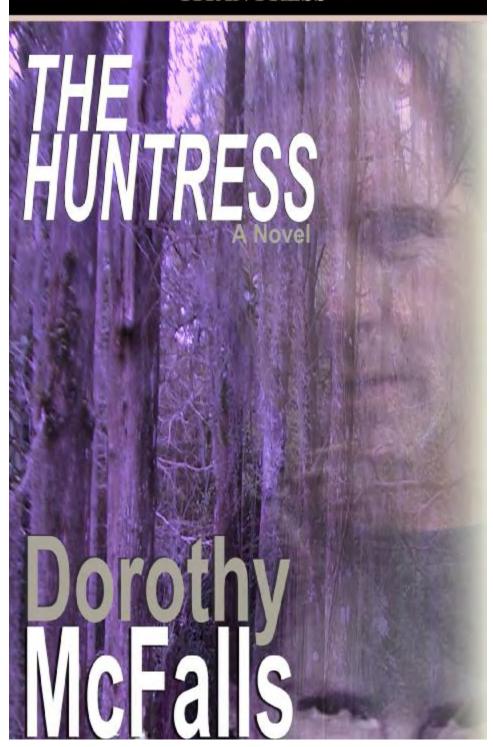
# TITAN PRESS



# THE HUNTRESS

# By

**Dorothy McFalls** 

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## THE HUNTRESS

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# Dedication:

For the strong women I've been lucky enough to know and, sadly, the world has since lost. I have been forever changed. Without them, I wouldn't have ever had the courage to write. God bless you.

# Acknowledgements:

I'd like to give a special thanks to Tracey West and Luisa Pugliano for helping this book finally make its way into publication.

And to Judy Ashley for helping me revise this book and giving me the encouragement to stick with it!

# Chapter One

Vega Brookes sighed and let her head sink deep into Butch Polsen's pillow. She couldn't think of a better way to spend the afternoon.

Butch was a hulk of a man with edges rougher than shattered glass, but damn, he knew how to touch a woman's body. Stripped nude, he balanced on top of her with his battered, leather cowboy hat sitting at a crooked angle on top of his blond head. His blue eyes sparkled. He liked to be on top. It was a power thing for him.

Today, she wanted him on top, too. She'd spent most of the previous night chasing a drug pusher with an arsenal of guns who got his jollies putting nasty holes in people and didn't think bothering to show up for his own jury trial important. The slushy Detroit alleyways she'd chased him through had nearly ruined her favorite lace-up boots. And they weren't cheap.

So when Butch pushed her onto his bed and climbed on top, she didn't complain. Let him do all the work, she was tired.

At the moment, he was tracing a line with that hot tongue of his around her breasts until her nipples turned hard before working his way up her neck.

"Butch," she whispered on a weighty breath, "do that thing with your fingers. That thing that makes me crazy."

He raised his head and smiled. He had that look in his eyes, that sharp, assessing stare. Vega knew what it meant.

"Let me tie you up." His hot breath caressed her neck.

"Butch--" The shrill chirp of her digital phone cut everything short, including her need to lose herself with him no matter how rough he liked to make things. With a push, she rolled him off her and slipped from the bed.

"Ignore it," he growled.

"Can't. Told Jack I'd be available." She pulled her leather jacket from the chair, and her phone from its inside pocket.

"Jack!" Butch punched the bed.

"Yep?" she said into the phone. Standing in the middle of Butch's one-room apartment not worrying about the uncovered windows or her lack of clothes, she scribbled a barely legible name and court date into her small notebook. "He'll be easy to get. This is what, the third time I've had to bring him to court? I feel like a freaking nanny or something."

But as long as the money was good, she'd happily bring in Lionel every day.

Lionel Wahl, aka "The Great Wall" because of his massive size, followed a rigid routine, including his attempts to give the law the slip. If she worked quickly, his pickup would bring her an easy paycheck. She uttered a quick goodbye to Jack--the owner of the bail enforcement agency that signed her paycheck--before snapping the tiny silver phone shut and jamming it back into her jacket pocket.

"You're going to leave? Just like that? In the middle of...of...? Hell, Vega." Butch punched the bed again just as Vega leaned under the kitchen table to grab her panties.

"Jack expects all his hunters to do local jobs when we're in town. It's good PR." She stood and slipped her black t-shirt over her head. The word "Goddess" blazed in gold letters, letters that strained across her chest thanks to a malfunctioning coin-operated washer in New Mexico that shrank an entire load of shirts by practically boiling them. The small shirts had worked to her benefit, though, by giving her fugitives a distracting view while she cuffed them.

She gave her lace panties a little shake before stepping into them, and then wondered where her skirt had landed.

"Jack takes advantage of you. He sends you on all the high-profile hard-to-find cases. That's good enough PR." He pulled himself from the bed. He was a good seven inches taller and at least one hundred pounds heavier. He liked to use his size to his advantage. "You don't need to do this local shit for him, too."

She laughed and gave his washboard stomach a light slap. "Don't be a jealous ass. Jack's my uncle."

She found her skirt on the sofa under Butch's jeans. "The longer I wait." She inched the supple leather over her hips. "The harder it'll be to find my quarry."

Butch growled but tugged his pants on. He hastily buttoned them, and then straightened his cowboy hat. Sometimes the guy could put on quite a show.

"Look." She gave him a hard kiss square on the lips. "This shouldn't take all day. I can get back by six or so."

"Maybe I won't be here." His rough expression hardened into a stare frightening enough to melt any woman into a quivering mass of nerves. But Vega wasn't just any woman. She thrived on tangling with dangerous men.

It was her job.

She was a bounty hunter.

"Guess I'll have my fun without you tonight, then." She checked the clip on her Glock 9mm semiautomatic pistol and snapped it back into place.

Sure, he could do things to her body that made her wonder if she might explode. That talent didn't make him indispensable.

Butch was her lover. A convenience. Jack was family. In her life, family came first. She shrugged on her leather jacket, quickly braided her hair into a cord that hung down her back, and made a straight path to the apartment door.

"I hate your hair like that," he muttered. He leaned his head against the doorjamb and frowned. He looked almost endearing.

For a moment, she felt guilty about leaving him and his bed. "Look," she said, "I promised Jack I'd help him out."

"I know. I know. You always keep your promises." He sounded pitiful. "Call me?"

Outside, snow fell in those large globs that stuck together, promising that the streets would soon get muddier and icier. She let the damp bite revive her. She'd always loved how the winter and the cold could clear her head and make her feel acutely alive. It invigorated her and made the chase all the more exciting. Her jeep, an ancient four-wheel-drive she'd revived from a pile of rust, took her down a bumpy street deep into one of Detroit's forgotten neighborhoods.

The depressed area, with its sprinkling of abandoned and burnt-out shells of houses on every street, would never make its way into a glossy tour book. The row houses dated back to the nineteen forties and probably hadn't seen a repairman for decades. Several shabby characters sat on a front stoop. A few others stood on the sidewalk. For the most part, everyone ignored her.

A twitchy little man with a permanently broken nose and missing most of his teeth gave Vega a wide gaping smile, though. He waved her over to the curb.

Monroe

Just the man Vega was hoping to find.

Monroe was a homeless drug addict. But he saw just about everything that happened in Detroit's underbelly and would share his knowledge...for a price. He limped over to Vega's Jeep and leaned heavily on the door.

"Hey baby, what'cha got for me today?" Monroe rubbed his red, swollen hands on his threadbare coat, probably to warm them.

Vega leaned forward in her seat. "Where's the coat and gloves I bought you?"

"Got expenses, baby, lots of expenses." He'd traded the coat for drugs if his glassy eyes were any indication. The sharp stink of urine drifted through the window. That was a new low for him. "New guy invading the streets, you know. He's a real expensive shit. Gotta do what'cha gotta do, you know?"

She pressed a twenty into his freezing hands. "Buy something warm with this." She peeled a second twenty from her money clip but held onto it. "Tell me, Monroe. Who's The Great Wall seeing lately?"

He eyed that second twenty like a kid would a forbidden sweet. "She's not some ho. Not this time. He's getting it for free this time, the lucky bastard."

Vega drew the twenty back when Monroe reached out to grab it. "Where can I find her?"

"Some apartment in the West Vernor area. Don't know the street, exactly." His hand was snaking out for the twenty again. "It's in one of them brick buildings. Can't go anywhere near there anymore. Rich bastards invaded the area. The cops hassle the hell out of me whenever I step foot on one of those streets."

She held tight to the money. "Her name?"

Monroe had to think for a moment. He kept his swimmy gaze trained on the twenty. "Lila...Lila Crafter, I think." He snatched the money and hobbled away.

Still parked on the side of the road, she made two quick phone calls while keeping an eye on a group of young kids wearing gang colors who had suddenly taken an interest in her.

The first call was to Officer Ford, a local cop she trusted. With a little prodding, he agreed to pick up Monroe before that forty dollars of hers could be used to purchase heroin. Ford was pretty sure there was a charge pending against Monroe somewhere, which was good. Monroe would get a warm bed and a solid meal tonight.

With that handled, she punched in the phone number for Fiona, her younger sister. Much to hers and her mother's alarm, Jack had recently hired Fiona to work for Skip Tracers.

Of course Fiona had thrown the fact that Jack had offered Vega a bounty hunter position at Skip Tracers four years earlier in their faces as a defense. But that was different. Vega had been a cop at the time with the Detroit PD. And unhappy as hell.

Fiona was the family's golden child. An innocent. Fresh out of college. She didn't know the world of violence and crime like Vega did. And Jack had no right to put her in their world.

Vega was only still speaking to him because he hadn't let Fiona do anything more than serve as research assistant to the team of active bounty hunters, much to Fiona's chagrin. As long as he kept her tucked safely behind a desk, Vega was forced to admit having her sister around was proving useful.

In less than a minute, Fiona had matched an address to a Lila Crafter living in the West Vernor area.

Number forty-five B on Green Street, Fiona had said. It took five minutes to navigate through the snowy streets and find a parking space across from the three-story brick apartment building.

Vega watched from her jeep while a bleached blonde, wearing a frilly flower print skirt and a pink coat with a white fur trim, climbed out of a shiny new Mercedes SUV and hobbled across the icy sidewalk in three-inch heels. Each step turned into a painful lesson in patience for Vega as the woman took her time, testing the concrete for slick spots.

Get on with it, Vega could barely keep herself from screaming. This woman, clad in her fashionable Prada helpless-wear—spiky shoes and matching leather handbag, couldn't really be Lila Crafter? Surely, a fashion-conscious woman like that wouldn't slum around with some gruff, occasionally dangerous criminal like Lionel Wahl.

Vega exhaled a long breath. The woman fiddled with her keys a moment before unlocking the door marked forty-five B.

That pink powder puff was Wahl's new girl. Go figure.

Vega stepped out of the jeep and crossed the street. A passing patrol car slowed. West Vernor was becoming trendy. Just down the block, a popular Mexican restaurant's

parking lot looked like a luxury car sales center. The cops wouldn't appreciate a commotion with a takedown, not in this neighborhood. Great.

After circling the building and checking all the exits, Vega knocked on the front door. The powder puff answered.

Vega took it nice and easy, giving Lila a gentle smile. A girlfriend harboring her fugitive was always considered dangerous, and she had no interest in getting sucker punched by this one, powder puff or not.

"Miss Crafter?" Vega said, making no attempt to step into the apartment. "I'm looking for Lionel Wahl. I've got a package for him. Is he around?"

Lila's eyes sparkled with confusion. She started to push the door closed. "I don't know who you mean."

"The Great Wall?" Vega stuck her boot in the door. "Your man, Lila?"

"Wally?" Lila flicked a nervous glance over her shoulder. Vega would lay good odds that Lionel was hiding inside.

One of the perks of being a bounty hunter rather than a cop was that she could go anywhere she believed her fugitive to be hiding. No warrant needed. No worry about civil rights. Lionel gave those up when he signed his bail bond. By not showing up for court, he was officially an escaped prisoner. And fair game for any means necessary to bring him back.

"Look, I'm a bail enforcement officer," Vega said, wanting to avoid strong-arm tactics. Though is was perfectly legal to force her way into the apartment as long as The Great Wall was inside, she didn't like to scare the civilians, like Lila. In fact, she'd called herself a bail enforcement officer, hoping it sounded more benign than a gun-slinging 'bounty hunter'. "Your Wally didn't show up for court today. I'm here to take him to the police before the cops get testy."

"That's impossible. You've got the wrong house." Lila threw another glance over her shoulder. "My Wally has never been arrested." She tried again to close the door.

Vega slipped inside the warm foyer before the door could snap closed. "Then you wouldn't mind if I had a quick word with your *Wally*?"

Lila's hands trembled as she brushed a few strands of hair from her face. "I suppose not."

Vega followed Lila up the stairs, into a living room furnished with a brand new tan and white sofa and matching overstuffed chairs. Lionel was sure moving up in the

world. The last time she picked him up, she'd found him sleeping on a broken bed in an abandoned fleabag motel used by the really cheap hookers. A rat had been crawling across his bare back.

"Wally, tell this woman she's mistaken about you."

His eyes met Vega's. He rose from the sofa. At nearly seven feet tall with broad shoulders to match, he lived up to his name, *The Great Wall*. Seated, he'd taken up nearly the entire sofa. Standing, he dominated the room.

"This is a nice place, Lionel. Don't ruin what you've got here. Just come with me peacefully."

He sucked in a quick breath. His pricey sweater stretched, his tailored pants rustled. "Didn't know you were back in town, Vega." His low voice rumbled. "Heard you were in New Mexico chasing some gun smugglers the feds couldn't keep their hands on."

"Caught them three days ago. It was all over the news. Sorry you missed it. You going to come with me downtown, right?"

"What does she mean?" Lila's voice grew shrill.

Lionel shrugged. "It's okay, Lila. I gotta go out for a while."

Vega eased out a breath. *Another easy pickup*, she thought. She was congratulating herself too soon, though. An explosion from downstairs shook the room and wiped the smugness from her face.

Shit.

Fate seemed to hate it when she got too full of herself.

She drew her gun and spun toward the foyer stairs just as Butch, cowboy hat jammed low on his head, charged into the room. A nasty short stock shotgun was locked in his grasp. "You're under arrest! Move a muscle asshole, and I'll blow your ugly head off!"

Lila started screaming.

Vega nearly dropped her Glock. "What the hell?"

Butch swung around, his shotgun aimed squarely at her chest. "Vega?" He lowered the barrel.

"Damn." Vega jammed her gun back into the hostler. "This is the second time the Tyler Bonding Company has contracted with two agencies."

"It's the new secretary." Butch locked the shotgun's aim on Lionel again. "I said don't move!"

Lila's screams grew louder.

"She can't keep her records straight." Butch kept his gaze trained on Lionel whose face had closed down into a blank street-tough hardness. "Wait a minute. What in the hell is Jack thinking? This scum is five times your size."

Telling Butch that size didn't matter would be a waste of breath. "I was here first," she said instead. "This is my pickup."

"Hell no, it's not."

Lionel backed away from the both of them. Vega didn't blame him. Arguments and guns...the combination had a funny way of turning dangerous.

"No you don't, asshole." Butch cocked the shotgun.

With surprising grace for such a large man, Lionel hurled a nearby lamp at Butch's head. Butch ducked, but the heavy lamp still smashed against his skull. A string of vile curses came spitting out his mouth.

Lionel gave a shout of his own and tossed himself through a diamond-paned window. The glass shattered, and he was gone.

Butch was bleeding from his forehead and cursing up a storm. He'd live.

But could this disaster be salvaged? Vega didn't know.

She grabbed Lila who was turning purple from screaming so hard, and gave her a little shake to capture her attention. "Don't worry. I'll protect your man."

Lila finally shut up.

"I'll get him." Butch swung his shotgun over his shoulder and disappeared back down the stairs.

Vega didn't waste a moment. She leapt through the gaping hole that had once been a window and landed in a slushy back alleyway ten feet below. Glass shards crunched under her boots.

The sun was already dipping low on the horizon. In less than an hour, Lionel was going to have the benefit of total darkness.

Following his trail in the snow, she tracked Lionel down one alley into another. He was snaking his way back to the drug infested streets Vega knew well. Problem was, Lionel knew them, too, and would soon have access to friends willing to fight for him.

Luckily, speed was something Vega had over those big, lumbering men. She could outrun just about any fugitive. Within a few blocks, she caught her first glimpse of

him. His lungs must have been burning by now. His massive feet pounded the ground, his body swinging from side to side. One more block and she'd have him.

"Lionel," she yelled when she was almost within reach. "You don't have to go down like this."

He stopped. His arm, thick as a log, swept a quick, deadly arc. She ducked, taking a glancing blow to the top of her head.

His eyes were like stone, his mouth set in a firm line. There would be no calming him today. Not after Butch had pointed that stupid shotgun at Lionel's head.

She'd have to subdue him before he hurt someone, namely her. Getting injured wasn't an option. She inhaled slowly to steady her breathing and focused all her energy on her attack.

Her first blow, a swinging kick, struck his knee. He stumbled a step but was far from down. Angrier, he lunged for her. She rolled out of reach. Springing back to her feet, she considered drawing her gun. But he was in a blind rage now. The threat of bullets wouldn't stop him. And she didn't want to shoot him.

Though he had a reputation for breaking people with those meaty hands of his—a real bone crushing kind of guy—lately he was just a money launderer. Been truly trying to lay off the violence. She'd seen the positive changes and, damn it, she didn't want to risk sending him spiraling back into a life that literally crawled with rats and cheap hookers.

She ducked another blow. Damn. Why hadn't she grabbed the Taser from her equipment bag before going in after him? Hell, because picking up Lionel had never been a problem before. They'd built a relationship built on mutual fear and respect.

Mentally shaking herself, she dodged another wild punch and tossed a series of quick kicks to the side of Lionel's knee. She followed up with a swift blow to his collarbone, ducking and retreating before his flailing fists could make contact.

He teetered. His growing rage made his attack unpredictable and inefficient. He swung those trunk-like arms blindly.

She could use that. She wasn't about to let Lionel get away. Not with Butch hot on his trail. He'd threaten to kill the guy. If nothing else, she had to protect Lionel. And despite Butch's taunts, she knew she could handle a giant like Lionel.

On the street, size didn't matter. Skill did.

Only 5'3" and one hundred and twenty-five pounds, she needed to depend on all her skills to get this guy. His freakish height would work to her advantage. Staying low, she charged and tackled his legs with a great big bear hug. Knowing he'd instinctively bend down to pull her off, she held on while twisting a kick straight up, aiming the tip of her boot for his nose.

It crunched

Lionel howled. His hands flew to his face.

Vega sprang to her feet and with one fluid move, locked a handcuff to his wrist and hooked the other side to a nearby dumpster.

"Sorry about the nose, Lionel," she said, while struggling to catch her breath.

Blood trickled down his chin. He kept his free hand over his face and moaned pitifully. She carefully patted him down, searching for any concealed weapons or illegal drugs. Not that she'd turn him in for the drugs. It was just that he didn't need anymore trouble than he already had.

She found nothing on him but a scrap of paper in his pocket with the name "Finn" scribbled on one side along with a phone number. She pushed the paper back into his pants and plucked a phone from her own pocket to arrange for a Skip Tracers van to pick them up.

"Get out of the way!" Butch charged toward her, his face beet red.

She dropped the phone.

"I've got him!" she shouted.

Butch didn't seem to hear. He aimed his shotgun at Lionel's head and cocked it. "Bastard."

He'd said the word in a deadly calm that froze her blood. Butch was planning to fire whether she got out of the way or not. Moving fast, she kicked the shotgun's barrel, sending its wide spray of bullets into the air.

"Have you lost your freaking mind?" she ripped the shotgun out of Butch's hands and tossed it to the ground.

He didn't answer right away. His gaze was locked on Lionel. An expression, soiled with hatred, wrinkled his nose and tightened his mouth into a set sneer. "Filthy scum. Scum like that doesn't deserve to live."

# Chapter Two

"I thought Butch was going kill Lionel last night."

Vega ducked a flying kick and then somersaulted into a crouch prepared to spring back into an attack.

"He's a hothead," Fiona said. She landed with a kitten's grace. Her brown hair flowed about her face as she easily deflected Vega's forward attack. "I've never liked him."

A short hand-to-hand sparring followed. Fiona was the one to retreat to the edge of the mat.

Vega gave her sister a moment to catch her breath. "I like Butch. He's a challenge, not some namby-pamby momma's boy like your man."

Fiona erupted with a little roar and charged back into action. Vega was impressed. Her little sister was beginning to improve. Her moves were fast, consistent and focused.

At the dojo where Vega trained for at least an hour each day, they were taught a mixture of the highly disciplined Tang Soo Do mixed with no holds barred street fighting. She trained hard, but with Fiona, she always pulled her punches.

Vega parried and blocked without committing herself to a full counter-attack. The quick sidekick was easy to deflect. Fiona always followed the move with a slicing right hook. Vega raised her arm in anticipation when from out of nowhere a thunderbolt struck the left side of her face, hurling her to the mat.

Pain coursed through her cheek. She closed her eyes and imagined that last move, mentally taking apart her action, Fiona's surprise thrust, and her own sloppy reaction.

"Off your game today?"

She grimaced and opened her eyes to find Jack's lovely mug. He offered her a hand up while Fiona danced around the mat with her arms in the air acting like the spoiled brat she could be.

"Lucky shot," Vega grumbled, rubbing her stinging cheek.

Jack tossed her a towel. A wide grin brightened his gently aging face. That grin always made her edgy. And she didn't need help feeling edgy today, not after she nearly blew her pickup yesterday. Her lack of preparation had almost gotten Lionel killed. Maybe she *was* off her game—losing her edge.

She wiped her face on the towel and tossed it aside. "Don't let one win get you cocky, Fiona," she warned.

Fiona wasn't listening. She'd pulled Mike, one of the instructors, aside and was showing him her new moves, her slender body replaying the lucky strike. Vega could only shake her head. Fiona had inherited the Brookes' family curse: a swaggering conceit. It was their father's legacy, of course.

Their father, Detroit's Police Chief David Brookes, had longed to train a son to be a tough-as-nails SOB. But his wife had given him nothing better than two daughters.

"About yesterday," Jack said, running a hand through his full head of gray hair. He followed her into the dojo's small, unisex locker room. "I promise it won't happen again. I've been on the phone all morning giving everyone a headache that can't be ignored."

She stepped into a changing stall and pulled the curtain closed. "You get Butch fired?" She didn't want Butch jobless, just pulled back a little until he learned to control his anger.

"Butch? No, I was talking about that stupid Tyler Bonding secretary. She won't be sending two different bounty hunters after the same prey again, that's for damn sure. About Butch, from the sounds of it, he lost his head. He's got a mercenary mentality I wouldn't allow at Skip Tracers, but then I demand a higher level of professionalism than most."

"He nearly killed Lionel in a blind rage." She still couldn't believe how his anger had transformed him. She'd nearly had to attack him just to get him to back down. "I don't understand what happened."

"Push hard enough and," he snapped his fingers, "can happen to anyone," Jack said from the other side of the curtain.

"Not me." She wiped the sweat from underneath her breasts. "I would never—"

"Vega," Jack's shoes scraped on the concrete floor as he left the locker room. "That's a dangerous attitude. Everyone has a breaking point. Deny it, and you'll blind yourself to knowing when you've reached yours."

Jack was probably right, but she wasn't ready to face it. For years, she'd honed her physical and mental abilities with one goal in mind: control. She might never match a man's physical strength, but she could push her own limits by maintaining a steady focus and by always keeping her head.

She stepped into a nearby shower and stood under the steaming stream of water unable to peel her mind from the unsettling thought Jack had planted. What would happen if she were pushed to the edge? How would she know what the edge even looked like?

"Meet me at the office in an hour, Vega. I've got a new project." Jack called out from the dojo's main exercise area, his voice echoing through the empty locker room. Leaving her alone to wash away her sudden encounter with uncertainty.

\* \* \* \*

It took a little less than an hour to clean up, change, and drive back downtown. The snow had stopped falling the night before and the main roads were clear and easy to drive.

Fiona had somehow finagled a ride back to the office with Vega. She sat in the passenger seat talking nonstop. That one lucky punch *had* gone straight to her head.

"You should take me with you on your next assignment. I'm ready, you know. I have my license. I'm bonded and everything. Didn't you just love how I surprised you with that left? I was planning..."

Vega stopped listening somewhere near the Chrysler Expressway. Nothing could convince her to trust Fiona to keep her head in a real-life situation. Fiona was so not ready for bounty hunting. Her bout of bragging only proved it.

"Oh damn, look. I broke a nail today," Fiona complained while the elevator rushed them to the sixteenth floor, adding more strength to Vega's point. Her little sister was fretting over a broken nail, for goodness sake.

Once on the sixteenth floor, Vega pulled a small pile of messages from the box sitting on the receptionist's desk at the entrance of Skip Tracers suite of offices. Two were from Butch, no message other than his phone number. The rest were from her mother, wanting to have dinner on Friday.

"Jack, I hope this next assignment takes me out of town," she said as she dropped into her desk chair and shoved the messages into a cluttered drawer. "Mom must have found a new bachelor to parade in front me. She's called three times this morning alone."

Jack frowned. "She won't be happy till her girls are settled, married and following her to all those society events she likes so much. Perhaps you'll take her seriously one day." His frown deepened. "I'd hate to lose you, though."

"I'd hate to lose me, too." She kicked back in her chair. "What'cha got for me?"

"It's a real challenge. You're my best, Vega. You're the only one I'd give this to."

"Yeah, yeah." She dismissed Jack's compliment. He was just buttering her up, which could only mean this new assignment was a real winner. "Get to the details."

"Grayson Walker." Jack tossed a picture along with a thick file folder on her desk. "Big reward, bail's set at five million. He was a top executive for Six-Star Enterprises." Jack paused, as if expecting a reaction.

He should have known better.

"Six-Star," Jack said with a huff. "Based in Atlanta. They're one of the newest and wealthiest Fortune 500 Companies. They've been in the news almost constantly for the past several years with announcements of the small industries they've been acquiring...quite hostilely."

Vega raised her head from the photo on her desk and stared blankly at Jack.

"You really need to break down and buy a television," he muttered.

"What did he do?" She didn't care to listen to the details about the company Grayson worked for. At least not until after she agreed to track the guy down.

"Murdered a partner in the company. Gruesome killing. Nothing is as simple as a gunshot in the head anymore. These damned crazies have to get creative."

"A shame," she said with a deep sigh. She stared at the photo of her quarry again. The men she pursued could rarely be called even passably good-looking. But the man who stared into the camera for this picture was unquestionably handsome. His hair was dark, short and a little tousled. His bronze skin gave his chiseled features a healthy glow. The photo certainly wasn't from the police file. The tailored dark business suit did wonders for his full frame, for one thing. He was smiling, for another. This man, this Grayson Walker, could melt a woman's heart with a smile like that. It was a crying shame that someone with those kinds of looks going for him could turn out twisted.

And unfortunate, for Vega's task at least, the brown eyes she saw staring up at her were sharp and dangerously intelligent.

"How long has he been loose?" she asked.

"Six months."

She flew to her feet. "Six months? He's been missing for six months and the bonding company is only now getting around to looking for him?"

Jack murmured something under his breath.

"What?"

"You won't be the first bounty hunter to go after him," he said louder this time. "Three others have already failed to bring him back. He killed the last one. But, I know you. You could get this guy without even trying."

"He's had plenty of time to bury himself into a damn deep hole, Jack. I don't know."

"Houdini couldn't hide from you." He waved his hand at the high-tech computer taking up half her desk and most of the adjacent computer table. "Work your magic. It'll be an easy five hundred thousand if he's still in Georgia, a million if he's fled the state."

Though the money was enticing, the challenge of succeeding where three other top bounty hunters had failed was what really snared her.

The photo of her father sitting high on a nearby shelf caught her eye. He was dressed in his everyday police uniform and wearing his usual stern expression. He'd died only a week after the picture was taken. Maybe if she succeeded where three others had failed, she'd finally be able to imagine him with a look of pride for her.

"Okay Jack," she said with a deep sigh. "I'll find him."

\* \* \* \*

Early the next morning Vega pinned the photo of Grayson Walker to her bulletin board. "Where would a twisted mind like yours go?" She flipped open the police file and began the long process of digging into a fugitive's head.

Days passed without much progress. The file was thick, but it didn't have much in the way of useful information. His childhood was a mystery. No birth records could be found. Vega decided to work backwards, beginning with his arrest.

"This guy is sick." Vega nearly lost her lunch when she finally got a copy of the crime scene photos. There wasn't much left of the man Grayson was accused of killing. This crime really drove home the term 'hack job'.

His best friend? That was always a good place to start. Unfortunately, the man Grayson allegedly killed, Greg Harper, was also the only man Vega might consider calling Grayson's close friend.

Girlfriends were usually great sources of information. She spent days on the phone trying to track down a steady girlfriend, a one-night stand, or a whore.

Nothing. The guy must have been celibate.

Or really good at covering his tracks.

He'd helped build the lucrative Atlanta based Six-Star Enterprises with two other men, Joshua Whitfield and Greg Harper. Joshua Whitfield was the money behind the company, a titan in the investment-banking world who appeared to have very little involvement in the day-to-day operations of Six-Star.

The dead Greg Harper and Grayson were the brains behind the corporation. She couldn't figure out exactly what Six-Star did besides acquire smaller corporations. But whatever it was, Greg and Grayson worked closely together. She traced their friendship all the way back to when they were roommates at the University of Georgia through their college years.

Something between the two must have gone sour in those last few days. Something that pushed Grayson so far over the edge, he saw nothing wrong with hacking his best friend into tiny bits. But Vega wasn't interested in motive; she just needed a clue to Grayson's whereabouts. Any crumb would do.

She was finally making some progress tracking down Greg Harper's pre-college history—hoping to find a continued link between the men—when the phone rang.

"Hello?" she nearly shouted into the phone, desperate to hear good news from one of the hundreds of contacts she'd made in the past several weeks.

"Lower your voice, Vega," her mother said with a stern clip. "I can't understand why you insist on speaking with that bold voice. It scares away men, you know."

Wonderful, her mother must have found *yet* another eligible bachelor. She'd just finished dodging that last one. "I'm really busy with a case right now, Mom. I'll be staying at the office until very late every day this week."

"You can spare a moment for your mother." It wasn't a request. Vega swallowed hard. He must be a real winner this time. "Tonight. Eight o'clock. I'd like you to meet Mrs. Byers's son, Kyle. He's a doctor." Her voice literally sparkled on the word, *doctor*.

"I don't know. I'm already seeing someone."

"Oh, and wear something appropriate. I certainly don't want Kyle scared away by those dreadful army boots, horridly baggy cargo pants, and one of those ill-fitting black t-shirts you insist on wearing."

Vega looked down. That was exactly what she was wearing. Was she becoming predictable?

"Well, it's practical. You can't expect me to apprehend a fugitive in high heels and long skirt. I wouldn't be able to defend myself. I'd break an ankle."

"I don't understand why you insist on dressing like you came from poverty. Your father was the city's police chief for heaven's sake. A very respected position. We have a duty to his memory to always look respectable. I about died the last time you showed up for lunch with me at the club."

"I explained that. I..."

"And another thing, Vega. Your job. It's unseemly. I'd rather you didn't talk about it with Kyle. You're not a kid anymore. It's time you started acting like a woman. It's past time you got married."

"I have no interest..."

"You have a duty. Just look at the example you're setting for your sister."

This was a new argument in her mother's repertoire. It stung, too, because she agreed. Fiona had no business following in her footsteps.

"I've tried to talk to her, Mom. She won't listen."

"She'd follow your example if you grew up and acted like a lady once in a while."

Vega listened patiently as her mother continued to lecture. Her duty as a daughter was to listen...not to agree. Though by the time she hung up the phone, she'd agreed to meet this new bachelor her mother had selected. Some family obligations simply had to be endured.

At five o'clock, she decided to call it a day. Fifteen minutes later, she found Butch Polsen's well-used Ford Crown Victoria parked at the curb of her apartment building. Butch was waiting for her at the door, his snakeskin boot propped up across the frame, his blond hair shimmering in the streetlight. He tipped his battered cowboy hat. "You won't return my calls."

"Do you blame me?" She crossed her arms and stared at him. She wasn't exactly disappointed to see him.

He might be an uneducated brute with a short fuse, but he was still the safest man in her life. Probably because he wasn't the type of man who could tempt her heart. Or make her long for his love. Love was for powder puffs like Lila Crafter and her mother. No way would she end up like one of them, loving a hard man like a brainless ninny.

"I won't apologize, if that's what you expect," he said. "That scum deserved to eat some buckshot after attacking me like that. You shouldn't have stopped me."

"You're a menace, Butch." She pushed him aside and unlocked the door. "Might as well come in since you're here."

He greedily accepted the invitation to invade her quiet space. "So, this is where you live?" He whistled through his teeth. "It's so bare...depressing."

Her second story apartment was furnished with natural woods: bamboo and maple. A few black crystals and polished ebony stones populated the tops of the furniture, creating a stark contrast to the whitewashed walls. A tall bamboo plant grew in a bubbling water garden beside a bank of windows. This was her sanctuary.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Butch. Not tonight." She closed and locked the door behind them. "I've been summoned to my mother's for dinner."

"Another bachelor?" A spark of anger flashed in his eyes. He grabbed her by the nape of her neck and pulled her hard against his body. Her senses exploded with the memory of their past physical encounter.

His lips covered hers. With adept skill, his fiery kiss teased her mouth open. His tongue encircled hers, enticing her to surrender.

A thoughtless tumble with him would do wonders for her nerves. The elusive Grayson Walker had haunted her day and night. His stunning smile even dared to intrude into her dreams. She deserved a break.

Her body turned tingly, alive in Butch's hands. He deepened his kiss, leaving her breathless. He'd already worked one hand into her shirt, arousing a nipple into a hard peak with those magic fingers of his. A hot gaze pinned her to the wall. A feral wildness she almost feared swirled deep in his blue eyes. His gaze pressing deeper, he peeled her khakis open and buried his hand in her panties.

She moaned against his lips. Her body throbbed as he eased a finger deep within her. Oh yeah, mindless sex would be a very pleasing way to spend the evening. She might even risk her mother's anger...

Her cell phone chirped.

"Don't you dare answer it," Butch growled. His heavy caresses grew more intense. Her legs weakened.

The phone chirped again.

She swallowed a lusty lump. Her body felt heavy, burning for satisfaction. "Have to," she whispered hoarsely, "expecting a call from Snitch."

It took all her willpower to peel Butch away and reach into her coat pocket for the phone. "Vega here," she said. Her voice sounded strained even to herself.

"Snitch," a metallic voice said on the other end. "I've got a bunch of weird stuff on your fugitive." There was a pause. "You okay? You sound funny."

"Just a little overheated. Go on."

"There's a CIA file on this guy and his victim. It's locked up tighter than Fort Knox. It'll cost you...um...five hundred for the risk."

Snitch was the best computer hacker in the area. Many of the bounty hunters in town used her services—at least they all thought Snitch was a 'her'. The metallic voice had a decidedly feminine lilt. No one knew for certain. Payments were wired electronically to a Swiss bank account.

"Thanks Snitch. I'll pay it. Let me know as soon as you liberate the files." Vega switched off the phone.

Her mind started racing. The CIA? What was going on?

"You're deep in that Walker assignment?" Butch asked. The passion drained from his voice.

"What do you know about it?"

"The last hunter to go after the bastard worked with me."

She didn't know. "Oh...I'm sorry, Butch."

He shrugged. "The bonding company withdrew their contract with us hours after that bastard popped a hole through my friend's head. Said they were afraid we'd carry out some kind of vigilante justice."

"Imagine that," she said dryly. Knowing Butch, he'd probably snap Grayson's neck like a twig if he were to get near enough.

"Watch yourself, Vega. Don't go after him alone."

She shrugged off the warning. She knew how to take care of herself. "Tell me, do you know anything specific about this guy that could help me find him?"

He stubbed his foot against the edge of a sisal rug for several minutes before answering. "I shouldn't help you. I lost a friend and a lot of money because of him."

"Fine." She checked her watch. She was dangerously close to being late for her mother's dinner party. "I've got to get changed and ready to go to Mom's."

A few sleek dresses hung in the back of her closet just for these occasions. She went into the bedroom and started to dress. Her mother, always eager to impress—she was the good political force behind her husband's rise to police chief—liked to make her dinner parties into grand affairs. Serving gournet meals on the finest china in the family's austere formal dining room. The fact her mother had inherited a fortune from a great-aunt, only made her lofty vision of what was 'impressive' all the more possible.

"He was Army Special Ops," Butch called from the other room. "That's what Snitch is probably opening, his Special Ops history file. His partner, Greg Harper, served with him along with two others. I don't know what missions they were on. The lid on his history is tight. Doubt Snitch can pry those files open. The hacker we used failed miserably. Couldn't get much of anything useful that way."

She emerged from the bedroom fully dressed in a pale violet silk dress that dipped low in the back. Her strappy pumps with heels that would make a fluff-ball like Lila Crafter proud matched the gown perfectly. She pulled her hair up into a loose French twist. She hadn't bothered with much makeup; her mother would scold.

"Thanks, Butch." She gave him a quick kiss and pushed him toward the door. "If I don't leave right now, Mom will be having fits by the time I get over to the house."

\* \* \* \*

After a painfully long evening, Vega collapsed on her bed and stared at the ceiling. This new bachelor her mom had selected had taken one look at Vega and just about licked his lips. The conversation revolved around his life as a doctor at a private clinic and his opinions on everything, all of which bored Vega down to the soles of her feet...until he started to talk about self-defense. He'd recent begun taking classes and thoroughly enjoyed the challenge. Finally, a topic of common interest. She had agreed heartily and explained how invaluable her lessons had been to her when bounty hunting.

The room slammed into an uncomfortable silence. Her mother's newest candidate for Vega's future husband snapped his gapping mouth closed. She'd clearly shocked him.

Vega and the renowned doctor fit together like two ill-matched puzzle pieces.

She stared at the ceiling for several more minutes before dragging herself back up to check her phone messages. Snitch had called twice. First to report she'd retrieved Grayson Walker's file, and then to report that she'd retrieved the files on the team who'd served with him.

Vega flipped on her computer and pulled up her email. Sure enough, the files Snitch had promised were sitting in her inbox waiting to be read. It took the rest of the night for her to absorb every word.

The files cracked open Grayson's past, but gave nothing of what Grayson or his buddies had done during their years in the army. With a little additional computer work, she put together a long list of family and neighbors from Grayson's childhood—all possible sources. Within a few days, she would know every detail, including Grayson's favorite color. As the first rays of light streamed through her window, Vega leaned back in her chair, grinning. She felt damned full of herself.

"Gotcha!" she said.

# Chapter Three

Her trail ended here.

The bar's crumbling concrete block walls were in dire need of a fresh paint job. A handful of cars, beaten and dirty, were parked in the crumbly asphalt lot. For over a week, Vega had pounded on nearly every door between Atlanta and this backwater, salty area in the low-country of South Carolina. She was searching for Tommy Fisher, the man Grayson Walker would most likely run to. Fisher owned the bar. It was a far cry from the expensive glass and steel tower her quarry had used to house his Six-Star Enterprises.

She pushed open the door to the Broken Cricket, a seedy bar stinking of sour alcohol and sweat, and stepped into the dark interior with a cautious gait. She zipped up her leather jacket despite the pit's heat, not wanting any uninvited eyes to take too much notice of her and her tight t-shirt.

Not when she had a job to do.

She let her gaze roam the darkened interior of the joint as she quickly made her way to the bar, peeling her boots from the sticky floor with each step.

Damn, this was not at all what she'd expected. Perhaps she was in the wrong place. Grayson, according to her research, would not willingly subject himself to such a hellhole.

"Give me whatever's on tap," she said to the burly bartender whose shifting gaze had followed her from the moment she stepped into the bar. She slid a couple of dollars across the wooden bar top that probably had never been cleaned.

"You a cop?" the bartender asked, staring wide-eyed at her money.

She leaned over the bar, inwardly wincing at the thought of smearing the filth from it onto her favorite leather jacket. "Does it matter?" she asked.

"Not to me." He pulled a glass from a shelf.

There was a large baseball bat hanging on that wall. She doubted the man was a sports fan.

"Might matter to some of these guys, though," he said as he filled a mug with frothy beer. "If'n you're not a cop, I hope you carry a gun just the same. Wouldn't trust a man in here with a woman as clean as you. Ain't a pleasant place, you see."

"Thanks for the warning." She took a deep drink of the beer, pretending not to notice the smudges of dirt on the glass. "Though, I *can* take care of myself."

"I hope so," he said as he wandered away.

She'd traveled too far to find this bar sitting in the middle of what the locals called Hell Hole Swamp, to run away now. Though she'd rather be spending Christmas Eve anywhere but here—more than thirty minutes from a freaking paved road—she wanted nothing more than to slap her cuffs onto her quarry's wrists.

Jack had promised her that she could find this Grayson Walker with her eyes closed

That had been a month ago.

She sipped the beer—slightly watered down—wondering again if she'd been mistaken about this place. Turning around, she stood with her back to the greasy Formica bar, letting her gaze search the darkened corners of the room.

The burly bartender could be the owner, Tommy Fisher. There was a definite resemblance to the photo tucked into her pocket. According to Tommy's cousin, Grayson and Tommy hadn't exactly remained friends after serving together in Special Ops. But they weren't enemies. That made Tommy a contact, a very good contact considering Grayson's short supply of friends.

She watched as the bartender carried a beer over to a gloomy booth in the far corner of the bar. A man, who was slumped down in the cushions, sat upright for a moment to accept the proffered drink.

Bingo.

The unmistakably finely chiseled cheekbones of Grayson stood out in this bar like a cut diamond in a pile of coal.

Unconsciously, she reached around to the small of her back to where her Glock 9 sat nestled in its holster and unhooked the latch. She was not about to take any chances with this one. Not after Grayson had rewarded the last bounty hunter to go after him with a bullet in the head.

She glanced around, assessing the situation.

Taking him here, in this bar filled with lawless hicks, would be just asking for trouble. But there was a back exit only steps away from where he sat. If she could get him to go out the back way, she could trap him.

There was nothing out that way except a dumpster sitting on a concrete pad. The property sloped sharply down into a murky swamp. An army of towering cypresses rising up from a sea of black water slowly advanced on the building, probably trying to reclaim the land that had been stolen years before.

Surely Grayson, from Atlanta's concrete wilderness, wouldn't risk the dangers of the swamp in the middle of the night. He'd stand and fight.

Fight. That was exactly what she wanted him to do.

The bartender bent down and whispered something in Grayson's ear. Both men turned to stare.

Undaunted, she smiled and raised her glass in a mock salute. She pushed away from the bar and started toward them, swinging her slim hips.

I sure hope he's attracted to women, she thought while she sidled across the room, slowly unzipping her jacket. She could feel several eyes burning into her skin as she used her figure, which had been described as sexy more times than she cared to hear, to throw Grayson off-guard.

"Buy me a beer," she said, her voice husky, just before sliding into Grayson's corner booth. She looked up at the burly barkeep—his expression literally growled—and graced him with her most disarming smile. "He'll pay," she said. She turned her sultry gaze back toward Grayson. "I guarantee he will."

Grayson stared at her, his mouth slightly open. "I want to be alone," he grumbled after Tommy left, shaking his head as if trying to clear out a bunch of cobwebs.

"On Christmas Eve? No one wants to be alone on Christmas Eve."

"I'm Jewish," he said.

"Oh," she said, though she knew full well he'd been raised Protestant. She knew damn near everything about him, except for his taste in women. "Well, maybe *I* don't want to be alone." She looked around the room at the motley group of men sipping on their drinks. "At least, not here."

Grayson nodded. "I understand. This isn't exactly a safe place. You don't belong here."

"You don't look as if you belong either," she said.

At that, he quirked a brow. "Looks can be deceiving."

"Yes, they can, can't they?"

"Look, I'll pay for your beer since it is Christmas and all." He glanced around the room. His shoulders were as tight as steel under his hand-tailored blazer. She wasn't exaggerating when she'd said he looked out of place in the Broken Cricket. She blended into the bar much more smoothly than he could ever hope to. "I don't mean to be rude. I just don't want any company right now."

He tossed a few dollars on the table in front of them and began to inch out of the seat.

