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GUILTY  
PLEASURES

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TORI  
CARRINGTON



# Tori Carrington

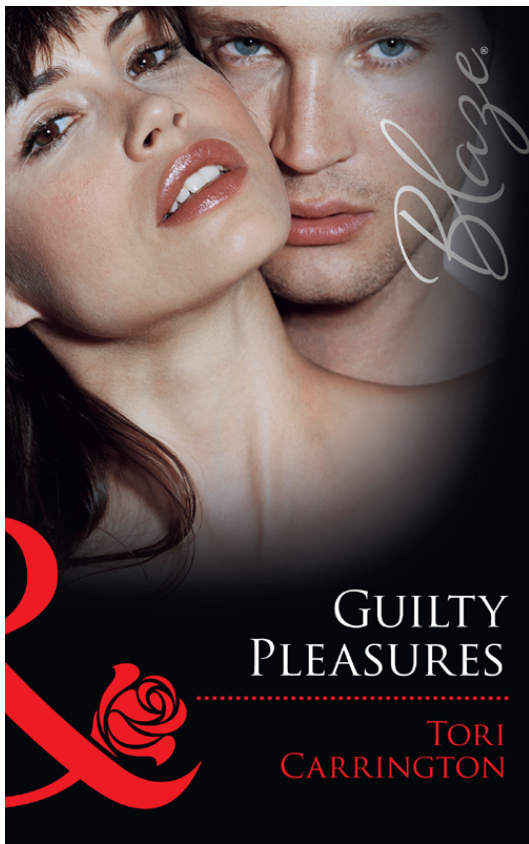
## Guilty Pleasures

### **Аннотация**

Ex-Army ranger Jon's first big assignment is to hunt down a murder suspect. But his straightforward case gets a lot juicier when the fugitive in question, Mara, is a scorchin'-hot woman who won't listen to "You're under arrest!" While Jon is determined to haul her in, Mara is determined to prove her innocence and exploit his one weakness... her!

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**Look what people are saying about this talented author**  
“Warning needed: whatever you do—just buy the book! Do not try to read parts in a public place! This one is seriously, seriously

passionately hot! An absolute sizzler!”

—*FreshFiction.com* on *Shameless*

“Tori Carrington’s imagination knows no boundaries and she proves it once again.”

—*Romance Reviews Today* on *Unbridled*

“Filled with passion, angst, and a very interesting relationship between two strong people, this novel is hot, hot, hot!”

—*The Romance Readers Connection* on *Branded*

“Get out the asbestos gloves to read this one, it’s almost too hot to handle.”

—*Writers Unlimited* on *Reckless*

“Consistently excellent authors with surprising emotional depth.”

—*The Romance Readers Connection* on *Reckless*

“One of category’s most talented authors.”

—*EscapetoRomance.com*

Dear Reader,

Take one part bad girl on the run, one part alpha male determined to catch her, add a healthy helping of sexual chemistry and physical danger and you have the makings of this latest Tori Carrington title!

In *Guilty Pleasures*, former Army Ranger Jonathon Reece is determined to make a name for himself in his new career with private security firm Lazarus, but he has his work cut out for him on his first big solo assignment: bringing in fugitive-from-justice

Mara Findlay. The problem? The sexy bad girl outwits him at every turn.

Mara is innocent of the crime of which she's accused, but why bother explaining that? Instead, she's going to prove it. Problem? The hottie on her heels.

Sex is just sex, isn't it? Not when it's the kind you can't get enough of. And when circumstances allow for both time and opportunity, Mara and Jon take full advantage ... until it's not about just the sex anymore. But during a time when nothing is as it appears, can Mara and Jon trust each other? More important, can they trust what they're feeling is real?

We hope you enjoy Jon and Mara's sizzling, heart-thumping journey toward sexily-ever-after. Curious about upcoming *Tori* titles? Visit [www.facebook.com/toricarrington](http://www.facebook.com/toricarrington).

Here's wishing you love, romance and HOT reading.

*Lori Schlachter Karayianni & Tony Karayianni aka *Tori Carrington**

# About the Author

*RT Book Reviews* Career Achievement Award-winning, bestselling duo Lori and Tony Karayianni are the power behind the pen name **TORI CARRINGTON**. Their more than fifty novels include numerous Mills & Boon<sup>®</sup> Blaze<sup>®</sup> miniseries, as well as the ongoing Sofie Metropolis, PI comedic mystery series with another publisher. Visit [www.toricarrington.net](http://www.toricarrington.net) and [www.sofiemetro.com](http://www.sofiemetro.com) for more information on the couple and their titles.

## **Guilty Pleasures**

Tori Carington



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

This book is dedicated to fellow readers who like their stories hot and dangerous! And, as always, to editor extraordinaire Brenda Chin, who always gets it ...

# 1

JONATHON REECE READ the detailed stat sheet, giving the grainy photos of an attractive brunette in the corner a cursory glance: the one on the right appeared to be a high school senior yearbook shot of Mara Findlay showing a clean-cut girl every guy in class likely panted over; the other was a mug shot of a woman with spiky blond hair and raccoon eyes, more wild animal than girl next door. The two were polar opposites, appearing to have no more connection to one another than a kitten did to a bobcat. He'd known his share of both, drawn more to the former than the latter.

Although this was the first time he was asked to hunt either down.

He looked across the desk at his boss, Darius Folsom.

“You up for it?” Darius asked.

Was he up for it? He'd been waiting for just such a solo assignment, to prove to his higher-ups that he was Lazarus Security material, not just capable in an ensemble assignment, but on his own, as well. And this, essentially a high-profile bounty hunter case, was right up his alley. Given his army ranger background, he knew he'd get his man—or in this case, woman—before any of the federal or local agencies, not to mention other bounty hunters. And he'd do it quick and be first in line for the next job.

“All over it,” he said with a grin.

Darius got up from his chair and rounded the desk. “Good. You’ve got contact info should you need backup. Don’t hesitate to use it.”

“I won’t.” Only he didn’t plan on needing any assistance. This was a clear-cut assignment. He had this.

Jon shook Darius’s hand, and thanked him, then traded the stark office for the long corridor leading to the back entrance.

