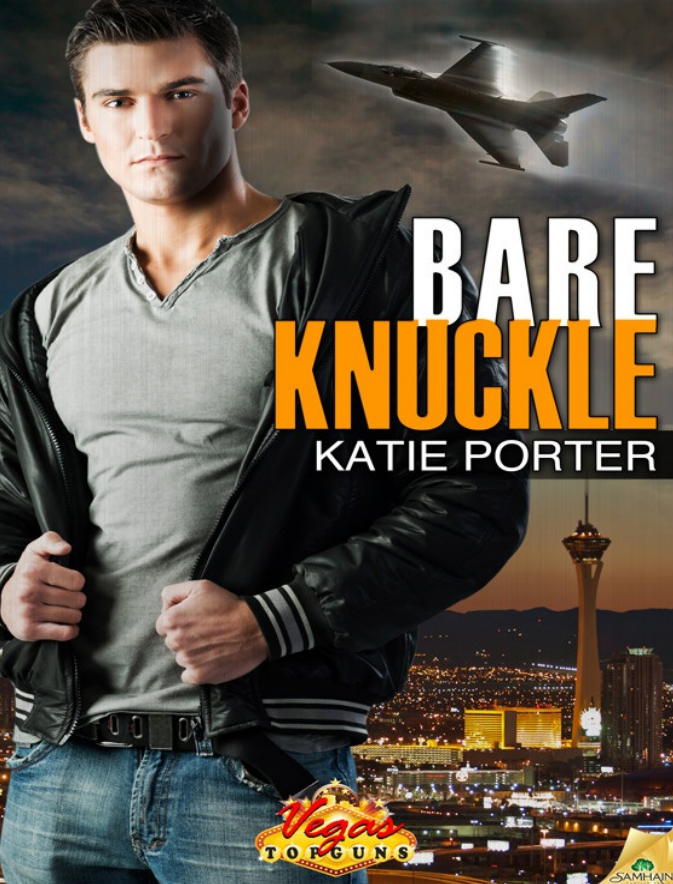




# BARE KNUCKLE

KATIE PORTER



# Dedication

To TH & TH

*Dream a little bigger.*

# Acknowledgments

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enthusiasm.

# Chapter One

Trish Monroe checked her ass for the fourth time. She rubbed a minuscule streak of fake tan that had smudged along the elastic of her string bikini. It wasn't that big a deal, but focusing on *anything* might take the edge off her nerves.

The mirror was floor length on the door inside the dressing room she shared with two other young women. A brunette, a redhead, and Trish the blonde.

How original.

That's what the promoters

wanted. More importantly, that's what the men in the crowd wanted — the perfect fantasies parading between bouts of hardcore violence. She swore testosterone smelled like sweat socks, cheap deodorant and foot powder. It permeated the boxing arena all the way back to where she and the pair whose names she'd only just learned got ready. Ring girls were practically afterthoughts. Such a humbling contrast to her brighter, more welcoming solo dressing room for *Princess of Egypt* at the Luxor.

She was still amped up from

having just finished her Friday-night performance. As soon as the curtain fell, a dozen women hustled to the dressing rooms, hurrying to strip shellacked makeup and feather-bedecked costumes. Out the door they went, bound for other jobs. Some were cocktail waitress, others strippers, others moms hoping to get home in time to tuck in their kids. This was Trish's first time making that harried transition. She wondered how long it took to wear a girl down completely.

Yet, sweet Jesus, the lights were addicting. The frenzy she'd faced that evening hadn't registered

while onstage. There, Trish and her fellow singers and dancers were stars. Applause became lifeblood.

Here, in an off-strip venue that had seen better decades, the calls and hoots would be of a decidedly more sexual variety.

*Pay the bills. Pay the bills...*

The mantra had taken on new meaning now that the semester was underway at UNLV. Her next tuition bill would show up any day now, waiting in an on-campus mailbox so her mama wouldn't find out. Most mothers would've been proud to support their daughter's college ambitions.



Some other daughter's life.

For Trish, it was a matter of fighting for what she wanted. More often than not, of late, what she wanted was in constant flux. Keep dancing in Vegas's many shows? Or *design* those shows? All she knew was she'd be spending her free time in the campus library, hoping Mama didn't ask too many questions about Trish's occasional "singing lessons". The *Don Giovanni* project for the production design class she loved was due a week into October. She'd be lucky if her money held out to see that pipe dream through.

As she arranged two skimpy triangles of bright red latex over her breasts, Trish hid a scowl, because strutting around a boxing ring was a new development. This hadn't been part of any of her plans.

A knock sounded at the door, right on the other side of the mirror. Trish jumped.

"Ten minutes, ladies," came the voice of the fight director's assistant. "Decide who's up first."

The brunette, Lola, kicked out a voluptuous hip to lean against the brightly lit vanity table. "I'll go." She paused a heartbeat. "If y'all

don't mind."

The other woman waved her away, then struggled to glue on a pair of false eyelashes. What had been her name? Meg? Details from the frantic night were blending to the point of nausea.

Trish, who also hailed from the South — although from Georgia, not Lola's gratingly obvious Texas — smiled sweetly. "Don't mind at all, sugar. It's all yours."

Lola was actually her type. She was a curvy brunette with some sass, who reminded Trish of her ex-girlfriend, Mallory Gibson. Trish's mood was too dark to do much

beyond cataloging Lola's pretty features. Her nerves were never this bad before a full-scale performance. Years in show biz hadn't put a dent in the giddy, happy high she got when entertaining an appreciative crowd.

But a ring girl?

It was the easiest money she would make in a dog's age. Mama had encouraged her to give it a try. "Nothing to worry about," she'd said. "Think of it as a pageant stage or a fashion runway."

Sure. Exactly the same.

The job was one step short of pole-dancing. She didn't judge

women who needed those gigs, or who liked them. Trish, however, would give up the whole deal before calling that show business. It wasn't her. She didn't *want* it to be her.

Lately, her mama had insisted on more and more embarrassing career moves – anything to fill the gaps between paychecks. If she knew Trish was funneling spare pennies toward textbooks, drafting supplies and a scientific calculator, she'd be too speechless to be angry. That wouldn't stop her from throwing Trish out of their trailer.

Trish's phone rang to the tune of

“Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend”, homage to her idol, Marilyn Monroe. She hadn’t come by her stage name out of nowhere.

“Hello?”

“Trish, darling, it’s Pam.”

A cold shiver along Trish’s legs had nothing to do with the blaring AC or her tiny Brazilian bikini. Her agent never called her after hours.

“What’s up?” she asked, trying to keep her voice light. Her throat was lined with dry cactus needles.

“*Princess of Egypt* has been canceled. It’s only got three weeks left on its run before they shut it down.”

So matter of fact. Not a hint of sympathy. No indication that with a trio of sentences, she'd ripped the world out from under Trish's red patent stilettos.

"But...my contract. Aren't we supposed to be given more notice?" She heard the Georgia molasses seeping into her voice. Getting flustered meant years of elocution lessons ran away lickety-split, like a squirrel with its tail on fire. "I'm sure we can't be dropped like this. I need to make ends meet."

"The production company's been taken over as part of a corporate buyout." Pam's demeanor made

Trish feel like a real professional. The woman's behavior was the exact opposite of Mama's hysterics and melodrama. Right then, however, her agent of five years sounded as brusque as an executioner. "They signed the paperwork today. Under these circumstances, they're only required to keep current shows open another three weeks."

"You had no hint this was coming?"

"It was a long shot."

"But you knew. You knew and you didn't think to tell me."

Silence.



As a headache exploded, Trish caught herself before she put a shaky hand to her forehead.

No ruining her makeup. No eating too much. No getting drunk or doing anything close to getting pregnant.

Her life was an endless series of *don't*. Right now, her self-imposed *don't* was *don't fucking cry*.

That meant blinking a hundred times and blotting a tissue beneath her nose. In the scant time since arriving newly scrubbed from the Luxor, she'd scrambled to secure her platinum wig and apply fresh cosmetics. She didn't have time to

ruin her look with minutes before her walk out. Plus she'd spent too many years toughening her emotional skin — as thick as a rhino's hide these days. This business ate the weak.

“I'm real sorry about this, Trish. It was a great part for you. A real chance to make your name. Great body. Great dancing. Easy to work with. But the complete package? That, you know — that genuine star quality. It's been five years, hon. I'm beginning to doubt it's going to happen.”

That was worse than bad news. That was bad news *and* a guillotine

*and* a stab to the heart. Trish grasped for the back of a folding chair and sat. The metal was cold and sent goose bumps up her ass and around her thighs. Heart pounding. Universe dissolving.

Oh God. The fallout waiting at home when she told her mama...

"You're," she started, swallowing tightly. "You're dropping me?"

"No, I'm giving you our contracted thirty days' notice. I'll send the official notice by registered mail tomorrow. I mean it. I'm really sorry about this. We've tried, haven't we? It just isn't working out."

“You’re right about that.”

She hung up and took a deep breath. Saying anything else would involve cussing until the paint peeled. Then again, maybe the grungy room could use a renovation.

Her knees shook and her feet jittered. She watched them as if they belonged to some other woman. Suddenly, the prospect of walking into that boxing ring holding a giant placard was not the most disappointing thing in her life. It was a lifeline rather than a bridge between paychecks. More disheartening, she’d have to do

damn well in hopes of getting an invitation to return for additional nights.

What a shitty turn of events.

“Bad news?”

Trish blinked. Meg — yes, that was her name — still sat at the vanity table. Her makeup was finished. She was a natural redhead, which was rare in their business. Hell, natural hair was a rarity. Trish hadn't taken to a stage of any kind without a wig since she was sixteen. Extensions and hairpieces had been routine by the age of four.

“Yeah, bad news. *Princess of*

Egypt has been shut down."

"Shit."

Lola whistled low. "Were you in it? Bless your heart."

"I had the lead."

"Sorry," Meg said with more genuine sympathy. "I know what it's like. I was cast in that *Wizard of Oz* revival at Caesar's. I was the Dorothy alternate and never took the stage once."

That revival had been five years ago. She'd been in Vegas as long as Trish. Funny how a pit stop on the way to the bigger prize of Hollywood stardom had turned into a half-decade holding pattern.

Another knock. "Time's up, girls. Let's go."

Trish took a deep breath and stood. Her knees held. She followed Meg and Lola out of the dressing room, like a magnet following iron. Pulled along. She smoothed shaking hands down her sides as her heels clicked down the fluorescent-lit corridor. She was as thin as always. As stacked as always. Legs for miles and the voice of an angel. She'd heard those words from a hundred different directions since hitting puberty. So had a couple thousand other girls from hick towns all over the

country.

At that moment, she had her body and sense enough to hide every worry behind a long-practiced smile. Bigger ambitions—oh, she had so many—would have to wait.

*Pay the bills...*

Standing straighter, catching sight of Lola's lush, twitching hips in front of her, Trish added an extra dollop of sex to her walk. She'd lived in the spotlight since before she could spell her own name.

Granted, spelling *Patricia Beauregard* gave most people fits. If that wasn't a Southern pageant girl's name, she



didn't know what was. But Mama had been right. It wasn't a Vegas name, and it sure wasn't a Hollywood name.

Trish Monroe — now that was a name. She and Mama had decided on it one late night while watching *Some Like It Hot*. Trish was going to be a star as bright as Marilyn. She'd been seventeen at the time and had believed that with every ounce of youthful enthusiasm.

The corridor intersected with where the fighters emerged from waiting rooms. More bright lights and considerably more people. Each man, no matter how obscure,

was encircled by an entourage of wannabes. Trainer, cut man, manager, dudes who...what, cheered them on and made them look more intimidating? Wearing sparkling walk-out robes and boxing gloves, the fighters bounced on their toes and donned their fighting postures.

Yup, the stench of testosterone was nuclear out here. No wonder her eyes occasionally wandered to the other side of the street. She'd been disillusioned for so long.

Slavering fans. Neutered industry professionals. Fellow wannabes. Or sugar daddies.

Men in show business—  
particularly in Las Vegas—didn't  
come in any other flavors.

Lola strode on ahead, as did Meg.  
They were swallowed into that sea  
of stoked, energized male bodies.  
The first bout was going to begin.  
Out in the arena, the MC played  
music and whipped the crowd into  
a flurry of cheers and applause.  
Trish wouldn't walk the ring until  
the third round, if the fight lasted  
that long. She stopped a man who  
seemed like a trainer's apprentice.  
He probably iced down swollen  
body parts for a living.

"You got anything worth

drinking, sugar?"

With boyish features on a big stud's body, he looked goofy. She put him in the slaver-fan category and leveled a megawatt smile.

"Sorry. Coach's rules."

She masked her disappointment with a tiny shrug. "Thanks, anyway."

He hurried to one of the warren-like rooms. *Damn*. She was all jagged edges and puzzle pieces. A drink would've been nice to smooth that sharp tension.

"What's your poison, girl?"

She turned to find a lone fighter

leaning against the white block concrete wall. He wore a satin walk-out robe like the others, but his was plain charcoal gray. She nearly changed her mind. No way was he a boxer, dressed so modestly and standing by himself. Without some heavy-duty flair, that bruiser would never catch the eye of a boxing promoter. It would be the industry equivalent of Trish showing up to an audition in sweatpants.

And no entourage? No way.

Only the man's well-worn boxing gloves hinted otherwise, that he really was a fighter.

With the robe's hood drawn up, a shadow covered the upper half of his face. If she never saw the rest of his features, Trish would've been satisfied with his mouth. Pouting lower lip. Beautifully curving upper lip. Almost too sensual for a man. Yet he held it with such a sardonic sneer. His expression offered no softness, no matter that lovely mouth.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Your poison. What're you drinking?"

"Jack Daniels, if you have it."

"After the fight."

Trish swallowed to keep from

taking her temper out on the stranger. She was pissed at life and, surprisingly, pissed at herself. Her head was so screwy that she couldn't tell whether he was coming on to her or being strangely polite. "Anything to tide a lady over?"

"It's in my training room." He hooked a thumb toward the door to his left. "Inside the locker. Top shelf. In a Dasani bottle. It's vodka, though."

"I'm not in the mood to be picky."

"Jack Daniels after the fight, though."

He *had* been coming on to her. Well, what had she been expecting?

“Wait a minute. I never said —”

The man pushed away from the wall. The movement offered no additional glimpse of his face, just those beautiful, half-smiling lips. He was big. Like...*big*. Not as tall as some fighters, but he had a couple inches over Trish's model-standard-issue five foot eleven. It was the width of his shoulders and the depth of his barrel chest. His loose robe couldn't disguise thick muscles — biceps, pecs and sloping trapezoids that ramped up to his solid neck. That kind of body



required a hell of a lot of work. She could relate. Only his routine probably involved eating six thousand calories a day rather than avoiding carbs as much as humanly possible.

“I don’t have time now,” he said. “Gotta go. I’ll find you later.”

“You have somewhere better to be?”

“My fight.”

The MC had the crowd in a frenzy. Over the raucous noise, Trish heard the name Jim Jennings. “Is that you?”

He shrugged those massive shoulders. “Gotta make a living.

Don't we?"

A shiver of awareness climbed her naked spine. He wasn't just talking about himself. Was that embarrassment she felt, or kinship?

"You'd better go then," she said. "I'll see you if you make it to the third."

"Don't plan on it, Number Three. You'll get the next bout."

He turned away with no ceremony and no further flirtation, though he'd practically arranged for them to meet up later. He was arrogant, but he didn't fit into her tidy categories. Far too guarded. She hadn't known too many boxers,

but none of them had ever struck her as reserved.

After glancing around, hesitant to stroll into his training room, she found the locker he'd mentioned. She grabbed the Dasani bottle then thought better of it. The last thing she needed was to douse the night in vodka and set it alight. She hadn't lost everything. She just needed to work harder. Hold on a little longer.

Trish took a deep breath and shut the locker. By the time she entered the arena, the mystery boxer was climbing into the ring. Only now did he move with the bouncing,

adrenaline-fueled energy of his sport — like a race car going zero to one hundred on a flat strip of desert highway.

Trish found her place next to Meg amid the vocal male appreciation she'd expected. That kind of attention got her high on anticipation. She liked performing for people, and more intimately, she liked being watched. But the shouts were a dull background throb as she watched the fighters take to their corners. Her curiosity had been piqued, which was a welcome distraction after a headless-chicken evening and that

acid-awful phone call.

The fighter called Jim Jennings shrugged out of his robe. Trish had been ready to enjoy a bit of enigmatic eye candy, but what she saw was far more visceral. He was a man built to fight. No doubt there. Muscle atop muscle. Strong bones and a buzzing pulse of violence that lurked under his tanned skin. A modern-day gladiator.

Including a gladiator's scars.

Deep white scar tissue climbed around his ribs and up his back like a strange vine. From a burn? Surgery? He turned to find her at the side of the ring. The face he'd

hidden beneath the robe's shadowy hood was scarred as well. A gash extended from temple to throat on the left side of his face. Another began at the center of his forehead and parted his sandy-brown hair.

He caught her eye and offered a curt nod. Then he smacked his gloves together, gave his neck a quick toss left and right, and backed into his corner.

Maybe she should have been repulsed. Maybe other women would've been. Trish was only intrigued—more intrigued than she'd been in a long time. Suddenly she couldn't wait for that promised

shot of Jack Daniels.

# Chapter Two

Fly. Fuck. Fight.

Once, those had been all Eric Donaghue needed. Everything else had only registered as background noise.

Not anymore. With his savings running dry, he was in a boxing ring again for the sixth time in as many weeks. Carey was depending on him. Keeping his face intact and his brain solid enough to keep flying mattered a helluva lot more than the hot blonde in the front row. He'd been cleared in June to



resume his place with the 64<sup>th</sup> Aggressor squadron. Only the need to pay for his younger brother's rehab was worth risking the career Eric had worked toward all his life — none more so than in the thirteen months since his crash.

That fucking crash.

His opponent, Gonzales, was practically a mirror of Eric in body type. Same height. The same weight within five pounds, all of it muscle. He had messy dark hair, sloppy footwork and a weak right cross. The opening bell rang. Eric sprang from his corner. He landed a flurry of smacking blows up the

other man's torso and sharp jabs under the ribs. Gonzales flinched back.

They wove across the ring. Eric had him on the ropes in no time, after a hard slam to the man's jaw. Gonzales shook it off. His lips pulled back around the teeth guard.

No more fucking around. Eric wasn't there to play. He needed the purse. He needed to keep Major Haverty from finding out about these extracurricular bouts. Pilots with scrambled eggs for brains were not what the Air Force needed.

He wasn't scrambled yet.

This fight would end *now*.

He cut beneath Gonzales's guard and cracked a hard uppercut to his chin. Eric followed with a left roundhouse to the temple that anyone should have been able to block — but maybe not in that condition. Gonzales blinked a few times. He staggered and sagged to one knee.

Eric stood back. The zinging force of the bout kept him popping up on his toes. He held his fists at the ready, having seen smaller men come back from harder blows, but it seemed like Gonzales didn't want it enough.

He didn't need the cash like Eric did.

Tonight's winnings would pay for one more week of Carey's care. Eric made a decent salary as an F-16 pilot, but the expenses kept coming. At least the rehab Eric had been financing for two months was more encouraging than bail for aggravated assault. Each check sent to the clinic lit him with a dim flame of hope. *Maybe this time...*

He'd left Carey behind once. Never again.

He hardly noticed when the referee declared the bout in Eric's favor. His lack of enthusiasm — an

unwillingness to play up to the crowd like some gorilla in clown makeup – was why promoters were halfhearted in their attempt to sign him. They didn't like how fast he fought, either. Betting thrived on bloodlust and drawing out the suspense. Eric had learned that much from the years when he *had* played that performance game, fighting his way out of Detroit.

He'd thought those days were behind him.

The US Air Force didn't look kindly on its pilots sporting concussions when they took to the sky.

He scanned the perimeter of the ring and found the leggy blonde. She'd stood for the match, applauding while wearing an expression of cool appreciation. The angle of her chin was more defiant than he'd seen on most girls in her position. Simpering would've looked all wrong on a woman who pulsed with confidence.

Yet she hadn't seemed confident when entering the arena. His bottle of vodka wasn't in her hands or by her chair. She'd been desperate in a way that didn't match her current, proudly feminine pose.

After a quick cool down, some

paperwork and a quick change of clothes, Eric lurked around the ring during the second match. Normally he went home. He wanted to hit and he wanted to get paid. He didn't crave the extra bullshit that came part and parcel with boxing, although once upon a time the guys at his gym and those who'd worked the same circuit had become a mixed-up, mashed-up family. Joining the Air Force had replaced bruisers with bandits, but he still got the same feeling of belonging.

Nine months in hospitals, physical therapy and flight retraining had pissed him off

because it sucked and hurt — plus he'd been left completely helpless while Carey made a screaming dive for rock bottom. For Carey to hit a wall just as Eric was getting his life back in order had been a blow more staggering than anything Gonzales had landed.

Eric sat back in a chair and absently watched the bout, wondering if it would go on long enough for the blonde to make an appearance.

Lucky for him, it did. The two welterweights went after each other like terriers until the bell rang. They retreated to their



corners, and the ring girl sauntered up. She held the sign over her head, which lifted her tits in that brilliant red swimsuit. Eye candy, pure and simple.

He appreciated watching women. One might call it his thing.

He crossed his arms and shifted on a fast rush of energy. She was a visual banquet. The hair that settled above her shoulders was a pale blonde that would contrast against his dark sheets — if he got her home. The micro swimsuit revealed the slender body that would be perfect beneath his. Her tiny white-girl ass was a gift from a higher power.

She slung attitude by the bucketful. Playing up to the crowd, she handed out swish and sweetness like candy. Her smile lit up when the audience roared.

So, she liked being watched? Being appreciated? He couldn't imagine a woman becoming a ring girl if she didn't. A buzz of excitement made his muscles burn, especially when she finished her circuit and aimed her smile straight at him. Every man in the crowd got to see what she strutted on obvious display. Not every man got a personalized come-hither smile.

He fisted his hands at his sides

and cleared his throat.

She returned the round placard before walking past him. She was such a playgirl – a bit of trouble combined with a whole lot of pretty. Slanting a honey-and-spice look over her shoulder as she drifted by, she found her seat.

Eric had resumed an active sex life since escaping physical therapy, scars and all, but discomfort always clawed up his spine. He didn't relish explaining a damn thing about what had happened. When he'd stopped telling war stories that women speedily elevated to heroic proportions, he'd stopped

getting as many returned phone calls. Apparently the truth was a turn-on — that the nasty scars crawling over his skin were from an F-16 training accident in Canada — but refusing to share sickening details meant he spent more nights alone than not.

Such a change from the previous year. To his surprise, he didn't feel like he'd lost anything in giving up strip bars and midnight quickies. He did miss being able to say hello to a woman without curiosity, revulsion or wariness coloring her expression.

Maybe that's why he'd been so

immediately taken with the blonde ring girl. She'd been...distracted. That seemed the right word. And he'd been hooded. Now, when wariness or disgust should've been making unwanted appearances, she kept sneaking sidelong glances.

Christ, she'd look amazing on film. His video collection was getting overplayed, a little flat. He could go for capturing her shining beauty and subtle arrogance on film.

Go for it in a damn hard way.

After the bouts, he waited outside the ring girls' room. Damn he was edgy. Nervous was too

strong of a word, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd actively pursued a woman and worried about the outcome. It galled him to think he might be as rusty at seduction as he'd been when stepping into a flight simulator for the first time in more than half a year.

Light flickered over the half-dozen men who eagerly clustered around the door. Fresh from watching the fights, they were sweaty from cheering and wearing the glazed-over expression that came from watching hours of blatant sex and violence — the

ingredients for an old-fashioned caveman. Eric shared the impulses but none of the desperation. This would happen or it wouldn't. Going home alone wasn't the worst thing to ever happen to him. Not anywhere close.

Eric idly pressed his fingertips against the left side of his ribs, where Gonzales had landed a rare punch. It was tender, but certainly not bad enough to keep him from other physical activity.

The door to the dressing room opened. A redhead stepped out. She looked different with her face scrubbed clean. She was still

beautiful, but more approachable. Eric couldn't decide what he wanted from the blonde — the real woman or the illusion. The illusion would be easier. One-night stands were simply less complicated. Eric had enough on his plate. But he was curious how she'd present herself to the real world, not a catcalling packed house.

The redhead chatted with a few of the men, took phone numbers from two and went on her way.

Then came the main attraction. Eric perked up. Pale white-blonde hair shone in the off-colored fluorescent lighting. The tall



woman had toned down her makeup. The result balanced between purely natural and the Kabuki mask of thick lipstick and false lashes she'd worn in the ring. She wore a scarlet halter-top over slim-cut jeans — clothed now, but just as sexy. Eric decided that he preferred this result. Anything could happen now.

She flicked a curious gaze over the lurkers. Eric saw a split second of disappointment.

Only when she found him propped against the far wall did her smile quirk on one side. What looked like amusement flashed in

her eyes and changed her posture — not as defensive as when she'd first emerged, and not as showy as when she'd greeted the impromptu fan club with plastic smiles.

When she finally wove through the men and met Eric at the wall, she did so with long, deliberate steps. She stood close enough that he could smell her fresh scent. Despite the flickers of desperation before the fight, she was in complete control now, as if the appreciation of the crowd had been a balm for her troubles.

She faced him almost dead-on. "Glad I left the heels on."

Focusing pale, clear blue eyes on him, she was direct almost to the point of being uncomfortable. There wasn't a hint of vodka on her breath. "Oh?"

"I'd have to look up at you otherwise. I don't think I'd like that."

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. "An even playing field."

"Exactly." Her smile was spotlight levels of brilliant. He had the feeling that smile had been a driving force in getting what she wanted out of life. She slung a giant purse over her shoulder, while Eric

reached out in silent offer to carry two sizeable duffels. She looked briefly taken aback before smiling and handing them over. Then she hooked her free arm through his. "Thanks. Now you owe me a drink. We can talk over your fight."

Halfway grinning to himself, Eric led the way down a corridor that exited to the parking lot. "What about it?"

"I haven't seen anything like that. Less than three minutes flat!"

The fight had been exactly what it had needed to be, no more. "I'll take your word for it. You must see a lot of Friday-night brawling."

Darkness washed over her features as they stepped outside, and not just from the change from fluorescent glare to orange-tinged streetlights. His '67 Camaro was one of the last cars remaining in the private rear lot.

"No, this is my first time," she said, shaking her head. "I'm in a show. On the strip. I was headlining, for all the good it did me."

"What's that mean?"

"It's done. Shut down. Finito."

Ah. So that explained her behavior before the fight.

She talked as if she didn't care,

but he happened to be touching her lower back as she spoke. The silky shirt and the dip of her spine almost disguised the tension in her muscles. No question she was telling herself a few whoppers.

His only question was whether to call her on the bullshit. He decided to respect her privacy because she'd been so good at protecting his — if only by the direct way she'd approached him, without coy curiosity or false flattery. They were going to get a drink. They both knew it. No need for drama.

He unlocked the passenger door

and held it open for her. She stroked a hand over the bench seat as she swung her legs in. A slightly avaricious glint shone in her eyes, but she hid it quickly. "Nice ride."

"Thanks."

Eric gave the Camaro a pat as he crossed to the driver's side. The rumbling beast was his long-time friend after years of work and sweat poured into the twists of metal. The Chevy was exactly the kind of perfectly engineered works of art that had rolled out of the factories in his hometown. Detroit boys knew cars.

A lot of that pride had worn off,

leaving him in a crumbling jungle he'd fought to escape. Literally. Sometimes he believed he'd taken all the fight left in his family too. No one else had managed to pull free of that generations-long collapse.

He slid behind the wheel then hitched one arm across the back of the seat. "I'm Eric."

"Not Jim? Color me so surprised," she said dryly. Southern brown sugar turned her words into foreplay. "I'm Trish Monroe."

*No, you're not.*

He had the sudden impulse to film her while she tucked her hands



between those long, elegant legs and talked dirty until she came. His body rocked to attention, although he kept the response well guarded. The service had taught him ridiculously strict discipline. Useful, considering how fast his particular desires could flip his mind inside out.

Eric cranked the ragtop down. The early autumn air was touched with creosote. Maybe rain on the way. That'd be a welcome change from months of hot and dry, hot and dry.

"Thing is," he said, shifting to watch her face. "I like honest. I like

seeing underneath.”

She shrugged. “That’s fine with me. I’m always honest.”

*Bullshit.* He began to wonder if anything on her was real. A change of clothing hadn’t magically turned her into an ordinary woman. She *wasn’t* ordinary, which left him unusually frustrated. He didn’t want to ruin the image, but some reality would be nice before they continued sparring.

“Then be honest. Tell me your real name.”

# Chapter Three

Trish kept her smile in place, although her insides were a mess. What kind of girl got into a stranger's car but balked at revealing her birth name? She couldn't remember the last man to ask. Everything in Vegas was glitter and false promises. It was better not to look beneath the surface. That meant people too, not just rigged betting odds and quickie weddings meant to crumble as soon as the booze wore off.

No surprise his scars were more

prominent at close range, lit by the parking-lot light planted at the nose of his holy-shit-sweet Camaro. Knotted scar tissue textured the left side of his face. She wondered if he'd ever considered reconstructive surgery. Maybe he wasn't the type. Maybe it worked to his advantage in snagging chicks like her. She couldn't deny that she was curious, that he was a novelty.

Eric. Well hell, at least he'd given up the goods.

"Patricia," she said with a defiant toss of her hair.

"Not enough. All of it."

"Tit for tat, Eric Anonymous."

A flash of uncertainty twitched that unforgettable mouth and tightened the corners of his eyes.  
“Eric Donaghue.”

She took a shallow breath. God, he smelled good. The right touch of aftershave or deodorant. Nothing too cloying. Of course he would've showered after the fight, with some plain but masculine soap. He wore the scents on his warm skin like he wore those astonishing muscles. Both were powerful aphrodisiacs.

“I was born Patricia Beauregard. There. But now I'm Trish Monroe — legally, even.”

Had she blinked, she would've

missed his smile. But it was real. She knew the difference between men who meant it and men who faked it — had known since before she could articulate such a mature undercurrent. The reward of his smile, no matter how brief, filled her with a pleasant feeling that wasn't entirely comfortable. If she was rewarded for honesty, she might want to give him more. She'd spent too many years layering defenses over defenses for that to happen.

“Beauregard,” he said casually. “I knew you were Southern.”

“When I'm tired.”

“When you’re breathing. Can’t ditch where you’re from.” He fired up the classic sports car and slanted her a keen glance. “No matter how many speech lessons.”

She bristled. “If you’re flirting, you’re not doing a very good job.”

Rather than take offense, he only revved the engine. And he grinned — filthy, mean, *genuine* again. How busted up was she that she loved it? Craved that edge?

“Then out you go,” he said, nodding toward the passenger-side door handle. “Dare you.”

To hide her amusement, she lifted her chin. “Just drive.”

Despite his curt demeanor and the clarity of his insights, he had a clever layer of humor. She did too. She needed to or else staring down the difficulties of her profession would be too difficult. Better to be able to laugh at life than let it tug you under the quicksand. If he wanted to trade some of that humor — when all around her, people were so damn serious all the time — then the night was going to be fun.

She could *really* use some fun.

They gunned out of the parking lot. He took the corner onto the street at a speed that shot her body



into overdrive. He was intense, which was probably some combination of his appearance and his monosyllabic replies, but his humor was accompanied by worldliness. His eyes never stopped moving, checking out dark corners. Only when he looked at her did his gaze focus. Laser-beam attention.

Performing before a crowd was one thing. Familiar. A heady rush.

It didn't hold a candle to that one-on-one thrill.

The lights of the Vegas Strip were as gaudy and beautiful as ever. Trish often thought she had more in common with the city than

with any one person living there. Bright. Shining. Hiding the mundane and the unsavory beneath a blinding flare of color and dazzling distraction. After all, people worked in offices in Sin City. People took out the trash and walked dogs. People got their brakes fixed and balanced their checkbooks.

Trish was a showgirl at night, while daytime meant compensating time for her college classes and advancing her career through auditions and social media. Those were the mundane details that claimed her time when the curtain

dropped.

The purr of the Camaro became the only sound as their small talk fell away. A lack of conversation wasn't easy on her jumped-up nerves. Talking meant flirting, and flirting meant getting what she wanted — well, in everything but show biz. There she had stiff competition, including girls who wouldn't hesitate to take it up the ass for a role. That wasn't speculation. That was fact, complete with names and bragged details she'd rather forget.

She hadn't sunk that low and never would. She'd spend the rest

of her life in one of those mundane offices, no matter that it would amount to a nuclear meltdown between her and Mama. Trish's body and decisions were inviolate. Hank Yardley had taught her how important it was to define one's boundaries and stay the hell away from those who tried to trespass.

She shivered.

"So what do you do?" she asked, hurrying away from dark thoughts. "Jim Jennings. I assume you're a moonlighter."

"Like you?"

"For now."

"It's always for now," he said

with a twist to that sexy-as-fuck mouth. "I'm in the military."

Well, maybe that explained the scars.

"No more details?" She crossed her legs. He noticed.

"You keep secrets, showgirl?"

"Of course."

"We'll play fair. Let me keep mine."

She smiled into the particolored lights streaking past the windshield. He was going to snag a speeding ticket. She only melted into the lush leather bench seat. "So mysterious."

"The appeal of a one-night

stand.”

“You just made one helluva assumption.”

“Do you mind?”

“What, having a one-night stand?”

“No, me being direct. I can play butter-up games if you want.”

He had a peculiar, unexpected way of shooting electrical charges through her veins, making her blood simmer. She shouldn't like having her expectations upturned, but he was sweet oxygen — a dizzying reminder that she'd been slowly suffocating. The only air hole in her life was knowing she'd

be back in class on Tuesday and Thursday. With two courses this semester, she'd taken a chance — pushing money and time to the limit. She didn't care. She needed that breathing space and that safe place in her mind where she could hide and plan when the bombs dropped, like losing *Princess of Egypt* and her agent in one fell swoop.

“No, it's okay,” she said, taking another breath, another straight shot of oxygen. “I'd rather do direct.”

“So we'll fuck tonight.”

It wasn't a question. It was his

brand of flirting. Her soaked thong said as much. Her mouth was parched when she replied. "Yes, we will."

He veered onto a dark side street and threw the Camaro into park.

Grabbed the back of her head.

Kissed her.

Trish grasped the leather seat to keep her bearings. He was a monster of a man. Overwhelming. His kiss was a hard plunder. That gorgeous mouth worked magic over hers. Softness with steel underneath. She met his tongue. He tasted of cinnamon. Gum, maybe?



Forget the gum. Forget the leather seat. She snagged handfuls of granite muscles—his bunched biceps, the side of his thick neck. Tendons flexed beneath her fingers. His hair was short, almost cropped, both spiky and silky.

“Then let’s fuck right here,” he growled against her mouth.

“What? You’re not serious.”

“Why not? I’m ready. You’re ready. Open those long legs of yours, showgirl.”

Oh shit. She was in trouble. *Heaps* of it. The image he planted in her mind was almost inescapable. Sweaty bodies and steamed

windows. One stiletto slung over the bench seat as he bulldozed her against the leather. Both of them clothed except where he shoved her panties aside and undid his fly.

Something brutal and beautiful and raw. It'd been so long.

Then there was the danger of getting caught. Someone could be spying from the darkened window of a nearby house. Or a cop might decide to watch them explode, the Camaro rocking beneath Eric's fierce thrusts. Only after busting him would the cop wank in his squad car.

She could get off to that idea for

years. It fueled her fantasies, knowing men liked how she looked in her bikini. Sometimes she lay awake touching herself, imagining she was hot enough to get them hard. It was crass and it sure as hell wasn't how she wanted to be treated in real life, but that rarely had anything to do with where a mind wandered during dark hours.

Eric renewed his sensual assault. No, there was nothing sensual to it. His fingers tightened over her breast. He hefted the weight in his palm, kneading. His breath was a heavy rasp. Jesus, his body. To ride him would be like riding a Mack

truck.

“No.”

Where had that come from?

*She'd* said it. And she meant it.

The reasons took longer to catch up with the primal part of her brain that wanted and wanted and wanted. Didn't matter. If she was going to have a fun time with this guy, she was going to do it on terms that didn't make her puke in the morning.

At least he stopped. That was good news. Some guys took longer to fend off. *She'd* been young and stupid and saved from the worst out of pure luck. To be frank, she

wasn't young anymore, but this was definitely a stupid moment. Eric Donaghue could've been a painful mistake rather than a potentially embarrassing or foolish one.

He frowned. "No?"

Trish gave his fierce muscles another squeeze and let go. He did the same with her breast, but he held fast to the back of her head. They were so amped up that their breaths met between their wet mouths. The Camaro's roaring engine rumbled into her slick pussy. She was so damn restless.

"Jack Daniels. Straight up. You

promised."

He swallowed a groan. "I bet you've heard the word cocktease."

"More often than I've heard men say my real name. But I didn't touch your cock."

"Do it."

"I said no. Bar, remember?"

"Just a preview."

Trish closed her eyes on a flash flood of *guh*.

"Look at me," he murmured.

"Now, did you mean it? Are we still talking about a one-night stand?"

*Don't lie. He'll know a lie. I'll regret a lie.*

“Yes.”

“Then what’s the harm?”

Her brain was like a circuit breaker fried by a lightning strike.

“No harm. As long as we stop. One-night stand doesn’t mean quickie.”

His lopsided smile — the lips turning up on the unscarred side of his face — was oddly endearing. Ninety seconds after having been stopped cold, he was *amused*. “You got me there.”

“Okay.”

“No, wait.” He caught her hand, both of them unsteady. She needed that proof he wasn’t completely stoic and unaffected. That would’ve

killed her libido and ended their night. “I want to watch you when you touch me. I want to see the satisfaction in your eyes.”

Desire shivered through her body and settled in the pit of her stomach, but it wasn't just desire. It was...wariness? He was speaking the language of her sexual imagination. Some might call it a fetish.

Voyeur. Exhibitionist. Inexorably linked.

Was that possible, that he might've known — or better still, that his needs might dovetail with hers? All the more reason to take



the night slow. If it was going to be good because he was hot and they were both ready, it was going to be even better if they shared the same kink.

So she kept her eyes locked to his as she slid her hand between their torsos. Down his ridged abdomen. Past the button of his loose-fitting jeans. To a bulge that was perfectly at home on that big, brawny body. His cock was huge and ironlike. It angled up toward his navel. Thick. Long. Worth more risks than she was prepared to mentally admit. Her body was throwing a tantrum.

She stroked once, twice, and

adored the way his eyelids slid toward sleepy, needy passion. But he never looked away. "Yes," he whispered.

"There." She pulled back before she gave up on the idea of leading him around by that magnificent tool. She was having too much fun. "Officially a cocktease."

His blue eyes, so shadowed, consumed her with his gaze.

"You look like a Barbie. A total fuck-doll fantasy." Stiff tension packed his shoulders as he released her. His knuckles turned white when he gripped the steering wheel. "But I don't think you are."

Another rapid-fire smile was a treasure to keep.

A treasure? *Seriously, Trish.* She'd nearly let him bang her in his car. The only treasures she wanted from Eric Donaghue were hot-as-hell memories.

His body. All hers for the night.

They reached his bar of choice in five minutes. He came around to open the car door, as if he were one of the slick Southern gentlemen she'd grown up with. He was anything but. Too rough. A city guy and a Northerner to boot. She'd stake the money she'd earned that night.

His hand at her back was innocent as they pushed into the bar. She led the way, soaking up the zinging thrill of turned heads and perked-up interest, as if she'd zapped the male patrons with cattle prods. She took those reactions as a given. On good days she soaked up their interest. On bad days, it was just plain annoying. But Eric's focused attention and the hunger he'd unlocked made her feel like a superstar. He stood as solid as a bank vault at her back.

Only when he positioned himself at her side did Trish realize the ridiculously obvious. Eric caught a

few looks of his own, though most of those stuck on his scars. Widened eyes. Grimaced. Averted glances.

Idiots, all of them. Whatever had happened to him must've been intense and painful, but she'd seen him fight, she'd been flattened by his kiss and she'd been surprised by his direct, honest...chivalry? Whatever it was, she wanted more. Past what everyone else seemed to read as his only feature, she found the danger of evasive, troubled eyes.

She shivered as her smile jumped out of her control. *Giddiness*. Not happiness. The two were not the

same by any means.

Such a typical dive bar. Ancient televisions tuned to various ESPN stations. Old license plates and framed pictures of famous people who'd stopped by. Even a barkeep drying heavy beer glasses with a white towel. It was something out of a movie set. That fit, considering the superstar arrogance she'd amassed with each of Eric's rough kisses.

She may have walked in front of him, but Eric led with the mere pressure of his hand at her low back. He guided her to a private booth then swaggered back to the

bar. Trish took time to check her appearance in a Cover Girl compact. She saved her money on the everyday stuff. Stage makeup was expensive. After the hot, mauling kiss she'd shared with Eric, she was glad she hadn't chosen a darker shade of lipstick. A quick dash of powder and a swipe of gloss was all she managed before he returned.

Two tumblers of whiskey, straight up. And a plate of cheese fries.

"Oh, none of those for me, thanks." It was like reciting a line from a play or musical — words that

weren't her own. They smelled *amazing*.

He slid into the booth opposite.

"You need to eat."

"I did, before the fight."

"What, lettuce?"

"A protein bar."

He leaned forward on his elbows. She tried not to look at his scar, but it defined his face. He'd been killer handsome once. Now he was something more, something darker. He was vulnerable. Made of flesh. He was also a fighter, a survivor. A girl could happily curl up against strength like that, maybe stay awhile.



“A one-night stand doesn’t mean a quickie,” he said, teasing with his gaze as he echoed her admonishment. “It doesn’t mean one time either.”

His words were a reminder that there wouldn’t be any “stay awhile”. In the scheme of a life, their night together would be as quick as his grin.

“You go all night, stud?”

“Hell yes.”

“So I’ll need energy, huh?”

“Lots.” He took up the glass. Nodded for her to do the same.

“And this is our only drink, right?”

She wasn’t used to men asking

her about things like alcohol tolerance. Where was the invitation to excess? Martinis and mai tais appeared out of nowhere when she occasionally sat down at the Luxor's bar after a show — as if buying her a drink would buy *her*. She'd mentally given in to Eric well before he'd followed through with his promise of a post-fight drink.

“Um, may I ask why?”

“I want consent from you, not Jack Daniels.” He lifted his tumbler. “Guys don't really do it for me.”

“What should we drink to?” The coy note in her voice sounded *off*, especially after what they'd said

and done.

“To a good night.”

They touched glasses, downed the two fingers and grinned simultaneously. Trish nearly laughed. It was that carefree.

“Now eat up,” he said.

“Only if you tell me something about yourself.”

He dove into the huge plate of cheese fries. Calories after a hard fight. He glanced up then licked his fingers. Trish licked her lower lip in a response that was plain reflex. “I like photography. Amateur film,” he said bluntly.

“Wouldn’t have guessed that.”

“Why not?”

*Because you're a brute. A scarred, mysterious, military brute of a fighter who likes fast cars and fast fucks.*

She couldn't answer truthfully, but neither could she think of a convincing lie. It was the uncomfortable equivalent of *if you don't have anything nice to say...*

She hid the slipup by nibbling a fry. One became five became ten. Ten became *oh my God*. She hadn't indulged in something so incredible in longer than she could remember.

The theme of the night.

“Don't worry,” he said with a wave of his hand. “I don't seem the

type."

"So, what, nature stuff? Portraits of classic cars."

"Nude photography." So calm. So straightforward. Normal as could be.

His tight expression said otherwise.

"Is that so?"

"Take it off the table if you're not interested," he said, voice tense. "I won't bring it up again."

He'd handed her the truth of what he really wanted. A round of hot-and-heavy was in the cards they'd both revealed. But this man was different. A night with him

would be different.

If she let it.

“You don’t have some creepy Tumblr account where you post pictures of chicks you’ve banged.” She wiped her fingers. “Do you?”

He leaned back against the worn plastic booth. The overhead lighting accentuated the line of ruined skin that skimmed into his hairline. His lips parted as he reached an arm across the back. Inviting. Yet almost...vulnerable — as if daring her to make something of his appearance. Maybe this was the moment when other girls backed down, wised up, gathered

their wits and better sense. He was waiting for a rejection that she had no intention of delivering.

She wanted to hold his face — the perfect side and the damaged side — and kiss him.

“No,” he said at last. “Just for me.”

“Can I say maybe?”

“Sure.” He pushed the last of the fries toward her. “Now finish up, showgirl. I’ll watch.”

## Chapter Four

They stayed in the bar another forty-five minutes. Found things to talk about. Most times, Eric would've tried to hustle a woman like Trish out the door and into the nearest hotel room, especially since his accident. His awareness of how he looked laid over his thoughts as surely as the scars lay over his skin. Any minute, she'd decide this wasn't such a great idea. Hell, *he* might. He had enough on his mind without spending the night wondering—no, outright wishing—



that this gorgeous pinup liked what he liked. He'd wind up thinking fabulous sex was a letdown.

Lately, though, that's what he'd felt after a night with a beautiful woman. The sex was satisfying, but it wasn't the same as commemorating the experience.

He hadn't brought it up until Trish. The whole thing struck him as too *Phantom of the Opera* — the scarred guy hiding behind a camera, perving after a glittering showgirl.

They kept talking while Trish finished the fries. She'd been in Vegas five years, him two. She was

taking a few college courses, while he'd graduated from Michigan State. The conversation was first rate, which only added to the thoughts of photographs. She was witty and coy — too coy at times. Hiding, like he did. Time to see if they could change that. The camera revealed everything. When he ducked behind the lens, he was revealing more of himself than he did to his closest friends. He was revealing what struck all the way down to his primitive core.

Who would ever know his fantasies other than a select few lovers? That was an exclusive club

he wanted Trish to be part of.

“So,” she said, appearing nervous for the first time during their conversation. “Where to next?”

“Hotel or my place?”

“Your place.”

“Why?”

“Because if I’m walking a boxing ring in a bikini and you’re taking punches as a hobby, I’m assuming money might be an issue on both sides.”

“Maybe I like boxing,” he said dryly.

She tilted her head. Her gaze roamed over his face with intensity enough to make him want to

bellow. Or walk out.

*Answer already.*

“No.” She shook her head as if emerging from a trance. “You’d have gloated more. And your lack of an entourage is appalling.”

Eric couldn’t hold back a laugh. “They keep calling in sick.”

The ride to his loft apartment on the edge of Vegas’s industrial outskirts was almost relaxed. She hadn’t fled and he hadn’t made an ass of himself—a tendency he’d been working on since a few rehab nurses had dressed him down like drill sergeants.

He flipped on the kitchen lights

and stood aside, letting her enter as she wanted. He liked having half a complex to himself and a cheap-ass mortgage, but a few women had complained. Trish either had a surprising lack of care for her safety, or she trusted him. Considering her savvy, he was betting on the second.

Not that he understood what in his mangled face said *trust me*. He didn't used to be a poster-child example of how to be a decent human being. Doing right by Carey was the best he could say for himself, and that was as much penance as caring. Even flying—

he'd fucked up and he'd made a couple enemies along the way. Since the crash, though...

He couldn't shake the memory of the ground rising up to meet him. Of gravity pulling him down. Of flames everywhere. The plane had been a dying animal wrapped around him, plummeting, groaning its last.

Only afterward had he realized how shallow, how *lonely*, his life had become. He'd gotten by on his attitude, looks and body. Few found incentive to stay when he was a surly-as-fuck cuss. And he hadn't realized how much he loved

his job. He'd almost lost it all. He had a lot of ground to make up, and that wasn't limited to the physical training he continued, determined to shake free from the last of his injuries.

He tossed his keys in their bowl. Trish looked around the loft, silently assessing.

She stopped in the middle of the open area that blended kitchen into dining into living room. "Sort of stark, isn't it?"

"By choice."

"It wasn't criticism, believe me. One of my classes is set design. I think it's habit now, assessing a

space and seeing how I'd interpret it or recreate it."

"See? Not a Barbie."

She flipped her hair and affected a wide-eyed, eerily blank expression. "Oh no?"

"Quit. That's spooky."

"I know." She laughed her way out of the pose. "But you wouldn't believe how many guys prefer it that way."

"Idiots," he muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Sure, sugar." Her expression said she was letting him off the hook.



The thing was, he used to be one of those idiots. Except for a few of the women he'd photographed where the relationship had remained platonic, he didn't have the best track record for valuing substance over style. Maybe Trish was an excellent introduction to the radical, smack-upside-the-head concept that he didn't need to compromise.

Good to know for when he was ready for a long-term relationship. Until his flight rotation was back up to one hundred percent, and until Carey was clean and sober, Eric didn't have the energy to

devote to what women needed.

For half a thought, he contemplated offering her a glass of wine. But no, he'd said one round in the bar, and he meant it. The drink would've been a delay tactic before confronting the topic of his bedroom and all the psychobabble that would go with it. Aside from trying to be a better person, Eric had tried to be more honest with himself — as direct as his habit when speaking to others. It didn't always work. In this case, though, he was able to call himself on his bullshit.

Trish had wandered away, around the right bend that

concealed the second half of the loft space. Make or break time. He followed.

The loft had been an old warehouse, with reinforced beams and brick walls. Eric had painted them white. The only artwork was his own stuff. In the more public half, he'd hung shots of his hometown. Detroit's beauty was morbidly blunt, but it was there if a guy knew where to look.

The private half of the loft held his photography equipment on one side and what passed as his bedroom on the other. The bare bed without headboard or footboard

worked for him. The walls were adorned with his best photographs – or more like, the photographs that spoke to him. He'd taken more carefully framed, more artfully constructed shots, but these were the ones he liked to study because of the women he'd immortalized in moments of purity.

Trish stood in front of one. He'd had a great symbiotic relationship with Dolores. He liked to watch and she didn't want to be touched. He'd never asked why, only took pictures of her astonishing body. His favorite shot of her was the one he'd had enlarged to life size. He'd

been behind her as she'd lifted her hand over her head, looking over her shoulder toward the camera.

He stood next to Trish as she contemplated the picture. "I think it's her mouth. She has a sad mouth."

"Technically she's smiling." He worried about Dolores sometimes. She'd left his life as casually as she'd entered it, like a train passing by. Only she'd left a few indelible reminders behind. He hoped her memories held up as well.

"Was she a sad girl?"

"Sometimes. Do you recognize it?"

Her shoulders straightened, which accentuated her breasts. A female dodge and weave. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't kid a kidder. Do you recognize her sadness?"

She flashed the same plastic smile she'd aimed at the guys outside her dressing room door. "Pretty girls are never sad."

"Screw that."

"It's what the world wants to believe. Boyfriend dumped you? At least you'll get another. Crashed a car? Someone will buy you one. Lost a job? Who wouldn't wanna hire a girl as gosh-darn pretty as

you?" She stepped closer to the black-and-white print, examining Dolores's curved neck. "Sometimes the opportunities never come." Then she whirled toward him and flashed another of those practiced smiles. "So, who looks better?"

He laughed. "Not answering that."

"C'mon. Me or her? Who's got the better body?"

"Nope."

A fierce light snapped on in her pale eyes. "Maybe you need a more accurate frame of reference. You need to compare like to like."

"Compare what to what?"

She glanced back up at Dolores. “You know... She’s naked and I’m not.”

“You could change that.”

Her moment’s hesitation was what Eric needed. She wanted to play, but this wasn’t her usual MO. Being admired – that was probably the way of things, as surely as people stared at his face. Being the sexual aggressor, however, wasn’t a Barbie’s role. She was waiting for his cues. He’d make sure that didn’t keep happening. With a unique, dramatic surge of excitement, he wouldn’t be satisfied unless she also got what she wanted from the



night.

“Fine,” she said. “Challenge accepted.”

Grasping the bottom hem of her shirt, she whipped it off so fast that white-blond hair swirled around her jaw. No bra. She ditched her heels and shoved her jeans down along with a tiny scrap of red panties.

Lord, she was priceless.

Long, elegant legs led up to the thrust of her hips. A narrow line of honey-blond hair accented pouting pussy lips. The flat plane of her stomach arched above model-standard hipbones. Her breasts

were perfectly shaped. Then she turned and lifted her arms over to adopt Dolores's pose.

"Now you *have* to tell me." Her voice wasn't as steady as her gaze. "It's a rule."

Even if it hadn't been true, he'd have picked her over Dolores. He'd always had a type, and Trish was it. Slender, elegant and so typically *Playboy* all-American it was almost embarrassing.

He stepped behind her and tucked his chin alongside her head. She was frenzy made flesh, as enticing as a siren's call. He curved his hands around her slim waist

then spread his fingers across her stomach. Lean muscle offered resistance to his testing flex. She wasn't going to break.

"You are. And better than that, you're here."

"Unfairly coloring your judgment."

"You gonna complain, showgirl?"

"Not if you don't."

He swept his hands up to cover her breasts and snagged perky nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. She curled her arms back until her elbow hooked around his neck. Eric liked being

fully clothed while she was bare-ass naked. She was a waking man's wet dream.

"It'd be so easy to blame my choices tonight on you being wicked." Twisting around to face him, she brushed up against his chest. "But it's not just you."

"Then show me what you want."

"Show you. Show you," she said again, smiling. "That's what *you* want."

He rubbed his lips over hers, breathing her anticipation. "Again I'll ask. You gonna complain?"

Hands on his shoulders, she nudged him until his knees hit his

bed. She didn't push him down. Instead, she wove around to use his shoulder as a support as she stood on the mattress. He turned to watch. She trailed fingertips through his hair, sending a wash of sensation down his neck and back. The scar tissue over his spine prickled.

"We *are* going to go a few rounds, aren't we?" The deeper timbre of her voice was almost as exciting as the touches she traced over his skin.

"If I have anything to say."

"And you're going to photograph me?"

“That’s up to you.” The centers of his palms burned. He wanted to grab one of his cameras and capture how she looked down at him. He could jack off to her mix of self-aware power and gentle vulnerability for months.

Her smile turned slinky. “You better make me look gorgeous, or I’ll take it out on you.”

He placed a single kiss on her thigh. “There’s no *making*. You’re gorgeous.”

“For a man of few words, you say the right ones.” She spread her knees slightly. “One problem though. I can’t stop thinking about

your cock. Is that unbearably slutty of me?"

He licked up her lightly tanned skin. He wasn't a soft guy, so he didn't know the right words. Silk? Satin? Then he locked his knees against the mattress and hunched down. He slicked his tongue between her nearly bare pussy lips. She was sweetly spicy.

She held the back of his head and tipped her face toward the ceiling. "Oh God. Probably not as slutty as letting you go down on me this fast."

"I can stop." He slid out of reach of her arms. Then he stripped his

own clothes while she watched— while she ate him up with her eyes. Was that what it was like to be on the other end of the focus?

“Fuck that,” she said with a laugh. “Get back here.”

