



The Movie Star and the Spy

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Description: Julian Starcroft fights villains in the hottest action films of the silver screen, vanquishing fictional criminals to win the hearts of millions. Everyone wants a piece of him – everyone, that is, except the mysterious extra lurking around the set. She flirts with every man but him, but Dara Dane can't ignore him when he chooses her as the lead actress' body double. He could never imagine the truth...

Dara Dane doesn't exist.

Undercover detective Cheyenne Kirk is playing the role of Dara, flirtatious and starstruck extra, to catch the criminal recruiting call girls from movie sets. She fights to complete her mission, yet 6'3 of solid muscle stands in her way. Julian usurps her time, attention and senses, foiling her attempts to play bait as he delves ever-closer to the truth. Soon he is pursuing far more than her secrets. He wants her.

He plays a secret agent in the movies...

What happens when he discovers his mysterious extra is the real thing?

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CHAPTER 1

“Remove your clothing, ma’am.”

Blue eyes blinked, slender shoulders edged closer. “All of it?”

The modern-day warrior showed no warmth, no sign the words affected him. He merely stood tall, focused on the designer blue jeans, the snowy white eyelet blouse he’d just banished. “I don’t know what you’re hiding, but I’m going to find out. You will submit to a thorough search.”

“Oh, Officer?”

The man stood to his full 6’3 height. His hair was black as night, his skin tanned from the sun, and his eyes like the arctic sea. The muscles on his arms bulged. “I’m a Federal Agent, ma’am. We don’t go by officer. Now start unbuttoning.”

“You’re... you’re not going to look, right?” she said coyly, come-hither lashes belying the tentative words. A small smile puckered pouty lips. “Unless you want to. I wouldn’t mind.”

“I have to look, ma’am. Otherwise, I won’t be able to see what you’re hiding.” He flexed corded muscles. “You are hiding something, aren’t you?”

The woman edged closer to the would-be lawman. Yet instead of pushing him away, she latched onto his chest like a clutching hawk, sharpened red fingernails stabbing the crisp fabric. He whispered a frown, as she tossed her head, blond hair flying.

“Cut!” she screeched.

A symphony erupted: a curse from the director, moans from the crew ? mostly male ? sighs from the women gazing at the hero with unabashed adoration.

Far from the stunning couple, a purposeful nobody in a crowd of extras, Cheyenne Kirk released a shuddering breath, yet even that reaction was a slip. As was the involuntary shiver that seemed an earthquake to her normal poise, despite the heat the excess bodies provided. How had Julian Starcroft seized her attention, like the others? For just a moment, he’d held her in thrall.

Oh, she had nothing to be ashamed of, not truly. From the way her fellow actresses heaved in air as if starving for oxygen, he affected every female of the species the same. Excitement. Awe. Desire. Of course, the several hundred people crammed into the Miami Beach set represented only a small portion of the fans Starcroft commanded with every flex of those steel biceps as he solved the crimes of the silver screen.

Now he leaned back against the oak table, one muscular leg straining the material of crisp blue jeans. A small smile played at his luscious lips, capturing the attention of everyone in the room.

It always did.

“Miss Carter!” The director’s voice boomed through a bright red megaphone despite being all of three feet away from the sulking star. His icy stare did nothing to cool the heated room. “Only the director yells cut. I excused it the first time, and the second, and the third?”

“This was an emergency.”

“What’s the emergency this time?” The director threw the megaphone on a chair emblazoned with the words *Spy Heat*. He held out his hand and was immediately supplied with a pristine white handkerchief, which he used to wipe his sweat-covered brow.

“He can’t undress me.”

Surprised twitters hit the air, gasps from the women who could not image greater fortune and chuckles from the men who would never be so lucky as Julian Starcroft. Of course, Cheyenne did not share their opinions. No matter how magnificently he filled out those jeans.

Julian raised an eyebrow, and collectively the crowd sighed. This time Cheyenne forced herself to adopt the same starstruck expression at the blasphemy being preached. It was vital she didn’t stand out as anything more significant than *Sexy Woman Extra #12*. Like all the others, she must appear to be in love with Julian Starcroft.

Otherwise, she would never fulfill her mission.

“I mean, it’s not that I don’t want him to undress me,” the star stated the obvious, and this time, even Cheyenne couldn’t maintain a neutral expression. The crowd giggled and snickered as the woman lifted a shoulder. “It’s just that it needs to be a body double. It’s in the contract ? my agent would kill me if I took it all off. You know, image and everything.”

The director’s glare froze every smile. “This isn’t porn, Ms. Carter. No one is asking you to strip to your birthday suit. He just has to remove a few pieces of outerwear. When we edit it, you won’t see nearly as much.”

“Nope.” The stunning blonde’s silky locks whipped around. “What if someone uses

their cell phone camera? I can't take that chance. Where's the body double?"

"On the set of another movie. You agreed to this earlier, so we didn't schedule her until a week from Tuesday," the director growled, throwing his handkerchief on the ground, where it was immediately retrieved by a thin, bespectacled intern. The director motioned wildly, and within seconds the producer, studio lawyer, assistant and, of course, the would-be federal agent/undresser huddled in impromptu crisis control. A flurry of waving arms and raised voices commenced, and less than a minute later, the director once more addressed the pert starlet, "Fine, Miss Carter, you win. Take five. We'll pull in an extra to work those scenes until the body double arrives."

It was like dangling a pair of Louis Vuitton stilettos – from next season.

First, a sliver of silence as the cast members processed the words, then murmuring as they realized the juiciness of the morsel, and then they pounced. They pleaded and implored, begged and cajoled, crying the evidence of their perfection for the role. They batted their eyes at the director, subtly and not so subtly pulled up dresses to reveal mile-long legs and stabbed surgically enhanced breasts forward. It was the chance of a lifetime ? the opportunity to (sort-of) play leading lady to the hottest actor in Hollywood.

Everyone except her, of course. While the others moved forward like performers in a flash mob, Cheyenne edged backwards. She needed to fit in, but having Starcroft peel off her clothing was not part of the job. So what if he was 6'3, 220 pounds of solid muscle? So what if he had a deep voice that made you melt inside, eyes that invited you to drown in their depths? She wasn't just a simpering fan, some lucky girl picked to get \$120 a day for screaming about mobsters. She was aiming for a far greater prize:

A criminal.

The man in question was now talking to the director and scanning the extras. Suddenly the flaxen-haired beauty in front of her gasped, bringing a shuddering hand to her heart as if to make sure it still beat. Cheyenne looked toward the front, and this time even she couldn't suppress a quick intake of breath.

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Starcroft was looking right at her.

Not at the woman, as the actress likely assumed, but no, most definitely, assuredly her. His blue gaze bore into her, the attention that swept a million women off their feet now focused on a single entity. His regard speared her, revealing no hints as to what lurked behind those soul-searching eyes.

Look away. She commanded herself, but her body refused to listen. As if he had shackled her with her own handcuffs, she could only stand still as his lips moved. She couldn't discern the words from so far, but then he turned to the producer, and the spell broke. And suddenly not one but all five men looked in her direction.

Not good.

Cheyenne slunk back behind the actress, even as heavy footsteps approached. Perhaps she was wrong ? perhaps they were indeed targeting the gorgeous model. Who wouldn't choose the leggy beauty queen with an extraordinary resemblance to the last Miss America? Though Cheyenne was no Quasimodo, she more closely resembled an ordinary human than an angel on earth. No doubt she would never have gotten hired if not for a friendly nudge from the Miami-Dade Police Department.

She counted every crack on the ground, blending in as best she could to its pocked gray surface. Perhaps she could pretend to be part of the crew, an assistant with wardrobe or props or grips, whatever that was. Shuffling sounded from retreating stilettos, as the sight of midnight black boots came into focus. The voices around her hushed. Then suddenly...

He touched her.

He didn't ask permission. In the movies he never did, and now in real life he didn't. His hand was warm, large and strong, and he slowly raised her chin, giving her a foot to head perusal of everything. The long legs that went on and on, strong hips that led to the muscles the shirt molded, a chest as wide as the ocean. Then that famous face, like an angel's with perfectly formed lips, sculptured cheekbones, a chiseled jaw and fathomless eyes.

"She's the one," he murmured. "Perfect."

Training urged a counterattack, to fight back as she'd been taught in the academy. No one touched her without permission. Yet she couldn't betray the cover that was her only chance to save unsuspecting women from a bleak future, eager starlets from a life of exploitation. But it was more than duty that kept her there, under his commanding power. His touch sparked fire ? it raced down her body, sending sensual heat through tender limbs and swelling sensitive spots with anticipation. The scents of nature and oak surrounded her, as her lashes fluttered downward, but still he didn't let go. It was no mystery why he enthralled the world, commanded fame unlike any other modern actor.

"She has the same coloring as the lead actress," the director's voice broke in, thin and nasal, like a broken violin compared to the Stradivarius that was Starcroft's. "The same build, too. You're right, she's perfect." The others murmured their agreement as one giant sigh of disappointment emerged from the crowd. "Congratulations..." The director looked to his assistant, who whispered in his ear, before he continued, "Destiny Dane, Sexy Woman Extra #12, you are now reassigned. Your new job is lead actress' body double. In other words... your role is to be undressed by Julian Starcroft."

Cheyenne's heart tumbled like an action hero stunt double. She could say no, should

say no, had to say no. How could she stand still while he slowly removed her clothing? In the script, the actress did not do it herself. Starcroft did it for her.

Yet she would allow it ? for the women who were being victimized, for the promise she made when she joined the force. To maintain a cover that would be shattered with one simple negative. Unlike the lead actors, the extras' contracts required agreement to nudity – there were more than enough willing women than to start negotiating. In other words, she had already consented.

“Is that agreeable?” Julian studied her, his steady gaze a palette of untold questions. How could she have ever thought he lacked intelligence?

“It’s fine,” Cheyenne replied, plastering a wide smile on her face. “I’m just tickled!”

He raised an eyebrow, and she fought a cringe. Had she actually just called herself tickled? It was a tumultuous start to an acting career, which was never supposed to emerge from the basement of extras. It boded ill for future endeavors, and disastrous for her life-changing mission. Could there be a way out of the role before he helped her out of her clothing? Maybe if she acted too overeager, he would change his mind. “I’m just soooo excited to be chosen! This is like winning Miss Excavator Falls all over again.” She waved her hands back and forth, furiously fanning herself as if about to swoon like some simpering Regency heroine. She inserted a loud sniff as a special effect. “I just never ever thought you would choose me. I adore you, you know. You’re the most amazing man in the country, no in the continent, no in all?” She pretended to count on her fingers. “On all nine continents! Probably on all twelve planets in the solar system, too!”

He gawked at her as if she had rocketed to one of those other planets. Excellent. Maybe a little more frosting on the crazy cake? “You’re like the butter to my bread, the boom to my backhoe. I’ve watched every one of your movies twelve ? no a dozen ? times!”

Cheyenne finished with a flourish, then stood back to view the audience. For a police detective, she had given a flawless performance. Strangely, the extras appeared to understand her musings completely, and a few even nodded in sisterly agreement. The men on the set appeared chagrined at Starcroft's luck, and the director just seemed irritated, a fairly common emotion for him. However, the only truly important reaction would come from Julian. Would it be exasperation, dismay or annoyance ? or hopefully all three ? along with a call to find a less animated actress? With a wistful smile, she looked into smoldering eyes to find... amusement?

What the?

He clapped her on the back, steadying her with his other hand. His grip was warm and firm, fully encircling her arm. "Thank you for the exuberant praise. Clearly, you are a dedicated fan." He winked. "Tell me, what was your favorite part of Thunder Force?"

Cheyenne froze, the smile melting from her lips as her memory held up a closed sign and dashed away. Julian's last action film had been wildly successful, scoring hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office, shattering records and demolishing its competition. Nearly everyone in the country had seen it ? everyone, that was, except for her. Just like she hadn't seen any of his movies.

Not even a clip.

"I, um?" Cheyenne blinked heavy lashes as Julian stomped straight through her defenses. Had he guessed her tactics? She had to recover, and quick. "I liked the part when you defeated the bad guy!" she suddenly shouted, far too loud, far too eager. He had to have defeated a bad guy somewhere in there, right?

He was not to be deterred. "And which bad guy was that?"

“There was more than one?” Cheyenne posed before she could stop herself, then grimaced as he chuckled deeply. She had fooled everyone else; how had he seen through her ploy? “The really bad one,” she replied. “The really, really, really, really bad one. The most hated man in the world.”

The bemused expression never left his face. “That’s funny ? I’ve never heard the bad guy described that way.”

“Which way?”

“As a man.”

Well, crap.

“The bad guy was, after all, awoman.”

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Cheyenne lifted her lips in a smile. Well, she tried to, but her mouth wouldn't quite rise, and the whole thing tumbled. Why hadn't she spent more time learning about Starcroft? Because she wasn't supposed to interact with him and had more than enough to memorize with the intricacies of the case. Perhaps this was good. Now that he knew of her subterfuge, he might let her out of the role. If he realized she didn't want the part, then maybe?

“Are you ready to be undressed, Miss Dane?”

Well, that was as daunting as when a perp calmly informed her he had rigged explosives all over the city. But she hadn't a choice. If she wanted to find the criminal mastermind luring young and beautiful extras to his high paying call girl service, she would have to pretend to be exactly that. “I'm ready.” Her voice came out more breathlessly than intended, but at least it matched the character she was portraying.

Julian didn't hesitate. He leaned down, and his heated breath fanned her cheek. “I'd ask if you were having second thoughts, but I don't think you ever got over your first ones.”

That infuriating man. He realized she didn't want the part, yet he didn't release her from the intimate duty, despite the hundreds of willing women clamoring to take her place. As he led her to the front of the set, Cheyenne strode rigidly behind. She had to pretend to like it. “Of course, I'm not having second thoughts. This is a dream come true.”

“Getting undressed by me?” His drawl slipped into her blood, turning it to simmer.

She stiffened. “Of course not. I meant for my career. I’m a professional, you know.”

“Are you?” Julian let out a low chuckle. “I’d love to hear about Miss Excavator Falls.”

“Oh, it was wonderful. Lots of excavators and diggers and tractors and more excavators.” She sounded like a toddler picture book. She cleared her throat. “Too bad they don’t have a Mr. Excavator Falls. You would be the undisputed favorite.”

“It would have catapulted my career to the next level,” he rumbled. “But are you sure you can handle being stripped before an audience?”

She stopped short, causing the director to pummel into her back. She would have fallen save for Julian, who caught her, stopping her fall by pulling her flush against his rock-solid chest.

Oh, yes.

Or no. No, no, no. Being pressed against him was bad.

But a so-small-it-was-barely-existent part of her insisted – oh, yes.

Heat surrounded her, emanating from the man who held her captive. Normally stalwart senses dimmed, as her entire world focused on the body she touched all over. Her co-workers had suggested Starcroft wore padding, yet every breath proved he was completely authentic. It was like being pressed against steel – fiery hot, organic, possessive steel.

She moved back – or at least she tried. He didn’t let go. She glared at the man who would dare capture her, for once seeing past the actor’s fame, beyond the façade he showed the world, to the raw emotion underneath: desire, passion, possessiveness.

“What are you doing?!” the director thundered. Julian ducked his head, then released her so suddenly she almost fell. When she looked back at him, his mask was once again firmly in place.

She had to do something before she attracted any more attention. Hopefully the criminal she hunted would not disqualify her because of her newly assigned role. The more attention she received, the more likely he would stay away. “Everything is fine. I was daydreaming and lost my step.” By narrowed eyes and suspicious expressions, it wasn’t enough. Time to forgo every shred of dignity for the sake of the role. She pressed her hands over her heart. “My knight in shining armor, you saved me! How can I ever repay you?”

The director rubbed his eyes, but Julian’s flashed fire. A sudden unease pricked. Hopefully he would not truly ask for repayment.

“You’re going to stay perfectly still while I remove all your clothing.” His muscles flexed. “What more can I ask?”

Her shiver gifted the expected reply. She was playing the part of simpering female a little too soon and a lot too well. As soon as she returned home, she would definitely schedule some quality time at the sparring ring.

Before Julian could touch her again, she strode ahead, ignoring the scrutiny that followed her like a weighted blanket. She had been in tense circumstances before. Hostage situations. High speed car chases. Shootouts with the armed and dangerous. Yet somehow those seemed tame compared to standing next to Julian Starcroft, waiting for the director to give him permission to expose her.

Finally, they were at center stage, and in position. “Is everyone ready to begin?” The director leafed through his script, spreading his ever-present scowl. “Any more objections?”

About a thousand. Yet Cheyenne said nothing as the director gave her a second's glance before moving on. Julian crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm ready."

"Then let's start." The director motioned to his assistant, who handed Cheyenne a script. "Since we're evaluating camera angles and not filming the final product, it won't matter that you're reading from the script. Just be as natural as possible."

Pretend she didn't want to be undressed by the muscular actor? No problem. Of course in the movie, the heroine actually did want to be undressed by him. But this was real life, not the movies, and she was an undercover cop and not a criminal hiding a weapon under her jeans. Actually, it was fortunate she had decided to forgo her weapon until she had some leads. Explaining a real gun would have been far beyond her fledgling acting abilities.

"Let's take it from where you left off." The director sat in his oversized chair, royal blue and emblazoned with sparkling gold letters. He picked up his megaphone. "Action!"

Cheyenne gripped the cool, crisp white paper in her hands, yet her part was as absent as her clothing would soon be. If only there was a distraction while she found her lines. Where was a bank robbery when you needed one? It didn't have to be a bank robbery. She'd take a train holdup, hostage situation or even a fun little zombie apocalypse. Maybe the zombies could hold up a train on the way to the bank robbery, and then take hostages. She flipped through pages as throats cleared, as extras giggled and the director sighed loudly, when suddenly the script was lifted from her hands, caught in the grasp of one very strong hero who was apparently as anxious to undress her as she was to flee the studio. He deftly flipped through the pages, found the right one and held it out for her. His expression tangled challenge with a dash of confusion, not surprising since even an extra should know how to navigate a script. If she wasn't careful, the clever man would move from confusion to suspicion and then to enlightenment, and then she'd be explaining how a movie star upended a professional

police operation.

The words on the paper danced into blurry ribbons as the paper bent in her clenched hands. She cleared her throat, read her first line, “Um, please be gentle.” Be gentle?! “Really?”

Julian blinked. Oh, yeah. A real actress would not give commentary. “I mean I really want you to. Be gentle that is. Yes, exactly.”

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His challenge and suspicion deepened. "I'll do what is necessary to discover your secrets. You have to surrender." He stepped closer, and all humor vanished.

Instincts urged retreat, yet she stood strong. She was a powerful woman, and no actor would intimidate her. "I will never surrender to you." The script dictated anger, instead her words emerged breathless and light. A smile played at Julian's lips, and she involuntarily licked her own. "Why don't you get undressed?"

Yes, please.

Um, what?

She didn't just think that.

And if she did, she definitely wouldn't admit it.

"Tsk, ts, tsk." Julian now stood directly over her, towering in Herculean strength. His power encircled her in heated waves, as if she had stepped into the deserts of the Sahara on the summer solstice. He studied her, not the character, not even Destiny Dane, but her, Cheyenne Kirk. Her mouth dried as he whispered, "This is happening now."

"Wait!" Cheyenne pushed against that solid chest just as he pressed closer. Or rather tried to. Although not part of the script, she couldn't help herself. If Julian was fazed by her misstep, he didn't show it, because he broke script when he grasped her hands and gazed down at her with a wicked smile. "Time to discover who you really are."

CHAPTER 2

Julian always delved deep into his characters, not simply portraying them but becoming them, bringing the characters to life. It could be difficult at times, to pretend to be someone so different from truth, yet in this case, he needed no effort and no tricks. There was no acting – he wanted to explore this woman, and not just physically. No, he wanted her.

Of course, no one could deny her attractiveness. With long blond tresses, creamy skin and a petite stature, she looked like an old-time movie star, a pin-up of yesteryear. Her skin was clear and slightly pinkened, her limbs slender yet toned, and she held enticing curves that dipped in all the right places. In a room full of beautiful actresses, she was extraordinary.

At least two dozen extras possessed similar enough features to fill the role, yet something compelled him to pick her. She had arrived a few days ago, later than the rest, and the fact that he noticed was strange enough. There was something different about her, something stronger, something substantial. In a crowd of preening swans, she stood out as an eagle. The gaze in her eyes bespoke a rare intelligence, especially when he caught her watching others, something she did with great frequency.

Her behavior was a mystery in other ways, too. When she talked to her fellow extras she changed completely, turning coy, silly and downright flirtatious. He had been an accomplished actor far too long not to recognize a poor one, and she had been acting. She hadn't seen his movies, at least not *Thunder Force*. Despite her words, she did not want the role every extra clamored for, the position that could gain her notoriety and a break to her career. Yet she also didn't want to directly refuse. It didn't make sense. He might be an action star, but he loved mysteries. Even more, he loved solving them.

Now she stood before him, watching him watch her. It was time for her to accept her

new role, and he would discover her true one. A burst of satisfaction sparked as he moved toward her, embarking on a journey to discover the truth...

He would uncover the real Destiny Dane.

Breathe. Cheyenne reminded herself several dozen times as Julian stalked ever closer. The script slipped from her grasp, but the director hissed, "Keep going! Don't worry about the script ? just follow Starcroft's lead!"

Cheyenne locked eyes with the movie star. His flashed as if lit by cobalt fire. "No more waiting," he murmured. "It's time."

Cheyenne had to physically bite her lip to stop the indignant reply the words deserved. Although she didn't know the correct lines, the character's response was obvious. She gave a quick, jerky nod.

"Don't move."

She was far more accustomed to giving commands than receiving them. But her surrender was in the script – she had no choice but to follow along.

His hand plucked a spaghetti strap.

You can do this. You've faced armed murderers, drug dealers and crime families, you can face a powerful actor who simply wants to undress you. Surely it can't be worse than the crime families.

He pulled the spaghetti strap down.

Okay, not much worse.

“Now reach for him!” the director yelled.

Yes, much worse.

The exchange wasn't one sided. Her character wanted him as much as he wanted her. So she opened her palms and splayed them on the raw steel of his expansive chest. He was solid and heated and firm, and the muscles jumped under her touch. And then... she squeezed.

That's right, she squeezed the famous actor's chest.

He stared.

She stared.

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He narrowed his eyes.

She narrowed her eyes.

He edged closer.

She squeezed again.

“Don’t stop,” the director hissed. “You’re doing great. What else do you want to do to him?”

Touch him. Rub him. Press closer. All of the above.

What was she doing? She was supposed to be slapping handcuffs on a master pimp hawking innocent girls, not standing under a domineering actor.

“Are you going to cooperate?” As if he sensed her challenge, Julian murmured, his voice a lesson of satisfaction. Was that in the script? “If you don’t respond, I’ll have to treat you as a hostile witness, and protocol will require additional measures.”

Additional measures? Red sparks distorted her vision. By the story’s path, she could only respond one way. “Yes.” Clenched teeth allowed only a hiss, and it lingered in the air, the slight sound belying its tumultuous impact.

Triumph reined in the actor’s gaze, so genuine that for a second Cheyenne believed it to be real. But of course it wasn’t – he was simply playing a part. “Excellent.” He directed her hand to her side but didn’t return to the spaghetti strap. Thank goodness.

Only then... he grasped the bottom of her shirt instead. “This will be more effective.”

This time no relief would come. She stood still as he raised his hands, and with it her shirt. Cheyenne jumped, pushing forward ever-so-slightly, enough his hands accidentally grazed her breast. Her nipples puckered, and his hand stilled. Had he felt it? He must have, as his pupils dilated to topaz shards. Her breasts were heavy and tender, her body heated and flushed. His hands lingered – would he ever move them? Finally he did, but then the cool air hit her stomach, a stark reminder of the current situation:

The entire studio could see her straining breasts, hidden only by a lacy black bra. She was breathing like she’d just run a twelve hour marathon. And Julian had a front row view.

“Touch him!” the director commanded, as the captive audience leaned forward as one. “Let him know how much you want him.”

Did she want him?

Um, a lot.

Like, a lot a lot.

Like, she was going to get fired if she didn’t start paying attention to anything but those muscles a lot.

Like, those muscles really were admirable and hard and she’d like to – stop – a lot.

So she splayed her hands wider against the metal masquerading as a chest – because the director wanted her to. And she traced the valleys and contours of a pectoral paradise– because the director wanted her to. And she squeezed that smooth skin –

because she wanted to.

His nostrils flared as he lowered his gaze to her breasts. Then Cheyenne couldn't see him as he brought the shirt up over her head, blocking her view and expanding his. Her own hot breath surrounded and suffocated her, locked in the confinement of the tight spandex cotton, stifling her as she gasped for fresh oxygen. Then the shirt was gone, lifted high above her head, and she heaved in a great gulp of air. Julian stood above her, pupils wide with blazing blackness, examining her uncovered state. Fate's ironic twist bespoke the desired response ? damsel in distress ? yet she was no actor. Did he realize how sincere her response was?

His slightly wicked and altogether amused regard proved he did.

"This doesn't have to be bad," he whispered. Was he reading from the script or talking directly to her? She could no longer tell. "If you just relax and accept, it'll be fine. Pleasurable even."

Pleasurable?

Pleasure had never been mentioned by the hundreds of suspects she'd professionally searched in her career. Specific procedures dictated every movement to minimize personal disturbances and invasions, yet now those were the goal. It was disconcerting, strange and a million other things, but pleasurable? No, definitely, one hundred percent not. Well, perhaps 99%.

The script didn't call for defiance, yet that's exactly what she gave, not with words but by standing straight and meeting his gaze. Unfortunately, the stance caused her to jut out just a little further, in a way that sharpened his onslaught. "Are you hiding a weapon?" His voice boomed loud enough for the microphones to pick up. My God, she was fighting for the pride of womanhood, and he was simply following a script. "You will share all."

“Say something!” the director hissed. “I don’t care what you say ? just go with it.”

If he wanted a response, he would get it. Logic and reason boarded a plane for vacation, as she ignored the plot and responded naturally, “I will not. You don’t affect me at all.”

“I don’t?” Biceps flexed... a response to a challenge? “Not even a little bit?”

She stood up straighter. “Not even a little bit.”

“So you’re okay if we continue?”

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“Of course, I’m okay,” she forced out fighting words through an arid throat. “In fact, I’m more than okay. I want you to continue.”

Wait, what?

She didn’t mean it, of course. It was just a performance. Obviously, he understood.

The fire blazing in his eyes gave the answer.

How could she turn it around? She needed something that fit with the scene. “To prove I have nothing to hide!” she shot out triumphantly. He smiled wolfishly, and she bit back a matching growl. The words were right, yet her tone proved their worthlessness. It was the character she was supposed to play, so what was the problem?

Problem: Now he knew how much he affected her.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said in a much calmer voice. “As I said, I have nothing to hide.”

“No?” His gaze painted fire on her skin, lingering, branding, possessing. This wasn’t real life, and he wasn’t a real cop – the disrobement had nothing to do with actual police business and everything to do with sexual tension. Thank goodness this was an action flick and not a porn.

“When will we be done?” The words emerged before she could stop them, as she waited for a “cut” that never came. If the police thing didn’t work out, perhaps she

could start a career as a body double.

Julian didn't respond with words. He tugged on the waistband of her jeans, pulling her closer and invading her personal space with his towering presence. Those muscles weren't props, nor was his power. She was accustomed to being in control, with him she was anything but.

He brushed her legs. Cheyenne closed her eyes as the cool air elicited tiny pinprick goosebumps on her skin. In a real search, they touched as little as possible, but here, Julian left no place unscathed. He brushed her inner thighs as he lowered the pants, running his hands along the entire length of her legs as he freed them. He reached the bottom and pulled gently up on her foot. As he lifted a leg off the ground, she fought for balance but lost, flailing her arms briefly before grabbing the closest thing for support. Him.

"Don't move," he commanded.

Being looked at was one thing, but actually being touched, patted down, caressed? But it was part of the scene, and she had no choice. As he loomed ever nearer, she closed her eyes. Then...

"Cut!"

Cheyenne exhaled shuddering air, sagging like a prisoner given a stay of execution an instant before the firing squad. All around, the world erupted in applause. Somehow, she had forgotten the audience except for the powerful male who was staring at her with an inscrutable expression, holding her clothing in his hands. In a flash, Cheyenne reached for them, but for the briefest of instants ? a fraction of a second ? he grasped them tighter.

In that moment, Cheyenne stilled, trapped by the powerful actor who was no longer

in a scene, who followed no script. His eyes blazed, and suddenly, they were not policeman and criminal, not actor and actress, not even movie star and undercover operative. They were only man and woman, dueling power and strength. In the next second, he released her, writing a symphony of unspoken words and masked emotion. Something sparked between them, something real, something powerful, something unstoppable.

Oblivious to intangible undercurrents, the director shouted, and for once he actually sounded jovial. “That was fantastic! What a scene, and the chemistry was undeniable. Lou, cancel the other body double.” He rubbed his hands together, grinning like an old-time robber baron. “Destiny, great job. Of course, you’ll have to brush up on the script, but you’ll do fine. Even though we won’t be using your voice or head shots, we need actions to match the plot. After a lot of private practice, you’ll be ready.”

“Practice?” Her voice emerged on the wrong side of panicked.

“Private?” Julian’s was on the right side of satisfied.

The director’s was all pleased. “That’s right, private practice. In the end, he takes off far more than he did today. The final product won’t be full nudity, of course, but to get the scene...” He shrugged.

Did he just say full nudity? Breathe. Relax. Pretend you are somewhere warm and fuzzy, like a bank robbery. Yet her skin turned from cream to pink to red, as images of Julian exploring played on a loop. Right now little clothing remained to protect her body, but it was vital.

So why wasn’t she already dressed? As she stabbed her limbs into the tight clothing, she forced her voice lower. “I thought you just needed the blocking.”

“That was before I promoted you to permanent body double. You want the job, don’t

you?” The director’s voice was half-questioning/half-warning. If she turned it down, she would likely be demoted to the coffee runner’s assistant’s assistant. It would mean the end of her fledgling acting career and her mission. She didn’t have a choice.

She formed her lips into a pained smile. “Of course, I do. I mean, who wouldn’t? It’s the dream, right?” Julian tilted his head to the side, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly, and her smile slipped at her clear overacting. She took a deep breath, back in control. Mostly. “Yes, I want the job. I’m just not sure what you want me to practice.”

“He wants you to practice being undressed by me,” Julian’s deep tenor broke in, eliciting a moment’s shiver. If only the guys at the station could see her now. She was supposed to be chasing a hardened criminal, but instead she had become a dress up toy for the most desired actor in Hollywood. Although they were no longer in the scene, he exuded power and control, strength and... possessiveness? He did realize no one was recording, didn’t he?

The director waved his script. “Destiny, you’re done for today. Julian, we’re going to spend the rest of the afternoon on the airplane scene. Tomorrow morning we’re shooting scenes with the secondary characters, so you’ll have time to practice. Understand?”

“Understood,” they said as one. The director turned away, but Julian continued to study her. Did he suspect she was not as she seemed? She would have to be extra careful, especially as she started her true job, the mission.

And she would ignore powerful muscles and the man who wielded them.

“Is she going to throw herself at every guy in the studio?”

Big blue eyes blinked in response.

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“They’re going to get the wrong idea.”

Big Blue eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly.

“She could get hurt.”

Big blue eyes filled with... amusement?

Big blue eyes in a rugged, masculine face, in the hulking giant of a man wearing torn fatigues and giant blotchy stains of faux blood. “Excuse me?”

“Cut!” the director yelled for the third time in as many minutes, glaring daggers at his once prized lead actor. “What the hell was that?”

The owner of the big blue eyes grinned tigerlike. “I don’t know who you’re talking about, but she can talk to me anytime.” The would-be villain, the actor who also happened to be Julian’s best friend, Zachary Thompson, gave a devious wink. “It’s important to be friendly.”

Friendliness was commendable, but why was Destiny making moves on every male from the supporting actors to the production crew to the guy who delivered coffee? Julian glared at Zachary, then turned a more apologetic look at the director. “I’m sorry. I got distracted for a moment. It won’t happen again.”

But actually it might. Because although he’d never had to redo the same scene thrice in the span of three minutes in the entirety of his career, now he couldn’t act in an elementary school version of Little Red Riding Hood. What was the matter with him?

Destiny Dane was the problem. This was obvious forty-two seconds later as she squeezed the muscles of yet another man. How many men was she going to pursue in a single afternoon, because she was up to a baker's dozen? He couldn't hear the conversations, but he didn't need to. She whispered in their ears with that secretive smile, rubbed their arms, arched her back to give them the best view of –wait. Had that extra touched her breast? If he was fresh with Destiny, the next production he would be in would involve incontinence products, kitty litter and–

“Julian!” Zach hissed the word, and from his genuinely surprised expression, he had said it more than once. “Are you there, buddy?”

“It doesn't appear so.” The director twisted the script into a tight tube, then glared at his expensive smartwatch. They had been at it for hours –had he touched her again?– and it was far past their normal quitting time. “We can't get one scene without my lead actor playing a zombie, and everyone knows I don't direct science fiction. Can you get it together tomorrow, Starcroft?”

“Absolutely.”

Because he was going to do something about the problem today.

“That's it, folks.” The director tossed down his script. With a parting glare, he stomped through the cavernous space, his assistants trailing behind him like overeager puppies. “Make sure to check your schedule in the morning.”

Julian gave a cursory wave, as his attention jetted back to the all-too-tempting body double. Now three men were eagerly staring at Destiny's breasts. He took a step forward, yet a rough hand on his arm stopped him. “Hey, man, are you okay?”

Zach's regard was reminiscent of the scene in which he was impaled by a sword: perplexed, alarmed and just a little bit stunned. He didn't blame him. Flubbing lines,

losing focus – it wasn't him. Yet ever since he'd caught a glimpse of the beautiful blonde, he had been distracted, out of sorts even. His friend looked beyond him, saw his target. "Do you know her?"

Not nearly well enough. "Of course, I know her. She's the new body double."

"I know that," Zach drawled. "I mean do you know her, know her? Like beyond the studio?"

"No." Julian gritted his teeth as a set of four muscle-bound guys replaced the set of three that just left. "We just met."

"Why are you so interested in her?"

"What makes you think I'm interested in her..." Julian's words turned into a growl as one of the men pulled her closer, and another, this one surfer blond and notoriously cocky, slung his arm around her. She put a hand on his chest.

"Julian, are you sure...."

"I have to go." Without waiting for a response, Julian took off for the other end of the set, where Destiny officiated over her flock. The extras moved out of his path, eyes wide at the storming, and he repressed the familiar discomfort. Even on set, he stood out, although far less than in public. He loved his fans, but people treated him like he was an exotic animal. His world mimicked a zoo, a life behind glass, a rare specimen belonging to others.

Fame did have its advantages, however, and one of them occurred as all conversation ceased upon his arrival to Destiny's all male revue. She had hooked arms with two men, and far more surrounded her. One of them slid his hand down to brush the actress' nicely rounded rump. Julian glared.

The man dropped his hand, and his jaw, as he stared at Julian. Expressions ranged from admiration to surprise to annoyance, yet Destiny stood stiffly, with a blank mask that revealed nothing. It played stark contrast to her animated countenance seconds ago. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

Shock rocketed the group at the clearly combative statement. Destiny, apparently realizing her mistake, quickly continued, “Not that you’re not welcome, of course.” Her tone was now placating, yet somehow conveyed he was completely unwelcome. Ah yes, she was once more gritting her teeth.

He smiled.

She frowned.

No matter how she tried to pretend, he affected her. She had been in the middle of some sort of campaign to charm the entire male population of Miami, and he had just ruined it. Perfect. “I saw your little group and wanted to join in on the fun. What’s the plan?”

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“It’s karaoke night.” Destiny pointed to a group of female extras in the corner. They giggled and whispered when they saw him looking their way. “If you ask them nicely, I bet they’ll let you join.”

“As much as I love karaoke, I’m going to have to pass. I’m sorry, gentlemen, but I’m stealing this lovely lady. We have some business to attend to.”

Anger darkened Destiny’s features, so brief, so subtle, that no one else noticed. But somehow he could tune into her feelings. She was livid.

“I thought we were done for today.” Her voice sounded sugary sweet, and the men drank it up like soda pop. Couldn’t they see her insincerity?

He did. “We have matters to discuss.”

She couldn’t hide a whisper of wariness, as she darted her gaze to the other men. She wouldn’t be getting any help from them – he would make sure of it. “What sort of things?”

“Just some basic questions related to the script.” Like why can’t I stop noticing you? Why do I want to growl at the men who are staring at you? Why do I want to throw you over my shoulder and carry you away?

Okay, so maybe they were slightly off script.

“I’m afraid I can’t make it. I? hey, what is that guy doing?” In an instant, Destiny changed. Her annoyance vanquished, replaced by pure challenge and

determination, a confident warrior instead of a coy actress. She stood tall and strong, her entire body poised like an action movie heroine.

What had she seen? Julian pivoted, straining to locate the source of her actions, when she yelled words he never thought he'd hear outside of the movies, "Everyone get down! He has a weapon!"

A thunderous boom splintered the world.

CHAPTER 3

The man was targeting Julian.

The man with the gun.

Instinct took over, reflexes responded, as Cheyenne pummeled into Julian, to knock him over before a discharging gun did it for her. Although he far outweighed her, she had learned techniques to topple most guys.

Julian Starcroft was not most guys.

Instead of going down, he caught her easily, then crouched down, bringing her underneath him, protecting her from the bad guy. She tried to rise, but he pinned her easily underneath him. "Stay put," he ordered as he twisted around. He kept an arm down to secure her.

Damn. Why couldn't she extricate herself from his grip?

She continued struggling but to no avail, finally halting when the futility of her actions became clear. Since she couldn't see beyond the mountain that was Julian, she listened to the rapid conversation, preparing for another gunshot. However, no

discharge sounded, and the original chaos at her scream had turned into light banter and relieved laughter. And finally, after an eon or two, Julian released her arm.

Cheyenne shot up, automatically reaching for the gun at her waist, only too late remembering its absence. She didn't know what was happening, but someone needed to take charge. "They have to get away from him." Cheyenne started toward the man with the gun, when Julian decided to do something no one else had done since she was a little girl. He picked her up.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, kicking and screaming. "I have to get back there. Put me down!"

People turned and gawked at them. "Ignore us," he commented. "We're just practicing a scene. This is the part where I carry her off."

Cheyenne twisted and squirmed, fighting to extricate herself from his grip, but no technique in any of the three martial arts she studied seemed to work on the guy. "Let go of me!"

Others watched with bemused expressions, obviously enjoying the impromptu performance. In seconds she found herself hefted past three security gates, across a wide lobby and through several hallways to a door with a bright gold star and Julian's name emblazoned across it. He kicked open the door and "helped" her in.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped when he finally placed her down. "Do you know it's a crime to mess with an offi... a person? This is kidnapping. I have to get back there."

"No, Destiny, you don't understand." He matched her moves, easily stopping her. She was a trained professional ? how was he managing it? "Everything is all right. He's an actor, and the gun is a prop. Don't you recognize Joe Struthers?"

Oh crap.

Oh crap. Oh crap. Oh crap.

“Joe Struthers?”

“One of the villains in the film.”

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It was an unforced error, a mistake borne of years of crisis training. “He was pointing a gun.”

“And he gets paid a lot of money to do it.” Julian’s voice was cautious, emotionless, suspicious. “He won an Academy Award last year for pointing a very similar one at someone else.”

Fantastic. She had just “saved” Julian from a toy gun-toting, Academy Award-winning actor. How could she explain that? I’m sorry, but my police training kicked in and I wanted to save you? Oops, but it reminded me of my last hostage situation? My apologies, but pivoting from an undercover cop to an actor is harder than it looks? She would go for offence instead. “Why did you carry me? And don’t think I didn’t notice your amusement.”

“Sorry about that.” His smile said he wasn’t sorry at all. “I did it to avoid you getting kicked off the film. The director has a very short temper when it comes to his cast. If he knew you freaked out at a prop gun he might decide to replace you with one of the other, saner extras.”

So he hadn’t set out to humiliate her, but to save her. She should have recognized the actor, seen the gun for the prop it was. She turned away from him, and for the first time, noticed the posh surroundings. And wow.

Overstuffed couches and throne-like chairs dotted a carpet so thick you literally sank into it. It smelled like Starcroft’s spicy cologne, sharp and overbearing, with a whiff of chocolate from a platter of fresh brownies. Gleaming awards (was that an Oscar?) graced cherrywood bookcases while dozens of photographs hung on the walls,

pictures of Julian with other A-listers, politicians and even a certain silver-haired queen. Cheyenne's gaze snagged at a picture of Julian and a distinguished older man. Both sported Oscars, matching grins and a connection to her they didn't realize.

"The renowned Charles Sanders. That was his third, or was it fourth, Oscar?" Julian walked next to her.

She swallowed. She shouldn't ask. Shouldn't even care. Definitely shouldn't mention that Charles Sanders was the one actor she did know. "Are you close to him?"

"Very close." Julian traced the picture. "I never knew my dad, but Charles is like a father to me. He was the star on my first film, and mentored me through it all. He's been a great friend ever since. I wouldn't have made it this far without him."

"I see." Her throat tightened.

He paused, glanced between her and the photograph. "You don't know him, do you?"

She'd sooner admit she was an undercover cop. "How would an extra know a big star like that?" Before he could respond, she stepped to the next bookcase. Numerous awards gleamed next to the photographs, including plaques from charitable organizations, several of which bore the Starcroft name, and trophies from martial arts tournaments.

So that's how he overcame her moves.

Julian tracked her. The suspicion – and challenge – never left. "What's this really about? Why did you go all action hero back there?"

Cheyenne exhaled. What could she say that wouldn't give her away? "I was in a situation with a gun. A robbery." Now that was true. Last week, in fact.

Julian's eyes flashed with shocking vehemence. "Did someone hurt you?"

"No, but there was a chase." She chased the robber, that was. "And the robber got caught by a veteran cop." Her. "Thankfully no one got hurt, but it was scary. I think my reaction might be a delayed response to that situation." Now that was just a lie.

Julian seemed to accept that. Thank goodness, one problem solved? "So how did you almost take me down?" He broke into her relief parade. "I recognized the technique right away and would have succumbed if I hadn't studied martial arts. Where did you train?"

Cheyenne opened her mouth to respond, closed it swiftly. Too late – his smug smile proved she'd already given him the information he sought. The corners of his mouth quirked up. "I thought so. We should compare techniques sometime. I am curious, however. A black belt is almost a necessity for an action star, but you don't seem to be pursuing those roles. What made you decide to study?"

This undercover mission was rocketing to a box office bomb. She was going for dimwitted and promiscuous, not female action star. How could she stay in character without denying the obvious? "It's just a hobby."

"I don't think so." He leaned in. "You're far more than you seem. What are you hiding?"

Her name. Her job. The true reason she was here.

Everything.

"Now you're being paranoid."

"Or I'm right." The low timbre of his voice revealed his power. "I keep tabs of

everyone on set. Three photographers snuck onto the set of my last movie. One of them even managed to get into my dressing room.”

She just stopped herself from asking what the reporter had seen. “If I was a photographer, do you think I’d willingly play body double?”

He shrugged. “Photographs of me go for a lot of money. Some people might be willing to go to great lengths to secure them.”

Breathe. Stay calm. Do not arrest him. “I would never pretend to be a body double for some ill-begotten pictures. I would only let someone touch me if I really wanted it.” What had she just said? “I mean I would only do it for my career,” she amended hastily. “For my acting career.”

Julian smiled like a fox who had just stumbled upon the national henhouse convention. Yet soon it faded. “The eight hundred guys you hit on earlier would say differently. Or I may be underestimating.” He grimaced. “You even cozied up to Franklin. Sheesh, Destiny, he’s been married longer than you’ve been alive.”

He had her there. The victims had been approached by a variety of men, which made the police believe the true mastermind hired male extras as recruiters for short periods of time before moving on to others to cover his tracks. The only constant was the perpetrators were always male, thus any and all men, no matter their age, appearance or demographic, were potential suspects. “You’re accusing me of hitting on a married man who’s old enough to be my grandfather?” She blew a wisp of hair from her eyes. “I’m just friendly.”

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“This is beyond friendliness. Did you feel the same chemistry with them as with us?”

This kind of talk was even more dangerous. “What chemistry?”

He stepped closer, storming her personal space. “You don’t feel it?”

“Nope.” Yes. Now she stepped closer, and then somehow they brushed against each other, as attraction flared, flamed and then engulfed her. It beckoned her closer, closer, closer...

Excited chatter sounded from outside, the high-pitched voices of female cast members conversing about Julian. She reeled back as reality returned. Stark loss fired at the broken contact, illustrated by Julian’s expression, a painting of undeniable passion with brushstrokes of confusion. Her breath hissed loud as she cycled between him and the door, considering and recycling strategies to emerge unscathed. She was here to hit on as many guys as possible to discover a criminal mastermind, not go all the way with the one man who clearly wasn’t one.

She needed time to regain her focus and conduct her mission, and she couldn’t do it while staring at a body chiseled by a master artist. With no better plan and no time to formulate one, she chirped, “Well, gotta go.”

“You’re leaving?” Incredulity deepened his voice, set to the timbre of rampant suspicion. With every action, she fed his distrust. Yet she was a strong woman and would regain control of the situation. What excuse would he believe?

Fortunately, none were necessary. “You’re right.” Julian grimaced, stepping back.

“I’m sorry. Despite what the tabloids say, I don’t usually move this fast. I’m simply not accustomed to women like you. Why don’t we just talk?”

The urge to accept his offer was nearly inescapable. Yet she needed to end their conversation before one wrong word outed her as an imposter.

“Unless you’re ready to practice more?”

Practice? Why yes, please. What a great idea. Plan: approved. Wait, no. Practice led to places she couldn’t afford. She had to extradite herself before she traveled back to those places, took the grand tour and set up a homestead. Garbled explanations hadn’t worked, time for some brains.

