

# TURNING POINT

## Chapter One

Someone was following me.

The streets of downtown Indianapolis were busy this Saturday night, even though it was the second week of February. After two months of nothing but cold, snow and ice, the unseasonably warm weather that was a precursor to spring had brought the residents of Indy and the surrounding suburbs out in droves.

Sounds of laughter and gaiety surrounded me as I hurried through the crowds oozing down Capital Avenue. My pulse beat quicker and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I chanced a quick glance behind me, but saw only people - none of whom paid the least bit of attention to me.

I knew he was still back there. Just because I couldn't see him didn't mean he couldn't see me.

He'd been following me for several blocks, always staying just out of sight when I turned around, and I'd caught only glimpses of an arm, a shoulder. But he was getting closer. I could feel it.

A group of men were strolling in front of me. An idea struck and I eased my way in front of them. Being short definitely had its advantages, I thought as I slipped past them into an alley. Hopefully, they'd concealed my movements enough for me to lose the man following.

Unable to withstand the temptation, I stopped and peered behind me. When no figure stepped into the alley, I slumped against the brick wall at my back, releasing a pent up breath.

"Nice move, princess. You almost lost me."

I gasped and spun around.

"Dammit, Kade! You scared me to death!"

Kade Dennon, former FBI agent and current gun-for-hire, was completely unfazed by my outburst, the smirk I knew too well curving his lips.

"It was a good thought," he continued, crossing his arms and leisurely leaning one shoulder against the wall. "Use your weaknesses to your advantage. Being short doesn't have to be a detriment."

"I'm not short," I groused. "I'm..." I searched for a more palatable word. "...petite."

"Whatever," he dismissed with a snort. "Let's try again. I'll give you a sixty second head start. Go." He looked down at his watch, timing me.

"Wait," I interrupted, holding up my hand. "It's getting late and I have a date with Blane tonight. Can we call it good for now?"

Blue eyes framed in lush, dark lashes and topped by wickedly arched brows peered at me. It didn't matter how often I saw him, Kade's dark beauty never failed to take my breath away, and tonight was no exception. His square jaw, roughened with a day or two's growth of stubble, tightened. Black hair, which I knew from experience was soft to the touch, fell over his brow. I likened him in my mind to a fallen angel, and the description had never been more apt, clad as he was in his customary dark jeans, black shirt and black leather jacket. I knew a gun was holstered at his hip, and somewhere on his person was concealed another, as well as a wickedly sharp knife.

"Fine," he finally said, the word coming out clipped. "But your wake-up call tomorrow is six am."

"On a Sunday?" I protested.

"And no coffee beforehand," he ordered. "I don't want you puking on me."

I didn't have a chance to reply before he was gone. With an ease I envied, he'd slipped into the stream of humanity passing by and disappeared.

I sighed in defeat, wondering if this was ever going to work.

Trudging to my car a couple blocks away, I recalled how Kade had shown up at my door a couple weeks ago, declaring that if I was going to be of any worth as an investigator, I needed to be trained.

Well, that's putting it more delicately. His exact words had been, "You need to be trained before you really fuck something up, end up dead, or both."

How could I say no?

In truth, I'd been excited and nervous about my new job as investigator for the law firm of Kirk and Trent. I'd worked there as a runner until Kade, who you could call a silent partner in the firm, had given me an abrupt promotion right before Christmas.

So far, the training had included time at the firing range with my new gun (courtesy of Kade), daily early morning runs (also courtesy of Kade), self-defense classes with an ex-Marine, and these impromptu lessons that had no name. I ached all over from hitting the mat too many times in the self-defense lessons, dreaded the morning like a condemned man awaiting execution, and had only done so-so on what I privately referred to as the "cloak and dagger" lessons. The only place I'd held my own was the firing range.

Not for the first time I wondered if this was going to be a job I could actually do.

I unlocked the door of my black Lexus SUV, a company car paid for by the firm, and climbed inside. Twenty minutes later, I was back at my apartment.

I lived on the top floor of a two-story apartment building near downtown, but in a neighborhood where people didn't walk their dogs after dark, at least not alone. When I'd first moved to Indianapolis almost a year ago, this had been the best I could afford. Even then I'd had to work two jobs just to make rent and pay the bills - being runner for the law firm during the day and bartender at night at The Drop. Luckily, my new promotion meant an increase in salary and I'd been able to quit the bartending gig.

I hurriedly showered and changed, pinning my long, strawberry blonde hair up so it wouldn't get wet. There wasn't enough time for me to blow it dry before Blane arrived.

