

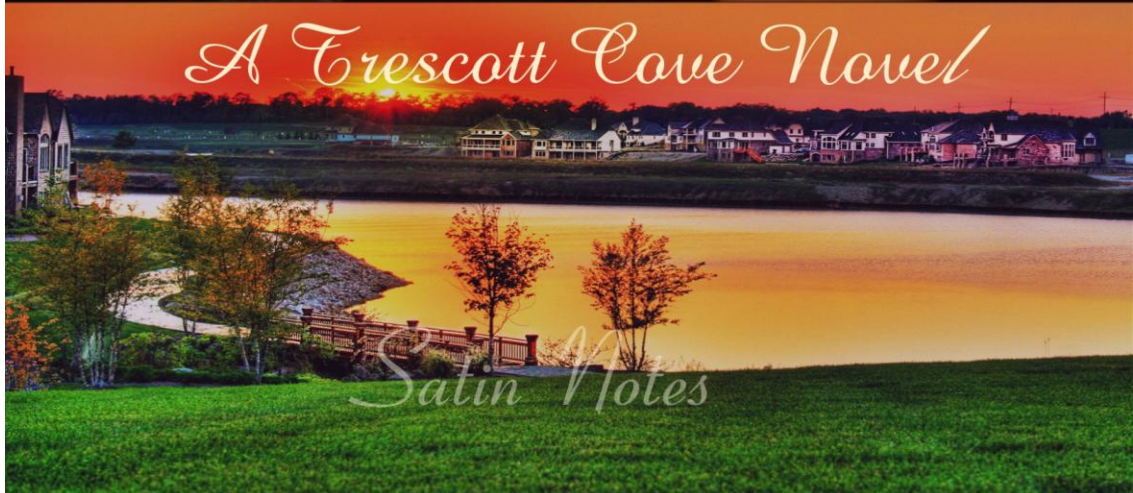
Osborne's Shelter

Aliyah Burke

McKenna Jeffries

Taige Crenshaw

A Crescott Cove Novel



Satin Notes

Osborne's Shelter

All Rights Reserved

Sentinel Copyright © 2009 Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw

Cover Art by MMJ of MMJ Designs © Copyright May 2009

A Satin Notes Free Novel

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the authors, Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw.



It has come to our attention that some of the free books/reads we have previously posted exclusively to our yahoo groups, our individual sites, and the Satin Notes sites are being uploaded/posted on pirate sites. We are not sure why. The free books/reads we post exclusively on said sites are that, *free*. On some of these pirate sites there are paid memberships and so on. Which means when it trickles down to it you are paying for books that are being offered for *absolutely nothing*. So with that being said, if any of our free reads/books end up on any of the pirate sites we will decide, at our discretion, if we will continue to write/post any more free reads. When books we write, either for free or published for sale, are given away on pirate sites it saddens and hurts us that it happens. It especially makes us not want to offer any more books for free. We want to continue to offer free reads as a thank you to you, our readers but this can change if our work ends up on pirate sites. We're sorry it has come to this, but this is how we feel when our books continue to be posted to pirate sites.

Further about our books published for sale by our various publishers that are given away on pirate sites. Please stop. We work hard to write these books.

Thanks
Aliyah, McKenna, and Taige

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries and Taige Crenshaw

Osborne's Shelter

A Trescott Cove Novel

Aliyah Burke
McKenna Jeffries
Taige Crenshaw

Dedication

To our fans who have supported us. We give you this free read in appreciation for all your support.

Aliyah, McKenna and Taige

Chapter One

Nina Osborne rubbed the back of her neck with one hand as her other sat curled around the warm cup of coffee. She wriggled her toes within the confines of her shoes. *Five minutes. I've got five blissful minutes of quiet before my meeting with Ryker.* With a sigh, she leaned forward, closed her eyes, and rested her elbows on the smooth surface of the wood desk. Before long, her body had found the calmness and quiet she had sought. Nina opened her eyes and smiled.

Taking a long drink of her coffee, she glanced at the silver filigree watch upon her wrist. There were three minutes before the top of the hour. It wasn't like she was nervous about meeting with Ryker, or that she felt like a girl with a crush. No, that wasn't it at all. Not that Ryker Chadwick wasn't one hell of a looker, for he was. He just wasn't for her. Nina was excited about this project. The remodeling of Blue Moon Café had been put off long enough.

A light tapping on her door brought up her eyes from where they followed the second hand on her watch.

"Come," she said.

The door swung in, and dark eyes peered around the edge. Natalie Varimis. "Your appointment has arrived."

"Thanks, Nat. Send him in, please."

"Will do." Natalie began to back out.

"Is everything okay, Natalie?"

"Yes ma'am. Thanks for asking. I'll send him in." Natalie vanished without another word.

Nina leaned back against the smooth leather. *I don't believe you, Natalie.* Still, a small smile crossed her features even as she shook her head. It didn't matter how many times she asked, Natalie continued to call her "ma'am." And Nat was damn near her best worker at the café. There were times Nina wondered if she even needed to come

into work. She had no doubt that Natalie would run it just the same if she were there or not...damn efficiently.

"Ms. Osborne." A deep voice filled the room and sent tiny shivers of electricity up and down Nina's spine.

Glancing up, she felt her breath catch in her throat. *Damn.* The man standing in her office wasn't Ryker Chadwick. The second their eyes met, she promptly forgot about her coffee. A pulse of desire rocketed through her. *Oh my...hell.* Her gaze traveled over his physique, from the floor up.

He wore construction work boots, and tight jeans hugged well-muscled legs. Her mouth only grew drier as she stared at the tautly stretched navy blue tee-shirt and corded arms which barely seemed contained by the cuffs of the sleeves. His face was ruggedly handsome. He had tanned skin, and staring at her from behind thick lashes were deep, cobalt blue eyes. Dark hair sat in an unruly mess on his head. Held before him in strong hands was a well worn baseball cap.

Have I said damn? And if I haven't...DAMN. Even if I have, let me say it again. Damn!

"Ms. Osborne," he said again, and his tone flowed over her like a well-aged whiskey. It had a similar effect, for she was definitely feeling a bit light-headed and intoxicated.

She stared at him a few more seconds as she struggled to formulate a sentence. *Get it together, Nina!* Lacing her fingers together, Nina stared at him. "Can I help you?" Glancing again at her watch, she said, "I'm expecting someone." *Didn't Nat say Ryker was here?*

"I'm your appointment. My name is Jared Buckman, of J&R Construction." Her expression must have been telling, for a flicker of disappointment flashed across his features. "Ryker didn't tell you."

"Apparently not." She swallowed and remembered her manners. "Please sit down, Mr. Buckman."

She watched him walk and could pick up on the power in his movements. Feelings long dead within her raced to the surface to breathe new life. Gritting her back

teeth, Nina had to dig deep to grab the calm she was well used to. Jared stopped before the desk and stuck his hand out. Nina didn't want to take it. Just being in his presence had created havoc within her.

Can't be rude, Nina.

Grasping the outstretched hand, Nina nearly jumped with the jolt of power which poured through her at their initial contact. Jared's hand was large, strong, and enveloped hers with a gentleness that made her belly do flip flops. His calluses burned her skin and sent her mind down a road she tried desperately to steer it off of traveling.

"I believe we've met, have we not, Mr. Buckman?"

"Jared, please," he said, releasing her hand and taking a seat across from her.

"And yes, we have. Once before. Briefly. I'm surprised you remember."

In truth, she didn't, but given who he was, she figured they should have. *I can't tell him that, however.* "I do apologize. My head seems to be somewhere else."

Wide shoulders shrugged. "It happens."

From his tone, Nina figured it did so more often than not. Not that she could see it. There was nothing forgettable about this man. *And yet, that's exactly what you did,* her brain taunted.

His unnerving gaze remained fixated on her, and she fought the urge to squirm on the seat.

"Shall we?" he asked in that same intoxicating tone.

Jesus, what is wrong with me? Her body temperature skyrocketed. Taking a deep and much-needed breath, she nodded. "Yes."

"Good. Ryker said you had some ideas on what you would like to have done to your cafe. Maybe you could give me a tour and show me what you were envisioning. Then I can take it from there."

It took her a moment to force down the things that were on the edge of her tongue. Plenty of things popped into her mind on things she would like for him to handle for her. *This isn't good. I'm about to drop to my knees and rub all over him like a cat.*

His blue eyes gleamed as if he knew exactly what she was thinking about, but he didn't say a word.

Getting to her feet, Nina picked up her coffee and walked around the desk to meet him as he stood. She inhaled sharply and was swamped by the scent of pure, raw masculinity. No scent in a bottle on this man. It screamed strength, power, and lots of sex. Mind-blowing sex. Her pussy creamed as illicit acts with him flashed in her mind. By the grace of some divine power, Nina kept the whimper of longing clamped tightly behind her lips.

"Follow me," she said, forcing back emotions she didn't have time to think about.

As she headed to the door, Nina could feel his gaze on her. She might be out of the line of work she once had, but there were some things you didn't lose. *At one time, you would have added an extra swing to your hips*, her brain reminded her.

Nina froze with her hand on the doorknob. At one time, she would have. A long time ago, when she was younger, carefree, and innocent, when all life's concerns centered around flirting, having fun, and having the guys stare at her, wanting but not being able to have.

"Ms. Osborne," Jared's deep voice brought her back from the brink where she teetered. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she forced out.

Nina squeezed her eyes shut, noticing the edge to her tone. *This isn't his fault. Can't make him pay*. The urge to make someone pay flared to life within her. With a deep breath, she pulled the door open, stepped through, and headed to the back, knowing he was behind her.

What the hell is the matter with me? Why is this man affecting me so? And why the hell can't I remember where I met him before?

She sipped her coffee as they walked. Nina paused at the back door of the establishment. Opening it, she led him out into the early morning. Jared stood beside her, his presence damn near dwarfing her, not in a menacing way, but instead in one

that offered a form of comfort. She shook her head slightly. *That doesn't make sense. None of my reactions to him make any sort of sense.*

"This is my idea." With a deep breath, she began to tell him just that.

Jared really had to concentrate to stay on task with Nina and her ideas for the remodeling. He had other things in mind to be doing with and to her. She smelled like a blend of coconut and fine chocolate, and he longed to bury his face in her silken hair and see where it led. He wanted to strip her naked and explore her body from head to toe, and when he was done, begin all over again, just to see if he may have missed anything.

Following behind her, he took mental notes of what she was pointing at and saying. Her café was much bigger than it looked on the outside, and while he ingested her comments, Jared made notes of his own ideas.

When they reached the main portion of the café, he stood beside her. Immediately *that* feeling slithered up his spine again. *This is why I prefer to stay in the background.*

It didn't matter to most that it had been well over a year since his reporter brother, Phillip Buckman, had been in cahoots with Mrs. Vivian Gates. They had conspired in a plot to kill the then intended of his business partner's cousin, Edward "Chad" Chadwick. At the last minute, apparently his money hungry brother grew a conscience and went to the cops with the information. Phillip had also ended up giving his own life to try and save Jem's. Yet it didn't matter. It had not been Jem in the store that day, but Vivian's daughter, Brittany. All that mattered to many was that it had happened, and that he was the brother of the madman. To listen to the rumors, he himself was a beast of a man. The whole family was.

Frankly, Jared had been a bit surprised Ryker hadn't wanted out of their partnership. But Ryker had just said, "You're not your brother." And that had been the first and last thing mentioned between them on that issue.

Squaring his shoulders against the unpleasant feeling the looks gave him, Jared cleared his throat. The animosity was getting old.

"What do you think?" Nina's naturally sexy voice rolled over him, stroking him.

Swallowing, he looked at her. *I'm not sure you're ready for what I've been thinking for a long time about you, Nina Osborne.* "I think you have some great ideas for your vision on how you want your café to look once it's completely remodeled. How about I go work up some plans and call you when I'm done so we can set up another meeting to see what you think? Then we can go from there and either get to work on the remodeling, or tweak it a bit more."

She narrowed her eyes. "You didn't write anything down. Are you *sure* you know what I want?"

Jared stepped close, reveling in the fragrance that washed over him again from her luscious body, not so it would appear threatening to anyone watching, but to ensure there was no chance they would be overheard. "I'm positive I know exactly what you want," he said on a low purr of confidence. "I've been doing this for a while now," he mentioned in a relatively normal voice, trying desperately to ignore the demands of his libido from being so close to his epitome of perfection. "We have the blueprints for the café, and I'll make sketches of them. I should have something for you before the end of the week."

Nina seemed taken aback.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No...I just...wow, isn't that kind of fast?"

A small smile curved up the side of his mouth. "We aim to please."

Her eyes darkened for a moment before she seemed to regain control. "In that case, thank you."

"My pleasure, Ms. Osborne. I'll be in touch." *And I'll be doing some touching.* Jared stuck out his hand, and when she took it, he shook it before letting her go reluctantly. *I wouldn't expect her to have calluses on her hand.* "Have a good day." Jared left before he forgot to be professional and took her in his arms and kissed her like he longed to do.

The pounding of his heart didn't slow until he pushed into his spacious and well-lit open office. With a groan, he readjusted his hard cock within his pants so it felt a bit more comfortable, and then he moved to his large drafting table. With a few clicks on his computer, he had fresh blueprints for the Blue Moon Café coming from the printer seated along one wall. Jared knew he could make the changes and suggestions on the computer, then print it out, but *this* project was not just for anyone. It was for Nina Osborne, and therefore, deserved a bit more of a personal touch. He put the blueprints on his table and got to work.

"Figured you'd be working at your table instead of your desk," a familiar voice said, breaking into his concentration.

Jared finished marking the page he was working on before he spun around and stared at the man who leaned in the open doorway. A suit hung perfectly from his body. Nothing looked out of place on Ryker.

"And what makes you say that?" he asked his business partner.

Ryker pushed away from the doorjamb and walked toward him. "Because it's for Nina."

"You neglected to tell her I was showing up for the meeting," Jared accused, pointing his pencil at him.

Ryker lifted a shoulder nonchalantly. "Hmm, really? Must have slipped my mind." There was not a single shred of contrition in his tone, either.

Jared didn't believe him for a second. Ryker may be many things, but forgetful wasn't one of them. "Yeah, that must have been it," he said, his own disbelief tinging his tone. He turned his attention back to the work before him, refusing to give in and smile at Ryker's behavior.

"So, how'd it go?" Ryker sat on the edge of the desk and stared at the blueprints.

"Fine." He could feel his friend staring at him. Jared arched a brow and stared blankly at Ryker. "What's with the look? Were you expecting something in particular to happen?"

"From the way you've been longing...or is that lusting...after her? Yes, I did. I expected something. So come on. Give. What did you get? A kiss? Anything?"

Glaring at his friend, Jared shook his head. "I wasn't there to get laid, Ryker." Although the thought of making love to Nina in her office did have great merit. Or his office. Hell, why not both? Considering his body's reaction, it seemed to agree with his assessment of the situation. *Shit. I need to deal with this sooner rather than later. I'm a fucking time bomb.*

"You need to get laid. Maybe then you'd stop being so damn uptight." Ryker ran his hand through his hair before drumming his fingertips on the tabletop.

"I'm not uptight, Ryker." Jared reached for the roll of blueprints containing Nina's ideas and spread one out before comparing it to his thoughts on how the remodeling would be best suited. "I just have better things to do than to get out and see how many women I can fuck around with before the right one comes along." His hand made a few marks on his own blueprint before he allowed the other to roll itself back up.

"Hey now, that's not what I'm doing. Just because I go out on occasion doesn't mean I'm like that. Besides, it's not like I have my eye on a woman who just happens to be in the same area as me."

"You'd better not." Jared's growl was only partially playful. Truth be told, he didn't have a clue on how he would react should Ryker actually be interested in her.

"I'm not like that, Jared. I'm many things, but you know I wouldn't do that."

"I know. I don't know what to think, Ryker. I've waited a long time to get her to notice me." A harsh chuckle exploded from his chest. "Do you know, she didn't even recognize me? She tried to play it off, but she couldn't remember where we met."

Ryker touched his shoulder, and when Jared looked at him, said, "It was a while ago, Jared. Quite a while."

He closed his eyes. It was true. They had met long before he had moved to Trescott Cove. It had been in San Francisco. But even that single meeting had told him that she was the one for him. And now that he'd found they actually lived in the same

city, Jared wanted nothing more than to tell her how he felt. He wanted her to remember him.

Nina Osborne was complex. Although she did a good job at hiding things, he knew there was something else she tried hard to keep buried deep.

"You're right, Ryker. Oh well," he said, playing it off. "Take a look at this and tell me what you think." Jared reached for the rest of her ideas and handed them to Ryker. "These are hers, and those there are the ones I am working on for her. Given the specs of some of the areas, I don't think, without shoring up a lot of the building, that some of what she would like will work. If that's the way she wants to go, we can. But on my set, I'm giving her other thoughts and ideas on how it may work."

"Go away for a second, Jared. Let me look."

Jared moved toward the small fridge in his office and grabbed a bottled water. Sitting there on the sofa, Jared thought about how this remodeling thing would go. The other thing about Nina was that she liked to be in control. He could see that about her just from having been in her café. It was run like a well-oiled machine.

"I think you've hit on something here, Jared. Looks great to me. Keep it up, and soon you'll be back in her presence. Perhaps, if you're lucky, you'll be back in her arms." Ryker walked to the door. "I'll see myself out. Have another account I have to work on, since, you know, you're *so busy* and all that."

Jared flipped him off as he left the room. Ryker's deep laugh lingered behind after he disappeared from view. Jared remained sitting on the couch for a few moments before getting up and returning to work. The Black Dog played in the background as he continued his diligent work on Nina's account.

Nina stared unseeingly at the pile of papers in front of her on the desk. They were important, and yet all she could see was the deep, cobalt blue of Jared Buckman's eyes staring unerringly at her from his handsome face. A shiver stole over her again, and she rolled her head on her shoulders.

It had been three days since his presence had affected her, and she was still feeling breathless just thinking about him. There had been no word from him, and she found herself hoping he'd at least stop in to grab a drink or something to eat. But there had been nothing from him; she'd seen neither hide nor hair of him.

"Maybe I should just call Ryker and see what's going on," she muttered as she leaned back in her chair and groaned.

Jared had said the end of the week. Today was Friday. In her book, that was the end of the week. *Is it the plans you want, or is it Jared you want to see?* Her brain posed the question. And she didn't have an answer. Nina still hadn't placed where she'd seen him before. That was driving her crazy.

Checking her watch, she shook her head. She'd been here for over twelve hours. Natalie was closing tonight, and Nina knew she didn't need to be around. Getting to her feet, Nina gathered the papers in a pile and put them in the middle of her desk.

"First thing tomorrow," she promised herself.

She'd just grabbed her purse when her phone rang. A low curse slipped out as she stared at it. Nina was tired. Sleep hadn't been coming easily lately, and she could really use a relatively early night. Duty overrode personal time.

Sitting on the edge of her desk, she answered it. "Blue Moon Café. This is Nina. How may I help you?"

"Ms. Osborne." Jared's voice slid from the receiver to her heart and sped it up.

"Mr. Buckman," she said with more calm than she felt. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry to call so late, but I'm glad I caught you. I've finished with the plans. Do you have a few moments to set up a time to meet?"

Her heart skipped a few beats. Her plans were ready. Nina moved around to her planner and said, "Name the time that works for you, and I'll let you know if it works on this end."

He was silent for a moment. The only sign he was still there was the sound of his deep, husky breathing. "Got time right now?" His question finally came.

Nina's breathing hitched, and her palms got sweaty. "Sure. Now works for me."

“Well, don’t let me keep you from anything, if you have plans.”

“No, I was just on my way out. I can stop by your office on the way home.”

“If you’re sure. I’ll see you in a few moments. Goodbye, Ms. Osborne.”

She was mute when the phone clicked down on the other end. Her hand shook slightly as she hung up the receiver. Briefly closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and stood up. Reaching for her purse, she licked her lips and strode out the door before she found a way to get out of meeting with him. *Focus on the big picture. This is your dream. Jared Buckman is just a man, like any other.* Even as the words floated through her mind, she knew that was a crock a shit.

“There is nothing ‘just’ about that man,” she muttered as she waved to Natalie and headed through the main area, smiling at the patrons who were there enjoying dinner.

By the time she’d made it into Building Number 1 of Caspian Towers South, Nina had on her cool mask of composure. She pulled open the frosted door with the scrolled wording “J&R Construction” on it and walked inside.

It was dimly lit, and there was no one she could see. Still, it was a comfortable looking place, the color scheme done in masculine tones. She smiled at the scale models of some buildings that were on pedestals throughout the room. *Samples of their work, I’d assume.* All in all, it was a relaxing and calm place.

“Hello?” she called.

No answer.

From the back, she could hear the faint strands of music. With a shrug, she skirted around the receptionist station and headed toward the music. *Sounds like techno.* Nina passed a few closed doors, but at the end of the hall, she saw a door partially closed. There was light coming out from it.

Stepping up to the door, Nina raised her hand to knock and froze. Jared Buckman stood there with his back to the door. He was on the phone. A groan slipped past her lips as she took in the blessedly tight jeans and the way they hugged his ass. The man seemed poured into them. A white tee-shirt covered his upper half, and she

took her time in roving over the muscles in his arms and back as he continued with his call.

As had happened in her office, her body flared to life and made her long for something in the past she'd never allowed herself to think was possible. Frowning at herself, Nina struggled for some kind of control over her wayward body, and only when she was sure there lingered no trace of her desire for the man did she reach to the side and knock lightly on the door.

In less time than it took her to blink, she found herself arrested by his cobalt gaze. He stared at her from over his shoulder. Those spine tingling eyes moved up and down her body, flaring with heat before he waved her in, indicating with one finger he'd just be a bit longer.

Nina nodded and moved further into the room, closing the door back to almost shut, but not quite. Smoothing her hands down the side of her skirt, she moved to a model of a house. She glanced over the intricate detail, totally impressed with how it looked, and yet even more drawn to the man in the room with her. His voice was low, and she did her best not to eavesdrop on his conversation. The more he talked, the more she picked up on the soft drawl he had.

Something he tries to hide. Nina liked it, personally. But then, she'd always been a sucker for a southern accent. Grabbing a seat on the couch along the wall, she surreptitiously watched Jared as he spoke. He'd sat down on the edge of his desk, and this time, he was positioned so she could see the front of him. She stared at his hair, which moved when he nodded and jotted things down on a pad beside him.

Nina licked her lips when he hung up the phone and stared at her. He sighed and raked a hand through his unruly hair before getting off the desk and walking toward her.

"My apologies about that, Ms. Osborne. I should have been at the front to greet you. I didn't think the call would take this long. I haven't kept you waiting too long, have I? Did you need to reschedule?"

He's making it entirely too easy for me. I could be pissed and demand to work with Ryker. Although the idea had merit, Nina wasn't one who backed down from a challenge. And that is exactly what working closely with Jared Buckman was going to be...a challenge.

"I'm fine," she said, with just the right amount of indifference in her tone.

Jared stopped before her and stared down at her. Again, that quiver in her belly began while he refused to let her gaze go. His eyes raked up and down her body before he shrugged easily. "Let's get started, then." Spinning on his heel, he walked over to a table.

Nina wasn't sure what to do about that. *Damn it all!* He wasn't supposed to ignore her. Getting to her feet, she bit back the sarcastic remark she longed to lob at him. *But you don't want him to notice you,* her brain taunted. Never before had a man ignoring her bothered her. *You've never met a man you couldn't handle, Nina Osborne. They don't exist.* She smoothed out the scowl on her face by the time she reached his side.

"This is what I had in mind. I incorporated your ideas and mine." Jared gestured to the blueprint. "Take a look. I'll be right back."

Ignoring him, she gazed at the paper on the table before her. A small smile spread across her face as she saw what he had done. *He was listening to me that day.* Her fingers moved lovingly over the diagram as if she could actually see the finished product.

"There are colored sketches beneath the blueprints," he said from behind her.

As she gazed at the images before her, she felt the sting of tears prick the backs of her eyes. It was coming true. Somehow, this man had seen deeper than what she'd told him and come up with something just short of perfection.

"This is..." She trailed off.

Jared's large body materialized beside her. He handed her a bottled water before reaching for one of the colored images. She stared at his fingers as they pointed to the sheet of paper.

"So, what do you think?" he asked.

Nina uncapped her water and took a sip, grateful for the cool liquid quenching her dry throat. "I think, Mr. Buckman, you do amazing work. I must admit, I had my doubts when I saw you not writing anything down, but this...wow."

"Jared," he said in a low tone.

"What?"

He leaned closer to her, and her breath hitched. His gaze burned as he dropped his eyes and scanned her body all over again, sending more trembling through her, followed quickly by dampness.

When his thick lashes rose to allow her another glimpse into his cobalt eyes, he uttered on a silken thread of promise, "Call me Jared."