The window into the hallway revealed a few dozen extras – female extras – the source of the conversation, which had saved her earlier. Before he could say more, she pivoted. “Hi ladies,” she called out, hoping they could hear through the partially open door. “Today’s your lucky day. Mr. Starcroft loves helping aspiring actresses hone their acting skills. Whoever is interested can give an impromptu performance right now. He’ll critique each one personally.”

The women gasped, shrieked in excitement. One almost fainted.

Time to put the final nail in the coffin. “And by the way, he has brownies.”

All of them came running toward Julian.

“I’m going to get you back for this,” he whispered.

No doubt.

Still he had no choice but to let her go as the hordes descended, as the women

redeemed their once in a lifetime offer to audition in front of the mighty and great Julian Starcroft. Cheyenne immediately pivoted, cutting a path to the door. She refused to run ? fleeing just wasn't her style ? but she needed to get away. She strode through the door and the set, passed the security gate and entered the open lot. She power walked through the busy walkway, barely hesitating as she passed several recognizable faces from television and screen.

A commotion sounded from behind her. Her breath lodged in her throat as Julian strode toward her with a determined expression and even more determined steps. How had he gotten away so quickly? Even in a lot filled with stars, he stood out, as people whispered and pointed, cell phone cameras playing a clicking symphony. He paid them little notice, however, instead catching her eye. He moved faster.

Cheyenne broke into a light jog. She wasn't running away, of course. She really needed a little exercise. She dared a glance back. Julian was still walking, but with his longer stride he was catching up.

She jogged – okay ran – to the exit. Fortunately, leaving the set was far easier than entering with its multiple security checks and formidable guards, and she emerged into the sun-splashed pathway seconds later. She threaded through the swarming tourists, who hoped for a glimpse of an actor who would dare leave from the busy main entrance instead of one of the more hidden exits. Of course, no one noticed her, and she slowed to a walk as she joined the sidewalk crowd, to avoid drawing attention. She had travelled approximately twenty feet when a scream splintered the air.

Automatically she turned, once more reaching for a weapon that wasn't there. She swore under her breath, but still pivoted towards the noise. Even without her weapon, she could help. Of course, heroics outside the studio would blow her cover, but if life and death were involved, she wouldn't have a choice.

Several women screamed again as people clustered into a haphazard circle, surrounding something. Cheyenne broke into an all-out-run, but soon she slowed. No one was hysterically fleeing or screaming in terror, and instead of frowns and fear, excitement buzzed electricity through the air. She stopped as the source of the commotion became visible.

“It’s Julian Starcroft!”

“Julian, I love you!”

“Are you single?”

“Marry me!”

“Please sign my?”

Oh my. Was it legal to ask someone to sign there? A grin stretched her lips, as Cheyenne backed out of hearing range. How could they get so excited over a mere glimpse of another human being, a man they didn’t even know? He may be handsome, but he most certainly hailed from mortal roots.

Cheyenne walked away at a more relaxed pace, as her heart evened and her breathing slowed. Starcroft might have escaped a bevy of aspiring actresses, but no way would he extradite himself from the ever-growing mob. Yet as she glanced back, she hesitated. The circle had grown many layers thick, and he was no longer visible through the thickening crowd. Her smile faded. She had wanted to slow him down, not put him in danger.

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She halted. Inhaled uncertainty, exhaled resignation. She couldn't just leave him.

Yet just as she took a step back, a dozen guards raced out of the studio, propelling people back and fighting their way to the middle. Cheyenne backed away once more, her escape, no matter how temporary, successful. Her relief didn't last long, as a single question emerged.

Why was he so determined to follow her?

Why was he so determined to follow her? Julian pretended to listen to the monologue of possibly the worst actress who had ever graced the face of the Earth. Thank goodness he was on the last of the forty-four extras he'd agreed to critique. After a brief break to pursue Destiny, he'd returned to fulfil her impromptu promise. Of course, he could have said no, but they'd been so excited and hopeful, he couldn't disappoint them. They were unfailingly sweet, and he tried to be as nice as possible. It wasn't their fault a sly, way-smarter-than-she-let-on sneak tricked him into doing this so she could escape. Soon, Destiny would learn her escape was only temporary.

Several of the extras did possess real talent, enough for him to recommend them, and he'd already decided to pass their names along. No reason not to give a chance to those who deserved it.

"Thank you, so much, Ms...." He looked down at the paper beneath him. "Ms. Cole. I'll be sure to pass your name along to any directors you'd suit." The young woman bobbed her head and flashed a rather stunning smile, which somehow didn't seem nearly as bright as that of a certain fleeing extra. Still, with her looks, she could do well as a model. He made a mental note to mention her to the agency.

“Ladies, thank you again for coming.” He stood and rubbed his hands together. “I hope we can do it ag... I mean I lookforward to seeing you all tomorrow. Right now, I need my special method to prepare for tomorrow’s role.”

The women nodded solemnly. He tried to keep his expression serious as they filed out, but they looked at him with such sincere gratitude, a genuine smile emerged. A recommendation from him could mean a lot for their careers. Maybe listening to aspiring actors occasionally wouldn’t be a bad thing. A certain grey-haired director with multiple sci-fi hits had given him a chance, after all.

Zachary appeared at the doorway as the last woman exited. “Are you sure you want to go in there?” she whispered to him, loud enough for Julian to hear. “He’s about to start his special method to prepare for his role.”

The sides of Zachary’s lips quirked up, but he nodded. “That’s why I’m here.” Sighs of envy swirled as Zachary shut the door behind him. He raised an eyebrow. “Special method?”

Grinning, Julian opened the mini-fridge. “Regular or light?”

“Ahhh. Hit me full force, buddy.”

Julian removed a pair of beers and tossed one to Zachary, who caught it easily. Two pops and hisses later, they each enjoyed a long swig. Zach swirled his glass. “So what’s with the woman?”

“What woman?”

Zachary grinned. “The one you carried off like a caveman, the same you tried to chase down.”

“I didn’t chase her down.” But actually he had. And that carrying off like a caveman thing – yeah, that happened, too. “I can’t believe you heard about that.”

Zachary shrugged. “Everyone’s heard about it. I heard the janitors discussing it.”

“No comment.”

Zachary held a hand to his heart. “I’m getting the paparazzo treatment? That hurts.”

Julian took another drink of his beer. “It’s not like I’m holding back. There just isn’t anything to tell.”

Zachary lifted his glass. “Now you’re just lying. I’ve never seen the great Julian Starcroft off his game, but today you were losing by fifty points in the first. I think it’s because your new body double is running offensive for the other team.”

“That’s ridiculous.” And so true. “Destiny doesn’t distract me at all.” I’d be less distracted by a Tyrannosaurus rex materializing out of thin air and asking for a beer. “Do you share all your romantic pursuits with me?” Do dinosaurs like regular beer or light?

His friend laughed at the thin attempt to change the subject. As successful actors, neither had to worry about finding women to date. Now finding the right person – that was as difficult for them as anyone else. Julian straightened. “I have nothing to hide.”

Zachary leaned forward. “Since nothing is going on with you and Ms. Dane, maybe I’ll get to know her better. She seemed pretty friendly back there.”

A dragon’s fire lit in Julian’s chest. “Get to know her better?” he responded slowly.

“Sure, why not? Since you’re not interested and all.” Zachary lifted his beer.

Julian suddenly had the urge to hit something. Something with a smirk and silky hair.

“That’s not a good idea.” He tried to make his voice light; instead he sounded like the Grim Reaper. On a bad day.

“No?” His friend raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

If he threw something at him, he could always claim he was rehearsing for the movie. They might believe him. I’m sorry, but I just had to practice that microwave-tossing scene.

“She’s flirting with every guy on set.” Zachary tempted him to throw that microwave.

“She seems to be looking for new friends.”

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“She’ll be stopping that.”

Wait, what?

Even if he could get her to stop, it was not his role or right to do so. Yet the urge to do so was nearly escapable.

Zachary raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? How do you figure?”

“Because—” Julian halted. How did he know that? Was he planning on stopping her?

Yes.

“Because you like her.” Zachary toasted his beer.

Far too much. Julian took an extra-long gulp of the smooth liquid. “Didn’t I say no comment?”

“Yeah, but I’m your best friend, and it doesn’t work like that. Besides, I tell you everything about my love life.” Zachary grinned. “Since Ms. Dane is obviously taken, even if she doesn’t realize it yet, I was thinking about getting to know Ms. Cole a little better.”

Julian frowned at the memory of the beautiful, sweet and yet slightly naive extra. “She’s not like the sophisticated women you’re accustomed to.” Although his friend liked short-term casual flings, the ladies always understood the situation. “Isn’t she a little quiet for you?”

Zachary held up both hands. “I know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong. I’d actually like to get to know her better. Literally.”

Julian waited for a punchline that never came. “You’re kidding. Do you actually want to settle down?”

“I’m not picking out minivans, but I may be ready for more.” His grin faded into seriousness. “Miss Cole seems like a mighty fine place to start.”

Julian lowered his drink. Zachary never seemed the type to want a deeper relationship. He was the stereotypical perennial bachelor, the guy who liked women a little too much to settle for just one. But people change – they want more. Destiny snagged his thoughts again. Did he want more?

It was ludicrous. He’d only known the woman for a short time, way too early to be thinking about what was real or not. One thing was certain: she was an enigma, and he didn’t like unsolved mysteries.

“Thinking about Destiny again, huh?”

This time he didn’t deny it. Despite her hesitancy, she was determined to play the role of vapid starlet, a role that included him. He’d happily take part.

And while he was playing hero to her heroine, he would learn more about her. He would uncover the true woman behind Destiny Dane.

CHAPTER 4

“Do you have any idea how lucky you are?” one asked.

“Sooooo very lucky,” another agreed.

“I’d just die to be you,” a third shared.

But then she’d be dead. So, really, not the best trade-off. If Cheyenne wasn’t so stressed about her upcoming... performance... she might’ve had more difficulty containing her laugh at the nonsensical comments. Right now all she could think about was Julian Starcroft.

And his hands on her unclothed body.

She’d hoped to make an inconspicuous entrance onto the set, but it was soon apparent that being elevated to permanent body double was something along the lines of an Oscar to the beautiful extras. They ahed and oohed, crowding her, as if her good fortune – or rather what they assumed was good fortune – would rub off on them. If only they knew she wasn’t here for Starcroft, but to protect them from a criminal intent on exploiting them.

To do that, she would flirt with every man on set, all except one, of course. One strapping, muscular, delicio...ahem. No, she wouldn’t be flirting with Julian Starcroft. Instead he’d require her to stay perfectly still while he conducted his intimate administrations.

Her phone buzzed, and she glanced down, froze at the flashing name. Anger and frustration tangled with elation and happiness, a juxtaposition of impossible emotions. She hesitated, but then nodded goodbye to the women and retreated to an alcove where she’d be shielded from sight and sound. It didn’t matter. She wasn’t going to answer the phone.

It buzzed again. She shouldn’t answer it, shouldneveranswer for this man.

It stopped buzzing, and the familiar sense of loss pierced her. She waited, and as if on the director’s cue, it vibrated again five seconds later. This time she answered on the

first ring. “Why are you doing this to me?” She hadn’t meant to whisper the words, certainly hadn’t meant to insert such raw emotion. She’d meant to demand he never call again. She’d meant to tell him that every time he called.

She never did.

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“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I—”

“Don’t you dare call me that,” she hissed. “I’m not your sweetheart. I’m not your anything. Why won’t you stop calling?”

“Because I gave you up once, and I’m never doing it again. I know it’s too late, but I want to fix things...”

“There’s nothing to fix. Absolutely nothing.”

But it wasn’t true. Not even a little. Because if there was nothing, acid wouldn’t be burning her throat like hot lava. Her breathing wouldn’t be short and her chest wouldn’t feel like it was being squeezed by a carpenter’s wrench.

A second’s pause, then a sigh. “That’s not true, sweeth... Cheyenne. I’ve spent the last fifty years observing people act, and I can tell when someone’s trying to convince me – and herself. You’re hurt, and you have every right to be, seeing as how I’m a few decades late. But I can’t change the past, only the future. I’m asking for that chance.”

He said it so earnestly, so softly, the harsh rebuttal she’d been planning froze on her lips. Instead she breathed deeply. “What do you want me to say?”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just think about it. Please.”

She wanted to say no, wanted to forget about him. Wanted to pretend he wasn’t the heartbreak of her past, the challenge of her present, the uncertainty of her future. Yet

no matter how she tried, the words wouldn't emerge. "I have to go."

"Of course. I'll talk to you soon." He hung up before she could respond, before she could tell him not to call. It didn't matter because he was right. He would be calling soon, and – like always – she would answer on the first ring of the third call.

A group of men had congregated near the coffee bar. Pushing the phone and its caller far away, she cut a path toward them. Perhaps some good police work would put her focus back where it should be. Yet someone followed her, and she stopped.

The woman halted breathlessly in front of her. Jessica Cole, another extra, smiled widely. "Ms. Dane, thank you so much for convincing Mr. Starcroft to screen us yesterday. He recommended me to a modeling agency, and they invited me for a test shoot. This could do a lot for my career."

Cheyenne betrayed no surprise to the lovely woman, who would most certainly make an outstanding model. With creamy skin, high cheekbones and pouty lips, her smile was genuine and sweet. "I'm thrilled for you, but I didn't do anything."

"Whatever you did, thank you. I'm so excited."

How about that? Julian had actually assessed the women. He obviously hadn't done it right then, since he'd been too busy trying to catch her like some prince grasping a lost slipper, so he must've carved out time out later. With how busy he was, it was actually kind of nice.

She shook her head. She needed to stop thinking about Prince Action Hero. So he'd done something nice, but that didn't impact her mission. She had to focus on catching a criminal, not a movie star.

And not letting the movie star catch her.

Cheyenne approached the male extras, changing the genuine smile to a wider, less sincere, version. “Well, hello boys.”

Half a dozen men turned to her. “Well, hello.” The brawniest man stepped forward while the rest gave appreciative looks. He was tall, handsome and muscle-bound – and did absolutely nothing for her. Unlike one very sexy leading man. She shifted, showing off her cleavage to its best vantage. “What do you guys think of my new role?”

“We love it,” six men said at once, in slightly different intonations.

Cheyenne giggled, bent down to give them a better look. Nine men – her group was growing – followed her every movement. “You don’t think I’m too shy?” She batted her eyelashes.

“You were outstanding,” a hunky extra called from the back. A dozen heads bobbed up and down in enthusiastic agreement.

Cheyenne laughed, brought a hand in between her breasts. Fifteen sets of eyes ogled. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked in a loud whisper. Even though they could clearly hear her, they leaned closer, their eyes constantly drooping to the breasts straining the thin shirt. “I don’t mind taking off my clothing for a good cause.”

“That’s fortunate,” a deep voice rumbled, “since I’ll be helping you out of them.”

Where were handcuffs when you needed them?

The words died in her throat. He shouldn’t be here, not now, not yet. Not when she’d arrived extra early just to advance her mission. Yet Julian stood in all his muscle-bound glory, as tall, dark and handsome as she remembered, as powerful as the warriors he played on the screen. His gaze was sharp and heated and possessive.

“Isn’t it early?” She clamped her mouth shut. What was she doing? In order to fulfill her mission, she had to play the role of naïve starlet. Questioning the leading star was out of character.

“We have a lot to do.” He smiled wickedly. “What I have in mind is going to take a lot of time and effort. Well, maybe not so much effort.”

Her breath hitched. Any effort would be on his part. She’d just be expected to... surrender.

“Weren’t you just saying how you’d happily bare all for a good cause? What could be more worthy than your career?” Julian turned to the other actors. “Just so we’re clear, Ms. Dane is a professional. There will be no undressing except for the part. I wouldn’t want anything improper happening on set.”

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Cheyenne choked back fury as the men stared at Julian. He was warning them away and destroying her mission all in one sentence. “I’ll be undressed by whoever I want!”

Julian went silent.

The men went silent.

The entire studio went silent.

Oh. No. Had she just destroyed her own mission? Only one move could save her, one response that could preserve her assignment, and it was the most painful path imaginable. She plastered the fakest, sunniest smile on her face and turned to Julian. “Which is why I want you to do it.”

Julian relaxed, the men relaxed, the entire set relaxed. Some even smiled, yet none were as large as the Cheshire Cat grin on Julian’s face. Bemusement, satisfaction and uncontrolled power reined, as he saw beyond her mask, deciphered the rebellion she couldn’t hide. The others clearly missed it, but Julian knew exactly how he affected her. “And only me?”

Cheyenne clenched her fists. They both knew what she had to say. “Of course.”

He smiled wider. “Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse us, it’s time to prepare Ms. Dane for her role.”

Cheyenne smothered a growl as the men looked back and forth between the two of

them like spectators at a tennis match. They knew exactly what type of preparation he had in mind. Before she could say a word, he grasped her hand and led her forward. Fighting every instinct to tug away from his hold, she allowed herself to be led through the studio, amidst smiling faces and envying eyes. He grasped her securely, but at least she wasn't being carried off this time. In minutes, they were at the door to his private dressing room. He unlocked and opened it, releasing and gesturing for her to enter before firmly shutting the door behind him. This time there would be no help from the outside. She was on her own.

"I'm not going to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. Anytime you want to stop, just say so."

She started at the unexpected statement. Instead of bemusement, his eyes were kind, calm. Could he sense her unease? "I know." She forced a giggle that came out like a choke. "This is a dream come true, remember?"

"A dream come true?" His footsteps boomed on the hard floor. "Then why are you acting like you'd rather be anywhere but here?"

"That's not true." She wouldn't want to be at the bank robbery she'd stopped last month and certainly not at the hostage situation. Although if you didn't count the bad guys, weapons, danger, etc. it really wasn't so bad. "I'm just getting accustomed to the role."

His eyes sparkled in the fluorescent lights. "Why do I have a feeling you're not used to giving up control? That despite your insistence otherwise, this goes against everything you know?"

Because it was. Yet she was also a strong woman who could play any role – even this one. "I am completely at ease. We don't even need to practice. I looked at the script yesterday and it's pretty straightforward. So why don't we just skip it?" Then she

could return to the set and uncover the criminal.

Unfortunately, Julian didn't give her a high five and agree. "Destiny, this isn't some low budget production filmed in a garage. This is a major studio release, and the producers expect it to be flawless. Although you acted sufficiently passionate yesterday—" His eyes darkened. "We have to practice for the scene to be seamless. We have to get to know each other."

"Get to know each other?" A bolt of lightning ignited in her chest. Was he saying he'd like to do something to get to know her better? He reached for several items on the counter – one of them a yellow cloth bag, and the other a small disc in a silvery package.

The world turned red.

"How dare you!" she hissed. "I don't know what you think I've agreed to, but I'm not interested in getting to know you better. Not a teeny, tiny bit." Okay, so that part wasn't entirely true. "Just because you're gorgeous and muscular and ridiculously tempting—" Hmmm, moving the wrong way here. "Doesn't mean you get whatever you want. So you can put whatever that is away because you will not be needing it with me. Do I make myself perfectly clear?" She folded her arms across her chest and glared.

He smiled. Wider and wider and wider. He should be embarrassed, horrified even, and apologizing profusely. He held out his hands, showed her the two items.

The yellow bag? A game of letter tiles. The silver-wrapped disc? A chocolate truffle.

Oh yeah, she was screwed. And not in an "Oops, I made a tiny mistake, let's laugh it off and start removing my clothing" sort of way, but in a "Why can't I get called away to a hostage situation" sort of way. Only she was the hostage in this situation.

“Um,” she stated eloquently.

He raised an eyebrow. “Um?” If he was trying to hide a smile, he was failing utterly. “I’m terribly sorry. I took a chance by getting the extra dark chocolate, and it obviously backfired.”

There was a strange twitch at the corners of her lips. No... it couldn’t possibly be... it wasn’t... a smile. “You understand the seriousness of this, don’t you?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded solemnly. “Chocolate is nothing to joke about. About what you said, would you care to explain?”

Possible explanations: A. She’d lost her mind. B. She’d lost her mind. C. She’d lost her mind. “No, thank you.”

He grinned. “Because it seems like you were thinking something far different.” He tossed the foil-wrapped disk in the air. “Almost like you thought this was a—”

“Chocolate. And I love chocolate. Love to eat it.” In one fluid motion, she grabbed the packet and tore it open. She popped the sweet into her mouth, barely noticing the smooth, rich flavor. Julian watched her intently as she licked her lips.

Oh yeah – she’d just made it a lot worse.

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She swallowed the suddenly bitter piece in her mouth. “This was for me, wasn’t it?”

Sensuality burned, as he answered in a husky voice, “Yes.” He cleared his throat. “So back to your earlier diatribe, how did you describe me?”

Of course, he would return to that. There were only two reasonable choices: playing dead or playing dumb. “I’m not sure what you mean,” she replied sweetly.

He raised his eyebrows, his smile turning wider. “You don’t remember calling me gorgeous?”

She cocked her head to the side, rubbed her chin. “Not really.”

“Muscular?”

“Nope.”

“Ridiculously tempting?”

“Not a chance.”

“So I’m not any of those things?”

Oh, he was. Every single one. Cheyenne resisted the urge to walk up and... well, and kiss him. “Are you done?”

He paused, tapped his chin as if considering it. “All right, but only since we’ve

become close enough to share the intimacies of..."

"Julian!"

"Chocolate," he finished with a bright smile.

She shook her head, but her smile was as wide as his. He held up the game. "So would you like to play? When I said we should get to know each other, I meant our roles might work smoother if you're more comfortable with me, and a game might help. However, if you think it's too intimate, we can get straight to the undressing."

Play a game or undress immediately? Undress! Undress! Undress! Her traitorous body rallied. "The game!"

He stared at her.

She forced herself to calm. "I mean, the game seems like a great idea."

He smiled in that annoying I-know-everything-your-traitorous-mind-is-thinking sort of way. "Perfect." He opened the bag and spread the tiles over his large executive desk. He motioned for her to take a seat while he sat on the opposite side. "Have you ever played before?"

She nodded, helping him turn the tiles so they were all face down. "We have to form words until we get rid of all the letters."

"Exactly." Julian placed the last tile facedown and gave them each their allotted amount. "Ready?"

"Ready."

“Then go.”

The game commenced. Cheyenne had always been extremely competitive and now moved with focused fervor, crafting word after word, rearranging to fit more. Unfortunately, Julian crept into her focus again and again, stealing her attention and slowing her movements. Tiles rapidly disappeared, and finally it came to a sudden death ending. With only one tile left each, they raced for a quick solution. Cheyenne found a spot and yelled “finish” a second before Julian put his down, winning it all. She jumped up. “That’s what you get for driving me wild! You can take that gorgeous grin, those heavenly eyes, that tight ass....” She halted.

Well, crap.

What just happened? As Julian laughed, she backtracked. “I mean that mediocre grin, those average eyes, that...” She couldn’t think of anything besides tight. She sat back. “I’m done now.”

She awaited his response, but he was no longer paying attention. He was staring down at her side of the table, where she had formed words. “Were you thinking about me while you played?”

Every second. “Of course not.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “It sure seems like it.” He read her words, “Handsome, powerful, frustrating.”

“You’re making that up.” She snuck a peek down at her letters. They were all there. Every. Single. One.

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“Attractive, ravishing, tight.” He let out a laugh. “Ass.”

“You think those were about you?” She tried for astonished, accomplished less than Oscar-worthy efforts. “I was thinking about the other guys on the set. And there are plenty of words that don’t have anything to do with you.”

“That’s true, but they’re as telling as the others.” He gestured to the pieces. “Games are a great way to learn about a person. For instance, despite your insistence otherwise, you were thinking about me.”

Denying it was kind of ridiculous at this point.

“Look at your other words: academician, agglomerate, monosyllable. They’re straight from an SAT vocabulary list, or at least someone who is very, very intelligent. Someone who would know twelve makes a dozen, how many planets are in the solar system, continents on the earth.” He gave her a pointed look. “Probably not someone whose only accomplishment is Miss Excavator Falls.”

Damn. With one simple game, not only had she given away exactly how tight his ass was (extraordinarily), but she’d also revealed her ditzy act was just that – an act. “Don’t knock Miss Excavator Falls. It’s really fantastic.”

He folded his arms across his chest.

“Fine.” She plopped down on the chair. “I might’ve played up the acting a little, just to help me get the role.” She hated to break character, but it was already damaged beyond repair, and Julian was obviously not working for the criminal mastermind.

The enterprise only chose extras, never a leading man.

Yet he appeared only somewhat satisfied with her excuse. There was only one thing that would distract him now. “So do you want to start rehearsing?”

He surprised her by shaking his head. “We still have a little time. Why don’t you tell me about yourself?”

Definitely not the direction she wanted to take. It was one thing to play a character, but if she inadvertently revealed her true identity, it would put the mission – and her – in danger. “There’s not much to tell. Typical back story of an aspiring starlet. I grew up wanting to be an actress, and I’m super excited for this chance. So anyway, if you’re ready...”

“I never wanted to be an actor.”

She paused. She shouldn’t ask, shouldn’t even care. Yet curiosity slayed good sense. “You didn’t?”

“Nope, I wanted to be a doctor. I was accepted into medical school and everything. Right before school started, a buddy of mine asked me to come along on an audition. I thought it would be an interesting way to spend an afternoon. I never thought I’d have a chance, much less get chosen for a role.”

“That was your first movie?”

He nodded. “They were specifically looking for a newcomer, a fresh face they could tout. How could I turn down a movie star role? The movie was the surprise blockbuster of the summer.”

“A single event can change a life.” It was why she was here, to prevent the tragedies

that destroyed women's futures. "You decided to continue acting instead of going back to medicine?"

Julian flexed his muscles. She didn't look. Much. "By then the acting bug had caught me, so I made the choice to switch careers. I've been lucky to receive great projects, and I really do enjoy it. Except for the fame, of course."

"Really?" How unexpected. Julian topped the lists of personable celebrities year after year. He was known to mingle with fans and attend countless charity events. "I thought fame was part of the appeal."

Julian shrugged, and again with the muscles. "I love the fans and am always happy to sign an autograph or take a picture, but the lack of privacy can be daunting. Everyone knows everything about my personal business – whether or not it's true – and there is endless bullying on social media. I can't take a walk without being surrounded, and even a trip to the mall is a full-scale production. People watch me every second." He ducked his head. "Of course, I am grateful. I chose this life, and being a celebrity comes with a lot of advantages. Just sometimes I wish I could be a regular guy for a little while. Maybe I should go undercover."

Cheyenne coughed. Loudly.

He frowned and offered her water, but she turned it down. "I'm fine." Except for nearly combusting when he simply mentioned the word "undercover."

He placed the cup back on the table. "So tell me more about Destiny Dane. What do you do when you're not fulfilling your duties as Miss Excavator Falls?"

Cheyenne thought back to the profile of the fictional Destiny Dane. The attributes and hobbies fit perfectly with the character and not at all with the real her. "Oh, you know, the usual favorites. Shopping, getting my hair done, sunbathing, meeting

celebrities, that sort of thing.”

Julian blinked.

Then he laughed.

And laughed.

And laughed some more.

Do not growl. Do not snap. Do not do anything that would be illegal in a plurality of states.

“I’m sorry,” he said, wiping his eyes. “Getting your hair done and meeting celebrities? That’s the best you could come up with? You didn’t seem at all interested in meeting me.”

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She smiled. “Must be you.”

“Ouch.” He laughed again. “Actually, I think you’re more interested than you let on.”

The short answer to that: Yes. The long answer: Hell, yes.

“And sunbathing?” He gave her a slow leisurely look, starting from the top of her head to her toes. His laughter turned to a wide, sensual smile. “Don’t sunbathers usually have tans? Although, come to think of it, you are looking a little pink.”

She peeked in the mirror. A little pink was an understatement. She was red all over, and it had absolutely nothing to do with the sun, but with a different type of star altogether.

“Now if you told me your hobbies included pretending to be someone you’re not and playing competitive board games, that I’d believe.”

She stiffened. The man saw through every lie she told, straight down to the true person. She had to say something. What would fit Destiny Dane enough not to ruin her cover but would match Cheyenne Kirk?

“Why don’t you tell me about your family?” he prompted.

Perfect. Both Destiny and Cheyenne had families. She wouldn’t give real names, but she could share general stories without blowing her cover. Of course, there was one facet of her family she would never mention, not to him, not to anyone. “I have four older brothers.”

Julian whistled. “Now that must’ve been fun growing up.”

The familiar wave of affection rose. “I love them with all my heart, but they were a tad overprotective. Let’s just say my dates brought me home an hour before curfew ended.” She laughed softly. “It was like having four bodyguards. To top it off, they all grew into tall, muscular guys by the time I hit high school.”

“It’s a wonder you ever made it out of the house.”

“I made sure of it,” she confided. “They might’ve intimidated the big guys, but I stood tall against them. So to speak.” She gave a rueful grin. “I even forced them to take me along on their adventures. I was quite the tomboy.”

He gestured toward her feminine attire. “You’ve come a long way.”

Actually, she hadn’t progressed at all from her tomboy origin. Did Julian realize her upbringing didn’t quite match Destiny Dane’s personality? “So what are they doing now?” he asked.

“They all stayed true to their roots even if I didn’t. They chose jobs with high physical demands. Two are cops, one went into the military and the other is a firefighter.”

“Do I need to worry when they find out what we’ve been doing?”

“Of course not.” Because they were never going to find out. Ever. If they did, they’d forget she was a grown woman and haul her back to the family home, 9 p.m. curfew firmly in place. Not that she would let them, of course, but it was still easier to avoid the fight. It had been bad enough when she decided to join the force.

Julian eyed her carefully. “You aren’t going to tell them, are you?”

“Not a chance in hell.” She grinned. “Your turn. Tell me about your family.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“Oh course not. How would I kno—” She stopped. What was she thinking? His biggest fan would know everything about him, including his family, hobbies, the brand of deodorant he used. Those probably made front page news. “Of course, I know.”

“Do you?” He folded his arms across his chest. “I’ll give you one chance.”

One chance to guess about his family? A hundred, or a thousand, wouldn’t be enough.

“One chance to take it back,” he elaborated. “Remember when you claimed to know my last movie?”

“Hey, I knew all aboutThunder Wave.”

“NotThunder Wave.”

“Thunder Plunder?”

“Try again.”

“Thunder and the Seven Dwarves?”

“Thunder Force.”

“Exactly.”

His eyes twinkled. “So do you want to take it back?”

“I’ll think about it.” She straightened. “I have an idea. Why don’t you tell me about your family, and I’ll tell you if you’re right?”

“I think I’m being scammed.” His grin returned full-force, with just a sprinkling of mischief. “Here goes. I have four older brothers who are very protective of me. Two are cops, one is—”

“Hey!” She choked out a laugh. “That’s my family.” She tried to ignore his charm, but it was hopeless.

“Actually I was raised by a single mom. I have one sister, who still lives with her.”

Her laughter quieted, but a smile remained. “A kid sister?”

“No, she’s older than me. She has Down syndrome. She’s absolutely amazing – sweet, kind and caring. She finds joy at every little thing.” His expression reflected adoration. “She’s special in an altogether wonderful way.”

Warmth, as strong as it was unexpected, infused her. “Do you see her often?”

“At least twice a week.” He nodded broadly. “I bring her to the set occasionally, and

she loves it. Of course, everyone loves her, too.”

“I bet they do.” She gestured toward him. “Just like her brother.”

“I don’t know about that.” He feigned a grimace. “I can think of one extra who, although she pretends otherwise, doesn’t find me interesting enough to even watch my last movie.”

“You mean Thunder with the Wind?”

“I’m starting to feel like you don’t take my work seriously,” he rumbled. “Are you going to at least watch Spy Heat when it comes out?”

“Probably not.” If it showed any of her, definitely not. “I tell you what. When they make Spy Heat into a book, I’ll read it.”

He rubbed his chin. “I just can’t imagine Spy Heat as a book.”

“Sounds like a great book to me.” She winked. “They could put a little romance in it, with an alpha hero and a strong woman.”

He grinned, but then the light banter melted to more serious regard. “So you made it on your own, without any big connections.” They actually had more in common than he realized. She’d lived half her life with a single mother, only inheriting her beloved stepfather and four brothers, or technically stepbrothers, when she was nine.

“No big network, but my mom and sister are great. Since I never knew my dad, I didn’t miss him. Like I said, I gained a replacement when I started in the business.”

Cheyenne fought to remain impassive as something passed between them, something different than the sizzling physical attraction and yet no less poignant. A connection

of a sort. “Where do your mom and sister live?”

“They live in the same development as me,” he shared. “Crystal Landing.”

Like pretty much everyone else, she’d heard of the famous Crystal Landing. She’d even once entered the exclusive community on a domestic call. The homes weren’t simply million-dollar homes – they started at ten times more.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like pretty much everyone else in the world looks at me. It’s just a house, and I’m just an ordinary guy.”

“Ordinary guys don’t have waterfalls in their front yards and roller coasters in the back. They grow up in cozy little ranch homes with a quarter acre of land.

She thought he muttered, “Not all of us,” but before she could ask, he changed the subject, “So you’re into fashion, huh?”

“Fashion? Why in the world would I... I mean why in the world wouldn’t I love fashion, because it’s so wonderful and great and... ummm... fashionable?” Yeah, fashion was one of the hobbies listed on her resume. Which she forgot. Again.

“You don’t say?” The humor was back. “My job brings me into contact with some of the big fashion designers. What are your favorites?”

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Did Target count as a designer? She didn't think so. Only one brand came to mind, and she didn't think about it before it popped from her mouth. "Under Armour."

Julian gave a half choke, half laugh. "Under Armour? The company that makes products to reduce sweat?"

Things were going downhill fast.

"That's the one," she chirped. "It's very important to... um... not sweat in my position."

Well, actually, in her new position, the whole point was to sweat. Time for this conversation to go in a new direction. "I love to exercise, so that's why I like it so much."

"I enjoy exercise, too." Thankfully he let her change the subject. "What do you do?"

Since both a policewoman and a body-conscious actress would want to stay fit, she could answer truthfully. They started a discussion about their favorite physical activities, then compared their favorite restaurants. The conversation grew comfortable and all-too-enjoyable, and soon they were sharing stories about fun family gatherings and eccentric relatives. From there, they moved to funny tales from the past and a bevy of safe topics like sports, television and general news items.

The conversation was lively and animated, as they laughed and joked like two old friends. Julian shared quite a bit, although not anything that wasn't common knowledge. After years of skirting the paparazzi, he clearly knew better than to

divulge any family secrets. When she finished laughing at one funny story, Cheyenne looked down at her watch and was stunned to discover two hours had passed.

“Well, look at that.” He tapped his smartwatch. “Two hours and you didn’t find anything to growl about.”

Cheyenne chuckled... and growled.

He laughed. “I stand corrected. When you stop trying to hide yourself, we get along perfectly fine.”

They did get along perfectly fine, or actually, just perfectly. Which in itself was far from perfect. It was a sobering dose of reality. Even if she didn’t betray her cover, she was still painting the picture of a far different woman than Destiny Dane. She needed to protect the integrity of her mission and stop wasting valuable time. She should be spending every minute looking for a criminal, not cozying up to a movie star. Which was why right now, she needed to get this over with.

She’d known she would never escape it, so it was time to stop putting it off.

“Is it time to undress me?”

CHAPTER 5

Is it time to undress me?

The air turned thick as a sourdough starter, heavy, dense, suffocating. Julian’s wide smile had vanished, replaced by a sensual grin and smoldering eyes. He took a moment before responding. “I didn’t think you were anxious to get back into the role.”

He pushed himself into a standing position, his tall, imposing form towering over her curvy yet petite build. She stood so quickly the chair tipped backward and fell to the ground with a loud clang. She reached down to get it at the same time he came around. He loomed over her as she bent down, touching her shoulders. “Let me.”

She tightened, allowing him to stand her up. He reached down with one hand and easily lifted the heavy chair. “Are you ready?”

“Of course,” she lied. “It’s just business. We’re both professionals.”

He flexed his muscles as if preparing for the work he would soon do. He held out his hand.

She hesitated.

“Are you afraid?”

“Of course not.” She forced her hand into his. It was large and heated and firm, and as he engulfed her far smaller one, something sparked. He held her firmly as he led her to the back of the room.

“Am I supposed to just stand still while you conduct your administrations?” She shouldn’t be questioning him, should be accepting as the real Destiny Dane would, but she couldn’t help it. How would she ever manage this?

“That’s right. Most of the scene will be with the main actress, of course, but when more is exposed, it’ll be you.” When she stayed silent, he continued, “And you’re sure you’re okay with this?”

She had to be – after all, nudity was in the contract. Just not the one she signed with the police department. That cited the high risk of police work, bodily danger, physical

harm. Nothing like the dangerous prospect of giving Julian Starcroft a la carte entry to her body. “Absolutely,” she bit out. “Of course, it’s okay. It’s great. It’s my job.”

“And you read the script?”

She actually had, last night. Well, as best she could with visions of one very sexy actor infiltrating every thought. She’d read the part where the hero made love to the coquettish heroine, touched her everywhere, took every liberty and made it his own. She’d never contemplated experiencing it in real life, even a surreal facsimile.

“Bet you never thought you’d be here.”

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She should answer affirmatively, say she'd hoped for such a career-building role, but she couldn't lie. "No."

"Before this goes further, I need to admit something. I just can't pretend anymore." He edged closer, towering over her with smoldering intensity. "Do you know how much I want you?"

Cheyenne bit back a gasp, forced herself to stand still under his penetrating gaze. "You do?"

"Of course, I do. Haven't you noticed how I can't keep my eyes off you?"

No. But maybe yes. She'd been busy doing the same to him. "You can't really feel that way."

"I shouldn't, but I can't help it. I almost lost it when I saw you with those other men."

He had seemed rather upset when she cozied up to the actors on the set. Then he'd warned them off, effectively sabotaging her mission, and all but threw her over his shoulder. Again.

"You need to stay away from them."

Cheyenne bristled. "You can't tell me what to do."

His smile widened as he stalked closer, barreling through her personal space. Her breasts brushed against his chest. "Actually, I can. Haven't you seen how everyone

treats me? I'm in charge of this whole operation." He pressed closer. "And of you."

Unbidden desire played villain amidst a dastardly concoction of anger and attraction. He couldn't really feel this way, couldn't be propositioning her like this. And yet, she could barely stop herself from matching his steps and showing him who was in control. "We need to stay professional."

"Actually, I can do whatever I want. It's one of the perks of my position."

He was absolutely outrageous. And narcissistic, arrogant and audacious. And gorgeous, handsome and sexy. His actions during the game and subsequent conversation must've been an act, a ruse to loosen her up. How could she have thought he was a nice guy? He'd probably even lied about medical school. And like one of the naïve starlets, she'd fallen for it. "This needs to stay professional."

"It stopped being professional the first time I put my hands on you."

Oh yeah, it did. How far should she let this go? No matter what, she couldn't betray her identity. He pressed even closer; now they touched along their entire length, upending her senses and weakening her resolve. "I suppose I'll just have to prove it to you."

Before she could ask what he meant, he swooped down and took her lips.

The kiss was everything he was: heated, powerful, bold. His lips were smooth and firm and tasted of spice, peppermint and pure need. He did more than kiss her – he caressed her, tangled their breaths, inhaled her resistance. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing her against endless muscles. She fought to stay strong, to stay unaffected.

Her resolve lasted two seconds.

She was no weak maiden, no naïve starlet or vulnerable character. She pushed into him, deepening the kiss, its intensity escalating like a star gone supernova. They pushed against each other, tasting, nibbling, devouring. When he pressed his tongue into her mouth, she matched it, unable to stop a low moan as she opened herself up for their pleasure.

Yet just as suddenly the kiss ended.

He pulled away, stared at her through passion-filled eyes. Cheyenne also backed up, licking swollen lips. How had she let this happen? She should chastise him, demand he back down, but she had kissed him right back. How could she get out of this without compromising her position?

His expression was inscrutable. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

She shook her head, erected a mental wall against impossible words. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

He rubbed her shoulders, a seemingly innocent gesture that couldn’t have been more intimate. “It would be easier if you accept.”

“No, buddy, it’s you who has to accept. This isn’t happening. Not now. Not ever.”

A strange light entered his eyes, like excitement before a battle. Instead of defeat, it held bold anticipation. She’d just issued a challenge to an alpha male, and he’d accepted. “You’re fighting yourself, Diana. You can’t win.”

Fantastic. Now he couldn’t ever remember her name. For inexplicable reasons, it infuriated her a thousand times more than the liberties he’d taken. “It’s Destiny,” she ground out.

His eyes clouded. He stepped back, taking his oh-so-wonderful hands with him. He blinked. “Destiny?”

If the Academy Awards created a category for biggest jerk of the year, he’d be a shoo-in. “Yes, Destiny, if you don’t remember.”

“Of course, I remember.” He absently stepped closer. That was better. “I don’t understand.”

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“Don’t understand why I want to be called by my actual name while you’re seducing me?” she challenged.

“What are you talking about?” He glanced back to the floor, where her script had fallen. “Diana is the lead character. Why are you breaking from the script?”

Cheyenne froze. “The script?” she whispered.

“Yeah, the script.” His eyes widened. “You do realize I’ve been acting this whole time?”

Acting this whole time?

Acting the whole time?

Acting this whole time?!

Cheyenne calmly recited every curse word ever created. Twice. Then again just to be sure. She turned to Julian and plastered a calm smile on her face, “Of course.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Of course?”

“Of course.”

He remained silent.

“I mean obviously,” she mustered out. “Clearly. Most definitely. Obviously.”

“You said obviously twice.”

“That’s because it’s so damn obvious!”

His smile told her how obvious it was.

There was simply no way out of this. “Didn’t you see how I kept up with the dialogue?”

His expression said nice try. “You didn’t say a single word from the script. I was going along so we could get to the physical part. Now that you did perfectly.”

First came the blush. Then, the anger. Anger at herself for letting him unsettle her, anger at him for unsettling her and anger at the criminal for putting her in this position. “Well, it’s your fault for affecting me so much!”

“I affect you?” His movements stilled. In contrast to her, he was clearly pleased, satisfied even, by her words.

“No,” she hissed. “I mean how much I obviously affect you.”

She waited... and waited... and waited. He didn’t respond, instead just stared at her with a slightly pensive look. Did that mean she actually affected him? “I think we should move on,” she said quickly.

“Good idea.” He still seemed distracted. But he nodded.

“I’ll get the script.” She moved to bend down, but he stopped her with a hand on the arm. She froze at darkened eyes.

“Actually, the next part requires no script.”

“Of course.” She adopted a calm mask, faced him like the hardened law enforcer she was. “What should I do?”

“Just go along with it.”

That’s when the lighthearted levity left, when sizzling, sensual heat took over. “I’m going to begin now.” Julian timbre deepened. “Acting. So there’s no confusion.”

“No, no confusion.” She licked her lips.

His eyes darted to them. “I know you haven’t memorized the script, but don’t worry. There’s not a lot of talking in this part.”

Of course not. There was touching. Caressing. Exploring.

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Seemed like a whole lot to worry about.

“Since the whole point is to get body shots, it really doesn’t matter what we say as long as it matches the movements. So I might improvise, and you can, too, okay?”

Cheyenne gave a jerky nod. Yet as he reached for her, suddenly it was all too much. Too much sensation, too much power, too much movie star. It was one thing putting your life on the line, but this... this was far more dangerous. There had to be some way she could both complete her mission and preserve her dignity. “Wait.” She moved back.

He retreated as well, but didn’t say anything. What could she do? She could refuse the role, but she’d probably get kicked off the film. Even if the police department managed to get her reinstated, the criminal could make his move in her absence. She had to continue. “I’m sorry, I just need a minute.”

Julian gave a crooked half smile. “Is acting with me that terrible?”

“Not at all.” Fire licked her skin, but it was true. Despite her apprehension, the thought was more tempting than unappealing. It signified the true problem. “I just got a little...” She searched for the right word.

“Overwhelmed?”

Precisely.

She shook her arms out. “I just need a second to get into character. I’ll be fine.”

“You know what I think?” Julian leaned back, flexing his triceps. “I don’t think you find it distasteful at all, and it’s scaring the hell out of you. You clearly don’t want the role, but for some reason you have to take it. Am I right?”

Yes. Absolutely. 110%. “Obviously I want the position. I wouldn’t have said yes if I hadn’t. I realize what a big chance this is.”

“Is that the issue?” He clasped his hands. “You feel compelled to take the role to further your career?”

“I’ve been honest about how I feel,” she lied. “This position is an opportunity, but eventually I hope for a more substantial role. It’s not a big deal.”

“I don’t think you can handle it.”

Cheyenne gave a short, sharp laugh. “You don’t think I can handle it? Think again, buddy. If anything, you can’t handle it.”

A furrow appeared between perfectly sculpted eyebrows. “Lady, this is what I do for a living. I undress women all the time.”

“I bet you do.” Something red and hot scorched through her.

He opened his mouth to retort, stopped. Speculation blazed in his eyes. “Are you jealous?”

“Jealous!?” Her voice squealed like nails against a chalkboard. “Of course, I’m not jealous. You’ve probably kissed hundreds if not thousands—”

“Millions,” he interrupted.

“Of women,” she ground out. “Everyone knows that. I don’t care how many women you give heart palpitations. I just don’t want you doing it to—”Woops.

He smiled. “To you? I give you heart palpitations?”

She glared. “Absolutely not. I was talking about vulnerable women. Women who aren’t me,” she clarified. “The point is, I can handle it.”

“What if I give you an out? A way to stay on the film, but not as a body double?”

Her next words, poised, locked and loaded, froze on her tongue. She revised then, proceeded cautiously, “What do you mean?”

“It wouldn’t be a performing role,” he elaborated. “Those are already taken. However, I could talk to the director to find a job that lets you stay on the film without exposing yourself.”