Lazarus Security was a newer operation, but already they were creating a name for themselves in the private sector, attracting high-profile cases and consistently delivering the goods. Not that Jonathon was surprised. Before he’d signed on, he’d heard of the five partners who, although not much older than him, were gaining mythical status within the military and personal security communities. Each had earned their stripes individually, but it was their combined story that guaranteed that whenever soldiers were gathered, active or veteran, it would be told.

He nodded at a new recruit, even as he took his cell phone out to make arrangements with Lazarus’s go-to gal to catch the first flight out to Arizona.

The fact that Winslow was also his hometown was a bonus. He knew Arizona as well as he knew where the dust on the tops of his boots came from. He gave in to a small grin as he exited the building and climbed inside his old Jeep Wrangler, his gaze catching momentarily on the top-of-the-line shooting range and the new recruits being trained there by Megan McGowan.

He was really here, wasn't he?

Yes, he was.

And he intended to not only stay here, but become worthy of partner status in record time.

He started the Jeep, running down what he needed to do in his mind. He'd stop by the small rental house he'd just moved into with his girlfriend, Julie, grab the duffel he'd kept packed ever since becoming a ranger and then head to the airport.

Miss Mara Lynn Findlay didn't stand a chance....

THERE WASN'T A CHANCE in hell anyone would expect her to make an appearance back at her place....

Mara Findlay gave her recently dyed brassy red hair a tousle so bangs fell over her green eyes and nudged her way past two slow moving passengers as she walked through Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport gate entrance into the terminal, her destination a long-term parking lot where she always kept a car. An old Chevy with no electronics that could be traced, much less lead, back to her.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee teased her and she stared hungrily at a small diner as she passed. She'd been running nonstop for over two days and there was so much caffeine already in her system, she fairly vibrated. To add more to it would be nothing short of stupid. As soon as she did what she needed to do back at her warehouse apartment, she'd better find a place to get some solid sleep if she hoped to keep her wits about her.

And, oh, boy, did she ever need to keep her wits about her....

*Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into.*

The Laurel and Hardy quote her father had been fond of usually made her smile, but it didn't now. Very few things were capable of making her smile right about then. Being wanted for murder tended to have that effect on a girl.

She hurried through the airport terminal, chin ducked down as she felt her way through her backpack for an energy bar.

She smacked headfirst into someone emerging from another arrival gate.

"Criminy, they put eyes in your head for a reason," she mumbled, crouching to pick up the bar that had fallen to the floor.

"Most probably so they could be poked out by the likes of someone like you," a man said.

She got the bar and began walking before she was even upright.

"Why, thank you for the reminder of why I'm still single," the man said.

Mara couldn't help herself. She smiled. She spared the guy a look and wasn't disappointed by what she saw—tall, dark and sarcastic. Just her type.

While no one would describe her as short, this guy had her by at least five inches and was long and lean, somewhere around her age, and boasted blond surfer-dude good looks that normally might have repelled her but somehow didn't, in his case. Mainly because, while he might look like a surfer, she'd bet he didn't own a board and he probably only went into the water to swim for

fitness, so his brain wasn't waterlogged and limited to the words *awesome* and *dude*.

No, this guy had military—or ex-military—stamped all over him.

Too bad she was in such a hurry. She might have considered talking him into taking her back to his place, giving him a nice, long ride, then crashing for ten hours straight before hitting the ground running again.

Of course, despite his comment, he was probably as single as a two-dollar bill.

She gave him a two-finger salute and watched him first look at his cell phone, then return a half-assed smile that told her she was probably missing out on a primo op for some great sex.

Ah, well. Story of her life. Fantasy was always much more interesting than reality, in her world. In her mind, she slept with any number of hot guys a day. In reality, you could count the number of men with whom she'd ever been intimate on one hand without the use of the thumb.

She emerged from the airport terminal and blinked against the hot, bright Arizona sunlight. She'd forgotten for a moment where she was. Which told her her need for sleep was greater than she'd realized. Maybe she should grab that rest before going back to her place, just in case it was being watched.

But what she needed couldn't wait.

Damn.

She boarded a shuttle to an off-site long-term parking lot right

before it closed its doors, standing instead of sitting, and watched the guy she'd run into come outside the terminal, shielding his eyes. Their gazes met and held until broken by distance, as the hum of the shuttle engine filled her ears.

In a parallel universe, she might have found herself straddled across his bare thighs at that moment, riding him through long, mountainous trails toward an awesome waterfall ...

She grimaced.

In a parallel universe, she wouldn't be wanted for the murder of a man whose only crime was to be assigned to hear a capital case against a militia head who had no intention of staying in jail.

She absently rubbed her forehead. She still wasn't clear on everything that had happened, other than what she'd read in the papers. Federal Prosecutor Ryan Mussel had been killed in his home office ... and apparently there had to have been enough trumped-up evidence left around to link his murder to her, since she had an outstanding arrest warrant.

Her step faltered.

While she hadn't known Ryan personally, she had known about him and had seen him on a couple of occasions years ago. She certainly had no motive for his murder. But she could only imagine what evidence had been manufactured against her: enough to earn her at least a life sentence if not a death one.

But why? What did she know? There had to be a reason she was being set up for a crime she hadn't committed. By a man she had once loved, along with his extended family. A family that had

also been *her* family not so very long ago, although it sometimes seemed like a lifetime had passed since she'd left the Freedom Way militia group to which she'd once belonged.

“No one ever truly gets out....”

She recalled the words of one of her “family” members when she'd said goodbye to him.

“Once in, you're always in. And not always in a good way.”

She hadn't completely grasped what he'd been saying ... until now.

She could only hope the information she was after would be enough to clear her name.

Of course, getting that information was going to be tricky.

Tricky? To most, it would represent a death wish.

But seeing as she was probably facing the death penalty anyway ... well, she had to risk it.

First she had to get what she needed from her place, the most important thing being cash.

She tightened her grasp on the pole as the shuttle turned a corner, suddenly cold despite the high heat....