"Wait." She covered his hand with hers. Their eyes met. An electricity rose between them, catching her completely off-guard as the tingling settled low in her belly.

She mentally kicked herself. This seedy bar was not the kind of place where she'd willingly hook up with a man. And Grayson was certainly not the kind of man who could give her the happily-ever-after she never really wanted in the first place.

He'd murdered his best friend, she reminded herself. But still, when she withdrew her hand, she could not deny the pang of regret in her chest. Surprising really, her emotions rarely intruded into her professional life.

He stared at her, looking just about as startled as she felt. His soft brown eyes weren't nearly as sharp as the man's she had seen in her file photo. Exhaustion had taken a toll. This was a man who had not slept a full night in months. He was nearing the end of his rope.

She'd have to take extra care with him.

"At least walk me out." She glanced toward the back exit. "I don't want to have to fight off any of these bar beasts tonight. Not on Christmas Eve."

He shrugged. "Guess it wouldn't be right to leave you alone. Come on." He pushed up from the table and waited for her to follow.

She looped her arm around his and easily directed him toward the back exit. He held the door open as she stepped out. The air was damp and sharp from the winter cold, a refreshing change from the smoke-filled bar.

"Oh," she said with a mock shiver. "Is it ever cold!" She waited for him to close the distance. He wasn't much taller than she was. She'd guess that he had a few inches on her. Still, she'd clearly felt the strength in his arm muscles, and wasn't about to take any chances with him.

The heavy back door slammed against its frame, leaving them in near darkness. She could hear, better than see, the scraping of footfalls as he approached.

Her heart still insisted on feeling a vague tenderness toward him, damn him. *He was a killer*, she reminded herself.

Vicious. Heartless.

She'd made it a point to memorize the crime scene photos. Gruesome had been an understatement.

"I know who you are, Grayson Walker." It wasn't her job to judge him. She just needed to deliver him back to the justice system. "I know what you've done." She raised her gun. She'd do well to remember he'd already killed one bounty hunter. "It's time to return to Atlanta and face responsibility."

She heard him suck in quick a breath. "Tommy said you smelled like a cop. I should've believed him. Since when does a cop look like she belongs on the cover of a fashion magazine?"

He didn't seem to notice the gun in her hand, a weapon that could easily leave several gaping holes in the center of his chest. Or if he did notice, he didn't care. He walked casually toward her, arms spread wide.

"I'm more dangerous to you than the police, Grayson. I'm a bounty hunter. I don't get paid unless you get captured."

He laughed in the darkness, a rather pitiful sound. "The fourth one, I believe. I wonder what makes you think you can succeed where those other brainless goons have failed? Are you planning to seduce me into surrendering?"

Without warning, he lowered his head and tackled her, tossing her to the ground as if they were playing a game and she was holding a football not a loaded pistol. Her breath whooshed out of her lungs. Grayson could remain where he was, straddling her torso, his hands pinning her arms, for the moment. She tightened her hold on the pistol he was working so doggedly to wrench from her grasp.

Pulling in a deep breath to calm her muscles and focus her strength, she visualized her first move. Her first approach, her attack, was crucial since everything that would follow would be born from instinct.

"Hope I didn't hurt you, sweet," he whispered in her ear. "I just couldn't give you the chance to shoot me."

His lips curled into that killing smile. "You are really very pretty."

Those eyes of his, eyes she'd memorized from the photo posted in her office, were nearly hypnotic in the darkness. He leaned forward. She heard his breath hitch. "I haven't had a woman like you in..." His lips covered hers. She could taste the raw hunger in the forced kiss.

"Sorry," he said, ripping away.

"Get off me or I'll really hurt you."

He laughed. He *actually* laughed.

In a fluid move, she twisted to the side, upsetting his balance, and pushed against the asphalt to propel herself up.

He tumbled to the ground.

He didn't stay down long. She swung her fist, hitting his jaw as he sprang back to his feet. She didn't need brute strength when he was so obliging in connecting his face to her fist with such force. She stood back and watched as he staggered, tripping over a cypress knee that had grown up through the broken asphalt.

Her fingers produced one of the two pairs of handcuffs she carried in her jacket pocket. Capturing him, a former Special Ops officer, seemed far too easy.

He stared up at her dazed, his eyes hazy and unfocused.

"You put up a good chase, Grayson." She locked a metal ring over his left wrist.

He let out a light groan as she rolled him over onto his stomach. With her knee pressing onto the center of his back, she reached for his right arm.

His hand shot out and captured her wrist as strongly as his left wrist had been ensnared in the trap of the handcuff.

"I don't want to kill you," he said gruffly—which was really a funny thing for him to say since she still had him on his stomach with his face pressed into the pavement.

She held his left wrist with her left hand. He held her right wrist in his right hand. She wracked her brain while trying to remember which side he favored.

"I'm left-handed," he said, startling her. He yanked his arm out of her grasp and swung with incredible speed back and up, slapping her in the face with the metal handcuff still hooked to his wrist.

She reared back, unwittingly giving Grayson an opening. Before she realized what he was doing, he'd snagged her pistol and twisted around to point it at her.

"Oh, no you don't!" She wasn't ready to let him win that easily. She lunged for her gun. The barrel flared red in the darkness as it fired. The force of the bullet's impact at such a close range sent her flying. She hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Great, just great. Braving a backwoods medical facility to be sewn up by a doctor, who probably doubled as the local veterinarian, was not her idea of a pleasant Christmas.

Her shoulder burned, and her arm had already turned painfully numb. Gulping air, she focused all her energies on Grayson. It took everything she had to hug her throbbing arm to her chest and charge him. She prayed he wouldn't have time to take careful aim and fire again before she could knock the gun from his grasp. She had nothing to lose. He'd already killed one bounty hunter, and she had no doubt she was about to be next.

She staggered—the back wall of the bar must have just collapsed—surely, that was a wall that had just fallen on her.,

Clutching her splitting head, she sank to her knees.

"Damn." Was the last sound she heard.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn," Grayson cursed again. The pistol slipped from his fingers and clattered against the pavement.

He stood transfixed, staring at the beautiful hellcat lying unconscious at his feet. Her dark blond hair shimmered in the smoky, yellowed light streaming through the back door. The light created an eerie halo around the bounty hunter.

Tommy towered over her, the baseball bat from the wall resting against his shoulder. "She wouldn't have stopped fighting you," he said, giving his head a shake.

Grayson reluctantly agreed. He'd seen how that glazed look, a look of unrelenting determination, had turned her beautiful cornflower blue eyes wild. She'd crossed over the line and made the decision to fight him to the death.

"I shot a woman," he whispered.

"Never mind her," Tommy said. "There's something wrong with a woman who looks like that and chooses to do a dirty job like this. You'd done her a favor, if'n you ask me."

Tommy was probably right. But still, he didn't like shooting women. Killing a man felt different, like he was a warrior championing some cause. Hurting women just made his stomach roil.

He knelt down beside her and peeled open her leather jacket. Blood oozed steadily from the gaping wound. He applied the weight of his hand to the nearest pressure point while fumbling around in her coat.

Tommy gave him a queer look. "Now are you gonna tell me what happened between you and Greg or do I have to keep guessin'?"

Grayson grunted. He wasn't ready to talk about the angry words, the deep red blood, and the overwhelming guilt...

"Your decision." Tommy sounded wary. Perhaps nervous even. "You go on, get out of here. I'll take care of this and talk nice and sweet to the cops too."

In no mood to let anyone clean up after him, Grayson ignored the offer. He found a tiny, silver cell phone in an interior pocket in the bounty hunter's jacket and dialed 9-1-1.

"Fetch me a dish rag or something I can use to slow the bleeding. The bullet blew its way through her shoulder," he said to Tommy while waiting for confirmation that an ambulance was indeed on its way.

His friend shrugged and disappeared back into the bar.

Grayson stared at the bounty hunter's too beautiful face, darkened and frighteningly motionless. "Don't you go and make me feel guilty about you, too. You picked this fight with me."

She was lifeless, her breathing too shallow. She was going to die—just like that last one. How many women would he have to kill before he dropped straight into hell?

"Go on with you now. Get." Tommy startled Grayson. He'd returned with a pile of relatively clean dishrags in his meaty hand. Sirens echoed through the dark swamp, only adding urgency to Tommy's warning.

He couldn't stay any longer, not unless he wanted to be taken back into police custody.

He plucked the bounty hunter's wallet from her pocket. "This should buy me some time," he said. He opened the supple leather wallet. Vega Brookes, her driver's license read. "They won't figure out my identity until they figure out hers."

Tommy nodded.

There were several hundred dollars in the wallet. Good. That should help him, too. He slipped the wallet into his pocket.

"I'll make this up to you somehow," he said as he tucked her gun into his pants and trotted toward a path that led directly into the swamp, the handcuffs still dangling from his wrist. "Well, maybe not..."

# Chapter Four

"Vega," a shadowy voice called to her.

"Dad?" Vega struggled through the darkness. It'd been ages since she'd seen him. Why had they lost touch? "Dad?"

Someone was pushing on her shoulders, keeping her pinned to the ground.

"Vega!" the voice said sharply.

She blinked. The room was dim. The early morning light was pushing its way around a drawn shade.

"Oh...Jack," she said as soon as her uncle's lean face eased into focus.

"Don't sound so eager to see me." A big, fat smile slid across his lips. He leaned in close. His face blurred as Vega's eyesight struggled to keep up.

She glanced around the room, a rather modern hospital room. Slowly, as if on a shaky foundation, her memory returned.

"Walker?" She bolted up. Pains sparked both in her arm and in the back of her head. She sank back onto the bed.

"He's long gone by now." Jack shook his head and looked damned guilty about something.

She didn't have it in her mind to question him, not while her eyesight still insisted on swimming in and out of focus.

"Merry Christmas," a new voice sang out. "I see our Jane Doe is awake."

A female doctor sauntered into the room. A green elf hat perched on the top of her head. She flicked on the overhead fluorescent lights. The hospital room glowed stark and bright, feeling painfully sharp to Vega's sensitive head.

"I'll need to update your name on this," the doctor said. She pulled a metalencased file from the hook at the end of the bed, flipped it open, and clicked a ballpoint pen three times before scribbling something into the file. "Sheriff Townsend contacted me this morning, letting me know who you were. We don't get many Jane Doe's around

here. You sure stirred up a bit of excitement in town. I'm Dr. Jane Kilpatrick, by the way."

Jack stepped back and gave Dr. Kilpatrick room to roll a stool up beside the bed. They murmured greetings in a manner that told Vega the two had already met—which didn't surprise Vega. Jack probably raised quite a fuss the moment he stepped into the hospital. His fuss-raising ability was legendary, especially when one of his hunters was in need.

Dr. Kilpatrick wasted no time before shining a viciously bright penlight into her eyes. "Good, good." She checked the huge lump on her head and probed the gunshot wound paining her shoulder.

Vega tried to lay still, passive, breathing deeply while she let the doctor do her job.

"What? No questions about whether I'd be called away to birth one of the farmer's cows?"

Cows? She didn't know the first thing about cows.

Dr. Kilpatrick laughed. "This one sure went on and on last night, convinced I was the town veterinarian," she explained to Jack. Vega didn't remember any of that. "I'm not a veterinarian. I'm a fully qualified M.D. I can show you my diploma if you'd like."

Vega blushed. "No...I believe you."

Dr. Kilpatrick laughed again and pushed back from the bed. "You lucked out with the bullet wound. Only minimal tissue damage. You have a pretty good concussion from that blow to the head. We were worried about that lump back there most of the night, but I think we can breathe easy now. You look good, considering."

Vega listened, half-dazed as Dr. Kilpatrick and Jack continued to discuss her health.

"Jane Doe?" she asked, cursing her mind's snail-pace. "Why call me Jane Doe?"

Dr. Kilpatrick frowned for a moment. "Well, yes," she said. "You came in without any identification."

"I had called Sheriff Townsend, an old friend," Jack explained. "Warned him you'd be in town on a job. When a Jane Doe showed up at the hospital, he contacted me."

"Jack." Vega shook her head and immediately regretted it. "I believe you must have an old friend in every police department across this country."

Jack scratched his stubbly chin. "I suppose I do." He turned back to the doctor and laid on his charm. The old dog, he was flirting with her. "When can I get Vega on a plane back home to Detroit?" he asked after smearing Dr. Jane Kilpatrick with a healthy serving of compliments.

"Wait just one minute," Vega said while struggling to push herself up. "I'm not going anywhere...not without Grayson Walker chained to my arm."

Both the doctor and Jack gave Vega a look that made her wonder if she was about to be told she had no more than six months to live.

"Don't pursue this one, Vega. Go home. Heal. Perhaps even find a nice stable man to marry, and have children. That would make your mom happy, you know. Besides, you're no longer assigned to Walker," Jack said much too quickly for Vega's nerves.

"Who is, then?"

Jack hesitated.

Her heart shuddered. "Who?"

"No one...yet."

"Then why that look, Jack? What's up?"

"Fiona."

"Fiona?"

The length of silence that followed could have been measured with a calendar.

She laid in the bed huffing as her anger built.

"Fiona?" she repeated, nearly leaping off the bed. "My sister?"

Dr. Kilpatrick rushed back to the bedside. "You really must try and lay still, Miss Brookes. Your stitches are liable to rip out."

Vega laid back into the soft pillow, letting the excruciating pains in her head and arm feed her anger. "She doesn't have the experience I have, and" she swallowed hard, "and look what happened to me."

"What could I do?" Jack asked, spreading his arms wide. "She was close to spitting nails after she heard what had happened to you. There was no stopping her from taking the next plane down here. I couldn't very well tie her up, could I?"

"Mom's probably ready to kill you, isn't she?" she said, conceding that once Fiona set her mind to a task, there was really no turning her attention. "Christmas day, and both of her daughters are in the field because of you."

"Yep," Jack said. He sank into a chair and pulled a hand through his silvery hair. "I don't know if Gillie will ever invite me over to your house for dinner again. And I so love her fancy shrimp cocktails."

\* \* \* \*

For half a day, Vega stayed in the sterile hospital bed, worrying about Fiona playing bounty hunter and wondering just how Grayson had managed to get the better of her. And, she wondered, what had he done with her gun? Her dad had given her that Glock 9, had pressed it into her hands on his deathbed. "You're strong for a girl," he'd said to her, the last words he'd uttered in this world.

What care would Grayson take of that gun?

She stared at the bright ceiling and worried until she teetered on the verge of madness.

A call from Snitch pushed her over the edge. "Just dug up a nasty bit of information on that fugitive of yours. He killed a woman," Snitch's metallic voice crackled a bit. "He wasn't Special Forces, but a professional killer for the Army's Intelligence Support Activity, the ISA. Had been working deep in the bowels of the illegal drug trade in Colombia, his team was given orders to assassinate a drug czar—all off the record kind of stuff, of course."

"Of course," Vega said, her mind reeling. Fiona was out there with a *professional* assassin?

"Your boy pulled the trigger and shot an innocent woman through the chest in order to kill his target—a Carlos Briceno."

"Shit. He's determined. What did the army do? Kick him out?" she asked.

"Nope, gave him a commendation. Of course, that was the official report, though this Briceno guy was a pretty huge thorn in our government's side. He controlled a solid pipeline of drugs into the US. But your fugitive did walk away from the ISA after that assignment. The three other men in his team left the army with him. Can't find out why he quit. Perhaps he was drummed out. Or guilt? I came across a communiqué a week before Carlos Briceno's assassination. Your Grayson Walker was requesting a visa for Mirna Catanzaro, the very woman he ended up shooting. Said he planned to marry her. Can you believe it? He'd planned to marry this Mirna, and then when she got in the way—bam—he killed her. What a jerk."

This guy needed to be stopped before anyone else got killed. After lunch, Vega sent Jack out to find her a decent meal. It was a ruse, though. A nasty trick she knew she'd pay dearly for later. She tugged herself from the bed. In the closet, she found the suitcase Jack must have gotten from her motel room. She pulled on her warmest clothes, and stuffed her remaining pair of handcuffs along with the wad of cash she kept in her suitcase into the pocket of her torn and bloody leather jacket.

A cab ride later, she found herself back at the Broken Cricket. It didn't take much to find Tommy's house. It was just down the road from the bar. She'd hunkered down for a good hour, watching with no success. She was just starting to curse herself for being the worst kind of fool to think Grayson might still be in the area when Tommy emerged from his house with a tray in his hands and bolt cutters poking out of his denim overalls.

That looked suspicious enough.

She picked her way through the swamp, keeping a safe distance behind Tommy while worrying about snakes, alligators, and any number of unimaginable ghastly creepy creatures as he led her to a wreck of a shack.

The shack leaned sharply to one side, looking just about ready to collapse. Puffs of white smoke rose from a pipe jutting out of the roof, a stark contrast to the ebony sky. It felt like hours had passed before Tommy left the shack with an empty tray.

The swamp looked like it regularly poured through that shack. She really didn't want to step foot inside there.

Why couldn't he hole up in the middle of the city? Rats, I can handle any assortment of rats.

A centipede crawled over her laced boot. She jumped and tossed herself against the wide trunk of an ancient cypress tree. A huge mistake. Her head swam and her arm hurt bad enough to make her stomach pitch. She had no business being out here.

But Fiona wouldn't waste time. Her sister would steal her notes, follow the same tracks, and soon find Grayson, too. She couldn't let that happen. No matter how weak she felt she was determined to stop Grayson before he became a danger to her sister.

What she lacked in strength, she made up in wits—and surprise.

She crouched down, just in case Grayson glanced out a window—if he were in fact inside—and began a slow advance.

She found a loose board on the front porch. It took very little effort to pry the soft plank free from the rusty nails and use it as a wedge to hold the front door shut.

As expected in a shack this size, she found just one other door in the back, in a direct line from the front.

That back door would be her entrance.

She drew up alongside the door and slowed her breathing as she pictured her attack. With one arm in a tight sling, unreliable eyesight, and no weapon, she was at a slight disadvantage. Okay, a big disadvantage.

No matter, she'd just have to make his strength work for her. Vega closed her eyes and began counting down.

Eight.

Forgive me Mom if I don't survive.

Seven.

Fiona why in hell must you insist on following me in everything I do?

Six

Perhaps Jack is right. Perhaps I should settle down.

Five.

If only I could find a man who excites me.

Four.

Grayson Walker excites me.

Three.

Okay, I should find a man who excites me who isn't also a murderer.

Two.

There's always a hitch.

One

With one swift movement, she kicked in the back door.

# Chapter Five

Vega stood face to face with Grayson.

"God, you look like death," he said. Curiously, he looked pleased to see her. Her father's Glock, the one he had stolen, was aimed at her head. Somehow, he'd been expecting her. Somehow, he'd bested her—again.

"Bastard." She kicked the gun from his grip. Grayson made a dash to the front door. Cursing when he found it blocked, he lunged for her, giving her injured shoulder a good jolt. Too bad for him, the pain just fed her anger and her strength.

He lunged for her again. She gave the tender area just below his ribcage a good punch. It didn't stop him. He didn't even grimace.

"I don't have time to play these games with you," he said, then socked her in the side of her head. She rode the impact as she dropped to the floor, hoping to give herself time to gulp a few short breaths.

They weren't to be had.

Grayson leapt on her, punching her wounded shoulder. She tried to roll away, but he grabbed her arm with a crushing grip and punched her again.

Escape impossible, she reared up and slammed her head into his chin. She followed with a flurry of cross punches to his temple.

The attack left Grayson on the ground, dazed, with a bruise forming under his eye. She clamped her backup set of handcuffs over his wrists. The fight finished, she doubled over and threw up all over the floor. She felt terrible. Worse than terrible. As if her head was going to split open and her shoulder was the size of the house.

While fighting for a smooth breath, she plucked her father's Glock from the floor. Once again, it sat comfortably within her soft grip.

"I should pull the trigger," she forced out between heavy breaths, "just to let you know how wonderful a gunshot wound feels." She lowered the gun's aim until it was in line with his chest, just below his heart.

He didn't answer. He lay motionless on the muddy, rough floorboards, and stared blankly up at her. Disgusted, she pulled him up by the collar and shoved him into the nearest chair. It creaked.

She kept the pistol trained on his chest. His eyes stayed locked on the gun. No fear. She wanted to see fear.

"Pull the trigger," he said, taunting her.

Why shouldn't she shoot the bastard? He had no problem hurting her—just like every other man in her life. Why shouldn't she start hurting them back? Beginning with this one.

She tightened her finger on the trigger.

No one would question her. He was a danger to others, a menace to society. And it was her time to show them, show them all, she was as good as any man. Better.

Much better than any of those men who had told her over and over how she wasn't good enough, strong enough...soft enough.

She heaved a deep sigh and let her hand drop.

"I'm not like you, Grayson. I'm not a killer."

"I didn't mean to shoot you yesterday," he said quietly.

"And you wouldn't have meant to blow my head off just a minute ago if I'd given you the chance?"

He shrugged after a long silence. "You'll be the one killing me."

She grabbed the shacks only other chair and moved it a safe distance away. Her arm and head were screaming, and her strength was threadbare. She just needed to sit. Just for a few minutes. Let her strength return before calling for backup.

"You did yourself in, Grayson."

"If you believe that, pull the trigger. Carry out justice. What does it matter? Either way, I'm just as dead."

She stared at him warily, tilting her head. "Why are you so eager to have me shoot you? What have you done to my gun?"

He turned his head away and refused to answer.

"It'll blow up in my hand, won't it?"

She pulled out the clip to study the damage he'd done to her father's favorite weapon. She couldn't believe what she saw. No bullets. The weapon was useless.

"Why?" She couldn't stop herself from asking.

"I'm not a killer," he said flatly.

"Tell that to your friend, Greg Harper. He's pretty dead."

"I'm not a killer."

"And what about that poor bounty hunter? I don't know many who wouldn't gladly give up the reward money and kill you without a second thought just for what you did to him."

He blinked

"A bullet at point blank range? Not a killer, eh, Grayson? You were simply protecting yourself?"

"Which one?" he asked. His voice trembled. It sounded like rage.

"The third one. Pryor. His name was Pryor." She drew a deep breath, fighting an urge to yell and scream at him. As if her anger would reform the evil buried deep within a man who could so cleanly profess his innocence. "He had a wife and two kids."

He pinched his eyes closed. "Oh, God. I didn't know."

"You didn't know he had a family? That would have made a difference?" she shouted.

"No, damn it." He opened his eyes and stared hard into hers. "I didn't know that they had killed anyone else."

"They, Grayson? A conspiracy against you?" She returned his telling stares with one of her own. "Keep practicing that one. Someone somewhere might believe it." She scanned the room. The bullets had to be hidden somewhere. "What did you do with them?"

"With what?"

"The bullets."

He sighed, a long, tired sound. "You don't need that damned gun, Vega. You probably would've gotten the better of me yesterday if you hadn't been carrying that damn thing."

She pushed the useless pistol into her coat pocket and leaned forward to get a better look at him. "And just how do you know my name?"

The air in the room grew noticeably stiffer. "Your wallet is in that box." His hands were bound behind his back, so he used his head to gesture toward a rusty tackle box in the corner of the room.

To look in the box would mean turning her back on him. And since she hadn't locked him down to anything in the room—not that there was anything substantial enough in the shack, the walls included, to hold even a child much less a fully-grown man like Grayson—turning her back on him would be suicide.

Curiosity chewed on her as she sat there waiting for the pain in her shoulder to notch down a degree or two. She was literally itching to know what else he had tucked away in that dirty little box.

Keeping a fierce glare on him, she backed toward the corner, crouched down, and lifted the lid to the box. A wicked stench rose into the room. Just a few quick glances into the interior were all she allowed herself—not much to see really. Her wallet sat nestled in a tangle of rusty hooks, her cell phone in a pile of freeze-dried worms—the source of the pungent stink. No sign of her missing bullets. She plucked the wallet from the hooks but left the phone with the stink. The battery would have been long dead by now anyhow.

"You robbed me." She shouldn't have been surprised her money was gone, yet the fact that he shot her, and then had the balls to rob her, threatened to burn a hole in her chest

"Couldn't help it, I needed time." A red spot danced on the center of Grayson's forehead. "The money was just a bonus—"

She tackled him, knocking him off the chair and onto the floor. The window across from them shattered. A jolt of air slapped her as the bullet sailed passed her ear. The sharp crack of wood splintering on the far wall was followed by an eerie silence.

"What did you do with the bullets for my gun?" she asked as calmly as she could manage while covering Grayson with her body.

"I dumped them in the swamp."

"Why the hell would you do something as stupid as that?"

"You don't need the gun, Vega." He tugged at the handcuffs binding his wrists. "Free my hands."

"Wouldn't you like me to do that?" She wiggled herself off him and, crouched low, made her way to the shattered window.

"We're probably going to have to fight our way out of here if we have any hope of surviving."

"I see," she said flatly.

"You don't understand."

She rose from the ground to peer out the window.

"Damn it, get down!"

"I don't see anyone," she said, lingering at the window. Slowly, she sank back to the floor.

"You won't. No one ever sees them coming."

Apparently, he was trying out his 'I'm-innocent-and-someone-is-trying-to-kill-me' spiel again. She chose to ignore it.

Vega moved away from the shattered glass on the floor and sat cross-legged to stare at Grayson. She kept her empty gun cradled in her hand.

Who could be out there with that high-powered rifle? "Could be the police. They're pretty fed up with you." She frowned at her Glock a moment, and then shoved it back into her ruined leather coat. A wide bloodstain covered the shoulder. "Wouldn't be Fiona. Not at all her style." More like Butch's. Perhaps Butch or one of his buddies was out there prepared to blast Grayson into tiny bits in retaliation for killing a fellow hunter.

"It's someone from Six-Star Enterprises," he said.

"Ri-ight." By the time she handed him over to the police, he'd have perfected that conspiracy story of his.

Still crouched low, she made her way back across the room. "I don't know who's gunning for you. But, seeing how I've no desire to get shot again, I'm out of here." She drew an uneven breath as her strength faded. Adrenaline could only do so much. "Since you're my prisoner, I've no choice but to drag you along."

"Give me a fighting chance, Vega. Unlock these." He worked himself up to his knees. He twisted around and thrust his arms toward her.

Instead of unlocking the handcuffs, she grabbed the chain that linked his wrists and hauled him to his feet as she rose to hers.

He cringed, closing his eyes as if expecting a barrage of gunfire to explode in the room. She wasn't too surprised. Some of the toughest men she'd picked up in the past had turned to jelly in the face of gunplay.

She gave him a not too gentle shove. "Let's go out the back way."

She stuck her head out the door and peered around the black cypress forest, assessing the situation. Off in the distance, she heard the distinct rustling of winter-dried leaves and twigs. Someone was advancing.

Without warning, Grayson shoved her aside and barreled out the door, presenting himself as a very tempting target.

"Are you nuts?" She dove after him, pulling him to the ground as she fell.

A bullet whooshed overhead, thudding into a tree several feet away.

She stifled a groan. Pain sparked through her shoulder, shooting numbing tremors down her arm. Her stomach roiled. She felt like she might pass out. Her shoulder burned as if it had been ripped wide open. Gasping for a smooth breath, she tried to concentrate on the situation and push her physical agony to the background.

She rolled over on her back and stared up into the dark forest. The sharpshooter's red laser light bounced amongst the cypress trees, searching for its prey.

"You okay?" he whispered. He was sprawled flat on his stomach right beside her. He wiggled his legs to push himself closer.

"Um-huh," she muttered. She couldn't conjure speech, not with the incredible pain trying to rip her shoulder apart.

"You don't sound okay." He inched closer. "Were you hit?"

"Yesterday," she managed between panting breaths.

He dropped his head to the ground and swore.

Why didn't he make his escape while she was powerless to stop him? He could take the keys from her pocket for the handcuffs without too much protest on her part.

What was he waiting for?

"I can carry you," he whispered. He hadn't bothered to lift his head and the words sounded pretty muffled to her ears. So much so, her pain-seared brain wasn't exactly sure what he was offering.

She turned to stare at him. His short, dark hair was shiny, even in the moonless light. Slowly, he lifted his head and their eyes met. His gaze held hers in a powerful grip. "We can't stay here. That shooter won't just give up and leave. We've got to get out of here before he decides to scout the area on foot."

She nodded. She'd already come to the same conclusion. She dug into her pocket and retrieved a key.

"Move your hands over here," she said. Her voice was much clearer now as her mind gained some control over the piercing pain.

He rolled over on his side and pushed his wrists toward her. Once free, he shoved the shackles into his pocket and vigorously rubbed his wrists.

"I'm not granting you freedom." She felt the need to tell him, especially now that she'd lost control of her last pair of handcuffs. "I'm still turning you over to the police."

Drawing a deep breath, she sat up. Unable to speak for a moment while her body protested, she gave a nod toward a large cypress tree not five feet away.

They both made a quick dash across the clearing. He kept a hand on her back, steadying her as they went. At the tree, they leaned into a deep groove in the ancient tree's convoluted trunk.

Vega stared out into the forbidding swamp with no desire to wander into its depths without a gun, a lantern or a map. But, considering the situation, she couldn't think of any other option.

"Shit," she muttered.

Grayson moved closer. His arms snaked around her waist. Avoiding her shoulder, he pressed against her, using his body to shield her from the hidden shooter.

"I don't need your protection," she snapped. "This tree is between that rifle and us. The laser sight flitting around out there is giving his position away."

"I know." He didn't pull away.

His warmth continued to seep into her, irritating her that his body heat was helping ease the pain in her shoulder and feeding her strength.

"On the count of three we're going to make a run for it. Keep close to me," she said, her complete focus turning to the next few seconds. "I'm going to zigzag through the trees about five hundred feet. The darkness should have swallowed any traces of us by then. At least, I hope so."

"That's exactly what I would do."

That settled, she calmed her mind and prepared her muscles for a terrible trial. "One," she said, beginning the countdown.

"Wait." He cupped her chin with both hands and bit his bottom lip as if trying to come to a decision. "Wait." He dropped one hand but kept the other clamped on her face. His rough thumb caressed her cheek. He glanced down at his pants as he fumbled in his pocket. "Here."

He pushed a key into her hand, wincing as he did. "I have a truck hidden about a mile from here." He let out a long sigh. "If you can get yourself beyond the reach of that sharpshooter, I can show you the way to the truck."

Why in the world was he doing this? She felt her head spin. Once beyond the dangers of the rifle, he could easily lose her in the darkness. What kind of resistance would she be able to give him if he did? It was going take most of her strength just to get through the swamp. She wouldn't have reserves left to chase after him.

But by handing her the truck's key, he was assuring her that she didn't have to worry. He was assuring her that he was going to get them both out of the swamp.

She jammed the key, clutched so tightly that the metal had bit into her palm, into her pocket. "Ready?"

He gave a quick nod.

Bullets sang through the air as they ran a haphazard path, weaving through the cypress grove, skipping over the knobby cypress knees that littered the muddy ground. Her foot splashed into a particularly deep bog, sinking into mud the consistency of fresh putty. She had to fight to keep her balance and her boot from being sucked right off her foot.

Grayson wasn't so lucky. He tripped over a stump and went flying forward, she grabbed his arm and pulled him along with her, not letting him fall, not letting him slow his pace.

Several hundred yards from the shack, her eyesight began to blur again.

Give me a little more time; she begged her muscles, while drawing a series of slow, deep breathes. Just a little further.

Not even her heart-pounding fear of the creepy creatures waiting to devour her in this dark wilderness was enough to overcome the damage she'd done to her body.

Suddenly, her legs felt like weights had been piled on top of them. She no longer cared if she made it out of the swamp or not.

Grayson tugged on her arm. "Come on. We're nearly there."

She stumbled. Her knees crumbled beneath her.

That was it.

She sank into the thick, wet mud, not minding the damp or the cold, or the creatures.

She was done.

Grayson scooped her up into his arms. She cried out weakly. Her shoulder screamed in pain.

"We're nearly there," he assured her. He continued his dash through the swamp at a steady pace, giving a worried glance over his shoulder only once.

Vega struggled against him, but the pain had taken over. The best she could do was to bury herself against his warmth.

Whether she liked it or not, he had her at his mercy. She couldn't help but wonder if that was what he'd planned all along.

# Chapter Six

Dark silhouetted loblolly and long-leaf pines lined the curvy road down on which Grayson steered his rusty red Chevy truck. The pine's straight trunks reached up to pierce the black night while dawn smoldered low on the horizon.

Vega hadn't spoken a word since he'd pulled her from the muck in the swamp. In the truck's dim interior lights, he noticed almost right away the spots of blood staining his shirt and hands from carrying her. She needed to get back to the hospital—should have never left it so soon in the first place.

He flicked a glance toward the passenger side to check on her. She sat on the rotting plastic bench still as a statue, her gaze trained on the road.

"You okay?" he asked. She'd make what he needed to do much easier if she would just pass out.

She didn't answer, didn't hardly change her slow, even breathing. She just stared. Gathering her strength, damn it.

If things scared him, this bounty hunter would rank high on a list of things to fear. He didn't want to kill her.

The truck jolted over a deep rut. She didn't flinch. Her focus was impressive—and dangerous.

After years of working from behind a desk, Grayson's reflexes were not what they used to be. He'd let himself get soft, sloppy. At thirty-five, he'd been featured in Forbes magazine as one of the youngest executives. Out here, against a bounty hunter with a warrior's training, he felt like an old man.

"You're what? Twenty-four, twenty-five?"

She didn't answer.

He wracked his memory as the truck bounced down a gravel path. He'd taken a hard look at her Detroit driver's license. How old was she?

"The ripe old age of twenty-six, if I remember correctly. Soon to be twenty-seven."

She gave no indication he was wrong.

One-sided conversations were too much work, so he clammed up and focused on the road.

At the first sign of man-made light, he made a hard right onto a paved road. The truck glided over the smooth asphalt surface, a welcomed relief from the tooth-jarring ride they were leaving behind. The pungent smell of salt rose in the cool, morning air. A few palmetto trees cropped up into the landscape now and then. They were very near the ocean.

He flicked another glance toward Vega. She hadn't moved.

Getting rid of her wouldn't be easy, but that was exactly what he needed to do. A stiff pain had buried itself deep into his bruised muscles thanks to her skillful attack. Yep, he had to get rid of her.

The bright lights of Bull's Bay Tackle and Gas came into view just up the road. The store, one of the many twenty-four hour places dotting the rural south that catered to hunters and local fishermen as well as carrying an odd mix of convenience items, was exactly what he'd been looking for. He could pick up a few supplies, bullets for Vega's Glock, and rid himself of that thorn in his side.

He smiled, as he pulled up beside the store's full-glass front doors not worried about security cameras. He should be long gone from the area by the time the police realized what he'd done.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as the truck pulled to a stop, Vega pushed its heavy door open. A sharp bolt shot through her shoulder and threatened to steal her consciousness. Gripping the door, she pushed the pain away. There was no time for any of that. Despite his help in the swamp, she knew better than to trust Grayson. Killers were strange creatures with unfathomable codes of behavior. He probably saved her life just to take it later, on his own time-schedule. She hadn't forgotten about the other people he'd killed. Mirna Catanzaro, a woman he supposedly loved, stood out like a flashing neon warning sign.

"Don't you go running off, hollering for help." He jumped down from the truck and rounded the truck to the passenger side before her toes could touch the ground. The

determined gleam in his brown eyes and cold flatness of his voice only added to her concern.

She wobbled a bit when her feet first landed on the pavement. "You're still in my custody."

"You sure you weren't hit by that sniper in the swamp?" he asked. His dark gaze touched her. Vega glanced down at her leather coat. It was caked with a mixture of dried mud and shiny fresh blood.

She was hurting but not from any new injuries.

"You're still in my custody," she said again, making sure he understood her determination.

He curled his hand around her arm and narrowed his eyes. "I am?" Flat. Hard. Dangerous. "And what do you intend to do about it?"

She couldn't very well overpower him. Her head was swimming and sharp pins were pricking fire all up and down her arm. And her eyesight was so blurry she could barely see.

Damn, she was in trouble. Even so, she wasn't willing to let him go.

She couldn't. Someone else might get hurt if she did.

With a sigh of irritation, she pulled away from him and headed straight to the store's front counter. A hefty woman in her mid fifties sat in a stool behind the counter. An assortment of guns, stuffed animals, and trophy fish hung from the walls. Two people were screaming at each other on the television perched high on a shelf across the room. The clerk peeled her sleepy gaze from the set and frowned as Vega approached. Her hand disappeared under the counter. A gun, probably a meaty 45, was no doubt hidden under there.

"I need help," Vega demanded. Her vision swam.

"There's a payphone outside," the woman drawled with thick lowcountry flavoring.

"I know. But--but you don't understand." Vega fought the dizziness as best she could. She leaned heavily on the counter, smearing it with mud. "You need to call for help..."

Grayson appeared by her side. His hand closed around her arm. The woman behind the counter rose from her stool, her shoulders taut with suspicion.

"Been hunting all night," he said, matching the woman's rich accent. "My girl fell into a deep mud hole, you see. She ain't none too happy. She's been wanting to call her mamma and cry about her ruined clothes."

The woman let loose a deep breath. Her whole body seemed to relax into Grayson's honeyed smile. "First time in the swamp, dearie?"

"It sure was," he answered before Vega could utter a word. He squeezed her arm just below the bullet wound. The searing pain kept her quiet. Hell, it was all she could do to keep her feet underneath her. "I'd still be out there, but I ran short of bullets. You wouldn't happen to have any, would you?"

"What'cha shooting with?"

He leaned forward. "Just a toy, really. A Glock 9."

Vega tried to pull away. He squeezed her arm even harder. She nearly sank to her knees as a fresh wave of blinding pain struck her.

"Sure she's okay?" the clerk asked. She leaned over the counter to get a better look at Vega. "She doesn't look too good."

Vega's tongue felt like it weighed a ton. She wanted to speak, to demand the woman's help, but her damned tongue just wouldn't cooperate. And the pain. Oh God, she couldn't seem to push through the searing raw pain where Grayson was pinching her shoulder. It kept her mind from working right.

"She's fine." She heard Grayson answer. His voice sounded vaguely distant. She fought to hold onto consciousness as she watched a wad of *her* cash being pushed across the counter and disappearing into the clerk's hands. "The bullets?"

"Might have something in the back." The clerk slipped through a narrow door.

"I won't let you kill me," Vega finally managed to get out through the blurring pain. "I'm a far cry from dead."

He answered with an emotionless stare. "I'm thirsty. Let's go look at what they have in the cooler." Without giving her a choice, he pulled her toward a wall of cold beverages. He tossed her up against the cooler's frigid glass. His hand flew to her throat in a vicious hold.

"Look," he whispered, his face nearly touching hers. "I can't let you take me back into custody."

When she tried to twist free, he slammed her injured shoulder against the glass. Sparks swam in her vision.

"I don't want to make this my life against yours," he said.

"Then what is it?" she asked through gritted teeth. "A really bad first date?"

"I've had worse." He released her arm for a moment to fish around in his pocket. She watched in horror as he produced her handcuffs. With her strength still lagging, she could only manage to kick him in the shin before he locked the handcuff around her wrist and slapped the other end to the cooler door's handle.

He rubbed his leg while hopping out of range. "Son of a bitch. Don't dare do that again."

The door to the back room opened. "I just happen to have one box left," the clerk called waving the red and white box of bullets in her hand. From her angle, she couldn't see what he'd done.

"Thanks, be right there," he said over his shoulder. His brown eyes locked onto Vega's for a moment. "This time, stay in the hospital. My capture isn't worth what you seem willing to pay."

Without warning, he pressed his body hard against her and seared his lips to hers. He took his time. She wanted to kick him again. But there was something about his kiss, the feel of his lips. Something compelling.

Who was this guy?

The tenderness of his lips—a woman could find herself trapped by such a kiss.

She ripped her mouth away from his. Damn him. Her heart pounded in her throat.

He gave her a sly smile and withdrew his hand from her pocket, taking her Glock 9 with him.

"Thanks."

"No!" Not her father's gun! Not again.

She lunged forward to rip the gun from his hands. He was a step faster. She'd nearly grabbed his shirt before the handcuffs jerked her back.

She shouted frantic warnings to the clerk as he made a mad dash to the counter. Vega was forced to watch helplessly as he dumped a second wad of money he'd taken from her wallet on the counter in exchange for the box of bullets and a handful of power bars. He didn't stop running until he got to his truck. The old engine sputtered a few times before roaring to life. Wheels spun against the pavement as he gunned back onto the road.

She muttered a soundless curse.

The clerk, a rifle snug in her arms, took her time weaving through the aisles before approaching Vega amongst the cold beverages. "I'm not in the mood for funny stuff," she growled.

Vega let her head drop back against the cooler door she was chained to. "I'm not either. Will you make that call to the police now?"

"Already did. They're on the way."

The clerk just stood there in the back of the store with the rifle trained on Vega's chest. Silly really. Even if she hadn't been bound to that stupid cooler door, she wasn't strong enough to go anywhere. It took nearly everything she had to remain on her feet.

\* \* \* \*

"Put that rifle away, Mrs. Hugine. What you've got here is a real live bounty hunter. You should feel honored."

Vega peeled her eyes open. A man dressed in a putty-colored uniform stood in front of her. He tilted his head to one side as he leaned forward to study her more closely.

"You are the Vega Brookes, right?" he asked.

She gave a sharp nod. Her watery vision wavered.

"Glad to meet you." He grabbed her hand and shook it with a vengeance. Pain sliced up and down her arm as he jolted her shoulder.

"And who are you?" she asked and pulled her hand away. If he touched her again, she'd sock him.

"Sheriff Townsend, Miss Brookes. A real fan." He swung around to the clerk, Mrs. Hugine. "I said put that rifle away. Miss Vega Brookes just happens to be the best damn bounty hunter in the country. Not once has she failed to bring in her fugitive."

The clerk sniffed deeply and returned to her stool behind the counter, clearly not impressed.

"Whew, you must've had quite a tangle with that Grayson Walker fellow. Can't say I've seen anyone look much dirtier than you do." He tipped his sheriff's hat back. "That pluff mud stinks to high heaven, too."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to get these off." Vega rattled the handcuffs. "Do you think your key will fit?"

"Sure can try." He fiddled with the handcuff until the lock popped open.

"There you go." He gave her shoulder a friendly pound.

She nearly toppled to the floor from the piercing pain. "Stay...away...from...me," she managed to grind out in between several deep gasps.

"Jeez, the best ones always seem strung too tight." But he did back away. "Called your uncle on my way over. He should be here by now. We've been out searching for you ever since you gave him the slip at the hospital."

On cue, Jack burst through the front doors and charged toward the back of the store. His complexion bloomed a blotchy pink, a disturbing color she'd never seen on him.

"It's okay, Jack. She's right here."

"It's not okay," Jack said in a tone that warned he was just winding up. "What the hell were you thinking, Vega? Were you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Walker hasn't gotten far yet." She simply couldn't accept that Grayson had escaped, *again*. She was itching to get her hands on him. Her prey had never bested her so soundly. She always captured her fugitive. *Always*. She had to go after him.

And she had to get her father's pistol back.

"If we went right now..."

"We?" Jack's complexion deepened into a true red. "You, *little girl*, aren't going anywhere near that fugitive. You're done. Finished. I'd already taken that assignment away from you."

"I know I screwed up, Jack," she started.

"Oh Vega, you can't begin to imagine just how much trouble you are in. I don't allow reckless behavior at Skip Tracers. You should know that by now. You are suspended. Indefinitely." He grabbed her arms and gave her a little shake. "I should send you to stay with your mother. I should—"

"Jack," she whispered. A tear found its way to her cheek. "I'm hurting real bad." That shut him right up.

Without much care for her comfort, he stripped her coat off her shoulders, then pulled a knife from his boot and sliced her shirt open. "No wonder you're in pain, you've ripped out all your stitches."

She glanced down at her shoulder. Thick red blood oozed from the angry wound. "There's one stitch left."

"And it's not doing a damn thing."

"I could radio for an ambulance," Sheriff Townsend said, sounding a bit too caffeinated for Vega's throbbing head.

"No, she's not dying." Jack's color was slowly returning to a less alarming shade of red. "I'll drive her to the hospital."

"I'll give you an escort." Sheriff Townsend swaggered off toward the front of the store.

"You will be okay, right?" Jack asked, sounding much more like her Uncle Jack again.

"Yeah, I'm just peachy."

Consciousness hung by a thin thread by the time she reached the hospital, which wasn't exactly a bad thing. Both Jack and Dr. Kilpatrick chewed her ears off for leaving the hospital without permission or anyone's knowledge.