Nina nearly lost control of her body at that moment. She had to concentrate not to drop the bottle of water to the floor. Yearning slammed into her, and she knew in that second that she *had* met her match. *Apparently one does exist.*

Chapter Two

Jared swore a blue streak as he stared at Nina's retreating body. Two weeks! Two whole weeks he'd been around her, day in and day out. It still galled him to find out what she'd done. He took a deep breath and headed down the hall in the direction she'd gone. *Work. Work is what I need to get my mind off each luscious curve, smooth caramel skin, plump tempting lips...*

"Most infuriating, stubborn, hard-headed woman!"

"Something you needed to say to me, Mr. Buckman?" Nina's voice wove out of the darkness and curled around him, dangerous, like a viper.

Jared had to admit, very reluctantly, he was shocked by her sudden reappearance. He refused to admit it to her, however. Instead, he shook his head and faced her. She stood in the doorway to her office, leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed and one of those finely plucked eyebrows arched. In the depths of her incredible eyes, there warred more than just anger. Passion swirled in them.

Stepping toward her, he gloated internally when her nose flared and she swallowed. "Yes, there is. But I think this is better done in private." He proceeded another step, and she retreated. Jared made sure the door shut with finality, telling them both they were closed in together.

"So say it and go get on with your work."

"Perhaps I should just leave and send *Ryker* back to oversee it all," he bit off, not hiding his displeasure. From her expression, Jared knew Nina knew exactly what he was talking about. Still, no sign of remorse or apology filled her expression. "Do you find something wrong with the way I'm conducting business here, Nina?" he growled low, advancing on her.

Her chin raised in challenge even as her eyes shot daggers in his direction. "I never said I did."

"What the hell am I supposed to think when you go to my business partner and ask him about me?"

"That I'm curious," she rattled off in response.

"Then come to me and ask *me*, not someone else. I know what people say about me, in front of as well as behind me. I didn't peg you as a person to be like that. Face it instead of acting like a bitch toward me." He stopped before her and held her angry gaze. "Don't think I haven't noticed it's *only* me you're like that with."

"Shouldn't you refrain from the name calling? I could fire you."

Jared narrowed his eyes and allowed one corner of his mouth to curve up before he shook his head. "Nope. 'Cause you may be many things, Nina Osborne, many that I haven't even scratched the surface of, but a coward isn't one of them. And if you want Ryker to be here to oversee it, we both know it's because you're scared. "

"I don't *get* scared," she ground out.

He smirked, "So I'm staying, then."

The urge to remove the pins keeping her hair up so he could experience it sliding over his skin nearly floored him. Nina smelled faintly like chocolate and coconut. The scent was turning him into a randy beast. Any time those smells reached him, his cock grew hard and he envisioned doing so many things with Nina. Jared ran his tongue over his teeth in a final, last ditch effort to behave before giving in.

With one quick motion, he reached out and sank one hand in the loose bun at the back of her head, jerking her to him. Without permission, Jared invaded her mouth with his tongue. She tasted better than all his dreams had hinted. Heaven. There was no other way to describe it. Jared took his other hand and placed it at the small of her back, drawing aimless circles with his fingertips.

Nina stiffened briefly before she began kissing him back. Her hands gripped his hips, keeping them pressed tightly together. With a low growl, he began to devour her; his skin tingled as she answered with a low growl of her own and matched his ferocity with her own. Drawing hard on her tongue, Jared moved them back until the wall prevented any further progress. Wedging a leg between hers, Jared continued his

assault on her defenses. Each whimper and every purr from her resonated through him. He thrust his hips against her as her fingers dug into the jeans covering his ass.

With a ragged breath, Jared separated their mouths. Her eyes, although still angry, overflowed with passion. He took in how the pulse beat so rapidly on the side of her neck, and how swollen her lips were from the kiss. Nina's caramel skin was slightly flushed. Bottom line, she looked like a woman who'd not only just had sex, but one who had been pleased and very well so. *Damn, I want her in my bed.*

Jared put his hands on the wall behind her, penning her in. His leg remained wedged where it had been. His own breathing came hard, and he had to swallow twice before he could say what he wanted.

"I'll be *damned* if you forget me again, Nina."

One more fast, almost punishing kiss and Jared abruptly stepped back, readjusted his ball cap, and left the room without a glance back. His body was rock hard and longing to lower her to the carpeting of her office and show her just how good they were meant to be with one another. He barely slowed to grab his work belt and hook it on.

Jared wasn't sure how much time passed before he heard his name being called. All he knew was he'd only just recovered from being so damn close and personal with one Nina Osborne. Sighing, he stuck his head around the support beam he'd been working on. Ryker stood there, dressed in another suit.

For one brief second, the thought that Nina had actually had him fired if Ryker didn't take over crossed his mind. Until he saw the humor in Ryker's gaze. Engaging the safety on the nail gun, Jared moved to his business partner's side.

"What's up?" he asked, wiping his brow.

"You need to turn your phone on, man," Ryker groused teasingly.

Jared checked his cell and swore. Sure enough, it was off. "Sorry, man. What'd you need?"

"I need to know where you put the schematics for the Pollard account."

Jared frowned. "Could have just called down here and had someone bring me the phone." A thought snuck into his mind. "Checking up on me?"

Ryker grinned before he began laughing.

Nina watched Jared and Ryker as they talked and shared some laughs, one man clean in a handmade suit, and the other dirty and sweaty in a baseball cap, tight tee-shirt, and ripped blue jeans. There were differences, and yet there were similarities. Both were strong, tall, and well built. But only one made her palms grow sweaty and her common sense take a holiday.

Jared. Even from this distance, her body still cried out for more of his touch. *What did he mean, he wouldn't let me forget him again? Why can't I remember our first meeting?*

She wasn't sure why she'd gone to Ryker. She couldn't seem to stop clashing with Jared. Every single time she ran into him, Nina found some way to pick at something he was doing, never mind the fact she'd approved everything beforehand. And Jared was sticking to the plans like glue. The one time he'd wanted to change something, he had come to her first. He was doing an excellent job. He and his crew were efficient and keeping out of the way of her business the best they could.

There was just no way to explain it. There was this need to needle him and get those gorgeous eyes of his to flash with danger and passion. She wanted him to break, just to see what would happen. And today she found out. When he kissed her, her world had tilted on its axis. And in that second, it had become clear to her. Jared Buckman had the ability to get beyond the barriers she'd erected around her deep and secret feelings. So in order to combat that, the best thing seemed to be keeping a distance between them by being bitchy.

The men laughed again, drawing her attention back to them. Her heart lurched as Jared removed his cap and raked his fingers through the dark strands of his hair. Nina shuddered at the memory of his hand on the back of her head, his fingers wound in her hair, massaging her scalp. When he'd first grabbed her, she'd prayed for the

strength to push him away. It hadn't happened. She had damn near tried to get into his skin. Jared Buckman tasted divine.

Nina fought the urge to squeeze her legs together as her pussy throbbed and grew wetter. All the years she'd been in Trescott Cove, and men hadn't been a "necessity." One kiss from Jared Buckman, and she was ready to lie naked before him and beg for his touch.

As if he knew exactly her train of thought, Jared turned his head and stared directly at her. His intense gaze burned right through her clothes and seared her skin. Nina had to lock her knees when his tongue swiped across his lower lip. Her pussy creamed, and she had to fight to keep the whimper of longing contained. As quickly as he placed his gaze on her, Jared removed it, putting his attention back on Ryker and their conversation. Another laugh from Jared rubbed teasingly over her skin, like he'd trailed a feather over it.

"Excuse me, Nina," one of her workers called.

Yanking her stare from Jared, she found Krysten James standing beside her. "Hey, Krysten. Didn't think I'd be seeing you in today. What can I do for you?"

"Just wanted to let you know I'm taking over for Lori today. She's not feeling well at all. Fever and all of that."

Nina nodded. Lori Spencer was Krysten's life partner. They lived together and both worked for her on opposite shifts. "Fine. Let me know if there's anything I can do for her. And give her my best as well."

Krysten smiled. "I will. Thanks." She shrugged and gestured over her shoulder with her thumb. "I should go get to work."

With an acknowledging wave, Nina entered her office and sat down at her desk, trying desperately to ignore the fact Jared had had his tongue in her mouth in here not too long ago. She failed. Nina groaned and reached for the mail. In the middle was a small envelope with no return address. Slitting it open, Nina withdrew the sheet of paper and stared at the statement in confusion.

MISS ME?

Picking up the envelope, Nina searched for a postmark, but there was none to be found. Not even the writing looked familiar to her.

"Okay," she said, tossing it to the side. "That was weird."

Brushing it off, Nina paid attention to the things at hand. She remained in her office for most of the day, venturing out very rarely. With a supper plate untouched beside her, Nina started when a knock came on the door.

"Come on in," she said, putting the pen down.

Natalie stuck her head around the edge of the door. "You're the last one here, Ms. Osborne. The back is all locked up. I'll lock the front door on my way out."

Glancing at her watch, Nina groaned. *Damn. I didn't mean to stay this long.* "Do you have a second, Natalie?"

Silently, Natalie entered the room fully, and Nina waved her to a chair. Her employee moved without a sound to a chair and sat down on the edge, back ramrod straight. Nina knew if she looked over the edge of her desk she, would see Natalie's ankles crossed and positioned slightly behind her. *She's so damn proper.* None of that stopped Nina's next question, though.

"Is there a guard waiting to walk you to your car?"

"No ma'am, but it's not needed."

Nina arched a brow. "Something new happen to make it unnecessary?"

Natalie shook her head and glanced at the floor before meeting her gaze. "Mr. McQueen is waiting for me."

In the light from her office, Nina could see the flush on Natalie's face. She smiled and picked up her pen. "Okay, then. Have a great night."

Natalie stood and nodded briefly. "You, too." She left as quietly as she'd arrived.

Nina chewed on her pen top while she stared at the door Natalie had just gone through. Part of the reason she'd been putting in so many hours was to help keep an eye on Natalie Varimis. It wouldn't do for Taylor McQueen to be hanging out all day at the café watching over her.

Although Nina didn't personally know Taylor very well, they were both well acquainted with Dominique Rule, now soon to be Dominique Blade. Nina had always been extremely impressed with Taylor, or at least what she knew of him. Aside from his close friendship with Chance Jameson, he really had no ties in Trescott Cove. He knew a few of the people over at Cerberus Associates, but tended to keep more to himself. All she knew was that Chance had sent him a request to come and help out Natalie, and he'd shown up the next day.

The blush on Natalie's face was understandable. A blind woman couldn't help but see the dark magnetism that oozed from him. Taylor McQueen was very attractive. Shoving Natalie and Taylor to the back of her mind, Nina focused on the remaining work before her, knowing full well that Natalie was in excellent hands.

Three hours later, Nina armed the café's alarm system and headed toward her car, a Sonoran sand colored Nissan Altima with blond leather interior and a six speed manual transmission. Her footsteps echoed in the empty parking garage. Stifling a yawn, Nina unlocked her car and slid across the seat, resting her hands upon the steering wheel. Before long, she was driving through Trescott Cove to her condo. As she waited for the opportunity to turn into the entrance to BluMyst, her condominium community, a slither of warning snaked up her spine. Nina glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a car behind her in the turn lane. When there was a break in traffic, she took the turn and headed to her parking spot.

She was out of her car when the other one drove past her slowly. Her gaze followed the vehicle as it proceeded by. It was a dark colored Saturn Ion with a dent in the left rear bumper. The car wasn't familiar to her, but she didn't know everyone's vehicle. With a sigh, she grabbed her purse, locked her car, and headed to the elevator.

Within ten minutes, Nina stood out on her balcony overlooking the cove that gave this city its name. Just beyond the cove was Mystic Lake, a huge draw for people to go boating in the summer. Cradled in her hands sat a mug of honey lemon tea. The warm night air flowed gently over her, bringing to her nose the subtle scent of jasmine

from the potted plants she had on her balcony. Her shoulders were stiff, and she rolled them, trying to loosen up the knots.

Another yawn left her, and with a sigh, Nina padded back into her condo, closing the door behind her. Even though she was on the fifth floor, she never left the screen fully open. Applying the foot lock on the sliding glass door, she left a small opening so the warm breeze could come in.

She put her mug on the spotless counter, and within seconds had it rinsed and sitting in the stainless steel dishwasher. After performing her normal nightly check, Nina headed for bed. As she slid between her ivory Egyptian blend sheets, a pair of cobalt blue eyes stared down at her, heating her blood all over again. She shifted against the sheets, moaning in duress as each movement only seemed to enflame the burning desire unfurling within her. When sleep did finally encompass her, her dreams were filled with Jared and his touch.

Jared walked along the path which followed the cove. His body responded to the knowledge he would be spending some more alone time with Nina Osborne today. During the renovations, Nina was closing her café on the weekends. That way, his men didn't have to work around her staff all the time. She treated them well, his crew. They had unlimited drinks, and she provided them with a free lunch.

It had been three days since he'd had the pleasure of her kiss, and he longed for more. Deep in her brown eyes, he could see her craving for more, and so he made sure to limit their interactions by having other people around. He wanted her to stew, to think on how it felt to be pressed against him.

He sat on a bench overlooking the cove and ran a hand through his hair. Jared acknowledged he was procrastinating. He should be heading over to Blue Moon Café to meet his men and begin work. Instead, he was sitting here.

"Hey! Sir, can you throw that back to me, please?"

Looking over his shoulder, Jared saw a young man, he'd guess between six and eight years old, waving at him. The child had smooth brown skin and a brilliant smile.

Dropping his gaze, he saw the football resting near his foot. *I must have been really lost not to hear that.*

“Sure.”

He got to his feet and picked up the ball. A smile filled his own face at the familiar weight of the football in his hands. Gesturing the boy back, Jared waited until he began running, then lobbed a pass for him. The boy caught it with ease and stopped to wave at him again.

“Thank you, Mister.”

Jared began walking back to where he’d parked his truck, the smile still on his face. Unlocking his vehicle, Jared froze when he heard that same young voice.

“Great pass, sir. Thank you.”

“No problem,” Jared said, pausing with his hand on the door handle. Casting another look over his shoulder, he was surprised to see a woman from the café walking toward them. Behind her was a tall, imposing man. *Shit.*

“Come on, Malik,” the woman said. Then she looked up and stared at him for a second. “Good morning, Mr. Buckman.”

“Ms. Varimis. Good to see you.” Jared flashed his gaze to the man behind her. “Morning,” he said to him.

“Morning.” The single-word response fell quietly.

Natalie looked between the two of them. “Mr. Buckman, this is my” --she paused slightly-- “*friend*, Mr. McQueen.” She pointed at the child between them. “And my son, Malik.”

Jared held out his hand to Mr. McQueen. “Pleased to meet you.”

The hand that shook his was strong. “And you.”

He repeated the action with the young man, who still held the football in one hand. With a small smile, Jared glanced at all three of them.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to get to the café and begin work. Nice to see you again, Ms. Varimis. Nice to meet the both of you.”

Jared turned and climbed up into his Patriot Blue Pearl Dodge Ram 3500 Quad Cab. With a wave, he shut the door and started the powerful Cummins Turbo Diesel engine. Before long, he was driving through the streets of Trescott Cove, heading toward his destiny.

Nina Osborne.

Jared had been there at the café working for a while when he decided to go seek her out. The men were on lunch. Walking away from the noise and dust in the front room, Jared headed for her office. The door was slightly ajar, and he could hear some music coming from inside. Knocking gently, he waited for her to respond.

"Come on in," Nina's seductive voice said, weaving around him.

With a fortifying breath, Jared pushed open the door and closed it behind him. When the click of the door echoed through the room, Nina glanced up at him with her big brown eyes. They widened with surprise, and then became expressionless.

"What do you need?" she said with considerably less warmth before she looked back down at the paper in front of her.

Jared leaned back against the door, hooked his legs at the ankle, and stared at her. Nina looked damn good in whatever she wore, but today she had opted to go with something a little more casual. Her hair was up in a ponytail with some wisps floating around her face, giving her a much softer look. Like usual, the intertwined scent of coconut and chocolate came to him. With a gulp, Jared shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans so he wouldn't grab her and do to her what he'd been doing to her in his dreams since the day he first met her.

"Cat got your tongue?" she sniped.

"Nope."

Nina gave an over exaggerated sigh and looked up at him. "Don't you have work to do out there?"

"Have lunch with me," he blurted out. *Where the hell did that come from?* Jared had no clue what prompted him to ask that. But he wasn't about to back down.

She leaned back in her chair, allowing him to see the tight white tee-shirt beneath her robin's egg blue hoodie. Pure amazement and confusion was on her face. "What?"

"Lunch. You do have to eat, right?"

The pulse on the side of her neck jumped. "With the way we've been going at it, why do you want to have lunch with me?"

"Not *we*, Nina. You. You are picking fights. I'm not a bad guy." *And we so haven't begun to 'go at it' the way I long to with you.* Jared pushed away from the door and strode to the desk. *Jesus, if she keeps staring at me like that, I'm going to forget all about lunch and show her what that look does to me.* Willing his body back under control, Jared halted before her desk and leaned over it, placing his hands on either side of her blotter.

"It's just lunch," he cajoled. "Come on. Nothing fancy. Just a bite between friends."

Images of where he'd really like to nibble on her flashed before him. His cock pressed insistently against his jeans. Indecision wavered in her eyes, so Jared decided to help her along. Reaching to grab one of her wrists, he tugged. Her eyes snapped over to his. He sent her a half grin.

"Come on. I'm not taking no for an answer. Let's go." He practically crowed in victory when she allowed him to pull her up.

"I think this is a bad idea," Nina informed him when she finally reached his side.

Lowering his head so it was near her ear, Jared closed his eyes and inhaled sharply, allowing the intoxicating scent of her to flow through him. "Then don't think," he whispered before letting go of her hand and heading for the door. Although he longed to hold her hand, Jared didn't think she would accept that yet.

After some final instructions to his crew, he led her out the back and to his truck. Holding the door for her, he shuddered when her delectable form slid past him and across the slate grey leather of the seat. By the time he climbed up, Nina had buckled herself in and was looking at him.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Starting the engine, Jared buckled himself in and said, "To the park. It's such a beautiful day out, I figured we could eat outside."

The small smile that turned up the corners of her lips made him feel like a king. The ride to the park passed in silence, but Jared didn't mind. He had her with him, and for the moment, that was all that mattered.

After getting something to eat from some of the vendors who were set up throughout the park, Jared and Nina walked together until he found the spot he wanted. It was secluded, but not so much that she might feel uncomfortable.

"Hold this for a second," he said, handing her his food. When she did, he took the blanket off his shoulder and spread it out on the ground. "Your table awaits, milady."

Nina chuckled softly and returned his food to him. "You really went all out for this," she said teasingly.

Soon they were stretched out a bit, enjoying their lunch and the warm summer sun. Nina had her head propped up on her elbow as she ate some of the fries before her. He couldn't tear his eyes from her. There was something totally different about her at this moment. A sense of peace flowed from her that he'd not seen before.

"Tell me where we met before."

Jared ate a nacho and readjusted so he was eye to eye with Nina, his own hand holding up his head. "You really don't remember?"

Her brows converged as she tried to recall. "No. I don't. I'm sorry." Nina reached for one of his nachos and ate it. "Thanks."

Jared raised an eyebrow. "You know, you owe me a fry for that."

"Tell me how you got into construction," she said, picking up a fry and handing it to him.

Eating the fry, Jared sat up and draped his arm over one knee. "I've always loved building things. I built our playhouse when we were kids, and a few other things. Seemed to be the only time when things went right in my world."

Nina nodded. "I know about one brother, but besides Phillip, do you have any siblings?"

Jared noticed there was no anger in her voice when she said his brother's name. That threw him for a loop. Most couldn't even mention Phillip Buckman without being angry. "I have two sisters, one older--Lexi, and one younger--Sara."

"Do you get to see them much?"

"No. I don't. I stay pretty busy here with everything in Trescott, and I don't get home very often. They've never come here to visit, either."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Nina took another nacho.

Tilting his head to the side, Jared asked, "And what about you, Ms. Nina Osborne?"

"I have two. They're both older, a brother and sister. Nash and Niccele."

He smiled. "See them often?"

"Not as often as I'd like, but we do keep in touch."

Glancing at his watch, Jared sighed. "We should get going back. My men will be back from their break, and I should be working along with them."

With a smooth motion, Nina got to her feet, and when he followed, she gathered the trash from their lunch while he folded the blanket. She licked her lips and smiled. "Thank you for this."

Holding the folded blanket in one hand, Jared stepped up flush to Nina and cupped the side of her face. Slowly, giving her time to back away if she wished, he lowered his mouth to settle upon hers. Unlike the last time he kissed her, this time he was gentle, sliding his tongue along the seam of her lips, asking for entrance.

She sighed and opened for him. Lust shot through him, and he clenched the hand holding the blanket as he tried not to become an animal. His tongue dipping and searching, Jared explored her mouth. His cock hardened to the point of almost being painful, and he slowly ended the kiss.

"Thank you for coming with me." He stepped back, and swallowed hard when the tip of her tongue snuck out to lick her lips.

They walked side by side back to his truck. The return trip to the Blue Moon Café was done in silence as well. This time, it was sexually charged, and Jared had to dig his nails into his palm not to reach across the interior and take her hand in his. They parted ways at the door, and soon he got back into the rhythm of construction. Yet in the back of his mind lingered his want and desire for Nina Osborne.

Next time, Nina. Next time it will be so much more than a kiss.

Chapter Three

Nina shook her head at the note. This was the third in as many days. There was as much leading information on this one as there had been on the first two. The second one had been three words: I MISSED YOU. This most current one said, WHY HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN ME?

Logically, she could assume there would be another one delivered to her today. That implied things which Nina wasn't ready to accept—either she had a stalker, or someone of questionable reputation thought it would be funny to send the notes as a prank. She frowned. Given her past, *this* wasn't anything she considered remotely hilarious.

Would Jared send me something like this?

Her heart stuttered at the thought of the man who'd been worming his way beneath her defenses. She knew he was here today, but she had yet to see him. Ever since that lunch they'd shared in the park, she really couldn't get him out of her mind. Even so, Nina did her best to keep him at a distance, something Jared Buckman didn't seem to care about. He'd brushed past her erected walls. However, he hadn't kissed her since that day.

He made sure to touch her, though—light, gentle caresses that only succeeded in flaming the desire she had for him. He was good; Jared did it in a way that she wasn't sure it had even happened, except for the increase in her pulse and body temperature. And she hadn't stopped being so cold to him in public. There was just something about it she couldn't seem to let go of.

Although the words would never come out of her mouth, she was sorry the construction was propelling along as well as it was. *He'll be out of my life before I know it.* The thought saddened her. Then there was the issue where they'd met before. She still hadn't figured it out, and it was killing her. Jared wouldn't tell her.

His shaggy head came into view around the door, as if he'd heard her thinking about him. "Hey, gorgeous," he said in his sexy timbre.

Her pussy gushed in response, but she refused to let him know that. "What do you want?" she bit off, totally ignoring the fact she'd just been thinking of him.

"You," he answered immediately.

Her eyes jerked up from the note she still held in her hand. "What?"

A smile turned up one corner of his mouth. "You heard me just fine, Nina." Jared walked in and kicked the door shut behind him with the heel of his boot. "Have you missed my touch, like I've missed feeling you beneath my hands?" he asked, prowling toward her.

Spikes of longing shot through her, and Nina struggled not to shift on her leather seat. A crinkling sound brought her attention to the paper she held in her hand. Her eyes narrowed, and she waved it in the air.

"Did you send this?"

Jared sat down on the corner of her desk as if he owned the place and had every right to do as he wished. "I haven't sent you anything. What is it?" He took it from her even as he questioned her.

Nina watched his reaction, and when the brows furrowed and the anger appeared in his cobalt gaze, a warning snaked up her spine. *He isn't lying.*

"Where'd you get this?" he barked.

"It came in the mail," she responded, reaching for it. "Give it here." Nina snapped her fingers when he removed it from her grasp.

"Who sent this?" he demanded.

"I don't know." As soon as she said it, Nina knew it wasn't the right thing to admit. Men had this terrible need to try and protect women, even if it wasn't needed. And in her case, it definitely wasn't needed.

"Have you gotten anymore?"

“Look. Just forget it, okay?” She gestured for the paper, and when he grudgingly returned it, she put it in the top drawer of her desk without sparing it another glance.

“What are you doing in here?”

Jared stared at her for a moment, not saying a word. Taking off his hat, he raked his hands through his hair and shoved the cap back on his head. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

Arching a brow, Nina leaned back in her chair just so she wouldn’t reach out to him. “Eating in the park again?”

His eyes darkened, sending shivers through her. “No, at my house this time.”

Her heart rate accelerated at the notion. *Breathe. In and out.* She held his gaze despite the desire to hide from her feelings. Jared leaned in closer, and Nina bit back a whimper as the scent of him washed over her. In a flash, she envisioned them in bed together, him sliding in and out between her legs, delivering her to a higher plane of passion than she’d ever encountered before.