My heart beat a little faster as I thought of Blane, anticipation curling in my stomach. Blane Kirk: high-powered lawyer, former Navy SEAL, rich playboy, my ex-boyfriend. One of those labels didn't seem to fit with the others. Our introduction had been less than what romance novels were made of, consisting as it had of my tripping and falling face first in his lap during a client meeting. I still winced when I thought about it.

We'd broken up before Christmas, after I'd found him in a clutch with his former girlfriend, Kandi-with-an-i. What I hadn't known then - what Blane didn't tell me until later - was that he'd suspected her of being the leak behind repeated attempts on my life, all for the purpose of controlling Blane and the outcome of a case he'd been working on.

Since then, Blane had been courting me, for lack of a better word, in an attempt to win me back. I'd been leery of jumping back into a relationship, despite the fact that I knew I was in love with him. His list of ex-girlfriends was as long as my arm, both my arms actually, and I had no interest in having my heart broken a second time.

Yet those reservations hadn't stopped me from going out with him, spending time with him, kissing him. It seemed no matter my resolve, I was helpless to deny myself Blane.

My phone rang just as I was checking the clock, Blane was a few minutes late which was unlike him. I picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Kat, it’s me,” Blane’s voice said in my ear.

Kat. That’s me. At least, that’s what Blane calls me. My full name is Kathleen Turner and yes, I was named that on purpose. My father, Ted Turner, and my grandmother, Tina Turner, were only too happy to pass on the family tradition. Since I had no brothers, it was left to my only cousin to carry on the dubious honor of being named after a famous Turner, not that I would know if he would since I hadn’t seen him in years.

“Hey,” I greeted Blane, sinking down onto my leather couch. If he was calling rather than knocking at my door, it couldn’t be good news.

“I’m sorry, Kat, but I’m going to have to cancel our date.”

I held in a sigh. “That’s okay,” I replied, keeping my tone light. No need for him to know how disappointed I was.

“I have to leave town for a few days,” Blane explained. “Something’s come up.”

A slight stiffness to his words made me frown, a hint of worry creeping in. “Is everything all right?”

“Absolutely,” he replied easily. “I’ll call you, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, wondering if I was imagining something that wasn’t there.

A few moments later, we’d disconnected, and I was left wondering what had come up that would make Blane have to leave town on a Saturday night. I’d been too taken aback to even think to ask where he was going and now I mentally kicked myself for the omission.

I changed into an old t-shirt to sleep in, baked a frozen cheese pizza and ate it while watching the latest episode I'd recorded of *Dancing with the Stars*. Not exactly the evening I'd had planned.

Finding some Rocky Road buried in the back of my freezer, I scraped the carton clean, absentmindedly licking the spoon as I thought about Blane. I'd moved out of his house and back into my apartment two weeks after Christmas. My excuse for temporarily living with him – the fact that I'd been shot in the leg by a psychopath intent on avenging his father's death – had healed well enough by then for it to no longer be a viable excuse for my staying there.

But I hadn't wanted to leave.

It was nice, living with Blane. I loved that he was the first and last person I saw every day. He was true to his word, giving me space and not pressuring me, though he had no compunction against using the explosive chemistry between us to tease and torture me into giving in. Each night he would kiss me before leaving me alone in my bedroom, though his kisses weren't chaste and sweet. They were hot, skilled and demanding – always leaving me wanting more – which of course was his intention.

It was during one of these heated encounters that I abruptly decided I needed to go back home. I couldn't think around Blane. Everything I wanted and felt was confused when his arms were around me and he was touching me, kissing me. What did it mean, this pseudo-relationship and my living with him?

"Wait, stop," I said breathlessly, wrenching my lips from his. That didn't deter him. His mouth trailed a scorching path across my jaw and down my neck. "Blane-"

Blane kissed his name from my lips. I became lost in his touch again for several minutes, then tried again.

“I should go back home,” I blurted.

Blane’s entire body went still. I could feel his heartbeat racing inside his chest as he pressed against me. Or maybe that was mine. He raised his head, his gray eyes glittering in the semi-darkness of the bedroom.

“You want to go back to your apartment.” It didn’t come out as a question, but rather a statement.

Nervous butterflies danced in my stomach. “It’s not that I want to,” I stammered. “But maybe it would be for the best.”

Blane didn’t say anything for a moment, and the silence seemed oppressive to me. I couldn’t hold his penetrating gaze, my eyes dropping to stare at the white linen of his shirt.

