

Rock Chick Revenge

Chapter One

Bad Ava, Good Ava

I sat in my hunter green Range Rover, hands resting on my steering wheel, forehead resting on my hands, wondering what in *the hell* I was doing.

Not only parked on 15th Street outside the Nightingale Investigations offices, where Luke worked, but any of it, all of it, the whole shebang.

Do it, do it, you know you want to do it, teeny, tiny, little Bad Ava, wearing a lacy red teddy, red stockings, spike-heeled patent-leather red pumps and devil's ears sat on my right shoulder and whispered in my ear.

Don't do it, go home, do yoga, light candles, meditate, teeny, tiny, little good Ava, wearing a white satin teddy edged in soft, fluffy feathers, gold high-heeled sandals with straps that criss-crossed up her calves and sporting a glittery gold halo sat on my left shoulder and whispered in my ear.

"I'm going nuts," me, the real Ava, said out loud.

You aren't nuts. You want to see him. You've wanted to see him for four years. Girl, you are shit-hot now. Let him get a load of you! Bad Ava reminded me.

This was true (not the shit-hot part, the other parts).

Go home, call Sissy and tell her you can't do it. Then call Luke and ask him over for dinner like a normal person. Don't do this. Don't! Good Ava said.

Argh!

Do it, go in there, suck him in, chew him up, spit him out, men stink! Bad Ava encouraged.

Luke doesn't stink. We like Luke, Good Ava protested, leaning around my neck to glare at Bad Ava.

Bad Ava gave Good Ava the finger. Good Ava poked her tongue out at Bad Ava.

I ignored them.

Men did stink, this was true. Men were scum. All of them. Luke too.

Probably.

I'd known Luke Stark since he moved in across the street when I was eight years old and he was twelve and he was the most gorgeous boy I'd ever seen in my little girl life and, when I saw him at his Dad's funeral five years ago, I realized he'd turned into the most gorgeous man.

Men stunk, on the whole, but Luke had always been ultra nice to me.

But then, as a kid, I'd been fat, four-eyed and had mousy brown hair.

And when I saw him at his Dad's funeral, I was still fat (more so), four-eyed and had mousy brown hair.

So, I figured all that time he probably felt sorry for me.

Now, I'd lost seventy-five pounds, got contacts and had my hair streaked with blonde. A partial streak, just the top and sides, the bottom back I left alone and for some bizarre reason against the blonde it had turned this burnished chestnut color, the same color as both my glamorous sisters' hair, the hair I'd always wanted, all my life, even prayed for, but never had, until now.

Last time I saw Luke, he was wearing all black... black suit, black shirt, black tie. It was a funeral but Luke had always been partial to black and I was glad because he looked good in it, even when he was a teenager he usually wore tight, black t-shirts, black motorcycle boots and jeans, I noted this like I noted everything about Luke. He had black hair and, on first glance, black eyes (though, his eyes were really a dark, dark indigo and total yum). At the funeral, I saw he'd grown a beard, not full and thick, but short and trimmed and it looked great on him.

I'd nearly melted into a puddle when his eyes moved through the graveside crowd, stopped on me, got soft and one side of his mouth went up in one of his half-grins that made him look so yumalicious you wanted to pounce on him. Instead of shoving the mourners aside and pouncing (which would have been highly inappropriate), I just gave him what I hoped was a jaunty wink and a stupid half-wave. The grin went full-fledged (guess the jaunty wink worked, but then again my stupid, dorky behavior always seemed to amuse Luke) and he'd turned away.

That was the very day I decided to turn my life around and that was the day I turned my life on its fucking head.

I rued that day.

I never thought I'd rue anything but I rued that day for certain.

However, now I needed Luke.

I knew from my Mom talking to his Mom (they were still friends, even though Luke's Mom had moved into a condo in Governor's Park and my Mom had moved to Phoenix), not to mention from Ally Nightingale and Indy Savage (my Rock Chick friends, though I hadn't seen either one of them in months, we *had* chatted on the phone) that Luke was some kind of kickass mercenary, bounty hunter, private investigator-type guy who worked for Ally's brother and Indy's fiancé, Lee Nightingale.

Luke had always been a badass. Two days after he moved in across the street, I caught him in the alley smoking cigarettes (again, he was twelve and smoking in the alley, and at eight I thought that was way cool). When he grew up, he drove muscle cars (loud and fast) and motorcycles (again, loud and fast) and sat in his Dad's garage with the door rolled up, lifting weights (I watched this out of my bedroom window, it was better than anything on television, believe you me). He always had a different girlfriend (and you could tell they were all easy but a nun would turn easy at one look at Luke) and he was also always getting

into trouble. I heard his Mom telling my Mom about it a lot. He'd been picked up by the cops out carousing more than once. He was a tough guy in high school and he roared off the day of his graduation after one of his many rip-roarin' fights with his Dad and became a tougher guy (I heard his Mom... well, you get the drift).

And right now I needed a tough guy.

"Shit," I said out loud.

You go get him, girl, Bad Ava said.

Be nice, Good Ava said.

Before I could chicken out, I got out of the Range Rover and went into the building.

* * * * *

I had serious second thoughts about my choice of clothing the minute I opened the door to the Nightingale Investigations offices.

I thought tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunting, private eyes would have shithole offices. Couches with the stuffing sticking out; filing cabinets with wire baskets on top overflowing with papers; dirty coffee cups; debris floating around – stuff like that.

Nightingale Investigations reception area was all smooth, gleaming wood-paneled walls; expensive leather couches (with no stuffing coming out at all); a huge cowboy print in a heavy, carved-wood frame; a bronze statue of a bucking bronco in the corner; and a mammoth reception desk with a state-of-art computer on it.

The desk was the only thing in the room not neat and tidy, it was a mess and there was a pretty, older, black woman sitting behind it. She had the biggest Afro I'd ever seen in my life and she appeared to be both eating a calzone and painting her fingernails a frosty, raspberry sherbet-type color at the same time.

I was wearing seriously faded Levi's I'd found in a vintage clothing store (and they were *the best*), my black Green Day t-shirt over a white thermal, black flip flops and my silver. I was a silver freak and that day as with every day I was dripping with it, four silver necklaces, five silver bracelets on my right wrist, three on my left, long, silver hoops at my ears and nearly all my fingers had heavy silver rings or bands on them. I'd slopped my hair in a messy knot on top of my head with a ponytail holder and I'd gone makeup free.

I was pretending I had nothing to prove and no one to impress.

I should have worn a dress and heels *and* makeup. Not to mention, done something with my goddamned hair.

Hell and damnation.

"Can I help you?" the lady behind the reception desk asked, breaking me out of my idiot thoughts.

I looked at her.

I hesitated, for a moment, wanting to run then I took a deep breath and said, "I'm looking for Lucas Stark."

“You got an appointment with Luke?” the lady asked, looking through the total mess on her desk (not that she’d ever find anything).

“No, I’m an…” I hesitated again, wondering if I wasn’t perhaps the stupidest woman in the world, I licked my lips and went for it, “old friend.”

“He ain’t here, girl, you want, I can call him,” the lady offered, looking at me closely.

“No,” I replied quickly, relieved beyond belief that Luke was somewhere else.

There it was, the gods telling me that this was not meant to be. I was going to go with that. Big time.

“I’ll just…” I stopped and looked around, deciding to get the fuck out of Dodge. “Forget it. Could you please just tell him Ava Barlow was here? I’ll try to catch him later.”

I was rethinking telling this woman my name (too late now) when she smiled huge like she’d just thought of some hilarious joke but wasn’t going to let me in on it.

“No problem to give him a bell,” she pushed. “I got his number on speed dial.”

Oh crap.

“No!” I cried, suddenly sounding desperate because suddenly I *was* desperate. I shouldn’t have come there. I could get the goods on Sissy’s stupid-ass, cheating, jerk of a husband myself. It couldn’t be that hard. I didn’t need Luke, I didn’t need anyone. “Really, thanks, but I’ll just go, I’ve got to be somewhere anyway.”

I started edging away, deciding on escape.

“Just hang on one tick,” the lady, ever-helpful, said, getting up, waving her hands to dry her nails, “I’ll just talk to the boys in the back. Maybe they know where he is.”

Eek!

Boys in the back?

A door opened and a man (most definitely *not* a boy) walked in and at one glance at him I stared.

At first I was worried it was going to be Luke, but it wasn’t. This guy was tall, dark-haired, with jade-green eyes, a lean, muscled body to-die-for and he was unbelievably gorgeous. Not your average-every-day gorgeous but otherworldly gorgeous. His green eyes were on me and he looked like he, too, thought something was hilarious.

I thought distractedly, considering everyone looked about ready to laugh, that this must be a fun place to work.

“Luke just called in,” he said to the black lady but his eyes never left me and all thoughts of a fun place to work flew from my head because all thoughts flew from my head. “He’ll be here in five.”

I had a silent freak out and wondered why, now that I needed advice, Good Ava and Bad Ava disappeared. I noticed too late that Hot-Green-Eyed-Guy was standing between me and the exit.

Crap.

“Hi, um...?” I looked at him.

“Mace,” he said and I blinked.

Yikes.

What kind of name was Mace? He certainly looked like he had some non-Caucasian ethnicity to him, maybe Polynesian, and who was I to say what Polynesians named their kids but *Mace*?

“Well, Mace, I need to go,” I told him.

He shook his head.

I stared at him, thinking maybe he didn’t hear me right. “I need to go,” I repeated.

“Luke’ll be here in five,” was all he said.

He stood with his arms crossed on his chest and I got the (correct) impression that for some reason he wasn’t going to allow me to leave. I found this somewhat alarming.

I gave up on him because he was big guy and he didn’t look like he was easily swayed and turned back to the receptionist.

“Um, really, I’ve got to go. I just remembered a dentist appointment. They get kind of touchy when you miss your appointments.”

This made her laugh.

“No, really. Sometimes they charge you,” I went on.

“Girl, so I can watch whatever’s gonna happen next, *I’ll* pay if they charge you,” the lady said.

Okay, it was safe to say I’d left the real, sane world and entered a loony bin.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“First, I’m Shirleen,” she told me.

“Um... hi?” I asked, still not following and wondering why it was clear I couldn’t leave and everyone in the room (but me) was okay with that.

“Hey there,” Shirleen said. “Second, to understand what’s going on you gotta know all that’s gone on before you. Since Luke’ll be here in five –”

“Three,” Mace interrupted from behind me, I glanced over my shoulder at him beginning to feel out-and-out panic and turned back to Shirleen.

“In three,” Shirleen went on, “there ain’t enough time. Just trust me, girl, go with the flow.”

She was making no sense at all. “What flow?” I asked then shook my head because I didn’t have time for information about the flow. I had to *go*. I turned and started toward Mace. They couldn’t actually keep me there; I was pretty certain that was against the law.

“I’m leaving,” I said to him.

His hard body went alert, I not only saw it, I felt it.

“Luke wants you here,” he told me.

I had taken two steps toward him which meant I was a foot away from him and about ten away from the door.

I tipped my head back and looked at him, surprised at what he said, “He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“He knows.”

“He doesn’t.”

“We told him.”

“How’d you know?”

He pointed and I followed his arm to see a camera in the corner of the room, the light on it was green.

God damn. The boys in the back had been watching.

My eyes went back to him. “You can’t keep me here,” I said.

He shook his head to tell me I was wrong.

This made me angry.

I had kind of a temper (okay, so maybe one could say I had a helluva temper) and right then, needing to go before Luke got there and calculating I had about a minute to make my getaway and unable to go, it got the better of me. Frankly, when I had a moment to look back, I was kind of shocked it took that long.

“Get out of my way,” I snapped, charged ahead and tried to dodge him at the last minute. He caught me and swung me around. I struggled and, laughably quickly, he subdued me, my back pressed tight to his front, my arms crossed in front of me, his hands at my wrists.

We were both slightly bent at the waist and I was still struggling, flipping out that I was all of a sudden stand up wrestling with a guy named Mace at the same time trying to pull free, when the door opened.

Mace and I stayed locked together but we both froze and our heads jerked toward the door.

Luke stood there.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I noticed instantly he looked even better than ever. Tall, at least four inches taller than me and I was five foot eight, lean and built, wearing a skintight black t-shirt, black cargo pants and black boots. His thick hair was clipped short to his head, not a buzz cut, but *short*. The beard was gone, in its place was the baddest-ass mustache I’d ever seen, thick and black across his lip and trimmed neat down the sides of his mouth.

Holy cramoly, I wanted to know, at that very moment, what it felt like to have that mouth, with that ‘tache, on me, on *any* part of me. I didn’t care which part and I wouldn’t have been choosy.

His eyes came to me, slid to Mace then back to me.

Then one side of his mouth went up in a half-grin. At the sight, I melted into Mace and even though he had to feel the fight had gone out of me he didn't let me go.

"Too late again," Luke muttered, sounding amused, his eyes on me but I got the feeling he wasn't talking to me.

"Not quite," Shirleen told him and she sounded like she was trying hard not to laugh.

This exchange confused me but I had no time to ask or say anything at all. Luke's eyes moved away from me and scanned the room, obviously looking for something then not finding it they sliced back to Shirleen.

"Where's Ava?" he asked, his eyes narrowed and the arms around me tightened and both my captor and I straightened.

"What do you mean, where's Ava? Boy, you looked right at her," Shirleen answered.

I heard a door open but since it was behind my back and there was a big, solid guy there I couldn't look. Not that I would have, Luke's eyes had cut to me and pinned me to the spot.

I went still and he stared at me.

"Hey Luke," I said, feeling and sounding stupid.

His brows came together. "Ava?" he asked.

"In the flesh," I tried for a jaunty smile even though Mace still hadn't let me go and I felt like a big dork.

Luke did a body scan then his eyes came back to mine. "What the fuck happened to you?" There was definitely a sort of pissed off accusation in his tone. Not the reaction I had dreamed of (quite a lot) when Luke saw the new me.

"I got contacts," I told him.

He glared at me.

"And I dyed my hair."

The glare turned scary.

"And I lost seventy-five pounds."

For some reason, at this, Shirleen burst out laughing and I could hear other laughter in the room as we'd been joined by more people that I couldn't see. I just kept my eyes on Luke who looked, for some insane reason, about to blow.

His jaw clenched and his gaze moved to the man behind me. "You wanna let her go?" he asked but it wasn't really a question and the tone of his voice was downright frightening.

The arms around me loosened and I took a step away.

Luke stayed where he was. "What're you doin' here?" he asked, still weirdly pissed off and still angrily glaring at me.

I decided instantly I didn't need a tough guy, I was going to go it alone so I lied, "Thought you might want to get a beer."

"I called you," he said, changing the subject suddenly, seemingly oblivious to our audience.

Crap, I was worried about this.

He *had* called me, half a dozen times after his father's funeral. Two, I missed because I was out. Four, I'd listened to, sitting there while he was leaving the messages and I didn't answer. None of them I returned.

"I know," I said softly.

"After my father died, I called you," he repeated and the laughter swept out of the room just as quickly as it came in.

"I know," I repeated.

"You didn't call back and now you wanna have a beer?"

His tone was even more frightening than before. I wouldn't have thought it was possible but there it was.

"Um... maybe not," I muttered, deciding that perhaps I should go home, go to bed and get up again and try the day differently, next time making smart decisions about my actions (read: not going to Nightingale Investigations).

"What're you doin' here?" he asked again.

"I told you," I answered.

"You lied," he stated.

My mouth dropped open. I had lied, of course, but how could he know that? And anyway, he was accusing me of lying in front of other people.

I felt my temper flare.

"I did not," I snapped and lied again.

"Bullshit."

"Don't you say 'bullshit' to me, Lucas Stark."

