

Creed

WARNING

This book is an ADULT EROTIC romance featuring a (kind of) anti-hero *and* anti-heroine. This novel contains explicit erotic scenes that include elements of control and bondage as well as anal sex. The heroine, especially, in this novel lives life by her own rules with no apologies. In an effort not to spoil it for you, I will not explain further about the heroine but she is most definitely not your (or my, in my other books) “normal” heroine. Please read the Author’s Note. There are also scenes of torture and rape in this novel so if you are squeamish about either or you do not enjoy the above sexual situations or characters, I would suggest that this novel is not for you.

Author’s Note and Acknowledgements

Creed, as was the first novel in this series, *Knight*, is a departure from my usual novels. It is more erotic, exploring the building of trust and connection between two people in love.

This series was meant to explore anti-heroes, or men who are not your traditional hero. In other words, they do bad things, break the law and live by their own code which is not the normally acceptable code by which most of society lives.

When they came to me, the characters in this book threw me for a loop. Instead of an anti-hero, I got an interrupted hero and an anti-heroine. My Creed may skirt the law but Sylvie breaks it and makes no apologies for it.

Therefore, Sylvie is not soft, sweet, giggly or flirty. She is also not sassy. Sylvie is badass, kickass and makes no excuses. Life has led her to develop a hard shell with sharp edges in order to keep distant and protect herself from life’s hurts but when she lets someone through... watch out. It’s a love like no other.

I adore her.

I adore her so much, no kidding, I wanted to switch gears while writing this and call this book *Sylvie*. Alas, Creed came through just as strong and the beauty of his connection with and adoration of Sylvie wouldn’t allow me to make that change.

That said, this is your warning that my Sylvie is not your usual romance novel heroine. She’s one of the boys. She is, in a sense, like the female version of all my alphas from my novels all the way down to the language she uses.

I hope you give her a chance and, if you do, I hope she’ll have you eating out of her hand.

Last but oh so not least, I want to thank my posse who again had my back in a lot of ways near and dear to my heart while I wrote this novel.

You know who you are and you know all you've done.

To the moon and back, girlies.

For my readers, here you go...

Creed and his Sylvie.

* * * * *

Chapter One

Black Expedition

I drove fast because she sounded tweaked.

Tweaked in her business was not good.

Tweaked in my business was not good either.

It was worse. She wasn't calling Knight. This meant bad things because it meant bad things were happening. Not bad, *bad*.

If Knight knew something bad was going down, he'd lose his mind which meant someone might lose the use of an appendage. She knew, if I hit the scene, I'd have a mind to carpet stains.

Shit.

I screeched to a halt on the road outside her house in my blue 1968 Corvette Stingray then reversed, parallel parking expertly between two cars. In a second, I was out, hand to the gun under my leather jacket shoved in the holster attached to my belt at the small of my back. I shoved my keys in my pocket and approached the front door of her tiny house, my eyes peeled and scanning.

No noises, no sound.

It was late, after three in the morning. Her neighborhood was quiet. It was a nice neighborhood, not flashy, not family. Just a neighborhood if a bit rundown.

I hadn't run Serena's check. Another of Knight's team did it. I didn't know much about her, though I'd taken her to a few of her early appointments and stuck around until they were over. This was a service Knight provided to his new girls. Strike that, it was a service Knight insisted his girls have.

I pulled up what I knew about her and remembered she was an art student, earning cash to go to some fancy school in France. Parents gone, a car crash. If she wanted it, she had to do it on her own.

Fucking whacked, that shit. Sure, you couldn't pull together money to buy a plane ticket, pay tuition and living expenses in a different country by waiting tables unless you had a decade to do it.

But shit.

Each girl had their own story. Most of them were way worse than Serena's.

Which meant Serena might not be all there upstairs.

Please God, I thought, do not let this bitch be seeing clients at her house.

I checked in the window first, seeing light coming around the blinds but they were closed. I couldn't get a lock on what was happening inside.

I moved to the door, stood to its side, reached out a hand and knocked hard twice. "Serena!" I called. "It's Sylvie."

I heard the locks open immediately.
Shit, she was waiting at the door.
It was thrown open and I saw her.
Fuck.
I heard the blood roaring in my ears and didn't move except to speak.
"You need a doctor?" I asked.
She shook her head.
Then she whispered, "Sylvie –"
I cut her off, "You report this to Knight?"
"I... he'll..." she shook her head again, "no."
"You call someone other than me to help you out? Get you cleaned up?" I pressed on.
She nodded. "Cher. She's on her way. She'll be here soon."
Good. Cher. That bitch was smart, had her shit tight. She'd see to Serena.
I nodded back then, "Who was he?"
"He was... he was new."
I nodded again then, "Tell me you didn't see him here."
She shook her head. "Never."
At least there was that.
"He do more than what I can see?" I asked.
She closed her eyes. I held my breath. She opened her eyes.
"No," she whispered.
I studied her, not getting it.
She'd been worked over, eye swelling, lip fat and busted open but only a small tear. It didn't look like she needed stitches. It looked like it hurt like hell but it wasn't that bad. Unacceptable but not that bad.
Why didn't she call Knight? For this, Knight would make a statement then cut the asshole off, he wouldn't lose his mind.
She had to be lying.
"Serena, you gotta talk to me," I pushed. "Why'd you call me direct? Why haven't you reported this to Knight?"
"The girls say he gets angry," she replied.
"He does and babe, he should. Your face is messed up. He does not offer protection so his girls can get messed up. He does not like that shit one bit. A statement needs to be made."
"He's scary when he's angry," she whispered.
That was the God's honest truth.
"Uh... just sayin', Serena, some asshole worked you over. He's a new client. You wanna tell me why you're protecting him from Knight?"

“I don’t want Knight to get in trouble.”

God. Serena was relatively new. This had never happened to her.

Right.

“That is not yours to worry about,” I educated her.

“But –”

I leaned into the door and dropped my voice. “Serena, babe, it’s not yours to worry about. It’s what he does. It’s who he is. That’s why you’re with him. If someone works you over, you report it to Knight. Immediately.”

She held my eyes for a beat then nodded.

I went on, “Now, you meet this guy at his place, a hotel, what?”

“Hotel,” she answered.

I nodded. “Where, when, how long you been home?”

She gave me the details.

I nodded again. “I’m paying him a visit, Serena, and I’m reporting this to Knight.”

She bit her fat lip on the side where it wasn’t as fat, then she stopped doing that and nodded back.

“How long before Cher gets here?” I asked.

“She said ten minutes and that was about ten minutes ago.”

I gave her another nod.

“Ice,” I whispered, dipping my head toward her face. “Take some painkillers. Lie down.”

She nodded again then whispered back, “Thanks, Sylvie.”

I caught her eyes and locked my gaze with hers. “Anytime. Know it, babe.”

She nodded yet again.

“Lock doors,” I ordered. “I’ll check in tomorrow.”

“Okay, Sylvie.”

“Ice,” I repeated.

“Okay.”

I looked meaningfully at the door, she closed it and I didn’t move until I heard it lock.

Then I moved quickly to the car but I didn’t jog. I didn’t run. I kept it controlled.

When I got in my car, I called Rhash, Knight’s right hand man.

“Yo,” he answered.

“Yo right back at ‘cha,” I replied. “Got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”

“Good,” Rhash replied, a tremor of humor in his voice.

“Right, I’m in an ass-kicking mood and I’m already in my car so there are no delays in going out to kick ass.”

“Fuck,” Rhash muttered, humor gone. He knew what this meant. “What’s the bad news?”

“Serena got worked over and she called me.”

“*Fuck*,” Rhash clipped.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“How bad? She need Baldy? What?” he asked.

“She says not bad. Just beat up. Cher is coming to look after her. I need an address on her client tonight.”

I waited for him to find it, he gave it to me and I programmed it into my GPS then he asked, “There a reason she didn’t call me or Knight?”

“Worried you’d lose your minds, get in trouble.”

“Stupid,” he muttered, sounding more than a little annoyed. “What’s she think we get that ten percent for?”

This was a good question and one I didn’t have an answer to. In my experience, ladies of the evening didn’t protect their protectors. If they were lucky, it was the other way around. They usually avoided them, if they could, or sought them out for not so good reasons, such as getting their fix.

Knight’s girls weren’t like that. I knew why, hell, I definitely knew why.

It still was stupid.

“Got an ass to kick, Rhash,” I reminded him.

“Need back up?” he asked.

“Feeling like kicking ass?”

“How bad was she?”

“Fat lip. Swollen eye,” I told him.

“Then... fuck yeah.”

I grinned.

That was why Knight inspired loyalty in his girls. Because he employed people like Rhashan and me who gave a shit.

“I’m starting at the hotel,” I shared. “Meet me there.”

“It’ll take me about ten, fifteen. Wait for me. I don’t want to miss anything.”

I grinned again. Rhashan and all the guys thought it was hilarious to watch me work. This was because I was five foot two and cheated the gods by drinking a lot and eating whatever I wanted and still, I was thin. I had tits and nicely rounded ass. Neither in overabundance so, no doubt about it, I was slender. I wasn’t girlie but I wore my honey blonde hair long and wild and I also had a not to be messed with, once a week schedule of getting a manicure and pedicure.

Still, I could take down a man over a foot taller than me, with over a hundred pounds on me and have him whining like a baby.

The guys thought this was hysterical, watching a man go down at the hands of a petite woman wearing nail polish. Sometimes, when I'd get the callout, two or three of them would show just to watch.

I never disappointed.

"See you there," I said to Rhash.

"Yeah, later," he replied.

I flipped my phone shut, started up my girl, she purred for me while I waited the thirty seconds before I saw Cher pull up and park. Then I gave her a chin lift through the windshield and waited while she walked to Serena's house. After that, I waited until the door closed behind Cher.

Then my girl and I took off.

* * * * *

I had my back to the wall at the side of the door when I heard the elevator beep. I turned my head and watched Rhash walk out.

Rhashan was a huge, midnight skinned black man. Handsome. Fuck, they made few of them as good as Rhashan from head to toe. Smooth with a kick, like a good bourbon. You sucked it back then sucked in a breath to ease the warmth on its way down.

He'd recently married a woman I liked unreservedly, which was rare. It was known he liked to dominate which was why I didn't dip my toe in midnight before he made the ultimate hook up with his new wife, Vivica.

No one controlled me. Not anymore.

That didn't mean I didn't enjoy the view immensely as he walked his muscled bulk my way.

When he got close, I lifted up a keycard between two fingers.

"Boss owes me a hundred, fifty," I noted.

Rhash's full lips quirked. "You get a receipt?"

I shot him a grin and jerked up my chin.

His eyes went to the door. "He in there?"

"According to my boy downstairs who's one hundred and fifty dollars richer for handing me a keycard, he's not checked out," I told him.

He looked me up and down before he remarked, "This hotel, I don't get away without shelling out at least two fifty."

"You don't have tits," I pointed out the obvious and his lips again quirked.

Then his face got serious. "You lead?"

"Uh... am I Sylvia Bissenette?" I asked.