"I could sedate her until she's ready to go home, if you'd like." Dr. Kilpatrick offered while tying a stitch in Vega's thankfully anesthetized shoulder.

Jack considered the idea for far too long.

"What about Walker?" Vega slurred the question. Couldn't hurt to try and change the subject. The pick-on-Vega-and-tell-her-how-stupid-she's-acted discussion had been done to death.

"What about him? He's not your concern. He wasn't your assignment anymore when you chased after him from this hospital bed," Jack barked back.

"You aren't letting Fiona go after him? He's too dangerous."

Jack fell silent, which worried her more than anything else did. "Fiona's okay," he said at long last. "I put her on a plane to Atlanta yesterday afternoon."

She batted Dr. Kilpatrick's hands away from her shoulder and jolted up. "You did what?"

"I could still sedate her," Dr. Kilpatrick said, struggling to force Vega back down to the metal table.

She wasn't ready to be so easily cowed. "Fiona's green, Jack. She can't go after that guy. Hell, I'm lucky to have survived, and I know how to take care of myself."

"She's strong, I give you that," Dr. Kilpatrick said, still straining against Vega's immoveable chest.

Jack nudged the doctor out of the way and glared at Vega using the same angry look her father had perfected years ago as a way to control his spirited daughters. Seeing her father's expression appear so suddenly on Jack's face was like bumping into a ghost.

"Lie back down and stop giving the doctor a hard time." Like an echo from the past, her father might have well appeared in the room.

"Yes sir," she answered, automatically. She'd been too well-trained by her police chief father to do anything but obey.

Jack winked at Dr. Kilpatrick.

"Atlanta?" Vega mumbled.

"Fiona's better trained than you think. Don't worry. I haven't given her the authority to do anything other than field research. She's on a simple job of reconnaissance, questioning every person who'd ever had contact with Walker. She doesn't have authorization to apprehend anyone."

"Pig-headed Fiona who is dying to prove herself to you, Jack?"

Jack mumbled something under his breath about pots and black kettles. "Don't worry about Fiona. I can generally handle my employees. Besides, Walker wouldn't dare go anywhere near Atlanta."

# Chapter Seven

Vega woke up panting and completely entangled in her sheets. She'd had the dream again.

Two and a half weeks since Jack ordered her home to Detroit to heal and Grayson's searing kiss still hadn't melted into an unpleasant memory. Something about it had made him seem so...vulnerable. Damn.

Her mind was wrapped around Grayson as tightly as her sheets had cinched up between her overheated legs. Her nipples puckered as she imagined just what kind of lover he would make.

She had to be out of her mind. Sex with him would be dangerous—crazy. Even so, the air in her dark, lonely bedroom was so heavy with lust it threatened to suffocate her.

She should call Butch.

During the day, she worried about Fiona traipsing through Atlanta in search of a murderer. At night, Grayson slipped into her dreams like a thief, caressing her with his gentle hands until he provoked her into a distressing pique of frustration.

She always woke up overheated.

She definitely should call Butch.

She punched her pillow a couple of times as if wounding a stuffed fabric square could solve anything. What she needed was satisfaction.

Not even Butch's skillful attentions could help her with this one, damn it. If she were to ask a shrink, he'd tell her she was frustrated over losing to Grayson. Her dreams were no more than a manifestation of that frustration. She knew all that.

She untangled herself from the sheets and climbed out of bed. Four-twenty, the clock read. Sleep wouldn't return again for a while and the dojo opened at five. She might as well get up.

Besides, some extra time spent training might help chase away her demons.

\* \* \* \*

"Let me get back on that horse, Jack." Vega planted herself in middle of her uncle's office, refusing to budge until he said the words she wanted to hear.

The low afternoon sun blared through his windows. The weeklong artic blast had finally blown itself out, but not even the return of daylight lightened her cagey nerves.

Spending the entire day in the dojo, getting her butt kicked by the master, only added to her frustration. She needed to get back to work. She needed to prove to everyone, herself included, that failing to apprehend Grayson didn't necessarily brand her a failure. Hell, bounty hunters were lucky to have a fifty-percent success rate. Her determination had led her to an unprecedented one hundred percent capture rate. Her perfect record could survive one blemish. Couldn't it?

"You were supposed to spend the day with your mother." Jack leaned back in his chair and gave her a chilling glare. "Gillie called five times looking for you. Five times I had to listen to how I nearly got you killed."

Damn. She'd forgotten all about her mother's plans to drag her to every fashionable-clothing store in Detroit. Her mother called it "Step One" in reforming Vega's wardrobe. "I'll call her tonight and apologize."

"You do that." Jack flipped open a file folder on his desk and began reading.

She refused to take the hint and leave. "An assignment, Jack. I'm crawling out of my mind from boredom."

"No." His eyes stayed glued to that file in front of him.

"Why?"

"You're not giving yourself time to heal. How many hours a day are you spending training?" Jack picked up a pen and tapped an angry beat on the top of his desk. "How many, Vega?"

"No more than four."

Jack raised a brow.

"Five at the most." Her doctors were amazed at the progress of her recovery. Her training partner complained she was holding back, taking too long. She tended to agree with her training partner. Her mind wasn't injured—just a couple of body parts. Though devilish pains still wracked her shoulder and bothered her head; that was no excuse for losing her edge.

"Throw me a bone, Jack. I can't rest."

"Can't?" Jack's pen tapping picked up speed.

"Right. Can't. Not while Fiona is in Atlanta with her neck exposed and Grayson's on the loose."

"Fiona's okay."

"Then let me go to Atlanta and see for myself."

"No."

She still refused to budge.

Jack sighed deeply and grabbed a folder from a pile on his desk. "Here." He pushed the folder to her. "This one."

She snatched it up and dashed away before he changed his mind.

Five minutes later, she slammed the door closed to her office before letting loose a string of colorful curses. What a fool not to ask a few questions before jumping at an opportunity. Jack, that old dog, had tricked her but good.

Brian Wright, a stockbroker living in the posh suburb of Grosse Pointe, failed to appear at his pretrial hearing last week. A freaking snob, too ashamed to show his face in a grimy public courthouse after being accused of embezzling a small fortune from his firm. He was probably more worried about losing his membership to his prestigious yacht club than any threat of jail time. These rich guys seldom went to jail.

And going after him just wasn't worth her time. He wasn't the slightest bit dangerous. The bond on him was tiny, a mere two thousand. Bringing him to the local police would earn her the usual bounty of ten percent—two hundred dollars, hardly enough to pay for her new leather jacket.

Jack gave his rookies piss-ant assignments like Brian Wright to cut their teeth on. The fact that he expected her to waste her time on this one was a blow. A real kick in the face.

She scribbled a bunch of notes into her small notebook and got ready to spend the next several hours making the tedious phone calls that any bounty hunter—despite the importance of the pickup—would be required to make. She jabbed her pen repeatedly on her desktop and scanned the rest of Brian Wright's file. Her gaze strayed to a thick file sitting off to one side on her desk. She absently flipped through the other file folder.

She'd show Jack. She wasn't ready to give up searching for Grayson yet.

\* \* \* \*

Oh hell, Jack gave her a job and she'd be damned if she didn't do it. The sun was dying in the late afternoon sky as she went out on the hunt for Brian Wright. The foreshortened winter days were just about the only thing Vega disliked about the season. Cold, she could enjoy. The lack of adequate sunlight had begun to leave her as irritable and impatient as nearly everyone else in the city on this blustery and darkening winter day.

It couldn't have been her imagination making her think that everyone was scowling worse than usual as she approached a brick and steel low-rise building, could it? Brian and his partner, Guy Pollock, kept an office in the new building out in the posh suburb of Grosse Pointe along with about twenty other small businesses, mostly investment and law offices.

Ah well, she could understand the city's collective bad mood. Her day hadn't been a stellar one, what with finding herself creeping out to the tamer section of the city to track down a bail jumper who was more likely than not hiding out at his girlfriend's and scared shitless about the prospect of spending a little time in jail.

When she found him, Vega intended to show Brian the problem with that kind of thinking. Running always made matters worse. She only ran when her life depended on it, and even then, it was sometimes hard to make her feet move.

So, she figured, if she could be out on the streets facing her failures and working through them, her preppy bail jumper could do the same. Her pace picked up as her frustrations grew. Grayson Walker had caused this trouble. She'd make him...

Like a whisper in the middle of a deep sleep, a small man appeared at her side.

She jumped. Her hand instinctively moved to where her gun should have been holstered if Grayson hadn't stolen it. Not that she needed to rely on a gun for her safety. She didn't.

"Shit, Monroe," she said, turning on her heel. "Don't do that."

Monroe hobbled closer. He was wearing a faded wool coat with an oversized fur collar. Put him in a pair of leather boots, the kind with heels that zip up on the side, and he'd look like a down-on-his-luck pimp. His eyes were glassy, his pupils too large.

Monroe's hand shot out and grabbed her arm, holding it with a vise-like grip. "Don't go after this guy," he said, talking much faster than usual. His twitchiness was flaring up, too. "You've already pissed off the big bad in this city by going after that Walker fellow in the swampy south."

She peeled his grimy, but at least warmly gloved hand from her new leather jacket. "What are you talking about, Monroe? And what the hell are you doing all the way out here? This isn't your kind of neighborhood."

"Ain't yours either." She couldn't argue with that. The people rushed by as if they wore blinders. All wore neatly tailor suits and tried to pretend that people like Monroe and her didn't exist in their world. "You've stepped into someone else's nightmare, Vega. When you hunted Grayson Walker, you pulled enough strings to make even Detroit growl. Don't go after this new guy of yours, like everyone else in this city with dirty fingers, he's tied to the same shit."

Monroe wove a little. Whatever he'd taken, it had sent him flying into outer space. Vega didn't know whether he knew what he was talking about or not. He usually turned mute after clocking out on such a heavy trip.

"Come on, Monroe. I've just started work on this new assignment Jack's punishing me with. There's no way you know what I'm working on. Word on the street doesn't move that fast."

"Brian Wright," Monroe said, sounding unusually sober.

How the hell did he know? The cords in her shoulders stiffened. She had to work to keep her expression neutral. "Who doesn't want me to find Brian Wright?"

"You'll find out."

"And what does that mean?"

He tilted his head like an attentive puppy. "There's lust in your eyes. It flared when I mentioned that slippery Walker. He shot you, and you're not done with him yet. That's what they're worried about. You're just about the only one who could catch up to him and expose it all."

"What all?" She didn't like the sound of that. Falling blindly into what sounded like a pit of vipers was something she tried to avoid. She'd much rather peer over the edge and count heads before jumping in.

She grabbed his arm before he could slip away. "Give me details. Who's this new boogeyman I should be afraid of?"

Monroe shook his head violently and jerked away from her. "Did my duty and warned you," he grumbled, "made everyone happy."

Her gaze shifted from the retreating Monroe, back to the office building in front of her. She knew better than to try and shake information out of Monroe when his veins were swimming in a cocktail of drugs.

But if there was any truth to what Monroe was telling her, she'd wager Brian Wright's partner, Guy Pollock, would know a little something about this invisible danger gnashing its teeth behind her back.

Guy looked exactly like he sounded on the phone. Slick. Heavily perfumed pomade greased his thinning, unnaturally dark hair back like a cresting ocean wave. His polyester suit not only screamed for a fashion updating, it was so worn that the pants shined like a mirror in the seat.

It looked as if their investment business hadn't been as successful as Brian's wife had made it sound over the phone.

Guy Pollock had met Vega outside the office door on the third floor. An hour earlier, with a simple threat of calling a friend who worked for the IRS, she'd convince Guy to cooperate. He fiddled with the lock and grumbled something under his breath before pushing the door open.

Armed with nothing more than two pairs of handcuffs and a bottle of mace, she followed Guy into a cozy suite of offices. No obvious clues could be found in the reception area or in the adjoining two offices. She poked around Brian's desk and even searched his trash.

Nothing.

"You're wasting your time," Guy said. "The police took anything that looked important and they can't find him."

"They're not searching for him like I am." She picked up a framed picture of Lake St. Clair taken from a fairly high angle. "His wife said the club is really important to Brian"

"It was. They're going to revoke his membership at the next meeting. He groaned on and on about it to me on the phone..." Guy's gaze lingered on Vega for a moment and he licked his lips. It looked as if he was imagining licking every inch of her body, the creep. "He didn't come from money like you and me. He fought for every dollar he made, stupid bastard."

She set the photograph of the lake aside and left Brian's picked-over office. She plunked herself down at the receptionist's desk and flipped through the appointment book, worming herself into her prey's head.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get Monroe's warning out of her head. And Guy, though not the most trustworthy of fellows, didn't seem to have a clue about any big bad ugly scaring the city. A slightly confused, vacant stare had given her more proof of his ignorance than anything he'd said. Maybe he knew but didn't know what the hell he was dealing with. People in way over their head often proved the most ignorant.

Or maybe she was a fool for listening to Monroe.

Her cell phone chirped, cutting short that line of thinking.

"Yep?" she said, and rolled the chair off to the side to find a little privacy. Guy had enough decency to pretend to be flipping through papers in a filing cabinet on the other side of the room.

"I'm not interrupting anything am I?" It was Fiona.

Vega's heartbeat picked up its pace.

"Nope. I'm working a cakewalk assignment. What's up?" Fiona was exactly where Vega wanted to be, hunting Grayson Walker, not playing round up to some greedy little bastard who'd gotten himself in over his head.

"I need your guidance. Actually, I need your research."

"Sorry, Fiona, no can do. You were the one who wanted to test your wings in Atlanta." Vega couldn't leave her sister hanging completely, though. "What have you found out so far?" she asked. "Maybe I can point you in a new direction."

A safe one.

"Well, his mother and father are dead, so no help there. The third partner, a..." Vega heard pages being flipped in the background, "Joshua Whitfield won't return my calls, and won't give me access to any of the Six-Star Enterprises files."

"Hmmm...What else?"

"What else?" The strain in Fiona's voice came through loud and clear. "I've been banging my head against every wall in Atlanta with no visible success, that's what."

"Okay, okay." Vega thought quickly, trying to decide on the safest course of action. If her going after Grayson was making someone in Detroit edgy, she certainly didn't want to send Fiona in a direction that might have her stumbling into a situation that could turn that edginess into a full-blown and dangerous temper tantrum. "Try going to

his old neighborhood, the one where he grew up. Interview any neighbors that might have known him or his family."

Fiona huffed. "I guess I could do that."

"That's what bounty hunting is about, Fiona—grunt work."

"Be easier if you'd just shoot more of your computer files to me. You must have a detailed picture of our fugitive? I know you. Just because Jack has pulled you back, you haven't stopped working on finding him."

"Who me?"

"Yes, you." Fiona's voice grew strained. "Let me help you."

"Sorry, Fiona. Not this time."

God, how she wanted to be out on the prowl with her sister searching for Grayson Walker. But she wasn't. Besides, maybe Monroe was right. Maybe Brian would lead her to the city's new boogeyman that would give her a connection between Grayson and Detroit.

A girl could always hope.

Vega turned back toward Guy. His slippery gaze never rose higher than her chest. She gave him a menacing smile.

Shaking this slime ball until all his dirty little secrets came falling out may not prove as satisfying as slapping a pair of handcuffs around Grayson's wrists, but it might come pretty darn close.

\* \* \* \*

Just as Vega suspected, though Guy was ignorant about any new evil that had woven its way into the fabric of the city, he did know all about the missing money. His hand had been as deep in the client's accounts as his partner's had—maybe deeper.

Vega sloshed through the snow, up a walk piled with snow, to an address Guy had happily provided, after a little friendly arm-twisting.

Brian's mistress's house.

This was exactly where she'd expected to end up.

The one-story bungalow was in a quiet neighborhood a few miles from the bustle of downtown. Children played chase under a streetlamp just three houses down, laughing that high-pitched sound that only children giddy from a warm sense of safety and comfort ever made.

This creep had a loving wife and family nearby who were honestly worried about his sorry hide. The fact that he kept a woman on the side in this cute little home curdled Vega's blood. He didn't deserve the help she was about to give him.

The bungalow, unlike many on the street, was dark, all the curtains drawn. Vega circled around to the back, hoping she hadn't arrived too late.

She would have to write off the chase as a loss if he'd gotten spooked and had driven over the bridge into Canada. She had no interest in finding herself in jail under a kidnapping charge over a meaningless criminal like Brian. Bounty hunters weren't legally allowed to cross national borders to capture their prey. Though some did. She didn't.

A brittle stick crunched under the snow. Vega spun around. She'd been stepping far too delicately to create so much careless sound.

Someone had to be in the yard with her.

Her eyes strained in the darkness as she tried to see who was hiding in the shadows of the bushes.

"I've got a gun," she lied. She didn't. She hadn't bothered to sign a gun out of Jack's supply closet. Not for this guy.

A whimpering sound shook the bush. Great, that was just what she needed. Vega prayed she hadn't just scared the crap out of some young kid who'd wandered too far from the game of chase just down the street.

"Come on out," she said, gentler now. "No one's going to hurt you."

A young woman dressed in nothing warmer than a pair of tight jeans and a tank top that didn't cover her midriff crawled out from under the brush. She shivered uncontrollably in the frigid night air.

Her long, silky black hair veiled half her face, but Vega could see the bruises despite the woman's efforts to hide them.

"Did Brian do this to you?" Vega demanded.

"No," the woman whispered. "Not Brian. The men who were looking for him did this. Said they'd be back."

"Who?"

"Kayne," she whispered the name. "He wants his money. Said he'd kill me if Brian didn't have it when he came back."

"And where's Brian?" If the bastard ran and left this kid to face this kind of trouble alone, Vega might just have to reconsider her decision not to chase a fugitive outside the US border.

Much to Vega's relief, the girl cocked her head toward the back door. "He doesn't have the money," she whispered. "Everything's wrong."

Bracing herself for anything, Vega made her way into the dark house. In the middle of the living room, she found a man huddled over a small oil lamp and scribbling madly into a notebook. Vega took a cautious step toward him and cleared her throat. "Brian Wright? Are you okay?"

He whirled around. The lines on his face were deeply shadowed in the dim light. "Who are you?"

"Vega," she said and took a half step closer. "Vega Brookes."

He held out his hands as if he was trying to hold her back. "Who are you?" he asked again.

"I'm a bounty hunter, Brian." She gained nothing by lying about it. "When you didn't show up for court a few days ago, people began to worry about you."

"She's trying to help you," his girlfriend said from the back door.

"I doubt that. All everyone's worried about is the money."

Vega shook her head. "Not me."

"Especially you." His eyes started twitching. "You need me to show up in court. You need me to subject myself to their scorn. You wouldn't make a living otherwise."

Oh dear. This guy needed some serious help. She'd seen it before; he'd tumbled headfirst off into the deep end. Vega rushed forward a couple of steps, trying to close the distance. She stopped just out of arm's reach when Brian held up his hands like a traffic cop again.

"Don't come any closer." He used a tone—a tremor that sounded like desperation—Vega knew from experience to respect.

Brian heaved a deep breath and carefully unbuttoned a heavy flannel coat. His gaze locked on Vega. He grabbed the lapels of his coat and pulled them wide.

Explosives, coated with a disarray of wires, crisscrossed his chest.

Vega sucked in a breath. "Oh...damn."

# Chapter Eight

"It's not my job to judge you, Brian," Vega said real slow and easy, while motioning his young mistress to back out of the house. "Many of the men I bring in are later found innocent. I understand you're scared. But things aren't as bad as they seem right now. Talk to me, Brian."

Keep him talking; she just needed to keep him talking.

His eyes darted here and there, never settling on any one spot for long. "I don't know what the hell happened to the money. I just don't know."

She didn't care if he'd frittered away his clients' money or not. All she wanted to know was where he kept the triggering mechanism for those explosives. His hands appeared empty.

"I spoke with your partner, Guy Pollock, this evening. He's pretty worried about you." A little lie couldn't hurt.

"Guy?"

He swung his arms, punching the air above him, which made Vega nervous.

Where was that triggering mechanism? She didn't dare go near him without knowing.

"He was the one who insisted we take the account. I was against it from the beginning. If Guy is worried about anything, it's his own ass."

"Account?" She almost kicked herself for asking. Wasn't there a saying about curiosity and dead cats? "What account?"

"Dirty money. It was nothing but dirty money."

Which explained Guy's nervous reaction to her questions, Vega thought.

"I didn't touch a penny of it. I swear. But no one believes me, not even the police."

Understanding his situation and defusing the explosives were two very different problems. Sure, Vega understood how he felt. He was frustrated. Hell, possibly more frustrated than she was.

"You build a reputation," he said. "You spend every waking hour to gain the respect of your peers, of your clients, and then one stupid mistake—one stupid thing happens and your life is ripped out from under you."

Yep, Vega knew the screaming anger swirling around in Brian's head. He'd summed up exactly how she felt about Grayson and how he'd made her look like a complete idiot.

"Life's bitchy, I know," she said. "But you don't see me crying about it."

"You don't understand."

"There's more to life than material things, Brian. Certainly, you can see that. You've got a wife and family who would miss you. You've got your young girlfriend who depends on you, too." He didn't deserve to die and leave his family in tatters.

"I'm already a dead man." He waved his arms, punching the air. "I don't have the money and Finn Kayne doesn't care if I do or not. He wants blood. I'm dead."

"No, Brian, you're wrong. The police can protect you. Don't end things like this." "Why not? I'm already ruined. How can I live?"

"There is much more to life than success or caring what others think of you, Brian. No one needs a stamp of approval to live a good life. I don't need anyone praising me to let me know I'm good at my job, and you don't need it either."

"But don't you see?" Brian said, reaching for something in his coat. His hands shook. "Getting to where I am now is everything I am."

The trigger.

Vega had to act quickly. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure the girlfriend had gotten herself out of the house. "Everything, Brian? Tell me about your family. Do you love them?"

His knuckles whitened as he gripped the black plastic tube. His thumb hovered over the plunger. Vega knew just enough about explosives to know she shouldn't wrestle him for it. She'd have to talk that damn thing out of his hand.

"How about your youngest son? Your wife told me today he just got accepted to MIT. Will he feel a void without you to cheer his success?" Vega asked, this time with twice the fire in her voice. "I want an answer, damn it."

Brian's gaze lost its focus. "I don't know. It doesn't matter. I can't prove my innocence. I can't figure out where the money went. Guy probably took it—that rat bastard. He was the one who insisted on investing that drug money for Finn Kayne. But it doesn't matter, nothing does. I can't prove anything. And even if I could, Kayne would still kill me."

By the time he finished, his finger sat squarely on the triggering plunger. Vega's time was up.

"I plan to take Kayne to hell with me."

"Damn it, you selfish bastard," she said, ripping her cell-phone out of her pocket. "I'm going to call your wife and let her know how you plan to ruin her life, too." Since she'd called the Wright household earlier in the day, the number was still stored in the phone's memory.

"No!" He lunged at her, which wasn't the smartest thing to do when strapped with so much explosive material. Any odd movement could blast them all into the next block.

Vega kept her head, backing smoothly away. She held the tiny silver phone just out of reach.

"Don't call anyone! No one can know about this, especially my wife. She can't know about Kelly or this house." His shoulders slumped in defeat. "Please."

"Don't you think she'll guess that you've been playing her for a fool after the police scrape your remains from all over another woman's living room? Drop the trigger and maybe I'll consider changing my mind about calling her." Finally, she'd hit a hot button. "Drop that damn trigger now!"

Brian's fixated gaze had transferred from that black triggering mechanism to Vega's phone. She held it high, taunting him.

His arms erupted from his side, reaching for her. "Give it to me," he spat. "Give it!" He stretched for the phone and let the trigger slip free to swing by his side.

Better, but still far from safe. She took a couple of steps back. He followed like a dog hungry for a bone.

"I'll put this phone in your hands if you let me have control of the trigger, and don't move for at least one minute."

He stopped dead in his tracks when Vega began dialing again. He placed the trigger into her outstretched hand.

"Vega Brookes, here. I need a bomb squad out in the Lake St. Claire neighborhood, like five minutes ago," she said to the watch commander who'd answered the local police precinct phone and gave him the address.

Brian paled. His eyes widened. He must have realized that calling in the cops was just about the same as calling his wife. He lunged for the trigger.

Shit.

She didn't have time to waste. One wrong move and she would be blasted to bits along with Brian. She dropped the phone and swung a quick blow, aiming for the spot where the jaw met the skull. Not too hard, she just put enough power into the move to knock Brian senseless.

Like a switch flipping off the lights, the madness fled Brian's gaze. His mouth dropped open at about the same time his knees buckled. Vega slipped her arm around his waist and used her weight to guide him, slumping against her chest, to the floor.

They were both still alive. Thank God. A few moments ago, she'd been feeling sorry for him. What a stupid mistake. Sometimes she wondered if her father hadn't been right about her being too damn soft.

She plucked the phone from the floor. "Still there?" she asked, her gaze glued on Brian. Her fist poised to put him back out if he stirred.

"What the hell's going on?" the watch commander shouted over the line. "Is this a joke?"

"No joke. Got a man strapped with some kind of explosives in someone's living room." She gave the address.

"A real live wire, huh?" He said and chuckled.

Vega didn't appreciate his humor. "Just get someone out here. I don't have enough experience with this stuff to be messing with it."

\* \* \* \*

"That freak's a raving lunatic," Vega's old friend, Officer Ford said shaking his head as he watched a team of officers lead the now deactivated Brian from the cute little bungalow. It had taken more than an hour to unhook all the explosives from his body. "A freaking lunatic."

Vega shrugged. Safe now, she couldn't help but feel fresh compassion for the lunatic. "He's just been shoved over the edge, could happen to anyone."

"Nope." Ford sucked on the end of his pen, an irritating habit he'd started when he gave up smoking three years ago. "Seen bunches of men arrested for embezzling. This is the first one to pull a psycho stunt like this one."

Ford and Vega had suffered through police academy together and had formed a strong bond of friendship along the way. She trusted Ford probably as much as she trusted Jack. If he said this looked different, she believed him.

"He says he's innocent," she said as they stepped back into the warmth of the house's foyer.

"They all do."

"Not my place to judge, but it sure looks like his partner, Guy Pollock, got their brokerage mixed up with some illegal money from a Finn Kayne. You know anything about him?"

Ford's pen popped right out of his mouth. "No wonder that poor bastard lost his mind. You should've let him blow himself up. You said he wanted to take Kayne along with him? You would've done everyone a favor if he had."

"This Kayne some new heavy hitter in town?"

"Best we can tell, which ain't much. He's not in charge by any means. A regional distributor, perhaps? All we know is that eighty percent of the drugs on our streets are now flowing from him."

Vega remembered that piece of paper that had fallen out of Lionel Wahl's pocket. It had a phone number and the name "Finn" scribbled on it. And Monroe, her street contact, was complaining about some new guy's high prices and had warned her to keep away from Brian Wright. Finn Kayne and whoever he represented apparently had tentacles reaching everywhere in the city—even into the glossy Grosse Pointe.

"I'll pass your information on to the feds. They're panting down our necks, nervous about Kayne. No one has a clue who's his boss, but the feds say a man like him has cropped up in just about every major city within the past several months. Every major city. Makes my skin crawl just thinking about it."

"Glad it's none of my business then."

None of her business or not, on the way home Vega called Snitch and asked her to dredge up whatever she could on Kayne from her electronic snoops. Perhaps she was just feeling overly sentimental, but she just couldn't leave Brian Wright out to hang like that. He might not have been perfect or the poster boy for innocence. But who was? Her gut

nagged her. Brian was a tiny piece of a much bigger puzzle—a hapless victim in desperate need of help. And if that was true, who else was being destroyed by this new wave of organized crime?

# Chapter Nine

"If I can take out a security guard, I can use his keycard to get into the building," Grayson said. He was sitting at a small blue linoleum-topped kitchen table with Matt Lockler, the fourth man in the ISA team Grayson had led in Colombia, and feeling pretty damn antsy.

Matt stubbed out a cigarette and lit another. He looked decades older than the rest of them. His face was a maze of wrinkles and his thinning hair the color of dried hay. "Let me come along. Been a while since I've killed a guard."

Grayson winced. Matt lived in Atlanta on the edge of society. He too was on the run from the law, which made this hovel of an apartment a logical place to hole up for a few days. The years Grayson and Greg spent putting themselves through graduate school Matt had spent institutionalized. The stress of the ISA had snapped his mind, or perhaps it only nudged him to where he'd eventually end up anyhow. Either way, Grayson found it ironic how such dissimilar circumstances, colleges and mental hospitals, had led to the same awful apartment.

Matt wouldn't say why the police were after him, but to hear him talk, Grayson could only assume he'd done something horrible.

"No--no thanks." Grayson pushed back from the table. Matt worried the hell out of him. "I've got it covered."

A cop car drove past on its regular patrol. When it slowed to make the turn around the corner, Matt dove under the table. Convinced the police were circling the neighborhood searching for him, Matt always dove under the table at the sight of their patrol. Grayson bent down and stared at him huddled under there, puffing nervously on his cigarette. "I'll bring dinner back with me," he said, unable to think of anything else to say. He wanted to help his friend, but damn, this guy needed a professional.,

"Kill the guard real dead for me," Matt said when Grayson made a move toward the door, "and pick up Chinese food."

\* \* \* \*

Grayson drove Matt's puttering Geo Metro into downtown, parking on Peachtree several blocks away from Six-Star Enterprises' glass tower. He sat in the car a few moments, assessing the scene. It was close to midnight. The streets in this business section of Atlanta were empty. Not a soul in sight, which wasn't ideal. Being the only one out in the street made him visible—vulnerable.

His plan was simple. Get into the building.

When Grayson had discovered Greg's body—what was left of it—there'd been a pile of papers scattered on his desk, which sent up an instant red flag. One thick folder in particular had caught Grayson's eye. The tab read "Financial Audit"—a second red flag when up.

Greg had never taken an interest in the company's financials before. His strengths had been in networking. Or if a hostile takeover was in the works, Greg had a knack for breaking down psychological barriers put up by the company they were targeting. Financials bored Greg. He skipped meetings where nothing but money was discussed.

So, what was Greg doing with a financial audit on his desk the day he died? Grayson never did find out. Six-Star security descended on Greg's office not more than a minute after Grayson had walked in to find Greg's body. Less than an hour later, he'd been dragged away in handcuffs.

Of course, that financial audit file wouldn't still be on Greg's desk. And if it contained, as he firmly believed, something that had gotten Greg killed, the file would be long gone from this earth.

But his partner had been an anal bastard. If the file had been important, Greg would have digitized it and stashed the copy away in that secret vault Grayson had installed for him.

Tonight, his biggest roadblock was getting past security and up to Greg's office on the sixth floor. The security in the building was state-of-the-art, unbreachable. He should know. He designed it.

He smeared black face paint on his cheeks and under his eyes to make it easier to sink into the shadows and took one last look in the rearview mirror to make sure the street was still empty. He got out of Matt's tiny car and edged along the side of a building. Several minutes passed as he blazed a careful trail to Six-Star's back service entrance.

He'd practiced this for the past four nights and knew it would take him exactly six minutes to get into position. Three out of those four nights, a security guard had stepped out the service entrance door, taken a quick look around, and then lit up a cigarette. The security guard, due to appear in about four minutes, was breaking the rules and putting the building at risk. He'd patiently watched the building for more than a week to find such an opening.

As he crouched in the darkness, a stocky club in hand, he hoped the guard wouldn't choose tonight to kick that nasty smoking habit.

Five minutes passed.

Where was he? He began to bounce on his heels.

Six minutes.

Still, no security guard. He decided to give him another few minutes before calling it a night. He could try again tomorrow.

Eight more minutes passed.

Just as he rose from his hiding place to leave, a shadow moved. A dark silhouette drew close to the service door.

What's this?

He held his position; confident the darkness concealed him as the shadow stepped boldly into the light.

A sick feeling twisted in his gut in reaction to what he saw. Word on the street was that a woman bounty hunter had been asking questions about him. At first, he'd suspected Vega. But this new bounty hunter wasn't discrete, he'd been told, and had thoughtlessly gotten herself into a few difficult situations. Vega was good. Too good. She'd be breathing fire down his neck if she had been actively on his trail.

This woman who'd stepped into the light, a curvy piece of work wearing a black cat suit that left nothing to his imagination, was probably the new bounty hunter. She tilted her head and stared at the locking mechanism on the door.

You're not going to get in through that way, sweetie. The longer he watched, the stronger the feeling of recognition grew. Though her long hair was brown, much darker than Vega's dishpan blond color, her high cheekbones, trim nose and insolent lips were nearly the exact duplicates of Vega's.

This hunter had to be a sister or cousin of hers.

"Damn if I'm going to slum around in that neighborhood talking to senile old biddies for one more day," the hunter muttered without a care that a security guard could appear at any moment. "If Six-Star won't let me into their personnel files, well then, that's exactly where I want to be."

Staying in the bright light, she retrieved a phone from a black satchel hanging across her chest. "Snitch," she said after a few moments. "Yeah, it's me Fiona."

Fiona. A fitting name for Vega's sister—it had to be her sister, Grayson decided.

"Listen, Snitch. I'm standing in front of a door with a lock flashing all sorts of lights. It looks electronic. Is there anything you can do to get me in?"

In your dreams, sweetie. This building is impenetrable.

Fiona recited the address after a long pause and then added, "Have you thought anymore about getting those files for me off Vega's computer? I'll double your fee."

The danger of getting arrested while trying to break into the politically powerful Six-Star Enterprises' headquarters should have put this hunter on alert. She definitely shouldn't be chitchatting on the phone while standing like a damn target in a spotlight at the back entrance.

"Okay, okay, I understand why you won't do it. I'll stop asking. How's the lock coming?"

Hah! Like she'd get any further than where she's standing right now. Go home, little girl. This game is for the professionals.

"Got it. Thanks, Snitch. I'll wire the payment in the morning." Fiona tucked the phone back into her satchel.

Instead of giving up like he'd expected, she stood her ground, watching that infernal blinking red light just above the slot on the door where a specially designed key card had to be inserted in order to deactivate the lock. What in the hell was she waiting for?

His calves were beginning to cramp from crouching in one spot for too long, which only made him crankier. He fingered the club in his hand. He'd been prepared to knock out that security guard who hadn't bothered to show up—and the guard hadn't done anything to deserve it. A tap on the head would get the bounty hunter out of his way—at least for the night. He inched forward.

The red light on the door turned green. The lock clicked.

"I'll be damned." He couldn't help but whisper.

Fiona, too absorbed with pulling the heavy metal door open, paused just long enough to make one last survey of the area before stepping inside.

Never one to pass up a golden opportunity, he caught the door before the latch clicked back into place and followed her in. He shadowed her up the back stairs. There were security cameras on each landing. Fiona didn't seem to care. Grayson tried his best to stay out of their range, but figured if a security guard had been paying the least bit of attention to the monitors, they'd soon have company in this stairwell. He pushed the short club into a belt loop and pulled out the Glock. He double-checked to make sure the pistol was loaded and ready.

He was just nearing the fifth floor landing when the door swung open. Since he'd been expecting it, the two men bursting into the stairwell didn't rankle his nerves at all. He calmly backed down a few of the steps to wait for the guards to take Fiona into custody.

She made the perfect diversion. The two men took her completely by surprise. Terror flashed in her eyes. She gave a shout and dashed up the stairs. If his luck held, Fiona would be apprehended and he'd have the benefit of a building in chaos to help cloak his efforts to get up to the sixth floor undetected.

The guards, guns drawn, chased after Fiona like two hounds drawn to the sight of a squirrel. Neither glanced down the stairs in Grayson's direction. They passed like a blur.

A high-pitched scream cut short followed.

They must have cornered their prey, which would give him thirty minutes, tops, before the building swarmed with police. That should be just enough time to empty out Greg's vault.

He backed further down the steps. His dark clothes stood out worse than a bright sign with great big letters shouting, "come get me" in the fully lit stairwell.

He watched from around a turn in the stair as the two men came lumbering back down to the fifth floor landing with Fiona trapped between them.

"Boss said to get her out of the way if she started meddling," the larger of the two men said.

For Grayson, the world stopped for a moment. He'd been expecting the standard dull-gray uniform all Six-Star security guards were required to wear. These two were not regular members of the Six-Star security team.

"She's meddling all right. I should pop her neck while we've got her out," the second man said. They wore black from head to toe. A black mesh mask completely covered their faces.

"I say let's have some fun first. She's a pretty bitch. I'd like to get my teeth into her."

That second man who must have been in charge considered the suggestion for a moment. "Guess it couldn't hurt. No one's going to find her body, anyhow," he said finally. "We could tie her up."

Okay, so the cops weren't on the way.

But it wasn't as if he'd gotten Fiona into this mess. She'd be just as dead if he'd picked tomorrow night to make his break-in.

"We'll have a good time now." The larger of the two beasts groped her shapely bottom. Fiona moaned.

The second man tightened his hold around Fiona's neck. "Let's go before she wakes up and starts screaming." He pushed the door to the fifth floor open.

In less than a second, they'd be gone, and Fiona's fate sealed. He could pretend he didn't see any of this, get up to the sixth floor, and get Greg's second set of papers without much risk of detection. Those two thugs would be well occupied for quite some time

But he owed Vega. He'd shot her and then left her hurt and chained up miles from the nearest medical care. Though he might not owe her this much, he knew he owed her something. Besides, surprise would be on his side.

Without further consideration of the consequences, he propelled himself up the stairs and leapt over the railing where they turned a corner. He slammed the butt of his pistol into the skull of the larger of the two men, dropping him like dead weight. The second man—who really wasn't that much smaller—released his death grip from around Fiona's neck, letting her slip to the floor, and spun around to jam his pistol into Grayson's belly.

Grayson reacted instinctively, giving a sharp chop to the bastard's wrist. The pistol dropped from his hand and bounced down the stairway. Grayson followed up with a quick upper cut that didn't seem to do anything but make him angrier.

Both his and the guard's gaze flew to the thug he'd knocked out. A second pistol lay right beside him. Grayson kicked the gun down the stairway.

"Damn you!" The bastard swung a hard right.

The fist grazed Grayson's jaw, sending him skittering down several of the steps in the cramped space before he caught his balance. Being several steps below the bastard put him at one hell of a disadvantage. He jammed his gun into his pants. If he shot this one, he'd probably attract more like him. He'd mostly likely have to deal with an army flooding into the deadly cramped space.

The guard smiled. His white teeth gleamed with amusement from behind his mesh mask. "Come on you scum," he taunted. "Fight me. I'll be a rich man once you're dead."

Escape was really the only option. The hell with getting himself killed while trying to save Vega's sister. He leapt down nearly a full flight of stairs and crashed onto the fourth floor landing.

He glanced up for just a moment and saw that the masked assassin had wasted no time in taking pursuit. Grayson also caught a glimpse of a feminine hand hanging off the edge of the metal fifth floor landing.

A helpless, feminine hand.

Damn. Damn it to hell and back. He couldn't just leave Fiona to be killed.

"I won't owe Vega a blasted thing after this," he grumbled, and charged back up the stairs. A long, slightly curved knife appeared in the guard's hand. The sight of it didn't slow him. He tackled him low in his legs, knocked him off balance, hoping to toss him down the stairwell.

The bastard grunted with the impact, wobbled, but didn't fall. Rethinking his plan, Grayson twisted to one side as the long knife came slashing down.

He kicked up, aiming for the slashing wrist. The knife clattered down the stairs. He sent a wicked punch just under the ribs.

The guard cursed again, but this time with less venom. He held his side and tried to kick Grayson in the face. Grayson caught his foot and kept pushing until the guard toppled over backwards, his head smashing on the edge of a step, his mask slipped off.

Grayson wasn't one to gloat. He stepped over the downed man, stealing a brief glance at his face, and climbed the steps to Fiona. He scooped her up and made a beeline to the back service door. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't risk going to the sixth floor when there might be more masked guards lurking in the building anxious to put the last nail in his coffin.

With Fiona snug in his arms, he slipped out the building the same way he entered. Security at Six-Star would be five times tighter tomorrow night. He'd missed his opportunity to get some solid evidence against Joshua Whitfield. Perhaps he'd never get another. Vega owed him.

Fiona groaned and pushed against his chest when he lowered her into the passenger seat of Matt's tiny Metro. He studied her innocent face in the dim dashboard light. This one had no business venturing into such danger.

Morning would soon wake up the city, and Fiona would be alert and spitting like a kitten. What was he going to do with her?

## Chapter Ten

"Out of the goodness of my heart, I hand you an easy assignment and you find a way to turn it into something dangerous." Jack slammed the door closed to his office and pointed for Vega to take the chair in front of his desk. It was just a few minutes after nine o'clock, not nearly enough time for Jack to have chugged down enough coffee that morning to make him this edgy.

She crossed her arms and curled her lips into that wry grin she knew Jack loathed. "You're lucky you sent me and not some wet-behind-the-ears hunter to pick up that Brian Wright fellow."

Jack grunted. He could grump all he wanted at her; Vega knew she was right. Whenever a fugitive was injured and there was a bounty hunter nearby, lawsuits followed. Skip Tracers got sued, the bonding company that hired Skip Tracers got sued, and the surety company underwriting the bonding company raised its rates. All and all, it was bad for business. By stopping Brian from blowing himself into several sticky pieces, Vega saved Jack from one whopper of a headache.

"Damn it, stop looking so smug," Jack snapped.

"Can't. It's how I feel. Give me another assignment and I'll get out of here. You won't be able to see my smug face."

Jack dropped into his desk chair. "You're supposed to be taking it easy, healing," he grumbled.

She frowned as she considered that. "I didn't get blown up last night. I consider that taking it easy."

He laughed, apparently unable to help himself. "You're one of a kind, Vega. Special." He shook away his smile. "You getting shot, seeing you at the hospital, damn, you shouldn't be involved with such rough work."

"Oh, please don't you start giving me that 'get married' spiel too." She rolled her eyes. "I've got it memorized. Mom's version is quite thorough."

"Maybe you should listen to her. You could've been killed out there."

"But I wasn't."

He didn't seem to listen. "Your father would never forgive me if something were to happen to you."

"Dad's dead."

"And that's more reason for me to say this. I will honor his memory, Vega, and that includes watching out for his daughters." His eyes took a vacant look as if he were lost in some long ago memory.

"He was always too tough on you girls. Just like your grandfather, your dad could be one helluva a mean bastard. But that was just his way. It wasn't just his legacy he was worried about, he was worried about you."

Her father worried about her? Wouldn't that mean he actually did care—if only a little? It took a moment for the words to sink into her head.

"He never asked you to play the part of his son. Never wanted you to follow in his footsteps. He was old-fashioned. Women were to be protected. Period. There was no changing his mind on that point. Every day you hit the streets with that gun strapped to your belt and a police badge pinned to your chest, he nearly died from fear for your safety. Can you image how lowering it must have been for a man as proud as your father to send his own precious daughter into potentially deadly situations? I couldn't understand his fear until the night I found you lying in that hospital bed. Daughters are to be coddled, pampered. You wouldn't let him—"

"He never wanted a daughter." Jack was wrong. He didn't know her father like she did. She'd just needed to prove herself. She'd just needed to show him that she was every bit as good as a son. That's why she'd become a cop. But that hadn't been enough. Besides, she hadn't been happy as a cop. And he hadn't been happy with her, either. She'd just needed to do something spectacularly brave with her life. Then he would have loved her. Then he would have been the caring father she always longed to have. "He didn't want me..."

Jack shot her a sharp look. "Vega, I have to be blunt. Your getting shot scared the hell out of me. Yes, you're good. You've made me a lot of money. You're unquestionably my best hunter. But still, I can't get that image of you hurt because of me out of my head. I'm beginning to think your father wasn't such a bastard after all. In fact, I'm beginning to worry that I might have made a mistake letting you work here."

No. He wasn't going to do this to her.

Running away from bounty hunting just because of a little danger wasn't something that her father would ever do, or something she would do. "Lock me out Jack, and I'll just go somewhere else. I'm not going to stop bounty hunting. It's who I am."

His frown deepened as he squeezed the bridge of his nose, but he didn't argue.

"So?" She decided to press her luck. "You going to give me a new assignment or do I have to beg again?"

He studied the stacks of files still littering his desk. He pulled a few out and looked at them before settling on one. "Don't complain about this one," he said, handing the thin file to her. "I would've given it to you no matter what had happened down south in that swamp. This one requires a woman's gentle touch."

