

ROGUE CARMEN FAYE STALLION



CHROME HORSEMEN MC 2

Annotation

No Honor Among Thieves When Cole Porter drags his brotherhood into a war with a local pimp, Gabriel Morelli, he finds that Gabriel has big connections in the local mob and will stop at nothing to hang on to the woman he considers his prized possession. With the Chrome Horsemen's reputation on the line, Cole must prove his own loyalty when the woman he's trying to save is found in a compromising situation with her so-called captors. Hell Hath No Fury When Nicole Bowers sees the mess that is building up around her escape from Gabriel who is apparently willing to kill a lot of good men trying to reach her. She calls her ex-pimp, and asks what will it take to end this. She's not coming back, but she's willing to pay. Gabriel names his price, and Nichole is shocked by his absurdity, but she has the amount, and agrees. Revenge Is Best Served Cold Gabriel lost his meal ticket when Cole made off with his best girl, but if Gabriel can't have her, no one will, and he will do whatever it takes to lure Nicole back into his camp. He knows her biggest fears, her worst nightmares, and he's not above using them to break her. EXCERPT "Cole, are you trying to seduce me? Because it's working wonderfully if you are, but it would be an unforgivable tease if you aren't," she sighed with breathless moans as he caressed her. He didn't answer, though she thought she felt a chuckle of pleasure thrum in his chest. She was painfully aroused by the time he began to kiss his way down her stomach, going lower with each kiss. The heat and smoothness of his tongue had her arching the ceiling. She expelled a hot gasp of pleasure from her lungs. "Oh, sweet mercy, yes, oh yes please," she moaned and curled her fingers into the sheets, gripping them, as he showered her with lavish attention. He wasn't bad. In fact, the sweet sensations radiating through her were telling her that he was very good, so very, very good.

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CHAPTER ONE

Cole pulled his bike into his drive, clicking the garage door opener attached to his handlebars and watched blankly as the door began to ascend. The Lowrider purred, sounding good. He would take it in for a tune tomorrow anyway. He just completed a run down to St. Louis, out to Kansas City, then up to Des Moines. This completed the schedule, so back to Chicago he rode. To date, that was the longest planned ride of his experience and he loved the journey, but he was glad to be home. He missed Nicole more than he could stand and spent an embarrassing amount of time talking to her on the cellphone.

Nicole came bouncing out of the house, running up to meet him with a smile on her lips and sex in her hungry eyes. She squeaked with glee and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him across his face and then narrowing down to his lips.

"Holy shit I missed you, baby!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I'm so glad you are back. Are you back? Do you have to go anywhere else tonight?"

"All done. Let me get the bike into the garage and check her over. Then I'll come inside."

She nodded happily, "I'll get dinner started and some beers out."

"Make mine a Coke. I need the caffeine," he requested.

"I visited with Angie today and she gave me a bit of crystal. Want some? Wake you up?" she asked. While she was terrified of heroin, Nicole knew how to manage her crystal intake. Hell, they gave this shit to kids for ADD. All she had to do was be careful with the amount and to keep herself properly hydrated.

"It will wake me up and put my dick in the dirt. Can't maintain erections on that stuff, but I'll give you good pillow talk," he offered.

"Never mind. I don't know anything about crystal. Haven't seen any for years in fact. Not even sure what it is, now that I think about it. So, a Coke? Cause I am very horny, lover. I have no idea what the fuck you did to me, but for a gal who use to think she thought about sex all the time, I'm seriously thinking about sex *all the time*," she pouted. "Only now it is all about how I'm not getting any because my lover is in fucking St. Louis."

"So, you did a bit of that crystal I take it," Cole decided.

Nicole bit her lip, "I'll get dinner."

"Good idea."

She tossed her hair into a shower of gold as she spun and skipped back toward the front door. Cole watched her with warm amusement and then he pulled the bike inside, hitting the switch to close the door behind him. He checked the bike over -- oil, air, belt, and tires. Then he leaned back against his tool bench and let exhaustion fall down on him. It was a good and profitable trip, but perhaps not the thing for him. Still, he made more money this week than he ever made in the same amount of time while doing something he loved to do.

His eyes suddenly focused and he realized that he had been dozing. "Might as well do some crystal. Not going to be much use to her anyway," he muttered, and went out the side door, and into the back door of the house, walking a tired but content stride through the kitchen looking for his lover.

She was at the front door and from her posture he could tell she was seriously scared.

"I called him, Antonio. I made it very clear." She was saying.

Cole then heard a professionally calm voice say, "Yes, I was there. It was quite amusing, Nicole, but unfortunately there is no *out*. You have a client tonight, in three hours. We need to get you there. Brian is your new driver; he's in the car and this is Davis, who will be your bodyguard. We are very

concerned about you right now. You are not making healthy decisions. So we are taking on a bodyguard's expense to ensure that you are safe, even from yourself. Now, do you have things you would like us to gather up for you?"

Cole knew Antonio and Davis. Brian, he dearly hoped wasn't a Chrome Horsemen, or this was going to get ugly and very difficult to explain. Antonio was the most dangerous. He was brutal and as skilled in close quarter combat as they come. His history boasted over thirty years of serious experience and when a man is an enforcer for the mob for thirty years, you don't take him lightly. He is a man who made it a habit to stay alive while making other men dead.

Davis was a monster. He was nearly as tall as Cole's six-four, but outweighed Cole by at least sixty pounds. Cole didn't know him well, but he had the reputation of being a knife man. So far, no one noticed him in the house and he made sure they wouldn't by changing his course as he came up behind Nicole, drawing his weapon.

They weren't going to take no for an answer, so he wasn't going to bother asking the question. Against a superior enemy, which he was, ambush is an acceptable and effective tactic. He just reached the position he wanted to be in when Nicole shouted "No! Don't touch me!"

"This is will hurt if you do not come," Antonio told her in his eerie calm voice.

Cole located the position of Antonio's voice on the other side of the door and fired at mid-height three times, then adjusted his aim to near the door jam area, across the portal, where he figured the bodyguard would be and sent four rapid shots into the wall, blowing apart the jam and splintering just about everything in the area.

Then he grabbed Nicole by her shoulder and spun her hard, sending her back into the house and flying for the couch while keeping his aim on the door area as he did. He heard her thump into the couch cushions just as the door was slammed, sending it flying on its hinges to crash into the entry wall, but by that time Cole was pulling the trigger. He fired, adjusting his aim as information presented itself.

The first face he saw was Davis, who had his gun out, but was looking the other direction -- a fatal mistake. Cole calmly fired two slugs into Davis' head, then swiftly adjusted his aim again as he spun on his knees, going as low as he was able to without losing balance while pulling the trigger on Antonio four times, going for center mass.

Cole's gun clicked empty, but instead of going for the extra clip in his jacket, he hurtled it at the surprised Antonio's face while sprinting forward as fast as he could. Cole caught the corpse of Davis as it slid down the doorjamb and removed Davis' gun from his dead hand in time to see another man running up the walk outside from the waiting limo. The new man had a gun in each hand. Keeping the stunned and dying Antonio between himself and the other man, Cole called out, "Horseman!"

The man stopped. "Chrome Horsemen?"

"Yes!" Cole replied making sure the man heard him. But staying out of direct line of fire.

"Cole? Shit! Is that you, Cole?"

"Yes! I don't want to kill you man, but I will. I'm in no gaming mood."

The man put his guns away and lifted his hands, "No, not between brothers man. What do you need?"

"I need to get to the clubhouse, fast. Myself and one other. And I need you not to know where we went. You're going to catch flack for this, Brian."

"Not from anyone important," Brian told him. "I'll make some calls, get riders to meet us on the way. I would advise moving now and not taking anything with you except what you need for survival. We'll buy everything else. Get on your bike and ride. I'll follow in the limo."

"Got it," Cole agreed, very relieved.

He didn't know Brian by name, but he recognized him now. He was one of the new guys, just came in to patch-holder status less than three months ago. That Brian was on the security teams list already

strongly suggested he had hardcore experience and top of the line training. Cole was happy not to have gone up against a man with credentials obviously much better than his own, especially in a fair fight.

Antonio collapsed.

Cole looked down at him and saw no life in the enforcer's eyes. "Fucking tough son-of-a-bitch," Cole hissed and put Davis' .45 under his belt in the front of his pants, then retrieved his own weapon and reloaded.

Nicole was watching with wide eyes as Cole went through the house, pulling out three more guns from various hiding places and eight more clips. He tossed Nicole's jacket to her, "Still have your stash here?"

She nodded, but didn't speak.

"Get it, now. Move!"

His voice drove her out of the couch and sent her flying down the hall. She came back with a black backpack, shrugging it on over her leather jacket. "I don't know... I don't know what to do," she gasped.

"I do," he told her. "Do what I say. Don't hesitate."

She nodded.

"They don't want you dead. They want you back. So we are fairly safe right now. They still don't know about me and that gives me two edges."

Nicole blinked, "What was the first edge?"

"I want them dead."

"Oh, okay," she muttered with a nod of her head, her eyes still showing how much shock she was in. There was no time for comforting, though. Other men could be showing up or waiting in ambush and cops were on the way.

"We're leaving. Cops will be on the way. Anything you need? Anything you can't live without?"

"Laptop," she sputtered.

"Grab it and put it in the saddlebags. Move!" he ordered.

Nicole ran for his office, returning with a laptop bag while stuffing in power cords. "I'm ready."

"Head for the back door. Don't stop or slow down. Go straight into the garage and get your laptop into the saddlebags. Let's move."

She didn't run this time, but she moved fast and sure. Cole felt a sweet pride in his girl right now. She wasn't bundled up into a ball of hysteria on the couch and she wasn't freaking out on him, or asking a lot of questions that start with *why* and are meaningless most of the time.

Cole played back what he heard and what he did, searching for anything that seemed out of place. He recalled Nicole saying that she had called Gabriel. Well, that was how they found her. Simple thing - - caller ID. Obviously Nicole needed some education. Serious education on basic survival skills and it wouldn't hurt to show her how to fire a weapon.

Cole nodded to this deficiency and mentally noted the tasks as urgent. Following close behind her, ready to knock her to the ground at the first whisper of trouble, they left the back door and moved fast into the garage.

As soon as she had her laptop in his bag, Cole fired up the Lowrider and clicked the garage door opener. Then he went into a crouch, taking Nicole's hand and pulled her to the side of the garage while he drew one of his pistols.

Nicole squatted down low behind him. They searched the street together. Seeing nothing and trusting that Brian was on the ball out there, he pulled Nicole back to the bike and they got on while pulling on helmets. Cole clicked the garage door as he cleared the threshold and revved his engine to warn Brian they were coming out. Then he released the clutch and thundered out of the garage.

Brian was in the road and held up his hand. Cole pulled over to him. He was probably thirty with deep red hair and looked about as Irish as anyone could. "You're fairly safe," Brian told Cole. "We were

the only crew sent after your girl here with orders that she was not to be harmed in any way that would show a bruise or keep her from working tonight. They really thought this was going to be a simple snatch and grab. They even had me waiting in the car like an asshole while they were gunned down."

"Better them..." Cole muttered.

"Agreed. Nice work, by the way. I have their wallets and phones, and two guns off the corpses. Davis was carrying an ankle. Now, head straight for the boulevard. Take it to the club. Riders are on their way to follow you in, but there's honestly no one coming."

"Thanks. I owe you," Cole told him.

"No, I owe you for shouting out, rather than just cutting me down," Brian laughed. "Ride safe. I'm behind you."

Cole nodded and then eased the Lowrider down his street, heading straight for the boulevard as instructed. Riders were on their way. The Horsemen looked after their own.

Unfortunately, Nicole wasn't one of their own and the Horsemen had a good, profitable alliance with Gabriel's stable. That connection was through Antonio, who Cole just gunned down as fast and hard as he could, along with Davis -- and who knew what connections Davis had or who was going to be pissed off about his death come morning.

"Not good," he muttered and put his hand down on Nicole's thigh. "But worth it."

CHAPTER TWO

When Nicole Bower saw the first pack of five Chrome Horsemen pass by them on the boulevard, speeding in the other direction, it sent a thrill through her. She looked over her shoulder and saw them making an illegal U-turn, then roaring even faster to catch up to her and Cole. It was like real Wild West stuff with the Calvary and everything.

She didn't even know these men, but that didn't seem to matter to them. They were here to back-up Cole, simply because he said he was in trouble and they came hunting for that trouble with guns and grim faces.

After three more blocks, however, she said to herself, "This is getting ridiculous," because there were over forty riders around them now, all armed, and none of them joking. Riders shot their bikes forward, up the side of the pack, to come to rest in the middle of intersections, to block traffic for the rest of the pack.

When she looked down crossing roads, she often saw three or four bikers running down the side streets while keeping up with them. These men were called "outriders." Cole had explained them to her during pillow talk the day she officially moved in with him and asked him about his work with the club.

"Outriders," Cole had told her, "and that was my first real job with the club's security service, follow or pace the main pack or convoy."

They were kept back for two reasons. The first was to give an attacker a false idea of how many men are guarding the convoy. The second was that in case of an attack, they would be the ones who are going to engage the attackers and hunt them down.

The men riding in the main pack only have one goal: to see that the package makes it safely to where it is going. If an attack came, the pack sped up to escape the area, only returning fire if it will help them get the package get out of the danger zone.

That was their job and their only job. While the pack is doing this, the outriders come in from behind and from the sides, assessing the situation as they do and focus on the attackers themselves with the intent of killing them."