“I’ll take you home in the morning,” he finally said.

I jerked my eyes back up to his, but couldn’t read anything from his face. Before I’d even realized what was happening, he’d placed a kiss on my forehead and disappeared out the door.

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling for a long time. I didn’t know what had happened, what Blane wanted from me. Did he expect I’d just continue living with him?

That just wasn’t me.

Then I heard the sound of the piano downstairs.

I got up, wondering what Blane was doing. Glancing at the clock as I pulled on a matching white robe to cover my nightgown, I saw it was after one am. Padding downstairs on bare feet, I followed the sound of the piano to the library. Inside, there wasn’t a single lamp burning. The only light was what filtered in through the windows from the streetlamps outside.

Blane sat with his back to me at the piano, his hands moving furiously over the keys. Notes and chords filled the room as though they were a living thing. I watched in silent awe. I’d never

seen him play like this before. His careful control was nowhere in evidence, but only exuberant passion as his body moved fluidly above the ebony instrument.

I don't know how much time passed before he suddenly stopped and turned around, startling me. I'd moved closer without even realizing, so engrossed in the music had I been. Now I stood mere feet from Blane.

He looked more disheveled than I usually saw him, his hair tousled, the neck of his shirt open and the sleeves pushed carelessly up.

The sudden overwhelming silence in the library and Blane's seemingly accusing gaze made me realize I'd rudely intruded on what had been a private moment.

"I'm so sorry," I said softly, taking a step back. "I heard music..." My voice faltered.

"That's all right," he replied, his voice rough. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Since he didn't seem angry, I halted my retreat. Cautiously, I asked, "What were you playing?"

"Rachmaninoff."

I nodded as though that meant something to me, though I would have been hard-pressed to even spell what he'd just said.

"It was beautiful," I said sincerely, then paused before asking, "But why are you playing at this time of night, Blane? What's wrong?"

He didn't answer for several moments and I held my breath. Finally, he glanced away, breaking our gaze. "Nothing's wrong, Kat. Let me help you back upstairs."

My breath came out in a huff as frustration reared its head inside me. I pressed my lips firmly together to keep from saying the words on the tip of my tongue. It seemed a recurring theme: just when I thought Blane might open up to me, really open up, he pushed me away.

The next morning, he took me home.

For all that we'd been through together, Blane still kept an emotional distance from me. For the first time, I seriously considered whether or not it was going to work out between us. He'd done so much, put himself in mortal danger for me, but I didn't know if it was because of me, or simply because that's who he was. And he'd never said.

Since then, we'd been dating. It was a combination of nice, sweet, and frustrating all at the same time. We were getting to know each other better, but it still seemed like Blane kept me at arm's length. The only time it felt like he wasn't was when he was kissing me.

I fell asleep thinking about him and wondering where he'd gone, what he hadn't told me, and when he'd call.

The next morning arrived oh-so-gently in the form of the covers being ripped from my body. I jerked upright, barely stifling a shriek as I saw Kade standing in my bedroom, the corner of my blankets in his hand.

"You're late," he said.

I flopped back onto the mattress with a groan, turning so my back was to him and buried my head in the pillow. "Go away," I mumbled. "It's still dark outside."

He didn't respond, and for a blessed moment, I thought perhaps he'd heeded me. Then, "Black's my favorite color. How'd you know?"

It took a moment for my sleep-fogged brain to process what he was talking about, then the cold air brushing my backside brought things abruptly into focus.

"Kade!" I exclaimed in reprimand, shooting upright and yanking down the t-shirt that had ridden up to my waist overnight, exposing the black lace of my underwear.

His eyes drifted slowly over me, from my sleep tousled hair, down my chest to my bare thighs. “Five minutes,” he said, abruptly turning and leaving the room. The door shut behind him.

I blew out a breath and pushed a hand through my hair, trying to calm my suddenly pounding heart. Kade and I hadn’t spoken of what lay between us, not since the night he’d told me that he cared about me. I’d hurt him that night, not that I’d wanted to, but there’d been no good answer I could give him that wouldn’t drive a wedge between him and Blane – his brother.

I just knew that I’d been overjoyed to see him on my doorstep, even if that meant getting up at the butt crack of dawn to go running through the streets of downtown Indianapolis.

Dragging myself from the warm confines of the bed, I hurried into the bathroom. Ten minutes later I was dressed in layers, had my hair pulled back in a ponytail, and was lacing up my tennis shoes.

