when he went down on me and—

Dream on. I'll never let my defenses down again. How can I?

It was because of *him* I got fired from my job. I allowed my overripe female

hormones to be seduced by this man with a slow, irresistible smile.

And a great butt.

He looked amused, which annoyed the hell out of me. Because of my indiscretion, I wasn't getting unemployment checks, my savings were almost gone, and my rent was due.

Naked sushi, indeed.

I wasn't just pissed. I was going to get even.

* * *

It all started weeks ago when I was working late, preparing to copy the cue sheets for a commercial spot due in the morning. No big deal. Five minutes of

slaving over a hot copy machine, and I'd be heading home to my studio apartment with Chinese takeout.

A single girl's best friend, next to her rabbit vibrator.

The office manager had gone home, so I decided to do the job myself, though I wasn't familiar with how the new machine worked. I was a computer research analyst programmer for a video game company, better known in the world of corporate acronyms as CRAP.

It was a private joke among programmers. No corporation could run without our snappy codes and erratic symbols splashed across pages of files that looked like Jackson Pollock got stuck inside a computer.

I liked my job.

I analyzed and edited clips of our company's ads and video games and then recoded the video and audio files and converted them for various media. I also did postproduction, including sweetening the videos with music. When I got bored, I'd get creative and do fun things, like embed hidden erotic poems into corporate microdots in PowerPoint presentations. Easy as texting if you knew how.

All you had to do was create a new text box on a slide and type in sexy stuff like, "Did your last date speak French without an interpreter?" Then change the font color to the background color to

make it invisible before shrinking it down to a small, dot-sized box. Add a grid, note the box's location, and then send that to all the programmers. The clued-in ones without computer anxiety knew how to read the sexy message. Made Tuesday morning meetings a lot more fun.

I also added sexy French words to the background tracks on test video games. I was good at picking up languages. And I loved messing around with spy stuff, which was why I'd applied to the CIA, FBI, DEA and ATF.

I never got past the written exams.

I found out sporting anchor-girl glasses didn't place me high on their list of qualified applicants. I was saving up

to get Lasik surgery before I got canned, but I could never get the cash together.

Then there was the matter of my questionable background. I was a security risk because I didn't know who my parents were. How could I? Officer O'Malley found me when someone dumped me at the 16th Street Mission BART Station while I was still in diapers. He gave me his surname and called me Mary Dolores after the mission nearby, but the guys knew me as "Pepper." I started calling myself that in the eighth grade to rev up my sex quotient.

Since it was doubtful I'd make it as a covert operative, I was determined to be

the best at my job. I was really comfy at my last place of employment. You *could* call me an arty techie, which was why things like outdated office furniture and dirty bathrooms, leaky ceilings and vermin of the four-legged kind bugged me.

I found out you can't escape the two-legged ones no matter how cool the decor was. I worked at one company with a gang of programmers who thought using soap was for girly men. Worse yet, I could hear rats scurrying above me. When a ceiling tile came loose and I saw a tail and two little feet dangling over my head, I bailed.

At my last job we had airy working spaces, bathrooms with cut flowers and

a lunchroom with a junk food menu to die for. Unlike a lot of software companies who dip their sticks in Silicon Valley, my ex-boss took over a restored Victorian house in San Francisco and turned it into a first-class company facility.

I loved discovering the secrets of the old house, including hidden cabinets, desks with locked drawers, even a concealed entrance.

And I had my own office. No backseat surfers peering over my shoulder and trying to tell me how to write code. Add to that a steaming-hot mocha latte on my desk every morning and I was stylin'.

Damn, I wanted my job back. That

place was *cool*.

It was the *why* I got fired that had me pissed.

I had sex in the copy machine room. My cheap surrender over the copier, buttocks thumping, my rear end overexposed.

I admit it took two to fandango, but it wasn't *all* my fault. I was hungry—and not just for Chinese takeout. I spent way too much time alone. It wasn't easy keeping a man interested when you get excited by new software programs and he had a hard-on. My last boyfriend dumped me because I worked late nights stressing over things like audio warping.

I noticed guys didn't dig chicks who knew more about their computers than

they did. Consequently, my dating life consisted of hanging out at a virtual world website and having an orgasm while I watched my flashy avatar have all the fun.

So who could blame me for taking advantage of the situation when I cornered a stud in the copy room?

Not just any stud, but my dream guy.

For years, I'd pined over the bad-boy type. Bare chest ripped to please and tease. Cute butt. And a lazy swirl of black hair that covered one eye at just the right angle. Daring a girl to go further into the dark with him...

And *not* look back.

Maybe it was because I was tired of

Chinese takeout or because I forgot to buy new batteries for my bunny vibe. Or maybe my new underwear was too tight in the crotch. Whatever the reason, I was feeling extra horny that night.

It all seemed surreal.

Midnight. Quiet offices. Dark shadows everywhere. Beckoning me like black holes you could fall through and land in an alternative universe.

I could almost hear the creepy *Rocky Horror Picture Show* music guiding my every step as I tramped down the empty hallway.

Then I noticed a light coming from under the copy room door.

I stopped. I wasn't alone. Who else was here, then?

I should have minded my own business, gone home and copied the damn thing in the morning. But the snoopy part of my personality that was convinced I had the makings of a spy wasn't about to walk away.

As soon as I opened the door, I discovered a guy I'd never seen before, making copies. I didn't think it totally strange since Mr. Briggs, the owner of the company, recently hired an up-and-coming video game designer to boost sales in new media. I figured he was copying the Playmate of the Month to hang up in his locker. All the guys did that.

It never occurred to me to slam the

door and run for help. I was too involved in eyeing his hard butt.

And those shoulders. Yum.

He was wearing a black baseball cap and black sweats, which should have alerted me that something was wrong, but it added to my fantasy of getting locked in here with him after hours.

I burst out with a cocky, “Copying corporate secrets?”

He spun around and my breath quickened. My eyes fixed on the bulge in his sweatpants with both apprehension and desire. Spiky black hair covered his dark eyes like the mane of a wild animal; his mouth curled into a snarl that relaxed when he saw me.

“Who are you?” he asked, with a

teasing smile. The dark shadow of a two-day beard heightened the cut of his angular jaw. “Security?”

His hand edged toward his pocket, a movement that didn't escape my eye. What was he reaching for? His smartphone?

I laughed in a casual manner, trying to keep the conversation light. “Who needs security with *you* around?”

He grinned and then took his hand away from his pocket and cupped my chin. When he stared into my eyes, my knees turned to honey, all warm and melty. A shiver went through me.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“Pepper.”

“Are you as hot as your name?” he wanted to know, bumping his hip into mine, his hot breath steaming up my glasses. His tough, sexy talk took me to a place I’d only dreamed of going. His voice gripped me, making me squeeze my pubic muscles in a delicious manner and then release them.

“How’d you like to find out?” I said, tossing him a wicked grin.

I loved saying that, figuring he’d laugh like the other programmers and then slap me on the back and ask me to go have a beer.

Imagine my surprise when he didn’t.

* * *

His mouth claimed mine, his lips moist and hot rubbing on my dry, cracked skin. He extended his curious journey to my bottom lip, nibbling on it until I surrendered to him like a hungry guppy. As if I had any choice. Before I could take a breath, his tongue darted into my mouth, sucking the air from me. That delicious moment stirred the fires in me left unattended for too long.

I couldn't get enough of him.

Tasting, probing, exploring me in a long, uninterrupted kiss. I was acutely aware of his intentions, that he was demanding something I wasn't ready to give. Sex with an improper stranger. Something new for me, seeing how I'd

always skated through life on the sidelines.

Not tonight.

We were alone in here. Kissing like two teenagers, making loud noises and tearing at each other's clothes. Nothing but the sound of our ragged breathing and the steady hum of the copy machine to keep us company. Drumming through my head like a vibrator on cruise control. I purred like a kitten, listening to my inner rhythm and loving it. I gave in willingly, my hormones flowing in harmony with his need, my need.

“Silly, dumb, stupid” were adjectives I'd use to describe my actions, but what girl stopped to think when a kiss was *this* good? I didn't. My body became the

prey of this corporate raider Casanova. His hands were all over me, toying with my heavy red-plaid flannel shirt, yanking at the buttons hanging on for dear life. With one small tug, he popped off the top two.

Oh, Lord, what next?

I did nothing to stop him when he cupped my breasts, wondering how far he'd go. He trailed his fingers along the flimsy black lace edging of my bra.

“Mmm...” he moaned. Was he enjoying the kiss? Or surprised that a geek like me was into sexy underwear?

Just wait until you see my new French-cut black satin panties, I wanted tell him. But I was so conscious of his

devouring mouth on mine, my entire being trembling with suppressed emotion, I didn't dare break the lip-lock.

Besides, I wasn't going to let him get that far.

Was I?

Pressed up against the copy machine, I began to have my doubts. I couldn't move, as surely as if I were tied down, my legs spread wide apart, his groin pressed into my mound. His hands wandered. Oh, boy, did they wander, searching up and down my body, his fingers pulling apart my shirt and letting it flap in the cool breeze blowing through the overhead AC vent.

“Oh, yes,” I barely breathed when he broke the kiss and then placed his hands

on each side of my waist and squeezed it. I couldn't stop the shiver that ran through me when he touched my bare skin. I wanted him to go back to eyeing the cute black lace edging of my bra with a front hook.

A front hook, I wanted to shout.

No fancy maneuvering needed to prove to me how much of a stud he was by reaching around and undoing my bra with one hand.

My nipples ached for his touch, but he seemed fixated on stroking and then pressing the flesh on my hips. His hands roamed over my buttocks and then up and down my legs, gripping and squeezing them with a cavalier vigor that

did me in. I arched my back toward him to give him greater access to me.

He grabbed my crotch.

I moaned. Damn, did it get any better than this?

Who would have thought I'd get caught in the copy room with a sexy guy when I had to work late? Not me. Had the geek fairy godmother heard my prayers and brought me a man of my own?

A little voice crept into my head, telling me to grow up and quit believing in fairy tales like my best friend, Cindy, but I couldn't turn back now. I pretended I was a bucking bronco and this cowboy was taking me for a long, sexy ride. I writhed, humped and nearly assaulted

him. I grabbed his black T-shirt and raked my nails up and down his chest. Wanting to touch him, feel him.

I breathed desire in his ear, not wanting to let him go. Still, I walked a delicate tightrope with this man. My ego was on the line. On one hand, I yearned to break boldly out of my shell. To act upon this chance encounter without guilt, no regret. Let him touch me, fondle me.

On the other, I was scared shitless. What if I disappointed him?

This was a common problem with me. Analyzing the hell out of everything I did, even sex. I was no sleek avenger with all the right moves. I was more like the sassy-mouthed brainiac in the spy

flicks who sat at her computer, tapping out answers on her fancy keyboard. Not that I'm bad looking, but I came off as an easy mark when I tried to flirt. I was too eager to please without thinking about the consequences.

Not tonight.

Sexually charged up, incredibly intense, I decided to go for it. I stepped out of my ordinary world and relished this escape from reality. My blue-rimmed spectacles slid all the way down my perspiration-slick nose. I didn't push them back up.

How could I?

I was completely helpless in his arms when his hand dropped down between my legs, his fingers pressing against me.

I wiggled my ass. I wished my jeans were off and he was pushing through my pubic hair until he found my throbbing clit.

Just thinking about it made me moan again; the steady pressure of his fingers rubbing against the rough denim stressed me out. I sensed this man possessed an enjoyment of sex that went way beyond a casual cop-a-feel.

A buzzing excitement slithered through me when I rubbed up against him, primal-like, daring him to tame me. I imagined him pulling down my jeans and panties and then probing me with his tongue, massaging all around my clitoris with his mouth. I growled, the low sound

coming from the back of my throat.

That aroused him more.

I wiggled my hips, hoping he'd get the message. Something about the methodical yet sensual way he touched me set off a slow burn between my legs I couldn't ignore.

"Don't stop," I whispered, pulling on the drawstring of his sweats, but I couldn't untie the knot. "It feels so good."

"You tempt me, babe," he said, kissing the nape of my neck. "Are there cameras in here?"

I shake my head. "Mr. Briggs is too cheap for that."

"Then what are we waiting for?" He kissed me again, deeper this time, his

hands holding me tighter. Pulling at my jeans and searching for the zipper hidden beneath the button-down flap in front.

“Allow me.” I unbuttoned the flap, nearly ripping it off.

“I’m curious,” he said, drawing down the zipper on my jeans with an alacrity that set me on edge. “How did you know I was in here?”

“I didn’t. I thought everyone had gone home.”

“You’re *sure* no one’s around?” He nibbled on my earlobe and then licked all around my ear until I shivered with pleasure.

“Yes. It’s Super Tuesday.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Poker night. The guys meet at Sam’s Bar after work and memorize cards.” A lightbulb moment flickered in my brain, making me ask, “How come they didn’t invite you?”

“I prefer strip poker.” He ran his fingers over my bare midriff, digging them down into the elastic waistband of my panties. I moaned and instinctively pushed against him. From the grin on his face, I could see he was turned-on.

“How about a game of Five-Card Stud?” I mumbled no louder than a whisper. Could he smell my need, moistening my panties with droplets of desire?

I could, which meant I couldn’t wait

much longer.

“I’ve got a winning hand right here,” he said, grabbing my ass.

What would happen next, I could only guess. Anticipation, I found out, could be as good as or better than the sex.

I didn’t have long to wait to find out.

He turned me around and faced me toward the copier and then slid my jeans down below my thighs. Next, he pulled down my black silky panties and then ran his finger up and down the crack in my rear, eliciting a moan from me. I wiggled my butt as his fingers moved up and down in an intimate manner so close to my anal hole I couldn’t stop panting.

The naughty girl in me was overly excited by what was happening to me in

the chilly copy room. I felt daring with my pants down in this high-tech room in an old Victorian mansion, once the seat of respectability.

And, boy, was I turned-on.

In spite of the air-cooled temp, I seethed with heated anticipation when he positioned himself behind me and then eased forward to push the bulge in his pants against my bare butt. I heard the snap of a condom.

“Is that a new one?” I asked him, hopeful.

That surprised him. “Don’t worry,” he said, laughing. “The expiration date is years away.”

I sighed, relieved. If I were thinking

straight, that would have alerted me that something was wrong. Most programmers I knew carry subprime, expired condoms. But I wasn't thinking straight. Instead, I twisted my head around and saw him pull out his dick and slip a raincoat over it.

Jeez.

“Big” didn't begin to describe him. I licked my lips.

I arched my back in total surrender when I felt his erect cock push against the cheeks of my backside. He found me wet and ready for him when he inserted one finger and then two inside me. Without a word, he slid into me with ease. I rode him without fear, his cock moving in and out of me, my passion

building, his breathing becoming more erratic with each thrust. I squeezed my eyes, and I swear tears escaped onto my cheeks. My feelings became so intense I couldn't help myself.

I moaned and moaned and moaned.

I didn't care about anything else then. All I could do was let go. I couldn't believe my luck. This was *me*, Pepper, desired by a sexy man. Instead of always being on the outside looking at the cool people, I was having a booty call at midnight, and it was sublime.

His hips smacked into my butt, pushing his cock into me, his breathing coming loud and fast. I could barely utter a word. My throat was hoarse from

letting go of my emotions and the pent-up feelings buried so deep inside me. I couldn't *wait* for release. I swear he sensed my desperation. He nuzzled his face in my hair, muttering sexy endearments in my ear, his musky, intoxicating smell overwhelming me. Then he fucked me harder, his thrusts stronger, his rhythm unchanging as his cock filled me until it was almost painful. I didn't care.

“Harder,” I yelled.

The stirrings of a powerful orgasm built inside me. That delicious spiral of something intangible swirling around inside you. Promising you a taste of pleasure beyond what you've experienced; pleasure you will do

anything for.

I couldn't hold back much longer.

I leaned forward over the copy machine, pushing my buttocks up against him, urging him on. His body stiffened against me and he yelled out, his voice ragged, vibrating off the walls.

The room swayed in front of my eyes, the steady rhythm of *sex, sex, sex* beating in my brain like frenetic drummers with ceaseless energy. A surge much like an electrical charge gripped us both, racing through his body and into mine.

Then he came.

His explosive climax set off an out-of-control response in me. I went wild, crying out, thrashing about and slamming

my hands down on the platen glass of the copy machine. Crazy, frantic, lost in whirling abandon, I slid my sweaty palms all over the machine. Wild, pawing, and scratching like a wolf in heat.

Oh, my God, it was good.

It didn't last.

In a wild moment, I pushed the copy button by mistake. A powerful white light flooded into my face as the light bar moved back and forth, blinding me.

I hit another button and a blaring alarm went off.

Oh, shit.

I was a goner.

Chapter Two

Damn. I couldn't see.

Groping helplessly, I fumbled around, trying to turn off the alarm, my panic mounting. Screeching, raw sounds grated on my ears, sending my passion into a nosedive.

No. No.

I pushed the button again, but the noise wouldn't stop. I pushed another button, then *another*, but the damn thing kept shrieking like a video game villain gone berserk.

“What the fuck—” yelled the stud in black sweats, slipping out of me and

then pulling up his pants.

“I can’t turn it off,” I cried out, frantic.

He pulled his baseball cap down lower. “Sorry I can’t help you, babe. Gotta go.”

Before I could pull up my jeans, he grabbed the file along with the copies from the exit tray and started for the door.

“*Wait!*” I yelled. “I didn’t come yet.”

“I owe you one,” he said, kissing me on the cheek. Tender-like. That surprised me. Then he saluted me with the tip of his cock—I mean, *cap*—before he raced out the door. I noticed then his hair looked weird, askew. It didn’t hit me until later he was wearing a dark wig under that cap.