That would be fantastic. Not quite the anonymity of an extra, but close. The conmen had approached both cast and crew in past crimes, thus she’d still have a chance of being a target. Plus, she’d be able to return to speaking with the extras, working to ferret out the criminal in their midst. She couldn’t possibly be this lucky. Except...

Suddenly changing jobs may put off the criminal. He – and others – may wonder why an aspiring actress would go from a position in front of the cameras to an administrative one. Unless she had a logical reason. Something like her new boyfriend didn’t want her publicly disrobing?

If she hinted she was dating Julian, just a low-key casual fling, it would provide that logical explanation. She couldn’t start a public affair, to avoid becoming tabloid fodder, but just give hints to the crew. Julian had been linked with enough costars to make it believable. Many of the victims had boyfriends, so that shouldn’t disqualify

her from the criminals' clutches.

It was the perfect plan – for the mission. And the anticipation of seeing him more, that was also because of the mission. The excitement? Because of the mission, as well. Indeed, everything was for the mission and not about any misguided, totally inappropriate attraction.

She lifted her chin and said in a clear voice. “How about a date?”

CHAPTER 6

Julian stared at his guest. Shock, satisfaction, anticipation. So many emotions, zipping by like a sci-fi film trailer, as the words lingered in the air, echoing against gilded walls. He stayed silent, and so did she, locked in a battle of hidden motivations. There was no “How about a date” on his bingo card, not even close. Of course, it matched the desire she couldn’t hide, the connection that sparked, yet she seemed determined to fight it. Now she wanted to explore? She was up to something.

He would discover what it was.

Although Destiny pretended he didn’t affect her, the truth was obvious. She disliked the body double role, and despite his claims otherwise, he didn’t want her in it. He may not have been with millions of women like he teased, but he’d been in relationships, and something was different this time. Something stronger. Something personal.

He wanted nothing more than to explore this force, but not as part of a role. Certainly not as a career move to “get ahead.” Uncovering her in front of the entire cast and crew made him feel like he’d eaten half an apple only to find half a worm inside. He’d accused her of jealousy, but the green-eyed monster had made a house call. He didn’t like it.

He wanted to get to know her better and not just in a physical way. He would’ve

suggested it himself, however, despite what the press reported, he had morals, and he would never take advantage of a starlet. “You don’t need to do this.”

She stiffened. “Is that no?”

He wanted nothing more than to go on a date with her. He’d been planning on asking her, but once the roles were over and it was clear he wasn’t doing it for the wrong reasons. “I do want to go out. A lot.” She blinked at him; he cleared his throat. “But this switch is not contingent upon any sort of recompense. I want to help you find a better role, and I don’t expect anything for it.”

She visible softened, her lips curving at the top. “You really are different than I thought.” The words were murmured, more a self-reflection than a response. She straightened. “I know you aren’t expecting anything, and neither am I. I just thought it would be fun.”

He wanted more than fun from her, but he wouldn’t share that now. For the first time in, well, ever, he felt something real. “I’d like to get to know you better. In the meantime, you’ll get the chance to go out with America’s most eligible bachelor,” he teased, flashing a broad smile.

She shook her head, but her eyes lightened. “Don’t you mean the most arrogant actor in the world?”

“Gorgeous.”

“Egotistical.”

“Handsome.”

“Pompous.”

He grinned wider. "I think we're off to a great start."

"Perfect." She took a deep breath. "But we do have to agree on some things."

Putting conditions on the date she asked for? Stranger and stranger. She was definitely up to something. "What things?"

"First, how many dates?"

Dissatisfaction tempered his humor. She wanted to limit the dates before they even started? If things went the way his imagination was predicting, it could be a moot point. "Four hundred and fifty-two."

She froze, gave a short laugh. "How about two?"

"Five."

"Three."

He nodded. Three dates should be enough to figure out why he wanted her so much and learn about the real her. More importantly, it would give him time to convince her to add more dates, even four hundred and fifty-two.

"They can't be public," she gave her next condition. "It has to be just you and me."

His mind conjured images of a private date. Just when he'd gotten himself back under control...

"I didn't mean like that." She flushed. "I just can't be seen cozying up to you. Your girlfriends become instantly famous."

He inclined his head. “Isn’t that what you want? Not to be arrogant, but being seen with me provides great exposure.” His last girlfriend had scored a supporting role in a popular comedy series, and the one before that was working her way up the directorial ladder.

A shadow passed over her. Strange. Why wouldn’t she want the benefits of being attached to a successful actor? Even a date or two could provide a hundred times the coverage of a body double role.

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“I’m shy.”

“Shy?” He lifted an eyebrow. “Didn’t you volunteer for a body double position? You also flirt with every guy on the set. I even saw you giving eyes to Goldy.” He wagged his eyebrows. “You know, the security guard’s goldfish.”

She looked skyward. “I didn’t flirt with a fish, and I didn’t flirt with you.”

“You said I was the most amazing man on all nine continents and twelve planets.” He swept his hair out of his face. “What do you call that?”

“A brief brain hiatus,” she said grumpily. “But if you agree to my terms, we should do it.”

“I was going to propose the first date be tomorrow at Fantasy-Con. It’s a huge convention for comics, movies and television, sort of an alternate version of Comic-Con. It’s not private, but the entire cast is going so no one will realize we’re together.”

She paused. “I suppose that’ll work, as long as you don’t make it seem like a date.”

Even if they didn’t label it a date, they’d still spend the entire day with each other. He could learn about her and the true motivation behind her actions. Perhaps then, he could figure out the mystery that was Destiny Dane.

“Perfect.”

Most likely suspects:

John T. – Arrogant extra always talking to different women

Alan B. – Quiet prop assistant who seems atypically nervous

Kevin J. – Extra willing to do anything to further his career

Peter L. – An assistant's assistant who wants more

Also, Jeff H., Colin C., Trevor D. on the crew and many of the extras

Cheyenne read the list of possible suspects, as she shifted sore muscles in the pleather bench seat. Her older, nondescript sedan cum makeshift office smelled like her last four drive-through meals and contained stacks of computer equipment behind heavily tinted windows. She currently perused three of those devices, yet the state-of-the-art machinery could not output the solution without input from her fieldwork.

At least she'd made some progress. She'd immediately weeded out the higher-level cast and crew, but that left all the extras, much of the crew and even some of the actors with bit parts. The criminals used a variety of personality types to act as recruiters, to make it more difficult to track them. The list was just a start. She would still need the criminal to make his move.

Cheyenne shut down the devices and shoved them into the secret compartment under the seat. She had chosen a relatively far parking spot to ensure no one saw her musings, but it would be a long walk to the convention center. She was about to exit the car when her phone rang. She didn't bother to look.

She let it ring through to voicemail.

Then once more.

On the third try, she answered it.

The expected voice was there. “Please listen before you say no.”

“No”

“I deserve that, but I’m going to try anyway. Let’s meet for a cup of coffee.”

Though he couldn’t see her, Cheyenne shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. We can’t meet in a public place – your job and all – but that doesn’t mean we can’t see each other. I own a café, just a little place, and we could meet sometime. No one would see us.”

She faced hardened criminals without a thought, but now a cold sweat made her hands slippery. “I really can’t.” Yet the words were stilted, the fortitude behind them weathered and cracked. The true message belied the denial: I can and I want.

He knew. “Sure you can,” he pressed softly. “It’s just a cup of coffee, nothing more.” A loud breath and a pause. “I think about you every day. I’m trying to move on, to be better, to be the... the...”

Cheyenne held her breath.

“The person you deserve. To be some part of your life, however much you’ll let me. If you could spare just a few minutes...”

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Cheyenne closed her eyes, opened them to a world gone blurry. So much of her wanted to say yes; so much wanted to say no. “I’ll think about it.”

She didn’t know who was more surprised by her answer. “I’ll take it,” he returned immediately. “And leave before you change your mind.” The connection ended with a click.

She squeezed the phone until a faint cracking sounded. For a sliver of a second, the past engulfed her, the pain, the heartache, the endless disappointments, but then she forced herself to the present. Her choice deserved deep contemplation, but not now, and certainly not here. She grasped the cool metal handle and opened the door.

A second later, her name was shouted, “Hey Destiny!”

Cheyenne turned at the bubbly voice of Jessica Cole. She forced her voice to a normal octave. “Hi Jess. How’s it going?”

“Great. I was surprised to see someone else parked out here. My agent says walking is a great way to keep in shape, so I always park far.”

Cheyenne smiled. It was a great excuse. “Same here.”

They fell into step next to each other, the conversation turning to neutral, benign and comfortable matters. Jess told her about her small-town roots, a rural origin with more wildlife than people. She was sweet, kind and a little naïve. Cheyenne would keep close watch on her, especially with the danger no one knew existed.

“So did you hear?” The bubbly woman was even more animated than usual, practically – no, literally – bouncing up and down with excitement. “I got your old role. I’m the new body double!”

“That’s great.” Yet Cheyenne’s heart plummeted to the pavement. What the hell was the matter with her? It should’ve been great. It truly was great. Jess was a kind woman who deserved a better role.

Yet why did it feel like her stiletto had just stabbed her heart?

She should forget about the body double thing. She needed to focus on her mission. Right now she should be questioning Jess in case one of the men had approached her. Although the criminals instructed the women to remain silent, the victims didn’t always comply. That’s how they’d gotten the tip that Spy Heat would be the next target.

Yet when she opened her mouth, something else entirely emerged, “I assume you’re going to practice with Julian.” She clamped her mouth shut. Of course, they were going to practice. As long as it wasn’t her, it didn’t matter.

“Nope.”

Cheyenne started, ignoring the feeling that was definitely not relief. “Why not?” At the girl’s surprised gaze, she lowered her voice. “I’m just curious.”

Jess shrugged happily. “Julian said we didn’t need to practice. Especially since there aren’t any scenes where he takes off all my clothes.”

Cheyenne nearly tripped on a fallen branch. “There aren’t?”

“Not anymore,” she confirmed. “Julian, the director and Zachary – you know, that

really hot actor – talked, and they took them out. They said it would leave something to the imagination. They still need the body double, though, because even partial nudity is banned in the lead actress’ contract.”

“It makes sense.” Only Julian had seemed perfectly happy to expose her, at least for a little while. “Congratulations on the role. On the subject of hot actors, have you noticed all the hunky extras?”

Jess’ giant hoop earrings bobbed with her grinning nod. “Each is more gorgeous than the next.”

“Aren’t they?” Cheyenne gushed. “Have you talked to anyone in particular? I’m a big fan of networking.

Jess stopped to wave hello to another actor, then skipped to catch up to Cheyenne. “No one except Julian about a modeling contract.”

“Let me know if anyone mentions any opportunities,” Cheyenne waved her hand in feigned nonchalance. “I’m always on the lookout for exciting roles.”

“Sure thing.” They greeted more cast members as they reached the convention center, a masterpiece of architecture and artistry that soared twenty stories high. With a glass exterior that gleamed in the early morning sunlight, the massive building was a work of art, all sharp angles and lush curves, like a three-dimensional model from high school geometry. Staircases rose this way and that, creating a maze of optical illusions to make M.C. Escher proud.

They walked through the VIP entrance, where actors, authors and others personalities converged on a red-carpeted path. Cheyenne slowly pivoted, tallying the suspects, when a commotion sounded from behind.

“Look who’s there!” a woman squealed.

“Is that Julian Starcroft!?” another asked.

“OH WOW, IT IS!!!”

Even in a crowd of celebrities, Julian stood out. When he emerged from the mass, surrounded by bodyguards, assistants, handlers, executives and endless fans, she froze. He was handsome in everyday clothes, stunning in the rugged outfits he wore on set, but in a skintight black costume he was devastating. The futuristic costume outlined massive muscles, powerful legs and his long, lean torso. It matched his black hair perfectly, and his eyes shone like icy blue topazes. He strode in power-filled movements, the ruler of his domain, dressed like a nightscape hero.

She couldn’t look away, but to be fair, neither could anyone else. The people parted as he walked, surrounded by assistants. Then he stopped...

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Right in front of her.

Oh hell.

“Hello,” he rumbled.

Everyone looked at them. Pointing, Considering. Wondering.

What. Was. He. Doing?

She donned a plastic smile, fought for control. A difficult task when she longed to feel just how smooth that costume was. She knew exactly where she’d start. “Jul... Mr. Starcroft. So good to see you.”

“You too,” he purred. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Destiny Dane, my new personal assistant.

Appropriate responses to the sudden assertion she was his personal assistant:

Yell, “hell no” (and kiss him)

Display an inappropriate gesture (and kiss him)

Arrest him (and kiss him)

Inappropriate responses to the sudden assertion she was his personal assistant:

Gawk, break character and exclaim, “Say what?”

Yeah, she did the last one.

It was an ambush, plain and simple. Just like when she’d walked into that weapon smuggler’s house two years ago, only slightly more volatile and far more dangerous.

“That’s right.” His drawl was as satisfied as a lion in a steakhouse. “While we were practicing our scene, I saw her potential. I don’t usually employ a personal assistant, but I just had to make an exception when she begged for the job.”

That little—

“It took a while for her to convince me, of course. She just made her devotion so clear, her willingness to do whatever it took to fulfill the role.” He winked. “Anything to add, Destiny?”

Cheyenne opened her mouth.

“No? Good. We’d better get going. Destiny has to get properly attired and all.”

Armed robbery. Double parking. Littering. There had to be something she could arrest him for. Wait. Had he said properly attired?

He waved to the crowd, and even though time was tight, spent a few minutes signing autographs and taking pictures. She stood to the side and mentally listed the prisons she could send him to. She was debating between Alcatraz and Devil’s Island (ignoring that both had been closed for over fifty years), when he waved goodbye to the fans. “We should go, or we’ll miss our panel. Bye, everyone.” A strong hand gripped hers, firm and possessive. It took all her professionally trained strength to stop from pulling away and creating a scene as he led her away.

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This was a disaster. The more she stood out, the less likely the criminal would approach her and risk getting in Starcroft's sights. Yet Julian didn't let go as they traveled down a long hallway and stopped in front of a row of dressing rooms. As he released her, one of his bodyguards handed her a large white box. She clutched it tightly, but didn't open it. She needed to get Julian in private and convince him to find her another job. "We need to talk."

"Sorry, Destiny, there's no time. You have to get into costume and then we have a panel to attend. I'll need lots of assistance, of course."

"Assistance with what?" she snapped. She exhaled, smoothed taut features. She couldn't demand answers when they had an attentive audience.

"Most of the cast and crew will be dressed for the occasion." He pointed to the aides carrying bags and boxes into the dressing rooms. "Since you didn't know, I picked up something for you. Don't worry, I got your measurements from your file. It'll fit."

Of course, he knew her measurements – he'd seen her nearly naked.

"Anything else?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

There was so much else, and absolutely nothing she could say right now. "Not a thing," she bit out. Did that sound believable? She still needed to play the part of obsessed fan. "Although I must say, I'm going to miss playing body double." She attempted a giggle.

He gave a wicked smile. "If you feel that way—"

“I’m good.”

“But you said—”

“No, I didn’t.”

“What’s going on here?” a loud voice bellowed. The director strode in, glaring at his stalled cast and crew. “This isn’t a vacation day. Get into your costumes. We have a panel in thirty minutes, and it’s a full house. Standing room only.” He nodded toward Julian, the only person he showed any semblance of respect to. “At least Starcroft is dressed.”

People burst into action. With no choice, Cheyenne strode toward the dressing room, but stopped at a voice from behind, “Hey, are you okay? You seemed a little upset there.”

Cheyenne gave Jess a weak smile. “I’m the luckiest girl around. Better get dressed now.” She quickly escaped into one of the unoccupied rooms. What a disaster. The ruse was failing if even Jess could see she was upset. Time to get back into character.

But first she had to adopt a different character altogether. She dropped the box on the stool like a suspicious package destined for the bomb squad. Who knew how explosive it would be? Without hesitation, she grabbed the lid and pulled it open so quickly it ripped. The sound of crinkling tissue paper crackled as she dug in, and the garment finally came into view. “Holy sh—”

“Whoa. Look at Jess in that outfit. I think the temperature just rose a hundred degrees.”

Julian barely heard Zachary. “Jess?”

“Ms. Cole. Your new body double.”

“Oh yeah.” Since the new body double had been chosen by the director, he’d hardly thought about her. In fact, really only once when convincing the director she didn’t need to be fully undressed for the scene. There was no reason to go that far when you could use easily concealed undergarments, which he preferred. Zachary sure as hell cared and had asked it as a rare favor. They’d gone together to talk to the director.

Zachary whistled low, still caught on the object of his desire. “She’s going as the Invisible Woman. That’s the superhero who can’t wear any clothing or someone will see her.”

“But she’s not really invisible.”

Zachary grinned.

Julian followed Zachary’s gaze. How does one pull off an Invisible Woman costume while perfectly visible? Craftily, it seemed. Made almost entirely of sheer nude mesh with strategically located lining, the suit performed its function well. The outfit and the lovely woman wearing it should’ve piqued his interest, but instead he idly wondered if it might be useful during body shots. It almost worried him, his complete lack of interest in a beautiful, nearly naked woman, until...

Destiny walked out.

And he stared.

And stared some more.

And kept staring and staring, longer and longer, for at least a century and a half.

He then reminded himself to breathe.

But he didn't stop staring.

Her outfit was a juxtaposition of pure midnight and scorching sun, fiery heat and white ice. It was the feminine version of his own costume, a warrior princess from a futuristic space opera. Pitch black, the jumpsuit fit like a second skin, molding to every curve, outlining every single detail. It showed off sleek legs, generous hips and a slender waist. Cut low on top, it hugged generous curves and luscious dips.

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“Um, buddy, you okay?”

“Uh-huh”

“You’re staring.”

“Uh-huh.”

“People are starting to notice.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Aliens invaded. They asked if you wanted to do lunch.”

“Uh-huh.”

A pause. Then... a punch on the arm.

“Hey!” Julian stared at Zachary. “What did you do that for? And why are you smiling?”

His friend shrugged. “No reason. I was just thinking we could triple date.”

“Triple date?”

“Us, the ladies and the aliens.”

Julian growled. Then he caught sight of Destiny again, and his lips quirked up.

“And Big Foot is coming along, too.”

“Uh-huh.”

Zachary may have mentioned something about a lost cause at that point, but he was too preoccupied to notice. Destiny epitomized the warrior she portrayed, a temptress in the black costume and matching knee-high boots. A fierce expression proved her power, as she undoubtedly formulated clever ways to exact revenge. Clearly, she didn't appreciate the creation he had selected for her.

Just as every man in the place clearly appreciated it.

Julian fought down uncharacteristic agitation. So what if the men admired the gorgeous woman? It didn't bother him when they looked at Jess. He hadn't planned on getting Destiny the costume, but as soon as he saw the matching garment next to his own, he couldn't stop himself. He'd ordered it on the spot and paid a small fortune to have them alter it that afternoon.

Nothing could explain his behavior when it came to Ms. Destiny Dane. He teased her like a fourth-grader pulling the hair of his playground crush, then gawked like a teen with his high school sweetheart. He didn't mean to unsettle her – well, maybe he did a little – but he just couldn't help it. More than anything, he wanted to know her better.

Zachary gave another low whistle as the women approached. “You ladies are gorgeous.”

Ms. Cole giggled. Destiny produced something that sounded like a choke, but by the upward tilt of her lips, it seemed like it was supposed to pass as a giggle. The others

accepted it. Julian winked, and her eyes turned thunderous.

“I agree,” he murmured. “You are extraordinary.”

Her skin pinkened, but she didn’t respond, at least not verbally. She lifted her chin with that stubborn tilt, brewing challenge in blazing eyes. She was glorious.

“Look what I’ve found.” a new voice sounded, chipper and smooth and professional. A tall, red-headed woman in a sparkling white suit spoke into a microphone, and the chatter in the hallway immediately ceased. The director, who had been snapping like a drill sergeant on the first day of bootcamp, made a jerky motion for everyone to quiet.

“I’m backstage at Fantasy-Con, and I’ve just run into A-list actors Julian Starcroft and Zachary Thompson. On behalf of millions of women on this planet and billions on neighboring ones, you guys are looking good.”

Julian grinned smoothly at the reporter, a well-respected newswoman from a high-rated entertainment channel. “Thank you, Stacy. You look wonderful, as always.”

“Thank you.” She flashed snow-white teeth. “I know you have a panel soon, but how about a quick plug for your movie?”

Julian complied, giving his standard thirty second speech about the upcoming blockbuster. When he was done, he answered a few questions about the plot and his role.

“That sounds great,” Stacy held the microphone towards Jess and Destiny. “Are these two lovely ladies also from *Spy Heat*?”

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“That’s right.” This time, Zachary answered. “This is Jessica Cole and Destiny Dane, two up-and-coming stars.”

“How exciting.” Stacy’s gaze sharpened as she parried between the men and women. “I sensed something between you guys. Anything we should know?”

Zachary’s grin widened. “Well Stacy, you – and your billions of viewers on neighboring planets – would be the first to know, of course.” He winked to laughter. “But in this case, even I’m not sure where I stand. Ms. Cole, have you agreed to go out with me?”

Jess blushed deeply. A second later, she regained her composure and beamed. “I believe I just have, Mr. Thompson.”

Stacy laughed as the crowd roared in approval, yet surprise stole Julian’s mask, for just a moment. Zachary rarely revealed his personal life to reporters, yet he’d just spilled all on national television. What had Jess done to elicit such a response?

Perhaps the same thing Destiny was doing to him.

“And what about you, Julian? Is there anything special between you and Ms. Dane? Don’t think we haven’t noticed the matching outfits. Are you guys an item?”

Total silence ruled.

He opened his mouth and paused...

How should he answer?

CHAPTER 7

Damn.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

This was bad. Not merely “I’m having a bad hair day” bad, but “There’s been an alien invasion and they think humans taste like chicken” bad. It would only take one word, three little letters – Y-E-S – to blow months of intel. If he said yes, she could forget about ever being targeted by the criminals. Hell, it could destroy her entire undercover career. And there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Why wasn’t he saying anything? Didn’t he know not saying anything was as good as climbing to the top of the Eiffel tower and screaming yes?

“Actually, now that you mention it...”

She held her breath.

“We have a wonderful professional relationship.”

Cheyenne barely stopped herself from pumping her fist into the air and yelling “Bring on the human-loving aliens because I can conquer anything today!”

“I just met Ms. Dane a few days ago. You might see us working closely, but that’s because she’s my new personal assistant. It’s her job to attend to my needs.”

Cheyenne ignored the words.

“Ensure my every desire is satisfied,” he continued.

Okay, a little harder to ignore.

“Answer to my every whim.”

Was it breaking character to kick the hottest movie star on Earth?

“Put toothpaste on my toothbrush.”

That was it. Just as Cheyenne crafted the perfect retort, the reporter, along with everyone else, broke into laughter. She relaxed. Of course, he was joking.

“What do you think, Destiny?” Stacy thrust the microphone in her face. “Is Julian an easy boss?”

Do not panic. Do not betray your cover. You are Destiny Dane.

But it was hard to keep cool under the camera’s unrelenting glare. When the captain saw this, and no doubt he would, he’d kick her to traffic duty so quickly she’d get road burn. Still she had to say something. “Sure.”

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Tick tock, tick tock, the seconds trudged as the reporter's eyebrows curved higher and higher. She wagged a finger. "You can't get away with a one-word answer. Tell us the truth. Is Julian a demanding tyrant?"

If the crown fits... "Sure." Then, although it was a really, really bad idea, she continued, "Although diva would be a better term. He's lucky he has me."

"Really?" The reporter's nostrils flared, caught on a whiff of something delicious. "Would he be lost without you?"

Cheyenne seemed to have lost control of her mouth. "I just started, but I can already say he definitely needs help." She lowered her voice to a loud whisper, as if sharing a deep, dark secret. "You don't know the extent of it. He wasn't joking about needing help with his toothbrush."

Now everyone laughed, and even Julian cracked a smile. More people watched them, drawing attention she couldn't afford. She formed an excuse to leave, but the reporter had already turned back to the star. "Julian, those are challenging words. Are you sure there isn't anything going on between you two?"

Cheyenne's breath hitched.

"Nope," he said. "Definitely not."

She relaxed.

"Absolutely, one hundred percent not."

They probably got the idea, but it was okay to make it clear.

“For sure no.”

Why was he continuing?

“Not a chance.”

People were starting to smile.

“The answer is negative.”

“They get it,” Cheyenne broke in. He was joking, but a strong enough negative could convey a positive. Curious expressions had already turned to outright suspicion. She swept forward. “If we don’t leave now, you’ll have a lot of disappointed fans.”

“What would I do without her?” Julian nodded at the reporter. “It was great to see you, Stacy. I’ll see you soon?”

“Count on it.” Stacy gestured for the cameraman to cut, then exchanged handshakes with the men and hugs with the ladies. “And you too, Destiny. I’d love to talk more about what it’s like to work with Julian.”

Cheyenne stiffened. She – and the mission – could ill withstand another interview. Yet before she could decline, Julian stepped forward. “I’m afraid Destiny won’t be available. She has too much to do with a tyrant as a boss.” He tempered the words with a wink, and the crowd laughed.

It was a welcome and unexpected save. Taut muscles relaxed, and oxygen came easier. Despite his earlier actions, Julian had just saved her, more than he could possibly know.

“Of course,” the newswoman replied smoothly, with a speculative glance that snipped Cheyenne’s relief. The reporter may be one of the tamer ones, but she was still a professional. If she caught a whiff of a story, she’d come looking for a taste, and then she might discover an entire feast.

She couldn’t worry about that now, however, not with a full day of undercover work. The actors bid goodbye and resumed their journey, hustling down a long corridor flanked by posters of movie stars from the past and present. An entire battalion of uniformed police officers accompanied them, well-built and heavily armed. When they passed through two heavy metal doors, the reason for the security became clear.

Cheyenne had seen Julian’s fame in and outside the studio, but nothing could prepare her for a journey through the mania. The cavernous room held thousands of people, swarming around a huge stage, rows and rows of chairs and booths running up and down the perimeter. Even before the crowd caught sight of their beloved star, they called his name, chanted it, screamed it while fanning themselves. They gasped and squealed, pointed and clapped, jumped up and down. A few looked ready to faint. Though there were other stars, there was one unequivocal king: Julian Starcroft.

“Julian, I love you!”

“Marry me, please!”

“Can I have your baby?”

The scrutiny was unbelievable. Flashing cameras blinded her, set to deafening screams that made her eardrums quiver. Huge screens flashed on the walls, playing action scenes set to lively music. A thousand scents tangled, perfumes, incense and the mash of hundreds of bodies. Excited fans pressed closer, held back solely by the flexible fence of police officers. Only years of crisis and crowd training kept her poised, as she stopped to observe.

Julian leaned down and whispered. “It can be overwhelming, so let me know if you need a breather. I’ve got you.”

He meant it, and not as a jest. Her neutral mask faded, just a little, as they locked eyes, carving a private world in a realm of thousands. In all this commotion, he’d stopped to make sure a single person was okay. That was not how actors were supposed to be. Actors were supposed to be arrogant and cold and care only for themselves. They were supposed to use women for what they wanted and then...

Then they were supposed to leave.

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The whispered words came on their own, “You really are a good guy.”

He smiled. “Nah, I just play one on TV.”

She returned the grin, and although realization of the crowd returned, it didn’t seem quite as overpowering. Then there was no more time for reflection as handlers hustled them along. She rubbed her hands, refocusing her energy. Time to pursue her mission.

They split into two groups, the major players like Julian, Zachary and the directors ascending the stage and the rest of the cast and crew moving to a group of chairs set to the side. Cheyenne picked a prime spot in the middle of several top suspects. It would take a few minutes for everyone to get settled, so she immediately set to work. “This is so exciting. Oh, hey Kevin and John.” She smiled widely, as if just noticing them. “Great to see you.”

“Hi Destiny,” they replied with matching cocky grins.

Out of the corner of her eye, Julian pivoted her way. Surrounded by celebrities, cops, officials and fans, he had thousands of people to occupy him – literally – but he focused directly on her. His annoyance beamed like the laser swords the cosplayers wielded.

She ignored him. “Others may prefer front row seats, but I scored the best spot in the house.” She touched both their arms and winked. “The very best.”

They laughed. One placed his hand over hers, while the other puckered an air kiss.

Julian's scowl turned thunderous.

"And how are you all doing?" She twisted, including the men in the row behind her. They rewarded her with a number of "Fines" and "Great, now that you're here."

"Do you know how attractive you are?" Peter, one of the men on her short list, grasped a lock of her hair and twirled it between his fingers. "I was disappointed when you left the body double role."

Julian turned red.

"Why thank you." Cheyenne giggled loudly. "I swear, this is the friendliest bunch I've ever met." She shifted her body to include more targets. When she reached out to touch another man's biceps, a commotion sounded by the stage.

"Excuse me," a strong voice intoned. Cheyenne froze, as did a thousand or so others, as Julian jumped off the stage and stomped to them. He stopped before her, looming like an avenging warrior from a bestselling thriller. "Destiny, I need you. Now."

Well, crap.

"Twelve shirts, seven pairs of pants and eight jackets," Cheyenne hissed to the hapless clerk at the laundromat, playing every bit the part of disgruntled police detective and none at all of helpful personal assistant.

The freckled teenager gingerly reached for the receipt. "Was the service okay?"

Cheyenne sighed. Perfect. Now she was lashing out at innocent kids. "Everything is fine. I just got into an argument with an avenging warrior and lost. Temporarily." She put a twenty-dollar bill in the tip jar.

The boy smiled gratefully and ran off to retrieve the clothing. He carried them in three trips before helping her out to the limo. Cheyenne would've much preferred to take her own car, but Julian had insisted she take his. No doubt so he could keep tabs on her.

The kid hefted the last load into her trunk and closed it. "I just wanted to make sure nothing was wrong, especially since Mr. Starcroft cancelled his normal delivery today."

Normal delivery? Cancelled?"I'm sorry?"

"We usually deliver Mr. Starcroft's clothing directly to his home, but we received a message that you were picking them up instead. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't a reason."

Oh, there was a reason all right, but it had nothing to do with the dry cleaning and everything to do with one very infuriating movie star."No reason," she gritted out.

"Great! Well, have a nice day then."

Nice day? Not even close. After the dry cleaning, she stopped by his accountant, his lawyer, his pool cleaning service and then half a dozen additional locations for random errands. And at each one, the story was the same: the regularly scheduled service had been canceled. To top it off, she ran each errand in the ridiculous costume, which garnered more than a few stares. She donned a jacket, which didn't do much, and by the time afternoon came she was deciding how many crimes she could charge him with. A lot.

She was about to embark on yet another dry-cleaning run (seriously, who had three dry cleaners?) when her phone buzzed with a text message. Return to the convention center.—J

Cheyenne gritted her teeth. No explanation or even a please – he simply gave a command and assumed it would be followed. He was used to people obeying his every whim. It would serve him right if she ignored him.

But... she would sabotage her mission if she did. She needed to get back as soon as possible to where a criminal was recruiting naïve women to join his little business. She texted back, On my way.

When she told the limo driver about the change in plans, he just smiled and said he'd already been informed. Of course. She should probably consider it a courtesy Julian told her instead of just spiriting her wherever his heart desired.

That was going to end. He was not in control of her. As soon as she got back to the center, she would resume her quest to entice every guy there. Every guy, that was, except Julian Starcroft.

CHAPTER 8

Was he allowed to banish all men from the convention?

It seemed a lofty goal, even for someone with his star power, but it may be worth a go. Or he could employ his prior strategy and carry Cheyenne out, caveman style. He could do both.

As soon as she returned, Cheyenne followed her usual routine, as if acting the same script in an endless loop. Wearing a jacket that did little to hide the skintight costume, she infiltrated a group of actors. She acted the kid in a candyland, delving closer and closer to men who were more than willing to reciprocate.

That man needed to stop twirling her hair. Julian stepped forward to demand it, but an excited fan asked for an autograph, then another and another and suddenly, half an hour had passed. He caught up to Destiny just in time to hear her address an entire gaggle of men, “This is the hardest decision I’ve had to make since choosing my mascara color this morning. Can’t I just buy all of you?” She batted her eyelashes.

She had to be kidding. “So now you’re buying men? Isn’t that a little illegal?”

“Not tonight,” she simpered. “The charity bachelor auction is going to feature all these handsome guys, and I broke into my piggy bank just for the occasion.” She giggled. “It’s like choosing from an entire box of chocolate. I can’t pick just one.”

Can’t pick just one? How could this be his smart, sassy and independent woman? And when had he started thinking of her as his woman? Was she on some sort of mood-

altering drug? Did she possess multiple personalities? No, by her shrewd gaze, she knew exactly what she was doing. Something was driving this strange behavior, and he would uncover every last detail.

“Too bad you have another engagement during the bachelor auction, Julian.” She fluttered charcoal lashes, curved a smile that belied the sweet words. “I’m sure you’re disappointed you can’t attend.”

Actually, that was just an excuse. Last year, the woman who won delved dangerously close to stalker territory. When she called his mother, he pledged to never repeat the experience. He’d donated an entire wing to the children’s hospital to make up for it, far more money than they would have gotten at the auction, even for him. He planned to do the same every year he missed it.

“I’ll be there,” one of the men broke in.

“So will I.”

“And I,” chimed the others.

They may be there, but they would not take advantage of Destiny. He would ensure it.

“Well, I will definitely get one—” She winked. “Or all of you. I can’t wait. I’d better get ready or I won’t look presentable.” And with that, she gave a cute little wave and bounced down the hall.

“That is one fine woman.” One of the extras whistled low. “I can’t wait for tonight.”

Neither could he. “Gentlemen, how would you like the opportunity of a lifetime?”

Tonight, Destiny was going to win more than she bargained for.

“This is so exciting!” Cheyenne squealed, waving to the men prowling the stage like a group of caged lions. Dozens of thin bracelets clunked together, matched by clicking stilettos and a slinky dress that attracted endless attention. Yet she was not the only standout in the exclusive crowd. Beautiful women and dapper men roamed the spacious ballroom, which was scented by flowery perfume and spicy cologne. In the corner, a crisp orchestra played a lilting tune.

The event was a far cry from the earlier fare, where raucous panels, fan meetups and cosplay singalongs invited spirited excess. Revelers discarded funky costumes for fancy tuxedos and glittering dresses, and Cheyenne had donned a long sequined sky-blue gown brought as a backup dress by Jess. Slinky and fitted, with a sweetheart neckline, spaghetti straps and a long slit up one leg, it sparkled under the lights like diamond dust.

“I don’t know which man to choose.” Jess rubbed her hands together. “It’s like an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“Except there are no calories here, ladies.” Cheyenne giggled, playing her part. Yet even she had to admit the so-called buffet was pretty scrumptious. Its offerings: Men, men and more men.

And not just any men. No, they were the most handsome, muscular and striking stars from the television and screen. From A-list actors to extras, they offered themselves to the highest bidder for the benefit of the children’s hospital. Winners scored the star’s company for the duration of the dinner/dance, including four plus hours of personalized attention and fun. The yearly event drew a hefty amount of media coverage, oodles of money for a worthy charity and some very delighted women.

Cheyenne intended to be one of those women.

Bidding on one (or more) of the men on her short list would give her some insight into possible culprits, and hopefully allow her to cross several suspects off her list. She had a limited budget from the police department, but hopefully it would be enough to buy someone, especially since the extras would go for far less than the actual stars. Last year, Julian Starcroft had elicited a winning bid of over \$50,000. Not that she would ever bid on the impossible man, even if he were in the auction and she was a millionaire.

“Who are you bidding on?” Jess clasped her hands. “I bet you wish Julian was for sale.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Cheyenne gushed the expected response. “That would be a dream come true. There’s nothing in the entire world I want more.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

Not again...

“Are you happy to see me?”

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About as happy to see the dentist. For a root canal. After they'd run out of anesthesia.

Apparently, there was no avoiding the man, or his effect on her. Cheyenne turned, preparing to jump into the role of adoring fan, yet instead she stopped.

Whoa.

It was bad enough to compromise her investigation, but to look so attractive while doing so? Now that was just impolite. Julian had ditched the super-tight costume, yet the Armani tuxedo showed off his physique to an art. Midnight black, fit to perfection, it outlined every single muscle in the tall man. Celyon sapphire eyes sparkled above a chiseled jaw, defining gorgeous features and captivating allure. He was the richest, creamiest treat in the candy store, but that didn't matter. He threatened everything. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Woops.

He laughed. "That's an interesting question from someone who just called me her dream come true."

"Of course, you are. I meant... I..." Cheyenne dug her fingernails into her palms as their audience watched with keen interest. "I thought you had an engagement tonight."

"It got cancelled."

"Oh, hell... I mean, hello, my dream man." She cringed. Relax. So he sent you on a

dozen ridiculous errands. You can arrest him later.

The thought made her feel better, until Julian smiled widely. “I’m glad I inspire such joy.”

The crowd tittered. “Does that mean you’ll be in the bachelor auction?” a woman in the back cried. A moment later, dozens of women asked the same.

He shook his head, eliciting sighs, moans and other assorted sounds of disappointment. “Sorry, ladies, not this year. But don’t worry.” He looked straight at her. “I’ll be here.”

She swallowed. Had he come for her? It seemed ridiculous. Perhaps he was just unaccustomed to women not falling over themselves for him. Her strange feelings for him? Obviously stress-induced.

A symphony of inhales came from the crowd, as a group of people walked toward them. Even for someone not prone to be starstruck, Cheyenne blinked at the approaching star power. The Billionaires of Miami, as the press famously dubbed them, sucked all the oxygen out of the room, leaving the others gasping. Of course, Julian Starcroft was a premier member. They were a mighty group, famous, talented and wealthy men with their equally famous, talented and wealthy women. She had met them once at a charity event the cast had attended.

Julian grinned as his friends approached. “Thank you for coming to support this charity. It means a lot.”

“Happy to do it.” A tall, striking man nearly as big as Julian slapped his back.

Another towering man, famous major league baseball player Jason Sterling, patted his arm. “I appreciate when you showed up at mine.”

They all supported each other – and numerous charities – at philanthropy events. They were kind, giving and fiercely intelligent. The last meant she would have to be very careful, lest they discover her true identity.

“Destiny, it’s good to see you again.” A lovely woman with a heart-shaped face and flowing locks stepped forward. “I’m not sure if you remember me. I’m Laura Bancroft, and this is my husband Aidan. These are our friends, Kaitlyn and Cameron Drake, Destiny and Jason Sterling and Adrianna and Dominick Knight.”

“It’s great to see you,” Cheyenne gave the half-truth, half-lie. They were an extraordinary group of people, and in another lifetime, she would have loved to be friends. Now, however, they only posed a risk.

“It’s the Billionaires of Miami!” A screech called from the end of the hall. The group frowned, cringed and grimaced as Stacy came racing down, heels clicking and cameraman in tow. “How lucky are we?”

A symphony of sighs sounded, but short of replicating the Olympic fifty yard dash, they couldn’t get away before the wily entertainment reporter was upon them. “I have so many questions. Who wants to go first? How about you?” She thrust the microphone between Adrianna and Dominick. “Adrianna, how did you feel when you learned the new office intern was actually the billionaire CEO in disguise? And did you actually invite him to come home as your fake boyfriend without knowing it?”

Before Adrianna could answer, Dominick placed a hand over the microphone. “No comment.”

The reporter gave a carefree grin and turned to the next couple. “What about you, Kaitlyn and Drake? There were rumors that you also were also an undercover billionaire. My sources said Kaitlyn believed you were an actor when she hired you to be her fake date. She had no idea you were a billionaire who ran one of the biggest

law firms in the country. What did she say when she discovered the truth?"

The couple blinked surprised glances, then gave a shared, "No comment."

"Oooh, we know what that means." Stacy laughed into the camera. "Let's hear from Jason Sterling, one of the biggest baseball stars in the country. We were all rocked by the recent revelations about your past. Did Destiny know the truth?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to funnel questions through the Florida Dragons publicity department," Jason rumbled. "Other than that, no comment."

Even though Stacy was hitting 0-3, she seemed even more gleeful. "There's definitely a story there. Well, what about you two, Laura and Aidan? Congratulations on the family, by the way. Tell me, why did we only recently learn about your beautiful daughter? There were rumors about some sort of mix-up at a fertility clinic."

"Don't tell me you believe rumors," Aidan replied smoothly. "I'm afraid you won't find my story, at least not here." He gestured to the actors, then at the poster for Spy Heat. "After all, this story is about movie stars and spies. You'll have to look elsewhere for other adventures."

Before the wily reporter could respond, a loud voice boomed from the stage, "Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready for the most exciting night of your lives?" The announcer paused for hoots, hollers and catcalls. "I have a big speech planned, but you look ready to rush the stage, so let's get started. Remember every single dime goes to the children's hospital, so dig deep into your wallets. We'll start with our stunning soap opera stars."

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With a saucy wink and promise to find each and every one of them later, Stacy left to cover the auction. Thunderous applause sounded, and Julian also turned to leave. “I’d better go. See you ladies later.” He said ladies, but by the way he looked at her, he meant one. In a world of deception, such focus was dangerous.

The auction was open to both entertainers and members of the public who had obtained pricey tickets to the event. It started with a well-known show, and from there the pace was fast and hectic, with bids coming from all directions. They ventured into the hundreds, thousands and beyond, especially when it came to the stars. They travelled through numerous television shows, movies and more, with actors hamming it up to raise the most money. The women whistled, jumped and cheered with every offering.

Finally, it was time for theSpy Heatcast, and Cheyenne stood taller as she scanned potential targets. The first extra went for over a thousand dollars, far higher than her budget. She bid on the next few, but they went a little too high. Finally, only one remained. She bid when a lull came at \$300.

That’s when she saw Julian. He was standing near the stage, poised and strong, with an incomprehensible expression. As if he had something planned...

“That’s \$350. Do I hear \$400?”

Cheyenne snapped back to attention. She’d been so distracted, she almost lost the auction. She quickly raised her hand. “\$400!”

“Excellent. \$400. Do I hear more?”

The ladies, saving their pennies for the more famous actors, kept silent. Cheyenne breathed in relief when the announcer said “Sold!” and pointed in her direction. Her co-stars hugged their congratulations, and she turned to the payment table. Her steps faltered when the announcer came back on. “Before we move to the next auction, there’s been a change in the last sale.”

Uh-oh.

John, her newly acquired prize, was huddled in deep discussion with the director of the auction and Julian. “We have bad news and good news,” the director said when Cheyenne reached them. “Which do you want first?”

Why did it seem like bad news and truly awful news? “The bad news.”

“The bad news is John is no longer available. Apparently, he received an offer to audition for a director tonight, and we simply can’t deny him this chance. However, we feel terrible leaving you with no one. Someone came up with the perfect solution, one that will make you very, very happy.” The director turned to Julian.

This was not happening.

“Do you want to tell her or should I?”

Definitely not happening.

“You’re in for the surprise of your life.” He paused for dramatic effect. “For the exact same bid, Julian Starcroft has offered to be your date. Congratulations – you’re going to spend the night with the man of every woman’s dreams. What do you have to say to that?”

“Oh yuck!”

Only she didn't say yuck.

It rhymed with it, though.

It was like a freeze ray stopped the world. Every. Single. Person. Halted. Every single person looked at her. Only one smiled...

Julian.

He winked. "You meant that in a happy way, right?" She just stood there, staring at him as they all stared at her. "Right?" he prompted.

Then she shouted "Yes!" and the world started spinning again. "Yes, yes, yes! I meant, oh fuc... um, how wonderful is this, right? Just so, so, soooo wonderful. And amazing and, you know and..." She exhaled deeply. "Wonderful."

"She's so flustered, she called you wonderful three times." The announcer, looking only partially recovered, gave Julian a thumbs up. He turned back to Cheyenne. "Bet you never thought you'd buy Julian Starcroft for \$400."

"No. Nope. Not even a little."

"And you want the deal, right?"

No. Nope. Not even a little. Well...What she wanted didn't matter. She had no choice, not with so many people watching. "Of course," she forced out, like she was agreeing to that anesthesia-free root canal.

"So what are you going to do with Julian all night?"

Throw him in a jail cell with a hungry lion and watch while enjoying a bottle of fine

wine.

“I’m sure we’ll think of something.” Julian took her arm.

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“You might just be the luckiest woman alive.” The announcer winked.

Luck had nothing to do with it. Julian had orchestrated this, and, judging by his smile as nearby women offered obscene money to buy him from her, he wasn't the least bit repentant. “My lady.” Like an old-fashioned hero, he captured her hand and brought it up for a kiss. Good-natured comments came from all around, but she barely heard them at the tingle that raced through her sensitized body. She snatched her hand back, a little too quickly perhaps, but his touch was doing things it shouldn't be. Hewas doing things he shouldn't be.

He towered over her as she settled the bill, paying with a stack of twenties. Then she turned... right into him. Fiery heat streaked in every limb, from her neck, down her body andeverywhere. “Steady,” he rumbled, reaching out, grasping her shoulders. “I've got you.”

Yes, he did, in more ways than one. Unacceptable. “You may want to stay back,” she whispered. “I just had a fantasy about you.”

“Did you?” He didn't appear the least bit concerned. “Did it involve a shark?”

“Actually, a lion, a hungry one.”

“And am I the lion?”

Oh yes. “You planned to be my date all along. Don't deny it.”

“I wouldn't do you the injustice. Do you know why?” He leaned closer. “I didn't

want you with those other men.”

Her heart acted its own action scene, skipping and then jumping and then pounding far and away. She hadn’t expected him to admit it.

“You suggested we date,” he drawled, “but if you’ve changed your mind, you are under no obligation. Of course, it wouldn’t affect your job.”

Yes, it would – her real job, that was. The more she stood out, the more the criminal would stay away. Turning down Julian Starcroft would invite a month’s worth of gossip. She smiled and waved at a passing actress. “It was supposed to be private,” she hissed.

“That’s the beauty of it.” He gestured to the avidly watching crowd. “No one knows we’re actually dating. Now how about a dance?”