JON'S CELL CHIMED several times the instant he switched it on, once the plane had parked at the arrival gate. Every time it did, he checked to watch another text roll in from Julie. Twelve of them at last count. He didn't kid himself into thinking they would be the last. He could only wonder when the calls would start.

Scratch that; they already had. Three voice mails were waiting

for him.

He didn't need to check. He already knew what he'd hear. Maybe not Julie's exact words, but the gist of those words. Essentially, he was a low-down dirty heel for leaving her high and dry with no warning. What was she going to do by herself for God knows how long? They were supposed to meet her parents for dinner. He couldn't possibly expect her to go by herself?

The messages weren't anything that couldn't wait until later, when he had both the time and the patience to listen to her rant.

He stood outside the terminal doors staring at the woman he'd run into in the terminal. She looked back at him. As was the case inside, he felt an odd prickling at the back of his neck.

He absently rubbed the area in question and then checked his cell phone again, which was exactly what he'd been doing when he'd bumped headlong into the hot redhead.

Only, *hot* didn't begin to cover it. He'd experienced an immediate physical awareness when her body had brushed against his. Only, she'd regained her bearings and then continued walking without missing a musical beat, issuing the verbal comment as easily as if she'd been wishing him a good day. Talk about one-sided attraction....

He squinted at the shuttle as it disappeared, leaving nothing behind but an invisible cloud of diesel fumes and a lingering sensation that he was missing something. But that didn't make sense. He and Julie had just moved in together, their relationship going on two years, and he'd never once been tempted to

stray. Despite her occasional—okay, maybe more like frequent—temperamental rants, their relationship was solid.

He grimaced. Okay. Maybe it wasn't all that rock-hard. He'd suspected, their first day together under the same roof, that he'd made a mistake. He'd hoped things would get better. But in the two months since the day, he'd found himself spending more time at work than at home. Which, of course, aggravated her all the more—

“Mr. Reece?” He heard his name above the sounds of shuttle engines and airplane traffic.

He spotted a pimply kid who looked barely old enough to drive standing next to a beat-up old Jeep.

“That would be me,” he said.

“Your car, sir.”

He'd specifically asked for a rental from a used car lot, as opposed to one of the national agencies, preferring something tried and true, without an identifying sticker on a cookie-cutter sedan that would immediately identify him as an out-of-towner—something he was not, despite now living in Colorado Springs.

Speaking of which, he hoped he'd be able to squeeze in some time to see his family, maybe after he delivered one very wanted Mara Lynn Findlay to the sheriff. He knew his mom wouldn't mind him popping up on her doorstep unannounced. And any one of his four siblings would enjoy a visit. If everything went the way he hoped, he might finish up in time to have dinner at his mom's, and a beer with one or three of his brothers and his sister

at Flossie's Tavern. Then he could soon be on a plane home, in time to have a long-overdue talk with Julie about the volatility of their relationship.

Yes. Sounded like a plan.

Jon opened the Jeep's passenger door, stashed his duffel inside, then closed and locked it. He took the key from the kid and then handed him a twenty.

"Thanks."

He rounded the Jeep and climbed in the driver's side. He put the vehicle in gear and pulled away, his destination the apartment of one particular fugitive from justice, Mara Lynn Findlay....

## 2

JON WAS UNSURPRISED to find that Mara's place wasn't so much an apartment as it was space above an abandoned warehouse. He was familiar with the district. Jancy's was an old automotive tool-and-die operation that finally closed its doors at some point in the mid-'90s. His uncle had spent a lifetime working there, as had a couple of cousins ... until the factory shut down without warning, leaving them high and dry with no more than a Closed sign on the door one morning when they reported to work.

Judging by the large Realtor sign affixed to the brick exterior, it was still standing empty.

Except for the upstairs apartment ...

Jon parked the Jeep in the back corner behind an old Dumpster that probably didn't see regular garbage pickup, and got out. There wasn't much traffic in this area outside Winslow. Not now that the few factories that had once kept the town humming had shut down. He was glad he hadn't gone through a car rental agency. A shiny new Ford would look a lot more out of place than his old Jeep.

He looked around at the weed-choked cracked asphalt, piles of discarded tires and empty wooden pallets. On second thought, any kind of vehicle that wasn't a rusty shell and whose engine ran, period, would stand out.

He squinted against the strong midday sun, his black T-shirt and dark jeans absorbing the heat as thirstily as a sponge, his shoulder holster and 9 mm heavy against his skin. If the Feds were anywhere around, they were well hidden. He walked toward the back of the warehouse and the wrought-iron stairwell where a large mailbox sat crammed full of what he guessed was junk mail. The warehouse itself was unremarkable: a long, simple building that was a mix of brick and aluminum sheeting, with windows lining the tops of the walls to allow for natural lighting, and large doors spaced throughout, presumably for shipping purposes. Above the original building was a second story that ran maybe a quarter of the length of the structure itself, probably once housing the factory offices. Now, he guessed it was a personal apartment. He grabbed the railing, about to climb the stairs, when movement through the grimy window to his left caught his attention. He went to the large, double-loading doors and cupped his hands to stare inside.

A Camaro. An old one, whose windshield had recently been cleaned by the wipers.

He automatically drew his gun and tried the door. It opened easily ... quietly.

Shit. That couldn't be good.

His thought was verified when he felt something hard hit him on the back of the head. He was aware of the cement floor jumping up to smack him in the face before all went dark....

MARA KICKED THE 9 MM away from the guy's hand,

checked to make sure he was out, then gave the area outside a visual sweep to verify he was alone, before closing the door and, this time, locking it.

She knew she should have seen to that before starting to cover the car. He'd never have gotten inside if she had.

Then again, if she'd gotten home ten minutes earlier, she would have had both the car covered and the door locked, completely bypassing her current circumstances.

She hauled a dusty stretch of canvas over the car, then went about the business of dragging the guy to the far corner of the warehouse, kicking a couple of empty energy-drink cans out of her way as she went. Although she was in excellent physical condition, deadweight was deadweight and he had at least fifty pounds, if not more, on her. And while the temperature in the warehouse wasn't as hot as outside, it was still hot. She finally reached the door to her working office, unbolted it then dragged him inside, wiping her damp brow with the short sleeve of her black-and-white T-shirt before sitting him upright and taking a good look at him.