He explained this in as few words as possible, but that didn't stop Nicole from thinking just how dangerous everything was. When she told him that, he just laughed.

"Riding as fast as you can into the middle of a gun fight to go after the people firing the guns at

you is dangerous, yes. But you eventually get good at it." he assured her.

She had grinned at him, "Don't make fun. This is all new to me."

"That's not going to be true for long," he told her and then brought her to him and kissed her until her toes curled up with rioting pleasures.

By the time they made it to the clubhouse, Nicole had lost track, but was sure there were at least fifty riders in the main pack and one limo. Brian, the man who would have been her new driver if Antonio and Davis were successful in kidnapping her earlier, remained right behind them in the limo that used to be her car.

The bar they pulled into the parking lot of was the clubhouse for the Horsemen, called *Abbey's*. They pulled in surrounded by armed men and thundering engines. As soon as they were parked, Brian beeped the horn of the limo and continued down the boulevard with a parting wave out the window as he guided the long car into light evening traffic.

The sound of all the engines and watching the large group of men fanning out, guarding them as Cole took her by the hand toward the club was calming, almost soothing. Gabriel wasn't going to be able to get her here. Not a chance. But, of course, she couldn't just stay here.

"What's the plan now?" she asked as Cole took her hand and gently pulled her through the front doors of the club.

"World domination. But then, that's always the plan...there is no other plan. However, what we are going to do right now is to talk to Big Jim, the president of the Horsemen. We'll have a clearer idea of what we can do and what we should do after that. My first instinct is to ride over there right now while your pimp Gabriel still believes you'll back in his stable within an hour or so. Just ride right now and kill him. Get this over with. And I would, too, in a heartbeat if..."

"If what, Cole?"

"Well, we have agreements with Gabriel and a profitable partnership. Big Jim would not enjoy the news that I just went over there and killed one of our regular customers – well, without his permission anyway."

"How would he feel about Gabriel killing you?"

"He would seek retribution, but that may not come in the *eye for an eye* way."

Odds are, they'd probably work out some concessions on Gabriel's businesses or cite a cash value to cover the cost to the club for no longer having me as a resource.

Most of the time, things like this were handled with cash and plenty of it. No one wanted to go to war and everyone likes cash, so it was normally the preferred method to put the guns away and get back to business.

She listened, then nodded her understanding, and asked, "So, how much are we talking here?"

"For my death? Probably one to three hundred grand would be asked and then negotiated down to nearly half that much. I'm a patch-holder of the club -- they couldn't let my murder slide, but they wouldn't want a war over it either.

"For you? To put an end to any claim he believes he has on you? Over a half million, I'm sure. You are obviously a profit center on Gabriel's accounting ledger; you are all black ink. He will be claiming damages, not merely the loss of a resource."

Once they were inside of the doors, she noticed only eight men in the whole building. All of them had a gun in hand as they watched the streets outside of the window. Two of them waved to Cole, who waved back as he guided her toward the bar.

"What will Big Jim say?" she asked as more men began filing into the bar. Most of them were silent, even brooding, but a handful were on adrenaline rushes, talking and joking loudly against the quiet place. Music wasn't even playing right now. Maybe they turned it off when they announced that Cole needed help and forgot to turn it back on.

"That's going to be hard to guess, baby. Yep, kind of hard," he told her and squeezed her ass in his large hand as she got up on the barstool, "Been wanting to do that for almost a week now."

She wiggled a little, "We could jump into the ladies' room for a quickie. Doesn't look like many ladies are here right now."

"Oh, wow," he sighed with restrained desire, "don't tempt me with that right now. We really have to see Jim right away." Cole asked the man behind the bar to give him a notepad and pen.

He wrote a brief request to see Jim, adding that he and Nicole would remain in the bar for at least three hours before using the hotel directly across the street. "That's our hotel," Cole explained to her. The Horsemen used it as a makeshift safe house. Cole wouldn't need to register or show ID there, or anything else. As far as the manager and employees over there would be concerned, the couple didn't exist and the room they were staying in would be logged as empty."

CHAPTER THREE

Nicole watched as the bartender took Cole's folded note and set two longnecks down in front of them. She reached for hers right away. Her nerves were shot, she was confused, and very scared. Just a while ago, Cole killed Antonio and Davis! Right in front of her! They were dead! "What makes your president's mind so muddy on this?"

Cole took a drink from his bottle while shaking his head slightly. Setting the bottle back down, he told her, "Not muddy. He's not a confusing man. Not at all. Generally, you can bet your paychecks on which way he's going to look at things, but I can't call this one right now."

"Why not?"

"Big Jim is, beyond a doubt, fully committed to the club, to its safety and its profits. You might believe that every president should be, but in the real world, this isn't the case at all. But for Jim, it is. All of his decisions, plans, and decrees are directly related to one or all of those areas. So, it is not Jim that is confusing; it's the situation." Cole turned to her, "If it was just me and, for some reason, Gabriel was after me like this, sending men to kidnap me into indentured servitude, Big Jim would kill him. Literally. I'm a member of the club. A rider. A patch-holder. That kind of shit is not tolerated at all."

"But it isn't just you and I'm not a member," she put it together.

"Exactly, and you used to work for him, and he may not simply trust on face value that you left with your hands clean. Walking in, not knowing you, he has to consider the possibility that Gabriel has a valid reason to be after you like this. I have to admit, I didn't think Gabriel's men would get this aggressive with you. I really didn't. But maybe when you called them and let them know where you were, it was too tempting of an idea."

"I never said where I was!" she protested.

"I believe you, but you forgot about Caller ID. He got my home number when you called from my home phone. It was just a matter of researching the number after that to bring them to my doorstep and to you."

She looked blankly and then her eyes widened, "Oh, shit. What a fucking idiot I am," she groaned. "I'm so sorry, Cole! Fuck, I didn't think about that at all."

"Why would you? You haven't been on the run from people with serious resources looking for you before, but it tells me we need to spend some time discussing survival basics and teaching you some tricks to avoid this in the future." Then he lifted an eyebrow, "Why did you use my phone instead of your cellphone?"

"The cellphone was in the bedroom and I wanted to make the call before I lost my nerve, and I felt the long walk back there would give me enough time to do that."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I was never coming back and, even if he did find me, if he was looking for me, I wouldn't do

the show again, not willingly. I said it was over and to leave me alone."

Both of Cole's eyebrows lifted this time and he nodded his head thoughtfully, "What did Gabriel say to that?"

She picked up her bottle again and motioned to the bartender for another, "I don't know. I lost my nerve and hung up on him after that."

He put his hand on her thigh and rubbed it with deep and soothing care, "Not to worry. In the future, it might be wise to refrain from calling him at all. Honestly, that's just going to make things worse at this point. Like I told you at the house, I know what to do. I'm good at situations like this and if you can trust me, we'll be fine."

She nodded and then finished her beer, "I trust you. I really do."

He studied her face, "I truly believe that you care about me and that you want to be with me, and there was no way you could fake the orgasms that you have, but it is all right if you don't fully trust me yet. Trust takes time and it is generally stronger the longer you wait to buy in."

She met his gaze with understanding, but a smile of humor, "Are you forgetting that we share each other's memories? Our thoughts and even our feelings? My empathy level with you is... well...it's shocking; that's what it is. I can feel the level of arousal you are at when we are having sex. Hell, I can feel you are uncomfortable in that area right now. I really wish you would at least let me suck you off. Seriously. I want to. I love sucking your cock, which brings up another reason I can trust you," she added, nodding her head with certainty. "You have a beautiful cock. Any man with a cock like yours has to be trustworthy. It would simply be unfair if you were an asshole with a cock like that. Talk about mixed signals from the universe. Shit."

"Glad you like it," Cole told her. "I've been working on it all my life."

"Well, stop and let me take care of it. Seriously," she told him as she slid gracefully off her stool. "I'll whisper in the bartender's ear that we'll be in there and slip him a hundred, asking him to knock on the door if Big Jim summons us. And I'll use every trick I know to get you off fast. Come on," she said, pulling at his arm. He looked bewildered and she told him, "Cole, I don't like performing sexual acts all that much, but I love doing them for you. I really do and you have been without for what? Five days now? Six?"

He slowly allowed her to pull him from the stool and stood up to his full height, "That's not exactly a long time," he pointed out.

"Not when sex isn't on your mind and you have other entertainments to work on, sure. But my money is on your last few days being filled with strong desires and loneliness just like mine were, and you should take advantage of this moment of downtime we have since, with the variables, you don't have a clue what we are doing next."

"We might just be going across the street," he offered.

"Which would be fine with me and if you knew that for a fact, I would agree that this could wait. But you don't. We may be riding south, Cole, all the way to Florida or heading north to some place Jim wants us to hide while he gets this worked out. Or another attack could happen, or..."

Cole lifted both hands up with his palms facing her, "All right, cease fire. I'll go. Willingly even."

She smiled broadly a sense of glee pouring out of her, "That's the first time in my life that I've had a boyfriend/girlfriend argument and won. We should have champagne or something with dinner to celebrate."

"If we aren't hiding in a boxcar waiting for the train to take us to New Orleans, I agree," he said and reached down to take her ass in his hand, "You aren't exactly a fair fighter, by the way."

"I'll go whisper in his ear. I'll be right back," she laughed and then hurried over to the man behind the bar.

The bartender, whose name she discovered was Hank, didn't even flinch when she explained the

instructions and where they would be, which from experience, didn't surprise her at all. Bartenders tended to be well experienced in the actions of humanity and this one worked at a club owned by an outlaw biker group.

As she walked back to Cole, she looked around. There was still only a smattering of people in the bar; most of the group remained outside, talking while their eyes remained on alert. Was there really something they could be worried about at this point?

She didn't know, but she wanted to know. After she took care of Cole, she would ask him about it. After. She also noticed that she was the only woman in the place, which was a good thing, until her logical mind gave her a reason for this. "They were sent home. The men are still on alert and so the women remain safe in their homes," she murmured. "There *is* something to worry about," she decided.

"Hank will let us know if Jim calls for you while we are in there, so come on, don't waste time," she informed Cole when she was in discrete talking distance while taking his hand and pulling to get him started.

She was amazed that he felt so shy about doing this. The men she was used to, the ones who taught her this little trick, often asked her to arrange someplace out of the way for a quickie.

Well, not all of them had this urge. Max didn't, but most of her regulars did.

She thought Cole would get off on it, but maybe it was embarrassing for him to share private space in a public area. Once she got him inside with the door closed, she pushed him up until his back was against the wall. Then leaned into him, pressing herself into the top of his abs.

"Thanks," she told him as she found his buckle and began the manual actions needed to get his cock out.

This was another skill she practiced and perfected -- buying a mannequin and practicing with her eyes closed as she listened to the evening stock exchange commentary on the radio. It was a good skill to have in intimate moments, so she didn't risk breaking the mood by fumbling around, especially with all the effort she put into creating those "moments."

"For what?" he said, very amused. "I'm the one getting the blowjob. Do you expect me to do you after or something?"

She grinned. She couldn't remember the last time someone did that for her. It was long ago; that was for sure. Clients didn't do that, at least hers didn't, and she never had a lover who did. Jorge, her last long term boyfriend, thought it was a disgusting thought, but then Jorge found most of the world disgusting or insulting.

"Like I said, Cole, I really enjoy doing this for you," she told him, still watching his eyes as she unclasped his pants and searched for the zipper hook.

"Do you?" he asked, "Did you ... before?"

She shrugged and looked down, found the zipper hook, and released the zipper. "No, not really. I didn't really enjoy any of it. It was a job and I like doing things right, or at least, not wrong. The job was sometimes interesting, sometimes humorous, and often a challenge. But, no, Cole, it was never enjoyable to me. If you want to know about that part of my life, then we'll talk, all right? But, after," she told him.

"You don't have--"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I *should* talk about it with you. A huge part of what I am was forged during those years. Not saying I'm proud of what I did, but I am proud of who I am, and I don't want to have huge parts of me hidden from you. I want to be with you. You. Not just your body, or the bedroom." She shrugged, "Besides, you'll get *deja vu* about that time of my life sooner or later, and we'll have to discuss it then."

Nicole lifted up on her toes, and gave him a sensuous kiss on his lips, "Now, nothing else until after," she sighed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Even after the experiences of seeing this thing of his, and sucking him off four times now, and studying it with great interest, because it really seemed like it was too much to be real, Nicole felt a little shocked every time she came face to face with the thing. On her knees in from of him, the thing was definitely in her face, and seemed to be mocking her with its half aroused state.

Studying it for a brief moment, she decided, *challenge accepted*, and took him into her mouth.

She did, really, get off on sucking him. He was tall, strong, and very powerful. After seeing him in action earlier, he aroused her so much she could barely stand it. She wondered, since he seemed so shy about getting a blow job in the lady's room, how he would feel about fucking her up against the wall?

She gently put that thought out of her mind, deciding this wasn't the day or the moment, to find out, though she longed to be stretched open again by this thing again.

The first time she was with him, last week, she fell into a mental state of analyzing, as if she were still on the job, doing the dance. The mood and mentality just slipped in, and it felt so natural to be like that during sex, she didn't even realize what had happened until waking the next morning.

After some review, she decided firmly that she didn't like being so distant from him. Sex was no longer an experiment in psychology or a source for understanding the physiology of human sexuality. It was also not time to engage in mental games with Cole, such as instigating mood changes, or guiding conversations, or making sure he was experiencing the right emotions about her, so that she would be his favorite, and he would leave a good tip.