"Last time I checked," he answered.

That got him another grin.

He positioned and so did I, both of us unholstering our guns.

I slid in the keycard, got the green light, slid it out, carefully turned the handle and cautiously moved into the dark room with Rhash at my back.

Within a minute, we'd ascertained the space was clear.

Rhash turned on a light and we both scanned the wrecked room with our eyes.

When I was done with my scan, my gaze went to Rhash and I noted his strong, square jaw was hard.

"She put up a fight," I remarked.

His eyes cut to me.

I was a loose part of the Knight Sebring team, not an official member. I was freelance. I had other jobs. But I was always on-call for Knight.

Being freelance didn't mean much to Knight's boys. For them, I took assignments, I took call, I was a member of the team. This meant we knew where each other lived. We drank together. We watched the Broncos together, usually at a bar. I was invited to Rhash's wedding. If I needed help on another one of my jobs, all I had to do was make a call and they had my back.

The fact that, outside work, our time spent together usually included alcohol meant we'd all shared.

So I knew Rhashan Banks had grown up rough. His Mom had him when she was sixteen. He had two sisters and a brother by the time his Mom was twenty-one. Each Banks kid had a different father and none of the dads stuck around.

Rhash was in a gang by twelve, his best friend got whacked during a turf war and died in his arms when Rhash was fifteen. Still, it took three more years and getting his girl pregnant before Rhash started to pull his shit together. She put the baby up for adoption, wanting nothing to do with it or a Daddy who was destined for dead or incarcerated. She dumped his ass, had the baby, got rid of the baby then promptly went back on her grand schemes and got involved with another gang member, this one about seven huge steps down from Rhash. Her new guy didn't mind sharing. In fact, he passed her around to all his buds.

To deal with a life that turned total shit, she eventually got hooked on meth. Now she worked Colfax and her life expectancy wasn't very high considering her pimp was an asshole, her strip was dangerous and her mind was always on her next fix.

Rhash fought his way out of that shit, eventually found Knight and lived every day knowing the kid he created with his girl was somewhere better. Knowing it and hating it because that better did not include his real Mom or his real Dad.

Somehow, all this shit got twisted in his head. The gang mentality wasn't gone. His loyalty was ingrained and extreme. It was just that now it was to Knight, Knight's team and Knight's mission.

Therefore, when he took in the evidence that one of Knight's girls fought back before getting a busted lip and a swollen eye, it pissed him off.

Rhashan Banks pissed off was a little scary and I say that even though not much scared me.

When he made no reply and I was done with his dark eyes burning holes into mine, I asked, "You got any cash on you?"

"Your tits wear off?" he asked back and I fought back another grin.

"They're b-cups, Rhash. They look good but they only go so far covered up," I replied.

He twisted his torso and the light went out.

Then I heard him say, "Let's move."

* * * * *

We turned from the night clerk who was two hundred dollars richer and told us what we already knew from the empty, wrecked hotel room.

Serena's client had paid in cash. The credit card he put on file for incidentals cleared at the time of check in which was eight o'clock. When the clerk ran it again, it had been reported stolen. Plus he had checked in under a different name and address than he'd given us.

The false name and paying in cash was not surprising. Clients did their best not to leave trails.

The address and stolen credit card, not good.

This meant he felt safe to leave the room in that state, knowing they couldn't find him to charge him.

Knight had a stable of fifty-seven girls and shit happened. It was rare because Knight also had a reputation. Nevertheless, it happened sometimes. But no girl took a client without him being checked out. This was part of the work I did for Knight. He didn't dig deep but he did dig. He never sent a girl out if the client was shady, had a record, cash flow problems or anything of concern turned up. We ran credit history, work history, financials, criminal records and we checked homes and places of work, all on the down low so as not to scare away clients.

In other words, this *particular* kind of shit did not happen.

Ever.

"His house," Rhash growled. "Meet you there. I'll text you details."

"Right," I muttered, walking beside him to the door. My head was tilted back, eyes up and aimed at his profile. I was assessing the level of his anger. I sensed it was not only increasing, but expanding to take in the guy who took his fist to Serena and whoever did the legwork on the client.

We were pushing out of the doors when I felt it.

Eyes on me.

I twisted my neck and shoved the door open with my gaze trained over my shoulder. I swept the reception area with not mild attention.

It was early morning, no one was there that I could see but the clerk.

Fuck.

I turned my attention to where I was going, heading for my girl in the lot.

This had been happening lately, too much. I long since learned how to sense it and read it. I might not be girlie but I'd have to be blind not to see that I wasn't hard on the eyes. This meant I got a lot of looks.

This wasn't that, some guy who liked what he saw and wanted in there.

This was a different kind of watching.

It had been going on now for about a month but every time I felt it, when I scanned or circled back to take a better look, I could find nothing.

I didn't like it but there was nothing I could do if I couldn't discover the source.

Now I had a job to do and I didn't have the time to swing back into reception on the guise of asking the clerk more questions to see if someone was checking me out.

So I followed behind Rhash in his car with my eyes peeled, looking for a tail.

And finding nothing.

* * * * *

I stood in the empty living room trying to hold my shit.

"Who did the check?" I asked, my voice low with anger.

"Live," Rhash grunted and I flipped open my phone, using my thumb on the keypad to scroll down my phonebook to Lively.

I heard Rhash hitting buttons on his own phone, I knew connecting with Knight.

We'd hit the client's house and found a for sale sign in the front yard. When we'd gone in, there was nothing there. Not a stick of furniture. Totally cleared out.

This gave me a bad feeling. This was not your random asshole that got off on paying for sex and roughing up women.

Stolen credit cards. False addresses.

This was bad.

The phone rang four times in my ear before I connected.

"Pip, what the fuck? It's after four in the morning," Live muttered sleepily in my ear, using the shortened version of the nickname that the boys gave me. Pipsqueak.

The guys jacked around all the time. We were always fucking with each other, playing jokes, giving each other shit. It was just the way. Pipsqueak and Pip were not the nicknames for badass bitches like me who could kick ass but what did I care? It was ironic and it sure as fuck could be worse. I knew this because one of Knight's men was nicknamed Tiny, this wasn't ironic and it didn't refer to his stature. He hated it but he put up with it because if he didn't it would mean he not only had a small dick but also no balls, which would have been worse.

And anyway, he had a secret that I knew because one of his women shared. This was, his dick might be small but that didn't mean he didn't know what to do with his tongue and fingers. The way it was described, he made up for it in a big way.

I didn't delay in sharing what the fuck to Live.

"Serena was worked over tonight. Client paid for the hotel in cash, gave a fake name and a stolen credit card. Right now I'm standing in his living room with Rhash and it's empty. By empty I mean there's no furniture and there's a for sale sign in the yard."

"Fuck," he whispered.

"Baby, it's late. What the hell?" I heard in the background and knew this was Live's woman, Amy. She sounded sleepy and snippy. I'd never heard her sounding sleepy. I frequently heard her sounding snippy.

Incidentally, she was *not* one of the guys' women that I liked unreservedly or at all. She was a ball buster. I didn't like women like her who happily accepted the dresses, shoes, jewelry and free cover to get into Knight's club, Slade, from her man. Amy didn't have any problems bitching about everything under the sun, including the fact Live had to work for the money it took to buy her dresses, shoes and jewelry.

"Yeah, fuck," I agreed, ignoring Amy which was my usual tactic for dealing with her. "You do the full check?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah, I did. 'Course I did," Live told me, insulted. "There was furniture there when I checked him out, all through the house. There sure as fuck wasn't a for sale sign in the yard."

"Baby, what... the... *hell?*" Amy snapped sounding less sleepy but definitely more snippy.

"Give me a minute, darlin'," Live replied to Amy then to me, "How bad's Serena?"

"Fat lip, swollen eye, could be worse but that isn't the point," I answered.

"Yeah," he agreed.

I heard Rhash's phone snap closed so my eyes went to him through the dark.

"Knight says meeting. Now. Slade. Get his ass in there, Sylvie," he rumbled then didn't wait for me to respond. He stalked to the door.

I went back to the phone. "You hear that?"

"On my way," Live muttered.

"What?" I heard Amy ask, her voice going shrill. "Now?"

"Later," I said into the phone then snapped it shut quickly in a successful effort to avoid hearing Live get his balls busted. I hoped she excelled at giving head or tasted like pure honey to be worth that shit.

I followed Rhash out the backdoor. We'd picked the lock and I made certain it was secure again before I moved around the house. As I approached my car, I watched Rhash give me a finger flick through the window as he drove away in his black Nissan Z.

I hit the sidewalk and was moving around the hood of my Corvette when I noted the big Ford Expedition motoring down the street the opposite direction from Rhash. My eyes locked on it, taking in the Arizona plates then moving up to the cab.

At the front of the hood of my Corvette, I stopped dead and my chest depressed like a boulder had landed on it.

The Expedition drove past, the driver not even glancing my way and my head turned, following it.

No fucking way.

No fucking way.

I'd seen him, this was true. I'd seen him dozens of times in the last sixteen years. Or, I had convinced myself I had.

But I hadn't.

He was gone.

There was no way after sixteen years he'd make his way from Kentucky to a street in Denver at after four o'clock in the morning at the same time I was on that street.

No way.

There was a time when I wanted it. I saw him everywhere, that was how much I wanted it. I wanted to see him again so he could take me away like he promised. Time passed and my life that had been swirling flushed down the toilet and I wanted to see him again so I could scream in his face, kick him, beat him, share exactly what his betrayal meant to my heart and my life. How, when he left, a shit life that was only ever good when I was breathing his air turned even *more* shit.

That time was not now. I was over it. I'd gotten out, moved on, lived my own life how I wanted to live it, not how someone forced me to live it. It wasn't easy. It was fucking hard. It nearly ended me.

But I did it and I was here. I liked my life.

And I didn't look back.

Not ever.

Not fucking ever.

So that wasn't him. It couldn't be him. It was my mind playing tricks on me.

Not the first time and, the way he fucked me over, I knew it wouldn't be the last.

I'd learned to live with it.

I came unstuck, rounded my girl, got in, started her up and headed to Slade.

I screeched to a halt in my driveway, threw open the door, angled out, slammed the door and ran across my yard to my neighbor's.

Shit, I was five minutes late. And five minutes for Charlene was five minutes too many.

I knocked loud twice on her front door then turned the knob and walked in.

"I'm here! I'm here!" I shouted over what sounded like pandemonium. "I had work. Sorry I'm late."

He came around and slammed into my legs.

"Sylvie! Sylvie! Sylvie!" Adam cried. "Toads are slimy!"

Then he pounded a fist hard into my thigh and raced away.

I followed him, walking from the entry into the living room, rounding through the dining room before I hit the kitchen which was bedlam.

Charlene was in a robe looking harassed. Adam was bumping repeatedly into the side of the counter. Theo was in his high chair, slamming his fists into the tray. Leslie was sitting in her booster seat, slamming her feet into the chair.

I went to Adam and gently led him away from the cabinets to the kitchen table, my eyes on Charlene.