“Ready,” I finally pronounced to Kade, waiting impatiently with arms crossed in my living room.

“It’s about time,” he grumbled, heading for the door. I stuck my tongue out at his back.

“I saw that,” he said warningly, his back still turned. He held the door open for me.

“You did not,” I said with a laugh, smacking him on the arm as I passed by him.

“Ah, so you did mock me,” he said, following me down the stairs. “You should practice lying, princess. You don’t have a deceitful bone in your body.”

We hit the pavement and Kade began running. He went at a pace that I could keep up with, at least for a little while.

“I can lie,” I protested, my breath coming out in puffs of cold as we ran.

“Please,” Kade said, rolling his eyes. I noticed he wasn’t even breathing hard. “I don’t think I’ll be taking you to Vegas anytime soon.”

“Why do I have to lie anyway?”

“It comes in handy,” Kade said. “Being able to make someone believe a lie can save your life.”

I was turning this over in my mind when he added with a wicked grin, “And get you laid.”

I went to smack him on the arm again, but he moved out of my reach. “I’m the bad guy, princess. Catch me.” And just like that, he took off.

“Shit,” I muttered miserably, before putting on a burst of speed myself.

I ran as fast as I could through the streets now starting to glow with the light of dawn. It became obvious I was never going to catch him, his legs were too long and he was just too fast. He rounded a corner up ahead of me and I abruptly changed direction, heading off to my right.

I ran hard, cutting through empty yards and a parking lot. Tearing around the edge of a building, I ran down the alleyway, stopping in dismay when I saw the chain link fence erected at the end.

Looking around, I saw a dumpster shoved into the corner. Wrinkling my nose in distaste at the smell, I climbed up on top of it, hunched down, and waited.

Sure enough, about five seconds later, Kade came running down the street. He had slowed down quite a bit and was looking over his shoulder, no doubt wondering where I’d gone. I waited...now!

I jumped, hurtling through the air toward him. He looked up, but not in time to get out of the way. The breath rushed out of his lungs when I tackled him and we both went crashing to the ground.

Pressing my advantage of surprise, I climbed on top of his body, grinning in glee at my victory.

“Caught you!” I enthused. “Betcha thought I couldn’t do it, right?”

In a flash, Kade had flipped me over onto my back, straddled me, and held my wrists prisoner in his grip above my head.

“And what exactly were you planning to do with me once you’d caught me?” he asked, his voice a sibilant whisper in my ear.

I heard the words but couldn’t concentrate enough to reply. I could smell the musky aroma of his sweat and feel the press of his thighs against my hips. His face was inches away, his blue eyes locked on mine. My breath was coming in pants, my chest heaving, and time seemed to stand still. His gaze drifted down to my mouth.

“What the hell?! What’s going on here? Get off her!”

The shouting broke my trance and I jerked my head around to see a heavysset middle-aged man hurrying toward us. He was carrying a bat. I squirmed frantically and Kade leisurely got to his feet.

“I’m okay,” I forestalled the would-be rescuer, jumping up. “I’m fine.”

The man seemed unsure, but halted. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Absolutely. I just...fell...and he was helping me.”

The man snorted in disbelief, but to my relief, he turned and walked back the direction from which he’d come.

I could feel Kade’s eyes on me, but I avoided looking at him, nervously readjusting my ponytail that had come loose in our tussle.

“Let’s go,” Kade said, and he broke into an easy jog. I hurried to catch up to him and we ran back to my apartment in silence.

“Meet me at the gym at six o’clock,” Kade said, glancing at his watch. His breathing was deep and controlled whereas the sound of my sucking air into my lungs would have embarrassed me if I hadn’t felt like I was going to throw up any minute. I clutched at a stitch in my side, raising my gaze to meet Kade’s.

He lifted an eyebrow, his mouth twisting in amusement. My eyes narrowed, daring him to say a word.

“Six o’clock,” he repeated.

I nodded to show I got the message and watched as he slid into his black Mercedes. In a few moments, he was gone.

Lugging my aching body back into my apartment, I collapsed flat out on the floor and groaned. Tigger seemed to think that was an invitation to cuddle and he was stretched out against my side in short order. I half-heartedly patted his marmalade fur, too exhausted to even raise my arm for a proper petting.

The only thing that got me off the floor was the thought of a hot shower and coffee.

I wiled away the afternoon doing laundry, making lunch and trying to pick a practice lock Kade had given me. It was difficult to do and I grew frustrated, having to take several breaks. When the lock finally tumbled and opened, I crowed with delight.