"Don't lie to me, Ava. What're you doin' here?" he wasn't going to let it go.

"I *was* going to ask you out for a beer. Then I remembered I have a dentist appointment and now I'm late so I'm just going to..." I was preparing for escape, I took two steps toward the door, mid-rant, and Luke moved.

One second, he was several feet away from me. The next second, he was right there, bent over and, I kid you not, his shoulder slammed straight into my belly, he lifted up and started moving, taking me with him.

I let out a small, surprised scream and I heard a couple of gasps as his shoulder twitched and he bumped me into a more solid position on it, his arm wrapped around the backs of my thighs. He walked from the room, opening a door and carrying me with him as he went through.

At this turn of events, I was too stunned to move much less struggle. But I did lift my head to see Shirleen and Mace as well as another black lady, another seriously Hot Guy

(this one Native American) and a movie-star gorgeous woman with black hair and violet eyes all watching us go.

We were in a hall and I saw the door close behind us right before I came to myself and yelled, "Let me down!"

Luke didn't answer, he turned and we went through another door. He stepped free of the door, turned again and I saw we were in a kitchenette slash locker room. I heard the door close before Luke turned one more time, bent forward and set me on my feet. I would have done something (though I didn't know what that something was) to get away but he moved into me. I had no choice but to move back and I slammed against the door. Luke came up close, the heat from his body hitting me, his face in mine and I stilled. He was so tall and broad, I couldn't see anything but him. He was so pissed off and full-of-attitude, I was captivated by him and wouldn't have been able to look or move away if I tried.

"What're you doin' here?" he repeated, dark blue eyes shining dangerously.

I ignored the danger, mainly because, at this point, I was seriously angry.

"Did you just carry me in here?" I snapped.

"Ava, I'm only gonna ask one more time," Luke warned.

I put my hands in the spare space between us, right on his rock-solid chest and gave a mighty shove. Then my eyes widened and dropped to my hands.

I was pretty certain I'd given a good, old shove but he didn't move, not an inch.

Holy shit.

Okay then, new tactic.

"First, your friend physically detains me and now you're carting me around against my will!" I yelled. "I'm calling the police."

"You're gonna tell me what's going on. Are you in trouble?"

"Step back, Luke."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Step back!" I shouted.

He didn't step back. Instead, he got closer, so much closer, his body touched mine, one of his hands went to the door beside my head, the other by my hip. I was totally trapped.

I sucked in breath.

Yippee! Bad Ava shouted in my ear.

Oh my, Good Ava breathed.

It was safe to say I pretty much would have sold my soul to the devil a thousand times in my life to have Luke this close.

"Talk to me, Ava," Luke ordered, his voice had dipped low. He didn't sound pissed off now, he sounded patient and a lot like Luke had always sounded whenever he talked to me. Gentle. Affectionate.

I should have responded to his tone but he was so close, my head tilted back to look at him and my eyes caught on his mouth.

That ‘tache was hot, but it surrounded the most superior set of lips I’d ever seen in my whole goddamned life. I’d, of course, noticed he had a nice mouth but I’d never had the opportunity to stare at it in that kind of proximity.

The top lip was nicely formed, the bottom one full, the balance was perfect and there were these sexy ridges that made you want to explore. I found myself wondering if that mouth was soft or hard when he used it to kiss you. Then I found myself wondering what it tasted like. Then I found myself thinking I wanted to run my tongue along it.

“Ava,” I watched it move as it said my name and my eyes drifted dreamily up to Luke’s.

I was in kind of a fog and when my eyes hit his I was no longer thinking clearly, totally lost in the moment, so lost I licked my lips.

“Jesus,” he muttered, his voice soft and now he was staring at *my* mouth.

I watched, fascinated, as his face stayed hard but his eyes went warm, ultra warm. Warm in a way I’d never seen them be warm. He always looked at me with warmth in his eyes, I knew he didn’t look at everyone that way, but he always looked at me that way, but this was different, *way* different. His eyes were warm in a way that made *me* feel warm, all over.

He wasn’t that far away but he started to come even closer.

Ho-ly *shit*.

I blinked and, self-preservation in mind, I shoved at him again, pulling my head back with a jerk and cracking it against the door.

The moment was broken.

“Step back!” I shouted.

Luke’s eyes narrowed. “What are you playin’ at?”

“I’m not playing at anything,” I yelled. “I was in the neighborhood, I thought I had time on my hands. Mom told me you worked here so what the fuck? Stop by and see an old friend. Then you all act like Neanderthal crazies. Jeez. Forget it. I have to go to the dentist. He’s gonna be pissed.”

I shoved again but Luke still didn’t move.

“You’re lying,” he said.

“I am not!”

His face came closer, the closer it would have come a moment ago when I thought, for one heart-stopping, insane moment, he was going to kiss me. This time, it came in threateningly.

“You waltz in here, after five years, not lookin’ like you, not actin’ like you, jittery and bitchy, somethin’ I never would have expected from you. You lie through your teeth

then stare at my mouth like you want to stick your tongue down my throat and when I'm ready to give you that opportunity, you go back to bitchy and lying."

I was staring at him, I couldn't help it. I'd never heard anyone be that brutally honest before in my life.

And he told me he was going to give me the opportunity to kiss him.

Um... *wow*.

"I'm not playin' this game, Ava," he warned, snapping me out of my thoughts. Gentle, affectionate Luke totally gone, we were back to dangerously pissed off Luke. "You got trouble, you tell me right now so I can help you. I find out another way, you'll pay."

My head jerked. "What?"

"You heard me."

I had heard him and I couldn't believe what I'd heard. "Did you just threaten me?" I asked.

"It wasn't a threat."

Read: It was a promise.

Yikes.

I didn't know what "paying" would entail and I sure as hell wasn't going to find out.

"I'm not in trouble," I told him.

And I wasn't, not really. Okay, maybe a little bit. But I was worried I was about to be in a lot in trouble.

"I find out you are..."

"You won't find out I am, in fact, I can promise you won't see me again," I bit out, glaring at him.

"I'll see you again," he said in a way that I felt a thrill go up my back.

Seriously, it was high time to escape.

"Step back," I demanded.

He stared at me

"Step back!" I shouted.

He stepped back.

I whirled, threw open the door and stomped down the hall.

Then I was twirled around, a hand at my elbow and I jerked my arm out of Luke's grasp. He was, for some reason, now grinning, face relaxed, one corner of his lips tipped up.

"Wrong way," he said and he looked about ready to laugh.

Great.

I was a total dork, making my grand exit and going the wrong way.

I threw him a look that should have made him spontaneously combust (of course, it did not) and stomped the other way, Luke beside me the whole time. His vibe had morphed from pissed off to amused and I didn't like it one bit.

He opened the door to the reception area for me and I hightailed it across the room, focused on the outer door and escape and not looking at anyone.

"Later," I said to the room at large because I didn't want to appear rude.

For some reason, this was met with Shirleen saying, "I'll put money down that she's livin' with him in four days."

My confused gaze swung to Shirleen but she was looking at the movie-star glamour girl who was looking at me.

"Three days," Glamour girl said, smiling at me and I thought, in other circumstances, I would have liked to meet her.

"A week, she's got spirit," the other black lady said, she was smiling at me too, not like I was the butt of some joke, but in a kind way.

I shook my head, thinking to focus, leave these nutsos behind and go, go, *go*.

I opened the outer door.

Before it closed behind me, I heard Luke say strangely, "Tonight."

Then everyone laughed.

Chapter Two

A Little Bit of Trouble

I was standing in my dinky little kitchen, taking my post-Luke-episode attitude out on an innocent cucumber.

That didn't go very well, Good Ava said on a sigh, resting the side of her head in her hand and her elbow on her thigh.

I thought it went great! Bad Ava yelled enthusiastically, jumping up and down.

I tried to ignore them both and pounded the big cleaver into the cucumber, chopping it in a cucumber-decimating frenzy, trying to get the confrontation with Luke and everyone in his office out of my head.

* * * * *

I lived in a row house in the Highlands area of Denver. I called it The Best Little Row House in Denver.

See? I'm a dork.

It had a living room with two big, arched windows at the front separated by double doors that rolled into the walls and led to dining room also with two big windows, these facing the back, a small kitchen off the dining room and a screened-in porch out the backdoor of the kitchen. All hardwood floors, except in the minuscule kitchen, which I'd tiled in slate with the counter tops tiled in shiny black. I put in white cupboards, all the hanging ones glass-fronted and displaying my huge collection of Fiestaware. There were two bedrooms and a massive bathroom with a claw-footed tub upstairs. I had a big, old basement its door leading off the kitchen which had two rooms and an old coal room. It was more of a pit than a basement, un-renovated and long-since unused, wallpaper peeling and exposed light bulbs. I only went down there to do my laundry because it creeped me out.

My row house was historically registered and had three fireplaces (dining room, living room and bedroom) and a sweet, little shady backyard with big trees kitty-corner at the ends.

It wasn't in the best neighborhood, but who cared? It had character, grace, history, a low mortgage, a garage out back where my Range Rover could be safe and I dug it.

I'd lived in Denver my whole life and was never going to move away. Denver was home. It had everything you needed, the big city choice of culture, food, shopping and entertainment all with a small town feel.

My family felt differently.

* * * * *

After my Dad left us when I was fourteen (rat-bastard number one in my life) and all us girls graduated high school, Mom took off to Phoenix like a shot. She hated the cold and the

snow and all the familiar reminders of my father. She also liked to be tan but felt claustrophobic in sunbeds.

I had two older sisters. My oldest one, Marilyn, moved to St. Louis after high school and got married to a car salesman then divorced him and almost immediately got married to a lawyer with whom she was currently involved in a bitter divorce at the same time dating a doctor, thus moving up in her chosen career as trophy wife. So far Marilyn had managed to work approximately four months of her life and spent the rest of it in spas and malls and on her back with sweaty slimeballs pumping away at her. I knew this because she talked about her active sex life a good deal, a kind of *gross* good deal, read: ick.

My other sister, Sofia, moved to San Diego and became a cheerleader for the San Diego Chargers. Sofia worked her way through the offensive line and then the defensive line of the Chargers (something, I might add, she also did as a cheerleader in high school). Now, retired from her career as an active cheerleader and football player groupie, she was running a cheerleading camp and engaged to a sports agent who was more of a slimeball than both of Marilyn's husbands put together and that was quite a feat, considering Marilyn's husbands were seriously the scum of the earth.

By the way, my Mom had named us all, with high hopes, after Hollywood bombshells. My sisters had both been bombshells from puberty, all thick, dark, shining hair, big boobs, tight asses, flat stomachs, long legs and sultry eyes. I had to work hard at bombshell status, and even then didn't quite make it because I was a big dork.

It was safe to say my sisters and I weren't close.

Sissy Whitchurch was another story.

* * * * *

Sissy and I had been best friends since second grade and we *were* close. She was the bestest, best friend in the world. Good at keeping secrets, happy to rip my silly and sometimes mean sisters to shreds with me, loyal to the core and always up for an adventure.

One problem with Sissy, she had shit taste in men.

Though, considering good men were non-existent, all women didn't have much choice.

However, Sissy's husband, Dominic, was beyond the pale in the shit-men stakes. Dom was a world-class asshole.

Dominic Vincetti was very good-looking (and knew it), made his money dubiously (and didn't hide it) and treated Sissy like shit (and never apologized). He didn't hit her, but he cheated on her (openly), walked all over her and talked down to her in a way that made my teeth go on edge.

Before Dom, Sissy was funny and sweet and there was no one in the world who was better to go to a rock concert with. She loved music like I did and she went wild at concerts, dancing, screaming, she always knew all the words to the songs and sang them loud.

After five years of marriage, Dom had forced all that good stuff out of Sissy, making her quiet, shy, uncertain and a homebody and Sissy didn't even notice it was happening.

I noticed and it pissed me off.

Sissy loved him though and put up with it and it wasn't my place to say anything. If she wanted him then I was there. My only other choice was to stop spending time with her and a life without Sissy, well, I couldn't imagine it.

But when I changed, lost weight, dyed my hair, Dom noticed.

In fact, a lot of people noticed.

In fact, even though I'd dated when I was heavy, I started to get some serious male attention as the weight dropped off then more then more. Since Luke's Dad's funeral, I'd had my first three longish-term boyfriends. I must admit, in the dreamworld I had in the back of my head, they were all practice for Luke. Of course, I never told them that and I could have fallen in love with any one of them, if they hadn't all turned out to be jerks.

There was Rick, who cheated on me (um, no).

Then there was Dave, who had a collection of pornography so big he could have opened his own store. And he called phone sex lines, like, a lot. Neither of these were bad things, as such. Except, phone bills over five hundred dollars month after month were a bit much. Not to mention, he wanted to have sex, like, twelve times a day, walked around naked at all times and tried to get me to go to swingers parties (um, no again).

Then there was Noah who took my Auntie Ella's jewelry and pawned it. This, I didn't find out until he also took my ATM card, found out my PIN number and cleaned out my checking and savings accounts before he disappeared. Luckily, I had the inheritance money my Aunt Ella gave me in a different account. She gave me her jewelry and a shitload of money, but only gave Marilyn and Sofia a token, which pissed them off big time but they'd always been mean to her and I hadn't, so fuck them.

See? All men were scum.

I wasn't a bitter, twisted spinster. I'd put myself out there and I had reasons to think that, what with my choices, Sissy's choices and my sisters' choices, not to mention my fucking Dad, who'd left and never came back, that all men were scum.

* * * * *

After Noah took off, Dom started to flirt with me right in front of Sissy. I couldn't believe it and did my absolute best not to rip his face off with my fingernails. However, there were a lot of times I wanted to rip Dom's face off with my fingernails, not just when he was flirting with me but when he'd ask Sissy if she *really* should be eating that second slice of pizza, giving her a shitty look when he didn't quite like the outfit she put on causing her to go and change it, getting pissy when he was served leftovers and the like.

Sissy ignored the flirting. So did I, passing it off as a joke.

Dom took this as a challenge. Dom was the kind of guy girls responded to mainly because he was really handsome which sucked, I figured he could use a scar or two, put there by my fingernails of course.

When I didn't respond, he flirted more, started touching and, just two weeks ago he backed me into the corner of their kitchen and kissed me, open-mouthed.

I bit his tongue.

"What the fuck!" he hissed, hand swiping at his mouth and glaring at me.

He was hot – all macho, Italian bad boy, dark, wavy hair, dark eyes, slim hips, broad shoulders.

When we'd first seen him, Sissy and I had both fallen in lust. Sissy had been over the moon when he asked her out. Sissy had never been heavy, she had blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair and was pretty, petite and dainty, like a gown up, human-sized fairy, without the pointy ears.

"Get away from me," I snapped at Dom.

His face changed from angry, to calculating. "You want it, Ava, you know you do. I've seen the way you look at me."

Like I said, he was hot, so he probably wasn't wrong. But he was also my best friend's husband.

"Get over yourself," I told him.

"I'd rather get on top of you."

I wanted to laugh in his face. That was a really bad line. Dom, I knew, because I'd seen it, could do a lot better.

Instead, I said, "Fuck off, Dom. Sissy's in the other room!"

"I get what I want," he said and something about the way he said it kind of freaked me out. He said it like he meant it and he was looking at me in a way that made my scalp tingle and not in a good way. I didn't know what he did for a living but I didn't think it was good and Sissy never talked about it which was concerning, Sissy and I talked about everything. He struck me as a bad guy, not only because he was a cheat and a jerk but also for other reasons.

"Dom, fuck... off," I snapped, but he kissed me again, arms going around me, tongue sliding in my mouth. I struggled, pushed and Dom pinned me against the wall, his hand going up my shirt.

Then we both heard a noise, Dom let me go and stepped back and we saw Sissy standing in the door.