"Sorry, I should have called," I said quietly. "Something went down. I got here as soon as I could. You go shower. I've got this."

Her eyes were brimming with tears, none of which had flowed over yet. That would happen in the shower. She'd go to work with puffy, red eyes again and hope they didn't notice she was strung out emotionally and physically.

"Thanks, Sylvie," she whispered before she took off and thus began the morning ritual.

"Cocoa Puffs!" Leslie shouted, still banging her feet into the chair.

"Right, Cocoa Puffs," I agreed. "And you'll get them if you stop making so much noise. Adam, up," I ordered, guiding him carefully into his chair then I got down to business.

I'd lived next to Charlene since I bought my house four years ago. Six weeks ago, her husband Dan took off on her. They went to bed and when she woke up, he was gone and so were most of his clothes, the flat screen TV they'd just bought, the string of pearls he'd given her two anniversaries before and, upon inspection, half their checking and savings accounts.

He hadn't cleaned her out. He'd left everything else.

He'd also left her with Adam, who was six and had Down syndrome, Leslie, who was three and Theo who was one and a half. He also left her a mortgage, daycare and special schools bills she couldn't afford on her salary. She had a job as a bank teller and family that all lived in New Mexico.

She was fucked financially, heartbroken and barely holding it together.

She said, over wine that faded into tequila and tears, that she had no idea Dan was over it. Money wasn't great, they were always struggling but they had a good family and lots of love.

It was my opinion that many women lived in denial and Charlene was one of them. Her husband's eyes followed my ass enough that she couldn't miss it; she just chose to ignore it. Dan would often stare off into space as if he was imagining himself somewhere else, not there. And for the last year, the rare times I was home to notice it, he got home from work later and later.

She was pretty clueless, her being surprised by Dan's defection was proof of this fact, but she was a fun drunk, loved her kids and her husband and she always took care of my cat when I went to Vegas or hit a beach. She made me a huge tin of Christmas cookies and brought it over with eggnog every year for Christmas. She also made me a massive birthday cake and brought it over with a premium bottle of bourbon or tequila.

Further, she was open and friendly. She told me she only ever wanted the simple life. A husband, a home, kids. She knew Adam was Down's before he was born and she didn't care. Didn't give it a second thought. Before Dan left, she was happy as a clam. Adam's special needs didn't seem to touch their lives. He was high functioning but he still needed more care and attention. She never complained.

"Pure joy," she told me on a smile. "Wake up to it, go to bed with it and it comes from Adam. How lucky can I get?"

She meant that shit. That was Charlene.

And that was probably why, last year on the fifteenth anniversary of it happening, when she brought over birthday cake and bourbon, I got sauced with her and laid it out.

All of it.

Everything about me.

Then I let it out, bawling like an idiot for the first time in years, clutching onto her like I could fuse onto her healthy, happy family cheerfulness.

I could count my friends on two hands.

But I could count those I was tight with on two fingers.

Knight and Charlene.

The only two people who knew everything about me.

So when Dan took off on Charlene, I stepped in. Every morning I came over and while Charlene got ready for work, I got the kids breakfast, got them dressed and helped Charlene get them in the car so she could get them to their different schools and daycare. If I was around in the evenings, I lent a hand then hung to give her some company. I'd also corralled Rhash's woman Vivica and Knight's woman Anya into helping her out a couple of times, looking after the kids so I could take Charlene out

to get her hammered and forget her husband was a dickhead and that life could be fun.

Dan had not contacted her, not once in six weeks. My guess, he was wind. She'd never hear from him again. I'd offered to track his ass down so, at the very least, she could divorce it and hang a massive child support payment around his rat bastard neck but she refused.

She was certain he'd see the error of his ways and come back, tail between his legs.

I was certain he was banging as much tail as he could find in an effort to turn his thoughts from the fact he was a total fucking douchebag and he'd never come home to a lifetime of shit he was not man enough to deal with. Not to mention guilt over the fact that he'd given up and fucked over a decent, kind, good woman who loved him. Charlene wouldn't serve up that guilt. But he'd feel it. And he'd do all in his power to avoid it.

Thus I'd already done a few searches and made a few calls. If he turned up, I'd be all over his ass whether Charlene said yes or not.

She showered and got ready for work. I fed the kids, cleaned them up and got them dressed. This was not an easy task but I was not a Mom who needed to be at work on time at the same time worrying about how I was going to pay bills so I had nothing on my mind but them and making it fun, which I did.

When Charlene was ready, we corralled them and got them out to her sedan.

"Work?" she asked me why I was late as she was strapping Theo in his car seat.

"Yeah," I answered, strapping Adam into his.

Her eyes found mine over the roof of the car and I saw her brows go up. "Bad?"

"Not good," I told her.

She pressed her lips together. She knew my history, she knew my work. She didn't agree with it but she was a good friend, she kept her mouth shut. Or, at least, she didn't lecture me too often, just enough for me to get her and for her not to be *that* annoying.

I leaned in and blew a raspberry on Adam's neck.

He giggled and shoved at me, shouting, "Sylvie! Toads are slimy! Raspberries too!"

I grinned at him and looked into the backseat to check that Leslie was secure.

Then I tossed a smile at Adam who smiled back so huge I was sure I could see all his teeth.

Yeah. Pure joy. The world would be a poorer place without Adam in it.

Or, at least, mine would.

I leaned in, touched my forehead to his, pulled back and slammed the door.

I rounded the hood of her car on my way home when Charlene said what she always said.

“Thanks, honey.”

My eyes caught hers as I passed her.

“You, me, them until the me in that equation isn’t needed anymore. Know it.”

I watched her pull in a breath to control the tears.

I rolled my eyes and muttered, “Such a girl,” and kept walking.

“You are too, you know!” she shouted at my back as I sauntered across her yard toward my house.

I lifted a hand and flicked out two fingers.

“And by the way, you keep walking through my yard, you’re gonna wear my grass down to dirt!” she kept shouting.

“Such a girl!” I shouted back, not bothering to turn. “Bitch, bitch, bitch.”

“Whatever,” she yelled and I grinned.

I hit my front door, pulled out my keys and watched as they drove away, both Leslie and Adam waving at me through their windows.

I waved back and let myself in, so focused on Charlene and her kids, so exhausted from zero sleep, mind so consumed by what Knight shared in the meeting that I missed something I normally would never miss.

The black Expedition parked right across the street from my house.

I locked the door behind me and walked directly to my bedroom. When I hit the door, Gun, who was curled in a ball pressed at the bottom edge of my pillow, looked up at me.

I was wrong earlier. I could count those I was tight with on three fingers.

Knight, Charlene and my cat, Gunsmoke.

She was white with a round head, kind of flat-ish ears and her fur was unbelievably thick. She looked like a big fat cat but she wasn’t. She just had a shit ton of short, thick fur. It also had a shimmer of gray at the very ends with vague gray rings on her tail. She was talkative. She was loving. She was superior. And she liked me and only me.

Not true, she adored Adam.

But she couldn’t bear Leslie and especially Theo. She might let them in when they weren’t so loud and manically active. Now it was just me and Adam, who was also full of exuberance and energy but not around Gun. He was quiet and gentle with Gun and she showed her appreciation.

She watched me walk in, sit my ass on the side of the bed and pull off my boots and socks. She then scooted away when I got up, turned toward the bed, fell forward and did a face plant in it.

And as I closed my eyes, sleep claiming me, I felt her curl up in the dent of my waist.

I knew she was probably hungry. It was time for breakfast.

But she was my Gun. She knew me. She had my back.
She'd wait.

Chapter Two

The Cutest Boy in Town

A cold, dark night in the hills of Kentucky, twenty-eight years earlier, Sylvie is six...

I heard them yelling.

"Fuck you!"

"You wish, dirtbag! Fuck you! You piece of shit!"

"Don't call me a piece of shit!"

"Don't tell me what I can say!"

"You eat my food, live in my house, suck my dick for diamonds, I'll do whatever the fuck I want!"

"I hope you have a good memory, asshole, because the last blowjob you got was the last you'll get from me! I. Am. GONE!"

Then I heard it, the thump and I jumped.

I knew what that meant.

I knew what it meant.

I knew. I knew. I knew.

She'd have bruises tomorrow and walk funny.

I didn't like it when she had bruises and walked funny.

"Come on, Bootsie, come on," I whispered and my doggie, a sweet, white, West Highland Terrier's, head cocked as I waved to her on my way to the door. She didn't want to come. She always tried to keep me in the room. She didn't like the yelling either, I knew it. She was a dog, she couldn't tell me but I still knew it. She also knew what would happen if we got caught. She was there and Daddy had even kicked her once when they found us.

But I couldn't stay. I couldn't listen anymore. We'd only been caught a few times but we'd gone walking loads. I didn't like getting caught but I heard the words in my head over and over again. I never forgot them. I didn't need any more of the words.

"NO!" I heard her screech.

"Last blowjob I'll get?" Daddy roared back. *"We'll see about that, bitch!"*

No more words.

We had *to go*.

“Come on,” I kept whispering and slid out the door, careful. I had to be careful. They couldn’t catch me.

That would be bad.

Bootsie followed.

I did what I always did, being careful. Before I put on my jeans, boots and coat, I took off Bootsie’s collar. You could hear it jingling.

They couldn’t hear it jingling.

I closed my door and we crept through my Daddy’s big house, quiet, so quiet. I’d learned not to make a noise, where to put my feet so they’d always hit carpet even in the dark.

We got to the backdoor and slid out, me and Bootsie.

Quickly, as quick as we could, we crossed the backyard. I could see the stables off to the side, Daddy’s horses shut tight against the cold. The pool was covered for the winter. Snow on the ground. I always worried Bootsie would fall in the pool under that cover and not be able to get out.

I hated winter.

I didn’t like summers much either.

Quiet, slow, I opened the back gate because it could creak if you didn’t do it careful-like. And I was always careful.

I’d learned.

I closed the gate behind us so they wouldn’t see it open. They might notice. They had before.

Or Daddy had.

That had been a bad night.

So I closed the gate. Always.

Bootsie and I moved through the snow and the trees. We did it fast. It felt good out there, the cold on my face, in my mouth, up my nose. I didn’t know why. It didn’t feel good normally, just nights like tonight.

I liked the quiet after all that noise too. I special-liked it after I’d hear the thump.

And I liked the cold up my nose.

Breathing it in.

And in.

And in.

Bootsie and I kept going through the woods and I wondered what would happen if we didn’t stop. Daddy hunted but he never took me. He said girls weren’t put on this earth to hunt. He said pretty little girls were put on this earth to do other things, like be pretty.

Daddy said I was very pretty but that wasn't something you *did*. That was just something you *were*.

So I didn't hunt with Daddy or fish with him or do any of the things he did with his buddies that sounded like all sorts of fun. I went to ballet classes which I hated. The teacher was mean and had a stick she'd bang against the wood floors and I didn't like the sound and I had to wear stupid outfits.

Daddy didn't listen when I said I'd rather go fishing.