Huh.

He was the guy from the airport.

What were the odds?

She stood straight, twisted her lips and considered him for a long moment. She'd tagged him as ex-military when they'd crossed paths before. But what would he be doing here—alone—now?

She didn't have to think too hard—he'd obviously been sent to apprehend her.

She leaned back, staring at where his 9 mm still lay in the middle of the open old warehouse—now her workshop—floor.

He began to stir.

Damn.

Having nothing on her to use as a restraint, and guessing he did, she was left with only one option, short of knocking him unconscious again.

She leaned forward and kissed him ...

SHARP PAIN SHOT THROUGH the back of Jon's head. Where was he?

And who in the hell was kissing him?

He blinked open his eyes, aware of three things: he was sitting on a cold, cement floor. He wasn't there voluntarily. And the woman straddling his hips wasn't his girlfriend.

Boy, if Julie was pissed before ...

Especially since he was starting to enjoy the kiss.

He couldn't be sure who she was, but she tasted of chocolate and mint and knew her way around a man's mouth.

Jon groaned, caught between wanting to go with the moment and needing to get a handle on the situation.

Her hands felt around his stomach, dipping down into his waistband, then his rear end. Her tongue lapped at the corners of his lips then slid inside his mouth, teasing his, even as her thighs squeezed him, making him overly aware of how close her pelvis

was against his.

She smoothed her hands down over his shoulders, his arms ...

Then she was grabbing his wrist, twisting it until he was facedown on the cement, the plastic teeth of a restraint being drawn tight together. In seconds, he found his hands tied behind his back—and around a six-inch metal support pole.

Sweet hell ...

The woman rose to her feet even as he sat back upright, staring up at her.

There was no way on earth that she was ...

“You,” he said simply.

Everything came together at once: the woman running into him at the airport; the stat sheet with the grainy photos; the whack of something solid hitting the back of his head.

He winced. It wasn't possible he'd been taken hostage by his own target. Was it?

“Me,” she said.

Jon tested the restraint behind his back, half-afraid it was his own. Which meant the police-grade plastic bracelet would be doubly hard to get out of.

Mara Lynn Findlay wore the same jeans and black-and-white T-shirt she'd had on at the airport, but she'd tied her shiny—and, he highly suspected, dyed—red hair back from her face. She looked nothing like either of the photos on the sheet.

Then again, there had also been nothing listed on that stat sheet that indicated she'd be anything other than an easy grab.

Her occupation was listed as “an artist.” He hadn’t expected her to be as fit and capable as a ranger.

She pointed a short, black-painted fingernail at him. “I’m guessing you know a whole hell of a lot more about me than I know about you,” she said. “So why don’t we remedy that, shall we?”

“Oh? I’m beginning to think I might not know anywhere near as much as I needed to know about you.”

He realized she had his wallet. She flipped it open and stared at his driver’s license, counted his money then put it back inside, then counted two credit cards, one issued through Lazarus for business, along with his most recent hunting license.

“Bounty hunter?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Independent?”

“Associated.”

“Out of where?”

“Colorado Springs.”

She raised her brows at that and tossed his wallet onto a desktop.

“I just got in a little while ago.” He offered up a sarcastic smile. “But of course you know that.”

She was watching him closely. “Army ... ranger, I’m guessing.”

He raised a brow. “Target on.”

“Must really piss you off that you’re sitting on the floor of my

warehouse in your own restraints.”

“You have no idea.”

She moved toward the corner of what looked like an office, the windows giving a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of what had once been a factory floor. He peeled his gaze from her primo behind and looked through the open door. A few of the die machines were still in place, dusty and dry. He made out the now covered Camaro and just beyond that, his gun.

He winced again.

Oh, this was so not going anywhere on his trip report.

He also saw that her art medium of choice seemed to be metal sculptures.

Positioned around the open area closest to them were at least three of what he'd guess were works in progress, one of them towering nearly to the warehouse ceiling and resembling a robotlike Greek statue, the others considerably shorter, perhaps too new to show what they'd ultimately end up representing. Two thigh-high piles of scrap metal lay just on the other side of them. Welder's gear of full mask, goggles and gloves were nearby, along with an industrial-size blowtorch as well as a smaller one.

He glanced back at her, easily imagining her wearing the full mask and working with red-hot fire.

“How about you?” he asked.

“Me, what?” She rifled through drawers looking for something.

“Ex-military?”

She hesitated. “No.”

He guessed that wasn't entirely true. But surely, information of that nature would have been listed on her sheet. Going after a soft-around-the-middle civilian was a much different job than pitting wits against someone with the same training.

He allowed his gaze to take her in, from her toned arms, her full breasts, flat abs and an ass you could probably bounce a quarter off. Military or not, she'd obviously had training. And not of the fluffy Zumba variety, either. The fact that she had gotten one over on him was evidence of that.

Again, it was something that should have been on her stat sheet.

Mara appeared exasperated as she slammed shut the drawer of a metal desk then propped her hands on her hips. She looked toward the areas that allowed a view outside.

“You alone?” she asked.

“You expect me to answer that?”

She smiled, reminding him of a predatory creature capable of taking a bite out of him. More like the bobcat he'd compared her to when he'd first seen her photos.

The fact that the idea excited him? Probably should have been of greater concern than it was.

His cell phone rang, the chime “MMMBop” by Hanson chosen by Julie herself.

Damn.

Mara stared at him, then at his front jeans pocket.

“Someone important?”

“No.”

She leaned forward and fished the phone out. “Julie? With a heart? Looks important to me.”

He didn’t say anything. For reasons he preferred not to delve into just then, he just hoped she wouldn’t answer it.

She didn’t.

He let out the breath he was holding.

Her amused expression told him she’d caught his reaction. “I think you’re lying to me.” She waved the cell at him. “How do you suppose Miss Julie-with-a-Heart would feel about your kissing another girl?”

“I don’t have to suppose. It would piss her off.”

She smiled then tossed the phone to the desk to lie next to his wallet. “I figure I have another five minutes, tops, before you break that restraint,” she said. “Which means I’ve got two minutes to get something else. Be right back.”