She licked her lips and did her best to contain the thrum of pleasure that coursed through her, and his eyes seemed to darken even more when they followed the path of her tongue. In the depths of his gaze, she read his promise. *Lord help me. I don’t know what to do.*

The door swung open without any warning. Nina fought down the urge to jump. Jared never moved, just remained where he was, staring at her as if he wanted to feast upon her. Past him, she could see William Chadwick standing there holding a stack of mail in his hand. His own sharp gaze swung between her and Jared before it filled with more than a healthy bit of suspicion.

“Nina,” he said. “Jared,” William added, after a pause.

“Hello William,” she answered, putting her eyes back on an immobile Jared.

Jared arched a brow. “Yes or no, Nina?” His question was a low purr.

She shook her head and said, “Yes.” *Damn it! What the hell am I doing? I meant to say no.*

"I'll see you around seven then," he said in a hushed tone. With a smooth motion, Jared got to his feet and turned. "William." Jared nodded at him before slipping past and leaving the room and her alone with William.

Jared never even looked back. The door closed behind him with a click.

When Nina pulled her eyes from the door and put them back upon William, he was right before her desk. His pale gray eyes were shrewd as he held her stare.

Lifting her chin, she arched an eyebrow. "Something on your mind, William?"

"What's going on with you and Buckman?"

Nina felt a spark of anger over the censure she heard in his tone. "And you became my father when?"

William didn't even crack a smile. "I wasn't making a joke," he stated.

Leaning back in her chair, Nina steepled her fingers and ran her gaze over him. William Chadwick was one hell of an imposing man. He never failed to seem deceptively relaxed, and today was definitely no different. His casual attire did nothing to downplay the air of mystique and intrigue which surrounded him. Nina knew him well enough that she knew William used that to his benefit. She skimmed over the portion of the tattoo on his left shoulder which peeked out from beneath the cloth of his sleeveless tee-shirt.

"Cut the bland stare, William. We both know I'm not impressed, and you aren't scaring me." Slowly, Nina put her hands down on the smooth top of her desk as she stood and leaned toward him. "Not anymore than you're scared of me. Whatever may or may not be going on between myself and Jared Buckman doesn't have a damn bit of anything to do with you."

"I'm making it my business," he said.

"Change your mind. It's not. And I don't need you all up in my business. Never have." Nina narrowed her eyes at him. "I thought you liked Jared."

"Liking him and him being right for you are two different things."

Nina reached out with one hand and touched the tip of his nose. "So sweet. Almost cute, even, but I'm long past the days of needing a big brother to screen the men in my life. In fact, I'm very good about taking care of myself."

"So you admit he's part of your life?"

Is that what I'm saying? "No. I'm saying you need to stay out of mine." Nina snatched the mail he held from his hand and sat back down at her desk. "Was there something specific you needed?" She began flipping through the items.

"Be careful with that one," William warned.

"Jared isn't a *that*. Jesus. I don't get why everyone is so quick to judge him. It wasn't him that tried to kill your sister-in-law." She speared William with her gaze. "Besides, if memory serves correctly, and we both know it does, *you* weren't too damn keen on Jem being in your brother's life, either. Sneaking around, digging up things on her, and more. So don't stand there and judge Jared." Nina barely registered that her voice had risen in time with her anger.

"So that's how it is, then?" William asked.

Nina got to her feet, the mail falling forgotten on the desk. "Look, William. How it is, is this: Stay...out...of...my...business."

For a moment, there was no sound in the room. She and William stared off, neither giving an inch. With a slow, nigh-imperceptible nod, William turned around and headed for the door. Nina reclaimed her seat.

"William," she said, right before he left. He paused but didn't turn back to her. "Leave Jared alone, as well. He's not your concern, either."

He stiffened again, and the only reason Nina knew it was because she was more than minorly well acquainted with William Chadwick. She knew his moods and his actions. The man left without a word. Despite knowing William probably had her best interests in mind, she didn't want anyone else involved in whatever it was going on between her and Jared. *Hell, I don't even know what to call it. A love-hate relationship.* The only thing she was sure about was how being in Jared's presence day after day was

weakening her resolve, and though it may not show, she had to work harder and harder at being snippy to him.

Reaching into her desk drawer, Nina found her stash of lollipops. She groaned in contentment as the soothing flavor of root beer filled her mouth. *These are my weakness.* Nina loved lollipops. Sucker firmly in place, she began looking through the mail. Her contented mood sank dramatically when she saw another envelope, the same as the ones delivered on previous days.

"What the fuck..." she muttered as she reached for her letter opener. Within seconds, she was frowning as her gaze looked over another sheet of card stock with the words:

I'M COUNTING THE MOMENTS UNTIL WE'RE TOGETHER AGAIN.

That warning snaked up her spine again as she stared at the all capped letters on the paper. Something niggled at the back of her mind. She quickly got out the other notes and laid all four side by side on her desk. Nina stared at each one as if seeking the creator of the messages. She couldn't figure it out. Well, she did one thing. As she stared at the small rectangles of paper, Nina knew they weren't from Jared Buckman. The pieces before her had a sinister feel to them.

"Figures," she muttered. "Just when things were beginning to go my way. Why the hell can't I just make a clean break and get on with my life?"

The phone on her desk began to ring, and with a smooth motion, Nina swept the cards up in one hand as she answered the call with another.

Jared had a smile on his face as he opened the door to his home. His belly was in knots at the prospect of having Nina Osborne to himself all evening, with no one else looking over their shoulder and no reason for her to come off all bitchy. The smile faded as he realized it wasn't Nina on the other side of the door.

It was Rafael Carmichael, a detective with the Trescott Cove police force.

"Detective," he said. "What can I do for you?"

“Do you have a moment?” Rafe questioned. “Sorry for just dropping by unannounced, but I was driving by and took a chance.”

Jared skimmed over the casually-clad man and stepped back after seeing the need to talk simmering in his smoky gray eyes. Jared waved him in before closing the door behind him. Tossing the hand towel over his shoulder, he crossed his arms and waited for his guest to speak.

“I hate to do this to you, bringing up bad memories and all of that, but can you think of anyone who might be trying to exact revenge for what happened to your brother?”

Jared studied Rafe’s face. There was no censure, just honest curiosity and even some concern. “I’m sorry, no. My brother and I didn’t get along all that well anyway, so he didn’t let me in on a lot of his personal stuff.” Running his hand over his face, Jared asked, “Why? What’s going on?”

“Hopefully nothing, but we’ve been receiving a few odd calls and things like that. I’m trying to cover all angles if something begins to pan out. Like I said, hopefully it’s nothing. But if you can think of anyone, or find anything in his possessions that strikes you as odd, let me know.”

Jared thought about the room full of items that had been delivered to him from the storage locker his brother Phillip had. He didn’t want to have the things sent home to their parents after his brother died; there was no telling what might be in some of the boxes. So Jared had just shoved them all into a spare room. He still hadn’t gone through them, and the thought of his brother having ties to something else as sinister as the plot to kill Jem made his stomach heave in disgust.

“I’ll do that,” Jared managed to say.

Rafe’s smile was strained; still, he stuck out his hand. When Jared shook it, the detective said, “Thanks. Have a great evening.”

Jared walked him to the door and saw him out. “Damn it!” he swore, smacking his hand against the door. “Just can’t quit fucking up my life, can you, Phillip?”

The doorbell rang and he jerked open the door, expecting to see Rafe still there. His heart stopped when he found himself face to face not with Rafe, but one beautiful Nina Osborne.

"I know I'm late," she said, "but I ran into Zora Jameson and Lewa Staller." Jared didn't move, just stood there and stared at her. "Can I come in?"

"Sorry," he blabbered before stepping back. "Please do."

As she moved past him, his nose was filled with the arousing chocolate-coconut scent she turned into one hell of an aphrodisiac. Turning to watch her walk, he licked his lips as the image she portrayed reached him. She wore a sparkly halter dress with a hi-low hemline and sparking beadwork in an enchanting ice blue color. The hue was beautiful against her smooth caramel skin. Upon her feet were matching shoes with an ankle strap tied off in a bow. When she spun on her heels, he noticed a tattoo curving around her ankle.

"It's a beautiful tattoo," he said, walking toward her.

Nina looked over her shoulder at him and smiled, almost shyly. "Thank you."

"What's it mean?"

"*Yume jitsugen*. It's Kanji. Roughly translated, it means 'realize your dreams'."

Jared knew the second she told him; there was a special meaning behind it for her. *I have realized mine, Nina. And you are the center of them.*

"You, Ms. Nina, are very beautiful, as well. That dress...wow..."

A blush moved up her cheeks. She closed her eyes and nodded minutely. Jared took a small bit of pity on her and let it go. He moved closer and brushed a light kiss over her lips before putting his hand on the small of her back. The dress seemed to singe his skin, and he longed to rip it from her body and devour her right then and there.

"Make yourself at home. Dinner is almost ready," he said, dropping his hand.

Nina looked at him, a slow burn in her brown gaze. "What are we doing?" she asked, stepping closer to him.

Jared did his best not to listen to his libido. "Having dinner." His chest tightened when she reached out and trailed her nails down his dress shirt. "Nina," he said on a shuddering breath.

"I shouldn't be here," she muttered, moving her hands back up toward the collar of his shirt.

Gritting his back teeth, Jared prayed for strength. His cock stiffened even more when she sank one hand into the hair at the base of his neck. "I'm trying to be a gentleman," he said.

Her face drew closer, and she licked along his lip. "Then be a gentleman. At least until after dinner."

Jared felt like he was going to burst out of his pants. His heart pounded a mile a minute, and his fingers longed to sink into her silken hair and hold her immobile as he plundered her mouth. *Touch her, and dinner will be over before it begins*, his brain informed him. Digging his nails into the palms of his hands, Jared leaned in for a brief kiss.

"Dinner won't be a long meal if you tease me like this, Nina."

"So let's eat then." She fingered the buttons on his shirt. "Is there a place I can freshen up?"

Swallowing hard, Jared pointed to the half bath on this floor. "Right there."

A siren's smile lifted the corners of her full lips. "Thank you."

Jared didn't move until the door had shut behind her. *I'm in serious trouble*. With a low groan, he readjusted his erection and walked back to the kitchen to check on dinner. Almost ready.

It didn't take too long, and they were enjoying a nice dinner of grilled salmon and steamed vegetables. Talk was relaxed and light. Soon they only had wineglasses and sat knee to knee, not really talking, more just staring at one another.

"What made you decide to come to dinner with me?" he asked as low strands of jazz played in the background. The dim lighting highlighted the coppery gold strands of her hair, so she appeared almost angelic until he looked into her eyes. The passion

swirling there made him think of endless nights of pleasure. *Not so damn angelic as you want people to believe there, Nina.*

"I didn't know it was really a choice. You more issued a command to me."

"You don't take commands, Nina Osborne."

She smiled. "Very true."

Jared leaned forward and kissed her. "Open for me, Nina," he whispered against her mouth."

She did, and he slid his tongue into her waiting mouth. His body jerked with need as the gentle taste of the wine she'd drunk combined with her own taste made a heady combination. He growled low in his throat and reached out to sink one hand into the strands of her silken hair.

His cock throbbed as she stroked her tongue along his and allowed him to lead her in the age old dance. Kicking his chair out from beneath him, Jared moved closer to Nina without breaking the kiss. He allowed his eyes to drift closed when her hands grabbed his hair.

He wrapped an arm around her and lifted her clean off the chair. Jared ran one hand up her satiny leg when she wrapped them around his waist. The kiss continued as he left the kitchen and carried her to the stairs. She tightened her grip and rubbed against his pelvic region.

Good Lord, I'm never going to make it up the stairs. He growled low in his throat as she drew back, ending the kiss.

"Now," she ordered, her naturally husky voice even deeper and more seductive than he thought possible.

"Upstairs...bed...slowly..."

Her hand tightened in his hair and she jerked it. "No. Now!"

Yes now! his mind cried. Spinning them so her back was at the wall, Jared kissed her again. This was no gentle kiss. It overflowed with passion and need and his soul's craving for her. The hand on her thigh slipped beneath her dress and skimmed over the core of her womanhood.

The dampness soaked his hand as he touched her. She whimpered and arched her hips into his touch. Plunging his tongue deep through the recesses of her mouth, Jared slid his fingers under the edge of her panties. His eyes rolled as he touched bare skin. Without hesitation, he sank his digits between the swollen lips and into her moist heat.

“Shit!” she moaned as her body clenched around his fingers.

Jared almost exploded within his pants. Never had feelings this intense swarmed him. With a low muttered curse, he released her hair and grabbed her chin. “Nina!”

Her hands were busy on the clasp of his pants, and he hissed when her fingers closed over his cock. Jared wasn’t sure how it happened, but within seconds, he was slipping his stiffness inside her wet pussy. Her mewl of pleasure echoed his own rumble of contentment. She held him like a vice, her internal muscles gripping him, rippling along his length as he began to move.

Nina undulated against him, adding to the friction he felt. Clenching his jaw, Jared fought to keep himself in control so he didn’t come before bringing her to pleasure. Pushing deeper into her, soon they had a rhythm going. In and out. Back and forth. Each stroke he delivered into her made his eyes nearly roll back into his head. Never had he felt pleasure like this before. Her legs tightened around him, and her short nails dug into his skin through the shirt he wore. It didn’t matter. All that did was the experience they were sharing.

Faster.

Deeper.

Harder.

She nipped his chin before she shuddered around him, coating his cock in her thick cream. The muscles gripped him and sent him over the edge in a spiral of lights.

“Fuck!” he growled as he erupted deep within her. She came again, and together they rode out the waves of pleasure.

Forehead to forehead, they remained for a moment before Jared slipped both hands under her ass and began walking up the stairs. No words passed between them

as he walked her to his bedroom, laid her upon the comforter, and began to move within her all over again.

Nina was sore as she rode up the elevator to her condo's floor. It was four in the morning, and she had just left Jared's bed and his arms. He'd made sweet love to her and fucked her senseless all through the night.

She smelled like him. Just the mere thought of it made her smile. *Good thing I'm alone in the elevator.* It stopped on her floor, and she got out. Nina was exhausted. With a groan, she continued on to her door. A frown marred her features as she spied a small envelope taped to the smooth surface of the door.

Exhaustion was wiped away like a hand smoothing moisture from glass. Her eyes searched the lock, pleased to find no signs of tampering. Only once she opened the door did she choose to pull the envelope off and carry it with her to the interior of her condo. Kicking the barrier closed behind her, she flipped on a light and dropped her purse by the hook before tossing the envelope on an end table.

She headed to her bathroom after locking the door and sighed in relief as the hot water soothed her sore muscles. Nina kept the shower short and was soon padding around, dried off, in a matching v-necked camisole and boy shorts, black with Japanese writing on the side in gold lettering.

Setting up the coffeemaker, Nina moved back to the sealed envelope as the coffee began to percolate. She sat down on the edge of her couch and opened it. Same as before, it contained a single piece of card stock. Unlike before there was more than one line upon the tan surface.

Nina:

Imagine my surprise to find out you were no longer in the business.

I'm afraid it doesn't work that way. The only way out is death.

You know that. I brought you in.

And now, I must help you on your way out, since you obviously want to be out.

I'll be seeing you soon.

Nina had no clue how long she sat there. *He* was back. Bile rushed to the surface, and she struggled for a moment before she bolted to the bathroom and threw up. After she got to her feet and leaned over the sink, rinsing out her mouth, Nina stared at her own reflection.

As if she watched herself from out of her own body, she could see the change settling over her. Any and all warmth left her gaze. No expression was left behind, either. No matter how hard she had tried, apparently she hadn't been able to outrun her past. For not only had it caught up to her, but it knew where she lived.

Merrick Stone. His sinister image floated before her. Eyes as cold as ice and twice as calculating. The man who'd pulled her into the world of the assassin.

The last time she'd seen him had been that fateful night in San Francisco. That had been the night she had realized she needed to get out of her current line of work, for she'd hesitated to make the kill. After that, Merrick and she had fought.

Damn it all! I thought he had died.

Fear of being found quickly changed into anger. She loved her life and didn't want to change it. Merrick was a man who used whatever was handy to get the results he wanted. As Nina stared at her reflection, a water droplet ran down from her temple, and she knew.

This time, one of them would die.

"Your mistake will be in thinking that I'm not as sharp as I used to be, Merrick." Lifting her chin, Nina sighed, acknowledging what was to come.

Jared's image flowed before her, and she left the bathroom. "That's it," she muttered. "I met him in San Francisco, as well."

Nina knew why she didn't remember. There was plenty from that night in San Francisco that she longed to forget, and the easiest way seemed to be for her to put the entire night out of her mind. And that action had resulted in forgetting her meeting Jared Buckman.

Her mood had soured as she poured herself some much needed coffee. Merrick was in town, and Jared could become a target. In fact, anyone around her could be. The thought of calling Dominique or William flashed through her mind very briefly before she shoved it to the side. This was her battle. She and Merrick had a long history, and no one knew him better than she did.

She alone would fight him.

And she would defeat him, once and for all.

Chapter Four

“You’ve been avoiding me Nina.”

Nina stilled her shudder. His voice made all the places she had tried to suppress come to life. It had been almost a week since she had spoken to him directly. With all that was going on with her trying to flush out Merrick she had thought it best to distance herself from Jared. She didn’t want to see him hurt. Merrick had no qualms about using others to get to you. Making sure she wasn’t at the café when he was around had been easy. Natalie had stepped in and ran the café easily without question. Nina took a breath and glanced at him. She bit her lip to stifle her whimper. On his sexy body a t-shirt and jeans should be declared unlawful and dangerous to the equilibrium.

Are you crazy to be pushing a man like that away?

It is for his own protection.

Protection for who. Please tell another huge whooper. You know you are more than able to protect him if needed from Merrick. This is just an excuse to distance yourself. Jared does things to you that make you afraid. I didn’t peg you for a coward.

Shut the hell up.

You know I am right. Stop being an ass and let things flow.

Nina suppressed the need to roll her eyes. She was really losing it to be arguing with her innerself. It was all true. Although it humbled her to admit it she was running from what he made her feel. Jared strode towards her with a purposeful gait. His movements reminded her of their one hot night together. The night she kept dreaming of. Nina stood to meet him coming from around the desk. They stopped almost touching each other. The intense look in his gaze made her breath catch.

“I’m sorry. I know we didn’t use protection but I promise you I’m clean. I had a physical a month ago and will show you the results. And if anything comes of us being together *I’ll be there Nina.*” Jared’s voice echoed the look in his eyes.

It took a moment for her to register what he had said. Her eyes widened as she realized they *hadn't* used anything the night they had been together. After the first time the need to have him had only intensified. It was as if she had lost all her senses. That was what had scared her the most. She could admit now in hindsight that she had left his bed at four in the morning because of it. The need to be with him and wake up in his arms was overwhelming. Now he was here and once again showing her what a caring man he was. She gulped at the concern and guilt in his gaze. Nina held in the pain she felt.

"No. No that's not it. I didn't even realize we didn't use anything. I'll show you my tests too." She swallowed and shook her head. "I'm not worried about getting pregnant."

"You're on some contraceptive."

She couldn't tell which he seemed to be more – disappointed or relived. Opting to believe it was relived she debated a moment then told the truth.

"An accident –" She paused as Merrick's face filled her mind.

She clenched her fist holding in the rage that filled her. After a few moments she continued, "made me unable to have children."

His quite perusal after her abrupt statement made her stomach clench.

"Ah, Nina. I'm sorry," Jared said softly and cupped her cheeks.

"It's okay. I've come to accept it," she replied in the same tone.

Jared studied her then hugged her close. "You keep so much bottled up, Nina."

She stiffened and went to pull away. He held her and glanced at her.

"I'm here if you ever need to let someone in."

Nina studied him in return. His uncanny knack for knowing there was more beneath what she showed people is what made her most afraid of being with him. She didn't know if she even could let someone in that close. Trust someone that much. Was it even worth it to continue whatever this is they were starting. Jared was bound to be hurt and disappointed when he realized she would not – could not be the woman he

expected. That happy, soft, settle down and let the man handle things sort of woman. Is he worth it to get more deeply involved? Jared smiled.

Yes. Yes he is. Even if it's just for a little time. She sure as hell was not a coward and wasn't someone to walk away from something that would push her beyond her comfort zone. Nina stepped closer to him and raised her head. He lowered his to meet her kiss. The softness made her knees go weak. Jared murmured then his arms tightened around her as the kiss changed. She whimpered at the carnality of his kiss. He was laying claim to her and she was enjoying every foray of his tongue.

"Uh um. Excuse me." There was amusement in the voice interrupting them.

Nina jerked but Jared held her kissing her then slowly releasing her. The wanton desire in his cobalt gaze made her pussy clench. She wanted him *now*. She leaned up for another kiss.

"Oh a show. Go Nina." The voice said again.

"Later." Nina said forgoing the kiss.

Turning her head she glared. Her gaze met topaz. She studied the woman in the doorway. An unrepentant grin curved full lips. A t-shirt and shorts covered a curvaceous body. The woman raised her hands and wiggled her fingers at Nina.

"You have such bad timing, Tahlia," Nina griped.

"My timing is impeccable. In time to see some hot make out session and before my eyeballs were burnt out by seeing you naked. Him on the other hand I don't mind." Tahlia Banks laughed.

"Don't make me hurt you," Nina growled.

"Okay, okay. I won't look... much." Tahlia rocked back on her sneaker clad feet.

"You're incorrigible." Nina rolled her eyes.

"I know and you love me for it." Tahlia winked.

Nina chuckled and stepped out of Jared arms going back behind her desk. She picked up her gym bag and glanced at Jared. He was staring between her and Tahlia.

"Jared this is Tahlia."

"Tahlia," Jared greeted warily.

"Hey there, sexy," Tahlia returned.

Jared lips twitched and he looked surprised. Nina stifled a sigh. She could guess why. The sideways and sometimes hostile looks and reactions of some of the Trescott Cove residents when they got around Jared were obvious. She could tell they bothered him but he ignored them. Nina smiled nastily. People had better stop looking at Jared like that when she was with him or they would answer to her. At the flash of protectiveness Nina frowned. How had he gotten under her guard so fast? Observing Tahlia and Jared bantering back and forth Nina was again taken with his sense of humor and easy going personality. If people would stop lumping him in the same category as his brother and get to know him they would see they were nothing alike.

Nina turned her attention to Tahlia. Tahlia knew all about what the other Buckman brother had done and would not judge Jared on that but on what he Jared was about. A feeling of being stared at made her look at Jared. The shock on his face made her glance at Tahlia suspiciously. The devilish grin Tahlia wore made her wonder what she had been telling Jared while she wasn't listening.

"You were banned from hockey for breaking Chad's nose." Jared sounded amused and awed all at once.

Nina glared at Tahlia. She shrugged.

"I didn't mean to hit him. He got in the way. I was aiming for Dominique." She defended.

"Dominique?"

"She would have ducked... probably... so I wasn't gonna actually hit her." She thought about it then amended, "I would have hit her somewhere else though."

"I didn't even realize you played for the Trescott League. I need to go to games." Jared laughed.

"I only got suspended this year because Jem got all pissy. Like she wasn't right there throwing punches too. At least until Chad got hurt then she went all mother bear crazy on me. She is one vicious woman when riled." Nina shook her head.

Jared laughed even harder. Nina chuckled and Tahlia joined in. It had been funny at the time too but she hadn't been laughing in face of Jem's wrath. The usually easygoing persona of Jem's went out the window. When Nina had received her suspension from hockey she had been livid. She enjoyed taking part in the various sports that was part of the Trescott League.

The Trescott League was the sports group in town where anyone could try out to join. Once you were accepted you could choose which sports you would take part in. It was all year round and you could choose to play or not based on the sports you enjoyed. There were a few men and women teams who competed against each other. They even mixed it up and the men and women combined as a mixed team to play against each other. They had a friendly rivalry going against the Savoy League. When Trescott team went up against the Savoy team either here or in Savoy the residents who watched the games would cheer for their team or jeer the rivals. It was a blast. It was one of the mixed types of games that resulted in her suspension. No matter how she tried to get back on the hockey team it wasn't happening. She had to be a spectator for hockey this year. Now hockey was over she was back.

"Nina, we're going to be late for baseball practice," Tahlia said.

Nina glanced at her watch and walked from behind the desk. She walked up to Jared and kissed him thoroughly then released him.

"Later, sexy." She winked.

"Definitely." Jared ran his hand over his moist lips.

Nina walked backwards away from him. She hit into something. A glance showed her Tahlia who was fanning herself and breathing hard. Nina rolled her eyes at her antics and pushed her out the door. She glanced back at Jared one last time then followed Tahlia down the hall. Nina waved at Natalie and went out the back door of the café. In moment she was in Tahlia's, silver Toyota Sequoia. Tahlia pulled out of the space and they merged with traffic on the way to the Trescott sports center.

"So, you and Jared Buckman. How long has that been going on? And why am I your *bestest* friend the last to know?" Tahlia asked.

"It was sudden. And not too long. You my *bestest* friend is not the last to know." Nina clasped her hands together and put them under her chin rocking back and forth.