“I can’t dance. I said we would go out, not that we were dati– hey!” She gasped as he seized her hand and led her to the dance floor. And because she couldn’t make a scene, she had to smile and follow. “Don’t you ever listen?”

“Not really.” He put his arms around her, bringing her closer to muscles she couldn’t ignore. “Besides, it’s tradition. Didn’t you specifically list dancing as one of the skills on your resume?”

When she found the person who wrote that resume... “Well, yeah, but not this type of dancing.”

He tilted his head, and for once she didn’t blame him. They were doing a simple slow dance. “What kind of dancing are you skilled at? Square dancing?”

Well, why not? “Hey, don’t knock it. It’s great fun and a fantastic skill. It can add

something to any movie.”

“Should we ask the director to add square dancing to *Spy Heat*?”

“It would be irresponsible not to.” Then she couldn’t help it – she smiled.

He turned the topic to the film, lightening the conversation. She tried to stay detached, but he captured her interest, and she laughed as he shared funny stories about his current and past roles. Only the laughter brought her into closer contact with his solid chest, and all humor vanished. She should stay aloof and reserved, strong and unaffected. Yet words and the world faded, as he held her with his heated body. She was accustomed to being with strong men in the force, but somehow he was just... more. A soft melody started playing, and they swayed in perfect harmony.

“Destiny?”

“Hmmm.”

“Have you heard a word I said?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then what did I just say?”

She hadn’t the foggiest idea. “That you’re really sorry for sending me to forty-eight dry cleaners?”

His expression was pure mischief. “I didn’t send you to forty-eight dry cleaners.” She lifted an eyebrow, and he dipped his head. “Fine. I may have sent you on a few unnecessary errands. I didn’t like you flirting with five hundred and seventy-two guys.”

The admission was blatant, surprising and far too pleasing. Something dangerously close to satisfaction stilted her next steps. It was ridiculous. Whether he noticed, cared or watched couldn't matter. "Now why is it a man like you makes millions at the box office, but can't count?"

"You're right. When you add up all the guys you flirt with on a daily basis, it's probably far more." He tightened his arms. "I don't like seeing you hitting on other guys, especially when you're on a date with me."

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Cheyenne meant to scoot back, instead she edged closer. “This date wasn’t supposed to look like a date. You’re not holding up your end of the bargain.”

Instead of responding, he simply held her tighter. And if she pushed into him ever so slightly, he didn’t mention it.

They danced the night away, as the saying went, and in truth Cheyenne couldn’t remember having a more fantastic time. Oh she tried not to, but clearly, it was a futile attempt. At the beginning she tried to flirt with other men, but every time she attempted an escape, Julian refused to let her go. Sometimes he grasped her hand, other times he led her with a touch on her back and once he gave the look – the one that said he was seriously thinking about throwing her over his shoulder again. The only other people she noticed were Jess and Zachary, and she smiled when she saw them deep in conversation at a table for two.

Somewhere between the second and third hour she forgot to be Destiny Dane and not Cheyenne Kirk. Oh, she didn’t completely blow her cover – she managed not to tell him her shooting average at the gun range – but she definitely didn’t behave like the naïve starlet she was supposed to be. When her stomach growled in hunger, he took her to the buffet and filled two plates full of steaming vegetable lasagna, crisp garlic bread and fresh salad. They ate heartily, replacing the calories burned during dancing, and then burned some more. Finally, near the end, Julian plundered the dessert bar, bringing back a thick slice of chocolate fudge cake next to an even thicker piece of caramel cheesecake.

“I didn’t know which you’d prefer, so I thought we’d share them.”

Share? It sounded harmless enough, but something about it seemed... intimate. Yet how could she resist? "All right."

He took a fork and dipped it into both the chocolate cake and the cheesecake to create the perfect bite. Her mouth watered at the scent of creamy chocolate ganache. She reached for the utensil, but he stopped her.

He brought the fork to her lips.

Now this was definitely too intimate. Certainly, people would notice. She had to stop it, only she didn't have time when he brought the fork closer and the cake grazed her lips. The rich flavor of chocolate burst into her mouth.

"Good?"

Cheyenne nodded, and before she could stop him, he brought another bite to her lips. When he went for a third, she stopped him. "That's enough," she said quietly.

"Are you sure?" he murmured. "Because it doesn't seem like nearly enough."

It wasn't. They were no longer talking about the cake, but something far more dangerous. She needed to escape, before she ruined her mission with the whole world watching. "I have to—"

Her cell phone rang.

"Answer the phone." She made no effort to hide her relief. It didn't matter if it was a telemarketer hawking vacuum cleaners, she would take the call. "I'm sorry, this is important. I have to get it." Before he could respond, she raced from the room, the phone buzzing in her hand. She finally looked at the caller ID, ducked into an empty nook and answered it quickly. "Captain?" she whispered. She looked around,

ensuring her privacy. “I’m at the comic convention.”

“I know,” the gravelly voice of Police Captain Stuart Suzman replied. “And so does the entire world. Why the hell are you spending the evening with Julian Starcroft?”

Cheyenne let loose a string of curse words... in her mind. “It’s all part of the act. The entire cast and crew are here. I’ve been talking to the suspects on my short list.”

“You are aware that Julian Starcroft is not on that list,” the captain rumbled. “He’s not a suspect. Do you know how I knew about tonight? I just saw it on YouTube. Do you understand the importance of this mission, detective?”

Cheyenne breathed out. “Of course, I do. I’ve been trying to avoid Julian Starcroft as much as possible. First, they chose me to be his body double and then his personal assistant. I couldn’t get out of it without getting kicked off the set.” She explained the bachelor auction. She didn’t explain how she’d agreed to date him.

His voice was only marginally calmer after her explanation. “Get away from Starcroft and back to your mission. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Thank goodness, he wasn’t taking her off the case altogether. “I’ll stay away from Julian Starcroft. He’s not what I’m after.”

With a terse goodbye, the captain hung up the phone. He was right – she had to focus, and she couldn’t do that with an all-too-clever movie star hovering near. She replaced the device into her clutch, pivoted and... gasped. Because standing right in front of her, with his arms folded, was Julian Starcroft. A thousand questions burned in his gaze, yet only one seized her:

What had he heard?

CHAPTER 9

Julian stared at the self-proclaimed actress. Who was she playing now – the naïve starlet or the smart and sassy woman? The up-and coming actress or the woman who eschewed the world's attention? Which one was the real Destiny Dane?

Most of all, why was he so determined to discover the truth?

If only he'd heard more of the conversation. He'd only caught the last few sentences, but it was enough to prove her subterfuge. Of course, she didn't know exactly how long he'd been there. He planned to use it to his advantage.

"Hey, Julian!" Unlike seconds ago, she now played the part of carefree actress, with a breezy smile and dramatic wave. He might've been fooled save for the tiny twitch at the corner of her eye. "It's great to see you. But it's not nice to listen to other people's conversations." She wagged her finger in mock censure. "You might misinterpret something."

Oh, he hadn't misinterpreted. "I didn't mean to listen," he replied smoothly. "I was just looking for you."

"Right." She bit her bottom lip, yet he remained silent. She flushed. "You were probably hoping to hear something juicy. I'm sorry to disappoint you."

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“On the contrary, what I heard was quite illuminating.”

The grooves in her forehead deepened. The urge to vanquish her worries like a mythical knight pushed him forward. “Is everything all right? Can I help you?”

“No!” The reply was immediate, firm and just on the wrong side of suspicious. Her cringe proved she realized it. “I mean, no thank you. Everything is fine. I’m fine.”

She didn’t sound fine, and his uneasiness deepened. Was she in trouble? “Are you sure?” he pressed quietly, “because you seem upset. Who were you talking to?”

“A friend,” she said quickly. She lifted her chin, no longer pretending. “What did you hear?”

“Enough to know you aren’t what you seem.” He hesitated. Perhaps he could reveal a little to learn a lot. “I heard you promise to stay away from me.”

She paled. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you. I just need to focus on work right now. I can’t be... distracted.”

“Am I a distraction?” He took another step closer.

Her pupils dilated, as she smoothed down her dress. “You know you are. It has to end.”

No. A single word, yet it usurped every part of him. “Is that what you want?”

She parted her lips, yet the silence stretched, as the desire in her eyes betrayed her true feelings. It was that craving that finally put him over the edge, propelled him to do what he'd been wanting to do ever since he saw her in that slinky blue gown. He brushed her lips.

She brought her hands between them, but instead of pushing him away, clutched at him, pulling him closer and deepening the kiss. She tasted like chocolate and mint and smelled like exotic flowers in bloom. He smoothed her arms and then her back, pressing her more firmly into his enveloping hold. Where she belonged.

The din of conversation sounded from the hall, stealing the moment. When she jerked back, he allowed it, despite the desire churning like an approaching storm. For unknown reasons, she was desperate to both keep their attraction hidden and deny it altogether, even to him. He would allow the first, but not the second. He grasped her hand. "Come. I want to show you something."

She looked down at her hand. The conversation grew louder, and a new voice joined the fray. "Julian, are you here? I saw you come this way."

Destiny paled at Stacy's lilting voice. If the clever entertainment reporter saw them, there'd be no way to hide the truth, not with her flushed cheeks, swollen lips and bright eyes. She grasped his arm. "She can't catch us."

He brought her further into the darkened corner. Hopefully, the reporter wouldn't see them as she passed, even if he had the strangest urge to share his romantic interests with the world. It was a rare and heady feeling for a man who valued his ill-afforded privacy, yet, of course, he would never betray Destiny.

When the people passed by without noticing them, they crept out into the corridor. Destiny's expression turned suspicious when he led her to the stairway, but she didn't say anything until they had climbed five flights of stairs. "Where are you taking me?"

“A place where you can see all the stars you want,” he answered vaguely. She didn’t complain as they ascended flight after flight, although she did stop to take off her heels. She was as fit as he was, and he exercised hours a day. She hadn’t been kidding when she said she liked physical activities.

They reached the top of the stairwell. Destiny slowed as he opened the door that read “Roof Access,” but he gently guided her through. As the cool night air engulfed them, she halted... and stared. He wasn’t surprised.

The surroundings were magical, after all.

Most commercial building rooftops were nothing more than boring slabs of gray, broken by the occasional piece of machinery, and from down below that’s all this appeared. Yet here in the middle of the sky, an enchanted garden bloomed, a wonderland of nature in the city jungle. Flowers blossomed all around them, resplendent with Florida’s tropical flair: emerald bushes bursting with ruby red roses, bougainvilleas twined with purple, pink and orange leaves, hibiscus trees blooming in huge clay pots. Tiny waterfalls bubbled over iridescent silver rocks, flowing into miniature rivers that wound through mulched paths, while flowering ivy climbed up filigree trellises, defining paths adorned by tiny twinkling lights. The scent of gardenia drifted on the nighttime breeze, cast from towering bushes with snow white flowers.

For a moment Destiny just stood still, taking it all in with a smile of wonder. Now this was therealDestiny. “It’s stunning,” she finally breathed, blinking up at him. “Who did this?”

Julian hid his satisfaction. “The owner of the building loves nature. He adds rooftop gardens to all his buildings.”

She turned her attention back to the garden, yet he couldn’t look away from her. In

the shimmering dress, she looked like a fairy in a magical garden. Did she realize she was the most breathtaking thing here? “How did you discover this?”

“I’m the owner.”

She chuckled, then her smile froze. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

He shook his head, amidst the slightest discomfort. Most women loved to talk about the perks of his career, but not Destiny. “It’s just a building.” He cleared his throat. “Do you like it?”

She noticeably relaxed, gazing around once more. “It’s fantastic.” Her voice turned teasing. “But I don’t see any stars.”

“Look up.”

As she obliged, he stepped closer to his enchanting beauty. “You’ll get a neck ache like that. Come with me.” He took her hand, pleased when she didn’t pull away. He led her to a small clearing in the garden, to a fully reclined chaise. Then, because he simply didn’t have the strength or desire to stop himself, he reached out and gently caressed her cheek. It was as soft as the roses scenting the air.

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“I have to get back,” she murmured even as she pushed into his touch. “People will talk.”

“I’ll tell them you got tired, and I took you home.”

She closed her eyes for a moment; when she opened them, they were as bright as the stars. She sighed softly.

“Come on, Destiny, relax for a few minutes. The party is almost over. No one will miss us.” He tapped her shoulder. “If you don’t stay, I might need a fourth date to make up for this.”

She looked alarmed, and her gaze darted to the seats. Just when he thought she’d argue further, she sighed and sank down on the chaise. He sat next to her, just close enough to brush her. He was surprised – and satisfied – when she didn’t move away. “It can be difficult to see the stars through the light pollution, but if you look closely, you can find them.”

A small smile came to her lips. “There’s one – Orion, my favorite.”

“What’s this?” he teased. “I thought I was your favorite star.”

“Only in your mind, buddy.” A favorite movie star might be more suited to the starlet she pretended to be, but a favorite celestial star far better matched the real woman.

He brushed a rose petal from her hair. “Do you wish on a star every night?”

A blush confirmed it. “It’s not a big deal. Reality can be harsh. Sometimes you need a little magic in your life.”

He settled back into the plush burgundy pillows. “Maybe I should start wishing on a star, although I’ve had more than my share of dreams come true. What about you? What’s your wish?”

She was still looking for stars, and by her smile, she’d found another. “I wish the past could be undone.”

How unexpected, and how poignant. A surge of protectiveness sharpened his focus, amidst the urge to find whoever would dare hurt her and make sure they never did it again. “Did something bad happen to you?”

“Of course not,” she swiftly denied, yet her cheeks tinged pink. “I was speaking generally. A lot of people have rough lives, and I wish they would get a do-over. I wasn’t speaking about me.”

It was a practiced response, hiding more than it shared. Did her mysterious behavior hide some sort of trouble? “Any other dreams? Something to do with a hot movie star?” he teased.

She smiled coyly. “Now that you mention it, those actors at the auction were hot. Didn’t you think so?”

Did she think she could make him jealous? Ignoring the fact that he was, well, jealous, he lowered his voice. “Don’t even think about it.”

She went to flick him, but he caught her finger and brought it to his lips. She shivered ever-so-softly at the kiss, and so did he. What was she doing to him? “When’s the next time I’ll see you?”

She answered readily, “Monday, 7 a.m.”

“Yeah, but when will I see you again?” Suddenly he cared less about unbalancing her and more about staking a claim. “After all, you are mine.”

Wait, what?

Her eyes widened. “For two more dates you mean.”

Not even close.

Could she read his thoughts, his determination, his challenge? If so, she refused to comment on it. “How about Tuesday night?”

“Aren’t we scheduled to work until ten p.m. that day?”

“Yes,” she said enthusiastically.

“No,” he said as enthusiastically.

She gave him a look. “Fine. Will Wednesday work for you?”

He started to say yes, remembered his commitment. “I’m a little busy that day.”

“Let me guess. You have a date with fifty women?”

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“Something like that. How about Friday? Because there’s no work the next day, we won’t have to worry about rushing home for an early morning start. You could come over so no one will see us.”

She nipped her bottom lip, which made him think about nipping it and– “I’m not sure.” She interrupted devious thoughts. “I might have plans.”

Suddenly he very much wanted a date without a time limit. “We could make it Saturday instead. Then we’d have the whole day together.”

“Friday night it is,” she exclaimed. She sighed. “People don’t say no to you too often, do they?”

He grinned. “Nope.”

She grumbled, shook her head, but a tiny smile burst through. Then they both relaxed and gazed at the stars. A cool breeze played next to them, as majestic birds cut a path through the velveteen sky. They were beautiful, yet nothing compared to the stunning woman next to him.

The moments passed, as they lay next to each other in comfortable silence. Their connection wasn’t just about physical attraction, not about desire. She brought rare contentment, an absence of the restlessness that so often plagued him. He’d been blessed with success, yet at times something seemed to be missing. For the first time, he felt the urge to do something about it sooner rather than later. That missing piece looked a lot like the woman next to him.

This was ridiculous. He'd only known Destiny for a few days. Not nearly long enough to start thinking about the future, at least not the long term. As for the short term, he just wanted to get to know her – the real her. "So do you want to..."

The words died on his lips. While he'd been pondering the mysteries of life, she'd fallen asleep. He reached over and softly brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. Even in repose, she was breathtaking. Had there ever been a creature as beautiful as this woman?

He should wake her, take her home. And yet as he lay next to her, he couldn't bring himself to interrupt her slumber, or even to leave her side. So after texting his limo driver to go home for the night, he closed his eyes and marveled...

Life had never seemed this perfect.

Sunlight filtered through Cheyenne's eyelids, casting a warm, comforting glow through the sleepy darkness. Birds chirped good morning melodies, heralding the new day's birth and the beauty that lay ahead. She took a breath of gardenia-scented air and stretched lazily, snuggling deeper into the warmth, moving back as it surrounded her. The day was crisp and cool, but all was warm and heated in her safe cocoon.

A second later she gasped, opening her eyes to an unfamiliar world. What happened? Where was she? But most importantly:

Who was holding her?

For a moment, she panicked and scrambled to get out of the unrelenting hold. Had the criminal captured her? Was her life in danger? She struggled but the man held her fast. "Relax, Destiny. You're safe. It's me, Julian."

The softly spoken voice broke through; at once she stopped struggling as memories of the night returned. It was okay... she was with Julian.

Wait a minute.

With Julian?

She resumed her struggles.

Finally, he opened his arms, and only then was she able to scramble away from him, almost falling off the chaise. Heaving brisk morning air, she looked first at him, and then at herself. Thank goodness she was still wearing last night's dress, albeit a wrinkled form. Of course that didn't mean...

"Nothing happened." He sat up slowly, holding out his hands. "We just slept."

Before she could stop them, the words popped out, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." He remained serious. "I would never take advantage of a woman."

Embarrassment painted heat on her cheeks. Of course, he would know, and so would she. She hadn't been drunk, just exhausted, and she'd definitely remember if they shared intimacies. However, that was not the only potential complication of the impromptu sleepover. Had she inadvertently revealed something in her sleep? "I didn't say anything strange, did I?"

The clever man didn't hesitate. "Like the real reason you're acting this way?"

Precisely.

He stared for a minute, before giving a curt headshake. "No, I already know you're

hiding something.”

She exhaled relief and alarm in a single breath. She may not have betrayed the secret – yet – but he knew one existed. Perhaps she could admit something trivial, to avoid him discovering the true secret. “I have a confession. I might have missed your last movie... or twenty.”

He showed no surprise at the unexpected change of subject. No doubt he understood her attempt at distraction, yet thankfully he allowed it. “Not even pretending anymore? And you know how many are in a dozen, right?”

She relaxed. She hadn’t escaped his scrutiny, but for now she was safe. “Of course.” As the mood lightened, she rubbed her chin. “Fifteen. Or was it thirteen?”

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“You’re wrong on both counts. It’s fourteen.”

“Well, suffering succotash.”

He smiled warmly, reached over and gave her a hug as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “I love the way you talk.”

Even though he had to be teasing, the words warmed her. The close contact – now that brought tingles. “Now you’re making fun of me.”

“I’m not.” His gaze was unwavering. “I really do enjoy it.”

Her grin faded as they stared at each other, until the sounds of early morning traffic drifted from down below, disturbing the conversation and bringing reality back. What was she doing? Every second they stayed in the magical garden posed a risk. Someone might realize they were together, and if they did, mission over.

“By your panicked expression, I assume you’re ready to leave.”

She nodded and rose from the chaise, yet stayed rooted in the flower-filled space. Before she could leave, she had to come up with a plan. “What are we going to tell people about last night? Do you think anyone put one and one together and came up with a couple?”

“I doubt it.” He smoothed down his wrinkled shirt. “The party was winding down, and people probably assumed we slipped out. I sent my driver home.”

“You did? But that means...” Her voice trailed off. He hadn’t inadvertently drifted off like her. She must’ve fallen asleep, and he made the conscious decision to stay.

“Don’t worry,” he murmured. “Like I said before, nothing happened.”

Nothing except they slept next to each other. Held each other. All night. But she couldn’t change that now. “As long as it never happens again.”

He smiled... and didn’t agree. “It’s really no big deal if they see you.”

“How can you say that?” she returned. “We talked about the publicity you’d get, about the publicity I’d get. I don’t want to be known as Julian Starcroft’s girlfriend of the week.”

He winced.

She softened her tone. “I didn’t mean it that way. I just don’t want to give people something to talk about when there’s absolutely nothing going on.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “No comment.”

“Julian...” she warned. He took a step toward her, but she stood tall. “Why are you doing this?”

He stopped with a pensive expression, as if even he didn’t know the answer. A second later, his usual confidence returned. “I’m not so certain there isn’t something between us.”

Neither was she. But they couldn’t let it become real, for a hundred reasons. Her job, of course, yet something else lurked. Something deeper and far more personal. An actor had once shattered her when she needed him most. That’s how actors were.

Her heart would not be destroyed twice.

“I heard your fans. Marry Me, Julian! Have my baby, Julian! Sign my you-know-what, Julian! Isn’t that sufficient to keep you smiling?”

He came so close she had to look almost straight up just to keep him in her sights.
“Would you like me to sign your-”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Because I’d really like to sign your-”

“Julian...”

“Script.”

She growled.

He moved so quick, he was a blur. The kiss was quick, unexpected and far too short. It was also warm and gentle and oh so delicious.

She growled again.

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He gave her a longer kiss.

She growled once more.

He kissed her again.

“Are you going to kiss me every time I growl?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “Why stop a good thing?”

After she growled two – okay five – more times, she touched her swollen lips and moved back to stop herself from initiating another (five) kisses. “So that settles it. I’m not interested in you. Just because you’re handsome, muscular, larger than life... I’m getting off topic... not everyone will immediately offer to be your girlfriend.”

“You think I’m handsome?”

She stopped. “That’s what you got from that?”

He grinned, nodded. “And how would you explain the last fifteen minutes of kissing?”

“Simple lust.”

“So, you’re in lust with me?”

This was not going well. “You’re twisting my words.”

“I’m not twisting your words. I’m just trying to get this right.” And obviously trying not to laugh. “You think I’m handsome, muscular and desired by a million women. In addition, lust is making you kiss me again and again. Did I get that right?”

Yup. Pretty much. Jackpot!

“So, I’m going to go.” She edged back toward the door. “If you don’t mind waiting a couple of minutes so we’re not seen leaving together, that would be great.”

“Just not going to respond, huh?”

She moved closer to escape. “I’ll quit while I’m ahead.” Or behind. “No matter what I think about your body, there’s absolutely nothing between us.”

“Do you want to know what I think?” He lowered his voice as he stepped forward, his midnight black shoes thumping on the soft ground. “I think you’re attracted to me.” Another step. “I think I’m scaring the hell out of you. No matter what the tabloids say, I’m not a ‘woman a week’ sort of guy.”

She knew that. It made him even more attractive... and dangerous. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not looking for a relationship. I’m not in a position— I mean I’m just not.”

“Because you’re hiding something.”

Yes, she was. And she needed to leave before he discovered every last truth. “I’ll meet you at your house on Friday.”

“I’ll send my limo driver to pick you up. Otherwise, someone might see your car coming to my home. The paparazzi camp outside my development 24/7.”

“Wow.” She couldn’t even imagine a life where people watched your every

movement. But he was right – if they saw her, they could very well find out who she was – and who she wasn't. But if she didn't... "You have to promise to take me home."

He smiled. "Are you afraid I won't let you go?"

"Yes."

She waited for his response, but none didn't come. He didn't actually promise he'd let her go. But she had no choice, not if she wanted to catch the criminal. The organization would act soon, and she needed to be here when they did. Yet as she turned to leave, neither the criminal nor the case usurped her mind, because it was wholly occupied by one very striking movie star. How would she survive an entire night with Julian...

Without revealing her secret?

CHAPTER 10

She was not who she pretended to be.

To an extent, he'd known from the beginning. Her behavior was just too inconsistent, too strange, as if she were two completely different women, an actress portraying an actress. Could she be in trouble? That concern motivated Julian to ask a friend, a private detective, to look into her past. Nothing too invasive, just a quick background check to make sure she wasn't in any major trouble. He'd been in his dressing room when the phone call came.

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The detective got right to the point. “Destiny Dane doesn’t exist.”

That wasn’t a surprise. Many actresses utilized professional names that differed from their legal ones. “I figured as much. What’s her real name?”

“You don’t understand.” The investigator’s voice was short and clipped. “Destiny Dane isn’t merely the stage name of an actress. The actress doesn’t exist. Her resume is a work of fiction.”

He’d caught her in some lies, but who didn’t embellish? “I know she exaggerated some of her skills, but that’s common—”

“No, not exaggerated,” the caller broke in. “Lied, and not just about one thing. About everything. Not one reference was accurate, and all those projects she supposedly worked on – not a single one panned out. I tried to track her biographical information without using a name and still came up empty.”

It didn’t make sense. “Surely there is something—”

“Julian, her social security number was invalid.”

He stiffened. Lying about experience and skills was common, but her social security number? That’s how they did payroll – she couldn’t get paid without it.

“Something is seriously off about the woman,” his friend voiced the suspicions churning inside. “I do a lot of these checks and you don’t find this much duplicity unless the person is hiding something. Something big.”

Julian didn't need a professional assessment to know that. This was more than an embellished resume. The woman was a profound mystery.

He knew just how to solve it.

Cheyenne forced her eyes open. Again. After she'd done so again and again and again. It didn't matter that it was daytime – it felt like she hadn't slept at all. There wasn't any big mystery behind her exhaustion, not when she'd spent the entire night waking up in a sweat to the most disturbing dreams of her life. Nightmares of car chases? Nope. Hostage situations? Not tonight. Bank robberies? Not even close. Instead the dreams centered on a single man:

Julian Starcroft.

She couldn't count the times or ways she'd dreamed of Julian. Julian acting out a scene... naked. Julian leaning over her... naked. Julian caressing her... well, of course, naked. It really was the only constant, and it made her wake up oh-so-hot and oh-so-bothered time and time again. Then getting back to sleep? Forget it. Even counting sheep turned into counting Julians... naked.

She took a bite of some generic flaky cereal that tasted like stale cardboard to her tired taste buds. She still wore her comfy velour robe, and her hair was sticking in so many directions it resembled a highway interchange. Thankfully, she had a few minutes before she had to get ready, so she grabbed the television remote. Maybe some mindless programming would get her mind off Julian Starcroft and his unclothed body.

An early morning talk show came on, with a way too chipper host discussing how to catch a guy. Definitely not suitable. How to lose a guy... now that might be useful. She switched past an infomercial for a fancy appliance that was pretty much a blender, some dizzying cartoons, exes battling it out in court and finally came to an

entertainment channel. She blinked as a picture of Julian Starcroft came on the screen.

“I’m really losing it if I see him while I’m awake,” she commented.

“And even more if I’m talking to myself,” she added.

She closed and opened her eyes, but the image of Julian remained. Was she still dreaming? However, this time he was fully dressed, which was what finally convinced her he was actually on the screen and not a product of her imagination.

She should change the channel. Or better yet, turn off the television and prepare for a day of sleuthing. Instead, she turned the volume up.

It was a replay of a previous telecast. “It’s Wednesday, and we’re at Miami Children’s Hospital,” a narrator was speaking, “and who do we see but A-lister Julian Starcroft? In our special segment, secret celebrity heroes, we look for stars going undercover for good causes. Julian, how long have you been volunteering for the hospital?” She thrust the microphone into his face.

It was one of those tabloid entertainment shows, where paparazzi stalk celebrities in search of juicy scoops. Julian frowned at the swarm surrounding him. “No comment.” He kept his eyes straight as he approached the entrance.

“Oh come on, Julian, give us some info! We want to hear all about your secret work.”

Cheyenne leaned closer to the screen, as he stopped, clearly frustrated. “This isn’t a photo opportunity, and I’m not doing this for publicity. I’m just trying to help. The cameras are disturbing the patients.”

Kids could be heard crying in the background. Parents carrying sick kids had to go

around the news trucks, fighting for access. Security guards were trying, but because of the reporter, more people were noticing Julian. A circle of fans formed around him.

“That’s great that you’re helping so much!” The overeager newswoman ignored Julian’s plea and nearly tripped a kid on crutches. “While we’ve got you here, any news about the love life? Are you still dating that Brazilian supermodel?”

Julian’s eyes flashed with anger. “I was never—” He took a deep breath. “I have to go. No more questions.” He continued walking even as the reporter yelled at him. Cheyenne turned off the television.

Julian was obviously trying to do some good in the world, but opportunists were willing to harm him and others for their stories. The narrator had said it was Wednesday night, the night he couldn’t go out with her because of mysterious plans. She had guessed a date with fifty women. The truth had been far nobler.

Her heart shuddered.

She forced him from her mind as she styled her hair and changed into jeans and a tan button-down shirt, purposely dressing down on this day of their second date. How could an entire week pass so quickly? Of course, no matter how she’d tried to avoid it, she spent hours with him every single day.

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From the crew's comments, Julian rarely used a personal assistant. He'd been assigned one by the studio, but the general crew took care of most functions, and he preferred to do personal business on his own. Since she'd come on board, he'd made a complete turnaround. Apparently, he needed her to stir his coffee, scout out new dry cleaning locations (to add to his current three) and alphabetize his fan mail. He didn't suddenly turn from the most independent down-to-earth star to the neediest diva overnight.

No, he wanted her around.

It made it even more difficult to talk to the other guys, especially since that's when he found the most chores. Once, when she was about to spend time with one of her suspects, he had the urgent need for a toothpick, and she had to run to the drugstore. When she finally returned, he declared it was the wrong brand and sent her out again. Then it was the wrong color. Who uses blue toothpicks?

Tonight, they had a date, but today presented a rare opportunity. Julian was filming on location. He'd wanted her to come along, but because it was a few hours away, they'd chartered a plane and didn't have extra seats. Working as an extra again, she'd finally get to spend time with the cast and crew as they filmed group scenes. Hopefully, the perpetrator would make his move. Even if he didn't target her, she could still catch the crime in progress.

Putting all thoughts of her date and Julian (naked) completely out of her mind (or at least a sliver), she finished her morning routine and drove over to the lot. She immediately infiltrated a group of extras standing by the bagel bar. "HeyJess, John, Kevin." She smiled brightly. "How is everyone this morning?"

“Great,” Jess chirped, sliding a shy smile to where Zachary Thompson normally sat. He was out filming with Julian. “Great, actually.”

Cheyenne gave a genuine smile. Jess was clearly hung up on Zachary, and the usually confirmed bachelor seemed taken with her as well.

“We figured you’d be on location with Julian.” Kate Jenkins, a beautiful but rather spiteful extra, sent Cheyenne an icy glare. “You’ve been inseparable from him.” She made a rather compelling rendition of sucking a lemon.

This was bad. If the criminals thought she was serious with Julian, they’d never include her. “Julian? He’s just business.” She put a hand on the nearest guy. “I enjoy hanging out with all my guys.” She winked.

As everyone laughed, her peripheral visions snagged on Craig, a prop assistant, on the fringes of the room. He was the only man on her short list she had yet to approach. She excused herself, grabbed a bagel and skipped to the crewmember, who was looking uneasy as always. “Hey.” She smiled. “I brought you a bagel. Poppy’s your favorite, right?” It was the only one he ever took.

“Um, yeah.” He made no move to take the bagel, instead peering down as if it were poisoned.

She gave a friendly smile. “Would you like it?”

“Um, yeah.” Again, he didn’t move.

“Well, here.” Cheyenne pushed the bagel into his hands. He fumbled but couldn’t grasp it, and it fell to the floor, cream cheese side down.

“Oh no.” He turned as white as the cheese.

“Don’t worry.” Cheyenne picked up the sticky bread. “There’s plenty more. Want me to get another?”

“No!” he practically yelled. People turned to stare. “I gotta go.” He scurried away before she could respond.

She frowned as she mopped up the gooey mess with a napkin. Something was definitely strange with that guy, but he probably wasn’t her criminal. While the recruiters differed demographically, all were confident, assertive and self-assured. They had to be able to convince the women to join their operation.

Cheyenne dumped the remnants of the bagel in a wide metal trashcan. None of her leads were panning out, yet the informant who marked the film was highly dependable. The criminal had to be here somewhere.

“Okay, guys, let’s get started,” the assistant director called. Wiping her hands clean, Cheyenne joined the others on set.

The hours melted away, and her work progressed. Not the work on the film, although she was definitely getting better as an actress, but with chatting up potential leads. She crossed a few people off her list and added a few more. The men were looking at her with interest, and hopefully she was back in the criminal’s sights. Then, just as filming was wrapping up, everything changed.

You could always tell when Julian Starcroft entered a room.

He was dressed casually, in jeans and a black t-shirt, but there was nothing casual about how the denims molded to his long legs, how the shirt stretched across his defined chest or how he towered above the crowd, with muscles that showcased pure power. As soon as he walked in, the temperature leapt about twenty degrees. There were the usual smiles and stares, even from the cast and crew accustomed to working

with the famous actor. As usual, the female extras led the pack. But he didn't walk over to them.

Nope, he walked right over to Cheyenne.

She stretched her mouth into what she hoped passed for a grin. "Hi Julian!"

"Hi Destiny. I need some help with something. Will you accompany me to my office?"

It might sound like a request, but in reality it was a command. She could do nothing but follow. "Of course. Bye, everyone." She waved to the group, the false smile still straining her lips. Julian walked slightly ahead of her, giving her a prime view of his ass, but of course she wasn't going to look. Okay, fine, she was looking, but she deserved compensation since he was sabotaging her mission. They didn't talk until they reached his office... and passed it.

She caught up with him. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Walking and wondering."

"Walking where? And wondering what?"

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“Walking to the limo and wondering if you knew this hallway was lined in mirrors. I know what you’re looking at.”

She flushed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His grin was just slightly wicked. “It’s okay. I look at yours every chance I get.”

“Well, I look at yours, too,” she shot back. She spent the next few seconds searching for a way to reverse time. Failed. “Can we pretend I didn’t say that?”

“Sorry, I can’t forget it. It’s engraved in my memory forever.”

So was his ass. Somehow she managed not to admit it. “Why are we going to your limo?”

“We’re going to my limo because it’s time for our date. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course, I remember. I haven’t thought of anything els... I mean, it crossed my mind once or twice.” Or 4,235,332 times. “But I figured I’d go home first, take a few minutes—” Hours. “To freshen up. I’ll call you when I’m ready.” With my excuse. The dates may have been her idea, but she was seriously rethinking them. So why hadn’t she canceled them? She wouldn’t evaluate it.

“You can freshen up at my house. You can even take a nap if you want.”

She wasn’t getting anywhere near a bed with him in the vicinity, no matter how much she wanted to. “That won’t be necessary. Besides, won’t people see us leaving

together? That's why you planned to pick me up in the first place."

"The shoot got out early, so I decided to meet you here. Don't worry – we're going out the back entrance, and my bodyguards will make sure it's clear. Any other excuses?"

"Those aren't—" she started to protest, then stopped. There was no use. "Okay, fine, no. Let's just get this over with."

"That's the nicest thing a woman has ever said to me."

She gave a low laugh. "I didn't mean it like that. But you aren't being honest either. It's a classic case of wanting what you can't have." She kept pace alongside him. "I'm probably the only woman in the universe who isn't spellbound by you."

"So I only want you because I can't have you? I appreciate your high estimation of my dating ability," he teased. "Although there must be at least one other woman on Earth who doesn't want to go out with me. You can't be the only one." He paused for a second. "No, you're right. You're the only one. There must be something wrong with you. Really wrong. Really, really, really—"

"Julian."

"Yes, ma'am?" He grinned like a coyote.

"No funny stuff, all right?"

"There isn't anything funny about what I have planned."

What did he have planned? They reached the limo before she could ask, and she climbed in. He entered behind her and then...

They were alone.

Cheyenne toyed with her watch. She could do this. She was a professional trained to take down muscle-bound men twice her size. She could spend the next couple of hours with a famous movie star and not romantically accost him. “What about the driver?” she whispered as the car smoothly glided away from the curb. As with everything associated with Julian, it epitomized luxury, with butter-soft seats, ambient lights and gilded highlights on varnished wood features. Road noises were muted, and a new car scent sweetened the air.

“Don’t worry about the driver.” Julian grasped a cut crystal goblet and filled it with an expensive brand of sparkling water. “In three years, he’s never revealed so much as my lunch to the press, much less a juicy scoop. I pay him well, and he’s very loyal.”

“That’s good.” She looked out the window, at the colorful windows passing by. Tried to stop thoughts of the man. Yet they came unbidden. Kissing? Check. Touching? Check. Tasting? Check, check, check.

He may be right about having herself fooled.

“There’ll be some tasting.”

She gasped. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Say what out loud?”

“Tasting?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No. Is that what you were thinking?”

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She flushed. And his smile grew. And grew. And grew some more. “What type of tasting were you thinking of, Destiny?”

Something very naughty. Something definitely not in the police detective handbook. “What type of tasting were you talking about?” she countered.

“Food, of course,” he gave the obvious answer. “Since cooking is your favorite thing to do, I thought you’d enjoy making something exotic. I found some great cookbooks with interesting recipes.”

She opened and closed her mouth like a floundering fish. Cooking was her favorite thing to do? Yeah, if you counted pressing the minute button on the microwave. Seriously, she didn’t even type the number. Then she remembered her fictitious resume.

“You like to cook, don’t you?” He leveled a heavy gaze.

“Oh yeah! I love to cook. And I’m really, really good at...” Destroying meals. Burning toast. Setting spaghetti aflame. “Cooking. You’re going to love my meals.” I hope you have comprehensive fire insurance.

“Excellent.” He straightened his sleeves. “Of course, I’m not bringing you over to cook for me. I have a chef, but I thought you’d enjoy it since it’s a passion of yours. Besides, I gave the chef and the housekeeper the night off. I know you value privacy.”

Suddenly privacy didn’t sound so safe. What would stop him from putting the moves

on her? Okay, fine... what would stop her from putting the moves on him?

“I never have time for something as simple as cooking.” His tone took on a wistful note. “I’d love to help you create something amazing.”

Like SpaghettiOs? Because that was the extent of her cooking skills. Before the night was over, he’d know she lied about something else on her resume. Hopefully he wouldn’t realize just how much.

They made small talk for the rest of the half hour drive. They finally reached the development, which was watched over by multiple guards behind a massive fort-like gate. After gaining clearance, they travelled over an actual moat (seriously, a moat?), past a waterfall and through a series of natural arches created by trellises and climbing ivy. If this was the entrance to the development, what would his actual home be like?

Breathtaking.

The four-story mansion went on and on (and on and on, etc.). Brick with white shutters, sweeping trees and intricate ironwork, the home hailed from the cover of Architectural Digest. Massive flowerpots adorned each window, filled with roses of all different colors. Expansive lawns spread out, broken by flowerbeds and a grotto with waterlilies and a babbling brook. They drove through yet another iron gate, this time, Julian’s personal one, and into a cavernous garage. More than dozen exotic cars gleamed under the lights: a Ferrari, a Lamborghini, a Rolls Royce. She’d never been a huge car enthusiast, but even she could appreciate the vehicle wonderland.

“Do you want to take a ride?”

She knew something she’d like to ride.

Did she just think that?

Yeah, she did.

He cleared his throat, his eyes darkened like the midnight sky. Did he know her unruly thoughts?

“No, thank you.” she quickly replied.

“Too bad.” A ghost of a smile played at his lips. “Too dangerous?”

“No. I just don’t think a ride would be... wise.”

“But enjoyable.”

Oh yes. So wonderfully, exquisitely enjoyable... and absolutely forbidden. “So, how do we get into this house of yours?”

“Through here.” He gestured her forward, placing a hand on the small of her back. They traveled through a long corridor and into a massive living room easily the size of three of her apartments. Ornate furniture boasted carved wood embellishments, under soaring ceilings and windows that reached at least twenty feet high, offering breathtaking scenes of the Atlantic Ocean. “The kitchen is this way.”

The cooking area was no less impressive for its practical function. Cherry wood tables and granite furnishings held state-of-the-art appliances in stainless steel. Hand-painted cathedral ceilings made a large space even as the wood provided a homey atmosphere. The breathtaking room was every chef’s dream. She whistled lowly. “Your home is beautiful.”

“Thank you. It gets all the dates. Townhomes everywhere clamor for its attention.”

She couldn't help it – she laughed. “That was a terrible joke.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“I'm not.” She laughed again.

“Yes, you are.” The mood lightened, and suddenly the world turned a lot less awkward and more comfortable. It simply felt... right. “Ready to get started?” He gestured to an array of cookbooks on the shelf behind her. “Is there one you prefer?”

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She spotted the perfect selection. “The Four Ingredient Cookbook.”

Now he laughed. Apparently, he thought she was joking. She looked closer at the options. The cookbooks covered a variety of nationalities and cooking styles, from novice to expert and everything in between. She didn’t want to admit she’d lied (again), but she’d give herself away with the complicated recipes. “How about that one?” She pointed.

He scooped the volume off the shelf and frowned. “Easy Meals in Under Half an Hour?”

Perfect. “You said you weren’t an experienced chef. I don’t want to make something too complicated for you.”

Narrowed eyes said he didn’t quite believe her. “All right. Do you have any particular recipes in mind? I was thinking we could make an appetizer, main course and dessert.”

She didn’t have to make one dish, but three? She’d be lucky to emerge without setting anything on fire. I’m sorry, Captain, but I burned down Julian Starcroft’s mansion. Don’t worry, it’ll only cost the department twenty-five million dollars. Just take it out of my next 2,472,972 paychecks. Thankfully, they no longer sentenced people to debtor’s prison. She flipped through the appetizer section and stopped at a page in the super-duper easy section. “Cheesy crackers. These are great.”

He blinked at the recipe. “The recipe consists of precisely two ingredients: cheese and crackers. Isn’t that a bit simple for someone who’s been cooking since she was

three?”

Her resume claimed she'd been cooking since the age of three? The department had wanted to give her a hobby, but they'd turned her into Michelin-starred chef, plus an accomplished dancer, Miss Excavator Falls, etc. Of course, they (and she) never imagined she'd have to prove any of it. “Simplicity builds a masterpiece.”

He looked at her as if she'd sampled a bit too much of the cooking wine. “What does that mean?”

She was hoping he'd know. “I really have no idea.”

Suspicious look #524. “Okay. Cheese and crackers it is.” He opened the fridge and retrieved several gourmet cheeses, then went to the pantry for some crackers. “All I have is plain salted crackers.” He held up the box.

“Classic.” Yet she couldn't quite hide the cringe as he adorned the crackers with small pieces of cheddar, mozzarella and gouda. When he'd made a small array, he set them out, and they each took a selection. Cheyenne bit into a surprisingly delicious appetizer, courtesy of the gourmet cheese.

Julian ate every bite. “This is actually quite good.”

“Classic,” Cheyenne repeated, amidst stark relief. She might actually pull this off. Now all she needed was a main dish, a dessert and an excuse to leave early, and she'd be on her way with date two complete.

Julian put the plates in the sink. “So now the main dish. Any ideas?”

“Maybe Italian,” Cheyenne suggested. Even she could make pasta, and a simple sauce with clear directions should be within her reach. He swept the cookbook to the

correct section, which listed thirty varied recipes, most of which seemed fairly straightforward. She pointed to an easy baked ziti. "This looks pretty good."

He read the recipe, a simple concoction of pasta, jarred sauce and pre-shredded cheese. "It doesn't even have four ingredients."

Even better. "Well, it looks really good."

He braced his hands on the counter. "Why do I get the feeling you're hiding something? Are you sure you're an experienced chef?"

"Of course. Cooking is my passion. After acting that is. And square dancing." She cleared her throat. "Like I said, I just want to make it..."

"Easy for me. I know." He gave her his patented I-know-you're-lying-just-like-you-were-lying-about-everything-else-including-the-square-dancing-and-furthermore-I'm-going-to-catch-you-in-it look. "But I like a challenge. Plus, I bought all these fresh vegetables." He turned the page. "How about this?"

She wet her lips at a mouth-watering vegetable lasagna. The list of steps went on and on (and on) in the most complicated recipe in the entire cookbook. "Don't you think that's a little complex? I'm just thinking of you, of course."

"Of course," he replied smoothly, "but you can teach me." His gaze challenged her to come up with another excuse.

Unfortunately, she was all out of them. "All right." She rubbed her hands together, pretended to study the cookbook. "The first thing to remember in any recipe is to follow the instructions exactly. We don't want to deviate at all."

"Really?" Julian turned the page to the continuation of the recipe. "I thought most

chefs liked to tinker. You don't see any way to make it better?"

"Order it from a restaurant."

He blinked.

Had she said that out loud? Woops. "I'm joking, of course." No, she wasn't. "It's absolutely perfect. Exactly as I would've made it." Except less on fire.

"If you say so." Chances he believed her: On the south side of 0. "Let's gather the ingredients. I'll get the pasta and vegetables, and you find the spices. They're in there." He pointed to a tall oak cabinet.

With forced poise, Cheyenne strode over to the cabinet and opened the door. Endless rows of glass jars stood like gleaming soldiers, each filled with a different spice. Red, green, yellow, black, brown, fine, coarse and whole, an array more comprehensive than at her local grocery store. The cupboard literally held hundreds of jars of spices.

And not one label.

“Uh, Julian?”

“Yeah?” Far more successful than her, he carried an armful of squash, peppers, mushrooms and broccoli and deposited them on the kitchen island. “Is everything all right?”

“The spices aren’t labeled.”

“That’s how you know they’re authentic.” He wiped his hands together. “My cook sources them from some exotic spice company. She knows them all, and since I don’t usually cook, it’s not a big deal. As long as I can recognize the salt and pepper, I’m good.”

At this point, she wasn’t sure she could pick those out of this line-up. What excuse would work this time? The hectic schedule made her forget? He distracted her to amnesia? Square dancing?

“Is there a problem?” He came up behind her, flaring heat everywhere. “I assumed you’d recognize the ones from the recipe. They’re pretty common.”