He watched her leave the office and climb a set of dark, steel stairs to a catwalk he guessed must lead to her upstairs apartment.

Damn.

She was right. It would take him at least another few minutes to free himself.

She was back in one.

She planted one of the old boots she wore between his legs, nudged his knees farther apart and then moved what he guessed was a steel toe closer to his family jewels than he was comfortable

with. She leaned over so she could secure the pair of police-issue steel handcuffs she'd brought down.

Aw, hell.

As irritated as he was growing, he couldn't help but peer down the front of her shirt as she worked, her breasts swaying ever so slightly in a shiny, black bra, a thin, glistening sheen of sweat on her smooth skin from her recent efforts. She smelled of something sweet and sexy that made his mouth water in a way that would only further piss off "Julie-with-a-Heart."

What was he talking about? It was pissing him off. The last thing he wanted was to feel attracted to a woman who had taken him hostage when he was supposed to be hauling her in instead.

She finished then stepped back, taking what appeared to be a toaster pastry from where she'd been holding it between her lips and chewing silently. She held it out toward him. "Bite?"

"What are you planning to do?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"Now? In the immediate future?" She waved the pastry. "Eat this."

He had to admit, she wasn't boring.

Although he'd much prefer it if their roles were reversed.

"And after that?"

Her chewing slowed and she used a pinkie to swipe a crumb from the corner of her mouth. "Sleep."

Sleep ...

The word wound around his mind even as he watched her toe

a bedroll she'd brought down along with the restraints and what appeared to be documents of some sort folded and stashed in a small, blue plastic bag he sometimes saw newspapers delivered in. She popped the last of the pastry into her mouth and opened the sleeping bag, stuffing the documents inside before stretching out on top of it. It was only then he recognized the signs of fatigue: the dark smudges under her green eyes, the paleness of her skin, the lethargic lag of her movements.

Hell, if this was what she was like at half speed, he'd hate to see her at full.

She'd positioned the bedroll so it was far enough away that he couldn't reach her, but between him and the door, close enough that if he awkwardly tried to escape, he'd have to step over her.

He eyed the open door.

She looked up abruptly then reached to slam the door. There was no mistaking the auto lock that clicked home.

Swell.

"How long you plan to be out?" he asked.

"As long as my body dictates. Try anything stupid and ..."

He hadn't realized she'd brought a gun down with her.

Oh, wait: she hadn't. That was his gun.

Damn.

It was going to take him a while to live down this one. Not that he planned on telling anyone. No. But it *was* going to take a while for *him* to get over this.

The sound of her soft snores a moment later told him she was

out like a light.

Jon drew in a deep breath and felt around his own restraints.

The way he saw it, all he had to do was wait until she decided what to do next before he figured out his next move.

He could only hope that hers didn't include putting the muzzle of his own gun to his head and shooting, much the way she had assassinated the good prosecutor she was wanted for murdering....

### 3

“I’M HENRY THE EIGHTH.”

Mara fought against the irritating words determined to yank her from a solid sleep.

He sang the words louder, apparently convinced she hadn’t heard him the first time.

She put her hands over her ears and moaned.

No, no, no ...

“Oh, hi,” her annoying hostage said. “Sorry ... am I bothering you?”

She cracked open an eyelid and glared at him, noting how close the 9 mm was ... and how easy it would be to do away with the annoyance.

“By the way?” he said, his long, denim-covered legs casually crossed at the ankles of his cowboy boots, looking as though he was there by choice and not by force ... and appearing a little too cheerful for her liking. “You already know from reading my license, but we haven’t been properly introduced. My name is Jonathon Reece, Jon to my friends. But I’ll let you call me that if you want ...”

She glanced at her watch. She’d only been asleep for a couple of hours. She reached for the gun and dragged it closer to her side.

“I’m thinking it’s been a while since you’ve gotten any decent

sleep, huh? Actually, I'm guessing it's been nearly forty hours. You know, the time that prosecutor bit it ..."

She squinted at him, sorely tempted to pull the trigger.

"That's a long time to go without rest. It messes with the system, big-time. Throws you off your game."

Groaning aloud, she rolled smoothly to her feet, taking the gun with her.

"Hey, a movie song isn't grounds for execution in most states."

She opened a drawer, looking to grab something she saw in there earlier. "What movie song?"

"The one I was singing. You know, from *Ghost*? Patrick Swayze sang it to get Whoopi Goldberg to help him. Just call me Swayze Crazy. Isn't that how the saying goes?"

"I wouldn't know. Never saw the movie. As for the song, it was written in the early 1900s, and popularized by Herman and the Hermits in the mid-'60s, a long time before the movie in question."

"Wow. You're smart."

The more he talked, the more her trigger finger itched.

She found what she was looking for and made her way back to him.

"Did you learn that in school? That song bit?" he asked.

"No. My father liked to pretend he lived in a time period other than the one he was in. Either that or he was stuck in the wrong time. I don't know which."

"What are you going to—"

She slapped a stretch of duct tape across his sexily infuriating mouth. Then just to be sure, she secured another in the shape of an X.

She looked into his eyes, the deep shade of blowtorch-blue, with lashes that were somehow too thick to be on a man, yet were ridiculously attractive.

Damn, but he was hot.

She licked her lips, momentarily recalling how it had felt to have them pressed against his. Her kiss had been a completely diversionary tactic, she told herself. If she revisited the naughty thoughts she'd originally had of him at the airport ... well, that was between her and her bedroll.

His expression was altogether too suggestive. Could he be thinking along the same line?

She cleared her throat and sat back on her heels.

“Oh, and there is more to that song,” she said. “It goes ...” She quoted him the full lyrics. “Just so you’ll know the next time you choose to annoy someone.”

If she didn’t know better, she’d say he was grinning at her through the tape.

She cocked her head, her gaze drawn to his mouth. She picked up a red sharpie from a nearby tabletop, uncapped it then drew another X over the tape.

There. A reminder of what was off-limits.

Trouble was? She was having a hard time not thinking X marked the spot.

Yes, he kissed that well.