She took the thin file. Tyree Robinson, the heading read. Jack wasn't done punishing her for the scare she'd given him by getting hurt. He truly cared about her. She didn't doubt that for a moment, so she decided she could put up with this crap for however long he needed to dish it out.

"Get out of here," he said with a brisk wave toward the door. "And be damned careful."

\* \* \* \*

Tyree Robinson, a high school honor student from Dearborn, had been arrested for drug possession. Heroin, in fact, which meant Tyree was probably a lost cause. Her trial date came and went a week earlier. She'd run away from home the day of the trial. Vega planned to visit her family in person, of course. Talk with them in a nice, calm voice and try to pry a little bit more information from them, though families rarely knew too much in these cases.

Fortunately, high school aged bond jumpers weren't too clever. Scared, a kid generally holed up somewhere where she'd feel safe, often hiding out at a friend's house; a friend the parents never seemed to know anything about. More often than not, the drug supplier. Certainly not the kind of kid an honor student would invite to her parents' house for dinner.

Because of the legwork involved, she figured this assignment would inevitably take her just about two days.

No reason to delay. Vega shoved the paperwork back into the folder. A stray scrap of paper slipped from the file and fluttered to the floor.

It was something Vega had overlooked.

She scooped up the paper, a column torn from a newspaper. A grainy photo of Tyree smiling, her hand raised in a wave, accompanied a brief article. "Tyree Robinson Crowned Miss Motor City," the headline read. A jeweled tiara sat at an awkward angle on top of Tyree's head.

"Great, just great. A freaking beauty queen. No wonder Jack wanted me to have this one"

"What's this about beauty queens?"

Her head snapped up. Butch quirked a blond brow and grinned. "Jealous of beauty queens, Vega?"

"Hell, no." She jammed the article back into the file folder and zipped up her backpack. Butch had never popped up at her office before. He called; they'd arrange a meeting.

The last time she saw him, he'd surprised her at her apartment, she reminded herself. She hadn't called him since that night. He hadn't called her.

"Been a while," she said, leaning back in her desk chair. "You've got one hell of a bruise on your jaw. Some fugitive get the better of you?"

He smiled good-naturedly, which wasn't at all in his nature, and stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. "Heard you got a hole through your shoulder. Bumps and bruises are just part of the game."

Pain rippled down her arm at the reminder of the injury. She pushed the sensation away. "Guess so. I'm okay, but it's not something I intend on letting happen again."

He leaned against the closed door and watched her with those assessing blue eyes of his. His battered cowboy hat tipped forward when he leaned his head back. "I would've called, Vega." She felt like she was being sized up, her fitness weighed. "I've been out of town. Just got back this afternoon. I'm glad to see you're healing up—physically and mentally."

He let the word "mentally" linger in the room, as if there was some note of doubt in his head about her mental fitness. Did he really think one blow to her ego would cause her to crumble?

"This bullet is no different than getting sucker punched. I should've seen it coming." She shrugged defensively. "I will next time."

"Good." His smile flattened out. He propped his boot against the door, striking a lazy pose. "I'm not here to grill you. Not unless you want me to."

"What do you want, Butch?" As if she needed to ask. Some guy sucker punched him. He was bruised and probably angry about it. What he wanted was a rough tumble with someone who could take it.

"Come back to my apartment with me." The vein in his neck jumped as his pulse picked up a beat. "For the rest of the day."

"I don't know." She thought about the kids she needed to interview and Tyree's family fretting after their daughter's safety. One missed afternoon wouldn't bring the girl home any sooner. Today's work would only lay the groundwork for tomorrow.

She could swing by Dearborn that evening...after Butch had had his fill. She wasn't about to say no, not when her body had been screaming for sex for days now.

"My apartment," she said, wanting Butch to take her in her bed. That's where the erotic dreams lived, in her bed. That's where she needed her lust satisfied.

"Sure," he agreed. He opened the door and took a step out. "Ready?"

The phone rang just as she finished packing up her things. "I'll catch right up." She reached for the receiver on her desk.

Butch growled and didn't have the good manners to give her a moment of privacy.

"Yep?" Vega said and gave Butch a hard glare.

"Snitch here," the metallic voice on the other end of the line sang. "Just a quick question. The man you wanted tracked, his name Finn Kayne?"

"Yep, Finn. That's what he's going by."

"Hmmm..."

"What?"

"Must be a new name. There's nothing." Snitch sounded irritated by that.

"Okay, I understand." Vega was ready to hang up. With Butch standing there devouring her with those wolfish eyes, her body wanted nothing to do with chasing down some new drug dealer.

"Wait."

Vega waited.

"Pay double the fee and give me a couple of more days and I'll get something. I promise."

"Sure." The two hundred dollars she got paid for bringing in Brian Wright was going to cover Snitch's fee with fifty dollars to spare. Double the fee would mean she was paying for Snitch's search out of her own pocket. Still, the money seemed worth it. If Finn Kayne was the new man calling the shots in Detroit, she'd do well to learn everything she could about him.

"Don't worry about Fiona," Snitch said quickly.

"Fiona?" That stopped her heart.

"She's been trying to get to your computer files. I won't do it for her, and the way I've set up your firewall, no one else can touch them either."

"I'll kill her," she said without much heat, not able to help respecting Fiona for trying such a conniving trick.

"Sisters." Snitch's metallic laugh crackled.

"Ready?" Butch bit off when Vega hung up the phone.

"You sure know how to woo a woman, Butch." She punched his arm and gave him a push toward the door. *Good thing his skills in bed far outweighed his lack of skills outside of it,* she thought. Otherwise, she would've sent him on his way alone.

The elevator was empty when they stepped in. She kept her gaze trained on Butch like a hawk following her prey as the doors slid closed. The tension in the air tasted heavy, sharp. They both wanted what he had to give. Mindless, thoughtless sex.

He wasted no time. He crushed Vega against the metal wall. She savored every rough curve he had to offer when he parted her legs and dipped down to thrust the bulge in his pants against her crotch, letting her know just how much he wanted her.

He covered her hand when she reached out to the round button for the first floor and pressed her fingers against the smooth plastic. The elevator jerked into motion, jostling her. He grabbed her hips and raised her into the air so that her legs opened wide to curl comfortably around his waist. He took her lips, kissing her with a madman's abandon, playing games with her tongue that sucked her breath away. He drove his pelvis against her over and over, shaking the elevator and threatening to break through the many layers of clothes while keeping her pinned to the wall—an interlude to what he intended for her in her own bed.

Her heart skipped an excited beat.

He lowered her to the ground and stepped away a moment before the elevator doors slid open. She grinned at his perfect timing. A small crowd of businessmen and women stood waiting just on the other side of the door on the first floor.

"Excuse me," he said, all business-like and brushed past them. Vega gave the group a friendly nod and followed.

"Finn?" he asked not a beat later. "What's your business with him?"

He lacked the manners to pretend he hadn't been listening to her conversation with Snitch, which Vega decided to use to her advantage.

"Just trying to find out who he is and what I need to watch out for. What do you know about him?"

Butch grunted. He was trying to avoid having to answer.

"You know something," she pressed. "Spit it out."

That's how it was between them. They could be humping like rabbits one moment and talking nothing but business the next. The ease with which they slipped from one role to the next felt comfortable. There were no emotional strings anywhere in sight to trip her up.

"He's bad news," he said finally. "Keep your distance. In his world, you're either working for him or you stay the fuck out of his way."

"He's importing illegal drugs, right?"

"That and whatever else the law doesn't want on the streets. Guns, prostitutes, you name it, he's wiggled his finger into it somehow."

"Oh...one of those," she said. Finn stunk of organized crime. Ford had said they thought he was part of something big—nationwide even. There must be some new crime boss pulling the strings somewhere and looking to wrench operations from the local troublemakers.

"One of those," Butch agreed. "Only bigger."

No matter how relentlessly she pushed him, he refused to elaborate. She hardly expected him to though. Butch liked to play with his cards held close to his chest, which meant very little sharing.

They each drove their own car to her apartment. Along the way, she tried to reach Fiona on her cell phone to ream her out for trying to convince Snitch to steal her computer files. Fiona's voice mail picked up. The phone had been switched off, a cheery recorded message informed her.

Vega wondered about that only briefly. It wasn't unusual for Fiona to switch off her phone when she wanted a break. When she finally reached her sister, she planned to explain, in firm tones, why she should never allow herself to become unreachable while on assignment.

Traffic moved swiftly on the Chrysler Expressway. In less than twenty minutes, she'd parked her jeep in front of her apartment building. Butch pulled his beat-up Crown Victoria into the open space behind her.

"So, here we are," he said after barging into Vega's serene apartment. He assessed the stark black and white interior, not able to understand the careful selection and placement of her furniture, and shook his head. "Damn, I was going to buy you something to liven up this place."

"You're lively enough for me." She dragged her hand along his bruised, swollen jaw. "Does it hurt?"

"Not aching as badly as some other parts." He flicked a downward glance.

She wasn't quite ready to dive right into the bed. Her dreams had been excruciatingly slow—inching toward the inevitable but never actually achieving a satisfying conclusion.

That's what she wanted from Butch—only with the satisfying conclusion—and she wasn't afraid to demand it.

"Ssshhh..." She pressed a finger against his lips. "Don't talk."

## Chapter Eleven

"Baby, you're killing me," Butch groaned when Vega rolled him over on his back and crawled onto his stomach to straddle him. She covered both of their bodies with the bed's crisp white sheet. Most of their clothes had long ago been abandoned in the living room. She wore her lace panties, no bra. Butch still had on a grungy pair of jeans. He'd removed his hat and carefully placed it on the bedside table a moment before climbing into the bed.

She kissed his nose. Somewhere between the deep kissing and the creative ways he stroked her, she'd lost interest. The realization hit her like a splash of freezing water. Mindless sex wasn't working. He wasn't the man she wanted here in her bed.

Mentally, emotionally, she was still back in the swamp pressed up against the cooler while Grayson did his best to fry her brains with a kiss. A kiss she'd never asked for but couldn't forget. Damn it. She wanted Grayson...a man she could never hope to have. *Should* never have.

She swallowed hard. Delicately getting out of this disaster wasn't going to be easy.

Butch caressed her shoulder, encircling her bullet wound.

"Grayson Walker," he said. Like she needed his name on his lips right then.

She pushed his roaming hands away and kissed his bare chest, his muscles rippled underneath her fingertips. "He's just a man with my gun," she said lazily, though she wasn't feeling it. Her mind raced, trying to think up a plausible excuse to get Butch out of her bed without completely ruining their relationship.

"He's a hard man to find," he said. He groaned when she shifted her weight over his hips. "A hard, hard man...how...did...you?"

"The usual digging," she said. She kissed his nose again. It wasn't as if she found Butch repulsive. He was devastatingly sexy, in fact. His bedroom gaze could pin her to a wall and leave her panting.

"Couldn't have been the usual digging. Not with him. Bet you could find him again."

Wait a minute. What was Butch up to? She pushed the sheet covering them aside. "Why are you here today, Butch?"

He pulled her flush against his chest. "Baby, I'm here because of you. You've got the hottest ass anywhere around," he whispered into her hair and gave her bottom a tight squeeze.

She wiggled off him and wrapped the sheet around herself. How he was acting—far too nice for him—and the loving way he was looking at her, it all came across as contrived. Butch and emotion? The two just didn't mix.

"I missed you these past several weeks. And I was worried."

"Uh-um..."

He propped his hands behind his head, making himself comfortable. "A woman likes to talk about these things. Get it all off her chest."

"Talk?" She picked up his cowboy hat and tossed it at him. "I'm not green. I know what you're after."

Butch was literally planning to pump information from her. He expected her to mindlessly create a golden trail to Grayson? The very idea smoldered in her chest. How dare he? How dare he try to use her?

Not that she was surprised. She wasn't. But that didn't mean she was willing to let him get away with his dirty ploy. She wouldn't give him the chance to steal the two hundred thousand dollar prize for Grayson's capture away from Skip Tracers.

"Get out," she said.

"Baby...Vega, please." He tilted his head and smiled in that endearing way that usually turned her legs to jelly.

"There's no please involved with this, Butch. Get out."

As she watched him gather his things, dress, and leave, she knew she shouldn't be angry with him. The only loyalty Butch ever had was to his money. His character, slimy as the mold growing in his refrigerator, came part and parcel with the whole package. Besides, she'd invited him over to her apartment with the thought of using him too.

What a pair they made. Butch was most likely the only man on the planet she truly deserved.

\* \* \* \*

"Don't poke the hostage." Grayson twisted a broom out of Matt Lockler's hands before he could jab the wooden handle into Fiona's side.

Matt had spent the afternoon circling the chair where Fiona sat bound with nylon ropes and her lips sealed with a single strip of duct tape. He reminded Grayson of a feral dog, anxious to dig his teeth into the juicy morsel held just out of reach.

Grayson tossed the broom aside, sank into a nearby plastic chair, and rubbed his aching temples. Bringing Fiona back to this crazy house had been a mistake. He peeked at her. Her eyes sparked with naked terror and her nostrils flared as she sucked in air. She kept her gaze locked on him, not Matt, glaring at him as if he were the big bad wolf. The girl needed to work on her instincts.

As dead to the world as she was when he'd rescued her, Grayson just couldn't bring himself to set her down somewhere alongside the road. He'd fought that demon inside himself that had even suggested it. Of course, a hospital had been out of the question, since those places were crisscrossed with security cameras now. Same reason he wouldn't leave Fiona at a convenience store. Unlike in South Carolina where he'd left Vega, he wasn't planning on running. Not yet. Not until he had the evidence, he needed to prove that Joshua Whitfield had ordered Greg Harper's death.

"Could put tape over her eyes," Matt said. He'd been making all sorts of helpful suggestions the entire day. He ripped a long length of the duct tape from the roll.

"That would be cruel, Matt." Grayson had tape wrapped over his eyes once in South America. Removing the damned stuff nearly ripped off his eyelids.

"So, can I do it?" Matt persisted.

Grayson stood and snatched the tape from Matt's fingers. "No, you can't." He whirled around to Fiona. She flinched, sinking in the chair as far as her bindings would allow. "What the hell am I going to do with you?" he shouted at her.

"You said her sister..." Matt started to say.

"Vega." An idea struck a dull chord.

"She pretty, too?" Matt licked his lips. "Get her. We wouldn't have to share then."

"Vega," Grayson repeated the name, letting the idea sink in. He really didn't want her anywhere near Atlanta. She was too intelligent, which made her dangerous. By holding Fiona hostage, he was nearly begging for Vega's interference though. Fortunately, whether he liked it or not, he held the upper hand. If he played the game real careful, he might just be able to dupe Vega into joining his team.

The very challenge of it excited him. "Good idea, Matt. I'll start planning something."

Fiona shook her head back and forth vigorously, her terrified doe-eyes widening.

Tyree Robinson's family lived in the Ford Historic District of Dearborn. Their cozy home on Nona Street was one of the first houses built for Ford employees in the early nineteen hundreds. The streets were plowed clean, the yards fastidiously landscaped. The area broadcasted an air of stability and security where the dangers of illegal drug trafficking could easily be overlooked.

It was creeps like the elusive Finn Kayne who brought the real world to their doorsteps. Vega parked in front of the Robinson's two-story clapboard home, painted a friendly yellow with pale green trim. Though the Christmas decorations had been removed, the houses still reeked of holiday cheer. White smoke puffed from the chimneys. Snow banked in gentle mounds around the front entranceways. Vega could almost picture families gathered around the fireplace, singing songs while the mother was in the kitchen brewing something sweet and warm to drink. This neighborhood was the carbon copy of the cute holiday village her mom displayed under the Christmas tree.

The inside of Tyree's house didn't disappoint. Mrs. Robinson offered Vega a cup of hot cider and homemade cookies while ringing her hands in despair over her missing child. From her, Vega learned that Tyree's best friend, Candice, lived just a few doors down.

Candice, like most frightened teens, kept her mouth shut. She didn't know anything about Tyree...not in front of her parents, anyhow. Besides, Tyree was a tough girl. She could take care of herself.

By the time Vega left Candice's house, the temperature had dropped a good twenty degrees. A brisk wind swirled powdery snow down the silent street. Vega walked into the wind back to her jeep, hoping Tyree had found someplace warm to stay the night.

There really wasn't anything more she could do right now to find the girl. She'd laid the groundwork. This was where patience took over. It took time for information to bubble up. Tomorrow morning she'd be back on Candice's doorstep.

Candice knew how to find Tyree. Of that, Vega was certain. She hadn't acted worried about Tyree because she believed her safe. Tonight, the seeds of doubt Vega planted were going to grow and shake the girl's confidence. As long as she confronted

Candice before she got the chance to run to a peer for advice, she'd have Tyree safely back into custody before noon.

Her thoughts were still with the green-eyed, perfectly coiffed beauty queen, Tyree, when she returned home. Tired and slightly distracted, she didn't notice anything wrong until she was almost on top of her front door. Not that she would've run from trouble, no matter the size of the package.

A halo of bright security lights shone on Butch as he leaned against Vega's apartment door. His arms cinched across his chest, holding himself against the biting cold. Seeing him here, at her door, surprised her. He wasn't the type of man who'd come crawling back so quickly.

She stopped several feet away and pushed her keys back into her pocket.

"What do you want?" she asked casually.

"To apologize. I admit I was trying to use you this afternoon. I shouldn't have used you." He studied his boots when saying that. It weakened his sincerity. A man who couldn't look her in the eye was a man hiding something.

"I was using you, too," she said. "We're square."

Surprise showed all over his face. "Using me? How?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." She thumped his chest. "Go home Butch. I'm not going to let you in tonight." She'd had enough of lust and unfulfilled desires for one day. The only thing she wanted to do in her bed was sleep...and hopefully avoid those pesky erotic dreams.

"Wait." He grabbed her arm and twisted it.

Vega stared daggers at the hand that held her and wondered just how much of that arm of his she should remove while prying him off her. Butch must have read her intent. His hand flew off her faster than if he'd touched white-hot steel.

"Wait," he said again. This time the word gentled into a request instead of an exacting demand. "Let me explain."

The bruise on his jaw had darkened over the past few hours. The injury must have been fresh when she first saw him at Skip Tracers that afternoon. He looked rather pitiful, beat up and sulky.

"I'm waiting," she said.

He paced the length of the apartment's covered walkway. The growing wintry wind howled past him. A lonely wanderer, no one could play the part better.

"I want that information you've got on Grayson Walker," he said. "I need it."

She expected he'd say something like that. Grayson had killed Butch's partner and had tried to do the same with her. Naturally, Butch itched to tear Grayson's head off.

"I can't let you blow Skip Tracer's chance at collecting the two hundred thousand dollar bounty. My feelings for you aren't that soft."

Butch's pacing had brought him within arm's reach. He grabbed Vega's shoulders. "My feelings for you are that soft. I can't tell you how worried I was about you." He gave her a shake.

The bullet wound piped up, reminding her exactly where on her shoulder Grayson had shot her. Butch's thumb pressed directly on the stitches. She twisted free and held up her hands, warning him not to try that again.

"I've fallen for you, Vega. I can't think of anything else but you and me." He started pacing again.

"And Grayson Walker," she added for him.

"He's the key." Butch stopped again. This time he was too far away to grab her. "I get Grayson and collect the two hundred thousand dollars."

"Yes?" Something in his tone didn't sit right.

"Don't you see? We can use that as seed money to start our own company. Polsen and Polsen we'd call it."

"Polsen and Polsen?"

"Your mother would never bother you with one of her infernal eligible bachelors again. You'd be off the market, baby."

"What are you saying, Butch?" He couldn't mean what she thought he meant. What had happened to a relationship without emotional strings?

Oh, God. Was she about to get tripped up?

He sank to one knee and held out a small black box. He did what every girl dreams of happening once in her life—pried open the lid. The diamond ring nestled in the box's velvet interior sparkled in the apartment building's security floodlight.

"I'm saying, we should get married."

# Chapter Twelve

Vega closed the apartment door and tossed her keys onto the kitchen table. She'd refused the ring and left Butch out in the cold.

"I'll think about it," she'd said.

There was a dusty bottle of whiskey somewhere in the back of a cabinet. She dug around for it until her fingers curled around the bottle's neck. Poisoning her body with alcohol was a rare occurrence. She had too much respect for her health to abuse it regularly.

But, on occasion, she made allowances. A stiff drink might wash some of those sticky emotional strings away. She still couldn't believe what had just happened.

Butch wanted to marry her. Worse, she was tempted to accept.

Before pouring herself a glass, she dialed Fiona's number. Although her sister may not have the instincts of a street-toughened bounty hunter, she did have a good ear. The line rang a couple of times before switching over to the same message Vega had heard earlier. Fiona's phone was still switched off.

She left a brief message, telling Fiona to call no matter the hour.

Fiona would follow your example if you were to marry and have children, her mother had said. The words burned in her mind. Fiona was innocent, green. If she stayed in the bounty hunting business, she'd either get hurt or be forced to transform into a different person—into someone hard and cynical, like her.

Perhaps her mother was right. Hell, even Jack had been hinting that she should marry.

Marriage—it wasn't an ending or a curse. And it wasn't as if she pictured herself being alone forever. She poured herself a healthy glass of whiskey and promptly drained it

"Now children," she said aloud and gazed at her kitchen, distorted through the crystal glass raised in her hand. "That's a different question all together."

The thought of spending her life—her happily-ever-after—with Butch prompted a tight shiver to run down her back. She poured herself a second serving of whiskey. It took two tries to get to the bottom of the glass that time.

"Ever after with Butch?"

She slammed the glass onto the table. The room wobbled...or perhaps she did. That was enough alcohol for the night. She screwed the top on the bottle and left it sitting on the middle of the table.

Good Lord, she thought as she dragged herself to bed, was she ready to accept such a life sentence? Did she really not deserve better?

Did she really not deserve to be loved?

\* \* \* \*

That night, erotic dreams of Grayson attacked her with a force she'd never felt before. She woke up feeling battered, drained, and more than a little shaken. The need to capture him and drag him back into the courts had escalated. He'd eluded her, become a black mark on her perfect record.

By Jack pulling her from the assignment, she really had no hope of wiping that mark away...unless she agreed to work with Butch.

But she would tackle one problem at a time. Her first responsibility was to rescue the beauty queen, Tyree Robinson.

She opened her eyes. A renewed sense of clarity hummed through her taut body. She rose and reached up over her head, stretching like a lazy cat. The day in front of her would be busy. She planned to find Tyree and give Butch a definite answer.

A half hour later, she took Michigan Avenue to Dearborn to talk with Tyree's friend again. The traffic was snarled. Her jeep's ancient engine shivered in the icy morning air.

As she drove she called Butch.

"I'm not saying no," she said as a greeting.

"Good." He sounded far too sure of himself.

"I'm not saying yes, either."

"You will."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. Butch probably believed that overconfidence of his was an endearing trait.

"I'm going to talk to Jack," she said, after a long pause.

"Jack?" Butch grumbled. "You'll just be wasting your time with Jack. He won't want to lose you and will tell you a thousand times why this thing between us is a bad idea."

Perhaps that was exactly why she was going to Jack.

"Jack won't let you go after Walker. I'll make it possible for you to track him down. I'll make it possible for you to show Jack just how capable you are." And that was exactly why she had called Butch. The opportunity was just too tempting.

"Perhaps we can form and partnership, find Grayson, and discuss marriage afterwards?"

"Of course, baby. Anything you want."

"Let me talk to Jack first. I'll call you in a couple of hours." She hung up before Butch could say anything to make her change her mind. Besides, she had a teenage kid in trouble that reached way over the girl's head, still to find.

\* \* \* \*

"Jack!" Vega called down the hall at Skip Tracers.

He waited for her to catch up but looked pretty impatient about it. His briefcase was tucked under his arm and a stack of files filled his hands. "I've got appointments with three bonding companies this morning. I don't have time to hear how you've managed to turn a beauty queen assignment into something deadly."

"I haven't...I mean I won't." Candice, the beauty queen's best friend, had reluctantly given over where Tyree's boyfriend, the drug dealer, might be found that afternoon. Seemed he'd been the one to convince Tyree to run away from home. There should be no problem with the pick-up. "I'll have the girl home before dinner."

"Good." He started for the door again.

Vega caught his arm. "Butch made a proposal last night that I'm seriously considering accepting."

His expression fell. "What kind of—wait, I don't want to talk about this in the hall."

She followed him to his office and took her regular chair. Jack chose to stand. He crossed his arms and scowled.

"I suppose Butch wants you to help him go after Walker."

She propped a leg across her knee. "As a matter of fact, he does. I've got quite a reputation, Jack...and some charm. I could easily lure the contract away." Not that she really wanted to. That was one reason she wanted to talk with Jack first.

"Butch has been itching to go into business for himself for several years now. He's money-hungry, you know."

"I know." She felt like she knew Butch inside and out.

Jack leaned forward, his gaze trying to pin her to the chair. "And unpredictable."

"You don't need to tell me." She gave him a little smile. "It's all Mom's doing, you know. She's the one who wants to see me married."

"Married?" He threw his hands in the air. "And I thought you were running away from Skip Tracers because I was keeping you from Walker." He settled down long enough to catch his breath. "I can't believe you'd turn your back on your family and go work for Butch just to escape your mother's lectures. Leaving won't make her give up on you."

She just had to tell him right out, though the thought of marriage to Butch still put a sour lump in her throat. "You don't understand, Jack. Butch has asked me to marry him—to be his partner in business and in life."

"Oh." He actually paled.

"I haven't agreed...yet. I'm tempted."

"Do you love him?" Jack asked in a whisper-soft voice.

The question propelled her to her feet. "That's really not important," she said, and started for the door. A good bounty hunter always knew when to retreat.

"I'm not asking as your supervisor, Vega. But as your uncle who loves you like a daughter. Do you love Butch?"

She shrugged.

The buzzing of the florescence light in the ceiling was the only sound in the room for several minutes. She was not about to dig herself into a hole by talking too much.

"Your father wouldn't approve," he said at last.

She smiled at that. "Mom won't either. Guess there's no chance you'd hand me Grayson Walker as a bribe to keep me at Skip Tracers?"

He didn't even pretend to consider the idea. "Not with you less than one hundred percent, Vega. I won't be the one to get you killed."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Just like her father, his lack of faith in her ripped her up inside. Maybe Butch couldn't give her love. But he could offer her the kind of acceptance she'd been searching for. She opened the office door. "I'll let you know what I decide."

She was halfway out of the office when Jack's intercom buzzed. "Jack, you've got an urgent call from Atlanta," his secretary said, not sounding at all flirty, which was enough to make Vega step back in and close the door behind her.

"Fiona?" she asked as the blood drain away from her head.

Jack picked up the receiver. He didn't speak a word, which was even more distressing than his secretary's flat tone.

"Don't hurt her," he said after listening to the person on the other end of the line for far too long. It wasn't a plea but an order carrying the threat of death behind it.

Vega reached over the desk and switched on the phone's speaker.

"Bring the cash to the men's bathroom just outside the Atlanta Cyclorama." She recognized Grayson's voice immediately. "Come alone or she's dead."

"Let me talk to her," Vega said.

There was a long pause. She thought he might have disconnected. "Vega." There was a grin in his voice. "Your sister doesn't hold a candle to you."

"Bastard, if you touch her—"

"I would worry instead how she fell into my clutches."

The line went dead.

"I'm going with you," she said.

Jack ignored her. He'd dialed the phone and was waiting for an answer.

"I'm going with you to Atlanta, Jack. I know this guy. I know we can trap him."

"Run a trace on the last call to come to this number," he said, still ignoring her.

She couldn't stand it. She felt close to jumping out of her skin. No matter what Jack said, she'd be on the next plane to Atlanta. She planned to tear Grayson into little pieces and toss the mess to the local cops. *No one touched her sister*.

Jack dialed a second number. Vega, too wound up to sit, paced his office while cursing Grayson under her breath.

He had the chance to kill you twice, but he didn't. The intruding thought did nothing to settle her nerves. She wanted her anger. Wrapping herself up in the raw emotion empowered her.

She caught no more than snatches of the conversation Jack was having with the Atlanta PD. Her complete focus had shifted to the future, to her confrontation with Grayson.

Jack finally hung up the phone. "You're not going to Atlanta with me," he said. His tone was calm and sounded terribly final.

"The hell I'm not! He's got my sister."

Jack sighed. "Yes, and he said if you came to Atlanta, he'd kill her. You're not coming."

*Oh God.* She could picture far too clearly Fiona's body lying lifeless in a casket. And Fiona's death would be entirely her fault. "What does he want?"

She sank into the closest chair, focused on a spot on the rug, and tried to calm her racing thoughts.

"He doesn't give us much time. I have to be in Atlanta this evening with fifty thousand in cash. I can do it, no problem. And the police will be there to scoop up Walker once Fiona is safely out of the way."

"What do you need me to do?" she asked.

"Do you consider yourself still employed here?" he asked, still using that dangerously calm tone.

Vega gave a quick nod.

"Good. I need you to find Tyree Robinson. Have that assignment wrapped up with a nice bow by the time I get back tomorrow."

# Chapter Thirteen

"How is asking for a ransom going to get our hands on her sister?" Matt asked. "This one looks much sweeter than money." He lunged forward and managed to poke Fiona in the side with his finger before Grayson pulled him back.

Still holding onto Matt's collar, Grayson led Matt into the other room. There were some things he wanted Fiona to hear, like the phone call to Jack setting the terms for the trade. There were other things he didn't want her to know, such as what he really had planned.

"I'm not going to kidnap Vega. After what happens today, that bounty hunter will be all over Atlanta asking more questions than a curious four-year-old."

"Never liked kids," Matt grumbled. "I don't recommend you kidnap any. Too much trouble, kids."

"Try to focus, Matt. My plan doesn't involve kidnapping anyone right now. I just want to play with Vega's mind."

Matt grinned at that. "Torture is a kind of mind game."

"Matt, not now. I need your help with this. You have to hold it together for the next couple of hours—that's an order."

\* \* \* \*

Vega left Jack's office and went straight to the arsenal room, a small locked closet at the end of the hall where Jack kept an assortment of handguns and Jack's new toys, a pair of advanced air gun Tasers, a new kind of stun gun guaranteed to disable a man from a distance of fifteen feet.

She rarely ventured into the arsenal room, preferring to purchase her own equipment. But she'd been unwilling to buy a new pistol, not when she planned on getting her father's Glock back. She weighed a light Beretta M9 in her hand. The balance felt adequate. It would do.

She signed out the Beretta and took it back to her office to take apart, clean, and load. Though chasing after a stock broker on the run without packing any heat hadn't bothered her, she sure as hell wouldn't step foot into a drug pusher's domain without some fire power behind her as a backup. Martial arts could only get her so far.

A trigger-happy dope dealer, even a gangly teen, which was who Candice had said Tyree had hooked up with, armed with an automatic weapon or the kind of submachine gun so popular now with the street gangs would blast several holes through her before she could hope to get close enough to disarm him. And though she hoped she'd be smart enough to avoid getting into that kind of Mexican standoff in the first place, she certainly wasn't in the mood to be blindsided by anything—not with her mind all knotted up with worrying about Fiona.

Jack was right, of course. She shouldn't go to Atlanta if going would put Fiona's life at greater risk. And she should keep herself occupied with the Tyree Robinson assignment. Searching for Tyree and her drug pusher boyfriend, Byron—according to Candice—went a long way to help calm her flaring nerves.

After seeing Jack to the airport, she drove straight to the corner of Lafayette and Griswold to wait for Bryon to arrive as Candice had said he would. Shortly after three, a man who fit Candice's general description—slightly gangly in his long height without an ounce of fat and very little muscle—parked illegally on the road and dashed inside a diner. He didn't stay long. With a bag in each hand, he hopped back in his huge SUV and roared off.

Vega followed a few car lengths behind into a neighborhood called 'Little Paris'. At one time, the city's tycoons had built their mansions in this part of the city, bringing with them a decidedly European flare with their grand architecture. Many of the homes sat abandoned, literally crumbling on their foundations. This was a haven for the homeless and prime developments for crack houses. A few urban pioneers had moved into the area, gutting and renovating, but "Little Paris" still had a long way to go to return to its original splendor.

Bryon parked his mammoth of a car in front of one of the smaller homes. It looked as if it had benefited from some recent repairs. Although the home screamed for a new paint job, the windows were all intact and the roof had been patched. A pirated electrical line slipped into the house through a small hole near the front door.

Vega parked a few houses down and waited for him to disappear inside before venturing nearer. The street appeared as abandoned as the three-story hull of a showpiece sinking into the frozen ground across from where she'd parked her jeep. But she knew how deceiving looks often were in a neighborhood where eyes seldom had faces, and arms nearly always held weapons.

With the Beretta securely in her hand and her hand in her coat pocket, she approached the house by going through the side yard of the two-story home next to it and cut through the back yard. Icy snow crunched under her boots and cars rumbled in the distance on busier streets. Her senses alert, she kept to the yard's long shadows and crept up to the house's back window.

She waited several moments, making sure she hadn't alerted anyone's suspicions, and then rose slowly from her crouched position just below a corner of the window to peer inside. The lights in the room flickered, a common problem with pirated electrical lines.

The room was sparse with a wooden double bed pushed up against the wall and a lamp sitting on the floor. She spotted Tyree right away. Dressed in jeans and a MIT sweatshirt, she sat cross-legged on the bed reading *Pride and Prejudice*. The Miss Motor City tiara sparkled on top of her head.

There was no sign of Byron.

She kept the Beretta in her pocket and circled around to the front of the house. She wiggled the doorknob and found it unlocked.

"Tyree, come get the damn food I bought you!" Byron's loud voice blew through the front door.

"I don't want another hotdog," she whined. "That's all you bring, day after day. Hotdogs. I'm sick of it. Can't we order a pizza? They'll put sausages on them, you know."

Trouble in paradise, Vega thought. Good. Breaking up the happy couple just got ten times easier. She pushed the door open a crack. The foyer was dark, empty. Not a lick of furniture to be found. She stepped inside, pushed the door closed behind her, and turned the lock. She didn't need any unannounced guests barging in on their private party.

"Tyree if you keep griping, I'm going to smack you."

Vega heard a scuffle. Playing it safe, she peered into the living room. A threadbare sofa sat across from a high-tech flat-screen television. Not a surprising combination for someone like Byron. The whole interior of the house smelled smoky sweet, like a tightly packed marijuana joint. Poison. How people could pollute their bodies that way, Vega just couldn't understand.

Second-hand inhalation wasn't a new experience for her though. She pressed on to the next room, the kitchen. The cracked linoleum actually shined. The drab olive appliances gleamed. Someone had taken the time to care for them. Vega guessed Tyree.

Two hotdogs, fixed all the way, sat unwrapped on the table.

Vega stood in the middle of the kitchen, listening to the soft grunts and giggles from the adjacent room. The door between the rooms remained open. Tyree looked to be the kind of girl who would have insisted Byron close the door if anyone else was with them inside the house. The poor lovers were in for a rude surprise.

Some bounty hunters stormed rooms while shouting threats and scaring the prey witless. She expected Bryon to be packing some firepower. Most likely an automatic. Scaring men with guns never seemed like a good idea. Vega preferred a subtler approach, like calmly announcing her presence and playing it by ear from there.

She drew the Beretta from her pocket and inched over to the door. The unhappy couple still had their clothes on, Vega was glad to see. Bryon's hips gyrated on top of Tyree's while their lips wrestled. The wooden bed creaked.

And for a fantastic moment, an image of Fiona flashed through her mind.

"Get off her, you bastard!" She aimed the Beretta at Byron's back and charged headlong into the bedroom, putting herself into the middle of a potentially deadly situation. The door she dashed through was the only entrance to the room. A person couldn't wiggle through the bedroom's tiny windows, much less dive out one of them to escape a barrage of bullets.

"What the...?" Byron managed to utter before Vega knocked him in the back of the head with the butt of her gun. The Beretta didn't hurt Bryon nearly as much as she'd hoped.

He grunted and rolled off the bed.

"Damn woman!" he shouted. "Who the hell are you?"

He popped up to his feet, a compact MAC submachine gun, not much larger than a pistol, held tight in his hands.

Instinct took over. She swung a flying kick, aiming for the gun's barrel. A few bullets sprayed to the ceiling before the weapon dropped to the floor.

Byron wasn't so ready to give up. He threw his arm out with a wild upper cut. The move would've made Fiona proud. Not one to be sucker punched the same way twice, she easily ducked the blow and followed up with a quick jab to his solar plexus.

"Don't worry," Vega said over her shoulder to Tyree, who was crowding against the wall. She ducked another gangly punch and hit Byron again. This time a little lower in the gut. "I won't hurt you, Tyree. I'm here to bring you back home."

Tyree inched to the edge of the bed. "Home?" She sounded hopeful. Days of living in hell could do that to a girl. "Who are you?"

"Vega." She jumped onto the bed to barely miss being kicked in the shin. "Vega Brookes."

"Knock her upside the head with your book, damn it!"

Tyree picked up her book and raised it. Vega shot the girl a dangerous look. Tyree dropped the book back on the bed.

Byron grunted his frustration and swung haphazardly with both fists. He could hurt Tyree, acting carelessly like that.

Vega tackled him, taking him to the floor with her.

"You look familiar." Tyree squinted and leaned toward the edge of the bed. "What did you say your name was?"

"Vega." She really didn't have time for this. She struggled to roll Byron over and slap her handcuffs on one wrist.

"Vega?" Tyree's pretty brows wrinkled. "I remember now. You were crowned Miss Motor City in—"

"That really isn't important right now." She managed to get the cuff over Bryon's other hand.

"But you understand." Tyree slid off the bed, having to step over Byron in the process. She took a moment to straighten her tiara. "You understand the importance of this crown. You understand why I can't go back."

Vega gave Tyree a blank look. "I'm sorry, but I don't." She pushed off the floor and placed her foot on Byron's squirming back to keep him safely contained. "Explain it to me."

Tyree shook her head. The sparkling crown bounced. "I was the best. It felt good, really good being the best. I don't want anyone to take that away from me."

"Whether or not you have that crown on your head, you're still the same person." Vega grabbed Tyree's arms and pushed back the sleeves to the girl's bulky MIT sweatshirt. "No track marks...and I bet I won't find any on the backs of your legs, either. You've never even tried heroin, have you, Tyree?"

Tyree struggled to pull free, tears sprung to her eyes. "I've smoked a joint once, but smoking does such terrible things to your skin...and your voice."

Vega believed her. She gave Byron, who'd become a heap on the floor, a nudge with her toe. "Rat out your boy here to the police. He's not worth your future."

Tyree tried to jerk away. "He said they'd still blame me."

"He's lying." Vega tightened her grip on Tyree's arms and locked her eyes with the girl. "I can help you talk to the police. They'll listen. You hand them a scum like Byron and they'll be panting at your feet."

"And my crown?" Tyree was beginning to come around.

"I can't make any guarantees." She wouldn't lie to the kid, not when Tyree needed to trust her.

"I don't know..."

Two loud crashes rocked the rickety house, as if the front door had been kicked in. Vega shoved Tyree back onto the bed and pressed her finger to her lips. Tyree had smarts enough to understand. She nodded and stayed put while Vega grabbed the fallen Beretta from the floor.

Vega eyed the MAC submachine gun lying next to it, but decided against taking the larger gun into the other room with her. They were messy shits. That was probably why they were so popular with the drug dealers lately.

"Byron! Where the hell are you? You said you'd leave the door unlocked!" The incensed voice filled even the dark corners of the house. "Damn stupid bastard!"

Vega cocked her head and listened. She picked out two, perhaps three, distinct footfalls. That would mean three guns heading her way.

Byron opened his mouth to shout a warning. Vega pressed her Beretta to his temple and a finger to her lips. Smart boy. He sealed his lips real tight and played dead on the floor.

She just needed to figure out how to keep herself alive and Tyree safe. Rules one...a new one in Vega's book...avoid gunplay. Smart, beautiful, and pretty damned skilled to boot, the gun really was unnecessary. She tucked the Beretta back into her holster and stepped out into the kitchen. She closed the bedroom door behind her and unzipped her coat to display how tightly a too-small tee shirt could fit over a pair of healthy breasts.

A dark-haired, neatly manicured man dressed in a black suit that looked vastly more expensive than the house they were standing in, strolled into the kitchen from the front of the house. Two sloppily clad, greasy strong-arms, each with MAC submachine guns of their own, crowded the doorway behind him.

"This her?" the suit asked.

Monroe stepped out from behind one of the strong-arms; one with so many piercing in his face it was hard to take a close look at him.

"What's this about?" she asked, directing the question to Monroe. His wide eyes were glassy. His expression looked sated, like he'd been given the chance to pump his veins full of drugs. God, she hated seeing him like that. "What have you done?"

He was killing himself. And these new friends were helping.

The second armed goon, a tall man with an eagle tattoo covering a deep scar slicing through the left half of his face, stepped forward. He looked ready to growl or bite her or both. She must have shifted her position in a threatening manner, or perhaps he'd recognized the deadly anger smoldering in her eyes. Guys like them, the ones who fed on the weak, didn't get the benefit of the doubt with her. They didn't deserve it.

"Sorry Vega," Monroe said. His glassy gaze slid over her body as he lifted his shoulders with a half-hearted shrug. "I warned you to stay out of his way."

"You must be Finn Kayne, then," she said, her voice flat, cold. "Can't say I'm overly impressed."

"Where's Byron?"

"He's not available right now." She let the menace build in her voice. Seeing Monroe jerk-dancing to some silent music only he could hear while Kayne's goons leered at her like a pair of hungry mongrels made her only too anxious for a fight. One where she got to hurt people. "Neither is his girlfriend."

Kayne must not have liked the way she quipped that last part as if he was nothing to fear. He ripped out a heavy .45 caliber and pressed it to her forehead.

"Is the bastard dead?" he asked. His pair of hired muscle followed his lead, aiming their MACs like well-trained hounds.

Monroe continued to dance.

"I can't tell you how much I hate staring down the barrel of a gun...much less three," Vega warned.

"Then answer my question, damn it. Did you kill Byron?"

"No."

"Good." Kayne smiled. A row of gleaming white teeth assaulted her. He lowered the pistol, so she wasn't too worried about getting another hole blasted through her from that gun. But the twin submachine guns were still pointed at her, and their owners didn't look smart enough to know when not to pull the trigger.

"Have your dogs taken lessons on how to use those?"

Kayne barked a laugh. "They'd shoot their own asses off before figuring out how to kill you."

His goons didn't join in on the joke. Both their expressions hardened.

Vega recognized the look. They craved blood.

She backed up a step. "Still, could you call them off? If you haven't noticed, you've got me cornered."

Kayne waved his hand, and his hired muscle lowered their weapons.

"So, you're the infamous Vega Brookes, the thorn in my side that just won't go away?" He stepped forward and peered into her face. "I expected someone larger, with considerably less sex appeal."

He wasn't the only one impressed with the view. Both of his men were grinning again—a menacing sneer like they were wondering what it would be like to tear flesh with their teeth—and their gazes remained considerably lower than her face.

Fine. The distraction might prove useful.

"My looks don't change anything," she said. "I'm a bounty hunter and I'm just doing a job. It's nothing personal." With her track record for bringing in the tough criminals, there were several big guns on the street who would happily shoot her just for her being who she was. She leaned against the refrigerator and watched him. If he planned to kill her, he'd have done the deed already.

"If you promise to forget about Grayson Walker, I have no problem with you taking Byron's girl. Byron wasn't supposed to keep her anyhow. She's underage, and that just brings trouble."

With Fiona's life in jeopardy thanks to that bastard, Grayson, there was no force in the world that could keep Vega from doing everything possible to put him back into a cage.

"I haven't been assigned to hunt Walker ever since he shot me," she said, not exactly lying.

"And you aren't planning to go after him anyhow? You haven't been paying people to search for him while you heal?"

"Nope." Why should she worry about lying to him? He was a damned criminal after all.

"Make sure it stays that way and we'll have no problems, you and me."

"Glad we could work this out, friendly-like." Vega made a move toward the bedroom door to fetch Tyree.

Kayne held up his hand. It must have been a signal his goons knew well. Like synchronized swimming meets boxing, they lumbered toward her. Not in the mood to take all three of those armed men on at once—there were so many less painful ways to commit suicide—Vega let the goons grab her.