That easily, he was at her feet. “What else?”

“Anything. We’re here. We’re doing this.”

He grasped the backs of her slender legs, above her knees, and stroked up until his thumbs met across her wet pussy. He watched her from under his lashes as he spread her open, then ducked his head for another salty taste. “Are



you sure?"

Her whole body shuddered, knees dipping. "I'm an idiot. Total idiot. But what the hell. Yes."

Eric pushed two blunt fingers up her sheath while rubbing his thumb over her clit. He curled his fingers forward in a come-hither motion. She bent for what seemed like an eternity, drawing out the moment as she eased over him. Her arms looped around his shoulders. He turned their bodies so that he sat on the bed and she straddled his lap. Her knees found purchase in the dark blue sheets.

He slid on a condom in no time.

She was too close to perfect. That she would let him take pictures...  
*Damn.*

Later, though. He was too roughly aroused. They had all night. This was only the beginning. For them, sex was not the main course. Maybe she was a lot like him.

He palmed her slim hips and urged her up enough so that her soaking-wet pussy grazed his cock. Then he pulled her down. Hot. Wet. Consuming. He eased back until he lay flat on the bed, supporting her with his hands around her ribs. He stroked the

underside of her breasts. She straddled his body with the grace of a goddess, but the dirty, playful glint in her eyes said she was a dark goddess. A witch on the hunt.

“Gimme what you’ve got, showgirl.”

Her hips quivered. *Goddamn*. He flipped back and forth between wanting to close his eyes so he didn’t go too fast, and wanting to watch—just watch as she rode him. He’d waited to see what she wanted, and this seemed to be it. She bit her bottom lip as her eyes went cloudy, her body rocking in a rhythm that sped and gathered

force.

“I’m not going to last long,” she breathed. She lifted her arms. Slender fingers tipped with red nails laced through her hair. The curve of her stomach... The way her breasts rose...

Good Christ.

With unadulterated determination, he held back pleasure’s grip on his balls. He’d used the same determination to keep his brains in his head moments from crashing into a flower-dusted Canadian meadow.

She was so enticing that she dragged him back from evil

memories with nothing but a gasp. Eric thought he'd lose it, with the way she assessed him while working his body. Her muscles tightened beneath his grip. Short breaths fashioned into a rough panting that turned into a low moan. Her elbows boosted toward the ceiling, her face buried in her upper arm as she came.

Eric did too, because she looked like a centerfold — except better. She was enjoying herself. Pulsing feminine muscles offered him lucid, erotic proof. But as Trish slumped, her shoulders bending and her breath calming, Eric was stitching

his thoughts back together. Life had handed him something astonishing for the night. Trish Monroe had more to give him and there was more he wanted to take.

They were anything but finished.

# Chapter Five

Trish had barely caught her breath, draped over Eric's *El Capitan* of a body, before her mind raced ahead.

*More please. Now.*

One of the benefits of winning Li'l Miss Peach at the age of seven had been a free wristband at the county fair. She'd sat on the dignitaries' platform as the fair was opened. Keeping from fidgeting in the Georgia heat and holding in her anticipation had been almost impossible. The wristband,

however, meant free rides for the whole afternoon. She only had to be a good girl, wave when everyone else waved, smile like crazy, and she would have her reward.

By the time she was free to go, Trish had only two hours remaining. She'd dodged her mother's grasp after each ride. Straight for the next line. The next adventure. The clock was ticking. She'd known that stupendous things—the thrill of a curtain call, the sweetness of her Mama's praise after a win—didn't last. It was best to spin and laugh and get sick and



start all over. For as long as she could.

Her wristband would expire at dawn.

She levered up until her elbows were straight. Eric slowly reached his hands above his head. The move did fantastic things to his torso, flexing and lengthening those powerful muscles. A patch of chest hair nestled between his pecs and formed a line straight down the middle of his rockin' six-pack. She was fascinated by the hair beneath his arms, and the six inches of scarred skin that curled around his ribs. His chest was nearly free of

blemish.

Only that gorgeous tattoo, which was certainly no blemish.

“What does it mean?” She traced two fingers along the whorls and dips and spikes of simple black ink. It was twice as large as her hand and edged across the upper half of his left pec. “Anything in particular?”

“The Detroit skyline in my rearview.”

Trish almost laughed, because it seemed like such an unlikely answer. Surely he was being flip. But his expression was deadly quiet. “You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

A sheen of sweat made his skin tacky beneath her damp palms. Looking more closely, she could nearly see the concept. The spikes were the tops of skyscrapers. The whorls were almost...clouds? No, too optimistic. More like smog and wind. The dips added perspective, as if his Camaro had put ten miles between him and home.

“Did you design it?”

“No, my kid brother.”

“It’s beautiful. Artistic talent must run in the family.”

He didn’t answer. Those slate-blue eyes remained pinned to her

face, roving, but always within the confines of her features. He wasn't looking at her tits anymore.

Trish tried not to fidget. "And these?"

More tattoos, this time the ones on his shoulders and biceps.

"Military."

"Ah. The mystery stuff. Fine." She hopped off the bed. Knowing he had nowhere to look but at her ass and the swish of her hair made her feel...safer.

She arched languorously. Her attention was drawn back to the marvelous pictures that adorned his bedroom. Beautiful women, but

framed in a way that brought out their best qualities. Fabulous bodies were a given, but he caught the sweep of a particularly graceful rib cage, or a shapely pair of symmetrically crossed ankles—the details that made a woman a woman.

“I like her best,” she said almost to herself. “What was her name?”

He propped himself on one elbow. Long legs were layered with strong quads, defined more dramatically by a shading of light brown hair. He handled himself like a caveman, but she liked that he wasn't massively hairy. So much

beautiful skin to admire. Ironic, considering the prominence of his scars.

“Dolores.”

“I was teasing you earlier. I’d have totally chosen her over me.”

“Find a new lake if you want to fish for more compliments.”

“No, I mean it. I’ve always liked women with curves. Brunettes, in particular.” She returned her attention to Dolores. “My ex, Mallory, looked a lot like her. I wouldn’t know what to do with a chick as bony as me.”

“Your...?” Eric sat up on the bed. The dark blue sheets and artful

lighting did wonders for his coloring. His tan looked deeper, his hair a brighter shade of that lovely sandy brown. And whoa, his cock was getting ready to play again.

Trish was so distracted that she couldn't recall what had prompted his return to fighting form.

"Hmm?"

"Your ex?"

Oh shit. She tried to save those particular parts of her past for special occasions. Generous men became more giving when she told choice stories. Few of her stories including Mallory needed embellishment.

She shrugged and strolled back to the bed. Sitting on the edge, she kept her eyes on the black-and-white photographs. Did he take any in color? Were they for art or for his sexual enjoyment? Mementos of conquests? Maybe all three.

"I've always liked women too," she said. "You gonna make a huge slobbering deal about it?"

"Most guys would."

"Yes. They do." She twisted at the waist and nodded toward his thickening tool. "But can we leave it at that for now, stud? Unless you wanna get cozy with the details and tell me about your scars."



He slumped back on the bed.  
“Mouthy all of a sudden, showgirl.”

“I get energized, I suppose.  
Maybe that’s the word. After a  
good fuck.”

“Good?”

“Really good. Like, year-end,  
top-ten, best-moments good.”

She didn’t like when her real  
smiles showed up unannounced,  
but his oh-so-goddamn luscious  
mouth was quirking too. They both  
kept at it, like kids exchanging a  
balloon full of helium, each voice  
pitching higher and higher, until  
Trish was laughing.

Sliding alongside his supine

body, then tucking against him, she spread one knee across his thighs. The echoes of a chuckle rumbled beneath her fingers. Giggles tickled like champagne bubbles under her ribs.

“This was foreplay.” He was still wearing his half-assed grin. “You know that, right?”

“Oh yeah.”

She laid an ear on his chest while he stroked her casually, caressing her spine, dipping down to her ass, as she regarded his collection of women. As much as she admired or desired them, she was envious. She wanted her turn.

“Begg the question of what next,” she said quietly.

“Your call.”

“I think I used the word *anything*. And there was a certain possibility on the table...?”

“You’ll have to say it, showgirl. Like I said — your consent. Not booze. Hell, not even afterglow talking. Sure as shit not me prodding.”

“Can we delete the ones I don’t like?”

“No.”

Wow.

He had an absolutely steadfast *no*. She’d heard them on occasion,

but most men didn't know how to conjure that particular blend of tone and firmness. With most, there was room to negotiate.

Not with Eric. Not on this score.

That didn't put her curiosity to bed.

"Why not?"

"Part of the process. I keep all of it."

He was hard again. Excitement shimmered all around him. Talking to him this long, holding out the possibility — she knew it was foreplay too. He'd been blunt enough to nearly fuck her in his Camaro. Now she held all the

cards.

*Nearly* all. She certainly didn't like the idea of him keeping creepy, weird, bad, awkward pictures. She wanted all of them to look as beautiful as the ones on his wall. The rest — delete button. But his expression hadn't shifted. The angry scar on his left cheek wasn't as intimidating as his magnetic eyes. He flayed her open, looking for secrets.

“Fine,” she said. Off him. Away from him. “Let's do it. I want to be on your wall.”

He pushed off the mattress and padded over to her. Big hands with

reddened knuckles encircled her waist. "You don't get to decide that."

"Maybe I didn't phrase it right. I *will* be on your wall." She stood on tiptoe and plopped an open-mouthed kiss on the underside of his chin, which was flecked with stubble. "And you know it. Now, where can I get cleaned up?"

"Not gonna tell." He swept strands of sweat-tinged hair back from her temples then framed her face between his roughened palms. "We do this just as you are. After we fucked. Can't get more beautiful than that."

“C’mon, that’s not true. Let me put on a little gloss or something. A hairbrush, for Jesus’ sake.”

He leaned nearer. Kissed one cheek. The other. With far more gentleness than he should’ve possessed, he cradled the back of her head and tilted her ear to his sinful mouth. “Trust me. You’ve done that much so far, you insane woman. A little longer now. I’ll make it amazing, Trish.”

It was the first time he’d used her name. She liked it too much. Intimate, real – all those things she claimed to want but found so hard to give.

“You can promise that? Really?”

A frown twisted his brow. “No, you’re right. I can’t. But I’ll try.”

Damn it. Had Eric found some quick lie or offered more impossible assurances, she’d have balked.

Maybe called it off. Her stomach was a beehive of nerves. To pose for him, to have him watch her so closely, knowing he’d keep every shot of her looking like a freshly banged stripper? It was almost too much.

*I’ll try.*

He’d been honest. As blunt as always. No BS.

“Okay,” she said on a shaky



exhalation. “Tell me what to do.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

His smile returned. Brief. So crazy tight. Her heart whirled with a quiet, warm happiness. When was the last time she’d felt that? Actual happiness? She’d bypassed giddy a few hours ago.

Rather than shove it away out of complete terror, she let it settle in. Orgasms, check. Memories, check. That didn’t mean she needed to deny a few extra bonuses — like feeling happy rather than strung-out, fatalistic, *tired* — especially if he intended to photograph her without makeup.

“On the bed. On your knees.”

Her legs were unsteady as she made her way back to those tangled blue sheets. “Bare feet?”

“Nude photography, remember? One hundred percent you.”

She needed to change her attitude. Quick. She'd decided he wasn't most guys. She had to stop using past experiences to anticipate what he wanted. Any other man would've quizzed her for girl-on-girl details, and any photographs would've meant full makeup, stilettos and maybe airbrushing the next day.

They'd taught her to see herself

that way.

Eric wanted something deeper. She had to be brave enough to give it to him. The rewards had the potential to be spectacular. Mostly she was curious to see what all this did to him. So locked down and so shielded, when would he lose control? She knew it was possible. She wanted to be the cause. Whether or not her picture wound up on his wall, she needed to be memorable.

Even if that meant on his terms. She knelt on the mattress and watched him work. A silk lighting screen. A pair of floor lights, one

with a brighter bulb than the other. A tripod. She'd only seen equipment like that in the hands of professionals — headshots, opening-night glossies, pageant reels.

Eric had donned a silk walk-out robe, this one shiny black. His attention was centered on his work as he prepared the camera. Almost. Occasional flicks of his eyes revealed his growing excitement. The tension jacked higher each time their gazes collided. Trish's thighs quivered. She held the pose.

A sudden flash. She blinked in surprise.

Damn it. She'd been nibbling a

hangnail on her thumb.

“That wasn’t fair,” she said.

“The whole experience, Trish. I wasn’t joking. You can back out.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m in. Let’s do this.”

She meant it. She was stark naked in a near-stranger’s bed. What the hell was the point of backing out now? Like that moment walking down the corridor toward the boxing arena, she found the part of her that loved to be watched. She arched her back, tilted her chin toward the ceiling.

Another flash.

*That’s more like it.*

“We’ll pose you until it’s not fake anymore,” he said.

“We?”

“You picked a pose, right? Now my turn. Hands and knees, head down. Let me see the back of your neck.”

Trish obeyed. A shiver crossed her bowed shoulders. Her skin sizzled, knowing he was back there behind the camera, utterly absorbed, setting up for the next shot.

Flash.

She tossed her head, hair flying up.

Flash.

“Back up. Drag your hand between your legs.”

Flash.

Eric didn't take a lot of pictures. He wasn't some shutter-happy guy who'd sort the good from the bad later. Each one was as deliberate as the last. Neither did he stop. Mere seconds separated the shutter's click.

The poses they traded conveyed shifts of mood. Playful. Sensual. Outright dirty. Trish laughed and shook her head until she was dizzy. Free and eager and completely turned on.

Flash.

“I like that one,” he said quietly.

She stopped. The air between them thickened quickly. It wasn't anonymous anymore. It was long past fake.

“Hand clamping your breast.”

She tossed her head back, not just because she was touching herself. He was ramping up the intensity. Soon it was her turn. His. Back to her. Each shot slid away from play, down toward mindless, dark places. She thrust two fingers in her pussy and gasped.

“Lick them, showgirl.”

She tasted herself and heard him groan. The shutter clicked, bathing



her in light. He stood like a shadow behind that bright barrier. Black on black. She couldn't see his eyes anymore. Not that it mattered. The camera lens was his gaze now. Never, not ever, had she been watched so intently. Hair prickled on her forearms—the dazzling thrill of being the center of his world.

“Are you touching yourself yet, Eric?”

“Not yet.”

Another snap of those empowering lights. “But you will. Like I’m touching myself.”

“Yes,” he rasped.

“You’ll come for me too – after I come for you and you’ve captured every moment.”

“Fuck, Trish. Shut up.”

The flash blazed despite his growled warning. He was keeping that memory too.

She blew a kiss toward the camera’s silvery lens and smiled – another of the real ones, because she was smack in the middle of the most erotic night of her life.

# Chapter Six

Thank God they'd already had sex.

If Eric hadn't been allowed that release, he'd be more looking-over-a-cliff lightheaded. Trish wasn't simply beautiful. She was giving him something he hadn't had in so goddamned long. Not since before his crash. He thought he'd recovered along with the scars that barely inhibited his range of movement. A month in the hospital. Six months of intensive rehab. He'd only been cleared to fly

in June — right around the time the legal system got around to handing down Carey's sentence for aggravated assault. Prison, or four months getting clean.

The kid was smart enough to give it one last try, because it was his last. Another fuckup meant Carey would go to prison.

Returning to boxing a year after his crash had probably been dumb, except it was what he knew. Need a quick spot of cash? Just go a few rounds with an arrogant wannabe. More than that, boxing was proof that Eric was better. Stronger.

Fixed.

The night was proving him wrong. He felt like he was running to catch up. He hadn't gone hunting for the rush of photography in so long. The crass way, the easier way, had been his life for too long. Static and numb.

Fly. Fuck. Fight.

When had he forgotten there were bigger thrills to be had?

Although Trish was naked, freshly fucked and completely open, she was the epitome of secrets.

His skin pulled and tingled with anticipation. She'd been artificial at first, more *Hustler* than herself, but

she was slowly shedding the tips and tricks she'd absorbed while drinking infant's formula. Girls like her — like his slightly older neighbor Tiffany Juno, back in working-class Detroit — were probably why he'd taken a turn toward voyeurism. Tiffany had been a lot like Trish, appearing as perfect as could be. Only, one night when Eric had been too damn young, he'd seen her undress through open shades. She'd worn a padded bra over small but beautifully formed breasts. False lashes had actually detracted from wide, luminous eyes. She glowed

with sweat after working out, her blonde hair limp and sticky against her temples.

She was someone different when no one was watching. He'd wanted more of that.

Trish's turn to pose. She shifted up, her ass off the sheets, until she was kneeling. Her slender thighs squeezed together while she fondled her pussy, fingers sliding between her lips. He let her play. Let her stroke herself until her head fell back and that pale blonde hair draped over her upper back. Her breasts plumped together into tempting mounds. He could drag

his tongue across that skin. Taste her.

Instead, he adjusted the camera's focus, narrowing in to capture her shoulders and the long, slim column of her throat. He'd know what she was doing down below, out of the shot. He would know by memory and because her tendons were tense beneath delicate skin.

He hesitated, enjoying the secret. Once he snapped the button, the moment shifted because of the intrusion of the camera and flash — a reminder that he was watching. He liked that. She wasn't alone. And God, she seemed to love it.



Her hand worked between her legs. The bow of her shoulders hitched. She'd found a sweet spot. Either that, or she liked the flash, liked knowing he'd saved the picture.

"Tell me, Trish. All this." He waved at the cameras and the equipment. At the space between them, which made her seem inaccessible, like a trophy rather than a woman he'd fucked. "Do you like it?"

Her smile curved as she stroked between her legs. The softness of her expression was a contrast to the sharpness of the air.

“I do. A lot.” She laughed then, bright and silvery laughter that bounced around his loft, up to the high ceilings. “I’m probably supposed to say no, right? Give some token protests. I barely tried modesty. Truth is, I’m really digging this.”

He tightened his free hand into a fist as he snapped off another shot.

“Hey now,” she said on a near laugh. “That was two in a row on me. It’s your turn.”

“Lie down. Legs up and together.”

She obeyed instantly. He hadn’t specified, but she angled her head

toward the top of the bed. His view was of her ass and her legs pointing toward the ceiling, her body toned and in control.

She kept her fingers between her legs. She was gleaming wet. The soft cleft of her ass was lush against the dark and tangled sheets. Picture taken, saved. Kept forever.

Jesus, these shots would drive him crazy for months. Maybe years.

She wanted to be on his wall, but Christ, that might not happen. Every time he saw these pictures, he'd be as high-wire crazy as he was at this moment. He was torn. He wanted to touch, wanted to

watch. Touching would change the tone of their play when he wasn't ready for that yet. So he held back.

A measure of control, at least.

"Knees toward your chest."

She curled into a knot of vulnerability. The pose accentuated her lower lips. Two fingers in her sheath. She worked herself slowly.

Another picture. Another secret. All his.

"I bet girls do this for you a lot, don't they?" Her voice was husky and raw. The molasses of the South stuck every word together. "They look at that body of yours and fall all over themselves to make you

happy.”

She shifted, lowering her knees and slowly lifting her shoulders off the bed as if she were drunk. He could sympathize. Jack Daniels didn't hold a candle to all this crazy. He ground the heel of his hand over his cock. That hard pressure helped ease the insistence of his need.

Without an order this time, she lifted her fingers from her pussy and licked them. Slowly. She watched him the whole time. He could have taken a picture then, a dozen more, but he was half-smacked, lost in his own head.

“Well?” she asked. “How many women have taken one look at you and stripped? You’re one sexy piece of man meat, you know?”

Shit.

His body jerked until his bones locked solid. Apparently he was more uncomfortable regarding his post-crash scars than he’d been willing to admit. The trip to Canada was supposed to have been a routine training exercise. He’d only been there to fill his buddy’s slot. Liam “Dash” Christiansen had requested leave to stay home and patch up his crumbling marriage. Eric had been lucky to survive after

the way he'd punched through the F-16's canopy, out of a cockpit filled with fire. His parachute had caught on a stand of pines then slammed him into a rock pile.

Leaving him completely marked.

"You want me to ask you how many sugar daddies you've had?"

Her shoulders snapped into hard blades. "Who says I have?"

The line of her jaw could turn fierce and square. Good to know. He snapped the shot, then another quick, rude flurry for good measure. This was Trish. No games. Pissed and turned on at the same time. He liked the mix.

Her eyes narrowed. "You take *that* picture. Not when I lick girl come off my fingers."

"That picture was *you*."

"I haven't had sugar daddies."

"No matter to me."

"I haven't." She sat. Her knees fell open naturally, crossed with one pale sole of her foot up on her knee. She played idly with her cunt. Her fingers were gracefully long, like those of a pianist. Although seemingly artless, her expression had turned cloudy. "I've never taken cash from a man. Only...presents. I know it probably seems like semantics—I've been



told that before — but it matters. To me.”

He snapped off another picture, to save and examine more closely later. “I tell you what. Tell me your biggest present, and I’ll tell you the number of women.”

Her gaze snapped back to the camera lens and took control of the moment.

“A car.” She grinned, as if to downplay the importance. “But it was used, an old beater. Hardly counts to some girls I know. I sold it to pay for my first semester of tuition. Your turn.”

Three pictures in a row. He was

getting impatient. Couldn't help it. He liked it when she was tuned in to him, into the pressure that built between them. "Three."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Bull crap."  
"Truth."

"You've had more girls than that."

"Sure. Photographed some and fucked more." He snapped off one more shot. The flash blared white. "But not the two together. That's only happened with three women."

"Huh. I like that."

"And I like it when you're surprised."

"But you *love* this. You're

probably three seconds from throwing me down on this bed. Your prick's so hard I'm amazed you can talk. I can hear it, you know. In your voice. You've got an amazing voice, especially when you're turned on."

She crawled forward on the bed, sat on the edge and tucked her heels against the bottom frame. Her knees were elevated, her whole pussy bare to his gaze. She dipped inside. A little more. Then out, circling, pinching her clit. Her ribs hitched high on a gasping moan. He snapped picture after picture.

"You should talk more," she said

between moans. "I like your voice."

He smiled. "Talk about what? How I want to bone the hell out of you? How your pretty snatch turns my brain inside out?"

"Yes. That."

Her fingers stroked. She caught a nipple between her fingers and pinched. A little mean with the pleasure. He could give her rough. He was skilled at that, after all. All the sweet shit that was supposed to come afterwards—not so much. Commitment? With what free time? With what stores of energy?

Trish was lost in her own head. Her eyes had drifted closed. Head

back. She was pouring pleasure over herself, with shudders and jerks. She moaned. Her eyes snapped open. She looked dead at him, in the moment with him. The skin over her cheeks flushed. This was a window into what she must do all alone in her bed, when she was bored by men offering gilded versions of the world.

“Jesus,” she moaned. “I’m going to come. There. Now. Take the fucking picture...” Her words dissolved into a groan that rocked down his spine and took hold of his balls.

She could be faking. He wouldn’t

put it past a girl in her situation.

He snapped off a picture, but after quickly flipping a ten-second timer, he strode forward.

Into the shot.

He'd never been in a shot.

Eric dropped to his knees, pulled her hand away and shoved two fingers in her cunt, which still clenched with her orgasm. Juices poured over his palm.

All real. All for him.

The camera flashed.

# Chapter Seven

Eric must've set the camera to repeat at intervals. The flash flared as he kissed her and leaned her back against the mattress. The camera would record their bodies in profile.

Being covered by his big, imposing body was so different than riding him. Then, she'd felt like a goddamn superstar. Queen of his mountain. She'd used him and basked under the burning zap of his dedicated attention. Being beneath him sharpened the sense of

vulnerability. He could do anything he wanted. Throw her against a wall, fuck her up the ass—his power was complete.

Flash.

She shuddered as he pulled a condom out of the pocket of his robe then slipped it on. She welcomed him inside. So *full*. Relaxation twined with excitement because now she knew she was safe. His kink wasn't non-consent or humiliation. He liked rough sex, exactly how she wanted, and he wanted pictures every ten seconds to commemorate the event.

It *felt* like an event. He surged



into her, with nothing done by half-measures. No truncated thrusts, but full, consuming, deliberate strokes. Her joke about whether he could go all night wasn't a laughing matter. His steady fuck and the concentration on his rugged, scarred face said he could do this until she exploded and exploded.

*Greedy whore.* As if two weren't enough.

Not nearly. She was climbing aboard another ride. Clock ticking.

She reached around and grabbed his ass. Hesitant at first, she only scratched those pumping globes of solid muscles. Some men didn't like

even a hint of pain, but he flashed that blink of a smile. "As rough as you like, showgirl. Do it."

He forced his tongue into her mouth as she dug deep. Squeezing and pinching his rock-hard flesh dragged a moan from them both. They drank each other in. His cock had no limits. Now, stretching her wide, challenging her body to take more and more, he was swelling. Lengthening. Every new sensation and every click of the camera's bright lights jacked his erection another notch.

Yet Trish hit a high, frustrating plateau. Her orgasm was so close,

but her body wasn't cooperating. She'd used up too much sensation earlier.

The noise she made must've signaled him that something was wrong. He slowed, stopped, with his cock buried to the hilt. "Tell me."

"Stuck," she said, turning her head unconsciously toward the camera. Another flash made her cringe. Great. He'd have *frustrated* among his array of unappealing poses. What the hell kind of picture was that? "My clit's a little numb. I..." She swallowed. "I don't think I'm gonna come this way."

He stroked her cheek. Intent, yes, and with tenderness she hadn't expected. "How often have you admitted that?"

"You make it sound weird."

"Don't mean to."

Why was she blushing? She wasn't doing anything wrong, but those times she'd faked it...she'd *felt* like it was wrong. The coward's way out. She hadn't demanded pleasure for herself, although she'd certainly accepted the gifts and trinkets that came from a satisfying performance. Now it turned her stomach.

"Never," she said softly. "Guys

don't want to know that shit."

"Then why tell me?"

She caressed up his back. A brief flinch marked the moment she passed her palms over his scars. Only then did she realize he'd positioned them so the damaged side of his face pointed away from the camera.

"I don't think you'd take kindly to me faking my way through."

"No." Another undeniable negative. He was good at those. She liked knowing when she guessed him right.

"And damn it, I *want* to come."

The camera kept up its pace,

recording their conversation. She wondered once more, what was the point? Maybe he'd been putting on a hard-ass front when he said he would keep all of them. That couldn't possibly be the case.

Eric trailed his fingers down her throat, along the side of her breast. "Thank you for telling me. Now we can do something to fix it."

His withdrawal was a reminder of his amazing size. Potent. Cock gone, body gone, she was bereft of that sheltered thrill – consumed and guarded at once.

"Up. Back on your knees."

Although wobbly after holding

all those poses, Trish complied. Quickly he left the bed and made a few adjustments to the camera. What, she couldn't know, but his expression was especially intent when he returned to her.

“You look like a man on a mission.”

“Your pleasure.”

“Oh God.”

His smile quirked at her reflexive response. The flash was clicking away, faster now. As Eric climbed behind her on the bed, she counted each at three seconds. Practically an old-fashioned flipbook.

He grasped her around the waist,

with one hand strong at her hip. Such a bruiser. He squeezed and groped her. He tossed her forward onto her hands and knees then fucked into her with no warning. Trish squealed. His grip on her hips was implacable. Every driving thrust threatened to shove her off the bed, but he held her firmly in place, ready to receive each pulse of his amazing cock.

She thought maybe she'd try her clit again. He was so *good*. All rhythm and power. But he slipped his arm through both her elbows and pulled them back, imprisoning them between sweat-slicked bodies.



The move arched her back against his chest and thrust out her breasts. His other arm wrapped low around her hips. Supporting her completely. He fucked her with the precision and timing of a piston.

Now she couldn't touch herself. She didn't know if she had the guts to tell him a second time that it wasn't working. A heavy sense of frustration and disappointment threatened to kill her buzz.

Until those unforgettable lips nestled close to her ear.

"They're watching us, Trish."

"What?"

He gripped her tighter. His

speed had picked up — as concentrated, as deliberate, but with an edge of desperation. “The paparazzi. Those cameras. All aimed at you.”

She gasped. That image hit deep, deep in her mind. Secret places. She’d almost forgotten the steady flash of the camera. Now it was all she could think of. “More. Please, Eric.”

“They’ve come to see the hottest piece of ass in Vegas get nailed. Get fucking *pounded*.” He punctuated the word with a stroke that made her cry out. “They barely remember to click the shutter. They’re too

busy staring at your tits. Nipples like jewels. They're hard for you, showgirl. One of them is out in that crowd with his fingers inside his fly."

Shit. Shit. *Shit*. His voice was such a turn-on, but his words... All the while knowing it was the most he'd spoken the whole night. For her. To get her off.

He slipped the hand at her hip down toward her pussy. Slowly, so slowly, he started on her clit. The pace of his thrusts never eased. His breath was as ragged as hers. He was close, while she was building up to an orgasm she'd never

experienced before — something she wouldn't be able to control.

It scared the hell out of her.

He didn't relent. "His hand's wrapped around his cock, showgirl. He's a professional man. He's got deadlines and pictures to present to his editors. A paycheck to earn. Hell, a reputation. He's experienced and proud of it. But the camera's hanging off his shoulder. He's too busy jerking off. Watching me fuck you. Watching how you move and the sweat on your stomach. You've got him mesmerized. He'll bang the shit out of his girlfriend when he gets

home. He'll take her up the ass for the first time. She won't know what hit her."

"Jesus."

Her whole body was shaking. She couldn't stop a moan that built in her gut, pulsing, pushing out of her throat. It got stronger, louder. She couldn't hold it back. Eric's fingers were as quick as his hips.

"Eyes open now. Look at them all here for you. Every flash is another man who wants a piece of you. That guy with his hand down his pants? He's fucking his hand. He doesn't care who sees. He's gonna come, Trish. He's gonna

blow his wad for my showgirl. He's waiting for you to look. For you to come."

A scream ripped her open. She shrieked as her climax erased her mind, wiped her memory. All pretense gone. White-hot pleasure made her convulse, doubling over, squeezing his hand between her thighs. The waves kept coming and coming as the lights flared behind her closed eyes.

"And I'll watch you too," he growled.

It was the last thing he said as a solid stream of sexy-as-fuck grunts accentuated his desperation. His

body seized. Every muscle locked, but he vibrated with a pulsing energy that poured into her. One more devastating wave of release left her sprawled on the bed in a used-up heap. Eric crashed beside her, an arm wrapped low around her waist.

“So good,” she gasped.

“*Just* good?” Laughter shaded his voice. “Again?”

“Holy-damn good?”

“Better.”

A minute later, his breathing beginning to steady, Eric disengaged. Trish turned to see what he was doing. He’d returned

to his camera and shut everything down. All the light that remained was a soft blue-tinted glow from a bulb way up on the high ceiling, like twilight brought indoors.

Struggling onto her hands and knees wasn't going to work. She was exhausted in the wake of the most intense orgasm she'd ever had. He'd played her so well that it was still scary. But whoa, the payoff.

Eric helped her. Tender hands now — strong, but with another glimpse of that out-of-place gentleness. "C'mon, Trish. Up you go."



Ice layered over her skin. “Does that mean I should call for a taxi?”

He stilled too. “Do you want to?”

“One-night stand, right?”

She knelt on the bed, facing where he’d become a human wall. That tattoo was so damn beautiful. Finding her courage, she looked up to meet his gaze. But she didn’t quite make it — focused instead on his lovely mouth. She shrugged, trying to make it no big deal.

He chuckled softly as he led her to the head of the bed, tucked her into the sheets, curled her around his barrel chest and solid legs. She couldn’t help stealing a taste with a

flick of her tongue.

“Stay. We can fuck before breakfast. And after.”

She grinned against his hot skin.  
“You’re back to you.”

“Hm?”

“After blowing my mind with all those words, you’re back to a couple syllables at a time.”

He kissed the top of her head. Thick arms held her close in the near darkness. “Now you know. I save them up.”

Trish woke up alone, but she heard Eric rattling around the

kitchen. For a moment she stared at the ceiling. Sunlight from industrial second-story windows filled the open space. She wondered how she'd managed to sleep so long with that brightness streaming in.

*Oh, maybe cuz I got nailed like whoa and how?*

She was sore all over. After cheese fries, Jack Daniels and rigorous exercise of multiple varieties, she was seriously dehydrated. Her head spun in a nauseating fog. She hadn't consumed that much sodium in one sitting in years. Turning to check the official time — something more

specific than “the morning after” — she found an unexpected surprise on the bedside table.

A twenty-four-ounce bottle of water. A bottle of aspirin. And a spare toothbrush. A neatly folded midnight-blue terrycloth robe lay at the end of the bed.

She smiled and smushed her face into the pillow he’d slept on, inhaling deeply. A laugh wiggled out of her body.

Best night she’d had in forever.  
*We can fuck before breakfast.*

His words had been so matter-of-fact. With most guys she’d have left at three in the morning. Safer.

Easier than hanging around after they'd both gotten all they wanted. This was more like a work in progress.

She sure as shit didn't want to look and smell like she did when the next round began.

She downed some aspirin with half of the bottled water.

Toothbrush and robe in hand, she headed into the bathroom, which was tucked behind his makeshift photography studio. A shiver of memory worked up her calves.

Damn. *So good.*

After a thorough scrubbing of both mouth and body, she gave up

on putting her wig back on. It was a wretched mess, and she didn't have any replacement pins or glue. She'd need to spend time getting the snarls out.

Trish swiped away the condensation on the mirror. Her short, almost tomboy hair was damp. Barely more blonde than brown.

This was huge. The only people who saw her without her wig were Mama and other women in Trish's same line of work.

With a deep breath, she reminded herself of how much Eric seemed to like the truth. Genuine

things. Maybe...

She cinched the bathrobe's tie and opened the door before she could change her mind.

A cup of steaming coffee waited for her on the same bedside table.

She smiled. Gruff, yes.

Inconsiderate, apparently not.

Was he in the kitchen? Listening more closely, she heard...grunts? Steady. Rhythmic. Like when he'd slammed into her before coming.

What the hell?

Apprehensive, she walked toward the open space on the other side of the bedroom's brick half-partition. And froze dead. Had she

grabbed the coffee first, she would've dropped the mug.

Eric was doing chin-ups. One after the other after the other. He was covered in sweat, wearing only a tight-as-sin pair of black boxer briefs. During their decadent evening, she hadn't been privileged with such a blatant view of his back. Muscles bunched across his upper back, his shoulders, his thick arms. Then he lowered his body in a controlled move. Everything lengthened, including his scar. It was as if a pale snake had coiled around his back, nestling where she knew it ended, out of sight around



his ribs.

She was going to offer a greeting, something light to belie how he turned her on. Because *poof*, she was wet and tingling with want. She'd never been with a man who took such precise care of himself. A masterpiece of macho.

Then she saw his laptop. It sat open on a nearby table. From where he worked out, Eric had a perfect view of the screen. On that screen was a slideshow of Trish. Only a second separated each transition. Naked, pouting, sweaty, straining and finally screaming. All the phases of their night.

Eric kept working. Harder now.  
Grunting with each fierce pull.

She swallowed and found her voice. Because she wanted in on a piece of that fabulous, rigid body before he worked out all the tension.

“So, stud...how’d they turn out?”

# Chapter Eight

A shot of energy sang along Eric's shoulders and down his back. He held himself upright in the chin-up for three more counts, finishing out the movement. Then down. His toes hit the floor. He'd done enough that he was huffing. Sweat had popped up along his skin. He hadn't been able to help it. The drive of Trish's pictures...

It had either been a fast, difficult mini-workout or jacking it while she was in the shower.

The pictures had hit him that

fiercely.

Maybe he should have shut them off, but no one in his right mind would've chosen *not* to look at her. The way she'd practically come apart over the course of the night. Let down her shields. Sweaty and dirty, laughing and free.

He'd loved every minute.

Grabbing a towel, he turned while he wiped away some of the sweat.

*Whoa.* He hadn't expected that.

Short hair barely brushed the tops of her ears in a color that more closely matched the honey between her legs. He should've known

better, that the platinum had been a wig. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so appreciative to see a woman with natural breasts. Now even her modest makeup was long gone, and she stood before him wearing her vulnerability like a second robe. She lifted her shoulders in a tense, halfhearted shrug, as if waiting for him to pass judgment.

He palmed the back of her skull. Her hair was baby fine and super soft. "Nice," he said quietly, then pulled her near enough to take her mouth. She tasted like mint, not coffee.

She splayed a hand across his pecs. "You certainly do know how to say good morning."

"The pictures..." He traced the arch of her eyebrow with one thumb, harboring the compulsion to memorize the shape of her face. "Perfect."

Her smile sharpened. "Told you I'd end up on your wall."

"Yeah," he said with a quiet laugh. "Probably."

She sauntered to the side table where his laptop rested. Hands in the pockets of his robe, she watched the slideshow. "Man, look at that. Look at *me*. I've never..." She tilted

her head as her breathing hitched a bit faster. "That is crazy hot. Oh! That one. Go back."

He angled around her hip to get to the trackpad. "This?"

In the picture, he was behind her, fucking her. His arms were wrapped underneath her breasts. While Eric buried his face against her neck, she looked right at the lens. Her eyes appeared sleepy yet crackling with energy.

She made an inarticulate moan. "Christ, yes. Lord, look at your arms."

"What?" He could barely see them beyond the plump rise of her

tits.

She folded both hands around his upper arm. "This. Your body is flat-out sick." Petting, she slid over the caps of his shoulders, down his forearms and along the veins that stood out there. "How much work do you put in yourself?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "I could ask the same of you."

"Skinny doesn't mean in shape. I couldn't do a chin-up to save my life."

Devious. There was no other word to describe the feeling that took over. He felt absolutely devious.



After gripping her ribs, he picked her up and spun their bodies. She squealed as he lifted her toward the chin-up bar. She grabbed it as if by reflex. The dark blue robe came open, displaying a creamy expanse of skin that remained slightly pink from the shower.

“Don’t you dare let me go,” she said on another squealing laugh. “So help me God, if you do...”

“You’ll what?” He pushed away the robe with his nose and nuzzled the inside curve of her breast. Those two pert nipples were irresistible. He sucked one tip into his mouth, then nibbled and licked.

Her legs curled around his waist. “This doesn’t much seem like any chin-up I’ve ever heard of.”

He smiled against her skin. “If you went to a gym, no man would ever leave.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a compliment.” Her legs tightened at his waist as she released one hand. She steadied herself with a hand at the back of his head, sending tingles down his skin — until she smoothed around to the edge of the scars on his face. “You can’t let me go, though. Promise me.”

Offering silent encouragement, he grabbed her hand and lifted it

toward the bar. He liked when she extended her lithe body, with her breasts rising to his mouth.

He also liked her *not* touching his scars.

He slipped his hand under her thigh and hitched her knee over his elbow. She was wide open for him – a tempting bit of wiry determination. Her pussy was already wet.

Teasing done. They were both ready.

He kissed her. Took her mouth. Stroked his tongue along hers, harder, more urgently, as their lips pushed and slid.

She threw her head back, inviting him to graze his teeth over her skin. He palmed her ass and positioned her wet cleft over his cock. "You still think I'm going to drop you, showgirl?"

"No. God, no." Her body lengthened in a lithe arc. "But you'll have to put me down to find a condom."

"Wanna bet?"

Eric reached up to release her grip from the metal bar. After looping her wrists around the back of his neck, he grabbed her hips and ass. The walk to the kitchen island wasn't a strain. He loved having his

body back, knowing he could be this strong and assured.

“You’re insane, you know that?” She nuzzled her face against his neck as she hooked her ankles at the small of his back. “I can’t believe you’re carrying me.”

Each step pressed her wetness along his throbbing cock. He was more in danger of coming than he was of dropping her. At the island, he planted her on the countertop. She gasped when her ass made contact with the cold tile, and gasped again when he kissed her. He dove into a drawer. Thank Christ he’d happened to see a

condom in there the other day.

He rolled it on with perfunctory motions. Trish leaned back on her palms, showing off her delicious body, spreading her knees wide. The gleam of her cunt was melting his mind. She stroked her fingers up the inside of her thigh then circled her entrance. "Those pictures. Picking which one goes on the wall... That'll be a special event for you, won't it?"

He grunted in response. He could barely get his thoughts straight.

She went on as if he'd managed to haul an appropriate response out

of his lump of a brain. "Will you play with your cock, Eric? Stroke it? Go through all the pictures a hundred times? Zoom in on some part of me?" She fanned her fingers wide over his body as she leaned her mouth close. "I want to be there. I want to watch you pick."

He slid into her too fast. Red-tipped fingernails dug into his shoulders. Chagrin rode him almost as cruelly as his arousal, but fuck she was too much. He'd never had a woman as completely into his kink. The image she'd conjured rode him. He'd scan through the pictures with his hand on his cock,

while Trish draped over his back. She'd look over his shoulder, equally turned on as they cast her as his own personal porn star. That loop of voyeurism threatened to break his skull open.

Later.

Right now it was kitchen sex and getting his fucking rocks off. She stole his equilibrium and sent him spinning.

He hitched her up and pulled her closer until she was off the counter and supported by his arms. He stroked his cock in and out of that clinging sheath.

"You're insane," she breathed.



“All that strength. Mine for now, isn't it?”

He could only grunt and force back the orgasm that grabbed the base of his spine.

She took his mouth — a hard kiss, then a harder grind of her pelvis. Stroke and fuck and taking. But giving too. Because good Lord she gave everything she had.

He didn't know how he held off long enough to let Trish come first. But he did. His reward was the ruthless clench of her pussy. The low moan in his ear. The shiver that raced down her back.

Eric spun and pressed her flat

against the stainless-steel fridge. Sweat smeared against the cold metal and between their bodies, blending them together. Push and take and *more*, until he broke open and the pleasure stole his breath.

His thighs were shaky as he remained pressed against Trish. She lowered her legs one at a time. Their lips clung a minute more. He'd never thought of himself as a kissy kind of guy – ironic considering his call sign, *Kisser* – but he liked her mouth. He wanted more.

“I mean it,” she said against his wet mouth. “I want to be there.”

“You still don’t get veto.” He’d meant that one too. He kept them all.

She licked her lips. “You’re a hard man in more than one way, aren’t you?”

“Not anymore.”

She grinned—a dazzling, flashy smile that shot a bright light into his dark corners. “And classy too.”

“I try.”

“At least you certainly know how to give a girl a good morning.”

“Should I top it off with some breakfast?”

Her mouth pinched into a displeased expression. “Nah, I don’t

think so.”

Eric nodded once. Weird to think he knew something of what went on in her head. “Either you don’t think I have your picks, or you don’t eat much breakfast.”

“Option the second,” she said, apparently chagrined. “It takes a different kind of work for a chick to maintain her figure. You’ve never faced a runway seamstress with a tape measure. Those bitches are fierce.”

“You need a cheeseburger.”

She laughed, full out. “Like hell. I’d have to run fifteen miles!”

He palmed her ribs and snorted.

“You could pack fifty cheeseburgers in here. No one would notice the difference.”

“Liar. Sweet, but a liar.”

“What if I promised we’d work it off?”

She pushed him away and sauntered off, tying the robe shut as she went. “Maybe. I’ll consider it. But first, I’ve got a day to get on with.”

“A show later?”

“Of course. It’s Saturday. That’s hours from now, though. Mama thinks I have voice lessons. Really, I’ll head to the campus library.” At his slight frown she lifted her chin

with definite pride. “Homework. So get a move on, sugar. I need a change of clothes, which means a trip home first. You’re gonna drop me off in that sweet ride of yours.”

# Chapter Nine

They didn't head straight home. Eric merely pointed his Camaro east and drove. Unlike when she'd sat on that same leather seat the night before, Trish was relaxed. She had more questions than answers, more doubts than certainties, but she tipped her head back and smiled. The late-September heat breezed across her face. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so free. Even if only for a little while, she breathed it in.

"Wish I had my camera," he said

quietly.

Trish opened her eyes to find him sneaking glances at her. “No way. You’d wrap us around a tree trunk.”

“Safety concern.”

“Absolutely.”

After having seen Eric’s rambling industrial loft, she was hesitant to show him the double-wide she shared with her mother, Laurie. He wouldn’t go inside. That was an unspoken no-no. But it wasn’t exactly the palace of a superstar in the making.

Eric didn’t seem to mind her real hair, and he had a thing about



sexual authenticity, but Trish had her dreams. They did not include a man like him getting an eyeful of how she was barely scraping by. Maybe she should've taken a taxi. She'd been too needy, wanting a few more minutes within their dream world.

Things had been awkward with her mama lately. They'd only get worse when Trish showed up after a one-night stand and passed on the news of her show closing. And her agent dropping her.

Damn.

"This the place?" he said.

"Yup."

“Nice.”

“Don’t.”

He put the classic Camaro into park and turned to face her. Sunlight glared through the windshield, highlighting his scar. Already it was a part of him. She took it as one feature among many, along with his beautiful lips, slate-blue eyes and biceps where they bulged from beneath his black T-shirt.

“I spent the first eight years of my life in a trailer.” He shook his head. “You won’t get any bullshit from me, Trish.”

“Sorry.” Miracle of miracles, she

managed to keep her hands to herself as she said it. Apologies were best topped off with convincing touches. Only natural. That wouldn't be the case with Eric. She knew it. "My baggage, right? I have this idea of where I want to be and this... This isn't it."

He nodded once. All the understanding she needed. He leaned nearer, tipped her chin with his knuckles. "One day, showgirl."

She smiled. A return to coy. But she had to break this off. It was getting too painful to stay, knowing they only delayed the inevitable. "Is that a promise?"

“Only if you’ve made it to yourself. Now kiss me and get out.” He said it with a grin.

“That’s more like it.”

His lips touched hers with delicacy, with sweetness. Were they saying goodbye? Because it didn’t feel final at all. Trish closed her eyes and soaked up every gorgeous spark.

He pulled back, then gunned the engine. Trish grasped the door handle when he said, “So I’ll see you on Friday.”

Her brain sputtered, and her heart did a crazy somersault. This was not good. More like, it was *too*

good.

“Friday.”

“Boxing? Ring girl? Will you be there?”

Of course. Of course — and *oh my God*. Now she had six nights to figure out what would happen next. As if she had any say on her own. “Only if I get a callback.”

“You will,” he said with utter confidence. “Make sure you’re number one this time.”

“Sure thing, sugar.”

She blew him a kiss and sauntered toward the trailer’s white aluminum door, knowing he watched her the whole way. At the

top of the steps, she gave her ass an extra shimmy. The Camaro revved and sped away — a sports-car version of Eric's edge-of-control growl.

Retrieving her keys from her faux-Prada bag brought reality back lickety-split. She wondered which question would come first. *Where've you been? How'd the gig go? Or, Where the hell is your wig?*

A toss-up. It really depended on her chosen mood. Mother, cheerleader or biggest critic.

Then there was the issue of breaking the news about *Princess of Egypt* and Pam dropping Trish on

her ass. The sun was high above the desert horizon. Vegas stood tall in the distance, far less glitzy without its magnificent lights. Early autumn waves of heat snaked off the sand and clouded the familiar landmarks, including the Luxor. She couldn't see her school from there, and she liked campus a helluva lot better.

From their trailer in the boonies, the future always looked distant. She had so far to go.

Even farther now.

Yet she carried a new buoyancy inside her and the taste of Eric's coffee on her lips. She wasn't such a

dumb bunny as to think spending the night with him was going to change her life. Fabulous memories. Something to look forward to if she saw him again in the ring. That would be a sweet bonus. She'd claw Meg's and Lola's wigs off if they tried to take the first round.

She hadn't had anything to look forward to outside of work and class for a long time.

At last, with a deep breath, she pushed the key in the lock and walked indoors. Mama stood in the tiny kitchenette sautéing what looked to be vegetables and tofu. Maybe for a spicy Szechwan stir-



fry? It sure wasn't cheese fries, but after indulging in a feast of sensations, Trish could do with something to scorch her mouth. She wouldn't taste anything with less bite.

"Hey," she said casually. She slumped her purse and huge duffels on her recliner. Mama had the old leather one, while Trish had the upholstered one where the blue had long since faded to a sickly gray. "What's for lunch?"

"Where the hell have you been, missy?"

"Out."

"Sure as shit *out*. You better start

talking.”

“The boxing gig was cool. Three minutes work, total. A lot better payout than that indie runway show.” She strolled through the kitchen, cruising for a bit of clean protein. Starving. And low on impulse control. A low-fat string cheese would have to do. “Now it’s a matter of waiting for the callback. The transition from the Luxor to the arena was rough, but I shouldn’t have any trouble. Six weeks would be nice money.”

She unwrapped the cheese and nibbled in small bites. For as long as Trish could remember, *small bites*

was one of the Ten Commandments of growing up a pageant girl. On impulse, she gnawed off a big hunk. She caught her mama's scowl and threw that scowl right back.

“Don't try to dodge me, Patty. And where in Jesus' name is your wig?”

Trish bit her tongue. *There it is.* And to top it off, her mama was the only person on the planet who called her by her childhood nickname. It probably said something about their relationship. Ribbons and bows for the rest of eternity — that's how Mama saw

her.

She rubbed the back of her hair, which had dried into soft falls. No product. So strange that she felt more exposed in front of her own mother than she had with Eric. He made her feel beautiful and sexy. Mama was looking at her as if she'd decided to trade ribbons and bows for a bucket of night crawlers.

"I met a guy."

"The one with the Camaro?"

"That's right. Happy?"

"No. Not at all." Mama stirred the vegetables with angry movements. The tofu was beginning to disintegrate in the

frying pan. She wouldn't spring for a wok. Thought it was pretentious. "What makes you think you can stay out till all hours with some stranger? Not a call!"

"When was the last time you remembered to check in during an all-night bender? Don't you dare point fingers."

"But you've always been such a good girl about men. You know what can happen!"

"And *you* know I've been on the Pill since I was fifteen. At your insistence."

"For your protection, missy. You've seen my stretch marks. A

baby would ruin your career. A year or more off work, and a body you'll never be able to fix."

Trish took a deep breath that scorched her throat. The cheese sat heavily in her stomach. Every time Mama talked over the horrors of accidentally getting pregnant, Trish wondered if she harbored regrets about giving birth when she was a junior — if, through the years, she'd been living vicariously through Trish's successes.

No, she didn't have to wonder. She'd always known. It only shone more clearly that afternoon.

There was no point in arguing

that she'd used protection or in zinging her with the fact that getting into Eric's Camaro had been the far riskier part of the night. She was tired, sore and agitated at the same time. At some point before finding the energy and concentration to head to the library, she'd need to call in a few favors. She needed another gig. A *real* one. Fast.

Time to shut down the minor, more personal drama in favor of bigger problems. Besides, no matter their occasional drama and spats, they were a solid team. Mama did most of the scouting for auditions,

even more than Pam had. Maybe they could put something in place.

Time to put that to the test.

*“Princess of Egypt* has been shut down. I have less than three weeks left.”

Mama flipped the burner off and shoved the frying pan off the metal. “Well, that’s just peachy. What happened?”

While Trish helped rescue what remained of lunch, she related Pam’s phone call. Only...she couldn’t quite bring herself to admit being dropped. One bombshell at a time, though she’d needed to endure both at once.



“Damn.” Mama sank into a chair next to their Formica table. “That was gonna be a big one, Patty baby.”

“Don’t rub it in. I have a few weeks to draw the last paychecks, maybe make a proper impression on the right people. The ring-girl job will fill the gaps.”

“If you get it.”

*Thanks for the support.*

Mama tapped her fingernails on the Formica. Her hands were rail thin after having followed Trish’s diet for two decades. Moral support, she said, but also trying to keep up with the compliments

Trish received. She liked to think it was harmless, almost flattering. They *were* a team, all the way down to tofu, for Chrissake. The lack of body fat, however, was beginning to make her early-forties Mama look a decade older.

Trish had a sudden craving for a cheeseburger. Eric would watch her swallow every luscious bite, and he'd tell her to lick up the salty juices. Hell, the sick stud might bring a camera. She wouldn't put it past him now. That the thought turned her on... That was new.

She and Mama ate in silence. The Szechwan was barely edible, and

Trish picked around the whole grain rice.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call,” she said at last.

Mama only shrugged. “I know how it is. He a good catch at least?”

“Not sure. He moonlights as a boxer. But he’s in the military somehow. We didn’t...” She blushed and dipped her gaze toward her plate. “We didn’t talk specifics.”

“He could be nice for you, missy. Fill in the gaps.”

The thought of manipulating Eric into taking care of her for even a short duration didn’t sit well. He’d

see right through it and maybe trot out another of those impossible *no* replies. She wanted to avoid being on the receiving end of those. Permanently.

“It wasn’t like that at all, Mama.”

“Looking like you do, it’s no wonder. So...common. Christ, Patty. Didn’t I teach you better? After all I sacrificed, this is how you make the best of a bad situation?”

She’d been waiting for that familiar refrain too. Yes, her mother’s sacrifices had been huge. Even the divorce of Trish’s parents could be traced to the pageant circuit. Mama had wanted it. Bad.

Daddy hadn't wanted it enough. He'd fought to rescue Trish from that life, but in the end, he'd been the one to walk out. Mixed messages for a six-year-old. What else had she been able to do but keep winning prizes and earning praise from the only parent left in her life?

"I'm tired, Mama. Don't—" She raised her hands preemptively. "Don't say it. Yes, I'm tired because I was up all night, but I worked the show and the boxing gig too. I'm not as irresponsible as your glare seems to think I am." She couldn't stand looking at her picked-apart

leftovers. "Thanks for lunch."

Trish grabbed her gear and weaved back to her tiny bedroom. One window. She pulled the shade and flopped onto her twin mattress, then dragged a knitted blanket over her shoulders. She wore the same clothes from the night before, which smelled of perfume, sweat and sex. Cool. She'd hold that close awhile longer.

Later, she'd shower. She'd cram in a few hours on her *Don Giovanni* project. Then it was down to the Luxor to put on her face and her hair. She'd reemerge as the Trish Monroe who hadn't lost her chance

at a future in Vegas. That didn't mean the job hunt needed to wait.

She snagged her phone out of her purse. From the safety of her darkened bedroom, wearing the last of Eric's scent on her skin, she punched the first number.

"Perry? It's Trish Monroe. How've you been, sugar?"

# Chapter Ten

To spend Monday morning in a briefing room was shitloads better with thoughts of Trish bouncing around Eric's head. She wasn't just beautiful. It was the mix of personalities and the way she'd let him see under her shell, if only for glimpses at a time.

His phone was burning a hole in the pocket of his flight suit. Subtly, he put a hand over it. He hadn't resisted loading a couple of Trish's pictures, buried in a hidden folder so no one else would find his secret



—and so she wouldn't be exposed to the world at large. All his. All those lovely, sleek curves and the way her bright blue eyes practically glowed.

“Kisser,” snapped a sharp voice at the front of the room. “You with us? Or do you have somewhere you'd rather be?”

Eric jerked upright at hearing his call sign. Kisser. What a fucking joke. It hadn't been funny even before his crash.