Common for someone who didn’t use their last cookbook as a doorstop. With hundreds of spices, many of which appeared identical, there was no way to select the right ones. Of course, she couldn’t tell him that. So instead, she lifted her chin, smiled and declared, “No problem.”

Oh, there was a problem. Ten to be exact, the number of jars she selected. By her not-so-scientific calculations, at least three were wrong, three were really wrong and the rest absolutely, positively wrong. He didn't say anything as they returned to the table and began.

The creation of the meal went shockingly smooth, as did working beside Julian. She might not be an imaginative cook, but she could follow directions, and they put together the lasagna with clockwork ease. He washed while she mixed, she stirred while he chopped. As promised by the cookbook, half an hour later they put the dish in the pre-heated oven. It even looked like the picture!

It would take an hour to cook, so Julian took her to the den, an expansive chamber with thick navy carpeting, oak furnishings and bookcases that rose two stories high. Floor to ceiling windows took up one wall, and a massive fireplace played centerpiece to the other. Cheyenne blinked at the last, which the perceptive man noticed. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"It's not nothing. I can see your surprise."

"I don't want to be rude..."

He swept his hand back. "By all means, be honest."

Well, he'd asked. "Isn't a fireplace in Florida kind of like giving a polar bear a snow cone?"

Julian's lips twitched. He leaned on the arm of the couch across from her. "It's one of the advantages of fame. We're impervious to heat."

“Of course, you are.” Cheyenne chuckled. “Any other superpowers I should know about?”

“I can cook like a Michelin-starred chef, I’m an expert at square dancing, I won Miss Excavat– Wait, that’s not me.”

She looked upward, but couldn’t completely hide her amusement. “Extraneous fireplaces aside, your home truly is amazing. Do you live here permanently?”

“No.” He straightened a picture on the mantle. It showed him with an older woman and a lovely girl with the features of Down syndrome. “I own the house, but I live wherever work is. It’s useful to have whenever I’m in town.”

How could such an amazing home be vacant most of the time? But of course, it was, and he probably owned ten mansions just like it. Most people she knew worked long hours to afford a modest home, herself included.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?”

“The ‘we’re so different’ look.”

“Weareso different.”

“No, we’re not. In fact, I’ll tell you a deep, dark secret. Heat actually does affect celebrities. A fireplace in Florida is absurd.” His grin faded. “My life isn’t perfect. I have goals, aspirations, problems.”

“Really?” Cheyenne teased softly. “Like picking out what you’re going to wear when you win another Oscar?”

The smile returned. “Actually, I’m not talking about acting. I have other goals.”

She shouldn’t ask. Shouldn’t even care. With every sentence, she risked delving closer to this man. Only she couldn’t stop herself. “Like what?”

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He paused for a second. "I wrote a screenplay, but most people don't even want to see it. They tell me to stick to acting."

"That's because writers don't take off their shirts," she replied automatically. His eyes crinkled as she tried again to reverse time. And again, failed. She was giving away far too much. Yet she sobered at his serious look. "Don't tell me the mighty Julian Starcroft lets others dictate what he can do."

"Of course not." He frowned. "It's just hard when they refuse to even look."

"Then convince them," she said softly. "It's hard to become a movie star, yet you did it. It's hard to fit in time for all that charity work, but you do. It may take an extraordinary man to convince them, however..." She lowered her voice. "You are extraordinary."

His gaze was unfathomable as the seconds ticked, as they drank each other in like fine wine. "You are extraordinary," he murmured.

Heat crept up her neck. She was extraordinary, but not in the way he believed. And if they didn't return to the light banter, he would discover how. "Maybe you could be creative. Take off your shirt while acting out the script."

And just like that, the comfortable atmosphere returned. "Actually, I don't get unclothed. That's the role of the body double." He looked at her pointedly. "Why did I help you switch out of that?"

"Because you're not interested in me like that?"

“Nope.”

“Because I’m not interested in you like that?”

“Definitely not.”

Moving on. “So tell me about your writing. Let me guess – romances?”

“Is it that obvious?” He laughed. “It’s my passion, but it’s tough to write those alpha males.”

Alpha male – that’s what he was, all right. Every solid, muscle-bound inch. But she was an alpha female. She gave in to the urge for a little mischief. “Not everyone can handle one like I can. They’re actually quite easy to manipulate once you get the hang of it. They may think they’re all-powerful, but the truth is a strong woman can always take control.”

“So you think you can control me?” He rose, took a step toward her. “As a member of the male species, and specifically of the alpha male persuasion, I owe it to my brethren to accept the gauntlet you just threw.”

“There’s no gauntlet.” She looked at her nails, gave a bored look. “Just a statement of fact.”

“That’s definitely a statement of opinion. One I intend to disprove.”

She forgot about her nails. And the world in general. “And how do you plan to do that?”

His smile was pure wicked.

It was her only warning before he swooped down and captured her lips.

CHAPTER 11

So he kissed her.

She wouldn't respond. Nope. Not a chance. No way.

He caressed.

She wasn't going to react. Wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he affected her. She was a block of ice.

He massaged.

Okay, a melting block of ice, but still, she could do this.

He licked her lips.

Who was she kidding? She grabbed his shirt and pulled him down.

Julian growled in satisfaction as he leaned over her, creating tantalizing pressure along her entire body. He explored tender lips, nipping and probing and creating all sorts of havoc. He was pure hardness, swathed in muscle and power, entirely focused on her.

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So he thought he could kiss her senseless and get away with it? She would show him. As he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, deepening the kiss to fantastic proportions, she pushed up his shirt, molding the hardness underneath. She rubbed her fingernails along his skin, as his muscles clenched in response. He would realize he couldn't wrestle control.

But suddenly he did. He started with her neck, the sensitive spot just under her ear. He flicked his tongue, cooling tingling skin, then pressed closer, trailing kisses down her neck, raining fire to her collarbone. Still, it wasn't enough. She urged his hand to the bottom of her shirt.

Somewhere deep within her, a warning sounded, yet he'd resumed his kisses, and she couldn't focus. She sighed as cool air tickled her stomach, as he exposed more and more of her tender body. She shuddered as the shirt was pulled up and over her head, baring breasts covered in only the thinnest red lace. Now he gazed at her with dilated pupils and an expression of pure, unadulterated need. Lust blazed passion and something far stronger. "You are exquisite," he whispered as he kissed her, eliciting sheer pleasure.

Pure need took over, instinct and desire. The warning grew louder. She needed to stop now, before she lost all control. "I think..."

"Yes?" He gave her another kiss, this one deeper, longer, stretching sensations throughout her body.

Oh, hell. "I think there's entirely too much clothing between us."

His eyes darkened to almost black. “What are you saying?”

This had always been inevitable. Destined almost. She simply couldn’t resist the need firing within her. So she pushed aside logic and reason, barred the future and consequences from the present and clutched at the man who once more stole all. “Make love to me.”

He stilled, watched, contemplated, considered. “Are you certain? I don’t want you to do anything that is uncomfortable.”

How could she ever be uncomfortable with this man? “Please,” she whispered. “I want—” A breath, a shudder and awish. “Everything.”

He held her gaze for a moment’s whisper, then gave the briefest of nods. He returned to his intimate task, exploring with his lips, hands and body. Just like the first time he undressed her, she was powerless to resist as he unbuttoned her jeans, as he pulled them down and off. It was like the moments she acted as body double, when she thought he was going to fully undress her. Then he had stopped.

This time would be different.

She squirmed as he grasped the thin straps holding her panties, as he slowly pulled them down. Coolness assaulted her as he slipped the undergarments from her feet, leaving her fully exposed. He moved back to look at her, his gaze as searing as any touch. She stilled his movement with a hand on his chest. “This isn’t fair.”

He looked down at his fully clothed body, then smiled. “No, it’s not.” In one quick movement, he reached up and pulled off his shirt, revealing corded muscles and six-pack abs.

Holy sh—

“Are you okay?” he asked wickedly.

“Great.” She licked dry lips. “Just fantastic. I guess this answers the question about whether you use padding.”

Of course, he wouldn't need it when he was so magnificent. She took his hand and led him to the massive jacquard chaise. He needed no more urging, as he settled her down and sank next to her. Supporting himself with a hand on either side, he leaned over her. “Are you certain?”

In a world where everything else was uncertain, this wasn't. “I want nothing more.”

Then...

He did.

He touched and teased, fondled and probed. She gasped and moaned, jerked and shivered. The inescapable touches slayed every sense, but she wanted more, needed more. Soon it was time. He paused for the briefest of moments to don protection.

Then they became one.

It had never felt so right, so perfect. It was as if he'd been made just for her, and she for him. She ascended higher and higher until suddenly she could take no more. She screamed, and so did he, as the world shattered into a million pieces. Waves of ecstasy roiled her as she soared through passion's crests, clutching him, pressed into his heat. Seconds followed, as she finally came down, as a new reality returned. His arms tightened around her, and there she stayed.

And stayed and stayed, far past when she should arise, far beyond when she should start the “This was wrongs” and “This can never happen agains.” All she could do

was lie there, content in his arms, where life had never seemed so right.

The beeping startled the woman in his arms, and Julian held her tighter, comforting her, soothing her. If only time would stop, preventing the moment he'd have to relinquish the beauty he'd held as the seconds, and then minutes, passed since their lovemaking. Though she'd jumped with the alarm, she quickly took back control. She liked control, this one, but not as much as he did. And he never wanted control as much as when he was with her.

How could he describe what happened? He couldn't, not with words at least. Fleeting monikers came to mind – awesome, fantastic, earth-shattering – yet they couldn't truly describe the lovemaking they had shared, the intimacy. The chemistry was undeniable, the sparks nuclear. Yet, it was more than simple chemistry, more than the long-awaited satisfaction of bone-numbing lust. No, he connected with Destiny in some other way.

He had to explore this force, discover if it could truly lead to something real, something permanent. He'd never imagined finding that once-in-a-lifetime relationship, but if it found him, he'd grab onto it and never let go. Only he had one date left. That might not be enough time, especially with Destiny denying her feelings. An idea formed, and he smiled. Perhaps that date could be extended.

Right now he had this night to enjoy.

“Was that the oven?” A whisper broke the silence, as the lovely form shifted in his arms.

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He brushed a kiss on her cheek. Then on her neck. Then on a dozen other places. “The lasagna is ready.”

She stretched, extending that lithe body and giving new life to his arousal. Never before had a woman attracted him so. “I love the sparks we make, but if we don’t get up, we’ll start a fire of an altogether different sort.”

“Actually, I set the oven to turn off automatically.”

Her eyes darkened. “You did?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’ll go into warming mode for as long as we like.”

“Well, then, I guess we might as well—”

He didn’t let her finish the sentence.

“Should we talk about what happened?” he asked a good time later, holding the beautiful siren in his arms. He gave her a soft kiss.

Her answer was short, concise and to the point. “No.”

A stark warning clouded his mind. Was she going to deny what just occurred, the connection that transcended the physical? Even she couldn’t claim this was a fleeting relationship based on simple attraction. “Destiny...” He caressed her cheek with his thumb. “You can’t think that was ordinary.”

She shrugged, but didn't refute it. She couldn't, not when their first – and second and third – bouts of lovemaking were so very amazing. "There's nothing to talk about. We both gave in to lust. It's as simple as that."

What they shared was far more than lust. But something was holding her back, something substantial, something powerful, and he was unlikely to get anywhere now. He would give her time, but there was one thing he wouldn't wait for. He needed to learn more about her.

He would start right away. "Let's go to dinner." He shifted, hefting her into his arms. She was so light, it was easy to lift her as he rose from the chaise. He held her close and started toward the doorway.

"What are you doing?" She gasped. "I'm still naked!"

He grinned. "I like you naked."

She blushed along her entire body. "We can't go to dinner like this."

He stopped. "You're right. It could get dangerous with the cooking." He placed her down for just a minute, slid on his pants, and then helped her into her panties and bra. He then picked her up and continued along the corridor.

"You forgot something." She squirmed, which put interesting parts of her body into contact with interesting parts of his body. Judging by the ever-deepening pinkness staining her skin, she noticed.

He certainly did. "You might want to stop squirming if you want to eat today."

She froze.

Then she squirmed just a little more.

She gave a sheepish look. “Sorry, I couldn’t help it. But we need the rest of our clothing. What if someone sees us?”

“There’s no one here. The windows are tinted, and I don’t have any cameras in the house. No one will see you... except me of course.” They reached the kitchen, and he sat her down on the counter, his arms a band around her. He leaned over her, crowding her space. “If I’m too much for you to handle, you can go back and get your clothing.”

She angled her chin, showing that jaunty side he loved so much. “You’re not too much for me to handle. I can handle anything.”

Now that was a challenge. He leaned forward to her lips, stopped and moved down. He kissed the peak of each breast. “Is this too much for you to handle?”

Her skin turned an adorable shade of pink, and she appeared to be debating between fleeing and pushing him down to have her wicked way with him. “I don’t know,” she whispered with unexpected honesty. She gave a soft shudder. “We’ll stay like this. But don’t blame me if you spill lasagna on your ridiculously fit body.”

He laughed. “You’re so different than the woman you pretend to be.”

Secrets and mystery swirled in fathomless eyes. Who was she? He would discover soon enough, as he released her and retrieved a pair of black oven mitts. Extremely careful for his unclothed state, he removed the steaming lasagna, savory and perfect and covered with golden melted cheese and hearty tomato sauce. He dished two white porcelain plates and poured them each a goblet of merlot. After they were seated at the table, Destiny grasped her glass and took a sip. Then she downed it.

Julian held back a laugh. “Coming to terms with what happened?”

She grimaced. “I’ll need another dozen for that.”

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“We can’t have that.” He tapped the table. “I want you nice and sober during our date. Well, naughty and sober would be fine, too.”

“If you think I’m doing anything nau... anythingelsen naughty with you, then forget it.”

This time he did laugh. “Just the reaction I’d hoped for.”

“I’m sorry.” Genuine honesty tinted the words. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just I wasn’t... I didn’t...”

“Mean for it to happen,” he offered. “And then again. And well, again.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “No, no and no. I’m sorry. You were a gentleman. I’m just upset at myself.”

With anyone else he would be insulted, yet this delved beyond their relationship, beyond morning after regrets. She had enjoyed it as much as him, proven it when she initiated further intimacies. Why was she so distraught? “It happened, and we can’t just ignore it. Not when it was so extraordinary.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She retrieved her glass and poured herself another drink. “And we can absolutely ignore it.”

She tried to act confident, but she was obviously lying to herself as much as him. He took away the drink. “Have some food first.”

She sighed and picked up her fork. He lifted his own utensil and cut into the lasagna. It was steaming hot and scented of oregano, basil and roasted onions. He liked his food fresh and gave it only a few seconds to cool before taking a bite.

His mouth exploded.

“What the—” Destiny gasped at the same time he snatched his napkin and choked fire out of his mouth. He grabbed his wine and took a gulp, but it wasn’t nearly enough to douse the white-hot pain annihilating his lips and tongue. Destiny was choking and turning red, her eyes bright and watery. He ran to the cabinet and pulled out two bottles of Evian – he held one to his guest’s mouth and gulped his own. When he’d finished, the burning in his mouth had gone from a five-alarm fire to a four, but it still felt like a thousand firecrackers sparking. Destiny sputtered and gasped, but appeared slightly less about to collapse. He led her to the couch, where he stood as she sank down, heaving in deep gasps. He grabbed the two plates of lasagna and tossed them in the sink.

They stayed silent for a few moments, recuperating from the heat. As the pain in his mouth receded to a more ordinary discomfort, Julian finally managed to speak, “Are you okay?”

With a small choke, Destiny nodded. They both looked to the sink. Then he folded his arms over his chest.

The redness returned to her cheeks.

“Is there anything you’d like to say?”

“Probably not.”

“Anything regarding the lasagna and, I don’t know... attempted murder by spice?”

“I’d like to speak to a lawyer.”

“So you’re admitting your guilt?”

“I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about. Although-” She paused. “You may have added a bit too much spice.”

He gave a sharp but painful laugh. “Me?”

“That’s right. You’re the one who put in the spices. And obviously too much of that...uh... spice.”

Oh yeah, she knew she was in trouble. By her watery and still shocked eyes, it hadn’t been purposeful. “You’re the one who gave them to me, and none were supposed to be hot. Exactly which spice are you referring to?”

“The hot spice, of course.”

“What’s its name?” He pointed to the cabinet. “Show me.”

She put her hand over her mouth and started shaking. Concern bloomed anew... until he realized what she was doing. “You’re laughing?”

She shook her head, but couldn’t conceal the truth. She’d destroyed the recipe, nearly committed homicide by spice and now she thought it was hysterical. Then he started chuckling, too, and then it deepened until it turned into the heartiest laugh he’d had in years. The mood changed, as if they were old friends connecting on some deep shared joke. It felt... wonderful.

The laughter finally slowed to chuckles, then to wide smiles. When they finally calmed down, he sighed. “You don’t have any idea how to cook, do you?”

“Well...” A grin broke out. “I know slightly less about cooking than I know about Julian Starcroft films. It’s a miracle I didn’t set anything on fire.”

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“Yes, you did.” He cradled his jaw. “Our mouths.”

She grinned cheekily. “You may have me there.”

“Is there any part of your resume that’s actually true?”

“Of course.” She ticked off her fingers. “I’m female. My hair is blond, and my eyes are green. And I’m five-foot-four.”

He looked her up and down. “My sister is five-foot-four. There’s no way you’re that tall.”

“I rounded up.”

“By three inches?”

She sniffed. “Everything else is true.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “So you really are an elite ice skater. Would you like to go to the rink and show me your triple axel?”

She paled, but quickly recovered. “I would, but my ankle’s been a little sore. Wouldn’t want to push it.”

“Your ankle looks just fine to me. But anyway, there’s nothing on your resume about ice skating.” She glared, but he just shrugged. “Did you even read your resume before you created it on an AI generator? I’ve heard of people inflating their experience, but

usually they remember its contents.”

“Of course, I read it. I mean no, I didn’t copy it,” she growled. “I know its contents, and I know I’m not an ice skater. I was just joking.”

No, she wasn’t – she’d truly forgotten. Who was the real Destiny Dane?

She certainly wasn’t an ice skater.

Or a chef.

Maybe not even an actress.

“I should be heading out.”

He started at the unexpected comment. And immediately rejected it. “Do you think you’re getting out of the date early just because you tried to kill me? There’s still dessert.”

Her lashes fluttered rapidly. “You can’t possibly want me to cook again.”

He looked up and down that beautiful body, breathed in the intoxicating aroma of woman and sugar. “I know a dessert where no cooking is involved.” Without breaking her gaze, he strode to the refrigerator and retrieved a bowl of whipped cream. He closed the fridge, removed the cover and approached his delectable houseguest, as her cheeks flushed bright pink. “I’m hungry for something sweet. Can you think of anything suitable?”

She bit that saucy lip, as her mouth formed a little O. Her eyes darkened with desire.

He dipped a finger and tasted the sweet concoction. “Of course, whipped cream isn’t

enough. I figured we'd bake something to go with it, but I'm not sure how jalapeño pepper tastes with vanilla."

She didn't respond to his jab, instead licked her lips. Now it was his turn to feel the sensual heat while she explored. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, since you can't bake dessert, how about if you are dessert?"

She gasped. Then...

She smiled.

"I have a better idea." She grasped the cool bowl. "How about if you are dessert? Isn't that the fantasy of every woman in America?"

Right now he didn't care about any woman except the sassy, beautiful and sexy female before him. "But it's only fair that you offer dessert. Since you ruined the lasagna and all."

She shrugged, offering a tantalizing taste of sweet vixen. "I still maintain it's your fault."

Sexual energy sizzled, charging his senses. "I tell you what," he drawled. "Why don't we do this fairly? We'll take turns."

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“This is such a bad idea,” she murmured. Yet she dipped her finger in the bowl, tracing whipped cream down his torso, smoothing the cool dessert over his muscles. She started at his neck, then lower and lower, running out just at his waist. He stood perfectly still as she leaned in, barely kept control when a little pink tongue lashed out to lap up the cream. As she continued her journey downward, the scent of gardenias surrounded him, and he growled, fighting to restrain himself from hauling her against him and kissing those luscious lips.

She finished licking up the cream. “Oops.” She bit her lip innocently, but her eyes sparkled. “I guess I didn’t go far enough.” She took another scoop of whipped cream.

And that’s when he learned...

Sometimes control was overrated.

Cheyenne tossed her purse on the table, cringing when its contents rolled out onto the faux wood floor. She’d get them later. Right now, she needed a nap before work started in a few hours.

That’s right, a few hours.

She’d accomplished many things in the last forty-eight hours, but sleep hadn’t been one of them. Sure, she’d gotten a few minutes here and there, in between lovemaking sessions and heartfelt conversations. They seemed to slip in between them, mutually unable to keep their hands off each other. They had spoken about anything and everything under the starlit nights – everything, that was, except for her true identity, although not for lack of trying on his part. His suspicions were obvious, his

reservations valid, as if he knew her resume belonged in the fiction section. Would he investigate on his own?

Meals had been haphazard, too. Pizza delivery the night of the ruined lasagna and then a parade of takeout and leftovers the rest of the weekend. Now she plopped on her bed, much harder than the softness of Julian's luxurious mattress, and placed a hand on her head. She'd spent the rest of the weekend with him, leaving only enough time for half a night's sleep before the work week began.

This was ridiculous.

She may not have broken department regulations – only because Julian was never a target in the criminal ring – but the relationship was definitely detrimental to the investigation, the case and her sanity in general. The more she focused on him, the less she could concentrate on finding the criminal. The more he focused on her, the less attractive she would be to anyone looking for an easy target. She'd known that going into the date on Friday. So what happened?

He happened. It was like sitting in front of a three-scoop ice cream sundae, complete with caramel, whipped cream, hot fudge and cherries (all of which played a part during the weekend) and trying not to eat it. Julian was her ice cream sundae, and she was simply not strong enough to resist him.

Which was positively ridiculous.

The worst part was that it was more than physical attraction – far more. As much as she loved his creativity in pleasuring her, she enjoyed their conversations just as much. They talked for hours about so many things. Like a cliché, they eagerly finished each other's sentences, with similar opinions and judgements, likes and dislikes. How she managed to keep her secret, she didn't know, especially when he tried to expose her (in more ways than one) every chance he got. She'd managed not

to blow her cover, but for how long? Hopefully she hadn't missed anything.

Was she falling for him? She couldn't be, not after what happened to her family. She understood actors. They were charming and perfect one minute and would vanish the next. It was simply in their nature.

Yet somehow a date that was supposed to last a couple of hours progressed through a night, then another day, another night and still another day. Every time she brought up the subject of leaving he managed to... distract... her. And she liked distraction a little too much.

Well, no more. They would go on one more date, but that would be it. It would not be a marathon, and there would be absolutely no whipped cream. Definitely no cherries and certainly no caramel. She closed her eyes and fought for sleep. Then she dreamed of...

Ice cream sundaes.

CHAPTER 12

"I really think he likes me!" Jess squealed. "Isn't he amazing?"

The women agreed enthusiastically, because realistically, Zachary Thompson was pretty amazing. Not as amazing as Julian, of course, but amazing still. Kate rolled her eyes, but the rest ignored her.

Cheyenne smiled at her friend. How different Jess was compared to her, barely able to stay awake this Monday morning after a weekend of wicked indulgence. She should probably be happy for the small amount of sleep she got.

"I hate to tell you, doll, but Zachary likes anyone with boobs." Kate smirked.

Gray clouds overtook the sunshine in Jess' expression. The others snickered, but Cheyenne put an arm around the pale woman. "That's not true," she said, and was shocked to discover she meant it. When had she ever thought actors could be anything more than shallow, self-centered players? "He's been more focused lately."

Jess perked up. "Really? You think so?"

Cheyenne nodded, while Kate gave a snort. "Whatever. If you ask me, he's just like the rest. When you want a man who's honest about what he wants, you come to me, okay?"

What a spiteful woman. Cheyenne put herself in front of Jess. "She doesn't want a man who's just looking for fun."

Kate sneered. "They're all looking for fun. Why not get one who doesn't pretend? At least you won't cry into your pillow when he doesn't call." She turned her venomous glare to Cheyenne. "It's just like you and Julian."

Cheyenne stiffened. "There's nothing between Julian and me."

"Yeah, right," Kate retorted. "Nothing serious, I'm sure, but something fun? It's written all over your face."

This wasn't good. If people were starting to notice something was going on – not that anything was going on...

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Kate's smile was as sweet as arsenic-laced honey. "Don't get your hopes up. Men like Julian and Zachary don't go for extras and assistants – they go for heiresses, socialites and starlets, and even then they're not faithful past their wedding nights. Everyone knows that."

Despite the venomous delivery, the words were true. It had been her guiding belief, even if certain people seemed... different. Regardless, Cheyenne had no intention of discussing relationships with Kate. "As I said, there's nothing between Julian and me. I'm just his personal assistant." Before Kate could comment further, she hooked arms with Jess, turned away and walked to the refreshment table. She spoke a donut later. "Can you believe that woman?"

"Um... yeah." Only instead of enthusiastic agreement, Jess bit her bottom lip, playing the role of thoughtful contemplation. Kate frowned. She would keep her eye on the vulnerable starlet.

But not now. Jess got called to work, and Cheyenne ducked into a group of crewmembers. She began another fruitless conversation, which gave her absolutely no clue as to who the culprit could be, then retreated back to the breakfast spread. No matter how many men she talked to, flirted with, boldly touched, no one offered any illegal propositions. Indecent, yes, illicit, absolutely, but illegal? Not even close.

The production was moving into the final weeks of filming, and time was running out. In a few days, they'd take a week off so half the cast could attend a big Hollywood event, and after that, only a few weeks would remain before production wrapped. Then her chance would be over.

Of course, once her mission concluded, her association with Julian would also end. The thought was surprisingly unsettling and gloomy and just plain horrib—

No.Nothing real could ever happen between them, no matter how tempting.

“There’s my missing assistant.”

Well, that was annoying. Not the large presence above her, the formidable man who painted heat on her skin every time he approached. Not his warm voice or the tingles they brought. No, it was that despite her best efforts, they elicited far too much satisfaction, pleasure and even joy. “Missing?” Cheyenne busied herself with spreading chive cream cheese on a roasted onion bagel. “How long have we been apart?”

“Five hours, thirty-two minutes and sixteen seconds.”

Cheyenne’s hand slipped, and the plastic knife nicked her finger. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

He smiled, and she picked up the bagel. Hewaskidding. He hadn’t actually calculated how long they’d been apart. Because if he had, it would be much closer to six hours, fifteen minutes and eight seconds.

No way would she tell him that.

She moved closer and lowered her voice. “You are kidding. Well, that’s good, because I have the perfect strategy for dealingwith our ill-advised, preposterous weekend. We’re going to forget it ever happened.”

“You can ignore what we shared?” An eyebrow lifted, challenge drafted, sealed and delivered. Then without warning, he grasped her hand. He strode toward the hallway

– taking her with him.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “Let me go.”

“No,” he said mildly.

“This might’ve been okay when you grew up in the age of the Neanderthals, but it’s not okay now. If you don’t let me go, I’ll scream.”

“No, you won’t. You don’t want to create a scene.”

Damn it. He was right. She forced herself to relax, allowing him to more fully grasp her hand as he led her along. If walking hand in hand looked bad, him dragging her to his cave looked far worse. “I’m going to get you back for this,” she hissed.

“No, you’re not.” He smiled. “Mainly because I’m never going to have you cook for me again.”

Wise choice. “In some cultures, spicy food is revered,” she sniffed. “They say it puts hair on your chest.”

“I like your chest just the way it is.”

Cheyenne fought a blush as they transcended the hallway and entered his dressing room. As soon as he released her, she pivoted and pointed a finger at his chest. “Why am I here?”

“We can’t ignore what happened.”

“On the contrary, I’m doing a fantastic job. You should give it a try.”

He leaned against a table. “Actually, you’re doing a terrible job.”

Yes, she was. This was supposed to be a surreptitious relationship, with just little hints for the cast and crew. Yet a few minutes ago, one of the extras asked what type of engagement ring she was hoping for. “I’m fine. We’re fine. Everything is fine. Now if you don’t have any personal assisting for me to do, I have to get back to...”

“Hitting on the goldfish? Don’t bother – it’s engaged to the angel fish.”

She ignored him. “No, to looking for...” She clamped her mouth shut. She’d almost blurted out too much. How did he make her lose concentration like that? More importantly, had he noticed?

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His gaze sharpened. “Looking for what?”

Damn. She took a breath, refocused. She was running out of cover stories. “I’m looking for a little fun. There are some really fascinating men on the set.”

“Are there?” His voice turned low, dangerous. “Too bad you won’t have time to flirt with them.”

Did he just—“Excuse me? You may be my boss, but you don’t have the right to dictate who I do and don’t see. You have no claim to me.”

His lips did a dangerous downturn. His steps boomed across the floor as he approached. Closer, closer, closer. “What about Friday night?”

Heat engulfed her, yet pride prevented her from moving back. “Friday night was a mistake.”

“And Saturday morning? And afternoon? And night? And all day Sunday?”

Cheyenne flushed. “Mistake, mistake, mistake and really big mistake.”

“I see.” He moved closer, and he brushed her. It was electric. “You didn’t seem to think so at the time.”

“I wasn’t thinking!” she shot back, scooting away from muscles and electricity and desire. “Look, I’m sorry, I really am. You’re an amazing—” Too strong. “I mean great, I mean good...”

“Please stop – my ego just can’t take it.”

She huffed out. “Slightly less than mediocre guy, but I can’t start anything serious right now.”

“So you just want to use me for sex?”

She hesitated.

“I’m wounded, but I’ll take it.”

“Wait, what? No!” She was losing control. “This isn’t just about sex.”

He smiled.

That little—“Making me respond... er... tripping up my answers isn’t going to help your cause. It doesn’t matter if it’s a real relationship or meaningless sex. It can’t happen again.”

“Why not?”

The strangest urge to tell the truth tangled her tongue. Yet that could derail the mission, not to mention her resolve. She looked away. “It just can’t. I’m not in the position to have any sort of relationship.”

“Even one with the potential to be something special?”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but nothing emerged. She wasn’t nearly a good enough actress to convince herself their relationship wasn’t special, so how would she convince him? They shared some sort of rare spark, a connection, pure and simple. But it didn’t matter, because of who he was and who she wasn’t. They could

never explore it.

“You owe me a date.”

“I know,” she acknowledged. “One more.”

Silence.

“That’s it, buddy.” She held up a finger. “One more date.”

More silence.

“Ugh. Okay, so when do you want it to be? Our last, final, never-to-be-repeated date?”

This time, he answered without hesitation. “Friday.”

The day before another weekend.... wait, an entire week off. “Not a chance. I’m not getting locked into a seven-day date, actually more counting weekends.”

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“I never said you were. I’ve already made special arrangements for Friday. Don’t you trust me?”

Like she trusted a wolf to babysit a bunny. “I don’t trust myself.” She closed her eyes. “Pretend I didn’t say that.”

“I knew you found me irresistible. If you can control yourself, we’ll be fine. By the way, do you have a passport?”

“Excuse me?”

“No worries. We’ll stay domestic. I’ll pick you up at six.”

“I don’t think—” She stopped at his obstinate expression. “Fine, six o’clock. But it’s going to be a normal-sized, normal activity date. And no hanky-panky.”

“Should I hire a chaperone?”

“Do you like driving me crazy?”

“I kind of do.” He winked. “Now that that’s settled, I need some more personal assisting.” He laughed at her glare. “No, not that type. I’d like you to sort through my fan mail and send responses. For most, a note and an autographed picture will be fine. If one is really compelling, put it aside, and I’ll look at it later. Ignore the creepy ones unless they’re threatening – keep those together so I can report them to the authorities. And no matter what they say, no one has given birth to my love child.”

Cheyenne arched an eyebrow. “You actually get letters like that?”

“You wouldn’t believe how many.”

Judging by how careful he’d been to use protection each and every time they made love, he probably didn’t have any unintended children out there. “Not that I’m opposed to kids,” he suddenly said. “I’m just planning on having them with someone I actually know.”

How unexpected... and satisfying... and unexpectedly satisfying. “It’s really none of my business.” She ignored the inner voice that wanted it to be her business. She pointed toward a stack of envelopes on the desk. “Is that the fan mail?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

She started toward them.

“And those.” He pointed at a stack on the floor.

“And those.” He pointed to a box by the door.

“And those.” He pointed at four more bins on the table.

There goes police work for the morning and afternoon, possibly the entire week. “Have you saved these up all year?”

“Just this week. And of course they don’t include emails.”

“Of course not.” She held back her sigh. “It also probably doesn’t include messages from off-planet.”

“Nope. My assistant on Jupiter takes care of those.” He winked. “I’ll be working at my desk if you need anything.”

She would get through them as quickly as possible and then get back to her real job. Cheyenne opened a pink letter with red hearts and the heavy scent of eau de parfum. She whistled low. “You were right. I’m only on the first one, and you’ve already got a love child. Twins, actually. You’ve been secretly living with the family every weekend, traveling to...” She chuckled. “The Arctic? You’ve been travelling to the Arctic every weekend? That sounds exhausting.”

“It is, actually. You wouldn’t believe the difficulty of a quick jaunt across the planet.” Julian grinned. “That’s the sort of letter I discard. I don’t want to offer any encouragement.”

“Got it.” She tossed the letter into the wastebasket and opened the next. “You also have a kid in France.”

He groaned as she discarded the letter. He waited as she read the next one. “Well, you’re off the hook.” She held the letter up. “This one does not claim to have your love child.”

“Thank goodness.”

“But she wants one.”

“Fantastic.”

She laughed at his comically crestfallen expression. “She wants other things from you, as well. Want details?” She didn’t wait for an answer before crumpling the paper.

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He stopped her before she could toss it. “Are those details explicit?”

She wagged her finger. “Oh no, I’m not going into explicit details with you. To be honest, some of these positions are impossible unless you’re an acrobat.”

Mischief sparkled in clever eyes. “But you’re my assistant. It’s your job to assist.”

“I’d be happy to.” She took the offensive letter, and really, it was ridiculous, and tore it in half. Then again and again and again until it became approximately twenty pieces of scrap paper. She threw it into the garbage and smiled brightly. “There you go.”

“Did you just destroy my property? Don’t you know that’s against the law?”

Yes, she did. Which was fairly ironic considering her true position. “That’s a bendable rule. I’ll never get to the rest of the letters if you don’t stop distracting me.”

“I’m distracting you?” He smiled, then he stood up.

Now that was distracting. She sat up straighter in the chair. “What are you doing?”

He took a step closer.

She gripped the armrests. “I thought you wanted your fan mail sorted. You probably received another hundred letters just during this conversation.”

He didn’t stop. When he was almost upon her, she stood. Face to chest, he towered

over her. “You falsely accused me of distracting you. Aren’t I allowed respond to such a serious accusation?”

She put her hands on her hips. Desire swept through her, heady need and endless temptation. She needed to regain control, and she could only do it by shocking him. “Since I already got in trouble for it, I might as well do it.” She brushed her lips against his.

Two seconds. That’s how long she kept it light. But he smelled so good, and tasted better, and somehow her arms snaked their way down to his ass and did just a little squeezing. And somehow he did the same. And she would’ve pulled back if he hadn’t felt so wonderful. Really, she was just about to, when he did...

Five minutes later.

“Well, that was uncalled for.” She sniffed, but her cheeks had to be as pink as a princess’ bedroom. “Can I go back to work now?”

“If that’s what you want.” He dragged his gaze over the length of her, tracing heat on her skin. She could withstand it. She was strong and disciplined and...

“Oh, hell.” She jumped back into his arms.

Ten minutes later he pulled back again, right before she would’ve stopped, of course. “I’d love to kiss all day, but I must get some work done. Maybe tonight...”

“No!” She took a deep breath. “I mean, no thank you. We’ll get together Friday night for a home-cooked mea... er, takeout and that’ll be it.” She plopped back in the seat and buried her nose in the next letter.

“Okay, but if you distract me, I’m going to kiss you again.”

She forced herself to focus on the letter. Really, how many love children could one man have? It really was—

He seized her lips.

She meant to tell him to stop. Which was almost the same as what she actually did: press into him. Finally, he pulled back.

“What was that for?”

“You distracted me.”

She gave him her best I-know-what-you’re-doing-and-you’re-not-going-to-get-away-with-it-but-actually-you-might look. “I’ll be sure not to distract you again.”

It only happened six more times.

All by accident – of course.

Despite the distractions, Cheyenne slowly made her way through the letters. Beyond the fanatical ones, most were sweet and heartfelt, written like missives to a long-lost friend. Clearly, they felt a connection to the man everyone adored. And even if she wouldn’t admit it...

So did she.

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“I’m done.” Cheyenne tossed the last letter onto the pile and sat back on the plush chair Julian had brought in an hour earlier, along with a delicious meal of fresh fruits and pastries, creamy smoothies and freshly-squeezed juices. She’d finished the work in several hours, mainly due to the high number of inappropriate messages. At last count, Julian had fathered two dozen love children and had offers for twice as many more. She handed him a tidy stack of papers. “You should read these. There are some meaningful letters and a few from ill fans. This one—” She held out a letter by her fingertips, “Belongs in Division 72.”

He read the letter and grimaced. “Division 72?”

“Yeah, the stalking department,” she said automatically. Then, she froze. The number of the stalking division probably wasn’t everyday knowledge. “Isn’t that the number of the stalking division? I heard it on the news, but I could be wrong. Maybe it’s thirty or something. Anyway, you should send that along.”

His gaze was suspicious, as she shuffled the rest of the pile. “I discarded the letters that weren’t dangerous but definitely on the wrong side of creepy, mother of my child sort of thing. Oh and I found this letter. It’s not from a fan, but some sort of kids’ charity. They want to thank you for your...” She started to read. “Whoa. That’s a lot of zeros.”

Julian swiftly took the letter. “That shouldn’t have been with the general mail. Please don’t mention it to anyone. Be right back.”

Okay, so not only did he surreptitiously volunteer his time to help people, but he also gave away gobs of money without telling anyone. His kindness and compassion made

it even harder to keep her distance. He called her a distraction, but he was proving a far greater one to both the case and her. “He can’t seriously be that awesome.”

“Sure I can.”

She pivoted. Why did he always show up at the most inopportune time? He grinned widely. “I can absolutely be that awesome.”

“I didn’t call you awesome.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I heard you.”

“You heard wrong.” Time to make her escape. “Now that I’ve finished your mail, I’d better go. I’m sure they could use my help on set.” She took a step toward the door.

“Nope.” He stopped her with a single succinct word, stepping closer. “Remember how I mentioned this was only a week’s worth of mail? Well, I’ve been a little behind.”

Uh-oh. “How behind?”

“Two months.”

“Two months?” Mental math churned the numbers. “One week’s worth took me three hours, eight more weeks is going to take me...”

“A while.” He leaned comfortably against the desk. “And if you keep distracting me,

it'll take even longer." He strode toward the exit, stopped just before it. "I'll just get the rest of the mail. By the way, I think you're pretty awesome, too."

"Julian, look this way!"

"Julian, I love you!"

"Julian, you're awesome!"

Julian waved at the excited, screaming and waving fans, smiling at the same compliment his personal assistant had given hours before. It was relatively tame compared to some of the other adorations, yet coming from Destiny, it meant infinitely more. Of course, she'd tried to get out of it. He wouldn't allow it.

The crowd surged forward, and security formed a tighter circle around him. He forced himself to maintain the smile through the discomfort. The fans had come a long way to see him and deserved his attention. "Hi everyone!" He smiled and greeted, making eye contact with as many people as possible. He was attending a fundraising dinner for the Special Olympics, a cause close to his heart, and they'd set up a red carpet prior to the event. He was always happy to do publicity for such a fantastic program and would be giving the keynote speech later.

"Hey, buddy."

Julian turned to Zachary, who was smiling broadly, probably due to the very glowing actress on his arm.

"Hi Zach." He shook his friend's hand, then smiled down at the woman dressed in red sparkles. "Hi Jess."

"Hi Mr. Starcroft," she gushed. "You remembered my name."

“How could I forget with Zachary saying it every two minutes?” He winked. “Plus, you are the body double.”

“What can I say?” Zachary hugged his date. “This woman is stunning.” As Jess blushed, he turned back to his friend. “Where’s your lovely lady?”

“Julian’s lady?” someone screeched.

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“Please say it isn’t true!” another shrieked.

“It can’t be!” yet another cried.

Julian gave his friend a look, started to deny it, and stopped. For once, he didn’t want to refute his interest. Because he was interested. Very interested.

But that someone, who liked him enough to call him awesome, was desperate to deny it. And although he had every intention of changing her mind, he couldn’t thrust her unwillingly into the spotlight. “No,” he said loud enough for the fans to hear. “There’s no lovely lady. I’m one hundred percent single.”

He gave Zachary a look, which was clearly understood when his friend clapped him on the back. “All the more fun.” At Jess’ pout, he quickly backtracked, “I mean, poor guy. We’ll have to find you someone. Maybe someone out there,” he called to the crowd.

The applause was deafening, and took everyone’s mind off his supposed lady love. Everyone’s, that was, but his. To be fair, he hadn’t been able to get his mind off Destiny in days. No matter his efforts, their time together would soon end. Even if she was his personal assistant, she was employed by the studio, and she was unlikely to take an offer of employment from him. They only had a few weeks of filming left, and then curtains.

That meant this last date had to count. One night simply wasn’t going to do it, not when Destiny had already set up personal meetups with multiple cast and crewmembers during her week off. She didn’t want to be seen with a movie star but

would happily date twenty different men? It didn't make sense. She may act the flirt, but he'd seen the real her, and she wasn't a twenty-guy type of woman. Her motivations played a mystery plot, and he was going to uncover every last detail.

He knew just how to do it.

CHAPTER 13

The two outfits were as different as a mystery to a rom-com. One was a black cocktail dress, smooth and silky and fit to perfection, the other faded blue jeans and a plaid button-down shirt, boring and ugly and well-suited to a cowhand. Cheyenne sighed with reluctance... and tossed both into the duffel bag.

This was ridiculous. She was packing (yes, packing!) for a two-hour date. But Julian refused to share their destination, despite her repeated questioning. He wanted it to be a surprise, although he promised it would be private. The thought of more time alone with him was more scary than placating, but at least it wouldn't compromise the operation.

When she pointed out she didn't know how to dress for their date, he told her to bring several outfits. When she tried to argue, he silenced her with a kiss. She tried to argue once (okay, seven) more times, but in the end it seemed easier to bring a few things. This was their last date, after all, and she'd already set up personal visits with multiple suspects. If she got lucky she might not have to return to the set at all. Might not have to see Julian Starcroft ever again, at least not outside the silver screen.

The thought made her distinctly uneasy.

A knock sounded, and she tightened. He was early. "Just a minute!" She threw a few more shirts into the duffel bag, zipped it up and jogged to the front door. She unlocked and opened the door to...

“Abraham Lincoln?”

With a long fake beard and a big hat, Julian bore a striking resemblance to the iconic president, and the presence to match. He stood in the doorway, waiting for her to let him in, but instead she slipped into the hallway. He didn't need to see the lack of personal items in the sparsely furnished apartment she rented for the assignment.

He looked behind her as the door clicked shut. “Hiding something or just in a really big rush?”

Both. She locked the door and smiled. “You got me. Big Foot is in my apartment.”

“I didn't know he made house calls.” He adjusted his fake beard. “Or are you just that anxious for our date?”

She snorted. “Nope, it's Big Foot— Hey!”

He took her duffel bag. She tried to snatch it back, but he kept it out of her reach. “Can't I hold my lady's bag?” Then he turned on his major weapon – that smile. Heat filled the small corridor. She was not going to win. Not this battle, perhaps not the others.

“All right.” She lifted a finger. “As long as you don't throw me over your shoulder. Again.”

He smiled wickedly. “My mother told me never to make promises I couldn't keep.” He took her hand. “And I'm keeping this, too.” He resumed his pace... taking her with him.

She tugged at her hand with the same success she'd had with the bag. “You can't keep someone's hand.”

He passed the elevator and went straight to the stairs. Hand in hand, they walked down the concrete steps. “Actually you can keep a whole person if you’re a celebrity. It’s in the job description.”

She walked fast to keep up with his long stride. “That’s completely untrue.”

The look he gave her was so full of comic disbelief, she couldn’t help but laugh. “No one ever told me ‘no’ before.”

Now that, she’d believe. People treated him like a king, emperor or some sort of supreme being. They would give him the moon wrapped in a big red bow if he asked politely. “You’d better get used to it.”

“Really?” he drawled. “Does that mean you’re planning on seeing me more?”

No. Of course not. Absolutely not. Yes. “Don’t worry. When I leave, I’ll train the cast and crew how to say no to you.”

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He laughed. “I wish people would treat me like everyone else. Most people just smile and nod. I don’t even know if they’re listening.”

“Well, you are a bit larger than life. Not that you intimidate me, of course.” She stood to her full height – and almost reached his chin.

He stopped on the stairs, turned to her. His regard was mesmerizing, as all humor departed. She’d never admit how much he affected her. Yet what she couldn’t voice, her body acted, as she leaned closer and closer and closer...No. She jerked back. One kiss and she’d be lost. “I’m not getting caught in that again. Especially when we haven’t even made it out of my building.”

“So when we get out—”

“No.”

“What about when we—”

“No.”

“Want to make a wager on that?”

“No.”

This date had to end as soon as possible. Now she galloped down the stairs, pulling him with her. Despite their speed and Julian’s disguise, people pointed and whispered, and a few even followed them. Fortunately, they made it through the

lobby without anyone approaching, screaming or fainting (as tended to happen when Julian was around), emerging into the comfortable early evening. A long stretch limo pulled up just as they made it to the curb. Before she could say a word, Julian shuffled her into its dark wood interior and shut the door behind them.