“You can’t leave me like this,” I moaned, sinking down to my knees with my jeans squashed around my ankles.

“You can’t.”

I squeezed my pubes together, but the unbearable ache in my groin wouldn’t go away. And that noise. I couldn’t stand it. I hit the machine with my fist, expecting it to blow up in my face. I didn’t care if it did.

To my surprise, the noise stopped.

The room went deadly quiet. Like a tomb.

I let out my breath and wiped off the sweat running down my cheeks, my neck. The silence was worse. My passion refusing to die, my ego suffering, my

mind telling me I must withdraw, retreat.
Forget him.

I couldn't.

I wanted to cry.

I was caught up in a web of fantasy that had crossed over into my real world, and I didn't want to escape its spell. I wanted to remain in this sexual wonderland like I was Alice.

Still groggy, frustrated, I noticed the stud had dropped the original file on his way out but taken the copies with him. Curious, I reached over to grab the sheets of paper spread out on the floor.

No sooner did I wrap my fingers around the official-looking documents than Ms. Sims, Mr. Briggs's office manager, burst through the door, yelling,

“What the hell are you doing in here?”

The Wicked Witch of the West.

In person.

She glared at me through her glued-on lashes. You'd think she'd never seen nude buttocks before when she saw me scrambling to pick up the papers scattered everywhere. My bare ass was up in the air, my thighs still wet with excitement.

I didn't get along with the tall, skinny woman with the perennial *Vogue* smirk on her lips. Ms. Sims—no one knew her first name—always wore black, including black jet earrings that dangled to her shoulders. I swore under the gaudy fluorescents her skin had a green-

gray tinge. She'd never liked me from the day I was hired. I was the only programmer the agency had in their job bank who could write the code they needed, so she was stuck with me. And she knew it.

“I was working late on that commercial spot—” I began, pulling up my jeans.

She ignored my explanation. “How long have you been using the copy room for your trysts?”

“Pardon me?” I asked.

“I wouldn't be surprised if you were sleeping with the whole department,” she said, twitching her nose at me like a squirrel. “On *company* time.”

“That is so not true, Ms. Sims,” I

protested, waving the papers around in a circle. “The guy flirted with me and then kissed me. It went downhill from there.” I didn’t tell her that *I* came on to *him*, never dreaming where it would lead: straight to paradise until the machine went wonky.

“I warned Mr. Briggs this would happen if he hired a female programmer.” “That has nothing to do with it, Ms. Sims,” I said. “I’m a good employee. I’m always here on time, and I work late. I even put the toilet paper on the spool in the girls’ bathroom the way you like it.” Over, not under. Ms. Sims liked to be in control of everything, even where you took a pee.

She pushed her dangly earrings off her shoulders and then motioned for me to hand her the documents. “Let me see what you were working on.”

“These papers aren’t mine—” I insisted, handing her the wrinkled sheets of paper.

“Then whose are they?” She grabbed them out of my hand, nearly tearing them in half.

“The new video game designer,” I insisted. “I found him in here making copies.”

“You’re lying. He doesn’t start until next week.” She held the papers flush against her flat chest so I couldn’t see them.

“What?” I blurted out, disbelieving. My thighs quivered and *not* in a good way. I’d been played, but by whom?

“No more excuses, Pepper. I want answers. *Now!*” she screeched.

“I—I...” Nothing came out. I swallowed hard and squeezed my butt cheeks together until they burned. Of all the low-down, dirty tricks, this was the worst. The geeky types I work with must have sent the stud here to punk me. Oh, my God, what if they’d set up a hidden camera in here? What if my big moment had already gone viral on the internet? Oh, shit, I was had.

“Admit it,” Ms. Sims said, prodding me. “You sneaked a man in here and had

sex with him while you copied confidential documents.”

“I did *not* copy any docs,” I said, trying to convince myself it was just a practical joke. It couldn’t be anything else, could it?

“Then what were you doing with Mr. Briggs’s—” she cleared her throat “—tax returns. They’re not for your eyes or anyone else’s.”

I shook my head, not getting it. Why would this prankster make copies of my boss’s classified information? Unless—

Red and blue lights flashed on and off in my brain like a squad car was chasing me. It all made sense. How the stud was surprised to see me, asking me if I was security, and reaching in his sweats for

what I bet was a gun. Then sweet-talking me into letting him kiss me while he felt me up. Checking me for a weapon, I bet. And I unbuttoned my jeans flap to help him. Talk about dumb chick moves. *That* was the dumbest.

“That guy was a thief,” I said under my breath. That statement knocked the wind out of me.

That was only the beginning of my downfall.

I leaned against the copier and tried to zip up my jeans but couldn't. Wetness greeted my fingers along with a pungent smell both sweet and musky. Panic filled me.

What if the condom had broken?

With that disturbing thought racing through my brain, I vaguely heard Ms. Sims babbling on about how she'd come back to the office to get her cell phone. When she heard the alarm go off, she ran to the copy room. A tall man wearing a baseball cap and black sweats knocked her down and rushed past her. When she opened the door and found me with my jeans down, she assumed I had invited him in.

I tried to explain to her what happened, but she wouldn't listen to me. That didn't surprise me. She had this thing against hiring girls who wrote code.

That was just the excuse she needed.

She fired me.
The bitch.

* * *

FBI Special Agent Steve Raines had a plan for this evening's mission—pick the old-fashioned lock on the back door of the Victorian mansion with the skills he'd learned as a kid from his older brother and then sneak upstairs and copy the documents he'd been angling to get his hands on for months.

After he got what he came for, he'd scam out of there before the spiders knew he'd disturbed their sticky webs. It should have been routine. It wasn't.

He never expected to meet up with a sexy redhead who had a come-hither look about her that steamed up her glasses and made him hard. At first, he wasn't bothered by her intrusion. If anything, he was turned-on by her unexpected appearance. In his line of business he spent many lonely nights camped out in the wet and the cold, doing surveillance. Strip-searching her was an entirely pleasant experience and one he'd enjoy doing again.

He doubted he'd ever have the chance.

Things got sticky when she came on to him like gangbusters. She'd given him no choice but to have sex with her or blow

his cover.

The question was, how was he going to explain his indiscretion to his boss?

“Did you get the docs from Briggs’s office?” Jordan asked him, her fingers tapping on the phone at the other end. Patience was not her virtue. Never had been, though she knew how to hold ’em when the target was in sight but not close enough for a sure kill.

This was not one of those times.

She wanted answers. *Now.*

Steve had stopped at the drive-through for coffee and then pulled into a dark alley and parked his old Buick behind a large trash Dumpster. For several long minutes, he studied the copies he’d made with a pen flashlight before dialing her

on his cell. Special Agent in Charge Jordan Parks played hardball with her agents the same way other women picked out shoes: she liked the ones that dazzled her eye.

Still, she was tough and ran her operations lean and mean. She got the job done or she never would have lasted in this business. He admired her for that, but he wouldn't let her tell him how to run his mission. As long as he came through with the intel, he knew she'd let him play ball *his* way.

Except that tonight he'd scored in one way and fouled out in another.

“Well, Steven, I'm waiting,” she purred. Or was it more of a growl? “Did

you get the documents?”

“Not exactly—”

“Exactly what *do* you mean?”

“I had them in my hand, when *she* showed up.”

“Who?”

“This redhead. She works there and caught me copying the docs.”

“Night crew?”

“You could say that,” Steve said evasively. He wasn’t sure *who* she was, but he’d sure as hell find out.

“You’re losing your touch, old boy.” He heard her smirk. “What happened? Did she suck you up with her vacuum cleaner?”

She emphasized *suck*. Steve said nothing. He was used to her bad jokes.

“No. She’s funny and very pretty—”
She cut him off. “Did you get rid of her?”

“I...well, you see...” He stalled, remembering how surprised he was to find black lace covering her bra when the buttons popped off her shirt. His hands ached to unhook her bra and cup her big breasts, but he was a man in a hurry. He’d frisked her to make sure she wasn’t private security packing heat. “I made love to her.”

“I imagine she couldn’t resist your charm,” she snarled.

“It works on you every time.”

“Can it, Steven. You’re the best-looking field agent I have, but the FBI

didn't hire you for your looks.”

He let that pass.

“Believe me, Jordan, you haven't seen this girl.” He whistled under his breath.

“She's sensational.”

He'd never forget how she'd ground her butt into his groin, teasing him, making him crazy. Dry humping him until he couldn't take it any longer. To knock him off balance? He had to find out.

He'd slid her jeans down over her smooth skin and grabbed her ass. A more perfect ass he'd never seen. And one that gave a guy all kinds of sinful thoughts. Damn, he was going ballistic over this chick.

Why? Because she'd touched a nerve in him.

For all her brave talk, he swore she wasn't as easy a lay as she made out.

Maybe it was the glasses, which he found sexy, that gave her the innocent air. In the end it was his job to make sure she wasn't a threat to him.

“Listen up, Steven,” Jordan was saying, “we’ve been trying to bring in this corporate sleazeball for months and get him to talk.” She paused, no doubt to gulp down her coffee. Black. Always. “And now you’re telling me when you get the chance to get the goods on him, you let your dick do the talking.”

“You’ll have my full report in the morning, Jordan,” Steve promised, knowing he faced another sleepless

night. He hadn't copied the whole file, but what he *had* seen didn't advance the investigation. Frustrated, he downed the last of his coffee. This case was keeping them both up late. Briggs had drawn the attention of the FBI when his bank reported that he split up large financial transactions into smaller ones and then tried unsuccessfully to take his name off them. They needed evidence to prove he was structuring the transfers to evade reporting them. It didn't stop there. It was the *why* that had them baffled. According to their sources, Briggs had made several unexplained overseas trips. Not to mention extravagant dinners at posh hotels, yet Pepper said her boss was cheap.

Steve's gut told him something bigger was at stake than tax evasion. He'd put out feelers on the street and had a few nibbles. What he'd learned so far wasn't pretty. He suspected Briggs was involved in money laundering. All he needed was proof.

"I want to see you in my office first thing in the morning," Jordan finished with a yawn. "Is that clear?"

"Anything you say, ma'am," Steve said, signing off, knowing she hated him calling her *ma'am*.

"Seven o'clock *sharp*," she insisted. "Before breakfast."

"I'll bring the beer," he said, grinning. "You bring the doughnuts."

Then he hung up.

He pulled the baseball cap down low over his eyes to take a quick snooze, planning his next move. His balls tightened. *Damn*, he couldn't concentrate. How could he even think? He couldn't forget his encounter in the copy room with the redhead. There was something about that girl that got under his skin.

He intended to find out more about this Pepper. Who she was, where she came from. And why she was working late. That made her suspect in his eyes. She knew something, but what?

He intended to get a full report on her. Pepper. Smooth, round ass. Sweet,

sexy bod.

A perfect fit for his dick.

Are you as hot as your name? he'd asked her.

You bet she was.

This case just got a whole lot more interesting.

* * *

This was one goddamn screwed-up night.

I'd barely zipped up my jeans when the Wicked Witch of the West made me pack up my things and give her back the key to the girls' daisy-wallpapered bathroom. We were the only two who used it since the company wasn't big on

hiring females unless forced to do so. All the other employees were guys. No receptionist up front. Nobody answered the phone when customers needed tech support since all the calls were routed overseas.

Just rooms filled with programmers and graphic art designers. A geek junkie's heaven on earth.

Then Ms. Sims recited the employee policy to me like it was the Miranda Rights.

“You are hereby ordered not to contact *anyone* at the company after your termination,” she said, stuffing the documents she'd taken from me into a folder. I grabbed my coffee cup and closed up my backpack. I assumed she

would report the break-in to the protection services Mr. Briggs hired to keep out interlopers.

Which made me wonder—

Where was the security guy who walked the perimeter? This wasn't the first time he'd messed up. The only reason he kept his job was because he was Ms. Sims's nephew.

“Why not?” I asked, confused. I often traded programming shortcuts with the guys.

“If you dare to initiate conversation with our employees,” she said, hands on her hips, “I will contact the authorities and have you arrested as an accomplice.”

“Accomplice to what?” I wanted to know. “You got your file back. Nothing was taken.”

Except my pride.

I didn't mention the copies. Why make things worse? Mr. Briggs's tax records couldn't be that important unless he had an ex-wife no one knew about. Besides, I'd never live it down if anyone found out about this, especially Cindy. We've traded secrets and diaries since high school. She'd think it was romantic and want all the juicy details.

“True, but you *did* allow that man in here.” She fumbled around for the right words. “He could have seen our new video game design.”

“I doubt it.” I threw the words back at her. “He was too busy eyeing my ass.”

That did it. The wrath of the Emerald City flying monkeys rained down upon me.

“You little slut,” Ms. Sims screamed. “Get out, *now!*”

I swore I saw smoke coming out of her ears. I shouldn't have said that, but I couldn't help it. She'd had it in for me since Mr. Briggs hired me. She was the Queen Bee until I arrived. She was jealous since I got all the attention from the guys. Was it my fault she didn't know WTF code from the acronym for the expletive?

That was the end of my career at the

video game company. The office manager threw me out on my butt with no references, no severance package.

Nada. I got screwed and the thief got away.

All because I forgot to buy batteries for my vibrator.

* * *

I figured I wouldn't have a problem finding work since video game programmers were a hot commodity. Yeah, right. Nobody told me the job market had gone cold. Or so it seemed to me. Over the next week, I sent out fifty résumés a day online and went on interviews only to have them tell me

they've stopped interviewing for that position. Which was a nice way of saying "not interested."

Worse yet, I discovered no one would hire me because I'd been fired for "misconduct of a nonbusiness nature." That piece of information was leaked to me by a kind soul at the unemployment office. I was persona non grata there, as well. No checks from the state hit my mailbox. Even those online personality tests had it in for me with their trick questions.

You're fucked. You'll never work in this town again.

I shouldn't have mouthed off to the office manager, but my offbeat personality had its roots in my traumatic

childhood. Shuffled from one foster home to another, I pulled off numerous crazy stunts to get attention. When I was in junior high, the other kids wouldn't stop bullying me, saying I was different and didn't have a real family. So I hacked into the school computer to find out what was in my file. Much to my disappointment, I didn't find out anything I didn't already know.

When I was in high school, I wrote a software program to help me learn fact-driven data at a faster pace. Instead of praise for my efforts, I got stung for my antics. You'd think I'd done something wrong, like designing a T-shirt with a logo that was really a cheat sheet. Since

then, I learned to shy away from people to keep from getting hurt.

When I went away to college to get my degree in computer science thanks to a scholarship, I found the only way to be accepted as an equal by the übergeeks was to play down my looks with jeans and red plaid flannel shirts.

And glasses.

I shied away from getting contacts. I had to admit I used the specs as a shield against the world. Recent life-changing moments showed me I couldn't hide anymore. The naked truth was, I was desperate. Past-due rent and an empty fridge were a real incentive for me to rev up my computer skills.

Time for me to do a little snooping to

set the record straight.

* * *

Dawn.

There was something about my old company at this time of day that got to me. Like it wasn't real, only imagined.

A gothic gingerbread house.

Fog sat lazy and white over the trolley wires, while the winding streets gave off a mood of nonchalance before dealing with the seething passion of the morning sun. Birds flitted from tree to tree, flapping their wings to keep warm.

I pulled my flannel shirt closer around me to keep out the wet chill as I traipsed in my clunky leather boots through the

pink and white azaleas around the back of the house. I was amazed how the delicate flowers tugged at their roots in their attempt to grow tall and strong like the wisteria vines hugging the worn brown sandstone. They provided great cover for my private entrance, allowing me to enter unseen through a hidden door leading into a basement room used for storage.

It was a jib door that looked like a window. When lifted and opened, it led into the rear of the house. Most likely it had provided a discreet means of entry for the Victorian gentleman or lady wishing to return home unobserved.

For me, it was the perfect way to sneak inside and put my plan into action.

I treaded carefully so as not to disturb the plump cat snoozing outside the secret door. A habit of hers recently. I'd arrived at the office before anyone else and then waited for the security guard to make his rounds before gaining entrance. No worry. I knew his habits. He did his job in slo-mo. By the time he came this way again, I'd be long gone. I knew what I was looking for. We all left our digital footprints. You just had to know where to look.

Two days ago I installed a device to track the keystrokes the office manager made on her keyboard. Yesterday I recovered it, uploaded it to my computer and then retrieved her password. I was

well aware I was guilty of hacking, but I firmly believed I'd been fired unjustly. I felt warranted in righting that wrong. I just wanted my life back.

I sat down at her computer and, after a few clicks, I was in.

Yes.

I drew in my breath, nervous and excited as files popped up on the screen. It didn't take me long to find what I was looking for: a list of former employees. I knew that Ms. Sims used an off-site human resources company to answer job inquiries about their ex-staff. She must have given them the off-putting information about my termination. All I had to do was change that info in my file.

I scrolled through the names, looking

for my moniker. Once I found it, I'd change the reason for my dismissal to "termination without cause." Then I'd add that I was part of a company layoff.

Next, I'd write a letter on the video company letterhead documenting that my efforts were of value to the company, but "because of the weak economy and a slowdown in the technology field," they'd had no choice but to terminate my employment.

With luck, no one would notice the change in my file, and I could email it to the various job banks to clear my record.

It didn't work out like I planned.

My file was gone. Disappeared. Like I never existed.

I stared at the computer screen as if I were reading another language, one beyond my comprehension. I felt dumb, foolish. I traced my steps again, tried another file, opened it. Nothing. Another file, still nothing.

I sat back, thinking. How did Mr. Briggs intend to explain my disappearance to the IRS? It occurred to me that might not be a bad thing. Still, I kept searching through the files, scrolling up and down, doing a name search.