Major Haverty wasn't someone to piss around with. His bite was sharp enough to match his call sign, Fang. He'd be leaving the

command soon, but that fact hadn't dimmed his authority. Eric spread his hands flat on the conference table, trying to shake the touch-memory of Trish's sleek thighs. "No, Sir. I'm here."

"Good to know," Fang said from behind his podium. "Wouldn't want to repeat myself when it comes to special assignments."

The woman standing beside him was recovering wild child Major Leah "Princess" Girardi. Not only was she Fang's second-in-command, she was girlfriend to one of Eric's best friends, Mike "Strap Happy" Templeton. Almost two

years ago, Princess had been the biggest fuckup in the squadron, despite her wicked flying. She'd cleaned up right before hooking up with Strap Happy. Jon "Tin Tin" Carlisle, her best friend and all around pervy little shit, as well as Major Haverty, had stood by her the whole time, helping to pull her out of that nosedive.

Odd as it was, a chick fighter pilot was demonstrating how, yes, it was possible to get one's shit together. A year ago, his chauvinism and bad attitude wouldn't have let him contemplate the idea.

A year could be a hell of a thing. Now, the fact Princess was smiling at Eric could be either terrifying or reassuring.

Eric shifted in his seat. "Yes, Sir."

"First up, the National Championship Air Races in exotic Reno," Fang said with relish.

A collective groan of roughly thirty voices went up around the plain industrial room.

No one liked working air shows. Thousands of tourists, long hours, and a whole lot of being on their best behavior. More specifically, a whole lot of *not* flying.

The last show Eric had manned...

Two days before his crash. He'd dressed the part and sold young men on the idea that the Air Force was the greatest thing since horny backup singers to has-been country acts. He'd grabbed that tasty piece of ass after finishing dinner.

At least his faith in his job hadn't changed. What they did at Nellis, and in the Air Force as a whole, made a difference. No matter the changes in Eric's life, he believed that with all his heart.

Liam Christiansen leaned across Eric to grin at Mike. "I see that smirk, Strap. Give it up. What are you hiding?"

The man's shark-toothed smile had become more frequent since he'd reconciled with his wife, Sunny, and because he was counting down to the end of his Air Force enlistment. The man known for nearly a decade as Dash was a two-digit midget — out in less than a hundred days. In fact, out by the end of October. And as if by unspoken agreement, he was Liam now. He hadn't flown in months, instead acting as the squad's technical advisor in post-flight debriefings, which meant his call sign was wearing off. He was a man on his way to a different future,

which included leaving the Air Force and raising his daughter, Kavya.

Mike laced his fingers over his stomach. "Nothing. Which happens to be exactly what I'll have to do with Hell No Reno. Nothing at all."

"Nice," Liam said. "Bang the boss, get out of the shit details."

Mike flipped him off. "What would it matter to you? Take Kavya and wear your uniform. Women'll be lining up."

"For the wrong reasons," Eric said, stuffing down a laugh.

Fang knocked his knuckles on the podium. "Bring it down,

bandits. I know the dog and pony shows suck. But it's in the relative vicinity. That means we need a presence."

Tin Tin hitched an elbow onto the table. He smiled that maddening sweet-as-dimples smile. "Sorry, boss. I'm sick that week."

Eric almost hated Carlisle. All mouth and too much money. Rumor was his daddy had pulled strings in the Department of Defense to get Tin Tin assigned to the Aggressors. The unit was the best of the best. Their mission was to teach other pilots the newest, most life-saving air combat



maneuvers, teaching them to fly as if against any number of enemies.

That mission did not include lunching with rich daddies.

But he had to admit the truth. Although the kid oozed attitude, he had the skills to back it up. And Eric ought to eat crow after the ration of shit he'd thrown at the enviable prodigy over the years. After all, Tin Tin hadn't been the one to go nose-down in Canadian soil. He'd been the one to warn that Eric's style of flying was pure trouble. That style had worked just fine over the relatively clear skies of Nevada, to the point of outclassing

his colleagues.

Against an unexpected Artic updraft, however, his sharp cornering and low-altitude, surprise-tactic flying had meant finding the limit of his F-16's capacities. An error. A *dumb* error that, by all rights, should've cost Eric his life.

He hated when other people were right, especially that punk. Maybe more than a year on from the crash, Eric's twelve-step program toward not being an asshole should include making nice with Carlisle. Christ, where Tin Tin was concerned, that sounded like as

much fun as shredding his own dick in a blender.

Major Haverty shook his head. "I haven't said when, Tin Tin. But lucky you, I've picked a team on this one." He aimed a look at Eric. "That'd be you, Kisser. And, Brunch, you too. Wednesday and Thursday. The Patriots Air Team will take over from there, promoting military aviation careers in general."

Eric cleared his throat. "Sir, I'm not exactly a poster child for the Air Force." He left off *anymore* because everyone damn sure knew what he was talking about. "Sure

you wanna scare off potential recruits?"

"First off, Brunch is pretty enough for the both of you."

"That's sexual harassment, Fang," came a protest from another female pilot.

"Deal with it. Second, you're a bona fide war hero, Captain. Five tours. A half-dozen honors to show for it." The major paused, then shook his head. "Let's just say none of this was my call."

"Aw, c'mon," Liam protested on Eric's behalf.

That was the other emotional fuckup Eric had to deal with, as if

Carey, Princess, Fang, Tin Tin and now, damn, even Trish weren't enough. Some friends affectionately, and some people not so affectionately, called Eric a caveman. Most times he agreed. He wasn't built to deal with interpersonal shit.

Liam was a different case. The man lugged around a shovelful of one hundred percent guilt. Eric had been the guy to take his place in the Maple Flag assignment in Canada. Eric had been the guy to crash. Hell, shit happened. But Liam was surprisingly sensitive under the standard-issue pilot bravado. Who

else would be giving up on the Air Force to raise his infant daughter and teach karate to kids? A nice guy and a family man. He woke up every morning believing he owed his current happiness to Eric for taking the fall.

Eric would let his friend wallow forever if it'd make Liam feel better, but that heavy cloud only reminded Eric of shit he'd rather forget. Pain. Rehabilitation. Wondering if he'd ever walk again.

Now he was relatively hale and hearty, enough to follow his basic imperatives. Fly. Fuck. Fight. That didn't mean he wanted to face a

bunch of strangers. Call him vain, but it got old. That's why he didn't want to do the air show. Get trotted out in front of all those people? Have to answer a million questions? The whole time he'd see the *unasked* questions on the civvies' faces.

Where the hell had he gotten all those scars?

His discomfort wasn't limited to strangers. Even his buddies checked in on him too often, as if he were an infirmed aunt. Couldn't they go back to treating him like just another throttle jockey?

He hadn't thought he was that

kind of man, so focused on himself. It had always been more important to find the perfect thrill. To fly the perfect mission. To find a gorgeous working girl and prove he was the best fuck she'd have for a year.

Now...Trish. He was back to thinking about catching the perfect shot.

Watching her.

Yet she'd drawn him out. He'd been compelled to join her in front of the lens. He hadn't noticed at the time. Afterward, looking at the pictures, he hardly paid attention to himself. His concentration and holy-fuck arousal centered on her.



But Eric was in more than half the shots, taking her, whispering in her ear, coming with a grimace of ecstasy he never would've recognized as being Eric Donaghue.

Trish hadn't cared about his scars. Although she'd wanted to talk about what happened — obvious enough — she hadn't given off the pity vibe Eric had come to despise, even when that vibe came from friends.

Yet he understood his duty. Good airmen always did. Airmen lucky enough to climb back into a cockpit after stuffing one into the ground understood that duty more

acutely. Three months of counseling had made that crystal clear, even if the shrink had worn doubts throughout every session.

At least she'd cleared him for flight.

He'd been lucky. Period. So everybody shut the hell up.

Eric said nothing in protest. He never would've, anyway. He'd earned his position through dedication and sacrifice. No reason to blow it now simply because he'd been ordered to sit in a booth for a couple days.

Maybe he'd get lucky. They might plant his shiny new plane on

the airstrip. Eric could stand next to it. He always felt at home near the F-16s he and the other bandits flew with such diligence. That might help compensate for the in-person shilling.

The meeting dismissed quickly after that, with Fang handing out the rest of the duty rosters and flight schedules. The next Red Flag, in which they'd stage mock war games with ally pilots to brush up on air-combat techniques, was in less than four weeks. Eric wanted to go. He wanted to be a part of it, just like everyone else — and maybe lay to rest whatever doubts people still

harbored. He could cut it without needing their sympathy.

In the meantime, maybe he would spend some of that time with Trish.

His phone vibrated in his pocket as he stepped out of the briefing room into the linoleum-lined hallway. He had the ridiculous thought that he'd conjured her call — a reward for having survived a surprisingly awkward morning-after phone number exchange. That implied possibilities beyond another chance meeting at the boxing arena.

Eric found that he didn't mind

the slight nod to a planned future, no matter how fleeting. *Pleased.* Yes, he was pleased by the thought that she'd call.

Any thought of Trish came with the visceral memory of her body, down to the backs of her knees and the way she pointed her toes when she came. Damn, how she'd felt wrapped around him, as if he could sink into all that brightness and laughter.

When he fished the phone out of his pocket, his stomach dropped. Lead weight wasn't descriptive enough. He slammed headfirst into reality, which colored his

peripheral vision sickly yellow.

Detroit area code.

Not his parents.

Odds were ninety-nine to one it had something to do with Carey.

Fucking Christ, let the boy stick it out this time.

He shoved the phone back in his pocket. No way he'd answer it during duty hours.

Instead he walked into the crisp desert sunshine and slipped on his sunglasses. Mike and Liam emerged next, the latter casually tucking on his regulation headgear.

Eric put on his own hat. "Strap Happy," he said to Mike. "If you

don't get a haircut soon, Fang'll tear you up."

Mike passed a hand over his hair and smiled as he grabbed the helmet off his BMW bike. "I'm in regs. That's enough for me."

"And for that girl of yours." Liam bounced car keys in his hand.

Laughing, Mike threw a leg over his bike. "Call her a girl to her face and see what happens."

Liam shook his head. "Not taking that dare."

Eric smiled along, but his phone buzzed against his stomach. Probably a voicemail. He'd learned the hard way that letting Carey's

shit bleed into his duty day was a god-awful idea. Crappy flights, bad attitude, near accidents — all because he wasn't keeping his checks and balances. None of it helped Carey anyway.

The kid sank further and further down.

*I don't know if I can handle another round.*

That was a new thought. One he didn't like. At all.

Hope was all he had to hold on to when it came to his little brother. Maybe the new program was working. Carey had just collected his sixtieth day. All reports until



now said he'd adapted well to the creativity-based program. He'd focused his gifts to concentrate on the arts. If he had a possible career once he got out—even designing magazine ads for bubblegum—he might not go back to ripping off cars. In Motor City, it was an appropriate criminal endeavor.

Not for Carey.

Liam punched Eric in the shoulder. "Sucks about your detail."

He shrugged. "Wanna trade?"

"Fuck that," the taller man said on a grin. "Compiling personnel audits for the 65<sup>th</sup> suits me just fine.

At home.”

Aside from his overly solicitous nature toward Eric, Liam was one of the most obnoxiously happy guys in their squadron. Mike was a close second, only because his Zen-master front meant he didn't rub it in.

Eric didn't count on anything that permanent with Trish, but he had hopes for a nice ride while it lasted. And if nothing else happened, he'd always have her on his wall. Anticipation burned down his spine. That would be his reward. Once he listened to the voicemail, he'd spend some time

with Trish's pictures. Her face, her eyes. The bonuses in every shot.

"Just means neither of us will be flying," he said. "Sucks."

Mike leaned back on his bike, shading his eyes against the sun. "No one will fly at the air races except civvy showoffs and the Patriot team. The only thing more arrogant than a Thunderbird is an ex-Thunderbird."

Eric and Liam joined in with mumbled, good-natured curses. The Thunderbirds and the Navy's Blue Angels were adept at what they did, fostering morale and patriotism. Retired air

demonstration teams such as the Patriots were nearly as effective in that regard. Eric was partial to the Aggressors' more practical purpose. Fly like the bad guys so other pilots didn't die. He loved it.

Suddenly Mike smiled past his friends.

Liam laughed. "Princess just walked out behind me, didn't she?"

"Sure did," Mike said unabashedly.

Part of Eric craved that relaxed joy, but it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. No one else could handle the stress of Carey's crap. Fuck, some might claim Eric had

crashed because of his brother. The timing had been right to bear that blame. Two hours after landing in Canada, he'd received a call.

Somehow Carey had managed to snag a phone, bawling, screaming, suffering another round of withdrawals. Eric had listened, heartsick, as the phone smacked something and what he assumed had been rehab personnel wrestled Carey into submission.

*Sorry, Sir. Won't happen again, Sir. He'll be fine now.*

Eric's head hadn't been in the game when he'd taken to the air. He'd resorted to rote measures to

maintain the envelope-pushing techniques Tin Tin had said would get him killed.

At least the shit hadn't been *that* right. Eric was still alive.

If he could barely handle it, how could he expect a chick to?

Although Trish wasn't the Barbie Eric had first assumed, she lived the life of a showgirl gypsy — not exactly a dependable, low-maintenance girl. Plenty of more casual souls had bailed over the years. Christina had lasted six months before shouting that Eric had “no emotional depth other than Carey”. During the darkest

times, when he felt like he was holding his brother's life in his hands, Eric had wanted to bail right along with her.

They didn't know how Carey had been there for him — the *only* person who'd understood his drive to leave Detroit. Everyone else thought he should've been able to make a life in such a big city. Instead, Eric crawled out of town and into a fighter jet, saving his own sanity by leaving his brother behind.

Carey had wanted out too, only he'd chosen OxyContin and boosting cars.

Leah walked over with a whole lot of attitude, but God forbid Mike catch anyone checking out her fantastic ass. Seriously, the man had no sense of humor regarding his woman. She ran a touch down his arm as she strolled toward her hot pink Ducati. They were a disgustingly matched pair.

Eric couldn't help a quick-flash thought of Trish. Unexpectedly, he remembered the way they'd laughed, wrapped together on his bed. Relaxed. Sated. Almost... playful.

When had playful memories ever popped into his brain before dirty



ones?

Princess Leah strapped on a helmet that matched her bike.

"Michael, did you tell them?"

Liam's mouth bent into a smirk. "Don't tell me you two are finally getting hitched."

"A barbeque," Mike said dryly. "We're having a damn barbeque. What the hell is with you?"

Eric shook his head. "He thinks marriage is catching."

"Not marriage, my friends." Tall and far too goddamn handsome, Liam wagged his finger in mock disgust. "*Happy* matrimony, and a sweet-faced baby as well."

This was what it meant to have friends. He'd risk his life for Mike and Liam. No question. That meant he wouldn't point out that a year ago, Liam and Sunita had needed counseling more than they'd needed oxygen. The soon-to-be ex-bandit was still struggling against the lingering demons of PTSD. He'd made progress a guy could only hope for when it came to honoring important people in his life — the kind of progress Eric had been waiting ten years for Carey to make.

“Barbeque,” Eric said neutrally. He wanted to wrap up this

conversation. Get somewhere private. Listen. Handle it. Then get his reward.

“A week from Saturday.” Leah revved her Ducati — a damn gorgeous sound. “Thirteen hundred hours.”

“You’re the only person in the world to make a barbeque invitation sound like an order,” Liam said.

She waved her fingers. “It’s a gift. See ya, boys.”

Mike sped after her, and Liam followed close behind in his souped-up Evo X.

Eric pulled the phone out of his

pocket. Dread iced his skin, even while sweating under the hot Nevada sun. The only way to deal was to dial.

# Chapter Eleven

*Edgy. Edgy. Edgy.*

*Calm down.*

Trish only had another minute to fuss with her eye makeup and the set of her wig — a stick-straight highlighted blonde number. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worried so much over her appearance. Maybe Miss Georgia? Probably the most nerve-racking experience of her life. She'd placed top five, but her mother's disappointment had been palpable. Her mostly uncommunicative

father hadn't called.

Geez. Sour memories tonight.

At least she'd gotten the callback from the boxing arena. Her second gig had been on Wednesday. Add in Fridays and Saturdays, and that meant doing the Luxor-to-ring scramble three times a week. Could be worse. Could've been better had the dash given her more than fifteen minutes to get ready for the ring.

What if Eric didn't fight that evening? What if he didn't want to spend time with her again?

A man could change his mind pretty damn easy in a week.

She pushed away from the vanity, trying to rein in her crazy-fast thoughts. The silver lining to the evening, however, wouldn't dim. With a flounce past Meg and the new brunette — maybe named Lisa? — she said, "I'll take number one tonight."

No room for argument. She was an optimist, after all, even when life had repeatedly given her a firm talking-to about putting faith in dubious hopes. If Eric stepped into the ring, she fully expected him to take down his opponent with the same ferocious ease he'd secured last week. She wanted him to be

there, and she wanted to be in within his powerful sphere when he had his game face on.

Then...she wanted some alone time when he was through playing Incredible Hulk.

Anticipation was a potent thing. She'd never been with a man who so enjoyed drawing out the moment.

She grinned to herself as she strode into the corridor, which was filling with fighters and their entourages. Her life was stuck in exactly the same predicament as when she'd walked that hall the previous Friday, but her strut was



genuine. Eager. She gathered stares like a little girl in a field gathered dandelions.

Trish knew that sometime during the evening — no knowing when — he'd be out in the crowd. She knew it like she knew how to swing her hips as she passed dozens of men.

Stepping into the ring, holding her placard, was a whole new experience. Lights glared as usual. The crowd hollered as usual. The MC whooped them into a frenzy, pointing out her assets as she slipped inside the ropes. But the erotic, throaty story Eric had told to get her off the other night rang in

her ears. Forget the boxing matches. Ten thousand men were there for *her*. The potency of her sudden arousal was staggering. If anyone looked closely enough, would they notice how damp her bikini bottoms were? The thought sped her heart. She was nearly dizzy with lust when she took her seat.

Why did fit guys pounding on one another appeal on such a primal level? Trish crossed her legs, with Meg and the new girl poised on either side in their front-row alcove. Battles for land, money and status – all true. The heart of it was beating brains for the chance to

fuck the girl of their choice. An impulse as old as time.

Trish was *so* not immune.

She was an absolute mess of nerves and desires by the time the announcer began the windup for the fourth bout. Sure enough, Jim Jennings. She'd almost forgotten the name he used when fighting. Why the deception? Eric Donaghue was a much nicer name, so he didn't share her reasons. Something to do with his outside life?

Never mind. He'd shown up. He was going to box. That was enough to make the moment sing.

Trish took her place on the steps

leading into the ring. From that taller vantage, she could see down the tunnel from the training rooms. The first fighter was taller than Eric, but far leaner. Although the man's reach would be formidable, Trish couldn't imagine his thinner body taking a few dozen blows powered by Eric's wall of muscle.

There he was. Rather than the plain robe from the previous week, he sported the one he'd worn when taking pictures of her on the bed. She had to believe it was no coincidence. Black satin molded over his shoulders and tapered to where it tied along his more

slender waist. The luxurious fabric shone beneath the blinding lights. He kept his head down, but the hood was thrown back. He moved with sure purpose, shrugging and bouncing on his toes to warm up. Twice he slammed the fists of his boxing gloves together.

He and his opponent climbed into the ring, with Eric opposite to where Trish stood. He slid those luscious shoulders out of the silk, which pooled at his feet. He kicked the robe away. Trish soaked in the potency of his back. Every movement shimmered like water over rocks in a stream. He was that

built, that carved of granite. The gut-wrenching scar that crawled over his golden skin was an added measure of badass. She couldn't help wondering if he intentionally presented his opponent with that formidable proof of his pain tolerance.

He turned.

Their gazes slammed together across the white mat. Such a rush. He was a man about to do battle. All of that concentration and violence was centered on her. His eyes were as dark as the sky at midnight, and his combination of rugged and elegant tattoos

complemented the warrior he'd become.

She shivered. Hard. He must have noticed, because a nasty smirk curled his beautiful mouth.

The referee helped Trish into the ring — no easy proposition in four-inch heels. She wore a tiger-stripe bikini, with shoes to match. She felt like a tiger sashaying around the ring, holding the placard high. Eric's stare was as hot and blatant as if he'd grabbed her ass in front of all those screaming people. She winked as she walked past.

The opening bell dinged, and she took her seat.

Eric landed fourteen body blows and an uppercut before the other man touched him. Goddamn he was fast. Not merely strong, but fleet of foot and perceptive. He seemed to know exactly where his opponent would strike next, then stayed the hell out of the way. Eric's aim was always true. So when he reared back for a devastating blow to the man's face, Trish knew it was over.

Knock out. Two minutes and thirty seconds.

Meg huffed a disappointed sigh. "I could've left forty-five minutes ago."



“But it was worth seeing,” Trish said, dazed.

The referee lifted Eric’s arm above their heads, signaling his victory. Eric spit out his mouth guard. His expression remained deadly serious, even when he found her place in the crowd. She couldn’t wait to feel that intensity turn into passion.

She stood, blew him a kiss and sauntered out of the arena.

Forty-five minutes later, high on adrenaline, Trish hadn’t changed out of her costume. She’d only donned a robe and found reasons to hang around the girls’ dressing

room as Meg and the other woman left. Christ, she wanted to touch herself. What she waited for would be so much better.

Unable to stand the anticipation any longer, she grabbed her stuff and emerged into the corridor. Most of the fans had left. She smiled to the few who remained but didn't coo over them. Too distracted. Too focused on the door to Eric's prep room.

Her fingers were numb as she knocked. All sensation had hightailed it to her erogenous zones. He'd touch her and she'd go nuclear. Simple as that.

He opened the door. Trish closed it behind them.

She was in his arms before she took another breath. A hard kiss. Hands everywhere. She stripped the satin robe from his torso and feasted on so much prime male flesh. Mouth. Teeth. Fingernails. He'd showered. His hair was damp and he tasted of clean water.

Only when she returned to his mouth, ready for another hard kiss, did she notice. Something was wrong.

He...stood there.

All of the enthusiasm had been on her part.

His hard-on was undeniable as she stepped out of his arms. The rest of him was as unmoving as a marble statue — the sort of masterpiece his body so resembled.

“What?”

“Nothing. Sorry.”

His halfhearted apology made it worse. She’d heard that tone of voice before — the “it’s not you, it’s me” tone. It was the flat, bored emphasis of a man who’d had his fun and wanted out.

Trish nearly had to sit down. The disappointment was that crushing.

“Okay. I got it wrong.” She swallowed past her pride. “A good

night is a good night, and we had one."

She turned on her killer heels, gracefully retrieved duffels that looked heavy enough to carry a half-dozen bowling balls and reached for the doorknob.

"Still only good, showgirl?"

Confusion and desire threatened to pop open her head. "What?"

"You have a habit of calling us 'good'." That nasty-fun smirk returned. "What's a guy gotta do to earn a better adjective?"

"Fucking kiss me back, for one." Anger spilled out of her without reserve — a faucet turned on full

blast. "Is this some kind of joke? You were the one who mentioned seeing each other tonight. That turned it from a one-night stand into something more. Now you don't want to touch me. What the hell is going on?"

"I said it's nothing."

"Bull crap." She wiped at her eyes, which were filling with unexpected tears. The whip-fast turn of her emotions was disorienting. "Unless you want me to think this is a twisted kiss-off — and believe me, I know what that feels like — you better start talking. Four syllables at a time is fine, but

open your mouth.”

Eric suddenly looked tired. His broad shoulders slumped, so at odds with his usually precise posture. He studied her for a long, long moment. She could almost see the wheels working behind his brooding eyes.

“My brother’s in rehab.” He straddled the metal bench that split the locker room down the middle. “OxyContin.”

Trish couldn’t have picked a less likely opening line. She stood dumbfounded.

“He’s at a specialty facility that promotes creativity. Gets a new art

tool each week he's clean. A privilege. The first step was paper. You know, origami?"

She nodded.

"Two months now and he'd worked up to pastels. On Monday he ripped his studio apart. Said he wanted his paints, wanted his computer."

"But he's not that far along yet."

Eric frowned slightly. "That's right. His temper could've set him back two weeks, but he's been clean and cooperative so far. No paints, but no delay in his graduation." He let out a tight sigh. "I got lucky."

"*You* got lucky?" Tentatively,



Trish walked forward. She took Eric's face in her hands, brought his eyes up to meet hers. "You make the payments, don't you? Your purse tonight?"

He hesitated. Then... "Yup."

"And it weighs on you all the time."

She pressed her lips together. Everything about her was humming. Some of it was beautiful. Some of it stung like electrical prods under her skin. Definitely shitty. He'd whirled her around so quickly that none of her usual tricks came to mind.

"Cool," she said with forced

cheer. It was better than the tear-drenched alternative. Screaming was a possibility too. Or pounding her fists against his chest for scaring her so badly. "At least he's got people there looking out for him. You're not the only one who wants him to recover."

Obvious confusion tugged his rugged features. "Why would you give a shit?"

Now it was her turn to frown. Mama didn't like when she frowned. Wrinkles. Guys didn't look twice at a girl with wrinkles.

"I don't deserve that language when I'm being sympathetic, Eric."

He looked away and nodded. Not technically an apology, but he appeared chastened.

“Besides, why wouldn’t I care? He’s your brother. This has obviously messed you up big time. And I’ve seen what beautiful art he can produce.” She traced one finger over the top of Eric’s tattoo. “He deserves a shot at making the most of that.” She took a deep breath. “But I’ll go, okay? Sorry I didn’t catch your signals right. Let me know if you change your mind.”

His arms snaked around her waist. She was wrapped up against him, held from shoulder to ass in

under a second. He dragged her down to his lap. Trish gave a squeal.

“I changed my mind.” He kissed her throat, then rested his forehead there. Startled but relieved, she traced the back of his neck and along his damp hairline. “Not true,” he corrected. “I got my head out of my ass. You didn’t deserve my crap. And...thank you. For what you said about Carey.”

“Your brother’s name?”

He nodded, forehead still pressed against her throat.

“Younger or older?”

“Three years younger.”

“So...it wasn’t me?” she asked quietly.

“No way.” Eric lifted his head. The passion she’d seen in the ring—the passion she’d expected to see when he opened the door—now radiated from his eyes. They were a darker blue. Piercing. “I want you, Trish.”

She kissed the mouth she was coming to adore. Such a handsome man. The scars might define him for some, but she’d come to crave the deeper beauty. An echo of the arousal she’d been riding all night became a full-on shout when he slid his fingers down her bikini

bottoms and grabbed her bare ass.

“Good,” she said against his lips.

“Now prove it.”

# Chapter Twelve

Eric touched the tip of his tongue to the column of Trish's throat, that long, sexy line. She tasted like a dash of salt. All she needed was a shot glass of tequila between those perfect tits and a lime wedge in her teeth. She was the kind of girl who'd be up for something that crazy. A hell of a time.

That was an option for a day when he didn't have his hands full of her tiny, perky ass. Dressed in that striped bikini, stalking around the ring, her ass had temporarily

snapped him out of his foul mood. She'd helped him focus long enough to take care of business. Fast, clean, none the worse for wear.

Or had it been the flat plane of her stomach, bisected by a faint kiss of muscle? Maybe her breasts, full and lush. Today's hair was long, sleek. Myriad blondes, as if she wasn't the same girl every time.

Fuck it. *All* of her. He wanted all of her. If Eric could pick his perfect girl, she'd definitely have Trish's body. And her willingness to let him photograph it.

After the doc's phone call, Eric



had spent too long with an open file of Trish's pictures on his computer — particularly the shot of her on her knees, head bent. She'd pushed that platinum hair out of the way to display the delicate bones of her neck, as well as a glimpse of vulnerability peeking out from her eyes.

Images of Trish had been his center since learning of Carey's temper tantrum. He'd behaved like a child whose room and board and treatment didn't cost fifteen grand a week. On top of handling that brother-induced crisis, Eric had weathered two excruciating days at

the Reno air races.

That was then. Unpleasant duty dispatched.

Now he'd bang some skulls—the perfect outlet to erase the chill of enduring the scrutinizing eyes of a few thousand strangers. He'd driven home from Reno first thing that morning, but the burning need to hide still ate at him. Only evening hours spent indulging in images of Trish had made the air show bearable.

His obsession with the new photographs worried him. He was fixating. He'd striven to keep his sex life as uncomplicated as

possible, without delving exclusively into what he admitted was his fetish. Trish could be the one to push him over the line.

With his mouth on her throat, he could barely make himself care. He dragged his teeth down her skin, marking her, but she was a performer. Faultless skin was an asset in her line of work. Six times a week, she became a goddess of the Strip. She hadn't mentioned the name of her show, so he had no idea what to imagine. Feather headdresses? Spangles? Even topless?

No matter the clothing, she'd

dance and sing knowing every set of eyes in the house was glued to her. She owned them.

Except *Eric* held her.

He shifted her higher across his lap and pressed her damp pussy over his cock as he took her mouth. Theirs were clashing, hard kisses, so fierce that her head bent back. She was absolutely into the ferocity, because her hands gripped his chest and shoulders. She scraped her carefully manicured nails down his back. A soft moan vibrated against his mouth. He shifted to suck her lobe between his teeth. He liked her flawless, showgirl skin, liked

the way she shivered and responded to him.

He swiveled her around so they straddled the bench, facing each other. He urged her to lie down. Her back made contact with the hard metal surface. She giggled on a shiver then arched her arms. The pose was *Playboy* perfect, lifting her breasts and delineating her ribs. She knew her body — how to best display it, how to best use it. Eric was too turned on to care that he could be manipulated for the rest of forever by the arching curve of her stomach and the teasing curve of her smile.

He dipped his thumb into her shallow navel as his fingertips brushed the underside of her breasts. The tendons of her inner thigh tightened and pulled against the bikini bottom, which barely kept her covered. He tugged, pulled. Underneath she was damp. He stroked over her closed lips before lifting his fingers to his mouth. All Trish. Only then did he realize he'd craved another sample of her taste.

Her lashes lowered as she put on a pout. "Why stop?"

"Haven't." With no ceremony, he pushed his fingers in her pussy.

She gasped, loud, breathy. Her slick softness clutched at his fingers.

One quick flick of Eric's other hand slipped her breasts out of the swimsuit top. Pale pink nipples beaded into small berries. He leaned forward to sip one into his mouth, rasping his tongue over her flesh. She clutched the back of his head to hold him to her. Her nails sent tingles down his spine. She moaned, though she was biting her bottom lip, apparently unable to keep it all in.

Wicked pride stabbed him. He could give her this. Even if he sucked at communicating worse

than he sucked at balancing his needs and those of his family, he could make her moan.

Eric shoved his shorts down after he'd grabbed a condom from his nearby jeans pocket. She took it and pushed his hands out of the way.

"It's hard to believe I hardly got my hands on you last time." She made up for it now by wrapping slender fingers around his shaft.

He grunted. Had to take a breath. Center himself. *Christ.*

Her hands were cool and smooth, so pale against the ruddy skin of his cock. She watched him, always looking out from under her



darkened lashes, smiling to silently torment him.

“You’re big,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s a shame *you’re* not into showing off. But you’re not. It’s not your cock versus others. You want to see *in*. All the hidden places.” She licked her lower lip. “You want a secret moment?”

He managed to nod. Words were beyond him. He only pulled her closer. He kept his fingers moving so that each of her words became rougher — a little more purr, a little less self-assurance.

She wiggled until they were chest to chest. Their hands worked

between, near enough that his wrist bumped hers as they played. She tucked her face against his neck. Her bite was hard enough to spike pain down to his dick—in the best way.

“Did I lock the door?” Her throaty voice drove him crazy as she started breathing harder and faster. They were ratcheting up. “I can’t remember. Anyone could walk in. You wouldn’t care if they saw you...but me. That’d be different, wouldn’t it?”

His chuckle was strained around his whacked-full arousal. “No one would notice me.”

“Not true.”

“*Very* true.”

She produced the condom package, let go briefly and unrolled the thin latex over his sensitive flesh. He grabbed her ass with his free hand. Once he was sheathed, he leaned back. The cold bench was hard. He couldn't give a shit when she straddled his flanks, her pussy wedged over his cock — and he really didn't once he was inside. They groaned together. He probably should've stripped her bikini. The bottoms were only shoved to the side. It was fucking hot, accentuating how insanely

eager they were.

She planted her hands flat on his chest and rode. Her hips thrust up and down, promising that what they both wanted was a sure thing. "I'm on top. Funny how that keeps happening."

He flashed his smile. Couldn't help it. She was so damn chatty — a good thing when his own brain shorted out. "No surprise."

She traced his shoulders, his pecs, down to his abs. Her rhythm faltered, as if she'd been distracted by his body. Made sense, since he kept getting distracted by hers. Soft curves and lean legs. He loved to

watch, and with Trish, he had no idea where to start.

“I think we both know why you like me up here.” She was one hundred percent aroused and one hundred percent sass. “I want to hear you say it. I let you take pictures of me. We’ve fucked the hell out of each other. But you haven’t said it. We’re both grown up enough to admit it, aren’t we?”

He skimmed his hands up the center of her body until he cupped her breasts. His smile couldn’t be helped, because hellfire, the woman seemed determined to get him to talk.

Fine. If that's what it took.

"I'm a voyeur."

She cooed a pleased sound. "You are."

Once again she lowered her pussy. Eric thrashed his head to one side then arched his chin to the ceiling. She could own him if she kept that up. Slams sent shock waves of tingling pleasure through to his soles.

"But that's not all." She shook her head, her expression a study of agonized concentration. "That's not all of it. You're a voyeur, and I've always been an exhibitionist. You watch *me*, don't you, Eric? That's

why you like me on top, and why you want to take pictures of me. If I wanted good odds here in Vegas, I'd bet the next step is a video camera."

He surged up into a sitting position and locked low around her hips, holding her sleek body to him. They were sticky with sweat as they strained and pushed.

"Promise me," she whispered. "You'll video me. I want you to."

"Promise," he managed to groan. "Promise, promise."

"Yes. Next. Camera..." Her words trailed into a low moan as she came — coming to the prospect

of his video camera.

That was enough to set Eric loose. He locked his hand around her jaw, angled her face up toward his. Her orgasm washed over her features while her cunt sucked at his cock. Her spine fused and she turned rigid. He slammed up into her, crazy wild on the thought that she *wanted* him to record her.

That it was next.

Flashes of singeing pleasure rocked out from his prick. Tightened his chest. Pushed him over the edge until his body shut down in one lost moment. Blackness spun over his thoughts.



All Trish's doing. She was exactly what he'd needed to take the stress away.

They leaned into each other. Panting hard. Trish's head rested on his shoulder. His hands spanned her narrow back. Air cooled the sweat across the back of his neck.

He'd never thought himself a dumb man, but for long minutes all he could think was the mental equivalent of *guh*. So fucking good. Like she kept saying.

If they stayed too long, they'd get caught for real. Not in any fun, sexy way — more like an awkward, don't-want-to-explain way.

He lifted Trish off his lap then disposed of the condom. His shorts were under the bench. He gave Trish's ass a pat as he ducked to grab them. "C'mon, showgirl. Get your pretty on. We've got plans."

His mind stuttered as she slowly — *deliberately* slowly — pulled a lacy black bra out of her duffel. As if she needed a bra. With breasts that great, lingerie became window dressing.

The eyebrow she raised was all doubt. "Those plans better not involve cheeseburgers."

"Fine." He couldn't resist slinging an arm around her waist.

He pulled her close enough to kiss — fast but not shallow. He stroked his tongue along the inside of her lip. “Milkshakes.”

“Do you like taking pictures of my ass or not?”

He laughed against her shoulder. “I do. Definitely.”

“Then I need to keep it in its shape. No milkshakes either.”

“I won’t take no for an answer.” He swatted her ass again for the fun of it. “And get dressed, you tease. Exhibitionist or not, we’re *not* getting arrested for indecent exposure.”

# Chapter Thirteen

They didn't speed toward whatever destination Eric had in mind. They *cruised*. Like something out of the '50s with greasers, Pink Ladies and James Dean's red *Rebel Without a Cause* jacket. Getting to the Strip meant hideous traffic, especially on a Friday night. Cars crept along. So Trish unbuckled her seat belt, scooted along the sleek leather bench and snuggled up against Eric's solid chest. He put an arm around her. Two movie stars on the world's most exquisitely

gaudy set.

“You sure you’re not gonna tell me where we’re going, sugar?”

“Nope.”

“Just...no wig.”

“That’s right.”

She hadn’t expected him to give up their destination, but she liked teasing him anyway. His curt replies held quiet notes of humor. He’d never be the kind to wisecrack. She’d dated showbiz men on and mostly off and found it frustrating how they competed for people’s attention. Eric’s attention was stuck on her. Perfect.

With the top down, she bathed

her face in the warm desert breeze. Sure it smelled mostly of booze, fried food and gasoline, but Trish loved the charged-up energy and the occasional hint of sage and sand. The lights were out in full, outshining the stars.

Only, they weren't bright enough to ease her lingering melancholy.

When she'd thought he was turning her away... The disappointment had been greater than it should've been. The quickie in the locker room and Eric's revelations about his brother had helped. Could it have been so hard

to tell her first? She'd taken the blow of his seeming rejection as if a choice role had been yanked out of her grasp.

"Will you at least talk about your car? I know you must love it." She stroked the supple cream-colored leather. "How much did it set you back? I can't imagine!"

At a red light, he gunned the engine. "Four grand."

"No way."

"Four grand and eight years of work."

"You restored it?"

He ran his left hand over the polished steering wheel. "I did."

“Do you always devote yourself to projects that take so long?”

He shrugged those big shoulders. “Don’t you? How long you been in the business?”

“Since I was three.” She couldn’t help the pride in her voice. “That was my first pageant. I won second place, but I didn’t care. I got to wear a blue dress with jingle bells layered in the lace. Any trophy for a three-year-old is better than Christmas.”

“Christ,” he said under his breath.

Trish stiffened. His tone darkened over that happy memory.



She sat up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Awfully young."

"So?"

He glanced sideways as the light turned green. "I didn't say it was wrong. Only that you were young."

"Don't think I haven't heard that before. People always blame Mama for dressing me up and parading me around. They never thought to consider that maybe I *liked* it."

"So you've always been a Barbie."

A flush swept over her face. "Have you always been an asshole?"

“You think I am right now.”

“Yes, I do. You have no right to judge me.” She crossed her arms. And of course he noticed. “God, you are such a hypocrite.”

“What?”

“You wouldn’t have looked twice at me if I hadn’t been wearing a red bikini and a fuck-me smile. Then you get to mumble about how I was brought up? Tell me, Jim Jennings, exactly how did you get out of Detroit?”

His lovely mouth pinched into a hard line. “Wrestling scholarship. Boxing. The service.”

“The male equivalent of pageants

and modeling. You use your body the same as I do. Who was the last chick you banged because she got off on your sparkling conversation? I bet you can't name one. So don't give me your shit. I work *damn* hard."

As she tried to calm her breathing, she ran a hand over her bare neck and real hair. God, she felt vulnerable.

Eric pulled the car into a parking ramp beneath the Stratosphere. After a tense ten minutes searching for a spot, he parked the car but let the engine keep purring like a jungle cat.

Another no-no scowl tugged at the edges of her mouth, but she couldn't help it. No pouting or playing or listening to Mama's voice in her head droning warnings of wrinkles.

She was genuinely hurt.

"I've never met anyone like you," he said, a quiet rumble.

"Hard to know what to think. I'm fucking up what I want to say."

"What do you mean by anyone like me? And *don't* say I'm fishing for compliments."

He shook his head. "You're a... fantasy. Any man's fantasy. Hard to keep it straight that you're real."

“Isn’t that what you were trying to find the other night? The real stuff?”

His nod was tight.

“No matter the parts I enjoy,” she said, “I hate auditions. Rejections hurt. I’m always sure they’re gonna toss me out. Every girl is prettier and has a better resume. I have to be *on* all the time. Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to sit here without a wig on? No. You don’t.”

The tightness in her chest kept building. Was she so fragile?

“Every man looks at me like you do,” she continued, forging on with

only a whisper. “I play up to the fantasies you mentioned. And sure, I get off on it. But sometimes I’m not worth talking to. Sometimes I’m a fun fuck, or I get slapped with dumb-shit remarks that remind me I’m meat.”

Eric flinched. His frown accentuated the scars along his temple. They stared at one another for the space of five excruciating heartbeats.

“Patricia?”

Her turn to flinch. She hated her given name and the molasses-drenched memories it conjured. She’d spent years struggling to

leave those dead-end roots behind. Coming from Eric, however, her given name felt...different. Serious. Personal.

“Spit it out,” she said. “You’re probably pissed.”

“No, I’m not.” He reached for her face. Turbulence churned in his night-blue eyes. Rough thumbs caressed her cheekbones. “I’m sorry.”

Trish inhaled softly. She couldn’t remember the last time a guy had apologized well enough for her to believe it. His earnestness urged her to let him off the hook. They could go back to the way they’d

been.

That would mean forgetting the rest of the evening's ups and downs. For once, no matter her vulnerability, she didn't want to compromise. A lot of that had to do with Eric. She got the oddest feeling he didn't want her to — even if his big fat mouth had chewed him into a hole.

“And?”

“You're not a Barbie,” he said quietly. “I've teased before, but I mean it. You're a woman. And I hurt your feelings.”

*Oh, fuck it.* It was the best she'd ever gotten — the most she'd ever



demanded for herself.

She met his mouth with a sweet kiss and a conciliatory smile.

“That’s right. I’d *never* settle for Ken.”

Strong hands slid to her shoulders. He glanced down her gold-and-black lamé top, which displayed a hefty dose of cleavage. She would’ve shot right back to red-hot pissed if he hadn’t flashed his quick smile. “And you’re sure not plastic.”

“Not a bit, sugar. All real.”

“Even your hair.” The caress he petted along her nape made her shiver. “Soft. I prefer it.”

“Although,” she said, wanting some levity back, “I wouldn’t mind the Dream House one day. Personal elevator, big whirlpool tub, fireplace, all decked out in pink and —”

“Do you want me to shut this car off or not?”

Trish stole another kiss, this one hotter and charged with a new energy. They’d created it from some awkward give and take. She talked a lot, but that didn’t mean she always said the important stuff.

“Let’s go, sugar.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “You sure?”

“Yup. Gimme what you got.”

Mischief danced across his intimidating face. She wondered if anyone else would notice.

“Remember those words, showgirl. No wimping out.”

“Wimp out? Never. I’m up for anything.”

Ten minutes later, Trish stared at the ticket booth for SkyJump Las Vegas.

“No way. And I don’t mean no way, but no fucking way!”

Eric *tsked*. “Bad language from such a pretty mouth.”

“I’m serious. If you think I’m jumping eight hundred feet to my *certain doom*, you’re insane. I shouldn’t be standing near you.”

He crossed his arms, so nonchalant, as if he’d proposed the tamest thing in the world. “What happened to being up for anything?”

“Dared into suicide was never an option.”

He pointed to a big-screen TV where, one hundred and eight stories up, the next victim was preparing. A SkyJump attendant strapped the young man’s Technicolor jumpsuit onto

protective harnesses and guide wires. "See? Perfectly safe."

"Eight hundred and fifty feet! How long would I be falling?"

"Eight seconds. At roughly...one hundred and five miles per hour when you finish."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"More than a pretty face, showgirl. C'mon, I thought you'd have more balls."

She couldn't help a giggle. "Wouldn't that have surprised you, stud?"

Eric did more than smile. He full-on laughed. "That would've made

for a really different night.”

Had she ever heard his laugh that fully before? That loud and carefree? She could get addicted to a sound so precious.

Dangerous.

First she had to deal with a more immediate danger.

“If you’re gonna make me pay a hundred bucks to plummet to my death, you’ll have to promise something pretty damn sweet.”

The shop’s giant TV showed the strapped-in guy as he walked onto the tiny platform. A straight drop toward the Strip. His face was sweaty and clammy pale.

Trish was gonna be sick.

Eric only flicked occasional glances toward the jumper. Mostly he watched her, like deciphering a puzzle — how to convince a sane woman to risk life and limb.

“How about a bottle of champagne? We’d come back. Grab our stuff from the lockers. Find a darkened booth.” He touched her ass below the waistline of her frilly black skirt. “I know what you’re *not* wearing under there. Could be fun.”

“Nope.”

“Then maybe a night here at the hotel?” He threw in a salacious

grin. "With me."

"Now you're not trying. That was a given as soon as I stepped out of your Camaro."

"Fine. Think about it. What will it take?"

He led her out to where several dozen people stood drinking and chatting on an open-air observation deck. Trish craned her neck. The itty-bitty platform could be anywhere up there, among the Stratosphere's lights. One distant human body was impossible to spot.

Cheers surged out of the souvenir shop. The young man



must've jumped. Then came his scream, like a little girl covered in spiders. If that was eight seconds, it was the longest eight seconds in the history of time. He got louder and louder as a bright blue-and-yellow jumpsuit plummeted toward the so-called landing spot.

Splatting spot. Definitely.

Trish gulped. "I'll take the title to your Camaro."

"Fuck off," Eric said on a sharp laugh.

She watched, numb everywhere, as the jumper safely slowed to a stop. Apparently alive. Attendants undid his harnesses. He walked

away as if he'd downed two bottles of Captain Morgan.

"Eric, you act like this doesn't faze you. Like you'd do it without a second thought."

"Yup."

"Boxing matches, sports car, free falling. You're an adrenaline junkie."

"Never claimed otherwise."

At least that made sense.

Everything was so locked down. Maybe it took jumping off buildings to tempt him out of bed. What that said about enjoying sex with her was humbling.

"Okay, I've got it. You have to

tell me what you do for a living.”

His amusement faded — a change as slow as a puddle evaporating. “I did. I’m in the service.”

“No, I mean really.” She was on to something. And hell, considering how little he talked, this might be the fastest way to learn. “For all I know, you write reports all day. You do dangerous stuff to get your kicks after another shitty day in a cubicle.”

For the first time, he seemed ready to call the whole thing off.  
*Over this? Really?*

“Eric, honestly, how am I supposed to know what kind of guy

I'm with?"

He shrugged out of his charcoal hoodie then pushed up the sleeve of his tight black T-shirt. That revealed one of his military tattoos – a red star centered in what looked like a gunsight.

"I fly F-16s with the 64<sup>th</sup> Aggressor Squadron out of Nellis."

Her first thought was another *no way*. Almost as quickly, however, it registered as completely true. The subtle pride in his voice. The air of mystery. But she sure as shit wasn't gonna give in to her cooing, soaked-panties arousal. Not yet, anyway.

“You loved saying that,” she said with a smirk.

“I did.”

“Explains things, I think. The Air Force wouldn’t be pleased with you moonlighting, would they, Mr. Jennings?”

“No.”

From her angle, under the bright lights, Trish had a brutally clear view of the scar on his face. Slowly, she touched the puckered skin at his temple. With one fingertip she traced the silvery length down to his throat.

“Explains a lot, actually,” she whispered. “Or am I way off base?”

Arms crossed, looking down, he pulled into himself but didn't wave her away. He shivered. "You're not. I crashed."

"Oh, Eric..."

He took a deep breath. Cleared his throat. Clammed up. "Okay. Pony up."

He obviously didn't want sympathy, but with those two words — *I crashed* — she was incapable of hiding her reaction. She wanted to know more, to comfort, to be trusted with such an obviously private hurt. Their brief affair would never satisfy her curiosity.

Just a good time. *Just a good time.*

She'd jump off a ledge just to get away from how uncomfortable they'd suddenly become.

"You need a little push, showgirl?"

*Oh shit.* Jumping. For real.

"I'd come back as a ghost, raid your house and erase all your hard drives."

"Cruel woman." He tilted her chin and kissed her so softly. "Off we go. I'll be right behind you."

"We'll be matching red splats. Maybe destroy a taxi."

"Nothing better to do on a Friday night."

She licked his lower lip. "Sure about that?"

"Champagne, dark booth, hotel room. In that order. But first I get to see your fine ass fly."

Trish felt like she had a jailer while she paid for her ticket and endured the gut-wrenching wait. Eric was there the whole time, as if she would bolt at any moment. Smart guy. She suited up. Signed the waiver. Listened to the safety instructions. And she actually stepped into the elevator. She, Eric and two guffawing men in their fifties rocketed a hundred and eight stories up. Might as well have been



to the moon.

“Who goes first?” asked an attendant.

Trish raised her hand. “But I want two shots of Jack. Now.”

Eric paid for her drinks and slammed one back too. “In solidarity.”

“Sure,” she drawled.

Then it was time. No more excuses. No more waiting. Trish sort of...left her body as the harnessed attendants near the open window strapped her in.

Shit. Fuck. Oh *goddamn*.

She stepped onto the ledge, took the deepest breath she could

manage and looked over to where Eric watched through the observation window. He smiled and winked.

“Bye, sugar. Give my love to Mama.”

# Chapter Fourteen

As much as Eric loved a hard, thumping rush, he wasn't in the habit of stacking one on top of the other. A boxing match would've been adrenaline enough. The mind-blowing fuck in a locker room had kicked it up a notch. Now...the look on Trish's face.

The pure *attitude* she threw at him. She had flat-out determination.

Over she went, screaming the whole way down.

Being strapped into the harness

felt like getting ready for a flight, with similar checklists and safety protocols. That echoed routine numbed his fingers and toes. He was going to fall – not the same free fall he'd experienced just before crashing, but a fall nonetheless. His chest seized. Not through any minute of training to become a pilot had he feared heights or the dizzying drops and swoops of flying. Now, however, the helplessness of the jump he was about to take was akin to reliving the accident that had nearly killed him.

The attendants escorted Eric onto

a small blue platform. The target, way down below, was nothing but a black speck. More safety protocols droned in his ear. He could barely hear the man at his side, couldn't think about it at all, couldn't stand reliving the sudden loss of control. He'd done his damndest in that plummeting Viper, with years of safety training kicking in to save his ass. The investigation guys had proclaimed him a marvel of instinct. Memories, though. They didn't ride away into the sunset.

But Trish had already jumped, and the whole experience had been his idea. Maybe on a subconscious

level he knew he needed to stand on a precipice and look the memories head-on.

*Sack up, asshole.*

He pivoted to face forward. Then he...let go. Off the launch. Over the side, as simply as diving into a pool. No water welcomed his body, just the rush of speed and wind and more speed. The coiling, poisonous squeeze in his chest fizzed away. His stomach gave up its gut-sick tension, leaving him with a soaring contentment that rivaled piloting a jet across the desert at sunset.

In seconds, it was over. Eric felt released. Falling, dropping, not

crashing. Maybe the shrinks should've shoved him off the Stratosphere in lieu of three months of chatter.

Once the safety guys unhooked him in the center of the target, Eric caught sight of Trish standing between the door to the top-off-your-experience-with-a-souvenir gift shop and the SkyJump bar. She seemed high, which raked across Eric's nerves in a way he knew shouldn't bother him. She was only running hot on the thrill, not hopped up on meth. She couldn't stop chattering. Every elegant step was practically a hop. That her eyes

remained clear and playful, not hazed out and listless, marked the difference he needed to see. Then he could enjoy her excitement and join her in his own way. Eric smiled, returning to that odd sense of peace within himself.

That didn't mean his blood was done effervescing. He needed to round the rough edges of his buzz, or he'd glut himself on Trish. He'd take too much when she didn't deserve to be treated like a fuck doll. She'd been right to remind him.

Although he would've preferring pacing, he snagged a booth at the



back of the gleaming, chrome-gloss bar. Retro. Shiny.

“Did I mention how amazing that was? Just...wow!”

“Yes,” he said dryly. “A couple times.”

“Be thankful I liked it, sugar. I could be chewing you out like an outraged Southern mama for having shoved me off a ledge.”

“You jumped.”

“I did! Oh my God, I did.”

“You keep reveling. I’m getting us something to drink.”

He waved down a waitress, who was short and curvy with a cascading tumble of blonde curls—

a wig, if he didn't miss his guess. He glanced at Trish and appreciated that she'd gone without. For him.

After having ordered, he found it difficult to keep from checking out the waitress's ass. Any guilt he might've felt dissipated when he realized Trish was looking too.

He lifted his eyebrows and smirked. "Busted."

Bright pink washed across her wide cheekbones. "You got me. She's not my type though."

Her sleek thigh pressed against his. He could feel her warmth through his jeans, not to mention

the way she jittered. "Feel free to tell me more."

She laughed and twined her ankle around his calf. He couldn't resist stroking along the hem of her skirt. She rested her chin on his shoulder, as if matching his view of the departing waitress. "I like brunettes."

He passed a hand over his brown hair. "Funny thing."

"Exactly." She rubbed her palm over his nape. Before the crash, he hadn't been known for admiring girls who took what they wanted out of life. Trish was showing him that the concept held definite

appeal. "But the waitress is cute enough. Those eyes."

"I noticed her ass more."

"You would." She stuck her tongue out. "But I'm still completely wound up. All that adrenaline. I can't believe I jumped off that crazy thing. Tell me you're more nutso freaked out than you look."

"I'm more nutso freaked out than I look," he said with a grin.

She returned his smile then sucked in deep breath. Her breasts lifted against that sinful shirt. He noticed the moment when she turned the unconscious movement

into playacting — how she caught his gaze from under her lashes. They could go on like that forever. Watching, acting, reacting, gazes intent on every nuance.

She had him by the balls, but he assured himself that was it. Who wouldn't be completely laid out by her?

He didn't want to be the guy who hurt her, though he knew it was all but inevitable if they kept seeing each other. His family sapped him dry. Carey's shit wasn't worth flinging on anyone else. If Eric were smart, or if he were the better man he was trying to

become, he'd let Trish go. He wouldn't have told her about Carey either. She was a soft touch, no matter how life in Vegas should've left her jaded.

She was strong, surprisingly so — in spirit and in body. Her skin was satin layered over lean muscle. Dancing in six live shows a week would do that to a woman. Eric loved the results.

She practically purred as she curled under his arm. "You can talk now and then. I'm so proud. Even if I you're just repeating me."

He pinched the inside of her knee, mostly teasing but with

enough force that she squirmed. Lush breasts pressed against his arm. “Behave,” he growled.

“Behaving isn’t near as much fun.”

“You are all talk.”

“Am not.” She laughed. “I’m a total party girl. Screw responsibility.”

“Right.” The hair behind her ear was silky and delicate. Super short and almost feather soft. He understood the wigs – part of keying into that fantasy aspect she had to display – but it was a damn shame to hide her real beauty. Any of it. “If that were true, we’d be

drinking milkshakes. What do you think?"

"Oh, stop."

After the waitress delivered the drinks, Trish watched her walk away once again. Eric knew that look. Avaricious.

"Tell me," he said roughly.

"Your sentences get shorter when you're turned on. Do you realize that? You're never precisely talkative, but you go down to monosyllables."