The scent of new car and wealth immediately sounded her. The ambient lights were low, and the space was warm with a soft amber glow. She settled into the plush seat and buckled herself in as the car rolled away. “This is being inconspicuous?”

“Don’t worry.” Although there were six seats, he took the one next to her. He brushed against her, and she brushed against him. He smiled and moved even closer. “No one recognized me.”

“I’m not sure about that.” She pointed to the window, where a small group of people observed their departure. Eyes played the part of eagles, cell phones poised and recording. “They didn’t actually think you were Abraham Lincoln. It’s like deep down you wanted someone to see us.”

He removed the beard and hat, then set his full gaze on her. Paused, considered. “What if I did?”

She forgot to breathe. Almost to exist. “Remember our deal. If our relationship becomes public, it changes everything. Besides, you can’t enjoy getting mobbed. Don’t you usually have a bodyguard?”

“I have several,” he admitted, “but they watch from afar when I’m in disguise.” His smiled turned wicked. “I don’t need protection from you.”

That didn’t mean she didn’t need protection from him. His gaze turned predatory, like a wolf, and she edged ever-so-slightly back. She couldn’t go far. “Where are we going?”

He plucked an invisible wrinkle out of his sleeve. “You’ll just have to wait a little longer.”

“Are you afraid I’ll back out?” she joked.

He didn’t answer.

“Now hold on just a—”

“Would you like some wine?”

“Moment. If you think—”

“Red or white?”

“You can take me wherever you want and I’ll just go along with it—”

“Red then? Here you go.”

“Ugh!”

He leaned in, all masculine power. “Do you really want to leave?”

“Yes.” No. “You can try to intimidate me, but it won’t work. You can also forget about anything sneaky. You have this one night – evening – and that’s it.”

He smiled. “So how was your week?”

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He didn't respond to her ultimatum, but it didn't matter. This time she wouldn't let him – or her – start something that would complicate their relationship. So she answered his question, and then another and another until they somehow fell into an amicable conversation. They discussed the week, laughing through dozens of stories and shared memories. Later, they traversed into a comfortable silence, as they traveled a winding road flanked by palm trees and colorful art deco buildings. Up above, a cloudless sky extended to endless horizons, darkening as night approached.

They travelled further and further east until they were almost upon the Atlantic, and then they turned south. They passed abevy of expensive, ocean-view restaurants. “Won't people notice us if we go out to eat?” Unexpected disappointment crashed like the waves of the sea, but she would have to dispel any such idea. A beachside dinner with the captivating movie star posed far too great a risk of exposure.

Yet that wasn't Julian's plan. “We'll be next to the water, but not at a restaurant. Only my employees will see us.”

They turned into a parking lot and stopped at a guarded security gate before threading through rows of gleaming cars at a spacious dock. Sailors and passengers disembarked, garbed in myriad outfits, from sailor uniforms to black tie as they made their way to the water's edge. A series of expensive yachts bobbed in the water before them. The destination was unexpected – and concerning. “We're going on a boat?”

“That's right. You're not prone to seasickness, are you?” He relaxed at her headshake. “Good, because we'll be there for a while.”

Uh-oh. “What's your definition of a while?”

Instead of responding, he gave her a quick kiss. Then he pulled back (too) quick. “Stop being so suspicious. New rule: I’m going to kiss you every time you ask a question.”

She grimaced.

He kissed her again. “And when you grimace.”

She glared.

He kissed her again. “And when you glare.”

She didn’t move, and he edged closer.

“Don’t you dare say when I stay still.”

He didn’t say it... but he still kissed her.

Thankfully, the car stopped then, and she scrambled out before he could kiss her again. She liked them far too much to resist. His smile was entirely knowing and utterly satisfied as he grasped her hand and took the lead. They passed a dozen majestic ships, each one larger than the last, until finally they came to the final boat. Then Cheyenne uttered the only possible response: “Whoa.”

If the other boats – which probably cost millions – were ordinary fare, this one was a mansion. Pure pristine white, the five-story vessel rose from the water in sleek lines and jaunty angles, with gleaming windows and winding balconies. It was luxury defined, its rich wood furnishings and golden accents perfectly suited to its movie star owner. The name *Starcraft* was emblazoned on its side.

“Like it?” Julian winked as he greeted the captain and a dozen crew members. They

walked up the ramp, passing open doors revealing lavish interiors, set around a resort style pool with plush recliners, slides and a waterfall. A table was already set on the deck, and he held out a seat for her.

She sank down on the plush chair, which overlooked the vast ocean. She smoothed sapphire linens, traced China dishes and tapped cut crystal goblets. “You sure know how to impress a lady.”

He poured them each a glass of wine. “You’re admitting you’re impressed. I’m shocked.”

She didn’t want him getting the wrong – or right – idea. “It’s not bad. If you like that sort of thing.” She waved her hand. “You know, living like a king.”

He laughed. “True, but what’s a king without a queen?”

She smiled impishly. “Still a king.”

He laughed again as a waiter brought a tray filled with savory appetizers: crusty bread topped with bruschetta, cheese-filled ravioli and steaming potato wedges covered in melted cheddar cheese, chives and sour cream. Julian served her a sample of each, then took his portion. She bit into the hot bread, and the flavor of fresh herbs and olive oil burst into her mouth. “Mmmm.”

He took his own bite and grinned. “Living like a queen not so bad?”

Not at all, and therein lay the danger. Acting as Julian’s queen, wined and dined in opulent wealth, was as tempting as the forbidden apple. Yet in truth, he represented the true culprit. She didn’t need money to be happy – she wouldn’t have become a cop otherwise – but Julian was entirely too enticing. “It’s nice, but not necessary. You don’t need wealth to stand out.” She inclined her head. “You already do.”

He didn't quite manage to hide his surprise – or satisfaction. He cleared his throat. "I just want to make this special for you."

"It is special, and not because we're on a twenty-million-dollar boat. Or more. Is it more? Wait, don't tell me. The point is you're pretty great the way you are, and you don't need any of this to prove it." She gripped the wine tightly. She hadn't planned to share so much, yet she couldn't regret it, not as his sapphire gaze shimmered, reflecting the twinkling stars. All of it was true.

"Thank you," he said softly. "Most people only notice the characters I've played or the actor with the fame, luxury and money. They don't actually see me."

How could they not see the man with his kindness, goodness and strength? She inhaled the cool evening air, spiced with his scent. "I see you."

He grasped her hand. "And I see you."

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Yes, he did, and not just the character she portrayed. He might not know her name or true profession, but he knew more than those who did. “I wish there was a chance.” She closed her eyes, opened them to the stark truth. Nothing could ever come of this. Julian was a famous movie star, but she was no actress, body double or assistant. She didn’t live a fairy tale, but a dangerous profession with a regulation-issued gun and a dangerous criminal who would be furious when she caught him. After the mission, she’d go back to regular shifts at the police unit and Julian would go on to another movie and thousands – no millions – more fans. And he would forget her.

She didn’t belong in his world any more than he belonged in hers.

“My life isn’t a fairy-tale. Yours, well, yours just might be. This can’t be.”

He leaned forward. “We live in the same world, Destiny, the same country, even the same state. From our conversations, we like the same things, have the same point of view on so many subjects. I can’t say I lead a normal life, if there even is such a thing, but at least it’s an adventure.”

She sipped wine far sweeter than expected, just like his offer. “My life is already an adventure.”

“It is?”

The wine turned as dry as the desert as it snaked down her esophagus. Destiny Dane’s life wasn’t an adventure – Cheyenne Kirk’s was. She swallowed hard. “Look around. I went from a low level extra to dining on a multi-million-dollar yacht. I’d say that’s an adventure.”

His regard didn't waver. "True, but that's not what you meant. There's something else, a reason that explains why your resume reads like a fairy-tale, why you treat me differently than the other men on the set."

"That's simple. No other guy attracts me like you do." She gasped. "I meant excites." She gasped again. "I meant arouses. I meant bothers!" She gripped the table. "Not that type of bothers."

He laughed. "Now why don't I believe you?"

"Okay, fine." Get it together, Kirk. "I never pretended I didn't lust after you. But that's it."

"You like me far more than you admit, and more than you want to," Julian challenged. "Tell the truth, Destiny. Why are you so afraid?"

"I'm not afraid." The wine glass in her hand creaked; she released it and picked up a pastry. "With me, what you see is what you get. Plain Destiny Dane."

"There's nothing plain about you." Fervent words blazed the truth, then a second's pause. "Or that name. What's your real name?"

The appetizer lodged like a golf ball in her throat, and she choked into the linen napkin. She drank half a glass of wine before she could finally breathe. Her head churned like the waves of the sea.

Concern darkened his gaze. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just went down the wrong way." Like his questioning. She clasped chilled hands. "Destiny Dane is my real name. Why would you think otherwise?"

“Most actresses use stage names.” He swirled his glass, but did not drink. “No offense, but Destiny Dane is clearly invented.”

Yes, it was. The resume writers truly had it out for her. The name sounded like an 80s stripper. “Maybe I’m just lucky to have a movie star name.” She tried to smile. “What about you, Mr. JulianStarcroft?”

He shrugged. “My fan club claims it’s my real name.”

“And what do you say?”

“It’s as real as Destiny Dane.”

She glared, and he softened. “I’m not accusing you of anything, Destiny. But your behavior makes no sense and your resume reads like a soap opera script. I’d like to help, but I need the truth. Are you in some sort of trouble?”

“Absolutely not,” she denied.

“That was passionate.”

“I really meant it.”

“Perhaps, or maybe you really want me to believe it. I’m sorry, I can tell you’re lying.”

Emotion surged. Of course, he could tell she was lying. They had some sort of connection, a bond that made deception impossible. She could resist simple attraction, yet this was far more powerful. He was all his fervent fans proclaimed him and more.

“Even you can’t deny it,” he said softly. “So why are you trying to?”

Because she wasn’t really an actress. Because she was an undercover operative on a mission. Because the fairy tale life of an actor’s girlfriend was just that – a fairy tale.

“I can’t talk about it.”

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His eyes narrowed. “Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t,” she said firmly. “My life is too complicated. Let’s forget this conversation ever happened and enjoy the evening.”

“I’m sorry.” He sat back. “I can’t just leave it at that.”

Not good. He’d mentioned searching for information on the Internet. If he looked long enough, he would discover a dozen red flags – maybe not who she was, but definitely who she wasn’t. “Are you planning to investigate me?”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

“Invasion of privacy,” she retorted. “Stalking laws. Common decency. I’d think you’d know all about that.”

“I do,” he countered, “but I’m not stalking you. I want to help.”

“I don’t need your help.” Not only didn’t need, but couldn’t afford. His investigation could blow her cover and put them both in danger. Although the criminal had never been violent before, who knew what would happen when the authorities closed in on him? How could she convince Julian she had nothing to hide? “You’ve got it all wrong.” She relaxed into her seat, lifting a potato wedge covered in melted cheddar. “I’m just an aspiring actress. I have no problems.”

Not quite true. Soon he would return to his world, back to the gorgeous starlets with their glamorous careers and matching millions. She might be a nice diversion, but in

the end he would remain true to his kind. That was the Julian Starcroft from the magazines, the larger-than-life actor who ruled social media. Just like the actor from her past, the one whose calls were harder and harder to ignore.

Only a tiny inner voice protested that Julian wasn't anything like that.

And that other actor? Perhaps he wasn't like that anymore either.

"If you have nothing to hide, do you mind if I ask a few personal questions?"

Not unless they had to do with field training. She smiled widely. "Of course not. You can ask me anything. I... hey!" She gasped as the floor beneath her shifted. The landscape beyond the boat drifted – no they were drifting. "Are we moving!?"

He sipped his wine. "It would appear so."

The chair clanged as Cheyenne shot up and ran to the side of the boat. She gripped the cool railing, gazed at a coast already some distance away. For a brief instant, she debated swimming for safety, but the water was inky black, swirling in dangerous depths. She pivoted back to Julian. The scoundrel was relaxing in his chair, munching on an appetizer. "Where are we going?" she hissed. "Are you kidnapping me? I could arrest you for this!"

Oh. My. Goodness.

His gaze sharpened. "You could arrest me?"

"I mean they'll arrest you. The cops will arrest you."

"You said you'd arrest me."

Yes, she had. “Well, maybe I will arrest you. A citizen’s arrest. Have you heard of those?”

The speculative light never left his eyes. “You asked for this date,” he finally said. “It’s just a boat ride.”

She released a low breath. He wouldn’t really be stealing her away. “Okay, fine, you’re not kidnapping me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “Which is it? Are you kidnapping me or not?”

He stood up, rising to his full 6’3 height. Silhouetted by the twilight sky, he appeared an avenging warrior. “Perhaps I am kidnapping you. Traveling to a world just for you and me, with no interruptions, no responsibilities, no obligations. No one else and no secrets.” His voice turned to a murmur. “Just us.”

Sensuality replaced anger, excitement replaced fear. Even as danger lurked, her body – and her heart – urged her to stay with him, to embrace the emotions he wrought. Around them, glistening waves played a night symphony, as they journeyed a path to the horizon.

Breathe. Stay calm. Relax. She was overreacting, as logic and reason rejoined her world. A movie star wouldn’t actually kidnap her. He was probably just taking her on a brief sightseeing cruise. “It’ll be a short ride, right? We’ll come back in an hour or two?”

He shrugged. “That or the kidnapping thing.”

Of course. She wasn’t a character in one of his rom-coms, where the hero steals the

heroine until she admits her love. They were just on a romantic evening out. “I’m sorry. I’m a little stressed.”

“Perfectly understandable,” he commiserated. “You should relax and enjoy yourself. Cruising is much more entertaining than sitting at port, and this is the perfect night for it.”

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Yes, it was. Sapphire waters stretched to the rapidly fading coastline, their gentle waves glittering like diamonds under the bright moonlight. A brilliant sunset lit the sky in wondrous glory, purples, blues and pinks highlighted by the fiery yellows and oranges of the setting sun. From afar, the beach looked like a picture postcard, its sand golden, emerald palm trees swaying amid the twinkling lights of faraway buildings. The sea air was salty and crisp, and its soft breeze cooled her as it whispered past. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is.”

She turned to Julian, but he wasn’t gazing at the sunset. “You’re not even looking.”

“Actually, my view is far more beautiful than sunsets or sunrises, diamond stars or vast waters.” His voice lowered. “Absolutely stunning.”

The wave of pleasure was powerful and all-consuming. “That’s unfair. How am I supposed to resist that?”

“You’re not.” He smiled without repentance. “I never promised fair play.”

No, he hadn’t, and she was weakening. She fought the urge to push closer, to kiss him, to share everything with him, here on the romantic ship under the velvet star-studded sky. She edged closer. One little kiss couldn’t hurt. She’d just give him a tiny peck on the lips and get it out of her system. She closed her eyes, leaned in.

A clanging sounded.

Cheyenne's lashes fluttered open as the waiter placed their salads on the table. Reality returned, the responsibilities and consequences of the real world beckoning. What was she doing? No way would they have stopped at one little kiss. She should be resisting him, not all over him like the Caesar on her salad. She needed to change the mood... now. "Tell me about your boat."

He lifted an eyebrow at the abrupt question, but nodded and answered. As they returned to their seats, he told her about all the wondrous places he'd sailed, the exotic ports he'd visited and interesting people he'd met. They continued to talk as the maincourse arrived, a savory pesto pasta dish with fresh vegetables and garlic, served with crusty garlic bread, creamy mashed potatoes and grilled zucchini. Flavor blossomed with each bite, and she ate until she was full and then some.

"That was wonderful." If only she could claim she'd had a horrible time, that she couldn't stand another moment in his presence, but he was like an ice cream sundae after a year without sugar. Irresistible.

Julian finished his third helping and folded his napkin on the table. "Save room for dessert." He laughed at her pained grimace. "Don't worry, we have time. We're not having dessert until the island."

Uh, what? "Did you just say island?"

Julian smiled and gestured behind him. And suddenly she realized that while she'd been eating, talking and occasionally imagining Julian naked, they'd reached an island, sprouting from the seas like the lost land of Atlantis. It was majestic and lush, with green vegetation, vibrant flowers and turquoise rivers. There was even a softly flowing waterfall, its melodic cadence chiming an ethereal tune. It would have been difficult to see such details by moonlight alone, but enough light emanated from the building's single structure to light half the island.

Calling it a “mansion” was far too diminutive. Castle – or maybe palace – far better suited the colossal structure so gorgeous it seemed a massive work of art. Five stories tall, endlessly wide, it boasted pure white bricks in sweeping arches and carved pillars. Covered in emerald ivy and sunshine yellow flowers, it was a storybook setting fit for a king, or a movie star. “What is this?”

“This—” Julian rose. “Is where we’re having dessert. I hope you like it.”

She liked it, beyond that, although she would never admit it. Every second he tempted her further into the fairy tale, but in this story, she had to resist. “Doesn’t a king own that or something?”

He winked.

“A king or...” She shook her head. “A man who lives like one. Don’t tell me you actually own that... castle.”

“All right.”

Relief rose. “So it’s not yours.”

“Actually, it is, but you said not to tell you.”

Relief edged away. “I suppose I should be grateful you don’t own the entire island.”

He hesitated, opened his mouth.

Relief hitched an Uber and left the country. “Don’t you dare say it!”

He smiled. “Time to disembark.”

With a gentleness that attested to the skilled crew, the boat barely rocked as it stopped next to a long pier. Cheyenne allowed Julian to take her arm as he led her down a short ramp and along the dock, followed by several crew members. When they reached the home, she stopped...

And stared.

She'd guessed a king owned the palace, and in actuality one would probably be envious of such a find. The home was even larger from close up, almost as impressive and intimidating as its owner. White pillars gleamed in the moonlight, their sides carved into intricate designs, while windows were plentiful and large, characterized by overflowing flower boxes. Towers rose high into the sky, with golden domed roofs and curved windows. It was pure elegance and regal luxury, yet somehow also welcoming and warm.

“Ready?”

Cheyenne hesitated, but then notched up her chin. She nodded.

Julian unlocked the door and disabled the security system. They entered a large circular foyer that rose four stories in height, pure white and the perfect background to the massive nautical paintings that adorned its walls. The foyer opened into a vast great room, with two golden railed, curving stairways leading to a second floor with many wide hallways, each with rows of polished wood doors. Several rooms could be seen from the foyer, including a dining room with a long cherry wood table, bedrooms that each eclipsed her small apartment and a spacious ballroom fit for a royal wedding.

Julian gestured to the dining room. "Wait for me in there. I'll be just a minute."

Cheyenne proceeded to the room, where a fifty-person table was already set with two covered golden place settings and a bottle of wine in a gleaming silver chiller. She sank down on one of the throne-like chairs as Julian spoke to the crew and an older couple she didn't recognize. After a minute, Julian and the others exchanged goodbyes. Everyone except the actor departed.

"Please tell me you didn't order a spaceship to take us to the moon," she teased when he returned. It faded as the door clicked shut behind the people. "Where are they going?"

He sat, picked up his napkin and smoothed it over his lap. "They'll be back. In the meantime, enjoy." He lifted the covers from both plates at the same time.

All thoughts of the boat (and everything that wasn't Julian) departed at the one thing

that was close to the star in deliciousness. The culinary masterpiece started with a thick piece of chocolate cake covered with velvety ganache. Creamy cheesecake followed, topped by a thick layer of chocolate fudge. A rich brownie and a drizzling of caramel completed the savory concoction.

Cheyenne picked up her fork, looked between Julian and the dreamy layer cake. Too delicacies, each more delicious for words. “If you’re trying to soften me up with the best dessert in the universe, it’s not going to work.” She stabbed a piece, somehow managing to get every layer in a single forkful, then took a bite. The rich flavor of dark chocolate exploded in her mouth, complemented perfectly by the sweet cheesecake and creamy caramel.

Julian scooped his own morsel of cake. “Are you sure it’s not working?”

Of course, it wasn’t. And she was going to tell him that as soon as she took another bite. But after that bite, she wasn’t quite ready to talk about it. And it wasn’t polite to leave her piece half finished, so she took another bite. She gave up the pretense as she took one bite after the next until she’d consumed the entire piece, every single crumb. She put down her napkin daintily. “See, it didn’t work.”

He’d already finished his cake. She hadn’t even noticed. “Actually,” he said putting down his napkin. “It worked perfectly.”

“How’s that?”

“Distraction.”

“What?” she asked, but his attention was no longer on her. Instead, he was gazing behind her, at a large glass window that overlooked the water. She pivoted and frowned. With nightfall, she couldn’t see much – just the dim outline of the coast, the water, the boat sailing away.

Wait – what?

“Why you little–” Cheyenne leapt from her seat and lunged to the front door. After a moment of fumbling with the lock, she opened it and ran to the dock as fast as she could.

It didn’t matter.

She stopped at the edge of the pier, her chest heaving, partly with exertion, partly with fury as her only escape cruised away. Julian came up directly behind her. “It’s too late. It’s already gone.”

He was right. The boat, which appeared large seconds ago, was rapidly fading into the darkness, way too far to reach or even hail. She looked upward, taking in deep breaths of the salty air. The stars twinkled, but they couldn’t help her now. “I can’t believe it. You really did it.”

“You actually kidnapped me.”

CHAPTER 14

Julian debated his plan for a long time, even made a pro and con list.

Pros:

Would get an uninterrupted week with Destiny, hopefully enough to discover her true identity.

Would reveal the potential for a permanent relationship.

He might never get another chance to crack the case that was Destiny Dane – or

whoever she really was.

Cons:

It was technically kidnapping.

Kidnapping was technically against the law.

One could go to jail for breaking the law (technically).

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In the end, he did it because he simply couldn't give up the opportunity. Of course, he wasn't going to make it appear like a kidnapping, but rather an unfortunate mistake that left them stranded together. He would even give her a way out, which she wouldn't take. So now she was his, at least for nine days. Maybe more. Much, much more.

Time to deal with the fireworks. "Isn't kidnapping overstating it?"

Her eyes flashed. "It's the very definition of kidnapping. Get that ship back here now."

He ignored her command. "You came at your own discretion."

"I came on a short sea tour, not a multi-day island retreat. Now call the captain and tell him to return immediately. We're leaving."

"You don't even know how long they'll be gone. For all you know, they could be returning tonight."

She took a deep breath. "Are they coming back tonight?"

"No."

"Tomorrow?"

"No."

“The next day?”

“No. And to answer your next few questions, no, no and no.” He grinned.

Her eyes blazed fire. Did she know how beautiful she was when riled up? “When are they coming back?” she gritted out.

“Well, we have to be at work next Monday.”

She gasped. “They’re not coming back for ten days?”

“Of course not. We need at least a night to prepare. They’ll be back in nine.”

She glared. “You are kidnapping me. The plan is over, because I’m not accepting it. You call for help this instant, or I’ll have you up on charges so quick your head will spin.”

He had no intention of calling anyone back, even though he could. Of course, she didn’t know that. “Are you sure? Most people would love an all-expenses paid vacation to an island paradise.”

“Sure, to Hawaii.”

“No problem. We can do that after filming.”

She ignored him, started looking around. “I need something to throw at you.”

He laughed. “Hawaii will definitely do you some good. As will this vacation.”

“I’m not going to Hawaii with you,” she ground out, “nor am I staying on this vacation. You get on the phone and call your ship back here. Now. Got it?”

He made a dramatic sigh. Too dramatic? Probably. “Okay, but I think you’re making a mistake.” He pivoted toward the house, stopped. Time to exercise those acting chops. “Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh?” Destiny repeated. “What do you mean uh-oh?”

“About the phones...” He let his voice trail off, even put some horror into it. Definitely Oscar worthy. “My main phone line isn’t exactly functional right now.”

Her eye twitched. “What does not exactly functional mean?”

“It doesn’t work.” That was actually true. His main phone system had gone down last week. He was still waiting for the technicians to come and repair it.

“You live on an island, and your phone doesn’t work?” She didn’t hide her incredulity – or disbelief. “You have no back-ups?”

Of course, he did – several actually. He wasn’t irresponsible enough to be on a deserted island with only a single phone system. He had multiple satellite phones, as well as other forms of communication. And, of course, there were two speed boats on the other side of the island. “Would I be acting like this if I had a backup phone system?” It wasn’t exactly lying. If she assumed it meant he didn’t have any backups, then that was really her mistake.

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“Well, you’re lucky I have my cell phone, otherwise you’d be on your way to a felony kidnapping charge.”

“Oh, you have a satellite phone? That’s lucky.”

“A satellite phone. No, of course no—” She clamped her mouth shut. “You don’t get service out here.” She tossed the phone back into her purse, took a deep breath. “And I don’t suppose you have a satellite phone?”

With all his travelling? Of course, he did. Again, multiple ones, just in case. “Not with me.” Again, not quite a lie. One was in the bedroom, one was in the living room, another was in the office.

She closed her eyes, opened them. “Let me get this straight. We’re stranded on an island with no way to contact the mainland and a boat that’s not returning for a week and a half. Is that correct?”

He smiled heartily.

She looked ready to commit her own felony. “What if there’s an emergency?”

Now to give her the perfect out – an option she wouldn’t take but which would prevent her from accusing him of blatant kidnapping. “Actually, I do have an emergency device that lets me contact the Coast Guard. It’ll be impossible to keep it a secret, of course. We’ll be on every news station within the hour. There will be helicopters, news crews, media boats, all those things. Of course, it might be a little challenging convincing them you’re just my personal assistant, but we can try. Since

I don't want to be accused of kidnapping, we might have no choice."

His reluctant guest clenched her fists, clearly fighting for control. Thank goodness she hadn't found something to throw at him. "That won't be necessary." She scowled. "I know you planned this."

Oh yeah, she did. She couldn't prove it, but she knew. Hopefully by the end of the trip, she'd forget about his little deception. Of course, if things really went downhill, he could always call for the boat to get them early, and she always had the option of contacting the Coast Guard.

So it wasn't really a kidnapping.

Just sort of.

She turned and started back to the house. "You better have a lot of that cake."

He smiled. He did.

"Strike! And a turkey. What a way to end the game." Cheyenne held her arms in the air, did one of those super-geeky fist pump motions and sat back down. She tried to tamp down her enthusiasm, but it didn't work. She was simply too happy.

Julian laughed. "Wow. Who would guess Ms. Excavator Falls not only liked bowling but played competitively?"

It was true. Her competitive streak extended to almost everything she did. Yet no matter how she surprised him, it couldn't compare to her surprise at her own mood, especially after her kidnapping. She simply couldn't help it.

She was having a great time.

Julian had been lying earlier. It wasn't obvious from his expression – he was an award-winning actor after all – but he had to be. Who lived on an island with only one form of communication? And what sort of emergency communication only worked with the Coast Guard? Undoubtedly that had been an excuse to give her a way out so he wouldn't technically be kidnapping her. If it were going to compromise her mission, she'd call his bluff, but her investigation couldn't progress with production suspended this week, and the captain would be furious if he found out. Staying was the best option.

She didn't have to have fun, however. Yet, it seemed she couldn't avoid it. She considered spending the week holed up in a bedroom, but in the end it just didn't make sense. Why punish herself? If she was stuck on the island for a week, she might as well have a little fun. But she wasn't having a little fun.

She was having a lot.

Even the reminder of her failed cover story couldn't stop the humor. “You didn't know bowling was the main criteria for Miss Excavator Falls?” she teased.

Julian laughed again. “No, I didn't. Maybe they should add it to the Miss America pageant.”

“I completely agree.” She took a sip of wild cherry sparkling water and sat back on the padded vinyl seat. “I still can't believe you have a bowling alley in your house.” Sure, it was only four lanes, but really – a bowling alley? “I was excited when I found a pinball machine at a yard sale, but now it seems kind of lacking.”

“What are you talking about? A pinball machine is exciting.” Julian took a swig of his beer. “I love old fashioned pinball games. In fact, I still play them.” He took a gleaming silver and white ball from the ball return, wound up and threw one straight down the center – too straight – and split it. He'd have to get the spare and then

another strike just to tie her. “Not that I have a lot of free time, but once in a while I get a break between projects. I prefer games to the television. Ironical for an actor, isn’t it?”

She was learning, and liking, more about him every day. “True, but I would’ve thought you’d have other pursuits.”

“Like what?” He smiled wolfishly. “What did you think I did in my spare time?”

“I don’t know. Lounge around while a harem of women peel grapes and fan you with huge feathers?”

He laughed and picked up the ball that had just returned. “That’s exactly what I do... while playing video games.”

She chuckled, then quieted while he set up his shot. He took several graceful steps and threw the ball. Just when it looked like it would miss, it hit the right pin at the very edge, sending it flying toward the left. They slammed together with a loud crack, and the spare was secured. He came back and held up his hand for a high five.

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And damn it, she gave him one.

He went right back to work, lifting the ball and hurling it at a speed that gave testament to his brute strength. She didn't have to look to know he'd rolled a strike. 196-196. A tie.

She held out her hand. "Good game." He took the offering, and then pulled her close and gave her a full kiss on the lips. She was dizzy by the time he released her. "You're not supposed to do that."

He moved closer, crowding her. "I rarely do as I'm supposed to."

If he wasn't playing fair, why should she? She gave him a kiss, only barely managing to pull away at the end. Not to be outdone, he immediately returned the kiss. And since she couldn't let him have the final say, naturally, she gave him another. By the time they were done, the world was spinning, her cheeks burned like a furnace, and everything tingled.

His grin was a little wicked and all satisfied. "Are you having fun?"

Far too much. She forced seriousness into her expression. "Not even a little." Maybe now would be a good time to escape, before he got ideas. Or realized she had ideas.

"Would you like to continue having no fun by playing pinball games?"

The excuse froze on her tongue. "Pinball games?"

“You said you enjoyed those. Interested?”

“Well, I should probably...”

“I have a dozen.”

She tried to say no, she really did. Unfortunately, the word yes emerged, and somehow it came with a smile. “I guess a few more minutes wouldn’t hurt.”

He’d manipulated her again. How could she take down hardened criminals but couldn’t resist the scheming of one hot movie star? He didn’t give her a moment to reconsider. He grasped her hand and led her through a series of wide hallways. Finally, they stood at the threshold of a large and dark room just off the indoor pool. With a wink, he disappeared into its confines. Then... it transformed into a neon wonderland.

The gleaming arcade took her back twenty years and a lifetime ago. Flashes of hot pink, yellow and orange spun in a dizzying array, topped by glittering mirror balls strung in asymmetrical waves. The pinball machines lit in a clinging, ringing and dinging symphony, their mechanical voices daring players to take a chance for a quarter. Teal carpeting with characters from classic video games lined the floors and walls, between overstuffed swivel recliners and giant orange beanbag sofas. Video games played introduction scenes of pixelated heroes, next to modern fare that included the newest games and even some virtual reality rides. Cheyenne did a three sixty to get the full view, ending at full-size air hockey, ping pong, billiards and foosball tables. The scent of popcorn and cotton candy flavored the air, from a bright snack area in the corner. “Did you rob a video game store?”

“Yes. When I’m not acting, I hold up arcades, trains and small bakeries.” He tapped her shoulder. “Are you going to threaten to arrest me again?”

She stiffened at the reminder of her unforced error. “Of course, I’m going to arrest you. Acitizen’s arrest. You’re under arrest for grand theft video game.”

He laughed. “I hate to disappoint you, but I didn’t actually steal an arcade. There was an arcade going out of business near my studio. They were looking to unload everything, so I made them a decent offer.”

“You’re a bargain hunter?” Cheyenne teased. “Good for you.”

“Just because I have money doesn’t mean I throw it away. I’d rather spend it on important things.”

Memories of Julian’s charity work flashed. “Like helping people in need?” She softened her voice, and her stance. “You seem to do that a lot.”

He shrugged, turned away. “I don’t do much.”

Yes, he did. He donated millions, and even more importantly, he gave his time. In addition to volunteering at the children’s hospital, he was involved with a number of charities and causes, including the Boys and Girls Club and Special Olympics. Anyone who had money could spend it, but time was precious. “You do a lot more than you admit.”

Now he seemed almost embarrassed. “What do I have to do to get you to threaten to arrest me again?”

Practically anything. “How about we try some games instead?”

He led her to a pinball machine, a fast action game based on an older superhero movie. The silver ball streaked like liquid lightning, its play almost as addictive as the man next to her. After several rounds, they switched to another machine, then another

and then half a dozen more. They spent the next two hours at the arcade, laughing and playing like carefree teenagers, as the real world faded into a distant dream. They played cheerleader for each other, clapped the wins and booed the losses. Julian gave her seven more congratulatory kisses, but hey, who was counting?

She gave him nine.

Finally, her eyes grew heavy, and the yawns emerged one after the next. “It’s been a long day.” She wrapped up another pinball game, her first and her favorite. “That’s it for me.”

Julian finished his own game. In perfectly natural motions, he took her hand and started toward the hallway. “But a good day, right?”

Actually, it had been a great day. She hadn’t had so much fun since... well, their last date. And before that, their first date. But before then, she couldn’t honestly remember. “It was terrible. Truly awful.”

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He traced her back, turning her muscles into liquid heat. “I’m sorry to hear that. You did look rather devastated while you laughed. Did you desperately wish to be doing something else?”

“Oh yes. I’d much prefer to be sitting home doing laundry.”

He laughed. “How could I take you away from such excitement?”

Ironically, that’s exactly what she’d be doing if it wasn’t for this trip. “You owe me for interrupting the joy of Friday night laundry.”

“Do I?” His hand tightened on hers. It was large and warm and sparked heat throughout her entire body. “What can I possibly do to make it up to you?”

A million ideas formed, none of which involved a stitch of clothing. By his darkening regard, he realized it. “Come,” he murmured, “I want to show you something.”

“Now wait right there, buddy. I’ve already seen something, and while I’ll admit it’s impressive – okay, really spectacular – I’m not–”

“Not that, silly.” He silenced her with a kiss. “Something else.” He led her down several cavernous hallways with cathedral ceilings and jewel-toned carpets, past endless rooms heralded by exquisite entrances, until they finally came to a pair of oversized oak doors, carved with a starry night sky. They opened soundlessly, and he gestured her through.

For a moment, it wasn’t clear if they had ventured outside or remained inside, until

she realized it was a glorious combination of the two. The ceiling soared three stories high, domed with textured paintings that extended down intricately carved walls and framed by gilded crown molding. A four-poster bed rose from the middle of the room, a centerpiece to grand cherry wood furniture that included an overstuffed couch, an antique desk and a cozy round table for two. A huge flat screen television took up most of a wall. Yet that fourth side held the room's true magnificence. Hidden doors opened, creating a portal into the majestic night.

Breathtaking. No other word could describe nature's bounty. Diamond sand glittered under the starry sky, shimmering as it kissed the midnight blue waters of the vast ocean. The cool night air was fragrant with lilies and dew, as captivating as a siren from a sailor's tales, under a brilliant full moon. Sparkling light caressed the gentle waves, illuminating golden grains and pearly shells.

"This is why I bought the island." Julian came to stand next to her. "It's the most peaceful place on the planet."

Yes, it was. For a man whose every movement was watched, followed and recorded, it was a heady boon. "You must appreciate the privacy."

"I do." His eyes reflected amber starlight. "It's nice to have a place that is just mine, where I don't have to worry about acting the perfect man. Yet sometimes, it's too quiet."

"Don't tell me the world-famous Julian Starcroft gets lonely." Cheyenne nudged a solid bicep. "With a million fans, how is that even possible?"

The jest brought a brief smile, but it soon faded. "The fans want the movie star, the larger-than-life man with the perfect life. They don't actually know me." He looked away. "You can be lonely even surrounded by people."

So very true. Even her job could be isolating. Positions like hers were dominated by men, and although her colleagues tried, sometimes she felt like an outsider, even among those who knew her true identity. “When you put so much into your work, it’s hard to find people who appreciate you without it.”

“Exactly.” He edged closer. “Especially when you’re pretending to be someone you’re not.”

Cheyenne stiffened, swallowed. She backed up, breaking the contact. “Everyone plays a role. It’s part of human nature.”

“Yet if you look hard enough, the façade disappears,” he murmured. “You cannot hide the true person.”

Had he seen the true her, just as she’d seen the real him? Not Destiny Dane, not the actress, but Cheyenne Kirk? “Just because you can look doesn’t mean you should. You don’t like others scrutinizing your life. Others feel the same, even if they’re not movie stars.”

He shrugged. “I can’t help what I see.”

No, he couldn’t. And just like he saw beneath her mask, she saw beneath his. He wasn’t the slick, woman-of-the-week movie star social media touted. Deep down, he was a down-to-earth, modest guy. A great guy. The type of guy she could fall for.

The type of guy she was falling for.

But she couldn’t let that happen. Too much stood in the way, too many reasons why it was impossible. Even if he were willing to overlook her subterfuge, she’d still have to give up the work she loved. As soon as they were romantically linked, there’d be enough publicity to compromise her entire undercover career. Even if it never

progressed past a few dates, the damage would be irreversible.

The wind picked up, tousling her hair. The perfect opportunity to change the subject swept in. “What do you do when it rains?”

“Like now?” The rumble of thunder sounded in the distance, and he retrieved a remote control from the marble nightstand. It glowed neon blue when he pressed several buttons, then a humming noise sounded as three-story high glass panes emerged from either side and slowly came together to form a glass wall over the opening. Seconds later, the first fat raindrops splattered against the windows. Another minute and rain pelted against the windows in a rapid staccato.

It should have been jarring, yet the rapidly falling water droplets only made it cozier next to the muscular man. “It’s lucky you were here. Your room would’ve gotten soaked.”

“Actually, it’s usually closed.” He replaced the remote on the nightstand. “I opened it earlier so you’d get the full effect when you walked in. Plus, there are sensors in the carpet by the window. If it gets wet, it’ll automatically shut.”

“That’s smart since the weather changes so quickly in Florida.” She frowned. “We’re still in Florida, right? You’re not actually king of this island, are you?”

He laughed. “I may be a lot of things, but not actual royalty.”

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She gave a face, then jumped as a piece of softball sized hail crashed against the window. She stepped back, pressing flush against a wall of muscle. Before she could escape, Julian captured her, pulling her close. “Don’t worry, that’s hurricane rated impact glass. And even if there was a hurricane, I’d keep you safe.”

She was anything but safe with him. “I wasn’t worried.” Except suddenly she was. Not of the rain, not of hail, lightning or thunder, not of any sort of weather. No, the tempest she was afraid of was right before her, studying her with darkening eyes. In their private, cozy chamber, safe and warm from the storm outside, she was anything but safe.

It was dangerous.

It was exciting.

Attraction flared like lightning in the pitch-black sky. She must resist it, must resist him. Yet under his smoldering gaze, her resistance blew away like sand in the storm. When he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, she was lost.

His mouth was warm and supple, his body hard and muscular, and he tasted delicious. She pushed into him, but it wasn’t enough. Then her feet were no longer on the ground as he lifted her, striding toward the bed like a warrior with his prize. She sank into the plush mattress, its softness enveloping her as he came down next to her. She tugged on his shirt, telling him without words what she wanted, what she needed, no matter how unwise.

But this time he didn’t let her undress him. Instead, he pulled back, pushing himself

above her. “I’m sorry.” An unwavering gaze betrayed nothing, yet an edge turned his tone to a quiet rumble. “This can’t progress any further, at least not yet.”

“What?” Fervent need surged, urging her to resolve anything and everything to return to the delicious intimacies. “You don’t want this?”

“I want this more than words can define, but I can’t. You see...”

“I’m blackmailing you.”

CHAPTER 15

Julian forced his expression to remain stoic as Destiny’s lit in undisguised confusion. “Blackmailing me?” She looked down at herself, spread out beautiful and oh so tempting on his bed. “If you didn’t notice, that’s not necessary.”

No, it wasn’t, and there was nothing he wanted more than to make love to her. Only it couldn’t happen, not if he wanted more than a simple affair. She was going to be astonished – hell, he was and he’d planned it – but it was his best chance. “Actually it’s the other way around. I don’t think we should make love.”

How he managed to keep a straight face, he had no idea.

She scooted back. “You don’t? Are you serious? We must have some serious signal crossing because—”

“No, I want to do this. Believe me, I really, really, really, re... um, I want to do this.”

She relaxed, a smile of feminine satisfaction playing on her lips. “Then what’s the problem? I’m supposed to be the voice of reason, but even I don’t have to ability to stop right now. What are you blackmailing me for? And with what?”

“Perhaps blackmailing is the wrong word, but I don’t think we should be intimate. That is, not unless you admit the truth.”

Her gaze immediately turned wary. “The truth?”

“The truth about how you feel. The truth that this is more than simple lust. The truth that it’s not impossible for it to continue.”

Her expression shuttered. She moved back, away from him, away from the attraction she couldn’t deny. “You’re wrong.”

Something was holding her back, and it had nothing to do with feelings. The emotion burning in her eyes betrayed her. “Then what is it?” he asked quietly. “Why can’t we explore it? What’s stopping you from admitting the truth?”

“Everything!” she suddenly shouted, her stalwart control slipping. “I can’t because of who you are, but more importantly, because of who I am!” She clamped her mouth shut, her eyes opened wide. She’d said too much.

He immediately assumed offense. “What do you mean who you are?”

She hesitated, no doubt trying to prevent another impulsive outburst. When she spoke, her voice was almost robotic. “You know who I am: Destiny Dane, Miss Excavator Falls, aspiring actress and personal assistant. And soon I’ll take another project, and you’ll move on to your next blockbuster and starlet.”

He tightened. “You have this preconceived notion of how I should be. Did something happen, some experience that led you to believe all actors were shallow and insincere?”

She said nothing.

He stayed still for a moment, then wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She gasped. “What are you doing?”

“Going to sleep.”

“After all this, you think I’m going to let you hold me?”

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“I hope so.” And he truly did. Even if they weren’t intimate, he loved the feel of her in his arms. It was simply right, like she belonged there. Like she belonged to him.

She bristled, but surprisingly didn’t demand her immediate release. He waited a minute, and then a few more. He might’ve given up ecstasy, but he had no regrets. If it made her see the possibilities, it would be well worthwhile.

She sighed softly, shifting in his arms. Her breathing turned even and deep, her chest rising and falling in gentle rhythm. Satisfaction rose. She might act tough and hard, but underneath it all there was a softness to her. She trusted him to take care of her while she slept.

Hopefully his plan would work. He had just over a week to persuade her to admit the truth, because once work resumed it would be all but impossible. He pulled her even closer, smiling when she gave a little mewl of satisfaction. Tomorrow she would have an even harder time resisting him.

He would make sure of it.

Cheyenne awoke to a cool breeze and the sounds of birds in morning song. She snuggled closer to the source of heat under the vegan down blanket. The band of warmth surrounding her tightened.

Wait – what band of warmth?

Or rather whose?

She shot up, or rather she tried, but the arm tightened and prevented it. “Julian!” she hissed. “Wake up!”

His response: pull her a little closer.

Every sense became overloaded with unfulfilled desire, as vibrant light illuminated the world, brightest at the open portal. Wait – the open portal? “I know you’re awake. You opened the windows.”

“Did I?” The fully awake voice held no remorse. “I suppose I’m caught.”

“Let. Me. Go.”

“Never.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Mind,” he added. “Never-mind.”

Only that’s not what he’d planned to say, and certainly not what he meant. An unbidden shiver made taut muscles quiver. “Are you planning on letting me go?”

“I’m considering it, but leaning toward no.”

“And I’m leaning toward a charge of false imprisonment.”

He finally let her go, but not before bringing her closer for a good morning embrace. And, damn, she enjoyed it. “Don’t get any ideas,” she warned. “You were right yesterday to stop our extracurricular activities.” No, he wasn’t. “Since I’m not giving in to your so-called blackmail, we’ll never have to worry about that again.” Yeah, right. It would be a miracle if she made it past noon.

“Sure,” he said with the ease of a man who knew he’d already won. “Ready to get started?”

Oh, she was ready all right. She’d start with his neck, then his chest, then lower... She licked her lips, stopped her thoughts. Noon was seeming optimistic.

“Would you like a tour of the island?”

“That sounds great!” She jumped at the distraction, a little too enthusiastically, perhaps.

He grinned. “I’m glad you like the idea. Breakfast is bagels, cream cheese and fruit, and there are picnic lunches in the fridge. It’s a pretty small island so we shouldn’t have any trouble walking it.”

“Sounds good.” Somehow, she managed to temper her voice as she slowly rolled out of bed, accidentally brushing against Julian. She stretched, annoyingly well rested after sleeping in his arms all night. “What a coincidence you told me to bring extra clothes, almost as if you knew we’d be stuck on this island.”

“Isn’t it?” He smiled broadly.

“You have no guilt whatsoever, do you?”

“Not the slightest.”

She couldn’t stop a small laugh. “All right then, let’s go check out this island prison... I mean paradise.”

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“After you, my prisone... I mean guest.”

Cheyenne travelled to the guest room he had given her, which had been used little. It would get use tonight, she promised. She changed into khaki shorts and a lavender scoop neck shirt with tiny flower embellishments and wispy cap sleeves. Her hair was pulled into a simple ponytail, with ringlets escaping down the sides. After a trip to the restroom, she donned her hiking boots and set out toward the dining room.

Breakfast turned out nicer than expected, with bagels that came from a famous Miami bakery, juicy grapes, freshly squeezed orange juice and the sweetest strawberries she'd ever tasted. She had a huge poppy seed bagel, toasted to perfection and covered with smooth chive cream cheese. Once they finished eating, Julian grabbed a large paper bag from the fridge, and they departed for their walk.

The island might have been relatively small, but it didn't seem so as they meandered through the lush natural world. They wound their way between tall palm trees and flower-adorned vines, over St. Augustine grass paths and under brilliant pink and violet bougainvilleas. Fluffy squirrels, dappled rabbits and emerald lizards scurried in the brush, while colorful parrots, blue birds and sparrows flew among the trees. Cheyenne hopped over a miniature brook. “This is lovely.”

Julian pushed aside leaves as big as him to let them to pass. “And there's only two bears.”

Cheyenne halted.

He winked. “Just kidding.”