She gave a mental eye roll, checked his restraints—both still firmly in place—then stretched back across the sleeping bag.

She stared at the grimy windows on the other side of the office.

While her attraction to Reece was purely physical, she needed to remind herself that it was another man who had put her in the position she was in now.

She'd been sixteen, had just lost her father, was living with an emotionally unstable and distant mother ... and militia member Gerald Butler had smiled that devastating smile at her, offering her what she thought was everything she'd ever need.

She supposed that had been true ... for a time. Two years, to be exact. It had taken her that long to figure out that the group and its ideals weren't any better than the organized government against which they rebelled.

And that the man with whom she'd fallen in love didn't know the true meaning of the word.

Of course, she understood how young she'd been then, emotionally as well as in years. And she was happy to say it had been a good long while since she'd actually thought about that time in her life.

Until now.

Until she'd been plucked out of Butler's files and set up for murder.

Oh, she'd read the news that Gerald had been arrested some

time ago for charges that ranged from crimes against the federal government to murder. But she'd barely given the news piece a cursory glance and a heart pang before closing the paper and then lighting her welding torch, returning to her artwork, something that never betrayed her, never lied to her, was always there for her.

If she'd worked for twenty hours straight in order to cleanse thoughts and memories of Butler from her mind before finally collapsing into a dreamless sleep ... well, that was between her and the sculpture she'd been working on.

Now, she cleared her throat and rubbed her nose. It was one thing to know someone you loved had never really loved you. Quite another to be set up for murder for reasons she knew benefited him.

"You know, you didn't ask if I did it ..." she said quietly to Reece, her body already beginning to succumb to sleep again. "Just saying. If it were me, it would have been the first question I asked."

He didn't respond. Not that he could.

"See you in a while, Reece. Don't try anything stupid ..."

HOURS LATER, JON CURSED himself for not keeping a metal handcuff key in the secret pocket sewn inside the waist of his jeans. Then again, he hadn't expected to need one.

He did, however, have a small pocket knife and had long since taken it out and freed himself from the plastic restraints, which were tighter than the metal ones. He'd blindly tried to pick the

metal lock with the blade, only to cut himself on the pad of his thumb. He felt the blood drip from his fingers, but knew it wasn't anything serious. It did, however, convince him to stop trying to pick the lock for a while, lest he accidentally hit a vein.

At one point, he'd drifted off to sleep himself, leaning against the metal pole he was tied to. While Mara had switched off the ringer to his phone, she'd left it on Vibrate. And he'd listened as it buzzed almost nonstop where it sat on the desk.

Julie, no doubt.

Damn.

He'd like to say his reaction was because he was afraid she was worried about him. Instead, he was more concerned his cell battery would go dead.

He leaned his head against the pole and cursed.

Julie ...

What wasn't there to like? She was blonde, sexy as hell and a kindergarten teacher. All those girl-next-door qualities that brought guys sniffing.

Just when had things started to take a bad turn?

He couldn't really say. They'd dated for two years before moving in together and from the get-go, he'd joked about her control-freak tendencies. He'd found them cute. Sometimes, he'd even enjoyed it when she got grumpy about one thing or another, usually connected with some imagined infraction. And she was adorable. Her sexy pout was the stuff of which dreams were made.

Then he'd left his safe employment as an insurance salesman—a job that bored him all to hell—to take the position with Lazarus....

To say Julie wasn't pleased would be an understatement.

"Come on, honey," he'd pleaded with her for the umpteenth time when he'd left on his first assignment with a Lazarus team to search for a missing girl in Florida. "Just look at this as an opportunity for you to get in some important 'you' time...."

"I don't need 'me' time. I need you," she'd said. "Besides, how am I supposed to get 'me' time when I'm completely responsible for Brutus?"

Brutus was the puggle they'd adopted from an animal shelter. He'd been Jon's surprise to her one Christmas morning.

Oh, she'd been surprised, all right. *Shocked* was more the word. And *unhappy*.

She never let an opportunity pass to pitch a bitch fit. "See, we could take a teacup Chihuahua anywhere we wanted to go. We wouldn't have to worry about imposing on friends," she'd said when he'd arranged a weekend trip to Catalina. "And there would be much less dog dirt to clean up...."

Of course, what had he been thinking? "Julie" time was all the time.

He grimaced.

When had her pouting become irritating?

The phone vibrated again.

Was it him, or did it seem weaker somehow?

Double damn.

Mara's leg jerked.

He glanced at her. She hadn't moved the entire time she'd been asleep. And he was sure she was sleeping. He could tell by her deep, even breathing and soft snores, the latter probably because she'd gone so long without quality shut-eye.

Still, the fact that she could sleep at all, given what was going on, was remarkable in and of itself.

Definitely military.

Or some sort of similar training.

He found his gaze trailing over her, appreciating her form. Where Julie was long-limbed and ... well, elegant, Mara was toned and compact. Not that she was short. He guessed the two women were the same height. But where Julie rocked a pair of high-heeled shoes, he guessed Mara would look awkward in them.

And the opposite applied in the case of cowboy boots. At least true ones.

He looked at where Mara still wore her short, black combat boots. Suddenly, he could picture her as a child, the victim of schoolyard teasing: "Your mama wears combat boots."

Likely Mara would have cocked a hand on her hip and said, "Well, that would make her more capable than yours, now, wouldn't it?"

Julie, on the other hand, would have been horrified at the mere thought.

And so would her Stepford Wife mother.

Jon's gaze traveled up the back of Mara's jeans to where her bottom was rounded and pert, then to the small of her back where her T-shirt had ridden up a bit, revealing a stretch of firm flesh.

He swallowed. Hard.

Which seemed to be the word of the minute, because he found a certain area of his anatomy growing noticeably harder.

He caught sight of a tattoo on the back of her left shoulder where she'd rolled up the sleeve. He squinted, trying to make it out. A bird's wing? Angel? He couldn't tell. There wasn't enough visible.

He heard sound outside.

Jon moved his head so he could see the warehouse interior. The sun slanted low, creating dingy, golden shafts of light against the gritty floor between him and the car some seventy-five feet away. He made out the shape of someone looking in the vehicle-access-door window much the same way he had hours before.