"Sis, girl..." Dom said, his voice conciliatory and I wanted to kick him. I mean, what did he expect to happen?

I didn't kick him though mainly because I was horrified and scared through to my fucking soul that I might have just lost my best friend.

But Sissy looked at me and said, “Ava, would you help me pack?”

Then she walked out of the room.

Halle-fucking-lujah.

I shoved Dom’s shoulder as I walked by him and glared but he just repeated, staring at me with an intensity that I did... not... like, “Ava, I get what I want.”

I rolled my eyes, left the room, helped Sissy pack and she moved in with me for a few days. She cried a lot and I listened a lot and I quietly seethed a lot more. Then she went to her Mom’s place in Wyoming. But not until after we’d hatched our plan.

Sissy was going to move away and I was going to get the goods on Dom so Sissy could divorce him and take him to the cleaners.

That was the plan.

I wasn’t sure *how* to get the goods on Dom, that was where tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunter, private eye Luke Stark was supposed to come into the scenario.

* * * * *

Sissy knew Luke, had met him several times and had stood beside me at my bedroom window checking him out on numerous occasions while he lifted weights in his Dad’s garage.

She also knew how I felt about him (read: big, huge, twenty-one-year old crush).

Dragging Luke into the deal was her idea.

Sissy also knew about the funeral, what happened there, in fact, she knew everything about Luke.

She knew, when I was nine and was walking home from school, that three boys I detested had caught up with me, calling me Fatty, Fatty, Four Eyes (not original but it hurt anyway). She knew how Luke, thirteen and already a tough customer, came out of nowhere and punched one of them in the nose, bloodying it and making all three run away. She also knew after that was over that I made some smart comment making Luke laugh because, being teased all the time for being fat and ugly, one only had two choices, go silent and shy, or become a smartass, I chose the latter, and he’d walked me home.

She also knew, after that, no kids ever teased me. Not ever again.

Further, she knew about when Luke was fourteen and I was ten, he’d had one of many humdinger fights with his Dad that I heard all the way across the street. He’d torn out of the house and I’d gone after him. I found him in a park, ass to the ground, back against a tree, head bent, wrists resting on his cocked knees. I’d sat beside him and started telling jokes until he came out of his mood and started laughing.

She also knew about when I was twelve and Luke was sixteen and Luke, his Dad and Mom had come over for dinner. My mother, an aging beauty queen who still had two shelves full of trophies and ribbons from “the good old days”, got tipsy and announced to the table, “I’m so lucky. I have two beautiful daughters and one smart one.” Marilyn and Sofia

grinned at each other. My father got red in the face and looked like he was going to hit the roof. Luke's Dad chuckled uncomfortably in a way that sounded strangled but his Mom stared at me with concern.

I squirmed.

Luke leaned back in his chair, looked at Sofia and said, "Congratulations, you must have made the honor roll." Sofia's mouth dropped open in horror (I wasn't the only Barlow girl with a crush on Luke, all three of us had the hots for him). I immediately stopped squirming and laughed so hard at Sofia's horrified expression, I snorted.

Sissy also knew about the time, only five days before he graduated from high school, when I was fourteen and Luke was eighteen and it had become clear my Dad had left and wasn't coming back – I was sitting on our front stoop, you could hear my mother crying and carrying on inside while my sisters argued with each other over a curling iron or something idiotic. I saw Luke come out of his house on his way to his motorcycle. He saw me, changed directions, crossed the street and sat down beside me. He didn't say a word and neither did I. I just stared at his boots and wished he was my boyfriend, not for the first or the last time. It would have been a lot easier to cope with losing Dad if I'd had Luke as a boyfriend or anyone for that matter, but especially Luke.

I was close with my Dad, I thought we had a bond. I always thought it was the two of us against the other silly bitches in the house. I knew he found it trying to his patience, my mother, flighty, naggy, demanding, wanting a better life, house, car, curtains, whatever and always going on about it and going on about all the men she *didn't* chose so she could be with Dad, rubbing his nose in it constantly. I knew, too, that he lamented where he went wrong with snotty, bitchy, catty Marilyn and Sofia though, he didn't have to look too far, my Mom was a good teacher.

Dad had come into my bedroom late at night the day before he left and said, "Sorry, Ava, darlin', but I just can't take it anymore." He'd woken me up and I didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't explain and he didn't say anything more.

The next day he was gone.

"I thought..." I said to Luke and then stopped because I didn't know what I thought.

Luke slid his arm around my waist and pulled me to his side. I put my head on his shoulder and we sat there a long time before Luke bumped his foot against mine. I got the hint and pulled back. He got up, leaned down, touched my nose then he was gone.

A few days later, like my Dad, he was really gone.

Luke came back every once in awhile though, visiting his Mom, fighting with his Dad and popping by to say hi to me.

Then he disappeared for eight years. I didn't know where he went and his mother wasn't talking or I would have found out because, normally, she told my mother everything.

Lastly, Sissy knew about Luke's father's funeral. I was twenty-four, Luke was twenty-eight. After the funeral, still at graveside, the Barlow Girl Brigade walked up to Luke and his Mom. Hugs and cheek kisses were passed around, both Marilyn and Sofia going for the gusto with Luke but his body went stiff when they pressed against him, which was embarrassing for me, having to watch it and knowing they were my sisters. As gorgeous as they were, Luke was totally aloof from the Bombshell Barlow Girls. That was until his eyes moved to me and I leaned in to kiss his cheek. His arms came around me and he pulled me into a close hug, pressing his bearded jaw against my temple.

"Good to see you, Ava," he murmured and it sounded like he meant it.

"You too, Luke," I said, pulling back a bit and looking at him. "Hanging in there?" I asked softly.

His eyes were warm, his face was hard and he was so fucking handsome, it took my breath away.

He kept his arms around me and looked down at me. "Yeah," he answered.

"Wanna get drunk?" I asked, mostly teasing.

"Yeah," he answered, definitely not teasing.

"I can probably arrange that," I told him, still trying to keep the tone light but wanting to help ease his pain all the same. He and his Dad never got along, I knew that. Still, his Dad had been youngish and it was a shock. Massive heart attack. Not good, even if they didn't get along.

"I'll take you up on that," Luke said. Then his eyes moved to his mother, he let me go and touched my nose. "I'll call you."

I nodded. "It's a deal," I promised.

Then we moved away and more mourners moved into our space to offer their condolences. I walked away slowly, wanting to be in his presence for as long as I could drag it out.

It was later I overheard my sisters talking in our living room.

"God, it was sick, seeing her pressed up to him like that. All her fat, like, bulging," Marilyn said.

"I know, I think I threw up a little bit looking at them. He could barely get his arms around her," Sofia replied.

"I came all this way just to see him and he barely looked at me. But he hugged Ava. How fucking weird is that?" Marilyn went on.

"Maybe he's gay," Sofia suggested.

Then they'd laughed, thinking they were hilarious.

Okay, it was safe to say that not only weren't my sisters and I close, I kinda didn't like them, as in *really* didn't like them.

But for me, hearing what they said, that was it. The final straw.

That was when I made my decision, my vow, that the next time I saw Lucas Stark and if he hugged me or touched me, no one who was looking at us would think it was sick, gross or throw up a little at the sight of us.

That was why I didn't take his calls and go out and get drunk with him like I promised I would.

Instead I went and found a personal trainer, had a mortifying fitness test, was put on a program, dumped all the shit food out of my house and started reading *Self* and *Shape* magazines religiously. I lost twenty pounds in the first month (water weight), the next fifty-five were a lot harder. My trainer changed my program every six weeks and drilled me like a Nazi. His name was Riley, he was always tan (not sunbed tan, he's outside a lot, even in the winter). He had blond hair, brown eyes and a great body and he told me I was going to be his Mona Lisa. I wasn't going for Mona Lisa, I was going for Jennifer Aniston but I decided not to share that with Riley.

Riley was a good guy, though likely a total jerk to his girlfriends, how was I to know? Regardless, I didn't want to let him or myself down. I was dedicated and motivated and living, cycling, treadmilling, stair climbing, ab curling and weight training for the day when Luke saw me again.

Though it didn't turn out like I'd planned. Mainly because, even with partial bombshell status, I became an asshole-magnet and realized it wasn't just Sissy, Marilyn, Sofia and Mom's bad taste it men. It was just that men weren't worth the effort.

So by the time I was ready for Luke, mentally and physically prepared to seek him out, I'd gone off men. I made a new vow that I was dedicated to just as much as fitness.

I was never going to get tangled up with a man again, no matter who, no matter what.

* * * * *

After Noah cleaned me out, Sissy and I went to Pandora's Box on Broadway, I stocked up and got myself a rabbit vibrator *and* a smooth, sleek silver one (so I could have variety) and enough batteries to last a year. Once I got them home, out of their boxes and loaded up with batteries, I vowed ever-lasting fidelity to my vibrators.

That was that.

Seriously.

The end.

So there I was, now a dedicated, bitter spinster with revenge on my mind. Not revenge for myself but for Sissy and every other woman who'd been fucked over by a shithead guy.

* * * * *

I stopped cleaving at the cucumber, tossed it into a bowl with the arugula I'd already nearly annihilated and had started on the onion when the phone rang.

I threw down the cleaver and picked up the phone.

“Yo,” I said.

“Yo, yourself,” Sissy said to me. “How’d it go with Luke?”

I could hear the anticipation in her voice. She thought he’d fall in love with me on sight and put a ring on my finger within the hour. She loved me and thought I was funny and cool, what could I say? It sucked to disappoint her.

“Not good, I didn’t ask him. I’m going it alone,” I tried to make it short and sweet.

Silence for a beat and then, “What do you mean, not good?”

“I mean, not good,” I decided maybe I shouldn’t tell her right now about how it actually went. She had enough on her plate and anyway, I wasn’t ready to relive it. “I think he’s kinda pissed that I didn’t return his calls after his father’s funeral.”

“You should have called him,” Sissy told me and she’d told me this before, like, five dozen times.

“Too late now. Anyway, we go ahead with the plan as it was, just without Luke. I’ll go to your house tonight.”

Sissy hesitated. “I’d be a lot more comfortable if you had Luke with you.”

“That isn’t gonna happen.”

“Okay, then maybe you can call Riley. I think he has a bit of a crush on you, now that you’re hot. Maybe he’ll go with you.”

The idea of Riley, who’d done a body fat test on me seventy-five pounds ago (and one just three weeks ago and about seventeen in between), having a crush on me made me burst out laughing.

“Riley does not have a crush on me,” I said when I quit laughing.

“Riley thinks you’re fine,” Sissy returned.

“Riley has a girlfriend with bleached teeth and a perma-tan,” I told her.

“He broke up with her *ages* ago. Anyway, you make Riley laugh, even when he’s holding your feet and you’re doing ab curls.”

“There’s nothing to laugh about when you’re doing ab curls.”

This was true, I hated ab curls. I hated exercise and I wasn’t that hot on cucumber, arugula, onion and Bulgar wheat tabouleh. I’d rather have a huge burrito with spiced meat, cheese, sour cream and guacamole and a humungous chocolate chip cookie but I hadn’t worked my ass off (literally) to go back now.

“Tell me about Luke,” Sissy changed the subject, knowing, after twenty-two years of being my best friend that I was holding out on her.

“Later.”

“Now.”

“Later, Sissy. It...” I stopped, then started again, “wasn’t good.”

“Was it bad?”

“No, it was just... weird.” Weird really wasn’t the word for it but I was going to go with that for now.

“Well,” she said, giving in and her voice had gone soft. “Then don’t worry about Dom. I’ll come home in a few days, we’ll do it together.”

“No!” I said, kind of loud. I didn’t want her to come back. I didn’t want Dom to talk her into taking him back. I wanted her clear of him. I wanted Sissy to come back to herself and for Dom to be out of her life, forever. “I’ll take care of it,” I finished.

“I don’t...”

“Sissy, I’ll take care of it.”

“I don’t like it. Dom’s not really a guy you mess with.”

“I won’t get caught.”

“Crap,” Sissy muttered, her second thoughts clear in her voice.

“I’ll be all right. I’ll go tonight, search the house. It’s his poker night, right?”

“Yeah,” I could tell she still didn’t like it. “Call me when you get home.”

“Okay.”

“Later, honey.”

“Later.”

I hung up, tossed the draining Bulgar wheat in with the other junk, chopped the onions, cried a little bit, threw them in too, mixed it up with a dash of olive oil, lemon juice and salt and pepper. I got out a fork, took a huge bite and said, mouth full, “Blech.”

It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t a burrito and a chocolate chip cookie either.

You know, you really should listen to Sissy, Good Ava said to me.

I think some breaking and entering will be fun! Bad Ava put in.

Shit.

* * * * *

I was about to head out for my evening’s festivities when the phone rang.

I’d put on dark jeans; a black stretchy, fitted, long-sleeved t-shirt; black flip flops; and, of course, my silver. I should probably have left my silver out of the equation since it was glittery and would catch the light but I didn’t go anywhere without my silver. And anyway, I’d been to Dom and Sissy’s a gazillion times, all their neighbors knew me and wouldn’t blink an eye that I was there. Furthermore, I had a key (well, not really, but I knew where they hid the spare). I didn’t answer the phone. Night had fallen, it was getting late and Sissy told me that Dom’s return from the poker game was up in the air. If he was doing well, he stayed out late, if he was losing, he cut it short, came home and likely took his bad luck out on Sissy by saying shit to her that made her feel like dirt.

The answering machine kicked in as I grabbed my keys and bag.

“Hey, Ava? It’s Ally, long time no see or hear, chickie. You’ve been, like, Ms. Invisible and loads of shit has gone down,” pause, then, “I heard you were at my brother’s

offices this afternoon and had a situation with Luke. Sister, what was *that* all about? I didn't even know you knew Luke. Call me, pronto. I want the dirt, Indy wants the dirt, we *all* want the dirt. We'll do drinks. Hornet, tomorrow night, seven o'clock. See you there."

Disconnect.

Shit.

Indy Savage and Ally Nightingale were Rock Chicks like Sissy and me. Those two were hilarious, crazier by far than Sissy and me or at least Sissy recently, for sure. We'd met at a concert years ago and went to dozens of them together. Sissy and I usually never missed one of Indy's kickass parties, she had a lot of them and she always had bowls of cashews and everyone knew bowls of cashews meant kickass party. Sissy and I also used to hang out at the used bookstore on Broadway that Indy owned called Fortnum's. I hadn't been in ages, at least eight months, maybe longer, since before Indy hooked up with Lee Nightingale. Indy had had a crush on Lee since practically birth, Indy and Lee's parents were best friends and she and Lee and Ally and Lee's brother, Hank had grown up together. It was super-fucking-fly that they were finally together, it made you think the world wasn't shit.

It wasn't that I didn't want to go to Fortnum's or see Indy and Ally (Ally worked there on occasion). It was just that Noah had cleaned out my bank accounts. I'd felt the need to score a couple more accounts for my at-home graphic design business to make up for the money he stole so, unusually, I was busy.

See, with Aunt Ella's money and a barely-there mortgage, I didn't have to work that hard. I'd bought the house dirt cheap, mainly because it was a nightmare when I bought it, but I'd fixed it up, mostly myself, not the electricity or the plumbing, just refinished the floors, re-skimmed the walls, did the tile work, painted, shit like that. I had a couple of business clients that kept me relatively busy, out of trouble and in plentiful amounts of my sliver. However, when your rat-bastard ex-boyfriend steals over five thousand dollars from you, it pushes you to put your nose to the grindstone.

I decided to call Ally tomorrow, after I searched Dom's house and figured out what I'd tell her about Luke.