"Fine. Trish, I'd be fascinated to know your interest in our waitress. Perhaps what you find attractive? What you'd do to her?"



“Wow.” She teased up and down the back of his shirt. Light washes of sensation trailed in her wake.

“That sounded fairly educated.”

“College too, remember?”

“I’m surprised it’s taken you as long as this to ask. Most men jump on it instantly. All the details. What I like. How many women I’ve been with. You don’t want to know all that stuff?”

He couldn’t help his chuckle.

“I’m not being noble or anything. I just have other...priorities.”

“I suppose so.”

“But feel free to fill me in.” He wrapped a hand around the back of

her neck. “Be descriptive and I’ll make it worth your while.”

“What exactly could you do in a bar?” Her knee nudged his.

He pressed his fingers toward her pussy. Warmth emanated from her center. “You’d be surprised.”

“Or not,” she said on a giggle.

“How about...my fingers on your clit? Here, with all these people around us.”

Her neck was sleek where he licked. Salt touched his tongue — leftover excitement from their ridiculously adrenaline-pumping free fall. He nudged behind her ear with his nose and licked again.

She exhaled a shaky sigh. “Becky Holstater.”

“Hmm?” He kissed one collarbone. More delicacy. Her body held more secrets than he’d ever learn. He could spend hours trying, then hours afterward with her pictures.

Her pictures...

He’d thought he would linger on the explicit shots. Not to pretend he hadn’t, but oddly, he’d returned again and again to ones where she’d been laughing, tossing her head side to side, kicking her feet. Everything impulsive and carefree. He craved her fire.

“My first girl was Becky Holstater.” She spread her hand across the back of his head, holding his mouth to her throat. “I’d been in Vegas a month. Mama was back home. I ran wild. She had long, dark hair. Curves to die for, like Mallory.”

“Your ex?”

“That’s the gal. We’re still friends, but I catch her watching me sometimes. She probably catches me right back.”

“That would be a moment to capture.” Eric shifted. The edge of his palm brushed her pussy. She was hot and damp. “You’d love it if

I touched you.”

She grinned up at the ceiling. “At least we know one thing that’ll get you talking. Girl on girl and getting them on film.”

He bit her neck. Fast. Hard enough that her soft squeal melted into another bubbling laugh.

She straightened and pushed his head away. “Stop that. You’re gonna get us in trouble.”

He forced a cough to fake a little dignity — not that he had any when it came to Trish. He mimicked her upright posture. The taste of her remained temptation on his tongue.

“Excuse me,” she said as she

tugged at his hidden wrist. "Forget something?"

Enough anticipation and teasing. He touched her heated pussy and traced figure eights over her lips, which were soft, open and plump. "I didn't forget anything."

Under the table, no one could see his motions. He was seated at the outside of the bench and shielded her with his substantially bigger body. But the *idea*. The thought of being seen, or some stranger spotting their wicked activities wouldn't go away.

He could see it arrow right through Trish. Her eyes went

heavy. That classically crafted mouth parted on a silent gasp. She eased lower in the booth. Her ass slicked against the leather seat.

“You’re bad, you know that?”

“You like it. You *want* it.” Damn, she hadn’t been teasing. She was bare. No panties. That made it all the easier to ease two fingers in her sheath. Not far, not at that angle, but enough that she took a quick, deep breath. “If the waitress came back... To check on us...”

Her fingers latched on to his upper thigh. “And she saw your big fingers in me, so close to making me come, me so gone over what

you can do. She'd be envious. She'd want a piece of that action."

"But I only want you." The words popped out of his mouth without thought. Christ, it was true. He was throbbing all the way down his spine. The night was crunching into one idea. Fuck *now*.

Her knees spread a little wider.

Eyes closed, her voice remained a low whisper. "Or maybe she'd want to play with me instead. She'd lick my pussy while your fingers were in me."

*Jesus.*

Despite his fierce arousal, Eric kept every movement deliberate.



His arm was practically motionless as he rubbed her clit in a slow, sensual grind. Trish pressed her mouth against his shoulder. Her nails sank into his wrist as individual brands. He was hit with a fierce rush of pride at being the cause of her undoing. Harder, faster, until she was panting softly with her mouth flush to his arm.

“Eric...”

His name was muffled, and so was her low, quiet moan. She bit him until a shivering orgasm melted into hapless giggles.

“Oh my God,” she breathed, drawing every word out. “I can’t

believe I let you do that.”

Eric sat back against the cool leather bench and crossed his legs to hold back the ache of his hard cock. He made sure to catch her eye before he stuck sweetly salty fingers in his mouth and sucked.

Smug. He definitely felt smug.

Trish sat up again, tugging her skirt down and wiggling in the booth. She shook her head. A wry smile widened her mouth. “You go right to my head. If I was the smart girl my mama raised, I wouldn’t let you do half this stuff.”

“Then maybe...” He grinned.  
“Maybe I shouldn’t mention the

video camera in my car.”

# Chapter Fifteen

They could've ditched the bar and headed straight for the nearest reception desk. Only, Trish was learning how much of Eric's turn-on was purely mental and how hers complemented it perfectly. She'd always thought herself a girl who needed a big, hard fuck to get off. Rough play was, frankly, what she got, whether she wanted it or not. Men played mean with Barbies.

Not that she generally minded. It required so little imagination. She was their turn-on, but so few had

ever tried to discover hers — not beyond a big cock and solid rhythm.

Eric did.

Which was probably why he led her down to the parking garage, and she let him.

Neither spoke. Neither looked at the other. They held hands like teenagers. The tension radiating out of his blunt, powerful fingers — fingers he'd used as fists to knock a man out cold, fingers he'd used to make her come in a Vegas bar — was a shimmering counterpoint to her anticipation.

A video camera. Oh Christ.

Whether consciously, or as an offshoot of what he desired, he'd gotten her off with a few flicks of his thumb and a dive into her deepest fantasies. She wanted to be watched while being sexy. While *having* sex. While coming.

Such a slut. No better than a stripper. If that was what her body and her trashy mind wanted, she might as well grind on a pole and get paid for what made her sweat. Hell, girls in porn made tons. But this was hers, it was Eric's and it was personal.

She glanced up at him. His neck nearly diminished a jawline that

would've been sharp as a razor on a thinner man. She loved his brutish strength. He was a walking, occasionally talking, brick wall, and so handsome too. The right side of his profile was unblemished by his scars. Tough. Angular, with a defined brow. And those lush lips. His tension wasn't contained within his boxer's hands but was visible in the tight way his lips compressed. He licked the bottom one. He swallowed.

Nervous.

She was too, but she wouldn't have thought such a built, brutal man was capable of that reaction. A

fighter pilot, no less. Good God, he was practically a superhero.

This wasn't porn or stripping or anything to do with her professional aims. This was Eric and how she felt when she was with him. How he gave her wickedest desires a safe haven.

They reached his Camaro, which gave her a happy jolt every time she saw it. Such a *man's* machine. Gloriously powerful and classic. Yet she needed a few questions answered. Not the personal kind that had opened him to her in new ways. More like...practical.

He keyed open the trunk. Inside,



the only items were a camera bag and a collapsed tripod.

“You planned this?”

He shook his head. “No plans. Hopes.”

Trish turned so that she sat on the open lip of the trunk, arms crossed. Looking up at him made her feel petite in the best possible sense — like when he’d hauled her across his kitchen. A goddamn caveman.

“And this...” She waved her hand at the trunk’s panty-wetting contents. “This won’t end up on some website somewhere? Because it would ruin me, Eric. You have to

know that. No casting agent would take me seriously. And... Jesus, try to imagine me trusting any guy again."

He stared down at her. Some of his sexual intensity faded as he touched her cheek. "It'll be mine. Every frame. I'll memorize it, you know. All of it."

"What do you mean, all of it?"

"The other night? We took 482 pictures. I have thirty-six on my phone. Number eighteen—it's the first time you smile. Number forty, your lips are parted. A closeup. But I know you had two fingers in your cunt."

Trish had stopped breathing. Then the air gasped into her lungs on a quick rush. "All of it," she said softly.

The touch against her cheek became a caress. "Does that bother you? This won't be any different."

She was shaky when she stood, but not out of some suspicion he'd throw her sexual gyrations up on YouTube. His intensity when he described his fetish was simply boggling.

Flattering.

Sexy.

"God, you turn me on." Hooking her arms around his thick, sturdy

neck, Trish kissed him without fear. "I want it too. You filming me while I pose and tease you. While you fuck me. Christ, Eric, while you watch the playback later and I ride your cock. You'd be so hard."

His response was subhuman. He was there...then *gone*. He mauled her mouth, palmed her ass. All power and need. With a throaty growl, he tucked her under one arm and grabbed the camera equipment with the other. Their walk to the reception desk wasn't nearly so controlled. Either Eric wouldn't talk or he couldn't. He only handed Trish his credit card

and clamped his molars together, looking away with an expression that was nearly pained.

Five minutes later they were in an elevator — not the kind that led to the Stratosphere's breathtaking thrill rides, but the mirrored kind that led to another kind of thrill. Alone in the elevator, Eric posed Trish so that she looked away from him, toward the left bank of mirrors. He turned too, back to back. Reflection followed reflection followed reflection in an unending pattern.

“Turn a little,” he growled.

Trish complied as if her feet were

separate entities.

“Ass out.”

Oh fuck. This was gonna be amazing.

“Smile, showgirl. Smile like you mean it, because I’m not waiting to set up the camera when we get in the room.”

She couldn’t help but smile. Slinky. Needy. Oh so ready. The adrenaline of the evening had built and built until even that quiet, private orgasm was another step as they climbed. “More,” she whispered.

Speaking into his mirror, watching her reflection, he closed

his eyes briefly. A man on the brink. Trish shivered.

“There are cameras in here.” His darkened eyes flicked to a black half circle nestled against the ceiling. “Can’t go overboard.”

“Something quick then. Innocent. For us.”

“Adjust your bra.”

Trish’s smile grew. She locked gazes with him in the mirror. Without looking away, she pinched her underwire and shifted it to a more comfortable position. She gave her girls a fluff. She lingered there, tweaked her nipples through the lace and the glossy lamé top.

Then she smoothed her hands down her sides and shook her ass. A little shimmy.

“Tell me how your body feels.” His voice was so low, so aroused.

She glanced down to where his jeans hugged a noticeable erection. “I’m tight. Too hot for my own skin. Want to claw at it, get free of this pressure. I want that big cock banging my pussy. Can you do that for me, Eric?”

The elevator door opened. Their floor.

He grabbed her wrist. Two seconds later they were in the hallway, and she was draped in his



arms. Being carried. So dizzy from what they were doing, from what she wanted, she tucked her face against his chest. A rock-hard pectoral was her refuge. The strap of the camera bag was cold against her cheek.

“Key.” He was positively monosyllabic. She was beginning to associate that descent with the best sex of her life. “Now.”

Cradled by his tree-trunk arms, she twisted at the waist and managed to slot the key. Door open. Door slammed.

Eric was behaving like a Neanderthal, but he was conscious

in there somewhere. He set the camera equipment gently on the floor, then lowered Trish with equal care. Not onto the bed. Or the couch. Or even the carpeting.

The tile of the entryway. Cold and hard. Only the back of her head was padded by a lush Turkish runner.

He stood over her while she lay on the foyer floor. She relished the view. The largest man she'd ever been with, as he unbuckled his belt, as he unzipped his fly, as he pulled out that fabulous prick.

*Oh yes.*

"Shirt off," she managed to say.

“You too.”

Eric yanked his T-shirt off. The sight of all that muscle and that beautiful ink washed over her as a visual wave of straight arousal. His scars had become part of what she expected from the sight of his naked torso. Primal and gorgeous and so damn strong.

His beautiful lips parted as she arched her back. The bra was easy to unfasten, and the lamé top untied with a few fumbles of her unsteady fingers. He rolled on a condom. Gaspd when she bared her breasts. And he knelt.

Those big, ruthless hands were

no longer gentle. He spread her legs wide. The heels of her pumps scraped the walls on either side of the entryway. He levered over her. His arms pinned her in place with one pressed elbow to wrist, above her breasts. The other hooked around her waist. His hand gripped her ass. Almost too much pain.

A single rough thrust dragged a cry from her throat. He groaned so long and low, but then it was all his rough grunts. Each powerful thrust. Without strong arms pinning her in place, she would've been fucked right across the floor. She had nowhere to go, nothing to do,

except cling to his implacable shoulders. Her pussy was his. Her mouth was his.

She managed to open her eyes because part of the fun was watching how he reacted. His expression was masculine need, teeth bared, brow clenched down in fierce concentration. She heard a knock on the door, but it wasn't from the outside. The heels of his boots thumped against the wood, seeking purchase, finding the power to give her more.

"Eric — oh my God! So...*good*."

"Better," he rasped against her neck.

Even in the middle of such a fierce fuck, she laughed. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so free when Eric hadn't been involved. "Yes, better than good. Like there's never been another cock in me. Like you could break me in half if you tried hard enough. But you won't, my vicious stud. You'll give me all you've got. Give it to me."

Another grunt, another thrust. "You're gonna pose for me. Lie here on the floor. Sweaty. Fucked. Your pussy soaked and dripping. You'll *pose for me*."

"Yes," she gasped.

“You will. Fuck, Trish, you will.”

“Yes, sugar.” She petted her fingers deep into his hair then caught his lower lip between her teeth. “Now shut up and ride that thought. Ride *me*.”

He was sweaty now. So was she. Slick bodies. Boots thumping. Her heels slipped against the walls. She kicked them off and locked her ankles around his ass. Every gyration was hers—from above and below. Eric angled his hand to grab one tit. He squeezed, dipped his head, took her nipple in his mouth.

One sharp sip was all the glorious torture she could take.

Trish's neck snapped backward, arching hard, as her body exploded with sensation. Ripples and shudders and a cry that sounded as if it had come from some other woman — some wanton creature who had lost control.

She had.

Eric kept her nipple in his mouth, sucking, grasping with his big palm. She dragged his chin up. She wanted to see it in his eyes when he burst apart.

“Trish,” was all he said.

With one powerful drive, his body stiffened. He groaned and shook, then ground his pelvis



against hers. Shudders of satisfaction rippled from his shoulders to his thighs.

“Holy shit,” she breathed against his neck.

“Uh-huh.”

Laughter wiggled out of her, unexpected and beautiful. She took his head in her hands and shook him. Back and forth. Simply laughing. A broad smile made his stunned, satisfied expression more accessible. He was there with her, equally amazed.

She kissed that lovely mouth. Kissed his rare smile. And feeling close, daring, she kissed his scar,

feathering kisses from his temple down to his jaw. Her heart seized when he didn't stiffen or pull away.

"We seem to need this," she whispered, still out of breath. "Sex as foreplay."

"You get me so wound up."

"It's mutual, sugar."

"Good."

Slowly, as if he might break her — now, after he'd pounded her into the tile — Eric untangled their limbs. He petted over where he'd grabbed and held her down. "Fuck, Trish. Too hard."

"Nope. Just right."

Tenderness softened his mouth.

It made her feel like a million dollars knowing she'd made that happen. "You deserve better."

"I deserve getting what I want. There's a difference. You had us both so amped up, we wouldn't have been able to do what we want."

Slowly, oh so slowly, a dirty smile pulled at his mouth. Underneath, however, was that quiet amazement she was learning to recognize — as if he couldn't quite believe this was happening. "We?"

"Yes. We."

His smile deepened. "And what

is that?"

Trish inhaled softly, gathering her courage. This was what she wanted, but old habits were hard to break. Her clothes were a shredded mess. Her short, natural hair was spiked in tangles. Her makeup had been smeared, and her body was damp with sweat. Yet she couldn't remember ever feeling more genuinely sexy.

"Get your camera, sugar. You have a priceless moment to capture."

# Chapter Sixteen

Eric's knees were shaky as he made it to his feet. He hitched his jeans over his hips and ignored the fine tremble. He'd do anything to ensure Trish kept looking at him that way. Her lips were glossy and plump, eyes heavy lidded. The curves of her body and the sleek plane of her stomach arched to her wet pussy. Raunchy, yes. He'd done that to her. He'd fucked her to hell and gone and she hadn't merely liked it, she wanted more. She wanted him to photograph her.

No chance he would deny her, not when it would also mean denying himself. Not when he knew he was saving up the experience. Eric didn't do long term, but that didn't mean he couldn't recognize a good thing when he saw one.

Trish was one helluva good thing.

She shifted, covering the thin swatch of light brown hair over her lower lips.

"Don't move," he said. Probably grunted. Christ, he became a beast when she was involved.

"Or what?" Her fingers spread

over silky skin. "You're not into punishing me."

"No." He snagged the camera bag by one strap and pulled out the better of his two expensive instruments, able to capture both photos and video. "Not into smacking." He flashed a tight grin, as if something live and mean crawled down his spine, urging him to grab this chance. Fistfuls of memories.

"On your elbows," he said.

She made a show of obeying. Her pretty pink-tipped breasts were luscious. She was depraved and smudged and smeared, with a smile

that hinted at being let in on a secret.

He watched her through the lens. Her fingers trailed over her stomach and touched her breasts. Eric worked the camera without thought from his brain, aiming closeups of the abraded red lines over her ribs. "Put your hand on your pussy. Open."

She laughed then, low and dirty. Not snarky. More like she was having such a marvelous time she didn't know how else to let it loose. "You're practically gonna pop, aren't you? It's okay. I can hardly bear the way you look at me, like



you could eat me at any second.”

He chuckled as he lined up a shot of her entire body — curves into angles into lean lines and surprising strength. “I could. In fact...I will.”

“Eventually.”

“Eventually.” He snapped a dozen more pictures before flipping the setting to record. “On your knees.”

She rose to hands and knees with feline grace. Her smoldering blue eyes appraised him. With deliberation, she licked across her bottom lip. “You make me feel like a superstar.”

“You’re gorgeous.”

“See? You can’t deny it. Am I your star, Eric? The best?”

“Fuck yes.”

She went over and above everything he asked of her, as well as how she lit up with every snap of the lens. The camera loved her. Luminous, creamy skin. The sinuous line of her curves. He panned over her body, letting himself revel, recording every inch of her for posterity.

He ought to have at least some shame. The things he wanted to do to her... Filthy, depraved things. But he wouldn’t dare. Why pass on something so amazing, so fleeting?

“To the bed.”

She swept to her feet, again revealing that she liked following her partner’s cues. Eric made it a priority that she’d have it *her* way by the end of the night.

He trained the camera on her ass as she sashayed away. That was for later. Now was all about distance. Looking in. Scratching beneath the surface of her perfect façade — not that she was so perfect now. Only her attitude remained flawlessly coy. Soon he’d have even that as artless and tousled as her body.

“To the bed? You didn’t specify how.”

He held back a chuckle. Then another. Who the hell was he around her? Someone lighter, someone without the heavy weights of his past and family around his neck. "I didn't."

She preened for the camera, lifting her hands to the back of her head so that her tits rose and her stomach flattened. "Should I use my imagination? Would you like that? *I* get to pick what I present to you. To the camera. To whoever's watching."

"Yes."

Christ, he was losing the ability to speak in full sentences. That was

even after taking off the edge with a mind-blowing orgasm. If he hadn't fucked her on the floor, he'd be lucky to form words. Maybe he wouldn't have to — not often. It seemed he wasn't going to have to pry what she wanted out of her. That she was beginning to trust him with her genuine desires was humbling.

She made a soft humming noise before smoothing her palms down the center of her torso. "I'm a lucky girl. I do like my breasts. They feel amazing when they're touched." She matched gestures to words, cupping herself and sliding her

thumbs over the tight peaks. "But I think I like my ass better. I've *worked* for this ass."

She turned slowly toward the bed to place her hands on the mattress and spread her feet apart. The tiny twist of her rumpled skirt accented her bottom. From Barbie to tramp with one quick fuck. That contrast tightened his balls and reminded him that although he was capturing the moment like a pro, he was losing control of his body.

She reached back to rub her ass and trace her fingertips over the cleft. Peeking over her shoulder, she said, "I think you like it too."

Of course he did. He trained the camera on her. Couldn't miss a second. Didn't fucking want to. His only pause was to open a small tripod on the hotel dresser and mount the camcorder. Then he sank into the chair kept against the window.

The room they'd rented was standard issue. An off-season special for locals. He hadn't wanted to bitch about spending too much. Otherwise the whole fighting-for-cash idea was totally negated. Trish was on a tight budget too, he knew, so intimate it was. He liked the effect. The closeness. The dark

fabrics of the window hangings held back the lights of the Strip, closing this moment into a private paradise.

“Touch yourself.”

She lowered her shoulders to the mattress, dipping her fingers between lovely thighs, over her lips. Eric liked that he knew what she'd do next — pinch her clit between two fingers.

“It's better when you touch me. But all this is for later. You'll wrap your hand around your cock. Later. When you watch the playback.” She found a sweet spot and shuddered against the bed. Her



knees dipped.

“Hold your ass apart.”

“Do I have to?” Her voice was hoarse. “Feels too good. I only need a minute...”

“Now,” he snapped.

She grabbed both cheeks and pulled them apart. Eric fetched a different camera from his bag then zoomed in where her face pressed against the dark burgundy comforter. He wanted the soft split of her plumped lips and the haze in her eyes. Gone. She was wholly gone.

He was getting this on film from two different vantages. Keeping it.

His own private glimpse.

She watched him in return, making him the object of admiration. That was new. He didn't know what to do with it.

"Possessed," she hummed. "You practically hold me by looking at me. Even with the two of us here, you're completely in charge of my body."

Such simple words, but he stored them up. Kept them for when he'd need to unpack them in quiet moments to fill the empty space that always returned.

"On your back."

She turned over, edging up the

bed, pointing her toes. Her hands returned to the temptation between her thighs. Two fingers in her pussy, then three. Smokey, smeared eye makeup. Clothes ripped away.

“Did I tell you to touch yourself?” His voice was gritty and low.

“No. But you didn’t tell me not to.”

“Stop.” Something fierce and powerful burned through him when she did.

“Wanna taste?”

He had to ignore that or he might laugh. The cameras would pick it up, and he didn’t like to

intrude on his future fantasies any more than necessary. "Arms over your head. Long. Pretty."

"You're awfully sweet for a bruiser."

"You're not in the ring with me."

"No?" She owned him when she posed. "We're going rounds, aren't we? Around and around. This one's your turn. Tell me what you want, Eric."

He wanted a lot, more than he'd ever found outlet for. But here was Trish asking what he wanted.

"You."

She spread her knees. "Me? That leaves so many choices. Do you

want my cunt?" Then she dipped toward the tiny pink bud between her ass cheeks. "Or here? Would you like to fuck my ass, Eric?"

He held down a hard shudder. "Not now."

"Because you're too wound up, aren't you?" She pushed to a seated position while her legs remained splayed. "You'd be afraid of hurting me. Too hard. Too mean."

She eased to her knees and moved toward him. His mouth went dry. He licked across his bottom lip, but it didn't make a difference. His bones rattled from the force of holding himself back.

She crawled right up between his legs—a lithe beauty on the prowl. Her touch began at his knees, though he couldn't feel it through his jeans. Her palms worked slowly up the inside of his thighs before she started on his fly.

Cool fingers dipped to pull out his cock. “How about my mouth? Would you like to take my mouth? Until I can swallow everything you give me?”

Her head tipped down in promise. The shortness of her hair showed off a delicate dip at the top of her neck. He circled that divot with his thumb.

She ringed his cock head with her tongue, unhinging his mind. He sprawled his fingers across her nape and squeezed. Greedy and wicked. He made himself back off, because she was right—he didn't want to hurt her. Instead he framed the edge of her jaw with a softer touch.

Trish pulled back and offered a sultry expression. "Don't hold back."

She lowered her head and swallowed his hard cock in one swooping suck. Wet, searing heat went right to his head. Eric's world spun. He set aside his handheld and

snagged the better camcorder from the tripod, needing the perfect shot. Aiming it right at her face — *that* was the perfect shot. The way her lips folded around his cock. The hollows of her cheek. The flashes of knowing depravity.

Saved. Forever.



# Chapter Seventeen

Giving blowjobs had never been Trish's favorite sexual act, but it was part of the business of getting men off. On her knees. Their hands in her hair. It was so...powerless. She preferred being on top where she could show off her assets, where she could set the pace. Men could grope and gape all they wanted, but she'd at least get off.

But here. Now. Kneeling before Eric.

She felt invincible.

The eye of the camera and the

deep, deep blue of his gaze watched as she pleased him. The pleasure she gave, every lick and every hard suck, ricocheted across his features. A hiss. A grimace that looked so near to pain. When his oh-so-seductive lips parted, breathing heavily, she felt a rush of arousal that outstripped anything she'd felt while sucking off a man.

So she took his thick, massive cock to the back of her throat. Every ridge and vein stroked against her lips, in and out. She tasted the precome that dotted his slit. That he was so close so fast did another number on her quivering pussy.

She really did go to his head like an opiate. With a camera in his hand and Trish giving him something dirty, debauched, *real*, he was an unstoppable fuck machine.

His prick was big and thick and hard enough to make her want another fuck. She'd seen disappointing gym monkeys who didn't realize — or maybe they did — that no matter how much iron they pumped, the exercise would never bulk up their cocks. She sucked with gusto because Eric was a rare prize.

Bobbing, tasting, teasing, she kept her eyes up. She alternated

between staring into the camera, knowing he'd admire her eyes sometime in the future, and reveling in his greedy expression. His tan deepened as his gasped for air, which accentuated his scar. He looked so damn vicious, yet she'd transformed into the one in charge. Every seductive pull of her mouth on his fabulous erection was hers to command.

*Aw, hell.* She wasn't going to last much longer than he would.

"You like this?"

He craved reassurance? Now? Because that wasn't sex talk. She saw the need on his face — the

desire for his fetish to be accepted. Softly, with a gentleness that belied their raunch, he touched two shaking fingers to her temple. They circled around to her cheek, where she hollowed and bulged around his thickness.

“Patricia. Please.”

A man like him, so potent.  
Asking please?

Slowly, relishing the long sigh he expelled, she sucked her way to his head and released him.

“Look at me, Eric,” she said quietly, but with more force than she’d believed possible from herself. He complied. Dead-on.

Their gazes locked. "You're going to have to trust me. This isn't some pity fuck, and it isn't a fuck aimed to wiggle prizes out of your pockets. Not with us."

A great breath lifted his muscled chest. Damn, she could get to like being on her knees if that picture of male perfection was hers for the taking. "You...you have no idea how good this is for me."

"Just good?" She winked.

A small smile crept across his lips. "Better."

"Well, it can't be *that* good. I heard a few complete sentences in there." She lifted her chin toward

the camcorder. “Turn the viewfinder to me. I want to see the moment I swallow your come.”

That worked a shudder down his big body. He complied with gratifying speed.

“Ah, perfect.” She could see her own eyes, glazed with passion—a unique novelty. For a second, she could also see the appeal of her short, spiky hair and her smeared makeup. She looked sexy in a way she’d never seen. He’d done that to her, made her so crazy for the feelings he caused in her. No artifice.

She gathered up the courage of

her thoughts. There was nothing to be afraid of, not when Eric held the camera, not when he gazed at her as if she were the most beautiful woman on the planet.

“You’re turning me on, sugar,” she whispered against his swollen head. “So much. Should I come too? Touch myself? Or will you eat me out after I’ve made you groan my name?”

His cock twitched. His hand was back in her hair, full of tension and need. “After, showgirl. You’ll scream, and I’ll lick your juices.”

“God, Eric.”

“Do it.”



She returned to her task. Oh, what a task. Pure pleasure. He swelled in her mouth. She watched herself in the viewfinder. Like a porn star sucking for her next paycheck, she slid up and down, swirled her tongue over and around his head, took him all the way to his thick hilt. This wasn't porn. She wasn't that low, that desperate. She was a woman being worshiped, even as she serviced a man to the point of exploding.

The viewfinder was nothing like his beautiful, practiced portraits. She loved that his hands were unsteady. The picture wasn't

steady. It shook with the hard rhythm she established. Would he be upset later by the lack of quality? Maybe all he'd remember was how her mouth made him feel, how edgy she'd made him.

She was stripping him down to something real, just like he'd done to her.

Trish dug her nails into the backs of his hard, tense thighs. His grip tightened on her nape. More power now. More force as he took control of her pace. She looked past the smeared mascara and the slightly purple circles beneath her eyelids. She focused on the seam of her lips

where he disappeared and shot back out. So fast now.

“Touch yourself.” His voice was barely human. Deep and animal. She *loved* it. Loved sinking him to that primal place. “Now. Get ready for me.”

She was *so* ready. He was too, ready to blow. She did as he commanded, half for the thrill of answering his needs, half for the spiking pleasure of her fingers circling her clit. She couldn't think about how his mouth would be there in a matter of seconds. She'd lose it. And she wanted to lose it beneath his teeth, tongue and lips.

“Fuck,” he ground out. “Faster. Work yourself. I’m watching you, showgirl. I *will* watch you. I’ll jack my cock. Fierce. Brutal. Needing you.”

His rasping words made Trish roll her eyes closed. She could get off to the sound of his voice when he supercharged her fantasies.

“Eyes open. Now. Watch yourself, like you said. See the moment I come in that fuck-doll mouth. So close, aren’t you? So close. So —”

He stiffened on a hoarse gasp. Her name was a cuss word when growled with such need. Trish

flicked her attention from his straining face to the viewfinder. Hot come filled her mouth. She watched her jolt of surprise, her eyes watering, her throat clenching around a hard swallow. Although her fingers slowed on her clit, she felt a warm rush of arousal drip down her inner thighs.

As Trish licked the last of his release, Eric shuddered and petted the back of her head. Her name, over and over, was a whisper to fill the sudden quiet. She grabbed the video camera that dangled precariously from his hand, stared right in the lens and blew it a kiss.

Then she secured the expensive-looking equipment on its tripod and aimed it at the bed. That she was aiding him in recording their escapade made her grin the whole time.

Suddenly she was off her feet, swung up into Eric's powerful arms. "Show off." She laughed against his sweaty shoulder. She licked him there. Her lips were slightly numb, and her body hummed with anticipation.

He posed her *just so* on the bed, but she twined and twisted, driven out of her skin by straight sexual energy. She coursed with it, from

scalp to pinkie toes. All of her need centered in her cunt.

“Now it’s my turn to beg, Eric. *Please*. Your mouth. I need you.”

He knelt between her legs. Her words triggered something dark and violent in his eyes. She shivered. *Oh God*. This was going to blow her mind.

Starting simply enough, he licked from her opening to her clit. She threaded her fingers into his thick brown hair, down to the scalp. But he stopped her. Removed her hands.

“Arms above your head. Show off that fantastic body, showgirl. I

know you want to.”

Trish reached toward the headboard, although he’d scooted her ass to the foot of the mattress. He had full access to where she needed him most. After hooking the backs of her knees over his thick shoulders, he resumed his maddening play, including the light graze of his teeth. She jerked and gasped.

“The lady likes that.”

“Yes.”

It was so intense. She’d need to let go in ways she never had, or her body would lock down, afraid of something so powerful.



“Don’t fight me,” he whispered against her inner thigh, then he licked her wetness. “Relax. Breathe and relax.”

She inhaled deeply and nodded toward the ceiling. No more thinking about cameras. This was about her, her body, and Eric winning out over both. The sucking rhythm of his lips and tongue made her squirm and cry out. But two fingers in her cunt made her call his name.

“Quiet, showgirl. Just feel.”

With the heel of his hand, he bore down on the flesh below her navel. The pressure tightened her

channel around his fingers. He shoved another in. Three brutal fingers, fucking her as steadily as he had with his cock. The press of his hand ground his inner fingers against her G-spot.

*"Oh God."*

"You're going to come. All over my face. Don't you dare fucking hold back on me."

She grabbed her nipples and twisted, needing some control of the sensations ratcheting higher, higher.

*"Can't. Eric. Can't."*

He laughed against her clit.  
"Now who's lost all her words?"

Poor showgirl. These fingers driving you crazy?"

"Yes."

"Want me to stop?"

"No!"

"Then give it to me. Take a deep breath and give me what I've earned. What you deserve."

Something beautiful unlocked in her mind. *Yes. Yes. Yes.* Over and over, she chanted that single word.

"Look at me." An undeniable command.

Trish opened her eyes. Met his. Gasp. "Do it."

His fingers pulsed so hard, with such a quick rhythm. He pressed

harder on her low abdomen. He lowered his mouth to her clit. Bit down softly. Then he licked with his firm, strong tongue until she couldn't hold back even if she'd wanted to.

Her orgasm ripped through her like a bolt of lightning. A scream shot out of her mouth as she bucked off the bedspread. Her vision grayed at the edges. When Eric yanked his fingers out of her pussy and pressed once more below her navel, her release splashed across his lips. He fastened his mouth wide over her cunt, from her clenching opening to her

pulsing clit. He swallowed her as deeply as she'd done for him.

"What," she rasped, "the hell was that?"

Eric licked his luscious lips and grinned. Total male satisfaction.

"Girl come."

"No way."

"Was that new for you?"

Her eyes fluttered shut on one last shudder. "Jesus, yes."

"That makes me feel like a goddamn superstar."

"You look it, smug bastard."

He crawled up her body, tickling her along the way. "Amazing, Trish. Amazing."

Softly, the way he'd let her before, she touched his scar, trailing gentle touches down that damaged skin. So he wouldn't get uncomfortable with that attention, she added her other hand, caressing both cheeks. "I had no idea. Honestly, Eric. No idea it could be that way. I... *Wow*. Kablooey."

He nuzzled and licked the hollow at the base of her neck. A contented hum purred out of his throat.

"I need a shower," she said against his crown.

"Later. Rest now."

Eric pushed off the bed and

turned off the camcorder. He returned to the bed and snuggled her into the covers. They were sticky and hot, but she curled against his big, sheltering body. Like she belonged there. Her heart gave a scared leap, but she was too tired to follow that thought.

She yawned. "Such a night."

"Boxing. SkyJump. Fucking fantastic sex. And it's only Friday night."

That scared leap became a jump — one she decided to speak aloud. "Got any plans for tomorrow?"

"Spending the morning in bed with you. Picking you up from the

arena after you work. Starting all over again."

"Damn I like the sound of that. I have a show tomorrow too. *Princess of Egypt*. Before the boxing."

"You do both in one night?"

"Three times a week. At least until it shuts down."

"When's the finale?"

"Two weeks from tonight."

"I'll be there," he said simply, as if that commitment was the easiest thing in the world. "But only if you attend a barbeque with me next weekend. Can you swing it?"

"Friends of yours?"

"Yup."



“I’d...” She swallowed a reflexive surge of apprehension. “I’d love to.”

He hugged her tighter and kissed her forehead. She looped her arms around his rock-hard middle and drifted to sleep, dogged by the warmth and the slight terror of making plans with Eric Donaghue.

Sweet Christ, what if he was worth the risk?

# Chapter Eighteen

At one point, flying had approached benediction. Eric wouldn't call it effortless, because being a responsible, kickass pilot was a hell of a lot of work, but it was when everything in the world came together. Each cog fit in place, as if Eric could make order out of a universe that lacked so much.

He wanted that feeling for Carey. There was no other reason to pay the exorbitant fees than to hope his brother could find that kind of purpose from his art.

If only Eric could find his way back to that feeling of rightness.

He'd need to shake the memories of ejecting through his half-stuck canopy. Screaming air. Screaming lungs. Screaming pain.

He pushed the flashes away.

Data streamed in through the digitized panels covering each knee. Tin Tin's plane pushed up on Eric's port side, flying toward an Israeli opponent. Fast and hard. Eric did too, once he gave his head a shake. He nudged the throttle and snatched more air. He could own any moment, even if he had to catch it by the balls. His plane

swooped along the terrain, up a ridge, then down the other side to take a Japanese F-15 by surprise. Score. Eric was on his game.

By the time he landed, he was feeling pretty damn good. He'd been Tin Tin's wingman, which meant parking their Vipers side by side.

"Nice kill," he said, voice sounding as if he were being strangled. "That Israeli."

Tin Tin slid him a wary look before marking it with his trademark sly smile. "Thanks. You played second fiddle on that one. Appreciate it."

“He was yours.” Eric shrugged.  
“I had your back if you missed.”

“Hell, Kisser, when was the last time I missed? For that matter, when was the last time *you* missed?” He affected a faraway look. “But one day, years from now, I’ll appreciate your support. Until then...unclench, man. You’re getting there.”

“Bite me, Tin Tin.”

“I’m rubber. You’re glue.” The punk grinned again, dimples and all, then jogged to join Leah as they strode off the tarmac.

Eric bit his molars together.  
Twelve-step program on how to

stop being an asshole. That was the goal. Nothing was impossible after spending the weekend with Trish. It was Tuesday, and he still couldn't escape the memories. Didn't want to.

The ugly thoughts he harbored about Tin Tin turned a little...less ugly.

Once the squadron finished post-flight checks, the hardcore determination Eric had poured into his flight left him pretty damn drained. Thank Christ he had a week before his next flight.

In the hangar, he flipped through his maintenance logs one last time.

Failure to dot every I and cross every T would come back to bite him in the ass. Major Haverty, the infamous Fang, would do the biting.

As if having summoned the man, Eric turned a corner to find the major standing in the middle of the hallway. "Fang, Sir."

Haverty's tall head blotted out part of the fluorescent lights. "Kisser," he said gravely.

A chill skittered down Eric's spine. "Sir?"

"I've been watching your flights."

"I get it done." Crossing his arms

over his chest was practically instinctive. "Blocks checked."

"That's the thing." Haverty scrubbed a hand over his jaw.

"Flying shouldn't be checking off a list. You're stiff."

"Is this a formal complaint?"

"No. But if you need someone to talk it over with..."

"I'd rather not. Am I still cleared for the Red Flag?"

"Just over two weeks. Get it in gear, bandit. We need Kisser up there."

Eric understood the unspoken message — the fighter pilot named Kisser, not a recovering headcase.



“I understand, Sir.”

Then he bailed. Fast. He didn't want to spend any more time getting the third degree from Fang. Making nearly nice with Tin Tin had been draining enough.

Stiff flying? Probably. There was no telling the cause. Too many to list these days, although the big one lingered. The fucking crash. He hated how it remained a brick in his gut, pulling him down. The possibilities dogged him on the drive home.

Quiet. A little peace. It didn't seem like too much to ask.

His phone rang as he walked in

the front door. He ditched his armful of paperwork on the kitchen island then fished the phone out of his pocket. Detroit area code.

“Donaghue.”

“I should hope I’d know your last name. It’s mine too.”

“Carey.” Eric dropped to the couch. “Man, how you been?”

“Rough.” His voice was softer than Eric had heard in a long time. “Real rough. But supposedly that’s a good thing. Means we’re on the right track.”

“Cuz the easy way’s the pills?”

“Yeah.” The line crackled a minute with silence — silence with a

heavy dose of sick anticipation.

Eric had been down this road so many times. He couldn't help the hope that swelled in his chest. Optimism was probably a disease too. In the quiet, he was suddenly back in their tiny apartment in Detroit. They'd shared a couple beers and a pack of tacos while Carey sketched the design for Eric's skyline tattoo. The music had blared because they were alone, with Mom out working third shift.

A solid moment. The kind of moment Eric held on to in these painful times.

He scratched down his thigh,

hoping for a bit of sensation — something to pull him safely back to earth. Clouds fell. Dissolved. He couldn't stay in the sky forever. Flying had gotten him as close as possible, but eventually the sky had spit him out.

He didn't want to put so many hopes on Carey. Though his brother was only three years younger, Eric had always thought of him as a kid. "You making it work?" he asked.

A dry laugh was the only answer at first. When Eric let the line stay quiet until Carey made a muted noise of agreement. "I'm trying. This place...I like it. There's good

people here. Really good. One girl, she's... Whatever. They make sense. I've got one counselor, Pete, who makes these awesome twenty-foot-high sculptures. He's a complete savant. Nearly autistic. Can't talk to people for shit unless he's got a list of questions in front of him, then you can't shut him up."

"But what about...?" He stopped himself.

"He's a great drug counselor, bro. He gets through to me. Maybe. I don't know. There's no judgment from him. He calls it gravity. Can't fight gravity." A pause. "Shit, Eric, I didn't mean that."

“Forget it,” Eric said, his words sincere. “I know damn well that’s the truth.”

“Okay. Cool.” Another pause. “But like Pete said, some things you *can* fight. That’s my job now. I tell you, man, it’s as shitty as cleaning out toilets with a toothbrush.” Carey was laughing some, which was good and bad. Good because it meant he could be on his way back. Bad because, holy fuck, was Eric the only one worried? The only one who remembered how many times this had failed?

He was sure as hell the only one writing the checks.

Fist tight on his thigh, he asked,  
“You talked to Mom or Dad?”

“Nah. You?”

Eric had the day after Carey's temper tantrum, but he hadn't mentioned the outburst. Until events swung one way or the other, he didn't want to give himself a headache by involving his parents. They'd abdicated that responsibility a long time ago. Instead he'd tried to get their mom to visit Carey. Hadn't worked. “Mom's stressed. Her hours got cut.”

“Of course. She's always stressed.” Carey's voice had turned harder. “And Dad's never home.

Nothing changes.”

“I should have taken you with me.” The words flew out of his mouth without thinking.

“What would you have done? Stuck me in your locker in the wrestling gym?”

He and Carey had always had each other. Mom worked a million and one hours, aiming for a solid retirement. One day. Dad had worked before the auto plant shut down, then spent his time hanging out at the bowling alley. Why bother coming home to their shithole apartment on the dingy side of town when his buddies



were waiting? It hadn't mattered at first. Eric and Carey had spent their time together. Worked out.

Wrestled. Made plans.

Eric had been the first one out. Carey had hit the skids. Abandoned.

"I could have gotten an off-campus apartment. Enough room for both of us."

"And paid for it how?" Carey blew out a long, shaky breath.

"Look, this is why I called. I don't need this. Your guilt. Pete wanted me to talk to you."

"I'm not feeling guilty."

"Bullshit," Carey said with a

laugh. "Give it up. I've made my own choices, like how I busted up my room last week. I'm sorry for that. You must've taken it hard, and I know what this is setting you back. But none of this is your fault. You were a hundred miles away when I popped Oxy the first time."

That was the problem. If Eric had stuck around, none of this would have happened. Worse, he'd *stayed* gone. He'd joined the Air Force, then enlisted not once but twice. His guilt wasn't going anywhere as long as he was in Vegas and Carey was stuck in a facility.

He pinched the bridge of his

nose. "You think it's going well now though?"

"I...I think it is."

They kept chatting a few minutes more, but the air fizzled out of their conversation. Anxiety dogged Eric after they hung up. Energy burned up the backs of his legs and down his spine as he stripped out of his flight suit. The tingling pressure made him want to strip his skin just as easily. But there was no escaping himself.

The idea of calling Trish hovered in his mind, but she was on an audition, trying to find a new job to cover the bills once her show shut

down. The absolute last thing she needed was his crazy shit and worry for his brother.

They didn't have that kind of relationship.

They were a good time. He gave her everything he could manage, but that wasn't much more than a fantastic weekend. If anything, Trish was too compassionate. Those blue eyes would well up with sympathetic tears, and he'd drown there. Trading the pain in one big guilt circle didn't sound fun for anyone.

Still, he could use a hit of her. A hit of that freedom they had

together. Something to take the bite out of a shit day.

He powered up his laptop as if his hands had free will. Trish's folder was open. Although he'd pored over the pictures, he hadn't looked at the video yet. Downloaded it of course, but something had made him hold off. Maybe he'd known he'd face a moment like this and need the fresh thrill.

He clicked the video file. The screen filled with Trish, on her back. Watching was like being back in that hotel room, when she'd been fucked and smudged and

trashy. Only for him to see.

With the sound off so he didn't hear his own voice, he watched her get up. Walk over to the bed. Stare straight at the lens.

Shoving his boxer briefs to the floor, Eric gave his waking cock a stroke. Then another when the on-screen Trish put her hands between her legs.

The bottom swell of her breasts was perfect, made to be held but not overly lush. She was gorgeous everywhere. With a hard cock came a clean mind. Everything else rushed away in the link between Trish and his greedy eyes. A private

show. She slipped to her knees and came closer to the camera. He'd zoomed out, making sure not to miss a second.

Eric gripped his prick and fondled the sensitive head, holding back the pressurized pleasure that wanted to boil out of his body. A little more. Her face on-screen and the smudged eyeliner. Hollowed cheeks and lips swelled with cock.

Each stroke went fiercer. Faster. Meaner. He wanted her. Watching her.

Fucking her hard.

The version of him on camera came, but Eric held off — resisting

the kiss she blew at the lens. He had a goal. A mission. Each clutching stroke took him closer to her explosion. He saw the moment it happened, even with the sound off. Her sexy body bowed up from the bed in a lovely arch. She'd tasted like honey as her juices washed over his tongue.

Standing now, Eric pumped his prick as she exploded on camera. He came. Holy *fuck*, he came. He slapped his palm on the desk. His thighs shook against his release. The sensation was sharp and blinding.

He stood at his desk until his



breathing got under control, until he was able to gather his head. As good as that had been, it wasn't enough. It was a substitute for having Trish there with him. Her special spark had been missing. Joy, maybe? Not the innocent joy of someone who didn't know better, but that of a woman who'd been privy to life's dark alleys and knew a first-class thing when she saw it.

He was starting to like her joy too much — to like *her* way too much.

He was so damn screwed.

# Chapter Nineteen

Trish had packed her bag for afternoon and evening. Three bags, actually. Class, an audition and the Wednesday-night show. It was only noon and she was exhausted. The last thing she needed was her mama's version of a pep talk, but that's what she got while fixing turkey on whole wheat in their kitchenette.

"I got a call from Hank Yardley last night," Mama said.

Trish's heart stuttered. The sandwich would be necessary to get

her through the rest of the day, but suddenly it resembled fresh roadkill.

“What about?” she managed.

“An audition. Since you’ve been having trouble getting them on your own.”

“I have one today!”

“Anyway, I told him sure,” Mama said, ignoring the comment completely.

“You told him yes without asking me? That’s not fair. Besides, I’ve got calls into everyone I know, and Dan Flowers says there’s a possibility at the Paris. He still remembers how well I did on that

Osmond show a few years ago.”

“You need the work, Patty.”

“Not from Hank. Not his kind of work.”

Her mother, once a beauty to rival Trish, hadn't put on a single ounce since following Trish to Vegas. That didn't mean she was pretty. Her skin had the consistency of leather drawn taut over wires. If she wasn't careful, Trish would end up the same way.

Mama crossed her arms under her ample breasts. Skinny or not, wrinkles or not, she hadn't changed out of her pajamas. “Don't you want to know what the job is?”

Trish cut the sandwich in half and stuck it in Tupperware. She threw it, an apple, a protein bar and a bottle of water in a paper sack. Every movement was stiff. "Not particularly. I get a feeling you'll tell me anyway."

"Modeling."

"Modeling." Trish spit the word. "We agreed that was temporary. A bridge between the circuit and taking a real shot here."

"Time's passed, Patty. And we need the money."

A flash of guilt swept up from Trish's collar, heating her face. *Tuition*. When sitting between two

other auditioning blondes who were at least four years younger, Trish battled her anxiety by concentrating on her next assignments. UNLV sure wasn't free, and landing a job in set design was nearly as difficult as show biz. She might as well have added *astronaut* to her list of backup plans.

So yes, they needed a heavy influx of cash. Soon. Or else she'd have to give up the one thing that kept her hopes high, buoying her during auditions that swung between daunting and disappointing. Sometimes they were one in the same.

“We’re getting by,” she said.  
“I’m *not* posing for him.”

Her mama’s eyes narrowed just before her temper snapped. “You’re not Julia Roberts, you know. You can’t afford to be picky.”

Trish snapped right back. How many times had they had this fight? “There’s a difference between being picky and refusing to pose practically nude for a pervert.”

“They were lovely shots. All tasteful!”

“Bull. They were soft-core porn and we both know it. I don’t care that it was for his private collection.”

She shivered. With Hank Yardley, she'd been dolled up. Painted. Wearing thousand-dollar Alexander McQueen heels and equally expensive lingerie. Technically, the poses had been much the same as what Eric had wanted, but she'd wound up feeling like an adjustable blow-up doll — maybe one of those top-of-the-line RealDolls.

Afterward, he'd kissed her cheek at the same time he'd cupped her pussy and gave her a mean squeeze. She'd carefully placed the to-die-for heels next to the front door before donning her beat-up track



shoes and sprinting to the bus stop. Hank had meant the heels as a present. She knew that if she ever wore them, she'd risk vomiting.

God, how had she come to make such a huge distinction between what she'd done out of desperation during those first few hungry months in Vegas, and what she did willingly with Eric? Maybe that was it. Her willingness. *With* him, not *for* him. Every step of the way, Eric had told her exactly what he wanted, giving her the opportunity to say no way ahead of the moment. And he'd cared what she wanted—a complete novelty.

The photo shoots for Eric and for Hank Yardley had both been intended for one party, rather than for a magazine or website, but she knew the difference. Eric gave a damn about her, as a person at the very least.

But her mother would call her a hypocrite if she knew the truth.

“You’re being selfish,” she said as if reading Trish’s mind.

It wasn’t mindreading, though. She’d heard the same refrain for five years. “So there it is. Blaming me for drawing a line in the sand.”

“After all I sacrificed for you, Patty. How can you do this to me?”

Years!”

“What future would I have if legit casting agents for high-end shows and movies knew I did that shit in my spare time?”

“How is working a boxing ring any better?”

“It just is, Mama. You found me the gig, but I had a say.”

“Hank is willing to pay. A lot. You’re turning it down out of spite.”

Trish slapped her hand on the Formica. Her palm stung. “Spite? Are you serious? You’ve sat here in a trailer for five years living off what I could scrape together, but

you never pull your head out of the sand. Casting agents treating me like horseflesh to be poked and prodded. Embarrassing questions like whether my tits are real.

Taping myself into a costume too small for a twelve-year-old. You don't want to see that side of it."

Hank's breath had stunk of too much whiskey during his supposed "photo shoot". His fingers had been sticky with what Trish thought might've been lube, which made his frequent trips to the bathroom that much more disgusting. Maybe he'd closed the door behind her mad sprint for the bus, proud he

hadn't forced her. Yay for restraint, asshole. But he'd trailed those sticky fingers down her arms to pose her, and the feel of how he'd "adjusted" her lingerie lingered like a swallow of bad milk. Disgusting and unshakeable.

And he'd *grabbed* her. She'd never felt dirtier.

Mama had been furious when Trish refused any more offers of work from the man, but a gig on a chorus line at the New York had ended the issue.

Until now.

"Would you like to know what he was really like, Mama?" Her

throat ached. "No. Of course you don't."

"I know what goes on, Patty. Don't think I'm naïve."

A dam of betrayal burst in her chest. "And you let it happen? You'd throw me back to him?"

"It's for your future. So, he's a little...gropey. No big deal. Plenty of successful actresses have done way more to make it big."

"Maybe I'm not cut out for it because I can't do that shit. I *won't*."

"We're back to you being so damn selfish. No wonder your father left. Maybe he was a helluva lot smarter than me, seeing the

signs so early.”

Trish went cold. Deadly cold. Her voice was as harsh and intimidating as she'd heard from Eric when she said, “Careful, Mama. That sounded a lot like blaming me.”

“He did what he did. That's the end of it.”

Trish's head was buzzing. Her guts spun as if in a cement mixer. Mama had never said it aloud. This was the closest she'd ever come to making the accusation — that being deserted by Jack Beauregard when Trish was seven had been because of the expense and rigors of the

pageants.

Internalizing that as a child had been way too easy. If Trish wasn't perfect, men left.

"I am not the family business," she whispered. "And I won't do this so you can live through my successes."

The skin around her mother's mouth tightened. Her back pulled straight — a reminder of how tall and elegant she'd once been. The high school cheerleader who'd dated the captain of the football team. It was as clichéd as a small-town girl trying to claw her way free. That was their life.



At that moment, her mother looked more like an enemy than a trusted partner.

“Your successes? I’d like to see them. What’s your audition today, my dear? Tell me. And then you tell me it’ll pay more than Hank would.”

Trish cringed. The audition was one of those...disappointing ones. She wished it was something better, if only to break her mama’s smug expression in two. “A cocktail waitress at the Wynn, with two performances on the second stage every night.”

Burlesque. How had she

bottomed out to the point where “at least it’s not topless” was an appealing feature of a new prospect?

“Perfect. That’s exactly what we wanted for you,” her mother sneered. “You act like you’re suffering so much. Do you think I didn’t give up dreams for you?”

Trish let her shoulders slump. She’d been so optimistic once. Nineteen and hitting the Strip for the first time. That brightness had seeped away. “Of course I know that. I’m...Christ, I’m *tired*. How long do we let this go on?”

“What, you have something

better to do? You've got nothing but your body and you know it."

"Mama!"

"I'm being practical, honey. That's all. We need to be realistic. You're twenty-four. If you don't work your ass off and grab hold of every opportunity, you're gonna fall right off the map."

Trish's anger propelled her words. There was no other explanation. "I've been taking classes. Part-time at UNLV."

Her mother recoiled. She would fight for Trish to do a nude shoot, but when it came to getting an education, she looked ready to spit

venom. "So that's where all the money's been going. You said costumes and voice lessons."

"Because the truth would've meant you'd shut it down."

"I'm shutting it down now!"

"Don't you care what I'm studying? How close I am to getting my degree?"

The closed-off coldness radiating from her mother meant she didn't give a damn. "I'm calling Hank back," Mama said. "And I'm telling him not to call anymore."

Apparently his offers are no longer welcome."

A place inside Trish burned with

a tiny flame of hope. Maybe...

“Thanks. I’d like that.”

“Yup. Good for you, Patty.

Because you know what I would’ve liked? A daughter with some guts. You think you’re so goddamn special. All these years. I could’ve trained *any* girl to do as bad as you have.”

An odd calm drained from Trish’s mind, down to the rest of her numb body. That was it. The end. She’d wondered if it would ever happen. And strangely enough, she felt entirely liberated.

“Thank you for that, Mama. Now I won’t have any regrets when I

leave.”

Trish sat at the brightly lit vanity in the dressing room. Thirty minutes to showtime, and she hadn't finished her makeup. Lots of foundation, but bare lips and nothing on her eyes. It looked strange. She felt strange.

Unmoored.

“Trish, baby?”

She lifted her heavy head and found Mallory Gibson standing beside her in full regalia. God, she looked amazing. Always had. A flutter of what they'd once shared

tickled behind Trish's breastbone. She'd dated Mallory in the weeks after the run-in with Hank Yardley. Three months of Mal's tender sexual therapy had been well-timed and much appreciated.

"You okay? We're on soon."

"Not the best tonight," Trish said softly. "I had a shit blaster of a fight with Mama. I think... I think we're done."

The astute woman flashed dark eyes toward where Trish had stacked her bags. Classes had gone well. She'd gotten a callback for the waitress job. But after finishing her performance that evening, she'd be

homeless.