I came up with zip.

What happened?

Where was my file?

I didn't even blink, as if by sheer

mental force I could will the pixels to form my name. Zilch. I rubbed my eyes. Nothing changed. Finally, I had to admit no computer trick or maneuver was going to bring back my file. I couldn't fix what wasn't there.

That left me no choice. I had to see Mr. Briggs in person and demand an explanation.

That presented a new problem. How was I going to get close enough to confront him? No doubt Ms. Sims would have security haul my ass out before I could talk to him. I would have to corner him somewhere off the premises, but where?

I had bounced forward, my feet flat on the floor, opening various files while

looking for his calendar, when something strange on the screen caught my eye.

What was this?

Mr. Briggs was doing business with companies I didn't recognize. Offshore companies, by the locales of their bank transactions. Weird. I shrugged it off, since outsourcing work in this business was common.

I closed the file and kept looking until I located his calendar. Scrolling through it, I could see he was out of town for the remainder of the week. Then he had meetings across the Bay at snooty banks with security so tight even I couldn't hack into their system. Later, a haircut at

an exclusive salon. I *could* go all scissor hands and scare the hell out of him until he gave me my job back. Not a good career move.

Wait. Next Thursday he had a luncheon appointment at a place called The Mermaid's Tale.

A sushi restaurant.

Cool.

I knew just the person who could help me snag a gig there.

Cindy Ball.

Former prom queen. Do-gooder. And all-round girl-gone-wild.

Better yet, she owed me one.

Chapter Three

“I can’t do it, Pepper,” Cindy said, glossing her lips so red she looked like a fire hydrant eager for a hot firefighter to push her buttons. “I could get fired.”

“You’ve *got* to help me, Cindy,” I pleaded, “my life depends on it.”

“That’s what you said when Mr. Ambrose found out you were doing my French homework and he threatened to fail us both.” She kept glancing down at her phone. She was waiting for a text from her agent about an important audition.

“He didn’t, did he?”

“No, because you discovered he was sleeping with the girls’ tennis coach.” She raised a finely drawn brow. “You always were a snoop, Pepper.”

Thanks, Cindy.

Still, it was Cindy who came to my rescue when the foster family I was living with tossed me out after I checked their computer and found out they were bilking the system. Her parents were squeamish about having a high school tech whiz with a questionable past under their roof until I showed her dad how to use his new computer software to maximize his tax deductions. Without their support, I would have fallen through the cracks and ended up on the

streets. Instead, I went to college and dragged Cindy along with me, much to her family's relief. We were best pals, though we had different goals. I wanted to be a spy, which made Cindy roll her eyes. She wanted to be a reality TV star. I put up with her dreams and she put up with mine. No questions asked. It was an unbreakable bond between us.

“You wouldn't have passed his class without me, would you?” I shot back.

“No, but—”

“I *so* need this favor, Cindy.” I said, poking around her cramped bedroom. Her Barbie doll collection with their sparkly gowns and tiaras grinned at me from every corner. As if they knew my ass was on the line.

“The restaurant owner has strict rules about anyone taking my place at the table,” she insisted. She bit down on her lip anxious-like when she heard a text come in.

“Just this once,” I begged. As long as I didn’t spill sake all over Mr. Briggs, I didn’t see what the big deal was. “I’ll give you the tips, too.”

Cindy looked at me funny, which I didn’t understand. Last I heard she was a waitress at The Mermaid’s Tale in between acting gigs. If you could call being a pair of dancing legs in a commercial an acting job.

“I’m not allowed to accept tips,” she said, reading the text.

“Why not? The Mermaid’s Tale is a hot spot for business luncheons. Are these guys that tight with their money?” I asked. When the one-percenters stopped tipping the pretty waitresses, you knew the economy was bad.

She blushed. “I got promoted at the restaurant.”

“Are you a cook?” I asked, imagining myself chopping up raw fish and cutting off a finger.

“I’m a sushi model.”

“A what?”

“Men eat raw sushi off my naked body.”

“Jesus fricking Christ.” I flipped out at the thought of having to take off my

clothes to get my job back.

“You may be in luck after all, Pepper,” Cindy said, tapping a message on her phone. “I just got word the hair show audition is next Thursday.”

“So?” Why did I ever come up with this dumb idea?

“The manager is cool about letting me go on auditions since he’s an actor, too. He won’t say anything.” Her face lit up. “I’ll do it.”

“Hold on, Cindy, I wouldn’t want you to lose your job,” I said, stalling. Suddenly my bright idea didn’t seem so bright. This was *so* not in my line of work. I was a programmer, not a supermodel.

“Where’s your James Bond spirit,

Pepper?”

“You don’t wear *anything*?” I had to ask. The idea of my body as the sushi blue-plate special of the day made me cringe. I got goose bumps thinking about the icy cold fish wiggling between my thighs, even if they were *dead* fish.

“A banana leaf covers me *here*.” She pointed to her crotch. “And big chrysanthemums cover my breasts.”

“*How* big?”

“Big enough. Since I got my implants, we’re about the same size.”

I still wasn’t convinced. I’d been hiding my body under red flannel tent city so long, I wasn’t sure I’d pass the hot bod test. Sure, I was thin because I

often forgot to eat when I was working, but I didn't have a tan. Cindy assured me I could wear body makeup. It was like having a thin sheet over your bare skin, she said.

A sheet over my face was a better idea.

I'd die of embarrassment if anyone I knew saw me lying spread-eagled with raw fish all over me.

Then I recalled Ms. Sims snarling at me to pack up and leave, waving her broomstick if she'd had one. A surge of daring rose up in me. This was my only chance to confront Mr. Briggs and find out why I was terminated and wiped off the face of the employment roll like an outdated floppy disk drive.

The question was: How bad did I want my old job back?

Enough to take off my clothes?

I looked down at my own Barbie cleavage peeking through my flannel shirt missing two buttons. The idea of taking down that superstud who had me bare-assed over the copier was also a big incentive. Once I got his attention, I'd fill Mr. Briggs in on the burglary and give him a detailed description of the thief, though I'd leave out his dick size.

There were some things they didn't show you in a police lineup.

Besides, he came and I didn't.

It was payback time.

* * *

Mary Dolores O'Malley, Steve read, peering at the data from the secure site popping up on his computer screen. *Date of birth unknown. Place of birth unknown. Parents unknown.*

He tossed his empty foam cup into the trash can next to his desk. That was a heavy load to carry. No trace of who you were or where you came from. His problem was just the opposite. He knew all too well where he came from.

His mother was a decent sort, but she'd gotten knocked up by the local bad boy and had then produced Steve's older brother. Tom knew his way in and out of trouble better than any comic book hero. When Steve was a kid, Tom *was* his

hero after his old man took off. He looked up to him. Tom taught him how to hot-wire cars and jimmy open locks and every other ruse in a thief's bag of tricks. He could con a con man. Steve wanted to be just like him.

Until a bullet stopped Tom cold.

A bullet meant for Steve.

Tom had tried to go straight, but it didn't work. He fell in with a bad crowd and pulled his kid brother in with him. He died in the dirty street surrounded by a rival gang, kicking and beating his broken body.

No hero's death for him.

Before he died, he begged Steve to get out of the old neighborhood and not to end up like him. Only through the

intervention of the local priest did Steve escape the streets *and* his past. The clergyman helped him sign up for the army. Afterward, he went to college and then joined the Bureau. There, while taking down the bad guys, Steve could use the special “talents” he’d learned from his brother.

He was about to close the file, when —

Hey, what’s this?

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Pepper had applied to various government agencies, including the CIA and ATF.

And the FBI?

She’d filled out the paperwork, taken

the Phase I entrance exam and scored quite high. She'd been invited to take Phase II, but she never followed through. She got cold feet.

Why? he'd like to know.

As if he ever would. No reason to keep her on his radar. Mary Dolores—Pepper—was clean. He was convinced her playacting with him in the copy room was harmless. Thank God, she hadn't done his case much damage. He'd found another way to get to Briggs and he intended to put that plan into action right away.

Meanwhile, Pepper had no idea who he was. He had to keep it that way.

Steve grinned. He wondered how she had explained their rendezvous and the

out-of-control copy machine to the woman he'd brushed by in the dark hallway. He imagined her embellishing the story and turning it into a wild tale. Most likely, she made him out to be her boyfriend needing a little late night nooky.

He sighed deeply. Too bad it wasn't true.

Steve looked at his watch. It was almost twelve. He had a meeting with Briggs and he couldn't be late.

He clicked off his computer and watched her file disappear into a cyber never—never land. He had to get Pepper O'Malley off his mind. The last thing he needed was a sexy computer geek with a

great bod tangled up in his life.

* * *

He's here. Coming closer to the table filled with sushi where I lay spread out like a topless mermaid on a giant half shell. I recognized his gruff voice.

Seymour T. Briggs.

My ex-boss.

I drew in my breath and squinted through my fake eyelashes, twisting my head and moving my shoulders, nearly shaking loose the yellow pom-poms glued to my breasts. Petals flew through the air, landing on my nose. I blew them off to get a better view.

Damn, who was he talking to?

Tall, dark-haired, well dressed.
Moving through the restaurant with the assurance of a man who knew women wanted him. He kept his eyes straight ahead; his shoulders were broad and powerful, propelling him forward like a sleek jet fighter ripping through the skies. A trip to the moon and back.

And he'd taken me with him.

Damn. It was *him*.

The stud from the copy room.

What the hell was he doing here?

He sat down at the table with Mr. Briggs and barely glanced at me.

But I recognized *him*, even without my specs. My throat was dry, my heartbeat went wild, and I swore my honey juices

drizzled down between my legs. Talk about embarrassing, since I already had a customer sitting at my table. The man sniffed, smiled and then picked up a piece of fish on my leg with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth.

I hardly noticed. I couldn't keep my eyes off Mr. Stud.

My, he cleaned up nicely.

Gone was the rugged biker look. He was a *GQ* ad in the flesh. He looked smokin' hot in a pinstriped dark suit with a cool-blue shirt and midnight-blue tie. Professional, but I knew that an air of wildness existed under that polished exterior. His dark hair was cut sleek on the sides with just enough length on the top to give him that bad-boy look I

loved.

That didn't explain his covert activities copying Mr. Briggs's file.

Who was he?

A sudden rush of fear made me shiver, and cool perspiration dripped down the sides of my face, my nerves attacking my courage. A sudden twitch in my leg made me jerk wildly as if I were a puppet and someone yanked on my string. My gyrations made the sushi rolls sitting on my thighs bounce up and down, giving the customer sitting within striking distance the opportunity to grab one with his chopsticks. He pinched me, but I felt no pain. I was distanced from what was happening to me, as if I

existed in a parallel dimension.

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my racing heart. It wasn't like I could get up and leave. I *had* to stay. Or Cindy would lose her job. And I wouldn't get my job back.

Yet all I could think about was—

The stud wouldn't recognize me without my glasses and my clothes, would he?

Only a foolish girl would think that.

It wasn't as if our shoulders merely touched when we bumped into each other in the copy room.

We had sex. Him thrusting, me pushing.

I breathed him in, filled with the warm, evocative memory of that night.

Heady musk mixed with the rich smell of office leather, cool AC blowing in my face. I loved it. Sexy encounters like that rarely happened to me. It wasn't like I had this prejudice against intimacy. I was afraid of where it would lead me. Someplace I didn't want to go, where I would have to face who I was, where I came from. So I went for the cheap thrill, the quickie sex.

This was the first time it had backfired on me.

Or had it?

What was I afraid of? *He* was the thief, not me.

I licked my lips, a new plan orchestrating itself in my analytical

brain.

All I had to do was convince Mr. Briggs this man was a burglar. A denizen of the night with criminal intentions that went way beyond seducing an innocent victim. Me, of course. Then I'd have my old job back in spite of his office manager firing me during one of her Queen Bee moments.

I wiggled my pink-tipped pedicure with the red rose petals stuck between my toes and smiled. I was all set to show my ex-boss he couldn't mess with Pepper O'Malley—*and* get even with Mr. Stud. You know what they say.

Revenge was sweet.

Even when it tasted like sushi.

“Mr. Briggs...*Mr. Briggs*,” I whispered, trying to get his attention. He couldn’t hear me. The creepy customer at the end of the table was making slurping noises. I motioned for him to back off, but he was intent on scoring another sushi roll off my thigh.

“I’ve been trying to crack the Japanese market for two years with no luck,” I heard Mr. Briggs say to the stud from the copy room. “What guarantee can you give me your company can do better?”

“We have experience in the Asian market, Mr. Briggs,” he said, choosing his words *and* his sushi with care as he

plucked a sliver of *toro* off my leg.

I winced and my mouth dropped open. Experience? He had experience all right. He knew how to fuck. So what was he doing here with Mr. Briggs?

“A Japanese manager won’t research new software on his own,” he continued, “but ask a colleague for a recommendation.”

“And your company can provide me with such recommendations?” Mr. Briggs asked, curious.

“Yes. Our strategy is to partner with Japanese insiders familiar with what we call ‘the hidden market.’ My company prides itself on having a strong network of well-informed personal contacts familiar with Japanese business

strategies.”

Listen to that bullshit he was feeding Mr. Briggs. Where did he get off acting like a big shot?

I'd grant him one thing, though. Up close and personal fit him. The burning in my belly reminded me *how* personal.

“It will take more than lunch in a Japanese restaurant to convince me you've got these contacts,” Mr. Briggs said, picking up his chopsticks and grabbing a wiggly piece of octopus off my stomach. Yuk. “Though I admit using the body of a beautiful woman to please the eye is innovative.”

“*Very* beautiful,” the stud said, surprising me.

Beautiful? Me?

Nah. He didn't mean it. He was cozying up to Mr. Briggs. That was all.

They chattered on for endless minutes. Another businessman sat down at our table and ordered a beer. I paid him no mind. I was waiting for the right moment to get Mr. Briggs's attention. My sixty-minute gig was almost over. Another model would be here soon to replace me.

Finally, the moment came when I saw the stud from the copy room turn around to order drinks from the kimono-clad waitress.

“Hey, Mr. Briggs,” I whispered out of the side of my mouth. “It's me.”

“Who?” he asked, choking on the octopus.

“Pepper O’Malley. I used to work for you.” I rushed my words. “I’m a software programmer. Video games, commercials. I’m the whiz kid who rewrote all the codes for the *Dragon Beware* game after the last guy screwed them up.”

“I—I have no idea what you’re talking about, young lady.” My ex-boss looked flustered, pulling at his collar, his walruslike double chin tripling in size. “I don’t know you.”

“Yes, you do. Your office manager fired me after this bozo sitting next to you cornered me in the copy room—”

Mr. Briggs glared at the customer dribbling soy sauce on my thigh.

“No, not *him*,” I sputtered, giving the jerk a dirty look when he smeared the salty mixture on my leg. “The guy ordering drinks.”

“How did you know I was here?” Mr. Briggs whispered, the angry look in his eyes telling me he *did* recognize me.

“That’s not important. I want my job back—” I clammed up when the stud turned back around and handed Mr. Briggs an Echigo beer.

“Imported from Japan,” the stud said.

I rolled my eyes. Mr. Briggs was not a Miller-time kind of guy. Expensive champagne was more his style,

according to the accounts I saw on his computer. *Very* expensive. And here I thought he was a cheapskate. The company was doing better than I imagined.

Not Mr. Briggs. He looked like he was about to throw up. I wasn't sure if he looked sick because of what I'd said to him or the ice-cold beer staring him in the face.

“How come the model can flirt with you and not with me?” said the jealous customer, sticking his chopsticks straight up in his rice bowl. Bad manners in a Japanese restaurant.

“She's *not* flirting with me.” Mr. Briggs put down the beer and wiped the sweat off his face with his

monogrammed napkin. “She—she used to work for me.”

I cringed.

This was getting dicey. The stud was giving me the eyeball, his eyes questioning, his heated glance moving over my heaving breasts and then down to my crotch. I should have kept my mouth shut.

Mr. Briggs turned to him. His voice shook as he said, “I think we should finish our business elsewhere.” He threw down his napkin and then got up from the table and left.

“I’ll be with you in a minute, Mr. Briggs,” said the stud, nodding toward the quiet customer about to grab a slice

of avocado off my shoulder. Without changing his deadpan expression, the man put down his chopsticks, got up and followed Mr. Briggs.

I couldn't believe it. They were working together.

My back stiffened. So what happened now? They roughed up Mr. Briggs in a dark alley? Stole his credit cards? Drove him to the ATM and mugged for the security cameras?

I wasn't prepared for the stud's next move.

“Well, if it isn't the sassy redhead from the copy room,” he said with a smirk. He grabbed a spicy tuna roll off my thigh and ate it in a sensual manner, smacking his lips and rolling his tongue.

“Surprised to see me?” I quipped.

“I didn’t recognize you without your glasses.” His dark eyes roamed up and down my nearly nude body. The look in his eyes was hot enough to burn the flower petals to cinders. In a low, sexy voice he said, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Trying to get my job back,” I shot back at him. “Until you screwed it up,” I’d rather die than let him know how seeing him again affected me.

He slid his chopstick under the flowers covering my breasts in the pretext of grabbing a slice of fish, rubbing my bare skin and sending tiny sparks through me. I clamped my legs

together.

Damn, why did he have to do that?

“You shouldn’t interfere in matters that don’t concern you,” he said.

“I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t seduced me.”

“*I seduced you?*” He laughed.

“You’re the one who tried to convince me you’re as hot as your name.” He leaned over and dangled a chopstick dipped in hot wasabi over my quivering tummy. “Pepper, isn’t it?”