"I'll let you have the girl. But I need to show you how important it'll be for you to keep your mouth shut and your body away from Grayson Walker." Which meant, he intended to let his hired thugs work her over until she was spitting blood for the next several weeks, she thought. No thank you. She didn't wish to play that game.

"This is a new coat. Paid good money for it, too," she said. "Let me take it off first."

Kayne gave a nod. He had his arms crossed in front of him and looked ready to enjoy watching the beating. Some creeps get off on that kind of thing.

Monroe gave another shrug and slipped out of the room.

The three remaining men were within arm's reach. The thugs had to release her arms to let her strip off her coat, but they were too busy drooling down her breasts to give her any breathing space. Vega didn't rush. She took her time pulling the jacket off one arm and then the other. With the coat hanging loose in her left hand, she turned to the larger of the two thugs, the one with the eagle tattoo, leaving the smaller pierced one to

stand directly behind her. Kayne remained to her right. They surrounded her like the points of a triangle.

"Here," she said and moved as she was going to hand the one with the eagle tattoo her leather coat. With a quick flip of the wrists, she tossed the coat over his head and elbowed the pierced thug behind her squarely in the chest. She followed up with a backhanded fist to his pierced face while the larger one tore her coat from his head.

His submachine gun swung into action.

Vega expected that.

She also expected Kayne to pull his gun. She swung a lower hook kick at the suit and dropped to the floor on her left side. Bullets exploded overhead from the submachine gun, peppering the thug's pierced and stunned counterpart with at least a dozen holes.

She managed to get Kayne's legs out from under him, and brought him down with a crash. Reaching up from the floor, she wrenched the gun from the eagle-tattoo's grasp before he could do anymore damage with that damn thing.

The butt made a useful club, too. He fell like a leaden weight. Kayne pushed up from the floor. She spun around and clubbed him too, knocking him flat. The smaller, pierced man with blood oozing from his chest remained on the floor without any convincing. He'd rolled himself into a ball and was moaning. She left him alone.

"Are they dead?" Tyree opened the door a crack and peered out.

Vega gave the smaller one a second look. "I think he'll live. He needs medical care. The cops can bring some with them. Let's get out of here." She grabbed Tyree's arm and gave a tug.

"Finn!" Tyree sank to the floor next to him. She brushed her hand over his brow. "No one messes with Finn! This guy even scares the shit out of Byron."

"No one messes with me, either," Vega said as she handcuffed Finn to the solid steel refrigerator doorhandle before getting Tyree out of the house. There was no sign of Monroe anywhere outside.

Vega called the cops as she sped out of the neighborhood to send them to clean up the mess she'd left in the kitchen and to get them to find Monroe before he got himself hurt. Her Jeep was just pulling onto Michigan Avenue toward Dearborn when her cell phone rang.

"Vega here," she said.

"Vega, it's Jack." Her heart stopped at the sound of his voice. How she kept the car on the road, she didn't know. "You find the beauty queen yet?"

"Yeah, she's in the Jeep with me now. I'm taking her home to her parents first. We can go to the police station as one big happy family." Vega swallowed hard. "What about Fiona?"

"She's fine." No explanation. "Any problems?"

"Nope, just routine shit. What do you mean Fiona's fine?"

"EMS checked her out. She's a bit shaken up, of course. Nothing to worry your mother over though." Jack sounded like he was hiding something.

She stepped hard on the breaks to stop at a red light. She considered pulling off at the next gas station. Her mind really wasn't on the road. Tyree white-knuckled the dashboard.

"Grayson?" Vega asked. The light turned green again. She slowly rolled forward.

"No sign of him. Sorry, Vega."

She stomped the breaks again when the car in front of her decided at the last minute to go to a fast-food restaurant and had stopped in the middle of the road before making the turn. Tyree's tiara jostled off her pretty head.

"I've gotta drive. I'll call you in an hour."

That next hour turned out to be the longest in Vega's life. Tyree's parents deteriorated into emotional wrecks at the sight of their errant daughter, scolding while hugging her with tears clouding their eyes. Vega fended off as many hugs as she could manage. Escaping their enthusiastic embraces became a losing battle after Tyree blurted out how Vega had overpowered three men with nasty guns.

The local Dearborn police weren't much more reserved in their reaction to her appearance with Tyree. Detroit PD had called ahead. They picked up the men she'd left at Bryon's drug shack—all except for the infamous Finn Kayne. Vega thought she smelled a dirty cop when she heard Finn had escaped. Of course, Finn could have pulled some kind of Houdini act and freed himself. But Vega doubted that. She'd done a thorough job securing him to that refrigerator. He wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Officer Ford showed up while she was in with the Dearborn chief of police, discussing Tyree's cooperation and willingness to testify against Byron. When she got a chance to question him about the arrests, Ford looked rather sheepish about Finn's

escape. There was definitely a dirty cop somewhere among the ranks. Her father must have been turning in his grave.

"Ford, you've gotta let me go. I'll give you a statement tomorrow." She quickly explained Fiona's situation in Atlanta—sketchy as it was. After a few more minutes of begging, Ford reluctantly let her leave the Dearborn police station without a full interview.

"Jack." Vega called the moment she got home. "Talk to me. How is Fiona really?"

"Let me put her on," Jack said. The phone went silent for several minutes.

"Hi sis," Fiona slurred. She sounded drugged.

Vega swallowed the urge to shout at her sister. "What happened? How did Grayson get you?" she asked instead.

"He saved me." Fiona's tone took flight. "I'd been attacked and I think he saved me 'cause I'm not dead."

Vega made Fiona put Jack back on. Her sister needed to sleep off whatever medication she'd been given before she'd make a whit of sense.

"Jack, I'm coming to Atlanta."

"No, you're not." He was adamant.

"Okay," she said, knowing damn well she'd be on the next flight out.

The beauty queen might have had one thing right. Sometimes pride was worth fighting for. Vega was the best in the business, no matter what anyone said. It was her duty to find Grayson and keep him from harming anyone else.

# Chapter Fourteen

"How does letting the pretty one go get us ahead?" Matt whined. He was under the kitchen table again. Puffing on a cigarette while hiding from the cops he imaged were circling the block in search of him. "We don't got her or her sister. We can't even share one woman now. It ain't making no sense, Gray."

Grayson ignored Matt. He'd been doing nothing but griping about the loss of *his pretty one* ever since they left Fiona tied up in that men's bathroom near the Atlanta Cyclorama.

"You forgot to wait for the money, Gray." Matt whistled through his teeth. "Shit, you're a stupid kidnapper. You should've killed the girl if you didn't want the money. Hell, you kill her even if you get the money. She knows who we are. We're dead meat."

Grayson bent under the table and handed Matt a greasy brown paper bag with a hamburger and fries inside. "Don't worry, Matt. I'll take care of you."

Matt popped his cigarette out of his mouth long enough to tear into the hamburger. "She's going to come after us, the sister, not my pretty one," he said with a mouth full of food.

"She is," Grayson agreed. His heart raced at the thought of Vega hot on his trail again. He didn't touch his own hamburger. His mind was running too fast to even consider eating. A cat and mouse game with that sexy bounty hunter promised to be a remarkable challenge. Especially considering the mouse planned to set all the traps.

\* \* \* \*

The air had turned even colder in Detroit. Butch watched as a small man quivered on his knees in front of him. The scum's breath swirled around his foaming mouth in white clouds. Butch gave him another punch in the belly for good measure. He'd brought the scum behind a deserted warehouse near the waterfront to teach him a lesson. No one worth shit would dare bother Butch here.

"I should beat you to death," Butch said. The man's expression paled to a shade whiter than the snow all around him. "But, today is a freebie. Tell your friends. Next time you don't pay your debts on time, you'll not live to tell anyone about it."

Butch's phone chirped.

Vega. He'd been expecting her call. He smiled at the thought of hooking up with her tonight. There was a new move he'd learned from a new whore he'd discovered that he just knew would make Vega putty in his hands.

"Get out of here." Butch pummeled the small man's face a few more times before letting him up.

Blood had splattered on Butch's boots. Damn. He'd have to clean them before meeting up with Vega.

"It's me, baby," Butch purred into the phone.

"I ain't your baby," the sharp voice on the other end said.

Finn.

Butch growled. Finn was calling a little too regularly. Playing the part of hired gun wasn't a role suited to Butch's ego. He was his own man, with his own mind and goals. Getting his hands on gobs of money topped that golden list of goals, which was why he put up with the likes of Finn.

"That damned bounty hunter knocked me upside my head this afternoon," Finn nearly shouted. Finn never shouted, never thawed that frightening cold exterior. This must have been big. "Two of my men are sitting on their hands at the police department and another is in the hospital thanks to her. I had to call in a few favors to not be there myself."

Butch knew better than to ask any questions. "Don't worry. We'll be in Atlanta within the next few days. She won't ever step foot in Detroit again."

"Funny, man." Finn's artic tone chilled Butch's blood. "Your bitch was seen boarding the 7:45 flight to Atlanta tonight. I'd told you I didn't want her involved with this. Kill her already and get this under control or I'll find someone who can."

That double-crossing lying whore. She didn't even have the courtesy to call him before she left. He thought they had something special—that she'd wanted to become his wife.

"Dammit. She'll be sorry she toyed with me."

\* \* \* \*

Vega found Jack and Fiona having breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Fiona's head bounced as she talked excitedly, pausing only to take small bites of her bagel smeared with far too much cream cheese. Jack smiled and nodded, playing the part of adoring uncle. No one would ever guess he'd charged to Atlanta yesterday with a briefcase filled with cash to save Fiona's lovely neck. A waitress dressed in a neatly pressed black and white uniform refilled both Fiona's and Jack's mugs. Vega hoped that it was decaf the waitress was feeding Fiona.

"He was the most awful man," Fiona was saying, oblivious of Vega's approach.

Jack must have sensed her. He snapped his head in her direction. His eyes darkened.

Fiona didn't notice her loss of an audience. She plowed on with her story. "He told me I needed to take lessons from Vega. Called me green. Can you imagine the nerve?"

"Been calling you green for years," Vega said. She propped her hands on her hips and waited for an explosion of protests.

None came.

Go figure.

Fiona tilted her head and smiled a sickly grimace. "Jack told you to stay in Detroit. Aren't you becoming difficult in your old age?"

Vega kept the inspired words that flooded her head to herself. She matched her sister's smile in size and sweetness. "You look good, Fiona. I'm glad."

There were two empty chairs at the table. Vega made use of the one closest to Jack.

"What are you doing here, Vega?" Jack asked, his voice crusty from all that caution he'd piled all around him.

"Well," she plucked a slice of melon from his plate and bit into it, "I've been thinking."

"Thinking?" Jack couldn't have sounded more wary.

"Yeah. And I decided you're a fool to keep me from finding Grayson. I know how to find him."

"I found him, too," Fiona protested.

"You stumbled in his way," Vega said flatly. "He's a danger. The longer he remains on the streets the more we jeopardize someone else's life. Who knows when he'll kill next or why he spared Fiona. Perhaps he has a thing for noisy brunettes."

Fiona sputtered and huffed before launching into a mini-tirade. Jack didn't flinch. He let Vega take the brunt of Fiona's anger for several minutes.

No one could do an impression of a deaf mute better than Jack. Vega tried, but failed miserably when Fiona began making bold and dangerous promises. "You will not walk out of here right now and go back to where Grayson kidnapped you." Popped out of Vega's mouth without any warning.

"Would to...if I wanted to."

Vega clamped her mouth shut. She had no desire to sink to petty squabbling.

Finally, she ran herself down. "I'm not a noisy brunette, either," she muttered.

"These sister to sister moments touch my heart," Jack came to life and said. "I hope you feel better now, Fiona."

She gave a sheepish nod and lowered her head to begin a close examination of the half-eaten bagel sitting on her plate.

"Good." Jack's coffee must have kicked in. His expression tightened with concentration. "How's the shoulder, Vega?"

"It's fine...healing."

"If I punched you there, would you go down?" he asked. His pupils sharpened to pinpoints. If she lied, he'd know.

"I'd stumble, sure. Doubt the pain would knock me down all the way, though. Getting hit *would* make me mad as hell. So don't dare try it, Jack."

He chuckled. "Okay." His head snapped toward Fiona. "Don't say a word."

"I wasn't..." Jack's piercing glance shut her up real quick.

"Fiona's kidnapping was a set up, you know that?"

She knew.

"He released her before we were even supposed to bring the cash, and he'd said if you show up he'd kill Fiona. That ploy has Brer Rabbit written all over it. 'Don't throw me into the briar patch' and all that."

"It's a trap," Vega agreed. "If he didn't want me in Atlanta, he wouldn't have laid so many tasty breadcrumbs."

"Wrong fairytale," Jack said. "I know you can find Grayson without any problem. What worries me is what he has waiting for you when you do find him."

Vega wasn't worried about any of that. She had no intention of playing this pickup by Grayson's rules. If there was a trap, she planned to avoid it all together.

"You can't take this assignment away from me Jack," Fiona jumped up from her chair apparently unable to keep silent a moment longer.

At that, Jack smiled. Not at Fiona, though, but at Vega. "I'm not taking anything from you, Fiona. You and Vega are now a team. Buddies sealed together at the hip."

"Jack, Fiona doesn't have the experience." Vega struggled to keep her voice calm.

"I know. I'm hoping her being here with you will keep *you* from doing anything stupid." Jack wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin he'd hidden on his lap and pushed back from the table. "I have an afternoon flight to Detroit. If there's anything you need before I go, you can find me up in the room. I have several phone calls to make."

\* \* \* \*

Vega had a few phone calls to make of her own. On the way back to her room, she stopped by the front desk and arranged to have her bags moved to the room adjoining Fiona's. She then made a quick call to Snitch to check on her progress with finding more information on Finn. Snitch asked for a few more days. Once back in her room, Vega plugged in her laptop computer and scanned the files on Grayson Walker. There was one name she couldn't quite remember but continued to nag her mind.

Matt Lockler.

Fiona had said—somewhere during that tirade of hers—that Grayson now had an accomplice with him. Tommy Fisher was in South Carolina. The bits of Greg Harper the coroner could scrape out of the carpeting had been buried.

But Matt Lockler, the fourth man with Grayson's ISA team in South America, had jumped bail three years ago. The file on Lockler was filled with mental evaluations. He tried to hack up a lady in a department store with a knife one afternoon. The police had arrested him. Lockler's psychologist had convinced a judge to grant bail based on the fact that his client suffered from, among other things, acute claustrophobia. Lockler had been fitted with a monitoring device that he'd pried off his leg without detection.

The criminally insane were often much crafter than the common fugitive. Vega made it a point to never underestimate their survival instincts. She printed out the file photo and went in search of Fiona.

She found her sister resting in a sunny spot on a lounge chair next to the hotel's glassed-in pool.

"This Grayson's accomplice?" She held the photo of Matt Lockler in front of Fiona's nose.

Her sister snatched the picture and sat up. "How'd you do that? I didn't even give you a description."

"I work." Vega took the picture back and left Fiona with her mouth still gaping.

So, Grayson had teamed up with Matt Lockler? Track down Matt and find Grayson. At least that was what Vega was banking on happening.

"Jack." She found him in his hotel room packing up his things. "I need you to get me a contract on a certain bounty jumper. Problem is, he's been on the run for three years."

Jack frowned at that one. "The bonding company must have already settled with the surety company. They won't want anything to do with us."

Vega held her ground. "Tell them I'll do it for free."

Jack quirked a brow and gave her a Vega's-lost-her-mind-again look. She tried to ignore it.

She handed him the photo of Matt Lockler and explained his connection to Grayson. "I'd like to legally take him into custody...just in case Grayson isn't still with him."

Jack nodded. "I should be able to work something out."

\* \* \* \*

Atlanta, nearly forty degrees warmer than Detroit in the dead of winter, shared the Motor City's dependence on the automobile. The amount of traffic on the road at three in the morning surprised Vega. She steered her rental, a brand new gas/electric hybrid Ford SUV she'd paid a premium for, onto the interstate and picked up speed to match the racecar pace of the traffic.

Whoever said the southern lifestyle was slow must have never driven in Atlanta. Vega laughed silently at the thought. She felt too damn smug and didn't care to do anything about it.

Grayson had returned to Atlanta for a reason. Vega could feel it in her bones. He wanted to prove something. Perhaps he wanted a confrontation with her. Fiona's kidnapping was a set-up, a ploy to pull Vega closer.

Well, she'd give him what he wanted.

No more games, damn it.

He'd played her but good, acting like he respected her abilities, like she was his equal, or perhaps even a little better than him, a trained Special Ops officer.

Oh, a girl could fall for such compliments, especially one as hungry for them as Vega. He was ever so clever. He didn't even overdo it with his words. How he conveyed his respect for her with his actions drew her in faster than any compliment.

But she could match his cleverness.

Grayson would never suspect she'd be able to connect him with Matt Lockler or that she'd be able to figure out so quickly where he and Matt had holed up.

Bounty hunters relied on the element of surprise. Late night raids that woke the unsuspecting fugitive from a deep slumber often guaranteed Vega the upper hand. Matt and Grayson should be no different. Everybody sleeps.

She left Fiona sleeping soundly in her bed, tossing from side to side. She didn't hear Vega slip out of the hotel to make the dead of night drive to Vine City, a revitalizing community near the Georgia Dome.

Earlier in the day, she'd spent several hours driving through a variety of similar communities, talking with the people on the street. Making friends by handing out liberal amounts of green. Even those with very little street knowledge knew of Matt Lockler. The visibly insane tended to make strong impressions on a community.

"The bastard slapped me upside my head for nuthin'," an angry muscle-bound man, with a scowl certified to make a baby scream, told her that afternoon in exchange for a hundred dollar bill. "Crazy son o' bitch packs enough firepower to bring down an army. I ain't goin' tell him nuthin'. I just kept on walkin' like nuthin' happened." Only a madman would consider crossing a mammoth like this guy. "You get that one off the streets and we'll make you some kind of saint in Vine."

The muscle wasn't the only one who gladly ratted out Matt's crackpot crib—as everyone on the streets called it.

She found the building just a few blocks from Martin Luther King Street, deep in the heart of Vine City where renovation and decay clashed in an all out war. She parked a few houses beyond the apartment building and walked back to it, keeping a keen eye open for surprises. There was no doubt she'd found the right place.

Fiona had given quite a thorough description of where Grayson and Matt had held her captive. In fact, Fiona's description had helped Vega narrow down which neighborhoods to search. Her keen eye for details had saved them at least two days of investigations.

The apartment building was as dilapidated as Fiona had described. No one inhabiting the singed hull with four walls and most of a roof paid rent. Though, by the glow from the windows the apartment building appeared filled to capacity. On such a chilly night, the residents living without the convenience of electricity would have to build fires to stay warm. Vega zipped up her leather coat and nudged the front entrance door open with her boot. The Beretta in her right hand was loaded and ready. The metal against her skin felt natural, though the weight of the pistol was wrong.

She longed for her father's Glock, with its perfect balance and familiar grip. She wondered if she'd finally get it back tonight as she climbed the stairs and passed a pair of addicts who stared blankly in her direction. The building was quiet...unnervingly so. She kept her senses alert.

Grayson wouldn't be expecting her, not this soon. But cockiness could get her killed. She expected a trap in order to avoid being blindsided by one.

Matt lived in the apartment on the third floor. The windows on that lofty level were mostly still intact. She figured residents of that choice floor had to fight for the privilege.

Fiona had described Matt as loony, but harmless. Vega hadn't met Matt, but harmless? The harmless didn't live in the choice spots in abandoned buildings. They just didn't

Fiona might be good with details, but her instincts definitely needed sharpening.

The eerie silence in the halls was broken by a raging argument on the third floor. The raised voice carried down the grimy, pitch-black hallway.

"I said no! No, no, no!"

No one in any of the other apartments bothered to stick a nose out a door and investigate the noise. It would have shocked Vega is someone had in this crime infested environment. She could have a shoot-out with Matt and Grayson while screaming at the top of her lungs for someone to call the authorities and not rouse anyone's interest.

Of course, that was how she preferred her pickups. Interference, both by residents trying to help or hinder, could put Vega in a dangerous situation. Even a well-meaning civilian could give Matt or Grayson an opening to escape...or worse, attack.

Vega had been told that Matt's apartment was the fifth door on the left. The apartment numbers had long been removed. Many locks were gone too. Makeshift bolts and padlocks secured several of the rusty, metal doors.

"Listen to me! Just listen to me! No, no, no!" The one-sided argument continued to fill the hall.

Vega stood outside Matt's crackpot crib and counted the doors again, hoping she'd made a mistake. The raging argument sprung from the other side of this pockmarked and bullet-hole riddled door.

With certified copies of the bail-bond for both Grayson and Matt, proving they'd surrendered their civil rights in exchange for being granted bail, Vega could legally blast down the door and rush in with fists ready. But she preferred to use a little finesse.

Instead of breaking down the door, she drew out the professional lock-pick kit she'd taken off a cat burglar a few years back and silently unlocked the door.

The quarrelling inside the apartment continued without pause now. Vega opened the door a crack and peered into the dim interior. A nude man—smaller than Grayson—with his back to her waved his hands in the air while shouting at the top of his lungs. He appeared to be alone.

She opened the door wide and walked into the room. This Matt wouldn't notice a herd of elephants marching through the room, or perhaps that was what he was noticing. Whatever he saw, it upset him fiercely.

"Matt Lockler," she said in a tone perfected from years of listening to her father, "you are under arrest." The simple statement subdued ninety percent of the fugitives Vega captured.

Matt, of course, chose to be extraordinary. He spun around. The fact that he stood with all his attributes showing didn't affect him in the least. His slim, naked body certainly didn't shock Vega. She'd seen everything.

Matt swung at her. He wasn't a natural hand-to-hand fighter. He telegraphed his punch with his shoulder before his hand even closed into a fist. Vega easily deflected the blow with her left arm and followed through with an elbow jab to the face. A jump-kick to the chest brought him to his knees.

His lower lip had split open. A few drops of blood got lost in the matted rug. "Gray had said you were better than my pretty one," he gasped for the air the kick had knocked from him. "Don't think that she could floor me soundly."

She locked the cuffs on his wrists and a second pair on his ankles so he couldn't get up and cause havoc while she searched for Grayson, or at least clues to where he might have gone.

With the Beretta in one hand and a high-beam flashlight in the other, she poked her head into the bedroom. Several rats and a hoard of cockroaches scattered.

"You won't find him there," Matt said. Vega shined her flashlight in his face. He lowered his head on the rug and began rubbing his cheek against the stained fibers. "You won't find him at all."

Grayson had already fled? How had he anticipated that she'd find him so soon? What was making her actions so damned obvious?

"If you cooperate with me, Matt, I might not have to kick you until you're blue." It was an idle threat that sometimes worked. In Vega's estimation, beating up the bail jumper caused more headaches than solutions. "Where did Grayson run to?"

His smoky eyes blinked several times in the blinding light. She knew he couldn't see anything but that disorienting white light. He wasn't supposed to see anything.

The blindness didn't seem to bother him. Matt pulled himself up into a kneeling position. "He killed a woman once you know. Shot her straight through the heart."

Vega didn't want to hear about Mirna in Colombia, not now. She considered stuffing a sock or something in his mouth.

"He loved her, too. But he killed her in front of all of us. Didn't flinch while doing it, either. That was in South America, you know."

Anything suitable Vega found on the floor was too filthy to stuff in his mouth. It would just be inhumane. "If you can't tell me where he is, just shut up."

"Bothers you, don't it?" A crooked smile formed on his lips, starting the bottom one to bleeding again. "He's a killer. He wants to kill you, too. I can tell, you know. I can see people's feelings—like colors."

Vega tossed aside a pile of automatic rifles stacked in the living room and pried the lid off a box of explosives powerful enough to flatten this street as well as the one beside it.

"He shot that woman in South America and got a medal. I tried the same thing and ended up in a mental hospital. I suppose you have to love the women you kill to get rewarded."

She left Matt in the living room as he contemplated ways to trick a woman into loving him, and found her way to the kitchen. A piece of paper, folded in half sat like a tent on the chipped linoleum-topped table.

Her name boldly printed on one side.

Grayson had been expecting her to show up.

Her heart stopped. It would be just her rotten luck to step into the middle of a trap.

# Chapter Fifteen

Vega froze where she stood and stared at the note while searching for trip wires. One small blast could create a chain reaction, detonating every live explosive in the apartment. In the living room alone there were boxes stacked on boxes, filled with what appeared to be a wide selection of highly volatile materials.

"Vega?" a thin voice called from the other room.

Fiona? How in the hell?

"I'm in here," Vega called back. She holstered the Beretta. "Don't move around too much. I might have stepped into the middle of a trap. No telling what Grayson has rigged with all this stuff."

"Told you he'd be expecting you. Makes me glad I decided to follow you." Fiona's voice grew a little louder. "I'll find some clothes for this one. We can't bring him to the police station naked like that, can we?"

"Pretty one!" Matt screamed. "My pretty one has come back!"

"Don't let him out of those cuffs without me in there," Vega called back. Her gaze remained glued on her name blazed on that folded paper.

He'd known she'd be there.

She took a cautious step forward, almost expecting the floor to collapse under her. When her foot hit solid vinyl, she crossed the room to the table and picked up the note.

"I've missed you. Found it hard to believe you gave up on me. I'm thrilled by your renewed interest. Keep me on my toes and watch your back."

The note was left unsigned.

Like a cat that had just cornered a rat, he wanted to bat her around for a while before biting off her head.

His sweet adversary, indeed.

She crumpled the paper and stuffed it into her pocket. Grayson must be nuttier than his buddy. Not once had a quarry doubled back to face off with her. She was the predator, not the prey...never the prey, in fact.

"Interesting," Fiona said her voice right in Vega's ear.

Startled, Vega just about hit the greasy ceiling. "Did you find something for Matt to wear?" she asked when her heart began beating again.

"Always cool as a criminal, Vega." Fiona clucked her tongue. "You can stand there staring down at me with that sneer plastered all over your face, but I know you. Something on that paper bothers the hell out of you."

Vega brushed past Fiona without giving her the satisfaction of a denial and returned to the living room. "The clothes, Fiona?"

Her sister huffed and pointed her flashlight toward a heap on the floor.

"Show me what you're carrying." Vega held out her hand.

Fiona frowned.

"You're armed, I can see the bulge."

Fiona pulled out a large Smith and Wesson 44 Magnum and handed it to Vega. The kick alone from firing such a weapon would toss Fiona on her butt.

"Good Lord, what were you thinking?" She had to wonder about her sister sometimes. "Have you even tried to fire this monster?" She handed Fiona the Beretta and pocketed as much of her sister's revolver as would fit into her coat.

"Keep the bead trained on his forehead and the flashlight beam in his eyes," she instructed. "I'm going to help him get dressed now."

Fiona held the beam of light steady. Vega could only guess her sister did the same with the Beretta. "How will I know when to shoot?" Fiona asked. Matt shouted out a string of profane protests and squirmed against the handcuffs, making the job of unlocking them twice as hard.

"Don't you dare pull that trigger unless I'm unconscious and well out of shooting range." Vega pushed a shirt into Matt's hands. "Put this on."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Vega set out early to question Grayson's childhood neighbors with Fiona tagging along like a hungry puppy.

"I should get half the fee," Fiona said in the car. Vega took her eyes from the road for a moment to glare at her.

"I helped you pull that poor, confused man off the streets. He was a hazard to himself with all those guns and explosives," Fiona pointed out. "Now he'll get the psychiatric care he needs. I should get half the reward."

"Okay," Vega said when Fiona showed no sign of giving up.

"How much?"

"Nothing." Vega shot a smile Fiona's way. "It was a freebie. Jack set it up for me."

"Oooo...what a waste of my talent." Fiona sank a few inches in the seat. "I don't understand why we're questioning these old neighbors of Grayson's, either. I've already been here. I've already talked to them. Every single one. They don't know anything."

"They might."

That stopped Fiona short. She was surprisingly quiet for the rest of the three-hour drive to the small town of Millville in southern Georgia, which suited Vega just fine.

She needed to think. Grayson had anticipated her last night. Certainly he didn't lure her to Atlanta intended just to taunt her? There had to be a reason.

By interviewing friends and neighbors who knew Grayson when he was growing up, she hoped to gain a deeper understanding of his patterns. Experience had taught her that when placed in a stressful situation, such as running from the law, people tended to fall back on instinctual behaviors forged at a very young age. By learning how Grayson behaved as a child would open a window to anticipating his actions now.

Fiona should understand that. Vega didn't feel like she was stomping on her sister's toes. Well, maybe just a little.

Millville, Georgia reminded Vega of one of those new retro communities, a throwback to the 1950s where the houses hugged the sidewalks, large live oaks shaded the streets, and children biked to the school adjacent to downtown where the town hall served as the central focus. Only this community wasn't retro. The houses, though well cared for, were all much older than Vega was. Behind the town's pride and charm hid snatches of poverty in the empty storefronts, the ancient rusty stands at the ballpark, and in the rural neighborhood a mile outside town limits.

Grayson's family lived in this rural neighborhood, his father surviving just five years longer than his mother, who died at the early age of forty-nine. Luckily, many of the neighbors enjoyed better health and unlike the younger generation, lived in the same house for a lifetime. Vega and Fiona talked with five former neighbors who'd known

Grayson when he was growing up. They heard generalities about him as a boy, nothing really useful.

Pearl Sampit, one of the Walker's closer neighbors, was their last stop for the day.

A rabid-looking brown and white dog with a blunt snout and a torn ear snarled and snapped at the door of Vega's rented SUV as she pulled into the gravel driveway of Pearl's simple bungalow. Faded green paint flecked off the asbestos shingles, and the roof sagged in the middle as if some giant had chosen to use the home as his seat for ten or so years. Dry stalks of dead flowering plants in the front yard's once loved garden rustled in the winter breeze.

"Pumpkin," a frail woman, whose back curled so severely she nearly folded in half, called from the front porch. "Pumpkin, come over here."

The mutt ignored the woman and started tossing himself to the side of Vega's door, snapping with an unquenchable frenzy and scraping his gangly nails down the side of the SUV as he fell back to earth.

"The rental company's going to love this explanation," Vega muttered.

The woman turned her neck to one side to get a better look at Vega and Fiona. "Don't worry yourself none about Pumpkin. He's a kitten."

"Don't believe her," Fiona said. "He ripped off a sleeve and part of my pants leg before I got to the house last time."

"Figured." Vega rolled down her window. "Can you offer him a snack, ma'am? Something big and juicy?" *A kitten*? Pumpkin weighed at least fifty pounds more than the fattest kitten she'd ever seen.

The woman shrugged, disappeared into the house, and returned a few minutes later with a raw steak still wrapped in the grocery store's cellophane package. Pumpkin must have caught the scent. He took off for the porch like a thundering bolt of lightening and snatched the meat out of the woman's powerless arms before she managed to break the cellophane seal. With the prize tucked in his mouth, he pranced off around the house and disappeared into the back yard.

"Let's go," Vega said and opened the car door.

"I wish I'd thought of that last time. That beast ruined a new cashmere sweater of mine," Fiona complained as she walked beside Vega up to the house.

"Mrs. Sampit, I'm Vega Brookes. We spoke on the phone."

Pearl clasped Vega's hand with a limp embrace. "Yes, you're the darl'n who wants to know more about the Walker boy. Please, call me Pearl. Everyone does." She released Vega's hand and labored to return inside. Fiona held the screened door open for her. "The cold hurts deep in my bones."

Vega believed her. Pearl's joints couldn't have been any stiffer. She'd done a good job keeping the damp southern winter from invading her house, though. While the stifling hot air in the living room threatened to singe Vega's lungs, a furnace continued to roar in the attic.

After settling into the plastic-covered sofa and accepting glasses of sweet tea, Vega successfully steered the conversation to Grayson.

Pearl leaned her head back in her easy chair and pressed her carefully styled silver hair against the chair's lace covering and smiled. "Such a sensitive boy, Gray." Her eyes glazed as she became lost in a memory.

Fiona, sitting on the edge of the sofa and looking uncomfortable as if sharp pins were poking her, lost her patience first. "As I had explained a few weeks ago, we need to find him. Do you know if he stayed in touch with any neighbors that might no longer be around?"

Pearl's eyes cleared. She sat forward. "Did he break your heart, darl'n?" she asked Vega, not Fiona. Vega bristled at the accusation, but kept her mouth shut.

"Even as a young thing, women were falling head over heels for him. Twisted that young kindergarten teacher all around his little finger—that he did."

"Yes," Fiona jumped back in with the questions. "But what connection did he have with an Etta...?"

"What was his family like, Pearl?" Vega interrupted Fiona and asked, hoping to direct the frail woman back to what she was about to tell them. Direct questions tended to muddle up details. Vega liked to let them unfold on their own when conducting background interviews. She didn't know what important pieces of information Pearl might know, and she couldn't guide the conversation with specific questions until she listened to the stories Pearl was willing to offer.

Fiona glared at Vega but after a minute, copied her relaxed pose.

"Mabel was a beautiful lady...and caring. The Walkers lived just next door, you know. In the canary colored house. It was purple when Mabel lived there." Pearl leaned forward. "She was superstitious you know," she whispered.

Vega had no idea why painting a house purple would mark Grayson's mother as a superstitious woman, but she nodded and smiled anyhow.

"That purple paint didn't do one lick to keep that evil man from her, now did it?" Her expression drew her soft wrinkles down; her lower lip trembled. "He killed her as sure as if he pulled out that shotgun of his and shot her. But no one really knew, never questioned her death. Too poor for them to care, I suppose."

"Grayson's father beat his mother?" Vega asked when Pearl's narrative faded to silence.

"Oh yes, Gray had run away from us years before. To escape his father...if you ask me. That man had no right to be raisin' a child. Broke Gray's arm in a drunken rage, once. Mabel did the best she knew how, taking herself and Gray away whenever things got tough. Disappeared, she would. He'd search and search, but couldn't ever find them. I hid from him, too. But he wouldn't touch me. I wasn't one of his belongings, and he was a coward really, that no good flea—only picking on those who couldn't fight back."

"And you knew where Mabel would take Grayson when she'd run away," Vega said.

A sly smile lifted years from Pearl's frail features. "I don't know about where you're from, darl'n. In this community, folks don't discuss other folk's dirty laundry. Don't matter anyhow, now does it? Gray's left Millville far behind him. Never come back once...not even for the funerals. Thought we'd see him when his mother passed, but we didn't."

Pearl sighed and leaned the back of her head against the chair again. "Such a sensitive boy, too. You won't find him running here."

No amount of prodding could pry any new information from Pearl's lips. She fiddled with her chair's tatted covering and played up the part of the helpless southern lady, which only irritated Vega. Before she felt pushed into spouting a lecture on the subject of womanly strength, she rose from the sofa, thanked Pearl politely, handing her a card, then fled with Fiona back to the car.

Thankfully, Pumpkin was nowhere in sight.

"Told you this trip wasn't going to be useful," Fiona said an hour into the trip back to Atlanta. She'd been brooding silently in the passenger seat up until then.

"Probably wasn't," Vega conceded. "But I had to try."

"You should have believed me." Anger flowed out of Fiona and filled the car. "I already questioned them. You didn't even bother to read the notes I'd taken. Really Vega, you treat me like I was stupid or something."

"You don't have the experience or the training I have," Vega explained. Surely Fiona understood?

Fiona hurled a wordless growl.

"I don't think you're stupid."

Vega's phone chirped. Fiona plucked the phone from the car's dash and answered the call before Vega could think to protest.

"Don't talk to me like that, asshole. I should hang up on you."

That caught Vega's attention. "Who is it?"

"Oh, you meant all that for my sister? Well, jerk-off, I'm not going to pass any of that crap along."

"Who is it?" Vega controlled herself and didn't wrestle the phone away from Fiona. "It's Grayson, isn't it?" He intended to taunt her for failing to capture him yesterday. She could just sense it.

"Okay, okay, I'll put her on. You don't need to shout." Fiona pressed the phone into Vega's hand.

Vega drew a deep breath. If this was Grayson, she needed to do some quick thinking. A couple of well-placed questions just might tease out a clue to his new hiding place.

"Hello?" she said and listened for any identifiable background noises.

"Vega, damn you. Why the hell did you ditch me in Detroit? I thought we had an understanding."

Butch.

Shoot. She'd forgotten all about Butch.

He deserved an explanation, the rough kind that could only be given face-to-face. "You're in Atlanta I suppose? Meet me tonight." Vega glanced at her watch. They wouldn't get back to the hotel until after six, and she'd need time to change. "At nine?"

"Where?" Butch grumbled.

Not at the hotel. Someplace neutral. Vega didn't know Atlanta well, and the places she knew weren't exactly the kind of places she'd voluntarily revisit. "Carl's on Peachtree," she said off the top of her head.

Yesterday she'd passed a brick building that had been painted black. Large red letters on the side of the building proclaimed the place to be 'Carl's Bar on Peachtree'. There'd been several nice cars in the parking lot, so it wasn't a complete dive. Without knowing anything else about the bar, Vega supposed Carl's was as good a meeting place as any.

Butch agreed.

\* \* \* \*

Since meeting Butch wasn't exactly business, she changed out of her usual urbancombat wear and into a short, brown skirt and a baby blue cashmere sweater-set her mother had given her for Christmas, insisting the color matched her eyes. Vega spent several minutes fiddling with her makeup and piling her hair on top of her head so that the blondish loose strands cascaded down her neck. Appearances were especially important when breaking off a relationship with a man, Vega had learned the hard way years ago. She needed to look her best.

At a few minutes to nine, she left Fiona at the hotel to fend for herself. "If you follow me, I'll tie you to the chair the next time I go out," she'd warned.

The interior of Carl's Bar stank of stale beer and tobacco smoke. Vega took a deep breath of the night's clean air before fully committing herself by stepping inside. Her watchful gaze skimmed the crowd, at least those who were visible. Dim, yellowed lights created long shadows where lonely souls who wanted to watch, but not be seen could sink deep into a booth and disappear. A deep thump, thump of the recorded music vibrated the room and the crowd inside. Swirling, colorful lights lit up an empty dance floor in the middle of the room.

This wasn't the place for long, intimate conversations.

Good.

She wasn't exactly in the mood for talking.

Butch's cowboy hat stood about a head above everyone around him at the bar. He wore those familiar battered jeans with a fairly new flannel shirt. He propped his elbow against the bar top, the heel of his boot tucked into the metal railing that ran along the base of the bar. A smile loosened those tense lips of his when he noticed her approach. He turned away from her for only a moment to speak to the bartender. A glass of beer was waiting for her by the time she stepped up next to Butch, who, she noticed, was drinking his usual bourbon and soda.

"Hey there," she said at a near shout to be heard over the music.

His smile grew into a big toothy grin. What was Butch up to? She'd never seen him show his teeth unless he was snarling. He let his sultry gaze rake her body, lingering over her breasts, which she expected, and returned to her face to linger on her full lips.

"I'm glad to see you." He didn't shout those words, didn't need to. His lips hovered close to her ear as he smoothly snuck his arm around her back and pulled her close for a kiss.

Vega felt none of the excitement or the promise of sensual moments his skillful lips often sparked deep in her chest. No questions lingered in her mind. The affair, or whatever it transformed into, was over.

"Let's go find a quiet corner," Butch whispered against her mouth when he pulled his lips away. She'd given him a full kiss, not pushing him away or fighting off his roving hands. She considered it a goodbye gift. They knew one another about as well as they knew themselves. Severing the bond between them wasn't going to be painless, for her or Butch.

She picked up her frosty beer and followed him to a secluded, but well lit booth he'd obviously selected ahead of time. Without even glancing down at the sticky mess she might encounter, she inched onto the seat across from his—the vinyl was surprisingly clean—and set her beer on the table between them.

"Vega," he said. His toothy grin grew even toothier and his blue eyes softened. He reached across the table, took her hand, and began tracing small circles on the back of her knuckles. "I understand you have reservations about marriage. Hell, I would too if I had a mother like yours. But baby, you've got to admit we're good together—more than good."

"Yes." She wouldn't lie to him. "We made a good match for a while, Butch. But..."

"No." He pressed a gentle finger to her lips. "No, don't run away from me now."

Butch had brains in his head and instincts to match. Those were two requirements of a skilled bounty hunter. And he nearly always captured his quarry, making him unquestionably good at his job. Surely, he sensed the coming breakup? She couldn't believe he'd take it with a smile—he never smiled that like. What was going on?

"Baby, we can start out with the partnership. Let me work with you on this assignment." Butch teased the soft skin between her fingers, a simple but erotic caress.

She looked down and watched his blunt fingers touching her, not feeling a damned thing beyond the sensation of his rough skin against hers.

"We can talk about advancing our relationship after we bring in Walker together. Together, baby."

Vega retrieved her hand from underneath his. "I'm sorry, Butch. This just isn't going to work between us. I don't feel all warm and hopeful about our relationship like you do."

That familiar, safe crust returned to Butch's exterior. His powerful gaze burned through her and, she figured, through the wall behind her too. "You can't call this off. We had an agreement."

"I never agreed to anything. All I said was I'd think about it." She was talking far too much, digging her hole deeper. She swallowed a taste of the beer in front of her and tossed a few dollars onto the table. "Goodbye Butch."

She slid out of the booth. Butch followed. He matched her wide stride with an angry stomp until they reached the edge of the colorfully lit dance floor.

He grabbed her shoulder then, pressing on the bullet wound with vicious intent, and pulled her back. Jabbing a knife into her shoulder would've produced less pain. A prickling numbness crawled down her arm and immobilized the muscles.

"You don't walk away from me," he said, holding his face far too close. She could taste the cheap bourbon on his breath.

"Take your hand off me." She gave the warning out of consideration for what they once had together. In her book, his pursuing her even after she'd made her feelings clear broke the last emotional string that bound them. The earth could open up and swallow Butch whole for all Vega cared at that moment.

"You bitch...you don't tell me to do nothing." His free hand whipped up and slapped her cheek. Because he held her shoulder, she couldn't ride the blow. The force of his hand snapped her head sharply to one side.

In that split second, Butch's position fell from pathetic ex-lover to enemy. She grabbed the hand that struck her and gave the wrist a sharp twist while pulling his arm to the side at an awkward angle.

The hold she'd used was guaranteed to bring tears to the strongest of men. Butch wasn't immune. He released her shoulder and whimpered. One more twist and she'd break his wrist.

And why shouldn't she? He'd treated her roughly, never really felt any consideration for her feelings or desires.

A small crowd had gathered around. Voices rose as explanations were passed around. If she broke his wrist in front of all these witnesses, the police would be called. Trouble would bubble up from every imaginable crack. And worse, Fiona might one day break some hapless guy's wrist, thinking losing herself to anger like this was acceptable.

"I should break your wrist," she whispered but unlocked her grip.

Moaning and cradling his arm, Butch sank to the floor. He'd bruise, if nothing else. Perhaps he'd learn something too.

Vega seriously doubted that last part. She knew wishful thinking when she heard it. Unfortunately, a crowd was closing in on her. In no mood to explain herself to strangers, she dashed out the closest exit and found herself standing in a darkened alleyway next to a large, smelly dumpster.

She leaned against the door for a moment to blink back a few tears. This blow up with Butch affected her more than she thought it should. But then, losing a dependable friend who understood the hassles of the bounty hunting lifestyle should hurt. She lived a lonely life. Not even Jack really understood her. He, like her mother, believed she should quit and get herself married into a safe, quiet existence.

Like safe and quiet ever satisfied anyone.

A shadow moved in the darkness.

Fighting off a mugger would cap off her romantic evening just perfectly. She held her ground and watched the dark figure close the distance.

Dressed in a black long-sleeved tee with even darker jeans and looking as fearsome as a devil's minion, Grayson emerged from the depths of the chilly night to block Vega's path. He folded one arm over the other and tilted his head, silently staring at her

"You!" Vega breathed. She didn't reach her hand around to the small of her back, though her hand itched to. The Beretta waited locked up in the hotel safe, miles away. Nor did she make any sudden movements. She wouldn't pounce until she could gage the enemy and assess her environment. Let him act first.

# Chapter Sixteen

Vega and Grayson stood not two feet apart. He remained as still as she, watching as steadily as she watched him. An expression of curiosity pursed his lips.

"Vega," he whispered her name as if he understood her every desire, her every hurt. His dusty- brown eyes smoldered in the lamplight.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said and sounded sickeningly sincere. Some men could do that, look a woman in the eye, and make her heart long to believe him. Grayson had refined the trick into an art form.