She didn't want a good tip, she wanted Cole.

Sex was now time for being with Cole, not for her research. In fact, there wasn't a place in her life for her research. She was glad she decided to leave all of her lab, and note books in the apartment. There was no room at Cole's house where they could comfortably fit in.

It took some time, but she could deep-throat him, she taught herself the skill. After sucking, and working his shaft with both of her hands, and warming up her throat by making happy sex noises, she took him all the way down, and was rewarded by a loud, low groan from Cole, and a brief spasm of pleasure in his hips.

"Fucking hell," he breathed.

Nicole reflected that this reward from Cole, was worth far more to her, than a good tip. Money was almost nothing to the men that visited her -- other than in their world it meant everything. Not having enough to buy a building however, was more of a social problem, than a financial one for them.

She had a good deal of money, very close now to a million -- which sounded like a lot, and it was a lot, but not enough to retire in the lifestyle she believed she wanted to a month ago. She felt then that she needed to triple that, and also have a similar portfolio, if she was going to retire from the show.

With the warmth of Cole's gift still glowing in her breasts, she worked, and sucked his cock, while occasionally taking him all the way down -- which was a serious depth to think about, so she chose not to.

It was perhaps ten minutes later, with Cole's low, pleasant moans giving her goosebumps, that she felt from him a peak of emotional power, letting her know that he was close to climax. She felt that power flair before, and it came into her mind looking like a star going supernova.

On the heels of his climax, he jerked, then twisted his hips. His hands were suddenly gripping her head, and then clutching at her hair. She felt a pleasant golden heat rush through her body, which she recognized as being the effects of what she use to call, climax.

Flattening her hands against him, she swallowed him once more, enduring several sharp thrust from his hips, pulsing his orgasm into her.

His abs were clutching up, so he felt like he was looming over her, but once his climax was over,

he leaned back against the wall. Nicole spent more than a minute afterward, humming happily, and lavishing his cock with licks, kisses and playful sucks at his over-stimulated head.

I came! I fucking came giving him head! I can't believe that.

But the afterglow was there, and her breasts were flushed. It was undeniably true. It wasn't as strong as a *Cole-gasm*, the kind she was put through having sex with him, but it was very soothing and warm anyway, and relaxed her shoulders from tensions she wasn't aware she was suffering from.

Standing again, she buttoned and zipped him up, after folding his cock safely away. Then performed a playful jump in order to reach his cheek, and give him a kiss. Then she stepped back, and looked him over. Everything looked good.

Once he passed her inspection, she went to the sink, pulling her brush from her purse, and quickly fixed her hair from the tangles created during his climax.

"All done," she reported with voice that was dangerously close to being girly.

He looked her over, his eyes lazy, and calm, then nodded, and came forward off the wall. "Thanks for pushing me to do that, I feel a lot better now. Not so edgy. Having an edge is good, being edgy sucks."

She nodded to this bit of wisdom, and agreed. Careful and concerned were a good mind-sets to have, in their situation. Paranoia could paralyze you from action, and that would result in greater losses than she was willing to cope with.

Nicole nodded, and then calmly asked, "When would you like to learn about my life as a call girl?"

Cole met her eyes, and then nodded, "Soon, because you are right. I want to know you too. All of you. Because I cherish all of you. But not right now. Now, we need to be ready to see Jim, and that's what I want to focus on. Maybe in the hotel, later, or where ever we are going to be spending the night."

Agreeing she said, "All right, let's go finish our beers."

They walked back to their seats, just as Hank was hanging up the wall phone by the register. He turned, and said in a voice that would reach them, "Cole? Jim is ready for you."

So, instead of sitting down they picked up their bottles and walked together to the office.

CHAPTER FIVE

Big Jim was easily the largest, meanest looking man Nicole had ever laid eyes on in person. He felt like the incarnation of a powerful storm and one that was on the brink of letting loose to level a few cities. His voice, however, though deep and feeling somehow muscular, didn't fit with the outer window dressing when he greeted them both warmly and asked them to sit down. Cole guided her took the offered chairs and they got comfortable.

"I read the note. Thanks for the overview to get me up to speed, but how long have you been guarding her over at your house, Cole?"

"I'm not guarding her; she's living with me."

Jim's eyebrow went up and he leaned back in his large, leather padded desk chair, which complained at his movement with strained squeaks and stressed wood. "I probably shouldn't say this, but I couldn't count the number of women I've seen you spend some time with, but I can't recall any of them ever moving in with you."

"That's because none of them ever did."

"Your choice?" Jim asked.

"Yes," Cole admitted.

"Hmm," Jim mused and came back forward to rest his thick forearms on the surface of the large, antique wooden desk between them. "So this is already fairly serious between you two."

"Yep, pretty serious, boss. For me it's more serious than anything before, real or imagined. Nicole has expressed the same level of commitment enough times that I believe her."

"So," Jim said with some thought, "everything is wonderful on the home front, until the visitors tonight who, if I read things right, were there to abduct Nicole and take her back to the life."

"That's exactly how it went down," Cole agreed, "only missing the part where I then shot and killed them for their efforts, and ran with her as fast as I could."

Jim drummed his fingers together and decided on something, "Ya know, I got an email from Gabriel a few days back, claiming a woman of his ran off with something and he also attached a photo. The email continued on to offer a one hundred thousand dollar reward -- alive and unharmed."

"Holy shit!" she breathed in a voice that was close to a whimper, "What the fuck?"

Jim nodded, "I agree. That was my first thought. That amount seemed to be overkill to me. But let's let that simmer and come back to it. Cole? Did you recognize these men?"

"Yeah. Antonio led and Davis was with him, and Brian. Brian Winters."

"You killed Brian?" Jim gasped in surprise and shock. "That might have been a point to put in your note," he added with reproach and anger was rumbling around in the back of this throat as well.

"No, I didn't. I know that quite a few of our men are drivers for Gabriel. I was one. I heard Antonio telling Nicole that her new driver was named Brian. Anyway, after I dealt with Antonio and Davis, I called out when he was running up the walk. Brian responded, recognized me, and then helped us get this far."

Jim drummed his fingers together again and then murmured, "Hell of a risk calling out to a man like Brian," while his gaze turned inward. Nicole could see Jim developing mental images of the scene.

"I couldn't do anything else," Cole pointed out.

"You could have shot him," Jim replied.

Cole laughed a little, "Like you would have, in the same situation."

Jim glanced back at Cole and allowed the hint of a grin, "Kinda got me there. Brian, though, is one hell of a warrior. Have you seen those twin guns he carries around?"

"Briefly," Cole said, "He was running up with one in each hand before I called out. Couldn't tell what they were, though."

"Those things make Desert Eagles look like pea shooters. And he can take the wings off a fly with them," Jim told Cole and it sounded like a warning to Nicole. "I went to the range a couple of weeks back with some of the guys. Brian was one of them. I've never met anyone close to the skills he has with those fucking cannons. If you happen to be on his good side, I highly recommend staying there. It's a warm and cozy place to be."

"I'll keep that in mind," Cole told him.

"Of course, you're no wimp yourself. Antonio *and* Davis? You took them both at close range in a gun battle? I have to say, brother, I'm very impressed."

"Not actually that impressive," Cole told him. "I ambushed them. Antonio was leaking before he ever saw me and Davis was highly unlucky a brief moment later. I knew of Antonio's rep, of course, which is why I chose the tactic. I didn't know shit about Davis other than he likes to fight and likes the knife, but better safe."

Jim nodded with agreement. "True enough. Davis was special ops in Afghanistan, discharged as *Other Than Honorable*. Not really clear on the details, but apparently his commander was found beaten and cut up. Then Davis took the discharge. The cops are looking into him for six killings, last I heard, and his skills at close combat were a rival to Antonio's, to hear Antonio describe them."

Cole was quiet for a moment and then said, "Glad I didn't know that a few hours ago. I might have puked and ruined my whole plan. I thought he was just muscle for Antonio."

"As if Antonio ever needed muscle," Jim said while looking down at the surface of his desk. "No, you might have had luck on your side, amigo, but it took real skill to take both of them down at the same time. And speaking of the cops, they are still at your house and would very much like to talk with

you. I have Jack coming over; he'll be here in about thirty minutes or so. He'll go with you for this talk, about defending your home from invasion and make sure they don't do anything silly...like arrest you."

There was a knock at the door. Jim lifted an eyebrow, and then shrugged, "Come in."

Hank the bartender opened the door, and held out a plastic grocery bag filled with items Nicole couldn't identify.

"Sorry, boss," Hank began, "but Brian suggested you needed this right away. Even if you were very busy and in a highly private meeting."

"Well, then bring it over here; let's see what we got. I don't think there's a tall redhead in that bag, though, which is the only thing that comes to mind for what I might *need* no matter what," Jim declared.

Hank gave him the bag and headed for the door.

"Hank?" Jim said, as Hank reached the door, "Thank Brian for me and good call on your part. If that man says something is important, it's likely more important than he's letting on."

"Yes, sir, thanks." Then Hank was gone and Jim was looking down into the bag.

"It looks like," Jim mused as he inventoried the bag, "I have a disappointing number of redheads in here, which is a shame. But there are three well made and very valuable pistols, two wallets of leather, and two cellphones whose value could pay my rent."

"Those would be the items Brian took off Antonio and Davis," Cole offered.

"Interesting and very good. This will probably ensure that you aren't going to spend much time with the cops. Jack can certainly use these. Did either of them get a shot off?"

"No," Cole told him.

Jim nodded in a way that let Nicole know he already guessed that this was the case. "Well, when you get outside with these things, I want you to pump a round out of each of them and *you* were the one who took these things off the corpses, not Brian."

"Got it," Cole agreed.

CHAPTER SIX

Jim set the bag forward to the edge of the desk in front of Cole and then turned thoughtful again as his focus came over to Nicole. His gaze felt like it had weight and she tried to sit a little straighter. "Let's return to the email I got offering the overly-done reward."

"I've already notified the men in my club, the ones who do a bit of bounty hunting in underworld affairs, that you are an internal matter for now and that you are under the protection of Cole.

"Cole is a good man, but you already know that part. He carries an impressive amount of respect around, handed to him by most of the members of our club and myself. So, for now, no one from this club is going to be looking to cash you in, but the note also mentioned that you took something from Gabriel when you left.

"He was very vague about what the missing *something* might be, but from the looks of you, I would guess it was his heart."

Nicole studied him and then said, "He doesn't have a heart. It's a birth defect."

"Rendering him all the more unpredictable in situations like this. Why are you so important to him?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "I mean, I was a call girl for him and good at what I did. I might have been better than some of the other girls, but we were never given information along those lines. I figured that he didn't want us figuring out that we were more valuable to him than we suspected."

"How, um, *valuable* were you?" Jim asked. Then he glanced at Cole, who calmly gave him a nod of permission to carry on.

So, Nicole told him, and told him about the tips, and what she learned about the bidding wars for her, which were common on particular days during the year. "When I overheard that conversation, the

ravings were about how they raked in twelve times my fee that year."

Jim lifted both eyebrows to this and then gave her a long appraising look. "Forgive me. I agree you are very nice on the eyes, but that's a lot of money for a night of sex."

Nicole quirked the edge of a grin before she was able to control her lips and replied, "No, Jim, that's an insane amount of money for a night of sex even with twelve women." She shook her head, "No, it wasn't about the sex. A prostitute gives you a climax. What I did was give you a night of freedom and then the sex."

"Interesting, but freedom from what?" Jim pressed.

She glanced over at Cole and said, "We were going to talk about this later, but now seems like a more appropriate time, if you agree."

Cole was silent for a moment, "It's important that Jim knows as much as he can right now about what is going on and why. So, yes, I agree."

She nodded, focused her thoughts, and let the words pour out. The men who were on her calendar regularly were very rich -- the multiple millions kind of rich in cash value with many times that locked up in investments and deals all the time. They were also extremely powerful and you could tell that by the way they came into a room and how they perceived things.

"For example," she explained, "a bomb threat at the Chicago airport would not be seen as terribly important. It would not delay them. They would simply make some calls -- one, or two at the most -- and then they would not only make their flight, but it would leave on time. Their problems aren't the problems other people have. They're the problems other governments have."

She paused for a moment and then continued, "If men like these just want sex, they don't come to me. They bend their willing secretary over the desk, fuck her, and get on with their day. Or, maybe it was their girlfriend, or perhaps their wife, or sometimes the young nanny, or perhaps three of those women in the same day.

"Men of power, like them -- and I suspect you, Jim, have experienced the beginnings of this lately -- don't see sex as an attractive goal; they view it as the release of nagging tensions and if they could get away with it, they wouldn't have it at all. Of course, they wouldn't sleep at all either. Since it is necessary and regular feedings of the animal urge result in improved concentration, they ensure they have some around, like a diabetic might feel keeping insulin around would be a good idea.

She met Jim's eyes, "And really Jim, pussy is just pussy, right? From what I gathered so far about Cole's lifestyle and the population who choose it, there are plenty of willing women here most nights of the week. And when you are feeling the tension in your shoulders and your mind is a little foggy even after you did a line, or maybe the imperious urge is on the path again, wandering out there to the bar, finding a willing woman, fucking her here on this desk, which appears to be the right height for a man your size, is a viable and reasonable response."

Jim shifted a little uneasily, but then nodded, "All right, go on."