“It’s time, Trish baby. She wasn’t good for your head. I said that years ago.”

“You did. But family, you know?”

“Yup. Completely. You need a place to stay tonight?” Mallory tipped up a saucy smile. “Maybe we could have some fun. Work on that mood of yours.”

Once, such a come-on would’ve been the perfect balm to ease Trish’s hurts. But she hesitated. Although she and Eric weren’t exclusive — not in any way they’d articulated — she couldn’t blithely



fall into bed with someone else. A shiver shot goose bumps across her shoulders as she suddenly hoped he was under the same impression.

“I’m sorta...seeing someone. I don’t know if that would be such a great idea.”

“Guy or girl?”

“Guy.”

“Well, at least that’s a relief.”

Mallory grinned and did a shimmy. “Would hate to think you didn’t find me sexy anymore.”

Trish managed the closest to a real smile she’d found since leaving the trailer, her bags in hand and her mother shouting after her. The

walk to the bus stop had never seemed longer.

She looked Mallory up and down. Oh, so much her type. Curvaceous. Gorgeous. Dark eyes and a darker, more knowing smile than Trish could attempt. Her lush chocolate hair was natural and trailed down to her waist when it wasn't bound in her elaborate, shellacked headdress. Trish had never been with a hotter girl, and she'd never come so close to staying with a woman permanently.

Something hadn't been right. She'd known she was hiding, even if that hiding place was soft and

comfortable. She'd wanted more. A serious spark.

Now that she'd found it with Eric, she was scared as hell.

"Sexy as ever, Mal," she said with a wistful smile. "But I can't do that right now."

"Then stay the night."

"I don't know."

Mallory knelt and picked up the grease pencil that would make Trish's lips shine red all the way to the back row. "Pucker up and listen. No funny business, okay? Just a cuddle. Panties and camisoles and no wandering hands. Promise. You know I can be good when I put

my mind to it." She frowned.  
"Don't smile when I'm doing your lipstick."

Trish took her wrist, preventing further damage. "Thanks. I'd... I need that tonight."

Why with Mallory instead of Eric? Maybe their history. Maybe the complete safety of being held by another woman. No expectations and no pressure. Frankly, she hadn't been with Eric at all without sex coming into play. She simply couldn't go there tonight.

"Good," Mal said with a nod.  
"And then ask this new boy of

yours for, you know, some play in the future. If he's worth it, the three of us could be a damn fun time."

Well. Wasn't that an idea.

Despite her cranky mood, Trish's body woke up. That jaunty thrill gave back some of the energy she'd need to make it through the show. "Maybe I will at that."

"Fuck, that'd be hot. I'll pass on taking any cock, but, baby, I'd love to see you get plowed. Now hold still."

Twenty minutes later the curtain went up, and Trish beamed. The spotlights were beginning to scald

her after so many years, but she was a performer at heart. Her reluctance faded. If only for the moment, she'd soak in the adoration and the chance to be something bigger than her scared little self.

Three hours after that, with her makeup scrubbed off and her body clean, she crawled into bed with Mallory. As the other woman had promised, their night was as platonic as could be. She relished the safety of being able to let down every guard, every defense, every scalding doubt. Mal petted her hair and whispered tender things, their

bodies twined in mutual comfort.  
Trish let herself do what she'd  
never done in front of a man, not  
since she was seven and her  
daddy'd said he was leaving.  
She cried.

# Chapter Twenty

As if it wasn't enough that Mike lived in an actual house, he maintained a grassy backyard. Hands shoved in his pockets, Eric scuffed his toes through the green stuff that resembled plush carpeting. During another barbeque to lay the sod more than a year ago, he'd assumed the labor would come to nothing. The grass would wither and die in the Nevada heat.

It wasn't just surviving. It was thriving.

He shook his head. "How much



work you put in?"

"What's that?" Mike looked up from the charcoal grill on the far side of the brick patio.

"The grass."

Mike flashed one of his bright grins. Nothing shook the guy. He hitched the bag of charcoal under his arm and surveyed the yard with palpable pride. "Enough. It's my stupid-ass hobby when Leah's watching crappy television or singing karaoke."

Grass. In Las Vegas. Eric couldn't imagine the amount of chemicals and water Mike poured into the ground. It had certainly paid off.

“Practically a gridiron,” he said.

Liam gestured with a bottle of beer from the patio chair he’d immediately claimed after arriving with Sunny and Kavya. “He’s brilliant. And right. What you have here, Strap Happy, is a gridiron. We need to christen it with a game of touch football.”

Eric shrugged. “Maybe.”

He could go for some rough-and-tumble, but Trish was due any minute. He’d offered to pick her up, but she’d passed. As with every spare minute all week, she had class or an audition. Today’s was for a Bellagio show, which was

apparently a big deal. She'd been so excited on the phone, spinning into a high-pitched babble session. It was cool — fun to hear her so amped up.

Definitely better than how helpless he'd felt when she'd called him an hour ago.

No callback.

The rejection proved their oncoming expiration date. He didn't have it in him to give Trish what she needed. He was stretched thin. So damn thin. And he couldn't lay all of it at Carey's door. The kid was making real progress. No, it was deeper than that, and he

sure as fuck didn't want to go digging through the muck of his own brain.

Mike put the finishing touches on his mammoth pile of briquettes, then doused them with lighter fluid. A fireball flared up two seconds later.

Liam jumped to his feet. "Damn, man. You trying to light your house on fire? Kavya's in there."

"Bigger is always better, right?" Mike said on a bit of a laugh. He tousled his hair. "Relax, I wouldn't let anything happen to your girl. At least it's going now."

Eric drifted toward them. For a

minute, the three men stood shoulder to shoulder, ringing the flames in silence.

Jesus, if only he could toss each of his worries in there and let them burn. The sheer size of his problems would snuff out the flames.

“You can’t cook on that pile,” Liam said. “You’ll turn our steaks into ash.”

Mike poked the flames with a long-handled fork. “I know what I’m doing. I’ll shake it out when the coals die. But, man, that’s some good stuff. Staring into the fire after a long week.”

Eric laughed. “Caveman.”

“You’d know, Kisser,” Mike said. Liam’s grin spread slowly, but it was decidedly enthusiastic. “Maybe I should club Sunny over the head and drag her back to my cave.”

Mike laughed hard enough that he angled his head toward the bright, clear sky. “Goddamn, you’re an ass. It’s a miracle Sunny puts up with you.”

“Hell yes it is.” Liam offered another beer-bottle salute then took a healthy swig. His gaze wandered toward the sliding glass window, but the glare meant no view of anyone inside. “I’m a lucky man.”

Eric wanted to ask how they’d

sorted everything out. Whatever they'd been, however they'd managed, Sunny had stayed. He hardly knew what to make of it. Or how to feel. Happy for his friend, but jealous of how they'd punched through a tough spot.

Liam pushed his shoulder against Eric's. "How about you, man? Is your mystery girl still stopping by?"

When Liam and Mike had razzed him about refusing to go out the previous Saturday, Eric had made what he hoped wouldn't be a mistake. He'd told them about Trish and that he'd be bringing her

to the barbeque — a fact they'd passed on to their respective chicks. That both men sounded so disbelieving had stung his pride, but he had it coming. The old Eric Donaghue hadn't worn a halo when it came to women. When he'd been stationed with Mike in South Carolina, he'd changed girls as regularly as days of the week.

The new version... Eric had no clue.

"Last I heard."

"Then why so quiet?" Liam asked, frowning. "You know, more than usual."

Eric shook his head. No way



would he admit the direction of his thoughts. There was guy code, after all. Lusting after another man's happiness wasn't okay. "Major Haverty's been on me."

"Fang?" Mike made his way to a cooler by the side of the house and spun the top off a beer. "What's the problem?"

"Dunno. He's...giving me crap."

Mike took a swig. "Think he knows your extracurricular activities?"

"Shit, I hope not." Eric grabbed a beer of his own and staked a spot around Mike's glass-topped table. An awning provided shade so that

the cushioned chairs didn't burn through his shorts. "Maybe he's just an ass."

Mike crossed his long legs at the ankle. "Fang's not so bad once you get to know him."

The beer went down cold. Exactly what Eric needed. For being with friends in a safe place, he remained tense. "Nah, Haverty hates my guts."

"Come on," Liam said on a laugh. "It's not as bad as all that."

"He does. Ever since I started going rounds with his boy."

"Good Lord," Mike said. "Don't let Jon hear you call him Fang's

boy."

"You're right." Eric grinned.

"Not a boy. Tin Tin's his lap dog."

Mike laughed so hard around a mouthful of beer that his shoulders bowed. For a second Eric thought he was going to spray across the table.

No way was he going to tell these two yahoos the mostly awkward, almost okay sentences he'd exchanged with Tin Tin on the tarmac. He and the kid weren't ever going to be friends, but Eric liked the idea that they could share the same air without wanting to shoot each other down.

When the laughter quieted, Mike shook his head. "You're lucky they're not here."

"Why is that, anyway?" Liam's mouth pulled into a smirk. "You give a barbeque and Leah's two best friends don't show? Do they disapprove of our caveman ways?"

Mike snorted. There was no shaking the guy, not when it came to Leah. "More like Ryan's wife had somewhere else for them to be. Some family thing. Jon's girl dragged him along."

"The day I'm led around by my cock is the day I give up flying." Eric wasn't sure where the words

had come from. Annoyance, maybe? That a smart-ass like Carlisle was happy in a long-term relationship?

It was just talk. No way could he give up flying. If he climbed out of the cockpit, he'd have fled Detroit for nothing. He'd have left Carey alone for no reason. After the crash, through his rehabilitation, Eric hadn't believed in giving up. Otherwise he might as well hand over the life that had been spared.

Liam cleared his throat. "If Fang finds out about the boxing, you won't have a choice. He'll yank you outta your Viper faster than you

can spit.”

“I need one more bout. I’ll have cash to pay up through November. Carey will reach one hundred and twenty days. The full deal.”

Both men knew what he was doing and why. That didn’t make it any easier to talk. He’d needed to tell them after a bruised rib laid him out for two weeks. He’d particularly worried about telling Mike, since his link to Leah meant he was closer to the boss man. But their friendship had won out. The three of them had claimed Eric’s bruised rib was due to afternoon PT. He was goddamn lucky there

hadn't been flights scheduled for that first week. Any more significant damage and even Mike wouldn't be able to cover for him.

Then Haverty would have Eric's head for real, not with ominous glares and vague warnings. Serious shit. Maybe taking-rank kind of shit.

He didn't want to think it through, because he didn't have a choice. For a US Air Force officer, knocking over a bank was less frowned upon than moonlighting in an off-Strip arena.

He'd do what he needed to do.  
The back door slid open.

Trish.

Even with hot-as-hell Leah at her side, she wasn't dimmed. She was breathtaking. Perfectly packaged. He'd almost hoped she'd go for the natural look, with her short hair showing, but she'd worn a platinum-blond wig. A little tousled and very movie star. A camisole top with skinny jeans completed the outfit.

She was wearing heels, though they were sturdier than her usual stilettos. They clicked on the bricks as she walked toward him. He stood from the patio table and wrapped an arm around her waist.



He kissed her cheek because her lipstick was as precise as the rest of her.

She was shut down. Not letting him look inside. He'd never say it, not in a million years because he knew how much it hurt her, but she was in full Barbie mode.

Plastic.

That Bellagio rejection had done her real damage. And something deeper. Last night's show? A class? He wouldn't be able to figure it out until he got her alone. In the meantime, rounds of introductions bounced over the patio.

When Leah turned Trish's

attention to the far skyline — both of them momentarily distracted — Liam aimed wide eyes at Eric. Super wide. He mouthed a silent *Damn!* Mike grinned along.

Eric flipped them both the bird.

“No, seriously,” Liam whispered. “How the hell did you get a woman like that?”

As if one bird wasn't enough, Eric flashed his other hand waist high. He wasn't sure if Liam's doubts referred to Eric's scars, his attitude or his past, or if it was good-natured bullshit. Didn't really matter. He had her. For now. He had Patricia Beauregard and a leg

up on all the heads that turned in her wake.

Not that she would notice today. She was too closed off.

Once Liam headed back into the house, either looking for Sunny or checking on Kavya — his two obsessions — Eric caught Trish by the elbow. He urged her to join him in the shade of the house.

The toes of his shoes were in Mike's grass, but Trish's heels stayed firmly on the bricks. He rubbed his thumb across the inside of her elbow. "You okay?"

The smile she bestowed was model perfect. "Why wouldn't I

be?"

"That phone call, for one." Even where he touched along her collarbone wasn't purely her. Shimmering lotion slicked his fingertips. So he kept traveling up — his hand over her throat where he felt the strength of her pulse. "Anything else I should know?"

She glanced toward Leah and Mike, then the back door, but she didn't pull away from his thumb. He dipped inside her mouth, finding the seam where red lipstick ended and delicate, damp skin began.

"I just...wanted to impress your

friends.”

She lied. He knew it. But that was part of the deal. They could be friends. They could be lovers – and honest lovers, at that. He couldn’t be more, and apparently neither could she.

Leah sidled up to Trish, her long ponytail flipping over her shoulder. “Eric, you know the rules. No bogarting the new girl.”

Eric dropped his hand. “Be nice, Princess.”

“It’s okay,” Trish said with a glassy laugh. “I promise ‘new girl’ is better than some things I’ve been called.”

“Bombshell had better be on that list.” Leah shook her head. “Cuz *damn*. Are you a model or something?”

“Sometimes.” She flashed Eric a quick look that was part nerves, part tease. “Mostly I work on the Strip. I’m finishing up a lead role in *Princess of Egypt*.”

“That’s so cool. C’mon in the kitchen. I’ll introduce you to Sunny, and we’ll pretend to make potato salad while we talk show biz and hot guys.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

Trish was hustled away from Eric with such ease that she hardly knew what happened. One minute he was poking at parts she'd rather he not see. The next she was arm in arm with the fighter pilot who had the lithe, petite body Trish had always envied. Not that Leah flaunted it. She wore a US Air Force T-shirt and cargoes that showed off her hips. The comparison made Trish self-conscious, that she'd taken so much time with her makeup and wig. It

was only a backyard barbeque, for Chrissake.

Necessary, though. She couldn't stand the idea of walking into an unknown situation without her usual defenses. Eric was one thing. His best friends and their significant others? No way.

"You're a miracle worker," Leah said. "I don't know if I've ever seen Kisser smile like that. When you walked through the door? Damn."

They crossed the low patio and through the sliding glass door, into a wide kitchen. A table was lined with all manner of typical barbeque fare — typical except for a strong



scent of exotic spices. Curry?

“What do you mean ‘Kisser’?”

“Ah, call signs. He hadn’t mentioned it? Sorry.”

“They’re a pain in the ass to get used to,” said another woman. She emerged from the living room. On her hip she bounced a sweet-faced baby in a white dress. For being so tidy, wearing an Indian-styled top and black slacks, the woman’s slightly disheveled hair seemed way out of place. She grabbed a potholder to slide a large covered sauté pan across the table.

Multitasking mommy magic.

“Some names stick harder than

others. It's taken a year to untangle Liam from his call sign. Dash was always...Dash."

"Because he's fast?" Trish asked.

The petite woman with dark, wide eyes and a heart-shaped face shed her potholder and offered her hand to Trish. "I'm Sunita Christiansen, by the way. His wife. Call me Sunny. This little one is Kavya. And no, it wasn't because he was fast."

"His Evo would say otherwise," Leah said. "That car can move."

"Trust me, I know." Sunny grinned. "Do you know, he told me we just *had* to keep it after Kavya

was born because four doors made it a family car.”

“Fat chance. This little sweetheart is gonna need a racing helmet.” Leah stuck her index finger in Kavya’s tiny fist and smiled at the girl. “And Dash stands for ‘dumb as shit’. After his first time in a centrifuge, he stumbled out like he was drunk. Couldn’t remember his name. Dumb as shit.”

Sunny stuck her tongue out. “That’s because he pulled more Gs than anyone in the history of history.”

The tall man in question

emerged from the living room. After he stroked a hand over the baby's incredibly thick black hair, he leaned down to kiss his petite wife's head. Something dark lurked in his eyes, sparking to life when their gazes met. Trish felt compelled to look away, but she didn't. There was a story between those two.

"Sunny, my love. Jumping to my defense. Only, be careful around Princess. You know she's got claws."

"Piss off. I save them for Mike."

"Cruel, cruel woman," he said, shaking his head. "Besides, I'll be

free of the flying monkeys at the end of the month, back to plain ol' Liam." He angled an adoring smile at Sunny. "You don't mind."

"That you're less 'dumb as shit' than you used to be? Hell no. Now get out and take this one with you," she said, handing their daughter to the tall pilot. "We have the privilege of gossiping with this pretty blonde. You do not."

"Fine, fine." Liam scooped up their girl, smiling, and strolled outside.

A stunning copper cuff glinted on Leah's left wrist as she pointed at Sunny. "You gotta tame that boy

before his ego gets completely out of hand. He was bragging up his newest class at the dojo, how some kid is going to win regionals or something. And how he's got his own competition coming up? He's been impossible to put up with."

A private smile shaped Sunny's lips as she went back to tending the food. Lifting the lid to the sauté pan released more of that fabulous curry scent. She looked at least part Indian, with flawless skin the color of deep amber. "Yup. He's a badass," she said, her grin deepening. "I'm most proud of his counseling, though."

Leah gave Sunny an affectionate hug. "I can only imagine how tough it's been. You're both doing amazing."

Sunny squeezed Leah's hand then offered Trish a slightly watery smile. "Sorry. PTSD. And here we were trying not to talk in code around you."

"Thank you. I hadn't expected anything so...personal."

"It's part of his counseling," Sunny said. "We face it. Talk through it. Keep it from remaining something shameful. But *you*. You're the new girl — with Kisser no less. Color me pretty fucking

impressed.”

Trish blinked at the woman’s colorful language. It didn’t fit, and neither did her not-quite-neat hairdo. But on her list of priorities, Trish wanted to know more details on Eric.

“Kisser’s his call sign?” she asked, trying not to sound too curious. Eric kept his military side so walled off that Trish felt the sting of being excluded.

“Yup.” Leah feigned taking a punch to the mouth. “He’s always been a wrestler and a boxer. Takes one in the kisser like a real champ. Ta-dah.”



“Huh.” Trish strolled to the open sliding glass door where the men had resumed their game of burn the steaks. More lighter fluid was involved. Only Liam stood apart, holding his daughter close but definitely urging the other men on. “I wouldn’t have thought...” She checked herself.

“What?” Sunny asked. “Thought what?”

Trish ducked her head. “Never mind.”

After sticking a spoon in an open canister of potato salad, Leah wagged a finger. In a singsong voice she said, “You were thinking

about his mouth.”

Heat covered Trish’s cheekbones. She was embarrassed, sure, but she hadn’t expected this ease, not with women she’d met minutes ago — successful, educated women who’d probably freak if they knew the extent of what she did for a living. *Princess of Egypt* was one thing. Playing ring girl at unsanctioned off-Strip boxing matches was another. These ladies hadn’t needed five years to get halfway through a degree.

But they didn’t seem catty at all. Just friendly. No malice.

Their teasing felt...fun.

For the first time since she'd arrived, Trish took a deep breath and found it in her to relax.

"Yes," she said with a giggle. "I was thinking about his mouth. Not so sure I like that you were, though."

Leah shrugged. "Not my type. Used to be I only put up with him because he was close with Mike. He was such a chauvinistic, cocky son of a bitch. Well...before."

Trish bit her tongue to keep from probing. As someone of importance in Eric's squadron, a member of his inner circle, the pilot probably knew all sorts of things from his

past. Who he'd been before his accident. What had happened.

She wanted to know. She wouldn't ask. Because if Eric revealed how he'd come by his scars, he might want to know about her argument with Mama, her night with Mallory or whether she thought about him constantly.

Sunny moved around the table to stand beside Trish in the doorway, watching the men. Leah joined them. Trish noticed that each woman had a distinctly different posture. Leah — hip cocked, supremely confident in her own skin. Sunny — self-contained, almost

ethereal. As for Trish, she felt like a tense, towering giraffe. She kept her shoulders back, her breasts out, her head tipped to a sultry angle. All artifice and she knew it.

“Eric’s *built*,” Sunny said. “I can definitely see the appeal.”

“That’s cuz Liam is a damn beanpole by comparison. He’d look like a mountain if he was filled out as well as Kisser.”

“But they’re going to get killed by that bonfire.” Sunny sighed.

“Maybe the Evo will come in handy when we haul their stubborn asses to the hospital. Leah, can you drive a stick?”

“I can drive or fly anything.” Then she grinned at Trish. “So, yeah. Nice work. He’s a keeper. A good guy deep down. We like you too much to lie about shit that important.”

Trish frowned. She felt it pulling her lips in that unpleasant way. “What makes you say that? About liking me and not lying?”

Leah matched her frown, looking puzzled. “Um, why not? You’re sweet. Polite. You’re stacked and gorgeous, but hell if I’ll hold that against you. Even in show biz, I bet that can be as much a disadvantage as an advantage.”

“Says you, flygirl,” Sunny said.  
“I’d give a kidney for half your cup size.”

“And then what? Liam would glue himself to your hip? Chill, girl.”

Trish smiled at their easy camaraderie. It wasn’t like when she was with Mallory; they hid from the world together. No, these women were friends, secure in their lives and their relationships. Trish was shocked to her toes by how much she wanted that.

Her gaze was drawn to Eric. Again. She could barely keep her attention on anything else. A black

tank top T-shirt revealed his hard, powerful arms and a glimpse of his tattoo. Casual cargo shorts. Athletic shoes. He was a warrior among warriors.

The tremor in her fingers wouldn't quit. Maybe she owed him the truth on how crappy she'd been feeling lately. The argument with Mama. The offer from Hank Yardley — although that would open up a can of worms too gross to discuss. On the phone, she'd been upset to lose out on the Bellagio role, but she couldn't bear mentioning that she'd been passed over for the singing cocktail



waitress gig at the Wynn. Too embarrassing. Then there was the giant *Don Giovanni* project due soon, with no idea if her plans would measure up.

And she definitely owed him the truth of her night with Mallory.

Not right then.

She wanted to keep breathing in this ease — the peace of a simple October-afternoon barbeque.

*Princess of Egypt* and another night strutting around the ring still awaited, but she dearly wanted simple, if only for a few hours.

After settling in with their food, whereupon the women marveled

that the steaks were not only edible but delicious, more of the usual trash-talking started up. Liam was chatty where Sunny was calm and softly spoken — with that wicked side of foul language. To Trish's surprise, Liam was the one to give their daughter a bottle, then burped her with complete efficiency.

Mike was chill, letting Leah fight the toughest verbal battles. Eric threw in his fair share of good-natured insults, smiling in a way that said he was genuinely amused. Guard down, he was content among his friends.

He reached between their

padded metal patio chairs and took her hand. Gave it a squeeze. Gave her a private smile. He leaned close enough to nestle quiet words against her ear. "You're doing great. Proud of you."

Then he was gone, sitting upright to offer Leah a snarky setdown.

"Wait, so touch football, right?" Liam asked. "No way we can let Mike's grandma hobby go to waste."

"Grandma?" Mike snickered. "Whatever, dude. Teams. Me, Leah and Sunny. Liam, Eric and Trish."

"How the hell is that fair?"

Sunny asked. Trish grinned at the woman's flash of temper.

"Sunny," Liam said with a smile. "Personally, I can't wait for the chance to take you down. But if you wanna argue that Princess can't play as hard as a guy, be my guest."

The two women exchanged matching mock glares, both of which broke into wide grins.

"Game on, then," Sunny said. "You got shoes Trish can wear?"

Trish put up her hands. "Don't bother. I'd really rather watch."

"No way, showgirl." Eric stood and pulled her to her feet. He was half a move from hauling her into

his arms, as he often had. The use of her nickname in front of his friends shot funny currents of electricity through her veins. She didn't know if she hated it or loved it.

"Come on," he whispered against her cheek. "I want to watch you get down and dirty."

Fifteen minutes later, Trish had wedged her feet into a stretched-out pair of Leah's old running shoes. Good enough. At least she was in jeans. Sunny was ready to risk her lovely slacks in order to tear the opposition apart. She was a dogged thing, squaring off against her husband, while Baby Kavya

slept in a pop-out playpen with an elephant-printed sun umbrella.

“Does it matter that I don’t know the rules?” Trish asked as she lined up between Liam and Eric.

“Nope,” Eric said. “Grab the ball and run that way. Don’t let anyone take you down.”

She nodded. “Kinda my motto.”

The game was more like a free-for-all than any football Trish had ever been forced to watch.

Scrambling. Lots more trash-talk.

Some halfway decent passes between Leah and Mike. Sunny wrestled Trish to keep her from running forward, where Trish had

the advantage of eight inches.

“Grab her, Liam,” she shouted, arms wrapped around Sunny’s tiny waist.

“On it.”

The man not only kept Sunny from protecting Mike’s run, but he completely took his wife down. They collapsed together on the grass, with Liam sprawled on top.

“Oh shit, dude,” Leah called. “No rough stuff in our goddamn backyard.”

Meanwhile, Mike hadn’t stopped. He ran toward Eric. Long legs versus a wrestler’s compact stance. Before Mike reached the

makeshift end zone, Eric sprang. The two men tumbled in a mass of muscular limbs and hard grunts. The ball slipped free. A few fists may have flown. Everyone else was tied up, with Leah checking on Liam and Sunny.

“Do it, showgirl,” Eric yelled. Mike popped an elbow in his gut. “Run it in.”

Trish could count on two fingers the times she’d run for any reason beyond physical fitness and catching a bus. She was barreling along on a heady rush of pure fun. She snatched up the football and ran back the other way.



“Hey!” Leah called.

Her attempt to catch up with Trish’s long legs was too little too late. Trish crossed into the end zone and laughed. Distantly, in the back of her mind, she was happy the rough play hadn’t caught up with her. The prospect of having her wig ripped off was right down there amid the circles of hell.

Sunny cussed like a trucker, and Liam smothered her lips with his long fingers. “Are you gonna teach Kavya that language? For the sake of our child, behave like a lady.” He grinned. “I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Would you two quit it?” Leah popped a hand on her hip. “I call bullshit because I was being my usual kind and generous self, making sure Sunny was okay.”

Liam had helped his wife to her feet. Both were flushed, lips parted, lost in each other. “You’re a helluva sore loser, Princess. Anyone tell you that?”

“Tin Tin does. All the fucking time.”

Trish could only assume she meant another of their colleagues. She was fizzy with her unexpected success, but the prospect of finding her way into this group was

daunting. She wanted it. Whether she would ever be offered the chance — by Eric — remained to be seen.

He and Mike had made their way back. Both sported grass stains and wide grins. Eric's chest looked especially large, so broad, as he breathed heavily. He strode past his squabbling friends and picked Trish up, this time his arms crossed below her ass. She was a foot off the ground.

"Put me down!" Her worries about the future evaporated on a peal of laughter.

"Not until they acknowledge

your awesomeness.” He turned his head and grabbed a little higher — right hand on one ass cheek. “Hey, dipshits. Game over. Trish scored.”

“Not until you get her alone,” Leah said with a grin. “Besides, *I’m* queen of this domain. Superior competition must be dealt with accordingly. Think you can handle that, Kisser?”

“Yes, Major.”

The woman offered a mock salute as Mike hooked her around the waist. “Oh, queen of this domain, you did a really shitty job defending. What the hell was that?”

“You are so gonna get your ass whupped.”

“Promises, promises.”

Only when Eric slid Trish to the ground, her body sinuously rubbing against his hard torso, did she tear her attention away from the mischievous couples. His dark blue eyes spun them away to private places. She *wanted* privacy. Screw the rest of it. They hadn't been together since Sunday evening after an epic weekend of diving off buildings and rocketing past old barriers. Charged up and happier than she would've imagined, she wanted more. He *was* that spark

she'd always craved.

"You have a promise to keep," she whispered against his mouth.

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah. But I have to be at the Luxor by six, then the arena by ten thirty." She inhaled deeply for courage. "Maybe I could come by afterward?"

"Of course. What promise, though?"

She stood on tiptoes. "Choosing a picture for your wall. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

His gusty exhalation had nothing to do with football or wrestling Mike. All her.

What a rush.

“Nope. Haven’t forgotten.”

“Maybe...changed your mind?”

“No way.”

She kissed the scarred side of his jaw. Again he didn’t stiffen, didn’t pull away – even in front of his friends. That loosened the rest of the tension in her chest. He wasn’t a casual fuck. She knew it. The optimism she’d thought long lost wasn’t so hard to find when he held her.

With the first genuine smile she’d offered him all afternoon, she said, “Then I’ll make with the fond farewells and see you later.”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

Eric should've known that Trish would have an exuberant knock, a long, cheery pattern despite the late hour. He opened the door to find her standing with a large pink tote slung over her shoulder, as well as a backpack and a duffel. She packed so much for long days.

"You keep awful late hours, showgirl."

She grinned cheekily. "It's the name of the game. You willing to put up with me?"

"Depends." He opened the door



farther, and she ducked under his arm. "You gonna make it worth my while?"

She strutted. He loved the swing of her ass, the sway that said she was completely confident in her strata of the world. She'd dressed down after the boxing bouts. Less makeup. Jeans like she'd worn to the barbeque, only they weren't as tight. And she'd donned the long, stick-straight wig. Not all of her defenses were down.

He tried to tell himself that he didn't mind. Without those walls, he wouldn't have anything to get under and figure out.

To duck behind.

Like he did behind his own locked-down barricades.

She walked to the other side of the kitchen and glanced over her shoulder. "Don't I make it worth your while by being here?"

"You have quite the opinion of yourself."

"You love it."

He watched her ass as he made his way closer. "Yup."

She dropped the bags at the end of the couch. "You're good to me. Good *for* me. If anything, I ought to be low as all get out. I only have five performances left then I get to

hope being a ring girl makes the rent. That'll only hold out till early November."

Something darkened her eyes, made her turn away.

"You want to talk?"

The laugh she gave as she spun back to him was bright and clear, tinged with showmanship. "You mean that literally, don't you? I'd talk, you'd listen."

He slipped one hand around the back of her neck. She seemed happy — less frantic than panic, as if she operated at a higher frequency. He liked it. Liked that hit he got from being near her, like cupping

lightning bugs between his hands.

He brushed a kiss over her mouth. "I mean it."

Her hands scratched through his hair to lace at the back of his neck. Delicate and strong at the same time. "I didn't come here at two a.m. to chat, sugar. I am a woman on a mission."

"Don't let me stop you."

"Then pay up." She swallowed briefly, but he couldn't tell if it was lust or apprehension. The parting of her slick-painted lips could've gone either way. "Pictures."

He'd set up his laptop, files open, having spent the last three hours

going through all 482. That was just from their first night. He hadn't started to wrap his mind around the previous weekend at the Stratosphere.

They settled on the couch. With shoulders and thighs pressed together, Trish tucked one of her hands under his elbow. He woke the computer.

The blood in his veins burned hot. "Full tour or short version?"

She tongued the inside of her bottom lip. Her eyes flickered with something he wanted to think was heat. "Full tour. All of them."

Jesus Christ. She shot right

through him. Every time. Lust charred his chest, flipping his lungs into overdrive.

He couldn't narrate. That was absolutely beyond him. He put it on slideshow mode, where the computer scrolled through one at a time.

She was beautiful on-screen, of course — the gentle curve of her hips as she posed on her knees, the shallow divot of her navel. But Eric found himself more fascinated with the Trish right next to him, watching her as she absorbed the flickering images of herself. She hardly paid attention to him. Her

eyes had gone wide, her breathing more forceful.

She dug her fingernails into his arm hard enough that he aimed his stare at the laptop. In the picture, she was on her back with her knees splayed. With the sharp delineation of her inner tendons, and the way she had both hands folded over her pussy, the image was as much about her blatant sexuality as it was her initial struggle to accept his demands—his demands to bare more and more of her genuine self.

The glance she slanted out of the corner of her eye was chagrined. “Not that one, okay? I don’t want

that one on the wall.”

“I get it, showgirl.”

She swiped the touchpad, made the next picture come up faster.

“Now that one... I look good there.”

She'd started to relax by then, with one hand over her face, peeking through her fingers. Laughing a little.

“Better than good.”

The slideshow continued. Eric ratcheted higher with each one. His muscles trembled with the effort of keeping himself in check... Until they were more than halfway through.



His favorite. Easily.

He hit pause. “Here. This one,” he managed to say, though his voice sounded like he’d lapped up glass for breakfast. He coughed, but there was no driving away the heavy sense of anticipation. “This one.”

Then he did something he probably shouldn’t have. He touched the computer screen — did what he’d done every time he looked at the picture. He traced the elegant line of Trish’s legs.

She’d been lying in the tumbled mess of his sheets, shot in profile. Flat on her back, with her arms and

breasts and belly one amazing wonderland of curves and valleys and planes. Her legs were straight up in the air, ankles crossed, displaying her lean dancer's beauty and the strength of her thighs. Her toes pointed to the ceiling.

He shouldn't be touching a computer image when the woman sat right beside him. She'd have every right to be offended.

She wasn't, though. Because, damn, maybe she was perfect. Her lips curved into a smirk. He didn't mind. Let her bring it. Especially when she trailed her fingernails up the inside of his arm. She

practically melted into his side.

“You have exemplary taste.” Her voice became a verbal caress. “You like that one, don’t you? More than appreciate. It does things to you.”

“Yes.” He made himself pull his hand back from the screen, resting instead on the inside bend of her knee, through her jeans.

“I’m feeling bold, Eric. You make me feel bold.” She cupped his cock through his shorts. “I’m picturing you having this on your wall, looking at me every day and every night.”

Fuck, it didn’t take much to get hard around Trish. Whereas

scrolling through a couple hundred pictures of her tits and ass and wicked smile was driving him fucking nuts.

He paged on. Fast. Because this was rapidly getting out of hand and he was going to lose control. Quick. Damn quick.

He reached his next favorite — on her knees, ass pointed at the lens, hands between her legs, fingers in her pussy. She'd been so damn wet that it shone. Smiling over her shoulder, she'd let him into the moment.

Trish hummed her approval. Her grip on his cock tightened. Pleasure

rocked through him. He was more than charged. He needed release. "I like that one too. A little slutty. A little beautiful. You're an amazing photographer, Eric."

He choked out something close to a laugh. "You. All you."

"Men who know how to give such sweet compliments get rewards." She dipped her hand under his waistband and began firm, assured strokes. He hardly knew where to look, where to watch, what to think. All he knew was that he'd prop his eyelids open with toothpicks if that was what it took to remember every second.

Except when he kissed her — his eyes closed in sensual lassitude, floored by the softness of her lips.

She stood only long enough to strip her clothes and pull a condom out of her giant duffel. He tugged his shorts down then stroked his cock. Not that he needed help staying hard. Between Trish in front of him and the Trish on the screen, he was more likely to lose his mind than his hard-on.

She pointed at him, a cheeky grin on her face. “Shirt off. Lemme have all that lovely hard muscle.”

He whipped the black tank top up over his head. She sank back

over his lap. Wet and heat and tightness clenched over his cock as she bore down, enfolding him. Tingles worked up his back, took over his skin.

She didn't face him as he would've expected. She faced the computer.

"You can see too?" she asked. Breathless. Gasping. Her chest hitched on a deep breath that eased into a moan as her hips worked.

"My pictures?"

"Fuck yes." He grabbed her waist. To stake his claim. To fill his hands. To hold.

Her hand layered over his at her

waist. He thought she might pull him away, but she clutched his fingers harder against her taut stomach.

With more coordination than Eric could've managed, she used the trackpad to flip through to a particularly raunchy shot. Lips and cunt both wet. Her fingers in herself. "This one. This won't go on your wall. But you'll look. You'll keep it. Pull it out and stroke this hot prick." She shuddered, her thighs lifting and dropping.

He cupped her breasts and pinched her nipples. Tight. Tighter. Until her spine bowed. Her pussy



clenched around him. "Yes," he rasped. "Until I come."

"Me. You'll come to my picture. My image in your head."

Agree. He could only agree. Yes. She had it exactly right. He'd have a hell of a time ever getting rid of her image. Ever. Why would he try? She was a miracle. With him. Fucking him. A lithe, lean bundle of beautiful on his lap and on his screen. So good his brain was gonna crack.

Except he needed to make sure she went first. With two fingers over her clit, he stroked her in fierce circles. She trembled, so he

folded his forearm across her low back. He rested his forehead against her neck. He couldn't look at the laptop. Too much. Keep the rhythm. Give her what she needed.

Her tendons wrenched tight. A shake, then her moan flew free. Her orgasm meant he could look.

The screen.

Her slender back. Her graceful beauty. He let go, let the rolling, jacking waves of pleasure punch out of his lungs. His release was phenomenal, with everything wrapped in hot, white rushes and a long, satisfied shudder.

He pressed kisses along her neck.

Eventually they came back to themselves, a little at a time. Shifting. Aligning. Trish eased off his lap, and he ditched the condom. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders until he was back in his own brain.

Not that it mattered. Even when his senses perfectly aligned, Trish filled his head. He was beginning to think she always would.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

Trish cuddled against Eric's side under the lightweight protection of his comforter. She smiled privately, her face bare of makeup, and tucked against his hard shoulder. How could something so hard be so safe? And how in the world should she be able to relax in such a bedroom, where erotic pictures of other women lined the walls? The contradictions only tickled at her brain. She was content. She was happy for the first time in longer than she could remember.

“You’re quiet,” he said in the near darkness. The single blue-tinted bulb way up on the loft ceiling bathed them in the soft tones of twilight.

“Expecting me to fill the spaces, Mr. Silent?”

“Nope. I like your voice.”

“Ha,” she said softly. “Hardly. I have a decent singing voice, but I always gave my elocution coaches fits.”

He tightened his arm around her waist, low enough that his blunt, strong fingers touched her hipbone. “Why?”

“My accent. And apparently I

sound nasal. No matter what I said in the interview portion of pageants, I was marked down for not sounding polished enough."

"There's nothing wrong with your voice."

Her mama disagreed, having backed up every criticism Trish's coaches had ever leveled. "Do tell."

"Soft. Musical. And your accent. Wish you didn't downplay it."

"Have to. For a bigger variety of roles, you know?"

"Jesus, Trish."

She angled up on her elbow. She needed to see his expression when they talked this way. Risking a

slew, she could only open up when she found encouragement on his face — not the cold, assessing stares she got from agents, directors and even her own mother. *Especially* not her mother. She'd thought moving out to the fleabag motel would mean Mama's voice would fade, but the opposite happened. She'd internalized the criticism. Fighting it was a lot harder when the struggle was totally mental. Fighting Mama, no matter how gut-wrenching, had given Trish something to push back against. Someone to stare in the face and think, *I won't be like you.*

What if that wasn't true?

“‘Jesus, Trish.’ What did you mean by that?”

“It’s amazing...” he grazed her nape, where her hair fanned down in its practical pixie cut, “...that you have anything left of yourself at all.”

Shrugging, she let her gaze slip away from his seriousness. “That’s not so important. It is what it is.”

“Not important? Don’t dodge this, Patricia.”

Her smile was a surprise. “You don’t ask for much, do you, sugar? Just open a vein? That’s all. No problem.”



Eric frowned in that way of his, so intense in his puzzlement. Too often, she wondered what was in that brain. He revealed so much and then...nothing at all.

“Is it that bad?” he asked.

“Talking?”

She didn't hesitate in sliding her palm along the scar that wove around his torso. “You tell me.”

A heavy sigh pushed out of his chest. “Touché.”

“How about how fantastic tonight's been?”

His fingers petted up to her crown, where her hair was thicker. He tensed his fingers, gave her

head a shake, smiled broadly.

“Fantastic, showgirl.”

Trish sat up and crossed her legs, naked. The comforter was tucked at the apex of her thighs, but she sat topless without embarrassment. It was the frank approval shining out of his eyes. She could sit that way forever, basking in his slow-burn arousal. Something might come of it as the hours waned toward dawn. Or maybe not. Knowing it was there, waiting under his skin, made her blood fizz.

“I think it was, yes. Next time we’ll have to watch the videos together.”

His choking sound made her laugh.

“Or else invite Mallory to join our session,” she said, peeking up from under her lashes.

His face went slack. “Mallory? Your ex?”

Well, this was going to be interesting. Confession time, although she didn’t know exactly what she was confessing to. Or maybe her nerves came from hoping he would agree – that fooling around with Mallory earlier that week would’ve strayed outside of unspoken boundaries.

“Yeah, her.” She nodded to the

picture on the wall that had so fascinated her from the beginning. Dolores. All dark hair and luscious curves. "The woman I said she reminded me of. We were together a few months."

He nodded as if responding to a grave topic, but his body had awakened. The hand at her knee tensed and relaxed. "Why bring her up now?"

Trish inhaled softly through her nose. Courage gathered in her lungs. "I had a fight with my mama on Wednesday. That night Mal offered me a place to stay...and more, if I wanted to."

She heard a click when he swallowed. "What did you do?"

"Stayed the night."

Hell if she was going to make this any easier on him. Not only was prying information out of him like ripping a steak out of a dog's locked jaws, she wanted to gauge his reactions. Was there any hint of possessiveness? Or nothing but the blasé ease of a man who wasn't emotionally involved?

Although he was a boxer and a pilot, he could've made his fortune at the gaming tables. His face was unreadable despite its many distinguishing features. Reading

him was like trying to read the thoughts of a marble statue.

“And?”

“Would it matter to you?” She forced herself to stare into his eyes.

“I...” He shook his head, chuckled some. “Would you hurt me if I said I don’t know?”

“Hurt you? No. Ask for an explanation? Hell, yes.”

“Had it been with a guy, that would’ve been different.” He licked his lips. He abandoned her knee in favor of the softer meat of her inner thigh. His thumb rubbed along her taut tendon. The comforter slid back, revealing inch after inch of

skin.

“Different how?”

“I’m not ready to share you yet.”

The air gusted out of her chest on a laugh. Was that relief? Surprise? She felt both, as well as a sweet burn. They hadn’t talked about the future, but his words felt like something. Maybe she was grasping at straws, looking for anything to read in his tea-leaves expression. Yet she needed reassurance. Opening up this much, this quickly, had left her dizzy. Even the slightest hint was a lifeline of hope.

“Good,” she said softly. She

traced the lines of his tattoo, having lost the strength to keep absorbing his intense gaze. "Because I'm not ready to either. I told Mallory I was seeing someone. So that night was pure cuddling. No funny business."

Although he shifted on the bed, nodding slightly, he didn't ask the obvious question: Why hadn't she come to him instead? God, she needed to stop jumping so far ahead.

Rather than indulge in those dark places, she sinuously draped on top of him.

"But you want funny business?" he asked. Both big hands palmed



her ass. He gave her a squeeze then began to knead and pulse. His prick was hard between their tummies.

“With her?”

“Sure. She’s lovely. Eats pussy like you wouldn’t believe.”

He cleared his throat, gave a little thrust. “I wouldn’t be able to judge that.”

She touched the undamaged side of his face. The tip of her finger brushed his hypnotizing mouth. He opened his lips and nibbled. That tiny jolt had far more power than it should have, radiating down to her toes. “Ah, but you could watch how she affects me. Mal’s fully lesbian.

No interest in guys. But she's played like that before, with men watching. In show business, exhibitionism isn't limited to me."

He pulled totally flush. Trish laid her cheek below his collarbones. His heart thumped against her ear.

As a child, she'd ridden in convertibles in county parades, waving to the crowds as Miss Whatever-It-Had-Been. Her favorite times were when the open-top escort trailed a marching band, right behind the rows of bass drums. That thumping tingle in her chest had been a strong counterpoint to the adrenaline of

being on display, adding to the excitement.

Eric's heartbeat was like that. Deep and soulful and thrilling.

"I'd need to see what she looks like," he said against the top of her head. His tone was all things teasing. "You know, to make sure she lives up to our standards."

"Of course." Trish tried to add a serious nod, but she only giggled. "Dark hair down to her waist, firm, natural tits bigger than mine, hips to die for. I'm sure you have to be careful who you watch going down on me. Or whose pussy I lick."

"You look like a Barbie

sometimes, but you're plain wicked."

Trish ground her hips against his. His hard-on was hot and undeniable now. And she was wet as all get out. "I like the sound of that, Kisser."

He flipped her over. His big body sank her deeper into the lush mattress. "Now don't you start."

"Oh no? Leah told me how you got the call sign, but then she caught me staring at your mouth."

"What about it?"

She leaned in for a decadent kiss. Passion intensified between them with every breath, yet this was

honey slow and just as sweet. Trish slid her tongue along his lower lip, as if asking permission. *Let me in.* It meant so much to them both, that honesty, no matter how tentative and dangerous.

*Let me in, at least here.*

Eric opened to her. She slipped her tongue inside, traced the slickness and flicked tender forays along every surface. His teeth first, then darting more boldly to search out his response. She wanted a gentle sparring partner in this exploration. He dragged his hands up her sides, across her shoulders, then laced his fingers at the base of

her skull. She was pinned so beautifully between his mouth and the pillow. Their kiss became heavier, stronger, as soon as he joined her. His tongue was as powerful as the rest of him. Even when caressing her with the same softness, he was a force restrained. She could feel that leashed drive. He needed more. Wanted more. She did too, but withholding right then was as sexy as fucking on the tile of a hotel room entryway.

She drew back with a shivering sigh. He didn't let go of her nape, which kept her face so close to his. "See? Kisser. That's where my

mind went right away."

"And Princess called you on that, did she?"

"Yup."

He stiffened, only slightly. "She tell you anything else?"

With a broad smile, she tweaked the solid swell of his upper pec. "That you were a chauvinistic asshole before."

He laughed too, more of that bass-drum power surging into her body. "She would say that."

"Was she telling the truth?"

"Yeah. I gave her a lot of shit."

"Why?"

"Girl pilots are easy marks." He

looked beyond her, toward the headboard. His Adam's apple bobbed. "And I wasn't as picky with the, ah, company I kept."

"Man whore?"

"Sometimes you're brutal."

"Maybe I'm finally learning how to get what I want. Admit it. When I'm brutal, you reveal a lot more."

He petted the hair that feathered over her temples. "Honest, right?"

For now.

She kept her gaze steady, but nothing shook the impression that they were only flirting around the truth. This was practically the easy stuff. She'd mentioned the fight



with Mama, but he hadn't asked any questions or offered to help. She'd alluded to his before, as in before his crash. Neither bothered to poke any deeper. Maybe it was that matter of hiding, protecting. She could only hope these were baby steps on the way toward something greater...

Or that he'd leave enough of her shell to recover when they were done.

Shedding her wig was one thing. Opening the cage around her heart was different. He had the key and didn't seem to know it.

Dangerous, dangerous man.

“So, man whore, you up for some girl-on-girl watching? Think you could handle that without embarrassing yourself?”

He ducked his face against her throat. The chuckle she'd expected was a deep breath instead. He grabbed a condom from the nightstand. He only levered off her enough to slide the latex over his cock. Smiling to herself — fending off that hard edge of anxiety — she wondered how many other bulky, well-built boxers could boast an erection as massive as their bodies? Too bad for them. And their women.

Eric palmed her cheek. His expression was almost wistful. "The finale's on Friday, right? I promised."

Oh, he was good. Too, too good. "Yup, you did. Should be fab. I'll make sure to get you a backstage pass so you can meet Mal." She took his prick in hand, stroked until his eyes closed. "You know, meet her up close and personal. Those standards of yours."

Then she spread her legs and guided him in. One deep, bone-melting plunge.

"You'll be our director," she rasped in his ear. "Hide in the

shadows over there. Camera. Video. I don't want to see you, and I know Mallory won't. But we'll know you're there. We'll hear your voice from the darkness. When you're ready for me, after I've made Mal come, I want you to shed that black satin robe of yours and come fuck me. Think you can do that, stud?"

He answered with a grunt and a hard thrust. Trish closed her eyes, lost in that image, lost in the feeling of his body rolling in sharp, strong waves over hers, and breathed out. He was going to undo her again, make her scream, and she couldn't fucking wait.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

Only two minutes in, Eric knew his Tuesday-night fight was going badly. Harley Hamilton had an extra two-inch reach, although they were fairly matched in weight. It shouldn't have mattered, but Eric's head was full to bursting with worry for Carey. After leaving an opaque voicemail about wanting to tell Eric something, he hadn't answered return calls.

Or maybe it was Trish, how far they'd come, how seeing her in the ring was such a fucking turn-on.

She'd even switched nights with another girl to watch him fight that evening, which had added an extra obligation to a day spent in class.

Or damn, it could've been that he was short an hour in the flight simulator and had to make it up before the end of the week. His participation in the upcoming Red Flag was still not certain.

Didn't really matter.

What mattered was the heavy-ass fist he took to the face. The pain of impact. The hard crack of his neck. The gray film that washed over his vision.

Fucked.

Eric was fucked.

He tried to come back, managed a flurry of gut shots that sent his opponent to the ropes. But Harley snaked in a sharp jab that connected with Eric's temple.

Rocking back, Eric gritted his teeth as he staggered. Power surged up his legs and into his arms. Swing. The other guy's torso was implacable. Punches kept flying. Eric took too many. Way too many.

Something sharp. Mean. Flames of pain up his side.

Harley pressed his advantage. A three-punch combo to Eric's gut. Pushing.

Holding his ground, Eric made it to the fifth bell, but the decision was in Hamilton's favor. Eric would have made the same call. By the way he was swaying on his feet, he felt like his head had gone on walkabout. He couldn't decide what troubled him more, the way his ribs throbbed with every breath or his already-swollen cheek.

He wasn't sure how he made it back to the prep room. A trainer wanted to check him over, but Eric pushed him off. The man left a pile of bandages, two sentences of advice to get to a doctor and a reminder that Eric had been



fighting in an unsanctioned match. Suing wouldn't be his best idea.

Message received.

Icepack to his face, he glowered at the door.

Until Trish showed up.

He hadn't realized he was waiting on her, but there was no mistaking the easier breath he heaved. The way his spine straightened.

She remained in her bikini, which was a fucking blessing – a neon-blue number with peekaboo cutouts on either hip. She was a beautiful distraction from his mixed-up mind and the dingy

eggshell walls.

She offered a shaky smile. "Well, I guess we know for sure which of us is the prettier one."

He lifted an eyebrow then winced against the spike of pain. "Wasn't in doubt."

"But we've established that you have the sexier mouth." She stepped near enough that he could smell her. Inviting. Light. Perfume or lotion, something sweet. Her fingers shook as she touched his face.

"At least you didn't say it was pretty."

"What?"

He chuckled, which only made his ribs and his lungs burn. "You know. 'You got a pretty mouth, boy.'"

"Dirty, dirty man." Her heart didn't seem to be in on the teasing. Instead she was looking at his cheek. Her eyes were huge blue pools of concern. "Didn't anyone tell that asshole you're too skilled to take a beating like this?"

"Apparently not. And here I was thinking Tuesday-night opponents would be easier marks than the weekend guys." He cupped her face. Perfectly precise features. She was flawless at showing off exactly

what she wanted the world to see. Now, however, she was practically see-through. “Why so worried, showgirl?”

“You’re hurt.” Her hands slipped down to his side. He flinched away. “Your ribs could be broken.”

He shook his head. “Bruised at most.”

“How would you know?”

“Been here before.” He swallowed against a knot at the back of his throat. Somehow these words were harder to offer up than it was to withstand her inspection. “Been hurt worse.”

Her fingers spread over his

abdomen. "You're not a doctor. It's not going to make any old injury worse, is it?"

"No." That much he knew. His most lasting injuries had been burns, and if his internals and his legs hadn't healed a full hundred percent, he never would've returned to the skies.

She searched him. Looked closely into his eyes. He wanted to give her more. Say more. But he was incapable. Bad enough she was seeing him like this. He held his arms tight to his body, containing the hurt. His neck was heavy. His head wanted to bow. He held back,

held it up. No giving up in front of her.

She wet her bottom lip and swallowed. "Will you at least let me take care of you?"

He could've made a dirty joke, ask if he could take pictures throughout. Anything to deflect. But she was open. He couldn't give her that bullshit when she was vulnerable.

His head was beginning to clear enough to put the pieces together. Thoughts lining up in cognitive order.

Carey. Damn.

Losing wasn't a matter of taking

a few blows. He'd need to fight again to cover the balance of Carey's treatment. Then there was Fang. These injuries would bruise. The next morning's work call would lead to a fuckload of trouble.

So no dirty jokes. He needed Trish. Some calm in the storm. He fought a shudder of pain up his left side. "If you want."

She picked up the roll of bandages left by the trainer. Her fingers were long and elegant. He focused on the details, like her red manicure and the veins just beneath the thin skin of her wrist.

"Arms up now."

He obeyed. Pain streaked through his muscles.

“So different.” Her smile wasn’t back, but it seemed to want to appear. “Me giving you orders? I hardly know what to make of it.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts, showgirl.” Talking for once had purpose. He could talk right over the pain.

“Next time I get a hold of you, I’ll have you standing. Hold your arms behind your back. Fuck you silly.”

“Big talk from a big man.” She started wrapping the bandages around and around his chest, her breasts brushing him. “Because first you’re going to have to heal up,



mister.”

That healing up definitely wasn't done by the next morning. Eric stood loosely at attention across the desk from Major Haverty. Fang had taken only one look at Eric before pointing at his office door.

Eric had gone, quick like. No fucking around when the boss wanted you on the carpet.

Fang eased into his chair, hands flat on the scattered papers that covered his desktop. From how slowly he was moving, a person might think *he* was the one who'd

been in a fight. But then, Fang was too straight arrow to screw up a good thing. With one foot out the door, on the verge of a promotion, he remained the epitome of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division's nickname: the All-Americans.

Rather than resent the man, Eric loosely knew that Fang had come from humble beginnings. Some rumors said they'd been shittier than Eric could claim. Fang was in command, a supreme hard-ass, but he was an officer to be admired and respected.

A muscle hopped and jumped in front of the man's ear. "Captain

Donaghue, is there anything you'd like to share with me?"

"No, Sir."

Fang's hands curled into fists. Loose ones, but there was no mistaking. He narrowed his eyes. "Last chance, Captain. Rethink that one."

"Wouldn't like. Might have to, but doesn't mean I'll like it."

"Go ahead. Be a smartmouth." Haverty spit each word with precise sarcasm. "You pick now to become chatty? Real brilliant."

Telling his CO to fuck off would be a worse idea, but Eric was nervous as hell. Fang could shut

him down. For good. He probably should if he was half the leader the Aggressors knew him to be.

"Sorry, Sir," he managed to bite out.

"I'm going to ask you this only once. What happened to your face, Donaghue?"

"A fight."

"A bar fight? I didn't think you were the type."

Eric sucked in a deep breath, then instantly regretted having a hot poker shoved between his ribs.

"Not exactly."