Tahlia laughed and smacked her on the arm. Tahlia fiddled with the radio and tuned it to the local Trescott Cove radio station. The voice of local radio DJ, Ebony Harris and another friend of theirs came on.

This is for all you out there to groove to. Ebony's sultry voice said over the radio. A soft sexy jazz started to play.

"Does Ebony know?" Tahlia queried.

"Not yet," Nina replied.

"Oh boy. I can't wait to tell her I found out before she did. Hah, see I told Ebony I was the *bestest* friend all along. Now this is proof." Tahlia hooted.

Nina shook her head. "You are a nut. You both are equal *bestest* to me."

Tahlia pouted then smiled. "But I still knew about you and Jared first."

"Yes. You have a one track mind."

"I do." She nodded.

Nina chuckled then changed the subject. "So, have they announced who is going to be the designated officer in charge of the new fire house?"

Tahlia was the Lieutenant of the firefighters in Station One. A little over a year ago when the "Buckman" incident as it was called happened. There was another fire that had happened on the side of Trescott that was closer to where Nina's café was located. By the time the firefighters had put out the fire at Jem's store and came to the other fire it had blazed out of control. Luckily with the help of the Savoy Valley firefighters the Trescott Cove firefighters were able to contain it. After this incident Trescott town officials had moved quickly to decide they needed another fire station. The fire house had finally been completed on the location that was chosen and as far as Nina knew the recruitment for the station was also done. The only thing that hadn't been decided was who would be the designated officer in charge. She had prodded Tahlia to find out how it would be decided. Tahlia hadn't said much or even let on if she wanted the position. In Nina's opinion Tahlia would be great for the position.

Tahlia pulled into a space in the parking area of massive Trescott sports center. She locked off the SUV, released her seat belt then turned to face her. Nina released her seat belt also.

“Not yet.”

“Isn’t the station supposed to be open in three month’s? What are they waiting for? God, why are you so calm? The position –”

Tahlia cut her off. “I got the job.”

Nina eyes widened then she shrieked and hugged her. Tahlia laughed and hugged her tight. Nina pulled back a little and looked her friend.

“You deserve it, girl. My friend, the head firefighter in charge.”

“That’s Captain Banks to you.”

“Damn, you got promoted to. Captain Banks, sounds so official.” Nina rocked her head.

Tahlia laughed. “They haven’t officially announced yet. So don’t say anything.”

“I won’t. I am so proud of you. Hey, does Ebony know?” Nina asked.

Tahlia shook her head.

“Oh, I can rub her nose in it I knew first too. Boy will that piss her off. She hates not being in the know.” Nina released her and rubbed her hands together.

“You are so bad.” Tahlia smacked her on the arm.

“I know. So are you.”

They laughed together.

“Do you know all the spots for the fire house are filled? We’ve got a few new people moving to Trescott for position in the fire house and in the arson investigator’s office.” Tahlia had a weird smile on her face.

Nina’s eyes narrowed. “What is with that grin? What aren’t you telling me? You know something.”

Tahlia smiled widened then she said. “Let’s go before we’re late.”

Tahlia opened her car and got out. Nina got out and they walked toward the center. Tahlia pressed her keys and engaged the locks. Nina looked at the other arriving

members of the League. Spotting Jem and Chad she waved at them and blew Chad a kiss. Chad chuckled and Jem flipped her the bird. Nina took a deep breath and smiled. It was good to be back playing sports. They all walked to the doors and went inside. After a quick stop to change into her practice clothes, Nina went to outdoor area of the center where the baseball field was located. Putting down her bag Nina joined the others as they stretched to warm up. Absently she glanced around noting the people in the stands watching them. It was not that full since it was only a practice. The people in the stands for practice were family and friends of the players as well as die hard sports fanatics.

"Umm... I can't wait for our first game." Tahlia said.

Nina glanced at her where she stretching besides her.

"I know. I feel so out of shape since I missed Hockey."

"Serves you right," Jem said behind her.

Nina glanced over her shoulder at Jem. "You have something to say to me Jem."

"Yeah." Jem put her hand on her hips.

"Jem!" Chad called.

"Shut up Chad," Jem said sweetly patting him on his cheek.

Nina turned to face her. Jem walked up to her.

"You see that face." She gestured at Chad. "That is mine and no one but me is allowed to break his nose. Or any other part of his body."

"Hey," Chad said.

"Okay. I'll try not to break any more body parts. It is all for you." Nina's lips twitched.

Jem lips quivered and then they were hugging and laughing.

"Crazy women." Chad harrumphed.

"Leave those lunatic women alone Chad." A voice she recognized as Taggart Blade called.

"One of them is my wife I have to go home with her." Chad sighed.

"Hey." Jem released her and glared at him.

Chad kissed Jem's cheek and ran over to join Taggart, Alton, Brawich and the other men.

"You have to show them who is boss," Taggart instructed. "Ump."

Taggart grinned widely at Dominique who had slapped him over the head. Dominique gave him a look then walked over to them.

"You're in charge baby and I so know it." Taggart called after her.

Dominique was grinning as she strode toward Nina but her tone was snappish.

"And you better recognize."

When she reached the women they all high fived and glared at the men. The men blew kisses and made please forgive me gestures.

"Pitiful. Are we going to practice or what?" A silky voice asked.

Most of the women shuddered and turned to face William Chadwick. Nina stifled a chuckle at the reaction of the other women. It was amazing. Young, in between and old most women seemed all to have the same reaction to William. Nina glanced at Dominique and they both rolled their eyes. She glanced at William and he winked at her. Nina flipped him off. He wasn't charming her. William liked to interfere in her life and she wasn't having it. His smile widened. Ignoring him she went back to her stretching. The others continued to jeer at each other good naturedly.

"I guess you won't be needing a ride back with me." Tahlia's comment claimed her attention.

"What are you talking about? I came with you. Some kind of friend you are. Now you are ditching me. Wh-" Nina trailed off as she raised her head and locked gazes with cobalt blue.

She tried to remember how to breathe. Jared lowered his eyes. His look was like a physical touch as he glanced at her. Nina locked her legs resisting the urge to go over to him and kiss him senseless.

"What is he doing here?" Chad hissed.

"Do you need another broken nose Chad?" Nina asked sweetly and looked at his nose.

Chad eyes narrowed then he glanced at Jem who hadn't said a thing.

"What's up? No saying she can't."

"She can't but I'm tempted to. Stop being an ass Chad. Jared can be wherever he wants to. Let it go. It was his brother not him." Jem glanced at him. "Besides he isn't even aware of anyone else but Nina." Jem looked at Nina and winked. "It's a little hot in here." She laughed and walked away.

Chad glanced between Nina and Jared then followed her. Nina looked back at Jared. He was still staring at her. She licked her lips. He smiled a naughty grin.

"I'm ditching you Tahlia," Nina said huskily.

"Like there was any doubt." Tahlia laughed.

"Play ball." Called a voice.

Nina shook her head and went to her place. Rolling her shoulders she picked up the ball, waited for the signal then let her rip. In quick succession she got strike one, two and then three. She blew Chad a kiss as he cursed. Nina glanced at Jared. He nodded to her. A pleased feeling filled her. She returned her attention to the game and rolled her shoulders again. Yep, it was so good to be back. Noting who the other batter was Nina narrowed her eyes. It was a fifty/fifty chance she would be able to strike him out. Winding up she let it rip. The bat connected with the ball. Nina glanced at the ball knowing already he had knocked it out of the park. Turning back she glared at William. He smiled then sauntered around all the bases. His team whopped and hollered. Reaching home William glanced at her then went back to the dugout. Nina harrumphed then got back to pitching.

Jared swallowed a groan as Nina pitched again. If anyone would have told him baseball uniforms could be so sexy he would have called them a liar. Yet here he was hard as a rock and doing everything in his power to not go onto the field and drag Nina somewhere private. He shifted to cover his erection and noticed the looks he was getting. Ignoring them as he usually did he returned his attention to Nina. She got another strike out. She was good. He hadn't known she was part of the League. He

enjoyed sports but wasn't a diehard fan and didn't have time to go to the games played by the League.

He'd heard about the League of Trescott and Savoy's rivalry. It was as well known as the 'The Rivalry' between Nina and Darryl Blade, the chef at Rissablu. He hadn't really went or even taken notice of either. He was usually buried in work and since over a year ago he was persona non grata to some of the other Trescott Cove residents he didn't pay it any attention. Before the whole debacle with his brother most people only knew him as the busy yet nice fellow who was a loner. Now after everything he was more well known and not in a good way.

As he continued to watch Nina and her teammates he wondered what else he had missed. The sight of Nina in her baseball clothing was something he defiantly should never have missed. He was so used to being on the outskirts of things in Trescott he had missed a lot. Nina stretched and he shifted again as his erection became even more hard. Nina's team came in he realized that both teams were made up of men and women. They were playing mixed today.

William Chadwick took the mound and rolled his shoulders. He glanced at Jared as he threw his first pitch. Jared returned the look. He didn't know how to take William. He didn't seem to be one of those who had an issue with Jared yet lately he had seemed cool. The interaction he had witnessed between William and Nina gave him a clue to what was going on. There was something there intimate between them.

Jared leaned back and smiled at William. It wasn't a friendly grin. William raised an eyebrow then smiled. Jared blinked. He had never seen such a genuine affable grin on William's face. At least not directed at him. William nodded at him then went back to the game. Baffled at what had just happened Jared absently watched the game as it progressed. His instincts prodded him that Nina had secrets but with William they screamed bloody murder. Jared couldn't figure out why people in town couldn't see that both William and Nina hid behind a facade. Jared glanced around and figured they were not the only ones. Lots of people in Trescott were more than they seemed.

He leaned back as the realization dawned he had always been able to know when there was more than meets the eye with people. Jared frowned. He had known something was going on with his brother and he was hiding secrets yet he hadn't pushed him. Jared rubbed his hand over his heart. To this day he regretted it. If he had only asked his brother would still be alive and all the shit that happened with Jem wouldn't have. He glanced at the laughing Jem and Chad guilt eating at him. If only. Jared pushed his thoughts away. It happened and there was nothing he could do to change it.

Jared stood as he saw the game was finished. He walked down to the fence. Nina was talking with Tahlia. She waved bye then ran up to him.

"Come to give me a ride." A sultry smile was on her succulent lips.

"If you're coming to my house," he replied huskily.

"Let me get changed and we can go."

"Don't change," he blurted out.

Nina raised an eyebrow. Jared silently cursed himself. He knew he was blushing. He leaned closer to her and she came close.

"You're sexy in you uniform," he whispered.

Nina shuddered and chuckled. "You have a uniform fetish."

"Not until today and with you," he countered.

Nina lowered her lids and smiled. She turned and sashayed towards the locker area. Jared growled watching her ass in her pants.

"She's quite a woman." A deep bassy voice said.

Recognizing the voice Jared stiffened. He glanced at the man standing next to him. Startling blue eyes studied him.

"No need to be uptight, Buckman. It's not like I'm here to arrest you." Ulrich Willis stated.

Jared could hear the unstated 'yet'. Something made him respond.

"I'm tired of being harassed about what my brother did."

Ulrich narrowed his eyes. "No one is harassing you Buckman. If you would get that damn chip off your shoulder and head out of your ass maybe then you would realize not everyone is your enemy. I know which Buckman messed up." Ulrich shook his head walking away. He stopped then came back. "And just like you don't like being judged and lumped in with others I don't appreciate it."

Ulrich turned away. Jared caught his arm. Ulrich looked at his hand then at him. Jared released him.

"Look I'm sorry. It's as if I have some sort of sign on me. People act like I'm my brother and I am not."

"I know. Lots of us know. But did you ever think people aren't seeing you as your brother but trying to figure out who *you* Jared Buckman is. Heck before all this I didn't even remember you. You're such a loner." Ulrich put up his hand warding off his protest. "I'm not saying some close-minded people don't blame you. They probably do but not the whole town is against you. Like the way you seem to believe. Most people are curious about you. Yes your brother's crap made people notice you." Ulrich studied him. "And you probably hate it but now you have to live with it. Hell you might make some friends too if you weren't so damn prickly."

Jared gapped then glared. "Prickly. I'm not prickly. You make me sound like a sissy."

"If that's what you want to be who am I to say different." Ulrich lips twitched.

Jared sighed. "I have reason to be *reserved*." He glared still bristling at the prickly crack. "Why would you care if I make friends anyway?"

"I watched how you stood up after what your brother did. I know it wasn't easy but you did. Despite the nastiness of it all. You got my respect for not shirking what your brother did but it wasn't your fault. And you need to stop being the Martyr and realize that."

Jared couldn't believe it. Ulrich was right. He had been so busy feeling guilty and defensive he didn't see not everyone was blaming him. Jared cleared his throat.

"So what now. We hug and get all girly that we are friends."

"We're not friends. We have to know each other first. And I can already see you're going to be a pain in the ass." Ulrich harrumphed then continued, "We have a weekly poker game on Friday's. It's at my house this week. Come on by and maybe you can start becoming friendly with people." Ulrich rattled off the address then looked him up and down. "Unless you want to continue being a prickly prick."

He smiled baring his teeth turned and then walked away. Jared watched him as he greeted various people. He could see the respect for Ulrich. Ulrich was the head of the police force but Jared knew it was more than that why people respected him. The tentative offer by Ulrich was a surprise. Jared would make sure he went to the poker game.

"Ready." The sultry tone he knew so well said behind him.

He glanced back at Nina who stood just behind him. She was still dressed in her uniform. He turned to her and kissed her. She murmured and leaned against his body. Jared slowly released her from his kiss. Nina eyes were heated.

"Take me home," Nina demanded.

Jared smiled. He took her bag from where it had fallen on the ground and placed it over his shoulder. He put his arm around Nina's waist and walked with her towards the front of the arena.

"What were you and Ulrich discussing so intently?" She asked.

"Me being an ass."

Nina frowned looking at him in question. He explained.

She laughed then replied. "That's Ulrich. He's a hell of a man."

"How well do you know him?" Jared asked.

Nina gave him an enigmatic look then responded. "We sort of knew each other before I came to Trescott and since I came here we became friends. He is great at sports. Both he and Jenisha, his fiancée, are part of the League. He had to work and couldn't make practice. He was probably picking up Jenisha. He's good people."

"Were you ever involved, privately?" he asked.

He opened the truck door and seated her before going around and getting in. Nina leaned over and kissed him hungrily. Jared grunted and returned her kiss. Nina leaned back and looked at him.

“There is no need to be jealous. I want you Jared. The past is past. “

“So you were?” Jared frowned.

“I never said that. Does it really matter? I’m here with you.” Nina leaned back and buckled her seat belt.

Jared looked at her and decided it didn’t. He started the truck and joined the line of cars leaning the arena. A while later he pulled up in front of his house. He got out and took her bag with him. Opening her door he helped her out. Nina kissed him softly then walked forward. She stopped and glanced at his house.

“Oh, I didn’t notice before. It is the model you have in your office. It is beautiful.”

Jared smiled. He was proud of the oasis he had created. His home. He glanced at Nina. A home he created hoping someday he would be able to share it with a special woman. Nina turned back to him and smile.

“So are you going to help me undress?” she said temptingly.

Jared mouth went dry as she walked away. Her ass bobbing perfectly displayed in her pants. She went up the stairs to his wraparound porch. She paused and glanced back over her shoulder.

“Are you coming?” she called.

Not yet but soon. He ran up the stairs. Nina laughed running to the front door. She turned resting her back against the door. Jared walked up to her and kissed her hungrily. Nina moaned and kissed him in return. He fumbled but was finally able to open the door. She stumbled back breaking their kiss. He followed her. Absently he kicked her bag inside the door then closed it. He stalked over to her. With quick movements he opened her pants and pushed them and her panties off her hips. Nina toed off her baseball cleats then kicked off her pants. He unbuckled his belt and fought with the button. Nina pushed his hands away and did it herself.

"Off, off," she growled.

She pushed off his pants and briefs. He kicked off his shoes and pants. Lifting her Jared backed her into the wall and impaled her in one thrust. He grunted and she moaned. Gripping her ass he stroked in and out of her moist wetness. The harsh sounds she made in her throat egged him on. He kissed her then licked down the side of her face to her neck. He growled and continued to take her hard. Nina nails scored his skin through his shirt. Crowding her so she was propped against the wall he moved his hips in sharp thrust. He grabbed the top of her shirt and pulled. Button flew as she gasped. He nuzzled down between her breasts. Impatiently he unhooked the front clasp of her bra. Nina purred. Jared smiled then leaned in suckling her nipple. She shuddered then pushed at him.

Confused he released her breast and looked at her. Nina grabbed the neck of his shirt and pulled hard. His buttons pinged. She ran her hands over his chest then dug in with her nails. He groaned. Nina tightened her legs around him then reached up over her head searching. She pulled up then pushed down. Blearily he looked up. She was gripping the ornate coat holder for leverage. He covered her hands with his and matched her movements.

"Ja...red... fu... har....Yessssssssssssssss." She hissed.

She held him tight within her heated walls. Her internal muscles gripping him, rippling along his length as he continued to move. She undulated against him pulling up and pushing adding depth to the friction they created. Jared fought to keep the release he felt tightening his balls at bay. Pushing deeper he moved in the sensual rhythm they were creating. They were in sync. Up and down. Swirl and clench. With each stroke his legs got weaker. Each time with Nina got hotter and hotter. She scorched him. Brought him pleasure that he never expected. Her legs tightened around him. He laced his fingers with hers. Nina held on her short nails dug into his skin.

"Go over, Jared." Nina's decadent whisper filled his ear as she pressed her lips against the shell of his ear.

"Ninaaaaaaaaaa!" he roared.

His cock pulsed erupting deep within her silken flesh. Nina moaned and shuddered coming. Her cream coated his cock. Her inner walls gripped him tight as her pleasure went on and on. His shaft continued to release with each of her orgasms. Their harsh breaths mingled.

“Someday we’ll make in the door and to bed first.” Finally able to speak Jared breathed out.

“Maybe.” Nina chuckled.

Jared joined her then kissed her briefly. He released her hands then held her firmly as he took her to the stairs and walked up with her in his arms. Nina murmured and snuggled into his arms. Jared tightened his arms around her and kissed her forehead. At the top of the stairs he went right to his bedroom then inside. He laid her upon the comforter, and blanketed her body with his. Soon they were moving together towards completion.

* * * * *

Nina got out of her car whistling. She went around to the passenger side and took the warm pan from the seat. Snagging the strap of her handbag she put it over her shoulder. Closing the door with her hip she pressed her key fob to set her alarm. Still whistling she went up the stairs to Jared house. They had spent most of their free time together these last few weeks. They usually met at the café and either went out somewhere before going back to his house or just hung out at his house. No matter what they did they ended up at his home. Reaching the door she rang the bell. Instinct made her move to the side. A sound whizzed by her ear. Nina glanced toward the sound. Her blood went cold at the sight of the knife embedded in the frame of the door. In a simultaneous movement she shifted her pan to her other hand and pulled the knife out of the door. She flung it the direction the knife had come from. Nina bent low and glanced around. The sound of the door made her straighten quickly. She pushed Jared inside quickly closing the door behind her.

“Nina wh-“

She cut him off kissing him urgently. He held her. Nina looked at him and smiled. Jared blinked smiled then quickly frowned.

"Nina, what is wrong?"

"Nothing. Couldn't wait to see you."

"Your eyes look so cold." Jared ran his hand next to her eye.

Nina turned her head and kissed his palm. "Just a hectic day. I couldn't wait to have dinner with you." She looked at him and frowned deliberately. "Shoot. I forgot my cell in the car. Let me go get it. Oh here put this in the oven to heat up." She gave him the pan.

Jared frowned. She made a shooing motion of her hands. He went looking back at her. Glancing around the corner to make sure he had was in the hall on his way to the kitchen. Nina dropped her bag on the table and ran to the door. She had seconds to reach the area before Jared got in sight of any windows. In a second her training kicked in. She went out the door low, pulling out her knife strapped high on her thigh as she ran along the length of the porch. She vaulted off the side over the railing and hit the ground running. In quiet movements she moved through the flowers and foliage Jared had set up. Studying the ground she tracked him. Reaching the area she knew he had been she knelt. She touched the blood on the leaves then glanced at the bloodied ground. From the amount of blood she knew it was only a nick from the knife.

Hot rage bubbled in her. Merrick had brought his evilness here. She figured he would but now he had it bothered her more than she thought it would. Although she knew he was gone. She kept searching the area to make sure he was gone. Caution was one of the first things she had learned from him. Sure he was gone Nina returned to house. Being through she made a stop by her car and did a quick search of it to make sure it wasn't tampered with. She checked Jared also. Merrick would want to be up close and personal when he tried to kill her. He liked the personal touch. Nina walked slowly up the stairs. Stopping before the door to go inside Nina glimpsed the look of death on her face. It was a look she never wanted to have to use again. Taking a breath she closed her eyes then steadied herself. When she opened her eyes she looked as she

usually did to everyone else. Nice affable Nina. She hoped it would fool Jared. She opened the door and went inside.

Hours later Nina rode up the elevator to her condo's floor. It was after four in the morning. She had snuck out of Jared bed again. All night she could tell Jared knew something was wrong but he didn't push when she asked him to leave it alone. They had a pleasant dinner and hot sex. She had left him after making sure no one was lurking around his house. She couldn't get comfortable. The idea of Merrick having the audacity to come after her so sloppily only made her even more furious. It was a test to see if she still had it. He had expected her to catch the knife before it hit the doorframe. The old Nina would have. She could imagine his spilt second of arrogant laughter that she hadn't before she had thrown the knife and nicked him. A grim smile curled her lips. The laughter had cost him some blood. In her estimation not nearly enough.

She was no longer the old Nina but after cutting him he would not underestimate the new Nina. And she would be more vigilant. Since she hadn't heard from him these last few weeks she had gotten complacent. Not anymore. Nina put her key in the lock and opened her door. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. In a swift move she pulled her knife and the gun she had under her jacket pointing them dead center of his forehead. Narrowing her eyes she watched the man sitting in her living room as if he owned the place. A nasty smile curled her lips.

Chapter Five

Nina watched him steadily. He didn't even bother to raise his bent head or look at her. Even though he hadn't, she knew he knew exactly what weapons she had pointed at him.

"This is really a bad time to be breaking into my home, William," Nina warned.

William still didn't glance at her, or alter his relaxed position in the chair he was sitting in. She studied him more closely. All her instincts were screaming at her to throw her knife. Suddenly, he looked up. The barely suppressed rage in his pale grey gaze made her take a cautious step back. She had only seen that look once before, and the aftermath hadn't been pretty.

"Do you know why *that night* in San Francisco I didn't kill you, Nina?" His voice was soft in contrast to his look.

His tone was even softer than the way he usually spoke. She had heard many women say that his voice made them imagine all manner of sin. If these same women could hear him now, they would run as fast as they could and pray he never found them. Nina tamped down the fear she felt coating her throat. William was one of the few people who could make her terrified with just a few words.

In a voice far steadier than she was feeling, she replied, "No. You never spoke of why you spared me. "

William smiled. It was even more chilling than his eyes. Nina stifled a shudder. He leaned back in the chair and rested his hands against the arms. Her tension ratcheted up. He was trying to appear harmless. She had done the same many times before making the kill. One moment, he was sitting, and the next, he had moved so fast toward her that she barely registered he had even moved. Nina turned out of the way. She was too late. His hand closed around her throat, and he pushed her backward, hard, until her back slammed against the door. Instinct made her raise her hand holding the knife. Effortlessly, he disarmed her, throwing the knife. Distantly, she heard the

thud as it embed into a wall. She turned her gun, and he blocked it with his body, taking that from her too. He slipped the chamber of bullets out one handed and let the gun fall on the ground. William didn't ease his hold on her throat. His eyes reflected her death. He leaned against the side of her face and spoke in her ear.

"I knew you all were coming that night, but not how many. I thought you were coming for me, and I was ready, no matter who was coming. I never expected-" He paused, and his voice went softer almost soundless, "I never expected *she* was the target. You could have taken her out at any time. Yet you didn't take the kill. That's why I spared you."

"I didn't save her. She died anyway," Nina said thickly.

"But not by your hand. Not by you. I might as well have killed her myself. She died because of *me. Me.*" The pain under his tone made tears prick her eyes.

Nina turned her head and looked into his grey gaze. The rage was still there, but so was the pain. She reached up, touching his hand on her throat. William turned his hand and gripped hers. Memories of that night flooded her in a fast-forward slide show.

The music was beautiful as she located her target in the ballroom. The first close-up view of the woman who was her target and William Chadwick surprised her. They were such an odd couple. The woman was so willowy and innocent, while he looked seemingly harmless. She wasn't fooled. She had seen his dossier and knew he cultivated the look. It was a facade. Watching them, she couldn't figure out why the woman was the target and not William. As the night progressed, she made it close enough to the woman for the kill and to be gone before anyone was aware. Something made her stop and hesitate. The feeling made her walk away and seek out Merrick. Her refusal to complete the assignment shocked even her. Suddenly, it seemed as if she grew a conscience.