“I’m surprised you remember.”

“That’s not *all* I remember,” he insisted, pulling yellow flower petals off my breasts with his chopsticks, one by one.

“Hey, sister, talk to me, too,” yelled

the disgruntled customer at the end of the table, grabbing his chopsticks out of the rice bowl.

“The lady isn’t talking to anyone.”

The stud jabbed me in the buttock. I winced. “*Anyone*, is that clear?” he said. “Or she’ll find herself swimming with the fishes instead of lying with them.”

“You can’t threaten me,” I said in a clear voice, though I was shaking inside. “If anything happens to Mr. Briggs, I’ll go straight to the police and tell them what happened in the copy room.”

“Everything?” he said, egging me on.

“*Everything.*”

“You want your job back that bad?”

“Yes. I—I need the money to pay my

rent. And to eat. I don't get to take home the leftovers.”

He looked surprised. “You're not kidding me, are you?”

I shook my head.

For a moment, a look of tenderness came over his face and I almost trusted him. Almost.

Then he retrieved a wad of bills that made my eyes bug out, peeled off several and stuffed them into my hand. “Now we're even. Keep your mouth shut or Mr. Briggs won't be walking so good.”

I could feel the crinkly bills filling my palm, tempting me, but that wasn't my style. I tossed the hundred-dollar bills down on the black velvet table. “I don't

take bribes.”

“Consider it a tip.”

“I’m not allowed to take tips,” I said, echoing Cindy’s words.

The unhappy customer tried to pinch a hundred with his chopsticks, but the stud was faster. He grabbed the wad and stuffed the bills back into his pocket.

Snickering, he turned and said to me, “I’ll see you around...*Pepper*.” Then he grabbed another tuna roll off my thigh and jammed out of the restaurant before I could say sayonara.

* * *

I kept pressing the on button on my cell phone, but nothing happened. It was

dead. Damn, they shut off my service. I told them I'd pay them soon. A lot of good *that* did me. How was I going to call for help? There was no pay phone in the dressing room or anywhere in the restaurant.

I grabbed the short pink kimono Cindy had left hanging on the door and put it on and then peeled off the yellow flower petals sticking to my breasts. The thick adhesive tape smarted when I pulled it off. I let the kimono hang loose as I walked around the dressing room, pressing the button and then sliding and tapping my fingers all over the screen, trying to make it work—

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.”

I spun around. It was him.

Looking angry but gorgeous. I let out a deep sigh. Why did this guy have to be so damned good-looking? I almost wished we were back in the copy room. Me with my butt up in the air and him behind me, sliding down my jeans.

That was before I knew he was a thief. I couldn't drop my guard around him.

Not this time.

“Did you forget something?” I said, cocky.

“Yes. *You.*”

“What?” I asked, not understanding.

“I had a feeling you wouldn't follow my orders.” He came closer; I stepped back. “Put down that phone.”

“What if I don’t?” I said, stalling. I pretended to text a message on a screen that was darker than my roots. Lucky for me he couldn’t see that.

“I’ll have to take you with me.”

Oh, my God, he was going to kidnap me.

“Like hell you are.”

In spite of my wild attraction to this hottie, I had no desire to become a missing person statistic.

I ran for the tiny bathroom, hoping to lock myself in, when he did some fancy martial arts move on me and knocked the cell phone out of my hand. When I leaned over to pick it up, he grabbed me around the waist and then reached inside

my short pink kimono and pinched my nipples.

“I’ve been wanting to do that since I saw you lying on that table looking as sexy as hell,” he said with a big smile.

“Why don’t you take your hot chopsticks and go play somewhere else,” I said, shooting him a cool “I’m not interested” look. I refused to let him turn me on.

Instead, I tried to kick him in the balls.

He anticipated my maneuver and backed away with a hip-hop move any rapper would envy and sidestepped my foot.

“You vixen,” he said, growling. Then he grabbed me around the ankle and knocked me off balance. I slid down to

the floor, landing on my butt.

“Ye—ow!” I cried out.

“Ready to give up?” he asked, staring at me.

“No way, José.”

Winded, I started kicking wildly with my bare feet, my kimono open and spread around me. I pushed out my chest, my nipples pointing straight up, begging for him to bite them. Hoping he'd take the bait so I could try out the karate chop I learned in a self-defense class. I had no time to lose. My ex-boss could already be hogtied and quartered in a dark alley like a bluefin tuna ready for market.

“You leave me no choice, Pepper,” he said in a husky voice. Before I could

take a breath, he sat on me, grabbing my wrists and slapping handcuffs on me with the finesse of a man used to tying women up.

“*Let go of me!*” I yelled.

“Not until you calm down, you little hellcat.”

“Then what are you going to do?” I asked. “Make raw sushi out of me?”

“You almost ruined six months of work with your sex games.”

“Sex games?” I said. “*You’re* the one stalking Mr. Briggs. Breaking into the company offices and seducing a helpless employee—”

“You? Helpless?” He laughed. “I’ve never seen a woman with so much fire in her.”

That gave me an idea. A smart girl would use her sex appeal to talk her way out of this situation.

I slowed my breathing and changed my tactics. “You’re not going to leave without satisfying me....” I licked my lips, nice and easy, my tongue making a wet circle around my open mouth. “Are you?”

He crossed his brows, and I swore I saw a flicker of interest in his eyes. It quickly disappeared. “You can’t blame a guy for wanting to make love to a beautiful woman, Pepper. But I’d never leave her hanging, unless my ass was on the line.”

“You mean *my* ass.”

“Don’t be so squeamish,” he said, making light of my misery. “You know the drill. I saw an opportunity and I took it. Nothing more.”

Inside I was hurting from his remark, but I kept my game-face on. I refused to let him see how much his words stung me. “I don’t believe you. A man doesn’t come like you did if it’s only a quickie.”

“It’s a perk in my line of work,” he said with a snicker.

“Oh, yeah? Who do you work for?” I dared to ask him. “A syndicate? A rival software company? Or are you just an ordinary thief?”

I saw his mouth set in a firm line, his breath coming faster. I’d hit a nerve.

“There’s nothing ordinary about me.” He gripped my wrists tighter, the sheer power of being helpless stimulating me, though in this situation my primal urges were better left suppressed.

“Oh?” I teased him. “I don’t remember. Show me.”

“I didn’t come back here to make love to you—”

“C’mon, fuck me. I dare you.” I wiggled, making my breasts bounce up and down, giving him an eyeful. I refused to panic. Keep him talking. “I bet you can’t get it up again.”

“Your game won’t work, Pepper. I have a job to do and you’re in the way.”

Uh-oh. I didn’t like the way he said

that. Like I was about to get tossed out of a speeding car in the middle of the night. I would have wet my panties if I was wearing any. I wasn't. In my mind, a thong didn't count.

I saw him reach into his jacket pocket. I tried to scream, but he clamped his hand over my mouth, shutting off my air. I struggled while he ripped the pink silk belt off my thin kimono and gagged me with it.

“This will keep you quiet,” he said. I kicked him in the shin, making him yelp. “*Damn*, I've never had so much trouble with a woman. Why didn't you mind your own business?”

I twisted and turned my body, going wild. What did I have to lose? He was

going to plug me with a bullet between the eyes anyway.

I couldn't believe my luck when Cindy burst through the door.

“Pepper, I got the job—” She screamed when she saw him sitting on me, my hands cuffed and pulled up over my head, my mouth gagged. “Don't anybody move,” she cried out as if she were auditioning for a cop drama. “I'm calling the police.”

“Stay right where you are, miss,” the stud ordered her, pulling a gold badge and ID out of his coat pocket and shoving them into her face. “Special Agent Steve Raines, FBI.”

“*Oh, my God, Pepper,*” Cindy gasped,

her hand going to her mouth. “What have you done now?”

No, no, no. I twisted my head back and forth, trying to get the gag off, tell her the badge was a fake. Had to be. He would have told me that night in the copy room if he was working for the FBI, right?

I kept struggling, anything to get him off me. I knew he was going to kill me as soon as she left.

“Tell my partner standing guard outside to come in,” he said. “I’m going to need a hand here.”

“Yeah, sure.” Cindy gave me a look of pity. “Don’t worry, Pepper. I’ll get you out. *Promise.*” Then she ran out, slamming the door and leaving me alone

with this guy.

Come back, Cindy. He's going to kill me.

It was too late. She was gone.

But I wouldn't give up without a fight.

I learned how to take care of bullies growing up. Kids calling me names, knocking my glasses off, trying to take me down. I fought back, used my brains to get through school and secure a good job.

No phony secret agent man was going to take it away from me.

I couldn't describe the survival-like spasms jolting through me, energizing me. No sooner had he turned his back to me than I brought my cuffed hands down

and slammed them on the back of his neck, stunning him.

He slumped to the floor, moaning, his badge and ID card landing on the carpet.

I grabbed them and stared at the gold badge for a long moment. I couldn't believe what I saw. The government creds looked oh so real.

A sick feeling hit me.

Jesus.

I'd just clocked a G-man.

Chapter Four

I spent the next two hours sitting half-nude in a gray room with no AC and no windows, taking a polygraph test. Back and forth went the convo like a volleyball on steroids. Two guys and a woman in plainclothes grilling me.

No one cracked a smile.

Them asking and then *me* answering questions about my ex-boss, his office manager, the other programmers, even the cleaning staff.

I was surprised they didn't ask me what birth control I used.

“Did Mr. Briggs make overseas

trips?” they wanted to know. “Ask you to make bank deposits for him? Pay you in cash?”

“I write code,” I said, trying to keep my cool. It wasn’t easy. Sweat dripped down between my breasts. I didn’t dare wipe it away. They’d probably book me for lewd conduct. “I spend my workday up to my eyeballs in funny symbols. Believe me, not *one* of them is a dollar sign.”

“What about the other programmers?” they asked. “Did any of them boast about making extra cash? Give you the idea they may be in on the operation?”

“No.”

“Any strangers hanging around who looked suspicious?”

I rolled my eyes and then shot a glance over to Agent Steve Raines, trying to keep a straight face. I could rat him out, make him squirm, but I had a better idea.

“There was this delivery guy who came on to me in the copy room...” I added the “delivery” bit to make it sound good. It wasn’t a big lie, so I hoped the machine wouldn’t notice.

“Yes?”

I adjusted my glasses and said in a bored voice, “But he didn’t make much of an impression on me.”

He coughed.

Gotcha.

“Any unusual emails? Computer files

compromised? Strange deliveries to the office?” someone asked me.

My inner geek bell went off. Now things were getting too close to home. If they found out I hacked into my ex-boss's computer, I'd be headed off to the gray bar hotel pronto.

I had to throw them off course.

“Yeah,” I said in a husky, dramatic voice that would make Cindy proud. “We had some weird stuff going on last week.”

A hush fell over the room.

“Tell us, Miss O'Malley.” They leaned in, waiting to hear what I had to say.

I grinned big. “Some jerk at the deli sent over a goat-cheese-and-broccoli

pizza instead of our usual double cheese, double pepperoni. The guys were pissed.”

Faces crunched, teeth clenched. My attempt at humor didn't go over well. The lie detector machine screeched to a halt. The operator shook his head and the feds whispered among themselves, giving me dirty looks.

I waited for them to decide my fate.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. My heart pounded in my chest like a bad ringtone.

Finally—

“You attacked a federal agent, Miss O'Malley,” said the interrogator with a stiff shirt collar and a stiffer dick, by the bulge in his pants. He kept eyeballing my

sweaty cleavage spilling out of my kimono. “That’s a crime and a punishable offense.”

“*He pounced on me,*” I said, pointing to the man who fucked me in the copy room. I refused to admit to anything. I knew my rights.

“What Miss O’Malley means,” interrupted Agent Steve Raines, clearing his throat, “is that she believed I was a threat to her. She had no idea of my identity.”

I blinked, disbelieving. He was lying. He’d clearly identified himself. Then I caught my G-man hottie giving them a look that said to go easy on me. My eyes widened. What was up?

“She broke the law, Steven,” another

agent chimed in. Female. Pretty in a classy way. Perfect hair. High heels. Higher IQ. I'd get no reprieve from her. "No excuses."

"Haven't you ever walked on the wild side, Jordan?"

"No."

"You should try it sometime." Then he grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the room. My teeth chattered. I'd never been so freaking scared in my life. I imagined the agents chasing after us, but I heard nothing but my ragged breaths in my ears.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"My boss. Special Agent in Charge, Jordan Parks."

“Oh,” I whispered.

Steve laughed. “Pay no attention to her. Jordan keeps her rep squeaky clean and wrapped up tight, like she’s wearing pantyhose.”

I nodded. Even an FBI agent had problems with a diva boss. Who knew?

I wasn’t off the hook, he said, but he wanted to speak to me alone. Without the suits coming down on me like vultures feeding on a dead horse. He took off his jacket and put it around my shoulders and then led me down the hall to another room. Empty, except for the two-way mirror. I prayed no one was on the other side.

“Sorry I had to cuff you, Pepper, but I

couldn't let you blow my cover with Briggs.”

“Why didn't you tell me that night in the copy room you were with the FBI?” I had to ask. No one could see or hear us in here. Despite my stiff neck and aching shoulders from being the fresh catch of the day, I wanted to find out more about Steve Raines.

“I couldn't. I wasn't there on official business,” he said, shutting the door, “but on a hunch based on information I picked up from a federal wiretap.”

He explained how he lured the security guy away with a phony emergency, making it easy for him to sneak inside the building. I didn't want to dent his ego by telling him that wasn't

hard to do. The guard welcomed any excuse to take a smoke break.

“I had to make you believe I was a thief to cover my tracks,” he said.

“Then why did you tell them I didn’t know who you were when I slammed you on the back of the head?” I asked.

“Orange isn’t your color,” he said, looking me over with a you-are-so-hot smile. “Besides, I like you.”

“I don’t believe you,” I shot back.

“Why not?”

“Lying is part of your job.” I pushed his jacket off my shoulders. A heated flash of anger raced through me. I wasn’t going to fall for his sexy, smoldering look, trying to make me believe he was

into me. I wasn't fooled. We were on his turf now. "You're good at it, too."

"So I've been told." He looked away from me, staring at the two-way mirror as if he could see his own past. Funny, he didn't look smug, which surprised me.

"By who?" I asked, more curious than I had a right to be.

"A terrorist."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"No, the bastard was threatening to shoot his hostage. A teenage kid he held by the throat." The federal agent wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, as if the memory left a bitter taste on his tongue.

I looked at him. I saw something

disturbing in his eyes when he turned back toward me. I met his stare. “What happened?”

“I shot him.”

Jesus.

“What if you’d missed?” I asked, a sick feeling creeping over me like wet, slimy worms crawling down my cleavage.

“I had to take that chance.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Like I took a chance on you, Pepper.”

“I don’t get it.”

“In my business, you get a sixth sense about people,” Steve said, making me crazy when he began rubbing the back of my neck. “The way you came on to me

all sexy and flirty, eager to prove to me you were more than a hot programmer made me wonder if you really *were* the wild and crazy girl you pretended to be.”

“So what did you find out?” I said, loving his hands on me.

Oh, please, yes, keep going. It felt so good.

“You have a raw hunger in you that cries out to be nourished,” he said, his lips brushing my skin, his mouth possessing me. “But you’re afraid to let yourself go, so you come on strong.”

“You’re no pushover yourself, Steve,” I told him, daring to call him by his first name. If he was going to get personal, so was I.

He relaxed his expression and then his face turned serious again. He held me close to him, his strong arms tight around me, as if he had something to say and wouldn't let me leave until he said it. "It comes with the job, Pepper. What the public doesn't see is the anguish you face every time you can't get a conviction or a hostage situation goes wrong. It eats you up inside, but you go on."

"What keeps you going?" I asked. I never expected to hear this stuff from him.

"A promise I made to my brother before he died."

"Yeah?" I pulled away, intrigued. I

never had any family except for Cindy. She was like a sister to me. I'd die if anything happened to her. Why was he telling me this? I couldn't believe I was getting all touchy-feeling with a guy who could have had me fitted for an orange jumpsuit. Only then did I see a pain in his eyes I'd never seen before, a determined resolution in the set of his jaw.

“I joined the Bureau after I got out of the army,” he said.

“You were in Iraq?”

He shook his head. “I served with my unit in Afghanistan after I lost my older brother.”

“You want to talk about it?” I picked up his jacket, slipped it over my

shoulders and listened.

“Tom was a two-bit hoodlum. He never had a chance after our old man took off. He started cutting school, using drugs.” Steve paused and then scraped peeling gray paint off the table with his finger. I could see the furniture was repainted over and over with the same iconic shade of gray. As if to dull the pain suffered here. “He taught me everything he knew, but in the end he admitted he was wrong and didn’t want me to follow in his footsteps.”

“What happened?”

“He tried to go straight,” Steve said, clenching his fists, “but he was murdered in a gang attack in our old

neighborhood.”

My hand flew to my mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Homegrown terrorism is a real threat we can’t ignore, Pepper.”

“So you joined the FBI.”

He acknowledged my comment with a nod. “I hit the streets every day to take down the bad guys so people can go on with their lives, never knowing how close they came to losing that freedom.” He looked at me and I saw the fierceness raging in his eyes, like a primitive animal ready to pounce. I shivered. “I do it for my brother, and for everyone like him who paid the ultimate price.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I wanted to know. This was serious

business. Way beyond a little taxpayer like me getting fired. What was his game?

“Because I believe you feel like I do.” He leaned down, so close to my lips, I swore he was going to kiss me. He didn’t. Instead, he shocked the hell out of me when he said, “We need people like you willing to put themselves on the line.”