"Make with the explanations. Now. Or I swear to God you'll have

an official letter of reprimand so quick it'll feel like a fastball to that thick skull of yours."

Eric fixed his gaze on the unit pennant behind Fang's head. He loved this damn squadron. And he was probably going to be kicked out. A deep, desperate part of him already mourned.

"Prizefighting, Sir. Boxing."

"Have you lost your goddamned mind?" Haverty slapped the knuckles of his fists on the desktop, levering to a standing position. The real surprise was Fang cussing. Eric had never heard him use profanity, even when he lost his temper.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t ground you this instant.”

“My brother’s in rehab.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

Eric kept his hands loose at his sides. No fighting this man. Wouldn’t help his case. “It’s not covered by insurance.”

“I’m not getting it.”

He risked a look at Fang. The man didn’t seem pissed. Well, not as pissed as a moment ago. “I’m paying for it. Mom and Dad...can’t afford it.”

“You’re an officer in the Air Force. Pilot pay. All the bennies.

What rehab is so expensive that you need prizefighting?"

His mouth twisted against the acidity of the words. "It's his third."

Fang eased back in his chair. "You can't be serious. And you're still paying?"

Eric only nodded. Maybe he really was an idiot, but he couldn't see another way. *Not* paying would be the same as giving up on his only brother.

"Second mortgage?"

"Upside down."

"Damn," Fang said on a rough sigh. He drummed his fingers across the desk. To one side was a

computer monitor and a palm-sized picture of his pretty redheaded wife. "Eric, you've got to stop. I cannot in good conscience let this go on. You're an officer. An Aggressor. You can't risk yourself or your comrades like this. You wanna box, try out for the Air Force team."

"One more." His pride broke. He leaned toward Fang. So much rode on this. "I need one more purse. Shoulda last night, but..." He waved toward his face.

"But you got the crud beaten out of you instead." Fang folded his hands together, apparently back in



control. "Who's to say it won't happen again? And you'll be asking me for one more fight after that. No."

Eric shook his head. He didn't have any kind of reassurance to give. And if this artsy stint crapped out, he had nowhere else to send Carey. For the rest of his life, he'd be fielding three a.m. phone calls from a cranked-out motor mouth.

And he wouldn't have the Aggressors to call his own.

Eric flat out wasn't capable of thinking that way. Nothing there but a hard, concrete wall. "One, Sir. Only one."

Trying to guess what was going on in Fang's head was like picking winning keno numbers. He could only hope the man wasn't thinking about that shit awhile back, when Eric had made it his mission to piss off Tin Tin.

One fight. Maybe Eric was delusional. He'd had a nice run. Carey was almost clean. Trish — and everything Trish was and said and did. Maybe it was time to be done. His luck had run out, like it almost had in a too-beautiful Canadian sky.

Except Fang pointed at Eric, his eyes narrowed. The muscle in front

of his ear jumped again. “*One*. I swear if it goes past that, I’ll see you personally court-martialed. Meanwhile, you’ll pull any detail I ask of you. And you’re out of the air until it’s done.”

“What? Sir, I’ve only been back in the sky a few months.”

Fang pressed his mouth flat. “You’re fighting. Your health is at risk. You’re not tiptop in that plane, and you could take someone else down. Tell me in good conscience you’d risk that.”

*Fuck.*

No arguing that, despite his first, desperate protest. So he’d stay out

of the air. For now. And he'd win that next goddamn fight. "I can't, Sir. Not in good conscience."

"As for the Red Flag, I want a full medical write-up before I consider assigning you. Got it?"

Although his chest cinched like tightening ropes, Eric nodded. He turned to go but stopped short. "Thank you, Sir."

He owed the man that much, at least.

Fang only shook his head. "Get out of my office, Captain."

# Chapter Twenty-Five

Thursday lunchtime.

She had a date with Eric.

He'd asked almost offhandedly as they had walked arm in arm out of the boxing complex. He had bruised ribs, if not a cracked one, and his mood had been dark. Dollars to donuts he hadn't gone to see a doctor since.

But he'd asked. She didn't know what to make of it. Something he'd planned ahead of time and didn't want to back out of? Something that had shaken out of his kicked-

sideways brain?

It didn't matter. A regular ol' date felt practically novel after the crazy things they'd done.

Trish barely made her bus. Class had gone long, but for the best of reasons. Her design project for *Don Giovanni* had been awarded top marks. The buoyancy she felt was like jogging with helium for bones, which almost made up for the fact that her mama still refused to take her calls. Not that Trish wanted to go back to the trailer, but she needed to know her only family didn't hate her.

History suggested she shouldn't

trust streaks of luck. She was in a shit stop of a hotel, where the cheap weekly rent made up for the rust-tinged water and rattletrap AC. She'd bought an extra set of padlocks for the window and door, but it was better than crawling home. Mal was out of the question, no matter how easy that would've been — a step backward.

Eric...she wouldn't bring it up, not with how good it felt to be together. He'd have to ask. She wasn't going to seduce her way into an arrangement with him as she had with men in the past. Whatever he'd opened up in her

was beginning to feel like all or nothing. Compromising with regard to something so important would only be selling herself short.

Maybe she was finally beginning to see that. Scary. But it was about damn time.

So she sprinted off the bus and down the street. Her portfolio banged against her leg, and her backpack kept a chugging rhythm as she hoofed it. Some dive joint, he'd said. She was disoriented being so far off the Strip. What was Vegas without the lights and glitz? It was only another city. And what was she in amongst it without that



same glitz?

*Don Giovanni*, that's what.

It was obscene how badly she couldn't wait to tell him. No one else knew. No one else would care. Even Mal might tip her head sideways before giving Trish the smiling equivalent of a pat on the head. She was so proud of herself she could spit. Sharing that with Eric would be a minor but welcome miracle.

Louie Paul's Diner.

She could smell the grease from two doors down. How was she going to get out of this one? She had a show in eight hours, and no

amount of sucking in her gut after a cheeseburger would keep her costume from ripping at the seams.

But oh, it smelled delicious.

She wiped a sheen of sweat from her forehead, smoothed her unadorned hair and pushed inside the darkened diner. Though she'd pictured '50s cool and Marilyn Monroe, it was more like an Irish pub. She could use a little of Marilyn's confidence these days. Trish knew better than to think the troubled woman had possessed a single clue on leading a happy life. At least Trish was old enough to see those facts, when she hadn't been

able to as a child.

Amid the shadows, in a rear booth, she found Eric. He wasn't lounging. He didn't smile when she slid in across from him. Only a nod.

Damn, his face was sorta... wrecked. Black and blue ringed one eye, and his lower lip was split and swollen. Nothing in his posture invited closeness. He had practically wrapped himself in barbed wire.

"Hey," she said anyway.

Only then did he seem to shake out of his funk. "Hey. Oh wow. Glasses?"

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Trish grabbed them off her face and shoved them into her backpack, not bothering with the protective case. "I was running late."

He frowned. "From an audition?"

"No."

Interest sparked in his eyes, the first since she'd arrived. "Oh, class?"

Do-or-die time. She placed her hands in her lap and squeezed her fingers into knots. *He's not Mama. It'll be different.*

"Yeah, for set design. Entertainment finance was this

morning.”

“Um. Damn. Finance?”

She smashed her lips together and pulled away from the table.

Eric reached out. “Give me your hand.”

With reluctance, she untangled her death grip and slid it into his care.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean...Christ, how that sounded.” He gave her fingers a reassuring pulse. “Look. I’ve always known you had a different fire in you.”

“Uh-huh. Barbie doll?”

“Okay, not from the start. I’m a dipshit.”

She smiled. A storm of tension in her chest dissipated like so many dark clouds. "Only sometimes."

"And you're a goddess. A flexible Southern blonde with glasses?" His expression eased into heart-melting territory. "I never stood a chance."

A waitress delivered menus and ice water. She winced when she saw Eric's face, then departed without a word. Trish tried to see what the woman must've seen, but came up with half an impression. Maybe to strangers, he really did look beastly. Trish saw the earnest interest layered over his battered

features...and the way he melted her heart.

“So, tell me.”

“Set design.” With those two words, the rest came streaming out. All her plans laid bare, when before they’d talked only in generalities of her studies. Finally she had someone to entrust them to, no matter the future. “Maybe I’ll want to be on the other side of the curtain. One day. I love the lure of the spotlight. But God, Eric, I’ve spent more than twenty years under the lights. It’s drying me up inside.”

“But it’s more than that. What

happened? Patricia, you're practically glowing."

"Only because I ran for the bus," she said with a grin.

"You take a bus? No car?"

"I choose to deflect in favor of the good news."

He sighed. "Fair enough. For now."

"I'm good. *Really* good. Today my set design for a modernization of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was given top marks in my class by two independent design professionals. Not only my professor. He treats me like a treasure, but maybe that's because he's a single mid-forties



male and I'm, well, me."

"But this is different," he said quietly. "And you know it."

She was beaming like an idiot. Didn't care. "Yup. Actual pros who know the industry inside and out. They judged my design without ever having laid eyes on me — only what I could imagine and articulate, not shimmy."

"You have the design on you?"

"A copy. The original is on campus."

She sounded so different, even to her own ears. Pride and hope. The staggering weight of wanting a new dream so badly was heavy to

bear.

Eric nodded once then nudged a menu forward. "Here. Figure out what you want and you can show me."

"Show you my design."

"Yup. And no fruit cup or some shit for you. Meat. I mean it."

"Eric..."

"Nope. Not having this argument. I love your body." His eyes narrowed, sharpened with desire. "*Love* it. But you work too hard. I know how many calories it takes to do all you do."

It was her turn to sigh. The menu was laminated, covered with grease

sheen. Pictures of the food had lost their color. One particular description made her mouth water. Her stomach twisted with hunger. The fact Eric kept shooting her near-anxious glances, as if he knew she'd cop out, made up her mind. No fries, but she fully intended to snatch a few of his. This was a special day.

The waitress returned. She carefully avoided looking at Eric's face, which made Trish want to shake her. *Don't you see him?*

Eric ordered a double mushroom and Swiss burger. With fries. She grinned. Mission accomplished.

Then he turned to her. "Well, showgirl?"

"Deluxe grilled cheese and a diet Coke."

Eric flipped open his menu and scanned the list. He actually laughed. "Three kinds of cheese on Texas toast, *with* bacon? Damn."

The waitress, who was far too old to wear an insolent expression, only shrugged and took the menus.

"Happy?"

His grin hadn't shifted. "Yes. Now, your design."

With curiously shaky hands, she rifled through her portfolio for the backup copy she'd made on the

oversized Xerox in the student union. No way was she letting something so important out of her hands without a backup. Or six. Her Photoshop files were in so many safe places, as if she could protect her dreams that way.

She handed it over. Eric didn't let it touch the table, which bore the same sheen of grease as the menus. Making out his expression was tougher under his injuries, but she recognized that focus. That intensity. Only, she'd rarely seen it directed toward anything but her or the results of their photo sessions.

“So you had to know the opera first?”

“Inside out.”

“And some vision of how to translate that to modern day.”

“Uh-huh.”

“While making it accessible to an audience?” He shook his head.

“Damn, Trish. This is... I’m speechless.”

“C’mon, you usually are. Nearly.”

He lifted his gaze. “How about fucking impressed? That help?”

She practically bounced in her seat. “Thanks. You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“Really? What about your mom?”

“Oh hell no. She’d rather me pose nude.”

Aw, damn. That was too far. The conversation had been going so well that it felt rude to shut up for a few minutes, but Trish didn’t know how to smooth that comment into oblivion. She was grateful for the surly waitress’s return with the plates of steaming, absolutely sinful food.

Eric handed back the drawing before they tucked in. “I’m glad you told me. I’m proud of you.”

“Will you be upset if I’m not

quite sure what to do with that yet?  
I'm still getting used to praise  
without my tits involved."

"Take your time. I won't change  
my mind." A smile tipped his  
beautiful lips—beautiful despite the  
damage from the fight. She was  
floored by the gut-deep fear she'd  
suffered while watching the  
beating he'd taken. Bruises and  
hisses of pain had followed  
afterward in the locker room. A  
man with more pride and less  
affection would've kept it from her.  
Instead he'd let her in. A measure  
of trust.

She tried to savor her



indulgence, but a gnawing bite of apprehension had settled in her stomach, alongside the grilled cheese. He was *unusually* quiet.

“Tasty?” he asked.

“Fantastic.” Before he could probe any deeper, because she knew he would, Trish changed the subject. “How’d it go with your boss?”

He grimaced then inhaled through his teeth. Whatever brave front he was putting on regarding his injuries was simply that. A front. “Not well. I told him about my brother’s rehab. All but begged him for another chance.”

“Did he agree?”

“Yup. Barely. I get one more fight. I’m off flight rotation until it’s done.”

“Oh, Eric. I’m sorry.”

That grimace returned, although she didn’t know why. “Forget it.”

“Will you have enough?”

“Should be, if I max out my savings.” He shrugged. “Maybe my Camaro. I don’t need...” A heavy shake of his head...then a full retreat. He sat back from the table.

Trish blinked rapidly. To be cared for so much – what would that be like? She knew full well how much that car meant to him.

No one put eight years of love and attention into a project and sold it without heavy regrets. Without being out of options.

She knew that feeling, at least. She also knew his pride was a mile high, and she so easily read all his no-go signs. In an odd way, she was happy he'd revealed this much. It wasn't lowering her expectations. She was beginning to know the difference. This was more like how he'd let her settle into his praise for her work.

They both needed time. Years of duck and cover were hard to undo.

His phone rang. He flinched then

covered the reaction with a fake smile. Didn't matter. It faded as soon as he checked the caller ID. "I gotta take this."

Without another word, he slipped from his bench and walked toward the men's bathroom. He didn't go in. Instead he stood in the relative privacy of the alcove. Trish watched. His body language snapped tense as a stake. She shoved away her half-eaten grilled cheese and sipped her Diet Coke. Had to be his commanding officer or his brother. Considering the fold of his shoulders and the anxious way he drummed his fingers on his

thigh, she guessed the latter.

It was probably too much to hope that he'd share the details. Trish took a deep breath and packed up her stuff. Everything was running behind that day. She needed to go. Another audition. Dan Flowers had followed through, securing her a by-invitation audition at the Paris. She'd worked with the up-and-coming producer years earlier and had manipulated him hard — smiles at industry events, thank-you cards when he introduced her around, a kiss on his cheek when last they'd parted — to keep her in the forefront of his

mind.

Too good to be true, but she'd give it all she had.

Frankly, after losing her agent, she'd been lucky to find the opportunities she had. Pam technically represented her for another two weeks, but it turned out former directors and casting agents had spread the word. They took her to be a hardworking, dependable asset. Staying off smack helped. And not getting pregnant. But it was nice anyway. A better reputation than she'd assumed she had.

Plus she needed to be gone when

Eric returned to the table. He'd be closed off and unwilling to talk. She knew that much. Better to call an end to this strange attempt at a date. Protecting her bubble of happiness was hard enough already.

After finding a pen in her backpack, she grabbed a napkin from the dispenser.

*Gotta scram. See you tomorrow?  
Backstage. XOX  
Trish*

She laid a ten-dollar bill on the table. With a wave that he may or

may not have caught, she kept her steps even, not rushed, as she left the diner.

The cooler October air was no relief; she was too worked up. She walked more slowly to the bus stop. Thoughts...a complete jumble. She tightened her grip on her portfolio, trying to ground herself. Her fallback. Her safety net. She would make it work.

After climbing on the bus and flashing her monthly pass card, bound for the Paris, her phone trilled with an incoming text. From Eric. Only one word, of course.

*Absolutely.*



# Chapter Twenty-Six

Eric had attended a couple shows when he'd first arrived in Vegas, as part of the whole Sin City ritual. He hadn't really cared one way or the other, but it seemed a rite of passage among the Aggressors. Hit the Strip, get smashed, gamble half a month's pay.

He'd held firm on gambling. The rest had been great. In fact, the shows had seemed like a waste of time. He'd wanted to head back to the strip clubs instead.

Watching Trish strut her stuff

across the giant stage was altogether different.

The women were dressed in matching costumes. Iridescent headdresses caught the light, as did more sequins than Eric would've thought possible to sew on a few square inches of fabric. Red bikini tops. Crimson smiles. And tiny twists of white linen over sparkling thongs, perhaps to evoke Egyptian togas. Or whatever they'd worn.

Despite the Barbie-doll sameness, Eric spotted Trish. Easily. He knew her hips, knew her ass. Knew those legs as she kicked above her ears. She had the largest headdress too,

which trailed feathers down to her hips. Spaghetti straps accentuated the long, lean muscles of her outstretched arms as she sang.

He barely remembered to look at a few of the brunettes. Which was Mallory?

Inexorably, he returned his attention to Trish. How beautiful and stately she was wasn't any surprise. He'd known she could move, that her elegance would make the stage come alive. He'd also known that she'd light up—ten times the magnitude of the sun. Fearless and bold.

He hadn't known exactly how

*talented* she was. She made the heels and the outfit and the overly dramatic poses work, elevating crass to art. She made each step count. Her voice filled him with melancholy or joy depending on every minute inflection.

In truth, he'd been doing her an injustice this whole time. That she was taking a course on finance, that her designs could wow trained professionals...that she wasn't just a pretty face. She wasn't a showgirl because of looks alone. Trish Monroe was a treasure.

He had no fucking clue why he should've been surprised. He was,

and he was uncomfortably ashamed of that surprise.

As soon as the show finished and the last of the applause faded, he made his way backstage. The pass she'd left for him at Will Call got him past bouncers obviously meant to protect the women.

And women there were, by the truckload.

They dashed around, some of them topless, swarming toward the dressing rooms, digging items out of bags or greeting visitors. Trish had convinced another ring girl to switch nights, with the final show cast party as her backup

entertainment for the night should arrangements with Mallory fall through. Otherwise she would've been one of the frantic women trying to change and hurry off to the boxing arena. Hell, she *had* been one of those women ever since they'd met.

How was she not exhausted twenty-four seven?

She stood in the entryway of a single dressing room, blocking the entrance with her narrow shoulders and one hand propped on the opposite doorjamb. The headdress was gone. She'd donned a short white robe that she held closed

with one hand.

She didn't like the guy she was talking to. Eric knew it instinctually, which made her smile baffling.

Eric pulled his hands out of the pockets of his slacks. He considered it a win that he didn't ball them into fists as he joined the pair. Trish might like his bruiser side, but that was only in the ring—or when it meant giving her a mean fuck and a hard orgasm. Punching out random men in her professional realm wouldn't earn him praise.

She lit up when she saw him.  
“Eric.”

She quickly knotted the tie of the robe and held out a hand. He took her cold, unsteady fingers and wrapped them in his. The angle of her body was intimate and seemingly in need of shelter. He wasn't used to feeling as if she truly needed his protection. She was vulnerable, but she was a woman who could hold her own in any situation.

So what situation had he wandered into?

Later. First he needed to say what he'd wanted to say since the first song and dance number. "You were amazing," he whispered



privately.

The ultra-lush lashes of the showgirl makeup fluttered. "Hush, you."

"You love it."

She smiled softly. Her real emotions were revealed by the sheen that welled in her pale eyes.

The bland man coughed. He wore a poorly fitting tan suit over an average middle-age build. At least he was lucky enough to have a full head of hair.

Trish stiffened beneath Eric's fingertips. "This is Hank Yardley. He was just leaving."

Eric refrained from punching the

man, sure, but he couldn't keep from tightening his free hand until his knuckles cracked. "Is there a problem here?"

Though her pulse fluttered wildly at the base of her throat, Trish shook her head. "He's leaving, like I said."

Hank's mouth twisted, but he didn't argue. He held a card out. Trish hesitated before taking it. She didn't meet the man's eyes when he said, "If you change your mind, call me. Listen to your mom. She knows what's best for you."

He disappeared into the throngs of women and their admirers,

leaving Eric alone with Trish.  
Finally.

When he kissed her, he poured in every hot, sex-drenched thought he'd had while watching her hips sway. Then he gave her the emotion she'd affected him with during song after song.

Her fingers gripped the placket of his button-down shirt. She pushed just beneath the buttons to stroke his skin. "Now that's the kind of greeting a girl likes."

"But that guy... Who was he?"

Her nose wrinkled with distaste. "An agent. And a...well, a photographer. Or he thinks he is. I

can do better than that on both counts,” she added with a sweetly coy smile — a smile that said she was playing him and they both knew it.

“Your mom?”

Her gaze dashed to the side. Framing her face in his hands was easy and natural, especially when she seemed to be fraying at the edges.

“Yes,” she said, lifting her eyes. “She likes Hank.”

“You don’t.”

“No one does,” chimed in a new voice. “No one with sense, at least, and Trish’s got gobs of sense.”

As soon as he turned, Eric knew without asking.

Mallory.

She was quite the looker. Long brown hair was braided back from her face. Although she'd cleaned off her stage makeup, she wore lip gloss that made a man think of blowjobs. But Trish had said Mallory was a lesbian. The way she stared at Trish backed that up, like she'd eat the girl in two big bites given the least invitation.

Fucking hell was that hot. The images Trish had planted in his head burned like supernovas. The idea was more fire than he knew

what to do with.

“And here’s an introduction I’ll actually enjoy making.” Trish nestled close to his side. Her lean curves were warm and vital, devoid of the stiffness she hadn’t been able to hide when fending off that guy Hank. “Mallory, this is Eric. Eric, this is Mallory.”

Mallory grinned as she stuck her hand out. “Nice to meet the man who’s put color in my girl’s cheeks.”

He couldn’t hold back a chuckle. “Your girl?”

“I’m fond of her. Kinda took her under my wing.”

Trish rolled her eyes. "You two are going to make me feel like some lost innocent. I'm right here, you know."

"You sure are." Bright mischief sparked in Mallory's dark eyes. "In that case, why don't you tell us something. Who eats pussy better, a guy or a chick?"

"Oh my God, no. I am not answering that." A grin looked ready to split Trish's face.

"On the grounds that you might incriminate yourself or someone else?" Apparently Mallory was chatty too. Eric didn't mind. Their teasing chatter gave him the chance

to watch them together.

What an image. Dark and light. They'd be beautiful when intertwined.

Trish gestured to her hips before ducking into the dressing room. "I have simply *got* to get cleaned up. If I keep this thing on any longer, I'll chafe."

The room was tiny. One chair sat in front of a mirror. The fancy feathers she'd worn throughout the show draped over a stand in the corner—he realized, a little sadly, for what would be the last time. This was part of her life at an end.

He leaned against the far wall.



After Mallory closed the door behind her, Trish dropped the white robe with no fanfare. Eric could almost believe she'd done it as a matter of course, no big deal. Except he caught her eye in the mirror — the way she watched his reaction, then looked at Mallory. Trish's pink nipples tightened. She'd just performed for ninety minutes with hundreds of people watching her. Now she stood in the small room in a red-and-silver thong as an erotic queen for only two people.

Mallory licked her bottom lip and managed to pull her gaze up to

Trish's face, then over to Eric.

"She's got a body to die for, doesn't she?"

She was testing him and Mallory both. They all were testing each other, like some warped game of chess. Which turn would the night take?

If the stars worked and the constellations aligned, would he actually be able to watch his blonde, gorgeous girl with another woman? The answer was hell yeah. His body was in agreement, and his mind arrowed toward the prize. Both prizes. His blood charged. He wasn't hard, but that was a matter

of self-control and not wanting to embarrass himself.

The issue now was Mallory. Eric had purposefully kept from catching sight of himself in the mirror. He was made of bruises on top of bumps on top of scars, like a car-crash victim who'd promptly been mauled by zombies. If Mallory didn't want to be anywhere near him, Eric wouldn't hold it against her.

He pushed away from the wall, getting close enough to touch...but he kept his hands to himself. "She's the whole package."

"I miss her." Mallory swept her

hands down the curve of Trish's waist, facing her. A kiss of sun had tanned Mal's skin, darker in comparison to Trish's paleness.

Trish giggled airily. She held Mallory's waist, the women as mirror images. "But you've seen me practically every night."

"Not the same." She rested her chin on Trish's shoulder, looking past her to scrutinize Eric. "Not the same as tasting you every day. Tell me, baby doll. You miss having my face between your legs?"

A hard jolt—right through Eric's torso. He woke up, all of him *aware*. He feathered his fingers through

the short hair at the top of Trish's neck. He needed to touch, and that was the safest place. "Are we doing this?"

She reached back to grip his thighs. Her tight ass pressed against his stiffening cock. "You tell me," she breathed. "Eric?"

He kissed behind Trish's ear, where her pulse throbbed. "Yes."

"And you, Mal?"

Mallory was watching him like a judge preparing to pass sentence. Heat lived in her dark gaze, but so did possessiveness and a hint of suspicion. "Can you promise this'll be worth my time?"

Trish smiled on a long sigh. Her body lost the last of its tension.  
“No, but we’ll both try.”

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

Trish knew his loft. Knew how it smelled. Knew the temperature of the air. But she and Mal looped their arms and huddled near, as if she'd never ventured inside. That night, everything felt new.

"Wow," the other woman said.  
"Nice place."

"Thanks." Eric tossed their bags into the corner by the front door. Such a loud, heavy thunk.

Amazing how much crap she needed to get through a performance. Trish could probably

get away with carrying half of it, if not for living out of her cruddy hotel room. That she could think at all was unbelievable considering the circumstances. Although they were all stone-cold sober, she felt as if she'd downed an entire bottle of bubbly.

Mal leaned in and whispered, "Been a while."

A shiver of anticipation worked up to Trish's lips. She kissed Mal on the cheek, then nuzzled there. "It has. One-time shot though, okay?"

"Oh, I know. You got it bad, baby." She glanced toward where Eric doggedly filled a couple glasses



with water from a filter pitcher.

“He’s pretty rough, and obviously a dude, but you finally found a good one.”

“Hush, you. C’mon. I’ll show you the bedroom.”

Their high heels clicked in tandem across the hardwood floor. Such a different prospect, being with a woman after so long. And knowing Eric would watch gave it an altered flavor. The fizz of want and the heavy beat of lust in her belly was nearly too much to acknowledge, like staring dead on at a floodlight.

“Oh, those are gorgeous,” Mal

said, her voice hushed. Wide, dark eyes flicked over the collection Eric had assembled on his wall. “Who’s the photographer?”

Trish waved toward where Eric’s array of equipment sat in the bedroom’s dark corner. The setup waited for them like a curtain ready to lift for a once-in-a-lifetime performance. “Him.”

“Wow. *Definitely* a good one. He really sees things, doesn’t he?”

“That’s the scary part.”

Mal cupped Trish’s face in her smooth hands. She leaned in and kissed, so softly, with her lips brushing against the gloss Trish had

applied in the car.

“It’s what you deserve, baby. Always have.” When Trish reflexively shook her head in protest, Mal’s touch strengthened. “Don’t you dare contradict me on this one, baby.”

“Okay,” Trish said with a half grin. “Do you mind, though? He’ll want to photograph us. Video too.”

The brightness of Mal’s lust dimmed a watt or two as she assessed the equipment. “How far does the finished product go? Just him or every adult video store in the city?”

“Just him.”

“And you trust him about that?”

Trish stilled. It was her turn to touch Mal — to hold her attention and mean it. She clenched her hands along the deep inward dip of Mal’s waist and gave her a friendly shake. “I trust him, Mal. But it’s still your choice.”

The woman shrugged with a chuckle. “Let’s do it. Besides, if I find it on the internet, I’ll know whose sweet Camaro my brother-in-law needs to impound.”

As if by choreography, they leaned in to kiss at the same time, this one restive and ready to go. Trish was so nervous, but a

homecoming with Mallory was a happy indulgence. They slid together, with two flavors of gloss blending, then fading as their tongues and gathering passion kissed away the artificial sweetness. What Trish found was Mal's own sweetness and the incredible softness of a feminine mouth. A man's lips, no matter how smooth or supple, couldn't compare with those of a woman.

Soft lips and soft bodies, as their breasts met and molded flesh against flesh. Mal had always been the more aggressive of the two. That hadn't changed. She cupped

Trish's ass cheeks and squeezed, pulsing, timing her hands with the steady thrust of her tongue as their wet, demanding kiss rocketed from flirtation to raunchy foreplay.

Trish crossed her arms around Mal's back then inhaled the woman's satisfied moan when they pulled flush. She'd always loved Mal's baby-powder scent, but she'd never identified the brand of perfume. Long ago she'd decided not to find out. It was just Mal and the warmth of a body made for sin.

"Starting without me?"

Dazed, Trish broke their kiss and found herself looking down into

Mal's dark, playful gaze. A smile shaped the woman's puffed, reddened lips. Trish pressed their foreheads together and smiled too. "Sorry there, sugar," she said to Eric, still close enough to keep breathing Mallory's baby-powder scent. "Someone has me a little dazed."

Mal drew back with a mock pout that was underlaid with unflappable confidence. "I'm just someone?"

"Never." Trish kissed her nose then turned to find Eric.

He stood propped against the wall between the loft's front open

space and the bedroom. Trish knew him well enough by now. His casual posture was a complete lie. He'd been more at ease when overlooking the drop at the Stratosphere. His bulky shoulders were tight, his back rigid. The hands in his trouser pockets had fisted.

"We got him so keyed up already," Mal said, quietly teasing. "Gotta love an eager audience."

"You won't find a better one." Trish raised her voice so that Eric could hear. "Isn't that right, sugar?"

"Hmm?"

"You're our eager audience."



He stalked slowly into the bedroom. His subtle cologne reached her before he did—a spicy, masculine bite compared to Mal’s petal silk. He touched Trish’s waist, then brushed his lips against hers.

“That’s right. Again now, showgirl. I like when you kiss like you mean it.” Then he stepped away.

Trish locked eyes with Mal, where passion quickly rekindled in those luscious depths. “Not a problem.”

Eric was there. He was watching. She *knew* he was watching. Although Trish wouldn’t back out

for every dollar in every casino in Vegas, she wasn't free of nerves.

*Showtime.*

She took her anxiety out on Mal's mouth. The kiss returned to nuclear-meltdown heat in a half second. Lips melded into a hot mash, all tongues and plunges. Feminine hands on her ass alternated between tight and tickling. Mal tasted sweet, so sweet, as if she'd guzzled the bubbly Trish had imagined.

Mal's tongue found its way back into Trish's mouth. They drank each other up. Trish went for broke. She wanted those beautiful breasts

beneath her palms. She grasped their full, heady weight and squeezed, stroked, *played*. Mal moaned into her mouth.

“I’d forgotten how much you dig my rack,” she said.

Trish licked Mal’s slick lower lip then kissed her way lower. Mal tipped her head to offer better access. “How could you forget a thing like that?”

“You have me jumbled right now, baby doll.”

Eric cleared his throat. Trish flicked her gaze toward where he stood a few feet away, his arms straight down and his fists tight.

His attention was riveted on Mal's face. Trish knew he found her attractive, but his expression was almost hesitant. "Will you do something for me?"

Mal cocked an eyebrow.

"Depends."

"Will you take your hair down too?"

The two stared at one another as Trish continued to pet Mal's body with eager strokes. The woman felt amazing. So lush and ripe. That damn bra would be *gone* as soon as possible.

Mal shrugged. "Sure. Why not. I'm in this all the way. Where's

your bathroom?"

Eric pointed to the far corner. Mal disappeared into the kitchen area and returned with a brush, comb and a zip bag where she kept her hair accessories. She ducked into the bathroom.

"You're asking a lot of her," Trish said. "We both have the same issues."

"Had to try."

She stood up tall and kissed his chin. "Then be a good boy and thank her later."

In an attempt to glue her brains back together, she turned away and started to strip. Her legs trembled

and her hands wouldn't work — until Eric stood in front of her and offered the steadiness of his body. His face was a wreck of restrained passion and concentration. The bruises were still brutal, but at least his lip had mostly healed.

Mal's champagne-and-gloss taste remained on her own lips. It was sensory overload.

"Your black silk robe, remember?"

He nodded. So tense. Requiring more courage to go on, eager to feel how this was blasting through his body, she slid her fingers down the center line of his torso. She pressed

her hands one over the other and fondled his rock-hard prick. Again she found a release for her building anticipation in using a lover's body. She squeezed until he grunted, then hissed.

He grabbed both wrists in a tight grip. "Not so fast. Want it all."

"Mmmm, the caveman has returned. Don't you have equipment to fire up?"

"Yeah." He exhaled heavily. Some measure of mastery returned to his features. He let her go and started arranging the cameras.

Trish strolled to the bed. She was liquid and steam and elemental.

Outside of herself. She shook, yet she was as in control of her body as she'd ever known. Every nuance was hers to display.

Mal opened the bathroom door. She was stark naked. Her hair, like the most tempting dark-chocolate cake, trailed over her shoulder blades and breasts. A modern day Godiva. She had proud shoulders, posture erect to display her best asset. Round, full breasts were tipped with dusky areolas and tight nipples. She was the perfect hourglass. The cage of her ribs rounded inward to a narrow waist, where round, fleshy hips swished



with every step. Shapely legs joined at an apex decorated with a thin, neat stripe of dark hair.

Trish's mouth fell slack. Distantly, she heard Eric's sharp intake of breath.

Trish crossed the room. Her feet powered her without thought. Their lips may have been soft, but their mouths were hard when they collided. Trish spiked her fingers into that luscious, silken mass, down to Mal's scalp. Damn, Eric had been right. With her hair unbound, she was a goddess.

A goddess with a mission, apparently.

With her hands tight on Trish's hips, their lips fused, Mal steadily pushed her back toward the bed. They landed sideways in a tangle of limbs—the best view for Eric's cameras.

Mal surged over her until their breasts pressed as closely as their hips. The chance brush of nipple across nipple sent a jolt of electricity through Trish's entire body.

She crossed her arms around Mal's curving spine. Having only gotten brief access before, Trish kissed down and down until she reached the decadently smooth skin

of Mal's throat.

"Oh," Mal said on a quiet gasp. "I was always a sucker for your mouth on my neck."

That was part of the reason why Trish had become obsessed with Mal's neck and the elegant slope leading to her shoulders. Mal loved it. The more Trish nipped and licked, the crazier Mal became. She moaned then grabbed the back of Trish's head to hold her closer.

"Suck. Harder, baby."

Trish found the perfect place and opened her mouth. She licked and teased until Mal scraped harsh nails up Trish's back.

No more play. Trish sucked with the same force she'd use on Eric's cock. Mal's gasp was like a shot of Jack and that addicting. Finding another spot, Trish sucked again — this time alternating with scraping teeth. Mal shoved her knee between Trish's legs and bore down.

"That cunt is mine," she rasped against Trish's ear, before taking the lobe between her teeth. "You're so wet for me already."

"I am. God, Mal. You feel amazing." Trish grasped wherever she could reach. Ass, hips, tits, then back down the wonderland of

Mal's roller-coaster curves. "I forgot how much I got out of groping you."

Mal bit harder on Trish's earlobe. The pressure increased until Trish tried to squirm away. Mal grabbed both wrists and dragged them up, pinning Trish with her body and her hands and her teeth. Only when Trish cried out did Mal give way. She released Trish's earlobe, then sucked away the pain.

"So fucking good," Mal growled.

With both of their arms stretched back behind Trish's head — Trish pinned and Mal pinning — their breasts rubbed together. Mal

intensified the contact by deliberately writhing. She used every inch of skin to torture every inch of Trish, then ground her thigh against Trish's pussy. They rocked together, a full-body caress. Tickles of long hair tangled in her hands and draped like a waterfall around their kiss.

Almost private.

Trish knew that wasn't the case. Grabbing, wanting, they soaked into one another, but Trish had never been more aware of Eric's attention. She couldn't see him where he'd settled into the shadows behind the bright lighting

screens. She only sensed his arousal branding her skin.

She swept Mal's hair to one side, so he'd have a better view of their devouring mouths.

And sure enough, the move was rewarded with a flash of a picture being snapped.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Mal whispered. "You like that, don't you, baby? That fucking brutal stud watching me touch you."

"More than touch, Mal. Harder."

The woman complied. She released Trish's wrists and wedged a hand between their torsos. Taut fingers raked up from Trish's hip to

her breasts. Mal groped, twisted and pinched, then dipped her head to take a nipple into her mouth. She'd loved Trish's breasts for the same reason Trish loved her neck. The responses. The potent energy of each erogenous zone. For Trish, it had always been her breasts. She gripped the back of Mal's head, pulling her, yanking her hair. She needed more. More of her lover's skin and the hot tension in her flesh. She smacked down on Mal's ass and clenched.

“Rougher,” Mal said, gasping.

Trish slapped her ass with both hands, slapped until her palms



stung. Mal hissed and moaned. She rocked forward again, using her body weight to rub her thigh against Trish's aching cunt. Any male partner would be right there, his erection ready to plunge, but now there was only the sultry slide of pussy over slick pussy.

The camera's flash spiked pulses of light behind her eyelids. Pure ecstasy.

Mal had almost always set the pace. She liked being in charge, which suited Trish perfectly. She couldn't have imagined trying to direct such a scene. Impulse ruled her, made decisions for her. So

when Mal's teeth scraped over a sensitized nipple, Trish could only gulp air and arch.

"Grab my tits, Trish, baby. I know you want to."

Mal raised her chest like an offering. Beautiful. So perfectly full and tipped with caramel cream. Trish fondled both before lifting her head from the mattress. She took one tight pearl into her mouth. She licked and nipped until Mal bowed, hands tight at Trish's hip and shoulder.

"Trish, you slut, I know you can do better than that. Work my tits like how you'll eat me out. Work

my tits like you could make me come that way.”

Trish groaned around one perfect areola and laved Mal’s tight nipple. She used tongue and teeth to flick the tender bud back and forth, around in circles, as if she were tonguing a clit. Mal’s escalating gasps and the hard bite of her fingernails encouraged Trish to be selfish. Be mean and be rough.

The snap of another picture. Another. Wet heat flooded Trish’s body.

“You’ll watch this,” Mal whispered. “Together. Later. When you ride him. When he plows his

prick into you.”

“Over and over.”

Mal’s hand dove between their bodies. Fingers. Tight. Twisting Trish’s clit in the balance between pain and pleasure. Fire shot across her skin in time with two relentless, matched pressures—tongue on nipple and fingers on cunt.

“And you want him to fuck you tonight, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Trish panted.

Mal drew back until Trish’s mouth was empty, then dove back down to kiss her, hot and fierce. She plunged two fingers into Trish’s sheath. Loud groans

stripped clear of them both. "I'll do him the favor of getting you ready for him."

"I already am."

A low laugh formed Mal's smile into that of an angel and devil. She forced her fingers in, rhythmic now. "Oh no. I'm getting at least one come out of you. And then, baby, you're gonna eat me out like you live for it, breathe for it."

"Ah, fuck me. Please, Mal."

"I am." She bent her head to Trish's tits. Her tongue against Trish's nipple was the perfect match to the pulse of her fingers. Three now, deep inside. "How hard

do you think that makes him?" She glanced toward the shadows where Eric hid like some theater phantom. "Is he stroking himself yet?"

Trish turned her head. Waves of pleasure gathered in her pussy and radiated out, up, through. "Tell me, Eric."

"Not yet." Christ, but his voice was pure gravel. "Work on your come, showgirl. She wants to get you off as much as I want to see it."

Mal grabbed behind one of Trish's knees, opening her completely. "He's not wrong. I want it. I want your juices. And I'll make you lick my fingers clean. But

I won't return the favor by lapping at your sweet pussy. You'll kneel between my legs, dripping down your own thighs."

"Shit. Oh, just...*damn*." Trish actually laughed. Snap – another flurry of photos. He must be poised for those moments – unique moments in a feast of flesh. "You are such a chatty bitch."

"That was our thing, Trish, baby."

"Always did the trick. God, Mal, that feels amazing."

"I know. Not my first fingerbang." She nuzzled Trish's neck, licking, smiling against sweat-

slicked skin. "You know I take pride in my work."

"Onstage."

"Tell me this isn't a stage. The tempting whore and her artfully fucked-up princess." The rhythm of her thrusts picked up. Trish focused on her face. Lush lips were flattened. Determined. Sweat dampened strands of hair that draped around Mal's cheeks. Her eyes were dark, even beneath the lights Eric bathed across their bodies. In those endless depths of brown on black on midnight shadow, Trish found passion and need she'd never experienced with



her former lover. Everything about them was blown a thousand times as high, a thousand times as forceful.

Mal added her thumb, right on Trish's swollen clit. Her fingers were pressed tight in Trish's pussy when she poured on the force, the speed, the brutal push toward release. Trish's whole body shook on the mattress as she let go of her tension and let Mal use her however she wanted, as hard as she wanted.

"You're mine now, baby. He'll bring his big, throbbing prick over here. Maybe he'll fuck your

million-dollar ass. You'd let him right in. But right now, you're mine. My impeccable little slut."

Trish arched her pelvis, grinding in time with the unrelenting drive of Mal's taut fingers. She was spinning, looping in her own mind as the *pop, pop, pop* of Eric's flash camera sparkled behind her eyes. She realized she was gripping the sheets, but that was a distant second to Mal's ass. Trish grounded herself in the feel of that flesh in her hands as she held on for dear life.

"Look at me, bitch," Mal rasped. Her hair had become damp,

tangled tendrils. "Give me what I want before I shove my fucking fist into your cunt. I swear to God I'll stop. I'll leave your drenched pussy gaping open and wanting. You'd beg for me, baby. I know you would. Beg for me now."

"Mal, *please*."

"That's right. Such a princess onstage. My skinny little bitch here in bed. Pinch my tits. That's it. Shit, more. Harder." Mal inhaled through her teeth and took her pain out on Trish. She fucked as hard with her fingers as a man could with a pulsing cock. "Now, Trish baby. Give me your come."

The wait was over. The torturous, exquisite agony. Trish snapped rigid, her whole body convulsing. She cried out while thrashing her head. The fingernails she'd dug into Mal's round ass became talons—her lifeline. The devious woman wrung every drop of bliss from Trish's limp body. They panted in tandem.

Then she obeyed with mindless obedience as Mal did exactly what she'd narrated. She held out one finger after another so that Trish could lick her own hot juices off manicured fingers.

Apparently satisfied with herself,

Mal grinned. "Excellent, baby. But now it's my turn. You owe me that dirty mouth on my pussy."

Trish batted her lashes, all faux innocent. "Did I promise that?"

Slick fingers tweaked her nipple. "Put that ass in the air and eat me out." Mal lolled onto her back, knees wide, her sleek folds gleaming. "Try to make your boy come in his shorts while you get me off."

From the shadows, as Trish's senses came back into alignment, she heard Eric groan.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eric was going to lose his goddamn mind. This was something approaching a miracle. Beautiful and dirty and gorgeous. Filthy.

Trish and Mallory twisted around on the sheets. The darker woman leaned back on her elbows, knees wide. She kept a neat thatch of dark curls, trimmed close. Swollen, damp folds glistened under the lights.

Eric's lights, his camera, his equipment. He was being given his

own wet dream.

Because as he snapped off more shots, he knew this was bigger than anything he would experience again. The women were completely wrapped up in each other, so bound by sensation that they ignored him. Just as he'd always wanted.

Trish's perfect ass lifted in the air when she settled between Mallory's thighs. Lowering her head made a lithe arch of Trish's back. Light and shadow played along the ridge of her spine. Her skin shone with the slightest kiss of sweat, left over from her orgasm.

He snapped off more pictures. Then he repositioned the video camera, because the real prize was what she was about to do. Her pink tongue slid over Mallory's pouting pussy lips. He adjusted the lens. Zoomed in. Gorged with his eyes and through the eye of the camera.

He needed this. Needed to know this side of Trish, to see her taking what she wanted from another woman. Serving and teasing at the same time.

It turned out that Trish gave women head exactly as meanly as she did men. A lick. A soft tease. Then with a greedy feasting intent



on devouring Mallory — before she backed off.

The woman framed one hand under Trish's jaw and tugged her face. "I didn't tell you to fuck around, did I?"

Trish laughed. She extended her tongue so that the tip flicked over Mal's clit. "Nope. But then you're not in a position to order me around."

"Wanna bet?"

"No way."

"Besides, I bet your boy knows what I want. It's what he wants too. Isn't that right, caveman?"

Eric couldn't help his moan.

Groan? Maybe growl. A guttural expulsion of want. "Lick her, showgirl. Lick her as hard as you want me to fuck you."

She looked over her shoulder toward where he stood. "Well, in that case..."

She dove in again. Mouth on Mallory's pussy. Tongue working. She eased her shoulders down, melting into the mattress, reveling in her duty. One hand locked behind Mallory's knee to hold the woman's leg open, making sure Eric could get the shot he wanted. *Needed.*

She sucked Mallory's tight clit

between her lips. Her jaw worked when she dipped her tongue in and out, fucking the writhing woman with her mouth.

Mallory was going nuts. "There," she panted. "Oh, baby. God, you took to that well. You still know me."

Trish's mouth was shiny with Mallory's slickness. She glanced up the other woman's curves and flashed a cheeky smile — the one that said she was up to no good. Or lots and lots of good.

She eased two fingers into Mallory's cunt. "Of course I know. I remember exactly what you like.

And I'm going to use every trick and every skill you taught me to make sure you come on my face."

Mallory gave a husky laugh. "Oh shut up, baby, and get back to it."

Maybe another man would be offended when he realized they were lost to one another. They'd used him for a moment to urge their passion to new heights, then forgot about him. Eric loved it—the pure voyeurism of watching when all the defenses were stripped and no one pretended anymore. He'd loaded a sixteen-gig memory card, and fuck if he wasn't going to need every scrap of space. He snapped

picture after picture as if he were aiming the lens into some other bedroom. Definitely not his. This was the bedroom shared by two sexy women who couldn't get enough of licking and kissing, slapping and pinching.

Except he was almost at the end of his control. Watching Trish come had pushed him pretty far. Now, watching her hips surge in the air as she lowered her face and opened her mouth over Mallory...

He wasn't going to last.

Luckily, it didn't look like Mallory would either. She closed one fist tight by her own shoulder,

pounding the mattress in breathtaking frustration. With the other, she splayed tense fingers across the back of Trish's head. Bountiful breasts with dusky nipples lifted toward the ceiling, arching, lowering, then arching again.

She started a near chant. "Right there, baby. Oh God. You know. Right there, don't stop. You gorgeous bitch, I'm so goddamned close."

Her breathing roughened. Shook. Hitched on crying gasps.

Trish didn't let up. She added the force of her whole upper body as

she stroked with three fingers. Her mouth locked down over the other woman's clit. She added a hint of teeth. But just before the end, Eric lost sight of those details. Picture after picture was of Trish pressed between Mallory's thighs. The woman used both hands now, grabbing the back of Trish's head while fucking upward with tight hips. Her fingers made crazy spikes out of Trish's feathery soft hair, while Trish thrashed side to side and worked her fingers so hard that it must've been painful — painfully perfect — because Mallory came with low banshee scream.

Absolutely transcendent. Lost in her release.

She kept her hand locked across Trish's nape, anchored by that connection. Trish didn't try to escape. She kept licking, kept sucking. More. Harder. A pinch over slippery-wet clit.

Mallory exploded a second time, so hard that her spine levered off the bed. She curled around Trish, her knees locked around Trish's pale shoulders. Her scream was a mean growl.

*Holy fuck.*

They crashed onto each other in a sweaty, hysterical jumble. Eric



couldn't tell which one started giggling first. God they looked amazing. A sexy couple he'd been invited to watch. And video. He'd revisit those frames for the rest of eternity.

Trish rose on her elbows, her hips drooping to the twisted sheets. She pointed her toes in the air, and her feet kicked back and forth as she licked her fingers clean. "Not fair. You've come twice. I'm behind."

Mallory laughed, huskier this time. "I think you know what to do."

"Sit on your face?"

“That is an option.”

Trish wiggled up her body and cupped the other woman's breasts. Her mouth dipped. Teeth nibbled along the bottom and inside curves. “You've got the best tits.”

“You used to spend hours on them.”

A hum of agreement was lost against skin. “You didn't mind.”

“Not a bit.” Mallory petted Trish's baby-fine hair. Her dark gaze found the camera lens. “But there's someone else who might want to help you out. Is your guy getting lonely?”

“I doubt it. He's loving this.” But

she eased to the other woman's side, cupping and fondling and exploring. Her casual attitude would've made Eric laugh, except he was ratcheted as tight as a man could be. "How about it, sugar? Do you mind watching me kiss and pet this sexy rack?"

"No."

"One word." She winked at Mallory. "That means he's really wound up."

Mallory took a kiss. "I don't blame him. But how wound up is wound up?"

"I don't know." Trish's legs shifted restlessly. He didn't blame

her. All of this was...amazing. "Are you whacking off, Eric? Do you have your hand on your hard cock?"

He was within an instant of saying no — before realizing that he was clutching his throbbing hard-on. Not jerking. But holding. Firmly. Fingers and thumbs were ringed around his dick, unconsciously resisting the rock-out tingles that threatened to overwhelm him. Pleasure gnawed at his senses.

"Yes." Any more words were beyond him. Out of his reach. His world had narrowed to this

unbelievable sight.

Trish reached behind her and dug around in the nightstand, returning with a condom in hand. "I've got somewhere better you can put that big, thick prick." She waved the packet. "Come fuck me, sugar. I need to come and I need you to do it."

He snapped. His body locked. He buzzed with the same anticipation that surged before combat.

Somehow he managed to put down his camera without breaking it. In the back of his head burned the knowledge that the camcorder kept recording.

Trish opened the condom. Slender fingers rolled it down his shaft. He flinched. Almost too much.

Mallory made a soft noise and tilted Trish's face to the side. She took a long, wet kiss, hard enough that their teeth clicked.

Eric dropped his hips and sank into Trish's tight channel. *So* tight, as if she was already seconds from coming. He hoped that was true. He wasn't going to last long, not while they continued kissing in front of him. Not while Trish's hands cupped and played with the curvy brunette's breasts.

She dropped her head back onto Mallory's arm. "That's so good. The way he fucks me. You don't know."

Mallory laughed and petted the arc of his girl's jaw. Kissed her. Red fingernails trailed down Trish's collarbones, across the top swells of her tits. "Keep your man all to yourself."

Her fingers traveled down Trish's stomach to the dip in her navel. She didn't stop until her index finger found Trish's clit. Trish jumped. Her hips flexing toward Eric. Her inner muscles wrenched hard over his dick.

He fisted his hand in the sheet by

Trish's head. Every stroke of his hips, every throb of his blood—a rush of pleasure.

“What I want,” Mallory continued, “is right here. This pretty pussy? I want another shot at licking it clean. You'll let me, my slutty baby doll. Or he'll make me. Not anything a man can *make* me do other than convince me to eat you out.”

Eric slammed his dick home, until he forced another shrieking orgasm out of Trish. Her hand grasped at Mallory's. Eric's body popped with the bright and wicked shards of *gone*.



He came. Came until he forgot to breathe. His chest clenched and wheezed. Colors burst across his eyes from lack of oxygen. Who the fuck needed oxygen?

Somehow he lost a few minutes. He wouldn't call it blacking out, but definitely skipping time. When he pulled pieces of himself back together, his face was pressed against Trish's stomach. But even an orgasm that devastating hadn't knocked him out.

Nor had it stopped the women. They'd resumed kissing, hands roaming over beautiful bodies.

"All fours, showgirl." The order

fell out of his mouth without thought. "And keep your ass up."

Trish obeyed. Damn, he loved that.

She tilted her pussy out toward him. "Will you lick me, sugar?"

"No." He shook his head. He was probably pinching her hips too hard, but she only moaned. "I want your ass. Objections?"

She shuddered, and her eyes turned heavy lidded. Absolutely smoldering. "No. None. Wish we had some toys, though."

Mallory lifted one hand in a mock wave. "My bag. Inside pocket."

Trish laughed. "You're shameless!"

"You know me." The woman had the most innately raunchy grin. She eased her hips under Trish's head. "There's no such thing as a bad time for a fuck."

Eric was off the bed and back in an instant. The toy was slender and elegant, made of purple metal. He laid it along Trish's pussy first.

She jumped as she hissed in a breath. "Cold."

"Give it a second to warm up," Mallory cooed. "Then it'll be your favorite thing ever."

"Too much chatter," Eric

managed to say. His gaze was pinned on Trish's ass, on the tiny pink pucker between her globes. He trailed the toy over her, along her sensitive skin, then followed with his fingers. "Suck that cunt, showgirl. While I play."

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

Trish wasn't the biggest fan of anal play, mostly because it could go too far. Maybe once or twice, that was it, all she'd ever tried. Men got so damn turned on and forgot they were fucking a real woman.

But with Eric? He wouldn't hurt her. Plus Mal was there, a constant comfort in the storm. Mal would just as soon kick Eric in the balls than let him get too rough.

Not that "too rough" seemed to be a problem. Trish's skin was practically numb, so keyed up, so

overwhelmed. Stopping now would be plain wasteful.

She lowered her lips. There between Mal's thighs, she teased and explored, as Eric did along the cleft of her ass. She remembered those months when she and Mallory had lived together as fresh lovers, how she couldn't get enough of that intensely female sex act. It was different now. A novelty. Something to be enjoyed for the evening, like reminiscing.

Had she and Eric been alone, Trish would've already tasted his cock—his salty flavor and the hard slash of his release across the back

of her throat.

Not that she was complaining. She smiled against Mal's inner thigh.

"Amused, you pretty bitch?"

"Very," she said. "You need to talk to me."

"Nah. Your big stud shut me up."

Trish threw a look over her shoulder, where Eric watched them, his fingers idly stroking her most sensitive skin. The cold metal toy followed his touch. "I *like* her dirty talk, sugar. You know how much I babble when I need to come. I've heard the same from you."

Eric grunted something noncommittal. He parted her folds with thumb and forefinger then slid the sleek, curved metal into her pussy. Trish pushed her mouth against Mal's pubic bone and moaned.

"From this hunk of silent?" Mal asked. She bent her knees, heels digging into the mattress, and threaded her fingers together at the back of Trish's head. "I doubt it."

The rhythm he kept with the metal wand was nearly...soothing. Hypnotic. As if he didn't actually intend for her to come. As if he only wanted more footage for his



collection. She hadn't ever performed for him, or taken him deep inside, with so few clues as to what he was thinking.

She would draw him out. Needed to.

Trish lifted her gaze to meet Mal's dark eyes. "He gets downright chatty when he's close. When he's got all he wants right in front of him. Like he can't hardly believe it."

Eric fucked the toy deeper now. His breath was a rasping, grating sound—a machine that wasn't working properly. "Shut up, showgirl."

“No.”

He scooped his forearm around her neck and bowed her back to his chest. “I said, shut up and eat cunt.”

With any other man, she would’ve been terrified. She’d have done exactly as she was told, in the hopes of escaping a bad situation. But Eric was shaking. His arms. His chest. His thighs as they shivered against the backs of hers.

“And I said no,” she whispered, giving his scarred face a long, luxuriant and open-mouthed kiss. “Now, I thought I heard something about fucking my ass.” She slanted a look back down, where his

forearm continued to work her pussy with that hard, unforgiving toy. "Get to it, stud."