She swallowed hard. Memories of those late night erotic dreams sent shivers pulsing through her body while his pressing, deep gaze softened her mind. Oh God, she couldn't breathe for a moment from the overwhelming need to feel his lips on hers.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she whispered.

"Why shouldn't I?" He inched closer to her lips, moving as achingly slow as she dreamt he would. He reached out his empty hand with deliberate care as if trying to lure a wounded animal closer.

Sensing no immediate danger, Vega remained perfectly still while her heart hammered in her chest. His hand tentatively touched the side of her face and then, when she didn't pull away, caressed her swelling cheek. "I bet whoever slapped you is whimpering on some floor right now and feeling sorry for himself," he said, a smile crept onto his lips. "I think that's why I like you so much. You can take care of yourself."

He recognized her strengths—found her competence sexy—hmmm...Vega found herself pressing her cheek against his hand. Her skin tingled underneath his gentle touch.

Why are you following me? She wanted to ask. What's this game about? No words formed in her dry mouth. For a strange moment, he became that shadowy man haunting her dreams—a man who could fill that empty spot burning in her chest. This dream world with Grayson became more real to her than any other time in her life. The tip of his finger lightly traced a trail down her nose and tugged seductively over her lips.

Vega's own raging frustrations roared out of control. Her mouth parted with a tiny growl. Tossing her common sense into a heap at her feet, she pressed her lips to his.

For a glorious, wild moment, she tasted satisfaction. Grayson's shocked lips softened and surrendered to her subtle attack. She was in complete control of this moment with him. The surge of power filled her. She hungered for more as her tongue swirled in his mouth, thrilling when Grayson moaned in response.

The feel of his hands roving her body nearly tore her restraint completely away. He shoved her up against the locked emergency exit behind her. The solid bulge in his pants pressed against her belly, pinning her to the spot.

"You are something else, Vega. I tried, but I couldn't stay away." He inched her sweater up. His warm hands teased the tips of her breasts.

A tingling sensation pulled against her common sense, heating her chest, her belly, and deep between her legs. Vega raked her hands through his short, dark hair and tugged on the blunt ends to hold his head tight.

Things felt so good, so right.

Life suddenly felt easy—too easy.

She peeled her lips from Grayson's. She leaned her forehead against his and heaved a calming sigh. If there was just one thing Vega understood, it was that life was never, ever easy.

"No," she said, and pushed on his chest while concentrating on regaining her balance. This man was no an innocent warrior going around rescuing damsels in distress. He was a ruthless killer who'd used Fiona to lure her to Atlanta and play a part in his dangerous scheme.

"What do you want from me?"

He stared at her, his eyes clouded with naked lust.

She swallowed. "I--I have to take you into custody now, Grayson. You understand that, don't you?"

He leaned forward and nudged her lips with his own. She fell into his kiss, his hot breath seeping low into her belly. Perhaps she could lose herself with Grayson for just a little while longer. He caressed her neck, sending shivers down her spine, and pressed his full weight against the length of her body.

This last act of Grayson's was purely aggressive. She pushed against him with both hands. He resisted. His one hand encircled her neck, the other pinned her arms.

Damn, damn, damn. She fell so neatly into his trap. She struggled against his immovable body to no avail.

He let her out of the kiss and looked down on her with those expressive brown eyes of his. "What do I want?" His lips brushed her lips. Fear kept her lust in check. "I wanted you to be wondering why I'd kill my best friend instead of wasting your time with those old cronies from Millville and dredging up dead memories." His breath sounded as ragged as hers was just a moment ago.

"I'm not a detective, Grayson. You might be as innocent as a baby, in fact. I don't care. It's not my job to care why you killed anyone. My only responsibility is to see you returned to the justice system."

He'd neatly pinned her, luring her close with those damned words of admiration. Shit

She'd been stupid. Surely she wasn't so starved for love—for real love, the kind that didn't care about quirky behaviors or tried to mold her into something she wasn't, the kind that lasted—surely she didn't just throw away her life in the hopes of tasting that kind of love?

"I have to poke into every aspect of your life whether you want me to or not," she whispered.

He tightened his hold around her neck. "That's exactly what I had wanted you to do. That's why I had sent for you, Vega."

Stars began to dance in front of her eyes as his hands continued to squeeze. He was killing her, and there wasn't a damned thing she could do about it.

"But I've changed my mind. I don't want to see you or your sister harmed."

A threat?

"Keep Fiona safe. Don't go near Six-Star."

Sure sounded like a threat. This was exactly why she shied away from relationships where she might slip up and make herself vulnerable.

His iron grip closed off her airway. "Greg Harper kept a secret set of files in his office. There's too much incriminating information in those files. It will get someone killed. I don't want you near them. Do you understand me?"

Vega's head bobbed as waves of fuzzy dizziness attacked. A shadowy Brer Rabbit hopped across her path, or was that just a large rat? Her lungs pounded against her chest and struggled for that next fresh breath that just wasn't coming. She did manage to

nod when he asked again if she could hear him. Not for long, but for the moment the pathway between her ears and her head still sparked.

"Good."

Vega could no longer see Grayson. Her eyesight dimmed even further and then faded to nothingness. The sounds around her were pulling away. Grayson's voice sounded like it had to travel through a long tunnel to reach her. The words he spoke made no sense. His fingers continued to tighten around her throat.

"We will meet again, sweet." She felt the feather-light touch of his lips brushing hers—and then nothing at all.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn it, stop fussing over me."

Fiona, armed with concealer, powder, and liquid base makeup, poked and wiped at Vega's bruised cheek and neck. She'd been fussing all morning.

"You shouldn't have gone unarmed," Fiona scolded for the sixth time that morning. Vega was counting. "We both knew Grayson was keeping an eye on you. That letter you'd jammed into your pocket the night we picked up poor, confused Matt Lockler said as much."

"You went through my pockets?" Vega pushed Fiona away and dabbed at her neck with a little powder. She was more than capable of concealing a faint bruise on her own.

"Had to. You won't tell me anything."

"Won't I? I'll tell you this. Grayson says he'll kill you if I try to get into his dead partner's files at Six-Star. You know, Greg Harper, the guy Grayson hacked to bits?"

"He's pushing your buttons." Fiona dropped a handful of makeup on the bed and began pacing, mimicking the wide stride their father used to make when he sank deep into his thoughts. "He wants you to do something he couldn't do when I bumped into him at Six-Star."

"Bumped into him at Six-Star. That's a funny way of putting it. He saved your ass, Fiona. Tell me about those security guards again."

"There's not much to tell. They were dressed all in black and wore masks. I heard one say—at least I think I heard one say this, I was nearly unconscious at the time—well, I think he said he needed to kill me if I got too close. And then the other said he wanted

to have some fun with me since I was going to be killed anyway." Fiona turned to Vega then and blazed a grin. "See, Vega. I was *getting close*."

Vega could only shake her head. Only her sister would find a way to turn a near-death experience into a validation of her abilities. "What do you think you were getting close to?"

Fiona shrugged elegantly. "Don't know. I didn't find anything...I was *close* to finding it."

"I think Grayson's threat against you is meant to prod me. To get me to go to Six-Star and investigate Harper's office and find these missing files for him." Vega, too wrapped up in her line of thinking, barely noticed Fiona bouncing on her heels. "I bet he thinks if he asked me to investigate the files, I'd ignore him, thinking he was sending me down the wrong path. He'd be right, too."

"I said all that already. Really, Vega, you should start listening to me. He's got you chasing your own tail. But, I agree, we do need to return to Six-Star. That guard had said *I* was getting close."

Vega didn't like the way Fiona continually emphasized how she'd gotten close to getting killed. It just wasn't something Vega wanted to be reminded of. "It might still be a false lead. Yet, because of how it was presented *and* because of what happened to you, this lead begs to be followed."

"Exactly!" Fiona darted into the adjoining room.

Vega got up from the bed and leaned against the doorframe between the two rooms. Her sister was pulling out a black spandex cat suit and matching knee-high, lace-up boots sporting a three-inch heel.

"What in the hell do you intend to do with that outfit?" Vega asked. It was either ask or laugh aloud.

"Wear it for our break-in."

"You don't mean...? Don't tell me you wore that crazy cat suit and impossibly high-heeled boots on your first outing at Six-Star?" Vega buried her head in her hand, knowing all too well the answer. "You're damned lucky you didn't break an ankle running up the stairs away from those security guards."

Fiona snorted. "I didn't break an ankle," she muttered under her breath. "Plus, it makes good fashion sense."

"Put your Halloween costume away, Fiona. I've no intention of breaking into Six-Star Enterprises."

"But you said...?"

"I said I would have a look at those files. I'm not planning to break the law to do so." Vega glowered at Fiona just like their mother glowered. It never was very effective.

"They won't let you in. The head of the company—" Fiona dived across her bed to grab her notebook lying out on the bedside table, she moved quite gracefully, Vega was forced to admit. "Joshua Whitfield, the third partner of Six-Star and the only man in charge of the company, wouldn't even let me come meet with him or have a peek at the personnel files. That's where I was headed when I was *getting close*. To the personnel files."

"Whitfield will cooperate." Vega sounded surer of herself than she felt. She too hit a brick wall when trying to wrest information from the tight-lipped Whitfield. But then, that was before she first encountered Grayson Walker.

This was no longer just an assignment to Vega. This was her proving ground. Grayson had run circles around her, making her the fool far too often. Not only was a great deal of money at stake, but also apprehending Grayson would give her another chance to prove her father wrong. To prove she was worthy of his pride.

"Grayson's had two opportunities to kill me...but he hasn't," Vega wondered aloud. "Why?"

"Four," Fiona said.

"What?"

"You've given him four opportunities to kill you. Which two are you forgetting?"

"The number isn't important." But that got Vega wondering herself which two had slipped her mind. There was the time he shot her in the middle of the swamp. There was last night.

"The number is important. I was nearly killed only once, and I've been working on this assignment longer than you have." Fiona propped her hands on her hips and gave her long, brown hair a toss. "I bet you don't count last night."

"I do count last night." And then she remembered Grayson chained her to the cooler in the convenience store. He could have easily shot her then.

"He expected you the night you picked up Matt Lockler. Even you were afraid he'd rigged a bomb for you to trip."

"None of that matters. I'm alive and I'll be his downfall." Brave words to be spouting when Vega had no clue how she was going to make that happen. He should've killed her, but he hadn't. Why?

Those damned heated kisses of his were confusing the hell out of her. Why had he kissed her when a killer would have used a more permanent means of silencing her?

Was he truly innocent?

She needed to get a peek at those files in Greg's office.

"While I'm banging on doors at Six-Star Enterprises—"

"They won't let you see anything," Fiona interrupted.

"We'll see. In the meantime, I don't want to waste today. Matt Lockler might have some information about Grayson in that muddled head of his. Would you mind questioning him? You'll have to charm his lawyers in order to get in, of course."

"Of course! I can impress on Lockler's lawyers how his cooperation could only help his case. They'll give me full access."

Giving the task to Fiona seemed harmless enough. Besides, questioning Lockler was something that needed to be done.

"Good." Vega stepped back into her room. "We better get busy then. We've both got a lot to do."

Fiona tossed her arms around Vega's neck, nearly knocking her to the ground. "Thank you." Fiona squeezed harder. "Thank you for believing in me, even just a little."

Vega didn't bother to make an appointment with Joshua Whitfield. He wouldn't grant her one, for one thing. She wanted the element of surprise on her side, for another. Though she'd told Fiona that she wouldn't be breaking the law to get what she needed, she never promised not to bend it a little.

After a phone call to an inside contact at Six-Star she'd made when searching for Grayson the first time, she discovered that Whitfield was in town and would be spending the day handling business from his Six-Star office. How fortunate.

Vega arrived at the Six-Star glass and steel building a few minutes past ten that morning. Her contact, Frank, was the security guard working the front desk. He'd known Vega for several years, and was happy to provide information and to clear her through security without confiscating her Beretta or handheld Taser.

Frank directed her to Whitfield's office on the top floor while calling for the elevator.

"If anyone asks," Vega said to him as she stepped inside, "you never saw me. I don't want you to get into trouble for this."

"Don't worry about me none." Frank blushed. "Just take care of yourself. There's some nasty business going down on those upper floors. Dirty, nasty business I'm keeping clear of."

On her way through the outer offices on the top floor, Vega grabbed a handful of letters from a mail cart and proceeded through the sanitized office as if she belonged.

No one questioned her until she reached the secretary guarding Whitfield's door.

"May I help you?" The secretary, her jet-black hair pulled into a tight bun on the top of her head, barked the question with no intention of actually offering any help.

"No, I don't think you can," Vega said before brushing past the desk and throwing open the double oak doors to Whitfield's corner office.

A man in his mid-fifties with a full head of silver hair and a suit as expensive as those worn by Detroit's newest bad boy, Finn Kayne, sat behind a massive brushed aluminum and oak desk. He glanced up at the intrusion and appeared bored by it.

"Whitfield," Vega said. She calmly crossed the room to stand directly in front of his desk. "I'm Vega Brookes, the one you've been ignoring. My firm has been hired to find Grayson Walker and I need to have a look around Greg Harper's office."

Whitfield may have well been dead. His lifeless expression gave away nothing. He sat tall in the leather chair and steepled his fingers in front of his pursed lips, listening.

"I happen to know investors are running from Six-Star. With one of the two active partners dead and the other accused of murdering him, finding Grayson Walker and settling this mess could help lure back those fleeing dollars."

"Investors are meaningless to me, Miss Brookes. Six-Star has no need of outside funds." He smiled then. The dead expression cooled the room by at least twenty degrees. "You are wasting my time. Please leave, Miss Brookes."

Vega narrowed her eyes and stared down Whitfield. But this man hadn't risen to the top of investment banking by caving to pressure. He gave her another little smile before turning his attentions to his nails.

"I get them done every week," he said. "It's extravagant, I know. But I can't stand dirty nails. I pay others to get dirt under their nails for me."

Vega listened. There had to be a threat couched in there somewhere. But she hadn't earned a reputation as a damned good bounty hunter by giving up easily, either.

"Security will be here in a moment," he said. "I suggest you leave before they arrive."

Three members of Whitfield's personal security team, dressed in black—no masks—marched into the office not a breath later, with automatic weapons tucked under their arms.

"What are you doing to warrant this level of security, Whitfield?" Vega leaned over his desk and asked. The question sounded like an accusation, because she meant it to

He smiled, pushed back his chair, and tilted his head in a mock salute. "Goodbye, Miss Brookes."

The closest guard poked her with the barrel of his gun.

"Whitfield." Vega shook her head slowly. "I really get testy when threatened with a gun. Call off your men, give me access to Harper's office and we'll have no problems, you and I." Testy was an understatement. Vega's blood was boiling. These security guards fit Fiona's description of the men who had threatened her life, which meant Whitfield had probably ordered them to attack Fiona if she got *too close*.

Too close to what? That pesky unanswered question was the only thing keeping Vega's itchy fingers from shaking Whitfield until he confessed to trying to harm her sister. Instead, when the guard jabbed the barrel of his automatic into Vega's side again, she backhanded him in the face and twisted the gun out of his hands. Before the other two guards could even think of reacting, Vega turned the weapon on Whitfield.

"Perhaps I need to repeat myself." She took her time to adjust the aim so he had no doubt the shot from the gun would be fatal. "Call off your men and give me access to Harper's office."

A bead of sweat broke out on Whitfield's smooth brow. His lips tightened and turned white as he stared at Vega in disbelief. "I don't understand why you're doing this," he said very calmly. "I could have you arrested."

"But you won't." She felt very confident on that account.

"Won't I?"

"No. Because my sister can identify at least one of these three men behind me as her attacker the other night—an attacker who admitted he'd been ordered to kill her. I can only assume this order came from his employer—you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." A second bead of sweat rose on Whitfield's forehead.

Staring down an enemy from across a boardroom table and staying cool was unquestionably Whitfield's strength. But staring down an enemy's gun barrel put him in Vega's territory. She knew this was a battle she could win.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, after a long stretch of silence.

"This will be the third time I've had to tell you, Whitfield. Listen, will ya? Call off your men and give me access to Harper's office."

# Chapter Seventeen

Vega kept Whitfield close to her, the barrel of his guard's small automatic pressed firmly in his side as they made their way to Greg Harper's office. She left two of his three guards handcuffed in his office. The other—the one who had threatened Fiona—was no longer armed. She had him lead the way.

"I could have you killed for this," Whitfield grumbled.

"You could," Vega agreed. "Just show me Greg's office. I really don't care what you do with this company. I'm not the law." She stopped then and slammed Whitfield against the nearest wall. "Neither is my sister. Keep her out of any battles you might be having with the police, the FBI, whoever...or I might just take a real serious interest in your business." To emphasize the point, Vega jammed the tip of the automatic into the soft skin just underneath his chin.

"Please," Whitfield wheezed. Stark terror drained the little color he had from his cheeks. "We can work this out."

"For your sake, I sure hope so." She pulled the gun away and let him slide partway down the wall before catching his collar and giving him a shove to continue down the hallway. They passed a vacant secretary desk sitting beside a pair of double wooden doors. The brass nameplate tacked to the one door proclaimed the office to be Greg Harper's.

Yellow police tape sealed the doors with the warning 'do not cross'. Vega pulled the tape down and stepped aside to let Whitfield use his key on the lock.

The office, about the size of Whitfield's, had been picked clean. Not a lick of furniture or a scrap of paper remained inside. Vega directed Whitfield and the guard to stand at the far end of the room by a bank of windows while she stood in the middle of the room and wondered if Grayson really expected her to find something. Was this just another wild chase he was sending her on?

He hadn't seemed happy she'd been poking around in his hometown. Maybe this was just a diversion to keep her from questioning someone specific there.

Whitfield watched like a hovering vulture as she stared blindly at the blank walls. A cool smile had returned to his lips.

"If you leave right now, I won't press charges," he said.

"You won't press charges an hour from now, either." She held her ground and continued to stare at the walls and wonder.

Greg Harper kept a secret set of files in his office, Grayson had said. Had he expected the office would remain untouched? A secret set of files—where?

She looked up at the ceiling. The plaster was smooth, unbroken except for a vent from an air duct. She could clearly see up the silver vent. There'd be nothing there.

"How long am I supposed to put up with this bullshit? I'm a busy man, Miss Brookes. Not only do I have this damned company to look after, I also have Whitfield Investments."

"Whitfield Investments? Is that how you have a connection with Finn Kayne?"

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about." A new bead of sweat appeared on his brow, which was telling.

She looked down at the floor and the unattractive, bloodstained brown and greenflecked carpet covering it. The carpet wasn't the kind that came off a roll, but in one-foot square tiles. If a spill or snag ruined one area, only a small part of the carpeting would have to be replaced. Not the whole room.

This must have happened sometime within the last year or so. One square on the floor didn't quite match the others. The brown was a shade darker and the green a shade brighter.

Vega crouched down and ran her finger over the newer carpet tile. The floor underneath felt different—slightly harder.

A floor vault.

Barging into Whitfield's world and holding a gun under his nose was merely a manageable irritation for him. Discovering papers that could potentially bring his empire crashing down around his ears raised the stakes significantly. Either Grayson killed Greg Harper or Whitfield paid one of his guards to do the deed. Whether Whitfield was part of the crime or not, didn't matter to Vega as much as the danger lurking in that floor vault

posed. She had to assume the contents of the vault got Greg Harper killed and put Fiona's life at risk.

Whitfield might go as far as risk a few bullet holes to stop her from turning whatever she might find over to the police. And she was not willing to take that chance.

Since she'd already used the twin pair of handcuffs she always carried to lock up the guards in Whitfield's office, she had nothing to use to secure Whitfield and the third guard.

"Give me your tie," she said, eyeing his cool blue silk tie—it looked sturdy enough.

Whitfield scowled while undoing the knot. He tossed the tie to her and she gave it a few yanks.

"Stand with your back to your guard."

"Why?" His cheeks whitened. "You want money? I can pay you double what you're being paid."

"I don't want your money." She pressed the guard's automatic pistol to Whitfield's belly and moving quickly, secured his wrist together with the guard's, using Whitfield's pricey silk tie.

With them standing by the window, essentially helpless, Vega was free to search the floor vault at her leisure.

"Don't move," she warned. She crouched over the floor vault and peeled up the carpet square. She was struck immediately by the complicated electronic lock standing between her and the contents hidden in the vault. Her simple lock-pick kit couldn't help her here. Anxious to get a look at the files before the police arrived, she stood and aimed the Beretta.

It would probably bring the whole building down upon her, but Vega pulled the trigger anyhow.

Whitfield screamed.

The guard winced.

The small vault sprang open.

She holstered the Beretta—there was no need to get shot by a nervous guard or police officer just for having a gun in her hand—and reached into the vault. The stainless steel interior felt cool to the touch. Where were those files Grayson seemed so desperate for her to find?

The only thing in the vault, far in the back, was a compact disc in a black case. Was this what Grayson had wanted her to find? There was only one way to find out.

She locked Whitfield and his guard in Harper's office with the warning that she'd come back and kill the both of them if they made a sound, and settled in front of the computer on the secretary's desk.

A harried-faced manager in a cheap tan suit ran by, followed by a few nervous security guards dressed in the usual dull-gray uniforms.

"Did you hear that?" a young woman dressed in a burgundy suit with an assortment of pencils sticking out of her hair stopped at the desk to ask.

"Hear what?" she asked. The computer whirled to life. She put in the disc and waited for the computer to recognize it.

"That noise. It sounded like a gunshot." The woman's hands were quaking worse than Whitfield's. Her eyes narrowed as she studied Vega's face more closely. "You from system's administration?"

"Yep. I'm getting this computer ready for use in accounting." Vega clicked on the mouse to bring up a listing of the files on the disc.

"Oh my, oh my. I suppose things like that need to be done. I haven't been able to think straight since Mr. Harper's death. The killer could be anyone. He could be in the building now."

"I thought Grayson Walker killed him," Vega said absently, while scanning the long list of files that had appeared on the computer screen.

The woman stepped away from the desk. "I don't know what's going on here and I'm not asking any questions." She stumbled over her own feet in her haste to get away.

Vega shrugged. The arrival of Whitfield's special guards probably had every employee quaking. She returned to work on the computer. The documents she brought up were financial statements with long lists of payments coming in to and leaving the company's accounts. Her eyes crossed. The numbers were meaningless to her. It would probably take a trained accountant several days of poring over the files to find anything fishy.

This could be important. Or it could just be a routine disc containing office financials. Not wanting to leave before making sure she'd gotten the right piece of evidence, Vega began randomly opening files. A long list of names, payments, and dates caught her eye. It wasn't the list that stood out, but one name near the top in particular.

Butch Polsen.

A sum of ten thousand dollars had been paid to him from Six-Star Enterprises. Had Butch been hired by Six-Star, or more specifically Whitfield, to capture Grayson?

Perhaps, but this file had been made before Harper's death.

She scanned down the list further and stopped on another, more disturbing name on the list.

Finn Kayne.

Weekly payments, all in the thousands of dollars, were being paid to Finn. Could this be the same big dog Finn Kayne taking over the crime scene in Detroit? Vega chewed on that thought for a moment. Why would a Fortune 500 Company want to get their hooks into organized crime? There were at least a hundred more names, besides Finn's, with equally large weekly payments included in the list.

Interesting information, but nothing that would help her track down Grayson.

She scanned the disc's list of folders again and found one titled 'partnership'. That looked promising. She opened the folder and then brought up several of the files.

One was a report Harper had written the day he was killed. She read it through while dialing the number for a contact of hers in the local FBI field office.

Harper's report explained, citing which files on the disc proved this, how Six-Star funds had been diverted to various terrorist organizations. She read the last statement in Harper's report aloud to Johnson, the FBI field agent who she'd helped in the past.

"Large payments from Six-Star to various questionable organizations appear to be for the sole purpose of spurring continued economic instability, giving Six-Star an edge over smaller, competing entities. Although this conspiracy was implemented by one of the founding partners, evidence suggests leadership decisions are being made by what appears to be an emerging domestic terrorist organization known simply as *Spider*."

"Whoa," Johnson said. "I'm sure it's a crank, but I'll send a team right out just to be safe."

"Please do. I've got a guard here that attacked Fiona."

The heavy thumping in her chest told her this wasn't a crank. Something very wrong was going on at Six-Star...something that had nearly killed her sister.

"And Butch knew about it..."

"Hey! Who are you?" The manager dressed in the cheap tan suit returned. A different pair of security guards, ones dressed in black and sporting automatic weapons, approached.

The manager quivered when his gaze flicked toward them. "What are you doing here?" he asked somewhat more subdued.

"Servicing the computer." She ejected the CD and pretended to be too busy to bother with someone as inconsequential as a mid-level manager.

"Where's your security badge?" the beefier of the two guards asked. His voice rumbled in the hallway.

"Good question," the manager said. "Well, where is it?"

She searched the empty desktop, "Must have left the damn thing home. Sorry."

The guard smiled a wide, toothy grin. "I think we've found our security breach." He swung toward the manager. "You didn't see any of this."

The manager stammered something incoherent, nodding heavily and hurried away.

"Now, what should we do with her? She's about as pretty as her sister." The second guard licked his thin lips.

"Boss would want this done quiet-like." He tapped his automatic pistol on the desk. "Get up. You're coming with us."

She pocketed the CD and stood. As long as they didn't take her CD or free Whitfield from Harper's office, she'd let the guards think they were in control.

"You stay quiet, and you won't suffer," the guard warned.

They led her through the hallway, down back a set of stairs, and out a fire door that led into a small, relatively clean alleyway.

If she wanted to be perfectly honest with herself, she'd have to admit that she was in a bit over her head. These two guards could blast enough holes in her to make Greg Harper's hacked up body look pretty damned untouched.

But who needed that kind of honesty?

Sweet, impetuous Fiona had been helpless the night several guards just like these had attacked with plans to rape and kill. Despite the uneven odds, Vega was determined to give those guards what they had coming to them.

She swung her fist, aiming for the bigger of the two. Careful not to telegraph her intentions, her attack surprised both men. Before either could fire a shot, she'd chopped

the beefier guard's wrist. His pistol clattered to the ground, and dealt a roundhouse kick to the thin-lipped guard's arm. He had to juggle to keep the gun in his grasps.

"Thought I told you to stay away from Six-Star." Grayson appeared beside her. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" He sounded genuinely pissed.

"I don't take orders well." Vega ducked a wild fist and kicked the thin-lipped guard in the gut. He grunted and staggered back a step. She lunged to the left when he produced a knife of his own and thrust, aiming for her belly. He stumbled when his blade hit nothing but air.

"I see that," Grayson said. The beefy guard sucker-punched him square in the nose.

"Bastard!" Vega turned her back on her own battle to help Grayson. She chopped the bigger guard's heavily muscled neck. It didn't have much of an impact.

"Now isn't the time for name-calling. I'm trying to help, damn it." Grayson had grabbed an arm as big as a log. The two men struggled, wrestling each other to the ground.

She hesitated a moment, trying to gage the best way to help, when the thin-lipped guard pounced and sliced his knife into her injured shoulder.

A stupid move on his part. The pain fed her battle rage.

"You know how long it took me to find this jacket?" She kicked the knife from his hand and struck him in the head with a quick right followed by a quick left hook. Bright red blood oozed from his nose.

"Of course you don't." She swung again. A sharp crack accompanied the unnerving sensation of cartilage breaking underneath her knuckle. He wobbled. She swung again.

"That's for my sister."

The guard dropped like a corpse.

She plucked his automatic, a heavy-enough weapon, and swung around. The butt cracked against the second guard's skull. The hands crushing Grayson's neck fell away.

"You okay?" Grayson coughed the question. He rolled the body off him and pulled himself to his feet.

Was she okay? A few spots of blood along with a nagging sharp pain told her that she'd been stabbed, but not more seriously than a scratch. She glared at the tear in her jacket. Another leather jacket ruined. Damn.

"Whoa." His hands flew to the air. "I'm the one who just helped you, remember?" His gaze locked with hers. A commanding strength lurking deep in his brown eyes held her motionless. He advanced, stepping over the guards and wretched the gun from her hands.

"The battle's over." His gaze pressed on her. She struggled for a steady breath. "You beat the bad guys. It's over."

Over? Hardly.

Her heart thundered at the sight of him. He'd appeared out of nowhere like some damned knight in shining armor. Like a hero.

"What kind of hero would strangle a girl and leave her defenseless behind some dark, dangerous bar?" Yes, keep remembering his evil deeds. Keep him from looking like the hero—the kind of man who only lived in a child's fairy-tale.

"I'm no hero, Vega. It's true. I didn't worry about leaving you alone last night. Once your lungs took a nice long bath in the fresh air pumping into them, you woke up, didn't you? I know you. You're strong enough to protect yourself from whatever unfortunate beast that might have stumbled into your path."

Wasn't he the smart villain, stroking her ego?

"I suppose you say that to all the girls."

His expression tightened.

She braved a step closer. This was it...her chance to capture the one prey who'd eluded her. All she needed to do was attack. To pit her will against his.

"You're a killer. Why spare me?" she asked instead.

"I'm not a killer."

"What about Mirna Catanzaro?" Mirna, the woman Grayson killed in Colombia. Vega had no idea why she needed to know. She just did. She needed to hear about Mirna from him.

"I shot her." He turned away as if he couldn't face the ugly truth.

"Why?" He'd saved Fiona and had protected her. Vega held her breath waiting for a logical explanation of Mirna's death.

"Okay. You're right. I'm a killer. That's what I'm trained to do, damn it. Kill. Condemn me."

The words fit with the profile of the monster she'd created in her file. They didn't fit with the man standing in front of her.

"I don't buy it. You wanted to marry her. You were there to kill the drug czar Carlos Briceno and you fell in love with Mirna. What happened? Did you find her in his bed? Tell me."

Grayson shook his head as if trying to chase away his memories. "I killed her."

"The file says she was in his bedroom with him, that you shot them both. What was it? Had she betrayed you?"

"No...don't." He grabbed her wrists and pulled her close. "Let the dead stay dead."

His lips captured hers. He took, demanding she give into the passion burning just below the surface. She did nothing to stop him. His guilt and heat seeped deep into her soul. What did he want? Her forgiveness? Understanding?

For a wild moment she was ready to believe anything he'd tell her. She was ready to believe him innocent.

He pulled away and held her at arm's length, scrutinizing her. "Last night, at the bar. Why did you kiss me?"

Why had she kissed him? "Because you're safe, I suppose."

"Safe?" He swallowed a laugh. "I'm a killer, Vega."

There was something seriously wrong with the picture he'd painted of himself. He wasn't a killer. His admission of coldly killing Mirna didn't ring true. There was much more to that story. Just like there was much more to the story of what happened to his partner, Greg Harper. Her instincts had lied to her. He'd never been safe.

"You see me as unattainable? And that makes me safe? Is that it?" He raked a hand through his hair. "Jeez, and I thought I was messed up when it came to relationships." He caressed her bruised cheek, tracing the line of her jaw.

"Who did this terrible thing to you? Who made you seek out men who can never offer you anything permanent?"

Vega jerked away. He'd hit too close to a truth she'd been unable to admit. Ask someone who was loveable how to find a lasting relationship. Not her.

Life drove her to harden any soft edges that could get her killed. That was just the way—the only way she could ever hope to become the very image of the stern man who'd made her.

"I'm not some sexy woman hiding behind a tough-girl package, Grayson. I am that tough girl. There's no room in me for anything pink and frivolous like love."

He pulled her back into his arms and gave her a little shake. "You're a terrible liar. Who did this to you?"

The question cut deep and pain spilled out.

"No one." She choked down a throat filled with tears. "I'm just trying to be the best..." To make my father proud.

"I've never met anyone as capable and sexy and so damnably desirable as you, Vega. You have nothing to prove to anyone."

She let him hold her tightly against his chest while he rained kisses on her forehead. Her ironclad defenses weakened. She felt lighter, like she didn't have to fight quite so hard.

"Excuse me," a man cleared his throat. "Not to interrupt this tender moment. But damn, Vega. You've made one hell of a mess. What the hell's going on?"

Grayson's hands slipped away, leaving her standing alone. Cold.

"Agent Johnson," she said. The FBI Johnson, a dark-haired man in his late thirties, was dressed in a dark suit and fit the federal agent stereotype perfectly. "Am I glad to see you." *Just not right now*. Five minutes ago would have been better.

Grayson increased his distance, preparing to flee around a corner and through a maze of alleyways she knew nothing about. She had to stop him. She had to get him to face his lies and tell her the truth about Mirna and Harper.

"Don't," he said when she took a step toward him. He plucked an automatic from the ground and pointed it at her chest, which didn't worry her. He wouldn't shoot her—at least, not again. Well, she didn't think he would.

Agent Johnson drew his pistol. "Drop it, Walker."

Vega remained completely still, cursing silently. Johnson would pull the trigger and shot Grayson without hesitation. Things *were* getting messy.

"I can't let you take me, Vega. I need to be out here."

"Why? If you're as innocent as you claim, why run?" She stepped between Johnson and Grayson, effectively blocking the FBI agent's aim.

"Just watch you're sister, Vega. She's in danger."

Three regular uniformed police officers stormed the alley then with their pistols drawn creating a mess of chaos.

And just like that, Grayson was gone.

Johnson darted past her in pursuit. A few moments later, he returned emptyhanded. He holstered his gun and gave her a curious look. Like he felt sorry for her or something.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asked.

"Umm..." Before Vega could come up with a reasonable explanation, an efficient officer shoved her up against a wall and cuffed her.

"Johnson? A little help?" He owed her. Last spring, she'd apprehended a crazed bomber who'd slipped through the feds fingers. The FBI would have gotten a serious black-eye if she hadn't pulled through for them. She'd even stepped back and let Johnson's team take the glory. He owed his job to her.

"She's not dangerous," Johnson said after a minute or so.

The cuffs came off, but the young police officers kept a cautious eye trained on her. So did Johnson.

"I suppose you had a damned good reason for tying up Whitfield," he asked. "He's got the political power to burn you to an unrecognizable crisp, Vega."

"Not today, he doesn't."

She explained what had happened and what she had found on the way back up to Greg Harper's office on the sixth floor. They found Whitfield loose and sitting at the computer Vega had used to view Harper's CD.

"She's delusional. Keep her away from me."

A young officer pulled her aside. He patted her down, confiscating her Beretta and Harper's data CD.

Whitfield straightened the gold-rimmed glasses balanced on his nose and nonchalantly took possession of the disc. "Next she'll be spouting all sorts of nonsense about conspiracies and attempts against her sister's life. I expected this, of course. What with all the negative press."

A condescending smile curled on his lips. Vega couldn't help but snarl. Johnson jumped in between to act as a calming shield. Unnecessary really. She couldn't do anything to stir up trouble while so many cops guarded the power broker.

"I'm sorry, sir. But I'll need to take that data CD into evidence." Johnson held out his hand.

"I don't plan on pressing charges," Whitfield said.

"Because you're afraid of what's on that CD," Vega said, only to have the officer restraining her give her a shake.

"You just stay out of this," Johnson warned. But he did ask Whitfield for the data CD all the same. "This is evidence, sir. It came from a murder scene. I have to take it."

Whitfield reluctantly handed over the disc. "You'll hear from my lawyers about this."

Johnson merely nodded. He dropped the disc into a small plastic bag, told the police officer in charge to take statements, and led Vega away from the scene.

She fidgeted while Johnson's FBI team interviewed nearly every employee at Six-Star. Across the room, an FBI agent began a cursory review of Harper's financial data CD. One hour passed. Then another. She glanced at her watch. She was supposed to meet Fiona within the next ten minutes to compare notes.

"I need to go." She found Johnson rushing down a hall. He'd just hung up his phone and was rubbing his temples. "You know how to reach me if you need any more information for Whitfield's arrest. Just be sure to question all those security guards in the black uniforms. At least two of them tried to kill Fiona. I'm convinced the one I'd tied up with..."

"Forget Whitfield for a moment. There aren't going to be any arrests today. It'll take weeks to sort out this mess." He passed another FBI agent in the hall, a young energized beanpole whose enthusiasm reminded Vega of Fiona. "Keep an eye on things up here. I'll be right back."

Johnson kept Vega close to his side while they rode the elevator down to the lobby. "I just got a call about a kidnapping. A witness saw that Walker fellow grab your sister right in front of the Atlanta police station."

Fiona? She couldn't breathe for a moment.

"That's impossible."

"It's very possible. So tell me. What the hell were *you* doing kissing him?"

Her phone chirped. She ripped the tiny silver phone from her pocket.

"Hello?" It could be Fiona...or Grayson.

"Vega."

Butch.

She didn't say anything. Her mind had frozen.

"Vega, listen to me. Fiona's gone."

"I know." This was impossible, unthinkable. Grayson wouldn't do this to her. He couldn't.

"I spotted him on the road a few minutes ago. I followed for as long as I could but lost him in the traffic on the interstate. I lost him, and he's got Fiona."

Oh God. What if Grayson had been playing with her emotions just to confuse her? What if he had intended to kill Fiona all along?

She'd kill him.

# Chapter Eighteen

But why would Grayson kidnap Fiona?

A whole day and a half had passed. No calls. No demands. This silence was the worst kind of torture. It prodded Vega to question and re-examine all her assumptions.

She paced in her hotel room.

Where would he take Fiona? Why take her at all?

Jack had booked the next flight to Atlanta minutes after her call. By late afternoon, he'd arrived and taken control of the situation. The police were combing the metropolitan Atlanta area street-by-street, searching for clues, while the FBI picked apart Six-Star Enterprises and its subsidiary companies. They all were doing all that could be done, Jack assured hourly.

"Face it, he fooled you. You're not the first person to believe a well-practiced criminal," Jack said, trying his best to comfort. "You won't be the last."

Vega didn't want comfort. "I've got to find him."

"We will. The whole state of Georgia is looking for him. He won't get far."

If only Vega could believe that.

She'd screwed up royally and let Grayson slip under her defenses to take Fiona. What else had she missed?

Well, she'd completely dismissed the legwork Fiona had completed in the weeks she'd been recuperating in Detroit. Perhaps that had been a mistake. Perhaps there was something in Fiona's notes that would provide a key.

Vega spent hours scouring Fiona's notebook. Her sister had been thorough. Her entries were neat and easy to follow. No surprise, really. Fiona was an excellent researcher.

Researching was safe, respectable. Dismissing her sister's work as meaningless had been wrong. A protective mechanism to keep Fiona at an arm's length with bounty hunting, yes...but wrong.

Buried in the notebook was a notation hastily written in the margin—a scrawled name, "Etta Gray" with, "ask Pearl Sampit about her" written beside it.

Just three days ago, Vega had stopped Fiona from asking Pearl a direct question. Another mistake. After hitting herself upside the head with guilt, Vega picked up the phone and dialed Pearl's number to ask the question she should have let her sister ask.

"Etta Gray," Pearl paused, as if the name answered all the questions in the world. "Etta is Grayson's grandmother."

"No she isn't." Grayson's parents and both sets of grandparents were long dead. And none of them had the surname *Gray*. Vega's research had been thorough.

"Not by blood, child." Pearl turned adamant. "Mabel...Mabel, dear woman. She was a good mother to Grayson, but she couldn't run to her parents when things got bad. She did that once, but he found her. Things were bad, back then. Etta—she lives in the neighborhood—took pity on poor Mabel and her young son, Grayson. She gave her a place to run to when trouble brewed at home. A place where that rotter of a husband couldn't find her or the boy."

"So Mabel would hide at a neighbor's house? I don't see how that would be much better than running to her parents."

"Don't be so thick, child. Etta has a summerhouse. She just returned from spending the Christmas holidays with her family there. It's far away, mind you, up the coast in South Carolina. That's where she'd take Mabel and Grayson. No one knew about it but me and Etta."

Perhaps this was why Grayson seemed worried about Vega poking around Millville. People tended to follow patterns. Turn the heat up too high and he'd go to the only place he'd ever felt safe.

"He wouldn't bring trouble to Etta's doorstep though..." Pearl let the thought trail off.

"But you said Etta has recently left the summer place? So, it would be deserted right now. Right?"

"Yes, child. It's been closed up for the winter for the past several days. Won't be a soul going out there until May."

You won't find him running here. Pearl Sampit had said the other day as if she knew where he would go. She'd said it because she did know. This summer place would be the last place he'd run while "Grandma Etta" and her family were staying there. Now

that they were gone, the place would be free for his use. What perfect timing—like a setup.

Take Fiona and run someplace far away and safe.

But why take Fiona?

"You're too green, too innocent for this kind of rough work," her father used to say. "That damned innocence is going to get you into trouble."

And it had. Because she'd begun to trust Grayson, to believe that someone was trying to set him up, he'd wedged his way into a powerful position. While she let down her guard and flirted with gentle yet dangerous feelings like love, he was able to steal the one thing that could hurt her the worst.

Fiona.

He was the one who'd turned this into a cat and mouse game. He was the one who'd kidnapped Fiona in the first place just to lure Vega back into the chase.

The reasons for tormenting her might not be clear. But, to Vega, one thing was guaranteed. It was past time to put an end to his game.

She packed an arsenal of weapons and equipment into the back of her rented SUV. Butch had called three times, offering to help. Each time, she'd refused. She didn't want Butch around muddling her thoughts. For Fiona, she needed to stay focused.

"Don't you worry, we'll get him," Johnson stopped by the hotel to report that afternoon. He scoffed at her suggestion that Grayson would run to a neighboring state. The borders had been sealed, the idea far-fetched. "That sure sounds like a wild goose to me."

"Fiona believed Etta Gray is the key. I'm not going to dismiss her ideas any longer. She's good, better than I give her credit for," Vega insisted.

Jack sniffed loudly and turned away.

"What about Joshua Whitfield?" Vega asked. "Are you any closer to making an arrest there?"

"Those files on the CD are a mess. We're digging and finding what looks like dirt. We're building a case showing that Whitfield was acting as the financial arm of a major organized crime ring."

"Spider?"

"Yes, Spider. They've got their fingers in drugs, terrorism, and general mayhem in many of the major cities around the country. They were paying thugs like the Finn

Kayne you encountered in Detroit to act as regional crime bosses. Finding this Whitfield/Six-Star connection is a huge break for us at the FBI. I hope to be able to charge Whitfield in the next couple of days." Johnson scratched his chin and frowned. "Unfortunately Whitfield's gone to ground. No one knows exactly where he is. His lawyers promise he's staying at his Miami estate. Between you and me, I'm worried. If he weren't so politically powerful, I'd haul him into custody. But I can't. I can't touch him without rock solid evidence."

"I'm not surprised. How about those files? Is there anything you can tell me about what Six-Star Enterprises was doing to help us figure out how to find Grayson Walker?"

Johnson only shook his head. "Best we can tell, neither Harper nor Walker were involved with Spider. But then," Johnson placed his hand on Vega's shoulder, "we're doing everything possible to find your sister. No matter what, we'll find her."

Vega didn't find any hope in his assurances.

"Why don't you get out of Atlanta for a while? You're just underfoot, you know. Go somewhere and sleep for a couple of days, you look like hell."

"Sleep is grossly overrated these days."

An hour later, Vega was in her rented SUV and heading down to the coast of South Carolina to follow up on Fiona's best lead. Jack had acted only too happy to get her out of the hotel. He pushed her all the way to the door, telling her he'd call if he heard anything.

\* \* \* \*

Spanish moss drooped off the limbs of the sprawling oaks, green even in the middle of January. A cool mist rose like an enchanted breath from the damp marshes. A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature crept down Vega's spine. She turned off the highway onto the road that marked the entrance of McClellanville. It was as if Fiona's own hand had led her to this impossibly small town not much more than a handful of roads, a few paved.

The sun dipped behind the pine trees to the west just as she found the address she was looking for. The dying afternoon sky blazed crimson, giving the unpainted, weather-beaten Victorian cottage with a lazy porch encircling the exterior a supernatural glow. While the water in the bay beyond appeared to open up and feed the night its darkness.

A small sign tacked beside the wooden door had the words, "boat rentals" printed in navy blue paint. Vega parked the SUV in front of the house.

It had taken her most of the day to get to this town on the rural coast of South Carolina. She was just a few miles away from Tommy Fisher's bar, the Broken Cricket, where this jinxed adventure had all started. And again, Vega was not at all certain she was in the right place. After Fiona's abduction, she was beginning to question her hunches, even the strong ones.