She grimaced. “The joke’s going to be on you when you discover a bear stowed away on the boat.”

He only laughed and grasped her hand.

As they walked, Julian pointed out a variety of plants, sharing his vast knowledge of the local flora and fauna. By the time they reached a small clearing with a sparkling, pristine lake, she’d all but attended a guided nature tour. “How did you learn about all this? Wait, let me guess. In addition to being a world-famous actor, you’re also a noble prize winning scientist.”

“Of course. I’m also a Supreme Court judge, quarterback for the Miami Dolphins and President of the United States. And, on the side, I’m an undercover spy.”

She stumbled.

He caught her before she could fall. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I got caught on a branch.” Or simply broke when he inadvertently mentioned her true profession.

His concern warmed her, as he moved closer. “What about you? Any big roles I should know about?”

She shrugged. “I’m at least one of those.”

“Obviously.” He grinned. “I’m not actually a botany expert. A friend of mine is, however, and he shared his knowledge during a get-together.”

A get-together, as in a guys’ retreat or something that involved ladies? Of course, it really was none of her business. She shouldn’t care, and most certainly shouldn’t ask.

“The island gets a lot of use.” He relocated a branch in her path. “It’s a great place to bring my family and friends. Of course, I only allow people I trust. The last thing I need is a hidden camera at the tiki hut.”

Cheyenne nodded absently.

“What is it?” A slow, leisurely smile formed. “Do you want to know if I bring other women here?”

“Of course not.” She flushed. “I mean, that’s none of my business. You could bring a hundred ladies here, a thousand even...”

“A million?”

“A million. It’s your island after all.”

The smile widened into a full grin. “As ideal as this place is for a romantic getaway, I’ve never felt the need – or desire – to bring another woman here. You’re the first.”

The satisfaction was unbidden, strong and impossible to ignore. She glanced away. “It’s none of my business. I was just curious how you used it.”

He brushed his fingers under her chin, softly caressing the sensitive skin. His smile was soft and warm. “I’m glad you care.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but the lie wouldn’t form. She gestured toward the picnic basket. “So what’s on the menu?”

He smiled, but allowed the distraction. “Actually, I’m not sure. My housekeeper prepared it.”

She remembered the older couple from her arrival. “That’s the woman I saw leaving the island when we came?”

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“That’s right. She and her husband take care of the place when I’m not here. It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement – the island is watched over, and they get a nice place to live.” He opened the bag and brought out two long subs. He gave them each one, then pulled out half a dozen platters containing various salads, fresh fruits and cookies. He handed her a hardy paper plate, utensils and a bottled water.

Cheyenne wet her lips. “Looks great.”

“It should taste good, too. My housekeeper doubles as a chef, and she gets fresh food from the mainland once a week.”

She bit into the sandwich and sighed at the flavorful delight. The sub was overstuffed with fresh vegetables, cheeses and a variety of sauces, artfully arranged for a colorful display. “This is delicious.” She patted her face with a napkin. “It’s like she just picked the vegetables.”

“She probably did. There’s a vegetable garden on the other side of the house.” He took a bite of his own sub. “We share the produce with the mainland when we’re not here.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, finishing both sandwiches. Afterwards they dined on pasta and potato salads and sweet lemon cookies. Cheyenne was more than full when she placed down her napkin. “Once again, my compliments to the chef. Please thank your housekeeper for me.” Mischief sparked. “Although if you want a little spice next time, I know just the one—”

“Not in a million years.”

She laughed. For a moment, they sat in comfortable silence, overlooking the crystal cool waters of the brook. Despite the welcome shade of the tree canopy, the day had grown warm, and the water was pure and inviting. “Do you swim here?”

“Every chance I get.” He gestured toward the bank. “Interested in a little dip?”

“I wish I could, but I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

“That’s okay.” His grin turned wolfish “Actually, that’s great. I’ve already seen your secrets, multiple times if you recall. Shall I prove it? There’s the cutest little beauty mark on your inner thigh, on the very upper part. If you’d like, I can show you...”

He leaned in, and she gave a hard shove. He didn’t know all her secrets. “Even if you’ve seen everything, we shouldn’t do it again, as you so wisely decreed yesterday.”

His smile was all wicked as he moved back. “Afraid you’ll give in to temptation if we swim naked?”

Precisely. Absolutely. Winner, winner, chicken dinner. “Definitely not.”

“Too bad.” He nodded at the sparkling waters. “There’s nothing like a cool swim on a warm afternoon. Want to play a game instead?”

Relief, disappointment and no small amount of surprise narrowed her eyes. He’d given in far easier than expected. “A game sounds fun.”

He removed a deck of cards from the basket. “Poker?”

“Sure.”

Although her mind stayed on swimming... well really on Julian swimming... well really on Julian swimming naked, the card game proved enjoyable. They played a dozen rounds, each winning about half. They talked, laughed and joked, alternating dealer duties. After he'd lost a particular close hand, Julian shuffled the deck in his hands. "Too bad you didn't have anything riding on that last round. Want to add something to make it interesting?"

She chuckled and shook her head. "My paycheck is missing most of your zeros. I like to hold on to what I got."

"How about we wager something else?"

"Like what?" She waved at the lush, natural surroundings. "Coconuts?"

"Actually, I was thinking of something more clothing-like."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Nope."

"You really expect me to play strip poker with you?"

"It would solve the bathing suit problem." He winked. "We could go for that dip you've been craving."

"Yeah, but there's still the 'we'll be naked' problem."

His expression showed he didn't think it was a problem. "What if I make the stakes worth your while?"

She bit back the no, proceeded cautiously, "What sort of stakes? Your reward is

pretty obvious.”

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“Playing definitely has its advantages,” he admitted, “but I want more.”

What he wanted was obvious. And damn it, she wanted it just as much. Yet she couldn’t give in. “I. Am. Not. Betting. That.”

He laughed. “I never dreamed of asking you to gamblethat. I’m the one who stopped us yesterday, remember?” He grimaced. “However, if you’re ready to admit...”

“Don’t say it.” She raised her hand. “If you’re looking for a confession, the answer is still no. Not that there’s a confession to make.”

He clearly didn’t believe the lie. “How about we make it simple? If I win, we go on another date.”

Another date? She might not make it through this one. “Our first date was one night, our second was a weekend and this one is a week and a half. If we go out again, it’ll last a month.”

“Good point. We should probably plan it for after production finishes.”

“Don’t you dare—”

“Fine. We’ll make it a normal one-night date. If you want to make it longer, I won’t stop you, but I’ll try not to plan any accidental plane trips to Italy. Although it’s lovely this time of year. Have you been to Venice?”

“Julian.”

“Of course, to get you there, I’m going to need your real name. For customs and everything. What is it again?”

She glared. “You already know my real name.”

“Destiny Dane isn’t your real name. You’re lying.”

About so many things. “Why are you so sure my name isn’t Destiny Dane?”

“Why are you so afraid to tell me the truth?” he countered. “What are you hiding?” He paused, yet she remained silent. His tone turned lower, yet no less powerful. “I wish you would trust me. I can’t stand back while you may be in trouble. I will discover the truth, even if I have to find out on my own.”

Cheyenne’s throat dried. He was no longer hinting. Hewasplanning to investigate her.

“So why don’t you tell me now?” His expression bespoke fierce intelligence, pure power and raw challenge. “Who are you really?”

CHAPTER 16

“Who are you really?”

The words echoed in Cheyenne’s mind, whispering like the breeze among the water lilies. She couldn’t admit the truth now, on a deserted island with no chance of escape. Her only chance was to change the subject, but what could possibly distract him? A splash chimed, from crystal waters. Perhaps... “What do I get if I win?”

He lifted an eyebrow, and for a moment it seemed he would continue the questioning. Yet instead he replied, “What do you want?”

So many things. Yet most she could never have, should never even want. She took a moment to compose herself, consider the potential prize. She could demand he not investigate her, yet that would only raise his suspicions, and he was unlikely to agree. There was something, however, that would remove the pressure, at least temporarily. “I want to go home.”

Except she didn’t – not really. She wanted to stay, to enjoy this majestic island vacation with this captivating man. Yet every minute she fell stronger for the star who could never be hers. If given the chance to leave, she had to take it.

His lips turned down. “The Coast Guard can get you home anytime you want.”

“You know I’d never call them. I don’t want to attract attention, and I believe you could find an easier way if you tried. You’re way too smart to leave yourself without communication – or a means to leave.” She dared him to deny it. “Those are my terms. You want another date, you’ll have to risk this one.”

He didn’t hesitate. “I’ll take it.”

He’ll take it? Just like that? That was easier than she imagined. It really was a lopsided deal, after all – he was risking an entire week for one night. Could there be a reason?

Julian shuffled and dealt the cards. A full house right off the bat. She tried to keep her poker face straight amidst her luck, hoping it worked better than her clearly lackluster acting one. He exchanged a few cards while she kept what she had, and in the end her hand easily beat his two pair.

“I guess you won this one.”

“I guess I did.” Now she didn’t hide her smile, brought on solely by the fact that she

was one step closer to getting home and not at all because a hot movie star was about to take off his shirt. Realistically, if she could skip that part, she would.

Well, maybe not.

He reached down to the hem of his shirt and grasped the smooth edge. She licked her lips as he brought it up, up, up...

To reveal another shirt.

He smiled.

She growled.

He smiled wider.

The burgundy t-shirt stretched taut across his muscles, yet still seemed a little bulky. She blinked. "Are you wearing multiple shirts?"

As one of the world's leading actors, he could have easily portrayed nonchalant innocence. He could've come up with some reasonable explanation, something that sounded plausible. He wouldn't have convinced her, of course, but he could've made the effort. He didn't. "I was worried I'd get a chill."

She wiped the sweat covering her brow. "Just out of curiosity, would you estimate the temperature at eighty degrees?"

He shrugged. "Probably closer to ninety."

"I see. And you really thought you'd get cold?"

“Not even a little.”

Cheyenne closed her eyes. So that’s why he’d been so eager to accept her proposal. He’d orchestrated the whole thing. With twenty layers of clothing, he didn’t have a chance of losing.

Which meant she didn’t have a chance of winning.

“How about this? Just to be fair, I’ll take off the rest of my clothing when you lose so we can go swimming together.”

Totally ignoring the chorus of “Hip hip hooray!” her girl parts were currently chanting, Cheyenne fought to appear unaffected. “You do realize this is cheating, don’t you?”

He put a hand to his chest, the look of wounded innocence so comical she snorted. “Me? Cheat? Never.”

Perfect. She could refuse to play, but then she’d still be stuck on the island for the week. She might as well proceed on the slight chance she actually beat him. How many shirts could he be wearing?

“Three,” he suddenly said, and she realized she’d spoken out loud. “Just in case we get a sudden cold front.”

In Florida? This time of year? “Let’s get this over with.”

“That eager to see me naked?”

As a matter of fact, yes.

Cheyenne got lucky and disposed of another of Julian's shirts without losing a hand. From there, things went seriously downhill. She'd been dealt a terrible hand, without a pair or face card in sight. She exchanged most of them, only slightly heartened by his grimace. He gave her new cards, but she fared no better.

He noticed her frown. "Not too good, huh?"

"That's an understatement." She revealed her cards. "High ten."

His worried expression transformed into a slow smile. "High Jack."

"No way."

He showed her his cards, and she threw hers down. "What bad luck."

His eyes twinkled. "Depends on your point of view." The levity disappeared as he turned serious, powerful and completely in command. His voice came as smooth as amber whiskey. "Are you ready to take off your clothes, Destiny?"

It was like the first time he watched her undress, except this time there was no acting and no audience. The intimacy was real, the desire unhidden. Unlike Julian, she was wearing only a single shirt and a single pair of shorts. Of course, she had on undergarments, but again only one set. That left only a pair of socks and sneakers. The choice was obvious. She removed a shoe.

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His gaze never left hers. “A disappointment, but maybe for the best. The anticipation makes it even more exciting, like unwrapping a present.”

Cheyenne forced false bravado. “Are you that sure I’ll lose?”

“I’m certain of a lot of things when it comes to you. Like who you are, and who you aren’t. Like the feelings you hide and the truth you can’t ignore.

He didn’t know the truth – yet. She forced a nonchalant smile. “Are you going to talk all day or deal the cards? You may get heat exhaustion if you don’t hurry. Unless we get a sudden snowstorm, of course.”

“Now that you mention it, I am feeling a bit hot.” He dealt the next hand, and this time she had a decent spread. When she finished, she had three kings. It wasn’t enough. “Three aces?!”

He nodded, gave a Cheshire Cat grin. “The shirt?”

“The sneaker,” she said firmly.

“You know you’re just delaying things.”

Yes, she did. And unfortunately, now it was his turn to score back-to-back to back wins. She lost both socks. The next item would mean exposure.

He won it.

“You seem to be out of footwear.”

Yes, she was. If only she had more time, more options. Was there something else she could remove, something to delay things just a little longer? She gripped the bottom of her shirt with clammy hands, stopped as a jangling sounded. Of course. She smiled as she removed one of her earrings. “Will you hold this for me?” she asked sweetly.

He gave a mock groan. “Isn’t that cheating?”

She glared. “You want to talk about cheating?”

“Perhaps not.”

The jewelry gave her freedom, along with an actual chance. By fortune or fate, she’d worn a dozen bangle bracelets. It would not make up for all his layers, but at least it gave her hope.

Or not, she thought half an hour later when she’d lost every single one. She should’ve predicted he’d be wearing multiple layers of socks. Even worse, he started removing the socks before taking off his last shirt. After his subterfuge, she deserved an unimpeded view of that chiseled chest. When he took off his tenth pair, she crossed her arms. “How many?”

“A dozen.”

She gaped. “How do they even fit?”

“They’re very thin. Kind of useless, really, except for the occasion.”

“Did you buy them just for today?”

“Naturally.” The cat grin was back. “Are you afraid you’re going to lose?”

“Yes!”

It was a well-founded fear. Within minutes, she’d made it through the rest of her jewelry, including several rings and a necklace. When he won another hand, she had no choice. It was either her shirt or her shorts.

She thought he would make some sort of comment, a joke or a jest, but instead he just looked at her intently, waiting for her to make her decision. She chose the shirt. Not needing (another) slow undressing, she took hold of it and brought it over her head in one smooth motion. His gaze pinned her as he took in the breasts straining against pale pink lace.

“Next round.”

They played quickly and she won, finishing up his socks, thank goodness. Still he had his shirt, his shorts and who knew how many undergarments. Compared with her three remaining articles of clothing – bra, shorts and panties – her chances were dismal.

He won the next round, and without a moment’s hesitation she scooted out of her shorts and waved for him to deal. Best get it over with quickly so she could dive into those cool waters and swim far, far away. She held back a shiver when he won the next round. Why was she so nervous when he’d already seen her? Hell, she’d been ready to show him everything again yesterday. But this was different. He wanted her to admit it was more than just a fling. What if the temptation was too much? If she gave in, it was akin to admitting her heart was involved.

He cleared his throat. She reached around to undo her bra, sighing slightly as it loosened and freed her. Exposed her. She looked down as she slipped it off, but

couldn't miss his quick intake of breath.

“Possibly the last hand.”

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Masochistically, she hoped so. With him still wearing so much, she didn't have a chance. Which is why she released a breath of relief when minutes later he revealed four aces.

He misinterpreted her relief. "You have a better hand?"

"No, two pair." She showed him her cards.

His eyes darkened. His biceps flexed. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

And suddenly she wasn't in such a rush anymore.

She stood up. So did he.

"Well," he said.

"Well," she said.

"Are you ready?"

Not even a little bit. It was like that first day, when she stood before him as he prepared to expose her. She didn't want to perform a strip tease, and yet she could barely move. She slipped her fingers inside the elastic of her panties, tracing their soft edges. She pulled slowly, slowly, slowly, avoiding his gaze as she brought them to her ankles and finally stepped free. She looked back up.

It was a mistake.

His eyes smoldered fire. It paralyzed her, excited her, made her long for more. But she couldn't give in – she had to escape. “Time for my swim.” Her voice emerged hoarse and raspy. She pushed herself to move, and suddenly adrenaline usurped control.

She took a swift step, but he shot out his hand, gripping her, branding her, possessing her. “Not so fast.” He towered above her, fully dressed while she stood naked and exposed. The passion in his eyes intensified as he took in every single inch. “You can't leave without protection.”

Her heart stumbled. “We don't need...” She stopped when she saw the oblong tube. Sunscreen.

“You don't want to get burned, do you?” He touched her shoulder, brushing by her breast. “Especially with so much exposed.”

Now she shivered, as if a true snowstorm thundered around them. It brought pinprick goosebumps along her entire body. “We won't be out long.”

“The sun is strong this time of year, and you have sensitive skin.” He ran his hand along her arm, then down to her bare stomach. “I would know.”

Yes, he did. They had been staying under trees and in the shade, but the sun cast unfiltered rays on the sparkling water. Just a few minutes in the scorching heat would redden her skin, and an hour would create a bona fide burn. She reached for the tube.

“No.” He pulled it away. “Let me.”

She should demand to do it herself, but he opened the lid with a soft pop, pouring the creamy white liquid onto his hand. He smoothed it onto her, using both hands to rub skin that already burned for his touch. He worked his way up along her arms, then

down her shoulders and along the sides of her body. Perspiration engulfed her as he massaged her stomach, stopping just above her auburn curls. Then he started from her feet and traveled ever-so-slowly up her legs. She didn't resist when he gently parted her legs so he could access her inner thighs.

He moved up and traced her breasts. Now she moaned, as he circled the two globes, caressed them, weighed them, brushed his lips against them. The world went from hot to scorching to unbearable. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

"You know I'm not," she breathed the shuddering truth. "What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing. This is beyond our power." He stood up, matching her naked body inch by inch. "Can you feel it?"

Yes. She fought for control, strove for discipline, yet it wasn't enough. No matter what the cost, she had to have him. She pulled at the bottom of his shirt. He growled a purely male sound of satisfaction, but stopped her. "Not yet. Not before you say it."

"Please, Julian," she whispered. "We both want this. Let it happen, just like before. No expectations, no strings."

He threaded her fingers, preventing her from lifting his shirt. "It's already beyond a casual fling, and you know it. You just have to admit it."

"I can't," she hissed. Darkening eyes demanded the truth, yet what she wanted didn't matter. The attraction, the desire, the feelings couldn't matter. "It can never be anything more."

"You still haven't explained why, although I suspect it has something to do with your secret. Right, Destiny?" He folded his arms. "Since you don't want to talk about feelings, how about we discuss your secrets instead? Like who you really are." He

stepped forward, brushing against her. “Your past makes no sense because Destiny Dane doesn’t exist. Can you explain that?”

No, she could not. She had to find an escape. Her gaze trailed to the cool blue waters. Perhaps there was a way to stop the questioning and get what she really wanted. “I admit it.”

That stopped him... for five seconds. “Admit what?” he asked cautiously.

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“Admit this is more than just a fling. My heart....” She paused. “Some feelings may be involved.”

He looked surprised – no shocked – by her admission. Of course, he had been expecting a confession of a different type, but that was impossible. She would sacrifice her mission if she exposed her identity. Now she was just sacrificing her heart. “Despite the potential, it can’t be more. We can’t be more.”

His frown was immediate and deep. “That makes absolutely no sense.”

“I know.” In the sky, a pair of bluebirds soared high, free to be their true selves. If only she had the same freedom. “Our lives are just too different.”

“No two lives are alike, and while I’ll admit mine is more unusual than most, there are some advantages. Perhaps I need to show you.” He stepped toward her.

Suddenly, letting things progress wasn’t such a good idea. Definitely not a safe one. She took a step back, as rocks heated by the afternoon sun stung her bare feet. “Maybe you were right about keeping this platonic. You’re not even undressed. Why don’t you relax while I take that swim?”

“This hasn’t been platonic since I first removed your clothing.” He stepped closer, and his muscles bulged under the thin fabric. “I have a better idea.” He reached for the bottom of his shirt.

She meant to walk away. She meant to turn, jump into the water, go for that swim. But she was, unfortunately, only human. So she did the only thing humanly possible

– stand frozen and try desperately not to drool.

He had watched her striptease, and now it was her turn. He lifted the shirt, slowly revealing six-pack abs, defined angles and corded muscles rippling with strength. He took off his watch, his only accessory. Slowly he unbuckled his jeans, bringing them down in tortuous slowness.

Where was popcorn when you needed it?

He grinned. “With all those bracelets, you weren’t that far off from winning. Another couple of hands, and you might have succeeded. Of course, I did have a backup.” He shook his jeans, and they jangled. “Twenty pennies in my pocket.”

She looked skyward, but soon all humor vanished. She stepped back, and his gaze sharpened, like a predator focused entirely on his prey. Then... he leapt.

“What are you doing?” She gasped as he easily picked her up, skin against skin, hardness against softness. Yet she didn’t protest, didn’t ask for her release. Didn’t fight what felt so right.

He handled her easily. “Helping you to the water. The footing can be loose here. I wouldn’t want you to slip, especially when you’re not protected.”

The blush pinkened her entire body. “I can walk on my own.”

He put a hand on her breast.

“On second thought,” she gasped. “I wouldn’t want to fall.”

“Exactly.”

He brought them both down into the water, gently submerging her in its cool depths. It was chilly, but not freezing, refreshing and sweet and pure. Yet she barely noticed for the heat emanating from his slick, muscular body. He set her down on a bed of sea grass. When he lowered his lips to hers, she was lost.

She moaned as she pressed into him everywhere. He tasted like chocolate and mint, pure deliciousness. He caressed every limb, traced every dip and curve, leaving no spot untouched. He carried her close to the water's edge, where tiny waves lapped at the shore. His weight pressed into her, gently pinning her to the soft surface in the shallow water.

A virtual fire burned within her, and she couldn't wait another moment. She opened her legs and pushed up, signaling what she so desperately needed. He took a second to don protection (where in the world had he hidden that?) and returned. In one motion he filled her completely.

It was the perfect moment. The cool water underneath her, the heat above her. As they moved together, the sensations rose higher and higher, the layers between them slipping away. She held nothing back as they danced in instinctual rhythm, like two halves of the perfect whole. Just when it seemed like she couldn't go any higher, she did, riding on a crest until suddenly she shattered. They shattered.

She screamed as he roared her name, shivers overtaking her body as the world transformed into a brand new reality. He held her tightly as they soared for an eternity, then as they descended into the land of cool water and soft sea. All around the world was peaceful and calm, accompanied by a poignant sense of rightness. She had never belonged anywhere like she belonged in his arms.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?"

She smiled at the softly spoken words. "I bet you say that to all the ladies."

“No.” His voice was somber, serious, genuine. “Don’t ever compare yourself to others. I’ve never met another woman like you.”

She fought the pleasure the words brought, a million thoughts and emotions raging through her. It would be a dream come true to stay here in his arms, to give in to the powerful force between them.

If only it were possible.

She opened her mouth to counter him but stopped short of speaking, for the more she resisted, the more control he’d take. For this one moment, she let herself lie there, warm in his arms, pretending she really did belong to him and he to her. Pretending they were two lovers discovering each other as they prepared for a life together. What would it be like to let herself go? To let herself fall in love?

Or was it already too late?

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Julian watched Destiny sleep, so beautiful, so peaceful, so perfect. He'd moved her from the water when she started shivering, but she'd been so tired, she didn't even stir as he carried her to the warm blanket under a row of palm trees. Now he sat next to her slumbering form, a million and one emotions boiling through him, all culminating in one truth:

He couldn't let her go.

It didn't matter that they lived two different lives. It didn't matter that he was an actor and she was a mystery. It didn't matter that she resisted him, but she resisted herself as well. He would break through that resistance, find out who she was and why she lied. Even if he didn't know her real name, he knew the true woman, and she was more amazing than any he'd ever known. She was beautiful, inside and out, kind and considerate, fun and daring, strong and giving. He simply couldn't imagine a more perfect woman. He might not know much about her, but he knew the most important truth of all:

She was his.

CHAPTER 17

Cheyenne had promised to enjoy the rest of the vacation, but she never imagined she'd fulfill her pledge to such an extent. The time on the island was like a dream, filled with pleasurable days and romantic nights. They hiked through the gorgeous flora and fauna, swam in lakes and creeks and made love under the twinkling stars. They spent time indoors and out, talking about anything and everything. She barely managed to keep her identity hidden through their hours-long discussions, and may

very well have unwittingly slipped. Whether he had any inkling of the truth, she didn't know.

Like in a dream, time flew quickly. She kept meaning to tell him they'd return to a platonic relationship once they rejoined society, but she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. She'd do it when they returned, because then it would be easy to go back to pretending nothing romantic existed between them. She'd give herself this week and end it when they got back. Nice and easy.

Only not so much.

The day of the ship's return came. There was no fanfare, no event of rescuing long-lost castaways, but a calm arrival as if they'd simply been scheduled to come back (which obviously had been the case). When they finally embarked on the trip back, the crew looked at her curiously when she talked about the lack of communication. They mentioned Julian's dozen or so satellite phones, his two boats, but the mischievous actor only smiled widely when she glared. Still, she couldn't stay mad at him, not when it had been so perfect. Nor could she maintain her anger when they returned home. He was just too good, too kind, too wonderful.

As for that breaking up she planned to do...

That part didn't exactly happen. No matter how much she tried (okay, she didn't try that hard) she couldn't stay away from him. She didn't want to, and realistically it would've been difficult even if she had. She was still his personal assistant, at least for a few more weeks, and Julian found constant tasks to keep her close. He must have given a vacation to every single employee for all the jobs he assigned her.

The case wasn't just progressing slowly – it had come to a complete and utter halt. None of the leads panned out, and finally only a week remained. A miraculous break was her only chance, so she was back to wearing her badge and gun during the day.

She tried to stay positive, especially since many of the offers were made at the last minute, presumably so castmates didn't wonder what happened to the missing women.

Of course, there was the matter of their last date. A romantic picnic under the stars at a private beach, it reminded Cheyenne of her forced yet pleasurable vacation. Afterwards, they made love to the sound of the waves.

When she left (the next morning) from their (alleged) last date, Julian mentioned how their agreed-upon last date was only supposed to last a few hours. Because this one continued all night until the next morning, he asserted it didn't qualify as their last date. Somehow that made a lot of sense to her at the time (probably because he was naked), so she agreed to another date. The next date also ended the next morning, so it was decided that they should go on another. Four dates later, Cheyenne gave up the pretense and agreed to go out with him... for the duration of the production. He flatly refused the time limit, but she would save the arguing for later. She'd be leaving soon, and if he ever discovered her identity, no doubt he'd end it himself. It was astounding she'd kept her secret for so long.

It was the last week of filming, her last chance to catch the criminal and her last moments with Julian. Both thoughts were disturbing, with only the first capable of providing a happy ending. She had all but given up hope the criminal would approach her. Despite her portraying the perfect personality for the criminal, her position as Julian's assistant had become too all-encompassing. It was unlikely the criminal would single her out when he had so many anonymous women from which to choose.

But all hope was not lost. There was still a chance he would choose one of the other women. If she could figure out who, she could track down the middleman and find her way to the mastermind. Then her mission would be fulfilled, her quest complete, and she would leave.

Successful or not, she had to leave.

As she neared the inescapable separation from Julian, her feelings crystalized into perfect clarity, no matter how she tried to deny them. This was no short-term fling borne of simple lust, no mere attraction. Her emotions were too strong, too encompassing, too passionate. There was no mistaking it:

Love.

Her heart knew the truth. She loved Julian Starcroft with all the emotions and feelings and fantasies that came with it. She was in love with him. But it didn't – couldn't – matter. Not because of her career, for a love that strong, she would give up her undercover work. Yet could a successful actor commit to a long-term relationship? A normal man faced temptation, but Julian kissed beautiful women, pretended to make love to them. He had countless fans begging for a moment's attention. In the past, there had been a man with the same temptations, a man who had given up the woman he'd claimed to love, along with his only child. How could Cheyenne give her heart to an actor only to have him shatter it? In her line of work, few things scared her.

Losing him after sacrificing all terrified her.

Yet was it fair to judge him against another, a man who even now claimed he'd changed? And if one man could change, could Julian be different than she assumed? Perhaps it was time to confront the past. Thus when the phone rang that next time, with the caller she always and never expected, she didn't wait for the third call, or even the second. She answered it immediately.

At first there was silence. "You answered right away."

"Yes."

“Does this mean you’ve changed your mind?” The voice was tentative, hopeful.

“No. Yes. Maybe.” Focus. “How about that cup of coffee?”

A moment’s hesitation, then a rushed response. “I would like nothing more. How about tonight?”

A whisper of anticipation flew through her. But she was a strong woman, a woman who controlled her life. No delay was necessary. “That’s fine.”

“Okay, then.” He rattled off the address swiftly, as if a second’s breath would give her room to change her mind, then hung up. It was set.

The day flew by in a daze of personal assisting and chasing leads, and for once, Julian Starcroft wasn’t at its forefront. His filming schedule was heavy, and they barely saw each other as she conducted her investigation. After work, Cheyenne drove home and busied herself with mindless paperwork, before preparing for the evening. She donned a conservative black pencil skirt and navy blouse, then pulled her hair into a severe French twist. Nerves begot restlessness, and she left early, arriving at the restaurant half an hour before they were scheduled to meet.

He was already there.

His visage was clear through the window of the small café, the same profile seen in countless websites, articles and social media sites through the decades. Memories resurfaced, the recent Internet searches, the magazines she'd leafed through as a teen, the newspapers she'd peeked at as a child on the grocery checkout line, while her mother carefully handed coupons to the cashier. He was a movie poster come to life, with the same rugged handsomeness, formidable power and imposing aura, even a few years after his prime. Thick blond hair and a well-built body still drew attention, and the confidence of a man who amassed millions of fans. Yet his eyes, startlingly green, comprised his most striking feature.

They were identical to hers.

He wielded a charisma that defined his runaway success. She'd seen his image on the Internet so many times, yet not once in real life, at least that she could recall. Endless emotion rose, far too many to characterize or even define. Then... he saw her.

His expression lit, not slightly, but with joy so poignant it seemed impossible to fake, even from one of the world's leading actors. He stood so quick the chair rattled to the floor with a crash, but he paid it no attention as he strode to the door and pushed it open, a welcome – no, an invitation. She sucked in a deep breath and entered.

“Dad.” The word came without conscious thought, without planning. The word she never thought she'd utter.

If possible, even more happiness shone in his gleaming eyes. “Do you know what it

means to have you call me that, after all these years?”

Like a swimmer about to plunge over the waterfall’s edge, she quickly backtracked. “I’m sorry, it just came out. I didn’t mean... I’m not ready, Mr. Sanders.” She shook her head so quickly it pained her neck.

“I understand.” He said it quickly, his gaze warm and understanding. “Charles, then?”

“Charles is fine,” Cheyenne whispered gratefully. He stood perfectly still, beaming like a child who’d just unwrapped a shiny new ten-speed on their birthday. The strangest urge to run into his arms beckoned, as she’d longed to do a thousand times as a little girl, but she held back. Finally, she forced a few steps forward and awkwardly stuck out her hand.

He grasped it with both of his. “Thank you so much for coming. I realize how difficult this is.”

She nodded curtly, forced herself to meet his gaze. “Years ago, I would’ve given anything for this moment.”

“I know.” The words were heavy with sorrow and regret. “I waited far too long, and for that I am sorrier than I can ever express. I’m hoping you’ll let me make it up to you in some small way.”

Any and all responses caught in her throat. Instead she simply nodded and took the seat he offered, oddly bereft when he removed his hands. Two already filled mugs sat on the table, with a carafe of coffee between them. An assortment of muffins and sweet cheese pastries filled generous plates, garnished with fresh grapes and berries.

“I... um... I...” When had she lost the ability to speak? She gripped the mug so hard, her hands burned, yet she couldn’t move. She had dreamed of this meeting so many

times, yet all the words disappeared from the world.

“I should start.” He reached for her, stopped and instead gripped his own coffee. “I won’t insult you with excuses. There’s no justification for a father to leave his daughter, nothing that could ever make up for years of missed time. I was selfish and foolish, a kid who didn’t know what to do with his sudden fame, and I made the worst decision of my life. I thought I had it all. I never realized I was giving it all away.”

The mug crackled in her hand, and she loosened her grip. “You may have been a kid when you left, but what about five years later? Ten years? Fifteen?”

“I’m so sorry.” Charles tapped his fingers in a repetitive pattern. “I planned to fix it so many times. I just didn’t know how, and suddenly half a lifetime had passed. I squandered so many years, and then it was too late. I was certain you’d reject me.”

“You rejected me!” Cheyenne hissed. “You’re the one who walked away. I would’ve welcomed you back for so many years, forgiven you if you’d only returned. All I wanted was a... a...” Breathe. “All I wanted was a dad.”

“I realize that now.” Charles ducked his head. “Things change when you get to my age, people change. You see things about yourself, things you don’t like. Decisions you’d give anything to undo. I took too long, but there’s no going back. All I can do is promise I have changed. I’ve tried to show you by not giving up when you pushed me away these past months. I’ll take whatever you can give me. If it’s a cup of coffee once a year, I’ll be over the moon. If you have room in that hectic life of yours, which you’ve dedicated to helping others, then I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give. If you let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life proving I can be the father you deserve.”

“And then what?” she whispered as the world turned blurry with liquid pain. “Once you prove you’re a great father, you’ll disappear again?”

“No.” His complexion paled, as he took a shuddering breath. Gone was the famous movie star, the poised thespian who played hero on millions of screens. He was simply a man, with decades of regret carving the grooves of his face. “You may not be a little girl anymore, but I realize how leaving hurt you then, just as leaving again would hurt you now, even more in some ways. I can make a dozen promises, swear on everything I own, but you won’t believe it until I show you. That’s all I’m asking for – the chance to prove it.”

That’s all? It was asking for the moon and stars and everything in between. Decades of hurt pierced her chest like a knife through her lungs. “Why should I give you the chance to hurt me again?”

“Because I’m hoping deep down you still want a father. Not the father I was, but the father I could be.” He reached out, but stopped short of her fingers. She would have to take that step. “Please, Cheyenne.”

Damn it, but he was right. “You don’t know what you’re asking,” she whispered. “You don’t realize how much your leaving hurt me. Even now, it sabotages my relationships.”

“Your relationship with Julian Starcroft?”

Cheyenne gasped. “How did you...”

He held up his hand. “Don’t worry, your cover is safe. You must know I’m friends with Julian. He confided about his new and interesting relationship, although with no names. But his description of you and your strange behavior got me thinking, and I wondered if it could be some sort of coincidence. Of course, the news segment about Julian Starcroft and his new assistant clinched it.”

Cheyenne gritted her teeth.

“Don’t worry. He doesn’t know the truth, and I wouldn’t jeopardize whatever mission you’re on by telling him. But, Cheyenne, Julian is nothing like me. You can’t compare him to the man I was.”

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Though she'd reached the same conclusion, she shrugged. "He's a rich, famous movie star who can have any woman in the world. Men like you face the same temptations."

"Money didn't make me leave you, and neither did fame. It was foolishness, plain and simple, a trait Julian Starcroft doesn't share. The tabloids may make him out to be a ladies' man, but he's a gentleman. Do you know you're the first woman he's ever mentioned as more than a casual fling?"

Cheyenn's heart stumbled. "Really?"

"Really." He nodded firmly. "He's been in relationships before, but never like this. Please don't give up something remarkable. I wish I hadn't." His frown was sorrowful and deep, borne of a lifetime of regret. Was he sincere? Had he actually changed?

Was she giving up Julian because of him?

There was so much to think about, so much to consider. She couldn't do it now, not here, with her father watching her. "I have to go." She shot up, grabbing her purse. The food remained beautiful and untouched on the table, as she stepped back from the past she still couldn't face.

He stood up, too, but slower, and for a second Hollywood's ageless man seemed a thousand years old. "I understand."

Cheyenne pivoted to the door. She didn't even remember walking, yet she reached it

in seconds. But suddenly she halted. “I just need time to think about everything.”

He responded in the next breath, “I’ll take it.” Something burned in his reply, something powerful and strong. Something she shared: Hope.

She couldn’t commit to any decisions now, not with the mission at a crux. For now, she would focus on her work, the reason she infiltrated the studio in the first place. She would journey the path she had set, finish her mission and then leave, all the while fighting to keep her secret intact.

And hoping she would somehow get over losing the love of her life.

Cheyenne arrived early on one of the last filming days and the final opportunity to solve the case. She stood in the middle of the bustling set, surrounded by dozens of actors, crew members and professionals, all blissfully unaware the set could soon become a crime scene. In her world, two men played center stage – the man who’d returned after so long and the man she would soon leave.

“Preparing for a life-changing confession?”

She jumped at the deep voice behind her. She turned, swiftly glanced left and right and relaxed. No one was close enough to hear. Although Julian often asked about her secrets, he did so discreetly, and others didn’t suspect. As for him...

He was closing in on her.

She fought to stay casual. “Actually, I do have a confession to make. You’re way too self-assured for your own good.”

“Oh yeah?” He shifted closer, hopefully not enough that anyone would notice. “You’re just saying that because you can’t resist me.”

“I can resist you.” she claimed boldly. She was about to prove it (or at least attempt) when Zachary suddenly appeared next to them. The movie star’s eyes were uncharacteristically grim, his mouth set in a thin line.

Julian took one look at his friend and frowned. “Is everything okay, buddy?”

A quick headshake said no. “Has Jess been around? I haven’t seen her all day.”

Julian grinned and clapped his friend on the back. “It’s only 10 a.m. I know you like her, but show a little dignity.”

“You don’t understand.” The seriousness of his voice broke through the haze of the morning. “She could be in trouble.”

Cheyenne’s policewoman instincts sharpened in an instant. “What makes you think that? Did something happen?”

“Yes... No... I don’t know.” Zachary raked a hand through his hair. “Can we go to your dressing room?” Julian nodded, gesturing the two ahead of him. When they were alone, Zachary grabbed a folded newspaper from his pocket and tossed it on the table. It was this morning’s edition, opened to the society section. They all read the three-inch headline, above a far larger picture.

“Whoa,” Julian exclaimed.

“Oh, Zachary.” Cheyenne cringed.

The picture showed Zachary locked in an intimate embrace with a beautiful blond with long legs, generous curves and a smile that proved she knew it. She clutched her prize with fire red nails.

Cheyenne frowned in recognition. “Doesn’t she play the vixen on that daytime soap?” The actor nodded miserably, and she tightened. This was why dating actors was no good. “I thought you had something special with Jess.”

“I do have something special with Jess.” Zachary growled. “It’s not how it looks.”

“Is it photoshopped?”

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The action star studied the floor. “No,” he admitted. “That was me. But I was ambushed. That woman has been after me for years. When she saw me at a party last night, she ran up and grabbed me just as a reporter came. Just as Jess came.”

Cheyenne peered at the picture, tapping into forensics skills from years of training. The features of the picture rearranged themselves, the obvious becoming clear. She pointed. “I can see that now. If you look at your hand, you’re clearly pushing her away. And although she’s smiling, your expression is grim. Did Jess get the wrong idea?”

Zachary clenched his fists. “She thinks I’ve been leading her on this entire time, but she’s wrong. Since we started dating, there’s been no one else. I tried to explain, but she stormed out and now I can’t find her anywhere. No one knows where she is.”

“I’m sure she’ll show up.” Julian rubbed his friend’s shoulder. “And when she sees you, she’ll realize the truth.”

“I don’t—”

A knock sounded from the door. When Julian called to enter, a production assistant stuck his head in. “Hey guys! I’m glad you’re all together. The director wants everyone on set in ten minutes.”

The assistant turned to leave, but Zachary stopped him. “Did you already give the message to Jessica Cole, the body double?”

The assistant’s expression turned uncomfortable. “She gave notice this morning.

Apparently, someone offered her a once-in-a-lifetime position. Since all her scenes had already been filmed, the director let her out early.”

There was silence as the man left, yet a thousand alarms shrieked stark warning. Jess had been upset. She had endured a public humiliation, which others, including the criminal, may have seen. She left for a once-in-a-lifetime position, just like the last victim in the case.

Just like all the victims.

It could be a coincidence. Jess was upset and might have used it as an excuse to leave after Zachary’s supposed betrayal. Or... the criminal had contacted her, given her a too-good-to-be-true offer. It would’ve been attractive in her vulnerable state, the opportunity to earn a great deal of money in a short time.

It was the first real lead in weeks. She immediately switched into investigator mode. “Zachary, has Jess been friendly with any of the other men? Has she talked to anyone in particular?”

Zachary frowned deeply. “I don’t think so. We both avoided doing anything that would make the other jealous.”

That’s what Zachary thought, but it didn’t mean Jess never talked to the criminal. Perhaps someone else had seen them. She pivoted to Julian. “I’m sorry, I have to go.” His gaze sharpened. How could she allay his suspicions without blowing her cover? “I’ll ask around, see if I can get any information. Someone might remember something.”

“That’s a good idea.” Zachary nodded. “I can help.”

“We should all go.” Julian stepped forward.

“No!” Both men stared at her vehement response, yet she didn’t have the time, or clearance, to explain. “I mean no, thank you. They may not tell you anything because of who you are, plus you intimidate most of them. It’s best if I go alone.”

They looked ready to argue, but then they exchanged glances and grimaced. “Take a few minutes to see what you can find,” Julian finally said. “We’ll see you after that.”

If the investigation proceeded as she hoped, she’d take far more than a few minutes. This could be the break in the case. She set out quickly, striding and then jogging to the set. She traveled from crewmember to crewmember, then actor to actor, yet no matter how many people she asked, the answer remained the same. No one saw Jess spend significant time with any of the guys except Zachary.

She relayed the news an hour later, while they were on a brief break. “I told you.” Zachary was confident, albeit clearly relieved, that his assertion had been validated. “There’s no other guy. If she wasn’t with me, she preferred to be talking to the girls. Besides you, she was close to Kate.”

“Right.” Cheyenne waved her hand. Then, the world halted.

Kate. The jealous extra with a thousand cruel remarks. The petty starlet who inserted herself into every conversation. The clawing woman Jess confided in.

Could Kate be the recruiter?

The seed of possibility germinated and blossomed, the evidence falling into place with a dozen resurfacing memories. Kate claimed to know men who were honest about what they wanted. She invited Jess to come and get one. What could be clearer than paying for services rendered?

None of the leads had panned out, but that’s because they’d been following the wrong

ones. The department hadn't researched women, and the criminals had covered their tracks by switching their M.O. It was time to follow the true lead. "I have to go." Cheyenne pivoted toward the exit. "I just remembered an important errand I have to run."

"What errand?" Julian caught up with her. "What's so important you have to leave in the middle of filming? And what about Jess?"

She didn't have time to formulate an excuse. "I'll explain later. Please, Julian, I have to go."

For a moment, he looked like he was going to argue, but then he released her arm. "Okay, fine. Call me later."

Well, that was easy. Too easy, perhaps? Yet she didn't have time to question him or her luck as she turned and dashed from the room. Time to catch a criminal.

Though she wanted to call the precinct right away, she waited until the privacy of her car. As soon as the door slammed shut, she dialed. "I need the address of Kate Jenkins, one of the extras on *Spy Heat*. I also need a full workup on her. Get as much information as you can – she may be the recruiter."

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They found the address right away, and Cheyenne adjusted her route appropriately. Since she was working on a hunch and not actual evidence, she turned down the offer of backup, but she promised to check in when she arrived. The drive was just under half an hour, taking her away from most of the suburbs and common residential areas. About halfway through, she pulled off the main thoroughfare onto a smaller road, then to a dirt road. They didn't have too many of those in South Florida anymore – either Kate liked her privacy or she had a reason for choosing such a remote location.

Finally, Cheyenne approached an open gate and pulled into a long, tree-lined driveway. Perfectly manicured lawns led to a large Colonial home, resplendent with carved white columns and emerald vines of ivy. A small pond gleamed like a mirror, surrounded by roses and marigolds.

Kate must do a lot better than she did as an extra. Or she had a little extra work. Cheyenne shut off the ignition and climbed out of the car, careful to shut the door with silent slowness. She treaded through mulched paths and lily-scented air, her hand parked on her gun. Although it was hidden under her clothing, its presence was sturdy and reassuring.

Long rows of windows lined the stucco front, guarded by opaque lace curtains. She could break in, but if she was wrong about Kate, it could ruin her mission. Since the peril to Jess could be imminent, a stakeout was not an option. Cheyenne took the only remaining choice. She strode to the broad oak door and knocked on the heavy wood panels. Seconds later, the door opened.

“Jess?” Cheyenne stared. Not at the actress' presence, which she'd expected, but at what she was wearing, or rather not wearing. Clothes, specifically, except for a red,

see-through teddy.

“Destiny?” The shocked woman blinked, flushing over every inch of her exposed body. She tried to cover herself, to little success. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” Cheyenne peered into the house behind the starlet, but the space appeared empty. “Are you alone?”

Jess’ flush deepened. “Yes, but I’m expecting someone—”

Before she could finish, Cheyenne ducked past her, slipping into the foyer. The inside was stark and chilled, with modern statues and blood red furniture. After a quick reconnaissance to ensure they were alone, she shut the door firmly behind them. “Why are you here? More importantly, why are you answering the door like that?”

The extra turned ashen. “I’m... I’m sorry.” She shuddered a breath, then lifted her head, her expression frightened but determined. “You have to go. Like I said, I’m expecting company.”

This was bad. If a client was on the way, she needed to get Jess out immediately. “Is this your new job?”

Jess gasped, giving confirmation to the obvious.

“It’s going to be all right.” Cheyenne maintained a low, calming voice. “I heard what happened with Zachary, although I believe you misinterpreted his actions. I need you to explain exactly what happened and who brought you here. Your life could depend on it.”

Jess’ eyes grew watery, and a tear escaped down her cheek. “I can’t... I just can’t...”

“Please. It’s the only way I can help you,” Cheyenne grasped frigid hands. “We’re out of time.”