My mouth dropped open. “You did a background check on me, didn’t you?”

He gave me that half smile of his that made me melt. “I had to make sure you were clean.”

“Then you know I applied to the FBI when I got out of college,” I said,

smoothing a strand of loose hair away from my face in a nervous gesture. “I didn’t make it.”

I didn’t clue him in that I lost my nerve and didn’t finish taking the tests after my background came into question. I was afraid they’d find out things about me I decided I no longer wanted to know. It was safer that way. It allowed me to live in a dream world with no responsibility to my past.

I looked again into his face and saw the puzzled expression etched on his features, as if he were waiting for me to explain further. I didn’t. To my relief, he returned to the present situation.

“Now do you understand why I had to get out of the copy room without you

knowing who I was?” he said, emphasizing his words. “I was looking for the intel that would explain how Briggs transferred funds to hide his dirty little secret.”

“What secret?”

“High-class call girls.” Steve said.

“In Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan.”

I let out a low whistle. “So that’s why he’s so determined to get into the Japanese market.” I paused, thinking, “His office manager said the documents you copied were Mr. Briggs’s tax returns. She was lying.”

He nodded. “I found company bank transactions from years ago, but they weren’t much help. Not surprising.

Briggs is a new player in the game. No doubt the woman is privy to his dirty dealings, making me suspect Briggs keeps what I'm looking for hidden in encrypted computer files.”

“Can't you get a search warrant and seize his financial records?” I asked.

He shook his head, frowning. “It's not that easy.”

“Really?” I couldn't imagine the FBI having to ask for permission to do anything.

“Not since a federal judge handed down a decision against keeping NSLs secret—”

“What's that?” I asked, curious to find an acronym I didn't know in this world of OMG, LOL and RAT. Remote Access

Tools. A bored programmer's fave pastime. Watching unsuspecting computer users doing weird things on their webcam, often sexual in nature. Not me. I preferred my fantasies in the flesh.

Like now.

I reveled in all this spy talk. Wishing we were two agents talking shop.

“NSLs are national security letters,” Steve said, “where the Bureau collects private information on a target, like financial and phone records.” He explained the Bureau found its hands tied with the recent crackdown on issuing such letters. “This operation will be put on ice for years if we can't gather the evidence we need to build a case

against him.”

I wiggled my fanny, knowing I had a secret.

“Not if I can help you get it.”

* * *

A dark, moonless night hid us as we sneaked around the back of the old Victorian house, better known as my former place of employment. I got a cheap thrill up my backside when I showed Steve how to slip through the secret door and his groin nudged my butt cheeks. Even through my sturdy jeans I could feel his rock-hard erection.

Dream on.

Hey, a girl has to take what she can

get. All through college, I spent my nights reading a handbook on string-searching algorithms instead of sporting a G-string. I never regretted it until now. I knew nothing about hotness, how to figure into that sexual equation of boy-beds-girl and thereby discover my self-worth. I always thought working hard and using your brain were all you needed to succeed in the corporate world.

Look where it got me.

No doubt I was now on the FBI's watch list, though Steve assured me no charges would be filed against me if I cooperated with the investigation. *That* part was cool. What sent my sex-o-meter into a nosedive was that after our heart-

to-heart, my new BF was all business. No head rubbing, no shoulder touching. Nothing.

I kept my hands to myself. Had to. I was on a mission to clear my name and if hacking—I mean looking for a security hole in the company's computer, Steve's words, not mine—got the job done, then I was up for it.

Lucky for us, the guard was on foot patrol on the other side of the building. Most likely smoking his favorite blend by the smell of it.

Giving us time to get inside.

“Be careful,” I warned Steve, bending low. “We might not be alone.” I was fearful he might trample a plump, happy

cat, snoozing near the door, with his heavy black boots. To my surprise, the kitty was nowhere to be seen except for a series of paw prints tracked inside the house. My heart skipped a beat, hoping nothing had happened to her. The tawny feline was the only one I could trust at my old job.

Steve cut through the narrow passage opposite from the phony window where we'd entered. "Where does that lead?" he asked.

"To the main reception area."

"Then what? I need to get into Briggs's computer."

"Not his computer. His office manager's." I told him about the companies I'd spotted in a file on her

computer and the offshore locations of the bank transactions associated with them.

“How did you secure the password?” he wanted to know.

“CTI,” I said without missing a beat. “Creative techno intervention.”

“You mean hacking.”

“I call it saving my butt.”

He shook his head, grinning. “You wait here, Pepper, out of danger. You could get hurt if Briggs and the men he’s working for show up.”

“What could be more dangerous than being cornered in a room with you with my pants down?” I asked, following him. I caught a brief glimpse of the copy room

with its big machine and cold platen glass. My pubes sent out a text alert. I squeezed my thighs, remembering Steve's hands on my waist, his hot breath on the back of my neck.

“You never fail to amaze me, Pepper,” he said, making me wonder if that was a good thing or a bad thing. After all, what did I know about the art of seduction? I was new at this. I worked two jobs in college and missed spring break when all the girls went au naturel and let the guys lick tequila body shots off their breasts and crotch.

I just smiled and went all computer geek, creeping into Ms. Sims's office like I was following the yellow brick road. Sitting down at her desk, I slid my

fingers over the mouse, squeamish about leaving fingerprints, and turned on her computer. I entered the password and double-clicked on a file, then another. And another.

“Holy shit.”

“What is it, Pepper?”

“There’s not just one file, but two more listing companies I don’t recognize, along with their shipping schedules and banking info. PacWest Comix, Tech-More Digital, Blue Seahorse Software.” I read more names off the computer screen, digging my fingers deep into the pocket of my red plaid flannel shirt.

“So?” Steve asked, leaning over my

shoulder. I wished he would cup my breasts, but my FBI hottie wanted answers more than he wanted to cop a feel.

“When I first spotted them, I figured the company was outsourcing work. Now I have my doubts.” I kept digging through the files. “We’d have to write a new video game every week to keep up with the work demand from this many companies. Even I’m not that good.”

Steve chuckled. “Don’t underestimate yourself, Pepper.”

I smiled to myself, secretly pleased at his remark. “I doubt if they’re new customers, either. All our clients are informed on a regular basis about next year’s video games and upcoming

marketing strategies.” I opened another file outlining the latest advertising campaign. “I was right. None of these companies are listed here.”

“Most likely they’re shell companies used to transfer funds back and forth.” Steve stood behind me, his hot breath hitting the back of my neck and sending a shiver up and down my spine as he shined his flashlight on the computer screen.

I sat up straighter, enjoying the closeness between us. Pushing my breasts out, hoping he’d get the message. He didn’t. Damn.

“I can’t believe my ex-boss is a crime lord.”

“Most likely he fell in with a syndicate who promised him bigger profits if he played ball with them. Like using his company as a front for illegal money laundering. I’ve no doubt Briggs got in over his head when he started using call girls to transport dirty money to offshore accounts.” He snickered.

“Not to mention getting some action on the side.”

I wrinkled my nose. Somehow I couldn’t picture Mr. Briggs getting it on with a cardboard-face bimbo.

“Why would he do it?” I asked, leaning in closer. Steve pretended not to notice. “The company is doing well, our sales figures are up—”

“When a CO starts thinking with his dick instead of his brain,” he said, “chaos follows.”

I couldn't resist adding, “Do you always think with your brain?”

“I wouldn't be here if I did.” He rubbed the back of my neck and the cool night air seeped through my flannel shirt. “Transfer these files for me, Pepper,” he said, leaning over me, his face so close to mine the stubble on his chin scraped my skin in a pleasant, sexy way. “I don't want to get caught in here when the sun comes up.”

“You mean we're not going to finish what we started over the copier?”

“And have you set off the alarm

again?” he said, pinching my butt.

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I’m curious,” I asked, trying to change the subject to cover my disappointment. “What do spies do when they finish a job?” I inserted a thumb drive into the computer. “Go to Disneyland?”

He laughed. “Sorry, Pepper, you’ll have to play Sleeping Beauty and lay low while I wrap up the case against Briggs.”

“Any suggestions where I can...lay low?” I burned the files onto the thumb drives and then safely removed them from the computer. I was about to stuff them into my pocket when Steve grabbed them, but not before his hand brushed

against my breasts, making me moan.

Thank you, God.

He said, “We’ll discuss that *after* we get these files into the right hands.”

“Speaking of hands...” I rubbed up against him and ran my hand up and down his thigh. His hard muscle flexed under my fingers, telling me my superman was human after all.

“Do all computer programmers think about sex 24/7?” He kissed the nape of my neck, nuzzling my ear, and then ran his fingers up and down my shoulders. I wanted to fall into his arms with joy when he wrapped his hands around my breasts. My nipples peaked like two peas under a hard mattress. I closed my

eyes and then let go with a sigh of unbearable pleasure. I tingled when he unbuttoned my shirt, sliding the flannel off my shoulder and caressing my bare skin.

“I can’t help it,” I whispered, closing my eyes, my whole being alive to the sensation of his lips trailing kisses on the back of my neck. “I work with hard drives all day.”

“Lucky for me,” he said, digging his fingers under my soft, foamy bra cups and working his way up toward my hard nipples. Pinching and twisting my buds and then pulling on them like they were knotted rubber bands. I groaned.

God, I couldn’t stand it. I wanted his fingers in me. Not one, two. Yes, two.

Steve slid his hand down my jeans, making me shiver with delicious anticipation. Yes, closer...closer...oh, yes.

I was floating in a la-la land of happy contractions when I heard angry voices coming from downstairs. I pushed away from him, every nerve in my body alert.

Who the hell was that?

Steve flipped off his flashlight and gestured for me to stay put, but I followed him anyway. I was so not letting him out of my sight. Not with those fingers.

Racing on tiptoe across the corridor, we peeked over the railing and looked down the winding stairway. There

below I saw Mr. Briggs and his office manager, Ms. Sims, arguing in the foyer. Then he pushed the button on the creaky, old elevator.

Jesus fucking Christ. We didn't have much time.

Steve grabbed my hand and pulled me back into the office. Without a word, I turned off the computer. Steve wiped it clean along with the mouse and then we headed for the stairway.

We were too late. The elevator was slow, but not slow enough. The door was opening.

They'd see us.

I freaked.

Chapter Five

“We have to hide,” I whispered, instinctively taking his arm.

“Where?” he asked. “I can’t blow my cover with Briggs.”

I saw the supply room door open halfway. “In here.”

We barely had time to squeeze inside the dark room and close the door when Mr. Briggs and Ms. Sims swept past our hiding place. A whiff of her tart perfume sent a wave of nausea through me. Yuk. I cracked open the door and heard my ex-boss ordering her to check her computer files. The overhead light went on, and a

familiar whir filled the silence. The cascade of blue windows coming up on the monitor cast an eerie glow on their faces.

Zombies best described them.

I cringed. What if they saw us?

Could Mr. Briggs fire me twice?

I pulled back out of sight, the sound of my breathing loud in my ears. Or was that Steve breathing down my neck? Nice. I couldn't stop a shiver wiggling down my spine. Damn, this was no time to rev up my libido. We had to bail out of here and slip through the hidden entrance unseen.

Still, I wasn't complaining about the delay in our getaway. What girl would? Crushed up against his hard body in the

small dark room, I couldn't get enough of him pressed up against me, his hands caressing my back. Up and down. Slowly. His lips brushing the bare skin on my neck. Every nerve alert.

I rubbed that special spot between my legs where my jeans cut into me. Damn, it burned. I wouldn't be able to control my pent-up passion much longer. Not when it felt this good. A slow fire simmered in my belly, evoking a pleasant ache that set me on edge.

Until I heard Mr. Briggs say, "I thought you erased that girl from your computer."

"I'm *sure* I deleted her," said Ms. Sims, tapping her long black nails on her

keyboard like a freak show organist.

“Yes, her files are gone.”

“I still can’t figure out how she knew I was going to be at that sushi restaurant.”

The office manager stopped typing on her keyboard. The silence was so acute it made me want to grind my teeth to assure myself time hadn’t stopped. “I can,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Mr. Briggs asked, clearing his throat.

“She’s been poking around in here.”

“*What?*”

“See for yourself. I entered the luncheon information on your calendar. She must have hacked in here and found it.” She raked her nails across the wooden desk, straining my nerves even

further. “I *told* you she was too smart for her jeans.”

I let out my breath, pleasantly surprised. A compliment from this woman was akin to scoring a date with a *Cosmo* hottie.

Mr. Briggs snorted loudly. “Then she had access to all my files, the little bitch.”

Ouch! *That hurt, Mr. Briggs*, I wanted to shout. I saved this company from going into the toilet when a rival software firm tried to steal our code. I stayed up two days straight patching up the holes. And *this* was the thanks I got?

I exhaled. Loudly. I was ready to bust outta there and tell him to go fuck

himself when Steve pulled me back. His hands gripped my butt. Hard.

“Cool it, Pepper.”

“I’m not going to let him get away with calling me names,” I whispered, squirming. I opened the door wider and saw my ex-boss pacing up and down and wiping his sweaty face with a paper towel.

“This isn’t the time to get personal.” Steve held me in a tight grip. I couldn’t move. “There’s more at stake here than your pride. A good agent wouldn’t let that bother her.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“Think about it, Pepper” was all he said.

I let it go, seeing how Mr. Briggs was

fit to be tied. Smacking his palms on the desk like a hungry walrus. “I want you to back up everything on that computer,” he told his office manager, “and then erase it.”

Ms. Sims lifted her crooked brow. “That could take hours.”

“I don’t care. *Do it.*”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t insisted on hiring her,” she mumbled, rubbing it in. Mr. Briggs ignored her and left.

His footsteps faded away and then the elevator bell dinged as the door closed. The upstairs was quiet again except for the office manager tapping away like the Mad Hatter on speed.

“What are we going to do?” I whispered to Steve, leaning my head back against his shoulder. The air in the small room was stuffy and made me sweat. “We can’t leave without her seeing us.”

“Looks like we’re stuck in here for the rest of the night,” he said in a low, dreamy voice that turned my legs into warm, gooey caramel.

“You don’t sound disappointed.”

“Are you?”

I heard an excited murmur from him as he pushed his groin into my ass, asserting his maleness with an undeniable show of power. I couldn’t deny I loved it. His unrelenting bulge

pushing into my butt crack made me hover on the verge of a climax. Feeling all hot and sticky, I contracted my pubes just a little. Okay, more than a little. I enjoyed the surge of pleasure racing through me.

Yes, yes.

“I’m sure that’s hard on you,” I said, reaching behind me and grabbing the bulge in his pants to demonstrate my point.

He stifled a groan. “I know how to fix that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said in a low, sexy voice.

My nipples tightened and a flutter of anticipation settled low in my belly. He lifted up my T-shirt and unhooked my

bra. I nudged up against him and closed my eyes. I was just settling into the heat of the moment when—

“Me-ow.”

“What the hell is that?” Steve asked in a loud whisper.

“It sounded like a cat.” I felt something furry crawl up my jeans leg, tickling me. A shudder went through me.

What if it wasn't a cat—

Gathering up my courage, I bent down and wrapped my hands around a wiggling creature, then a second one. I held the tiny bundles of fur up to the light peeking through the door.

I smiled.

“Kittens. So that's why the cat was fat

and sassy,” I said, hugging the little creatures with the Hello Kitty cuteness. “She must have followed me inside the house and then sneaked in here to have her babies.”

“They’ll be safe here,” Steve said, opening the door wider. “But we have to make a run for it.”

“We *can’t* leave the mother and her kittens,” I protested, holding two in my hand and putting a third one into my shirt pocket.

“We have to, Pepper. It’s against Bureau policy to put witnesses in the line of fire,” Steve said, wearing his FBI hat, “including furry ones.”

“So was making love to me,” I reminded him, both of us keeping our

voices to a whisper. “But that didn’t stop you.”

His eyes focused on me for a minute and then he grabbed the mother cat.

“Let’s go.”

Hugging the wall, we slipped out of the room without the office manager spotting us and made our way down the hallway. I swore my shoes squeaked. We were nearly at the stairway when a milk-hungry kitten scratched my hand.

“Ye-ow!” I cried out and bumped my hip against the railing. I lost my balance and—

“Oh, shit!” I said under my breath. The room whirled around me and I saw the marble entryway looming in my face.

I was dizzy, but all I could think about were the kittens. I'd never forgive myself if—

“Steve, the kittens!” I called out in a harsh whisper.

“It's *you* I'm worried about, Pepper,” Steve said, hauling my ass up by my jeans waistband before I went over the railing. “The kittens have nine lives. You don't.”

I fell into his arms, still hugging the tiny felines. I couldn't help but stifle a cry. No one ever worried about me before.

God, it felt good.

I didn't have time to enjoy the moment. Ms. Sims was acting like a diva behaving badly.

“Who’s there?” yelled the office manager.

She rushed out of the office and scanned the hallway but didn’t see us. She looked disheveled and bleary-eyed, every hair out of place. Catching my breath, I could see her black pencil-slim pants and high-heeled pointy shoes, her skinny butt swaying back and forth like two pomegranates.

“Be ready to move out,” Steve said, holding the wriggling mother cat. He let her go and, with a loud *me-ow*, she scampered across the polished floor, sending the office manager into a tirade of expletives. Who knew the woman had such a sexist vocabulary? She slammed

the office door shut and went back to erasing the files from her computer.

“*Go!*” Steve whispered, grabbing the feline. We left the same way we came in. No guard in sight. Ms. Sims must have sent him on an errand to keep him out of her way. She didn’t trust anybody, even her own nephew. It wasn’t until we were speeding away in Steve’s old Buick, the mother cat and her kittens snuggled in my lap, that I could breathe again.