"Even with the money, power, and resources these men have, they don't have any moments of freedom. Throughout their lives, they have been committed and focused. They've learned and practiced the mental skills necessary to have as many irons in the fire as they can at one time.

"Time is not recoverable and the general belief among them is that only the insane waste it. While they were learning and loving the results of their growing mental abilities, and very invested in taking multi-tasking to the level of the divine, something else was happening to them, as well.

"Their minds now no longer actually leave the boardrooms or negotiating tables. They never really shut the computer off and sigh with satisfaction after a long, but rewarding day. They have like this bubble around them, which traps them inside with themselves.

"There are no moments of actual leisure in their lives while this bubble is there. Inside the bubble there are always ten or more things that need their focused attention and their email cues always have an

important message they need to compose a response for. The list of important and critical things is always long and impossible to compete."

"After I meet a new client, I learn as much as I can during the time I am with him, so that I can talk his language the next time he comes over. The nights with me normally begin with decompression. I allow them space for a while, getting them drinks, perhaps getting their shoes off while they catch up on a few emails or stock positions.

"Then I begin a subtle seduction, which normally begins by engaging them in conversation on topics I know are appealing to them. During these conversations, for the next two, maybe three hours, I guide their emotions and the topics of interest, to places outside of that bubble. I may take a shower with them, or dance for them, or even perform masturbation for them, but normally the seduction at this point is subtle.

"As soon as I have them fully engaged in interests outside of their bubble, such as horse breeding, or motorcycles, or whatever it is that they could envision themselves doing as a hobby or find mentally stimulating, the bubble begins to pop and they become present in the room with nothing on their minds other than the desire to spend the next few hours free with the woman who broke them out -- and then we have sex."

"Because before that bubble pops," Jim reasoned, "sex with you is going to be just as interesting and effective as sex with the secretary."

"Exactly. The sex, too, requires a great deal of research and takes several hours of my day to go through the current regimen of exercises I have scheduled at any given time. These exercises are always specific to my current technical goals so that I can perform the techniques to offer higher arousal and control. A perfect example of this is the technique known as pompoir."

Jim was fully engaged now in what she was telling him, "What's that? What is pompoir?"

"Pompoir is a technique that requires the mastery of the pussy muscles, the ones inside, not just around the entry area. Once mastery is achieved and individual muscles can be flexed and relaxed at will, the woman-on-top position is used and she makes use of her internal pussy muscles to work the cock with ripples of excitement without using humping motions or hands.

"From across the room, she'd look like she is just sitting there, straddling his cock. To the man attached to that cock, there is a riot of stimulations happening to him."

"Get out!" Jim blurted with a laugh.

"Pompoir requires several months of dedicated training to be able to use it properly," she continued as if she wasn't interrupted.

"You're serious," Jim said in astonishment.

"I'm very serious about all of these things. I have spent the last three years engrossed in the study of physical sex, how the brain makes decisions, the physiology of lust, attraction, stages of arousal, and taboo attraction.

"I've also learned about finance, negotiation tactics, the psychology and skills of investments, stocks, mutual funds, and, if given a couple minutes and my laptop connected to the Internet, I can tell you the best place to get sushi in a city I have no experience with."

"Jesus Christ," Jim said and looked over at Cole, "She does this pompoir for you?"

Cole nodded and then glanced at Nicole.

"Tell him," she encouraged keeping her face emotionless.

"Fucking wildest thing I've ever had done to me, Jim," Cole laughed.

"Holy shit," Jim mused, with a slow thoughtful voice. "The other call girls? Are they the same? With the training, and bubble popping?"

Nicole thought about this, "No, I don't think so. Not to the levels of mastery I set for myself, no. I mean, I never asked them about what they do or how, but Gabriel would make them come over and visit

several times a month, so they could talk with me.

"Many of them confided after a few visits, after we became more friendly, that since they started doing some of the things I described, their tips increased a great deal."

"I bet they did," Jim mumbled and looked out into space, leaning back a little. "So, she's the star performer,"

For several long minutes, Jim simply sat, staring at nothing, while drumming his fingers together.

It could have been four minutes in real time, but it sure felt much longer to Nicole. Then Jim seemed to suck back into himself, like he had been out of the room all that time, taking a little stroll somewhere as he went through the problem.

She turned to Cole, but Cole didn't seem to notice this and when it was over, she wondered if she really saw it herself, or if stress was finally bringing her down.

"Well, my lad," Big Jim said to Cole, "I do believe we have truly stepped in it this time."

"I'm thinking I smell it too," Cole confessed. "Where do we start with the cleaning?"

Jim looked Cole over and then spared a glance toward Nicole, "I was right the first time, though it was just a joke then," he told her when their eyes met."

"Excuse me?"

"You took his heart, or at least the heart from his call girl group. *You* are the precious thing you took and I don't believe anything else is going to satisfy him," Jim explained and then leaned all the way back until his head was against the wall behind him.

"He probably thought he had at least another five years before he had to consider your appeal dissolving. But that's not your fault or your concern. In five years, he would just be thinking the same thing -- another five years of this Halloween being better than the last."

Jim suddenly came forward and nailed Cole with his eyes, "Yep, a shit storm, lad. A real shit storm. The first thing we are going to do is clear you with the cops. You are going to ride down to your house with Jack, doing what I described with the weapons first. Nicole is going to be at the hotel or here, surrounded by members. The manager on at the hotel tonight is Mike, I believe. Good man."

"I know him and I agree. He is a good man and skilled." Cole nodded.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jim picked up his desk phone, hit some numbers, and waited, then said into the phone, "Brian still out there?" After he received his answer he said, "Good. Tell Brian I've got questions and also some work for him." Then he cradled the phone again and refocused on Cole, "Brian will watch over your lady here until you are back. With him in the room and five men close by and us right across the street, I think she'll be safe for a few hours while you clean up your back trail."

Cole nodded, "Agreed." Then he glanced at Nicole, "You all right with that?"

She nodded, "Sure. Won't the cops want to talk with me, as well?"

"Seeing as you just left town, for parts unknown, they can *want* all they would like," Jim told her. "We're taking you off the grid for a while. Might be a couple of weeks before this settles. I can't see Gabriel taking cash to settle this, at least not the kind of cash the club has available and I'm not paying him anything for Antonio or Davis.

He sighed. "That leaves only the possibility of war between us. He's too bloodied already to back down and I'm too stupid, but I can't see paying him for sending two enforcers to my man's door and then saying sorry that they weren't good enough to kill Cole. Fuck that."

Nicole suddenly felt very concerned about being the reason a war was going to happen and Jim seemed to pick up on it right away, shaking his head in a slow, reassuring way, "The shit between us and Gabe has been brewing for years. Been brewing between us since before my time.

"Sure, you kicked the hornet's nest, but it was going to blow sooner than later anyway. He's pulled

some serious stuff with us this year, but I'm not going to air that dirty laundry right now. Suffice it to say, you could be still with him and within a few months, we'd be at each other anyway. The timetable has changed, but the actions are all going to be the same."

Nicole attempted to allow this news to make her feel better and failed, but she nodded, "Thanks."

Jim nodded his head in return. "Good and settled. Cole? I'm probably going to need you back here at noon tomorrow for a powwow with the core. I'm sure I'll hear from Gabe before then and get an ear full of his whining." Jim turned his focus inside again and said, "I should catch him off guard and call him now. He may still be thinking his men have you."

Jim smiled the wickedest grin Nicole had ever seen and picked up his cellphone, thumbed through some numbers, and then pressed the dial button. He shot a look of pure mischief at Cole who leaned forward listening intently.

"Gabe? Jim here. I got questions. Well Gabe, I'm sitting here asking myself why I'm on the phone with you when what I really should be doing is kicking your ass. But first, I would like to know why you sent three men to one of my member's house with guns and violence in mind. He's one of my best men, in fact, as your men found out."

Jim listened for a bit, "No, no, he's fine. It's your men who are dead. But that makes no difference to me. That shit doesn't fly and you've been throwing shit around for so long, a good ass-whooping might do you some good. Get you back on track. Knock your head out of your ass."

Jim listened again, smiling from ear to ear. He winked at Nicole, letting her know he was having far too much fun with this. "Yep, that's how it looks from here. Both Antonio and that brainless twit Davis. Yes," Jim then said with the slow and patient voice of a man who was heavily annoyed, "they are dead, Gabe. Well and truly dead. My man put them down on his doorstep, but like I said, that doesn't matter. You are the one sending people at mine and I'm not having it.

"What? No, not a word, but that don't matter to me either. If she left you, good, and I wish her well in her new life. In fact, if I happen to come across her, I may give her some cash to help her on her way." Then his voice took on seriously angry tones, "Especially, if a call girl is your reason for sending enforcers to my man's door. That's the lamest thing I've ever heard and you'd better have something more reasonable than that to say or we won't even bother with negotiations.

"Fine," Jim said, after a long time listening, "That was my feelings on the matter anyway. Consider your ass-whooping on the way."

Jim clicked his cellphone off, and then waited for a small span again to speak while he collected his thoughts. After this pause, he dialed another number and waited for it to answer, "George? Yep, Jim here. I want you on the phone as fast as you can, calling all the men working for that asshole Gabriel and pulling them out.

"Tell them to show up at the club and I'll have some things to say in about two hours. After that, go through the roster and head off anyone working in the morning or near future." Jim drummed his fingers, "Oh and you don't need to bother with Brian, he already knows," he added and then, after listening to George for a moment, answered, "Yes, it has been coming for some time. Should have cleaned this slate with him near the beginning of the year. Shit just keeps piling up." He drummed his fingers once more, "Good. See you in a few then."

Jim hung up the cellphone and looked at Nicole with glitter in his eyes, "Yep, he was still under the impression you were on your way. Now he's all fucked up and that should give us some time to figure out something more solid than actually going over there and performing a full scale ass-whooping. If I play this right, I may be able to shame him into leaving you alone, as well as getting some good concessions out of him for my trouble."

There was a knock at the door again and Jim bellowed for the visitor to enter. Brian came in the door and softly closed it behind him. Nicole looked him over. To hear Jim talk about him, the man was more dangerous than any five Antonios, but she couldn't see it on him. He stood straight, presenting all of his 5'11" height.

He had a good build, though nothing as impressive as Cole's. The suit he wore fit him perfectly, but had a humble cut to it, which told the world around him that he was just a working man, though that suit probably cost him a couple grand. It was definitely made to order. His dark red hair was like a low burning flame on his head, one that was soon to be coals. Brian's inviting, and friendly eyes, were soft green. No, he didn't look like a killer at all, but she had no reason to doubt Jim's honesty and even less to doubt the man's appraisal abilities.

I would never see this man coming, she thought to herself.

Brian stepped farther into the room, nodding to Cole and then said, "Good to see you again, Nicole. Hope you have been able to calm down from that business at your house."

"Thank you, I'm fine. And thank you for your help with that," she told him.

"I didn't do much," he grinned a little shyly, "And I'm glad it was your man here that I was up against or I would likely be laying in a blood spatter area instead of here. Not many people keep their heads like that when the shit hits the fan."

"You seem to like her and that's a good thing," Jim said to Brian.

"Sir?" Brian asked.

"I would like you to watch over her tonight, keeping her around here or over at the hotel. Either one is fine, but nowhere else. I don't want unfriendly eyes crossing her path. Cole has some cleaning to do with the police and that business earlier. We are taking your name completely out of the story -- sorry about that if you're one of those types who likes to find his name in the morning paper."

"Not at all. I could live my life without my fifteen minutes and consider it a blessing," Brian told him.

"Good. Also, take over the room next to the one you get for her and settle in when Cole returns. I'll want you over here at noon tomorrow for war council. This shit has been coming for a while, but now it's here and asses will be kicked."

Brian nodded, more seriously this time, the friendly gleam in his eyes flickered and died, "Well, at least I won't have to worry about being fired tomorrow."

"No, that's a worry you no longer have," Jim agreed.

"Good, I hate being fired for not dying. It sucks," Brian said, as if this had been a problem for him in the past.

Another knock requested entry and Jim bellowed his permission.

A man, nearly as tall as Cole, but built like a rail with shoulders, came in wearing a gray power-suit, tailor made, and carrying the confidence she only expected from men like her clients.

Jim introduced the lawyer, Jack Thorn, around the room, and then filled him in on the events of the evening.

"They were armed, I take it?" Jack inquired.

"Yes," Cole answered.

"Then this shouldn't be a problem. They'll tell you things like not to leave the city and all that, but that's all bullshit anyway. Will Nicole be joining us?"

"No, she's left the city already, which is a shame," Jim told him. "I kinda liked that girl."

"Ah, yes, me too," Jack confided. "Seemed like a woman with her head on her shoulders. I'm confident she'll land on her feet, though." Then Jack gave her a conspiratorial wink, which was so surprising friendly and boyish, she nearly laughed.

Then Jack looked back to Jim, "Well, we should probably take care of this sooner than later. We'll

go by his house first, but if they have already closed up shop there, we'll hit the station," he said to Jim and then back at Nicole he said, "Don't worry, I'll have him back to you in a few short hours."

"Thanks, because getting a replacement for him would be very difficult and I'm rather attached to the one I have," Nicole replied, as she reached over and took Cole's hand.

Cole gave hers a squeeze, "I guess we are off Jim. Thanks for standing behind me on this one."

"I owe you and the club owes you several. Never should have crossed your mind that this would go down any differently," Jim told him, rising from his chair and, for a brief moment, to Nicole, it didn't seem like he was ever going to stop rising.