Competition for the bounty?

Made sense.

Then again, the Feds could be making another pass.

The sound of the individual trying the door echoed in the room.

Shit.

He heard the quiet dragging of something metallic across the floor. He realized Mara's breathing was no longer deep and even. She had moved only her arm and was now pulling his 9 mm closer

to her side.

Wow ...

She slowly turned to look at him, nodding in the direction of the visitor outside the building. "With you?"

He shook his head.

The figure moved from the window. A moment later, Jon made out the sound of quiet footsteps on the stairs leading to her apartment.

Mara was on her feet in a flash, stuffing the blue plastic bag he'd seen her holding earlier inside the front waistband of her jeans and covering it with her shirt, then checking the ammo in the gun: he knew it was a full sixteen rounds. She stuffed that into her waistband, as well.

She stopped to look at him.

For a moment, he suspected she might leave him there. And he could tell she was giving it serious consideration.

Then she said, "If he's not with you, then I can trust you're not going to make any noise, right?"

He gave her a long look.

She yanked the tape from his mouth and then headed for the door.

"The hands?"

She came back, leaned over him much as she had earlier with the same tantalizing view. He heard the teeth give, but when she straightened a moment later, he found his hands were still restrained ... only now without the post involved.

She stared at the question on his face. “You won’t be needing them. Now up, soldier. I know you know how to move with your hands tied behind your back.”

He thought about making a smart-ass comment, but she was already through the door and ripping the tarp from the car.

He got up and began following her, then backtracked to get his cell and wallet from the desk, stuffing each into back jeans pockets. Then he spotted a click-top pen. Bingo. He palmed it and stuffed it inside the waistband of his jeans before joining her.

She climbed inside the car and reached to open the passenger’s door for him. He awkwardly got inside and was trying to figure out a way to close it with his foot when she reached across him, her breasts brushing against his thighs, to close it for him.

Then she reached behind him, taking his cell from his pocket and tossing it to the dash.

He had to give her credit; she didn’t miss a trick.

Which made him feel a little less bad about being taken hostage by her.

A little.

“The doors?” he asked.

She gave him a long look. “Blocked from the outside. The bastard parked on the other side.”

“Then how are we going to get out—?”

The engine started and the car was in gear before he could utter the next word. His neck jerked as she sped in Reverse, the old car’s monster engine roaring in his ears.

She reached across him and yanked the seat belt across his lap, shoving the latch into his hands behind his back before doing her own.

“Hold on,” she said, smiling in his direction.

She pressed a button on the visor. Even as he awkwardly secured his seat belt, he looked over his shoulder, watching as another door, this one a garage type, lifted some fifty yards behind them on the opposite warehouse wall.

“It’s not going to make it up in time,” he said over the engine’s growl.

“It’ll make it.”

Twenty yards ... ten ... five ...

The top of the car hit the bottom of the door, but it didn’t slow them down.

She hit the brakes on the other side and did a one-eighty.

“Oops,” she said.

He couldn’t help shaking his head, amused.

The car was barely straight before she shoved the stick into Drive, roaring off before the guy in her apartment had any idea what hit him.

Or maybe not.

Jon stared back at a large man in faded, full-out desert military gear rounding the side of the warehouse a hundred yards away. Only, he didn’t look like anyone he’d ever served with. This guy had long blond hair tied back and a full beard. And his weapon was Russian, more specifically an AK-47.

Definitely not something an American soldier would be toting.

Militia? Or military-loving mercenary?

That meant their visitors numbered at least two: the one on the stairs and this one.

He caught Mara's glance as she looked away from the same sight. She didn't appear surprised. But if he was expecting any kind of explanation, he was sadly disappointed.

Jon shifted in the seat and worked on getting the click-top pen out of the waistband of his jeans, the spring of which he planned to use to pick his handcuffs....

## 4

AFTER TEN MINUTES, Mara slowed her speed on the mostly deserted roads for which she'd opted, checking her mirrors every few seconds for signs she'd been followed. She hadn't been.

Or at least it appeared that way.

But it wasn't empty, really, was it? The road behind her was choked with ghosts from her past.

She felt a breath away from having the Pop-Tart she'd eaten this morning hurl from her churning stomach.

Now that the urgency had passed, her worsening circumstances crowded around her, inside her, making it impossible to do much beyond keep the car on the road and stare at the glaring reality of her situation. It wasn't enough that they'd set her up for murder ... Now they were trying to kill her.

She checked the road behind her again. Still empty. But she didn't expect it to remain that way.

She passed a slow-moving sedan on the two-lane highway then screeched to a stop on the right shoulder. Jon looked at her as if she'd gone mad. Which was okay with her; the more unpredictable she came off, the more she had the upper hand.

She'd learned early on that it wasn't curiosity that killed the cat, but predictability. At least when it came to predators. So she made it a point to never do the same thing twice.

Of course, she would have been well served to remember that over the past few years. Instead, she'd allowed herself to be lulled into a false sense of security.

She ignored the horn blow of the sedan as it passed them as she got out of the car and slowly made her way around the vehicle.

Though it had been parked in the off-airport lot for months and, as an older vehicle, had no low-jack tracking device, that didn't necessarily mean it was bug free. And it would certainly explain why she hadn't been followed. If she was being tracked, then there was no need.

It made a tactical kind of sense, their targeting her now. They'd gone through all the trouble of setting her up for the prosecutor's murder. The last thing they needed was for her to be hell-bent on proving her innocence.

If she was surprised and hurt to see an ex-family member standing outside the warehouse toting an AK-47 ... well, she wasn't about to cop to it.

She did feel a bit of relief that he hadn't taken the money shot when he'd had the opportunity. But she didn't kid herself into thinking she'd be as lucky next time.

So it wasn't only the local and federal authorities, not to mention who knew what yahoos from private firms—she spared Reece a glance—on her tail. It was also the local militia. People who knew her better than any biological family members, if only because they'd taught her all she knew.

Well, not all. If that was true, she might as well surrender to

her fate now.

At any rate, she also understood that it wasn't so much what you knew, but what you did with that knowledge that determined the outcome of any situation.