“Thanks for not abandoning them,” I told him, hugging the little furry angels close to my heart and cuddling them. Their tiny tongues licked my fingers. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the seat. I couldn’t believe my maternal

instinct was so strong. And this from a girl who never knew her own mother. That thought tugged at my heart.

“All in the line of duty.” Steve squeezed my knee. “Don’t worry, Pepper,” he said, grinning. “They’ll be put into witness protection with plenty of milk and cat food.”

I put my hand on top of his and squeezed back. Nothing more needed to be said. I knew he’d find them a good home. Though Steve tried to play hardball with me, I saw the look in his eyes when he spied the defenseless cat and her brood. Tender, caring. Here was a man who’d never turn his back on the underdog.

I never doubted he'd save the mother cat and her kittens.

Not once.

What surprised me more was that he'd let it slip that he was worried about me. This coming from a street-tough, straight-talking G-man.

Oh, my.

Be still, my heart.

He didn't mean it.

Really.

Did he?

* * *

“You and your damn doughnuts are ruining my figure, Steven.” Jordan grabbed a glazed special out of the box

on his desk and bit into it.

Nice and slow.

Teasing him. A trait of hers with her male agents when they were on her “naughty boy” list. Steve had worked with her long enough to know she had something on her mind and it wasn’t doughnuts.

Or sex.

“What do you want, Jordan?” he asked, putting down his cell. He had a man keeping the eyeball on Pepper. He’d been so tied down with the Briggs case, he couldn’t do the job himself. He was worried about her. The field agent had just called in to tell him she was headed out this morning in a hurry. What she was up to now, he could only guess.

She jumped into situations faster than a bunny banging on his drum. Steve ordered him not to lose her.

“Nothing except a sugar high,” she said between bites.

“Don’t tell me you’re PMS-ing,” he said, knowing she hated that. She’d been on him for days to file his report on Briggs. He couldn’t. The file was still wide-open, like a pole dancer’s legs doing a split. “This has to do with Pepper, doesn’t it?”

She paced up and down, her smart, metal-gray stilettos tapping on the warped wooden floor. Gray slacks. Black turtleneck. She maintained a professional image at all times. At least,

on the surface. Underneath she simmered with a slow burn and, man, could she kick ass.

“I see you’re on a first-name basis with the mark,” Jordan said. “How’d you manage that?”

“Tradecraft.”

“Don’t lie to me, Steven. I didn’t need to see her polygraph exam to know the girl was lying to us.” She slam-dunked the half-eaten doughnut into the trash can by his desk. “You made quite an impression on her, didn’t you? Enough for her to jeopardize her freedom by hacking into her ex-company’s computer.”

“I insisted.”

“*That* I don’t doubt.”

“You have to admit, Jordan, the girl is a whiz kid with computers. She can decode *anything* and get into the most sophisticated software.” Steve explained how she’d cracked the password on the office manager’s computer. “I’ve never seen anyone with such a knack for bypassing antivirus software and finding the holes in the system.”

“Isn’t finding holes *your* job?” Jordan smirked. She poured herself a cup of coffee. Into *his* cup. Black.

He ignored her barb. “Pepper knows her way around a hard drive better than the most seasoned spymaster. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You wouldn’t be trying to recruit

her, Steven, would you?”

“Why not?” Steve said. “The Bureau could use her talents. We’re dragging our asses when it comes to corporate security. You know as well as I do, Jordan, the hackers are beating us.”

“Same old Steven. Always thinking of the Bureau first.”

She squeezed his balls through his jeans. He gritted his teeth, but he didn’t flinch. Pepper would be a good fit for the FBI if she could just get past her fears. Not let them cripple her mind. He’d seen that happen to his brother. Never felt good about himself, always had to prove something. Tom fell into a rabbit hole and never climbed out.

He didn’t want to see Pepper take her

smart skills down the wrong road and end up lost and abandoned.

“You succeeded in a man’s world, Jordan,” Steve said, complimenting her. The Princeton grad had overcome a childhood with an alcoholic parent and a house with little to eat but stale cereal.

She exhaled. “It’s not easy being a female in this business. You have to work ten times harder than the men, and when you do, they call you a troublemaking bitch.” She leaned back against the doorjamb and licked her lips. “But I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Where else would I find myself surrounded by handsome men like you?”

“So why not add a little sugar to your

coffee?” Steve said, sliding his chair across the floor and taking his cup back.

“I admit Pepper O’Malley fits the profile of a good agent. She’s smart, creative, adventurous. But that’s not everything, Steven. Under pressure, even the best candidate can crack.” Jordan shoved the metal trash can across the floor with the heel of her stiletto. “What makes you think she’s got what it takes?”

“Pepper is that good, Jordan. Let me prove it to you.”

“No can do. You compromised yourself by fucking her. You’re off the case.” She leaned over him so he could get an eyeful of her full breasts, her nipples pointing through her tight sweater. Her way of keeping her power

secure in her empire. “Agent Barker will take over.”

He cocked a brow. “I’ve never seen you this jealous before, Jordan.”

“I’ve never seen you take such an interest in a material witness before.” She crossed her arms over her chest in a show of authority. “The higher-ups are on my ass to wrap up this case before someone blows the whistle and the media get wind of it. I’ve got a team sitting on Briggs day and night. He’s bound to slip up.”

His cell chimed—a text. His Japanese contact. Briggs wanted to take a meeting. That gave him an idea.

“What if I promise you I can get a

taped confession from Briggs that will stand up in court?” Steve said. “Will you put me back on the case?”

Jordan smirked. “Does it involve you getting into that girl’s pants?”

Steve grinned and then stuck his middle finger through the hole of a crispy, glazed, sugary, doughy delight. “Care for another doughnut?”

* * *

“You want me to do *what?*” I asked, adrenaline racing through me like popcorn popping outta control. I turned down a rainbow-painted path and headed toward Bongo’s Pizza Playland.

“Wear a wire,” Steve said, not

missing a beat. “It’s the only way we can nail Briggs.” He was hot on my tail. I wasn’t a happy camper. I hadn’t heard from him since our *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* rendezvous, complete with the rescue of the cat, like in the film.

And now this?

“You’ve got to be crazy.” I didn’t care how good-looking Special Agent Steve Raines was. I was *not* going to jeopardize what little future I had left by letting the FBI hot-wire my bod so they could listen to everything I said. What if I said something stupid? Like how I hacked into the company computer?

Or, worse yet, admitted I’d gone all Bruce Lee and zonked a federal agent? I’d be sent to a planet far, far away

faster than you could send R2-D2 to a recycling bin. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a job interview and I’m late.”

I rushed through the bright red double doors into the pizza parlor and put on my best cheesy-clown smile. I prayed Steve wouldn’t follow me. Why bother? He knew my routine. He’d had a tail on my ass all week. I wasn’t so dumb that I didn’t notice a guy with tattoos following me. Guys with tattoos *never* followed me.

So I wasn’t surprised when Steve showed up with his scary request. It wasn’t enough the FBI had seen me half-naked and put me through an interrogation like I’d tried to get past

airport security with a double latte. Now he wanted me to play Mata Hari. I *knew* what happened to her, and it wasn't pretty.

“Hi, I'm Pepper O'Malley,” I choked out, handing the balding manager my résumé. He smelled like garlic and had pepperoni stuck in his teeth. I held my breath. “I'm here for the ball-pit job.”

“You got any experience?” he asked, and then sneezed on my resume.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, unnerved. “I play with balls all the time.”

He snickered. Too late I realized what I'd said. Then he explained to me that all I had to do was keep the kids' ball pond filled with red, blue, yellow and green hollow plastic balls. Hey, a job is a job.

And you get free pizza, a programmer's main food staple. So what if being trapped with a bunch of screaming kids in a padded cage wasn't my dream job? A girl had to eat.

The manager stuffed my résumé into his jeans waistband and then looked me up and down while he picked his teeth. With a penknife. "Do you have good people skills, Pepper?" His eyes lingered on my breasts.

"I love kids," I blurted out.

"She hates kids," said a deep male voice behind me. It made my nipples hard.

Steve.

He didn't stop there.

“She eats them for breakfast.”

“Who’s your boyfriend?” The pizza parlor manager wanted to know, staring at Steve like he wanted to put him through a sausage grinder.

“He’s *not* my boyfriend,” I said, my spirits sinking.

“I’m her pimp,” Steve said, and then he grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the pizza parlor. Holding me by the elbow, he steered me toward his unmarked car parked in an alley. Nobody around. Perfect for a kidnapping.

“Why did you do that?” I asked, jumping into the passenger seat rather than make a scene. I didn’t want to go

downtown to the federal building a second time. “I answered a hundred online ads, and this was the only job that would talk to me.”

“Cool it, Pepper, I’ve got a better offer for you.”

“Since when did wearing a wire for the FBI pay the big bucks?”

“You’re going to be a companion girl,” he said, checking his messages on his cell.

“A *what?*”

“Your job is to entertain Japanese businessmen.”

My eyes bugged out. “I’m *not* taking off my clothes again.”

“You don’t have to. You’ll wear a recording device here.” He slipped his

hand under my baby tee and cupped my breast. Okay, so he had my attention. Next, he flicked his finger under my bra strap.

Oh, that wasn't fair. He knew I was dying for him to pinch my nipple.

“What if he gives me a bear hug and finds the wire stuck to my tits with duct tape?” I asked, trying my best not to get turned-on. I didn't want to go down that road only to be disappointed again. I liked Steve too much to play games.

“It's not like the old days, Pepper, when you had to wear a clunky, battery-operated recorder. Everything's digital. The recorder is implanted in a jeweled pin.” He smiled that devil grin of his.

“No one is going give you a New Jersey pat-down but me.”

He leaned over and ran his hands expertly up and down my rib cage, then between my thighs, taking time to dig his finger into my crotch. He rubbed his thumb into the tight denim cutting into me.

Pushing, probing, stroking, delicious sensations filled me up. I squirmed. So much for me not getting turned-on. It was pure hell for me not to unzip my jeans and slide them down my thighs so he could finger me.

I decided to play along. Let him try to convince me.

What did I have to lose?’

I had no intention of wearing a wire.

“How do you know Mr. Briggs will be at this fancy party?” I leaned in and ran my finger along the sexy stubble on his chin. I loved the way he touched me, made me feel good.

But I wanted more.

I didn't want to press my luck, but I couldn't help wishing he'd kiss me.

“He's eager to meet my Asian contacts,” Steve said, grabbing my fingers and entwining them with his. It was a romantic gesture and one that made my bachelorette meter soar even if he *was* trying to con me. “There will be several pretty models at the hotel. All you have to do is follow the script I give you. There will be a surveillance team

in place. We'll move in quietly and take Briggs into custody after we get what we want."

I pulled away. I wanted to see my ex-boss pay for what he did to me, but those old feelings of doubt lingered in my mind. Like smelly gym socks left in your tote bag. You didn't want to open it.

"I can't do it."

"Pepper—"

"Mr. Briggs may be a crook, but you're asking *me* to be a snitch."

"You want to be a spy, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then be one."

He had a point. For years, I'd watched every cop and spy show on TV. Learning the lingo, imitating their moves

when they kicked down doors,
practicing my two-handed gun pose.

Still—

“What if I screw up?” I had to ask.

“You won’t, Pepper. I’d stake my
badge on it.”

“You would?” I asked, disbelieving.

“I would.”

He tilted my head back and claimed
my mouth with the most intoxicating pair
of lips a girl ever knew. Burning with
need, melting into me, pressing harder
when I reached around his neck and held
him tight. I parted my lips and he
entwined his tongue with mine, leaving
me breathless.

If this was a bribe, bring it on.

I pressed my breasts against his muscular chest and moaned so loud I shocked myself. “Don’t stop, Steve, please don’t stop.”

He gave it to me hot and long, sweetening the moment with trails of kisses up and down my neck and then sticking his tongue into my cleavage. Tickling me, unhooking my bra. He circled my breasts, but he didn’t play with my nipples.

What the—

“Suck on my nipples, *please*,” I said, jiggling my breasts like a wound-up Kewpie doll.

“No.”

“You know you want to,” I teased,

biting down on my lower lip. Was that *me* talking?

“Not until you promise to help me take down a corporate thief. A man who is a liar and a cheat.”

“Steve, I—I—”

“You can do it, Pepper.” He cupped my breasts and squeezed them.

Oh, the frustration. Whoever thought he'd resort to such torture?

Jesus, I thought I was going to die.

I begged him to bite my nipples. Twist them. Wet them with his tongue. Blow on them. *Do something.*

No, he said. Not until I promised to do what he asked.

I writhed about in the bucket seat of his old Buick, the split leather cracking

under my butt. I was in an emotional pickle. I wanted to be a spy and when the opportunity was handed to me on a silver platter, I froze. I knew this was my defining moment. No more daydreaming about being a spy girl.

Do it or forget it.

That meant I had to let go, get over my fears, and if it took wild, passionate sex to put me over the top, then so be it. I couldn't stand the burning in my belly another minute.

I gave in.

“Okay, Steve, I'll *wear* the damn wire.”

He grinned wide. “I thought you'd see things my way.”

“Do I have a choice?” I asked, panting hard.

“No, but I do.” He bit my nipple hard, then the other, and I fell headfirst into exquisite pleasure.

Chapter Six

“Jeez, Mr. Briggs,” I muttered in a flat voice, “what a surprise seeing you here.”

“*No, no, no*, Pepper,” Cindy said, exhaling with a loud *whoosh*. “You’re too stiff. Try it again.”

I pulled in my gut and clenched my pubes. “*Jeez, Mr. Briggs—*”

“You sound like a robocall,” Cindy said, exasperated. “Now say it with feeling. Give it *oomph*.” She cleared her throat. “Jeez, Mr. Briggs, what a big surprise seeing little ol’ you here.” She batted her Dolly Partons.

Her lashes, not her boobs.

“I’m not trying to seduce him, Cindy. I’m trying to get a confession.”

“Whatever. You have to be *in the moment*. Think of something way more important than Mr. Briggs.”

“Like Steve’s dick?” I teased.

She sighed. “You’ll never be an actress, Pepper, if you don’t give it your all.”

“I’m a tech-head, not a drama queen.”

She shot me a dirty look and fluffed her hair at the same time. That was a joke between us ever since high school when she was cast as the Good Witch of the North in a spoof of *Wicked* and I worked the special effects “wizard”

board.

“So? Didn’t I let you sprinkle techie dust on me so I could learn how to use that image-fixing software you bought?” she reminded me.

“Yeah,” I said. It was a matter of survival. Cindy was determined to zap her freckles from her headshot.

“Then *you* can learn how to pronounce your vowels and how to breathe properly.”

“I don’t *want* to breathe, I want to die.” I tossed down the script Steve had given me and sank into the big easy chair in her parents’ living room. She couldn’t afford her own apartment. Acting wasn’t exactly a high-paying job, though she was determined to convince me

otherwise.

She tried the I-did-it-and-so-can-you approach.

“You know that hair show I did?” she said, bubbling over like fizzing soda pop.

“Did they cast you or your dark roots?”

Cindy ignored my sarcasm as she always did. She was my best friend. She put up with me.

“I’ve been dying to tell you, Pepper. A TV producer saw me and wants to cast me in his new reality show about four single girls who can’t live without their phones.”

“What’s it called?” I asked with a

smirk. *“Confessions of a Cell-Phone Princess?”*

She rolled her eyes. “All I have to do is live in a store window with three other girls with no communication to the outside world except our smartphones. The girl who gets the most votes from the viewers wins fifty thousand dollars.” She sighed. “Just think, Pepper, I could move out on my own.”

With that Barbie collection?

She’d never find a one-bedroom apartment that big.

“What about your intimate moments?” I asked.

“I don’t know all the details,” she admitted, furrowing her pencil-thin brows.

“Like bathroom breaks and lonely nights with your vibrator.” I wasn’t surprised at Cindy’s news since recent stats suggested more people in the world had a cell phone than a bathroom.

“Oh, I never thought about that.” She perked up. “Well, anyway, I’m sure they’ll work the kinks out. What’s more important now is getting you your job back.”

“I wouldn’t do this if Steve hadn’t kissed me.”

“He’s that good?”

“Better,” I said, my whole bod humming, the memory of his kiss and the promise that went with it stirring my desires. I rubbed my thighs together and

moaned.

“*That’s it, Pepper!*” she said, her lips parting in a big O. She was so excited she jumped up and clapped her hands together. “You’re *in the moment*. Now, try it again....”

And so it went for hours with Cindy directing me like we were doing a *Star Wars* sequel and I was Princess Leia. Too bad I didn’t have her lightsaber. All I had was a measly recorder between me and exile to a doomed planet for fired programmers. God help me.

Finally, we had it down to where she thought I just might pull it off.

I thought about how what had started out as a job fixer-upper had turned into something far different. Because of

Steve. This sexy FBI agent had flipped my world into a new orbit. Melted my resistance. Forced me to face my fears. No matter what happened, there was no turning back.

I jumped when the holy grail of polyphonic rings ripped through the air and my cell phone lit up with a now familiar caller ID.

Steve.

“The eagle...that is, the walrus,” he said, referring to my oft-used description of my ex-boss, “has landed.”

I gulped.

Lights. Camera. Action.

This was it.

The big takedown.

Oh, my God, I just wet my pants.

* * *

My assignment: Get Mr. Briggs to hire me back. Not as a programmer, but as a courier. Board a private jet. Deliver documents to his contacts in Asia. Then return with cash or drugs hidden in my—

No, I couldn't even think it. It was too gross.

Hopefully, I'd never get that far. Once he made me the offer, I was off the hook. That is, wire.