Merrick readily agreed and said they would abort, then walked away. The sense of relief she experienced was short lived, as some instinct made her know it was too easy. Frantic, she searched for Merrick. When she stumbled onto the balcony, she was too late. The woman was already dead. William was rocking the woman in his arms and looked up at her. The rage in his

eyes was like nothing she had seen. In that moment, she knew why the woman was the target. She was William Chadwick's weakness. His love. She ran from the look in his eyes and went inside looking for Merrick. He was laughing and dancing on the dance floor with some woman. She grabbed the first man she could find. The man's cobalt blue eyes were startling. The intensity with which he looked at her made her feel as if he was seeing into her. Seeing the real her. When she pulled her gaze from his, Merrick was gone. Abruptly, she left the man and went searching for Merrick.

He was waiting for her in one of the antechambers with the rest of the team they arrived with. She cursed herself for being so stupid. She usually worked alone or with Merrick, but she let him talk her into working with a team. His excuse that it was a special assignment sounded plausible, since she knew of William Chadwick. Merrick, in his arrogance, told the others he would handle the traitor. His words cut. She foolishly thought they meant something more to each other. Shutting it away, she removed her knives and prepared to kill. They fought. Viciously.

She was ready to die. Then, as she lay bleeding from the deep wound in her abdomen Merrick smirked and jeered. A burst of energy came over her. She rose up, stabbed him and pulled him onto the balcony off the room. She whispered in his ear. 'I've told you your need to be a showman would get you killed one day. And that day is today.' She sunk her knife deeper then threw him off the balcony. Holding her side to stem the blood she already knew she was dead. With a grim smile she went back inside the room.

The rest of the team met her and attacked. She started dispatching them one by one but knew it was a losing battle. As she started to fall she heard the weirdest sound – a roar of rage that she thought would make the room crumble. Blearily she saw the door buckle and men and women flooded the room. All of them except one stopped by the door. William started taking out the people in the room who came to kill, one by one. They rushed him en masse but no one was a match for him. With such a minimum of movement, he made all of them look like amateurs. She thought the reports of him being invincible were a myth. Yet she was viewing it with her own eyes. When everyone who came with her was dead, William stood breathing in and out, then turned to her. She knew he would kill her. Even on her best day, she was no match for him.

Pride made her get to her feet. Swaying, she met him. William raked her with those pale gray eyes and asked in a soft voice, "Do you still want to be an assassin?"

She looked around the room at the others who came with her then turned on her. Then the sight of William holding the woman filled her thoughts. She shook her head. William nodded then turned from her. Her legs buckled, unable to hold her anymore. William turned and picked her up. He carried her to the door and told a woman to clean up the mess. A lyrical St. Thomain - accented voice said something she couldn't understand as she passed out.

Nina's thoughts returned to the present as she looked at William. The rage she had hoped to never see again up close and personal was right in her face.

"The person who hired us is the one to blame. Not you."

William glared at her. "And when I find who hired you, I will make them pay."

There was a resolve in his voice that left no doubt. After all they had been through since that night, it was the one thing she wished she could have told him. Who hired them? She had no clue. Merrick would have known. But until recently, she'd thought he was dead. Realization dawned as she figured out why William was bringing all this up. Guilt ate at her. In hindsight, she now knew she should have told him.

"Wil--"

"No, Nina. Say nothing. I'm this close to taking out my anger on you. When I can think clearly, I might be able to see that you've done what you felt you had to do. Kept secret the one lead I have to"--he paused, then continued-- "find this person I've been searching for. I know you and Merrick have some unfinished business." His look was steady and determined. "But I have business with Merrick Stone also. If you find him before I do, get me the name, then smoke the bastard. Make it hurt."

William raised their laced fingers to his lips and kissed her hand.

He smiled, a tender grin. "Trying to go up against a crazy man by yourself is not a good idea, no matter how bad ass you are. You of all people should know how dangerous Merrick is. He's playing with you, trying to make you afraid. He doesn't know you that well. You eat fear alive. I love you, Nina. " His look went hard. "But if you ever pull a stunt like this again, I'll kill you myself."

He kissed her hand again, stepped back, and motioned for her to get out of the way. Nina shook her head and moved to the side.

"You are one frightening man, William Chadwick," she said.

"I know." He winked at her.

William opened the door. Nina wanted to stop him, but didn't. The rage was still in his eyes. The rigid, careful way he held his body made her very cautious around him. He closed the door quietly behind him. Nina watched the door a moment, then went to the phone and picked it up. She dialed a number. It rang once and was picked up.

"Ziva, some--"

"Fuck you, Nina." The lilt of Ziva Jackson's St. Thomian accent was even more pronounced.

Nina winced and sighed. It looked as if William had already called to tell the troops. And now she had amends to make to a few people. She shuddered to think of Dominique and Hunter's reactions.

"Ziv--"

"Fuck you, Nina," Ziva repeated.

"Fuck you, too, Ziva. If you would let me tell you, Will--"

"We've already got him covered. He's on his way home with Symond and Barkin. They'll make sure he's okay. Unlike you. How could you not tell him? You let him be blindsided by this." Ziva breathed harshly, then said in a cool tone, "Leave me the hell alone. I can't promise I won't hurt you for this. Not now."

"Ziva, I'm sorry," Nina said, her voice thick.

"I don't give a fuck. Do you know what that son of a bitch did?" Ziva demanded. Somehow, she knew Ziva was talking about Merrick. She was afraid to know.

"He sent William a postcard that said 'Wish you were here in hell'. A postcard with the picture of *her body*, just after she died, on it. You should have told him so he would know to be prepared for something." Ziva's voice got cooler and cooler.

In that second, Nina realized how close she had come to dying. It was a testament to William's control that he hadn't hurt her. Nina bit her lip and closed her eyes. It was just like Merrick. He liked to taunt and torture people. He believed himself to be a showman. She could only imagine how William had felt when he saw it.

"God, Ziva. I'm sorry."

"You should be," Ziva said coldly.

"Take care of him," she said.

"I'll take my watch later, but for now I am watching someone."

"Who?" Nina demanded.

"The man you've been doing the horizontal mamba with. William wanted to make sure no one you care about gets hurt," Ziva said in an expressionless voice.

She felt even worse. It was just like William. Despite it all, he wanted to make sure everyone he cared about was protected. And knowing William, he had asked Ziva to keep an eye on Jared. That Ziva had agreed showed how much she not only cared for and respected William, but also Nina. Ziva never did anything she didn't want to.

"Thank you, Ziva."

"Fuck you, Nina. You have a long way to go to make this right," Ziva replied in that same expressionless voice.

"I'll work on something to make it right."

"You want to make it right?"

"Yes," Nina replied.

"If you get to him first, make him hurt *a lot* before you kill him."

"Done," Nina promised.

Ziva hung up. Nina replaced the phone gently. She walked to the chair William had been sitting in and dropped down. Nina covered her mouth with her hands, then laced them under her chin. She would keep her promise to Ziva and William. Long after the sun came up, Nina continued to sit in the chair. The phone broke the silence. She reached over and answered.

"Nina."

As the person spoke, her eyes widened. Hanging up, Nina swore and got up.
"God, I don't need this now."

Days later, Nina still didn't know what had brought her to this.

"Nina, I don't need a babysitter. I can figure my own way around Trescott Cove. Hell, I'm going to be living here," an exasperated voice said.

Nina glanced up from the paperwork she was trying to finish up. She met eyes similar to her own. Niccele Osborne, her sister, blew out a breath and slumped in the chair in front of her desk. Nina clenched her fist. A few weeks ago, when Tahlia had smiled that smile that meant she was up to no good, Nina should have pushed her on what was going on. She had been so distracted with all that was going on with Merrick and Jared, she had forgotten about it. At least until she got the call a few days ago from Niccele, asking her if she wanted to come over to her house for dinner. Since Niccele lived in Chicago she had replied that was a long way for dinner. Niccele had said not really, she was living about fifteen minutes away and Nina should come over so she could explain. Knowing her sister wasn't prone to flights of fantasy, Nina knew she wasn't going to like what she heard. She was right. She hadn't.

Not only did Niccele actually have a house in Trescott, she already had a job as a firefighter in the new fire station. Tahlia had known. Niccele had even admitted William had helped with her relocation. Found her a house for her needs and so on. Nina couldn't even scream at him for it. Not after how he'd looked the last time she had seen him. But Tahlia she had let have it. Now she not only had to worry about Jared, she had to think about her sister too. Keeping Niccele close under the guise of showing her around was what she could come up with. She knew it wouldn't hold, but she was trying.

"Have you spoken to Nash yet?" Niccele asked.

The smile on her face made her uneasy.

"No, I've called his cell and house a few times but he hasn't called me back yet. Spoke with the kids at the house. Why?"

Niccele shrugged. "It's not my news to tell."

Nina groaned and put her heads in her hand. Her usually stable family who lived far, far away were all of a sudden up close and keeping secrets.

Niccele chuckled. "Poor Nina, not able to control everything. You should let people in."

Nina raised her head sharply. "What do you mean?"

"You keep everything bottled up. Everyone at a distance. Even that scrumptious man you're involved with." Niccele shrugged again.

Nina sat up, not saying anything.

Niccele spoke again. "Hey, instead of babysitting me, why don't you spend some time with him?"

Nina's lips twitched. If she was having unexpected family drama, Jared was having a boat load. Both his sisters had shown up in Trescott the day after Niccele. Lexi, his older sister, also had a job in the new fire station, and a home. A town house to be exact. Sara, his younger sister, had a job in the TCPD--Trescott Cove Police Department--and a town house a few doors down from her older sister.

When she had told Jared about her sister, he had chuckled. It was just desserts when, the next day, the shoe was on the other foot. He wasn't laughing when his two sisters showed up out of the blue. Nina sighed. Between all the family things she hadn't gotten to see him alone. They had all gotten together for dinner. Their sibs had fun retelling how they had pulled off their move without Jared or Nina knowing. Jared's sister's accomplice for the move was Ryker.

Those damn Chadwicks.

"Call Jared. I'm going to explore a little and get some unpacking done," Niccele said as she stood.

Nina opened her mouth. Niccele gave her what she called "the big sister look." Nina closed her mouth, pursing her lips. Niccele smiled and came around the desk. She kissed her on the cheek, then patted it.

"Call your man and have some fun."

She strode toward the door. Nina smiled as she watched her sister's confident stride. Niccele was accustomed to have her way.

"He's not my man!" Nina called.

"Yeah, yeah. Keep telling yourself that." Niccele waved her hand in the air. "See you tomorrow, or better yet, in a few days. Call him."

Niccele glanced back at her, then went out the door. Nina shook her head and placed a call. After making sure someone would keep an eye on Niccele, Nina leaned back. She smiled and stood. Quickly she got her bag and went out to the café. Gathering what she needed, she left it by the counter, then went outside. A few minutes later, she strode into J&R Construction. Not seeing the receptionist, she walked down the hall to Jared's office. Reaching the doorway, she observed the man.

He was bent over his draft table. His hair was in sexy disarray. Jared glanced over at her. A smile curved his lips.

"Hey there." He turned on his stool to face her.

Nina smiled and strolled over. She kissed him, putting her hands around his neck. Slowly she released his lips.

"I've come to steal you away for a decadent night of pleasure. Pleasure of your taste buds. Then maybe I'll seduce you and have my wicked way with your body." She punctuated each word with a kiss.

"Oh yeah. Give me a few to put this stuff away, then I am all yours." Jared winked.

She kissed him once more, then walked away to let him finish up. A few minutes later they were on their way. They made a quick detour to Blue Moon Café to pick up the bag she had put her stuff in, and then they went to his truck. Nina relaxed against the seat and watched him drive. Before she knew it, they were at his house. She unpacked the bag, and then got to work. She put Jared to work cutting vegetables while she got the rest of the meal together. She browned the meat for the stir fry. A ringing sound came from her hip. Unhooking her cell, she saw the number.

"I have to take this. Keep an eye on this for me."

Jared nodded, and she walked quickly to the glass door, opened it, and went outside on the porch. Keeping a cautious eye out she opened the phone.

“Nash, I’ve been trying to reach you.”

Nash laughed, then answered, “Yeah. I got your messages.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“Nope. Deal with it. Niccele is there and not leaving. Christ, Nina. We’re your family. You keep us at such a distance. Let us in.”

Nina blinked. It was almost the same thing Niccele had said. Heck, even William. Nina closed her eyes. After her former profession, she’d had to relearn not to watch everyone suspiciously. She had been so busy trying to keep things bottled up, she had pushed people away without realizing it.

“Besides, Niccele isn’t the only Osborne moving close to you.” Nash sounded amused.

“Oh God. Please tell me you’re not moving to Trescott, too.”

“I’m thinking of it. But I don’t want to uproot the kids. Since the incident last year when I visited, Trescott Cove Hospital has offered me a job. It’s hard being here.” Nash’s laugh was soft and bitter.

Nina winced. Nash had lost his wife of over twenty years about a year ago in a freak accident. It was hard to believe they had met at seventeen and stayed together all that time. They had been so in love. She had offered him and the kids a place to stay for a few weeks to recover. They had come, and she had helped them any way she could. The incident Nash mentioned and downplayed whenever it was brought up was that he’d saved a child’s life. He had been in the park with the kids when a child had been run down. If it wasn’t for him, the child would be dead. He refused to accept credit for his heroics, saying it was his job. Just what he did every day as a trauma doctor.

“If you need to move, do it. The kids will be fine.”

“My little angels, you mean.” Nash chuckled.

Nina laughed. Her nieces were well behaved, but very outspoken. She didn't know how Nash and his late wife did it. Three sets of twin girls, ages twenty, ten and eight. When she visited, it was interesting to see how they worked it.

"Only two sets of those angels live at home. You can put the house on the market and don't have to wait for it to sell. Just come here. Summer's coming, and by the time it's done, the kids will be settled and ready to start school." Nina was earnest.

Nash was silent, then said, "I'll think about it. Anyway, I wasn't the one I was talking about moving there. Raina and Riley are. There was a bidding war for Raina between Cerebus Eclipse and Renegade. But she liked Cerebus Eclipse's R&D facilities and took their offer. Well, actually Riley will be moving to the town next door. Riley will be working as a trauma surgeon at Savoy Valley General."

She could hear the pride in his voice. Nash's two oldest twins were geniuses. Their IQ was off the charts from the time they were young. They had excelled in school, and now they had graduated. Nina smiled. She loved all her nieces and was proud of them.

"Even more reason to move here, to be close to them."

Nash was silent, then demanded, "Who are you, pod person, and what have you done with my sister?"

Nina laughed, then sobered. "I like the idea of having family near. You need a change, Nash. Make the move."

Nash was again silent, then sighed. "I will."

"Good. How soon can you get here?"

"I need at least a few months. Have to work things out." Nash laughed.

"Do you need some money until you sell the house? Help finding a house or something?"

"Nah, I'm good. William can help me find a place," Nash replied.

Nina narrowed her eyes at the suppressed laughter in Nash's voice.

"Damn Chadwick," Nina said good-naturedly.

Nash laughed. Nina joined him. William had become a part of her family. Her siblings loved him. Interfering man.

“Shit. We have a trauma coming. I have to go.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, Nina. A man came by the ER a few weeks ago and asked for me. When I got there, he mentioned he knew you.”

Nina’s blood ran cold. “What was his name?”

“Merrick. He had a knife wound, and I treated him.”

“Nash, be careful.”

“Nina, who do you think you’re talking too?” Nash asked quietly.

Nina blinked. She sometimes forgot her brother was an ex-Army ranger. He had good instincts.

“I’m only telling you because he wanted me to tell you he said hi. I don’t know what’s going on, but the vibe I get off this man is bad news. I called the cops, but he was gone by the time I went back. You be careful, Nina.”

Nash knew better than to ask her any questions about what was going on. He had learned that years ago.

“I will. And Nash, if he comes back and asks for you, call the police and don’t go near him.”

“I will, sis. Gotta go.” He hung up.

Nina pressed the button to disconnect the call. Then she changed her mind and called to set up protection for Nash. After she was through, she looked up at the twilight sky, wondering how many more people she would put in danger because of her past. Sighing, she went inside. Closing the door behind her, she smiled as she glanced at Jared cooking at the stove.

“I didn’t know you could cook.”

“I can do a little something, something.” Jared looked at her and winked.

She walked over to him.

“Are you okay?” He studied her.

Nina pushed away the worry. "I'm good. Have more family invading."

"More?" His eyes widened in mock horror.

She laughed and bumped him with her shoulder. "Behave."

"If I must." He pouted.

She kissed him. Jared laughed. She filled him in on her conversation with Nash, not mentioning Merrick. Jared laughed even more. Nina rolled her eyes and took over the cooking.

Jared watched Nina finish up their meal. There was worry in her demeanor. She kept putting him off that everything was okay. Yet he could tell it wasn't. He had been giving her space and time to tell him, but she wasn't.

"Let's have some supper, and then it's on." Nina gave him a sexy look.

Seeing her looking so playful, he hated to ruin her mood. *Tomorrow I'll push her to tell me.*

Nina plated their food, and then they went to the table. After a scrumptious dinner and dessert, he shooed her out, taking over clean up duty. Drying the last dish, he turned to go look for Nina. As he went down the hall to the living room, he saw most of the lights were off except those going upstairs. He went up the stairs, shutting off the upstairs lights as he went. Reaching his bedroom, he stopped in the doorway. He swallowed hard as he took in the sight of the luscious woman lying before him.

Nina stretched, arching her naked body, showing off all her curves. The apex of her mound drew his gaze. She shifted her legs opening them, giving him a glimpse of her succulent slit. He wanted her.

"This time we made it to bed," Nina purred.

Jared glanced up, startled, then laughed. He stopped abruptly. Nina ran her hand down between her breasts, over her ribcage and the soft mound of her belly, then between her thighs. She moaned as her fingers sank into where he wanted to be buried.

"Come and get it," Nina growled.

Jared didn't need to be told twice. He stripped quickly and went to the bed. He crawled up her body, licking the arch of her ankle, her leg, inner thigh, then between. Nina widened her legs, whimpering. He settled in for a long taste of her sweetness. He took his fill. She gripped his head, moaning. Feeling her tightening to come, he backed up, suckling her lightly stopping the impending orgasm. Time after time, he took her to the brink, then stopped before it. Nina pounded him on the shoulders.

"Damn you. Let me come," she moaned.

Jared smiled and continued with his seduction. He licked once more deeply, then outward. He continued up her body, biting gently on her stomach, then licking up her ribcage. He suckled each breast, then along her collar bone. He nibbled across her face to her lips. He kissed her. Nina grunted and put her hands in his hair. She jerked his head back and growled.

"Take me, Jared. Take me now."

Before she could finish her words, he impaled her in one thrust. Nina screamed and clasped her legs around him. Jared held still. She pounded his shoulder.

"Move, damn you."

"Slowly. This will be slow and thorough." He punctuated each word with a slow thrust.

"You're trying to drive me out of my mind!" Nina wailed.

"No. I'm trying to prolong our pleasure. Slow, Nina. Slow," he said.

His movements were slow and measured, taking her with even thrusts. Tender and soft. Hard and deep. Never varying the speed. Nina undulated, moving fast. He held her hips, guiding her in his rhythm. Her whimpers and moans filled his ears with sweet music. She clenched around him tightly, then came in a torrent of pleasure. Jared thrust hard and joined her in release. Nina breathed harshly and hugged him close. Jared rested his head against her heaving breasts and sighed. She stroked his head. In moments, he feels asleep.

A loud ring shattered the silence. Nina cursed, then fumbled. Jared shifted, snuggling against her chest. He kissed the underside of her breast.

"Nina."

She stiffened. Jared glanced up at her. There was shock and anger in her gaze. Nina hung up her cell.

"Blue Moon is on fire," she said in a shaky voice.

"Nina," Jared said.

"Let's go, Jared."

Her tone brooked no argument. He got up quickly and dressed. Seeing she was dressed, he ran with her down the hall, then down the stairs. He grabbed his keys, and they went outside. As they got in the truck, a ding sounded. Nina pulled out her cell. Jared started his powerful vehicle and drove toward Blue Moon Café. Nina gripped his arm. Her face was calm and her voice flat.

"Drive faster. Niccele is inside Blue Moon." Her tone held a certainty.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"A message from death." It was said in the same tone.

Her calmness scared him more than anything else. Jared pressed the gas. Nina said nothing as he drove. She was so still he wouldn't have known she was there if he hadn't kept glancing at her. They pulled up some distance away from Blue Moon Café. There were too many cars to get through. Nina opened the door and took off at a run. Jared got out behind her, running after her. She was moving so fast and silently, he couldn't catch up. She ran straight for the building.

"Nina!" he screamed, afraid she would run right into the burning building.

There was so much noise, he was sure no one heard him. He sped up. She kept going. Suddenly, someone stepped out of the crowd and caught Nina. She fought them hard. They held her, not letting her go. Reaching them, Jared saw it was William. Nina subsided and looked between him and William.

"Niccele is inside," she said in the flat tone.

"I know, Nina. I know. Sh-"

A loud boom cut William off. The earth shuddered under them. Jared grabbed Nina and held her. "Niccele!" Nina screamed.

Horror filled him as he took in the raining debris and blazing flames.

Chapter Six

"Niccele!" Nina screamed again.

Jared held her as she went nuts trying to get away to go to the building.

"Nina, s--"

A loud voice cut him off. *"Get off me! Don't make me have to hurt you. I need to go to my sister. Let me go!"*

Surprised, he let go of Nina and turned to where the voice sounded like it came from. Nina was already on the move. A path cleared. Niccele was arguing with an EMT. Nina stopped just before she reached her. Niccele stopped arguing and looked at Nina.

"Peanut," Niccele said, softly putting out her hand.

"Mello," Nina whispered.

She made a weird noise and went to Niccele. The sisters embraced fiercely. Jared smiled. Nina and her family had nicknames for each other. They wouldn't tell him why they picked the names they had. "Mello" was short for Marshmallow. He wasn't sure what Nash's was. The sisters talked quietly.

"Nina cares very deeply," a soft voice said beside him.

"I know." Glancing at William, Jared eyed him up and down. "Why do you always seem to be around her?"

"I'm one of those she cares about." William smiled.

"We're together now, William. Back off." He growled.

William blinked, then started to laugh. As suddenly as he'd started, he stopped. His expression was cold, and his smile even colder.

"I'm not going anywhere. You'll have to deal with me."

"We'll be talking about this *soon*," Jared promised.

William's pale gray eyes were unwavering. "I'm looking forward to it."

William walked over to the women. Jared's eyes narrowed as Nina and Niccele glanced at William, then each held out a hand. He took their hands, and they pulled him into their circle. Jared gritted his teeth. Something about the way William acted around Nina was almost possessive. He didn't like it one bit. They would talk, and he would get to the bottom of what was between William and Nina. He walked over to them. Nina glanced at him and smiled. She let go of William's hand and took his. Jared glanced at William. William had a small smile on his face. Jared clenched his other fist. He could imagine how it would feel to break William's nose. William's smile widened. Jared focused on Niccele.

"Nina, I thought it was you. They had on the same clothing you were in earlier and waved me in. I wondered why you were working so late instead of out with the hot stud here." Niccele winked at him, then continued. "It wasn't until I was inside that I realized it wasn't you, but a man. He moved so fast." She shook her head. "Everything went dark. I think I was only out for a few moments. When I woke, I could smell the smoke. He had me tied up and behind the partitioned off area that Jared is building for the café. He was waving this big ass knife with a nasty grin on his face. It made the scar on the right side of his face stand out. I thought I was a goner."

"It was just for show. How did you get out?" Nina asked.

At the certainty in her tone, Jared stared at her. She had an inscrutable look on her face. He glanced at William and saw the same look. Jared narrowed his eyes. They knew something which they were not saying. He noticed they didn't ask Niccele if she recognized the man. Niccele's reply caught his attention.

"Ziva. Damn, she's one fierce woman. She came out of nowhere and kicked the man's ass. They were moving so fast. Knives flying, fists going, back flipping, and cursing all over the place. Ziva cut him across the left cheek. I could see the bone." Niccele's tone was awed. "The man ran, and Ziva looked as if she was going after him, but she came back. She lifted me up, threw me over her shoulder, and got me out of there. She'd make a hell of a firefighter." Niccele smiled sheepishly. "Imagine, a firefighter being rescued."

"Your rep is safe. You were tied up." Nina winked.

Niccele laughed, then sobered. "What's going on, Peanut?"

"You know better than to ask me that," Nina replied.

Niccele frowned, but didn't ask again. She shifted on the stretcher she was sitting on.

"Where are you hurt?" Nina released Jared's hand and touched Niccele.

"Just a knock over the head and a little smoke inhalation. I'm good." Niccele shrugged.

Nina nodded. "I'm glad you are."

She hugged Niccele. Niccele punched her in the shoulder.

"Don't go getting all mushy, now."