“Only took,” I glanced at the clock above my television, “an hour and a half.” I sighed. Well, Kade had never said this would be an easy job.

Speaking of which, it was time to go to the “gym.” When I’d thought of a gym before, it was with vague thoughts of a place filled with exercise machines, maybe a pool, weights, stuff like that. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the kind of gym Kade sent me to.

I parked outside the dingy place, which wasn’t in a great part of town, and considering where I lived, that was saying something. The fading sign over the door read “Danny’s Gym.”

Inside, the usual smell of sweat and linoleum assailed me, though it wasn’t unpleasant. Although the outside looked like a dive, the inside was kept immaculately clean. There were numerous free weights and weight sets over in the corner and heavy punching bags along the wall. The center of the room was dominated by a large boxing ring.

Today, the gym was nearly empty save for the owner Danny, the ex-Marine who had been training me. A head taller than me and sporting a crew cut, he stood with his arms crossed over his massive, t-shirt clad chest, watching two people in the ring.

I frowned as I got closer, studying the figures as well, then my eyes flew open wide in surprise.

It was Kade and Branna, sparring in the ring.

I watched as they circled each other, Kade having removed his shoes and dressed only in gray sweatpants that clung to his hips and thighs. His hands were taped as though he’d been boxing.

Branna was similarly attired in form-fitting black yoga pants and a blank tank top. Her long, nearly black hair was tied back in a French braid. I felt dowdy in my shorts and t-shirt, my hair in a ponytail.

I hadn’t seen Branna since Chicago, when Kade and I had infiltrated a datacenter and she had hacked into the security cameras. I remembered the story Kade had told me of how he and

Branna had shared a foster home, that she had been abused as a child and he had done what he could to stop it.

Thinking of that made me feel sympathetic for Branna. That and the fact that I'd known the moment she looked at Kade in Chicago that she was in love with him. I didn't want to feel sympathy for her – she barely tolerated me and would like me even less if she knew the thoughts going through my head.

As I watched, Kade made his move. He was fast and I held my breath – Branna was a small, delicate looking woman – but she dodged him, pivoting on her toes. He snagged her arm, but she easily twisted away, doing something to his hand that I couldn't see but which made him wince. They moved again, grappling, and I was sure he was going to hurt her. Then suddenly Branna grasped his arm, used his momentum to twist him...and a moment later, Kade was flat on his back. My jaw dropped in astonishment.

Beside me, Danny clapped. “Nice one,” he praised.

Kade groaned, accepting the outstretched hand of Branna's as he got to his feet. “I'm getting too old for this,” he grouched.

She laughed lightly. “Don't be ridiculous.” I could hear the slight trace of an Irish accent. “I'm just better than you are.”

He rolled his eyes at this, then spotted me. “Perfect timing,” he called out.

Branna turned to see who Kade was talking to, and I could almost feel the temperature drop ten degrees when her green gaze fell on me.

“What's she doing here?” Her voice held none of the warmth from when she'd teased Kade. Inwardly, I grimaced. It seemed she was no fonder of me now than she had been in Chicago.

Kade gave her a sharp glance. “She's here to train.”

With that, he climbed out of the ring and made his way over to Danny and me. Branna remained where she was.

“Make sure you lock up when you’re done,” Danny said, glancing at his watch. “I’m meeting a buddy, so I’m outta here.”

“Will do,” Kade replied. He turned to me as Danny left.

I tried and failed to not ogle his bare chest, carved in planes of muscle and glistening with sweat. Kade wasn’t a huge guy, but the lean sinew of his body was honed to perfection.

“How’d your date go last night?” The question seemed innocuous on the surface, but the sarcasm in his voice gave it a whole other meaning. I shifted uneasily. Blane’s and my relationship was a touchy subject with Kade, ever since he’d seen me fall apart after witnessing Blane and Kandi together.

“Blane had to cancel,” I said. Kade lifted a single eyebrow in silent question. I shrugged. “He said he had to leave town for a few days,” I explained, frowning. “Didn’t he tell you?” Blane and Kade kept rough tabs on each other, from what I knew of their relationship.

“I’m not his keeper,” Kade replied, then abruptly changed the subject. “Today I want you to train with Branna.”

“What? You must be joking,” I stammered in surprise. “I’ve been training with Danny. Why Branna?”

“She’s closer to your size and a woman. She has a better understanding of how to train you than Danny does, though he’s been great at showing you the basics.”