I blinked through my star-crossed, false eyelashes and checked out the private lounge in the hotel filled with happy partygoers. Japanese and

American businessmen drinking expensive whiskey and gulping down cubes of Kobe beef and truffles. Pretty young models wearing thigh-high, slinky dresses and spike heels. Their long earrings dangled over their bare shoulders when they laughed, provocative and jazzy.

Was I the only one not having a good time?

I glanced briefly into a dark corner and spied a couple making out on the couch. Two men drinking and laughing pointed to them. One of them must have told a dirty joke. I moved on before they zeroed in on me. I had never felt so vulnerable. My skin prickled like I was a chicken with its feathers plucked. Yet I

knew Steve and his team were here somewhere.

Watching me.

“Do you copy, Pepper?” I heard him say in my earpiece. The microbud was the latest in surveillance technology, giving me the freedom to move about and receive information.

“I’m here, Steve,” I whispered, grabbing a martini off a tray. My third. I scanned a trio of businessmen watching a pretty girl balance a champagne glass on her forehead while they trickled the bubbly down her cleavage. “But Mr. Briggs isn’t.”

“Keep looking. You’ll find him. And when you do, *be sexy*. Make him forget

you were ever a programmer.”

Easier said than done.

I was afraid to jiggle my boobs. Steve had fastened a faux diamond pin with the tiny digital recorder onto my low-cut dress. What if it came loose?

At least I could see where I was going. The Bureau had staked me with soft contacts for the job, or so Steve said. I was sure the money came out of his own pocket. I considered it a personal loan, and I intended to pay him back as soon as I found work.

I sipped my martini. Sea salt and orange mixed on my tongue as I peeked over the rim of my glass. I shook, not stirred, my courage. Revved it up all the way. Swaying my hips so the sparkly pin

caught the light. Swinging my silver-sequined purse with the long chain over my shoulder. I had this fantasy I *was* a spy. Especially in this setup. An intimate lounge with cut crystal and glass, blue velvet couches and purple walls that reminded me of a scene in a Bond flick.

The villain's lair.

How juicy.

I scoped out the men drinking at the long mahogany bar.

There he was. I saw Mr. Briggs raising his glass in a toast with an Asian businessman, his other hand grabbing the man's business card. Perfect timing. I knew his game: Get a foot in the Japanese video game market and he was

set.

Not tonight, Mr. Briggs.

My job was to convince him that he “owed” me a job, and I would blow the whistle on him if he didn’t hire me.

Remembering what Cindy said about being in the moment, I thought about sex as I sashayed over to my ex-boss.

Steve’s big dick. And his hands all over me.

No wonder I had a big smile on my face when I came up behind him. “Jeez, Mr. Briggs,” I said, tapping him on the shoulder, “what a surprise seeing you here.”

Flustered, he spit out his drink and then turned to see me grinning at him. “You show up in the strangest places,

Miss O'Malley.”

“I’m a whiz kid, remember?” I said, leaning in closer. “Your calendar is an open book to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “Leave me alone.”

“Not until you give me a job.”

“I just hired a new programmer to take your place.”

“That’s *not* the job I want.” I cozied up to him, licking my lips. The Asian businessman next to him smiled, bowed and left. “You could send me to Japan to work on your *other* business.”

Mr. Briggs wiped his sweaty brow with his cocktail napkin. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do.” I sipped my martini, flirting with him and batting my thick eyelashes like a pop music queen. “All that lovely, dirty money flowing into your hands, and all you have to do is wash it clean.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me, Miss O’Malley?”

“All I want is what you owe me, Mr. Briggs. Back salary and my key to the exec girls’ washroom.”

That last part was off script, but I couldn’t help it.

“What?” he asked, not getting it.

I took a deep breath and got back into character fast. “I hear there’s *beaucoup* bucks in moving overseas money through

phony shell companies—”

An irritated female voice butted in. “Excuse me, honey, but Mr. Briggs isn’t interested in balling you, so lay off.”

Holy shit. It was Ms. Sims looking glam, if you could make a witch glam. Her perfume reeked, as usual. Where did she get that stuff? It smelled like hair dye.

“Did you fly in on your broomstick?” I asked, feeling smug.

It took her a moment to recognize me.

“Pepper O’Malley,” she screeched, “what the hell are you doing here?”

“Mr. Briggs and I are discussing business,” I said, standing up to her.

“Now if you’ll excuse us.”

“I’m calling security.”

“Don’t be so hasty, Genevieve,” Mr. Briggs said, nervous.

Genevieve?

“Miss O’Malley is going to be our new business associate.”

Did you get that, Steve?

“Make him offer you a job outright,” I heard in my earpiece.

Damn, this wasn’t going according to plan. I needed more courage. I downed the martini in one gulp.

“Mr. Briggs wants me to be a courier for the company,” I said in a clear voice.

He acknowledged what I said with a brief nod and a weak grin.

“Make him *say* he wants you to move money for him, Pepper,” Steve

whispered in my ear. “We need his voice on the tape.”

“You want me to be your new courier to Japan and pick up phony documents *and* cash. Right, Mr. Briggs?” I said, the vodka cruising to my brain in a slow, easy fashion. I will not get dizzy. “Who would ever suspect me? I’m perfect for the job. After all, I wrote the damn video game program.”

I burped. Loud.

Mr. Briggs didn’t notice. He was too busy freaking out, praying no one had heard me. I don’t know where my sassiness came from. Either Cindy was a damned good acting teacher or three martinis was a damned good incentive.

“She’s *crazy*, Seymour,” Ms. Sims

said, pulling on his arm. “Don’t agree to anything.”

“Are you going to let *her* run *your* business, Mr. Briggs?” I said, not letting up. I was enjoying this. Big-time.

“No,” he began, “but Ms. Sims is in charge of the overseas accounts.”

I was sweating pink. Hot and heavy. I still didn’t have his confession.

I made one more try.

“*I need* this job, Mr. Briggs. Say you’ll hire me to move cash for you, *please!*” I begged him. Jeez, that was dumb. Overkill. I broke the spy rules. I couldn’t help it. My pulse kicked up its heels higher than I wanted to go. My desperation showed.

Something popped in Ms. Sims's brain.

She looked me up and down. I swear she was onto me and knew the fake diamond pin stuck in my cleavage was a recorder. "Something smells fishy here, Seymour. Who let her in here?"

"*Who cares?*" he said, going postal. "I'm hiring her to be a courier for us. If I don't, she'll go to the feds and tell them everything she found on your computer. The phony companies, the overseas dirty money, *everything.*"

"Keep your mouth *shut!*" Ms. Sims swiveled her head from left to right. She gasped loudly when she saw Steve and two men in plainclothes closing in on

her. “*You fool! You damned fool.* Look what you’ve done.”

She pushed me hard, knocking the glass out of my hand, then bolted. She left poor Mr. Briggs wiping his forehead and demanding he be allowed to talk to his lawyer. I ignored him. Steve could take care of him. Ms. Sims was right. Something *did* smell. Her exotic dill weed perfume lingered in the air.

I jammed after her.

This was one takedown I was going to enjoy.

* * *

Ms. Sims had the advantage. No one knew why she was running. She could be

headed to the bathroom to toss up the fried squid kebabs. Or reapply her demon-red lipstick. She also hadn't downed three dirty martinis *and* she was used to maneuvering the corporate world in sky-high heels. I wasn't. That didn't stop me. I sprinted through the devil's lair like a regular speed freak, my arms flailing about like I was a roller derby queen.

Nothing could stop me.

Until—

A trio of businessmen blocked my way. They were trying to look up a model's skirt when she bent over to pick up her earring.

“Excuse me, excuse me,” I busted out, knocking off a Japanese businessman's

glasses when I zinged past him. Then I slammed into a waiter carrying a tray of empty plastic champagne flutes. Down we went like dominos. I heard the loud *crunch* of plastic under my butt as I landed.

Ouch.

Huffing and puffing, pulse racing, I yanked off my silver-heeled kicks and then got to my feet and took off. I ran out into the hallway and looked up and down, but Ms. Sims had disappeared.

Damn.

I figured she was hiding in the bathroom, when—

There she was. Heading toward the exit. Two purple potted palms stood on

either side of the private elevator.

I took off, my bare feet gliding over the plush plum carpeting so fast I was almost airborne. I was determined to grab her before she got into the elevator.

“*Stop, FBI!*” I shouted out. I have no idea where my courage came from to falsely identify myself as a fed, but it seemed like a good idea. I opened my purse and pulled out an expired department store credit card and flashed it under the overhead light.

Gold, it wasn't.

Tarnished pewter, maybe.

Like my ass, if I didn't make the collar. Talk about being in the moment, as Cindy would say. Anyway, Ms. Sims turned around and saw my feeble attempt

at pulling this off.

She threw back her head and laughed. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“No joke, Ms. Sims,” I said, so close to her I could smell her revolting perfume. “I—I’m with the FBI.”

Technically, I wasn’t lying. I was *with* the feds, but I wasn’t one of them. Yet I had sense of belonging, knowing I’d helped them get the dirt on these two. I knew now Ms. Sims was the instigator and poor Mr. Briggs was her patsy. His kingdom for a lay. Why did men always fall for that stunt?

What mattered most to me was that I didn’t give up. Didn’t let my fears sidetrack me. I could do this. I got a

funny chill then. A strange sense this was what Steve wanted me to feel, that I had the moxie to make it as a federal agent.

I soon discovered it wasn't all about flashing a badge and giving a shout out.

The doors opened and Ms. Sims raced into the elevator all smiles and then pushed over a potted plant to block me from following her. Dirt flew everywhere.

"I always said you were dirt under my feet." She jabbed the elevator buttons to make the doors close.

"You won't sweep me away that easily," I shot back, and then I shoved my bod through the doors seconds before they closed on my boobs.

Ms. Sims was one angry conspirator.

She smashed her palm into my face and then pulled my hair. I refused to let her petty chick move throw me off balance. I kicked her in the shin. She yelped, but that didn't stop her. She ripped off the pin attached to the front of my low-cut dress with her claws, scratching my shoulder and making me wince.

Oh, yeah? No one takes my decoder pin.

I grabbed her wrist and squeezed hard until she dropped it. She yanked on my exposed bra strap. It broke and my breast fell out of my C-cup.

What the hell?

I wasn't going to let a bare tit stop me.

I'd shown more skin at the sushi restaurant.

I dove at her while she tried to get the doors open; she sidestepped me. I pushed her; she shoved me back. She punched the buttons, the doors opened, she tried to get out. I tripped her. She went down like a long-legged giraffe with an angry lioness hot on its tail, her butt up in the air. I jumped on her back and straddled her before she had a chance to kick me, and then I pulled her arms back toward me and did what any good FBI agent would do if they didn't have a plastic zip-tie.

I cuffed her with the long chain on my silver-sequined purse.

“I couldn’t have hogtied her better myself, Pepper,” Steve said, wrapping a black velvet tablecloth around my shoulders. I shivered when his hand slipped to my bare breast. Thank God, no one could see him.

“Too bad you missed the foxy catfight,” I said, loving his touch. He was giving me what I wanted and needed, and I would take down the inglorious Ms. Sims all over again if he promised not to stop.

“Thank God, you weren’t hurt,” he said. He nuzzled his face in my hair, his breath hot on the back of my neck. I got all warm and fuzzy inside, hearing his

words.

He hustled me through the chaos, taking control, answering the questions thrown at us. Even in the dim light, I could see his eyes were on fire, his whole body moving in exact precision. As if he were in the heat of battle. Orchestrating the takedown of Mr. Briggs and Ms. Sims smoothly and with the expertise and know-how of a trained field agent.

That was when it hit me.

This was how an FBI agent operated in the real world, not the virtual fantasy sandbox where I played. Fool. I'd been so caught up in "being in the moment," I'd turned that moment into a sideshow. I imagined the two federal agents

muttering to each other that I overreacted, backed up with comments about me being a typical female, even if I did take down the target.

I dropped my chin to my chest. I was ashamed of my bravado, my tasteless theatrics. I was no closer to joining the FBI now than I'd been before tonight. The truth was, my dream seemed further away than ever.

I didn't tell Steve how I felt. He had high hopes for me and I'd let him down. Yet I couldn't believe how he kept me close to him, protecting me, while he barked orders to the hotel staff to serve drinks and keep the party going. The situation was intense, edgy, and the

sooner they cleaned up the scene and got their prisoners out of here, the sooner everyone would forget the FBI had shown up as an uninvited guest.

Everyone except Mr. Briggs.

He couldn't resist a parting shot at me before they took him away in handcuffs. He pulled hard to get away from the agent gripping his arm to have his say.

"You never would have caught on to me without Miss Smarty-Pants here," he sputtered, glaring at me. If looks could kill, I was among the walking dead. "I should have fired her months ago."

"Then why didn't you?" I looked right back at him and didn't blink a phony lash.

"Because you were the best

programmer I ever had.” He shook his head. “Who would have thought the FBI hired agents *that* smart.”

I beamed. Damn, that felt good. My ex-boss thinking I was an agent *and* giving me the credit for his takedown.

“Briggs is right, Pepper,” Steve whispered in my ear. “It’s *your* collar.”

I nodded, loving hearing him say that. But this was no cop show. I had stepped through the fourth wall tonight and become part of the real world. I could no longer hide behind my glasses. Nor did I want to.

“That doesn’t mean the next time I want you running around cuffing suspects half-naked,” Steve continued, his voice

stern. We headed toward the parking garage, the party chatter and clinking glasses behind us, the plush gold-and-red carpeting under my bare feet masking our footsteps. “The Bureau has rules about that.”

“The next time?” I asked, my pulse racing.

“Fighting white-collar crime is important business, Pepper,” he said, “and you’ve got the talents the Bureau is looking for.”

“What about my employment record? Ms. Sims deleted everything.” I kept pace with him, stretching my neck to keep my head level with his chin, emphasizing my height sans heels as if to prove to him I was no slouch. That I

could fight cybercrime and keep the workplace safe for all of us who sit down at a computer every morning and log on with a cup of java and a Twitter addiction.

“A few phone calls to the right sources and we’ll have your job record cleared,” he said. “*And* your back-unemployment checks.”

“You forgot one thing,” I said, hating to bring it up. “I’ve got a record with the FBI.”

Steve grinned. “After what you did for the investigation tonight, I can convince Jordan to make sure there’s no account of you slamming me on the back of the neck. And I wouldn’t be surprised if she

pushed your paperwork through pronto.”

I smiled. Jordan. His sexy boss. Cool.

“We’ll get you set up for the second phase of testing,” he continued, “and when you pass—”

I loved hearing that. His words gave me the confidence I would need to get through the process.

“—I don’t see why you can’t start your training at the academy with the next class.” Steve paused in the dark stairway and kissed me. Not sexy. Deeper than that. Soulful. Caring. Something I always wanted but never had. “On *one* condition, Miss O’Malley.”

“What’s that?” I breathed, knowing I’d agree to anything with his lips so

close to mine, his hand playing with my bare breast under the black velvet.

“You have to follow the rules of the game.”

“Like you do?” I asked.

He smiled, but he didn't answer me.

“Do you agree?” he said, leading me to his unmarked car. Double-parked.

“Yes.”

Keep it simple. No wordy explanations, no begging.

“And you're sure you have what it takes to be a special agent?” he asked, unlocking the passenger door.

“Yes.”

“There's no stopping you, no matter what they throw at you?”

“No.” My heart was racing, drawing all my reserve together to keep focused, make my dream crystallize.

He jumped into the car. I followed. “Then be at my place tomorrow night at eight o’clock sharp.” He gunned the engine and sexy vibrations zapped through me like I was hot-wired. My libido went from zero to ninety in a heartbeat. “I’ll show you the ropes.”

He gave me the address in his clipped, agentlike manner, not repeating it, expecting me to set each word in my mind and not forget it.

“I’ll be there,” I told him. He smiled and then jammed his old Buick out of the underground parking garage like Batman

on a mission. I held on tight.

Boy, will I.

Chapter Seven

Eight o'clock couldn't come soon enough.

Steve laid out the tools of his trade in a precise manner, taking care to make certain the sake was cooled to room temperature, the linen ropes smooth and pliable, the roses' effusive scent intoxicating.

And his dick hard.

He didn't have to worry about that. His groin tightened, his breath quickened. He remembered how his agent-in-training moved when he was in her, her back dipping instinctively to

meet him as he drove her home. Him yearning to finger her in her most secret place. Her knowing only that the burn between her legs intensified with each stroke. Moaning like a slave begging her master to take her. To fuck her. Her pleasure mixed with her curiosity, like sipping fine wine from a king's silver goblet. The taste was made sweeter by the experience.

Steve tied the rope into an intricate knot, winding it this way and that. Precise, its artistry appealing to the eye. Cool to the skin. Such a knot would make Pepper squirm when he wrapped it around her breasts and then pulled on it. Gently, then harder...making it tighter. Making her moan. He couldn't wait to

see her breasts standing up, her nipples erect.

He looked at the clock. Ten minutes before eight.

Would she be on time?

Or would she run from the challenge?

He imagined she was filled with apprehension, her emotions over the top, her heart pounding.

Her juices flowing.

He was betting on her avid curiosity to break down any resistance. Especially after she'd had a taste of what she could do when she'd taken down Sims. *And* Briggs. Using the computer files and taped confession secured "from a reliable source" as evidence, he'd had

no trouble getting a search warrant to raid the offices of Seymour T. Briggs for paper documents and additional computer files relevant to the ongoing investigation.

All that was left to wrap things up was to bring Pepper into the Bureau.