She only hoped she wasn't as rusty as some of her sculptures back at the warehouse.

She got onto her hands and knees and searched underneath the vehicle, inspecting and prodding all the normal hitch spots along with additional ones. It didn't appear to be wired, but there was no way to be sure. There were too many places and it was too big a vehicle to cover every inch. Besides, technology today was so advanced, a tracker could be the size of a dime and hidden under a floor mat at this point.

Still ...

She continued searching under the car, stopping only when she hit a pair of feet standing next to the open passenger's door.

She sat back on her haunches and stared up at Jonathon Reece. "Remember when you asked why I hadn't asked if you'd done it?"

She squinted.

"My answer is I don't care." He pulled his hands out from behind his back. "Oh, and I'm free...."

He grasped her shoulders, pulled her up then urged her against her own vehicle, fastening her own cuffs on her.

Mara briefly closed her eyes.

Damn. And she'd gotten sleep.

Then she realized maybe that was the problem. She needed caffeine. Massive quantities of it.

“Mind if we stop somewhere for coffee?” she asked as he put her in the passenger’s seat and did up her safety belt nice and tight before rolling down her window and closing the door.

He didn’t answer until he was buckled into the driver’s side. “I’m sure they’ll have something you like at the county lockup.”

He started the car and did a one-eighty, heading back the way they’d come.

Mara swallowed hard, turning her face into the hot wind coming in through the window.

The car wasn’t the only thing that had done a one-eighty. Her mindset had taken a noticeable nosedive since he’d slapped the cuffs back on her.

That was a lie. It had gone south when she’d spotted the gunman back at the warehouse.

Frenemies. Wasn’t that a new word spawned recently? Although, what she was in the middle of had nothing to do with petty bickering over who had borrowed what or stolen whose boyfriend: this was a matter of life or death.

Namely, her own.

And then there was Reece....

Ironic that she’d been searching for an enemy presence on her car when it had been right in front of her.

The sun ignited the western horizon, setting the sky on fire. But she barely saw it. Instead, she imagined what waited for her

at the other end of their journey.

She'd been running on pure adrenaline since she'd originally returned to her apartment three days ago to find FBI agents waiting for her. She hadn't had a clue what they'd wanted then, but she hadn't been about to stick around to find out. At least not from them. So she'd run. And found out soon enough what she was wanted for.

And understood immediately why.

"Who were those guys back there?"

She blinked to look at Reece.

"At your place. The one guy had *militia* written all over him."

She stared out the window, deciding not to answer him.

What had he said? He hadn't asked if she'd committed the crime for what reason? Oh, yes. Because he didn't care.

He messed around with his cell phone, then cursed loudly and tried again. She guessed the battery was dead. Not surprising, considering how many times it had vibrated since the moment she'd restrained him back at the warehouse.

She closed her eyes again, feeling sweat beginning to bead between her breasts under her T-shirt.

"You can't turn me over to the local authorities," she said quietly.

He probably hadn't heard her over the roar of the engine and his own rant at his dead cell.

He gave her a long look, proving otherwise. "Oh? Why? Coffee not up to snuff?"

She didn't answer for a long moment, then turned her head where it lay against the backrest, feeling exhaustion saturate her every molecule. It was more than the lack of sleep or even the lull after the adrenaline rush. This was ... was ...

Antipathy.

Complete and utter disenchantment with the world at large and specifically the people in it.

She'd experienced it only one other time....

She forcibly ousted the memory from her mind and instead focused on the here and now.

Which was looking pretty bleak.

She took a deep breath and told him, "Because you'll be directly responsible for my death if you do, that's why."

Mara wasn't given to drama or exaggeration. She didn't even like saying the words because they sounded too much like both. But in this case, well, the truth was the truth.

"That's for a jury to decide."

She jerked her head to stare at him, feeling her blood warm again. "Trust me, you take me to the sheriff's? I won't ever step inside a courtroom."

The militia was so well connected throughout the local and federal law enforcement communities, not to mention plugged into the electronic highway, period, that the instant her name was entered into any computer, the countdown would begin.

Mara watched as the city limits loomed ahead. The sheriff's office lay on the main drag, five, maybe eight minutes away. Off

to the west, the sun was quickly sinking into the sand so the sky to the east was already dark. She yanked on her cuffs. There was nowhere near enough time for her to figure out how to pick them and free herself before they got there. At least not in the mental state she was presently in.

Reece grabbed his cell phone again as if it might have magically recharged itself in the time since he put it down.

“Do you have a phone?” he asked.

Her answer was a stare.

“Yes or no.”

“No.”

She'd ditched her cell phone on Day One. If the battery was in, it was transmitting, no matter if it was on or off. She'd thought about picking up another one that couldn't be traced back to her, but until she had an actual need for one, what was the use?

He tossed the cell back to the seat between them. “So I'm left to your word.”

“Yes.”

He slowed the car's speed, but whether it was because he was considering his options or the speed limit had changed, she couldn't say. He was as easy to read as a murky, rain-swollen brook on a stormy day.

When he pulled up in front of the sheriff's office moments later, her heart pitched.

There it was, then.

Damn.

She waited for the will to fight to return, fire up her own personal engine. But everything remained eerily silent.

Did it have something to do with him? Had she been hoping against hope that he'd listen to her? Change his mind? Take her at her word? Trust not only that what she was saying was true, but trust, period?

Who could say? She was so tired. Not only for sleep. She was tired of running on what seemed to be a never-ending treadmill.

With no one to rely on.

It was one thing to know a man you had once loved had set you up for murder.

Another to know he'd also put out a hit on you.

She realized Reece had yet to make a move. She looked to find him staring forward, but not really at the sheriff's office, itself. The engine was still running.

His hands were still on the steering wheel. The gear was in Park.

Hope sparked.

Then he looked at her, shut down the engine, pocketed the keys and got out.

"I'll leave the keys with the desk sergeant."

He got out and rounded the front of the car to her side. "Gee, thanks," she said.

He opened her door and helped her out.

He led her toward the curb, grasping on to her wrists behind her back. His hold both touched and angered her in its gentleness

and control.

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