Going fishing, he told me, wasn't for pretty little girls either.

But I liked the lake. I liked water. I liked boats.

I liked all that a whole lot better than ballet.

Daddy didn't care.

Maybe Bootsie and I could walk to the lake. Maybe we could even walk to the ocean. I'd been to the ocean once and I liked it. The sounds were good, the waves hitting the shore. I liked the sand under my feet, hard, tingly but still soft and fluffy. The sun felt better at the beach but that was because there was a breeze. It was hot and cool. I liked having both. Not hot and still. I didn't like that.

Bootsie and me could walk to the beach. We could walk all the way to the ocean. Just go on and on and on. Maybe we'd find someone nice who'd give us food. If it took a long time, we'd find berries. I found wild strawberries all the time when summer was new, sometimes I could even find raspberries when it was old. We'd find nice people and berries and walk to the beach. Just keep going until all we could see was water forever and ever.

Bootsie would like the beach.

Then again, Bootsie liked anywhere just as long as it had me.

This was what I was thinking when my feet went out from under me. I heard and was terrified by the cry I let out and the sounds of Bootsie barking as I went down. I tried to stop, threw my arms out but I just rolled, my body banging against stuff, my coat catching on things, the sting of the snow hitting the skin of my face as I just kept going.

I landed and it hurt because I landed against a tree.

"Ouch," I whispered, hearing Bootsie's barking come toward me.

We were far away. We'd never walked this far. I'd never noticed that ridge.

We'd walked too far.

Still, I worried Daddy would hear my cry and Bootsie's barking.

The tumble made my body feel funny. Tight but tingly. Still, I turned my head to see Bootsie jumping through the snow down the slope I'd fallen over, yapping the whole way.

She needed to be quiet.

Before I could say anything to her, tell her to be quiet, I felt something under my arms then I wasn't lying in the snow anymore.

I was up on my feet and being turned.

This scared me so much I didn't move, didn't speak. Just looked at the heavy plaid shirt in front of me, knowing Daddy would find me. Knowing whoever caught me would call him. Knowing, when they did, Daddy would be *mad*.

"Quiet, dog," I heard a firm, low, boy's voice say and my head tipped back.

Then I didn't move or speak for another reason.

This was because, right in front of me, his hands still on my sides, was Tucker Creed.

Tucker Creed.

The cutest boy in town.

Chapter Three

Pretty Cat

Present day...

I opened my eyes and felt it.

Shit.

Fuck.

Shit.

Someone was in the room with me and that someone was not Gun.

I rolled quickly over the bed, angling my hips so I didn't roll right over Gun as my hand went to the weapon still holstered on my belt at the small of my back.

I fell over the side of the bed, getting my feet under me and coming up in a crouch immediately, hands up, arms resting on the bed, gun pointed across the room.

I saw him and froze solid.

No fucking way.

No fucking way.

Jesus, I was dreaming.

Fuck, I had to be dreaming.

His eyes on me, he was unarmed, his back to the wall, one knee bent, the sole of his boot also to the wall, arms crossed on his chest, he held my gaze steady, direct, intense and whispered, "Sylvie."

At the sound of my name coming from his lips, raw washed through me, a feeling I last felt drunk on my couch in Charlene's arms on my birthday last year.

A feeling I'd felt time and again before I learned how not to feel it anymore.

A feeling that threatened to shred me now.

A feeling that with lots of practice I buried.

“Tucker Creed?” I asked.

His arms came uncrossed only so he could lift his hands in the air which I was guessing was his confirmation that he was, indeed, Tucker Creed. My first love, my protector, my savior.

My betrayer.

He crossed his arms again and requested, “You wanna stop aiming your weapon at me?”

Actually, no. I didn’t. I wanted to keep aiming my gun at him and I might also want to pull the trigger.

I was not wrong last night. That was him in the Expedition.

And I knew it was him watching me at the hotel. It was also his eyes I felt for the last month.

I knew it.

I fucking knew it.

And I didn’t get it.

Even though I preferred to aim my gun at him, I still stood. As I did I reached behind me to re-holster my gun at the same time keeping my eyes on him and asking, “What the fuck?”

He looked to the bed then back to me before he shared, “Pretty cat.”

I looked to the bed to see Gun sitting on her ass, tail sweeping the covers, curious eyes on Tucker Creed. It was the first time since I got her that I lamented my choice of cat over Rottweiler.

I looked back to Creed and when I did it hit me that this fucking *asshole* had accepted all I had to give him, everything that was me, he took it then took off and left me to the wolves and pretty much the first thing he said to me was I had a pretty cat.

“Are you shitting me?” I asked.

His face changed and his mouth moved.

“We gotta talk.”

We had to talk?

Sixteen years, out-of-the-blue he’s in my bedroom and he tells me I have a pretty cat and we had to talk.

Oh yeah, he was totally fucking shitting me.

I studied him.

The last time I saw him he was twenty-three. Now, he was thirty-nine. One look and I saw either life had not been kind or it had been full of adventure of the dangerous variety.

He’d always been tall, even as a little kid. Back in the day, when he was mine, or I thought he was mine, I’d loved that. He grew to be six foot one. He towered over

me. He had broad shoulders, a wide chest, narrow hips, thick thighs. I loved that too. The power of his body. Growing up with him, watching him hone it and learn how to use it.

He'd had a rough life, like I did, since he was born. So rough, we used to discuss in a way that was a joke but also wasn't but it *was* a release which one of us had it rougher. We never came to a conclusion. He'd learned to take care of himself. I'd got him early so I learned he'd take care of me. Being big, learning fast, he was good at both, taking care of himself and me.

Or, I thought that too.

In the end, I'd been wrong.

Now, he was still tall but he was broader, wider, he'd bulked out and not a little bit. He wasn't a behemoth but one look at him, simply his size would make some men ill-at-ease and most would leave a wide berth.

But there was more.

His skin was tanned, leathery, creases fanned from the sides of his eyes worn there not through smiling. There were more at the sides of his mouth, along his forehead.

He had a scar that scored through his upper lip, mid right side. He had another one that slashed over his cheekbone, up his temple and disappeared into his hair but you could see it didn't end there. This was because his brown hair was white in a thin stripe along the side of his head leading from the scar at his temple and stopping where his skull curved to the back. It wasn't gray with age. In fact, he had no gray in his hair even at his age. Someone had got him good with a knife, meant harm and got interrupted in their endeavor of attempting to kill him.

No, life had not been kind to Tucker Creed.

I didn't know what to think of this. The only thought that came to mind was *good*.

He had on a plaid shirt in light blues, grays and greens mixed with white over a white t-shirt, faded jeans and light brown boots that had an almost yellowish tinge to the suede. His clothes were clean, they hung on him well but they were not new or fashionable. He bought them for the purposes of covering his body, comfort and nothing else.

His hair was a mess and I felt a sting looking at it because it always was a mess, even back in the day. He rarely got it cut, it hung well past his collar and was always flopping in his eyes. That was no different now, except it wasn't flopping in his eyes. Though I knew, if he bent his neck forward even a fraction of an inch, it would.

Although he wore the years that passed from top to toe, his eyes had not changed. Sky blue, bright, the color so stark in his tan, rugged face that it seemed to glimmer.

Eyes I saw in my dreams, even now, if I admitted it to myself.

Eyes I saw in my head on the rare occasion I let my mind wander and it went there, to the glory days tarnished with betrayal.

Eyes that I remembered trusting as he looked down at me and moved inside me. The first man I took and when I did I was sure he'd be the last.

He was not.

Not by a long shot.

"Were they going for the eye?" I asked, dipping my head toward his, my eyes on the scar on his cheekbone and I noted his entire body gave a weird jolt.

Then he answered, "Brain but their path was through the eye."

My gaze moved from his scar to his. "You jerked."

"I like my brain as it is."

"Good call," I noted.

He began to push from the wall. "Sylvie –"

Oh no. I didn't know why he was here. What I did know was that we were not going to do this.

The time to do this was sixteen years ago.

The time we would never fucking do this was now.

I began to move around the bed. "Got a cat to feed, a shower to take and shit to do. What I don't got is time to talk."

Especially not with you, I finished but only in my head.

"Sebring's meeting is at two and before that, we gotta talk."

Fuck.

Fuck!

I stopped dead and looked at him. "What?"

I asked the question even though I knew the answer.

Last night, Knight had told Rhash and me he'd heard rumblings of trouble. A takeover.

The work I did for Knight was rarely trouble. It was legwork, checks on clients and girls. Providing security, presence, escorting girls to and from appointments. Sometimes stuff went down in his club and he needed a team to take care of. Shit happened and did, if someone was stupid enough to try it or thought they could pay or bully the girls into keeping their mouths shut after they'd misused them. But usually work for Knight was a mundane payday.

The meeting that included the boys had mostly been Knight wanting to know how the shit with Serena got so fucked. Live had reported he'd done the routine and didn't cut corners. Knight had interrogated the rest of the team about all new clients and their background checks.

After that, he'd dismissed everyone but Rhash and me and shared that he had a gut feeling Serena was the beginning. He'd had someone come to him on the hush-hush saying they were hearing something was brewing. An old nemesis was back in town, Knight had fucked him over years ago and he was setting up to fuck back. Knight's

brother was also back in town and although he seemed to be towing the family line, they'd had issues and Nick, Knight's brother, used to work for Knight. He knew the operation and Knight wouldn't put it past him to sell information.

Knight was also concerned about a mole.

That meant, he'd told us, he'd brought in outside talent. Someone objective. Someone not on the team.

Someone Knight wanted me to partner with to investigate Knight's operation and assess the danger, inside and out, and neutralize it if we found something while Rhash kept an eye on business.

The outside talent Knight brought in was Tucker Creed.

"Talked with Sebring after your meeting earlier," he stated, confirming what I knew. "He told me he told you. After that, I shared with him we had history and I was gonna have a word with you 'cause if we're gonna work together, we need to talk about that history."

I stared at him, my brain moving fast.

I did what I did for Knight Sebring because I knew how it felt, to spread your legs for someone because you were forced to take him for whatever reason forcing you to do it. I had no Knight Sebring to protect me from his bullshit, his demands, his temper. I had no Rhash or Live or Tiny to swoop in and teach him a lesson on one of the numerous occasions he did something I did not like.

There was no denying Knight and his boys operated outside the bounds of law.

In my mind, there was also no denying what they did was providing a needed service.

Until I learned the hard way how to protect myself, I would have done anything for the kind of protection they provided the girls.

Now I provided that protection. I got paid for it. I broke the law to do it. I conspired to break the law, making it safe for them to do it. And I did not give one fuck.

This meant, if there was some asshole out there that wanted to take over Knight's operation, I had to do what I had to do to stop it.

Even take a partner.

I was down with that.

Until now.

"We're not working together," I told him, moving out of the room and feeling him following me.

"He considered assigning this to you but you're tight with his team, might not be able to be objective but more, Sebring doesn't want you out there on your own," Creed said to my back.

"He's protective. He'll get over it," I said to the bathroom as I walked into it.