I went to my Range Rover, backed it out, hit the button for the garage door to close and headed to Sissy and Dom's. They had a very nice, popped-top bungalow in Washington Park. Sissy loved it and I liked it too. I hoped she got it in the divorce settlement.

I did a drive by, checking for lights and to see if Dom's BMW was parked in their back drive off the alley. It wasn't, so I parked around the corner, hoofed it up to the house, went around the side to the back and found Sissy's fake rock by their outdoor Jacuzzi which held the key. I opened it with the combination she gave me, put the rock back where I found it, went to the door and let myself in.

I didn't bother with gloves, my prints were likely all over the house anyway.

I also didn't turn on the lights. I knew the house like the back of my hand. I'd partied in it, had Christmas dinner in it, had crashed there on many occasions (normally drunk) and even helped Sissy clean it a number of times.

I didn't know what I was looking for, shirts with lipstick on the collar? Love letters?

I had the bad feeling that I was going to have to follow Dom with a camera and take pictures of him while he was doing the nasty with some bimbo. I didn't relish that idea so I hoped Dom was a love-letter-keeping type of guy.

I went to the kitchen drawer where I knew Sissy kept her small Maglite and I decided to start in the bedroom.

I'd seen enough movies and television to do a decent search. I started at his nightstand and found an industrial-sized box of condoms he had to have bought at some warehouse retail store (I didn't even know they made boxes of condoms that big). I made note of this, knowing that Sissy was on the pill therefore Dom didn't need condoms. Sissy and I had both gone on the pill together, me for friendship's sake at the time since I'd been a virgin. I lost my virginity at twenty-three to a sweet, goofy, geeky guy named George (it wasn't awful, but it also wasn't great, by the way) but I'd been on the pill for two years before that for no reason at all.

I shrugged off thoughts of my contraception history, checked the bottom and insides of the drawer, the back and bottom of the nightstand but nothing going.

I was moving to the closet, intent on my task when, suddenly, a steel-band-like arm wrapped around my waist, a hand went over my mouth and I was lifted clean off my feet.

Freaked out, legs pumping and screaming under the hand, I was carried out of the bedroom and into the living room like a weighed as much as a rag doll.

I planted a well-aimed, savage elbow to the side of who I suspected was Dom, someone who I not only didn't want to catch me snooping. I also didn't want to be alone with him, at all, ever.

I heard a grunt when my elbow connected and I was dropped. Heart pumping, mind flying from thought to thought, I caught only one and that one thought was *go*.

I started to run but was caught by the back of my shirt. It went way tight against my chest and I was yanked back, again off my feet. My shoulders slammed against something hard right before I was whirled around and the arm went around me tight, pulling me against a solid torso just as the hand went back over my mouth.

"Quiet," Luke Stark clipped.

Ho-ly *crap*.

I went still and stared, though I couldn't see much of anything. I'd dropped the Maglite somewhere in the bedroom.

What in *the hell* was he doing there?

"You gonna stay quiet?" Luke asked.

I nodded. His hand went away.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I whispered, not knowing what to think, or feel, just shocked out of my mind.

Was he following me? And, if so, why?

“Could ask you the same thing,” he said to me, cutting into my thoughts.

“I’m visiting a friend,” I lied quickly.

His body tensed and I felt something fill the room, something crackling and dangerous. I couldn’t see it in the dark but I could feel it. I could feel it because his arm got tight and it hauled me even deeper into his body so we were pressed close, chest to crotch.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“Stop lying to me Ava,” I could tell by his tone that he was not happy, so not happy that I had to admit I was a little scared of him.

“I’m not lying,” I lied.

“You’re tellin’ me that Dom Vincetti is a friend of yours?”

“No, Sissy Vincetti is.”

He knew Sissy, he’d met her way back in the day. This was likely why his arm relaxed enough for me to pull away and put a foot of space between us which was a far more comfortable position, believe you me.

“Sissy isn’t here,” Luke said to me.

“Well, I know that now,” I said, like I’d expected her to be there, in other words, I lied, again.

“You often go to your friend’s houses when they’re not home and search them in the dark?”

Eek!

Before I could think up another lie – because it wasn’t any of his business what I was doing there, I mean, it would have been his business, if he hadn’t carried me through his offices like a caveman that afternoon, but it wasn’t his business anymore – he reached forward and grabbed my hand, tugging me back into the bedroom.

“Luke, stop. What are you doing?”

He bent down, nabbed the still-lit Maglite from the floor and snapped it off. “We’re gettin’ out of here,” he said, pulling me out of the bedroom and back into the living room.

I planted my feet when he started to yank me across the room. He stopped and looked back at me.

“No. *You’re* getting out of here,” I flashed at him. “I’m, um... looking for the earring I left here the other night.”

That sounded like a good lie.

Luke obviously didn’t think it was a good lie. He gave my hand a sharp tug, I fell forward and, without a word, he started walking, dragging me behind him.

I yanked my hand out of his, stopped again and cried, "Luke!"

That's when the room exploded.

One second, we were standing there, me glaring at him in the dark, him holding his body tense like he was just stopping himself from shaking some sense into me. The next minute there was so much noise and flying debris, every thought flew out of my head.

Luke moved quickly. He threw himself at me in a body tackle and we went down to the floor. He landed on top of me, body slamming into mine and immediately pulled himself up, wrapping his arms around my head and leaning his shoulder into the floor, my face pressed into his throat, his head tucked in, temple against the top of my forehead.

Glass, dust, plaster and bits of Sissy's adored pottery collection flew everywhere as machine gunfire blasted through the huge living room window.

I lay under Luke, pretty certain I was going to die and wishing I'd made a will. Now, my sisters and mother were going to get all Aunt Ella's money. I should have left it to Sissy and a cat shelter.

The noise finally stopped and, even though it felt like it had gone on forever, it was probably less than a minute. Luke didn't move, just kept me tucked tight underneath him and it hit me that our position meant he was using himself as a shield to keep me safe.

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Stop right there.

That was too much, it was all too much, time for me to bury all this somewhere deep and have a nervous breakdown later, when Sissy and I were on a beach enjoying Dom's money.

"Luke," I whispered and his head came up.

I was quiet because I could tell he was listening and not to me. Then his head tilted down and I could feel his eyes on me.

I lifted my hand up between our faces, index finger and thumb held an inch apart and I said, "Maybe I'm in *a little bit* of trouble."

It was then he made a noise and it sounded an awful lot like a growl.

Chapter Three

That's Who I'm Keeping Safe

“Luke?”

“Quiet.”

He knifed off me, yanked me to my feet and wasted no time pulling me through the room through the kitchen and out the backdoor.

I didn't resist.

I didn't want to be anywhere near a room that exploded with gunfire. I was more than happy to be moving away from it, swiftly, hand-in-hand with a tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunter, private eye-type person who clearly knew what the hell he was doing.

Luke jogged through the backyard then broke into a sprint down the alley, his hand in mine, dragging me behind him and, let me tell you, it wasn't easy sprinting in flip flops, I was going to have to rethink my footwear on my next nail-Dom-to-the-wall assignment. I saw lights go on in houses and heard police sirens but Luke just kept going.

It took me a moment, considering the fact that I was freaking out and perhaps fleeing for my life (on flip flops, no less), to realize that he was moving in the wrong direction.

I pulled at his hand. “My car's the other way,” I whispered loudly to his back.

He kept going, dragging me with him.

“Luke!” I hissed, tugging hard.

He didn't stop, just kept dragging me.

We shot out of the alley but stopped next to a shiny black Porsche and he bleeped the locks. He opened the passenger side door.

I had to admit, even in my current state, I was a bit impressed that he drove a Porsche.

“Get in,” he ordered, snapping me out of my thoughts about his Porsche.

“What?” I asked, confused, freaked, winded from the Flip Flop Getaway and wanting maybe to take a second and do a cartwheel of joy that I was still alive and not full of holes.

“Get in the fucking car,” Luke snapped.

I guessed Luke wasn't into cartwheels of joy.

“My car is...” I started to tell him but I stopped talking when his hand went to the top of my head and he pressed me into the car. He did this so forcefully, my body had no choice but to comply. My legs just buckled and my ass, of its own accord, aimed for the seat. He slammed the door the minute my feet cleared the frame.

He was in the driver's side before I finished blinking away my surprise.

I turned on him. “I want you to take me to my car,” I told him. My purse was in my car and I needed my purse, my cell was in my purse and, just like anyone, I felt naked without my cell phone.

He started the Porsche (incidentally, it purred like a kitten).

Maybe not thinking entirely clearly, I turned to the door, my hand on the handle, deciding I’d run to my own car.

What happened next shocked the breath right out of me.

Luke grabbed my wrist, pulled me away from the door, leaned forward and yanked a set of handcuffs out of the glove compartment, the whole time not letting me go. He snapped a bracelet on my left wrist and the other on his right.

As I was staring at our wrists bound together, he put the Porsche in gear, my arm moving with his, and we rocketed from the curb.

It took a few seconds but then I stammered, “You just... you just... handcuffed me to you!”

“That’s right,” he told me as he – or, more to the point, *we* – kept shifting.

“You just handcuffed me to you,” I repeated inanely.

He didn’t answer.

“Why did you handcuff me to you?” I asked.

He stayed silent.

“Luke!”

“Quiet, Ava.”

It was then I lost it. I had an excuse. I *had* just had a near-death experience.

“You’re nuts! You’re crazy! You’re following me. You handcuffed me. We just got shot at. I can’t believe this shit. Take me to my goddamned car!”

He pulled over, the Porsche moved sleekly under his command but this maneuver was still sudden enough for me to snap my mouth shut.

When he had the car idling, he turned to me, his left hand shot out, wrapping around my neck and pulling me toward him.

Our faces an inch apart, he said, “Quiet, Ava.”

“I will not be quiet!” I screamed in his face. “I’m freaked, right, the hell, out. We were just shot at! I think we just ran away from a crime scene. And, I repeat, you just handcuffed me to you!”

“You got the choice to be quiet or I’ll shut you up.”

“Yeah? How’re you gonna do that? Gag me?” I yelled.

“I had somethin’ else in mind.”

“Fuck quiet!” I shouted, ignoring his words, totally in Freak Out La La Land. “I need tequila. I need my car. I need to call Sissy,” I was rambling and I knew it but I’d been in a room that *exploded*.

“Quiet,” he repeated, his voice holding a low warning.

I also ignored the warning. “Seriously, take me to my goddamned car.”

“Why am I always repeating myself with you?” he asked, sounding slightly impatient.

“Maybe because I don’t snap to when you tell me to do something like all the other women in your life likely do,” I retorted, sounding bitchy as all hell.

It was at that, his hand at my neck jerked me forward, his head slanted and, I kid you *not*, he kissed me.

For your information, those lips were hard when they kissed you.

Ho-ly *crap*.

I was stunned still (yes, and quiet) as his mouth moved over mine. Then he let me go as quickly as he kissed me, turned back to the wheel and we moved into traffic.

I decided my best course of action at that moment was to stay silent.

It was a good thing to do. It gave me the time to bury Luke’s hard, angry kiss right down deep next to him shielding me from gunfire with his body and us getting shot at *at all*.

I’d wanted Luke to kiss me, like, for ages, but not like that. I didn’t even know you could kiss someone like that.

My silence and our drive also gave me time mentally to rehearse my conversation with Sissy about this incident.

Um, Sissy, you know that collection of Stephen Kilborn “Day of the Dead” pottery you’ve been painstakingly collecting for years...?

We were in lower downtown when Luke’s right hand moved, taking my left one with it, pulling me out of my unhappy thoughts, to flip down his sun visor. The car slowed and he hit a button affixed to his visor then he flipped it back up, his (and my) hand moving to the stick as he down-shifted.

“Where are we going?” I broke the silence.

He turned into an underground parking area and headed to an open spot of which, I noted, there were many.

“You’re staying at my place while I find out what the fuck is goin’ on.”

He parked, pulled up the brake and turned off the car while I processed this information, coming to the conclusion I did not want to be at Luke’s place while he found out what was going on. I didn’t want to be at Luke’s place at all.

Before I could protest (not that it would matter), he got out his side which meant, considering I was attached to him, I had to scramble over the seat and follow him.

“Luke, I need to get my car, my purse is in my car,” I said while he closed the door behind me and bleeped the locks. I used a calmer, more rational voice, hoping to impress him with my cool attitude and get him to do what I wanted.

“One of the boys’ll bring it here,” he said, hitting the button to an elevator.

“What boys?”

“Lee’s boys.”

Oh.

Well then. That was my car taken care of.

I carried on to the next important subject. “I should go home. I’m supposed to call Sissy.”

He turned to me, eyes assessing. “You know where Sissy is?” he asked.

Oops. I’d just outed myself on the “just visiting Sissy at her house” lie.

Argh!

“Um...” I muttered, wondering how to backtrack on what I’d given away.

“Jesus Christ. You two are in on this together,” he said, yanking me into the elevator and pressing a button. We were still cuffed together but he was holding my hand.

“There’s nothing to be in on together.” Oh man, there it was, lying again. I was going straight to hell.

“You two were always in on something together,” Luke said.

“We were not,” I lied. Again!

Luke looked at me and I found it hard to return his angry stare.

“What about the time you two lit off bottle rockets in the middle of the night in Old Man Humphries back yard? He nearly had a stroke.”

I made a sound like “humph”. “He deserved it. He shot Sissy’s dog... for trespassing! How can a dog trespass?”

He didn’t answer me, he went on. “And the time you sold a bag of oregano to Mitch and Josh Burk, telling them it was pot?”

“We needed money, there was a Kiss tribute show coming up. They never figured it out, said it was the best weed they’d ever had.”

“And the time you filled Megan Carmichael’s car with popcorn?”

“She was a bitch. She stole Sissy’s boyfriend.”

He shook his head as if *I* was the crazy person in this scenario, not him, Mr. Handcuff Man. The doors opened and we walked into a semi-dark space. It wasn’t that dark since the lights of LoDo were shining in from quite a number of huge floor-to-almost-ceiling arched windows.

I knew it was a loft, a kickass loft, but this was confirmed when Luke flipped a switch, soft lamps lit the space and he dragged me into it.

I didn’t fight. I stared.

His loft was super-fly.

One huge room with four huge windows down one side, two windows down both the narrow sides. All the walls were exposed brick, the ceiling had duct work painted black and the floor was shining wood planks cut only with rugs under the bed and living room areas. Smack center, between the four windows opposite the elevator, there was a kitchen

area with a counter against the wall, a semi-circular bar facing the room, stools around the bar with stainless-steel bases and black leather seats. There were shiny, black appliances including an enormous fridge. To the side, stationed between the two windows, there was a black couch, a huge black recliner to one side, a black-lacquered coffee table and a gigantic flat screen TV was fixed to the wall. Well across from the kitchen was a big bed with a black slatted head and foot board but deep-gray sheets and comforter. The other side of the room had a set of weights, a weight bench, a fancy weight machine and an elliptical machine. In the corner next to the weights, there was a small room made of glass block that I assumed was the bathroom.

It was obviously occupied by a man, there were clothes all over the place, magazines and opened mail in disarray on every surface and dishes in the sink. The bed had been slept in and hadn't been made.

Still, even with the mess, the tough guy, mercenary, bounty hunting, private eye business must pay well for Luke to have a Porsche and a LoDo loft like this.

I was now definitely impressed.

This lasted for two seconds, mainly because he'd dragged me to the side of the bed and he was now unlocking the bracelet on his wrist.

"What're you doing?" I asked, watching him.

"Cuffing you to the bed."

My body went solid.

Then I screeched, "*What?*"

Too late, I should have run, struggled, something. Instead I'd gone still, like the big dork I was, and he pushed me back with a hand to my chest. I fell to the bed, he leaned into me and before I knew it, or even began to struggle, he'd cuffed me to one of the slats.