Goddamn that man is big," she shuddered to herself.

Back out in the bar, she gave Cole a hug and then a kiss, "See you soon and don't worry; it looks like I'm going to be well taken care of. I think I'll hang out here for a few hours anyway and then around midnight hit the hotel for some sleep if you aren't back by then."

Cole looked at Brian, "What are your plans if it goes sour with the cops?"

Brian answered as if he had already thought this out, "We'll stay at the hotel, at least for a few days. If I am forced to move her, I'll safehouse her at my place. I have a spare room with a comfortable bed and a pinball machine. We'll be fine. Not to worry, and both Jim and George have my address. It's only about a mile from here," Brian told him. "In any case, I'll keep both Jim and George updated on my movements if something presses us beyond that. But she will be safe and well looked after until you are back. I guarantee you that much."

"What are your first instincts about running, say to New Orleans?" Cole inquired.

"You thinking along those lines?" Brian asked in return.

"It would be a major hassle with the house and other stuff, and the Horsemen aren't there, which was actually one of my reasons for picking it out of the blue. Maybe getting out of town for a few months and waiting for things to cool down would be a good idea."

"My first thought," Brain answered, "is that with Antonio's demise, this shit is only going to calm down with a short list of solutions. The way I read it, Antonio was more or less a calming element with Gabe and now Gabe's making decisions all by himself. That's going to keep the waters churning for a while, because that man uses way too much coke. But to the first question, it's a good choice. San Diego would be better. Gabe doesn't have nearly the arm his delusional ego believes. Twenty miles outside of Chicago and your threat level drops to near zero. Hate to see you leave, though. I think you and I got some good miles to ride together."

"Same," Cole nodded and then to Jack, "I need to shoot a trash can. I'll meet you at your car. No sense taking the bike. It's safe here."

Jack nodded and walked toward the door.

Cole kissed her lips and then rubbed her nose with his, "See you soon. If you decide to cause some trouble, at least make it interesting for Brian."

"I can do that," she nodded and returned his kiss with one of her own. "Sooner is better."

CHAPTER NINE

Cole was able to make it back to the club before midnight. He shook hands with Jack, thanked him again for the backup and perfect language skills, and then got out of his car. He looked back inside to the lawyer, "Think they'll call me in again?"

"Not really," Jack decided after a brief moment, "I can't prove it, but what I saw in their eyes was *case closed*. They didn't seem motivated in sifting around for a few months in order to pin anything on you and even less motivated in expending effort in looking for Nicole. A runaway call girl isn't high on their priority list, which means they're stupid in this case, but that's the breaks."

Cole nodded his head in agreement and thanked him again as he closed the door. Scanning the long

parking lot to the side of the bar, as Jack guided his Mustang out and into the light traffic, Cole counted ten men spread out, looking casual while being heavily armed. Across the street, around the small hotel, he picked out five more men with the same attitudes.

Gang wars should be avoided, he was told by their last president, Sam, but if you are going to engage, then you hit hard and often. As Cole approached the door, a group of ten more men filed out and every man in sight began heading for their bikes. One of them was Rat, who he waved over.

"What's up?" he asked his friend.

"Oh, just a little strafing and harassment," Rat told him. "Jim wants to draw first blood before sunrise, so we are going to put a bunch of holes into some choice real estate and then catch the late movie. Want to come?"

"What's the movie?"

"Not sure which one, but one of those old Clint Eastwood's, I think," Rat said seriously.

"Oooh, that is tempting *and* we get to shoot at houses," Cole smiled. "but, have to pass. I have an extremely attractive woman who is delusional enough to seriously like me who has promised sex of the circus act variety inside. Otherwise..."

"Yes, I was given some of the scoop on her, a call girl or something," Rat said, studying Cole's face. When his comment failed to raise an immediate response from Cole, he shrugged and said, "Well, do me the favor and don't trust her too much. She's hot, extremely hot, and over at the end of the bar with Brian, but... still."

"Can't promise that one, amigo. I've already gone past what caution would advise," Cole admitted, "Planning to go much further, too."

Again Rat shrugged, as if this wasn't an important matter to him, which Cole knew wasn't the way of things, as Rat said, "You're a grown man, so I see nothing to complain about."

"Thanks for that, but --"

"But, you weren't asking," Rat broke in.

"Actually," Cole said thoughtfully, "that's a lot cooler than what I was going to say, so I'll go with that, but when I said it, I sounded more like Clint Eastwood than you just did, which brought up the coolness value several degrees."

"I don't think you need to worry much about your coolness value right now," Rat told him. "You're a major topic of discussion, being that you took down Antonio and Davis, together -- in a gun fight, no less. Even I'm close to doing a little hero worship of my own and making sure everyone knows that we are friends and shit. And you know I don't get into that kind of play."

"I cheated," Cole told him.

"Well, shit, of course you did," Rat said with a tone of voice that suggested he was affronted that Cole didn't believe he figured that out already, "I know that much, because you are still walking around without holes in you or leaking everywhere. But who cares? They are dead and you are not. This is a good thing."

"I agree with that," Cole said seriously.

Bikes began starting up across the parking lot. Both of them looked in that direction and then back to each other, "Safe wind buddy," Cole said.

Rat began moving for his bike, "Call me tomorrow," he yelled back to Cole, "we'll do something maybe. Or bring your new friend over for dinner or something. Angie is making a roast and she likes it when you stop by."

"I'll try, but with..." he began to say, but then just shrugged.

"Yeah, sure. Well, try harder," Rat advised and then turned, heading quickly for his bike.

Cole remained where he was, watching the outriders of the club hitting the road with targets in mind, and very little mercy in their hearts. After Rat's bike thundered by, Cole turned and walked into

the club.

Scanning the room, he decided that the general mood was much more somber than normal, which he supposed with the news coming down, the mood would then be considered normal. He also decided he needed a beer and perhaps shot, and then some good sex with Nicole. He walked in the direction that Rat said she would be and found her surrounded by Brian and four other men, all smiling and flirtatious.

"Having a good time?" he asked, coming up behind her and putting a hand on her shoulder.

"It just got a lot better," she said as she turned with a blazing smile and wrapped her arms around his neck, "Everything good?"

"Well, except for the possible prison sentence, yeah," he said with a subdued voice.

Her smile vanished with such suddenness the room got darker.

"Kidding," he explained quickly and kissed her, "Everything is fine. Great, in fact. They are no longer interested in me, not interested in you at all it appears, and couldn't care less if the case were closed tonight. Seems Antonio and Davis were not the kind of community members these detectives give a shit about."

She slapped his chest lightly with the palm of her hand, "That was not funny. Not at all," she pouted.

"Ah," he mused, "I'll try something different next time."

"Better be a lot funnier than that or I might stick you with a pin while you are sleeping," she warned.

"Maybe we could try that pompoir again tonight," he suggested.

"No, not tonight, not after that joke. I don't want you to feel rewarded. It would only encourage you to dabble and dabbling in those areas of amusement is dangerous. So really, it's for your own good."

"Of course," he agreed, cynically.

"I could be enticed to explore other areas of pleasure and interest, though," she said with an alluring and very affecting voice while running her hand down to his chest, and exploring in a way that suggested everyone else just left the room.

"Hmm, that sounds hopeful," he mused with a grin.

She nodded slowly, looking him over with lust-filled eyes, "And I'm quite sure you will maintain those feelings of hope right up to the point where you become graphically and overwhelmingly grateful for the level of fulfillment I plan to bring you to," she told him, returning his grin.

"Well, I need a beer and perhaps a shot before I jump into monkey-sex mode. You want another?"

"A coke, maybe. I've had several beers already and a handful of shots," she reported.

CHAPTER TEN

The men who were gathered around her, flirting shamelessly, were giving him greeting smiles and drifting away behind her back, all except for Brian who looked a little uncomfortable with the level of overt flirtation going on between Nicole and him, which made this even more fun for Cole. But now he wrapped his arm across her shoulder and called out to Hank with his order. With his order in, he turned his attention to Brian.

"She give you any trouble? Try to drag you to the mall for a quickie shoe purchase?"

Brian smiled lightly, "Not at all and no signs of any problems on the horizon either. I'm sure that will change in the morning when the smoke clears around the outriders activities tonight, though."

"Yeah," Cole agreed, "I got the impression from Rat that they are going to stir this pot up and shoot up the town."

"In so many words, those were the orders. There are a couple of party dens they are going to hit and a couple of red-light houses, as well. They aren't hitting Gabriel directly, though."

"You sound concerned about that," Cole noted as he put a twenty on the bar and signaled that Hank

should keep the change.

Brian made a gesture of agreement, "I am. If you are going to start a war, don't flirt around with it. Kick them in the nuts, put a bullet in the brain, and go home. This tactic tonight only ups the scale of combat, which Gabriel probably assessed as minor. He'll assess it much differently in the morning."

"I've heard that tactical advice before, from trusted and experienced sources," Cole agreed, then added "I believe what Jim's thinking is, if we actually show that we are committed to action and impress Gabriel with the fact that we aren't putting up with his crap anymore, then he'll wise up and drop this shit -- not only with Nicole, but the other crap he's been pulling. If it works, then what the outriders achieve tonight will be all the violence that happens."

Brian looked unimpressed and ordered a beer. When he turned back around to Cole, he said, "First off, I'm behind Jim. Whether I agree or not, I'm in. That said, you can't impress an idiot. I've only met Gabe a couple of times. He's good at business and brilliant at finding talent and promoting for new clients. His call girl service is the best in the city, but since his promotional skills are so high, it really doesn't matter if it is or not. By reputation, it is, which in areas of business such as his, where real evaluations and comparisons can't be made, reputation is reality. He's also vicious and protective of his territory, and makes powerful friends. However, his idea of self-worth is blatantly delusional; it is clinical. Medication is definitely required. He's insane and I mean that literally. He won't be impressed with the action; he'll be furious that we dared to act, at which time, he'll overreact – and, God, I hope I'm not right about that. In his mind, having Nicole back is not only what he wants, but it is also his God-given right. When you threaten a man like him, you have to be ready to put him down a second later."

Cole thought about what he knew of Gabriel Morelli, which was only what he heard from others. He never met the man; his only contact with that group had been Antonio and then Nicole. Brian had also said earlier that Antonio was the one who kept Gabriel in check and the only one who could. With Antonio dead, the Horsemen might discover just how crazy Gabriel really is. He glanced at Nicole, who had the look of agreement on her face.

Nicole looked up to meet his eyes, "Brian is right. Gabriel simply doesn't believe that he can be wrong or that his little empire can be taken down. These kinds of failure thoughts simply don't register in his mind. He'll be furious at the audacity of what the riders do, not the damage. He literally has no doubt that he can not only engage in a war with you, but he's obviously going to win the war. The first thing he's going to do in the morning is begin making calls and gathering resources. Then he's going to hit the Horsemen. He'll hit you hard and publicly. He'll want the world to know that he doesn't take shit, even from a group like the Horsemen."

Cole downed his shot and then took a long drink from his beer. "God, I hope you two are wrong, but my gut tells me differently. Either way, I've just passed exhausted, which I was at when I got home this evening and I'm now in a new and unexplored fun park of total depletion." Then to Nicole he added, "I think I need a rain check on the monkey-sex."

She smiled and leaned into him, "Monkey-sex can wait. Well, it can wait until morning anyway. Let's get you to bed."

"I'm in the room next door, to the East. If you two decide to hit breakfast before the noon meeting with Jim, I'd like to join you."

"Sounds good. Let's plan on hitting Jacob's Diner at nine," Cole offered.

"Sound perfect," Brian agreed. "See you in the morning."

Cole's last conscious thoughts were on the prediction Nicole made, wondering what would be hard and public enough to attract Gabriel's attention as a target tomorrow. As he went through his inventory of Horsemen real estate, the one place that stood out was the club. It would take some serious balls to hit them there, but if Gabriel was seriously delusional, with a firm belief in his divine right to do as he

pleased, it was the only place that made enough statement for the *God of Pimps* to hit. All of the other places – the strip clubs, the pawnshops, and liquor stores – were minor compared to the club across the street. Nicole was on her laptop, clicking keys. He listened to her for several more minutes, intending to call her to bed, but never made it that far. His weariness from the long ride and everything after washed over him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nicole finished her accounting and was both happy with the results and a little sad about them, too. Once she crawled into bed beside Cole, she put her plan out of her head and curled up beside him. If she was forced to admit it, the one thing she did enjoy about the call girl life was that she didn't have to sleep alone most of the time. Being alone in bed was miserably lonely to her.

Having Cole's muscular warm body next to her was so calming and soothing; it surpassed basking in a hot tub. For those long nights she was alone while he was running cocaine from the Chicago Harbor into the mid-west cities, she was not only worried about him, but alone with that worry in bed. Her sleep was fitful and she woke often in the dark by imagined noises and threats.

She had planned out his homecoming much differently than it turned out. It was amazing to her that Cole and Jim were risking so much for her. Maybe she should have left for New Orleans, but after playing the scenario in her head, she realized it wouldn't have changed anything. If Antonio would have found Cole home, without her, then the conversation would have quickly turned to torture and the pain wouldn't have ended until Cole was forced to tell them where she was. The moment he broke, Antonio would have killed him. Cole would have been caught flat-footed at the door with no chance against Antonio and Davis.