Steve knew what he was getting into. He was putting himself on the line, something he'd never done before. But she'd changed his mind about training a woman with the techie mind of a computer programmer. She was soft and curvy and all female. She'd impressed him with her raw talent and sex-on-top-of-the-copier routine. She was a natural. He couldn't wait to begin her training. Not every woman would consent to

enjoy the erotic evening he had planned.

He had no doubt Pepper would.

Her big green eyes staring at him, her full, pink lips parted in wonder, her high cheekbones finely sculpted. Innocent, but as sexy as all get-out. His mind flipped through his mental notes again as he'd done every night since he met her.

Tall. Big breasts. Great legs.

Long, flyaway hair that shimmered red-gold like a never-ending sunset.

But there was more to her than her gorgeous bod.

Her curiosity amazed him. Her smarts challenged him. And her brazenness charmed him. In a world of spies and counterspies, secrets and lies that often

left him frustrated and disillusioned, Pepper was the one real thing he could count on. A woman who said what she meant and looked damned sexy saying it. No regrets, no teasing a man until he couldn't walk straight and then dropping him like a hot poker. She played it straight. Shot from the hip. And fit into his arms perfectly, her head snuggled against his chest, his arms snaked around her beautiful curves.

He couldn't tell her how he felt. Not yet. First, he had to get her into the spy game.

And then?

It was up to her.

He was convinced Pepper had a bright future at the Bureau. *If* she could

learn to trust her instincts and believe in herself. Years of self-doubt had wound themselves around her ego like a tight rope. Taut and unbreakable in her mind. Choking her ambition. That was where *he* came in.

Steve had planned this special evening to give her that confidence.

He had concealed his feelings well, giving small hints of his intentions toward her. Why not? She fit the profile of a good special agent. Reading body language. Going on the offensive when confronted with a difficult situation. Not backing down.

He'd never forget how she yelled out "*Stop, FBI!*" in a loud, convincing

voice. He had to smile. He could imagine her racing after the elusive Ms. Sims, Pepper's big breasts bouncing up and down. Christ, he couldn't contain himself when he'd caught up to her and saw her beautiful tit exposed, her pointed nipple tempting him. His first instinct was to take her hard bud into his mouth and suck on it.

He would have if they'd been alone.

They weren't.

His two backup agents couldn't take their eyes off her. Steve had ripped a black velvet cloth off a table and wrapped it around her. He still remembered her soft mewling, her head against his shoulder. Then they did a fist bump. It was a moment he'd never

forget. He'd ignored his cell phone ringing. Jordan. His only thought: protect Pepper at all costs. For the first time in his career, he let his heart rule his head. He knew that wasn't how an undercover agent acted, that getting too close to the witness often led to guilt feelings if there was any screwup.

The only guilt he felt was putting her in danger without the proper training.

He'd soon fix that. He'd run her through the drill. Give her the opportunity to learn how to deal with any situation. Meanwhile, his team had Briggs in custody. And Pepper had Ms. Sims tied up like a prize pig ready for market.

He grinned. Tied up.

Yes, that was the idea.

Steve let the rose petals drift through his fingers onto the bed covered with satin sheets as shiny as black cod. The cedar fragrance of the *hinoki* wood headboard blended with the floral essence, while the velvety softness of the petals reminded him of that delightful spot between her legs. That special place where he could let himself go—something he never did, even when fucking a woman. He didn't dare.

Always on the alert, always ready for trouble, Steve never dreamed *anyone* could make him let down his guard.

Pepper did. She made him laugh.

Something he hadn't done in years.

He held his breath in anticipation of the moment when he'd again pull her jeans down to her knees. Then slip his hand between her thighs and press one, then two fingers inside her. Stroke her clit, explore her. Then make her his.

Christ.

His mouth went dry. To quench his thirst, he grabbed the bottle of sake and tilted his head back, the cool drink sliding down his throat. *Smooth. Rich.* Its lingering sweetness left a pleasant, fruity taste in his mouth. *Perfect.* The rice wine was the nectar of the gods. And she was his goddess.

What if she didn't show?

He wouldn't believe that. *Couldn't.*

Tension filled him as he held the glass bottle in his hand, running his fingers up and down its slender neck. Its rounded bottom was curvy, like a woman's. Like Pepper. But she was more than a wildly, tempting invitation to sex. She was special to him. No one in his life was like her. Sure, he'd had women. Sexy, beautiful women. But none could compare to Pepper O'Malley.

The doorbell rang.

It was five minutes *before* eight. Steve smiled.

For tonight, he had one mission.

Make her cry out with pleasure.

Over and over again.

The rope pressed into me and hit my clit spot on.

I clenched my muscles tight. God, that burned. But wonderfully so. I did it again, shocked by my own brashness. I was right about Steve acting like a man used to tying women up. Did I hit the mark. I didn't pride myself on having insight into how men's brains worked except when it came to computers, but I tapped into the intimate desires of this man bound by strong beliefs that bordered on kink.

But oh, what kink.

I was nude, lying on my back. Red rose petals scattered on my breasts, belly, and thighs, a thick white rug

hugging my body like a sensuous cloud. I breathed in a fragrant mist delivered from a bubbling fountain scenting the air around me. Whatever fears I had when I stepped into his world were gone. I was bathed in muted backlighting and—

Tied up.

Naked sushi *à la bondage*.

When I arrived, my FBI hottie had wasted no time ordering me to strip while he watched. When I asked him why, he told me a special agent should be prepared for physical inspection at any time.

I blushed. His request had an intimacy about it that surprised me. Turned me on. As if he were seeing me naked for the first time.

I nodded and obeyed.

First my tee came off, then my bra and best jeans with the rhinestone buttons. When I stood nude in front of him, he said nothing. Instead, he pressed his palm against my pubic area, cupping then squeezing me. Not hard. Just enough to set off tiny tremors in me.

His gesture took my breath away. I couldn't move.

Then his cool hands stroked my thighs, sending a chill through me before he moved upward and caressed my breasts. His fingertips lingered on my pert nipples before pinching them so hard I couldn't help but cry out, the painful pleasure startling but pleasing.

I was already wet when his hand dropped to my buttocks, kneading my soft flesh before moving to my thighs, parting them and slipping his finger inside me. I began to move against him, but he insisted I wasn't ready yet and removed his finger without giving me the satisfaction of having him stroke my clit.

Wanting, needing, crazed with desire, I fell into his arms without resisting when he picked me up and carried me into a spa with a sunken tub. I held him tight around the neck. He liked that and smiled at me. Then he bathed me with unscented soap, taking a soft white cloth and rubbing me from head to toe. Warm water seeped into my pores when he

drizzled the soapy suds down the crack of my butt and the backs of my legs.

“You’re beautiful, Pepper,” he said, pulling the cloth between my legs and hitting the nerve-rich area around my perineum. I arched my back, a pleasurable moan escaping from my lips. “And so sexy.”

“Nobody ever called me sexy,” I said, spreading my legs and shuddering with pleasure when he ran the rough texture of the cloth over my vaginal lips and then parted them with his fingers. He rubbed the cloth back and forth across my clit, making it burn. “Mmm...I like that.”

“You’ll like this more.” He moved up my belly, then my rib cage, washing my breasts, swirling the cotton ringlets of

the cloth around them until they glowed pink. I pushed out my chest. He didn't disappoint me. He pulled on my nipples, making them pointy and erect, then let them go. "Your nipples are perfect for ___"

"Nibbling on?" I asked, hoping, waiting.

"Soaping up." He reached under my breasts and cupped them in his strong hands, my nipples pointing straight ahead. Begging for him to put his mouth on the hard buds, one then the other, sucking. I couldn't stop looking at him, watching his hands holding my breasts, massaging my flesh. I could see behind his dark eyes how aware he was of my

response to him. And that aroused him.

Teasing, he lathered up his hands and then capped my erect nipples with translucent soapsuds, pinching them between his thumbs and forefingers long and hard until I could stand it no more. Still, he didn't suck on them. He called it the "Spartan touch." Indulging in foreplay but denying me pleasure until the right moment. Expending his energy on making me want more but giving me only enough to keep me in a limbo of anticipation.

The game took on new meaning when he cooled me down with a tepid shower so my body temperature was ready for—

"Sushi," he said, explaining this was one meal I'd never forget.

Then he began tying me up.

Stroking me with the long, white rope. Slapping it on my butt with a pleasant sting and then sliding it down between my thighs in a slow crawl before bringing it upward and twisting it around my breasts. Pulling on my nipples until they peaked. Long, lustful minutes passed as my mind worked overtime, wondering when, *when* he would speak.

Not a word.

I lay stretched out on the white rug, waiting. Watching as he secured my wrists together and then executed intricate knots around my waist, breasts and thighs. The taut pressure made me aware of my body and heightened my

senses. Every time I tugged on the rope, it squeezed my breasts, making me moan.

I'd never felt so vulnerable, lying here, my bod bound with soft rope. Yet I also sensed an aura of security, as if Steve was protecting me by tying me up. I didn't understand why I felt this way and that bugged me. But the delicious sensations filling me up pushed any doubt from my mind.

"Not too tight?" he asked, pulling on the linen rope encircling my waist, under my breasts and around my thighs.

"No," I mumbled, dreamlike. I relished the subtle strength of his power when he tugged on the end of the rope, pulling me toward him but not to him.

A show of dominance, reminding me

he controlled my movements.

I wiggled, or tried to, but nothing moved except my breasts. His skillful rope-tying around my orbs forced my breasts to stand up and not flatten out, my nipples waving at attention, hard and taut. Glancing down, the sight of my body squirming but powerless added to my growing feeling of arousal.

“I can’t move,” I said, grunting and straining at the ropes.

“Good.”

“Does that turn you on?”

A sly smile eased the tension on his face. “That’s not the objective.”

“Then what is?”

“You’ll find out.” Steve brushed my

cheek with his lips, but nothing more, keeping me wanting. It was most definitely a nipple hardener.

A cool, new sensation wiggled through me when Steve arranged the sushi on my body. No food porn, he said; no oysters that looked like vaginas or raw salmon with the taste and texture of my nether lips.

Instead, on my belly he arranged buttery yellowfin that would dissolve on his tongue. Crimson tuna crowning my nipples, and purple-hued octopus tendrils swirling around my breasts.

According to Steve, raw freshness was key to good sushi.

Better yet, he said, was a live woman. How experiencing the fish eaten off the

bare skin of a female heightened the taste of the food.

Next, it was show-and-tell time.

He pinched my nipples and then smeared spicy wasabi on my skin, his tongue gliding over my belly, licking it off. Next, he plucked tuna off my hard bud with his teeth, biting it as he did so.

I arched my back, gasping with delight, wanting more, flowing with his rhythm. Him eating, sucking, licking, biting. Me moaning and writhing in pleasure. I felt no fear, no danger in being tied up and defenseless, something I'd never experienced with anyone.

Little did I know what was coming next.

When I thought I couldn't stand the deep burning in me another second, Steve unloosened the knots around my thighs and spread my legs.

“Ever heard of *wakame sake*?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I didn't see it on the menu at The Mermaid's Tale.”

“You could call it a Japanese body shot. It means drinking sake.” He pointed to my pubic area, all naked and pink and wanting, not to mention wet. “From *here*.”

My eyes widened. Was he kidding? I hoped not. I was filled with rising feelings of desire, approaching something new and, like I said, kinky. I

was finding out this man knew no limits.

He burned like incense. Slow and intoxicating. Knew no fatigue.

Oh, yeah.

“I hope you’re thirsty,” I said, daring to push up my hips and expose my lower swollen lips for his approval. I swore I could see them glistening with my juices.

He smiled. “*Very* thirsty.”

Pouring sake into a small cup and setting it aside, Steve told me it was vital to stimulate me first to create the flow of my juices and mix it with the flavors of the sake.

Stimulate me? How?

I had no idea how aphrodisiac a pair of lips could be.

To demonstrate his prowess in the

traditional sake art, he kissed the soft spot between my legs. Lightly at first, lapping up the moisture beading between my lower lips. Then, more demanding, opening me up to his insistent probing and making me twitch uncontrollably against his mouth.

Not letting up, he pushed inside me with his tongue, flicking and rolling it over my hard clit. Exploring me, tasting me, teasing me without mercy, his tongue thrusting in and out. Deeper and deeper.

I thrashed about wildly, pleading with him not to stop. Reveling in the rising, burning ache weaving a serpentine dance of pleasure in my lower body, making my need for his cock more intense—

He stopped.

Was he mad?

I struggled against the ropes binding me, frustrated. I wanted to grab his dick, sit on it, let it carry me to the brink of orgasm, ride it long and hard, but I couldn't move. Exasperated, I let my head fall back and the room spun around me. Everything seemed to blur. I heard him breathe hard and then let out a low groan.

I forced myself to focus my eyes on him. I watched in unbearable anticipation as he trailed a finger over his lips and inhaled my aroma, and then he leaned down and licked my inner thighs, his tongue traveling over my bare

skin.

He was avoiding my sweet spot, damn him.

Why, why?

Knowing I was watching him, he lay on his stomach, opting for a better view while he blew his hot, moist breath on my mound. Coaxing my lazy pubic hairs to flutter like daisy petals bowing to an insistent breeze as he brushed up the curly hair with his fingers.

Next, he put a black silk pillow under my head and shoulders, putting my body at a slight angle, and then he poured light and fragrant sake into my navel until it overflowed. Though the sake was room temperature, I let go with a slight shiver. The sake tickled me as the liquor flowed

from my navel downward and through my pubic hair, making it sway to and fro like seaweed.

Lubricating me.

I wiggled my hips, waiting for his tongue to slither inside me and soothe my aching clit.

I didn't have long to wait.

Steve put his head between my legs and lapped up the sake. Filling his mouth with the tepid rice wine mixing with my juices. His tongue left a trail of fire up and down my inner thighs, then along my nether lips, while a myriad of blissful spasms ripped through me. Bending toward him, I couldn't help but expel a long, low moan of sublime pleasure.

He wasn't finished.

I heard the flick of a condom wrapper and then saw him slipping it on his erection.

“I owe you one, remember?” he said, waiting for my reaction.

“How could I forget?”

What more could I say? The lovely fire in me hadn't cooled, only intensified.

I sparked and tingled as my approaching orgasm escalated, though I lay here tied up with delicious knots and rope inhibiting my every movement. A rolling ball of fire coming at me with all the force of a creature out of the darkness, invading yet electrifying. The

tension of not being able to move made me reach for it even harder, forcing me to arouse my own strength to grab on to it.

I realized then that was what Steve wanted to teach me. To become a special agent for the FBI required straining against the mental bonds that in the past had sabotaged my efforts. How I found excuses that kept me from going after my dream job because I was afraid of being rejected. How I blamed instead what I believed was the bum rap life threw at me. In reality, my own lack of self-confidence prevented me from achieving my goal.

I arched with desire, my breathing heavy, expectant, my legs spread, my

buttocks quivering. This was no fantasy video game we were playing, though I was embarrassed to admit I'd found them arousing in the past. Spreading the thighs of my buxom avatar wide and allowing an equally sexy male avatar to slide into her three-dimensional image.

Not anymore.

I didn't hold back when Steve came in me, sensing this was a magic moment, that pulse of excitement I'd longed for but never experienced. We were breathing as one, wrapped up in raw emotion that exposed my soul as well as my body.

Hot damn.

This was one orgasm I owned.

And *so* much better than any video game.

Epilogue

Pepper here.

That is, Special Agent Pepper O'Malley.

Smarter, with new insights into myself, some painful. My libido is satisfied and every inch of me is primed to be the best special agent I can be.

No more running through hotel lobbies, waving an expired credit card in the air and yelling, "*Stop, FBI!*" I graduated from the academy, and I got my own gold badge and creds.

And I got my guy, too.

Steve said he has to marry me to keep

me out of trouble.

Me, in trouble?

Only when he's around...

God, I love that man.

* * * * *

About the Author

Jina Bacarr wrote the award-winning *The Blonde Geisha* and *The Japanese Art of Sex*. She worked as the Japan consultant on KCBS-TV, MSNBC, TechTV's *Wired for Sex*, Canada's *Pleasure Zone*, British Sky Broadcasting's *Saucy TV*, La Biennale, Venice, Italy, *Men's Health Guide to the Best Sex in the World*, *Passport to Pleasure*, The Vision Board and Playboy TV. She is author of *Naughty Paris; Spies, Lies & Naked Thighs; Cleopatra's Perfume* (an RT Reviewers' Choice Award nominee); and *The Blonde Samurai*, an *RT Book Reviews* top pick.

Books by Jina Bacarr

Spice

The Blonde Geisha

Naughty Paris

Spies, Lies & Naked Thighs

Cleopatra's Perfume

The Blonde Samurai

Spice Briefs

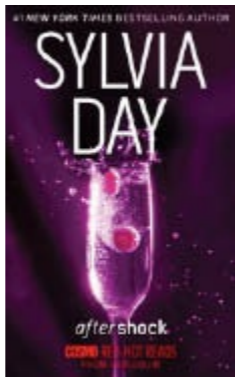
Tokyo Rendezvous

COSMO
RED-HOT
READS
FROM HARLEQUIN

Sexy, contemporary romance stories for today's fun, fearless female.

On sale November 12, 2013

Aftershock by New York Times
bestselling author Sylvia Day



On sale November 25, 2013

Ripped by Sarah Morgan

Definitely Naughty by Jo Leigh

Two Red-Hot Reads available in ebook
format each month!

Visit www.harlequin.com/Cosmo today.

Cosmo Red-Hot Reads from Harlequin

ISBN-13: 9781459254817

NAKED SUSHI

Copyright © 2013 by Jina Bacarr

All rights reserved. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether

electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental. This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

COSMOPOLITAN and COSMO are

registered trademarks of Hearst Communications, Inc.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.Harlequin.com