I stared at my hand cuffed to the slat then I stared at him, completely at a loss for words.

He was looking down at me and he seemed deep in thought.

"I don't like this," he informed me.

He didn't like it?

I found some words. *Loud* ones.

"I don't like it either!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Uncuff me!"

He put a knee to the bed, grabbed my other wrist then came forward and pinned me with his heavy body.

This time I struggled, twisting under him but it was like I didn't even move. He worked at the cuffs, pulled up my other arm and slapped the bracelet on that one so I had no free hand. He did this all with minimal effort but I was breathing like I'd just run a marathon.

Then he got off me, stood and stared down at me.

“That’s better,” he murmured.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” I said softly and I was hoping he was. I was hoping this was all a big joke, he’d give me one of his half-grins and say, “Psych.”

“Be good while I’m away,” he answered instead, turning.

“Get back here! Uncuff me!” I shouted. “Luke, I’ll scream my head off!”

“Do it,” he invited, hitting the button to the elevator and turning to me, looking totally calm and I wished I could throw something at him. “The loft upstairs is vacant, for sale. The people downstairs are still in Florida for the winter. Each loft is the whole floor. No one’s around to hear you.”

The elevators opened, he flipped the lights off and disappeared.

I screamed, “I’m going to kill you!”

The elevator doors closed and he was gone.

Well, this is a fine mess you’ve gotten us into, Good Ava said into my ear.

Ooo, we’re in Luke’s bed, Bad Ava cooed into my other one.

Shit.

* * * * *

When you were fuelled with adrenalin, had been shot at and were lying handcuffed to a bed owned by a man you’d had a screaming crush on for most of your life, it was impossible to sleep.

Not to mention, both arms over your head was *not* a comfortable position.

So I laid awake thinking of all the ways I wanted to kill Luke.

Then I realized, when I couldn’t find a way I liked, that I didn’t want to kill Luke because I wasn’t a killing type of person.

Instead, I focused on all the reasons why I hated men.

They cheated on you. They lied to you. They stole your stuff. They made you feel like shit. And they cuffed you to beds.

I was mentally arranging and rearranging all the men I hated in order of the ones I hated the most (Luke being on the top of that list in each arrangement, for obvious reasons) when the elevator doors slid open.

He’d been gone a long time, it felt like hours (though it probably wasn’t).

He walked silent into the room. I saw him moving because the room was dimly lit with the city lights but he barely made a sound. He put something on the kitchen counter and I watched, quiet and secretly fascinated, as his upper body twisted when he pulled off his tee. I held my breath as I saw skin in the moonlight, and even the definition of muscle, and what I saw was nice.

He turned to the bed, walked to it and sat on the side then bent forward and tugged off a boot.

“Please take me home,” I said quietly. I’d decided quiet was the way to go, all my other attempts to get my way (yelling, screaming, shouting and struggling), didn’t work so I was trying out other options.

“No,” he said just as quietly, foiling my new tactic and dropping his boot to the floor.

“I need to take out my contacts,” I told him and this was true.

He stopped taking off his second boot then bent down, picked up the first one and tugged it back on.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he got up.

He walked to the tee he threw on the floor, pulled it on and went to the elevator. “I’ll be back,” he said, standing at the elevators.

“Wait!” I called but too late, the doors opened, he disappeared into them and the light from the elevator was extinguished as the doors closed.

* * * * *

This time he didn’t stay gone long and came back less silent because he was carrying a rustling bag.

“Where’d you go?” I asked as he went back to the counter, threw the bag on it and then again pulled off his tee and dropped it to the floor.

“Contact solution and a case,” he said, coming to the bed, sitting on the edge again and tugging off his boot.

“You can just take me home, I have, like, a million cases there *and* contact solution.” This was obvious but I pointed it out anyway.

“I’m not taking you home, Ava.” He dropped boot one.

“I don’t understand. Why? Whoever they were, they weren’t shooting at me. No one even knew I was there.”

He dropped boot two. “I know. They were shooting at Vincetti.” He pulled off a sock.

I sucked in breath. This was news.

“They were shooting at Dom?” I whispered, unable to wrap my mind around this fact.

“He isn’t a well-liked guy,” he pulled off the other sock.

This didn’t surprise me, as I explained, Dom was a jerk. But shooting out his living room with an Uzi? That seemed a bit much and this was coming from a woman who was searching his house to try to find evidence to nail him in an upcoming divorce battle.

“Why would they shoot out his living room with an Uzi when he wasn’t there?”

“It wasn’t an Uzi. It was an AK-47. And they were sending a message.”

He’d turned toward me and was leaned into me, working at the cuffs.

I sucked in breath again, mainly because Luke’s naked chest was close to my face and it was freaking me out and playing havoc with my vow to stay faithful to my vibrators.

I felt my hands freed and I pulled my arms down, sat up and shook them out. Pins and needles shot up them and I took a deep breath to tamp down my temper. It wouldn't serve any purpose, I was learning quickly Luke didn't like my temper and he was a lot stronger than me. He seemed in a mellow mood and I wasn't going to piss him off, pissing him off wouldn't get me home and I needed to get home and soon. I figured him going out and buying me contact lens solution meant he thought, for some reason, I was spending the night. My purse was in my Range Rover and I was pretty certain Sissy had called my cell, probably dozens of times, checking in. She was likely panicked. I needed to phone her and quick.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from saying softly as I rubbed at both of my arms, "That hurt."

He threw the cuffs on the nightstand, twisted at the waist, grabbed my left wrist and started to massage my arm.

Oh my goodness, Luke's massaging your arm! Isn't that sweet? Good Ava trilled in my ear.

Jump him! Rip his pants off! Bad Ava shouted in my other ear.

I ignored my advisors and sat, completely still, and registered how nice, warm and strong Luke's hands were. They felt good. No, they felt great.

Shit.

"I needed to make sure you were safe," he told me, thankfully pulling me away from thoughts of his hands feeling great.

"They didn't shoot out *my* windows," I pointed out.

"Then I needed to make sure you didn't do something stupid."

Hmm.

One, two, three, four, five... okay, temper under control.

"Now that you know I'm safe and I can promise you I won't do anything stupid," *tonight*, I thought, but did not say, "Can I please go home?"

"No."

"Luke!"

His hands went to my armpits, he got up, taking me with him and set my feet on the floor.

I'd kicked off my flip flops and they were lying somewhere in the bed. There was something very weird about me, barefoot, standing in Luke's dark loft *with* Luke, also standing barefoot and shirtless with me. There was something intimate about it, something sweet and nice and wonderful.

Hell and damnation.

He took my hand, led me across the room to a dresser, opened a drawer and took something out. Then he led me to the bar and grabbed the bag. Then he led me to the

bathroom, flipped a switch and gave me a gentle push inside. He tossed the stuff in the sink and looked at me.

“Take out your contacts, get changed, we’re going to bed.”

I stood, blinking in the lit room, mouth dropped open and watching the door close through my blinking.

We’re going to bed, WE are going to bed, he said. Yippee! Bad Ava yelled happily in my ear, punching the air and doing a touchdown dance.

He’s so thoughtful, going out to get your contact stuff. I think he’s adorable, Good Ava shared.

Oh for goodness sake. Good Ava needed a reality check. Luke? Adorable? Please.

I sighed. No reason to fight it because I obviously wasn’t going to win.

Tomorrow, he’d take me home and I’d forget all of this ever happened.

This was not likely but I was going with it for the moment.

I pulled the stuff out of the bag, noting he also bought me a toothbrush, took out my contacts and used the bathroom because I needed it, badly. I found this mortifying for some bizarre reason, everyone had to use the bathroom. Still, it wasn’t like I was removed in any way from Luke, there was only one other room in the place, he could probably hear. I was pretty certain I’d gone through my whole life, even when he came over with his parents or we were over it his house, without Luke ever knowing I had any need of the facilities.

Oh well, what the hell.

I washed my hands, took off my clothes, shoved my silver in my jeans pockets and pulled on the tee he’d given me. It was seriously cool, old, faded, soft and black with a Triumph motorcycle in silver on the front of it. It was huge on me, coming down over my hips to my upper thighs. It felt good on, nice and snuggly and I tried (hard) not to think of wearing Luke’s t-shirt at the same time trying to figure out how to steal it.

I folded my clothes neatly as if my life depended on it. Without anything else to do to delay, I opened the bathroom door, switched off the light and walked into the loft.

The loft was still lit only by the lights outside.

Luke, I saw, my heart beginning to beat a little faster in my chest, was lying in bed, sheets to his waist, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling seeming peaceful and Zen as if he spent a lot of time in that position.

This was all I really saw, mainly because without my contacts my vision was blurry. Which I had to admit, still struggling with fidelity to my vibrators, was kind of a bummer.

I walked slowly to the bar, semi-feeling my way with my feet, and put my clothes on a stool. Then I turned to him.

“Can I use your phone?” I asked.

Instead of answering, he took his hands from behind his head, twisted to the nightstand and pulled the phone out of its cradle.

I walked to him and took it from his outstretched hand. "It's long distance," I told him.

"Where's Sissy?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes, mainly because I was also noticing that you didn't get much by Luke and that was kind of annoying.

"Wyoming."

"As long as it isn't England."

I nearly smiled at him but stopped myself just in time.

I looked at the phone. Then I realized I had a slight problem.

Although I'd memorized Sissy's Mom's number, I couldn't see the keypad without my contacts. It was a new phone to me, who knew where the buttons were?

Shit.

I was wrong, the going-to-the-bathroom thing was embarrassing, *this* was mortifying.

I stood there uncertain. Then I realized I had no choice. Sissy was probably packing the car as I hesitated, ready to come down to find out what happened to me and face my house, empty, or her house, probably cordoned off with police tape. Then she'd lose it, thinking Dom had killed me or, more likely, I had killed Dom.

Crap.

"Luke?"

"Yeah?"

I couldn't tell for sure, but I thought he was looking at me. "I need you to dial the number. I can't see the phone."

I didn't know what I expected him to do. Still, I was surprised that, without hesitation, he sat up and took the phone out of my hand.

"What's the number?"

I told him, he punched it in with his thumb and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I whispered, listening to it ring.

"Good to have you back, babe," he said, his voice soft, gentle, affectionate and I felt my body jerk in reaction to his tone *and* his words just before Sissy answered the phone.

"Please let this be Ava," she said.

"Yo," I replied, turning away from Luke, wishing I could run away from Luke, and again wondering what in *the hell* I was doing.

"I've called a gazillion times!" Sissy shouted in my ear.

"I know. I'm sorry. I... something happened and I got separated from my purse." I made it to the window by the kitchen, leaned against the brick sill and stared out at Lodo. It was blurry but I could still tell that Luke had a kickass view.

"Are you okay?" Sissy asked.

"Yeah, fine."

“My phone says this number is blocked. Are you home?”

Shit.

I had to make a split-second decision. Lie to her or tell her the truth when the truth would both freak her out (her living room getting shot out and Dom, still her husband, being delivered a very scary message) and make her jump for joy (that I was standing in Luke’s t-shirt in his loft in LoDo).

I decided to hedge. “Listen, I’m really tired, I’ll call you tomorrow. Tell you all about it.”

“Did you find anything?”

I had to give her something and that something had to be something Luke, who I was certain was listening, couldn’t get anything out of. “Just an industrial-sized box of condoms in his nightstand.”

Silence.

“Sissy?”

“Guess he isn’t pining for me, hunh?”

“Sissy,” I said softly, feeling her pain as only best friends do and wishing she were closer so I could give her a hug.

“Get to sleep, it’s late. Tell me about it tomorrow,” she said.

“Okay.”

“I want to hear about the Luke thing tomorrow too. Ally called my cell, said something happened between you guys. She said he carried you through the reception area!”

Oh crap.

“Ally,” Sissy laughed, “she’s so full of shit.”

Oh *crap!*

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I told her.

“Ava?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. You’re the bestest best friend a girl could have.”

I smiled into the phone. *That* was worth getting shot at for.

“Later,” I said.

“Later,” and I heard her disconnect.

I looked at the phone and realized I didn’t know how to turn it off.

I didn’t have to wonder long, it was pulled out of my hand because Luke, again silent as a cat, was right beside me. He beeped it off as I stared at him and saw he was wearing nothing but a pair of dark (probably black) shorts that rode low on his hips but were long on his thighs.

I swallowed as he walked away and put the phone on the kitchen counter. Then he turned and started back to me.

Now what?

I looked from his shorts to his face. "Do you have a blanket?" I asked.

"Why?" he asked back, stopping close.

"So I can sleep on your couch."

"You aren't sleeping on the couch."

I looked around, confused then asked, "Why not?"

"You're sleeping in the bed."

"So, you're sleeping on the couch?"

"No."

"Are you sleeping on the floor?" I asked, surprised, but figured it was maybe some Zen, macho guy thing, roughing it on a plank wood floor.

"No."

Uh-oh.

"Where are you sleeping?" I asked.

His hand shot out and, too late, I saw the blurry glint of steel and heard the clanking right before the bracelet was slapped on my wrist.

I pulled back. "Oh no," I said, my heart thumping in my chest and my blood pumping through my veins.

He slapped the other bracelet on his own wrist.

"No!" I shouted, yanking back, viciously this time, but it was like he didn't feel the pull. He just leaned in, shoulder to my belly, picked me up, his free arm around my thighs, his other wrist bound to mine and he started to the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted, feet kicking, pushing at his waist with my free hand.

This was too much. Too *fucking* much.

"Going to bed," he said calmly.

"Handcuffed to me?"

"Damn straight."

"You're nuts."

"I'm not taking any chances," he said, tossing me on the bed and coming down with me.

I tried to scramble away. He pulled me back with a jerk on the cuff.

I stopped scrambling and stared at his fuzzy face in the dark. "Not taking any chances with what?"

"You taking off in the middle of the night, getting shot at again, kidnapped, car bombed, any of it."

I was right, he *was* nuts. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you in the morning, after you tell me about your *little bit* of trouble."

EEK!

I decided to ignore the second part of that. "Tell me now."

"Go to sleep, Ava."

"Uncuff me!"

"Settle down and go to sleep," he ordered, settling himself on his back.

"Un... cuff... me!" I pulled hard at the cuff.

He jerked it again, harder, and I toppled into him, breasts to chest and his other arm went tight around my waist.

"Settle," he said low.

I glared in the general direction of his face, knowing I'd never win but not about to give in gracefully.

"I hate you," I declared.

"You don't."

"I do."

"Okay, maybe whoever this new Ava is does but she's a bitch and I don't give a fuck if she hates me. The old Ava doesn't hate me and she's in there somewhere, I saw her five minutes ago and that's who I'm keeping safe."

That knocked the breath out of me and cut me deep.

So deep, to hide how much it hurt, I did as he told me to do and settled into his side, my body mostly on him because my right wrist was cuffed to his left and his arm was thrown out wide to the side to keep me there. Without anywhere else to put it, I rested my head on his shoulder. Still, I held myself tense because I was totally freaked out.

Woo hoo! We're in bed with Luke! Bad Ava crowed.

Oh, this feels nice. His chest is so hard and his body's so warm, Good Ava breathed.

If Good Ava and Bad Ava could get close, I was certain they'd high five.

Jeez.

I lay there, trying to relax. I couldn't relax.

So I started talking. "I won't get shot at again," I muttered into his shoulder.

"I'm not taking any chances."

"I certainly won't get kidnapped, the idea is ridiculous."

He was silent.

"And a car bomb, what on earth?" I mumbled.

"Babe."

"What?"

"Please be quiet and go to sleep."

"Fine," I snapped.

His arm around my waist tightened and his other hand came close to rest on his chest, forcing my hand to rest on his chest too. I slid off his body but he held me close to his side.