"I'm allowed," Nina said, cupping her cheek. "I'll be back. I'm going to check on Ziva and thank her for saving you."

"Yeah, I so owe her. What does she like to eat? I'm so cooking her a nice dinner," Niccele said.

"I'll let her know. Knowing Ziva, she'll ask for something crazy." Nina chuckled. She glanced at Jared. "I'll be right back."

"I'll keep an eye on her," he replied.

She squeezed his hand and walked toward the next ambulance, not too far away. William walked beside her. They seemed to move in an almost fluid way. Nina and William looked around. Suddenly, it dawned on Jared that they were looking around for something, or someone. Something was not right. He took a step toward them.

"Jared." Niccele's hand touched his.

He glanced at her. The gash on the top of her forehead looked nasty. He stepped closer to her and hugged her. He kissed the top of her head, then looked at her.

"You'll be fine," he said.

"You're such a liar. This will leave a mark." Niccele gestured to the cut on her head.

"It'll make you more mysterious."

"You're a charmer. I can see why Nina hangs with you." Niccele chuckled.

Jared laughed with her. He glanced toward Nina. She, William, Ulrich Willis, Symond LaPalia, and Ziva seemed to be in an intense conversation. Symond glanced around, then shifted, moving behind Nina and William. Jared studied the pale man's demeanor. He kept looking around and stood at attention. It was as if he was guarding them.

Guarding them from what? Jared watched them a few moments more.

"Lots of flash and no substance," a voice said.

"What?"

Jared glanced at the speaker.

"The fire. It's just a lot of flash and no substance. Probably won't do much damage. There'll be more damage from putting it out than anything else."

Jared recognized Erick Lockhart from the poker games he had been going to. At the first game he went to, until Erick had reminded him where they had first met, he hadn't remembered him. Erick had been the fire investigator on the case concerning his brother.

"Really?" Doubtfully, he looked at the flames and debris.

"I know these things. The arsonist wanted to showcase, but not actually destroy. More drama." Erick slapped Jared on the shoulder, then started to walk away. "See you next game. I need to win back some of my money."

He strode over to one of the firefighters in full turnout gear, who removed a helmet and turned to Erick. Startled, Jared realized it was Lexi, his sister. He'd never seen her in her gear before. He frowned. Lexi wasn't supposed to start working for two weeks. Not in the new fire house where she'd eventually be working, but the one they already had. It was a training period on how things worked in the Trescott Cove Fire Department. Lexi glanced over at Jared and waved. She and Erick walked away.

"Excuse me," a voice said.

Jared glanced at the EMT and shifted. Niccele grabbed his hand as they started to work on her wound. Jared patted her hand, his attention torn between her and the group a little distance away.

Ziva stood next to the stretcher, her feet braced apart. Nina listened as Ziva described what had happened. It was almost identical to what Niccele had described.

"I thought it was you, but something bugged me. So I went to check. By the time I got inside, Niccele and the person I thought was you were gone from view. Something seemed off, so I didn't say anything. Then I smelled the smoke coming from the area you're building on. When I got there, he had Niccele tied up and was taunting her with the knife." Ziva paused and rolled her eyes. "He really likes to show off. He spotted me, and then it was on. I gave him another nice mark on his left cheek to match the right." She smiled fiercely. "He's a slippery little worm. And good." She said it grudgingly. Ziva looked right at Nina. "And quite mad. There is no sanity left in him, Nina. Merrick is out for blood. Anyone he can get that you care about. Then you. You'll be the icing on his sick little cake."

"Merrick Stone. That crazy fucker is in my town, and none of you told me." Ulrich Willis's tone was ominous.

Nina was surprised Ulrich knew who Merrick was. The look he gave all of them was pissed. Nina shrugged. Ziva grinned, rocking back on her heels. Symond didn't even let up his guarding routine on her and William.

"You were not in the need to know category," William replied, a smile twitching his lips.

Ulrich turned to look at him. A lesser man would have stepped back. William didn't move.

"I'm the chief of police, William. I can run you in for obstruction and probably a few other things." Ulrich glanced at Nina. "And you for a few things, too. I'm sure I can dig up a warrant on you somewhere."

Nina's eyes narrowed. There was knowledge in Ulrich's gaze. She hadn't known he knew of her past. Knew what she used to be. In a heartbeat, coldness overcame her.

She smiled, a cold grin, then replied in a soft voice, "We all have to do what we have to."

Ulrich stepped in her face and said just as softly, "Don't give me that scary assassin face, Nina. Yes, I know your past. I also know what you've done since. I don't judge you for it. So don't pull this on me. You"--he glanced at the rest of them--"all should have told me."

"And me," a deep voice rumbled.

Nina glanced at Alton Blade as he walked from the side of the ambulance. None of them had heard him come up. Her instinct told her he had been there all along and heard everything. His expression was bland. Nina wasn't fooled. She glanced at Ziva.

Ziva stiffened. "It's none of your concern."

Alton didn't spare her a glance as he replied, "Since you can't seem to keep out of trouble, everything about you is my concern."

Ziva made a noise and turned to go at him. Nina stepped close to her and shook her head. Ziva glared and turned her back on Alton. Nina looked at William. He was trying not to laugh.

"Dominique and Hunter knew, too," Alton told Ulrich.

"I should have known," Ulrich said.

Nina stifled a smile. She could only imagine the conversation Ulrich and Hunter would have. Ulrich glanced at her. Nina smiled at him and walked over. Ulrich glared at her a moment, then put his arm around her shoulder. Nina slapped him in the stomach.

"I knew you would be trouble from time I meet you." Ulrich squeezed her.

"From time you tasted my caramel tart," Nina teased.

It was a well-known fact that caramel was Ulrich's weakness. He loved it. She still remembered the first time Ulrich had come in to Blue Moon Café. She had been on guard. He was, after all, the law, and in her previous profession, that wasn't a good

thing. Ulrich had ordered her caramel tart. She had served it to him herself, with caramel whipped cream she made for it and caramel shavings. The look on his face when he took a bite was exquisite. He had declared he would be back, and often. After that, they had talked whenever he came by and had become friends. He treated her like a kid sister. The whole Willis clan had practically adopted her.

"How long have you known about what I used to be?" Nina asked.

Ulrich glanced at her. "Since you moved here."

Nina was surprised. She had come to Trescott and worked for William at Renegade for a little over a year before deciding to open Blue Moon Café. That Ulrich had known all that time and not let on...she was impressed. Not many people could fool her. She hugged him, and he returned it.

"I'm sorry about Blue Moon. We'll get the bastard," Ulrich said softly.

Nina glanced at Blue Moon Café. It was her sanity and her haven. She'd created it, and she loved the place.

"It'll be okay. Knowing Merrick, it's more for show than any real damage." She glanced at the firefighters manning hoses, putting out the flames. "The water and so on will probably do more damage."

She released Ulrich and walked over to Ziva.

"I'm not going to the hospital. I'm fine. Do I look like I need help? Get off me," Ziva growled at the EMT.

Alton was smiling as he stood a little behind her.

"Thanks for saving Niccele," Nina interjected.

Ziva glared at the EMT, then glanced at Nina. "I'm still pissed at you, Nina."

Nina sighed and rolled her eyes. "I know, Ziva. I know. I'm going to do this anyway."

She hugged Ziva. Ziva stiffened, then hissed. Frowning, Nina pulled her hand back. It was wet. Nina gripped Ziva and raised the side of her shirt. She gasped at the gapping wound on Ziva's side. It was deep and ran from her waist almost to her breast.

"God, Ziva, you're hurt," Nina said.

Ziva glanced down. "I thought it was a knick. What do you know? The bastard cut me?"

"Ziva," Alton said.

"Leave me alone," she growled.

Ziva took a step, then gripped Nina's hand. "My heart's racing really fast. Something's wrong."

Nina exchanged a glance with William. Nina looked back at Ziva.

"When he cut you, did you feel a hot sensation or anything?"

"No t—" Ziva let out a high-pitched sound, then collapsed.

Nina caught her. Alton grabbed Ziva and picked her up. He put her on the stretcher. The EMT stepped in. Nina grabbed his hand. He wasn't the same one who had been there moments earlier, and she didn't recognize him.

"Who are you?"

"Frost." The onyx-skinned man looked at her.

Something about him made a spot between her shoulder blades itch.

"Nina, Frost is from the Savoy Valley fire house. He and Ash, who is over with Niccele, came over to help out," said Harmon, an EMT from Trescott she knew.

He stepped in by Frost. Nina released his hand slowly. His being from Savoy explained the feeling. It was the same feeling she felt when she got around some of the other residents of the neighboring town. It wasn't a feeling they were dangerous, just that there was something more than meets the eye. Since she had her own secrets, she respected their boundaries. Ziva made a noise again and started to buck.

"She's seizing," Harmon said.

Frost got to work, while Harmon held Ziva down. Ziva jerked so hard she almost threw him off. Another EMT ran up with a bag and pulled out a syringe and vial.

"Use this," William said, stepping in.

He held out a pressure syringe.

"Who are you, and why should we use that?" Frost demanded.

"She might have been poisoned," Nina replied.

It was one of Merrick's favorite ways to kill. Poison on the knife blade. Give a slight nick, not even enough to feel. When the mark dropped dead hours later, no one could figure out why. He liked to vary the poisons he used. The more exotic, the better. Poisons no hospital could trace or even identify. She had done the same many times. With the gaping wound in Ziva's side, she had a lot of poison in her system. It was a testament to Ziva's strength that she hadn't succumbed before.

"How would you know?" Frost glanced sharply between her and William.

"Does it matter? Just use this. Right between her breasts would be best."

William's tone was arrogant and demanded compliance.

"I don't have to do anything." Frost's grin was not friendly.

William stepped toward him. Before he could do anything, in a swift move Alton took the vial out of his hand, then smacked Frost in the chest, knocking him back a few steps. Alton plunged the syringe in between Ziva's breasts.

"Don-" Frost pushed at Alton.

Ziva gasped, her eyes flashed open, and she grabbed Frost's wrist. Frost glanced at her. Ziva's eyes were clear.

"Are you an angel?" Ziva's voice was slurred.

"More like a demon," Frost replied, smiling at her.

"Even better. Are you wicked?" Ziva asked, laughing.

"When I need to be. Let's get you to a hospital." Frost winked.

She sighed, then passed out. Frost and the other EMT's picked her up and put her in the back of the ambulance.

"Alton, go with her," William said.

"I don't take orders from you." Alton glared at him.

"Just saving you from having to justify why you should go with her." William shrugged.

"Fuck you, William," Alton said.

Alton climbed in the back of the ambulance. Frost glanced up, and they exchanged a look. Alton smiled coldly and sat. The door closed, and they took off.

“What was in the syringe?” Nina asked William.

“A serum that we developed when we knew Merrick was in town. It neutralizes any poison,” he replied.

She glanced at William. From her time at Renegade, she knew there were two development areas. One the regular employees at Renegade knew of. The other was for top clearance employees and was where certain secret projects took place. Renegade had many government contracts to develop various things. Nina was grateful that her niece had not seen the top clearance area; if she had, she would have taken a job with Renegade.

“Good call.”

Nina linked arms with William as they walked back to Niccele. Niccele was bickering with the EMT.

“Come on. All I have is a little cut on my head. I don’t need to go to the hospital. Tall, dark and silent will see me home.”

Niccele jerked her thumb to the silent man close to her. Suddenly, she made the same weird noise as Ziva and swayed. Barkin stepped forward and caught her. He plunged the pressure syringe in between Niccele’s breasts. Niccele gasped, looking up Barkin.

“It’s always the silent ones who know how to sweep a woman off her feet.” Niccele’s words were slurred.

“Rest.” Barkin’s voice was soft.

“Okay.” Niccele slumped against him.

Barkin put her on the stretcher. The EMT took over. Nina nodded at Barkin. He didn’t like to be touched. They put Niccele in the ambulance. Nina glanced at Jared.

“I’ll meet you at the hospital.” He kissed her on her cheek.

She nodded and got inside with her sister. She held Niccele’s hand. As they drove, her thoughts were filled with how close Niccele and Ziva had come to being killed. All because of her. It had to stop.

Hours later, Nina stood between the two beds. Ziva was on one and Niccele on the other. Both women were asleep. Nina sighed. She hadn't needed Ziva to tell her Merrick was crazy. Nina took out her cell and flipped it open. She pulled up the message.

Cut for cut.

Blood for Blood.

Life for life.

Who do you think is dead?

Nina tapped the video icon. A picture of Niccele's terrified face flashed on the screen, then Merrick. He smiled and blew her a kiss. The screen went black. Nina closed her phone. She had seen the madness in his gaze.

"How long do I have to stay here?" a grumpy voice demanded.

Nina glanced at Ziva. She shook her head and walked over.

"Probably for a bit. You should be knocked out with all the drugs they have you on."

"You would think so. They need stronger drugs to knock me out." Ziva yawned and stretched.

She winced, then swore. "Son of a bitch. I want to get out of here."

"Ziva, you're barely out of surgery. Go to sleep," a voice said behind Nina.

"Shit, not you. Tell me when he's gone," she told Nina.

"I'm not going anywhere. Sleep, Ziva." Alton walked up and sat in the chair next to Ziva's bed.

"I can't deal with you now," Ziva grumped.

"Good. We can fight tomorrow. Sleep," Alton repeated.

"We so will." Ziva gave him a look, then glanced at Nina. "The babysitter over here will keep an eye on us." Ziva gestured to Niccele and herself. "Go get some rest. You look like you can use it."

Nina stifled a chuckle. Ziva was sending her to bed, and she was the one hurt. Ziva yawned, and then closed her eyes. In moments, she was asleep. Nina glanced at Alton. He was looking at her.

"I'll keep an eye on them," he promised.

"Thanks. Nash, my brother, will be back. He went to check with the doctors about them both."

Nina went over and kissed Niccele on the cheek, then went outside. In moments, she reached the waiting area. Jared stood and walked over to her. He pulled her into his arms. She closed her eyes and rested against him.

"Let me take you home."

Nina nodded and let him lead her out. A few minutes later, she was settled in his truck. She rested her head back against the rest.

"Nina, we're here."

Jerking awake, she glanced blearily around. They were at his house. Too tired to ask why, she got out the door he was holding. Jared led her inside, then to his bed. He undressed her, then put her in the bed. She heard the rustling of clothing, and then his body heat pressed against her back. She relaxed against him.

"Sleep. We'll figure it all out later." He kissed her softly on the side of her face.

As sleep claimed her, Nina knew there would be a lot to do in the next few days.

A few days later, glancing around Blue Moon Café, Nina took in the wreckage left from the fire and putting it out. The fire investigator had confirmed what she had already known. It was more flash than actual damage. The investigator knew it was arson, but they didn't have any clues on who did it. She knew who it was, but couldn't very well tell him. None of those who knew would. Merrick was too dangerous to chance some investigator going after him.

She had spent most of her time at the hospital. The doctors had kept her sister to monitor for the poison. They didn't know what type it was, but trusted William's word it was poison. Ziva was having complications--infections and so on. Despite it, she was

making noises about wanting to go home. William wasn't hearing it. Heck, Alton was keeping vigil at her bedside, and she wasn't going anywhere.

Nina focused back on the wreckage around her. The partition between the changes she was making and the main café was partially still there. But the area was now a blackened shell. The main area of Blue Moon had been untouched by the fire. The water and so on had caused the most damage. Nina walked through the overturned tables, broken booths, and smashed items. She bent and picked up one of the menus on the floor. She sighed. It would have to be cleaned.

"Here we are, and she's already being lazy and resting," a snide voice said.

"Cami-" Nina stood and turned.

She stopped speaking as she took in the sight of Camilla Maxwell and the people with her. Cami strode in, and behind her were people from the League, her employees, and several other residents of Trescott Cove. Jared came over to her.

"So, where you want us, boss?" Jem asked.

"What are you all doing here?" Nina asked, bemused.

"Getting the Café running. Girl, we need your pastries. The faster we get this done, the quicker you can get to cooking. You know you're better than Darryl," Jem whispered loudly.

"Hey. You want me to cut you off?" Darryl Blade came from the back of the crowd.

"Oh, forgive me," Jem said, batting her lashes.

"Let's get to work," Cami said.

Before Nina could say anything, Cami was putting people to work. Stupefied, she watched them starting to clean.

"People wanted to help. They care about you," Jared said.

"Jared!" Ryker called.

Jared kissed her cheek and went over to his business partner. They disappeared behind the partitioned off area. Nina glanced around the café at the people helping to clean. Jem and Chad were bickering. He didn't want her lifting heavy things. Cami was

giving orders. Robert and his business partners were discussing the best way to get new furnishing in quickly. The Willis and Blade clans were carrying the tables outside. Tahlia and some of the other firefighters were running pumps to get the water out.

“You see? This is what happens when you stop being on the outskirts of society. You become part of the people,” a soft voice said next to her.

“What I see are targets. Any one of them is a potential mark for Merrick to take out to hurt me.” Nina glanced at William.

There was understanding in his gaze. William linked his arm with hers.

“You can’t think like that. Don’t go back to that place. You’re not that person anymore, Nina-- looking at everyone with suspicion. Don’t let Merrick take you back there.”

“No, I won’t allow him to. Thanks for taking me out of that, and giving me a chance to experience this.” Nina gave William a hug.

“You kept me sane. So we’re even.” William kissed her cheek. “Now, let’s get to work before Cami comes over here.”

Nina laughed and hugged him again, then they went to work.

Jared stared at the way Nina hugged William and the kiss they shared. They went to clean up with the others. They joked and laughed together. The familiarity between them was obvious. He would bet William knew what was going on. He still hadn’t had a chance to ask Nina. With all that was going on, there hadn’t been a good time. He narrowed his eyes as William swatted Nina on the butt. She laughed and pushed him. He and William would definitely be talking soon.

“Jared!” Ryker called.

He turned and went back to his partner. They looked around together at the now burnt area.

“If we run the crews on overtime, we can still make the deadline,” Ryker said.

“Yes. We can have it ready to go in three weeks,” Jared replied.

“Then let’s do this.” Ryker clasped hands with his.

They turned to their men and gave out the orders. Soon, the sound of saws mixed with the chatter of the people beyond the partition. Jared went over and looked out to the main part of the café. Nina and William were still working together. Nina glanced at him smiled and blew him a kiss. He returned it, and then looked at William. William nodded at him, then returned his attention to Nina. Jared watched them a few more moments, then went back to work.

* * * * *

Jared rolled his shoulder as he strode into his office. He went over to the windows and looked out of his office window. He sighed. In the last two weeks, between his times spent getting Nina's café back in shape and his obligations at work, they hadn't had a chance to really talk. Nina spent most nights at his house, but he could see how tired she was. She was spending a lot of time working at the café, and at the hospital. Usually they ate, made love, then fell asleep.

Sighing, he rubbed his neck, then turned. He strode across the room. Frowning, he noted the box on his drafting table. Jared picked it up and opened it. He cursed, closed the box, and strode out the door. Minutes later, he walked down the hall toward Nina's office. He stopped outside at the sound of voices.

"Come on, Nina. You owe me this," Niccele said.

"You are so *not* using being hurt to make me agree to have a party. You should be home resting. Smoke inhalation is no joke," Nina replied.

"I know. That's why I haven't been cleared to go back to work yet. Don't change the subject. This is not a party. More like a celebration to launch the reopening and unveiling of the addition for Blue Moon Café. From what you said, everything should be ready in less than a week. Come on. Open it with a bang." Niccele's tone was pleading.

"I don't have the time to prepare a menu and plan a party, too." Nina's tone sounded as if she was considering it.

“You’ll do it. Yes. Don’t worry. I’ve already talked with Kalen Irvine, the event planner from Delicious Surrenders. He said they could handle everything. He is such a hunk, and he knows what he’s doing,” Niccele gushed.

“You’ve what?”

“Come on, Nina. This will be a good thing. I’ll take care of it. You don’t have to do anything.” A chair scraped.

“Niccele, I’m not letting Delicious Surrenders prepare the food for this thing you seem to be planning already without me. I run a café, for god-sakes. I’ll handle the food.” Nina’s voice was firm.

“Okay. But... um...Darryl Blade and Zora Nicolette said to tell you they will be preparing a few things, too, no matter if you”--Niccele coughed--“get a stick up your ass and want to do it all yourself. They said think of it as the first time you’ll have “The Rivalry” in the new and improved Blue Moon Café.”

Nina laughed and replied, “You all have been plotting behind my back. Tell Darryl and Zora it’s on. And nothing too fancy for this celebration.”

“Okay. See you later.”

Jared walked toward the kitchen and put down the package he held. When Niccele came down the hall, he went over to guide her.

“Jared. It’s good to see you. Nina just agreed to a celebration to show off your work. Is it going to be ready as planned?” Niccele asked.

“Yes, it will be. Should you be doing so much?” He led her toward the front of the café.

“All I’m doing is talking,” Niccele retorted.

“Okay, but take it easy. How did you get here? I hope you didn’t drive. Do you need a ride somewhere?”

Niccele patted his cheek. “You’re sweet to offer, but I don’t need it. My tall, dark, and silent shadow will take me where I need to go.”

Jared frowned, then glanced where she gestured. Barkin Quinn stepped forward. He hadn’t seen the tall man when he had come in. Barkin nodded. From the little Jared

knew of the man, he rarely spoke. He returned the greeting. Niccele put her hand on Barkin's arm and waved at Jared as they left.

"Now, my chauffer, we have to go to Delicious Surrenders," Niccele said as the door closed.

Barkin led Niccele to his SUV. He put her inside, then got in the driver's seat. They drove away. Jared retraced his steps. He picked up the package and went back to Nina's office. Nina's head was bent as she worked on paperwork.

"Nina!" Jared called.

She looked up smiling. It faded and she stood.

"What's wrong?" she demanded.

Jared walked over to her. He placed the box he held on the desk. He opened it. Nina glanced down and cursed. She lifted out the contents. The knife glinted in the light filtering in from her blinds. Jared glanced at the note attached to the handle that was already burned into his memory.

Give Nina my love.

See her in hell. Soon.

Merrick.

"I've been waiting, and then things happened, and there are all manner of reasons why I haven't asked you what's going on. Tell me now, Nina. What the hell is going on?"

Nina looked up at him. That closed look was on her face. Jared slammed his hand on the desk.

"Don't shut me out. These secrets and cryptic things going on. I'm not blind, Nina, or stupid. Tell me. Let me in," Jared demanded.

Nina stared at him. The cold look in her eyes was the same as he'd seen a few months ago, and more frequently recently. Nina's hand flashed out so fast he wasn't sure she had moved. Jared glanced down, and then blinked at the knife, which was now embedded in the top of the desk. His eyes narrowed. Her desk was oak, but it took a

minimum of movement and force it took for her to do that. Most people wouldn't be able to do that.

"Some things it's best that you not know." Nina's tone was deadly calm.

"Fuck that, Nina! Stop hiding behind this damn armor." He gestured at her closed expression. "I've tasted you all over, shared so much with you, yet I still feel this wall between us. You hide behind it. Why are you afraid to let me in?" Jared cried.

"Jared." Her voice trembled, but her expression did not change.

"Tell me," he demanded.

Nina walked around the desk. She stood almost touching him.

"I was good, Jared...so good at what I did. There was no place I could not get into. No one was safe. It was like an adrenaline high"--she put out her hand, palm up--"holding something so fragile in your hand."

Jared rubbed his damp palms against the sides of his slacks. His heart raced.

He was almost afraid to ask. "Holding what?"

"Life and death." Nina smiled--a weird, cold grin. "I was a highly paid, sought after assassin. I was a murderer."

Chapter Seven

Nina's heart clenched when she saw the expression settle across Jared's face. Right on its heels, however, was anger. *He's the one who demanded to know what it all meant.* Stiffening her spine, Nina moved back to her chair and sat down. *Draw inward, Nina. Don't let him get to you.*

"Now you know, Jared. Glad you asked?"

His cobalt eyes found hers, and he moved around to sit on the edge of the large desk, facing her. Nina could see the war raging in the depths of his gaze. She waited for him to say something.

"And this Merrick person?" His question came delivered on a tone she knew well. He was barely holding onto his control.

She leaned back in her chair and stared at him. "He's here to kill me."

Jared sighed, and his frustration rolled off him in waves. "Well, it makes sense you're just sitting here, calm and unruffled as usual," he said in a dry tone, dripping with sarcasm. Jared jerked his hat off and raked his hand through his hair. "Jesus, Nina! Where are the cops? Ulrich? Rafe? What about them? And can you tell me why you're so damn calm?"

Nina wanted to go to him. Wanted to try and relive some of his fears and anger. But she couldn't. The threat was here, it was real, and she had no time for feelings. The edge she had survived with for so long was being erected within her. Licking her lips, she got to her feet and reached for the box Jared had come in the door with. With barely any effort, she pulled the knife out of the desktop, flipped it in her hand, and placed it back in the box, the box that made her reveal her past to the man she was falling in love with.

“This *is* me, Jared. I’m sorry if I’m not what you’d believed.”