I went right to my toothbrush.

Creed stopped in the doorway and leaned a shoulder against the jamb.

“Sebring strikes me as a man who likes things to go the way he wants ‘em to go,” Creed noted and he was not wrong.

“I’ll have a chat with him,” I muttered to the basin as I grabbed my toothbrush and turned on the faucet.

His voice changed, it was deep, there was roughness to it with an edge of smooth and that was also a change. It had been deep and smooth back in the day. Now that hint of rough said he smoked. It said he drank. It said he lived as jagged as his voice.

But when it came at me just then, there was a vein of soft that brought back the raw.

“Sylvie, we need to —”

I turned my head to him, toothpaste in hand and cut him off to declare, “I don’t do partners.”

“You did,” he returned immediately, his eyes watching me closely. “But he died.”

That sent raw through me again for two reasons.

One, because he was right. My partner died and he did it leaving a wife, a kid and one on the way. Stupid fuck enlisted. Enlisted when we were at fucking *war*. “Gonna do my bit,” he said. Fucking fucker got out of the Marines, set up a life where there was a possibility, not a probability, that people would shoot at him and then he went *back* to the probability, re-enlisting and got himself shot dead.

The other reason was because I knew Creed had checked me out and I didn’t like that. I didn’t like him knowing anything about me. I figured, Knight hired him, he was good at what he did.

So he knew.

Everything.

I turned back to the mirror and loaded up my toothbrush. “Yeah, I did. He died. Learned that lesson. Now I don’t do partners.”

“This shit is what Knight thinks it is, the ride’s gonna be bumpy. You need someone at your back,” he replied.

Maybe but it sure as hell would not be him.

Before shoving the toothbrush in my mouth, my eyes went to the mirror and I returned, “Need it, I got Knight or Rhash,” then I started brushing.

Creed appeared in the mirror behind me and my eyes went up to his in the mirror.

“He might have a mole. As far as his team’s concerned, it’s business as usual for both of them,” he told me something Knight explained last night. “Banks nor Sebring are available to you.”

I shrugged.

“Sylvie, I’ve already been workin’ this job a month. I know that team better than you do.”

That pissed me off enough to pull the brush out, spit out foam then catch his eyes in the mirror again. “No fucking way. You may think you do and they may have secrets they haven’t shared but no amount of digging you could do in a month tells you more than what I know working side by side with those guys for years. You’ve lived the life, Creed, it’s written all over you. You know that. You had something on one of them, Knight would already have that intel. So you don’t have shit.” After delivering that, I shoved the brush back in and kept at my teeth.

“You’re right,” he confirmed. “That doesn’t mean there isn’t something to get.”

I shrugged again.

“You know what hangs in the balance,” he stated and I held his eyes.

I knew but he told me anyway.

“Scenario one, Knight keeps business open and another girl gets it worse than Serena last night. He keeps it open, that shit escalates and girls get hurt. Scenario two, he shuts it down. Okay for him but if he can’t neutralize the threat in a timely manner that means, first, he’s gotta let boys go. He doesn’t need a team that big when there’s no girls to look after. Second, the girls are fucked. They got no jobs, they got no money then they look for alternate ways to get paid without a man or a five foot two powerhouse at their back. You know Sebring. He won’t put them in danger. He’ll shut down. That club turns over a mint, he’ll survive. Those girls won’t.”

I stopped brushing, spit, rinsed and looked back to his eyes in the mirror as I shoved my brush in the holder. “So I’ll find the mole, if there is one, and I’ll track down the trouble and put it out of commission. You’ve been looking into me, Creed. You know what I’m capable of. This assignment is not outside my skill level.”

“Two working together is safer and shuts this shit down faster than one,” he shot back.

Unfortunately, this was true.

“Then I know a couple guys who I can work with,” I returned. “They’re local. They can hit the ground running. I’ll talk with Knight about them.”

“Again, I’ve had the job a month. I don’t have to hit the ground running, Sylvie. Right now, it’s you who’s catching up.”

Fuck.

Fuck!

Exactly how was this happening?

Exactly how in *the fuck* was I standing in my bathroom, brushing my teeth, Tucker Fucking Creed at my back after I hadn’t seen him for sixteen *fucking* years, talking to

me about partnering on a job with him and not groveling or writhing in pain after I kicked his ass?

I knew how.

Because that was then but that was over and this was now.

This was now.

That was over.

“Fine,” I agreed and watched a weird flare in his eyes but I ignored that, turned to face him and kept talking. “Got shit to do. We’ll meet with Knight, after, you’ll catch me up.”

“No, now we gotta get shit outta the way so, as we work, it doesn’t get *in* the way.”

“No shit to get out of the way,” I replied and moved out from in front of him and deeper into the bathroom.

This got me another eye flare which wasn’t weird. It was annoyed.

“Sylvie —”

I shook my head. “I don’t just work for Knight, you know. I got things I gotta get done. It’s late. I don’t have a lot of time. You wanna help out, you can feed Gun on your way out.”

“I ride along on your shit, we talk before the meeting which means after we can get down to it.”

This was, for anyone other than Tucker Creed, an excellent suggestion.

Since it was Tucker Creed, I shook my head. “Not gonna happen. I work alone.” He opened his mouth to speak so I finished quickly, “Except for this gig for Knight, I work alone.”

He didn’t move.

I did, to put my hands to the hem of my shirt and I did this as I asked, “You not moving, does that mean you aren’t gonna help out and feed my cat?”

“I know,” he whispered and for the first time in a long time I had to hold back a flinch.

But I managed it and kept the mask in place.

“No shit?” I asked.

“We need to talk, Sylvie.” He leaned forward an inch. “He told me —”

Oh no.

Fuck no.

I whipped my shirt off and tossed it aside. Creed stopped speaking abruptly and his eyes dropped to my torso as my hands moved to my belt.

“Learn this about me, partner, and I suggest you do it now,” I told him. “I do not go back. Eyes ahead. Feet moving forward. I don’t ever fucking go back. I don’t talk about it. I don’t think about it.” I undid the button on my jeans and pulled the zip

down. “You were in my life a long time ago. I’ve lived two full lifetimes since then, each entirely different. I like the one I’m in now. I’m not going back to the ones before. I didn’t like them as much.”

His eyes shot back to mine and his lips whispered, “Sylvie —”

It was my turn to lean in an inch. “Deal breaker. You’re all fired up to discuss that shit, this is done. I’ll tell Knight to find you another partner. He’ll understand. We’re tight. He’ll give me that and not one thing will change between us. You keep your mouth shut about that shit, eyes forward, feet moving ahead, mind on the job, we’ll be fine.”

His gaze moved over my face and it took its time.

Then he said quietly, “You’re serious.”

“Serious as shit,” I replied immediately then pulled down my jeans.

I stepped out of them and straightened, hands to my panties.

“You gonna hang while I shower?” I asked on a tilt of my head.

His eyes were locked to mine. “I’m ride-along with you,” he declared.

“Man, I work alone.”

“Not anymore.”

I took my fingers out of the waistband of my panties and planted my hands on my hips. “Deal is, Knight’s job and only Knight’s job.”

“Deal is, we’re partners. We learn to work together so we don’t get dead workin’ together. That means we take every opportunity to work together. Sebring’s footin’ the bill and you got yourself extra hands, eyes and brains on your other jobs that have shit to do with him. Honest to God, you gonna turn your back on that?”

“Yes,” I returned instantly.

“Then that tells me that hard shell with sharp edges you grew isn’t about life but about protecting yourself,” he shot back. “Which means you won’t let me in because of the shit we share. That means it’s between us. And that means, we need to take each other’s back, with that shit between us, we’re fucked. And that... *partner*, means, if that shit’s between us, you aren’t lookin’ forward. That’s bullshit. You got your eyes trained way the fuck back.”

Fucking fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I held his gaze.

Then I told him, “Full can. Wet food. Cat bowls in the cupboard by the stove. She likes a clean one every day. And, by the way, I get out of the shower, before we hit the road, toast would be good. Don’t skimp on the butter and ignore the grape jelly. The kids eat that. I like orange marmalade and don’t skimp on that either.”

His head jerked to the side. “The kids?”

“Don’t fuck with me, partner, you know exactly who I’m talking about.”

“Adam, Leslie and Theo. Neighbor’s kids,” he stated immediately. “Then there’s Josh and Dora, your dead partner’s kids.”

Oh yeah. He’d looked into me but he was still fishing.

I didn’t know what to make of that so I didn’t make anything of it.

“You get more visitors than the Pope,” he remarked.

Yeah, he’d looked into me.

My eyes went down to see Gun slink into the room, rubbing her fluffy side against Creed’s jeans-covered ankle.

Damn cat. Figured. She only liked me and Adam and now, apparently, Creed. She didn’t give the side-rub to anyone she didn’t like.

Shit.

I got rid of this asshole, me and my cat were having a chat.

I looked back up at Creed.

“Cat’s hungry,” I reminded him then I put my hands in my panties and yanked them down.

By the time I straightened, Creed was gone and I just caught Gun’s hind end rounding the door.

I didn’t bother closing the bathroom door to take my shower. He’d seen it before. It’d been years but he’d seen it. So had a number of other men.

Anyway, if he had a mind to my privacy, he’d keep well away and I needed that right about then.

Before I stepped in, I shouted, “Don’t forget the coffee! Strong!”

“Strong!” Tucker *Fucking* Creed shouted back.

Tucker *Fucking* Creed making coffee in my kitchen.

Jesus.

I got in the shower and kept it buried where it should be. No tequila. No bourbon. Nothing would work it out.

The job would get done then we would be done.

Then he would be gone and I would move on.

Again.

* * * * *

We stood in my front yard, me in a tight, ribbed, grass green tank, low rider jeans, wide brown belt, gun at the back and brown cowboy boots with a piece of toast in one hand, a travel mug of coffee in the other, Creed carrying another one of my mugs.

My mug in Creed’s long-fingered, veined hand with the stark, pale nicks of scars around his knuckles. Strong hands. Capable hands. Experienced hands.

Christ.

“Uh... no,” I told him. “I drive. You ride.”

“No offense, Sylvie, but you drive like a lunatic and the interior of your car was made for people like you, small who like to make a lot of noise. I’m not folding into that death trap. I drive. You ride.”

I stared at him. “That is not gonna happen.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Not me that’s got shit to do,” he reminded me.

Fuck!

“Seein’ as you’re part Grandpa, I’ll check my foot,” I allowed.

“And you’ll stop at stop signs.”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“That would be, come to a complete halt.”

Fuck!

“God granted me peripheral vision, Creed. I can see someone coming. I’ll slow and roll through like normal. You’ll be fine.”

“Jesus, Sylvie, the slow and roll doesn’t work. A stop sign is put up for a reason.”

I cocked my head to the side and narrowed my eyes. “When did you get a stick planted up your ass?”

He cocked his head to the side and regarded me closely. “We talkin’ about our pasts now?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

“Okay, I’ll stop at stop signs,” I gave in.

“And you won’t turn on red if there’s a sign that says you can’t turn on red,” he kept pushing.