Vega knocked on the heavy pine door. The quick raps echoed high in the thick canopy of trees surrounding the house. It took no more than a moment or two for the yellow light on the porch to turn on. Her senses alert, she kept a keen eye on the growing shadows around the property, watching for movement.

"Yes?" a voice from inside the house asked. The rusty hinge wailed when the door opened a crack. A single ancient eye, nearly entirely white from a heavy cataract, peered out at her.

"I'm looking for Etta Gray's place," Vega said. "I'd been told you could guide me to her summer home." And that was why Vega had been drawn to this clapboard house.

The man sighed and stepped back from the door. The place looked like a museum, only much more disorganized. Stacks of antique furniture, folk art, and mysterious wooden crates narrowed the front hallway from floor to ceiling.

"I'm Vega Brookes." The man appeared to be nearly blind with those white, cloudy eyes of his, but nothing seemed wrong with his hearing. The wrinkles on his face, a testimony to his wisdom and experience, pulled down toward the floor as he turned back toward her. "Pearl Sampit sent me."

"That old gossip?" the man snorted. He didn't offer his name and Vega chose not to pursue it. "Might as well make yourself comfortable." He gestured toward the living room where more treasures upon treasures had been heaped. A sweet, musty smell filled Vega's nostrils when she perched on the corner of an ornate sofa that, in a museum, it would've had a velvet red rope hanging across the faded red velvet cushion.

He picked a battered easy chair that held no value besides comfort. "It'll cost you one hundred dollars a day plus fifty dollars for me to draw you a map and give instructions on how to find your way through the marsh."

"Okay." He'd lost Vega. "One hundred dollars a day for what?"

"For the boat, of course."

"The boat?"

"Pearl told you nothing. Etta's summer home is on a marsh island. I'll give you instructions on how to navigate the maze of channels to get you to her island—not that'll be easy, mind you. You'll most likely get lost."

"I won't get lost."

The old man chuckled. "I require cash, up front. For fifty more dollars, you're welcome to stay the night."

"Stay the night?"

He snorted again. "An outsider like yourself couldn't find the ocean, much less a small house in the middle of this marsh at night. Be lucky to do it during the day."

That night Vega slept upstairs in the man's sprawling old Victorian home on what felt like a cardboard mattress with the room's expansive windows open. Teams of cicadas droned in her ears while confusing images of Fiona and Grayson haunted her dreams.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, water whirled along the side of the fiberglass hull of the twoman boat Vega had rented. The bottom of the boat was wide and shallow. The craft glided down the creek with very little resistance from the tugging tide. A soft hum from the boat's tiny trawling motor was the only sound for miles. Two wooden oars lay at her feet, she intended to switch off the motor and paddle her final approach to the island circled with a red pen on her map.

Navigating through the narrow marsh channels proved a disorienting challenge. Rough blades of marsh grass, winter brown in color, towered over both sides of the boat and over her head, even when she stood. The grasses blinded Vega, forcing her to rely solely on the hand-drawn map, which wasn't easy. The pull of the tides created several narrow paths and openings that looked nearly identical to the navigable channels.

But Vega took her time and managed to find her way to the unmistakable fork in the channel where a folly of palms rose up from the grasses. Etta Gray's secluded island, according to the map, should be just a few more turns down the creek's winding channel. She shut off the engine and opened her black backpack holding her mini-arsenal. She tucked a loaded Beretta into her hip holster so it nestled in the small of her back. And in each pocket of her leather coat, a pair of handcuffs and an air gun Taser with a fifteenfoot range, and a shock guaranteed to overwhelm an assailant's central nervous system.

She needed to take Grayson alive. If he didn't have Fiona with him on the island, she would wrestle the information out of him.

"It's your responsibility to watch out for your sister," her father had once shook Vega by the shoulders and scolded.

Fiona had been only five at the time and had followed Vega on one of her solitary biking adventures through the neighborhood. Before they'd gone even two blocks, Fiona had fallen off her three-wheeled trike and was nearly hit by a car, tore her dress, and scraped her arms and legs. The driver of the car had carried Fiona back to the house while Fiona screamed as if that sound was to be her last and she wanted to make an impact.

I expect you to be the responsible one, Vega, and yet you continually disappoint me.

She could feel her father in the boat with her, with that scowl he'd get whenever his gaze chanced to meet hers. That look of utter dissatisfaction would harden his features. She should have taken better care of his charming little Fiona. She should have never allowed herself to believe in Grayson. Perhaps...

She gulped an uneven breath. Fiona would be okay. She'd trade her life for Fiona's, if need be. That should please her father.

With a strangled sob, she caught hold of the budding emotional outbreak and pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes. Her focus slowly centered on the coming few hours until nothing else existed but her determination to capture Grayson.

He would not escape this time. She was good. Her prey never eluded capture for long.

Vega dipped the oars into the water and silently guided the boat up the creek. Gradually, the channel widened and the water rose, giving Vega a better view over the marsh grasses. She rounded a bend in the channel. A heavily treed island came into view. According to the map, this land belonged to Etta Gray.

She rowed toward the island, searching the marshy shore for the slightest sign of movement. Grayson shouldn't be expecting her, but she sure as hell wasn't about to take any chances. Out in the channel, without the cover of any kind of vegetation, she presented a tempting target to whatever might be lurking in the trees. Vega tugged on a floppy hat she'd purchased low on her head and tossed a fishing line out over the side of the boat.

A short, rickety dock with several loose boards curling up here and there and the supporting piers slanting at a sharp angle appeared on the far side of the island. There were no other signs of human inhabitation, no grand house rising up over the trees. Vega

pulled up beside the dock and secured the boat to a pier close to shore. After hopping out into shallow water, she wedged the boat between the piers underneath the dock so it wouldn't be readily noticeable. She took her backpack filled with an assortment of weapons, and sloshed her way over oyster beds and up the muddy bank.

Grand oaks like those in McClellanville, green even in the winter, hugged the shore. A grassy path led through the maritime forest, leading, no doubt, to Etta Gray's home site. Hoping to make a silent approach, Vega wove her way through the thick woods. They swallowed her up, creating a strange sensation of being transported back a century, to a lush flowering tropical forest somewhere much further south.

She stayed parallel with the narrow man-made path until she reached a clearing in the forest. Smoke rose from the chimney of a rusty roofed bungalow. Her heart thumped. The bungalow wasn't closed up for the winter after all. Just as she suspected, someone had taken residence in Etta's absence.

Vega stashed her backpack against the far wall of a boat shed and covered it with pine straw and leaves. She crouched down to watch the house. Other than an occasional rustle of leaves and the creaking of a well handle as the wind pushed it, the island was completely silent. Almost too silent.

If Fiona's life weren't depending on the finesse of the execution, she'd charge the house and use her Taser to immobilize anyone she encountered inside. But the direct approach might put Fiona's life at a greater risk. She played out several scenarios in her head. The most deadly would be to tip off Grayson and give him the opportunity to harm Fiona.

The only way that made any sense was to take Grayson fast and hard...and soon. Which meant she'd either need to locate him inside the house before he noticed her presence, or figure out a safe way to lure him out.

To lure him out, she'd need to create enough of a disturbance to rouse his curiosity without sparking excessive suspicions. It was a gamble of course, but Vega decided it would be safer to confront Grayson outside as far away from Fiona as possible. Besides, she had no desire to walk into a room without knowing exactly what to expect.

While she sat there wondering what she could do besides throwing stones at the windows, which just seemed like a really bad idea, the front door to the small house opened. She kept her back pressed against the side of the small shack and peered around the corner of the building.

Grayson stopped on the bottom step, his alert gaze scanning. Her father's Glock was snug in one hand, a rope sling for carrying wood in the other. He headed toward the shed. Vega could see the military training and focus with each step.

She looked behind her. A pile of wood was stacked just a few feet from where she stood, which meant he'd walk right into her snare.

Hopefully the air gun Taser worked as well as Jack claimed. According to him, this stun gun was the best thing to happen to small arms since the invention of the self-indexing breech that had made the development of automatic pistols possible. Instead of bullets, the gun fired two electrified probes that, when latched onto the target, sent an electrical-muscular disruption pulse through the body strong enough to completely disable the central nervous system. Temporary, harmless paralysis. A damn good tool for her business.

But because she hadn't field-tested it, Vega wasn't about to bet her life on that claim. She drew out the Beretta, prepared to follow up with a real bullet if the electronic ones failed to stop him.

Grayson stepped into range, carefully scanning for enemies, while not seeing the danger that lurked right in front of him. She fired the air gun Taser. Two wire probes shot out of the barrel and collided with Grayson's chest, snagging on his flannel shirt.

For a breathless moment, she waited while Grayson stared at his shirt with wonderment. Her father's Glock slipped from his grasp and bounced to the ground. His expression twisted. The weapon's electrical current was coursing through him, causing every muscle to contract. He toppled like a broad piece of deadwood, landing with his face half-buried in the sand. Jack hadn't exaggerated. That Taser walloped one hell of a punch.

Though Grayson looked helpless, Vega approached with extra caution. She wouldn't take chances when her sister's life depended on it. With a quick movement, she bent over him and locked a pair of handcuffs over his wrists and her second pair around his ankles. Once she was certain he wasn't going anywhere, she switched off the Taser's power.

Grayson, still face down in the sand, started coughing. He was gasping for breath when Vega flipped him over onto his back and straddled his chest.

"Vega." A smile creased the corners of his pained eyes as he raked her body with his gaze. "You look damn good right now. I was afraid you were one of Whitfield's

guard's from Six-Star." He coughed again. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to see that I was wrong."

She had no reason to take offense, but she did.

"You shouldn't be happy. I'm taking you back to Atlanta with me." Her tone rose with her anger. "There's no escape this time. You understand that?"

He tugged at the handcuffs binding both his arms and legs. "I expect I do."

"Good." She drew a deep breath while fighting an urge to punch him. "Tell me what you've done with my sister."

Grayson stared blankly up at her.

"Where...is...my...sister?"

"Fiona? I haven't seen her since I dropped her off at the cyclorama weeks ago."

"The Cyclorama?" Vega's heart was pounding in her ears. Surely, it was painfully obvious he wasn't going to escape this time, so he had no reason to lie. He should be cooperating.

"She's damn good at getting into trouble, that sister of yours. You should've watched over her more carefully," he said.

Just like her father, he blamed her for Fiona's misadventures. Why shouldn't he?

"Stop playing me, Grayson. Where is Fiona?"

"I don't know, Vega. Where is she?"

She smashed the butt of the Taser against his temple. "Don't lie to me, you bastard. What did you do with my sister?"

Grayson shook his head. A dazed glare clouded his eyes. She must have knocked him harder than she intended. She slapped his cheeks. "What did you do with her?"

"Nothing," he said again.

Nothing? He was a damn liar.

"What did you do? Did you kill her?" she shouted.

"No, Vega."

Her father's Glock was in her hand. How it got there, she wasn't sure. A moment ago, it had been on the ground near her hand. She was glad to be holding it though. The barrel pressed so nicely against Grayson's forehead.

"Did you kill my sister? Just tell me the truth. Did you kill her?" Her finger tightened against the trigger.

"No, Vega. I didn't." A breath away from death and he refused to plead, refused to do anything other than gaze at her with those powerful brown eyes.

That wouldn't do.

She needed him to feel the same fear Fiona must have felt when he kidnapped her. Damn it, how could she have been so stupid? How could she have believed the word of a killer? She'd been ready to believe him innocent, and look at the cost of her mistake.

After checking to make sure the pistol was indeed loaded, she eased in close so her lips hovered just above his. "Don't you care that I'm about to blow the top of your head off?"

"You're making a huge mistake, Vega." Cool as a criminal. Grayson refused to break. Shooting him felt too quick, too painless—too final. She wanted him to suffer.

Suffer like Fiona must have suffered when he killed her.

"Damn you." Rage born from the frustrations, the losses she'd endured over the past several weeks exploded in her chest. She tossed down her gun and pulled back her fist, poised to pummel him to death.

He didn't deserve to live, none of the bastards did.

# Chapter Nineteen

So, this is what the edge looked like. Jack had warned her that she'd blind herself and not see it coming. And for a terrifying moment, Vega clung onto her sanity with both hands. Slowly, she clawed her way back to her comfortable, grounded self. Killing Grayson solved nothing. His death could never fill the gaping void losing Fiona's had created.

"Just tell me what you did with the body," she said as she uncurled her fist.

"I didn't touch your sister, Vega. Why would you think I did?" That open look of concern returned to his face, tempting her to rethink her restraint from pummeling him.

"Shut up." Not able to remain so near him, she jumped to her feet. "The police saw you take her. Butch saw you."

"Butch?"

"A friend." That wasn't exactly true. Vega didn't consider Butch much of anything to her anymore.

"I see." Grayson closed his eyes for a moment. "I don't suppose this friend has an interest or connection to Six-Star?"

Butch had both, Vega remembered. She never did ask him why his name was on that list Greg Harper had copied. The need to find Fiona had been more important than trying to figure out why Finn Kayne or Butch would have been mentioned in those files.

"I turned the data CD I found in Harper's office over to the FBI," she said, while her mind kept its hooks in Butch's involvement with Six-Star.

"The feds?"

Vega stepped around the corner of the shed for a moment to return the Taser guns and Beretta to her backpack. She tucked her father's Glock back into her holster where it belonged. And still her mind traveled back to wondering about Butch's involvement.

"Yep, feds are tearing Six-Star apart." Vega swung the backpack over her shoulder. Her phone refused to pick up a signal. She needed to head back to

McClellanville right away even if it meant having to risk navigating the channels in the dark. "Just tell me where Fiona is."

"I think you should ask your friend Butch. What did Greg find that made someone kill him?" He tugged on the handcuffs, trying hopelessly to push himself up from lying flat on the ground.

Vega walked right past him without a word and followed the trail back to the dock. The belly of her boat sat half buried in the muck. The channel where water rushed through just a little over an hour ago was dry. Puddles here and there made the waterway look like a muddy field after a heavy rainstorm.

She wasn't going to be able to take Grayson anywhere, at least not until the tide turned.

\* \* \* \*

"If you didn't take Fiona, what do you suppose happened?"

Grayson could see the anger building in her eyes. The force of her concentration in the way she pursed those sexy lips of hers as she figured out how she'd been manipulated. She'd returned from the boat landing and released the shackles from Grayson's feet and moved him into his grandmother's bedroom, where she'd shackled one of his wrists to the heavy metal cot frame. Afterwards, she took her time to discover for herself that the island didn't have electricity or phone service.

Mamma Etta's small cottage was neatly furnished and cozy. An odd sort of comfort filled him as he watched Vega moved through a home he'd always cherished. He smiled when she picked up a clay pot he'd handcrafted back in the fourth grade, catching a glare from Vega.

No one's nerves were strung tighter than hers were at that moment. He knew better than to pluck them.

"I suspect Whitfield took Fiona. I was worried this might happen," he said quietly.

He held his breath and told himself to clear his head. His pulse shouldn't be racing just because Vega found him again. But damn it, he enjoyed watching the way she moved. And if his back was going to be pushed to the wall by Six-Star's hired killers, he'd not want anyone but Vega fighting beside him.

"Did you find out what was in those files Greg had secreted away?" he asked when she didn't respond to his thoughts on what might have happened to her sister.

Vega stayed at the door to the bedroom. Grayson could feel the uneasiness rising off her like steam from a kettle. "There was nothing in those files that would make him kidnap Fiona. The CD had some damaging evidence. Whitfield is connected with some new terrorist organization, Spider. And with some new crime boss in Detroit, Finn Kayne. Perhaps he'd think Fiona was connected somehow...though I don't see why he'd..."

"What, Vega? What are you thinking?"

"Butch's name was also in the file. He's on the same payroll as Finn Kayne—Spider's payroll, perhaps." She paced a little. "Butch had been acting different—strange. I just thought he was a little crazed because he desperately wanted to get his hands on you and avenge his friend's death."

"Avenge his friend's death? What are you talking about? Am I getting blamed for every damned murder in the country now?"

She stopped and stared him straight in the eye. "I'm talking about the bounty hunter you killed."

"I didn't kill any of the bounty hunters. I knocked one out, yes. When I left him, he wasn't dead. I swear."

"Doesn't matter one way or the other."

"It does to me," Grayson grumbled.

"What matters is that I'm beginning to think I was wrong." She fell quiet for several minutes. She started pacing again. "I'm beginning to think that Butch was being paid to get to you. Being paid a heck of a lot of money to get to you. I think...no, that can't be right...I think he was desperate for me to lead him to you so he could hand you over to Whitfield. He was on the payroll. He'd been working with them for quite some time."

She punched the doorframe. "Damn it, how could I have been so stupid? I bet Butch took Fiona just to create this crisis so I would rush off and do the impossible—find you."

Grayson had to agree. He never expected anyone, not even Vega to be able to track him to this island. While his sanctuary was a good hiding place, it could easily turn into a death trap if hoards of killers were to follow Vega and land on the shore.

"So this Butch fellow could be mere hours away from dropping in on our little party?"

"That'd be his style." Even pacing, Vega refused to cross the threshold and come into the bedroom, which irritated Grayson. He wanted her in the room. He wanted them to be as close as they were out behind the bar where she'd kissed him.

"You plan on confronting them, don't you?"

Vega nodded.

"Could be suicide."

"I know," she said. "But Butch and Whitfield have Fiona, don't they?"

"If she's still alive, they probably do."

"She's still alive."

"I suppose you're not interested in rushing me off to safety?" Grayson smiled as he asked the question. He already knew the answer of course.

"Not when you're the bait." A grin snuck onto her lips. "Don't worry. I won't be able to collect the bounty if you get killed."

\* \* \* \*

Vega breathed in the pungent smell of the stewed greens and fried chicken she'd found in the bungalow's antiquated icebox. A good bounty hunter never starved her prey. Steak dinners were the usual fare for long-distance pickups. In this case, leftovers would do.

Grayson sat on the edge of the small cot with the plate balanced on his lap and used his free hand to eat. Despite his pleas, Vega refused to unchain his wrist to let him shovel the feast into his mouth unhindered.

Vega's belly growled. The nutritional bar she'd eaten couldn't compete with the rich aromas filling the room.

"Take whatever you want," he said, holding up the plate. While the offer enticed her grumbling stomach, she shook her head. He just shrugged and pretended to ignore her. But she caught him watching her several times with a look she wasn't sure how to read. She twisted her legs into the lotus position and took a moment to meditate.

Perhaps she was simply pretending to ignore him too. She had a devil of a time letting her mind and body relax with him sitting across the room from her.

"Are you afraid to come near me?" he asked. Evening was approaching. The shadows in the room had grown much longer in the past hour.

"No." Vega closed her eyes and pretended to ignore him some more.

"Then why won't you even step foot across the threshold into the room?"

Vega practiced a series of controlled breathing exercises before deciding to answer. "I can watch the front door, the back door, and you from this spot."

"I don't believe you." He set the plate on the floor and leaned back against the wall. "I think you're afraid of me."

Vega rolled her eyes.

"Don't misunderstand me, Vega. I don't think you're afraid I'll overpower you and escape. I think you know I won't. I think you now know I'm innocent, in fact."

"It's not up to me to determine your innocence, Grayson. That's a job for the courts."

"But you are afraid," Grayson pressed on, undaunted. "You're afraid you might want to kiss me again if you get too close."

Of all the arrogant, testosterone flavored things to say. Vega walked out of the bungalow before he coaxed her anger into flaring again.

You would like to kiss him.

There was nothing wrong with feeling attracted to an intelligent, appealing man. Why shouldn't she wonder how his arms would feel wrapped around her body? Why shouldn't she want to snuggle up against his broad chest?

Those erotic dreams of hers, so vivid in her memories, didn't help cool her thoughts. Nor did prowling the island. On the far side, she found a sandy beach that stretched out to a marshy flat. The rising tide lapped at the shallow shore. Far beyond, Vega could see the faint glow of whitecaps in the Atlantic Ocean. This island was truly a paradise. She could understand why Grayson would want to find refuge here.

A light breeze tickled her neck.

You're a fool, Vega. How many times had her father warned that she'd screw up? That she'd be exactly where she was right now—in the middle of the biggest emotional mess of her life.

She held her father's Glock. The cool metal felt flat, lifeless in her hand. His gun. His life. His dreams. This was all about him. Getting his gun back from Grayson—proving to her father that she was worthy to call it her own had consumed her. She never noticed how somewhere along the way of trying to become the son he'd never had, she'd completely lost herself.

You're strong for a girl, were her father's last words to her. For years, she struggled to improve her body and mind. Imagining that she could somehow get her

father to revise those last words, so one day he could smile at her and say that she was strong. Period. No qualifier necessary.

This quest for a dead man's approval had cost too much. Fiona's life was far too steep a price. Besides, her father was dead. Gone.

Tears welled up in Vega's eyes as she finally faced the truth. She'd hated every day on the police force. Got no satisfaction from a job where her only desire was to please another—to please an unappeasable father. At least with bounty hunting, she did find a certain satisfaction in helping others when they were feeling their most desperate. When she wasn't pushing herself and wondering how she'd measure up in her father's eyes, she actually enjoyed her work.

"And I'm damned good at it." Her instincts had been right about Grayson. Nothing in Harper's hidden files had mentioned him. They did however, point an accusing finger toward Whitfield. In hindsight, the facts of Harper's murder appeared simple. Straight forward. Harper finds the files and questions Whitfield. Whitfield, scared of what might happen, orders Harper's death and sets Grayson up to take the fall. Only Grayson doesn't fall easily. His military training kicks in. He runs, looking to survive.

She should have seen it all along. Grayson's determination rivaled hers. If she'd only followed her instincts and focused more time on figuring out why Grayson might want her to dig around Six-Star for him, Fiona would be safe right now. Damn it. If she hadn't let echoes of her father's discontent guide her, Fiona would never have been taken.

Vega blinked her tears away. It was past time to let go. Her father was dead. The past could not be changed. That child who longed to have her father playfully muss her hair and tell her how proud he felt would never find peace. She had to stop trying to fix the past and start living for the future.

The first step involved her father's Glock. For years, that gun served as the very symbol of her father's approval. If she weren't about to face down Butch and Whitfield as they come to silence Grayson, she'd toss the damn weapon into the sea.

Yet, the protection that Glock could give her was necessary. Bullets and steel. She required nothing more from the gun. Years of struggle had made her strong, much stronger than that little child crying for a father to love her back. She didn't need anyone's approval to carry her. She could carry herself.

It was past time to take some risks and live.

She returned to the dock to check on the channel. The water there was still too shallow to float a boat. It would be a few more hours before she needed to worry about any threats coming from that direction, so she decided to return to the bungalow to face Grayson—and her future.

She found him standing beside the bed in the shadows with his back to her as he gazed out the window.

"Do you plan to leave me chained like a stag waiting to be fed to the lions?" He banged the handcuff against the cot's frame.

"Perhaps." She really hadn't considered what to do with him yet.

He turned around. His white teeth gleamed in the twilight. He didn't look too worried. In fact, the way he was smiling and looking at her with that heated stare, made Vega suspect he might be trying to seduce her.

"It won't work." She crossed the threshold and joined him in the bedroom.

"What won't work?"

"You won't seduce me." She climbed onto the bed and stretched out her legs. It felt good to take a break.

"Wasn't considering it," he turned back to the window, "thought *you* might try to get *me* into bed."

She propped a pillow against the cot's metal frame and leaned back against it, making herself comfortable. "Did you now?"

"Admit it, Vega, you're attracted to me." He peeked at her with the most arrogant grin plastered on those edible lips of his. "I've never had a woman look at me with such lust before...it's damned attractive."

Of course, she was feeling some deep stirrings in her belly. Especially with his soft, brown gaze caressing her body like that. She laughed and shook her head. "For someone who claims he's not even trying, you're doing one hell of a job of seducing me."

"Am I?" He worked his way onto the bed. Like Vega, he didn't bother kicking off his sandy boots before kneeling on the mattress with his legs straddling hers. "I can't kiss you with you way over there." He tugged at the handcuffs holding him to the frame. "This is going to make everything difficult."

"With all your skills, I suppose you'll figure something out." She enjoyed watching him struggle against the shackle while his eyes heated. She wasn't about to give in too easily.

One broad hand grabbed her knee and gave a sharp tug, knocking her off the pillow. He inched her closer, working his way up her thigh, her waist, and her chest.

His hand lingered on her chest. Not touching anything sensual in particular. The flat of his palm just rested between her breasts, following the steady rise and fall of her breath.

No rush. No pressure. Like he intended to take his time, to orchestrate the encounter as if she was the one bound to the bed, not him.

When would he make his move? She felt as green and horny as if this were her first time with a man. She lay flat and still, waiting...afraid to spoil the magic.

His gaze trapped hers as his slow, even breathing picked up its pace to match her much shallower rhythm. Each inhalation piqued her anticipation. Each exhalation melted her into the mattress. His hand still waited between her now throbbing breasts. The longer he refused to touch her the more her body ached.

This was nothing like making love with Butch or anyone else, for that matter. This was much, much more dangerous. She gripped the metal bed frame to keep from running.

"Unlock the handcuffs, Vega." A demand.

"Not on your life."

"I can't do this properly with just one hand."

"Try."

Those handcuffs would serve her well. He couldn't own her. Couldn't possibly do to her what she was reading in his sex-clouded gaze, while half-bound to the bed.

"Didn't say I couldn't do it, just that it wouldn't be proper." He seemed to say more to himself than her. "I've been dreaming of this for far too long. There won't be any rushing. Oh, no. I plan to savor you, Vega—savor every delectable inch."

The cot creaked as he shifted his weight and inched forward so that his groin was balanced directly above hers. A sly smile spread on his lips. Lips that had not yet tried to kiss her, lips that taunted with teasing disinterest.

His hand stirred. Oh, he wasn't lying about taking his blessed time. The movement wasn't much more than a pressure change as his palm migrated lower, tantalizingly following the slender curves of her stomach muscles.

This was too much to endure. His hand didn't follow the neat script weeks of erotic dreams had created. He didn't go after what her body yearned for him to touch. Her hips rose with an instinctual need to guide him to that hot, wet place between her legs.

He didn't obey. Damn him. Instead, he bunched up her tight, black t-shirt sliding it up to expose her breasts.

Though there was no heat in the bungalow, her taut nipples were about to ignite. Touch them already. She grabbed his hand and pressed his rough fingers to her breast. Her lips rushed up to meet his, giving her a taste of the cool night air lingering on them.

He guided her hand to touch the bulge straining his pants.

Control fled in the frenzied moments that followed. Vega graduated from acting the frightened virgin to playing the part of starving, insatiable wanton. She kissed him, licked his lips, and explored his enticing mouth with her tongue. He did the same, while squeezing her tingling breasts and teasing her nipples.

She reared up to curl her legs around his hips as he knelt on the bed. She wasn't about to deny her needs now, not when her body was crying out for a release she hadn't been able to find, not even in those heated dreams of hers.

Frantic, she dug into her pocket, produced a small, silver key, and held it out for him to take.

As the lock slipped open, she shivered. Sure, living life came with risks, but was she ready? Unlike sex with Butch, giving herself to Grayson could open her heart up to the kind of pain she'd spent a lifetime to avoid. With Grayson, she could fall in love.

"I hope this isn't a mistake."

"This can't be a mistake," he whispered the promise. His lips brushed against hers with such tenderness. Her concerns couldn't help but fade.

He eased her pants down over her slender hips while she fumbled with the top button on his tight jeans. This was what she wanted. This was getting closer to the point in her dream when she'd wake up panting.

*Please, don't let me wake up.* 

He pushed her hands away so he could suckle her through the tiny pair of black lace panties she wore. The damp heat and pressure drove Vega wild. Her spinning head fell back onto the bed as she lost her mind in a deep sigh.

It took all her concentration to get her shirt over her head and onto the floor. The effort was worth it. She wanted to feel her flesh against him without the muffle of material.

Not even lace. While she shoved her panties out of the way, he stripped. It was a heady feeling knowing that finally she would get to see him, all of him. Not just look with her eyes. Vega intended to use her fingers, her legs, her mouth, and her entire body to explore the man touching her with a lover's abandon.

Could this really be happening? He nibbled on her lower lip.

Should this be happening? Life had already dumped more onto her than she could handle right now. A voice of reason demanded she stop. To think about what she was doing. She didn't need another emotional entanglement in her life.

His tongue moved against hers as he caressed a soft spot on her inner thigh, daringly close to her crotch. Her body shivered with arousal.

This was what she wanted.

She wanted all of him. She needed him. She didn't care that she wasn't in total control of his actions. For all the feelings rushing through her body, there was no room to worry about control. She was losing herself, feeling a freedom of letting go. For the first time she was trusting herself.

And giving.

Her hands caressed everywhere she could reach. The hard plains of his muscles tightened beneath her questing fingers. She dipped her head and took him in her mouth. His cock was rock hard and steamy hot, like a brand.

"My God, Vega," he groaned and pulled away.

Who was this man aiming for her soul?

His strong fingers twined through her hair and, holding her head tight, he pulled her to his mouth. His lips closed over hers.

Kissing her, he guided her down onto the bed and pushed into her hard and fast. She curled her hands around the bed's metal frame and pinched her eyes tightly closed, overwhelmed by how quickly and violently her body responded to his.

The cot squeaked. Through the thin mattress, she could feel the unevenness of the aging bedsprings. *Strange sensations to notice when the peak was rushing up to her so quickly,* she thought. It was a breathless experience as she bucked against him, riding his deep, urgent rhythm.

Instead of subsiding, her budding orgasm built. Hot erotic waves filled her body until she felt stretched to her limit.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him and held on for dear life as the frustrations and tensions she'd allowed to fester were forced out by the sheer power of his release.

In the quiet that followed, she heaved a deep sigh and went limp. The thoughts in her mind were new, fresh. The air she breathed tasted cleaner.

A glimmer of something terribly unsettling grew in the stillness. Being with Grayson felt like two halves ripped apart were finally coming back together. She stared at him, startled.

The same bewildered look was echoed in his soft brown gaze and slightly gaping mouth.

They were in deep trouble.

This was not the time to get mixed up with an accused murderer, even if evidence now made him look damned innocent. He *was* innocent. He was a man with a future that could include her...oh, shit.

This was one hell of a time to be entangling her head with emotional strings she never really trusted in the first place. Such feelings could make a hand hesitate, a mind rethink a decision. In all, those damn strings could get them both killed.

In the next several hours, she was about to face what could be the biggest challenge of her life. Hell, her sister's life was at stake.

"We'll talk about this later," he said.

"Now definitely isn't the time," she agreed.

# **Chapter Twenty**

Vega laid flat on her belly in the thick, prickly undergrowth beneath the trees near the boat landing. A creature with far too many legs squirmed beneath her shirt and began to slither down her back. Her skin crawled and her stomach churned in response to the creeping sensation. But that was just about all she could do about it at the moment.

Grayson was stretched out a few feet away. She could barely hear his steady breathing over the slosh of water against the shore and the growing whine of several motorboat engines. The boats approached in perfect darkness. Vega lowered a night vision monocle over her left eye. Through the green haze, she watched two boats racing down the tidal creek. The drivers, and several men with submachine guns poised on the crook of their arm, all had night vision goggles strapped over their eyes.

"There's eight people on two boats," Vega whispered to Grayson, who without the night vision glass wouldn't be able to make out that much detail yet. "Perhaps nine. Six of them look like your company's security force."

She didn't tell him that she could clearly make out Butch's large profile and cowboy hat.

"Can you see what kind of firepower they have?" Grayson asked.

"At least four sub-machine...can't tell the make...two rifles." The person seated in the second boat looked like Fiona. Vega didn't allow herself to garner too much hope though. Butch had no reason to bring Fiona here with him. No reason at all.

"We can assume they each have handguns and knives too," Grayson said. The dry way he added that, like he was counting weapons, sounded like he was putting a plan together in his head. Vega was glad for that. He had the military training and experience. She didn't.

He turned his head to face her. She didn't see him move but heard the leaves rustle and a branch snap. "I want you to get that boat out of the shed and get out of here. The water's high enough now. You can launch from the beach."

"Not a chance." Vega wouldn't consider the suggestion.

"Let me handle this. Those are men employed by Six-Star to come after me. This isn't your war."

"You can forget it. If you get killed, I don't get paid." But that wasn't the reason she was staying. Butch had Fiona, so she needed to get her hands on Butch. Besides, she'd do whatever she could to keep Grayson from getting hurt.

The boats slowed as they drew closer to the island. Vega knew how the drivers were feeling. Just that morning she'd been the sitting duck. The men with the submachine guns and night vision goggles moved to the edge of the two boats and scanned the forest. The small bushes and vines entangled all around Vega and Grayson provided sufficient cover. They didn't have to worry about being discovered yet.

"With that night scope of yours, you could probably shoot a few of the assassins before they reach shore," Grayson said. "It would give away our location though. They might blast apart our cover with those submachine guns."

"Bad idea, then." A second slithering creature began blazing a trail down her back. Vega could no longer stand it. With a grunt, she flipped over and wiggled in the dirt.

"What?" Grayson nearly shot up from his hiding place. "What's wrong?"

"I can't stand those damn slimy bugs that keep trying to crawl all over me." Vega rolled over onto her stomach again, grateful to be rid of that creeping feeling.

Grayson chuckled softly. "I should've hid deeper in that swamp a month ago. You never would've gotten past the insects, huh?"

She didn't answer. She watched the first boat pull up to the rickety dock while the second craft served as cover.

"Not exactly a back-to-nature chick, eh Vega?" He stopped chuckling when the first man stepped onto the dock. Grayson's partner, Joshua Whitfield followed. Vega could almost feel Grayson's muscles tighten.

Something else had wormed its way into Vega's shirt by the time the second boat beached and began to unload. She barely noticed, nor did she care. There, under the moonless sky, she watched through her night vision monocle as Butch lifted Fiona over the edge of the boat and set her on her feet. The skirt of the slate-gray suit her sister had worn to the Atlanta police station to question Matt Lockler, was ripped at the hem. Her jacket gone.

Fiona didn't move from where she'd been placed in the sand. She shivered in the cold night air and glowered at Butch while some bastard kept the barrel of his light machine gun, a M249, trained on her gut. Whitfield stood nearby with a cigarette hanging loose between his lips while he fought with a lighter.

"That man with the cowboy hat," Grayson whispered. "I recognize him."

"Butch?"

Grayson turned his head and stared at her. "You know him? I fought him, stopped him from killing Fiona."

Vega ground her teeth at the thought of the lying bastard touching her sister. She scuttled forward on her belly with one thought in her head. She had to get Fiona out of danger.

Grayson's hand clamped down on her ankle. He pulled himself forward until he was directly on top of her. "What the hell are you doing?" His quiet voice barely registered in her ear.

"Fiona," Vega twisted around to mouth.

"You will get yourself killed. Wait."

Vega had no choice. Grayson rested on top of her like a walrus. Fighting him off would make far too much noise. She'd have to think of another plan, which meant waiting.

"Damn it!" Butch's voice boomed through the night. "Where the hell is the infrared scope?"

Vega's heart stopped. An infrared scope would give Butch a deadly edge. Attach the scope to a rifle and no amount of thick, scrubby bushes could hide Grayson and Vega. They'd be finished.

"What?" Butch backhanded the hired gun who'd been speaking to him. "Damn incompetent fool." He stomped away.

The guard he'd hit heaved forward and covered his mouth with both hands.

"The rest of you split up into teams of two and find Walker and Vega. Kill them on sight."

Fiona growled. Butch caught her jaw before she uttered anything coherent. "Vega! She's got to be watching us." Butch turned a full three-sixty, dragging Fiona along with him. "She won't let anything happen to her precious little sister."

"That's why I insisted we bring her," Whitfield said.

Butch rolled his eyes.

"Having to stop what I'm doing to save your sister is becoming a thorn in my side," Grayson said. He started to roll off Vega when a pair of Six-Star guards trampled through the scrub brush not three feet away. She could feel Grayson holding his breath as he waited. The men moved too quickly to spot a neon sign, much less anyone hiding in the bushes. They quickly passed by and disappeared into the island's thick maritime forest.

"They're splitting up. That gives us a chance to pare down Whitfield's forces." Grayson rose and began tracking the two men, moving low and making less than half the noise than them.

"Wait." Vega caught his arm. "I've got an idea. Follow me."

She led Grayson back to the bungalow where she'd left her backpack filled with an assortment of goodies. From the bottom, she retrieved a coil of nylon rope. She'd never had cause to use the rope before, but good old Jack had always insisted she carry it. She was going to have to suffer through months of *I told you so* from Jack after this was over—if it worked.

She handed the rope and a pocketknife to Grayson while she retrieved and loaded the pair of her special Taser guns. They felt like regular pistols, only more boxy and fired electricity instead of bullets.

"They're coming this way," Grayson whispered urgently.

Two of the four guards searching the clearing were headed straight for the cottage.

Vega smiled. "Good."

"Have you lost your freaking mind? I've seen that look before. On soldiers, usually just before they blasted their way into the middle of a deadly situation and gotten themselves killed." He pulled her up by the shoulders, not mindful of her healing injury, and gave her a shake. "Snap out of it, Vega. We can't take them on directly. Not with those toys of yours." He pointed to the stun guns in her hands.

Vega's grin only grew. "I've got a plan. Don't worry."

"Don't worry? Hell." He heaved a deep sigh. "The risk isn't worth it, Vega."

"Watch." She snuck toward the front door, keeping low so no one glancing in a window would see her. Grayson tried to stop her, but the men were already at the door...were nearly already on top of her.

"Damn," he muttered and fished the Beretta out of her backpack. "I'm not going to sacrifice another woman. This isn't Colombia."

Vega was dying to ask him about that comment. But there wasn't time. A guard charged into the room and spun around. He lifted his M249, prepared to shoot. Vega pulled the trigger to the air gun Taser. The electrodes shot through the air and hit the guard like a bolt of lightening. He dropped instantly.

His buddy must have heard the crash. He dashed into the bungalow, the point of his machine gun preceding him. A foot into the room, Vega fired. He too collapsed. His heavy torso smashed onto the top of the first guard.

Neither man moved.

"Tie them up and gag them while I get another set of charges ready," she said. In the darkness, she could barely make out the wires running from the guns to the electrical probes snagged on the men's uniforms. "We'll go after that second pair before anyone starts missing these two."

"Next time, explain your plan before you run off and scare the hell out of me," Grayson grumbled and shoved the Beretta into his waistband. He tied up and gagged the men, making sure they weren't going to be able to do anything more than groan softly, before disconnecting the electrical current.

"Effective, no?" Vega bent down, and grabbed the shoulders of the smaller of the two men and started dragging him across the rough wood floor. "We should lock them in the shed."

Grayson shook his head. "Thank God you're finally on my side."

"Speaking of sides." Vega put her hand on his shoulder. Now that he was carrying a gun and acting as her partner, there was one question she needed answered. "What happened to Mirna? You called yourself a killer. So tell me, did you murder her? I need to know what happened. I need to know what kind of man is watching my back."

Deep down she really didn't want to know. What if he really had killed her? What if...?

Grayson's eyes sparkled like a predator's as he stared at her silently for several minutes. "We don't have the time for this."

"Yes, we do." She blocked the door. "What happened?"

Grayson dragged a hand through his bluntly cut hair. "You already know part of the story. We'd been sent to kill the drug czar Carlos Briceno. Mirna was our contact. She got us into the compound."

He crossed the room as if distance were needed for the rest of the story. Vega held her breath. "Somehow, in the midst of the chaos and killing, I fell for her. I wanted to take her home with me.

"The plan was to sneak into Carlos's bedroom. Mirna was going to get us there. She was his favorite mistress, you see. We had no trouble getting into position, and no trouble luring Carlos into the room. Then it happened, the one thing I always dread might happen. I don't know what tipped him off—the guy was paranoid. I should have planned for that. He grabbed Mirna just as I fired. He hauled her against his chest. The bullet..."

Vega went to him and slipped her arms around his waist.

"I should have known that Carlos would choose that moment to grab her. But how could I have...?"

They were together in this and she had to admit she trusted him. Even if the data CD she'd found in Harper's office didn't completely clear Grayson, it had connected Whitfield to Spider. And Butch and Whitfield were the bastards holding Fiona at gunpoint.

They left the bungalow and began tracking the second set of guards through the woods. Grayson had a M249 slung over each shoulder. He looked surprisingly like a comic-book action hero. Vega let him keep the assortment of weapons he'd filched off the two guards along with the Beretta he'd taken from her bag.

The guards were following a trail that led to the beach, trashing around in the bushes. Why they chose to search that way Vega couldn't begin to guess. No one would hide so close to the trail. The guards weren't completely stupid, however. They took turns watching their rear, giving Vega and Grayson cause to take extra care. After one of the guards stopped and actually backtracked several yards, listening carefully, Grayson took Vega's arm and pointed to a path the forest had reclaimed years ago. She could barely make out the opening with the night vision monocle.

"It's too dangerous to follow them like this," he whispered. "Besides, this way will get us to the beach first."

She followed as Grayson pushed his way through a tangle of vines. The sand turned deeper, the wind whipped sharper, and the trees shorter as they neared the beach.

Several yards away an angry voice rose. Vega stopped mid-step and listened as the two guards argued. The one guard thought they should turn back while the other insisted they needed to follow the narrow beach.

"I'd swim for another island, if I were in their shoes," one of them said.

Vega drew out the air gun Taser and squeezed past Grayson. "Follow in about a minute," she whispered in his ear as she passed. Grayson shook his head violently in protest but didn't try to stop her, though she could see how he was itching to take control.

Which wasn't going happen, not with Fiona's life in danger. Fiona was *her* sister, *her* responsibility. If anyone needed to make a sacrifice, she intended to be the one making it.

A few bright stars winked from behind a curtain of clouds, sparkling in the dark waters before disappearing again. A bird perched somewhere in the thickest part of the vegetation called a long, lonely tune. The two guards down the beach continued to argue.

They were foolish, those guards. Vega had run across their type before. Vicious on the outside but no depth or discipline, which made them easy prey. Crouched low, she worked her way through the sea oats and hilly dunes to close the distance between her and the men. Her Taser guns were effective to up to fifteen feet, but since she didn't have much experience with them, she worked her way closer.

Ten feet.

*Five feet.* 

The one guard shut up. He punched the other man in the chest and put a finger to his lips. She held herself perfectly still while the men scanned the area. At this distance and with their night vision goggles, they'd spot her.

It didn't matter though. She had her sights fixed on the both of them. She squeezed the triggers. With a whoosh, the electrical probes sailed through the air.

The guard on the right fell. The guard on the left gave a cry of alarm and fired his M249 into the dunes. The rapid percussion echoed through the night while a veil of sand shot up into the air.

She must have missed her mark. Vega dove for cover and pulled out her Glock.

The gunfire would alert the others. The third pair of guards would probably descend at any moment. She had to act fast.

She aimed the gun. His life for hers. She'd never had to make that decision, never actually taken a life. But with her sister in jeopardy, she didn't stop to battle her morals. She steadied the gun, aiming for his chest—a nice wide target.

A gun crackled.

The guard fell to his knees. Not a heartbeat later, he toppled over sideways.

The M249 bounced in the sand.

But she hadn't fired.

What the...?

She whirled around to find Grayson with his feet planted boldly in the sand, no cover protecting him. The Beretta was locked in his grasp, his arms outstretched. He had a calm look to him, deadly calm. She'd read him right the first time she'd met him. He was a trained killer, cold in his performance.

And he'd risked his neck to take out the guard.

The fool.

She dashed the five feet to the fallen guards. One man was dead. His eyes stared sightlessly at the blank sky. The other guard lay quite immobilized, having been struck with both sets of probes. She quickly disconnected one set.

"I'll tie him up." Grayson was standing right behind her. She'd felt his presence even before he spoke.

One miss with the Taser gun and the situation had spun out of control. She glanced at the dead man one more time and shuddered. What feelings would be swirling in her belly right now if she'd been the one to have pulled that trigger? Damn, she thanked God she didn't have to know.

"Butch will send someone to see what we've been doing...probably guess it just by the absence of his killers," she said before unhooking the probes from the stun gun once Grayson had the man tied up.

She tossed the weapon aside. It was useless now. They'd used all of the cartridges, which left them with just the noisy, deadly weapons. She picked up one of the fallen M249s and gave it a thorough inspection before slipping her arm through the strap.