I figured I'd never in a million years, snuggled up next to Luke Stark, man of my dreams, wearing his t-shirt, lying in his big bed, in his huge loft and handcuffed to him for God's sake, get to sleep.

It took, like, five minutes and I was dead to the world.

Chapter Four

Payment

I woke up in the middle of the night when my body moved, not of its own volition.

I opened my eyes, it was still dark. Luke had turned into me, his arm holding me close, pulling me over the top of his body.

“What’s going on?” I whispered, my voice sleepy.

“Shh,” he shushed me and rolled, taking me with him, settling me on my other side.

Our cuffed arms were cocked and up between our bodies and he had me close so his and my forearms were pressed beneath my breasts. His free hand slid down my hip to my thigh, pulling it up, gliding down the back of my thigh to my knee and hooking my leg over his hip.

If I hadn’t been mostly asleep, I would have probably flipped out at the intimacy of this position, struggled and maybe thrown a hissy fit.

Instead, I was warm, tired and the position was ultra comfortable.

I snuggled into his warm body, his arm moved to rest at my waist and I fell back to sleep.

* * * * *

I woke up and blinked at all the sunlight coming into the room. Denver was a sunny place but this was crazy.

I stared at the wall of hard-muscled chest that was right in front of my eyes and for a second felt confusion.

Then it all came back to me and I tensed. Inventorying my situation I realized I was pressed against Luke’s side, he was on his back, our cuffed arms on the bed under our bodies, my thigh thrown across both of his, my head on his shoulder, my free arm resting across his abs.

Ho-ly *shit!*

I rolled away onto my back.

“You’re awake,” Luke noted.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“Yeah,” I said to the ceiling.

He rolled toward me, hand going to my hip, his fingers putting pressure there so I turned into him and we were face-to-face.

Since we were close and it was light, I could see him pretty well. He looked very awake, very alert and very gorgeous.

Holy cramoly.

“Time to talk,” he said.

Eek!

I was a morning person. I usually only had to brush my teeth and have a couple sips of diet soda to clear out the sleep-cobwebs and then I was all morning energy. Still, I wasn't ready to talk, certainly not lying face-to-face in Luke's bed.

"I need to brush my teeth," I told him.

"After we talk."

"No, seriously, I can't face the day without brushing my teeth." As I mentioned before, this was the truth.

He stared at me, probably trying to decide if I was lying or not. I didn't blame him. I'd lied to him a lot in the last less than twenty-four hours.

He must have made his decision because he rolled into me, over me and reached to the nightstand, opened a drawer and pulled out his keys. He rolled back, lifted our wrists and unlocked my bracelet. I was silent through this as I'd had another close-up view of his chest and I was fighting the urge to press my mouth to it and I won't even mention what I wanted to do with my tongue.

The minute I was free I didn't hesitate. I jumped off the bed, hightailing it to the bathroom, totally intent on escape.

It was after I used the facilities, splashed water on my face to wash away the sleep, brushed my teeth and put in my contacts that I realized my mistake.

I should have brought my clothes in with me.

Hell and damnation.

I pulled my hair back away from my face with both hands and stared into my light brown eyes the mirror. Both my sisters had sultry, dark brown eyes, which sucked and wasn't fair, I couldn't dye my eyes and colored contacts I thought looked fake.

Since I couldn't at that moment do anything about the fact that I was barely dressed, I focused on what to do with my hair.

Last time I saw Luke, my hair had been shoulder length. I'd only gone for trims since then allowing my hair to grow long, down my back to my bra strap with thick, chunky layers cut in. It had always had an unruly wave and length and weight had done nothing to tame it, in fact it went all the more wild. I needed a ponytail holder. It was now a mess of waves and tangles and currently in an untamable state without a shampoo and a shitload of product to force it under my control.

Oh well, what the hell. I had to go with it. No way was I taking a shower in Luke's bathroom for this would mean being naked and there was no way in hell I was going to be naked at Luke's place, not even in the shower.

I dropped my hands, walked out of the bathroom and stopped dead.

A man was walking out of the elevator carrying my purse. He was blond, trim, fit and ultra cute. His eyes cut to me and took me in, top to toe, standing there frozen and wearing nothing but Luke's Triumph tee.

Then he grinned.

Crap.

His eyes moved to Luke. So did mine.

Luke was standing by the semi-circle kitchen counter, wearing only shorts (yes, black) that were made of that breathable material with the tiny little dents in it like basketball players wore. They hung loose and super low on his hips, running long but not as long as the basketball ones, partially down his thighs. They showed not only the definition of his hip bones in sexy relief but most of a pair of knockout muscular thighs and calves. I would be remiss not to mention a full blown, sunny loft, contacts in view of his well-defined chest with not-too-much, not-too-little, but *just-the-perfect-amount* of chest hair, jutting collarbone and stubbled jaw.

There was also a long, brutal looking scar tracing across his six pack.

Ho-ly crap.

My knees wobbled at the sight.

“Shit, Luke, I had two days in the pool. Christ, you tied Lee’s record,” the blond guy said.

Luke did a half-grin.

“What?” I asked.

The blond guy looked at me, still grinning. “Nothin’,” he said. “I’m Matt.”

I pulled out of my mini-hot-guy-trance and walked toward him. “I’m Ava.”

“I know,” he was still grinning, his blue eyes dancing. I figured I wasn’t in on the joke but let it slide considering I had to focus on getting dressed and getting out of there without having Luke’s “talk”.

“I brought your bag.” He handed it to me and I took it.

“Thanks,” I said, feeling like a dork but happy to have my purse.

“Your Rover’s in the garage.”

I looked at him and smiled, more than happy to have my car. “Thanks again.”

“Your keys,” he handed them to me and I took them, “your purse is beeping.”

I dipped my chin, feeling kind of weird because he was really cute and kept grinning at me. “Thanks again, again,” I said to him.

His grin faded a bit but didn’t go away and he was now watching me closely. “You okay after last night?”

Wow, what a sweet guy, Good Ava said in my ear.

Flirt! Bad Ava yelled.

As usual, I ignored them.

“Sure,” I said, “it gives me something juicy to put in my memoirs.”

He threw back his head and laughed. His laughter was deep and nice so I laughed with him.

“You got that right,” he told me when he was done laughing.

I got over feeling weird and gave him a big smile.

“Matt.”

Both our heads swung to Luke who hadn’t moved but now his arms were crossed on his chest, his legs were planted and his brows were knit. He looked kind of pissed off, which was confusing. Maybe he wasn’t a morning person.

Matt looked at his feet and chuckled. I threw Luke a look, walked to the counter and plopped my purse and keys on it, digging for my cell.

“I need to go out,” I announced, still digging in my purse. “Get a diet pop.”

This was met with silence. I located my cell and yanked it out, flipping it open and glancing at Luke. Matt had come closer and both of them were staring at me.

“Diet pop?” Luke asked.

“Do you have any?” I returned.

“No.”

“Then I need to get some.”

“It’s seven o’clock in the morning,” Luke told me.

“I know.”

“You drink diet pop at seven in the morning?” Luke asked.

“Well... yeah. I need to wash the toothpaste taste out of my mouth.”

Luke and Matt kept staring at me.

I looked at my cell. Six missed calls.

Crap.

I pressed buttons on my cell, my eyes on it, and said, “I’ll just get dressed and pop out.”

I really did need diet pop to wash the taste of toothpaste out of my mouth. However, this had the double duty of being my excuse to get the hell out of there so my Diet Pop Destination was my very own fridge.

“Do you mind?” I heard Luke ask and my head came up. “Ava and me need to talk.”

Matt was grinning at me again. “You need anything else?” he asked me, amusement in his voice. “Breakfast?”

I looked at Matt then at Luke. “No, really, I’ll go.”

“You’re not going,” Luke said.

I narrowed my eyes at Luke. “I’m going.”

“Matt’s goin’,” Luke returned.

I opened my mouth to say something but Matt moved. “No problem. Diet pop,” Matt said.

“Get a case,” Luke told him.

My eyes bugged out. A case of diet would last me a month.

Matt burst out laughing and hit the button on the elevator.
“I don’t need a case. I just need one,” I told Matt.
“A case,” Luke said decisively.
The elevator doors opened and Matt walked in. “I’ll get a case,” he told Luke and the doors closed.
“Really, that’s unnecessary,” I said to Luke.
He didn’t reply.
I sighed, heavy and annoyed. He wanted a case of diet? Fine. Who cared?
I gave up and scrolled through my missed calls. Five from Sissy, one from Riley.
Hmm. Riley.
Interesting.
“Ava.” My head came up and I looked at Luke.
Shit. It was time for the talk.
“Do you have any food?” I asked in an effort to delay. I didn’t like to eat before I’d had my diet soda but desperate times called for desperate measures.
“Yeah,” he answered.
“Do you mind?”
His body relaxed and his lips moved. They kind of twitched, like he knew my thoughts and found me amusing but was trying not to smile.
I squelched the desire to throw my phone at him as he offered. “Help yourself.”
I dropped my phone in my purse, walked around the counter the opposite side to Luke and went to his fridge.
I was stunned to see it was packed with healthy eating options. Low-fat yogurt, high-quality, multi-grain bread, tons of fruit and veggies. I spied a half a cantaloupe wrapped in cling film and pulled it out.
“Can I have some cantaloupe?” I asked, turning to Luke.
He tilted his chin up in a nonverbal “yes” and I pulled it out.
There was a cutting board in his sink. I put down the cantaloupe and went to work cleaning the cutting board.
“You’re well-stocked.” Again, I was delaying “the talk”.
“Sandra went shopping.”
“Sandra?”
“A woman I’m seein’.”
At his words it took every bit of energy I had not to freeze, gasp or maybe vomit.
Of course he’d be seeing someone. Luke was hot. Luke was a guy. Luke had a testosterone-fuelled job. He had to be getting it from someone. He didn’t strike me as the kind of guy who would be faithful to his hand like I was faithful to my vibrators.

“Will she mind if I eat her cantaloupe?” I asked, drying the board and not looking at him.

“It’s my cantaloupe. Sandra got it but I paid for it and it’s in my fridge,” he answered.

I nodded, set down the board, unwrapped the cantaloupe and grabbed a knife out of a big butcher block and started cutting. I tried not to think about the messy bed Luke threw me into last night and hoped he hadn’t thrown me into a bed that got messy through his activities with another woman.

I failed at not thinking about it.

“Will she mind that I spent the night?”

Why did you ask that? Silly girl, Good Ava remonstrated me.

I’m so sure! He handcuffed you to him and slept with you when he’s seeing someone else. What a jerk, Bad Ava huffed.

“We’re not exclusive so it’s none of her business,” Luke answered.

See! He’s a jerk, Bad Ava ranted.

Good Ava kept her silence, likely pouting.

He’d come to stand by me at the counter, I could see the side of his hip leaning against it out of the corner of my eye. I ignored the hip and kept cutting.

“Do you want cantaloupe?” I asked, keeping my eyes on my task.

“No, I want to stop talking about cantaloupe and start talking about your troubles.”
Shit.

“Okay,” I said, still cutting. Then I was silent.

So was Luke, for a moment, then he broke the silence.

“Ava,” his voice held a warning.

My mind raced for an excuse for another delay and it found none.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Time to get it over with.

“Um... well. You know my friend Sissy?” I asked, eyes on the melon.

“Yeah.”

“She’s married to Dominic Vincetti.”

“I worked that part out,” he told me.

“Now, they’re kind of separated.”

Silence.

“She’s going to file for divorce.”

More silence.

“She’s up in Wyoming, staying with her Mom.”

I looked at the cantaloupe and realized I’d cut far too much for just myself. Oh well, at least Sandra wouldn’t have to worry about cutting up the cantaloupe next time she was there. I put down the knife, picked up a chunk of melon and popped it into my mouth.

“Are you done?” Luke asked, my eyes slid sideways to look at him and I swallowed.

“Um... yeah.”

“That’s it? Your trouble is that Sissy’s filing for divorce?”

I grabbed another chunk and put it into my mouth while I turned to him and leaned my hip against the counter. “She’s my best friend. Her troubles are my troubles.”

Luke stared at me for a beat then said, “So why were you there last night?”

“She needed something and asked me to get it for her.”

“She needed something out of Vincetti’s nightstand?”

Hell and damnation.

I looked down at the melon and back at Luke. “I cut too much melon just for me. You sure you don’t want any?” I stalled again.

He shook his head, totally seeing through me, but took a chunk and put it in his mouth. I found watching him chew was weirdly fascinating and decided I was not a dork, I was a freak.

Once he swallowed, he said, his voice kinda scary, “Ava, I’m not gonna tell you again not to lie.”

Crap.

I took another chunk of melon and chewed while glaring at him. “You know,” I told him, again trying to stall, “this is really none of your business.”

“It became my business when you and I were caught in a hail of gunfire.”

Hmm.

In all fairness, he was kind of right, though I wasn’t about to tell him that nor was I going to give in. I didn’t ask him to be there.

I nabbed another chunk of melon and chewed it angrily, now seriously glaring at him. “I didn’t ask you to be there,” I pointed out. “You weren’t even supposed to be there.”

“Okay, then it became my business when you walked into the offices yesterday.”

“No it didn’t.”

“Yes, it did.”

“No. It didn’t.”

He took another chunk of melon and threw it in his mouth calmly then his eyes came back to me and I noticed he was totally oblivious to my glare.

“I don’t need your help,” I told him, switching subjects and still delaying.

“Right,” he said.

“I don’t.”

“Maybe you would have had the presence of mind to get out of the line of fire last night, maybe you wouldn’t. With the way you freaked out afterward, I doubt you would’ve. The way I figure it, you owe me double.”

I blinked with confusion. “Double?” I asked. “I owe you double for what?”

“Saving your ass last night and not telling me you have a situation.”

I shook my head, not following. “Excuse me?”

“You’re standing here right now because of me. And yesterday, I told you if I found out you had trouble, you’d pay. You’re paying.”

I was not getting a good feeling about this.

“I don’t. . . I don’t even know what to say. That’s just crazy,” I told him.

“Nope. It isn’t. Last November a friend of mine did something brave, but stupid, to save someone she cared about. She got a bullet to the chest and another one to the gut for her troubles.”

Yikes.

I sucked in breath at his announcement and the way he shared it. He looked angry and his body was tense and I knew this event affected him in a profound way (as it would anyone).

I stared at him but he wasn’t finished talking. “I saw her on the floor, bleeding while her man tried to staunch the flow with a fucking bath towel. Before she went down, she shot a man in the head, killing him. She’s got to live with two kinds of scars now. The kind you can see and the kind you can’t.”

Ho-ly crap.

“Luke.” I’d lost my glare and my anger and my voice went soft.

Luke didn’t feel like responding to my soft voice. He came closer and it took a lot of effort because his intensity was freaking me out, but I stayed where I was even when I saw his eyes were shining with anger.

“I’m not playing this fucking game with you, Ava. You told me last night you wanted to know why I cuffed you. So now I’ll tell you. You’re playin’ with fire and I’m not about to stand around and watch you get burned. Before Jules got shot, there was Roxie, another friend of mine’s woman who was stalked by her ex, beaten, abducted right from his fuckin’ house while he was out runnin’, and taken on a crazed, zig-zag ride through three states. We found her cuffed to the sink in a sleazy motel. Before Roxie there was Jet, whose Dad got some poker debt and his loan shark tried to use Jet to force payment. She caught the attention of a fuckwad and ended up kidnapped and nearly raped. Before Jet there was –”

“Okay, I get it,” I broke in quietly.

Jeez. I was freaked out and he hadn’t even gotten to the car bombs yet. Boy, and I thought all the men I’d met were assholes.