The bottom line was leaving Gabriel had no meaning if she couldn't be with Cole afterward. The only place she felt the safe, recuperating sense of belonging was as a child with her mother. When her stepfather came into their house, he ruined her safe refuge from the world. After a few years of his presence, being away from home felt safer than being in her own room. But now she had a new refuge and he was stronger than a house. Now, Gabriel wanted to take this from her. Another insane man was ruining her refuge. She couldn't let that happen.

When shit with her stepfather began, starting close to her fourteenth birthday, she was too young and too inexperienced to do anything about it; she had no means of fighting back. Mama had already shown that she wasn't a refuge against her stepdad. He ruled with his anger and his fist, and Mama couldn't fight back or leave him. Nicole spent many hours before sleep wondering why Mama didn't tell him to go away. It made no sense to her at all.

Looking back on it now, those before-sleep thoughts proved just how naïve and young she really was. Her mother feared sleeping alone, as well, probably far more than Nicole did.

Her mother didn't believe she was beautiful or able to make it as a single mother with three children. Fear, Nicole had learned after countless demonstrations, was a powerful and paralyzing emotion. It made you do things you never believed you were capable of doing. It forced hands and drove wedges into the deepest commitments.

Since running away from Gabriel, layers of blinders, woven by fear, were falling away from Nicole's eyes. While Cole was gone on his run, she admitted to herself that the real reason she never left Gabriel before and never found any pursuit interesting enough to tempt her was that she was too frightened to leave. Not of Gabriel coming after her, why would he?

No, she was terrified of being out in the world alone again. She could have easily hooked up with Max and even thought about it several times, but while Max was extremely rich and powerful, he didn't project a sense of protection. Not like Cole did.

Cole felt protective, and strong and comfortable. He felt committed, as well, and while he might

not offer to help fight all of her battles, he wouldn't leave her to face them alone. He would always be there and ready with a hug, and a safe place to rest. Cole attracted her so strongly, her blinders didn't have a chance of blocking him out.

Jim impressed her. He was by far the largest man she had ever met, but even larger was the feeling of pure loyalty flowing out from the man. He not only respected Cole. In a way, he loved him. She felt that same sense of loyalty extend to Brian when he came in the room and even to Hank, the bartender. The tone of his voice and the body language he projected bellowed the clear promise *I have your back*.

Toward her, he was sympathetic, and open and polite -- also he loved looking at her tits. But he held back the full commitment he extended to the others. Even without his full commitment to her, it made her want to impress him somehow. It made her want to be worthy of his level of loyalty.

His presence gave her the same desire to please as she remembered having toward her own father before he died. It wasn't mixed up with sex or attraction or any of that crap. She didn't have any desire to be a member of the Horsemen, but what Jim offered his men, what he demonstrated with Cole and Brian, was so attractive that it crossed her mind to ask Cole what the requirements were.

She wondered why the man wasn't married. Surely other women could sense the amazing amount of loyalty he projected. He would never cheat on his woman and always come home to her. With that last thought, she had an insight to her question, sensing that Big Jim wasn't looking for a wife, because he already had one.

He had the club, the Chrome Horsemen, who trusted him enough to make him president. A man with that kind of loyalty and protection invested into something he thought of as home, was not a man whose home you wanted to threaten. The reprisal would be tectonic. She realized then that Jim was all-in with this thing. He didn't do it because of her directly; he did it because Gabriel had proven to be a true threat, by sending enforcers to Cole's house, to come after her. Gabriel crossed a line that Big Jim felt was too bold and too obvious to miss on accident. He could not accept apology at this point any more than Gabriel was capable of contemplating his mortality.

"Men are going to die very soon," she whispered into the dark. This sentence made the commitment to her own plan even stronger and the expenditure an acceptable investment into the life she had fortunately had fallen into.

Besides, one of those men, lying motionless on the battlefield her mind conjured up, might be Cole and she needed to be ten years married to him. Needed to be. Those strange illusions she had with him were too good, felt too right to risk.

She was deeply excited when Cole asked Brian's thoughts on running to New Orleans. That Cole was thinking of getting her out of Chicago and coming with her felt wonderful. But with the outriders riding through the city right now, tearing up Gabriel's little world, the war had begun and Cole was too loyal to his club -- his family -- to leave them under these conditions.

Much of what he would be trying to protect with a move would still be threatened by the same source with an equal amount of violence. So he wasn't going to run with her. He was going to stay. He would get her into a safe, hidden environment, and then he would turn his bike around and he would fight.

She snuggled closer to him. She couldn't ask him not to fight. The reasons he would ride into this war were the same strong qualities she loved about him. She couldn't and wouldn't change him. She may discover some things about him as they grew closer that she didn't like -- no man was perfect -- but these qualities were very dear to her. They saved her from a life of servitude and deep-current fear so powerful it blinded her. Now she had new fears created by love rather than despair.

When she woke, the sun outside was glowing along the edges of the thick hotel curtains and Cole was talking to someone named *Rat* on his cellphone.

"Again, man, sorry to wake you so early. See you at noon," Cole said after many short, unconnected things she couldn't make sense of. Cole set his phone down on the nightstand and slid onto

bed beside her, "Hey, lover. Did you sleep well?"

"I'll let you know after you give me a kiss," she murmured.

"I have to earn your answer to a simple greeting?" he asked amused.

"Yes, before coffee, yes," she pouted. "Who is Rat? Is that his real name?"

"His real name is Rafael, but he refuses to answer to it. There are some seriously deep hate-currents between him and his family. So, now he is Rat. I asked him to let you stay at his house for a few weeks and he talked to his wife, Angie. They both agreed they can help us out."

"You're not going to be there?" she asked, feeling suddenly a little afraid.

"I'll be there, but with everything that is going on, there's a lot I'll need to pitch in with, too. So will Rat and everyone else in the brotherhood. Once we take care of this, though, we can get back home and try this again," he promised.

She nodded, but was unwilling to express agreement with words. *He's found someplace safe and now he's already turning his bike around to ride into war.* She knew it was coming; she was aware this was coming last night, but now that it was here, it hurt her in ways she didn't know she could hurt. Wrapping her arms around him, she clung to him with sudden desperation. "Don't die. I won't live if you aren't here with me."

He petted her like she was a great cat and his most precious possession, "While I don't have the pure conviction that Gabriel is thought to have about being bullet proof, I do have a strong sense of self-preservation. I promise not to get into anything I can't see my way out of, all right?"

She nodded into his chest, surprised that she got that much. She was expecting something along the lines of '*a man's got to do what a man's got to do*', which she would have slapped him for. Then, after he fell asleep tonight, she would have put a pin in his butt just so he would remember that she was very upset. "Can't you guys just snipe him or something?" she asked, amazed that she suddenly felt gunning someone down was reasonable.

"If it gets to that point and we have a shot, I'm sure we'll take it," Cole told her, still petting her. "Things have rarely been that easy in my life, however. Have you ever had good things fall in your lap like that?" Cole asked her.

"You, but before that, no," she admitted.

"I believe on our first date, I was in a gun fight, so I can't agree that it has been all that simple for us to get together."

She nodded against him and then kissed his left nipple. "No, it really hasn't been all that simple, has it? Have you thought that I might not be worth all this ... all of this?"

"Not once. Not even once," he told her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He untangled himself from her and then got under the covers and wrapped her back up, kissing her with deep passion. Then his hands began to explore her body and fondle her ass.

"Cole, are you trying to seduce me? Because it's working wonderfully if you are, but it would be an unforgivable tease if you aren't," she sighed with breathless moans as he suckled and pulled at her nipples.

He didn't answer, though she thought she felt a chuckle of pleasure thrum in his chest. Her breasts were hot and her nipples were painfully aroused by the time he began to kiss his way down her abs, going lower with each kiss. *Was he going to...?*

He did continue all the way down, between her thighs, which were now spread, and shaking with micro-vibrations of anticipation, wanting very much for his tongue to perform what no one has done for a very long time. It had been so long, she considered once taking on female clients just to get some head every once in a while, but couldn't visualize making the leap.

The heat and smoothness of his tongue on her arched her breasts to the ceiling and expelled a hot gasp of pleasure from her lungs. "Oh, sweet mercy, yes, oh yes please," she moaned and curled her fingers into the sheets, gripping them, as he explored her pussy with lavish attention. He wasn't bad. In fact, the sweet sensations radiating through her were telling her that he was very good, so very, very good.

When he came up to her clitoris, she was on the verge of enraptured adoration for him. When he focused all of his attention to her heated nub, she crossed that line with reckless abandon. Those first sweet, golden sensations soon beautified into eager yearnings and she ran her hands over her body, loving every moment of being a woman and having a body that was so responsive.

She was, of course, aware that her body attracted most men's attentions, which she would freely admit was a blessing of DNA and the lucky coalescence of cells. But having a body that generated such glowing wonder from those attentions was a gift from the Almighty and she gave praise again and again as yearnings evolved into urges and needs.

She knew that the more the body's arousal level refined, the more it hungered for greater levels of arousal. Those hungers, when Cole brought her to the breach of climax, were sweet, fully developed agonies, which clutched and curled her abs, forcing her hands to knead her breasts with fervent passion. She came to the mental and spiritual place of offering -- the climax's closeness compelling her to do whatever it took to keep him doing what he was so good at doing. "Yes, Cole, yes, please don't stop, please. I'll do anything you want, baby. Please. Oh shit, I'm going to come! Oh, please don't stop now. I'm fucking going to come!"

She promised him pleasure, servitude, and fulfillments only gods could claim, all with urgent assurances that she would not only perform these fantasies for him, but would love doing them. Not in so many words did she make these offerings, because during those moments her vocabulary seemed to be crippled, but she was sure the areas lacking in her words were being soundly communicated by the lustful, surging seductions of her body.

The climax came with a turning and twisting clash, throwing her from one direction to the other, and then lifting her only to throw her back down on the bed. Her hips twisted and thrust, as her heels dug into the bed, powered there by quivering legs.

Cole continued to arouse her clitoris to riotous, electric pulses that convulsed her with powerful drums of devastating release. When she began coming completely undone under his continued tongue, he wrapped his thick arm around her thigh and pressed her hips firmly to the bed, holding her there with his forearm, restraining her convulsing body so that she couldn't disturb his continuing efforts.

His goal, she felt, while in the midst of this orgasmic storm, was to sustain her agony and not let her come down. While such a thought during a bath moment or as a distracting fantasy would be very potent, the thought of actually enduring such treatment threw her swimming emotions in the direction of panic and trepidation.

"Oh, no, oh please. God, please. Let me down!"

Cole didn't let her down and his conservation the rhythm he preformed was astounding. Her pleas for mercy only seemed to urge him to continue. She was completely at the will of her orgasm now.

Her legs and arms and body all flung and clawed and did everything they could to break his rhythm, to stop the surging wave of electrocuting bliss. If the pleasure levels were removed, she realized, this would probably feel very much like being electrocuted. No other reference experience came to mind.

"Stop! Please, Cole! Oh God! I can't ... I can't ... I can't"

Breathe! She screamed in her head, not being able to get the word out past her hard panting.

Cole finally let her down and her abs jumped and convulsed with aftershocks. Her hands were pulling at her hair, holding on to great clumps. Her chest heaved for air and expelled it as fast as she

could take it in. After several moments of recovery, she said, "Dear God, Cole, I'm sorry. Whatever I did, I'm truly very sorry."

"Are you really?" he asked with a touch of doubt as he lay back down beside her.

She bit her lip. The afterglow raging inside of her was fucking amazing. "Well, sure. I mean, well, no not really."

"I didn't think so. And best not to pile lies on top of such heinous crimes," he smiled at her. "Time to get up, breakfast with Brian is nigh."

"Nigh? Did you just say nigh? Who the fuck talks like that?"

"My dad," he told her without hesitation.

"Oh," she said, "But, um, don't you want me to... well... treat you?"

"Not right now. That's all the monkey-sex we have time for. We slept too late. So, get up and showered or I'll spank you, and you don't want to see that."

"You aren't into spanking, are you?" she asked a little softly, clutching the blanket.

"Not sure. Never had the opportunity to find out. Are you going to force me to explore a new area of sexual interest?"

"No," she said, and started moving as fast as her ravaged body would allow. "I'm getting up. See? I'm moving. No worries. I'm heading for the shower. See?"

"Good," he said and followed her into the shower.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She found Jacob's Diner to be cozy and the service was perfect. They rode here on the bikes and the morning air still held some chill from the night. She was glad she wore her jeans and boots yesterday, and that Cole tossed her the leather jacket he bought for her since hers was too thin and strictly for use as fashion, not protection.

She brought with them three hundred from her *just-in-case* stash bag, telling Cole that she needed at least a change of clothing and some basic necessities which they didn't have time to gather yesterday evening.

"Angie will take you for a full shopping trip, I'm sure, but yes, there's a super-store we can stop at on our way back to pick up what you need today. Just keep in mind the size of the saddle bag while you shop," he told her.

"Are those the largest size?" she asked curiously.

"Without going custom, yes. Why?"

"Just wondering, as I plan on going on trips with you in the near future," she said and leaned over for a kiss.

After he kissed her, he looked at Brian who was studying traffic through the large windows, "Any word from last night's raids? Rat said his group hit three places and came away with a sizable amount of cash, as well."

"Pillaging is one of the great wealth bringers known to man," Brian said without turning from the window. "There's a car across the street, two men in the front seat. A Cougar, I believe. Red. See them?"

She searched at the same time and found it just as Cole said, "Got them. What's up?"

"They were outside the club at the curb down from where we were. We were most likely the first patch-holders out on the sidewalk this morning."