Jess remained silent. When it seemed like she wouldn’t answer, she murmured in barely audible tones, “I never thought I’d do something like this. I didn’t even mean to say yes. I was just so upset about Zachary, and she said it could lead to other opportunities, roles where everyone would notice me.”

Yeah, right. The so-called opportunity would be the last she would ever have. “Where Zachary would notice you?” Cheyenne guessed.

Jess flushed. “I was in so much pain, I didn’t think about the consequences. For what it’s worth, I changed by mind, but she said it was too late. I already promised to do it.”

“It’s not too late.” At least not yet. “I need some information, then you’re going to the police station. You’re going to tell them everything.”

Jess blanched. “I can’t do that! They’ll arrest me.”

“No, they won’t,” Cheyenne promised. “You haven’t done anything wrong. They’ll protect you, but first I need to know who brought you here.”

Jess’ hands shook. “She said something bad would happen if I told anyone.”

“Forget what she said.” Cheyenne swiped the air. “She was just protecting herself. I already know who it is, but I need confirmation. Tell me, and I’ll ensure your safety.”

“It was...” A deep breath. “Kate.”

Cheyenne closed and opened her eyes, amidst endless tangled emotions: Relief and

satisfaction instincts were correct and yet stark concern. “You said you were expecting someone. Is it her?”

“No.” Jess hugged herself. “It’s the... the client. Kate didn’t tell me when she’d be back. The man is supposed to take me somewhere safe when we’re done.”

Cold dread elicited a silent shiver. Jess would never be safe again. Instead she’d be brought to where the other girls were being held until it was time for the next client, and then the next and the next. There’d be no more real roles, great or otherwise. “When do you expect him?”

“Any minute.”

“Then we haven’t a second to spare. Here’s what we’re going to do...”

Jess listened as Cheyenne explained the plan. Less than five minutes later, Jess was barreling out the door toward the backyard, where her car was parked. She was no longer dressed in the teddy, but something far more practical: the clothing Cheyenne had arrived in. Apparently Kate had taken Jess’ clothing, to stop her from changing her mind, no doubt.

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Cheyenne grimaced at the reflection in the mirror. If Jess looked like a wispy waif in the tiny red teddy, she played sultry siren. The outfit was tight, barely containing her breasts behind a thin veil of scarlet. The matching sheer thong was little more than a tiny triangle, tantalizing more than it hid. She looked ripe and sexy and more than willing. The only thing not on display was her gun. As much as she desired it, there was no hiding place in an outfit you could literally see through. She placed the weapon in a decorative canister, where she could easily reach it if necessary.

Hopefully it wouldn't be.

As soon as Jess drove away, Cheyenne grabbed her cell phone. She needed to tell the captain her plan and initiate a search for Kate, who may already be fleeing the area. She would also request backup for the increasingly dangerous situation. She was dressed for the role in the infinitesimal lingerie, but she wasn't planning on fulfilling it. Hopefully she could convince the client to share names while avoiding a full performance.

She needed that backup now. She dialed the first number, was reaching for the second when a scraping noise sounded from the front door. She turned just in time to see the knob turn.

The door started to open.

CHAPTER 18

Why had she assumed a criminal would knock like a houseguest to a tea party? Cheyenne tossed the phone over the couch, where it landed behind the furniture with

a soft thump. She rubbed her hands together, centering herself, as the door opened slowly, slowly, slowly. The heavy scent of cologne tainted the air, mixed with the stench of cigarettes and booze. A tall, well-built man stepped through the portal, then stopped and observed her with a leisurely grin.

The man was handsome, in an edgy sort of way. With closely cropped black hair, tanned skin and bulging muscles, he had a scar across his face that somehow added to instead of took away from his appearance. He was dressed neatly, yet not fussily, enhancing his natural good looks. Yet despite his attractiveness, something unsavory soured his appearance, an ugliness his arrogant leer highlighted.

This was not a good man.

Soulless eyes reflected pure coldness, so dark the pupils were nearly indistinguishable. He narrowed them, calculating, licking his lips, as he dragged his gaze up and down her nearly naked form. Her mind flashed to another man, a man who couldn't have been more different. They were both muscular, both powerful, both in charge of their world. Yet whereas Julian inspired excitement, this man brought only disgust.

“You’re as pretty as Mr. Par... as he promised,” the client drawled. “Simply delicious.”

She should be appalled, frightened or both, and yet elation made her smile genuine. He'd nearly revealed the criminal. He clearly realized his mistake, but that didn't mean he couldn't be tricked into saying it again. “Thank you,” she replied in a sultry voice. “And you’re as handsome as he said you’d be.”

The man's eyebrow lifted. “He did?”

She sashayed closer, painting a distracting pose. By how he tracked her, it was

working. “He’s been after me to work for him for ages, but when he described you, I became fully convinced.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, but Cheyenne thrust out her breasts, and his gaze followed. He clearly had trouble forcing it back up. “I didn’t realize you knew him.”

“We go way back,” she lied. “In fact, I’d love to thank him for sending you to me. You don’t happen to have his number, do you? I misplaced my phone and all my contacts.”

The man edged closer. The smell of sweat assailed her nostrils. “No need to worry about that. After our little...playdate... we can call him together. Of course, that might not be for a few days.”

Cheyenne giggled. “Why don’t we make that call now? Can I borrow your phone?”

Narrowed eyes proved she’d gone too far. “I say we stop talking about Mr. Parlonston...” He let out a deep breath. “About him and move on to us.” He fingered her sheer gown. “This is nice, by the way. I might leave it on for a little while. Are you ready to play?”

A shiver threatened her one-woman performance. Time for a tactical retreat. Now that she had a last name – and an unusual one at that – she could track down the mastermind. “That sounds... exciting. Why don’t you go up first? I have a surprise for you.”

He grinned wickedly. “I like surprises.” She bit back a gasp as he tweaked a nipple, sending a shot of pain through her. “Don’t be long.”

Only the certainty he was going to jail stopped her from arresting him that very moment. “I won’t.” She remained still as he ascended the stairs, with that wide smile

frozen on her face. The moment he disappeared, she raced to the couch. She dived for her phone, losing precious moments fumbling for it, then ran to where her gun was hidden. She opened the canister, reached in...

She didn't make it.

Icy arms surrounded her, knocking the phone from her grasp. A sweaty hand reeking of cigarette smoke and rot clamped over her mouth, cutting off her cry. The man snatched the gun, cocked it and aimed it straight at her temple. "You wouldn't be trying to get away from our fun, would you?"

This. Was. Bad. With his hand tight over her mouth, he wasn't expecting an answer. She could struggle, but she couldn't outrace a gun. In all likelihood, he would shoot her.

"There was something strange about how you mentioned our mutual friend. By the way, it looks like you found your phone." He clutched the device tightly, and a spider web crack crunched the screen. "Clearly, you're not who I was expecting."

Cheyenne fought to keep still, focusing on the gun. If only she could grab it and take control. If they were the same size, her fighting abilities would've made it worth the risk, but his bulk, strength and weapon combined to entrap her.

He correctly interpreted her thoughts. "You're not going anywhere, at least not yet. I know who you are, or at least what you are." He held the gun tighter. "The boss isn't going to be pleased with this little complication. You're going to get your wish to meet him. He'll want to deal with you personally." Now his grin turned wide. "Don't worry, your life isn't in danger unless you're stupid. The boss enjoys his playthings. He even has a special place for the troublesome ones."

Do not panic. Stay calm. You will get out of this.

“Don’t have anything to say, sweetheart?” He removed his hand from her mouth, his smile wickedly wide. This was her chance. She might not be able to fight him, but she could tell the world she was here. She let out a blood-curdling scream.

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He only laughed. “Go ahead. In case you didn’t notice, this house is pretty secluded. No one can hear you.

Muscles tensed, poised to lunge, but he aimed the gun straight at her chest. “Don’t move or I’ll shoot. It’ll be a waste, but I can’t risk it. Believe me, I’ve done it before.”

Damn it. If the women weren’t at stake, she might take the chance she could somehow overpower him. But she had to remain alive to save the others. “You’re not going to like what happens when they catch you. If you surrender now, you can avoid—”

“Save your breath.” He waved the gun. “Lady, they’re not going to catch me because they’ll never find you. The boss has a nice secret space, and we’ll keep you so busy you won’t have time to escape. They’re sending a car over right now. While we wait, you can—”

A roar splintered the air.

It startled both of them. The criminal pivoted, but it was too late. Something – or someone – flew at him with dizzying speed, slamming him back into the wall. The gun soared across the room.

Cheyenne lunged after the weapon. She wrapped her hands around it, aimed, but the men were hurdling off each other like a movie action sequence, preventing a solid shot. Finally, with one last thunderous punch, the newcomer knocked the criminal to the ground. The victor stood tall, like a warrior straight from the silver screen.

Julian.

He pivoted toward her, dragged his eyes over her barely clothed state. “Are you all right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, he captured her in his arms. “What happened? This can’t be how it looks.”

“Of course not.” She had endured tough situations before, survived close calls, but never had she delved so close to tragedy. Yet she must remain strong, for the danger that still threatened untold women. “You have to let me go.”

“I’m not planning on ever letting you go, whoever you are.” He disengaged only long enough to take off his jacket and place it on her shoulders. It engulfed her, falling to her knees. He grasped her once more. “Who are you?”

She attempted to lean back, but he was having none of it. Her cover was compromised, the investigation now requiring her true identity. Every choice but one disappeared.

It was time to reveal the truth.

How do you tell the man you love you’ve lied about everything? That you are nothing like the woman you purported to be? Her heart galloped, sending fresh blood to every muscle. “Julian, I’m an undercover agent.”

That finally had the power to get him to loosen his hold, although he didn’t release her. He blinked. “What?”

A deep breath of courage. “I’m a detective for the Miami-Dade Police Department. The role was a cover for my true mission – to catch a criminal. Now I have.” She gestured at the unconscious man on the floor. “Thank you so much for your help, however there’s another criminal, someone far more dangerous, and we have to move quickly. I have to contact my superiors.”

He stared, as if they had just entered an entirely different world. Even as she took the criminal's phone and dialed the police department, explained the situation and requested backup, he watched her. And continued to do so when she was placing zip ties on the criminal, who was now stirring. "What's your name?"

She wiped her hands on the jacket as she stood. "I guess you never believed Destiny Dane. It's Cheyenne Kirk."

"And you're an undercover agent? You work for..."

"The Miami-Dade Police Department," she said softly. "I've been a cop for years."

"And everything on your resume?"

"Fabricated."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Why did you target the set?"

Sirens sounded in the background, as red and blue lights flashed against the trees outside the window. Their time was almost up. "I can't give details, or I could compromise the case. You should see something in the paper tomorrow."

His lips tightened, drawing a severe slash. "Won't you be giving the explanation, if not now, then tomorrow? Or were you planning to leave without a goodbye?" His voice rose with every syllable, power present and defined. "Was this all part of the plan?"

"Of course not." How could she explain that despite everything, she still couldn't be with him? That she couldn't risk her heart with another actor? "Once the assignment is over, Destiny Dane must disappear. I have to disappear. Otherwise, you could be in danger."

“I don’t give a damn about danger. I care about you,” he growled. “Was I part of your assignment?”

How could he think that? “Our relationship nearly ruined my assignment. I was supposed to be an ordinary extra, the type of woman the criminal would target, not Julian Starcroft’s girlfriend. I tried to stay away from you, but...”

“I wouldn’t let you,” he finished. It would be an easy out, a claim to destroy their relationship, but she couldn’t let him believe what they’d shared was fake. Only how could she explain what was keeping them apart? “Listen, Julian...”

“Detective Kirk?” A door slammed open, as pounding footsteps thundered from the front. Rapid conversation followed, from no less than a dozen men. Backup had arrived, signaling the end of any and all explanations.

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“Come over tonight.” Julian’s quiet words made it no less of a demand. “You owe me that.”

He was right – she did. “All right,” she agreed as six uniformed agents burst into the room. They raced to her, surrounded the criminal, nodded at Julian. And just like that, the undercover mission was over.

And so was her time with Julian.

“Cheyenne Kirk,” Julian repeated the name for the hundredth, no the thousandth, time. It was a nice name, and far more fitting to the real woman than the theatrical Destiny Dane. Just like the position of undercover police agent.

He’d known she wasn’t what she seemed for a long time, yet he never imagined this. He figured she had a past transgression, something embarrassing that wouldn’t look good for an aspiring actress. Perhaps she had a rough childhood or made some bad decisions. He never considered she was on some sort of secret mission, risking her life to save others.

Thanks to his presence at the mansion, he now had a fairly good idea of what that mission was. Apparently, Cheyenne had infiltrated not just his set, but a prostitution ring, setting herself out as bait. Only the criminals had bypassed her and targeted Jess instead. Cheyenne had found out, tracked Jess and switched places with her. Things hadn’t gone quite according to plan, and she almost found herself in a position even she couldn’t handle. If he hadn’t been there...

No. He’d tortured himself with “what if’s” long enough. He had been there, had

thought to follow her, and that's all that mattered. And now, he had another focus: Convincing Cheyenne to take a chance on what could be.

He'd never experienced love like this, the desire to be with a woman now and forever. He'd known long before the recent events, and seeing her in danger only made it clearer. He loved her. He was in love with her. And unless she'd suddenly become a much better actress, she was in love with him. Even if she denied it, he could see it in her eyes, feel it when he touched her. He would get past whatever was holding her back.

Only he might need to be slightly devious.

The doorbell rang, and Julian relaxed tight muscles. She'd promised to come, but he hadn't been certain she would until this very moment. He strode to the door and opened it to the most beautiful sight in the world. Even in a plain navy t-shirt and blue jeans, she was stunning. "Come in."

She hesitated, peered behind him.

"Don't worry." He grasped her hand and led her in. "I know how important your privacy is. We're alone."

She nodded and relaxed. Then she turned to him and became visibly less relaxed. Good. No matter what she claimed, he affected her deeply.

"Thank you." Her voice emerged low, husky and oh so sexy. She cleared her throat and spoke in a more authoritative tone, "Normally, I wouldn't discuss a case, but you're going to see it all over the news tomorrow. Unfortunately, it's going to include your name."

Julian had figured as much. It was a high-profile case, and scores of people had seen

him at the crime scene. “Will it include yours?”

“No. They conceal our identities so as not to compromise our work,” she explained. “The good news is we got him. The mastermind is behind bars.” Her smile was brilliant and genuine, and almost blinding.

He returned it. “That’s great.”

“Yeah, it is. Those guys were dangerous, and the women they targeted were never the same. We hoped to track the ringleader through Kate, but she didn’t know his identity. Turns out the thug who attacked me did, however, and once he realized how advantageous talking would be, he led us right to him.” She clasped her hands. “Luckily, I got to Jess before she did anything she’d regret. So did Zachary by the way.”

“I know that part.” Julian grinned. “Zachary stormed the police department and informed Jess he was never letting her go. They weren’t dating for long, but he knew what he wanted. He asked her to marry him on the spot.”

“How wonderful.” Her features softened. “I’m so happy for them.”

“When it’s right, it doesn’t take long to figure it out.” He caught her gaze. “What about us?”

A moment’s hesitation revealed a lifetime of messages. She looked away. “There isn’t an us. There can’t be.”

“How can you say that after everything that’s happened?” He grasped her hands, forcing her attention back to him. He wouldn’t let her run. “How do you feel about us? About me?” She blushed and didn’t respond. It was all the answer he needed. “If it isn’t a lack of feelings, what is it? You claim my fame makes it impossible, but

Zachary is as famous as me, and he and Jess are together.”

“Zachary and Jess are alike in many ways,” she countered. “Both are actors, both work in the same circles. He’s obviously ready to commit.”

What had happened to make her so wary of him? “You don’t think I’m ready to commit?”

She backed away from him. Her expression betrayed panic, as if she had said too much. “We’re from two different worlds. I’d have to give up my undercover work to be with you.”

That stopped him for a moment. He hadn’t considered it, but she was right. If she became his girlfriend – or more – everyone would recognize her. It would be impossible to work undercover with photos plastered all over social media. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “If I could give up my work instead, I would. Unfortunately, fame isn’t reversible.”

“But you would?” She looked astonished. “You’d give it all up for me?”

He didn’t even need a second to consider. “Absolutely.”

“But why?” she cried.

“Because I love you.”

Silence screamed. For a moment, pure elation shone – an instant later, her expression turned blank. “You only think you love me because you can’t have me. This isn’t real.”

What happened in the past to make her believe that? Pain, wariness and fear sparked, but he stood strong. He wouldn’t allow fear to sabotage the future. “You’re wrong. This is about you and me. Why can’t you believe me?”

“I... I don’t know.” Yet her eyes couldn’t hide the truth. She was terrified.

“You do know.” He stepped closer. “There’s something you’re not telling me, a missing piece that completes the puzzle. After all this, don’t I deserve the truth?”

A pale face belied all denial. She looked down, up and away, anywhere but him. “It’s not because of anything else. It’s just us.”

“Oh no. If it was just us, we would be together right now. Something is holding you back.” Dread crept a sharp path through his chest. “Or is it someone?”

This time the gasp gave her away, the eyes just a little wider than before, the pinkness that stained her cheeks. His heart slammed against his ribs. “Is that it? There’s someone else?”

“Yes!” The cry was a thousand whispers put together. She stood tall and rigid, her arms by her side, hands fisted and clenched. “There is another man: Charles

Sanders.”

She could have mentioned many men: Another actor from the set. One of the crew members. Santa Claus. But Charles Sanders? His friend and mentor? Although many older actors dated women generations younger, neither Charles nor Cheyenne had shown any indication of knowing each other, much less something more. “How could you possibly have something with Charles Sanders? How do you even know him?” His voice was getting louder, and more fervent, as doubts unbalanced the world. “He’s old enough to be your father.”

“Actually...” Her chest rose and fell, once and then twice and then three times. “He is my father.”

“What?” The man he’d looked up to for so many years was this woman’s father? How could it be? A puzzle piece took shape, forming smooth edges with angles and curves before joining the mystery that was Cheyenne Kirk. It didn’t quite form a complete picture, yet it was far closer than before.

“It seems unbelievable.” Her expression was wary, and a thousand other emotions, shining through liquid irises. “Father isn’t truly the correct term since he was absent my whole childhood.” She hardened, looked away. “Of course, that didn’t stop me from wanting him.”

“Are you sure?” He kept his tone quiet, careful. Did not reveal brewing suspicions. Could he know more about the situation than her?

“I’m sure,” she spat bitter words. “This is not one of your fan letters, from a far away land with a woman you’ve never met. My mother and Charles had a relationship, however brief. He acknowledged me, at least to her, and even gave it a go when I was a baby. I have the pictures to prove it, but of course he never went public. I wasn’t even walking when he left, never to return.” Her eyes shuttered. “Actually, that’s

untrue. He's suddenly reentered my life, or at least he's trying to. Yet how am I supposed to—" She stopped suddenly, took a shuddering breath. "This is not the time to discuss this."

"Actually, this is very much the time. Don't you see? Your fears are a reflection of your past. Not your present, and most certainly not your future."

"You can't say that," she refuted. "He was just like you: the most beloved movie star of his time, with all the perks that go with it." She stopped, closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were bright with regret. "That isn't fair. This is about me, not you. You have been the perfect..." Another breath, and she stood taller. "I just can't take another chance. I have to go."

No. She would not escape. Every instinct rose as she pivoted, urging him to stop her in any way possible. It took a single word. "Starbeam."

She stopped, turned slowly, slowly, slowly back around. "What did you say?"

Was this the right move? Was he breaking a confidence, or was it two, by sharing what he knew? No, she deserved to know. "Starbeam. That's what your dad called you, right?"

"How did you know that?" she whispered. She wrapped her arms around herself. "He mentioned in one of his letters that was my nickname when I was a baby. But I don't understand. He actually told you about me?"

"So many times." The words were raw, genuine and completely honest. "He didn't share your real name, of course, and I didn't know who you were." If he had known the woman he'd fallen for was his mentor's secret child, matters would have progressed very differently. "He talked about his daughter, how amazing you are, and how much he cared about you." He paused. "He regretted so much."

The lines in her forehead smoothed ever-so-slightly. “He’s trying to fix it, but it’s so late. I’m an adult and—”

“No.” He stopped her. “Not just recently.” Did she really not know this part? “He tried to get back into your life for years.”

“What?” She paled. “You’re wrong. He reached out just a few months ago. It was the first time I’d heard from him in... well, ever.”

“But it wasn’t the first time he tried.” It was a heady reveal, and perhaps not his to share, but she deserved to know. “Ever since I knew him, Charles was hoping to be part of your life. He admitted he left when you were a baby, which he told me was the greatest mistake of his life. Yet he tried to contact your family only a few years later, when you were a toddler. He wanted to be a father.”

“He could have been a father anytime,” she snapped. “Nothing was stopping him.”

“Actually, someone did. Your mom.”

“What?” She shook her head, backed up. Her mother had just passed last year. “You’re wrong. My mom did everything for me.”

“And this doesn’t change that.” He stayed where he was, his stance light and nonthreatening, with both hands held out. “Being a single mom is the hardest job out there, and she raised an amazing daughter. I wouldn’t blame her for being wary of him. He abandoned you for years, and she believed he would do it again. That’s why she asked him to stay away and wouldn’t even take the money he sent.”

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“No.” The word was a whisper, borne of anguish and pain. “That can’t be. Why didn’t he say anything?”

“He didn’t want to disparage your mom, so he kept his efforts a secret.” Despite her distress, he had to continue. She deserved the entire truth. “Your mother turned him down, however she agreed to send letters and share pictures of your life. He read each one at least a dozen times, and he even carries a picture of you in his wallet. He’s always been so proud of you.”

“It can’t be.” Her eyes glittered glossy sorrow. “It still doesn’t make sense. He could’ve seen me on his own, especially when I was older. I’ve been an adult for years.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Only he can answer that, but I think he began to believe what she said. He worried he would hurt you, and the more time that passed the harder it became. Yet he recently looked back and decided the chance for a relationship was worth the risk. He told me he was going to reach out again to you.”

“He has.” She closed her eyes. “I just wish...” She breathed out, ticking the seconds. When she lifted her lashes, her expression was grim. “This doesn’t change anything. Not with him, and not with you. I am so sorry.”

Frustration threatened his control, but he suppressed it. Arguing wouldn’t stop the fear driving her decisions. He needed to show her the truth. “That’s it, then.”

She opened her mouth as if to argue, closed it. “I should go.” Yet she made no move to depart, staring at him instead. Just as her eyes turned glassy, she turned away.

“Thank you for everything.” She started to walk away, stopped and turned. For a second she hesitated, then...

She jumped into his arms.

He held her tightly, like a perfectly molded piece. Warm and soft and beautiful, so perfect inside and out. For a moment, it seemed she'd changed her mind, but then she stiffened. He stifled his regret. Soon she would be his.

She pulled back, and this time the tears were apparent. “I’ll be seeing you... I mean... well on the screen, that is.”

He nodded, but didn’t move as she walked out the door but not out of his life. She didn’t need his arguments, his lecturing, his logic. She needed time. Time to figure out what she meant to him, what he meant to her. Time to realize their love was worth fighting for. Time to discover the truth.

She belonged to him.

She just didn’t know it yet.

CHAPTER 19

Cheyenne plucked a soft red petal. She rubbed it between her fingers before letting it drift to the ground. “I love him.”

She plucked another, held it for just a moment. “I still love him.”

She gathered another velvety petal... without hesitation, it joined the others. “Continuing to love him.”

Another petal, and this time, “I love him, damn it.”

Cheyenne tossed the entire flower on the ground. “I love him. I love him. I love him. This is ridiculous. I’m so far gone, I can’t even say the word not.”

A throat cleared, and she lifted her head. The man stood across the small park clearing, with a sad smile and a fathomless gaze. “Aren’t some of those supposed to be I love himnot?”

Cheyenne blushed. She hadn’t meant to share something so personal with him. Not even if he was technically her father. He’d asked if they could meet, and she had agreed. Only this time they were outside, under a sun that didn’t seem nearly as bright, amidst flowers that somehow seemed duller. Even the air tasted stale and lifeless.

Charles edged forward. “It’s all right, sweetheart. You were both gone a long time ago. The sparks are pretty obvious.”

“I never denied the chemistry,” Cheyenne admitted. “And if that’s all there were, I’d be over it by now. But it’s more than attraction. It’s... it’s...”

“Love.”

Love. One simple word, four little letters, and yet such meaning. But it was true, and she couldn’t deny it any longer. For some reason she had the strangest urge to confide in the man who’d forged her fears. “I thought I could just forget it. Forget him. Only two months have gone by, two months without contact, and I feel no different. Even my job seems dull and boring, which is ironic since that’s the excuse I gave him for leaving.”

Charles’s expression was kind. “Are you sure that’s why you gave him up?”

“Yes... no.” Cheyenne averted her gaze. “Work had nothing to do with it. How could I be with a man like that? A man whose job involves kissing other women, pretending to make love to them? How could I ever feel secure?”

Charles sighed. “Because he isn’t me. Because my leaving doesn’t mean he will. I did this to you, and I’m trying my best to undo it. You and your mother scared the hell out of me, and I ruined my life because of it. I lost the only people who truly mattered. Please don’t make the same mistake I did.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s not the same.”

“Close enough.” He placed a hand on her shoulder, and this time she welcomed it. “Don’t sabotage your life for fear. Has Julian given you any reason to believe he’d be unfaithful?”

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Their relationship replayed in a hundred memories, from their first meeting through every interaction to their fateful final conversation. Through it all, he hadn't engaged with other women. Even though the tabloids had shown him on the arms of many starlets, none had ever suggested he cheated. Since their breakup, even those pictures had disappeared. "No," she admitted. Then because she just couldn't help it, she asked, "Is he seeing anyone?"

Charles smiled. "Anyone besides you? No. In fact, he can't stop talking about you. It's a bit strange since he knows our true relationship. Have you been agonizing over that every day?"

Yes. Time hadn't weakened her feelings – instead they'd grown stronger, clearer. She just loved him so much.

By Charles' sympathetic expression, it was obvious. "You're the bravest person I know. You take on criminals without a thought. Yet when your heart is at risk, you run the other way."

"I didn't run." Except that's exactly what she did. "Okay, maybe I did, just a little. But what can I do now? Send him a fan letter?"

"Actually, I was thinking more of living happily ever after." Charles' gaze was soft. "No agent or publicist necessary."

Could it really be so simple? Could she go back, admit she'd made a mistake and start anew?

“Please think about it. I’m going to see him today. Do you want me to tell him anything?” He lifted an eyebrow. “Or better yet, do you want to come?”

So. Very. Much. But she couldn’t, at least not yet. She needed more time, just a little, to make the right decision. “No, thank you.”

“I understand.” Despite the negative response, Charles voice was light, and he seemed happier than she’d ever seen him. “I hope I helped, if even a little.”

“You actually did.” For once, the anger seemed less. The fear smaller. The hope greater. Just as her relationship with Julian was being redefined, so was the one with her father. “I was thinking about maybe giving you that chance.”

Eyes identical to hers widened. “Really?”

Cheyenne nodded, but the expected anxiety was absent. No anguish or even apprehension, but instead peace. “Maybe we could try for that cup of coffee again.”

He was silent for a moment, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, he beamed pure sunshine. “That sounds perfect.” Then he took a slightly unsteady breath, walked up and gave her something she’d been dreaming of her entire life.

A hug from her daddy.

That evening, Cheyenne hopscotched between euphoria for her second chance with her father and anguish for the one she was denying Julian. She spent two hours at the gym sparring out her frustration, resulting in more frustration and a lot of sore muscles. A day (and many hours of exercise) later, her resolve faltered. The next day she found herself watching every one of Julian’s flicks... twice.

The next day, she was done for.

She just couldn't give up the relationship of her dreams, at least not without trying. Julian claimed to be in love with her, and even if she hadn't admitted it to him – and barely to herself – she was in love with him. So she fortified herself and explained the situation to her boss. They agreed she'd have to leave her current position, but he promised a space for her within the department. Now she just had to decide how to tell Julian.

Only a few days later...

It started with a knock at the door at four a.m. Cheyenne stumbled out of bed, and half/slept, half/staggered to the front entrance. She peered through the peephole, blinking once and then twice and then a dozen times. What was Julian's agent doing here? She swiftly opened the door. "Frank, come in. Is everything okay with Julian?"

He held up a hand. "Julian's fine. I'm here to deliver something."

He was visiting before dawn to bring a present? He followed her to the living room and handed her a small, wrapped box covered in gleaming silver paper and a glittery bow. She tore the paper and opened the box. "An invitation?" She read the description and gasped.

It was an invitation to the biggest awards show of the year, the program watched by millions of people. She shifted the paper in her hands, and a small note slipped out. She grasped it before it could fall to the floor.

Please join me, but only if you're ready to tell the world.

It ended there, but no explanation was necessary. She had a choice, a decision that would redefine her life. Was she ready to admit her love, to show the world that Julian Starcroft belonged to her, and she to him? Or would she ignore it and spend the rest of her life without the man she loved?

She didn't debate for even a second.

"Does that wistful smile mean you accept?"

Cheyenne inhaled courage, exhaled anticipation. Only one word remained. "Yes."

Elation turned to pure joy. Julian hadn't given up on them, and he hadn't moved on. He'd been biding his time, granting her time to make her own decision. Now she was ready. She reread the invitation and halted. "Wait – this is today? In California?"

"That's right." He tapped his watch. "Which means we have to hurry. Your flight leaves in two hours."

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“My flight? Two hours? We’ll never make it. I have to pack and—”

“Don’t worry about that.” He stopped her. “Everything has been taken care of. As long as we make it to the airport, you’ll be fine. All you need is to dress and grab your purse. Can you do that?”

Could she? “Absolutely.”

The next few hours passed in a whirlwind of high-speed travel. They made it to the airport with minutes to spare and waited in the first-class lounge before boarding a nonstop flight to Los Angeles. Cheyenne had never flown first class before, and the wide, plush seats and gourmet meal of Belgian waffles with fresh whipped cream and strawberries were divine. The double serving of chocolate raspberry ganache cake tasted even better.

The flight arrived early, and Frank led her to a waiting limo. She hoped to see Julian right away so they could talk, but instead a woman dressed in sparkles and sequins approached with double air kisses. Louise Beauchene, one of the premier stylists in the country, was introduced as her personal stylist for the day as Frank waved farewell. “I’d love to stay, but I have a busy afternoon. I’ll leave you two to it.”

Of course, he was busy. He’d flown across the country to retrieve her on the day of the awards. Julian had gone to a lot of trouble to make this happen. What other surprises did he have in store for her?

She ducked into a luxurious car decked with plush seats, swanky furnishings and a minibar stocked with expensive liquors. They coasted down a crowded thoroughfare

flanked by palm trees and mega mansions, while up above fluffy white clouds drifted lazily across the sky, carried on a cool breeze that swirled through the open windows. Finally, they pulled into the Raffles L'Ermitage Beverly Hills, a luxurious hotel known for catering to the rich and famous. Cheyenne (somewhat) managed not to stare like a gawking tourist as the stylist checked them in and led her to a spacious suite with gilded accents and a balcony.

“How is this going to work?” Cheyenne tore her gaze away from the stunning view outside the window. “Are we going to the mall? I might not be a star, but I don’t think they’ll let me wear jeans to the awards.”

Louise turned pale, as if she’d suggested going buck naked. “Of course not, but we’re staying right here. The mall is coming to us.” Before Cheyenne could ask for an explanation, a light knock sounded from the door. The stylist answered, then returned with a large white box. “This is for you.”

Cheyenne placed the box on the table and removed the heavy lid. A gasp was the only possible response, as she lifted a creamy silk dress covered in Swarovski crystals. The floor length creation was an ethereal creation fit for a princess – or a movie star. A sparkling sweetheart neckline gave way to wispy off-the-shoulder sleeves, and then a shimmering skirt with hand embroidered embellishments. Tiny seed pearls glazed the crystals, like foam on a diamond sea. With every movement, light casted fiery rainbows along the magnificent work of fashion artistry.

Though she’d always been a tomboy, even she couldn’t resist the beautiful creation. With Lousie’s assistance, she discarded her casual outfit and slipped the gown over her head. Minutes later, she stared at the reflection that couldn’t possibly be her.

If the dress had been lovely in the box, it was nothing less than stunning on her. It molded to her curves, showing off her fit figure and shapely curves. Faceted crystals sparkled like tiny stars, amidst shimmering pearls and tiny glass beads reflecting the

glittering light. The skirt glistened with each movement, falling in soft waves all around her.

The stylist clapped her hands in glee. “It’s perfect.”

“I’m more than perfect – it’s amazing.” Cheyenne couldn’t look away from the iridescent reflection. “Thank you so much.”

“I would love to take credit, but I didn’t choose it,” Louise admitted. “Julian picked it out himself. He knew your exact measurements.” She smiled as Cheyenne blushed. “You probably don’t want to take it off, but I’m afraid you have to, at least for a little while. The team is here.”

There was more? “The team?”

What Julian had done, she discovered in the next few hours, was order a virtual army of professionals to gift her the spa day of a lifetime. First, an hour-long massage that turned her muscles to jelly, then a facial. Her nails were next, polished to a gleaming French manicure with crystal accents to match the dress. The hairstylist followed, world famous apparently, and created a half-updo with shiny ringlets that made her look like a princess. Next, the makeup artist turned her skin flawless, her eyes bright and her lips sparkly. Hours later, she finally slipped back into the stunning dress and its matching crystal-encrusted heels.

“You look fabulous.” Louise fussed over her after everyone had left. “The stars will wonder who this beauty is.”

It was like living in a dream. “Thank you. You did an amazing job.”

“There’s one last thing in the hallway. Why don’t you take a look while I order dinner?”

What more could possibly remain? A flying carpet? As the stylist dialed on her phone, Cheyenne crossed the corridor and approached a flat black velvet box. “What did you do, Julian?” she whispered. With a deep breath, she lifted the top.

Diamonds, emeralds and rubies, so many of them, gleaming and perfect and flawless, lay nestled against a midnight velvet background. They etched vines and flowers in a beautiful filigree necklace, a stunning representation of the nature Julian loved so much. The gems were clear and vibrant, sparkling as if lit by an inner light. A matching bracelet and earrings set accompanied them.

“Oh my.”

Cheyenne started at the voice from the doorway.

“I apologize.” The stylist grinned. “I didn’t mean to intrude. Julian wanted to know how you reacted when you saw them.”

“They’re amazing.” Beyond so, truly. She gave a curt shake of her head. “But just for tonight, right? He must’ve borrowed them like actresses do for awards shows and—”

“He bought them,” Louise broke in. “They’re yours.”

What? She traced the flawless sparkling surfaces. She couldn’t accept, of course, but perhaps she could wear them just this once. With Louise’s help, she donned the stunning suite. Then... she was ready.

The rest of the afternoon melted away. The food the stylist ordered was delicious and savory – lasagna, a fresh wedge salad and crusty bread covered in thick slices of garlic. Finally, the limousine came and whisked them away, just like that magic carpet. When they reached the theater, Louise turned to her. “This is where we’ll separate.”

“You’re not coming?” Cheyenne frowned. After the stylist’s hard work, she should see Julian’s reaction.

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“I’ll be there, but if I show up with you, everyone will notice. The reporters know you’re Julian’s ex-assistant, and they’ll wonder what you’re doing here. Of course, they’ll know soon enough, but we thought you’d rather wait for the reveal.” Louise gave a secretive smile. “Someone will take you to your seat. You’ll be sitting next to Julian, but he’s one of the presenters, so he’ll be backstage until after his performance.”

Cheyenne opened her mouth to ask more questions, but the limo came to a sudden stop. Louise gave her a quick hug. “I’ll see you soon!”

Cheyenne would’ve preferred a year or two more to prepare, but an usher opened the door, and just like that, time was up. With no choice, she climbed out of the limo, stepping into a sea of gloriously dressed actors and flashing light bulbs. Nervous energy slowed her steps, subsiding marginally when the crowd focused on the celebrities emerging from the other limos.

“Ms. Kirk?” An impeccably dressed usher greeted her. She nodded, and he gave a literal bow. “I’ll take you to your seat.”

Cheyenne followed him, thankfully bypassing the red carpet. Yet as they entered the lower level, travelling closer and closer to the stage, her apprehension grew. Then, he gestured to the front row.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

He smiled... and gestured to the same seat.

“Okay then. But when the president of the academy says I stole his place, I’m telling on you.”

The usher wouldn’t do something as undignified as chuckle, but his eyes sparkled. He gave a short bow before leaving, and Cheyenne sank down on the plush seat. Now people did notice her, whispering behind hands encrusted with massive diamond rings, exchanging hundreds of curious looks and taking (not so) subtle cell phone pics. They must wonder whose guest she was. Soon the whole world would know her identity.

The minutes passed quickly, and the hall filled up. She’d never been starstruck type, but it was a little surreal. She was grateful when they finally announced the show’s commencement and the lights dimmed.

A popular comedian from late night television was hosting this year, and he performed a hilarious opening monologue, complete with song and dance. Several speakers followed, celebrities in dazzling dresses and dapper tuxedos handing out the famous golden statues. There were a few tributes and videos, then a commercial.

After the break, the host returned. “The next speaker needs no introduction, at least not to his millions of fans. Please welcome the star of the upcoming movie, *Spy Heat*, Julian Starcroft.”

Apprehension stole Cheyenne’s breath. Months had passed since she’d seen him, but it seemed seconds as the handsome movie star strode onto the stage. The crowd cheered and clapped and hooted, but their calls faded as an unspoken connection sparked, despite the distance. They smiled at the exact same moment, eliciting a dizzying juxtaposition of warmth, chills and pure love. Every doubt disappeared in a minute, every uncertainty vanquished. She had made the right choice.

“Thank you for the warm welcome, ladies and gentlemen.” Julian’s voice boomed, as

he stood completely at ease in front of the vast audience. “I’m thrilled to be here. In a minute, you’ll find out why.” He winked, sending off a new round of applause.

A funny feeling fluttered in her stomach.

“When the Academy approached me to do a presentation, they were looking for a segment on love in the movies. I explained I was an action star, but they didn’t believe me.” He paused to laughter. “But then something happened, and suddenly I found myself with the perfect material. But in this case, it wasn’t about fictional love, but true love.”

A murmur sounded through the crowd, and Cheyenne’s heart leapt into a gallop. He couldn’t possibly be talking about...

“It struck like lightning, like they always talk about in the movies, only this wasn’t in any script. It began with a woman, an amazing, strong, beautiful woman, who turned out to be more than I ever imagined. I may play a hero in the movies, but she’s the real thing.” He gazed right at her. “I simply had to get close to her. So I asked – okay, fine, convinced – her to spend time with me.”

Everyone smiled, including Cheyenne.

“As I got to know the true woman, something unexpected happened. Something I’d never experienced before. Love—” He paused to applause so thunderous, he couldn’t be heard even with the microphone. He stood tall and heroic, beaming like a man whose greatest dreams had come true. Finally, when the applause showed no sign of abating, he gestured to continue. “I used to believe true love only happened in the movies, but it happened to me. I met the perfect woman, a woman who is kind and giving, sweet and strong, noble and compassionate. A woman who is willing to sacrifice herself for others, who is honorable, fierce and so very intelligent. I couldn’t imagine my life without her.”

Now he spoke directly to her, as if they were the only two people in the entire world. “I don’t care what your name is. I don’t care who you are or what you do. All I care about is you. I want to be with you today, tomorrow and forever. This time, I’m not asking for a date – I’m asking for a lifetime.”

He descended the stage and strode to her. Then...

He bent down on one knee.

The world grew blurry as he held out a small velvet box to reveal a stunning ruby and diamond ring, the perfect match to her set.

She gasped.

The crowd gasped.

The world gasped.

“Cheyenne Kirk, will you make me the happiest man in the world? Will you marry me?”

She didn’t notice the crowds. She didn’t notice the cameras. She only saw her love, the man of her heart giving his own. She would take it, keep it safe, hold it next to hers as they journeyed life together. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, yes, yes!”

His smile shared the truth of his love as he slipped the ring on her finger, where it fit with perfection. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her like he’d never let her go. He never would.

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“I love you so much,” she whispered. “And I don’t care who knows it. I love this man,” she called for the world to hear.

“Forever?” he asked.

“Forever,” she said.

And the world applauded.

EPILOGUE

Life was wonderful.

A dream come true, since Sarah had married Julian in the wedding of the decade, as deemed by the news, social media and hundreds of influencers. All the Billionaires of Miami and their spouses attended, as well as friends and family. Who walked her down the aisle?

Her dad.

Their relationship had blossomed since they reconnected. It may never be a traditional relationship, or a perfect one, but he’d made vast efforts to support her, in little and big ways. He made time for her at a moment’s call, attended special events and let her guide their relationship. When it was time for the wedding, asking him seemed natural.

Tears had been shed.

With the mission successfully closed, she'd returned to the force, albeit in a different role. She led investigations and, with the assistance of makeup and wigs, even delved undercover for short stints. She was still doing what she loved, catching criminals and seeking justice, yet there was something – someone – she loved even more.

Julian.

Life with him was an adventure, filled with the ordinary, extraordinary and everything in between. Despite their hectic work schedule, they made it work, spending more time together than apart. He had even booked an upcoming television show set in Miami, so he wouldn't have to travel to location. For special events, she often accompanied him.

Now they were at one such special event, another comic convention filled with thousands of enthusiastic fans. As they prepared for their presentation for *Spy Heat*, she planned something special, a homage to their unusual beginning. They were acting out one of the biggest scenes, in which the hero, i.e. her husband, captures the masked villainess. Only instead of using the actress, Cheyenne convinced the director to let her dress as the character. In full costume and makeup, she was unrecognizable, if a little sweat-slicked under the skin-tight garment.

Yeah, she was going undercover.

They stood on the grand main stage, under garnet cascades of curtains, before an audience of thousands. The air smelled like cake makeup and anticipation, with a warmth of so many bodies packed so close together. Under the brilliant lights, the crowd hooted, clapped and cheered, ready for their favorite characters. The scene started, and Julian crept across the stage toward her, giving his famous monologue, vowing to discover all the criminal's secrets. She stayed still in her hiding spot, waiting for him.

Even though his approach was imminent, she still jumped when he captured her. He lunged from the side and wrapped his arms around her. “You will never escape me,” he growled.

Then... he froze.

Freezing was not part of the script, not for him, not for her. He was supposed to launch into a triumphant speech, his victory lap now that he caught the criminal mastermind. The villainous was supposed to scream and struggle, proclaiming her innocence.

Yet neither played their part as they locked eyes, sharing a thousand messages. Did he realize it was her? How would he react? He shifted her, his narrowing eyes showing a tangle of confusion, shock and challenge. So she did what any red blooded woman would do when held by the hottest movie star in the universe.

She kissed him.

It was sweet, delicious and filled with more passion than all of *Spy Heat*. As usual, he stole control, holding her flush against his heated body, as he plundered her mouth. He whispered her name, proving he knew the woman he married.

Around them silence reined, traveling from a cacophony of screams and shouts to the utter quietness of a second's breath. It lasted but a moment before the noise returned with a vengeance, the whistles, hoots and hollers filling the cavernous hall. Finally he pulled back and lifted her mask. They grasped hands... and bowed.

The presentation had been a success, and more fun than she ever imagined. Julian had previously offered her cameos, and for the first time, she actually considered it. She was already famous, whether she liked it or not, and working with him would be a rare treat.

Since the disguise worked so well before, they had both donned similar costumes for the remainder of the afternoon. Now they walked through the convention, and for once nobody was paying attention to them, providing a rare freedom. The costumes covered them from head to toe, including masks that only revealed their eyes and lower face. Of course, they were not Spy Heat costumes, but instead various aliens from a show that involved a time-travelling hero in a little blue box.

So far he hadn't mentioned her subterfuge, instead staying silent as they passed talented artists, enthusiastic celebrities and exuberant cosplayers. Vendors offered a variety of souvenirs, including photographs and paintings of them. They passed a group of girls giggling about the Spy Heat presentation, and she grimaced. Three, two, one...

"You do realize I'm going to get you back for that little performance." Cole gave a rather convincing growl that sent lightning through her blood. "Expect retribution."

A shiver stole her breath. She couldn't wait. "I'm a trained professional. I'm not scared of you."

"No?" He lifted a perfect eyebrow. "Do you want to hear all the things I have planned?"

Oh. Yes.

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“First,” he lowered his voice. “I’m going to make you play... a... word tile game.”

“No!” she gasped.

“Then you’ll have to answer thousands of fan letters.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“After that, I have some dry cleaning to drop off. I’ve added another six locations—”

She stopped him the best way she knew how.

And boy was the kiss delicious.

When they finished the kiss (and the two subsequent ones he initiated), they grasped hands and walked through golden-edged glass doors onto the grand balcony. They emerged to a private wonderland, under a star-studded sky that extended to the heavens above. The air was cool and fresh, surrounding a cityscape with soaring skyscrapers and bridges illuminated with rainbow lights. They stepped across pearly tiles and grasped the intricately carved balustrade. “Isn’t it beautiful?” She smiled.

“Yes, it is,” he replied softly, gazing at her with a thousand shades of love. His smile widened at her blush. “I’m the luckiest man in the world,” he murmured, ending the last of the distance between them. He caressed her cheek, lifting the mask ever-so-slightly. Leaned closer... closer... closer.

“Oh my gosh, it’s Julian and Cheyenne!” A young woman screamed. Then another

and another, like a set of dominoes. Suddenly they were surrounded by cheering fans. They jerked back, yet a new cheer arose, “Kiss, kiss, kiss!”

Cheyenne laughed. What had her life become? In the distance, security was on its way, but for now, she allowed Julian to grasp her, holding her against a wall of pure muscle. She pushed even closer. “We can’t disappoint them.”

“No, we can’t,” he agreed.

So they started where they had stopped, kissing under the shimmering sky and cool night breeze, before fans and friends and the world. The night disappeared, as they traveled to their own world, just for the two of them. One home, one path, one destiny.

And their love?

That lasted forever.