“Tell me right now what you and Sissy are up to,” he demanded, moving back but only slightly.

I gave in. I might as well, he wasn’t going to let it go, that was easy enough to read. And anyway, I knew this extent of sharing was taking some effort for him, what with being a

tough guy, macho man and all. I didn't like that he was angry and struggling with unhappy memories and I further didn't like that I was the cause of it. It made me feel crap.

"I don't want Sissy to come back here," I blurted and Luke's body went still, likely preparing for what I'd say next. "Dom's good at sweet-talking her back to him and he's a total jerk and no good for her. I won't get into it but, trust me, he's seriously no good for her. While she's gone, I promised to get the goods on Dom, find some evidence to use so the divorce would go well for her."

"So you were searchin' his shit last night to find somethin' on him."

"Yeah."

I watched as his body relaxed and I felt my body relax in response. I didn't know his tension was making me tense and I didn't know what to make of that. I decided not to think about it as I watched him nab another chunk of melon and throw it in his mouth.

"It's covered," he told me, mid-chew.

I stared at him. "What?"

"I'll get what Sissy needs."

Yee ha!

"Really?" I breathed.

Yay! No more breaking and entering and stupid behavior, Good Ava shouted happily.

Damn, there goes all the fun, Bad Ava pouted.

"Really," Luke said.

I couldn't help it, I smiled at him. This was good, really good for Sissy. I imagined Luke knew what he was doing, considering the loft and the Porsche showed that people paid him a lot to do it.

His eyes dropped to my mouth and watched me smile. When they did this, his face, as usual, stayed hard but his eyes lost the shiny, dangerous anger and went soft and warm.

I ignored this because it made my knees wobble.

"What do I do?" I asked. "Do I go to the offices and talk to Shirleen? Set up an account?"

His eyes moved back to mine. "You aren't gonna pay Nightingale Investigations."

My smile widened and I had the happy thought that maybe there *were* good guys out there and Luke was one of them.

"No, that's okay. I have money and Dom's loaded. Once Sissy nails him, she'll have more than enough to cover..."

"You aren't payin'."

"Luke, really, it's cool," I told him.

"I'll rephrase. You aren't payin' in money."

My smile died, my heart clenched and I feared that he was going to prove my earlier thought wrong about there being good guys out there.

“Excuse me?” I whispered.

“This means you owe me triple,” he told me.

“Excuse me?” I repeated.

“You owe me triple.”

My body got stiff.

Nope, there it was. No good guys. Of course he wouldn't do something for nothing. Of course he wouldn't do something just because he was a good guy.

Fucking hell.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I haven't decided yet.”

“Okay then, what does *that* mean?” I pushed, eyes narrowed on him and finding it kind of hard not to yell or cry or go out and buy an island for just me and my girlfriends, no men allowed.

He cut into thoughts of my Girls Only Island and said, “That means tonight, we're havin' dinner and I'm gonna find out what happened to the Ava I knew. Once I find that out, I'll decide.”

Holy shit.

“Nothing happened to the old Ava,” I told him.

He shook his head. “The old Ava was funny, smart and sweet. The new Ava acts more like Marilyn and Sofia.”

It felt like he'd slapped me across the face. I even felt myself flinch at his words. Seriously not a good guy and knowing this about Luke hurt more than his words.

“That wasn't nice,” I whispered.

“No, it wasn't, but it's true.”

Damn, but he was honest. Still, he didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't know the half of it about Dom and he didn't know anything about Rick, Dave and Noah. It wasn't like I was being a bitch for the fun of it. I had reasons and he didn't even bother to find out what they were before he made a judgment. I didn't care about his offer of dinner so he could get my explanation. He knew, maybe more than anyone, except Sissy and my Dad, how much it would hurt to compare me to Marilyn and Sofia.

“A lot has happened since I last saw you,” I said, not about to go into detail, *never* going to go into detail. He could blow for his explanation.

“Yeah, that's obvious.”

Time for an evasive maneuver. This talk was beginning to sap my strength, suck my energy and make me want to stay in bed for a week eating rolls of chocolate chip cookie dough, bags of cheese puffs and tubs of ice cream (of all flavors).

“I can't go to dinner tonight, I'm meeting some friends,” I told him.

“We'll talk after you meet with your friends.”

I thought about Ally and The Hornet. I figured it was a taxi night for certain, considering nearly any time I'd spent with Ally ended up with me being shitfaced and sleeping with a foot on the floor so the room would quit spinning. *Not* the disposition I wanted to be in for the next brutally honest third degree.

"It's probably going to be a late night."

"I'll wait."

"It might be a wild night."

He gave me a half-grin. "That'll work."

Shit.

"Luke," I said, sounding like I was putting a line under this conversation.

He ignored my line. "I'll give you a remote for the garage and a key. You don't come here after you're done, I'll find you. You make me find you, you owe me quadruple."

This talk was not going my way in *any* way.

"Why can't I just pay money for your services like normal people?"

"You aren't normal people."

"I am."

"You're Ava."

"I'm that too."

"I've known you since you were eight."

"So?"

"I've liked you since you were eight," he said.

Oh! I like him again, Good Ava told me.

Jump him! Rip his shorts off! Bad Ava urged.

Luke kept talking over Good Ava and Bad Ava's blathering. "That makes you *my* people."

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Stop right there.

I needed time to bury that deep before I set myself up to start thinking he was a good guy again only to find out he wasn't. To buy that time, I said quietly, "Luke."

"We're not talking about this anymore," Luke told me.

"We are."

"We're not."

I glared. "We are. Give me something to go on here, what's triple payment mean?" I asked, sounding kind of bitchy.

"I told you, I haven't decided."

"Which way are you leaning? Maid service? Vacation planning? Darning your socks?"

He threw back his head and laughed. I crossed my arms on my chest.

“This isn’t funny,” I told him and it wasn’t.

Before I could react, his hand snaked out and wrapped around my neck, pulling me forward with a gentle jerk and my hands came up to shield my fall. They hit his chest right before my hips slammed into his.

I tilted my head back to look at him and pulled at his hand at my neck. This served no purpose. So I glared at him and pushed against his chest. This, also, served no purpose.

I saw in close proximity that his eyes were very warm.

Eek!

Danger, danger, retreat, Ava Barlow, retreat!

Before I could push away, he spoke, sounding lost in thought. “Maybe, part of your payment is makin’ you worry what your payment will be.”

See? There it was again.

Not.

Nice.

I pushed against his chest again and pulled my hips away. His other arm slid along my waist and pulled me back, pinning my hands and arms so they were helpless between our bodies.

“That’s really not nice,” I told him but he didn’t respond then I demanded, “Let me go.”

His eyes moved over my face and hair and then settled on my mouth. I pursed it angrily. The minute he saw the pursing of lips he did the half-grin.

“Gotta admit, I’m beginning to like the bitch.”

“Stop calling me a bitch.”

His eyes came back to mine. “Stop actin’ like one.”

“Men suck,” I told him, because this was true.

“See you don’t feel like not actin’ like a bitch.”

“You suck too,” I went on, going for the gusto. Why not? I had nothing to lose.

“Babe,” he said, sounding like I was entertaining him.

“Stop calling me ‘babe’. It’s demeaning. I’m not a babe, I’m a woman.”

The fingers of his hand at my neck slid into my hair then twisted, wrapping it around his hand. This wasn’t a rough gesture, it was a sensual one and it made tingles slide across my scalp, the good kind. I stared at him, realizing belatedly we were ultra-close and of their own accord, my eyes dropped back to his lips.

“Where’s Matt with my diet?” I asked, sounding desperate and kind of breathy and not taking my eyes from his mouth. My body was going pliant and I couldn’t control it even if I tried (though, I didn’t).

I knew he felt me melting into him. I knew this because his arm around me drew me closer and his fist in my hair gently pulled my head back. This was not a good position to be

in, plastered against him, arms pinned, head tilted back in a way that my face was an open target for anything he wanted to do. My eyes shifted to his and the warmer than normal warmth was still there and my knees got weak.

Shit.

I tried to pull myself together, mentally chanting “men suck” and reminding myself I knew exactly where to place the vibrator to get ultimate orgasmic pleasure, thus no fiddling around and experimenting with hitting the target like most men found difficult to do. Even so, I found it impossible with his mouth so close to me, his lips being so fantastic and my eyes dropped to them again.

They were *fine*.

I licked my lips.

“Ava.”

My eyes drifted back to his and I was in a Luke Lip Fog. “Yeah?”

“You lick your lips while looking at my mouth one more time, you’ll find that pretty pink tongue of yours *in* my mouth.”

Ho-ly shit.

His face came closer and I watched, frozen and fascinated, mainly because that meant his lips were also coming closer.

His indigo eyes had melted to pure, liquid ink and I forgot totally that men sucked.

“You wanna taste me?” he murmured.

Yes, I wanted to taste him. I’d pay every penny of Aunt Ella’s inheritance to taste him.

“No,” I lied.

He did a full grin this time, a full *satisfied* grin. It was hot, so hot, my knees totally buckled and he took all my weight into his body.

“Liar,” he whispered, knowing he had me. Then again, he couldn’t actually miss it, considering I’d lost the ability to stand on my own two feet.

I watched as his lips started to get closer. In response, my eyes began to close and my lips parted in preparation for contact. Honestly? I hated to admit it but I could barely wait.

It was then the doors to the elevator glided open. My eyes flew open and Luke and my heads twisted to watch Matt walk out of it, carrying a case of diet soda.

Thank you *God*.

I instantly tried to pull out of Luke’s arms but he didn’t let me move an inch even though his hand went out of my hair. It only did this to wrap around my back to keep me where I was.

“Hey, sorry,” Matt said, grinning like an idiot, not looking sorry at all and even with the idiot grin I wanted to kiss him for interrupting. My vibrators were going to divorce me if I kept going like this.

I looked at Luke and saw his lips were pressed together and he didn't seem happy. "Next time, buzz up," Luke's voice proved my theory correct and made me slightly concerned about his use of the words "next time".

Matt put the case of soda on the counter. "Will do," he replied cheerily, ignoring Luke's pissed off voice. "I'll just be going."

"Good idea," Luke said.

Matt lifted a hand in a small wave as he walked across the room and then he hit the elevator button. I pulled again at Luke's arms, he looked down at me, still with an unhappy expression, but let me go.

I moved straight to the diet.

"Later!" I called to Matt as the doors started to close.

He lifted his hand to his forehead, gave me a wink and a salute right before we lost sight of him.

Burying the latest episode with Luke deep, deeper, deepest, I ignored it even happened and got myself a can of pop, a glass, some ice from the fridge and poured it. All the while I was doing this, Luke watched me moving around his kitchen, his back to the counter, hips against it, arms crossed. I knew this not only because I saw him looking at me but I also *felt* it.

"You want a soda?" I asked, pretending not to be affected by him watching me.

"No," he answered.

"I'm going to get dressed," I told him.

Luke didn't respond.

I took my glass of pop, grabbed my clothes and moved toward the bathroom, sensing escape and planning my grocery store dash, direct to the cookie dough.

"Ava," Luke called.

I stopped and turned to him. "Yeah?"

"I've decided your payment."

My body froze and a thrill ran up my back. It was a good thrill, maybe even a great thrill, definitely a vibrator-cheating thrill and I stared at him.

"What is it?"

"Be here tonight when you're done with your friends."

Uh-oh.

I did not *think* so.

"Luke, just tell me."

"Be here tonight."

I would have put my hands on my hips if my arms weren't full. Instead, I hitched a hip and put a foot out in Bitch Attitude Stance.

"Tell me."

“Tonight.”

I glared at him. He watched me.

Then he turned away, threw another chunk of melon into his mouth and started to make coffee. I made the instant decision that there was no way I was coming to his loft that night.

Fuck that.

And he couldn't make me pay him anything unless he sent me a goddamned invoice. That, I'd gladly pay.

On that thought, I stomped to the bathroom, sucking back some soda and I kicked the door shut with my foot.

Chapter Five

I Need Cookies

I was standing in the cookie section at King Soopers, searching for my motivational, healthy living mojo when my phone rang.

I dug through my bag, pulled it out and saw it said “Riley Calling”. I flipped it open and put it to my ear.

“Thank God it’s you, Chips Ahoy or Nutter Butter?” I asked instead of saying hello.

Riley laughed in my ear. “Neither, where are you?”

“King Soopers and I had a shit night. I need processed cookie-type food.”

“No shit night is worth processed cookie-type food,” Riley told me.

He was *so* wrong.

“Last night was, believe me,” I said.

“Ava, step away from the cookies.”

“No.”

“Do it.”

“No.”

“Step away from the cookies and I’ll bring lunch to your place, one thirty. Deal?”

Holy crap.

What was *that* all about?

I’d never seen Riley outside of the gym. Well, not exactly, he’d been to all my birthday parties for five years and my annual Thank God It’s Summer Party that I held on Memorial Day every year, maybe we should just say I’d never seen Riley at my house *alone*.

“Deal,” I said, feeling kind of weird.

“Later.”

Disconnect.

Well, that’s interesting, Good Ava said.

Luke’s cuter, he has better lips and he has good chest hair. Not to mention his eyes are total YUM when they turn ink, Bad Ava said and then peered across my neck at Good Ava. *Did you see his eyes?*

I saw ‘em. They were YUM! Good Ava agreed.

“Shut up,” I whispered and a lady standing beside me gave me a weird look.

I shot her an embarrassed smile, went directly to the produce section and bought enough grapes, oranges and plums to unconstipate the French Foreign Legion.

At Luke’s I’d dressed quickly, came out of the bathroom, grabbed my purse and keys and gave him a “Later”. The whole time he sat on a barstool, holding his coffee cup, watching me and not saying a word.

I'd managed to escape without him giving me keys or his remote which I figured worked in my favor.

I went directly to King Soopers and was saved by Riley.

After I left King Soopers and was heading home, I decided I'd call Shirleen at Nightingale Investigations and set up an account. I figured she'd take my information and invoice me. It *was* a business and they had to keep their men in lofts and Porsches. They weren't going to turn down my trade.

What I didn't allow myself to think about was *anything* that had *anything* to do with Luke, his eyes turning to ink, the scar across his belly, his chest hair, how good a night's rest I had while lying beside him (even handcuffed) or what he might taste like.

And I definitely didn't think about getting shot at by AK-47s.

I let myself into my house and to keep my mind busy I cleaned it. Then I took a shower and tamed my hair. I swiped on a hint of makeup (Riley was coming over, after all) and because it was warm I put on a black Foo Fighters baby doll tee, another pair of faded, but not quite as faded as yesterday, Levi's and a shitload of my silver to buoy my spirits. After I'd done that I had about a half an hour before Riley got there, so I got to work on one of my accounts. A deadline was drawing near and with all the Sissy business, I was procrastinating. I had to get some work done or I'd be fucked.

I had an office upstairs in my second bedroom. I'd painted it a soft salmon because I heard that orange sparked energy and creativity and had a desk and futon in there. I'd made it into a funky room with cool, light wicker baskets and boxes, colorful toss pillows on the futon and a kickass, state-of-the-art swivel chair so I wouldn't mind spending time there while I worked.

I barely got my computer booted up when my phone rang.

I answered it with a, "Yo."

"You didn't call me," Sissy said, her voice sounding funny.

"Hey," I replied. "You okay?"

"The police called me."

Uh-oh.

"Sissy..." I started.

"Someone shot up my house and Dom's missing."

I blinked. "Dom's missing?" I asked.

"Yeah, they waited for him at the house and they called his cell, no answer. They went to his office and he hasn't shown up for work for two days, no calls to explain why he wasn't there. Nothing."