Before I could make another protest, he took me by the arm, leading me over to the ring where Branna still stood, glaring at us.

“You didn’t tell me I’d be having to train the bartender,” Branna said, her voice rife with condescension, ignoring me completely as she glared at Kade.

“You get paid no matter what,” Kade replied indifferently, handing me into the ring. I reluctantly took off my shoes, eyeing Branna’s malevolent gaze as she watched me. “You don’t have to turn her into a ninja expert, just show her some moves, defense techniques. Danny’s been working with her, but you’re going to be able to show her things he can’t.”

The ringing of a cell phone interrupted anything Branna might have said, and Kade dug into a duffel bag stowed alongside the wall. “I have to take this,” he said after he’d glanced at the number. “Be right back.” He answered the phone and walked to the back where Danny’s office was. When he was out of sight, I reluctantly returned my attention to Branna.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. I could again appreciate how beautiful she was, even with her lip curled in distaste. Black hair, green eyes and near-porcelain skin made her coloring dramatic. Small but curvaceous, I envied the narrowness of her waist. Kade was correct, she and I were about the same height. But that’s where the similarities ended.

“Danny’s been training you,” she stated rather than asked.

I nodded. “A bit,” which was a nice way of saying I ended up on the mat a fraction less often than I would have a month ago.

“Well, then,” she replied with a smile I wasn’t sure I liked. “Let’s see what you’ve got, shall we?” Her accent made the words appear innocent, but the gleam in her eyes said otherwise.

All kinds of alarm bells were going off inside my head as I watched her resume a fighting stance. I desperately wanted to get out of the ring, but didn’t know how to do so without looking like a coward. Her disdain and contempt made me angry, and I wished I did have the skills to

put her in her place. Unfortunately, I could see how this was going to go, and I grimly hoped none of my bones would be broken before Kade reappeared.

Branna moved and I watched her warily, caution making me keep my distance. We circled slowly, each observing the other for a sign. Whether that be of weakness or opportunity, I couldn't say. When she did come at me, I was unprepared, taking a blow to my stomach before my legs were swept out from under me and I hit the mat hard.

Branna's tinkling laugh made my hands curl into fists as I coughed, trying to get my breath back. My stomach burned from her hit, but I gamely got back to my feet. She looked simply delighted now. Gone was the irritation at having this chore handed to her by Kade. I guessed the prospect of kicking my ass was an agreeable one to her.

The next few minutes were a blur of pain and sweat. Branna toyed with me like a cat would a mouse, and I knew I was going to be sporting black and blue marks all over later. I kept a tight grip on my temper, though I was furious. Branna was a bully.

I was on all fours on the mat, sweat dripping down my nose to land on the vinyl, wondering how much more my body could take when I decided I'd had enough of this.

"I don't think Kade's going to appreciate your training methods," I wheezed, painfully sitting back on my haunches.

"Then he should have thought of that before," Branna replied haughtily. She was untouched, not even her hair was mussed from the tight braid. I hadn't been able to lay a finger on her.

"Does he know you're in love with him?" I asked. "Because you don't strike me as his type." Branna's eyes narrowed. "I hear he likes blondes." I smiled.

At that, she came at me as I'd known she would, but this time I was prepared. Still on my knees, my hands shot out to catch her calf as she kicked out at me. I gave it a hard twist and

yank. She grunted in pain as she hit the mat. I launched myself to my feet, sure I was going to pay for that, and I wasn't wrong. Her fury at being bested, even if only fleetingly, was scary. In seconds, I had blood dripping from my nose and was once again face down on the mat, but this time, she was giving me no time to recover, yanking me by my hair until I was on my knees.

"Branna! What the fuck is going on?"

The pressure on my hair suddenly eased and I collapsed back down on the mat, groaning. Kade had finally returned, and if I hadn't been so relieved to hear his voice, I would have gladly killed him for leaving me alone with the Terminator.

"I told you to train her, not kill her!"

"It's not my fault your little protégé can't hold her own in a fight," Branna defended herself.

The vinyl felt blessedly cool against my cheek, and I wouldn't have moved for quite a while if Kade hadn't gently turned me onto my back. I blinked blearily up at him, the look of dismay on his face as he surveyed me quickly replaced by one of fury.

"Jesus Christ!" he exploded, the anger in his voice making me wince as he faced Branna.

"Why do you always have to make it personal, Branna?" Kade asked in disgust. "I needed you to do a job, not release your inner bitch."

I thought that Branna's "bitch" wasn't so much "inner."