His cobalt blue eyes narrowed before he grabbed her chin in strong fingers. “Don’t lie to me, Nina. This...this cold, uncaring woman isn’t you. It was no act, your concern for your sister, or Ziva. That was true emotion. So I don’t know what *this* is, but it’s not you.” Jared released her chin and pulled her in close to his chest, sending ripples of awareness and want through her. “I’ve seen you, Nina. Seen you when you think no one is watching you. And you know what? Beneath the cold, heartless, bitchy façade you do your damndest to maintain, there’s a beauty within you dying to come out.”

Nina struggled with his words. *How is it he sees so deeply into my soul?* Every fiber of her being longed to curve into his strength and comfort. But she didn’t. She couldn’t. Images of her sister came to her mind, and the rage grew from deep within. Nina pushed away from Jared, and saw the rejection in his gaze.

She swallowed and said, “I have to-”

“I don’t want to hear it, Nina,” Jared interrupted. A hardness settled across his features which she hated. “You only have to let me, and I’ll be all the shelter you’ll ever need.” He sighed, and anger filled his gorgeous eyes. “I guess I’ll never be as important as William to you.” One hand slashed through the air. “I have to go.”

Her heart clenched as he got off the desk and moved to the door. “Where are you going?”

He turned, and she found herself staring up at cold dispassionate eyes. “Not that it matters to you, but I’m going to Natalie’s house. Goodbye, Nina.” He left.

A myriad of emotions rushed her. The top two were jealousy and pain. *He left. He’s never left without kissing me goodbye. Was that affection in his voice when he spoke Natalie’s name?* Her belly heaved and rolled, and she sank to her chair, head held in her palms.

For the first time in her life, Nina felt the pain of loss. Sure, she'd had people she knew die, but this was different. It was like someone ripped out her heart. Her legs still shook, and she knew if not for being seated she would have collapsed. The urge to scream welled up within her. Shoving a hand through her long hair, she composed herself. Holding in her emotions, Nina got ready to head home.

Each minute that passed in the car, she got angrier. Words that would make a trucker blush flowed from her mouth as her condo door closed behind her.

"Can't believe it! Can't believe my sister was hurt. That she moved here!" Nina stomped over to a large hutch, where the top was filled with decorative plates. Hands on the handles of the cabinets, she drew it open and saw the extra dishes on the shelves.

"Like there aren't other fire stations in the world. Then I have the dumbass idea of telling my brother to come here." Nina shook her head. "Way to go, Osborne. Get your siblings killed."

She reached inside and around the corner of a door to push the slight depression there. Up from the base of the hutch rose a rectangular panel about two inches thick. Nina shut her eyes and pushed open the door on it. Before she opened her eyes, she took a fortifying breath and swallowed hard. Sitting before her was an array of knives. Close to forty. Different makes, but all honed with a deadly razors edge and with the same purpose in common. To kill. Staring at the selection, Nina could feel the armor chinking into place around her emotions.

Reaching for a Boker A-F 5.5, Nina sighed as the weight settled into her hand. Her thumb skimmed over the extended tang, and she nodded to herself. "Let's finish this, Merrick," Nina muttered before pulling off some knives and taking them with her to her bedroom. Within moments, the hutch looked like an ordinary one, and the knives were secured on her person.

A knock on her door made Nina wary. Going to answer it, she checked the newly installed monitor that told her who stood outside her door without using the peephole. With a groan, she opened it and demanded, "What do you want?" Her visitor arched a brow, but Nina had long since passed the mood to deal with his own odd mannerisms. She stepped back and said sarcastically, "Come on in, William. It's always a pleasure."

Jared waved goodbye to Taylor McQueen and Malik as he pulled out of Natalie's driveway to head home. For once, there was no music playing in his truck; the only noise was the diesel engine. Emotionally, he was beyond a wreck. Nina meant so much to him, and yet this news had thrown him for one hell of a serious loop. He mulled over things as he drove.

"An assassin? Jesus. What am I supposed to say about that?"

He smacked the wheel and downshifted as he reached his house. Jared parked and shut off his truck, then jumped out. Walking to the mailbox, he raked a hand through his hair. Mail in hand, Jared headed to the porch and unlocked the door. Once inside, he tossed the mail on a table and headed to the fridge for a beer.

His mind raced around at full speed, not giving him a moments rest. "Damn it!" he thundered, slamming his fist down on the granite countertop. "Well, I know something that will take my mind off Nina."

Beer in hand, Jared strode to the doorway of the room which held his brother's things. The oppressive feeling in there swarmed him the moment he entered. *No time like the present to get this dealt with.* Taking a swig of beer, Jared moved to the first box and opened it.

A few hours later, Jared dropped yet another box of useless papers in the fifty gallon drum he was burning things in out in the backyard. Most of the papers were

names and addresses, sources, and threatening letters. He did find some unpaid bills, which he kept out to take care of. Assured the fire would stay in the barrel, Jared went back inside.

"Even now, Phillip, you're a pain in my ass," he uttered, wiping the sweat from his brow and reaching for another box. Jared carried the box outside as well and dumped it into the fire. Then he sat on the picnic table and flipped open a notebook that said Vivian Gates on the cover.

Holy shit! The news he got from that made his eyes bug out. Slamming it closed, Jared got off the table and moved to the barrel. One last look at the information, then he dropped it into the hungry flames.

"Just couldn't stop meddling and snooping in people's lives, Phillip," he muttered disgustedly.

"Something which must run in the family," a low voice said, floating across the afternoon air.

A low rumble of displeasure rose up within his chest. Clenching his jaw briefly, Jared turned in the direction the voice had come from. Standing near the rail of his back porch steps, his visitor deceptively seemed relaxed, hands shoved in pockets of his chinos, which he wore with a plain t-shirt. William Chadwick.

"What do you want?" Jared demanded.

A sardonic grin filled William's features. "I just left Nina and figured I'd come play your bodyguard for a while."

Jealousy flared like a deprived flame just given gasoline. "Stay away from her." William arched a brow, and a glint appeared in his gray eyes. Jared held the gaze, refusing to back down. "You don't scare me, William. I've seen you make women swoon and frighten men. I'm not impressed, and *you need* to leave Nina alone."

William pushed away from where he leaned and moved toward Jared and the fire burning in the drum. Stopping close to him, William asked, "And who are you to say that to me?"

It's like he can't help challenging me. Jared bristled, but didn't step back. In fact, he closed the distance even more, and in the depths of William's eyes, he could see the action wasn't expected. They were similar in height, and minutes passed with the men standing there, glowering at one another, neither giving an inch. The tension was so thick, it could be cut with a knife.

I'm the man in love with her. "I'm the man she's dating," Jared responded after a few terse moments.

Anger sparked, washing away the emotionless stare down he'd been in, before William growled low, "Then why were you at Natalie Varimis's house?"

Jared almost laughed. *I've got your number now, William Chadwick. You're nothing more than an older brother to Nina. My Nina.* Instead, he maintained the blank face. "None of your biz why I was there."

Gray eyes narrowed. "I'm not a man to mess with, *Buckman.*" William issued the statement in a low tone.

"Fuck you, *Chadwick.* I may not be the son of a founding family of this town, but that doesn't make me any less than you. I don't give a flyin' fuck what you think of yourself. I'm not one to mess with, either. So either quit making all the empty threats and do something, or keep your goddamn arrogant ass out of my way, life, and business. I've heard people say how dangerous you are, n' I don't give a fuck."

William crossed his arms over his chest. "Natalie Varimis?"

Hell no! Jared narrowed his eyes. "Get off my property." It was not difficult to see that William longed to put his hands on him.

"I will do what's necessary to protect Nina," William growled.

"Join the club." Shaking his head, Jared questioned in a snotty tone, "Why don't you take this surly ass attitude of yours over to Natalie and try to get her to tell you what I was doing there?" A sneer filled his face. "I'm *sure* Taylor would love you there, trying to demand answers from her."

William shifted, and Jared waited for the strike. He knew William was formidable, but he'd be *darned* before he let that man see any fear. Jared understood he may very well get his ass kicked, but he would give it his best, should it come to that. Jared realized that William wanted nothing more than to protect Nina. And while he longed to punch the smug bastard in the nose, Jared wouldn't start anything for one reason. Nina. She and William shared something he may not like or understand, but there it was.

"Stay away from Natalie," William commanded.

"Sure honey," Jared drawled. "That's why I married you, so you could nag me n' pick my friends." Jared shook his head and turned his back to William. "You know how to find your way back from whatever rock you crawled from."

Jared had made it up two steps of his porch when William spoke. "I don't like you, Buckman."

Not responding until he got to the top of the deck, Jared picked up another box of papers to burn, placed it on the rail, and said, "Looks like there's something we have in common, rich boy. Our mutual dislike of one another. You know what else? I don't care if you like me or not."

William stared up at him before he nodded sharply and walked off. Jared knew that was it. He and William would tolerate each other out of their respect for Nina, but being actual friends wasn't likely.

“Glad he didn’t kick my ass, though.” With a groan, Jared heaved the box up and got back to work.

He worked the rest of the day, and when he walked from the newly cleaned room to the kitchen to grab a drink, he froze as he spotted none other than William Chadwick sitting in his living room, feet propped up on an ottoman, beer in hand, leafing through a *Sports Illustrated* magazine. Leaning against the wall, Jared briefly held the amused gray stare of his uninvited guest before William turned his attention back to the magazine.

“Gee, honey. I thought we had gotten a divorce,” he stated in a toneless voice.

William took a swig of beer and answered without hesitation. “I missed you, so I came back.” Looking up, he asked, “When’s dinner?”

“Whenever you get off your ass and cook it,” he retorted. *Guess this is his way of telling me he still thinks there’s something for us to discuss.* Walking to the kitchen, he grabbed another beer and went back to the living room. “But since you’re here and apparently making yourself at home in my house, you may as well be useful. Come help me move some furniture.”

William arched that damn brow, but tossed the magazine down and leisurely got to his feet, beer in hand, and shrugged. “Figures you’d need some help.”

A reluctant grin lifted the corner of his mouth. Jared rolled his eyes and turned back the way he’d come. *I guess we’ve struck some kind of truce.* Soon the men were hauling in the futon and other furniture Jared had set aside to be put in this room once he’d cleaned it out. When William left, the truce was still in place. They’d discussed neutral things, and Jared had formed a reluctant tolerance for the man. *Not that I’d ever tell him that.*

The doorbell rang. Wiping his hands off on his jeans, Jared strode out of the newly furnished room and glanced at his watch. Eight. He pulled open the door on the

warm night. All words left him, and he was silent as he stepped back to allow the person to enter. When the door closed, Jared sighed and asked, "So what happens now?"

*

Merrick laughed as he mixed the contents in the container before him. He couldn't help it. "It was so perfect seeing them search the crowd for me, walking by so close, I could have reached out and touched them."

Staring at the beaker, he saw a few more lumps in it and continued to move the glass stirrer around. He looked at his reflection in the mirror on the desk he sat at. His cheek throbbed like a son of a bitch, but his new scar was gone. So was the old one. The face staring back at him was a plain, ordinary, everyday looking man. Nothing overly spectacular to grab anyone's attention or stick out in their memory. Mousy brown hair and medium blue eyes.

Solemnly, he traced his finger along the scar now covered by putty that hid his real features. His eyes narrowed, and he ground out, "I hope your death is excruciating, Ziva."

With a sigh, Merrick smoothed out his expression and turned his attention to the object before him. Clear liquid remained. "Perfect." He unrolled some brown cloth, lifted out the knife, and dipped the black muted blade in the beaker. Then he got up and moved to the sink where he poured the liquid slowly and carefully over the entire blade, making sure to coat every inch. Setting the wet blade across the opening of the empty glass, Merrick left it there.

"Oh Nina," he murmured as he stood in the middle of his hotel room and readied himself to begin a martial arts workout. "This has been a long time in coming. A long time."

*

Nina drove back to work. Her visit with William had gone poorly. She sighed.

“Should have expected that.” William treated her like she still wore diapers at times. “I know he means well, but he’s too damn nosy and interferin’ for his own good.”

Parking up the street from where the café was, Nina got out and engaged the alarm on her vehicle. Body alert, senses attuned, she moved easily down the street, smiling at people she knew.

Just another day.

Nina entered through the front door of her café, smile firmly in place. Her staff called out greetings, as did many patrons. The smile became real as her gaze landed on a group off in a corner. Chance Jameson and his fiancée, Zora Nicolette, with her colored micro braids. Natalie Varimis and her hunky bodyguard, Taylor McQueen, and a woman she didn’t know. *Wonder where Natalie’s son Malik is.* Adjusting her trajectory, Nina wove through the tables, shoving down the immediate jealousy she had thinking of Jared going from her to Natalie.

Zora glanced up and smiled. “Hey, Nina. Come join us for a spell.” She pushed out a chair with her foot.

Stopping at the table, Nina grabbed the chair and sat, noticing how the men stood upon her approach and sat again after she did. *Men with manners. I love it.*

“Zora,” she said. “Good to see you. Hello, Chance, Taylor, Natalie.”

They all nodded, and Zora spoke again. “Nina, this is my friend, Lewa Staller.”

Reaching across the table from where she sat between Zora and Natalie, Nina shook Lewa’s hand. “Nice to meet you.” Her gaze took in the numerous bright bracelets she wore. “Are you just passing through, or sticking around Trescott Cove?”

"Pleasure to meet you, as well," Lewa said, dropping her hand and leaning back in the chair. "Kind of undecided right at the moment. Looking over a possible job, but nothing's final yet."

"I understand that." Nina noticed her accent. "Well, welcome to Trescott Cove, no matter how long you stay." Putting her gaze on Zora, she said softly, "About this party."

Immediately, Zora shook her head. "Not until everything's resolved. Don't worry about it."

Nina wanted to explain her reasons. "It's just that--"

Zora placed a hand on her arm. "No explanation needed. It'll just be later." She winked. "And I'll keep Cami in line."

Nina laughed. Zora was one woman who Cami couldn't pull her shit over on. Licking her lips, she met Zora's gaze, and Nina knew her thanks had been understood. Turning her attention to Natalie, she asked, "Where's Malik?"

"Hi, Miss Nina," a young voice said from behind her.

Nina twisted around and saw Natalie's son standing there in shorts and a football jersey. "Hello, Malik. Am I in your seat?"

He flashed a grin. "It's okay. A gentleman always gives his seat up for a lady."

To be in the presence of such innocence made her eyes prick with tears. "Thank you, Malik, but I should get to work. You, young man, have impeccable manners."

Malik's smile grew wider. Then he looked over at Taylor and said in a stage whisper, "Did I do good?"

Nina flicked her glance over to Taylor in time to see a near imperceptible nod from the solemn man. A quick look told her that was all Malik needed, for he beamed

even brighter. The urge to ruffle Malik's hair rushed over her. *A child. What would it be like to be a mom?*

"If you all will excuse me, I need to get to my office. Excuse me." She stood, and the men did as well.

She walked away with their goodbyes in her ear. Entering her office, Nina sank against the door and closed her eyes. She moved to her desk and opened up a drawer, grabbed out the notes Merrick had sent, and left work content Merrick would be waiting for her and not go after any others. The thing with her sister and Ziva had been nothing but his sick way of getting her attention.

"It's my fault Ziva was hurt, as well as Niccele. If I'd just figured it out sooner." A tremor overtook her. "Or if I'd just killed him, this wouldn't have happened. A mistake I *won't* make again," she vowed as she started the engine.

As the sun began to set in the sky, Nina pulled into Jared's driveway. She licked her lips and got out to head for the steps. Climbing them, she trailed her fingers along the smooth railing. His house was beautiful, and it brought her a sense of peace her place didn't. Or couldn't.

You only have to let me, and I'll be all the shelter you'll ever need. Jared's words floated through her mind. *I want to. God, do I want to.*

Nina paused outside the door before pressing the doorbell. Her breath caught when the thick oak door swung open and she found herself face to face with Jared. A shirtless Jared. A hot, sweaty, and damn sexy Jared. His tan skin glowed in the setting sun, upper body muscles all defined as if he'd been working out. His jeans rode low on his hips, making her mouth water. Dragging her gaze up his body from his bare feet to the newly shorn hair on the top of his head, she shuddered as lust slammed into her with the force of a freight train.

It's not only lust, her brain taunted, a sentiment her heart fully agreed with.

Jared's cobalt gaze heated before cooling considerably within seconds as he stared at her. She could feel his sigh as much as hear it. "So what happens now?" he questioned, stepping back to let her in.

Slipping past him, Nina waited for him to close the door before answering. "I thought we could talk."

His expression remained bland. "So talk." Brushing by her, he went to the living room and began collecting beer bottles.

Jealousy reared its ugly head within her. "Am I interrupting something?" she bit out.

"Nope. Just cleaning up from William being here."

She frowned. "What was he doing here?"

"We were talking."

"You were just sitting here talking to him, instead of coming to find me and see if we could work this out?" she demanded.

"You're the one who has been keeping secrets from me and trying to keep me at a distance, Nina. Not the other way around. I figured you wanted your space, so I was giving it to you."

"By going over to Natalie's," she spat, glaring at him from where he bent over, putting the bottles in the recycling bin.

He slowly turned his head toward her, glancing over his shoulder before his body followed. Slow, measured steps brought him closer and closer to her. Nina couldn't move; it was as if his gaze had cemented her to the floor. Jared stood before her, cobalt eyes staring directly at her, seeing her innermost emotions.

“Yes, by going over to Natalie’s, but I would have gone over there even if that thing in your office never happened.” He tipped his head to the side and cupped the side of her face with one large hand. “Why don’t you just ask me if you want to know what I was doing there, instead of jumping to conclusions, Nina?”

“What were you doing over there?” Nina burrowed her cheek further into his hand, desperate for his touch.

“Natalie can get money off her rent if she fixes up the place, so I’m doing it for her. Today, I put in reinforced doors, and Taylor and I replaced the back porch and set posts for the backyard fence I’ll be putting up tomorrow.”

The generosity of this man totally amazed her. Shame welled up within her as she thought of the vicious thoughts she’d had about him and Natalie together. Nina closed her eyes, but opened them when he spoke again. His deep voice ignited feelings no other man had been able to come close to touching.

“Natalie is a very beautiful woman, Nina, but she’s not the one I want to be with. No matter what arguments we have, or if things aren’t always immediately resolved between us, that doesn’t and won’t change how I feel about you. I should have handled your telling me about your past differently, and I’m sorry I handled it so poorly. I just didn’t know what to say to that.”

He leaned in close and brushed his lips lightly over hers--once, twice, and a third time--before she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against him. Moisture flooded her body, her nipples tightening. His rumble of approval wound all over her. She shuddered when his other hand cradled the other side of her face, and he deepened the kiss. *Lord, this man is dangerous.* Their tongues slid along one another, intermixing their tastes, until they became one.

Slowly, Jared ended the kiss and drew back until their eyes could meet. Nina bit back her groan of frustration, smiled shyly up at him, and said, "I'm sorry too." His answering grin melted her heart. *I love this man.*

"Stay for dinner?"

"I'd love to. Now, will you tell me what William was doing here?"

Jared chuckled. He dropped his hands from her face and grabbed one of hers before leading her down the hall and stopping before a room. Nina stuck her head in and gasped. She remembered the numerous boxes piled high on one another and now, the floor shone; there was a desk, a futon, and a few file cabinets in there.

"This is what we did. He helped me move furniture."

Nina glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. *There had to be more to it than that.* But she didn't press, just took his explanation.

Jared and Nina ate a light dinner and spent a short time curled up on the couch. When it was time for bed, they walked up the stairs hand in hand. Nina could see the question in his gaze as she undressed, exposing the numerous places on her body where she had weapons. But he never asked.

They curled up together, Jared holding her naked body tight against his own. There had been no sex, no making love, but as Nina drifted off to sleep, she had never felt more cherished when Jared's whisper reached her. "I love you, Nina Osborne." The cool night air blew over them as they both fell into an exhausted slumber.

Chapter Eight

Jared lay in bed, watching as the early morning light streamed in through the window, bathing the beauty in his arms with a warm, golden glow. Nina slept curled against his chest, her warm breath skimming across his skin, making him long to have mornings like this be a forever kind of thing. He stroked one finger along the hair falling about her face, causing her to stir and burrow closer to him, one arm flopping across his midsection to rest beside his hip.

Glancing at the clock, he sighed as he saw it was still before six. Dipping his head, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head and closed his eyes again, allowing her deep even breaths to lull him back to sleep. Light, feathery kisses woke him. Cracking open his eyes, he saw Nina moving down his chest, kissing as she dropped lower and lower.

“Nina,” he uttered, reaching for her shoulders.

“Jared,” she whispered in between kisses.

He shivered when her tongue circled his belly button. She looked up at him, her brown eyes smoldering with desire. Nina crawled back up toward him, her naked body brushing against his own. Jared groaned when she straddled him, brushing his hardened cock with her wet pussy. She gathered her lower lip in her teeth and rose up to sink down on his length.

“Shit,” he moaned as her heat encased him.

Nina stared at him, not moving. Her eyes grew molten before she rotated her hips, her muscles clenching around him. Jared settled his hands on her hips and allowed her to find her own pace. Back and forth, up and down she moved. Each rotation, each stroke along his shaft, sent him spiraling deeper into a pit of bliss.

Jaw clenching, he struggled to keep his control intact. As she moved slowly and consistently on him, her eyes drifted closed. Jared watched from beneath lowered lids as her hands slid up over her skin, across her belly, breasts, and around her neck. Passion exploded within him. Flexing his fingers, Jared groaned and picked up the speed and intensity of his thrusts. Low, seductive moans slipped from her throat, which only succeeded in adding to his desire to wrest away her control and take her until they were both too exhausted to move.

Up and down, she continued to move along his cock, her breasts swaying gently with each motion. Her internal muscles gripped and released, creating a tingling in his balls. Jared knew he wasn't going to last with much more of her sweet torment. He inhaled sharply when her hands covered his and Nina interlaced their fingers. Her lids lifted, her thick curved lashes exposing gorgeous brown eyes to him.

Nina leaned forward, their joined hands going over his head, her breasts teasing his chest as she increased her pace.

"Nina," he murmured, thrusting harder against her movement. "Stop torturing me."

Before his eyes, a siren's smile crossed her face. Her mouth lowered to his, and she slid her tongue deep into his willing mouth. Jared groaned and drew hard on her tongue, delighting in the shudder which racked her body. Nina growled in the back of her throat and increased her speed. Jared lost his control.

Wrenching his hands from beneath hers, he grasped her hips and began to power up into her. Their tongues dueled for mastery as, with a quick move, he rolled them over and thrust deeper into her heated core. Tearing his mouth from hers, he licked along her carotid, loving how it pulsed beneath his tongue.

"Jared!" she wailed as her body arched and began to spasm beneath his.

"Let it go, Nina. Let it go," he whispered against her neck.

The sweat beaded on his brow as her internal muscles clamped viselike around his cock. Her strong legs held him, and her hips undulated against each stroke he made, bringing them together so close he lost the ability to tell where he ended and she began.

“Uh, uh, uh,” she panted. Her hands skimmed along the back of his hair before sinking into the muscles of his back.

“Come with me,” he uttered.

She did. Nina bowed up against him and screamed her release to the room. One, two, three more thrusts were all he could manage before he erupted deep within her, coating her womb.

Exhausted, Jared collapsed, pulling out of her wetness and rolling at the last second to land beside her, flat on his back, so he didn’t crush the woman below him. The room was full of harsh, ragged breaths as they strove to control their breathing.

“Morning,” she said after they had lain there for a while.

He smiled and turned his head so he could see her. Her skin had a delightful flush to it, highlighted by the sun. “Morning,” he drawled.

Nina readjusted her body so she faced him. One hand drifted over his hair. “Why’d you cut it?” she asked.

“Figured it was time for a change,” he responded. Her simple touch evoked more emotions within him. “Don’t you like it?”

“I do. I can see your face more. I kinda liked the shaggy look though, too.”

“It’s hair. It’ll grow back.” He worried his lower lip in his teeth.

Nina sighed heavily. “I know that look. We still need to talk.”

“Yes.”

"Okay," she said, and Jared wanted to kiss her for not becoming upset with his need to work this out. Nina leaned forward and brushed their lips together before sliding out of the bed and reaching for her clothing. "I need to run home, but I'll come straight back here."

Jared got to his feet and drew on a pair of sweats before standing next to her and zipping up her shirt. *Will she really come back?* He had to begin to trust her sometime. "Sounds good. I'll have some food ready when you get back here." He trailed his lips along her collarbone and thrust his hips against her. "Don't be long, Nina."

She laughed and said, "The longer you distract me, the longer it takes for me to return."

He chuckled too and stepped back. "In that case, get to it woman." Jared smacked her on the ass.

Nina got in her car and drove away after a lengthy kiss on the front porch. When her car disappeared from view, he headed back inside and showered before beginning breakfast.