"I'm not liking where this is going," Cole growled.

"Me neither," Nicole piped.

"How do you want to play it?" Cole asked Brian. When Brian turned a little with a raised eyebrow, Cole said, "Don't give me that look. I'm a street fighter. Learned all I know from gang fights and getting jumped in the wrong neighborhoods. I only have one tactic: kill them. That's as far as planning ever gets

with me. However, Jim tells me you're a walking *Art of War* and I follow directions very well."

"Thanks," Brian told him. "You're senior and thanks for letting me handle this for you."

"Hey, buddy, I like breathing. So you lead. I'll follow."

Brain nodded his thanks again and then looked back out the window. "Well I doubt they are coming in here. If they decide to, we'll spot them long before they get here. Are you armed?"

"Yeah, the cops took mine last night since it was the weapon that was used, but I have extras," Cole informed him.

Brian nodded to the wisdom of this and then asked, "Who is up and close right now? Got their numbers?" Brain asked.

"Yeah," Cole said, taking out his phone and looking over to her. "Hey, baby, eat. It's still good food. Best breakfast in Chicago."

"I seem to be losing my appetite." She murmured.

"Not a good time for that," Cole told her. "You're going to need all the energy you can get."

She looked at him wide-eyed and then Cole added, "Well, you're going shopping after this, right?"

She didn't quite get it, but when it hit, it was lame and cute, and funny as hell under the circumstances. She laughed and gave him a smile, "That is so chauvinistic. I'm shocked you think of me like that."

He returned her smile and started to eat. She checked the car outside again and followed suit.

Cole reported, after a few calls, that he could get two men there in ten minutes. Brian nodded and told him where he wanted the men to arrive at, what direction they needed to come from, and what to do.

Cole listened and she watched his expression, and the growing concentration in his eyes as Brian's words built up the scenario like a model in his mind. Cole could almost see the plan unfolding in his facial expressions as it controlled the enemy's movements, forced the men in the car to divulge their intentions, and then killed them after the plan revealed they were looking to do the same thing to the Horsemen.

Through her studies, Nicole came across descriptions of people who possessed eidetic memories – memories that were highly visual in nature. These memories tended to degrade very slowly over decades, not hours, with amazing recall clarity. Cole had told her during their first evening together that he never finished high school -- *yet he reads Shakespeare*. She felt a low, deep sadness that Cole's life hadn't allowed him to make use of a gift like his, if he in fact possessed such a gift, and the odd connection between them was telling her he did.

Cole had quit eating halfway through the plan, falling into a state of pure mind power as he concentrated on what Brian was laying out for him. When Brian finished, she watched Cole's eyes as they continued to move around the table, as if he were replaying it and studying it from different angles. "Shit, Brian," Cole announced after a few moments, "Jim sold you short. That's fucking brilliant."

"Thanks," Brain said and calmly took a sip of his coffee while Cole got back on the phone and told Mark and James the plan, and their parts in it.

When that was done, they paid the check, but were set to wait for twenty more minutes.

"Cole? What was I wearing for our first ride together?" she asked, unable to control her curiosity.

Cole recited her outfit without hesitation and from what she remembered, which she felt was fairly accurate since she spent a lot of time picking out her clothing, it was near perfect. In fact, she felt he was dead on. "What color were the eyes of the first man you saw on the boat that day?" she pressed.

"Green," he said, "You going someplace with this?"

But Nicole noticed that Brian was suddenly very interested, as well. How he might have picked up on where she was going with this, she didn't know. *Fucking brain trust in this group of motor junkies*. "That car across the street, did you see it at the hotel?" she asked.

"Yeah, just where Brian said it was, but I didn't notice it here until he pointed it out," Cole explained.

"What's the license number?" she pushed.

Cole, again, told her without a second of hesitation. There was no brain searching. It was just there, in his mind, like magic.

"Wow," Brian said, not bothering to hide his amazement and sat back looking at Cole, "Eidetic memory?"

"What's that?" Cole asked, looking from Brian to her and then back again.

Nicole walked him through what she knew about eidetic memory, admitting that the subject, at the time she came across it during her research, didn't hold much interest for her, so her understanding was limited. "No one has ever brought that up to you?" she asked him with slight wonder.

Cole shrugged, "I get the visual part. I use that a lot and certainly during every fight I'm in." Then Cole ran a play by play with the boat ambush he walked into, even moving pieces like the salt and pepper and sugar packages around as he explained how he knew where the attackers were behind the curtain, or at least the couple of places physics would allow them to be and used that to aim.

"Again, wow," Brian said with a little more wonder in his voice. "I've heard about it, too, but listening to how you use it puts chills in my spine knowing I was so close to going up against it."

Cole checked his watch, "It's time. We can talk about my brain after we take care of this little chore."

"No we won't," Nicole told him, "You're going to avoid the subject like a plague." She smiled teasingly while she rose from her chair and shrugged into her jacket, "aren't you?"

Cole grimaced at her.

"I don't know what impresses me more, your memory or how well she knows you," Brian laughed. "You two have quite a connection with each other."

Cole looked at him, "Buddy, you have no idea."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The only thing Cole didn't like about this plan was that Nicole would be riding behind him. But, there was no way not to tip their hand if she didn't get back on the bike. He noticed a tremble in her hand as she strapped on her helmet. He wanted to say it was going to be fine, but that felt kind of silly coming from the man who was about to ride her into battle. Then he noticed the expression in her eyes. They were alight with the fierceness of a small Valkyrie whose wrath was barely contained by her glowing blue irises. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready ten minutes ago," she told him with a smile. "Let's get them."

That was probably *the* moment, the moment he fell in love with her. He wasn't sure now, though, if he hadn't fallen in love with her before this and just now realized the depth of his feelings for her. It felt like he had always loved her and was just now catching up. If it wasn't the moment, it should have been, he decided and got on his bike.

He started the engine up and came off the kickstand just as he saw a flash of red movement in the reflection of the diner's window. In that brief flash of reflection, he recalled with pure clarity the Charger coming up behind them and a large gun in the passenger's hands as he was making his way out of the window to sit down on the opening, preparing fire across the top of the car. They were going to strafe them, right here, right now.

"Down! Gun!" he shouted, and came off his bike, pulling Nicole with him.

His bike fell as its center of gravity was pushed the other way during his hurried dismount. There was no time to look to Brian and he hoped his brother heard him as he rushed Nicole, nearly carrying her, behind a parked car a few feet away. Brian showed up at the back of the car a breath later, his twin

guns out and ready. Then Hell hit the other side of the car with a fury of lead and tearing explosions.

There was nothing Cole could do except wrap Nicole up in his arms, and cover her with his body, which he did. He expected her to be screaming, but she wasn't. Cole guessed they were about half way down the side of the car, turning it to junk with the automatic weapon when Brian suddenly stood leveling both guns at their attackers with a smooth, graceful motion that made Cole think of a ballet dancer and pulled the triggers of his hand canons -- once.

In fact, it sounded like only one shot and the effect was as if Brian just turned Hell back off, like he might turn off a radio. The gunfire was gone and he heard nothing on the other side of the car. Then Brian holstered his nickel-plated guns and looked to Cole, "I think there was a small hole in my plan."

Much too curious to lay there any more, both he and Nicole got up, and peered over the hood of their shield. The Cougar was against a parked car across the street, coming to rest there, because the driver was dead and so was the gunman. Both were shot in the head, from what Cole could tell.

Cole was too experienced with violence to be in shock for very long. He left Nicole's side and ran across the street to the car, yanking the dead driver back from his dead-weight slouch against the wheel. A quick search rendered him a new 9mm, a cellphone, and the driver's wallet from the inside pocket of his suit jacket, which felt very expensive.

Brian finished with the gunman, taking a large automatic pistol, which Cole thought might be an Uzi, and said, "Let's go, we'll round up your men on the way."

"I'm behind you. Lead," Cole told him and they ran back to Nicole. Cole yanked his idling bike up, and a got on in one smooth motion. A breath later, Nicole was on the seat behind him. Instead of backing the bike out to the street, he gunned it up over the sidewalk curb, ran around the bullet-riddled car, then back down onto the street with Brian behind him. Just as he was giving his bike fuel, Brian's bike roared past into lead position, heading for the men waiting for them.

Nearly halfway back to the club, the four riders pulled over at Cole's signal and Cole got on his cellphone, dialing Jim's by memory. As soon as Jim answered, he ran down the ambush details without preamble and told him they were on their way to the club. "I think they're going to hit the club, Jim. It's burning in my gut."

"Got it and I'm on it," Jim told him and the connection was broken.

"Jim's on it; let's ride," he said to the others and they rode through the streets as fast as they could with the traffic, weaving in and out of cars and sharing lanes between them.

When they arrived at the club, there were chains across the parking lot entryways and a large sign that said the club was closed due to remodeling; *please come back soon*. As they approached, two men dropped the chains and let them into the lot.

Once inside Jim's office, Jim asked, "All right, tell me what happened" with as demanding and threatening a voice Cole could ever remember hearing, including what was used during all of the action movies he's seen.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cole was about to begin his report when Nicole said, "Well, we had breakfast and then Brian came up with this amazing plan that was simple, easy to execute... just brilliant, really, but then he decided to just kill them so we could get back here."

Cole and Brain tried really hard not to laugh, and failed miserably. A second later, Jim joined them and in a release-of-stress moment, he took her in to a bear hug that lifted her up and had her legs kicking about a foot off the ground. After he set her back down, he tousled her hair and said, "You're all right, kid. I'm really starting to like you."

"You're all right, too, big guy," she smiled.

"Now, once again," Jim chuckled, "but with a little more detail."

Fifteen minutes later, Logic, a wiry man standing five-ten and weighing little more than Nicole, was on his laptop, hacking into the CPD database to look up the names of the two men in the Cougar. Cole recited the license plate for him.

Bear, the club's Sergeant at Arms came in right after him – a large, burly looking man with a full and wild beard that had several colored memento beads braided through the whiskers. He received a recap of the drive-by from Brian and was then on the phone lining up rosters and summoning men.

George, the List Master, who ran the security and outrider details, came in right behind Bear. George looked like a CPO who rode on the weekends. His hair was perfect, fingernails perfectly trimmed on manicured hands, and white pearl teeth, which generally smiled often. He wasn't smiling right now and his face became more serious as Brian recapped the story.

"What makes you think they'll hit the club?" Jim asked Cole.

"The driver's suit," Cole said, "it was too expensive. A suit like that might have cost him close to five grand, maybe more. No one on Gabriel's crew brings down enough to wear a suit like that on a drive by. These guys were skilled, patient, and professional. Gabriel has brought in mercs, probably from the docks. Mercs aren't going to fuck around with strip clubs and liquor stores. They'll hit us where it hurts. They'll hit us here and at our homes. They'll buy lists of current members from CPD contacts and start hitting where there will be no security, and no protection."

Everyone in the room was silent and had only eyes for Cole. Then Logic spoke, "He's right about the two guys, Jim; they are both heavy hitters for Lou."

"Fuck," Jim hissed and rested his forearms on the desk, staring at the wood grain.

"Lou?" Nicole asked.

"Louis Donadio," Brain clarified. "He runs the smuggling at the dock yard. Nothing moves in or out that hasn't been taxed by Lou. He's honest-to-god, real-as-it-gets mafia and very unhealthy to get tangled up with." Brain explained to her, making her eyes go wide.

"How the fuck could Gabriel bring in Lou on a skirmish like ours? How could he *afford* to bring in Lou?" Bear asked.

"He's insane, he really is, medically insane," Jim said, his voice low and filled with awe. "He's got to know this will cost him his business."

"No," Cole told him, "Gabriel doesn't. He's obviously delusional enough to think he'll find a way out of that eventually."

George came out of the corner, where he went to make a call, snapping his cellphone shut, "Just got off the phone with one of the guys scouting out Gabriel's house. There are at least fifty suits walking around with auto rifles and subs in the open, dogs, large armored trucks, the whole works. The place is locked down. If we attempt to charge that, a lot of men are going to go down trying."

Nobody spoke for a long time and Cole really didn't think he had anything to say either. Then Jim picked up his cellphone and speed-dialed a number.

"Lou? This is Jim Hawker," Jim said into the phone and then listened. Everyone in the room froze and it felt like they weren't even breathing.

"Sally is good, just finished high-school; how are Tony and Beth doing? Tony should be out of law school by now, eh? That's great. I wish him the best and maybe we'll throw some business his way. I don't want to waste your time Lou, so I'll get right to the point.

"It seems that fate or really bad decisions have put us and some of your men at odds, and I would like to ask about rules of engagement. One of my crew believes that personal homes, wives, and children are on the hunting list. Of course, I told him that would never be the case, but I wanted to clarify it with you before someone does something seriously stupid." Big Jim held his face still as stone as he listened to the man on the other side of the connection. "Thanks Lou. I'm glad to hear that. Your wife's birthday is in a couple of weeks, isn't it? Any ideas? Really, I know just the place for those. Have

a good day Lou." Jim set down his phone, and scanned the faces in front of him, "No homes, women, or children. I don't know why I don't feel better right now."

"Because we're still up against Lou and they were on the list before you called," Brain suggested.

"Yeah," Jim nodded, looking grim, "that's exactly why."

"What if Lou was lying?" Nicole asked, her eyes still wide.