He *so totally* followed me.

Often.

Shit.

My stare turned to a glare, I bit off a huge chunk of buttery, marmalade coated toast and said sharply through it, “Fine.”

“Speed limit, as in, you’ll go the.”

I chewed, swallowed and asked through slitted eyes, “Jesus, *are* you a Grandpa?”

“Daughter’s twelve, son’s ten so no, not yet, thank fuck.”

I didn’t even blink. It cost me but I didn’t even blink.

Fuck, he had kids.

Fuck, that killed.

“Ten miles over,” I offered.

“Five miles,” he countered.

“Seven.”

He grinned and I didn't blink again but that killed too. With me, he used to grin a lot, smile a lot, laugh a lot. Even so, each one was precious. He'd been beautiful. All of those transformed his features so he was magnificent.

Age and scars hadn't changed that. Not even a little bit. He still had great, even, strong white teeth. Fantastic lips. Strong, expressive features.

Magnificent.

"Deal," he grunted and moved to my girl.

I moved to her too and juggled my breakfast (even though it was past noon) in order to get in. With the coffee between my thighs and the toast between my teeth, I started her up and pulled out maybe a *hair* faster than was needed.

That said, that was how I usually pulled out.

"Jesus," Creed muttered.

I bit back a smile, changed gears, shot forward on a screech of tires then took a bite out of my toast and drove one handed.

"Right, catch me up," I ordered.

"You first," he replied.

I glanced to the side.

Shit, Tucker Creed was sitting beside me in my car.

Shit!

I buried that and asked, "Me first, what?"

"You first. I'm ride-along, maybe it would be good to know what I'm ridin' into."

"Hit The Retreat. Check in at the office. If there's time, check in on Serena. After that, Knight," I told him.

"You still on The Retreat job?" he asked, exposing just how much he'd looked into me which meant just how often he'd followed me.

I'd never tagged a tail.

Damn.

"Man, I'm *always* on The Retreat job," I informed him. "Every third asshole who cheats on his wife takes his bitch to The Retreat. My ass is in the parking lot there so often, management suggested they paint my name in a parking spot so it'll be reserved."

"Not good for business, a PI's name in a parking spot," Creed muttered.

"That's why I declined. That's me, looking out for the local adult resort."

I heard his chuckle and it was different than I remembered too. Not just deep and smooth, the rough was in it. It made it sexier. A lot fucking sexier.

Shit.

"You ever been there?" he asked.

"Where?" I asked back.

"The Retreat," he answered.

“Partner, were you talking in your sleep thirty seconds ago?”

“I meant as a client, not an investigator.”

Oh yeah, I had. Rubber mattresses. Fake silk sheets. Velvet comforters. Mirrors on the ceiling. Hot tubs in every room. “Environment chambers” where you could fuck in a gentle rain, breeze or both. Swings. Love machines. Steam rooms. Twelve channels of porn. Rooms available at matinee rates.

I’d *so totally* been there.

“So we *are* talking about our pasts?” I asked and he was silent. “Advice,” I went on. “You feel like an adventure, call the top in the environment chamber. Seems like it’d be awesome but that water hitting your face all the time is distracting.”

That got more silence, which worked for me because it meant he shut up.

It stopped working for me when it went on a long time. He had a month of a possible hostile takeover of Knight’s business to catch me up on and he couldn’t do it in sign language when my eyes were on the road. This was because I couldn’t see his hands and I didn’t know sign language.

I glanced his way again, mouth open to say something then I glanced straight ahead and shut my mouth.

I did this because his stubbled jaw was tight and his head was turned slightly to look out the side window.

Unhappy thoughts. Unhappy thoughts I did not give one shit about.

“Rule,” I said quietly into the car. “You don’t wanna know, don’t ask.”

“Deal,” he muttered immediately and that killed too.

I knew why. For some reason, it fucked him up that I’d had experience of The Retreat. Why this would be, I did not know. *He* disappeared on *me* and he’d done it nearly sixteen freaking years ago. He couldn’t think I’d been holding out, pining for him all that time. He’d looked into me, he knew I didn’t. At first, I didn’t have a choice. Then, I did and I sure as fuck took advantage of it.

I wasn’t going to think about that either.

“You wanna fill me in on what you’ve learned for the last month?” I asked as I kept moving us toward The Retreat.

“Yeah,” Creed answered. “You know Drake Nair?”

“Yup,” I replied.

“You know who he is to Knight?”

“Been in Denver awhile, Creed, and almost all that time, I’ve known Knight.”

“So you know Knight stole his stable *and* his club right out from under him.”

“Yup,” I repeated.

“And you know he’s back in town.”

“Didn’t until last night but yeah, Knight filled Rhash and me in. Rhash already knew. He flew under my radar. Nair’s half asshole, half moron and since most people

can't think very well with their ass, even though they try, he's not much of a threat so can't say I pay a lot of attention to him."

"Asshole with money gets other people to think for him," Creed replied as I took a turn onto Colfax.

"This is true," I muttered before switching gears and shoving the last bite of toast in my mouth.

"Been watchin', Nick hasn't got near him. Nick doesn't keep good company, though. He's not doin' blow all the time now but he doesn't have great friends. Been too busy and, without a partner, only had so much time, couldn't make a connection. That doesn't mean the connection between Nick and Nair isn't there."

"Right," I said through a full mouth then finished chewing and swallowing before I asked, "Now tell me what else has kept you busy."

"Makin' sure you and Rhashan Banks are clean."

My head whipped to the side and I stared two full seconds before I looked back at the road feeling like I'd been punched in the gut.

I thought he'd looked into me because that was what I'd do. I had a prospective partner pinned to me, I'd know him inside and out before I got anywhere near the job.

I didn't think for one second Knight set him on me.

Or Rhash.

"Knight set you on Rhash and me?"

"Knight said it was a waste of time. *I* investigated you and Rhashan. Shit like this, no stone unturned. He's blinded by history and loyalty. He hired me because I'm not."

"Well, just to confirm," my voice was barbed, "neither of us would fuck Knight. Ever."

"Any way that could be?" he asked and I glanced at him again before looking at the road.

"Don't wanna know, partner, don't ask," I said quietly and felt his eyes on me.

"This shit, I *need* to know. He's deep with his woman. You two got history I haven't learned, affects everything, including us working together. You two hook up?"

"No," I replied.

"Ever?" he asked.

"No," I repeated.

"Wanted it?" he pushed. "Either one of you."

"Yeah, absolutely. We discussed it, found we weren't compatible but that was years ago, one night we both had too much to drink. The other part of that

incompatibility is that, you fuck up what we got with sex, it'll never be the same and what we got is worth *never* fucking up. You with me?"

"Yeah," he muttered.

"Then I'll make sure you're totally with me. I'm tight with Anya too. We're solid. She has no reason to know Knight and I even discussed that shit, even one night when we were getting hammered and letting it all hang out. She doesn't need that thought in her head. He's not deep with her, Creed, she's his life. Their daughter is his life. His family is the most precious thing to him, a man who's got everything so he's also got a lot to choose from and his two girls are his choice. Do not fuck that and do not put me in the position where I'm even a *little* responsible for fucking that."

"She the jealous type?" he asked.

"Don't know and seriously do not want to find out. There's even the barest possibility of losing that, Knight will lose me. I got two people who mean something to me, Creed, and he's one of them. You take half of my world away from me, for sixteen years, you were a memory for me and that's what I'll make you for your kids too, except you'll never stroll back into their bedrooms while they're sleeping. You still with me?"

He was silent a beat before, "Two people in your life who mean something to you?"

"Yeah."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Banks?"

"He's not the other one. We're tight but not that tight." He was silent again and this lasted more than a beat so I prompted, "Did you get me?"

"I got you, Sylvie," he answered quietly.

I flipped the left turn signal on, slowed, stopped, waiting for my opening and pulled into the parking lot of The Retreat. I found my spot and reversed expertly in it. I switched off the ignition then I reached behind Creed's seat to grab my camera. I rested it on my thigh, grabbed my coffee, threw back a slug, returned it then yanked out my cell, found the number and hit go.

It rang twice in my ear before I heard, "You're killin' me."

I grinned into the phone as I stared at the building. "C'mon, buddy, what would you do without my incentives?"

"They find out I'm giving you info, they'll find other places for their rendezvous."

"There are no other places in Denver who rent for an afternoon and have rubber mattresses, Clyde," I reminded him then continued. "Looking for a guy, five ten, salt and pepper, glasses, paunch, suit, drives a Chevy mini-van."

"No mini-van," Clyde stated.

“He been in before?”

“Fuck,” Clyde muttered.

He had.

“Wednesday’s his day, yeah?” I asked.

“Fuck,” Clyde muttered.

“Crisp bill, Clyde.”

“They usually get here around one.”

I looked at my watch. Five minutes.

“Right,” I said into the phone. “I’ll be in the office with your money after they check in and get to their room.”

“Fuck. You’re killin’ me.” Clyde was still muttering.

“They ever quit coming?” I asked.

He didn’t answer my question because they didn’t. They always kept coming in more ways than one.

Instead, he said, “See you in ten minutes.”

I grinned again and flipped my phone shut.

“Clyde the day clerk?” Creed asked as I shoved my phone back in my back pocket, grabbed my coffee and the camera. I took a sip of it as I switched the camera on.

“Yup,” I answered as I shoved the coffee back between my thighs then I looked to him. “So, the last month, Drake Nair on radar but nothing, Nick Sebring on radar but nothing and you ascertained that Rhash and I would never fuck Knight. You get anything else?”

“Lively did the full check on your girl’s client last night,” he replied. “I followed him through it even though he didn’t know it. When you hit that house last night, I was as surprised to see the for sale sign in the yard as you were.”

This was good to know.

“So Live isn’t falling down on the job,” I surmised.

“That’s still up for debate. I just know none of the team has deposited anything unusual in their accounts. They’ve also not purchased anything unusual, high ticket items or even medium range toys. Half-assed tails, they aren’t off the beaten path or normal routines. Phone records show nothin’ either. So if there’s a mole, he’s playin’ it smart and that means we dig deep.”

“There’s no mole,” I told him firmly.

“We still gotta look, Sylvie,” he returned, his eyes holding mine.

“Yeah, and that sucks for me because these are my boys. If they ever find out I did this shit, I’m a rat. They’ll get over it, the loyalty they have to Knight but it’ll take a while and I may never have their trust like I’ve got it now.”

“But you’ll do that for Knight.”

I nodded. “I’ll do it for Knight.”

He kept his eyes locked with mine as he said softly, "And the girls."

I nodded again and didn't speak softly when I agreed, "And the girls."

He didn't look away and he didn't speak for long moments. I knew what he was thinking as he looked at me.

He knew why I'd risk a rap sheet for those girls.

Then he spoke.

"New deal."

I rolled my eyes and when I stopped rolling them, I stated, "Jesus, partner, I can't keep up."

He didn't reply to my comment.

Instead, he said, "I work the team. You work Nick and Nair."