When she returned, they sat opposite one another on the blanket he'd spread out in his backyard. They were in a far corner, giving them even more of a private and intimate setting. He'd dressed in faded jeans and a black button down. The woman across from him had on a dark brown outfit which highlighted her amazing figure and still looked loose enough to be comfortable. Large silver hoops hung from her ears. Breakfast was finished, and now they sat staring into each other's eyes. Every so often, Jared would reach across the space between them and brush some hair back behind her ear.

"Can you tell me why?" Jared asked holding her gaze.

Nina took a deep breath, licked her lips, and looked around before bringing her gaze back to his. "Short version, I was young, gullible, and an easy mark for a man like

Merrick.” He arched a brow, and she sighed. “I kind of figured you’d want the longer version.”

“I want to understand why, Nina. Why you do this.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Did. That was my past until Merrick showed back up.”

He pursed his lips. “Fair enough. Did.”

Nina looked down at her hands briefly. “I was a different person then. I’d convinced myself I had no feelings, and I reveled in the power I had over someone’s life. Me. A young girl from a small, Podunk town in the middle of nowhere. I had control over whether or not they would wake up the next morning. I decided when they took their last breath.”

His stomach heaved with horror. Nina must have seen the disgust in his gaze, for her expression saddened.

“I never said it was pretty, Jared. Do you want me to stop?”

Hell yes! “No.” Jared took a deep breath before reaching for one of her hands and lacing their fingers. He stared down at the hand he held. It was so small in his, and yet he couldn’t help but wonder. *How many lives has this hand ended? How much blood has it spilled?* “Keep going,” he rasped, dragging his gaze from the hand and back to meet Nina’s unwavering and unapologetic stare.

“I made awesome money and sent quite a bit back to my sister. Not that she ever knew, because I made sure to distance myself from them.”

Nina fell silent, and Jared waited her out, his thumb stroking along her index finger. She shook her head and ran her free hand through her hair.

“I’m not sure when it all changed for me. Somehow, it no longer held the same rush or appeal. My conscience was no longer silent about what I did, and that’s when

the nightmares began. Merrick didn't care; I was damn good. But he did start to question my commitment. And then...*then* I was set up."

Jared shivered from the ice lacing her tone. Her eyes had grown diamond hard and stared out at something only she could see.

"My last one was a target in San Fran."

Realization dawned. "You were on the job the night we danced."

Nina blinked and focused back on him. "Yes."

Jared didn't know what to say. He ran his tongue along his upper teeth and stared at Nina. Nina Osborne. A woman he loved more than anything. An ex-assassin. *Does it really matter? Like she said, it's her past. If it was past, why is she carrying enough weapons for her own arsenal?* With a strong mental shake, Jared took a deep breath.

"So what happens now, Nina, now that Merrick is here?" he asked.

That cold, deadpan expression filled her features. "I kill him before he kills or hurts anyone else I care about."

"Doesn't it bother you to talk about killing someone so casually?" He could hear the appall in his own tone.

"No. Not for him. Listen to me, Jared. Merrick is beyond any evil you can even begin to fathom. I was his pet, his *creation*. It won't ever be over until one of us is dead."

Jared hated the matter-of-fact way she spoke about it. Like her death wasn't important. "I can't lose you, Nina. Do you hear yourself, talking like it's no big thing if you die?"

"I don't want to die, Jared. I would love to grow old with you, but Merrick wants me. I have to end it, so I'll find him and do just that."

His skin prickled. "Grow old with me?" he asked, a grin lifting one side of his mouth and dissolving the somber mood over them both.

"Old and wrinkled. Where we have 'his' and 'hers' walkers."

His heart swelled with love. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I love you, Jared Buckman."

I never believed I would hear those words from her lips. There's really only one thing I can do. Jared stared at her, dropping her hand to stroke the side of her face. "You will come back to me, right?" he asked on a whisper.

"Yes."

Jared's heart clenched with fear, but he kept it inside. Leaning forward so their lips lightly touched, he said, "Then go. Go do what you have to, and then come home to me."

"Home?" she breathed.

"Home," he vowed. "I plan on marrying you, Nina Osborne." Pushing her back, Jared lowered her onto the blanket and showed her what their future held.

Nina sat on the hood of her car off the main road between Trescott Cove and Savoy Valley. Spread out next to her were the notes. She stared at them and frowned.

"I know you, Merrick. You've given me some kind of clue as to where you're hiding out." Nina ground her back teeth. "You want me to find you, or at least try." Her fingers clenched. "I *will* find you, Merrick. On that, you have my word."

Jumping off the hood, Nina began to pace before the car. "Think, Nina, think," she admonished herself. "You know how this freak operates. Okay, Ziva said she cut

him, so he would have done his own stitches, not willing to get to a hospital. And I know him, which also means he doesn't look like he normally would. Great. So all I have to do is figure out what he would look like with this new disguise. Knowing that bastard, I've already seen it."

With a groan, she sat back down upon the hood and grabbed up the sheets of paper that fluttered in the breeze. Drawing her legs up, Nina tipped her head back and stared up at the sky. Jared's face shimmered before her and she smiled.

He wants to marry me.

The smile slid from her face when Merrick's mug took the place of Jared's. Closing her eyes on Merrick's image, Nina let her mind drift back to the time when she was young and foolish enough to idolize Merrick Stone. The long and often repetitious hours of listening to him describe different types of poisons, how they killed a person, how long it took. All of that. Then there were the classes on administering first aid to avoid hospitals and authority figures.

Shaking her head, Nina ran her hands through her hair. "Damn it! Come on Osborne, think." She knew the information needed lingered somewhere in the recesses of her mind. Nina had been a quick study and very observant. She'd learned all of Merrick's codes, and he never had a clue. So what she needed was there; she just had to uncover it.

"Okay. I can do this."

Nina had buried so much of her years with Merrick, it was as if she were stumbling around in the fog, searching high and low for the light to illuminate her path, so she could rediscover what she sought. She leaned back along the hood and watched the clouds above go floating by. Setting her jaw for her next trip down memory lane, Nina began sifting through more obscure recollections. About five minutes later, she sat up with a jerk.

“That’s it!”

Sliding off the hood, Nina hurried to the driver’s seat and started her car. As she drove, she pulled her cell out and dialed a number. When the other end was picked up, she said, “I need a favor.”

An hour later, Nina sat at a large table and stared at the screen before her. She worried her lower lip, left hand hovering over the button which would begin the video.

“You know, if you’d tell me what you were looking for, I’d be happy to go through it for you.” The voice came from across the room.

Nina sighed and looked over to meet the steady gaze of Dominique. With a terse smile and a shake of her head, Nina said, “Thanks Niq, but I don’t know exactly what I’m looking for. I’ll know it when I see it.”

Dominique leaned back against the couch and crossed one leg over the other. “You know, we could help you.” Her reprimand floated across the room.

Nina pressed the button, and the footage began to run without sound. “No! I came to you, Niq, because I thought you’d respect my decision to hunt the bastard down. If I had wanted more meddling, I could have and would have gone to William.” Nina never took her eyes off the screen.

“Point taken,” Dominique said. “Just remember, you don’t have to do this alone.”

“Nice thought, but I do. It’s personal now, and I *will* be the one to end it, permanently this time.”

“Okay. You sit and look. I’ve got some things to take care of. I’ll be in my office if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Niq,” Nina said.

"You're welcome." Dominique briefly squeezed her shoulder.

Soon Nina was totally alone in the large conference room of Cerberus Associates, scanning through the security camera footage of the scene at her café when it burned and her sister, Niccele, and Ziva were attended to by the EMTs. She spotted herself and William walking through the crowd. At one point they separated to move around a stunned spectator of the chaos. Her gaze narrowed as a grin cracked the man's face after she'd passed him.

Rewinding it a bit, Nina paused it and closed in on the man's face, staring hard. Instantly, rage filled her.

"Bastard!" she seethed. "I was close enough to touch you. I've got you now, you fuck!"

Nina memorized the face and closed down the computer before leaving the room. She waved goodbye to Dominique, who was at her desk and on the phone, before totally leaving Cerberus to head home. By the time she arrived, her features were perfectly composed. She made sure to act like nothing different was going on in her day, but her mind was extremely alert for the image she'd committed to memory. After getting what she needed from home, Nina headed in to work.

Jared was there with his crew as they did some final things to the café. The heat in his gaze burned her, and even in her office, her body's temperature was almost out of control.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, poking his head into the room.

A smile crossed her features. "Hey, yourself. How are things going out there?"

Jared fully entered the room, closing the door behind himself. Nina's breath hitched as he moved toward her. *My man!* Her belly clenched, pussy pulsed, and

nipples tightened. *Damn him for making me think of nothing but ripping off his clothes and having my way with him.*

“Nina?” he said.

“Huh?” She snapped her gaze to his, a bit shocked to find him so close.

“I asked if you were okay. I answered your question, and you sat there staring off into space at something.” He frowned. “Is it...?”

She shook her head and tipped her face up to accept his kiss. “No. I wasn’t thinking about Merrick. I was actually thinking about you.”

Heat flared in his cobalt gaze, and he waggled his eyebrows. “Good thoughts?”

Nina trailed her hand up and down his chest before curving her fingers around the stiffening length in his pants. “Very good,” she purred. “Oh so good.”

His hand covered hers and squeezed. “Nina, don’t start this. I have to get back to work.”

Rising to her feet slowly, Nina brushed her chest against him and nuzzled his neck. “If I say pretty please?” His pulse throbbed beneath her lips.

“Nina. I have to get to work. But honey, I swear to you, you and I will christen this office and a lot of other places in your café. Just not right now.” Jared grabbed her, drew her between his legs, and plundered her mouth.

She shivered and answered his demanding kiss with her own. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she mewled in the back of her throat as her pussy gushed and cried out for attention from this man.

Just as suddenly as he’d grabbed her, he separated them. His eyes glazed with passion and desire as he licked his lips, almost like he wanted more of her lingering taste.

"Jesus, woman, you're dangerous. I'm leaving now, so I don't rip your clothes off and fuck you as you lay bent over your desk and scream loud enough for your patrons to hear your pleasure."

His words shot lightning through her. Nina touched his cheek gently and nodded. "Go."

Jared stared at her a few moments longer. "I'm going." He backed up to the door, his hand reaching behind him, searching for the knob. "I love you, Nina Osborne."

Warmth flowed through her. "Love you, too, Jared Buckman. Now go before I decide I don't care if they hear me or not."

Nina could see him take a step back toward her before he somehow reined in his control and slipped out of her office. The door was partially open, and with a few deep breaths, Nina sat back down and tried to focus on the work in front of her. All she could see was Jared lowering himself over her, his thick cock teasing the entrance of her core and filling her, sending her spiraling toward ecstasy.

"Come on, Nina. Focus here. Get some work done," she admonished herself.

It took some doing, but eventually she made progress on the paperwork. Every so often, she'd pause as Jared's distinctive voice or laugh would float in the door to her ears. Then it would be another struggle to concentrate.

Nina stayed in her office until around dusk. Saying goodnight to her staff, she strode to her car. As she unlocked it and slid behind the wheel, she noticed William standing off in the shadows, watching her. Nina smiled and drove away, making sure she headed home. Once there, she shoved her hand into her pocket and pulled out a neighbor's car key. Grabbing a bag she'd had with her all day from the backseat, Nina locked up her vehicle.

Walking through the garage to Mrs. Niels' assigned parking spot, Nina unlocked and opened the door to the elderly woman's older model Buick. Tossing the bag in on the passenger seat, Nina slid across the cracked leather. Within moments, she pulled out of the condo parking area and was back on the streets of Trescott Cove. The interior of the car was totally silent as she drove.

Reaching her destination, Nina shut off the car with a sigh. Her skin prickled with the knowledge of what was about to come. This time, it was different. It wasn't someone else who may lose her life. It was her. The only thing she knew for certain was if she died, her family and Jared would be safe, because she was taking Merrick with her.

"Yume jitsugen," she muttered as she stashed the bag beneath the seat. It was full of medical supplies and a few antidotes, just in case. Nina nodded and said it again. *"Yume jitsugen. Realize your dreams."*

I have realized my dreams, and they lie with a man who has dark hair and the most amazing cobalt eyes. A man who makes me want to wake up in the morning, just to see what will come next. A man who has finally silenced the nightmares raging within me, and has made me believe that life can have a happy ever after. Jared Buckman.

She waited until darkness settled over the city before slipping out of the car. Her dark brown outfit blended in perfectly with the night and the shadows. The flat boots she wore made no noise as she moved along the warehouse with a single light coming from it. Nina slid silently into the back and cautiously moved up toward the light.

Her heart hardened and her eyes narrowed as her gaze landed upon the man she'd once believed in. Merrick Stone. He moved fluidly as he practiced his marital arts. His skin's scars showed up in the light, but even she had to admit he had a grace about him. He had removed his face putty and she could see the newest addition courtesy of Ziva.

Opening her left hand, she felt the power ripple through her as the cold steel of her blade crossed her palm. Low, she maneuvered herself to where she had a good shot and waited for him to present the opening she sought.

Merrick worked, eyes closed as he moved through his training. When he spun around, presenting her with his back, Nina acted. The blade sped through the air, soundlessly. By the time it sank into the wood near his head, she no longer remained in the same spot from which she'd thrown it.

A sadistic smile crossed her face as she watched him jump and face where she'd been. Stepping from the shadows, Nina said, "Hello, Merrick."

He spun toward her, and she could see the shock on his face before he composed his features and his eyes hardened. "Nina, Nina, Nina. It's been so long, my dear."

"You seemed to be going to a great deal of trouble to get my attention, Merrick. Well, congrats, now you have it. *All* of it."

"You know, I could just shoot you," he commented.

Nina remained where she was, hands down by her sides, ready for anything he might throw at her. "Really? And where in that...um...outfit of yours are you hiding a gun? Because I've seen what you have to offer, Merrick, and that *package* in your pants, you can't even pass off as having a derringer in there."

She fought back a smile as his gaze narrowed at her. He was nothing if not arrogant.

"So what happens now, Nina? You kill me?"

"I want to know who contracted you to kill Chadwick's woman."

An evil smile curved up his lips. "Ah, yes. You know, I was hoping it would have been him. That's a job I would have done myself." He grabbed a towel and dabbed

his face. "I'll tell you what, Nina dearest. We fight. You and me. You win, I'll tell you. If not, well, it won't matter anyway because you'll be dead."

Kinda what I was thinking about you. Sidestepping, Nina kept her gaze on him. "Anytime you're ready."

Merrick launched himself toward her before his towel even hit the ground. At the last second, he dropped and kicked out with his leg, sending her to the cement of the warehouse floor.

Nina rolled, swung her legs, and got back to her feet. Merrick had found a knife and stood balanced on the balls of his feet. By the time she regained hers, there were knives were in her hands, as well.

For the next several minutes, they traded punches, kicks, and more. Nina bled from a few superficial wounds, as did Merrick. For the moment, they circled one another, gauging each other, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

"You're better than I thought you'd be, Nina," Merrick said, tossing his knife from hand to hand as if to taunt her.

"And you're slower, Merrick. Age must be catching up to you. I've hardly broken a sweat." He grumbled under his breath, picked up a chair, and threw it at her. Chuckling, Nina dodged it easily. "Not so tough without your friends to back you up, are you?" she asked.

"What makes you think they aren't here? You were stupid to come alone."

Nina kicked a pallet toward him and sneered, "What makes *you* so sure I came alone?"

Dropping his knife, Merrick heaved a large barrel at her. Jumping out of its way, she tripped over something else on the floor and fell, her knives skidding out of reach.

Pain flared up in her ankle, but that faded when her head caught on a jagged edge and she felt her skin rip and the blood begin to flow.

"Shit!" she cursed as she rolled away.

"You always worked alone, Nina," he said, grabbing her leg and flipping her over to straddle her. "Remember how long I had to try and convince you to work with a team?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but he backhanded her across the face, cutting short whatever answer she may have given. Her head rocked back and forth on her neck as more pain flooded her body. Merrick shook his head.

"You and I, Nina. We had something. We could have been unstoppable, but no." His hands, his large hands, closed around her neck and began to squeeze. "You had to believe you could leave that life behind. Leave me behind. After I gave so much."

Spots began to appear before her eyes, and she struggled for a much needed breath. Lifting one leg, she brought it around and kicked him in the chest, sending him backward. Sliding away from him, Nina gasped for breath and wiped the blood and sweat mixture that dripped into her eyes away with her torn sleeve. Blinking rapidly, she saw Merrick striding toward her, holding a knife in his hand. There was no more sadistic glee on his face for fighting with her, no more joy at being able to mete out punishment. In his gaze, she read her death.

Merrick licked his lips and stated in a remarkably calm voice, despite the rage in his eyes, "It's your fault it had to be this way, Nina. And after I kill you, I will erase your bloodline from the face of the earth. And that man you've been spreading your legs for? I'm going to enjoy making him bleed as well."

Jared's face flashed before her eyes, and she pushed to her feet. Ankle weak and body sore and bloody, Nina stood tall, refusing to cower or beg. She lifted her chin and challenged him. "If you think you're man enough, Merrick, then do it."

If she'd thought he moved fast before, she was wrong. Merrick was in front of her before she could blink and kicked her square in the chest, launching her backward. *Damn, that hurts!* Nina flipped her body mid-air and landed inches above the ground, toes and fingers from one hand keeping her off the floor, legs spread wide like she was doing a split. A knife sailed from her right hand to sink into the flesh of Merrick's left bare shoulder. She knew his moves and had thrown it based on her knowledge of that.

"Bitch!" he hissed, reaching with his right hand to pull it out. He threw it to the ground, then charged at her.

Nina got to her feet and lunged back when he swiped across her belly with the black blade. The man smirked, grabbed her around the neck, and backed her into a wall.

"See now, Nina," he whispered by her ear. "I could cut you again and make you bleed even more...but I won't. Want to know why?"

Dread filled her as he drew the blade down along her shirt, between her breasts, to settle along her stomach.

"Poison," she gasped.

"Yes. My own mix." He ran his tongue up her cheek, and she bit back her nausea. "By now it's already working. You will die a slow, painful death."

His hand rested between them, and Nina held his gaze. Grabbing his wrist and jerking it, she rotated the blade so it sank hilt-deep into his abdomen. "You first!"

There in the warehouse, silence dominated like a dark cloud before Merrick released a hiss of pain and stumbled back, falling to the floor.

"No," he gasped, glancing from her to the knife embedded in his body. "This isn't possible. You, you were cut, your muscles should be weakening."

Nina stood over him and unceremoniously jerked the knife out and threw it out of his reach. "You sliced across my clothes," Nina admitted. "Ruined one of my fave shirts. But you *never* broke skin with that knife." She lifted her shirt and showed him the formfitting Kevlar vest she wore. "See Merrick, while you remained the same, I didn't. I learned and grew."

Nina stood up and walked over to his things, grabbing the knife on her way. Lifting his bag, she pulled out a black box and opened it. There was an indentation telling her it was the container which held the knife in her hand. Lying on its side next to that was a small vial filled with a reddish liquid.

Always so predictable, Merrick.

Spinning around, Nina saw Merrick trying to push himself across the cold concrete floor. Wincing at the pain in her ankle, she grabbed a chair and walked over to him, stepping over the smear of blood he'd left behind. "Fight's over, Merrick. You lost, so you owe me some information."

"Go to hell," he rasped.

Nina chuckled. "I don't believe it's my time yet." With a sigh, she dropped the chair so the rung was across his windpipe. Then she straddled it, placing her booted feet by his ears. "Now, the way I figure it, Merrick, is this red bit is your antidote." She uncapped the small vial and sniffed it. "Maybe I was wrong." Tilting it, she began to pour the liquid out.

"No!"

Resting her arms on the back of the chair, she stared down at Merrick. "Thought so. Tell me what I want to know." His skin took on a bluish color. "Looks to me like your throat is closing up. I expect the chair on it ain't helping any."

His feet slammed against the floor, and she poured a little more liquid out by his head. "So what does this poison do exactly?" she questioned, watching as he figured out a way to get a miniscule amount of air into his lungs. Nina took a deep breath. "Obviously, it screws with your ability to breathe, but I wonder what else it's doing to you."

A drop of her blood fell down and landed on his bare, sweaty chest. Her head swam, and Nina blinked a few times. "Where were we?" She looked at her hand and how badly it was shaking. The adrenaline high was wearing off and exhaustion quickly taking over. Forcing steel into her limbs, she sighed, "Right. You were just about to tell me who hired you."

Another shudder ran through her. This time, it was a shiver of awareness. They were no longer alone in the warehouse. Dropping her gaze, she noticed the glint of satisfaction in Merrick's icy eyes.

"You think I'm going to die alone? I'll make sure you come with me." Tipping her hand, Nina drained the rest of the liquid out of the vial. A lone shot rang out, and Nina jerked as the bullet tore through her shoulder. *Front to back. That means the asshole is ahead of me. One knife left.*

She picked up on the sound of another gun being cocked. *I'm sorry, Jared. I tried to make it back.*

"Left!" a deep voice commanded from behind her somewhere.

Nina threw herself off the chair to the left and covered her head as shots rang out above and all around her. She remained immobile until it stopped; even then, she hesitated to move.

"I should kick your ass."

With slow and painful progress, Nina sat up and lifted her head to stare into angry gray eyes. "Fuck you, William." She held out her hand and grimaced when he pulled her up. Immediately, her gaze slid to the man on the floor. His eyes stared sightlessly up at the ceiling.

"We need to talk, Nina," William commanded.

Feeling lightheaded, she sighed. "Not tonight. I'm outta here." Turning, she took three steps toward the door she'd entered through at the beginning of this confrontation. Then a hand clamped down on her arm. Biting back a hiss of pain, Nina glanced back at William, who stared at her. She knew what he wanted. "He never said. I'm sorry."

William swallowed and dropped his hand from her arm. "Where are you going?"

Nina licked her lips, and a small smile lifted the corner of her mouth. "I'm going home."

He nodded. "He's good for you, Nina. I'm happy for you." Spinning on his heel, William walked off, gun still in hand, and began issuing orders for the cleanup.

"Yes, yes he is," she whispered.

An hour later, Nina hobbled up the steps to Jared's house. It was well after midnight, and there were no lights on. She felt his presence before she saw him. He materialized before her, the moonlight streaming down, showing her his worried face, the lines of tension.

"Hey," she murmured.

"Is it over?" he asked, his hands sliding up her arms softly.

"Over." Nina burrowed her cheek into his palm when he touched her face.

“And now?”

“Well, unless you’re telling me you’ve changed your mind, I believe you said something about marriage.”

His mouth covered hers gently before he swept her off her feet and carried her inside and up the stairs. Nina was silent as Jared tended her injuries. When they were all done, he laid her back upon the bed and held her in his arms. For the first time since she’d learned that Merrick was back, Nina relaxed. Sure, she hurt...a lot. But she was with the man she loved, and she knew her future was with him.

“I love you, Jared,” she whispered to the darkness.

“Love you, too, Nina. I love you, too.” His lips brushed her temple, and they both fell into a much needed slumber.

We hope you enjoyed Osborne’s Shelter. Check back soon at Satin Notes ~ <http://www.satinnotes.com> for our new story.

For more about Trescott Cove and Satin Notes check out the site.

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw

The Authors

Aliyah Burke

Aliyah Burke loves to read and write. Her debut novel is titled *A Knight's Vow*. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at aliyah@aliyah-burke.com, aliyah_burke@hotmail.com, or feel free to apply to join her yahoo group at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah_burke. She is married to a career military man, they have two German Shepherds and a DSH cat. Her days are spent sharing her time between work, writing, and dog training.

Website: <http://www.aliyah-burke.com>

Chat Group: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah_burke

McKenna Jeffries

McKenna Jeffries has loved the written word from time she picked up her first book. Soon she was creating tales of love and family.

Although McKenna used to make up stories never did she even think to put them on paper until after she realized she had to share her stories. Ever since she had been writing stories ever since. Some new idea or story is floating around her head. With the itch in her fingers until she can get a piece of paper to write down the idea McKenna is always busy. She writes because it's a love affair. McKenna tells anyone who will listen and even some that didn't want to listen about her work.

Her collection of books has grown by leaps and bounds throughout the years. Someday her plan when she get her dream home is to have one of those huge libraries put in with the shelves built from floor to ceiling, a fireplace, couches and the works.

Currently writing a contemporary romance and with many other ideas floating around McKenna is hard at work. Visit all the pages to see her work and future mysterious changes that are coming up.

Website: <http://www.mckennajeffries.com>

Updates Group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/McKennaJeffriesList/>

Taige Crenshaw

Taige Crenshaw has been enthralled with the written word from time she picked up her first book. It wasn't long before she started to make up her own tales of romance.

With novels set in today, in alternate dimensions, or in the future she writes with adventure, fun sassy heroine's, and sexy hero's.

Always hard at work creating new and exciting places Taige can be found curled up with a hot novel with exciting characters when she is not creating her own. Join her in the fun, frolic, interesting people and far reaches of the world in her novels.

Website: <http://www.taigecrenshaw.com>

Chat Group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/crenshawcafe>