I knew Dom had an office. He "worked" for his Uncle Vito but I suspected it was a front for something. I didn't ask because Sissy wouldn't tell. And anyway, I liked Uncle Vito. I met him at Sissy and Dom's engagement party and he was a hoot. He thought I was

hilarious and always laughed at my jokes. I didn't like thinking he was a criminal mastermind mafia-type person that would suck.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm freaked. Can you check my house?"

"Sure," I told her.

"Thank God you weren't there," she breathed. "They told me they used a machine gun, totally shot up my living room. Can you imagine if you were there?"

Yep, I could imagine.

"Go to the house during the day," she said. "Take someone with you."

"Riley's coming over for lunch. I'll ask him if he wants to go."

Silence then, "Riley's coming over for lunch?"

"Yeah. He called me this morning and told me he was coming over."

"What's *that* all about?"

I laughed at her saying my thoughts out loud. "Hell if I know."

"Call me the minute you find out."

"I will."

"Do you think I should come home?" she asked.

"Let me check it out, Sis. I'll let you know."

"Okay," pause then, quietly, "I hope Dom's okay." I didn't speak. "I know you don't like him and I know he's a jerk but I can't help how I feel."

"I know, Sis. I hope he's okay too."

There it was again. Liar, liar pants on fire.

We said good-bye and I barely put the phone down when it rang again.

I picked it up. "Yo."

"Yo back at 'cha," Ally Nightingale said in my ear. "You comin' to The Hornet?"

"Hey girl. Sure," I told her.

"Cool, but you gotta give me something early. The girls are goin' nuts. You know Luke?" she asked.

Shit.

"What girls?" I asked back.

"The Rock Chicks. Indy, Jet, Roxie, Daisy, Jules..."

My breath caught. "Jet, Roxie and Jules?" I asked.

Those were the names of Luke's friends that he told me about and since not many people were named Jet, Roxie and Jules, they had to be –

"Yeah. Jet works for Indy and she's living with Eddie Chavez. Roxie's my brother Hank's girlfriend, they're living together too. Jules is with Vance, one of Lee's boys."

Holy cramoly.

See, what'd I say about Denver having a small town feel?

“So... Luke?” Ally prompted.

“I’ve known him since I was eight. He lived across the street.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Wicked, sister. Luke’s hot,” she said.

Boy, did I ever know *that*.

“He works for my brother,” she went on.

“I know.”

“What happened yesterday?”

“I don’t know. He went gonzo on me. I haven’t seen him in years. I popped by and he just lost it.”

Silence then, “Girl, I know Luke pretty well. He doesn’t lose it unless he has a reason.” She said this with only a hint of accusation but I felt like a bitch.

Maybe I *was* turning into Marilyn and Sofia. I shivered. That would suck.

Time to fight back the Barlow Bitch Pull.

“It’s a long story,” I confided. “We have some history. I made him a promise I didn’t keep and it was important to him.”

“You two work things out?”

“Not really.”

“You gonna work things out?”

I hoped not. I didn’t know what working things out would entail but I had a scary feeling it would entail Vibrator Infidelity.

“We’ll see,” I allowed. “I’ll tell you about it tonight.”

“Righteous. See you at seven.”

“Cool.”

We hung up and I sat looking at the phone with the very unhappy thought that my life was about to get pretty fucking complicated.

I’d barely pulled up my files when the doorbell went. I sighed, walked away from the computer and down the stairs. I opened my door and Riley was there.

Really, he was seriously good-looking. I wasn’t into blond guys but if I was I’d likely have a crush on him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he replied on a white smile and lifted up a bag. “Noodles, veggies, no processed cookie-type food.”

“Damn,” I mumbled to be funny, and, as usual when I was trying to be funny, he laughed.

As I let him in the phone started ringing.

I took the bag from him saying, “I’ll see to the food, you get the phone.”

“No problem.”

I headed to the kitchen. Riley headed to the cordless in the living room.

I was pulling noodles and veggies out of the bag (which, I had to admit, looked good) to put on Fiestaware plates (Cobalt blue for Riley, pink for me) when he walked in saying, “Sure, she’s right here.”

He took the phone away from his ear and said on a grin. “It’s for you.”

I reached for the phone. “What a surprise, Riles, you big dork.”

He reached out and nabbed the back of my head. Pulling it to him, he kissed my forehead. I went solid, phone in my hand and stared at him totally stunned.

He’d never done that before. Sure, it was kind of brotherly and cute but it *was* a kiss.

To cover my freak out, I said, “Quit kissing me, Riley, you’ll give me cooties.”

“Fuck off,” he returned, still grinning at me.

I put the phone to my ear and said, “Yo.”

Silence.

“Hello?” I called into the silence.

“Who’s Riley?”

Fuckity, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

It was Luke.

“Luke?”

“Who the fuck is Riley?”

Wow. He sounded pissed off. As in, *extremely* pissed off.

“Um... a friend?” It came out as a question, like I needed Luke to answer it for me.

“You didn’t tell me about any friends this morning.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“Okay, then I’m askin’ now.”

“About what?”

“How many friends do you have?”

“A lot of them.”

“I’m talkin’ about the ones who kiss you.”

Someone’s got the wrong end of the stick. Hee hee, Bad Ava sing-songed in my ear.

Oh dear, Good Ava said in the other one.

“I can’t talk now, I’m kinda busy.” I wasn’t playing games. I was acutely aware of Riley watching me and the fact he’d just kissed my forehead and this was a weird situation I’d never found myself in. I honestly didn’t know what to do.

I felt unhappy vibes stinging my ear through the phone.

“Why are you calling?” I asked when Luke made no response.

“You forgot the remote and keys.”

“Erm...”

“You gonna be home for awhile?”

“I have company.”

“You gonna be home for awhile?” he repeated.

“Um, no, we have an errand to run after we have lunch.”

“We do?” Riley asked and I waved at him to shut up.

“You gonna be home after your errand?” Luke asked in my ear.

Shit.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be there at four.”

“Luke.”

He didn’t hear me say his name, he’d already disconnected.

“My life is fucked,” I told Riley, punching the off button on the phone with my thumb.

“Who was that?” he asked, his face morphing to concern.

“An old friend,” I blew it off, not wanting to delve deeper and certainly not willing to share. Thankfully, Riley let it go.

“What errand we running?” he asked.

I told him about Sissy’s place.

“Holy shit. Sure I’ll go with you,” he told me.

“Thanks, Riles.”

We ate lunch, we chatted, he teased me (as usual), I made him laugh (as usual). Nothing weird, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to make this seem in any way other than our normal friendship. Nothing.

After we were done, he drove me to Sissy’s and we inspected the damage using the key I still had after pocketing it last night.

“Holy shit,” Riley repeated his words of earlier, looking around while standing in the living room.

Holy shit was right. The place was a mess, the front window and door were boarded, debris everywhere.

I started to get the shakes, for more reasons than just seeing the devastation an AK-47 could do. Flashback City.

Riley put an arm around me and guided me out. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Sissy’s going to freak,” I told him.

“Sissy’s going to freak,” he replied.

“I think this is a processed cookie-type food moment.”

“Ava, *no* moment is a processed cookie-type food moment. This is, however, a shot-of-tequila-type moment.”

He was not wrong.

We went to Reiver's, a bar on South Gaylord that was close to Sissy's place. It had been there forever and was decorated entirely in wood. They had kickass black bean dip there but I did not suggest this to Riley who would likely find that suggestion a disappointing testament to lack of motivation for healthy living mojo.

I had a shot of tequila, chased by a diet pop. Riley had a beer. Riley engaged me in a conversation that would take my thoughts off Sissy's living room and what he didn't know was my thoughts of my own mortality and plans to draw up a will, ASAP.

Eventually, I looked at my watch and gave a little scream.

"What?" Riley asked.

"It's ten to four. Luke's gonna be at my house at four. We gotta move." I'd jumped off my barstool and was hopping around on my flip flops freaked the hell out.

"Who's Luke?" Riley was watching me closely.

"An old friend."

His eyes narrowed. "You got a lot of them."

"Let's go!" I nearly shouted.

"All right, all right. Keep your pants on."

We paid, we left, we got home too late.

I knew because the clock on the dash of Riley's Pathfinder said it was quarter after four. I also knew because, as we rolled up to my house, Luke's Porsche was parked there, Luke leaning against it arms crossed on his chest. He didn't look happy and this unhappiness increased exponentially when his head turned and he saw Riley and me pulling up.

"Crap," I whispered.

"That Luke?" Riley asked, checking him out.

"Yeah."

"You owe him money?" Riley asked, maybe trying to be funny but his question was too close to the bone.

"Thanks for lunch, for going with me, for the tequila, everything," I said, turning to him as I saw Luke push away from the Porsche.

"I'll just make sure everything's okay. He doesn't look —"

"No!" I cried, again in a near shout.

Riley's eyes cut to me. "I'll just make sure everything's okay," Riley repeated in a tone I'd never heard him use before. He was usually laid back. He looked not at all laid back anymore.

Crapity, crap, crap, *crap*.

Riley got out. I got out. Luke met us on the sidewalk by Riley's car, right in front of my house.

Luke and Riley sized each other up.

Riley was a personal trainer and Luke *still* looked like he could wipe the floor with him.

“You Luke?” Riley asked, even though he knew the answer.

“Yeah, you Riley?” Luke asked, even though he, likely, knew the answer too.

“Yeah.”

They stared at each other and I had visions of them wrestling each other to the ground in a tough guy death match and this made me ultra uncomfortable.

“I need cookies,” I blurted and both men looked at me.

Luke’s mouth twitched. Riley’s brows drew together.

“You gonna be okay with this guy?” Riley asked what I thought was a question that proved he was a lunatic.

Luckily Luke showed no reaction to this in-your-face question.

“Of course,” I said.

Riley looked like he didn’t believe me. Then he did the wrap-his-hand-around-my-head-kiss-my-forehead thing again but left his hand where it was and looked me in the eyes.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked softly.

I nodded.

Riley threw a scowl at Luke who was back to looking unhappy in a way that made Riley’s scowl seem amateur.

Riley got in his Pathfinder and took off. I turned to Luke. Now he was glaring at me.

“You have something to give me?” I asked.

“In the house.”

“Luke, I need to get some work done, I haven’t had —”

“In the house.”

Jeez. All right, in the house if that’s what he wanted. The sooner I did what he wanted, the sooner I’d get this over with.

I stomped up to the house and let us in. I walked into the living room, threw my keys and purse on the couch and turned to Luke.

“Okay, Luke, we’re in the house,” I put my hand out, palm up. “You have something to give me?”

“Who’s that guy to you?”

“Riley?”

“No, Jack Lemmon,” he said and I couldn’t help it, I laughed mainly because it was funny.

He advanced so fast, I barely got my feet coordinated to retreat. But I did, all the way across the living room until my back hit the wall and Luke came up close. One of his hands hit the wall by my head, the other one wrapped around my waist and pulled me into his body.

I stared at him, shocked breathless at his behavior and every thought flew from my head.

“You like playin’ games?” he asked and his eyes were shining dangerously.

“No.”

“You like yankin’ men’s chains?” he asked.

Holy crap.

Where was *this* coming from?

“No!” I shouted.

“Lose weight, get contacts, dye your hair, become a knockout and make all the men pay who wouldn’t look at you before?” he clipped.

At his words, I lost it. I mean, how *dare* he?

“Fuck you!” I yelled.

“Why’d you come to the offices yesterday?” he asked.

“Go to hell, Lucas Stark.”

His palm pounded on the wall next to my head and his face got right in mine so he was the only thing I could see.

And this scared the shit out of me.

“Don’t fuck with me, Ava.”

“I’m not fucking with you,” I whispered, totally freaked out.

“Who’s Riley to you?”

“He’s my personal trainer,” I said immediately.

“You fuckin’ him?”

My eyes rounded and I instantly answered, “No!”

“He wants to fuck you.”

“He does not. We’re friends.”

“He does.”

“No he doesn’t.”

“Yes, Ava, he does.”

“Step back.”

He didn’t step back, he came closer or more to the point, brought me closer. Both arms wrapping around me, he hauled me tight against his body.

“You just earned a preview of tonight,” he told me, face so close his mouth was nearly on mine.

“I don’t. . .” I cleared my throat and that pissed me off because it made me sound scared. I *was* scared, I just didn’t want to *sound* scared. “I don’t want a preview.”

“Too bad.”

“Luke.”

“You’re gonna be in my bed and not like last night. I’m gonna give you a taste of me and I’m gonna take more than a taste of you.”

Ho-ly... fucking... *shit*.

“Luke,” I repeated.

“One thing you need to know, while you’re sharing my bed, I don’t share your body.”

At this, I blinked, thinking I saw red film covering my eyes but he went on before I could say a word.

“Until we’re done, however long that takes, no one touches you, not even to kiss your goddamned forehead. Got me?”

Um.

One, two, three... oh fuck it.

“You are fucking *kidding* me,” I snapped.

“Not even a little bit.”

“What about Sandra?”

“Sandra’s gone.”

“Her food is in your fridge!” I yelled.

“She’s gone.”

“Have you told her that?”

“Not yet, but she’s my next visit.”

Oh my God, he was a jerk. He was beyond a jerk. He was the jerkiest jerk I’d ever met.

“You’re a jerk,” I told him.

His brows snapped together. “You *want* me to fuck Sandra while I’m fuckin’ you?”

“You’re not gonna fuck me.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Ava, you missed it when it happened so I’ll clue you in. Last night, around the time you fell asleep against me, you became mine.”

My eyes went huge. “How do you figure that?”

All of a sudden, his face changed. He was watching me and I could tell he was thinking about something and by the look of him whatever it was didn’t bode well for me.

“Luke, step back,” I demanded.

“No,” he said softly but it wasn’t to my demand, it was to himself. “I’m thinkin’ you’ve been mine a lot longer than that.”

I stopped breathing and stared at him, scared *far, far* more now than I had been when he was angry.

His eyes roamed my face and hair again then they locked on mine. "I'm thinkin' you been mine since about the time your Dad left your Mom."

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

This was *not* happening.

"Step back," I whispered.

"Maybe before," he was still talking to himself.

"Please, step back."

His eyes had gone far away but they came back and focused on me. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"You're crazy and an out-of-control macho man is what you are."

"I'm right."

"You're nuts."

"Think about it."

I wasn't going to think about it. I was going to move to Wyoming and live with Sissy and her mother to get away from Luke.

That's when I realized something and my eyes snapped back to his. "How did you know my phone number? It's unlisted."

His face began to relax from its trip down memory lane intensity but I was way behind him, still back at being pissed off.

"Babe, I work at a private investigations agency."

"Is that how you found out where I live?"

"Yeah."

"Did you follow me from here last night?"

"Yeah."

I found that my hands were holding onto his waist and there was no way to put them between us so I grabbed at his tee and tried to shove.

He didn't move.

"Luke, forget finding dirt on Dom. You're fired. I'll hire another investigations agency."

"First they'll have to find Vincetti, which they won't do nearly as fast as Vance's gonna do and he's already working on it."

"God dammit," I shouted, foiled again.

He did the half-grin. I glared at him.

"Don't fight it," His voice was soft, gentle, affectionate and I had to claw at my anger to keep it with me, I liked that voice so much.

"Please go."

The grin didn't fade but he did let me go to move away about two inches. Then he dug in his pocket, pulled something out and shoved it in the front pocket of my Levi's.

His eyes came to mine and he said, "See you tonight. You get drunk, you call me. I'll come get you."

I didn't answer, I just glared at him. He ignored the glare, touched my nose with his finger and then he was gone.

Oh my. I've got goose bumps, that was INTENSE, Good Ava told me.

I think I had an orgasm, Bad Ava shared.

I slid down the wall and put my head on my knees.

Yep, I was right, my life just got pretty fucking complicated.