Eric pushed her down. She and Mallory locked eyes and shared matching grins. But her grin faded into a long moan as he tilted the toy up and in. The perfect spot.

"There," she gasped. "Oh shit."

Another ten seconds of that and she'd have screamed again. Eric gave her maybe...eight. He pulled it out with a quick jerk. Trish groaned her disappointment. Mal grabbed her head, angling Trish back to what the other woman craved. If given the opportunity,

Mallory would spend the rest of her life on her back with an eager woman's mouth on her pussy.

"Don't move," Eric said. His voice was too loud in that quiet space. Proof that he was more than way past gone. "Now."

She fixed her lips on Mal's clit, her body motionless as her tongue continued to flick and tease. That stillness became harder to maintain when Eric slid his fingers in her pussy and trailed her wetness up, around, over her asshole.

"You love his tattoos, don't you, baby?"

Trish could only moan against

Mal's swollen skin. The woman's hands clenched and released in a rhythm that nearly matched Eric's stokes. They were both preparing her, in tandem, readying her for the orgasm that would shred her soul-deep.

"Quite impressive," Mal continued. "I don't dig cock, but I can appreciate a finely built man. You should see his expression, baby doll. Seconds shy of drooling over you."

One of his thick fingers pushed inside her anus. Trish stiffened. Mal petted gentle fingers over Trish's brow and temples, and offered a

quiet shushing noise. "Take a breath, baby. Relax. It's only us. Me and this man who wants you so bad."

Mal's quiet reassurances and Eric's patient pulsing soothed the last of her tension. Trish sank into two extreme sensations: giving a woman pleasure and preparing for a man's most potent aggression.

He traded his finger for the thick, rounded end of the toy. Oh, it was warm now. Trish faltered in her attentions, her head falling sideways against Mal's thigh.

"Toldja," Mal said with a laugh. "Your new best friend."

“Don’t forget for my next birthday, okay?”

“Fuck,” Eric growled.

Mal giggled. “He’s getting pissed at us.”

“Maybe.” Trish looked back at the hulking, taut muscles that rippled across Eric’s shoulders and upper chest. “But he should be used to it – watching the show as it unfolds.”

The toy plunged. Trish arched her back, ass out, tits out.

He caught her earlobe in his teeth. “I’ve graduated to director.”

The forearm he slid around her low belly felt like a hug, a sweet

caress, until he clamped down with all his strength. Trish couldn't have moved her hips if her next breath depended on it. His left arm held her in place. His right hand worked that glorious toy in a more forceful rhythm.

"And the scars," Mal said wistfully. "I bet you were a sucker for them, Trish. What's he do?"

Trish gasped. "You could ask him."

"Nah, I don't think I'm here anymore. He's watching you, baby, and so am I."

"Fighter pilot," Trish managed to say.



“No shit? That’s fucking hot.”

Mal had started in on herself, apparently because Trish couldn’t concentrate worth a damn. Eric claimed too much of her focus. That metal was hot now, nearly as hot as the breath choking in her throat. He pumped her asshole, each plunge filling her with sparkling pleasure. She was parched and couldn’t stop moaning.

“Not so chatty now, showgirl.”  
Eric’s voice was animalistic now.

“Not when you have this hard metal fucktoy rammed up your ass. You’re a wreck. Sweaty. Your hair a mess. Your makeup smeared after

shoving your face against her snatch. I've never seen wetter lips. Nose to chin, covered in her come. Christ, Trish." He inhaled raggedly. "You should see yourself."

"Well, well. I lie here corrected." Mal's fingers looped over her clit, swirling in a way that caught Trish's attention. She watched through heavy-lidded eyes as the woman fucked herself with one hand and stroked faster, faster with the other.

"Beautiful, Mal," she said through a haze of pleasure. "Come for me, please?"

Trish wasn't the kind to order

others around. Never had been. But she wanted to see it happen. Mal's wicked smile tightened into a near grimace. Their gazes locked.

“Since you asked so nicely.”

The last word was a gasp that edged up and up to a long string of curses.

Eric slid the toy free on a curse of his own. “Damn you both. God, Trish —”

She heard another condom unwrapped. A shiver worked through each limb, down, then back to her core. Pussy. Asshole. Both were trembling. Waiting. She didn't know where he'd go next.

He pressed against her back, both on their knees, with his cock tucked between her ass cheeks and his mouth on her throat. "Let me?"

Trish laced her fingers at the base of his skull, where cropped hair scored her palms. "Yes. But...take care of me, Eric."

He shuddered. With a slight change to the angle of his supporting arm, he cupped her mound. "I *can* promise that."

"Oh, this I gotta see," Mal said. Trish's world exploded.

Eric Donaghue was not some sex toy, no matter how great that metal had felt. His cock was real and thick

and pulsing. He pushed the head in, then deeper, that whole long shaft — so slowly that Trish felt turned inside out.

“Breathe, baby. Remember?” Mal knelt in front of Trish. Their nipples brushed, adding a distant tingle of pleasure to the hot ache of Eric’s prick buried ass-deep. She lifted Trish’s face with both palms.

“Breathe. He’s got you. He’s got you so well. Here, look at the camera, Trish. Later he’ll get to see how hazed your eyes are, how your lips are slack, your brow shining with sweat. You know that’s what he wants. Even now.”

“She’s right, showgirl.”

With his free hand he cupped her jaw. Both of them held her face in place. Trish could only stare at the distant lens of the camcorder, trapped by the web of sensation they’d woven. Eric lifted his arms, crossing them around her breasts and hips. Mal took the opportunity to slide her hand up the inside of Trish’s leg. Fingers. Clit. It was nearly too much.

His voice was as rough as a buzz saw. “I can’t wait to watch this again. I’m right here fucking you, but you have my head in two places. So scattered.”

“No,” she whispered. Her chest ached. But through that cloudy filter of passion, she knew what she wanted. She wanted *him*. “Not two places. Eric, stay with me. *Here*. Now. Not the camera. Not for later. You and me.”

“Right now?” He shuddered. His hips faltered. Then he tucked his forehead against her nape. “Yes, my showgirl. Right fucking now.”

Eric bucked into her. Rougher. Each stroke dragged another pleased gasp from Trish. She was floating on it, that feeling of deep, deep fullness. His hips met her ass every time, with every sharpening

slap of body into body.

Mal had retreated. Trish didn't know when, but the other woman had edged back toward the head of the bed. Now she was the voyeur, and Eric was the active participant. He urged Trish onto all fours. She couldn't support herself. Her forearms collapsed. With that amazing body of his, Eric held her. He had her. Protecting her.

Pounding her ass with his massive tool — oh hell, yes — but within the shield of his strength and control.

“Touch yourself.” His damp, rasping breath shivered between her shoulder blades at the top of



her spine. He bowed over her. The entire hard weight of him pushed into every thrust. "Come with me. I'm waiting for you, showgirl. Fucking *close*."

"Can't," she gasped, nearly crying. So intense. She had no other outlet.

"Yes, you can. Fingers in your pussy, on your clit. I've got you. Lean into my arms."

"Mal can —"

"Nope." His ground-glass voice was almost teasing. "Mal's enjoying the view. Touch yourself. We'll blow apart together. This is you and me, Patricia. Like you said. You and

me."

*You and me.*

Trish lost everything. Her mind. Control of her body, her voice, her lungs. Some crazy woman screamed out an orgasm that sounded more painful than beautiful. Yet it was. It was beautiful, so colorful and sharp, like fireworks bursting under her skin. Eric never let go. His arms shook, but they never faltered. He grunted between her shoulder blades. All caveman. All power and need. He stiffened too, smacked sideways by the release that blasted through them both. The hoarse way he cried

her name was the roughest poetry.

She felt him shudder, felt him withdraw. But she couldn't see anything. She'd collapsed into the bedding. Completely immobile. Chest heaving. Tears on her cheeks. A rough hand pushed them away.

Eric leaned close. "Tears?" he whispered. "Trish?"

"Good tears." She let loose a long, aching sigh. "So good."

He nuzzled her temple. "Still just *good*. Damn, you're a hard woman to please."

Their smiles matched as they kissed with tenderness and awe. He looked like a freed prisoner. Every

ounce of tension was gone. Only a satisfied man remained – glowing and beautiful despite his rough features. Softly, gently, his blunt fingers soothed the tender skin where he'd surged and thrust. The change was too much to process. More tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. He sipped them away with sweet patience, his murmured words low.

Distantly, Trish heard a door shut. She pushed up. "Mal?"

Mallory had been to the bathroom and back, her clothes on and her hair braided. She crossed to the bed and leaned over. She

looked Eric in the eye. "May I?"

He nodded.

Mal pressed a hot, sweet kiss against Trish's lips. Already she tasted of fresh lip gloss. Trish didn't know the next time she'd be able to move, let alone get cleaned up.

"Fantastic, baby doll. But I gotta blow. You've got your hands full here."

Trish grabbed her hand, kissed her palm. "Thank you, Mallory."

"Save that mushy stuff for this bad boy." She winked and gave Trish's fingers a squeeze. "We'll see each other soon. Can't fight the spotlight." She took Trish by

surprise when she straightened and planted a short, playful kiss on Eric's forehead. "You done well, caveman."

Then she was gone, sauntering away as if what they'd experienced was nothing more than another Friday night's entertainment. Maybe it was for her. For Trish, it had been an evening as once in a lifetime as catching sight of Halley's Comet.

As Eric brought a warm washcloth and cleaned her feverish skin, two phrases echoed through her mind.

*You and me.*

*Can't fight the spotlight.*

She shivered. Eric shut down all the equipment and the lights, then tucked Trish and himself under the lightweight comforter. Tangled. Sated. Too shattered to speak. His heartbeat soothed her toward sleep, proof he was there, proof he couldn't walk away from what they'd shared as Mallory had.

*Stay. You and me.*

She buried her face more deeply against his chest, silently repeating those words like a prayer.

# Chapter Thirty

Even the most mediocre coffee became a thousand times better when served by a hot blonde in a tank top and a tiny pair of panties. Eric accepted both mugs so Trish could crawl over him, which unfortunately left his hands too full to sneak a grope. Her ass—the one he'd fucked the night before—twitched in plain white panties as she crossed his lap.

Once she'd settled against the pillows with her legs loosely crossed, she took her mug back.



“Is that black coffee?” he asked.

“Not my fault you didn’t have my sweetener.”

He sipped and leaned back. Their shoulders brushed. “What’s wrong with sugar?”

She gave a snort. “Right. Like I wasn’t supposed to notice the Sweet’N Low next to the sugar canister? You are such a fraud.”

“I’m not a fraud.”

“Right.” The finger she playfully jabbed between his ribs was too mean for a lazy Saturday morning. “These muscles happen by accident.”

He put his coffee down, took

hers and set the mugs side by side on the nightstand.

Then he pounced. He yanked her hips so she lay flat. Covering her, he buried his face against her neck and inhaled sweetness and spice. He scrubbed his morning growth over her skin until she squealed with laughter. "You like my muscles."

"Hell yes." She grabbed handfuls of him, across his back and low on his spine, and laughed when he ran his fingertips up and down her sides. "But you can't pretend it happens by putting sugar in your coffee and eating chili fries every

night.”

“You deserve to indulge yourself now and then.”

She froze. Her eyes were wide. She smiled so slowly it was like a flower opening in the dawn.

“You’re a big ol’ softy. Boxer, fighter pilot and freaking softy.”

“No way.”

“Yup. Softy who’s insanely nice to me.”

That was the opening he’d been hoping for. Something natural.

“You won’t think so when I’m off the grid for a couple weeks.”

Lots of women couldn’t cope when military boyfriends

disappeared at the Air Force's whim. He'd never had to concern himself with that before.

So when Trish's eyes flickered and she swallowed tightly, he was thrown for a loop. "Where are you going?"

"It's a training exercise called Red Flag. With any luck, I'll be in Alaska flying a whole lot of hours in a pretty damn short period."

"What do you mean, with any luck?"

"Remember what my CO said? I get one more chance to box. I have to win. And I have to do it quick enough to pass a medical exam on

Wednesday. If I don't pass, I don't have a shot. If I don't win..." He shrugged and looked away.

When Trish wiggled, he let her go. She returned to the headboard, picked up her coffee mug and wrapped her hands around it in a closed-off gesture. She looked down into the dark liquid instead of at him. "Cellphones don't work in Alaska?"

"It's not that. I'll have one. But a Red Flag means being busy as fuck. Flying 'til all hours." He touched her knee and thumbed the tender skin underneath.

If anything, this would be the

perfect opportunity to split things off. Carey's graduation was coming up in late November. Eric intended to move him to Vegas once he was clear of a halfway house. Helping his brother construct a new life would keep Eric busier than any Red Flag.

She saw something in his face, or felt it in the way his hand had tightened on her knee. "And after?"

"I'll be all over you," he said too quickly. What he still had to tell her was rusting his joints. "But I want you to know..." He cleared his throat. "My crash. It was during an

exercise like this.”

Trish’s beautiful lips parted on an intake of air. “I always assumed in combat.”

“Most people would.”

Questions churned in her bright eyes. He could be sucked into that wellspring of sympathy if he let it happen. The reasons why he should resist were swirling away.

Had Trish pushed for details at that moment, he might’ve given in to the temptation of entrusting dark memories to a confidant. Instead she set the coffee aside, reached out and traced the scar that ducked into his hairline. “And

you'll go back out there. That's so brave. I don't have words. How can you stand it?"

"You stand under the lights and audition every chance you get. Standing up to that much scrutiny? Brave too. You keep going back because you love it. My job's no different."

"Oh, don't you start. Caveman fits you, but not aw-shucks modesty." She pushed up and straddled him, holding his head. "I can't believe you. Sometimes I don't understand you. Do you even get how many men I've known in my life? About three thousand too



many. Every single one of them would've given me some gory detail by now, to earn my sympathy and work on getting lucky. You wouldn't have told me if this trip wasn't a possibility. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Nope."

"Why not."

"Never expected to get this far. Us."

So graceful, she cupped his face and kissed his mouth. The taste of coffee and woman was heavenly. "Have to admit it, sugar. I didn't either."

He was nearly leveled by the

swirl of emotion in her unforgettable eyes. "Will you be working the ring tonight?"

Her smile was brilliant and happy. The way he liked her. "Of course. I've still got three weeks left on my contract. Oh, and I have the teeniest bikini ever. It's pink."

"You look good in pink."

"I look better in nothing."

He tugged the hem of her tank top. "So why are you wearing this?"

"Makes the unwrapping more fun." She walked her fingers down his chest, to the elastic band of his boxers. "You will... Eric, you will be

careful, right? The fight and..."

"I'll do my best. Remember?  
That's all I can promise."

She pinched her lower lip with a row of straight white teeth. "So this cellphone you'll have but won't use much... Will it have my pictures on it?"

He didn't figure laughing was the most politic choice, but he was damn tempted. His chest felt light and his head as if he'd spin away. "Yeah. Plenty. Plus my laptop."

"Laptop, even?" She grinned, big time. "You can't get enough of me."

"Nope." He filled his hands with her hips. "Blame me?"

“Nope.” Her nails scraped easily over his pecs. “Have you snuck a peek yet? Of me and Mallory? The pictures must look great.”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t looked at them.”

“Liar.”

“Nope. Haven’t needed to.”

“Really?” Something wicked took over her mouth. “Does that mean we can watch together?”

He did laugh then. He couldn’t help it because he felt damn good. He felt *happy*.

“Any time you like, showgirl.”

They didn't get a chance before that night's bout. Coffee in bed had turned into a quiet roll in the sheets before going out for brunch. Eric hadn't given Trish crap about her veggie egg-white omelet. They'd ended up at the mall of all places, where Trish had cooed over shoes without buying any, which had to be a feminine first — at least in Eric's experience.

Christ, he liked her. More than he'd liked any woman. Her bubbling joy was both infectious and fragile, never quite sure of herself.

That night, however, watching as

she carried the placard around the ring, had nothing to do with happiness. She charged him up, readied him for the fight on a primal level. The pink thong accentuated the pert twitch of her ass, just as neon stilettos complemented her long, sleek legs.

Okay. He had to get his head in the game. Focus. Push.

Too much rested on this match. Carey's future and Eric's whole damn career.

Because, holy shit, a familiar face glared up at him from the front row. Major Haverty folded his arms. A grim expression drew his

mouth flat. He looked cold. An executioner in the waiting. Eric's wings would be stripped if he fucked this up.

Last chance.

Eric listened to the ref's introductions and instructions, but his mind narrowed like a bird of prey sighting its next kill. All he knew was the feel of his fists wrapped and bound in their gloves, and the energy powering up his legs, up his spine.

The bell was his release. He flat-out launched.

Killian Red McMahon was a gingery, pale-skinned opponent.

With a thick barrel chest, the other man was three inches shorter than Eric but heavy with muscle. None of that muscle made him ready for Eric's assault: a flurry of body blows, a jab to the kidneys and a helluva uppercut. McMahon only landed one punch. Eric blew the pain out of his gut and renewed his attack.

McMahon was an outfighter, dancing around the ring. That technique meant he hoped Eric would be stupid enough to follow the other man's pace.

Fuck that. Eric needed this done. The sooner the better.



Three of Eric's punches to the jaw sent McMahon staggering backwards. Eric connected another slam to the temple, so hard that his knuckles throbbed.

The redheaded fighter snapped back into his game. He smashed a combination against Eric's torso and a hard jab to his chin. Eric's teeth clamped down on the mouth guard. Pain gnawed on his nerves.

The bell sounded. Three minutes gone.

He didn't look away from McMahon as someone lifted a water bottle to Eric's lips and rubbed lidocaine over his cheeks.

He was so focused that he barely noticed a woman strut past. She wasn't Trish, so she didn't matter. Only McMahon mattered now. Beating the man.

Round two began with brawling punches. Eric rained slam after slam on his opponent's head and jaw and cheek. McMahon couldn't dance away this time. He reeled and grunted. The skin of one cheekbone split just before he fell flat. The knockout was declared by the black-and-white-striped referee.

Match over.

Eric had won.

He spit out his mouth guard as the ref lifted Eric's right arm in triumph. His chest was burning as he gasped for breath. He'd won. And he'd done it so fast that passing the med exam was almost a sure thing. Damn, what a feeling. More than a win. It was the moment when Eric had saved his life and Carey's. Relief was cool and sweet in the back of his mouth.

He looked for Trish.

His girl.

She was clapping and screaming from her place beside the other ring girls. The brightness of her blue eyes could've lit the whole arena.

Next, Eric found Major Haverty. Fang nodded solemnly then pointed at Eric. The warning was unspoken.

*That's it.*

Eric nodded, then ditched any thought about his CO.

Trish was waiting just outside the ring. She threw her arms around his neck with unbelievable enthusiasm. The crowd was ear-splittingly loud, but he heard when she giggled near his ear.

“You won, sugar! You did it.”

“Fuck yeah.” He was sweating. Didn't care. Wearing his gloves, he hooked an arm low around her

hips. "Got the prize money and a showgirl. Lucky man."

Her kiss was hot. Wet. Taking and giving. She curled her tongue along the inside of his lip. Sharp nails dug into the back of his neck — tiny spikes of pain to ground him, to bring him back to earth.

Fuck, it was easy to believe this could end well. Maybe she was strong enough after all. Maybe she could grab a guy like him and hold on tight.

At that moment, Eric almost believed she could.

# Chapter Thirty-One

Trish had never been on a military base. She'd known plenty of soldiers and seamen back home, especially when so many of her friends' older brothers and cousins went to war in the wake of 9/11. That wasn't the same as arriving with Eric at Nellis. He'd been cleared by the doctors and was leaving for a Red Flag in Alaska to fly combat missions against allied pilots. He and the other members of his squadron played the bad guys. That definitely fit Eric.

She didn't like that a previous exercise had been responsible for the scars he wore like armor. She *really* didn't like that he'd taken his frustrating, sweet ol' time telling her even that much about his crash.

After passing through checkpoints in his Camaro, he drove them across base. The quiet Wednesday morning had started to brush the streets and buildings with streaks of pink and orange. Trish asked questions, and he responded with more detail than she would've expected. About his job and where he worked, he was becoming practically chatty.

“That’s the BX there.” He pointed toward a building shaped like a stark warehouse. Then again, most of the buildings had that industrial, stripped-down look. Purely functional. When compared to the rest of Vegas, it was quite a different mindset.

“BX?”

“Base exchange. Like a Walmart. The commissary’s for groceries.”

“How long have you served?”

“Seven years.”

Trish nibbled her lower lip. How much could she risk? She wanted to pry more and more out of him while he seemed amiable,



especially because he would be gone for two weeks. “And how many times have you gone over to fight?”

“Tours? Five.”

Five times. He'd returned from those missions unscathed. A routine training exercise, though? Not so lucky. Anything to do with jet planes bore a measure of risk. She'd either cope, or she'd have to step back.

As if she could make that decision now. So much of him remained a mystery.

She shivered in the cool October dawn. They'd left the top down.

She wore a halter under a fake leather jacket, but she wished for a little more protection, especially since she'd complied with his midnight phone request to accompany him unadorned. No wig. Very minimal makeup.

When had she started to put his opinions and desires above the need for her usual defenses? Of course they were defenses. She'd never been self-deceiving on that score. She only wondered if she was deceiving herself about Eric.

Trish checked the urge to reach over and touch him. Lately, when they were together, she was always

forcing herself to calm down. Grasping wasn't sexy. Men backed the hell off. But the deeper she got — and God, only recently could she admit that she was in deep — the more she needed some reassurance that he was sinking down with her.

Instead she was left with assumptions. A guy wouldn't lend a girl his Camaro for two weeks while he was gone. "No busses," he'd said that morning, having made a call to his insurance company. The Camaro was probably his most prized possession outside of his photo collection.

"And here's the squad's hangar.

The 65<sup>th</sup> is down that way.” He pointed. “They’re Aggressors too, but they fly smaller planes.” He said that last with a cocky, absolutely masculine grin.

He pulled into a parking lot. Long dawn shadows draped over the asphalt and a who’s who of incredible vehicles. She laughed, easing some of her disquiet. “Are sweet rides a requirement?”

Eric shrugged those wide shoulders, which seemed wider and more impressive because of his flight jacket. “Adrenaline junkies, remember?”

For the first time, she was seeing

him as a real serviceman. She'd known he could be fierce and brutal. But his choked-back admission of the crash... Now his jacket and his responsibilities... He was smart, determined and had devoted himself to long years of training. He hid so much in that bounced-around skull of his.

He parked next to a pair of bikes she recognized from the barbeque. "Mike's and Leah's?"

"Yup. Never dare them to race."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Without fanfare, he shut off the engine and handed her the keys.

"My house key's on there too if you

need anything.”

Trish banked a hard moment of temptation. She hated her hotel. It was like living in a pile of rancid meat. Asking him whether she could stay at his place while he was gone would mean admitting where she lived. She got the distinct impression he wouldn't approve. She would've appreciated that possessiveness had he backed it up with anything more substantial. Instead she was left with the prospect of sleeping among his things, in his bed, washing clean in his shower — all in secret. The flash image of wearing his black satin

robe against her naked skin made her inhale.

She masked that hard reaction by taking the keys in her hands, trying for nonchalance. "Thanks."

Eric leaned in then, cupping her cheek. "Kiss me. I want to taste you before I go."

"You tasted me plenty two hours ago."

"Complaining?"

"Not at all, Captain Donaghue."

He blinked once, as if the name was unfamiliar. Maybe it was, coming from her. But his mouth stopped her racing thoughts. Soft. Intense. The touch of tongue and a

gentle moan. He hadn't been joking. He was tasting her as much as kissing her, drinking her in. Trish pushed closer and crossed her arms around his thick, leather-warm middle. *He's leaving.* She ducked her face against his neck to stem a strong tide of emotion. She needed to get it together.

After a pair of breaths, she thought she could trust her voice. "Would it be too corny to say I'm gonna miss you?"

"Nope."

Trish pulled back and grazed down his scar. She ended at his mouth, that beautiful mouth,



where he nibbled her fingertip.  
“Well then,” she said, “I’m gonna miss you.”

He took her wrist and kissed her palm. “Me too, showgirl.”

A place in her chest opened up wide. She felt like she could resume breathing, although she hadn’t realized she was so lightheaded, waiting for him to match what she felt. “You’d better.”

One more kiss. His eyes were such a dark, dark blue, but insanely vivid. He was memorizing her. The process was scary, but she would’ve been disappointed had he done anything less.

“And good luck with your audition. Second callback. That’s gotta be a good thing.”

“Sure it is.” She banked another round of nerves and hope, so nervous to return to the Paris that afternoon. Maybe... God, maybe. “But you don’t say good luck. That’s *bad* luck. You say break a leg.”

He squeezed the thigh nearest his. “I like your legs just the way they are.”

A throat cleared behind Eric. He gave her one more swift kiss. “C’mon.”

They both got out. Leah and

Mike stood together like two goddamn bad-asses, though only Mike was suited up for flight. Shoulder to shoulder. So different, but an undeniable team. Trish choked back a swallow of envy.

“Didn’t take you for the type to make out in a parking lot, Kisser.” Leah grinned. She practically bounced with energy. Mike stood calm and tall, sipping from a takeaway cup of coffee. “At least not anymore,” she added with a wink. “Morning, Trish. Damn, love the hair.”

Trish ran a hand over her nape. “Thanks.”

“I mean it. Really suits your face.”

“Princess, it’s too early for so much talk,” Eric said.

“That’s *Major* Princess to you, Captain.”

“Whatever. Sometimes I prefer Fang’s snarls to your mile-a-minute.”

“Won’t be an option much longer,” came another voice. A wiry young man with a dark buzz cut and a sly smile joined the group. Trish sensed Eric’s sudden stiffness. “Fang’s ditching us for good. This is his last Red Flag.”

Eric lifted his brows. “No shit?”

“We knew it was coming. Bigger and better awaits our fair leader, although apparently that means Florida.” The man faked a shudder. “It’s official as of last night. In less than three weeks, the newly minted lieutenant colonel and his lady love will set up house at Eglin AFB. Major Princess here will be our CO. Daddy Dash was senior, but he’s on his way out, so Allegheny will be her second.”

“*Two* chicks in charge?” Eric asked with mock outrage. Trish slugged his arm.

The dark-haired man smirked behind his hand. “What’s the world

coming to, eh, Kisser?"

"Congratulations, Leah," Trish said, taking the high road above all the shit-slinging.

Leah shrugged in a self-deprecating way, although Trish guessed her insides were jumping around as much as the woman was prone to do on the outside. "That's why I'm back behind a desk at S-3 today instead of flying with these cocky shits. To earn it — no matter how long the freaking paperwork takes." She smiled at Trish. "Dues to pay, you know?"

"I do."

"Damn straight," Mike said with

a proud smile. "Like the kid said, less than three weeks."

Eric's body relaxed, as if having made a decision. He grinned at the young, dark-haired man. "At least the XO won't be you."

"Or you, Kissy Face." He nodded to Trish. "Are you going to introduce me?"

"Trish Monroe, this is Jon Carlisle. Call sign Tin Tin."

Ah, so that was it.

She remembered the name — something about how he and Eric didn't get along. That would explain their slight wariness. But Eric had eased, and Carlisle didn't

seem a bad sort. Trish knew men. This guy Carlisle was cocky. His polished voice didn't come from an elocution coach. Maybe money? *Old* money. No wonder he and Eric didn't gel. She hardly minded the chip on Eric's shoulder, but he probably didn't do well among men who'd grown up in the lap of luxury.

Carlisle extended his hand. "A pleasure, Miss Monroe." His cheekiness was gone. Only a polite welcome remained.

"Same here," she said with a gracious smile.

Whatever weird vibe had pulsed



between him and Eric dissipated to nothing, as if Eric had expected something bad that hadn't materialized.

He nodded toward Carlisle. Nearly...approval.

"Damn it, you idiots." Leah hitched her flaming pink motorcycle helmet under her arm. "Kiss and make up already."

Carlisle flashed her a snarl of a smile. "I think we just did. Shall we do some damage, bandits?"

The pilots hardened. Trish knew that moment of transformation, when the laughs and frantic preparation behind stage screeched

to a stop. Curtain rising. Showtime.

Eric gave her one more kiss, this one to her temple, then ran a hand over the Camaro's steering wheel. "Take care of her."

Although she nodded and managed to bank a surprising shimmer of tears, she had to swallow before she replied. "And you take care of you."

Two weeks was a long-ass time. She still went to class. She still worked the boxing ring. On those nights, when she missed him the most, Trish gave in to the

temptation of staying at Eric's loft. She wanted to be close — closer than phone calls that crackled with static. Their conversations lagged more than usual, between his brevity and the things he wasn't permitted to say.

The Thursday Eric was supposed to come back she packed her stuff and tidied up traces of her presence from his place before heading to class. He'd be home that evening. Beyond the excitement of his return, she couldn't wait to tell him the good news. In person.

Lead dancer at the Paris's new show, including three solo songs. It

was a dream come true — another step toward making sure Vegas didn't eat her alive. She'd done it on her own.

That was for later. She sat in her midday design class, so distracted. Time dragged, which was hardly ever the case. Her mama had called three times in the past week, apparently ready to resume communications on her own terms. Trish should probably answer someday, but the voicemails had been filled with digs and emotional blackmail. She wanted her life more settled, with more potent ammunition to defend her choices.

She pressed her temples against a gathering headache.

After class adjourned, she packed her portfolio and tried to figure out how to kill the hours before nightfall.

“Miss Monroe? A moment, please?”

Professor Granger stood behind his desk in the front corner of the classroom, which was packed with desks built for laptops and easel benches for creating hand-drawn sketches. The combination of smells, from warm computer wiring to spray fixative, was the other half of her. No perfume and

hairspray here.

She wondered if her inattention had shown. "Sir?"

"I have a letter here from the head of the design college." He was so typically the artsy theater type, a strange mix of hipster cool and computer geek. And he was always interested. In her. Right then, however, he was shining with something different. "They sent me a copy too. You want the gist of it, or to read it yourself?"

"Gist."

"You've been offered a full-time scholarship to cover the rest of your degree. That includes an internship

in design with Caesar's."

Trish went numb. Like...  
completely, icy, dead-limbed numb.  
She sank onto the nearest bench.  
"Holy hell."

Professor Granger laughed.  
"Yeah, something like that."  
"Sorry!"

He waved a hand. "Nothing to  
worry about. You've earned it,  
Trish. But read the letter for  
yourself. I think you'll be  
particularly impressed with the  
word *gifted*."

Gifted? Trish shook her head as if  
to clear away the ringing aftermath  
of loud music.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” he said. “We’re all proud of you here. *I’m* proud of you. I hope you have someone to share the good news with.”

She was too muddled to recognize whether that was a come-on. Instead she decided to take it at face value. A smile that actually hurt burst across her cheeks. “I do. I mean—I will. Tonight.”

Suddenly the numbness was gone. All energy. All giddy, *amazing* energy. She jumped up from the bench and shook his hand vigorously. “Thank you.” She said it



a few too many times, but then she needed to be gone.

Eric.

She snagged her portfolio and backpack, and dashed out to his Camaro. Popped the top. Gunned the engine. Only then did she freeze.

Trish grabbed the letter Professor Granger had given her.

Going to school full-time. An internship.

And the show at the Paris.

A rock fell into her stomach.

She drove to Eric's house in a half-haze. Waited there. Waited until night fell and she gave up on

returning to the hotel. He was supposed to call when he reached base, so she could go get him. She had his car, after all. Not like he could have gotten far.

She curled onto his bed. The knowledge she'd need to choose between two dreams stooped her shoulders, as did a shard of disappointment. She'd been so looking forward to sharing the glut of good news with Eric.

But mostly... Mostly she was worried sick.

She moved like a zombie traipsing through a graveyard to grab a tumbler of something.

Scotch? Whiskey? She drank it without caring.

Night gave way to dawn. She awoke a little disoriented. Her mouth was sticky, and her head tingled with dehydration. Heart pounding, she checked her messages. Nothing. It was half past ten.

Christ, she didn't know what to think. Panic held sway over everything else. No one would know to contact her if something had happened. Not even Eric's friends had her cell number. They'd all treated the Red Flag so matter-of-factly. No big deal.

It was anything but.

On a flash of inspiration she opened her phone's browser and looked up Sunita Christiansen. Sunny was a lawyer. She might have a listed number. Bingo.

After three rings came a crisply professional voice. "Sunny Christiansen."

"Sunny! Oh, thank God. I'm so glad you picked up."

"Who...?"

"Oh, sorry. It's Trish Monroe. With Eric?"

"Trish." Sunny's voice perked up. "Sorry about that. I wasn't expecting you."

“It’s okay. Sorry. Only...I’m concerned for Eric. He was supposed to be home yesterday evening. Has something happened? I’m kinda worried and didn’t know if anyone would think to call me.”

“Let me put you on hold. I’ll call Liam.”

The line went silent. Muted. Trish picked at a cuticle, which she never did. It was that or throw things. Only when Sunny returned to the line did she force herself to stop.

“Trish, I don’t know what to tell you. Liam says he’s fine. As soon as the squad got back yesterday, Eric

flew to Detroit.”

# Chapter Thirty-Two

Fall in Vegas meant forgetting there was such a thing as weather. Getting off the plane in Detroit was always an unpleasant reminder of the old days. Gray, dreary clouds hovered over the city. He'd never been claustrophobic, but those blanketing clouds made each breath more of a strain. The cold barely managed to knock away the sharp scent of city rot — a bit of trash combined with the sickly sweet of homeless piss.

Gee was it great to be home.

A taxi took him to the rehab center. If he hadn't been sending money to the address for more than three months, he might've thought he was in the wrong place.

Someone had taken a row of peaked-roof homes and refurbished them all. The only hint that they were intended for rehabilitation, rather than a row of solidly middle-class housing, was the fact that a waist-high metal fence encircled the whole block.

Eric stood on the sidewalk for a long time, his hands shoved deep in the pocket of his flight jacket. The leather held off the chill, but it



didn't hold off his dread.

Eighteen days early.

Carey was leaving eighteen days early. There would be no official graduation.

Eric had gotten the call while still in Alaska – a voicemail, because he'd been flying at the time. He hadn't been able to get Carey or any of the support staff on the phone.

He'd hit the ground running, grabbing an evening flight out of Vegas. He didn't want to think how much that ticket had cost. He'd take the price out of Carey's ass if given the chance.

Eventually he made his feet move up the walkway. Individual bricks were painted with colors that looked like they'd appeal to children. Names and dates. Handprints. Animal shapes.

When he reached the front porch and glanced back, he saw the real artistry. Each brick had been carefully shaded and placed so that, as a whole, they became a sunset over a horizon, complete with an appealing path within the path. Genius.

After being buzzed in the front door, he waited in a comfortable reception area that resembled a

living room with soft couches and low tables. Only the desk with a blood pressure machine gave the place away. The receptionist-slash-nurse greeted him warmly then made some phone calls.

She smiled up at him as she put the phone back in its cradle. "You can relax, Mr. Donaghue. Everything's fine."

"But he's being kicked out?"

Her gaze flicked past him to the open archway. "I'll let Mattie explain that. But really, *it is* fine."

Weirdest thing in the world—his first thoughts were of Trish. Not relief that Carey was okay, but

regret that he hadn't called Trish after all. He'd been too rocked with worry, too locked down. Calling her would have meant talking, and talking would have meant expressing his fears that his brother had screwed the pooch yet again. Eric had risked his entire goddamn career for someone who wouldn't appreciate it. What if he stuck himself out there and made himself vulnerable to Trish, only to be disregarded the same way?

When he turned around, he saw a fresh-faced Carey. Skinny as hell. Purple-gray shadows clung under dark blue eyes, but those same eyes

were clear. His mouth — an unscarred version of Eric's own — was turned up in a smile.

Eric's throat clenched. "Bro."

"As chatty as ever," Carey said. His voice was rough with tears. "I like knowing some things never change."

Their hug felt good. Backslaps even better. Then another hug.

Only when they pulled back to arm's length did Eric notice the brunette standing next to them.

"I'm Mattie Winchester, your brother's primary counselor. Why don't you two come into my office? We'll discuss everything there."

After a few minutes, they were settled with coffee in a miniature office. Carey perched on the edge of his chair, both hands wrapped around his mug. His toes bounced over and over in a rapid tattoo. Once it might have been because of drugs. Eric hoped it was nerves.

“So.” Eric rested on a stack of textbooks for lack of a better place. He glanced down at his boots and what looked to be a hand-tied rug of bright colors. He didn’t want this to sound accusatory, yet he didn’t know any other way to start. “What happened?”

“What you really mean is, ‘What

did you do wrong, Carey?"

Mattie held out a hand. All she said was Carey's name, using a quiet tone.

Carey's dark hair was shaggy, drifting into his eyes as he nodded. "Yeah. Okay."

Eric shifted in his chair. He felt like he'd slammed his foot in his mouth but didn't know why. "Just explain."

Damn, he wanted Trish there. She'd have been able to interpret all this better. Hell, maybe speak for him or hold his hand because apparently he'd completely lost his balls. He hardly wanted to be there

and didn't trust that she'd want to be either.

"I've got a hundred and two days. Leaving early is a... preventative measure. But I'm going straight to a halfway house. It's already been arranged." Carey was finally talking, but his eyes roved around the office. "It's a precaution, to be safe."

"I don't understand how quitting early is safe."

"It's not quitting," he spat.

*Damn.* Eric winced. "I'm not getting it."

Mattie's bland features took on a conciliatory look. "It's considered a



bad idea to enter into a relationship within a year of recovery.”

“A relationship?”

“Her name is Lila,” Carey said. “She’s here too. We’ve... Let’s say we want to be more than friends. But it’s too soon for either of us. She’s only at seventy days and needs more time. Focus on herself, you know? Not us.” He exhaled a tense breath, but he was smiling. “Because I’m much farther along, we decided it was for the best if I went to the halfway house. They have a bed open for me.”

Eric wet his lips. “I thought maybe you could come to Vegas.

Someone I know works in a gallery. Get your work in front of people.”

“I’m grateful...” His Adam’s apple was more prominent because of his thin neck. “I’m grateful for what you’ve done, hanging in there for me. But I need to do the steps. More than that, I need to do it on my own. We’ve talked about this before. I’m asking you to listen this time. Really listen. You feel guilty for making a life for yourself, and that’s the last thing I need. Let’s leave it. Let it go. Start fresh, okay?”

Those words echoed what he’d hoped to hear from Liam for over a

year. *Forget it, man. It is what it is.* That guilt Liam lugged around had done Eric more harm than good. He'd never really believed his own guilt could be weighing as heavily on Carey.

Eric crossed his arms. "So... gravity, huh?"

Relaxing for the first time, Carey smiled. "Except the kind that won't kill you. The great kind. Some rules just *are*, and you work within them. *I want to be here.*" He paused and his face lit up. "You should meet her, Eric. She's worth waiting for."

The choice was responsible, though it was also made out of

emotion. Better than that was the steadiness in his brother's eyes—a steadiness Eric hadn't seen since leaving for college.

Warmth unfurled in his chest. Of all the scenarios he could've envisioned, this hadn't been one of them. Carey trashing his studio, some kind of fight, stealing, sneaking out. All of those had filtered through his head because they'd happened before.

Instead his brother was serious about a girl, and they were both serious about making new starts. It was too much to sort. Too new. Too bright.

All through this...

He'd forgotten how to hope. He'd been determined and he'd done what had to be done. He'd mistaken that determination for hope, but it was more like barreling through a field of barbed wire. Don't stop, feel pain, get caught — and don't think about the finish because it was always too far away.

None of that was the same as hope.

Trish knew the difference. She'd endured a million and twelve auditions over the past month, but she'd gone into each one convinced it would go her way...or that the

next one would.

Christ, he missed her. Wanted to be near her. The women who'd ditched him before...maybe they'd done so because Eric wouldn't have *cared* had they walked. They'd felt that distance.

He needed Trish. No more distance.

After he met Carey's girlfriend, Lila, saw the halfway house for himself and hugged his brother one last time, Eric caught the first flight back to Vegas.

Except Trish wasn't anywhere to be found. She didn't answer her cellphone. His car was parked in

the spot outside his loft with the keys on his kitchen counter.

Chills splashed over his skin in waves of hot and cold. Something was wrong. He found himself cruising out to Trish's trailer. She'd never wanted him there, though she hadn't said so in words. When he knocked on the front door, he better understood her discomfort. The place was worse off than it looked from the street. Paint flaked under the eaves. The door creaked when it opened.

A worn, too-skinny woman opened the door. Her gray-streaked hair might have once been the same

honey blonde as Trish's. She crossed her arms over her artificially ample bosom and lifted her eyebrows. "What?"

"I'm looking for Trish."

Her smile was cruel, though he'd be damned if he knew what he'd done to deserve it. "Ain't we all?"

"Is she here?"

"Depends." She dug a soft pack of cigarettes out from between her boobs and fished one out. "You a bill collector? Or an agent?"

"Neither." He was...something to Trish. Damned if he knew what.

Maybe it was a failing of his, but he'd never been the possessive sort.



Safer that way. Except now, being unable to find Trish made him want to stake his claim. Grab her and hold her. The feelings that had crystallized in Detroit were growing rapidly.

Trish's mom shrugged. "I don't know where she is anyhow. She got her nose in a snit and moved out a month ago."

"She what?" Shock poured freezing water down his spine. "She didn't say anything like that."

But...the barbeque. Her tension. The fight she'd mentioned, and the night she'd spent with Mal. Even since then?

The woman took a long drag off her cigarette and blew the smoke at him in a stinky cloud. "Guess that leaves two of us out in the cold."

"You have any idea where she went?"

"Last time she left, she ran off to that Mallory girl. Bad influence." She wore a sly, mean look. "No telling what those two get up to. You sure you want any part of that?"

Trish would've mentioned if she were involved with Mallory again. To conceal that would've made their threesome one huge charade. He knew down to his bones that

wasn't right. They'd done something true that night. Gone to real places together.

He turned away from the door and stepped down the concrete steps. "I want any part of Trish that she'll give me."

"Have at the twit." She sniffed with disdain. "But if you see her, tell her the rent's overdue."

Eric spent the rest of his Saturday tracking down Mallory. She agreed to meet him at the back entrance of New York-New York's theater — her new gig.

Dressed in a tiny orange miniskirt and a close-fitting black

halter top, Mallory looked ready to slay men dead. Or women, as her interests turned.

“You mislaid your chick already?” Her mouth pressed flat. “Knowing Trish, that makes me think you’ve screwed up. Big time.”

He shrugged, but he knew the answer.

“She’s got a huge heart,” Mallory said. “You’d have had to push her hard to make her run.”

“I know.” His hands were rocks, clenched tight. He had nothing to slam except his own shit-for-brains head. “Tell me where she is.”

She studied him. “I’ll tell you,

but only because I want her out of that shitbag motel.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll see.”

The address provided was only four blocks from the Strip, but it was another side of the universe. The sallow-skinned clerk seemed five minutes away from one hit too many of heroin. His eyes drooped with every breath, and he didn’t protest when Eric asked for Trish’s room. He offered a key for an extra fifty bucks.

Fuck all and Christ on a cracker. Eric didn’t want to touch the railing as he went up. Dark splashes

appeared sticky and uncomfortably like blood. The chug of window air-conditioning units was punctuated by the occasional raised voice and a siren from a block over.

If he'd had half a clue this was where Trish was living, he'd have fucking *insisted* she stay at his place. He was turning to stone as he knocked on the door, because it was dawning on him. To stay in that place meant Trish had iced him out. Hadn't given him a hint.

That last, useless burst of righteous anger flipped back on himself as soon as she opened the door. Her eyes were reddened, her

nose pink. She wore a slim-cut pair of sweatpants and a spaghetti-strap tank. Her expression was coolly distant. "You."

"Me." He kept his hand flat on the door. He had the feeling she would slam it shut.

She slapped on a completely artificial smile and lifted her brows. "Something wrong with the Camaro? I left it locked up tight. Made sure of that."

"Not the Camaro. Wondered where you were." He rocked up on the balls of his feet. This was unusual. He wasn't normally the one trying to make her talk. His

gaze flicked over her shoulder.

A queen-sized bed with dingy, washed-out sheets and a faded orange comforter folded at the foot. The TV was buckled to the dresser.

“And right now,” he said, “I’m wondering why the fuck you’re living here.”

Her smile dropped away.  
“Maybe because no one worries about Barbie once she’s no more fun to play with.”



# Chapter Thirty-Three

Trish forced herself to breathe. No shouting. No slapping his goddamn face. But rage was a safer emotion than the others pinging through her brain and stinging her heart. He looked as strong as ever. His dark, deep blue eyes were a lure to reel her in.

“That’s bullshit and you know it. You’re the one who ran to ground. Hiding out *here*?” he said in a near growl.

“I’m not hiding,” she spat. “I’m *surviving*. All my show cash went

toward tuition, which made Mama oh so happy. Try finding a decent place on the money I make strutting my ass – and after tonight, I won't have that anymore. A stripper makes more than I do in the ring, which believe me really makes a girl wonder about stupid things like self-respect."

"You wouldn't," he said. "You're not built that way."

A hard laugh escaped her. She hated the sound. *Jaded*. She couldn't help it. He was steadily chipping away at whatever optimism she'd secretly stored. "What's that old song? You didn't know me when.

And I don't remember you giving a damn."

They glared at each other in the doorway. At least they were in a place where a man and woman's raised voices wouldn't gather attention. In that complex, it took gunshots before anyone noticed.

He'd made her into a fool, when she had hoped to have left that stomach-sick place well behind her.

He smashed his lips together, ran a hand over his cropped hair, looked at his boots. "Let me in, Trish."

"No." She tightened her hand on the doorknob. He'd be able to force

his way past, but let him be the bullying asshole to make the move. At the moment, she doubted he had it in him. That would mean giving a shit. "I don't want you here. In fact, it'll be better if I never see you again. Believe it or not, I have better things to do than wait around to see if you're alive."

"What the hell?"

She tried to shut the door.

Couldn't do this anymore. The fear she'd suffered through that night at his loft choked in a ball of tears at the back of her throat. No way in Christ was she letting him see her cry.

The last time she had — the only time she'd let her defenses down so completely with a man — had been at the end of their night with Mal. Pure rapturous release. Happy tears, she'd said. It hadn't felt wrong at all. Freeing. Close. As if they'd shared something precious.

A complete fool.

Eric was having none of her attempt to shut him out. Maybe he gave a damn after all, because he pushed past her and slammed the door. Or maybe his goal was winning the argument. That seemed more likely, and it sure as hell was the safest thing to believe.

He thumbed the padlock she'd bought for the door. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Would you rather me be robbed? Raped?" Her stomach ached. "I've come too damn close. It's not an experience I want to repeat."

He looked as knocked sideways as he had in the ring against that bruiser Harley. "*What* did you say?"

Another sharp laugh. She was fraying like an old blanket. At least she was seeing him, seeing *them*, more clearly now. "You really expect me to open up, don't you? Spill out another story from my

life? That's almost precious, sugar," she said, sneering her usual endearment. "When you give me nothing."

"Give you nothing. That's a crock."

She tipped her head. The backs of her thighs were pressed against the bed, and he'd slowly closed the gap between them. Backlit by the room's only window, his scars were more intimidating and prominent than ever. "Go ahead and convince me of that one, right after you tell me what happened when you crashed. It's been here the whole time, Eric. All you gave me was the

knowledge that a training exercise could be devastating.”

“What the hell do you want to know?” His voice was an explosion in that tight room. He smacked his fist against the nightstand. Trish would’ve flinched as recently as a few months ago, but righteousness was a strong shield. She’d need it to keep poking him. To show him how much he’d hurt her — and make it stick.

“It’s not hard. Tell me what happened.”

“I crashed,” he snarled. “It hurt like fuck. I got better. That should be enough!”



“It’s not and you damn well know it.”

“Well, that’s all you’re going to get. The past is done.”

Trish shrugged. Even her mouth relaxed. That same eerie calmness she’d felt when fighting with Mama, or facing Hank Yardley, helped her leave her body. This was happening to someone else. The real Trish would deal with the fallout later.

“Well, that’s all you’re gonna get from me too,” she said. “The past is done.”

“Like hell.”

“Fine. Let’s deal with the

*immediate* past. Why did I deserve you bailing on me? You *left*. I waited for you *in your home*, for hours, all night, worrying whether you'd smashed into a mountain in Alaska somewhere. I had to hunt down Sunny to make sure you weren't dead. Do you get that? Do you understand how scared I was?"

"It was nothing to worry about."

"You are so goddamn thick. Look at you!" She gestured to his face.

"It's happened before. Don't tell me flying around at Mach whatever is like heading down to the office."

"I had to go. Carey needed me."

She sank on the bed. Easy as that,

tears welled behind her eyelids. She blinked them back. Hard. She stared at the dingy gray-green shag rug as her insides wilted. "I have seen you step into a boxing ring how often now? For him? And I don't merit a phone call. That's some priorities you got there, Eric."

"Women need attention. I've been here before, with some girl making me choose between her and my brother. It's no contest."

"Some girl? Wow." Trish was cold in a way she'd never been. Left naked in a snowstorm. "That puts it in perspective. Sorry to have stolen so much of your attention, Eric. At

the time it seemed like you enjoyed it.”

“You’re being irrational.”

“Nope. You’re being a chickenshit asshole.” She pushed back on her elbows, finally able to meet his eyes when hers had cleared of tears.

He leaned against the wall so heavily that it looked like he was trying to prop it up. His bowed shoulders nearly got to her. He only carried that weighty tension when he was tied up in knots, hurting, confused. But she shouldn’t need to interpret rune stones to get an answer. She deserved better. The

painful irony was that Eric had been the one to help her see that.

“What would you have done?” His voice was thick, so extremely low. “Had I told you?”

“Well,” she said, almost conversationally. “I wouldn’t have spent the night in your bed with my hands curled around my cellphone.” He flinched. About goddamn time. “No, I take that back. I would’ve. I’d have waited there, phone in hand, expecting you to call. Hoping to be someone you could turn to in case Carey was in trouble again. I *could’ve* been there. Apparently you didn’t need

that, so all's well that ends well."

"Don't joke about this."

"Okay. You want me to get pissed and keep shouting? Believe me, Eric, I'm capable of it."

So quietly, he exhaled. "This isn't how I wanted it to be."

"Bit late for that sort of regret. Too bad you didn't let me in on how you wanted it to be. I don't even think you knew. I rated that low on your priority list."

"That's not true."

"Oh? Show me proof."

He looked away. Rather than taking some perverse pleasure in his lack of answers, Trish was only

getting more sick to her stomach. What she'd said was right; she hadn't rated a stray thought.

He gave a thick-throated grunt.

"And now I'm not worthy of a reply," she said. "Perfect."

That hysteria she'd held in check, that ice under her skin...all gone. The perfect scapegoat – the only scapegoat she needed – was still propping up a goddamn hotel wall. He might as well have been a statue. She surged off the bed, unzipped her duffel and began filling it with what she'd need for her last night walking the ring.

"You know, I took your affection

and dedication to your brother as proof that you were a good man. Quiet, sure. Slow to open up. But hell, I was too. Now it looks different. It looks like you have a heart so small that it's only got room for one person. Too bad I didn't know that before I fell in love with you."

She paused in the middle of packing her makeup case. But it was too late. She'd said it.

"You...?"

"Forget it, stud. Such fabulous taste in men I have. From bruisers and slimy sugar daddies to you. At least I knew where I stood with



them. You stripped me down, and this is my reward. I can't say it's been worth it. I'd have preferred a little spending money and a new bracelet." She flicked her eyes toward the clock on the grimy nightstand. "I have to get going. Can we wrap this up?"

He pushed away from the wall, like a bear lumbering out of a cave — disoriented after a long sleep, blinking against the light. "I want to make it up to you."

"Fuck off."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

"I'm not letting you stay here."

She poked a hard finger against his breastbone. "You don't get a say. Not one goddamn word! I'm done playing beauty and the beast."

He pulled back. Shock registered across his warped frown. "What?"

"You heard me. Here I've been trying to open up enough to help you heal. I've been turning myself inside out, hoping you'd give back in return. I'd been called a Barbie before, you know, but I'd always smiled and taken it as a compliment. Only you made it sound like an insult. Woke me up. Made me see how deep I was hiding. So I've been trying my

damnedest to turn into a real person."

"Don't give me that self-pity shit." He scraped his forearms in an uncharacteristically anxious gesture. "You're a real person and you know it."

"And you? Do you feel real?"

"Oh, come on. What the hell?"

"Tell me what it feels like when people stare. Or when kids ask their moms what happened to you. Or I bet when your buddies looked sideways at each other, wondering if you were back up to snuff. Then tell me the names of the doctors you've seen for advice on

reconstructive surgery.”

He bared his teeth in a nasty grimace. “That isn’t your business.”

“Oh, I know that. Loud and clear, sugar. Little of your business is my business, unless it involves a camera and my tiny ass in the air.” She stepped forward, chin upthrust, and she did something she never thought she’d do. She looked at his scar and conjured her most disgusted expression. “You think other girls will bang you for reasons beyond consolation or curiosity? Nope. You’ve got so many no-trespassing signs stitched on your face that I need my eyes

examined.”

“You’re pissed. I get that. Now shut the hell up.”

One last touch. She gave his tense biceps a squeeze and a pitying smile. It was that or break down completely. She was traipsing on the edge. He jerked away as if burned.

“So big and bad,” she said, throat tight. “Maybe it doesn’t matter to you when people judge you by your looks. Maybe I’m nothing but a wilting flower when that judgment hurts me. You can quietly chastise me for the times when I need a few extra pretty defenses,

but you wear the same defenses up and down your face.”

Hurt.

Actual hurt.

She saw it in his eyes before he locked it down.

Oh, she was so done with this.

She grabbed her sweater off a hanger, because no way in hell did she let her clothes touch the floor or the furniture.

“So that’s that,” she called over her shoulder. He hadn’t moved.

“Now you know what it feels like when someone you trusted turns on you. Loses faith. Doesn’t have the balls to be a kinder soul.”

“Trish...”

Heavy bag over her shoulder, she stalked toward the door. Only a little farther now. Soon she'd get free of this nightmare.

“I have places to be. I hope your pictures will be enough. And I hope Carey knows what he's getting into with you once he's clean. I bet he'll be feeling pretty fresh and shiny. He'd be better off without your lack of faith holding him down. I know I will be.”

Door. Numb fingers. Turn the knob. Walk out. Close it behind her. Don't run. Keep moving.

But no mantra could stop the

tears that blinded her walk to the bus stop. She sobbed. Her heart burned like a firework blowing up in her chest. The pain had nowhere to go but out, out, out. She furiously wiped her cheeks. A stooped-back woman at the bus stop eyed her curiously but said nothing.