I didn't suck in breath but I held it because that was cool. Way cool.

Creed kept talking. "We stay tight, meet often, talk often, debrief and you need me, I'm there. I need you, you come when I call. But I look into the boys. That way, you're not a rat. If they find out you worked this, they'll find out you didn't work them. Even if I turn up nothin', I'll undoubtedly turn up somethin'. Everyone has secrets. I uncover them and they don't pertain to this investigation, you're none the wiser. They haven't shared with you, when this is over, they'll know you *don't* know. They can trust you got nothin' on them. They can trust you didn't turn traitor. Keeps you solid with the team."

Yeah, that was cool and that was huge because it stated firmly *he* was cool. He got it. He got the team. He got the importance of the team. And he got me.

"Deal," I whispered.

His eyes moved over my face then over my shoulder and he muttered, "Mini-van."

I looked over my shoulder and watched the mini-van drive into the lot and past my car. It parked two spots down. My target got out the driver's side door as a Nissan sedan drove in and passed my 'Vette to park just beyond the mini-van. My target waited for his piece and, thinking quickly, I moved my travel mug to the floor.

When they began walking toward reception, they'd have to walk in front of my car.

This meant they might see us and wonder why we were sitting in the car and not going at it on a rubber mattress covered in fake silk sheets, all this accessible only feet away.

Therefore, my hand shot out tagging Creed around the neck. I angled across the emergency brake, pulling him sharply to me and crushed my mouth to his.

One second elapsed before two strong arms curled around me, tightened and hauled me across the brake, twisting me so my back was to his hard thighs and Creed hunched over me, his mouth pressing hard against mine. One of my arms angled

across his back, the fingers of my other hand drove into his hair and curled, fisting the thick softness in my hand.

Ten more seconds elapsed and my heart was thundering in my chest so hard I could feel it in my throat when his head came up.

I forced myself to recover quickly and quip, "Way to sell it, partner."

He grinned down at me, my heart squeezed at seeing it so damned close and he replied on a murmur, "Gonna do it, go big."

"We share that motto," I informed him.

"Good to know," he returned.

"I gotta position. Got photos to take," I reminded him seeing as he wasn't letting me go.

"New plan. You go in and pay off Clyde. I'll take the camera, get in the room and get your client enough evidence to nail his balls to the wall. When I'm done, I'll meet you at reception."

"I'm all for nailing a lying, cheating asshole's balls to the wall but usually shots of them entering the room work."

"Shots of him entering something else would work better."

I couldn't argue with that.

But I could argue something else. "Man, you're a mountain. No way you're gonna get in one of those rooms and not be seen."

"Trust me."

It was the wrong thing to say. Absolutely, one hundred percent. He knew it and I knew it. We both knew the other knew it because both our bodies tensed so tight, I could feel with the slightest movement my tendons would snap and I sensed the same with him.

Still, I buried it. We had to work together. We had to partner up. Which meant I had to trust him.

This sucked but it was my experience that a lot of shit in life sucked. This was just the most recent.

So I forced myself to relax and said, "Right. Meet you in reception."

He lifted up, taking me with him and twisting me in my seat. I retrieved the camera that fell to the floor at my feet as well as my travel mug. I handed him the camera and avoided his eyes trying not to look like I was avoiding his eyes.

He angled out his side.

I angled out mine.

He moved right.

I moved left toward reception.

Clyde rolled his eyes when I entered.

“Please, a hundred dollars for a two minute phone call?” I asked as I walked toward the reception desk. “I am not a pain in your ass.”

“No, you’re killin’ me,” he returned.

“No, I’m sending your kids to college,” I retorted, pulling out my money clip and handing him the bill.

He snatched it out of my hand and it disappeared in a blink.

Bullshit moaning weasel.

My eyes went to the TV sitting angled toward him at the end of the reception desk. I leaned into my forearms on the desk and checked it out.

“Classic porn,” I muttered. “Odd choice.”

“Seen all the others, like, a gazillion times,” Clyde muttered back and I grinned.

I had no doubt.

“We havin’ a party?” Clyde asked because I usually paid him off then took off and I looked from the porn to him.

He was balding and not liking it, thus growing a line of hair way too long in order to do the comb-over, a tactic that men should abandon. I didn’t know when they’d get that bald was beautiful all you had to do was have the balls to carry it off.

Clyde clearly didn’t have those kinds of balls. Then again, he was slender, narrow-shouldered, had an unfortunately shaped nose with a hook at the end *and* a bump on the ridge and squirrely eyes. Thus, just physically, there were a myriad of reasons he lacked confidence. Not physically, he was a whiner, not a good trait in anyone, man or woman.

It was my experience anyone could work anything. A man or woman could be what convention said was ugly or overweight and if they held their shoulders straight, looked you in the eye and had a ready, genuine smile, that shit melted away. The light shone from within and if you had the balls to shine it, all anyone would see was beauty.

Alas, people did not get this and Clyde was one of those people.

“Waiting for my partner,” I answered and his brows shot up.

“You got a partner?” he asked.

“Yup,” I replied.

“Since when?”

“Since a couple of hours ago.”

“I give it a week,” he muttered, his eyes sliding back to the TV.

I hoped it would last a day. I worried it would last a month.

I moved to a chair, sat my ass in it, lifted my boots up to rest crossed at the ankles on the coffee table scattered with Retreat brochures and settled in. I killed time by calling Serena to make sure she was okay (she was, kind of). Calling Knight and leaving a message that I’d connected with Creed and we were on the job. And last,

calling Live to check in to make certain he wasn't beating himself up too much. The last call lasted a while because he was beating himself up too much and it took some time and an arsenal of my teasing to get him to feel better.

I'd barely flipped the phone shut on Live when I heard a tap on the window and I looked there to see Creed outside, crooking a finger at me.

"The summons," I said to Clyde. "Gotta go."

"Don't come back now, ya hear?" Clyde returned and it was my turn to roll my eyes since he was full of it. Sure, if his bosses found out he was doing what he was doing, he was shit out of luck *and* a job. He was also a survivor so his bosses would never learn and he averaged a hundred extra dollars a week for doing nothing so he'd keep doing it. Unfortunately, he'd also keep bitching about it.

I didn't bother with a wave or retort as I walked out and stopped on the sidewalk next to Creed.

"Well?" I asked.

His answer was to turn the camera's back to me with an image on it.

I leaned in and checked it out.

"Whoa, soccer dad likes pony play," I murmured. "Ride 'em cowboy." I heard Creed's chuckle and looked up at him. "How'd you get in?" I asked.

"They had other things on their mind and the TV blaring loud. Got in through the bathroom window," he answered and I felt my eyes get big.

"Shit, man, those are high *and* tight."

"Upper body strength and determination go a long way," he replied.

He was not wrong about that and visibly had the former while the latter was demonstrated on the camera.

"Right on," I stated, lifting up my hand in an invitation for a high five.

He stared at my hand and didn't move.

"Seriously?" I asked. "You gonna leave me hanging?"

His sky blue eyes came to mine and again I held my breath as his hand moved. He gave me a high five but when his big hand clapped against mine, it stayed there. His fingers shoved through, linking with mine, bringing our hands down. Then he shifted them so we were palm to palm, fingers curled around the sides. This he took straight into another shift where we had our fingers curled together from tips to knuckles in our palms. He then used my hand to pump our arms twice so hard, I was forced to take a step into him.

Then he let me go.

I forced air in my lungs.

Then I joked, "I'm learning good things about you, partner. Jive handshake master. I like it."

He shook his head grinning, tossed the camera in the air, my hands shot out to catch it so it wouldn't fall and, seeing as I was engaged in this endeavor, he had the chance to start sauntering toward my girl.

I took a moment to watch mostly because his shirt hung really good from his shoulders. It was untucked so it mostly covered his ass but his movement hinted at a fine one. And I was coming to the conclusion I seriously liked his boots.

Once I processed this information, I followed him.

* * * * *

I stood at the big one-way window in Knight's office that faced down to Knight's now empty nightclub and watched Creed stroll across the vast space toward the front door.

The meeting was done. Rhash met Creed. Creed gave his brief. We discussed our plans and now Rhash was gone, Creed was off to work the boys and I was going to spend the rest of the afternoon finding and surveilling Nick Sebring.

I felt Knight get close but I didn't take my eyes from the window as I watched Creed walk out the front door.

"It's him," Knight murmured.

"It's him," I confirmed.

"Fuck, babe, you never shared his name. I had no fuckin' clue. I did, that contract would not have been signed."

I looked up at him. He was scary handsome in all the ways those two words could communicate. That was, he was incredibly good-looking, tall, dark-haired, striking blue eyes that were a deeper and more vivid blue than Creed's but they were no less effective. His features were not beautiful, they were aggressively masculine. He was also scary because he just *was* aggressively masculine in a way that no woman or man could mistake. Just like with Creed, with one look at Knight, you knew you did not play with him, you did not mess with him. If you couldn't deal with all that was him, you avoided him.

It was hot. Luckily, since we'd made our decision that drunken night years ago and he was in way deep with his woman, he was like a brother to me, so his hot didn't affect me, our relationship or the job I did for him other than the inescapable fact I couldn't mistake it.

"It's cool," I assured him. "We're cool. We'll get this done. No worries."

His eyes moved over my face as his lips muttered, "Why don't I believe that?"

"Knight, you know me. I'm about the job. No joke, we'll get this done."

Finally, his gaze locked with mine. "I want this job done, you know that. What I don't want, in gettin' that, is you shredded in the process."

Seriously, I loved Knight Sebring.

"I'm good," I said softly.

Knight studied me again before nodding and saying, “Word is he’s the best.”

I found this interesting.

“We got the best in Denver so I’m surprised you didn’t go to Nightingale Investigations,” I remarked.

“Who do you think told me they heard that shit on the street?” Knight asked and I felt my brows go up.

“Lee Nightingale?” I asked back.

“Yeah but he’s covered in work. He recommended Hawk Delgado but I had a sit down with him. Delgado isn’t about finesse like Nightingale can be so we decided it wouldn’t work. It was Delgado who recommended Creed.”

Liam “Lee” Nightingale of Nightingale Investigations was a badass private investigator-slash-bounty hunter-slash-anything goes man with a team of badasses to back him up. He’d contracted with me and I’d worked jobs with them when he needed a woman. I liked him, respected him and his team. They took pretty much any job that came along as long as the client could pay the hefty invoice which meant the lawfulness of their activities was a bit vague. That said, they had close ties with law enforcement so it was a helluva lot less vague than Knight’s.

Cabe “Hawk” Delgado, on the other hand, was a badass commando with a team of badasses to back him up. His jobs were usually more covert, intense and often out of town. I’d done one job with him and his team in town and that shit was extreme. It was kickass fun but it was extreme. Since most of his work was out of town, I didn’t have a lock on the looseness of his morals.

In movie terms, Lee Nightingale was James Bond except more kickass and super cool. He didn’t bother messing with gadgets when he could just shoot someone. He was also a Broncos fan and, I had a feeling, when he had the time, James Bond watched rugby.