"If you don't like the way I do things, then you shouldn't have called me," Branna shot back, though I noticed her fair skin had turned a shade of crimson at Kade's words.

"Get out," Kade dismissed her, returning his attention to me and helping me sit up. The pain in my stomach made me catch my breath. I gritted my teeth, not wanting to give Branna the satisfaction of hearing me make a sound.

“Fine,” Branna bit out, grabbing her things from along the wall. “But do your own damn training from now on.”

“No shit,” Kade replied, barely glancing her way as she slammed out the door.

“I don’t like her very much,” I managed to say, using the hem of my t-shirt to swipe at the blood accumulating beneath my nose.

“At the moment, neither do I,” he replied. “Can you stand?”

I nodded and tried to rise, though Kade had to help me. His arm curved around my waist and I maintained a tight grip on his shoulder, the strength in his arms and the feel of his skin beneath my fingers distracting me from the aches and pains in my body.

He helped me to a bench and I gratefully sat, resting my head against the wall behind me and released a sigh. Kade got up, returning a few moments later with a wet cloth.

“I’m sorry, princess,” he said quietly as he gently wiped the blood from my face. “I wouldn’t have left you alone with her if I’d known she would do that to you.”

I didn’t mind the nickname Kade had coined for me, though what had begun as something disparaging, had now turned into a type of endearment. He’d begun using it after watching me do a karaoke performance of my beloved pop princess Brittany Spears. I wasn’t good at a lot of things, but I could do a dead-on Brittany impression.

“It’s all right,” I dismissed his apology. “It wasn’t your fault.” “That Branna’s such a bitch” I left unsaid.

“Come on,” he said, getting to his feet. “I know what’ll help.”

I stood slowly, wincing, and followed him to a room in the back. I hadn’t been back there before, and I glanced around curiously. Lockers filled one wall while shower stalls lined the other. Kade kept going, pushing his way through another door, which he held open for me.

I stepped inside the small, wood-paneled room, immediately assailed by humidity and the aroma of chlorine. A bubbling hot tub sat in the middle of the room.

“Get in,” Kade said, nodding toward the tub. “It’ll help with the ache.”

I glanced down at my attire uncertainly. I hadn’t brought an extra change of clothing.

“I won’t look,” Kade snorted, then smirked. “I’ve seen it before anyway.”

I blushed at the reminder. Kade had helped save me from being turned into a cinder when my car had been blown up. The damage to my clothes had been irreparable, and he’d taken care of that, too, though I’d been unconscious for that part.

I still hesitated and Kade heaved a long-suffering sigh. “I’ll be back in fifteen.”

He left the room, and I could no longer resist the allure of steaming water. Stripping down to my plain white cotton underwear and bra, I eased into the water. It was blissful, and I could feel the coiled tension in my muscles easing. Sinking down to my neck, I rested my head against the side and closed my eyes. It felt heavenly

I didn’t keep track of time but it must have been fifteen minutes later when the door opened and Kade stepped back inside. Nearly having fallen asleep, I groggily lifted my head. He’d changed into jeans and pulled on a t-shirt. I briefly mourned the loss of the view of his naked chest.

“Time’s up, princess,” he said, holding out a towel for me. I took it as he turned away to shut off the bubbles for the hot tub, then left the room again.

I stripped off my wet bra and underwear, pulling my t-shirt and shorts on over my bare skin. It felt weird, but I was only going home. Holding my dripping clothes, I emerged from the hot tub room to find Kade standing in wait by the doors, staring outside at the darkening streets.

When he heard me approach, he turned, his gaze taking in my appearance, including the small bundle I held.

“You going to be all right?” he asked when I reached him.

I shrugged. “A few bruises. Nothing I can’t handle.”

He gave a short nod in response. When he said nothing further, I smiled nervously. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Let’s grab some dinner,” he suggested. “I’m starving.”

I blanched. “I can’t go somewhere like this,” I protested. “I’m not wearing any-” I abruptly cut off, my face heating.

A grimace crossed Kade’s face and was gone. “Wear this,” he said, digging inside his duffel bag and tossing me a hoodie. “And please stop reminding me about what you’re not wearing.”

I shrugged into the hoodie and zipped it up, noticing as I did so that it smelled of Kade. Whereas Blane always wore cologne, it seemed Kade rarely used the stuff. The aroma drifting from the cotton was a mix of leather, spice and warm musk - nothing that could be captured in a bottle and all uniquely Kade.

“I’ll drive,” he said, and I didn’t argue as I followed him out the door.