"Vega, I want you to sit the rest of this out." Grayson was still bent over the bound man on the ground. "You're not a killer. That conscience of yours will get you into trouble."

"You're wrong." She started down the path that led back toward the boat landing. If Butch felt threatened, he'd take his frustrations out on Fiona. She needed to get her sister away from him as soon as possible.

"We should be killing these men, not just tying them up. This guy will be back in action as soon as he's found," Grayson said.

She stopped long enough to watch him wipe his hands against his pants to get rid of the sand.

"I'll handle this my way." I know Butch.

\* \* \* \*

Butch paced the small clearing near the boats. If that bastard Whitfield gave him one more order, he swore he was going to put a bullet through his head. Whitfield had insisted they bring along his personal guards. Had insisted they blaze onto the island like a damned army landing on a foreign shore, and had insisted they keep that mouthy sister of Vega's alive.

Grayson and Fiona would both be dead right now and Vega well on her way out if not for Whitfield's interference. The jerk had been adamant on coming along just because the feds were breathing heat down his neck and he was running scared.

This promise of four million dollars was turning into a major mess. The papers were filled with speculation about Spider. Finn had gone underground, and Whitfield was practically sitting on his shoulders.

If Finn hadn't been such a damned good salesman, dangling gobs of cash in front of Butch's nose, he would've never allowed himself to get mixed up with an idiot like Whitfield. Killing Greg Harper had been a snap—an enjoyment, really. But then, Whitfield hadn't interfered until after the fact. The police had scared him. That was when Whitfield brought in a team of security guards and dressed them like they were Kung Fu warriors who'd escaped some poorly dubbed Japanese flick.

Everyone knew teams created headaches. At a cost of a thousand dollars a day per guard, this was one headache Butch knew he could do without.

"I can't get C.K. or Lynch to answer their radio," whined the guard with the bleeding lip, Jasper or something, Butch hadn't paid much attention to names. "I think they got killed. We all heard the gunfire." Jasper put the radio down and stepped closer to the fire they'd built. His wide eyes scanned the darkness beyond. Because of the bright fire, he'd removed the night vision goggles and was staring blind, stupid bastard.

They were all bastards.

Butch hoped Jasper was right, that four of Whitfield's guards were dead. It meant he wouldn't have to pay them.

"Polsen, what do you intend to do?" Whitfield didn't sound scared, but Butch could smell the executive's fear and see his jumpy gaze.

"Nothing." He sat down beside Fiona who'd made herself comfortable on an old Palmetto log and gave her leg a-none too gentle squeeze. "Can't bring back the dead, now can I?"

"Damn it, I mean how do you intend to stop Grayson and Vega from picking us all off one by one?"

"Don't worry." Butch drew a Colt from his boot and caressed Fiona's neck with the point. She jerked away. "Vega will be here any minute now, dragging your unlucky partner along with her."

"I hope to God you're right," Whitfield grumbled and walked away. He'd worn a dark business suit, the ass. Sand was caked all up and down those expensive trousers of his. Butch wondered what Whitfield had expected to encounter.

"My sister won't fall into your trap. She's much crafter than a stupid thug like you," Fiona mouthed off.

Butch only smiled. She could say whatever she wanted. She'd be dead in a moment. He just wanted to make sure Vega was around to watch him make the kill.

Vega's attack would be direct and honest, exactly like her behavior under the sheets. He knew her, every damned inch of her in fact. She would come exactly when he wanted her to, as intimate experience had proven.

The underbrush rustled. Butch rose from the ground and pulled Fiona up along with him.

"You might want to get out of the way," he called to Whitfield. Getting Whitfield killed might put a strain on Butch's relationship with Finn. And since Finn doled out the money, Butch didn't need that relationship strained. "She's here."

Whitfield started sweating. It was forty degrees out, and the coward was sweating. Butch just shook his head and pointed to the closest boat. "Take cover in there."

Jasper, with the split lip, waved his machine gun around while turning tight circles. The second guard, Whitfield's own personal protector, followed him onto the boat, making Jasper the one to watch.

Butch held his breath in anticipation. Vega was about to pounce. He predicted she'd drop from a tree.

Not a moment later, Vega dropped. Her brown boots, olive colored cargo pants, black leather jacket and dark blond hair tied back into a long braid, created a blur of color as she landed on Jasper. The jerk was out and on the ground before he even realized he'd been attacked.

The intense focus of her gaze excited Butch, got his heart pumping as he remembered seeing her look at him like that many times before. They were good together. Oh well, it might be hard, but he'd soon have enough money to buy himself a replacement.

She swung one of Whitfield's machine guns off her arm—the motion was fluid, poetry really—and aimed it squarely on Butch.

"Let Fiona go." Vega wasn't even breathing hard.

Butch smiled and tightened his grip around Fiona's arms. "Tell her," he whispered into Fiona's ear.

"No," she whispered back, the bitch.

Butch shrugged. "You won't shoot me, Vega."

"Won't I?" If Fiona hadn't been in the picture, she'd shoot him without a second thought. He wasn't a fool.

"I've got a Colt pressed into Fiona's back. Don't I, darling?" He jabbed it nice and hard into Fiona's spine so she'd jump. The effect was perfect. Vega lowered the M249 just a bit.

"I know you, Butch. You wouldn't risk your neck just to kill Grayson and collect some money." Vega kept her voice calm. He was impressed.

"You're right, I wouldn't. But I also know you won't shoot me, knowing I'd kill your sister before dropping down dead. That makes me pretty damn safe, baby. Drop the gun."

For the longest time Vega didn't move. Butch feared he might have a standoff to deal with, which he didn't like. Not with the unknown still hiding out there somewhere in the woods. He knew better than to try and predict Grayson's actions. That one was illusive as hell. Only Vega seemed able to read his mind.

"Drop the gun, baby, and I'll let your little sister go." He jammed the Colt into Fiona's spine again. This time hard enough to make her cry out.

Vega paled at the sound. The M249 went down.

"Whitfield," Butch yelled. "Get your man out here to take the gun from Vega."

The guard jumped off the boat and approached her carefully, his gun ready. He lunged forward and ripped the M249 from her hands before making a hasty retreat.

"Secure her with these," Butch tossed over the twin pairs of handcuffs he carried. "And by God be careful. She's dangerous."

The guard picked up the handcuffs and then shook Jasper, rousing him before daring to return to Vega. Each man held an arm while chaining her hands and ankles. They didn't bother to search her.

"Good." He liked his women helpless like that. "Good," he said again.

"Let Fiona go. Let her take the boat I have tied to the dock." Vega's voice had lost much of its vibrato.

"I don't think so." He pressed gun to Fiona's temple. "I'm going to kill her and you're going to watch."

"No!" Vega shouted.

## Chapter Twenty-One

"Wait," Whitfield called from the boat. "Stop. Don't kill either of them."

"What?" Butch shouted back, and then cursed as he lowered the gun, which meant Whitfield must have been the man in control. Grayson released his finger from the trigger and the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

He'd lived the last few minutes in hell. Relief washed over him like a cool dip in the ocean. He'd watched helplessly as Vega dashed headlong into danger before he could stop her. He'd then positioned himself in this impossible situation where he could save either Fiona or Vega's life, but not both. He had trained the Beretta on Butch's broad skull, thinking to get Fiona out of danger while praying Vega would be able to fend for herself until he could get to her.

But Whitfield, by calling Butch off, changed everything. But what was Whitfield doing? Grayson worked his way closer to the boats. He knew benevolence hadn't been the source of this lucky event.

Not that Whitfield's reasons mattered. The delay bought Grayson time. With his options limited and the dangers heightened, his mind sharpened and his heart rate pick up a beat. If not for Mirna's death in South America, he'd still be living a life strung on the edge and loving it. Situations like these, as damnable as they were, made things interesting.

And here, just like in South America, Grayson had a choice to make. The pain over Mirna's death, still alive deep in Grayson's chest, kept him from doing what his training and experience had taught him to do, which would be to blast down anything with a gun and not worry about the causalities, namely Vega and Fiona. But a rescue attempt, no matter how he planned to play it, was too risky. The probable outcome would be his death, Vega and Fiona's death, Whitfield's escape, or any combination of the above. Pick one. Which one didn't matter, they all pointed to failure.

Delaying the inevitable for as long as possible, he inched closer to the edge of the clearing. No one was watching the perimeter with adequate care. He took advantage of the opportunity to get close enough to hear what Whitfield was telling Butch.

"He's like that," Whitfield was saying. "I know him. I know how he plays."

Fiona had inched away and taken a seat on that Palmetto log again. No one besides Grayson seemed to notice.

"You're wrong," Butch said, shaking his head. He kept glancing away from Whitfield's tall, skeletal frame and over to where Vega stood with her hands bound behind her back and her legs hobbled.

"This guy has morals, Polsen. The only things keeping us alive are those two women. Kill them and he'll rain bullets on us."

Butch shrugged. His gaze was now fixed on Vega. Grayson worried about her. She appeared out of it, perhaps in shock. Her head bobbed slightly forward and she seemed to have trouble focusing on anything, much less notice Butch approaching her or the menace pulling his lips into a vicious smirk.

"Don't hurt her," Whitfield warned. "I'm telling you, it's a huge mistake."

Butch only nodded. "That's exactly what I'm hoping."

He grabbed Vega by the waistline of her pants and pulled her chest to his. She fell forward like a boneless rag doll. Seeing her sister in danger must have pushed her over the edge. She was done.

Grayson knew then what he needed to do and how he planned to do it. He pulled up one of his pants' legs and used the lacing from his shoe to strap the Beretta to his thigh.

Butch had his hand on Vega's breast and his tongue in her mouth. She whimpered. The helpless sound only strengthened Grayson's resolve. He dumped one of the two M249s that had been slung over his shoulder, leaving the weapon well hidden in a mass of brambles.

If events unfolded the way he planned, both Vega and Fiona would escape alive.

\* \* \* \*

Vega fought an urge to bite Butch's tongue. She'd whimpered instead, hoping to feed his desire to control her. His handcuffing her hands and legs had made escape difficult, but not impossible. And his pawing her only improved her chances. She was pleased he fell for her lure.

Especially, after her direct approach had failed miserably. But she was still alive and Fiona was still alive, and being alive was everything. So she let go of her past mistakes and focused on the present. Butch had anticipated her attack. He knew her strengths too well.

What he didn't know were her weaknesses.

To keep herself and her sister alive, she'd have to do some things differently. Butch let his hand trail down her chest, over her abs, and lower. Vega shuddered and sank into his arms.

She wasn't a man, and would never be able to match a man's physical strength. What she was, what she'd denied herself to fully become for as many years as she could remember, was a woman. She should have never even tried to become a son to her father. She didn't have the right qualifications.

Butch's hand slipped into her pants. She let a small cry pass over her lips. "Please Butch, no," she whispered on a feathery breath. "Please don't."

Her protests and fear prodded him. His excitement grew. She could feel him move against her belly.

"Damn it, Butch. Do you plan to rape her in front of us?" Whitfield cried. He sounded as panic-stricken as she had. Fiona had remained curiously silent, which pleased Vega enormously.

"Shut up," Butch growled.

His muscles were taut bundles. His defenses were still raised. Vega sighed a quivery breath into Butch's mouth. "Please Butch, not in front of them." Her echoing Whitfield's objection must have pleased him. He pulled her closer and bit her lip. She could feel the urgency in his groping hands.

The time was ripe, thank God. Now was the time to show Butch that soft feminine side she'd kept hidden.

"Butch," she said with a lusty sigh. "I won't fight you. I know you're stronger than me."

He grunted.

"I can get you Grayson." She laid a trail of kisses down his pulsating throat. "I can get him to play into your hands. Just let Fiona go."

He paused, his roving hands stilling in her pants, and quirked a gentle brow. "I'm getting him into my hands right now, baby, aren't I?"

"No." Vega licked her lips. Butch once said kissing her was better than licking ice cream—his favorite treat. "He's not suicidal."

"But he's still on the island?" She had him. His glassy eyes cleared. His confident stance sank a good inch as his shoulders slumped.

"I think so. I think Whitfield is right when he says Grayson wants to protect Fiona and me. But would he trade his life for ours? Would you?"

Butch hardened further as her confidence drained away. "Of course not."

"Let Fiona go?"

"I can't, baby. She's part of the deal."

"I can't help you then." Vega hadn't stopped kissing his neck, his ear, his chin. She kept her voice soft, pliable.

"Yes you can, baby." Her tone had soothed Butch. He was beginning to cave. "I'll make Fiona a clean kill. That should be good enough." He curled a hand around Vega's bottom and squeezed.

A bullet sailed into the clearing and kicked up sand at Butch's feet, putting a huge monkey wrench in Vega's carefully plotted plan.

Before she could react, Butch had his gun pressed to her temple.

Couldn't Grayson have waited another minute?

"Let the women go." His voice echoed through the trees.

Both guards fired blindly into the canopy and sent a spray of broken branches and leaves raining down on their heads.

A second bullet thudded into the sand a foot from Butch's leg.

"Let the women go." This time Grayson's voice bounced through the lower branches. Directionless really. The guards followed with a second barrage.

Two reports from a pistol followed in the silence. Sand sputtered at Butch's toe. A bullet had grazed the boot, taking off a strip of snakeskin. At about the same time Whitfield shouted and fell. He curled up into a ball on the ground, cradling his arm as he rocked.

"Let the damn women go," Whitfield cried.

Butch rolled his eyes. Grayson's strong-arm tacit only served to piss him off. "Jasper, shoot Fiona through the arm," Butch said without a breath of remorse.

One guard, his hands shaking and his gaze jumping from Butch to the forest to Whitfield, swung his M249 around and pumped two bullets into Fiona's left arm.

Fiona cursed and pressed her right hand against the blooming red wounds. "Kill him already, why don't you?" she shouted up to the trees.

"Make Grayson come to you," Vega whispered. She refused to let her heart race or her mind be affected by Fiona's injury. Her thoughts rushed through possible scenarios for salvaging the situation. Butch certainly wasn't going to let anyone leave, not with Grayson threatening him. "Tell him you'll make a trade." She had to neutralize the danger Grayson presented to Butch.

"I'll let them go if you give yourself up," Butch called into the dark vegetation. "You have five seconds to make a decision before Jasper shoots Fiona again."

An M249 fell from a high branch and landed near the fire. "Don't fall for it," Whitfield moaned from his fetal position in the sand. "We're dead men. I suppose we were dead the moment you botched Greg's murder. It was supposed to look like an accident."

"Shut the hell up!"

Whitfield wiggled around in the sand. It looked like he was trying to get up. "Lenny, help me get to the boat."

The second guard rushed to Whitfield's aid. The two men were nearly on the boat when Grayson stepped into the clearing with his arms stretched out, his hands empty.

"This doesn't involve the women, Butch. Even Whitfield admits that."

Jasper, the nervous guard who was holding his gun on Fiona, regained much of his courage at the sight of Grayson looking harmless without a gun. He turned the weapon's aim to Grayson's chest. But from where he stood, Butch and Vega were within the line of fire.

"Get me out of here," Whitfield was shouting at the guard helping him. "I know his military history. We're dead men."

Butch tightened his hold on Vega, maneuvering her so she shielded him from Grayson. With her chest pressed against his, she didn't have many options.

Fortunately, she only needed one.

"Grayson, you asshole," she shouted as loud as her lungs would let her. "I had the situation under control. What the hell were you thinking? I can't collect a bounty on a dead man."

The way Butch was holding her, she could no longer see Grayson. She could see Jasper pointing his gun at them and Whitfield struggling to get into the boat. But she could image that Grayson was still advancing at a steady pace with his arms held wide.

Everyone's attention was on Grayson, which meant Fiona was in no immediate danger. That was important.

Vega couldn't overpower Butch. The best she could do at the moment was give Grayson an opening—she prayed he had a gun hidden somewhere on him—and then get Fiona to safety. It wasn't exactly suicidal. Though the pistol pressed to her temple didn't help paint a rosy future.

She stopped yelling at Grayson long enough to whisper to Butch, "I don't feel right." Her body dropped as every muscle relaxed. Butch tried to hold onto her and refocus the aim of his gun at the same time. In the confusion of movements, she slipped out of his hands.

BAM. BAM. The shooting started almost immediately.

She kept her head down and tumbled into a flip. There was no time to worry about the gunfire or the shouts and confusion. Grayson could take care of himself. Fiona was her goal. Besides, this mess was his fault. What kind of cooperation was he expecting, coming blasting into the boat dock like that? He got Fiona shot and made those guards with the guns cranky. That military training of his must have prepared him for situations like these. He should be able to take care of himself.

"Fiona," her sister's name whooshed out of Vega's lungs as she landed in Fiona's lap, and knocked her off the Palmetto log she'd been sitting on.

"You okay?" Fiona asked through a grunt of pain. She instinctively grabbed her injured arm as she crashed into the sand. The question struck Vega as backwards. She should've been asking Fiona if she was okay, not the other way around. Vega nudged her sister to the far side of the log for additional protection.

"If you can manage...in my pocket is a key."

Fiona's slender hand slipped into Vega's pants pocket. .

"The handcuffs." Adrenaline pumping. Gunfire thundering. Time moved twice as fast while eternity compressed itself into the space of a heartbeat.

With very little fiddling, Fiona managed to unlock the handcuffs on Vega's wrists. Vega drew her Glock while Fiona released the shackles from her ankles. She peered over the log.

Silence. She hadn't noticed when that silence had started.

Grayson was running toward them, blood smeared across his brow. One guard was laying face down in the sand. Whitfield, Butch, and the third guard were gone.

Vega lowered the Glock and sat up. "What happened?"

"You okay?" Fiona asked Grayson.

Grayson jammed the Beretta into his pants and felt the side of his head. He frowned at the blood on his hand. "Damn bullet grazed me. I'll live."

Vega had already figured that out. She took Fiona's arm and began binding the wounds to slow the bleeding. Fiona's skin had paled several shades and was coated with a sheen of perspiration.

"That guard of Butch's ran into the woods as soon as the bullets began flying. Butch followed not far behind him. I got the guard helping Whitfield." Grayson explained.

"And Whitfield?" Vega asked.

"He's in the boat, crying."

"Damn mess," Vega muttered. She fastened a sling for Fiona, then took off her leather jacket, and wrapped it around Fiona's shoulders. "You nearly got us all killed with that Rambo shit."

"You're welcome." Grayson growled.

Vega met his gaze. He was still breathing heavier than normal and his eyes were clouded with a lust that had nothing to do with sex.

"I had it under control," Vega said.

"You had it...?" Grayson stomped away. "You were bound up tighter than a Thanksgiving turkey...and scared...and at that bastard's mercy."

"I had it under control," Vega repeated. She was about to blast into Grayson when Fiona doubled over and vomited. Vega's heart dropped straight to her toes. She wrapped her arms around Fiona and brushed the strands of hair away from her sister's face.

"I'm okay," Fiona muttered. She sounded anything but okay.

"I know it hurts bad, Fiona. You don't have to be brave for me. I'll get you help." Vega started to lift her sister, but Grayson pushed her aside and took Fiona into his arms.

"I'm hoping you can navigate the marsh in the dark?" Vega asked. She plodded along in the sand beside Grayson. Fiona had closed her eyes and may have passed out.

The bleeding wasn't heavy, but the pain might push her into shock. She required immediate medical care.

"Don't worry," Grayson said without slowing his stride. "She'll be okay. The wounds aren't serious, and I do know my way around this area."

"I'm okay," Fiona muttered without opening her eyes. "I'm not worried."

The boat bobbed and jostled Fiona as Grayson lowered her to a cushion in the front of one of Butch's boats. Whitfield was lying on the fiberglass floor of the boat near the engine, moaning. Fiona remained uncharacteristically closed-mouthed.

With Grayson and Fiona settled in the boat, Vega untied the rope and gave it a push into the channel. Water swirled around her pants, making the material cold and heavy. She put her hand on the side of the boat to steady herself for a moment.

Grayson took hold of her wrist. "You're coming too."

"I'll follow in the other boat." Her wet hand easily slipped from his grasp. "I'm going to sink the third boat, so Butch and his pal won't be able to get away."

The look Grayson gave her overflowed with mistrust.

"Go. Get Fiona medical care. I'm like a homing pigeon. Once I take a route, I have no trouble following it back," she lied smoothly. "I'll be ten minutes behind you."

Vega backed up onto the shore. Her boots sloshed. Another pair ruined. She watched Grayson watching her. He stood in the silent boat as it glided away, caught in the tide's strong current.

"Ten minutes?" he called before starting up the engine.

Ten minutes...give or take however long it would take to find Butch. A lack of transportation wouldn't stop him from getting back to the mainland. Leaving the island without him would be handing Butch a ticket to freedom.

She had no intention of doing that.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

Grayson steered the boat and steamed. The dangers on Mamma Etta's island were too great. Leaving Vega alone there, even for a few minutes was just wrong. He kept the engine low and looked back over his shoulder, watching for Vega.

Whitfield had finally settled down. It had taken a heavy blanket and several threats to get him to stop crying, but the silence was worth it.

He flicked a glance toward Fiona. Her eyes shined in the dim light. Her resolve impressed him. Like biting the bullet or taking it all in stride, she embodied those kinds of sayings.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"I'm dying because of you," Whitfield moaned. Everyone ignored him.

"She's not coming," Fiona said. Her voice sounded oddly calm in the dark.

"What?" Grayson asked. He took a quick look over his shoulder again without realizing it.

"This boat's going at a snail's pace and you're watching for her. But I know my sister. She won't leave without Butch." Fiona paused for a long time. "I think she believes she's defending me."

The winter air suddenly hit Grayson. This was his mess, not hers. She'd only gotten wrapped up in it because it had been her job to bring him back into the justice system. The wet cold sank deep into his bones.

He turned off the boat's engine and tossed over the anchor. Once he felt the line bite and pull snug, he left it to check on Fiona. The blood was just beginning to seep through the fabric strips Vega had fastened around the gunshot wounds, but she was alert and strong.

Whitfield was pretty healthy too, if the strength of his lungs were any indication. He started to scream the moment Grayson killed the engine. "Whatever you do, make it fast," Whitfield finally sputtered.

"I can't leave Vega," Grayson said to Fiona. "You understand that?"

Hell, he didn't understand the feelings he had for that spitfire huntress of his. That round of sex with her had only muddied his mind. But he did know he couldn't leave her to fight alone. Although Fiona and Whitfield needed medical care, their injuries weren't life threatening—not yet.

"You're a much better man for Vega than Butch ever was," Fiona whispered. The pain was getting to her again. "Butch was an ass from day one. Don't know what my sister ever saw in him."

Grayson didn't ask. He cranked the engine and pulled up the anchor. There was just enough room in the creek for the boat to circle around. He opened up the engine and roared back toward Mamma Etta's island.

Damn, damn, damn. He'd wasted too much time.

Her arrogance might have already gotten her killed.

\* \* \* \*

Vega plodded deep into a tangle of scrubby oaks and prickly vines. Butch had been a fool to stay out in the open near the boats. She understood why he had. He'd been worried that she'd do exactly what she'd just finished doing. She'd pulled the drain plugs in the hulls and set the boats adrift, leaving him with no quick escape route.

But to remain in the clearing only made her too tempting a target. Vega got as deep into the woods as she could before taking a breather to organize her gear and plan.

Defeating Butch wouldn't be easy. They were well matched. She'd trained with him a few times. In hand-to-hand combat, he could best her two times out of three. Of course, at the time, she hadn't been thinking about how he'd just ordered a man to shoot her sister or how he'd played with her emotions.

Things were vastly different out on this island. She was royally pissed, for one thing.

Butch's voice carried in the darkness. She could hear him talking quietly to the other man with him. They were just a few yards away. Vega hunkered down and waited. From the sound of it, they were heading in her direction.

Perfect. She intended to confront Butch before he stumbled over the other killers Vega and Grayson had left tied up and scattered around.

"I said don't worry, damn it. Vega's rushed off with that stupid sister of hers. You heard the boat. I heard the boat. Everyone's gone." Butch must not have been totally

convinced though. He spoke softly and kept a cautious stride, stopping every few feet to listen.

He took another step and stopped again.

Vega put her father's Glock back into its holster. She had no intention of killing anyone. The game would play out hand to fist. Her first move would be to get the guns away from Butch and his man.

She lowered the night vision monocle over her right eye and prepared for the attack. Her heart fluttered in her chest with anticipation.

Butch took a step and stopped mid-stride. He cocked his head, listening intently.

"What?" Jasper asked. His voice quivered.

"Shush." Butch didn't move. He was waiting.

For what?

Then it hit her, sending cold fingers of dread shooting down her spine. Butch was waiting for her. He knew she was here. Was expecting her attack and was waiting for her to fall into his clutches again.

Perhaps she should give him what he expected. He tended to get overly cocky when in the winning position.

A seagull cried out overhead. In the distance, a motorboat engine roared. Something in the air had subtlety change. Night would soon turn into morning.

Vega felt around the sandy ground until she found a heavy shell. With a quick throw, the shell sailed through the air and bounced off a tree. Jasper spun around and blasted apart the poor tree that had just been smacked the shell. His M249 clicked. It was finally empty.

Butch wasn't as easily fooled. He had the night vision goggles on over his head and had latched his gaze onto hers in no time.

He smiled.

Vega kept her focus. His cockiness would hurt him.

He made the first move. With his head low, he charged like a football player. She held her crouched position until he was nearly on top of her.

She then sprang up with a flying kick to his face, which Butch easily blocked. She followed up with a roundhouse kick aimed for his midsection. Again, he had no trouble blocking her. She tossed a few punches, telegraphing them far in advance of the actual

blow. She moved quickly, not giving him time to do anything but block moves he'd expect her to toss his way.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, Butch ducked a right cross and jabbed Vega in the ribs with a bruising upper cut. She staggered back, but since she'd kept her abs tight, the air stayed put in her lungs.

"Give me a hand, damn it," Butch shouted as he worked hard to block another round of punches.

"He's run away, I think," Vega said between panting breaths. She scanned the area just to make sure. If he was still around, the kid was doing a good job hiding.

"You can't win." Butch kicked, the execution sloppy. His frustration was getting the better of him. "I always let you win at the dojo."

"Funny, I thought *I'd* been letting *you* win."

Vega got blindsided with a quick left jab for that smart remark. She closed her mouth. Her energy was beginning to wane. She'd been running on high for too long and needed to take Butch out before his helper found himself a fresh dose of courage or another gun.

She feinted a blow to Butch's kidney, getting him to block low. That gave her an advantage. Her right jab to his nose hit home. He stumbled back, but she didn't give him a chance to recover before swinging a left jab to the stomach that bent Butch slightly over. A spinning kick to his face finished him off.

A heavy cloud moved and the stars brightened the night as she stared down at Butch's crumpled body on the ground. Now that it was over, rage bloomed like a poison in her veins.

He'd professed his love and proposed just to get her to find Grayson for him. When that failed, he'd tried to kill Fiona. He'd used every emotional trap he could to trip her up...and had damn near succeeded.

"It's a good thing you're unconscious, Butch," Vega managed to get out from behind her clenched teeth.

"Vega!" Grayson's voice carried through the trees.

He was the last person she wanted to see right now. This emotion business was fraught with too many landmines.

"Vega!" Grayson charged through the forest and pulled her into his arms. "Damn you, I was so worried." His lips found hers. The kiss was hard and demanding. He squeezed her till she thought she might break.

It felt rather nice.

"Oh hell, you do something to me. If we're not careful, this attraction could lead somewhere...to love even," he said as he peeled his lips away.

Love? Go figure.

Vega gave Grayson a friendly punch in the chest and wiggled out of his embrace. "Wait till the adrenaline wears off. I'll be plain old Vega to you again." She laughed. It was do that or cry. Her emotions were bubbling up all over, now that her worries were gone.

Butch groaned.

"Jasper," Vega said, pulling herself together again. How did she manage to have forgotten Jasper?

"I've got him tied up at the dock. Found him drowning in the water. Guess he thought he could teach himself to swim while trying to get away from you."

\* \* \* \*

A half hour later, Vega sat perched on the edge of the crowded boat. Grayson had dropped Butch and Jasper next to Whitfield at the stern of the boat and had told the three of them to keep their mouths shut. He seemed to have known that she needed the silence. Her phone had picked up a signal twenty minutes into the ride, and she'd been able to arrange to have an ambulance and the police meet them at the dock in McClellanville. She'd also called Jack to let him know that it was all over.

She closed her eyes and leaned back to enjoy the cool air blasting against her face. Grayson pushed the boat to its limit, slowing only for the sharpest corners.

"I still have to turn you over to the police, you know," she said without opening her eyes. She tried to imagine her father beaming with pride at the news of her successful capture of Grayson and of the men trying to frame him.

Fiona got hurt in the process. You should've protected Fiona first and worried about work second. Her father's scowl wrecked her fantasy—old habits were hard to kill.

She peeled her eyes open long enough to check on Fiona, who appeared to be sleeping. Her chest rose and fell with deep regularity.

"The feds will have a lot of questions, too," Vega added.

Whitfield groaned at the mention of the federal authorities.

"You have something to say?" Grayson asked. He stopped the engine and let the boat drift. He stepped over Jasper to get at Whitfield. "Do you have something to say?"

Whitfield turned his head. His pale skin glowed in the early morning gray light. "I intend to sue you for ruining Six-Star, Grayson. Getting mixed up with a terrorist organization and trying to make me look like the guilty one? I should have expected it from someone like you...a murderer." Whitfield's boardroom voice replaced the frightened, whiny one he'd been using, stupid man.

Vega rose from the edge of the boat, prepared to stop Grayson from doing something stupid.

"What—did—you—say?" Grayson asked.

"I said, you killed Greg and refuse to admit it, even to yourself. Stop accusing others for your crimes."

Grayson moved quickly. He yanked Whitfield up by the collar and punched him. Vega lunged forward and grabbed hold of Grayson's arm before he could hit Whitfield again.

"You need him alive," she said.

"Really?" Grayson shrugged off Vega's hand and punched Whitfield in the side of the head. She turned away, not willing to watch Grayson do this.

"Please," Whitfield whined, "I'll talk."

"Shut up," Butch said.

Grayson hit Whitfield several more times. The sound of flesh slamming against flesh caught in Vega's throat.

"Please stop," Whitfield whined even louder.

"Why? The man you paid to kill Greg didn't stop, even after he was long dead."

"That wasn't how it was supposed to be! Butch was supposed to make it look like an accident! He wasn't supposed to torture him! Please! Butch is a maniac! He even killed a bounty hunter he worked with, saying he'd gotten too close!"

"Shut up, damn it!" Butch shouted.

"He--he said he could handle things. He was the one who wanted to kill you. Please don't hit me again! I swear I'll talk to the police!"

Even the cicadas were shocked into silence after that outburst. Vega turned back to Grayson and held her breath. She watched as he tightened his grip around Whitfield's

collar, curled his hand into a tight ball, and slammed his fist into Whitfield's bony jaw. Whitfield dropped to the bottom of the boat.

"That'll be the end of Six-Star," Grayson said and cranked the motor. "I'm not exactly sure what Whitfield was into, but if it's as bad as I suspect, the feds will seize all company assets. I'll be unemployed."

"Jack's always looking for new blood. Ever consider bounty hunting?"

He frowned at her for a moment, but the dock was fast approaching so he had to pay attention to the waterway. "Depends," he said.

Nearly an hour passed as Fiona and Whitfield were loaded into an ambulance and Butch and his minion into a squad car. The police put a boat in the water to return to the island to pick up the guards they'd left tied up in the boat shed.

"Depends on what?" Vega asked, while Sheriff Townsend—the same man who'd released her from those chains in the convenience store—hovered nearby.

"What?" Grayson asked.

"Bounty hunting. I told you Jack is always looked for new talent." Vega wanted to kick herself for pursuing it. She didn't know why she wasn't ready to let Grayson out of her life. "And you said—"

"It depends on whether you're included in the deal."

"Hmmm..." Vega couldn't think of anything more intelligent than that to say without committing herself. Her knees suddenly felt a little weak.

"Miss Brookes," Sheriff Townsend called out. "Isn't that the same man who...?"

Vega tossed her arms around Grayson's neck and gave him a kiss guaranteed to keep him thinking about her while he was locked away and answering endless questions poised by the feds and the Atlanta PD.

"Yes." She was slightly out of breath when she landed on her feet again. Grayson looked a little wobbly himself. "Yes, Sheriff. This is the same man. He needs to be returned to the authorities in Atlanta. I've got a bounty to collect."

"You won't get rid of me that easily," Grayson promised.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

"Did you see this?" Fiona asked. Her nose was buried in the morning newspaper. A steaming caffe latte sat untouched on the table in front of her.

Vega settled in the painted metal seat across from her sister and gave her glass of organic grapefruit juice a sip. This was a new routine for them, gathering in the coffee shop across the street from the dojo after spending the early morning hours training together.

Fiona was taking training seriously. A real change in attitude. For the last two hours, she'd worked with a killer's focus.

"Whoa, you've got to read this." Fiona folded the paper in half and handed it across the table. "And don't you dare tell me you already knew."

Vega stared at the headline.

Three months had passed since she'd caught Grayson hiding on that small marsh island and realized she'd been chasing the wrong villain...in more ways than one.

He'd promised she'd see him again. Three months and no phone call, no scrawled note, nothing. She'd learned of his release from jail through the papers. Johnson with the FBI had called several days later to tell her that Grayson had been cleared of all murder charges. Whitfield, it seemed, was cooperating beautifully.

While Six-Star Enterprises was crumbling and the FBI went about arresting a larger and larger net of criminals involved with the Spider organization—though regional organizers like Finn Kayne were slipping through the holes—Vega had waited. She had to be a fool. The connection she'd made with Grayson had been magical, but surely it hadn't been real.

Even so, her heart ached whenever she found reports of Spider in the headlines. They reminded her of Grayson. She'd allow herself to be vulnerable around him...what a damned fool.

"So?" Fiona asked, nearly bouncing in her seat. "What do you think this means?"

Vega shook her head as she read the article.

"Mega-Mogul of Whitfield Investments Murdered in Jail Cell," the headline read. The article went on to detail Joshua Whitfield's rise in the investment banking world and his connection to Spider. All the facts where laid out: how he'd provided a financial safe-haven for Spider; how he'd conspired with Butch to murder Greg Harper when he'd found out to much; and how they'd set Grayson up to take the blame. And the article praised the indomitable Vega Brookes—their words—and described how she had single-handedly discovered Whitfield's dirty dealings and exposed the Spider crime organization.

"Before her, we had a vague idea that there was something building in the country," Agent Johnson was quoted saying. "The FBI now has a name to put to the activities. Unfortunately, Whitfield was only one tentacle on this monster. There's still a considerable amount of work to be done."

Whitfield had been stabbed by one of his inmates with a sharpened butter knife just a week before he was to testify before a grand jury. "Authorities inside the prison suspect Spider's involvement," the paper quoted Johnson again.

"Whitfield's death won't get Butch off," Fiona said over Vega's silence. "They've got enough evidence on him to keep him locked up forever."

"I know."

"They didn't mention my name once. I did help, you know. They said you single-handedly..."

"I know you helped." Vega smiled. "That's why I gave you half of Grayson's bounty."

"Four million dollars." Fiona's green eyes sparkled with excitement. "I still can't believe Butch was going to be paid four million dollars to kill me. They were scared of me, Vega. Four million dollars scared."

"Not just you." Leave it to her sister to turn a brush with death into a victory. "We were a package deal...you, Grayson, and me. And you shouldn't be so smug about it."

"Smug? Me? Never!"

They both laughed. Vega couldn't help but feel awe at how close they'd grown in such a short time.

"Vega! What in the world are you wearing?" Her mother scolded as she approached the table. They had plans with Gillie to spend the morning shopping followed

with an extravagant lunch at the club. Vega glanced down at her short jeans skirt and slightly worn brown wool sweater, and wondered what was wrong with it. It wasn't as if her mother had invited another bachelor to lunch for her to...

"Who's coming?" She fought an urge to run for cover.

"No one. I just wish...oh, nothing. I just want you to be happy, dear." Amazingly, since Grayson's capture, the parade of bachelors had virtually stopped.

"I am happy," Vega insisted.

Gillie gave her daughter a maternal once over and sighed. Things weren't perfect with her family. Her mother had even started to take an interest in Vega's life. Hell, normal be damned...they were getting *closer* as a family.

It felt pretty good.

"You look nice, Fiona." Gillie took a seat at the table and fiddled in her purse for a moment before producing a small golden compact. "How is your arm feeling today?"

The morning flew by, as did the afternoon. After an exhausting day shopping and being friendly at the club, the three of them returned to their mother's mansion for a refreshing bout of 'girl-talk'.

Things were certainly changing.

And Jack. Well, he was still Jack. He arrived at Gillie's sometime around four and promptly settled in a large velvet-covered armchair. Sipping on her mother's best brandy he looked just about as pleased with himself as a cat bringing a plump, dead rat home to present to his owners.

"You're not going to work alone anymore," he announced out of the blue. "No more scaring the shit out of me, Vega. I'm teaming you up with a partner."

"Not Fiona." The words popped out of her mouth before she could think how hurtful she must have sounded. How like her father... "I mean, I don't think she's ready yet. Soon, but not yet." No matter how good her sister became at defending herself, Vega doubted she'd ever be comfortable with her sister following in her footsteps. Fiona would always be the younger one, the one to be protected.

"Not Fiona," Jack said softly with a broad smile in Fiona's direction. "Someone else."

And that was all he'd say.

No amount of prodding would get him to talk.

Not even a gentle threat of violence.

\* \* \* \*

Vega didn't return to her apartment until pretty late that night. No matter how hard she tried, the surprise of meeting a new partner just hour away...still bounced around in Vega's mind as she pushed open the door of her apartment.

She sensed his presence even before she saw him. He'd stolen into her space like the thief in her dreams.

He'd promised he'd come. But that had been three months ago. Her trust in his word had all but faded. And now there he stood, in the middle of her darkened living room no more real than a shadow.

"Should I think I'm dreaming?" Vega asked cautiously.

Without speaking a word or breaking the magic, he silently crossed the room and took her into his arms, crushing her against his chest.

She had enjoyed the sense of safety those erotic dreams of hers had given her. In the darkness, she could open her heart freely; confident he'd always return. Confident he'd never do anything to hurt her.

"You are real, aren't you?" she said, reaching out to caress his rough jaw.

He nodded as he lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers. Her heart pounded in her throat. True to his word, though painfully late, he'd come for her. He'd come to make love to her, to reawaken the emotions she'd discovered during that brief interlude on the island.

Having him finally here, in her apartment, was terrifying.

"You're late." She wiggled out of his embrace and crossed her arms high on her chest. "Several months late."

"I know." He drew his thumb across her lower lip. The simple gesture was so very intimate. She leaned forward and let him trace the outline of her upper lip. Her mouth opened slightly, anticipating. A warm shiver spiraled through her chest, settling low in her belly.

No. He wasn't going to draw her in so easily. She backed away. "Why stay away? Why didn't you at least call?"

"Why?" He raked a hand through his short, dusty brown hair. "Damn, this is going to be harder than I thought."

Vega waited. Oh, it killed her to not just let him kiss away those twisting feelings of distrust.

"Mirna," he whispered. "I needed to face her death. All these years and I've never really accepted... I was afraid that if I returned to work with you, I might make the same mistakes and get you killed."

He took her back into his arms and buried his face in her hair. His hands traveled up and down her spine. "I went to Colombia after the feds let me go. That's where I've been... putting the past behind me."

He kissed her then, leaving her head spinning. "I had to find peace there, Vega, before I could explore a future with you."

\* \* \* \*

Two days later, Vega dragged Grayson from her bed to give him a tour of the city. He'd exhausted her—not physically, but deeper, in a nameless dark place—and she used the tour as an excuse for a break.

"It's still overwhelming you?" he asked as she drove him through the Rivertown District and spouted off useless tidbits of information about the age of the converted warehouses in the area and the industries that used to rely on them.

"A little," she admitted.

"Flirting with love can do that."

Vega wasn't ready to admit to such a problematic emotion.

"I don't need the words," Grayson said after several silent minutes. "I wasn't fishing for them, you know."

"I know." Suddenly the interior of her Jeep felt too cramped for the both of them. Vega turned into the Civic Center Promenade, a riverfront park, and parked. She jumped out and gulped a deep breath of air. This being in love business was much more frightening than facing down a room full of hard-edged drug dealers.

"Let's go for a walk along the water," she suggested.

Grayson's eyes widened as he looked up at the heavy-laden clouds above them. It was cold, and windy and about to rain buckets.

Vega didn't give him the chance to protest. She forged down the path, not slowing until Grayson caught her hand.

"Don't run away. I'm not trying to rush anything, I swear." He linked his fingers with hers and walked beside her down the path. He didn't have a jacket on, only a heavy cotton sweater. Vega's new leather coat—the third one in as many months—kept her reasonably warm against the spring's damp chill.

"I do like having you around," Vega admitted. Jack had made a good choice with making Grayson her partner. She looked forward to their first assignment. "We'll make a good team, you and me."

Grayson nodded absently. His hand tightened around hers. Without any more noticeable change than that, his manner went from playful lover to killer on the prowl.

"What?" Vega asked.

The attack came from behind. A blade tore into the front of her jacket. She chopped the attacker's wrist before the steel tip could bite into her skin. The dark-haired attacker shouted a pained sound and looked up in shock.

"Finn?"

He tore away in a hard run.

She pulled her father's Glock out of her purse and took pursuit. Finn was fast, but she was faster. Even Grayson struggled to keep up.

At the water's edge, she closed the gap, grabbed the back of Finn's shirt, and spun him around. He kicked out and knocked the side of her hand. The Glock spun end-overend sailing over the railing, falling toward the dark, swirling Detroit River.

"No!" Vega watched helplessly as her last link to her father spun away. Finn slipped from her grasp.

"You okay?" Grayson asked as he leaned over the railing. Her father's gun landed in his outstretched hand.

She drew a deep breath and held it while staring dumbly at the pistol.

"My dad's Glock," she said at last.

"Yeah?" He gave her a queer look. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." Vega shook off the ghosts of the past. Grayson had given her what she'd been chasing all those years. By being there for her, she finally found safety in love. She trusted him not only with her life, but also with her heart. "Nothing's wrong at all."

"Really?"

"Really." Vega smiled. "Let's go follow Finn."

They traced his trail down a long stretch of the promenade to a dim, narrow alleyway leading between a row of brick buildings.

"I think I saw him take off that way," Grayson said and insisted on going first. She didn't argue. Finn would be long gone.

At the end of the alley, behind a new green dumpster, they found him. Color her wrong. He hadn't gotten very far at all. His body was sprawled out in a muddy puddle. His own stiletto knife stuck obscenely into the center of his chest. The first thing Vega noticed was a glossy photo of a neon green spider that appeared ready to leap lying on his forehead.

"Spider," Grayson said.

"Looks like they're cleaning up loose ends." She called the police and gave them the briefest of details. They would arrive on the scene within a few minutes. There was no need to stand guard over the body, and Vega had no desire to stare at it.

"They better not consider you a loose end," Grayson grumbled as they walked away.

"My guess, Finn was acting alone today. After losing Six-Star as a financial base, Spider will need to regroup. According to Snitch, the organization's gone to ground. Finn coming after me would naturally cause problems. I'm a danger to them. They don't want me interested."

Grayson stopped her then. "Are you?" he asked.

"Interested?" A smile warmed Vega. She could not seem to take her eyes from Grayson's open expression. His concern touched her in places she'd once thought untouchable. "Not today," she said. "I think I'm distracted."

Grayson slipped his arms around her shoulders. "Good." He pressed his lips to her forehead. Exquisite shivers hummed down her chest and spread a seductive heat throughout her body. "Let's go home then."

Vega snuggled closer, burying her face in his thick cotton sweater. The soft fibers tickled her nose. She ignored the sirens, growing louder and the drizzling rain that had begun to fall, and breathed in Grayson's spicy low-country heat.

Her world felt so very safe and quiet here, wrapped in his arms. And for the moment at least, safe and quiet suited Vega just fine.

## About the Author

For Regency and suspense author, Dorothy McFalls happily-ever-after is more than just a fictional ending, having enjoyed every day of marriage to her sexy sculptor husband. Formerly an environmental urban planner, she now writes full time. For information about Dorothy's upcoming books, visit her website at <a href="http://www.dorothymcfalls.com/">http://www.dorothymcfalls.com/</a>