Jim shook his head, "No, Lou wouldn't bother lying about a thing like that; he doesn't have to. What could we do if he simply said, 'yeah, your man is right; that's the way things are'? No, he took them off the list because I called him and he was feeling generous. We're good business for him."

Jim leaned back a little, straightening his shoulders, "I'm thinking he sided in with Gabriel, believing we would back down as soon as we found out, which would be the logical move, granted. But his real goal is to take over Gabriel's operation. That's long term, steady cash coming in there. A takeover is much cleaner and more profitable in a shorter amount of time than trying to build up his own.

"And like it or not, Nicole, I'll let you know that, by reputation, Gabriel's call girls are known all the way down the East coast and through most of the mid-west, and you are the star of those recommendations. I did some checking and made some calls after talking with you last night," he told her as way of explanation. "So, Lou knows what he's getting into is a good investment of his time and resources. He'll make returns of a hundred-fold in two years after he takes over."

"So, really, Lou is after Gabriel, not us," Bear clarified.

"That didn't stop him this morning," Brian pointed out.

"No, no it didn't and it won't," Jim agreed and rose up from his chair, "and it doesn't mean shit until this is over. We have some time before the pow-wow. So, I'm going to get some air; then we'll all get back here and sort out how we're going to work this."

"But..." Nicole whimpered.

"There's no buts here, Nicole. None at all," Jim told her and then looked at Cole, "Glad you read that thing right this morning, so we know what we're up against. Do you have a safe house for Nicole yet?"

"I'm running her to Rat's place as soon as I'm free to leave," Cole confirmed.

"You're free to leave then and take some of the boys with you," Jim told him.

"I'm with you, bro," Brian said, clapping him on the shoulder and then heading for the door."

Cole took Nicole's hand and said, "We're right behind you."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was near twelve-thirty and the meeting was well underway, though things were already sounding bad, when Cole's phone rang. Since phones had been ringing from the start and well before, he checked the display and saw it was Nicole calling. He answered, walking to the corner they were using for this, so as not to interrupt the discussion.

Cole was actually a little surprised he was here at all since he wasn't an officer, or even an outrider any longer.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Hey, Cole, look, I tried. I really tried," Nicole began.

"What are you -- "

"Just listen, all right? I have to get ready, so I don't have a lot of time for this. But I thought you deserved to hear it from me. Since we have hooked up, you've almost been killed how many times? Two, three? And now there's a war and men are already dying. I don't know if they were good men or not, but you could be next and might be as soon as Gabe puts this together. Now we know Lou is in the game and, baby, that's not the life I was looking for when I left here. I know exactly who Lou is, just

needed to know we were talking about the same Lou. See, he's a client, Cole. I know what he's like. I know him a whole lot better than anyone else and he couldn't care less how many of your men are blood splatters. He really, very truly, doesn't care. Lou's already been paid, up front, by Gabriel for the month.

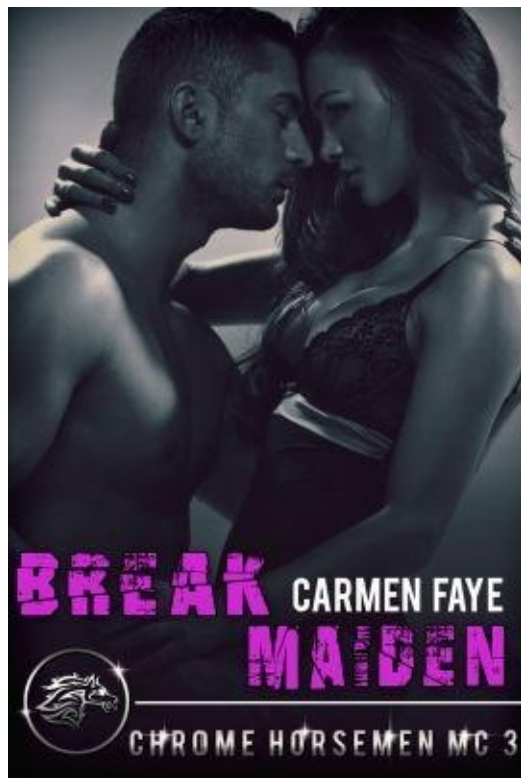
"So, anyway, honestly, the bottom line is I miss it. I know I told you I wouldn't and I really believed that was true when I said it. I really did. But I do. So, I'm back and hopefully we can all get back to business. You can check with Angie and verify that I got into a cab all on my own, and had it drive me back here.

"Goodbye, Cole. It was more than I've ever experienced before, but I got to go. Oh, and always remember what I told you. Bye."

The connection broke.

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CHAPTER ONE

When Nicole left Big Jim's office, earlier that day, with Cole and Brian, the sunlight hurt her eyes as they stepped out into the perfect blue day. The emotional wars inside of her created patches of shivers in unpredictable places, and she couldn't slow her churning thoughts down. Cole apparently noticed that she was distraught, but he didn't understand why, and she couldn't tell him, or he would stop her -- and now, it had to be today. She definitely had to act today.

Learning that Louis "Lou" Donadio, was now invested in this gang war between the Chrome Horseman and Gabriel's organization, meant that there was going to be a great deal of blood spilled today, and even more tomorrow, if she didn't do something. Big Jim understood what he was up against, and was still planning on finishing this war. That simply wasn't acceptable to Nicole. She couldn't live with this afterward, knowing that if she had acted, she could have saved many of the Horseman from deaths they didn't deserve.

She knew who Lou was, of course. He was a client of hers. One of her first, and a first regular as well. Max and Lou were the only regulars she had who never missed their scheduled days. Others would sometimes miss. Of course they always paid her rate for the night to Gabriel, and would always

send her a gift of apology, just to insure that they remained on her list, but never Max or Lou.

Unlike Max, Lou frightened her, and until his bubble popped, she would be so nervous around him that she was sure that she would not be able to perform well enough to get inside. She always managed to do so, though she often wondered how. From the time he came in, until the moment she burst through, her fear of him was close to paralyzing. Until she discovered his deep affinity for boats, sailing, and the waterways of the Great Lakes, she felt terror before each visit -- this time, this time she wouldn't get through.

After this discovery, she thought of Lou as her lost seaman, and took to calling him *Captain*, when his bubble burst, and Lou would finally be in bed with her.

Then she discovered his ultimate pinprick -- a needle that burst his bubble almost instantly.

Near the beginning of last year, she was attempting to put together a model ship, to help learn the names of things, and how the riggings worked with the sails, and all the other details sailboats are full of.

When Lou came over, he was as dark as she had ever felt him before, and she instantly prescribed a longer decompression that evening, but then he spied the model, and it was like it magnetized him. He continued to glance at it, distracted constantly away from his laptop during her allowed decompression.

"Do you like it?" she finally asked, bringing him his second bourbon. "The riggings are very difficult."

"Yeah?" he asked a little wistfully.

"Yep," she admitted. "I know all of the knots, and I understand how riggings should work..." and then she felt a seriously boyish, but deep desire in him, and added on impulse, "...could you help me, maybe?"

Pop.

After that, even the darkest Lou didn't terrorize her any longer. This was not to say he didn't frighten her any longer, she wasn't an idiot. Just because you knew how to sail a storm, didn't mean you did so if there was a safe harbor nearby. She gave dark Lou all of the respect and focus he deserved -- at least until her Captain arrived.

She could tease Captain mercilessly, though he would eventually fight back, and chase her around the apartment to tickle her. He loved to laugh, especially at himself. But she never, ever, mixed the two of them up.

Yes, she knew exactly who Lou was. She knew about his smuggling, his take overs, and his tactics. She knew how to read him, and understood the consequences of reading him wrong. She knew him far better, she was very certain, than anyone else in this world. And that's why she knew she had to act today, before Lou got tired of this little war, and swept the Horseman, and Cole with them, away.

Jim was right, Lou expected the Horseman to quit, now that they realized he was in the game. To Lou, this would be a given, a simple fact, like weather. He respected strength, and even a measured amount of defiance. Strong men, and strong adversaries were very precious to Lou -- he didn't often get to meet them these days. So, Jim standing his ground against Lou's enforcers today, and perhaps tomorrow, would earn him a great deal of respect from Lou -- but not the day after. Maybe not even tomorrow. Lou didn't respect idiots. Defiance was one thing, suicidal stupidity was quite another.

"Milwaukee and Detroit will be riding in tomorrow," Brian said to Cole, interrupting her thoughts.

"That will add, what? Two hundred to the ranks?" Cole estimated as they reached their bikes.

"About that, yeah," Brian agreed.

Two hundred? Were they fucking insane? They're just going to piss dark Lou off!

She felt lightheaded suddenly, and leaned against Cole, who wrapped his arm around her, "You alright?"

She nodded, and said, "Just got a little woozy there for a minute. Can we still stop at the super-

store? I really need a change of clothes. Nothing fancy, just *clean* would be fine. Then I can go shopping with Angie later."

Cole shrugged, and looked to Brian.

"I don't mind, and the three coming with us, probably won't either," Brian told him.

Cole looked down at her, "Can't have my girl feeling un-girly."

She grinned at him, "Good, because I can barely stand myself now. I should get my laptop, and bag from the hotel room as well, right?"

Cole nodded, "Don't think we'll be coming back, so, yeah, good thinking."

After the hotel check out, they hit the store. Brian, and the other three, who she still wasn't introduced to yet, remained outside in front, while Cole took her inside. She felt more than a few eyes on her as she was escorted to the front door by five, large, armed men, which had her feeling slightly self-conscious in the clothes she was wearing.

She picked out a pant-suit, which was simple, but fit her decently, then added panties and bra. She changed in the dressing room, removing all of the price tags to present to the cashier. Adding a chocolate bar to the pile, to Cole's amusement, she checked out, and were back on the road, with her old clothing in the saddle bags.

The ride to Rat's house was tense for her, but wound up being uneventful.

Angie, a stunning Puerto Rican woman Nicole's age, greeted them on the walk up to the house, with smiles, and familiarity. She hugged Cole, and gave the others warm welcomes.

"Cole is a very good man," she told Nicole. "You are so very lucky that I found my Rat first."

Nicole liked her instantly. Brian, and the others waited outside again, while Cole following her in. Angie showed her the room they had to offer, which was a well decorated, cozy guest room she honestly didn't expect to find in a house owned by a man named Rat. However, in a house owned and ran by Angie, it fit perfectly. She grinned, having a feeling that Rat, was likely a guest in his own house.

Angie seemed to read her mind, when she said, "He gets the garage, and some of the backyard, around the grill. Any more, is just confusing for him."

Nicole returned her conspiratorial smile, and then said, "I really need to change Angie, I'll be right out." Then to Cole she said, "I need to talk to you before you leave. Won't be long. We can do it while I change."

Angie practically gave her a wink inside the grin she crafted with her full lips, but said, "I'll get the men some beers." Then she left them alone, throwing that grin back over her shoulder at Nicole as she left.

Nicole pulled Cole inside the little room, and began undressing as soon as they were across the threshold, forcing Cole to close the door.

"I have to tell you something Cole, something very serious for me," she said, as articles of clothing fell into a pile. She wasn't going for allure, she was ripping them off for speed.

"Serious?"

"Very serious. In fact, I've never been in this position before, so I'll probably fuck it all up," she told him, as she unsnapped her bra. "But I hope I don't. I mean, I probably will, since I've never done it before, but it's one of those things that you really want to do right, ya know?"

"Um," he tried.

"But it's kind of like your virginity. You want it to be real, and thrilling, and sensuous, but all you really know about those things at the time, is how to spell the words, right?"

"Um," he tried again, since it seemed to work last time.

"So, I know this is most likely the exact time not to do this," she said, tossing her panties to the pile, and coming over to him, taking his belt into her hands and beginning to work it open, "But you are riding off into a very scary situation now, and I don't want to think about this being the last chance, but

it could be. It really could be." She had his belt undone, and his pants open before his hands could stop her.

When he did grab her hands, she looked up to his eyes, and said, "I love you Cole. I was getting to the point I never thought I would say that to someone, but here you are. And, no matter what you hear, or what someone you might meet knows about my past, or whatever happens, I want you to know that I love you. Very truly love you. Even if it looks, and feels, and you swear that it can't possibly be true, that will never change. Ever."

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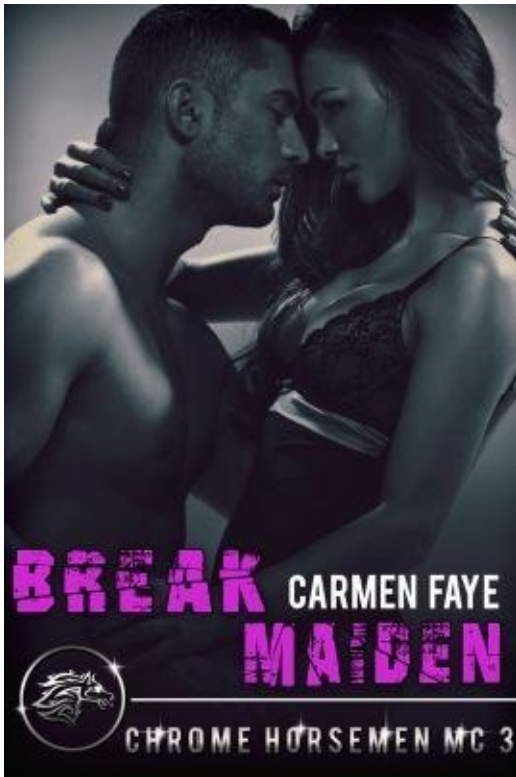


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