The Mercedes was an expensive automobile, and I enjoyed riding in it. It was a manual transmission and I surreptitiously watched Kade’s hand deftly handle the gearshift. If I allowed myself to think about it, I could almost imagine I was Kade’s girlfriend rather than his employee. Sitting in his car, wearing his clothes – it was not an altogether unwelcome notion. I knew that few, if any, women had been allowed this close to Kade.

The image of Blane abruptly intruded on my thoughts, and guilt hit me hard. I shouldn’t be thinking about these things. It was beneath me, not to mention classless and tacky, to entertain

thoughts of Kade like that when I was dating Blane. The sexual tension between Kade and me was thick enough to cut with a knife, but that didn't mean we had to act on it.

I deliberately looked away from Kade's hand, my gaze turning to watch unseeing out the window.

A few minutes later, Kade stopped the car. I got out, glancing around. We were parked on the street near a building marked simply "Tavern." I raised my eyebrows in a silent question at Kade.

"What?" he asked innocently. "They've got great burgers."

I followed him inside. It was pretty busy for a Sunday night, the tables, booths and bar stools full of people. Kade slipped into the crowd and I grabbed a fistful of his shirt hem so I wouldn't lose him. Reaching behind his back, he unfastened my hand from the cloth and laced my fingers through his. A warm sensation flowed through my veins at the gesture and the feel of his thumb brushing across the top of my hand.

A moment later, we slid into an empty booth in a far corner. I sat with my back to the room while Kade's was to the wall.

A waitress whose nametag proclaimed her to be "Cindy" came up and handed us menus. Kade ordered a beer and so did I. She left to get our drinks and I began perusing the menu, waiting. I didn't have to wait long.

"What did you see?"

It was the standard question Kade had begun asking. This was my observation lesson and I'd been practicing ever since Kade had begun teaching me. I put down my menu and looked at him as I answered.

“There are two exits, the front and the one at the rear past the bathrooms. Five waitresses and two bartenders, plus two cooks. They must have trouble relatively often because the phone number for the cops was taped to the wall near the phone. A possible problem tonight will be the five men at the bar arguing over the basketball game – IU versus Purdue. IU is winning in the second half, but the Purdue fans appear drunker.”

The corner of Kade’s mouth twitched in approval, and the warm feeling from earlier spread to my belly.

“Oh, and there’s a hooker reeling in a John at the other end of the bar,” I added.

“Nice job,” Kade said with a smirk. “Though I think you forgot the two guys who checked out your ass on the way in.”

“Likewise I didn’t mention the three women who watched you walk across the room like you were sex on a stick,” I retorted. I’d wanted to scratch their eyes out.

Kade’s grin widened. “Sex on a stick, huh?”

I didn’t give him the satisfaction of replying.

“Any helpers?” he asked, getting back to business.

I nodded. “Two guys at the table in the southeast corner. One of them’s wearing an IFD t-shirt.” Kade had taught me to look for anyone who might be police, military or fire department, as they’d be most likely to help a complete stranger in trouble, especially a woman.

The waitress came back with our beers and took our order.

“Address?” he asked once she was gone. I told him where we were. “Nearest cross street?” I told him that, too.

“Why’d you move out?” he asked out of the blue.

I stared at him in confusion. “Move out of where?”

“Blane’s.”

Oh. I took a nervous sip of my beer. “I was just staying there until I healed,” I explained.

“And he let you go?”

I bristled. “Let me? I wasn’t aware I had to wait for him to ‘let me’ do anything.”

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Kade lightly reprimanded. “Oh wait, I forgot.” He leaned across the table. “You’re not wearing any.” He took another swallow of his beer, his eyes glittering with mischief as he watched me.

I ignored my embarrassment. “Thought I wasn’t supposed to remind you about that,” I said archly.

Kade shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. It’s all I can think about anyway.”

I swallowed. “Kade, I’m dating Blane. You know that.”

Kade’s jaw tightened and he finished off his beer without replying. The waitress appeared with another as well as our food, which she set before us on the weathered wooden table surface.

“Are you sleeping with him?”

I choked on my beer. “I can’t believe you just asked me that,” I spluttered, my cheeks burning.

“That means you’re not,” he said, and there was no mistaking the satisfaction in his voice.

“It’s been six weeks,” he continued. “If Blane hasn’t sealed the deal by now, it’s open season.”

I was almost afraid to ask. “Open season on what?”

The look in his eyes made my breath catch. “On you.”