Hawk Delgado was John Rambo without exceptions notwithstanding the headband.

What I knew about both of them was, regardless of what they thought about his business, they were smart enough not to make an enemy of Knight Sebring and he returned the favor. There was mutual respect but no discussion about Knight’s operations. I never asked how they felt but then again, even if I did, they’d never tell.

My brows stayed up. “Hawk Delgado knows Creed?”

Knight nodded.

“You know their connection?” I asked.

“Worked jobs together.”

“Those would be?” I pushed.

“They would be for you to ask Creed, Sylvie,” he stated. “You got it in you to put that shit behind you, you gotta get to know your partner. I’ll tell you this, it’s fucked

how shit works but he's you except male and maybe a little scarier. The shingle says PI. The word says his resume has a lot of blank spots and his skill set is varied. He doesn't take the job if he doesn't believe in the mission and like or respect who he's workin' for." Knight grinned. "But he charges a fuckuva lot more than you do."

My eyes went back to the window to take in the empty club and I muttered, "He's got kids to support."

Knight was silent.

I let this stretch then threw him a grin and started toward the door, saying, "Got shit to do."

I had my hand on the handle when Knight called my name and I turned back.

"You need to bail, do it," he stated. "You're still mine, I'm still yours. Nothin', woman, not this shit, not you needin' to protect yourself from history in your face, not anything comes between you and me."

That meant the world but he knew it so I didn't have to say it.

I jerked up my chin but assured him again, "I'm looking forward. It's cool, Knight, trust me."

"You may be lookin' forward, babe, but that direction right now means most of what you see is history. You can't deal, you can't. Understood and it's all good."

Seriously, I fucking loved this guy.

Still, I griped, "Jeez, man, it was sixteen years ago. I'm totally over it."

"Anya left me or I lost her, I'd never get over it so don't bullshit me," he shot back. "There's only one, we both know it, and Tucker Creed was your one. So you aren't over it. That doesn't mean you can't cope. But you *won't* cope if you deny that somewhere inside you can't."

It kinda sucked he was hot, rich, cool *and* smart.

"Heartfelt, badass lecture over?" I asked and his lips twitched.

"Yeah."

"Terrific. Got shit to do," I muttered and threw open the door.

"Sylvie," he called and I whirled on a snapped, "*What?*"

"Bottom of my soul," he whispered across the room, eyes locked to mine.

I sucked in breath through my nose before I whispered back, "Bottom of mine."

Then, before he could *really* get to me, I took off.

Chapter Four

Orange Sherbet Push-Ups

A cold, dark night in the hills of Kentucky, twenty-eight years earlier, Sylvie is six, Creed is eleven...

I stared up in Tucker Creed's pretty blue eyes that I could see were a pretty blue even in the dark.

Everyone in town knew Tucker Creed, his Momma and his dead Daddy. I'd even heard about them, all of them.

When his Daddy died, my Daddy told me the whole town went to his funeral. This was because he was a hero. He had the medals to prove it and *everything*.

My Daddy didn't talk about Tucker's Momma straight to me but I heard him talking about her.

What I heard was him saying, "Winona Creed is a slut, a total fucking whore. If Brand Creed was alive today, he'd beat her bloody and the bitch would deserve it."

I wasn't certain sure what "slut" and "whore" meant but obviously they weren't good. And I wasn't certain sure Brand Creed, Tucker's Daddy, would beat his wife bloody. That didn't seem like what a hero would do at all.

Looking up in eleven year old Tucker Creed's eyes in his cute boy's face, I could believe his Daddy was a hero. He was so tall. So handsome. His eyes so pretty. He looked like a hero too. Now I knew what all the older girls at church were talking about all the times, and there were lots, when they talked about him. He was everything they said.

And more.

"I cannot believe you are SUCH a DICK!"

I heard the words and my body jerked hard, my eyes flying to the side.

Oh no, the words.

The words were here too.

Suddenly, I felt hands over my ears, my eyes flew back and when they did, all I could see was Tucker Creed.

"Fuck you, you fuckin' cunt! Fuck YOU!"

That was a man. A man and a woman saying the words and gosh, I didn't know one of them but it sounded a lot worse than Daddy and my stepmom's.

My eyes slid to the side and I saw them outside the little, rickety house with its gutters falling down. The outside light was on. I could see the paint on the sides of the house and around the windows nicked and chipped. The screen hadn't been switched out of the side door since summer which was crazy and the screen had come loose on one end, hanging down. I could see the house was a whole lot smaller than Daddy's and mine. Then again, everyone in town, even me, knew the Creeds didn't have a lot of money and my Daddy and Granddaddy and all the ones before made certain that everyone knew we did.

I could also see a man and a woman outside in the snow. She was barefoot. He had his jacket on. She was pushing him. He shoved back and she fell on her bottom in the snow.

I gasped.

I just heard the words.

I never saw. Never, never, *ever*.

Tucker Creed jerked me around so his back was to the house and I couldn't see anymore. Then he started walking, fast, making me walk backwards, his hands still covering my ears.

Silently, Bootsie followed us.

He came out like I did. He came out to get away from the words. He came out so he wouldn't *see*.

"You don't like the words," I whispered and watched his head move funny, hard, fast, like a twitch.

"The words?"

"Mean words," I told him as he kept pushing us back.

"Fuck you, motherfucker!" the woman shouted. *"You leave, don't come back!"*

"I time it right, you got a bottle of Jack in you, you'll lie back and spread so fast, my head will spin then you'll spin that tired, used cunt of yours ON my fuckin' head!" the man shouted back.

Tucker kept pushing me into the woods, his hands over my ears, clenching kind of tight but not hurting, his body blocking the view.

Then his mouth came to my ear.

"I don't like the words."

He didn't like the words. Like me.

"I don't either," I whispered in his ear.

"Time it for TWO bottles, asshole. That's what it'll take for you to get me to spread!" she screamed.

Tucker kept pushing us back, asking, "You got the words?"

I nodded, his hands moving with my head. "Daddy and his new wife."

Tucker kept pushing us then he said, "We're in the sun."

I blinked.

"What?" I asked.

"We're in the sun. On the pier. By the lake."

"Get off me, bitch!" the man shouted, I closed my eyes tight but my hands came up, lifting high, I put them over his ears.

"We're in the sun," I agreed, seeing it, feeling it.

We were on the pier on the lake in the sun.

Tucker kept pushing me backwards. “We’ll do cannonballs off the pier. My splashes’ll be bigger than yours.”

I kept my eyes shut, kept moving back with him, feeling Bootsie against my leg following us. I was also feeling the sun, the warmth, seeing the lake in my head, Tucker in swim trunks doing a cannonball off the pier.

“No way, my cannonballs are *the best*,” I told him.

“Not as good as mine,” he said.

“Better,” I replied then kept talking in his ear as he kept moving us back. “I’ll bring a picnic. In a big basket. We’ll swim and we won’t wait thirty minutes after we eat.”

“We won’t wait.”

“We’ll jump in right after we eat. Bologna sandwiches. With cheese. And Ruffles, they have ridges. The cheesy kind. We’ll drink as much Coke as we want. Cans and cans of it. And we’ll eat frozen Snickers bars,” I said.

“Frozen Snickers bars. Sounds good.”

“Takes forever to eat them. It’s great.”

“Bologna sandwiches and frozen Snickers bars,” he agreed.

“Cannonballs and sun and water,” I said. “And nothing else.”

“Nothing else,” he agreed again.

“No one else,” I told him.

“Just us,” he said.

“Just us.” I nodded, moving his hands with my head. “And Bootsie, my doggie.”

“And your dog.”

We were moving up the incline I fell down and it made me think things I didn’t like.

I started to shiver.

“I been gone a long time, Tucker,” I whispered. “Daddy might find out I’m gone. He doesn’t like it when I take my walks.”

“Then let’s get you home, Sylvie.”

He knew my name. I didn’t know how. I didn’t care. I just liked how it sounded when he said it.

We’d made it almost to the top, he let my ears go but took my hand, turned me and kept us walking. I heard him give a low, quiet whistle and Bootsie trotted with us.

“It happen a lot?” he asked in a soft voice.

“Unh-hunh,” I answered and felt his hand squeeze mine.

“Your Momma... does it —?” I stopped talking when his hand squeezed mine again and he answered, “Yeah. Lots.”

I didn’t like that. I didn’t like the words for me. I didn’t like them for him either.

I squeezed his hand back.

He kept walking me toward my house.

"You know where I live?" I asked.

"Everyone knows all about the Bissenettes," he answered in a way that was kind of funny. A kind of funny that didn't feel good.

I didn't say anything.

We kept walking, Bootsie at my side and we did this a long time.

Then Tucker asked, "You go out when it happens?"

"Unh-hunh," I repeated.

"He ever catch you?"

"Yeah," I whispered and the word was shaky but his hand gave mine another squeeze so I knew he knew why my voice was shaky. That squeeze made me feel better.

I saw the fence that surrounded our backyard in front of me and Tucker was leading me to the gate.

He didn't say anything more until we got there. I thought he'd stop and I'd just go in but he stopped and didn't let me go. He tugged my hand in a gentle way, like when I tugged at Bootsie when I wanted to pet her and she wasn't close enough to me.

I liked it.

I looked up as he turned into me.

"Next time you gotta get away, Sylvie, you come to me."

My breathing felt funny.

"What?" I whispered.

"It gets bad, you gotta get away, you come to me. I'll take care of you."

I stared at him.

"What?" I whispered again.

"We'll talk about the lake and cannonballs and how I'm gonna buy you orange sherbet push-ups from Merlin's store when summer comes."

Oh wow.

I *loved* orange sherbet push-ups. They were *the best*.

I had this feeling, deep, deep in my belly that Tucker buying them for me would make them better.

"I'll freeze Snickers bars for you," I promised.

"Sounds good. I like Doritos. Cool Ranch."

"Okay. Ruffles for me. Doritos for you," I planned.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Yeah." I nodded.

I stared up at him and felt my nose sting even as I heard my voice come out in a super, super quiet whisper.

“You’ll take care of me?”
“My Dad said you always got something if you’re not alone. We were alone. Now, we’re not alone.”
That thing deep in my belly felt funny but it also felt nice.
“I don’t like being alone,” I whispered.
“You’re not anymore.”
That felt nice too. Nicer than my birthdays. Nicer even than Christmas!
I nodded.
His hand gave mine a squeeze. “Go in. Be careful.”
I nodded again.
“Happens again, Sylvie, my room is on the right side, first window at the back. Just knock on the window. I’ll hear you.”
I nodded again.
“Don’t let them see you,” he whispered.
And I nodded again.
His hand gave mine a squeeze before he let me go.
He opened the door of the gate and he did it super slow, being careful and I was thankful.
I started through, Bootsie at my side, and looked back at him.
I smiled.
He smiled back.
Wow.
It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw.
Then I slipped through the door, Tucker closed it slow and careful behind me and I did what I would do normally but also what Tucker told me.
I got in and to my bed and didn’t let them see me.

Did you like it?

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