When a '67 Camaro peeled out of the parking lot and screamed down the road, Trish turned away. She'd already given Eric way more candor than he deserved. If he had the guts to look in the rearview mirror, he wasn't going see the heartbreak streaming down her



face.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

Eric didn't think framing professionals often got cussed out when they called to say orders were ready. So he managed to hold his tongue, even when he picked the damn picture up and took it back to his loft.

He unwrapped all the packing materials and stripped away the paper. He propped it against the spot he'd originally intended for it to hang, on the south-facing wall, next to the wall of windows. He'd planned to watch the play of light

over perfection from bed every morning.

The irony was that he'd picked a shot where Trish was happy – her toes pointing toward the ceiling, lying flat on her back, grinning at the camera. She wasn't happy anymore. In fact, she'd given him the most effective fuck off of his life.

She was haunting him.

Trish stared at him from against the wall, while he got ready to leave the loft again. He didn't want to. Picking up that damned picture had been hard enough. He wanted to spend the rest of his Sunday

getting his drunk on. But a squadron didn't miss roll call.

When the roll call was also your boss's farewell party, it became absolutely mandatory.

No go was no fly, and Eric had risked that privilege too many times.

He'd known he and Trish wouldn't last, but he'd always assumed he would have her pictures once she left. Technically he did. In reality... He wasn't getting a damn thing off them. No hit. Only sadness. His chest hurt when he looked at her.

Due to the sheer number of

people expected, Fang's wife, Cass, had hornswoggled him into having the party at her parents' house. Eric drove all the way out to Henderson. He thought about putting the top down, but that reminded him of Trish. She had so freely admired his car and loved having the convertible open.

He parked at the end of the block for an easy exit. No way he was staying any longer than he had to.

As soon as he walked into the backyard, he was pinned. Mike and Liam all but grabbed him by the arms to hustle him toward a corner of the garden.

Liam started in on him first.

“What the hell happened? Sunny said you took off without telling Trish.”

“Not your business.”

“Great. So it’s true. That’s priceless, dipshit.” Mike crossed his arms, maybe shooting for intimidation.

Eric would have to give a shit in order to be intimidated. His chest was a gaping maw of pain. All gone.

“Sack up,” was all he said.

“Nice.” A sneer shaped Liam’s mouth. “We all know you’re not the classiest dude, but that’s low.”

“Then listen to this,” Eric said to the man. “I’ve spent my whole career feeling responsible for my brother. I joined the Air Force. He got wasted. I heaped on the guilt. But you know what? He’s on his way back.”

Liam and Mike exchanged confused looks, probably because Eric’s explanation sounded like they were being dressed down. Couldn’t be helped. He was a volcano, and this was the best he could do to keep from exploding altogether.

“Carey told me he didn’t need my guilt trip weighing him down.

Same goes for you, Christiansen.”

“What the hell did I do?”

“You’ve been dogged by what happened to me, how you should’ve been there in Canada — maybe dropped out of the sky instead of me. But fuck that. You kept your wife. Had your daughter. The world’s a better place for both. *I’m* on my way back, and I need you to drop the guilt-ridden shit. Officially. Right now.”

Liam blinked, mouth hanging open. His shark smile was long gone. “Well. All right, then.”

He held out his hand, which Eric shook. One hard pump. One firm



nod. Walls down. Shoulders relaxed. Both of them. It felt damn good — a cooling balm for the many wounds he had yet to heal. At least he could have his friend back.

Luckily Princess broke into their *Oprah* moment by standing on top of a wooden patio table and clinking a glass with a fork. She was wearing a skirt, of all things. Her hair was a neat, smooth curtain. She looked completely put together, not at all the legendary wild woman of the 64<sup>th</sup>.

Why couldn't Eric do the same?

Maybe if everyone would let him leave the past alone. There was no

moving on when he wore the crash on his face, a mask he would never be able to remove. Seeing his brother happy and releasing Liam from a guilt prison should've been enough.

Not even close. He needed more. Trish should've been there with him, poised and happy on his arm. Instead she would spend the night in that motel out of *Psycho*.

"Listen up, bandits," she said. "As of first thing tomorrow morning, I'm back in the air!"

A loud cheer rose up from the packed backyard, full of airmen and some civvies. Maybe people from

Cass's work? Even Eric couldn't help a tight nod of approval. Leah Girardi belonged in a Viper. No two ways about it.

"That's because as of midnight tonight, I'm your commanding officer. *Suckers.*" She grinned when the groans matched the cheers. Her expression, however, sobered when the heckling died down. "I wouldn't be standing here right now without the support of the 64<sup>th</sup> and the undying courage of three men in particular. Strap Happy." She raised a glass toward Mike. "You know all that I'd say but can't."

Liam grinned and elbowed Mike in the ribs, then took Kavya from Sunny when she joined them. Mike only nodded to his best girl, his expression quietly radiant with pride.

“But Mike wouldn’t have looked twice at the hot mess I was a couple years ago. I wouldn’t be a major. I wouldn’t be on the verge of leading the best fucking pilots in America. Hell, I probably wouldn’t be in the Air Force anymore. Down to brass tacks, I wouldn’t be *me*...not without Tin Tin and Fang.”

Her voice tightened with what must’ve been tears, which Eric

could hardly believe. She tossed her hair back and swallowed. Always tough as nails. Always Princess.

“Jon, Ryan.” She found them in the crowd. “You’ve been my best friends for almost five years. I don’t know why you stayed with me. I really don’t. But I’m grateful, and I’ll never forget what you’ve done to make my life amazing.”

“Because we won’t let you forget,” Jon called. He raised his glass with an indulgent, dimpled smile.

“Save it, butt munch.” She matched his grin. “Because, really, the man of the hour is not the

almighty Tin Tin. It's not even Major 'Fang' Haverty. No, we're here to celebrate our incredible, fearless, nearly former leader, Lieutenant Colonel Haverty – and more importantly, his tolerant-as-hell wife Cass.”

The pair stepped forward to receive fond wishes and kissed one another when catcalls made it inevitable. Damn, Fang looked solid. Squared away. Confident and happy. Cass Haverty was a cute redhead with a smile that could power the Strip's electrical grids. They were radiant. Eric's eyes burned watching them, but he

couldn't look away. He stood there, letting his regret and loathing fester into something dark.

He needed light. He was tired of living in the shadows. But life didn't always shake out into gold-glittered endings. People couldn't make everything okay by wishing. Yet even Carey had been brave enough to let love into his life.

Meanwhile, Mike helped Leah down from the patio table. Eric saw him whisper something in her ear. Her dark, perceptive gaze jumped to Eric's face, and she made a beeline for him.

His new boss. *Joy.*

“You gonna be polite, pit bull?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Funny, I always figured polite meant you didn’t walk around wearing an expression that says you want to go ten rounds with everyone in sight.” She sat on a carved wooden bench. The way she spread her arms across the back meant no room for him.

“Is this an official meeting?”

“Do you need it to be?” Leah lifted her eyebrows. Arrogant. But then she’d have to be to be female, and a major, and in charge of the Aggressors.



The silence swirled out for a moment. Behind them were happy voices, clattering silverware and the low thump of music from an audio system.

Leah lifted her chin. "Fine. We'll call this an official visit. As your new commander, I'm here to warn you. I'm not putting up with a lot of bullshit. Fang told me about your fighting. If this whole Billy Badass attitude is because of boxing—"

He cut her off. "It's not."

"Then what's wrong? You can consider answering an order."

He tightened his fists. "Trish and I split."

“I’d kinda figured that,” she said, her expression suddenly solemn.

“She didn’t understand when I had to go check on my brother. He needed me.”

“You don’t think Trish needed you too?”

His stomach did three full somersaults.

There it was.

The fact he’d been blindly trying to avoid for weeks. Maybe longer.

Every time she smiled at him or laughed or straddled his lap, or when she’d shown him that amazingly detailed assignment for her class...

She needed him. His attention and support. His love.

Acknowledging how much she needed him included a flipside he hadn't wanted to accept.

He'd needed her. To draw him out. To turn him outward from his obsessions and fears. He hadn't thought himself capable of handling more than Carey's problems because his brother's rehab wasn't the only issue dragging him. He'd needed someone to care — to accept him without judgment or pity. Trish had been the one to shine a bright, unrelenting light on his loneliness.

He'd been the one to dim that light.

He tilted back against the twisted trunk of a juniper tree, failing at a casual pose, a casual tone. "She's strong. She'll get by."

"You're such a jack nugget."

"Thanks, Major."

"Pretty sure we've left the official stuff behind now." She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. "You're an idiot."

"I don't need this shit."

"Don't get me wrong. We're talking one jack nugget to another." She pointed behind Eric, toward where Mike held a beer, laughing

because Kavya had spit up on Liam's shoulder. "You know I almost screwed things up with Strap, right? I mean, forget being a drunk and a club-girl douche. I was perfectly sober when I fell in love with him. That didn't keep me from shoving him away with both hands. Scared goddamn shitless. Until that day — that day when nothing could've scared me worse."

Eric had been there. Mike had nearly crashed, and Leah had thrown herself at him after his safe landing. Presto. Their secret affair revealed. They'd kept their relationship easygoing and

professional ever since, but that moment of terror had revealed the deep extent of their love. Eric felt a similar terror now, nearly as bone-crunching and heart-stopping as rocketing out of a burning cockpit.

Leah stood and thwacked a punch to Eric's shoulder. "Here's the thing. You'll only have one chance to apologize. Trust me on that. Screw it up and she won't ever give you another shot. Make it count."

Something crawled down his spine. "I don't always talk well."

"Of course you don't." Leah laughed as she walked back toward

Fang and the revelers. “You have a penis. I wouldn’t expect any different.”

Eric had flown his jet over hostile territories. He’d bailed his nineteen-year-old, high-as-a-kite brother out of jail. He’d gone rounds with men bigger and heavier and with meaner right hooks than Eric ever dreamed. He’d crashed an F-16, for fuck’s sake. And he’d fought through the pain of surviving.

That had nothing on the fear threatening to knock him down as

he stood at the back of a UNLV classroom. Trish had mentioned the hall a few times since she loved it so much. She'd said Alta Ham was a dumb name for a place where so much beauty was made. Eric had searched the whole building until he found the right room. It resembled an auditorium, where the floor slanted forward in a semicircle, but every space was crammed with various sorts of desks. Students milled around as they gathered books and portfolios, which meant that no one noticed him. Not at first.

He saw Trish. Straight off. Their



fight in the hotel room was only three days gone, but Eric felt as if he hadn't seen her in a year.

Her hair was the pale, feathery blonde. She wore jeans so skintight that they showed off her long, showgirl legs. Her top was bright red. But he'd seen her in far more elaborate getups. Wearing her glasses, she nearly blended in with the other college girls.

She was leaning over the professor's desk at the front of the room. Eric knew without a doubt that unless the man was gay he was sneaking looks down her top. Who could blame him? Trish was

probably the most beautiful woman in the world.

If she noticed, she didn't make a fuss. She was completely pro, wearing a focused expression as she pointed at the paper she'd put in front of the other man.

Eric wanted to shove his hands in his pockets. Couldn't. His hands were full. Instead he waited halfway up the row as students filed past. Some gave him awkward side eye.

Trish eventually saw him. Her gaze flicked up for a half second before returning to the papers. She flattened her hands on the desk as

her shoulders lifted toward her ears. She didn't want to see him. No surprise. She'd made herself perfectly clear, with words that stabbed him when he lay in bed at night.

Even if this failed, he had to do it. She deserved to know he hadn't ever wanted to hurt her. Hadn't wanted to treat her like something less than she was. So he took a deep breath and walked down toward the professor's desk.

Trish straightened. Her gaze practically burned. "You're not welcome here, Eric."

"I have to talk to you."

“Not here,” she said, each word clipped.

The professor calmly started gathering his belongings and stuffing them into an attaché. “You can leave with me if you’d like, or I can leave you in peace. Your choice, Trish. But if this is who’s holding you back from accepting the scholarship, I hope you know you can do better.”

One word stuck in Eric’s brain like a thorn. “Scholarship?”

The man blinked. “She didn’t tell you? Perhaps you’re not the problem after all.” He looked back at Trish. “If necessary, I can notify

security.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s fine. Eric only likes to rip my heart out. He’s not into the physical stuff.”

Christ, that hurt. But it was no worse than he deserved.

Finally Eric was alone with Trish. He finished the long walk to the desk. He wanted to touch her. Needed to. But he had no right.

He set the portable external hard drive down on a stack of manila folders. It gleamed dull silver.

Trish’s eyebrows lifted. “What’s that?”

“Everything.”

“Not enough to get rid of the real me?” Her mouth twisted, and she took off her glasses. She was made up, sure, but so simply. She was one hundred percent Trish. “You have to get rid of all the pictures too?”

“Not like that.”

“Then what, Eric? Do explain it to me.”

He tapped his note cards together. Referenced the first. At least his writing was neat, because fuck it all, his hands were shaking. “First, I want you to know that I say this with no expectation of reciprocity. You have every right to be furious with me and to never

forgive me.”

“Wait a second.” Her hands flashed out. She wrapped slim fingers around his wrists and tugged down so she could peer at the lined cards. Her skin was soft. A little cool. Her touch went straight to his brain like a roundhouse or a double shot of Jack. “What the hell are these?”

“I made notes,” he said simply.

Her lips gaped, enough to display her white, even bottom teeth. “But...why?”

“Because you’re too important to risk not saying what I need to.”

# Chapter Thirty-Five

Trish needed to sit down. Her knees insisted. Yet she didn't want to give up the ground. He was tall enough, intimidating enough, that to sit would mean looking up at him like a suppliant. She would've for the rest of her life, had he been worth it.

So she remained standing and gave up the grip on his wrists. Her palm burned as she laced her fingers together. No sense letting him see her unsteadiness.

His features were as stern as



ever. That rarely changed, only softening on occasion when he smiled or laughed. She'd almost been able to convince herself of having made all that up. He was an asshole. He'd punched a hole through her skin. The guts he'd pulled out were back in that skanky hotel room adding new stains to the shag carpet.

But his eyes...

The cockiness was gone. The blatant lust. The heavy cynicism. All she found, no matter how deeply she stared into that shadows-over-water blue, was anticipation. He was suspended in

time, waiting for her answer. One way or the other. She couldn't recall ever having held so much power over an individual.

A flash of sympathy caught her by the throat. How often had she been on the receiving end of that gut-tensing anxiety? Each and every audition. And now, at school, she felt it every time she handed in an assignment.

All she'd wanted was a chance. A chance to prove she was as good as anyone they'd ever seen, whether agent, casting pro, director or professor.

Just a chance.

She forced a stiff shrug then nodded to the cards he held. “You got nothing to lose, sugar.”

“I think I do,” he said softly.

Eric looked at her for another moment. He was memorizing her, but with more solemnity than she’d ever seen. No desire. Only a yearning she couldn’t name — unless she looked into her own heart and found its mirror image.

He stared down at his cards. His thick neck had never been meant to bend at that angle. When he’d lost that fight, he hadn’t been cowed. His pride had exited that ring intact, though his body had been

battered. Now pride was something he'd checked at the door.

Nope. No go. She'd given him too much credit before. Guts. Carpet. Pain.

"I'm waiting." Her voice was chilly to her own ears.

He cleared his throat, shuffled the top card to the back and started in earnest.

"I'm returning these photographs and videos because they were gifts given in good faith by a woman with the most resilient spirit I've ever known. I've betrayed that faith. The happy, spontaneous, trusting moments we

shared have been tainted. *I* did that. I don't deserve to keep that joy. Please, do with them as you wish."

Okay, she *did* need to sit down.

Trish fumbled for the back of Professor Granger's chair and let it take her weight. She was shaking. Holy hell, there was no denying that, even as she flattened her palms on the battered green metal desk.

Eric didn't show any hint of smirking victory. He only took a breath and shuffled another card to the back of the stack.

"You called me on my bullshit. You made every fantasy come true.

You made me laugh.” He lifted his eyes, which were bleak. Haunted. “God, Trish, do you know how long it’s been? Just...laughing.”

She swallowed and was surprised to find that she had a voice. The ice was gone. She didn’t know what to replace it with. “You never said.”

“I should have.” He licked his top lip then tucked back into his notes. “Through it all, you gave me the two things I damaged the most — your trust and your hope.”

Trust. Hope. She was only getting snippets of words now, the words he’d obviously taken so

much time to craft. Her brain and her heart had gone to war. Slings and arrows. Full-scale combat. Their clamor was so loud that she gave her head a little shake. She didn't want to miss a damn thing.

“We had so much in common when we met.”

He was warming to his delivery, somewhat less stilted. More inflection and passion poured from him. He met her gaze more often. Whatever he'd written had genuine emotion behind it, as if the sentences themselves needed to be any more seductive.

“A scarred boxer and a dolled-up

ring girl. Both of us hiding. Because you were right. My scars are as much of a persona as your wigs and stage makeup. We even went by fake names. Yet you've blossomed. You've persevered past rejections and disappointments, forging a place for yourself here, where people can admire your thoughts, not just your beautiful body."

He flipped a card, ran a hand along the back of his neck, looked up from under his brows. "I haven't budged an inch. I'm the same surly animal I was last year in a Canadian hospital. I'd have taken off a nurse's arm rather than say I was in



pain, or admit to a therapist that sometimes all I felt was *falling*. Instead I would lie in bed reliving the moments I'd expected to die. I couldn't even enjoy the company of my friends—not like before. I tempted you to lower your defenses while guarding mine like a fortress. That discrepancy is shameful.”

Trish stood. She couldn't do this anymore. His strong, powerful arms, accentuated by the tight fit of a dark blue henley, were visibly shaking. The catch in his voice wouldn't abate.

As if approaching a snarling bear

in a trap, she edged around the desk.

He kept reading.

“My brother was the only person in the world who believed I could be more than a bruiser from Detroit. When I left him to join...” he stopped, cleared his throat, “...to join the Air Force, I believed my desertion drove him to make poor choices. But in taking an active part in his rehabilitation, he’s shown me that he’s capable of making balanced decisions—and that he’s equally responsible for the bad. He’s so much stronger than I believed he could be.”

She took a chance and touched his forearm. Eric flinched, then gripped the cards tighter and closer to his chest, as if protecting them. She couldn't breathe. Nothing worked right. Her hearing was cloudy and she couldn't stop blinking away a sheen of potent emotion. Yet these tears were bubbling up from a deep, deep wellspring of possibility. She'd always had the strength to continue because of it.

"You can go on if you need to," she whispered. "But I'd like to touch you while you do. Is that all right?"

A soft shudder worked up his back. He faced the ceiling. His Adam's apple lifted and lowered. He nodded. But before he returned to the note cards, he brushed his nose against her temple. Whether intentional or not, they both inhaled sharply.

She deepened the touch by sliding her hands around his middle and tucking her brow against his tense upper arm. Another shudder shook from his body into hers.

"I doubted Carey. I doubted you and the faith and hope you held out to me like gifts. But it was a

smokescreen. I was a broken-down coward who feared I'd never fly again. I feared always walking into a room and bearing the stares and whispers of everyone who turned to look. Who would want to stick by a man so filled with fear? I doubted myself, and I took it out on you."

The cards toppled from his hands. They scattered over the laminate floor. Eric bundled her into his embrace with his arms crisscrossed around her back.

"Christ, Trish," he rasped. The tears she'd barely held back let loose as he kissed her head, her

brow, her cheeks. "I should've called. At least kept you from worrying. Fuck, what was I thinking? Should've asked you to come with me. Missed you bad. Wanted you there. *Needed* you."

Despite how overwhelmed she was, Trish choked on a laugh where she nuzzled his chest. Without the cards, he was back to being Eric. Blunt little sentences. The emotion was so raw, so real, that she only held on tighter.

"My brother *was* the only person. He believed in me. But for a while, I had two. Two people who thought I could do anything." He

stroked a hand up her back. Shivers started there and wouldn't quit.

"Trish, please."

She gathered her courage and stacked it around everything she knew she was worth. She wasn't settling, not even for Eric.

With quick swipes, she smeared the tears off her cheeks. "Please, what?"

"I..."

He looked down and to the side. The thick muscle along his jaw worked. He was fighting for it, fighting for the right to win her back, and she was silently cheering him on. She'd never wanted

anything more than for Eric Donaghue to be the man she deserved.

“In the hotel, you said...love.”

She touched his chin and urged him to look at her, full in the face.

“I did,” she whispered.

He inhaled. “Could you forgive me? Still love me?”

It was Trish’s turn to be at a loss for words. She was too busy trying to keep her heart in her chest.

Trying to hold back happy tears was a lost cause.

Eric bowed his forehead to hers, in much the same pose as when he’d read from his meticulous note



cards. "Because I love you, Patricia. It's all in me. Want. Hope. Trust. You did that. You made me dig deep. I'm a better man for it, no matter..." Blunt fingertips cinched at her waist. "Tell me it's not too late. Please. Let it be you and me."

Dizzy and weightless, she clung to his hard, unyielding body as if her next breath would send her flying away. She didn't want to go. She wanted to be right there, in his arms.

Up on tiptoes, she whispered her answer against his warm skin. "You and me."

Eric held her tight and lifted her

as he tucked his face low against her throat. Whatever speech he'd managed was gone now. A slight trembling spoke for him as he held her, kissed her neck, breathed with shallow gusts.

Only when he returned her to the floor did Trish lean back. She needed to see him and to offer an apology of her own. With an inch or two between their noses, she looked at his rough face, cupped it between her hands. Beneath one palm was smooth masculine skin, freshly shaved. Beneath the other was the damage that said so much about who he was.

A survivor.

“I didn’t mean what I said about your scars.” She forced the words past a thick lump of regret.

“They’re part of who you are. Part of the man I love. I was hurting and I lashed out. I’m sorry, Eric.”

He nodded. His brow was a twisted mass of emotion. “Thank you. But...you were right.”

From in his jeans pocket he pulled out a business card. Trish wiped her eyes and took it from him.

*Matthew Polanski, MD.*

*Specialist in reconstructive surgery.*

An appointment for later that

month was written on the back.

“I’m ready to let it go,” he said quietly. “Will you help me?”

“Yes.” She held him tighter, and then she was kissing him. Over and over, lips and jaw and every place she could reach. “Yes, sugar. Anything. But none of it will change what I feel. You hear?”

“I hear.” A tentative smile peeked out from the dark clouds. “Say it again?”

“Which part?”

“God, Trish, all of it.”

“Nah,” she said with a grin. It started out as wobbly as her limbs but soon gathered fire. “I don’t

want to keep crying all day. It sucks, even if it's good this time."

He smoothed away one last tear. "I'll do my best by you, showgirl."

"Good. Because I'm gonna need your help too."

"You got it. Whatever it is."

Practically bouncing now, she twined her fingers with his. "See, I have a teensy dilemma."

"Oh?"

"Lead in a show at the Paris, or a full scholarship to finish my design degree. Whatcha think?"

He blinked. "Holy shit."

"I know, right? Feast or famine."

"Both?"

“Yup. I learned on Thursday when you were supposed to get back. I think that’s part of why I was so pissed. I’d gotten used to having you with me. You don’t say much, sugar, but you help me sort it out.”

“And I wasn’t there. Damn.”

She ducked to meet his lowered eyes. “Hey.”

“Hey, what?”

“Quit it. If you want me, stud, you gotta man up.” Hands bolder now, no more shaking, no more fear, she grabbed his belt loops. Dragged him closer. “The past is past, remember?”

“Well. At least the bad shit.”

His grin was back. She felt like a magician at having made it reappear.

“Uh-huh,” she said with a smile of her own. “So...that means no more shitbox motel. I’m moving in with you. Pronto.”

Strong hands spread along her waist, waiting but protecting. “Yes, you are.”

“And you’ll help me figure my way out of this embarrassment of riches. School versus another show.”

“I will.”

“And we’ll each keep one

souvenir as we let all that bad shit go.”

“Huh?”

Trish met his mouth with hers. She poured all of her love and excitement into her kiss. Eric enfolded her with a hunger that was almost shocking. Almost. After all, she'd felt it every time he responded to her. She only needed to hold on and soak up his robust power. Her body responded as quickly. The pain sloughed off, leaving nothing but the wide-open potential of a future.

“Yup, one souvenir each,” she said against his mouth, breathless



now. "I'm gonna grab these note cards, and you're gonna grab that hard drive."

"You're serious? The note cards?"

"I could always erase those files," she said, mock threatening.

He chuckled softly. "Nope. Fair trade. But, Trish? They're only pictures. It's you I really need."

The words were spoken without fanfare, so confidently that she released the last of her doubts. He meant it. He was there with her, body and soul, in ways she hadn't dared believe. And yet...she *had* believed. A quiet hope had always

flickered inside her. About her future. About a future with Eric.

Now it was theirs to claim.

She slid her hands down low on his back. “They’re *really* good pictures, though.”

“Yes. Yes, they are.” His grin turned downright wicked as he licked her lower lip. “But give us an evening and we could top them all.”

“Not just one evening, sugar. As many as we can imagine.”

# Epilogue

The lights dimmed, warning theatergoers that the show would start in two minutes. Eric shifted in his seat and rubbed the velveteen arm. Nerves on Trish's behalf spiked his blood. His respiration had jacked. This was it. Her big show. The debut she'd been working toward for seven months.

He wasn't worried, though. She was going to nail it. She knew what she was doing inside and out.

The fact she'd let him be there...  
Her forgiveness had become one

of the most important turning points in his life.

He squeezed Trish's hand.  
"Excited?"

Her smile would have lit the entire theater had she been onstage. Instead she was seated beside him. The black dress clinging to her body would've been sedate on any other woman. On Trish, it was a work of art. "I'm more excited than I thought I ever could be. I might pop."

"No popping." He tucked a lock of her hair behind one delicate ear. She'd been growing it out. The honey-blond strands brushed her

jaw. When they made love, it wound up sticking out in all directions. He loved it, knowing it meant he'd roughed her up.

"You've been working so hard for this."

It was late May, and the evening was intended to showcase the talents of the UNLV theater program's star students, from costumes to the orchestra to every performer onstage — the stage Trish had helped design.

Satisfaction lifted her chest as she sat back in her chair. "I know this never, ever would have happened without the internship. But I don't

care. I'll take any advantage I can get."

"Bullshit." He laced his fingers through hers and pulled her hand into his lap. "This is all you."

"Me and six other interns, but you bet I'm awesome."

"Yes you are."

Eric could hardly believe how lucky he was. Friends and family occupied seats farther back in the theater. Mike and Leah were there, as were Liam and Sunny. But best of all, Carey and Lila had flown down from Detroit for the long Memorial Day weekend. The attendee to make Trish happiest

was her mom, who'd bullied some poor agent into taking her on as his secretary and was paying for the trailer on her own.

On her own...except for the fifty bucks or so that Eric slipped her on occasion.

It was a start, at least — one he knew had lifted an invisible burden from Trish's heart.

They'd meet everyone else after the show, for Trish's triumphant dinner at a restaurant Tin Tin had recommended. But this moment was for him and Trish.

He'd paid for front-and-center tickets, an upgrade from the

mezzanine seats Trish had been comped. He wanted her to have the best. Always. The last time he'd sat in such a seat he'd watched Trish dance — her long legs carrying her through complicated steps, her voice like a Southern-born angel.

“Do you miss it? Wanna be up there tonight?”

“No. Not really. I'm still sucking up the love for my talents instead of my tits.” She slanted him a look. “The only person I want to perform for is you.”

Eric kissed her neck as the lights dimmed for real. The theater filled with the quiet rustling and



humming of a thousand people settling in. Programs shuffled. Voices quieted to whispers.

The curtain lifted. The timing of the first number meant the stage was bare for only a few moments. Trish and her team had done wonders. Eric knew nothing about colors. He knew even less how to shape a stage. But he knew she'd slaved over every detail. Colors and risers and the cloth hangings halfway up the stage. He knew the work she'd put into it, and how she'd spun herself inside out to get it right.

He sure as hell heard the happy

hums and gasps that echoed around him. The impact of the curtain revealing the stage was almost as dramatic as the swell of the music and the appearance of the dancers.

Trish seemed torn between grinning maniacally and sneaking peeks at the patrons. He'd rarely seen her happier.

That joy lasted through the entire first act. She lit up with each song as if she'd sung them herself, and her toes tapped in time. But her attention centered on the design elements she'd contributed — that mixture of awe and scrutiny that always came with assessing one's

work.

She glowed with the satisfaction he felt when he was back in the air. Crashing had messed him up a lot harder and a lot longer than he'd wanted to admit, but the accident hadn't been as destructive as the shell of isolation he'd wrapped around himself in the aftermath.

He had his friends back. He had scars that were healing — literally.

And he had Trish.

Although the transition had hurt like hell, he wouldn't take his old life back for the world.

The lights came up for intermission. A few people slipped

by to stretch their legs or get drinks. Trish stayed where she was, breathing in the moment.

Make or break time.

He shifted out of his seat and knelt before her. With shaking hands, he found the ring box that had been burning a hole in his pocket for hours – and in the back of his brain since he'd bought it two weeks before.

Trish's pale blue eyes widened as she looked from him to the glimmering diamond. He'd taken a long time selecting the perfect ring, an emerald-cut center with balanced baguettes alongside. The

stone was only a quarter karat, but Eric had made sure it was as flawless as his showgirl.

Her bottom lip shimmered with gloss, and her eyes with tears.

“Eric?”

“I don’t need note cards this time.” He held her hand, thumb smoothing over her delicate skin. “I love you, Patricia Beauregard.”

Her throat clenched. “I love you too.”

“I need you in my life. I’d be a lesser man without you and your endless optimism. It still blows my mind that you want to share the good and the bad with me. I want

to be there with you. Good and bad.” He took a deep breath and smiled. “Will you marry me?”

She was incandescent. He loved being the one to have given that to her. If he had any say, he’d make it the purpose of his life.

“Yes, Eric. I’ll marry you.”

He slipped the ring onto her left hand then cupped her face. “Thank God, showgirl. I didn’t want to have to haul you out of here just to talk you into it.”

“There’s my caveman.” She laughed, loud enough to gather a few stares. Attention from random strangers hadn’t ever been his

thing. But it didn't matter. Nothing else did.

Not so long as Trish was his.

# Author's Note

The 64<sup>th</sup> Aggressor Squadron is an active United States Air Force unit assigned to the 57<sup>th</sup> Adversary Tactics Group, stationed at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada. The pilots' objectives are as we've described: to fly as adversaries against allied pilots from around the world, teaching them to better counter enemy tactics. The unit dates back to WWII when it participated in multiple theaters of operation.

Now, the 64<sup>th</sup> and other



“bandits” from the 57<sup>th</sup> ATG regularly conduct dogfighting simulations in the United States, known as Red Flags, and Maple Flag exercises in conjunction with Canadian Forces. They also add their expertise to the USAF’s Weapons School syllabus and travel the country to provide training and test mission support to various units.

All individuals described in this story are fictitious. Research mistakes are entirely our own.

In the meantime, we enjoy assuming that at least one of these dedicated, highly skilled bandits is

a keen shutterbug.

# About the Author

Katie Porter is the writing team of Carrie Lofty and Lorelie Brown, who've been friends and critique partners for seven years. Both are multi-published in historical and paranormal romance. Carrie has an MA in history, while Lorelie is a US Army veteran. Generally a high-strung masochist, Carrie loves weight training and has no fear of gross things like dissecting formaldehyde sharks. Her two girls are not appreciative. Lorelie, a laid-back sadist, would rather grin

maniacally when Carrie works out. Her three boys love how she screams like a little girl around spiders.

To learn more about the authors who make up Katie, visit [www.katieporterbooks.com](http://www.katieporterbooks.com) or [www.facebook.com/MsKatiePorter](https://www.facebook.com/MsKatiePorter) or follow them on Twitter at [@MsKatiePorter](https://twitter.com/MsKatiePorter), [@carrielofty](https://twitter.com/carrielofty) and [@LorelieBrown](https://twitter.com/LorelieBrown).

# Look for these titles by Katie Porter

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Blaze and Betrayal

*The Boston Boys*

Own  
Snap  
Bind

*A Dom double-teamed by two  
submissives? He doesn't stand a  
chance.*

## **Chains and Canes**

**© 2013 Katie Porter**

*Club Devant, Book 2*

Wealthy businessman Daniel Baker doesn't have a creative bone in his body, but he knows art and craves beauty. Contemporary dancer Naya Ortiz, his fiancée of three years, embodies both. His protective commitment to her happiness extends to hiring Dominas to satisfy the sexual

masochism she craves.

The balance of their relationship is tipped when Naya dances with reckless Cajun choreographer Remy Lomand. His magnetism as a Dom carries over to a backstage encounter that leaves Naya breathless – and Daniel unable to look away.

Remy knows the deal. The fancy people want to play with a disposable boy toy. He's fine with that...but not with letting Daniel remain a bystander. As their sessions intensify, Remy guides Daniel's awakening as a sexual submissive. Their no-strings



threesome reveals the physical connection Daniel and Naya have lacked – and the emotional depth Remy fears.

When Remy and Naya tirelessly work to found a professional dance company, Daniel is left on the outside looking in. And although he and Naya are ready to submit to Remy for the rest of their lives, the man they call *Sir* may not want their love at all.

*Warning: A sexy-as-hell Cajun choreographer plays slap, tickle, chains and canes with a caliente Puerto Rican dancer and her repressed businessman fiancé. What could possibly go wrong?*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Chains and Canes:*

“Naya’s safe word is red.”

“My, oh my. Safe words and everything.” Remy rubbed a thumb over the edge of the belt wrapped around his hand. Even that small twitch made his carved biceps shift all the way up to the shoulder decorated by a circular black tattoo. He lowered his arrogant chin, his expression filled with mirth. “Did you two learn that from a naughty book? Maybe one with a black-and-white cover?”

Daniel chuckled. He hadn’t

expected to like Remy's dry sense of humor. It should've been enough to see the liquid way he moved, as if he were the personification of dance, even off the stage. Just like Naya. The bonus was a whipcord-fast mind and bitingly incisive observations.

"No," Daniel said. "We've been at this a while. You'll see."

If he were a different man, he would've jerked Naya's thick hair and forced her to her knees in a deliberate echo of Remy's backstage behavior. The problem was that he *wasn't* that man. The right moves occurred to him, knowing

intimately what Naya craved...but it wasn't in him to bring her down.

Remy didn't have that problem. At all. "On your knees, hands behind your neck. Present your pretty self to me."

Daniel's stomach flipped with a surge of excitement. Naya dropped. Her knees spread to shoulder width apart, toes together behind her ass. She lifted her elbows, which dragged the T-shirt up to display her flat stomach. She buried her hands beneath the glossy fall of her hair.

Unable to help himself, Daniel stepped back. He wasn't supposed

to be in that tableau, not when Remy loomed over Naya. The Cajun was a sinuous curve of muscle and tendon. His dark hair skimmed the back of his neck and stood up straight on top, as if he'd run his fingers through it before getting off the elevator.

Naya's gaze dropped to the renewable wood floors. The bamboo had been polished to such a shine that she'd be able to see them both watching her. She'd feed off that. Submissive and showoff together. The worst punishment a Domina had ever inflicted was ordering Naya to put her nose in

the corner. The blonde had left her there for over twenty minutes.

That unpleasant memory returned Daniel to the topic of rules. They'd learned so much as a couple, despite the fact Daniel had never lifted a hand to do her harm. "No blood play. No needles or permanent marks. Humiliation does nothing for her."

"There's a difference between humiliation and being presented such a lovely gift." Remy's gaze roamed over her beautiful pose. Then he looked up and pinned Daniel with his magnetism. A simple silver bar pierced his right

eyebrow, accentuating his eyes.  
*Look at me, it said. Pay attention here.  
I'll teach you things.*

“Permission to speak?” Naya asked in a soft voice. Her tone was different now. She wasn’t the firebrand who could drill a phrase of steps into two dozen dancers in just a few minutes. She’d already hit that headspace, which Daniel desired almost as much as she did.

His chest clenched on a greedy jolt. This was the good stuff, his angel reaching her full potential and happiness.

He lifted his eyebrows at Remy.  
“Well?”

The grin that shaped Remy's finely carved features was...slinky. Knowledgeable. "Am I in charge yet? No other rules? You're leaving me a lot of room to play. I like that."

There were other things Daniel could say. Warnings that Naya wouldn't fuck Remy, that the sexual aspect was something only Daniel shared with her. After she came down, safe and cared for, she always turned to him.

Except for the first time, he didn't want to say that. He didn't want to...close it off.

"If Naya says red, it's all off. No



matter what.”

“Of course. A gentleman always respects a lady’s wishes. I decided awful young I didn’t want to be a man who didn’t.”

He dipped his head, which made Daniel wonder once again what secrets he hid. Some of them, at least, were unhappy.

Only Remy didn’t look unhappy now. “Permission granted, sweetling.”

He’d made her wait all that time, assured that she *would* wait. That it was his *right* to make her wait. Daniel could’ve achieved the same display of authority around a

boardroom table. Easily. That would have involved strategy and power and defeating lesser opponents. None of that applied to the woman he loved.

Her lashes fluttered. The face-down pose didn't permit a hint of her thoughts, but Daniel read how her shoulders remained curved and loose, even with the hands behind her neck still perfectly poised. With her dancer's physique, holding the position was nothing too strenuous. Instead it was the meaning of it, kneeling at the feet of two men.

She cleared her throat, as if asking permission again. "I don't

know what to call you.”

That was new. Daniel flicked his attention between Naya’s down-turned head and Remy’s. On previous occasions, she’d waited for her Dominant’s instructions. Naya had never asked.

Remy passed his hand over the crest of her head, softly stroking her hair before tangling his fingers into the heavy mass. Naya lifted her face against what had to be a bite of pain. Her eyes were hazy, lids at half-mast. Her dusky-pink lips parted.

She looked beautiful.

“You may call me Sir.” Remy’s

words hit a deeper timbre. Rougher. More assured. "Go to the couch. Stay on your knees. Keep your hands where they are. I want to see those gorgeous tits of yours take the lead."

A growl tightened Daniel's chest. "I warned you about humiliation."

The look Remy snapped toward him was electric and powerful. He knew that look, when he flashed his power around the business world, when necessity meant taking down ambitious hotheads.

"Did the girl say red?"

"No."

"Then *I'm* the one giving a

warning. I know what I'm doing. We all know it, or I wouldn't be here. I heard what you had to say, Daniel. Red means red. Decide whether you can abide by that rule, or we don't play at all."

Daniel's first thought was *fuck off*, but he shoved that reaction down, far away. They were so close, sitting on the edge of something new. Giving up at this point wasn't what he'd hoped. This was for Naya. This was about giving her what she needed while he enjoyed the beautiful view.

Remy had been right. Naya hadn't said a thing. No safe word.

Underneath her slim-cut shirt, her nipples had beaded into sharp points. She gave Daniel a tiny nod. Many people would've missed it, but in that moment, between the two of them, it spoke volumes. She was still on track.

Daniel met Remy's challenging stare and said, "Fine. Your way."

"Good." The word was a long, dark purr. "Now stand behind the couch. Decide where you want Naya to kneel. She'll look right at you as she takes every one of my blows."

Fuck, Daniel was hard. And so early. That hadn't happened before

either, not before Naya actually started crying out in relieved pain.

But he went. Without even thinking about it. He'd reached a place where he wasn't sure how or why he was playing along...but he definitely was.

He stood behind the couch, midway between matching end tables. White leather stretched smooth beneath his hands. The supple material wouldn't absorb wetness. Tiny salt trails would mark the path of Naya's tears.

If Remy could even get her there.

It was a small doubt, but Daniel felt the need to prepare should this

go wrong. Naya's disappointment would far outweigh his own. He'd shaped a huge portion of their life around *not* disappointing Naya. She was the star he wanted to see rising in the sky.

"It's been a while for her," he couldn't help but say.

Remy had his hand on Naya's head again—not with an overabundance of affection. The move seemed absentminded, like touching a pet who butted up against his leg. "Is that an appeal to be merciful?" His smile was ferocious. "Or to go harder?"

Daniel clenched the too-soft



couch before lifting his shoulders in a shrug.

“I thought not.” Remy pointed to the cushions in front of Daniel.

“Pose, *chère*. You have your orders.”

She did it automatically while infusing every movement with grace. Sexiness. Some might attribute it to her perfection as a dancer. Daniel knew better. She was more than a dancer. Brighter. More intense in her highs and lows and all the elegance of life in between.

She didn't falter when she got to the couch that separated her from Daniel. He'd become so wrapped

up in watching her that he'd almost forgotten Remy. Almost.

“That’s it. Kneel, Naya girl. I want you touching your man. Put your hands on top of Daniel’s. Then don’t move.”

*They've got the sex factor in spades.  
But can love survive the "ex" factor?*

## Knowing the Ropes

© 2013 Teresa Noelle Roberts

Selene has harbored kinky, submissive fantasies most of her life, but her experience as a domestic abuse counselor leaves her leery of giving up that much control. Case in point: the ex-fiancé she didn't love quite enough to test the limits of trust.

At a BDSM meet-and-greet, she sets out to learn how far is too far. Nick seems like the ideal dom to

show her the ins and outs of ropes, floggers, and paddles—with no commitment clause.

After losing a sub he loved too much, Selene's country girl common sense and smoking sensuality is like a dream that Nick never dared to have—a perfect blend of kink and long-term domestic bliss.

Yet it's tough to figure out just how far they can push their limits when they've both agreed to a no-strings affair. Especially when an ex needs Nick's muscle and Selene's counseling skills to get out of a dangerous situation. By then it may

be too late for love to survive all the things they're afraid to say.

*Warning: Sexy, kinky, geeky dominant guy. Smart submissive woman. Crazy ex. A little experimentation between girlfriends. And lots and lots of kinky sex.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for*  
Knowing the Ropes:

Selene found herself with Nick, drifting toward an early dinner somewhere. He had a place in mind but hadn't actually told her where, and she found she liked the feeling that she'd put herself into his hands in this small way.

The more she talked with Nick, the more his cool blue gaze and warm smile distracted her, and the more she felt his body language sync up with hers. No, not exactly in sync but one step ahead, anticipating her next movement and influencing it, as if starting to mold her already. She watched his big hands, imagining them alternately caressing and slapping her breasts, her thighs, her ass.

She looked down at his feet when she imagined her fevered thoughts were too obvious in her eyes, then imagined herself kneeling there, naked, trembling,

wet.

Actually, she didn't need to imagine the wet and trembling part. Her panties already felt suspiciously damp and her knees were shaky.

They walked more or less in silence. Between traffic noise, noise from the perennial construction along Atlantic Avenue and the melting heat, talking seemed far too much like work. Even the breeze off Boston Harbor was sticky.

By the time they crossed a bridge over Fort Point Channel, she was wishing she'd worn flats, even if

they wouldn't have looked right with the outfit. She prayed that the restaurant would be an informal place where she could slip her shoes off under the table.

Once she saw the restaurant, her feet breathed a sigh of relief.

The Barking Crab was a tribute to the beachside clam shack. Rough picnic tables covered with butcher paper — they even provided crayons for doodling. A mix of fried and steamed seafood, with a few more sophisticated but still basic selections. And outdoor seating on the harbor, so she could kick off the damn heels and relax. “It’s a tourist



trap,” Nick said, “but it’s fun.”

Soon they were drinking cold beers—he’d recommended the fascinatingly named Smuttynose, from a brewery in New Hampshire—and awaiting plates of fried scallops, fried calamari and steamed mussels. Selene hadn’t eaten a great deal that day and the frosty, hoppy beer was making her feel pleasantly euphoric.

Or maybe that was Nick.

She stretched out her bare foot, brushed it against his calf. Hard muscle under soft denim. Nice.

Yeah, Nick might just have something to do with the euphoria.

He took the hand that wasn't holding her beer.

No, he didn't exactly take her hand. He covered her hand with his and closed his fingers around her wrist. Then he looked into her eyes.

A slow, sensual smile opened on his face as he said, "That's better. Isn't it?"

It wasn't really a question, but he was giving her an out if she wanted it.

She didn't. That firm grip on her wrist hinted at so many things she'd dreamed of. "Oh yes," she breathed. "Better." She dropped her voice a notch. "And wetter."

It may have been purely coincidence that the woman sitting behind her giggled at that second, but Selene was sure she'd overhead.

Heat flared in Selene's cheeks and, to her surprise, between her legs. She squirmed in her seat, less from actual embarrassment than to enjoy the pressure the movement put on her swollen lips.

Under the cover of the first round of food arriving, Nick leaned forward. "So, you enjoy a little bit of public embarrassment? I'll file that away for later."

"You're so confident that there'll

be a later?"

"What do you think?" He ran one fingernail down the tender inside of her forearm.

His nails weren't sharp, but she still shivered.

"What about the common-sense test?" she asked. Her voice sounded a little desperate to her own ears, grasping at verbal straws. "Don't I fail it retroactively if I go home with you tonight?"

"If you come home with me and let me lock you in a cage, then yes. But to do that, I'd need a cage, and where will I find one in downtown Boston on a Saturday night?" He

laughed. "I'm regretting that test. It's making us both think we have to be sensible, and right now I'd rather be impulsive."

"Would it help if I said I wasn't thinking of much of anything except you?" Had that really come out of her mouth? "Okay, you and food. I'm starving." She grabbed a ring of fried calamari and popped it into her mouth, hoping the squid would keep her from saying anything too stupid. Calamari had the texture of bubble gum, in her experience, and it was rude to talk with your mouth full.

Damn it if this place didn't

manage to make calamari tender. Delicious too, with a nice, crunchy coating and a bit of spice.

Much tastier than what she'd been expecting but not nearly as effective for keeping her safely quiet.

"Try it with a bit of the banana pepper," Nick suggested, picking up a calamari ring and a piece of yellow-green pepper. She thought for a second he was demonstrating the proper technique.

He wasn't.

He reached across the table and held the food before her lips. "Try it," he urged.

Her mouth opened of its own accord.

He brushed his finger across the pout of her lower lip, making her shiver.

She opened her mouth slowly, took a tentative nibble to test the pepper's heat, then parted her lips wider and engulfed the food and Nick's fingers.

Unfortunately, there was only so much room around the morsel for tongue and fingers to work their wiles upon each other. She did her best, though, sucking and nibbling on his fingers while he moved them against her tongue, tantalizing

something besides her taste buds, which were already busily dealing with piquant pepper and warm, spiced calamari. She found she was leaning forward to take him, wanting to feel more, liking the sensation that he was filling her mouth.

She wanted him filling her mouth with his cock, wanted him to move in her mouth as he was now — no, harder, more forcefully, claiming that piece of her as his.

She arched her throat, tried to convey the fantasy through what she did to his fingers, and discovered that the calamari and



pepper were interfering.

She coughed.

It didn't stop the lovely, depraved images running through her head. Frankly, it fit with them, because the blowjob she was imagining was the kind where you might find yourself almost choking on cock but not wanting to stop. The kind where you'd actually revel in the bit of discomfort because your lover was getting off so much on thrusting hard into your throat.

On the other hand, cock couldn't actually end up in your windpipe, but a stray piece of food could, and

nothing spoiled a flirtation like a Heimlich maneuver and a visit to the ER.

Regretfully, she pulled away and actually applied herself to chewing and swallowing.

The pepper-and-squid combination was delicious, all right, but not as delicious as his fingers.

She thought of his cock deep in her throat, imagined how he might taste as he poured into her, felt herself flushing.

She forced herself to giggle. "Something more delicate might have worked better," she said,

making her voice stay even.  
“Maybe a taste of one of the dipping sauces next time.”

Something about the way Nick smiled in response let her know that he knew exactly what she'd been thinking, because he'd been thinking it too. Not just oral sex, because that was what you always thought about when you teased someone like that, but a very specific kind of oral sex, the kind that was claiming, almost brutal. “I don't know. Are delicate morsels what you prefer?”

“Delicacy has its place. But so does less delicate, and that was

perfect. Just considering other possibilities that might be...perfect in different ways."

"Oh," he said, smiling luxuriously, "we have time to try all sorts of morsels. This is just the appetizer."

How in the world, she thought, shifting in her seat for the pleasure of feeling her slick lips rub together, was she ever going to get through the rest of dinner without begging him to take her on the table?

*The crew is back and they're dirtier  
than ever.*

## Nailed to the Wall

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*Powertools, Book 5*

Five sexy men with a penchant for love and lust in any variation have formed a crew. They work hard and play harder — together. Though their partnership began in construction, renovating houses and selling them for a mint, they've formed a bond around their shared goal to provide women, and each other, with the ultimate sexual

experience.

Over the past year, as each member discovered his soul mate — or two — they expanded the reach of their circle, lighting up their nights along with their souls.

Monogamous relationships and the desire to start families threaten to put their libertine revelry on the back burner. Will the passion that bonded them fade away? How will the new crew wives cope with the complex relationship the men will always cherish and crave?

Determined to prove they stand by their men, the women decide it's time to flex some muscle and give

the crew a dose of girl power. They collude to take the guys as their horny hostages, using some big guns: boudoir photos, a pillow fight and a calculated foray into partner swapping. But will they have the guts to go through with their plans?

*Warning: By Book Five in this series, fans will attest that anything goes in the crew. Be prepared for ménage in every flavor – m/f, f/f, mfm, fmf, and more – along with a slew of “that’s what he said” jokes. No throwing tomatoes at the author, please!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Nailed*

to the Wall:

Kayla, Morgan and Kate held congress in low tones from their perches on the rumpled duvet.

“No, nothing happened...” Kay bit her lip and hesitated when she caught sight of Devon returning.

“What’s going on?” Dev asked.

“We’re waiting for you to get your act together so we can savor our feast.” Kate deflected genuine concern with sarcasm. “So hurry it up, punk.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll give you *punk*.” Devon sprinted the last few feet. She leaped and tucked her knees to her chest, cannonballing into the



pile of plush covers between her friends. The mattress bounced, jostling them all.

“Very funny.” Kayla laughed as she whipped a pillow from the head of the bed. “But you left yourself unprotected.”

*Whap.*

Something puffy smashed into her face. “You did not just hit me with...”

*Whap. Whap.*

Kate and Morgan joined in the battle. They took turns pummeling her with the light bundles. Devon’s fit of giggles didn’t do much for her coordination. She lunged for the

fourth pillow while unsuccessfully attempting to evade the incoming barrage.

Battling to her knees on the mattress allowed her to launch a counterstrike. Her one-against-three odds improved when her friends' coalition deteriorated. They whacked each other as often as they did her. Every woman for herself.

They shrieked, chased, ducked, whooped, dove, tackled and smacked each other. Feathers flew through the air. They fell as thick as the flakes that had blanketed the mountain during the legendary blizzard that fused Dave and Kayla

in an inseparable pair the previous winter. Busy daydreaming about what it would have been like to watch Dave, James and Neil ravaging Kay in front of the fireplace downstairs, Devon got caught off guard.

*Whap.*

She leaned into the force of the blow, but it was no use. Her arms windmilled. Gravity pitched her inevitably toward the floor. She braced herself for impact, heart racing as she completed a split-second assessment of the minimalist railing that kept the space open to the cabin below. It

would probably hold.

Instead of a slat of wood to the ribs, strong arms—too thick to belong to one of her female friends—banded around her.

*Neil.* She would recognize his hold anywhere. A perfect blend of tender yet unbreakable.

“It’s all fun and games until someone cracks their skull open.” He rocked Devon against his chest. “Careful, baby. I have plans for today that don’t involve a trip to the emergency room.”

“Unless it’s because you’ve fucked yourself into complete exhaustion and dehydration,

right?" Joe smacked Neil's back, rattling both him and Devon.

She hated that she nearly cried. Clawing at Neil's shoulders, she encouraged him to squeeze her tighter. "You're home early! Damn, I missed you."

"Same goes. Couldn't stay away any longer." He buried his nose in her hair and breathed deep.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Mike asked as the rest of the crew piled in close on Neil's heels.

The loft had never seemed cramped before. Hard bodies and testosterone overwhelmed Devon's senses. She couldn't speak so she

indulged in the luxury of having them surround her.

“A pillow fight?” Dave groaned when he took in the four women, naked except for the feathers tangled in their hair and stuck to the light sheen of perspiration coating their flushed skin. They breathed hard where they’d collapsed onto the bed. “And here I thought you couldn’t get any sexier.”

“Why the hell did we need a vacation again? We’re living the dream.” Joe stared, licking his lips, while James sidled up beside Neil. He sandwiched Devon between

their chests. Neil angled her so she faced their partner. Several inches shorter than Neil, he easily claimed her mouth in a scorching yet infinitely tender kiss. His fingertip traced the tattoo – similar to the one both he and Neil sported – on her ring finger.

“I missed you too,” Devon whispered when they finally broke apart.

“But not as much as Kay missed me. Right, babe?” Dave strutted to the side of the bed near his wife.

Morgan surprised them all when she whacked him hard in the gut with her pillow. “Ha! She’s got

nothing on me. Without Joe, I almost died of loneliness. And horniness.”

The women’s ceasefire erupted into a second round of good-natured exchanges. Devon squirmed from Neil’s arms to join the fray. The crew cheered on their girls, calling out helpful tips. When Kate swung wide, her pillow caught the edge of the tray on the nightstand.

Mike dove for the tipping platter. The guys roared when he rescued it. Sort of like he’d done for Kate that fateful afternoon two summers ago.



“Hey, now. Truce. That’s not funny. Bacon almost became an innocent casualty. Wasting it would be a cardinal sin. Straight to hell, do not pass go.” Joe snapped up a slice and devoured it in one bite. If he were a cartoon, they would have heard the *galoomp* of him swallowing it whole.

“Did you even chew that?” James shook his head, whether in awe or disgust it was hard to tell.

“There’s nothing better than salty breakfast meat.”

“That’s what *he* said.”

# Bare Knuckle

*Katie Porter*

*Skin deep is never deep enough.*

*Vegas Top Guns, Book 5*

After a near-fatal plane crash,  
fighter pilot Captain Eric “Kisser”

Donaghue is a changed man. By day he labors to regain his confidence in the cockpit. By night he moonlights as an off-Strip boxer, fighting for prize money to pay for his younger brother's third stint in rehab.

In the ring, no one cares he once had a face that launched a thousand one-night stands—and neither does Eric. He's only there to win. Yet he can't take his eyes off the new ring girl, a glitz-meets-pageant-queen vision of blonde perfection.

Down on her luck but not quite out, Vegas showgirl Trish Monroe lives for the spotlight. The scarred,

steely-eyed loner who stares at her from his corner of the ring gives Trish an extra reason to strut her stuff.

Curiosity and the temptation of a no-strings good time bring them together. The discovery of their secret fetishes—she likes to show off, he likes to watch—turns mere sexual chemistry into a fiery exploration of matched passions. They're a natural fit. Trust in love, however, is harder to earn than trust in bed, especially when this beauty and beast hide even from themselves.

Warning: This book contains a Sin City-style Beauty and the Beast love story, lots of naughty pics and vids, adrenaline-pumped base jumping, and a set of *very* important note cards. Oh, and as always, an incredibly hot fighter pilot.

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