
HIS MOMENT TO STEAL

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Published by Cathryn Fox

Cover by Jan Meredith

Formerly published with Samhain Publishing

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ISBN 978-1-928056-58-4

Print ISBN 978-1-928056-75-1

Jesus, those had to be the biggest melons he'd ever set eyes on.

Security expert Luke Phillips swallowed down the saliva pooling on his tongue and stared at the gorgeous woman coming his way. With his mouth watering for a taste of those juicy, oversized melons, his gaze traveled upward to meet with a set of big blue eyes that held a measure of panic.

"Shit," he mumbled, and discarded his cart to help. It wasn't like he'd actually planned on purchasing any of the groceries inside, anyway. No, like any good thief, he was simply pretending to be a customer when all the while he was actually scoping out the place. Seconds before the woman's armload of honeydews went crashing to the floor, Luke quickly closed the distance between them and reached out to help her.

"Here, let me lighten your load." His cock twitched. Okay, wrong choice of words...

She stopped dead in her tracks, her dark lashes blinking rapidly in confusion as she stared up at him. His head came

back with a start, surprised by her reaction. What, had she never been offered help before?

"It's okay, I got it." She arched her back as she awkwardly shifted the gigantic fruits before they fell and splattered on the polished tile floor.

Ignoring her protest, he grabbed three melons, leaving her with two, and glanced at the nametag pinned to her apron. *Emery*. Different, but pretty. Like her.

"Now what kind of guy would I be if I just stood here watching you juggle your melons?" He tossed her his best flirtatious grin trying to make light of the situation and put a smile on her face.

"Thanks," she mumbled, but instead of playing along, she gestured with a nod to the table set up at the end of the grocery aisle. *Tough crowd*. "You can put them there. But just so you know, I did have everything under control." She jutted her chin out a little bit, and Luke's grin widened as she tried to hold her own against him.

"Are you always this stubborn?" He took in the curves her work apron did little to hide. Stubborn, yet sexy. Damned if she wasn't his kind of girl.

She shook her head and loose blonde curls flared around her shoulders. He breathed in the floral fragrance of her shampoo, pulling it deep into his lungs as it overshadowed the scent of ripe honeydew.

"I'm not... I just... Look, I'm just in a hurry, that's all." She placed the melons on the table, adjusted the sale sign, then glanced at her watch. "I have to be somewhere in ten minutes."

He took in the worry in her eyes and the pink tinge on her cheeks before he stole a peek at his own watch. At twelve noon he too had to be somewhere. Not that he had far to go. No, his meeting was with the owner of the upscale market smack dab in the middle of Austin's trendiest neighborhood

—a market he never, ever thought he'd step foot in again. If it weren't for the youth who hung out at Sheffield Community Center, he'd have stayed as far away from the place as possible. But he'd promised the kids new equipment and since he never went back on his word, he had no choice but to take the job. That, and the owner was now a woman, which had him thinking Taylor's Market had changed hands in the last decade. Yeah, he was pretty certain the man who fought to put the "kid from the wrong side of the tracks" in juvenile detention—and won—had retired and was long gone from the place.

"I'm no efficiency expert, but more hands make lighter work." He followed her back to the pile of melons she was moving, and assuming she had to rush off to some appointment on her lunch break, he added, "Shouldn't you get one of the other staff members to help if you have to be out of here in ten?"

Something troubled passed over her pretty eyes as she grabbed another armload and shifted them in the crook of her elbow. She pinched her lips tight, then said, "We're short staffed."

Of course they were, which was probably why the owner, Mrs. Vincent, had called his company looking for a security expert in the first place. Overworked staff had a negative impact on employee health, leading to shortages due to stress-related illnesses. It also had a negative impact on the business itself. With no one watching the store, a thief could easily rob Taylor's Market blind—and likely had—considering they were looking for his services.

Luke had come to the market early to get a feel for their security, and as he stole another glance around, he could see why they needed his help. The place was packed with customers, and there were only three employees on the floor: Emery working produce, a young man behind the deli

counter, and one cashier working the front register. Unfortunately, there was no management to be found. Not that Luke thought management would ever help a lowly employee. God forbid anyone in the upper echelons get their hands dirty.

Or give second chances...

But they should at least be watching the store and monitoring the place for theft.

He helped her carry another armload, finishing off the stack, and took note of a young boy around fourteen years old combing the aisles. From the way his T-shirt jutted out from his baggy jeans, it was easy to tell the kid had a pocketful of stolen goods. Luke exhaled slowly, memories of his own youth bombarding him as he kept watchful eyes on the little delinquent. The kid glanced at him, made eye contact, then moved to the next aisle.

Even though Luke wasn't officially on the job yet, he placed the last of the melons on the display table, knowing he had to do something. Stepping into soldier mode he excused himself and walked to the front of the store. He had every intention of catching up with her later to get her number.

He stood by the door and once again took in all the holes in the store's security system as he waited for the kid to exit. Even though it was nearing his appointment time, he wanted to deal with the boy first. At least if he was the one doling out the punishment the kid stood half a chance. Painful past experiences had taught him that the rich lived by their own rules and were biased against those outside their elite circle.

When he saw the boy round an aisle and sidestep the long line at the cash register, Luke picked up a box of specialty cookies and pretended to study the ingredients, giving the boy a chance to escape. For his plan to work, he needed to catch the kid red-handed, outside the store.

The boy slipped out the door. Luke put the box down and followed. He walked behind him for a few seconds, moisture

breaking out on his forehead as the warm sunshine heated the sidewalk and radiated upward.

He closed the gap, and when he was within arm's reach he said, "Hey."

The boy spun around, and his eyes went wide with recognition as Luke glared at him. "What the fuck do you want, man?"

Nice...

Luke gestured with a nod. "How about everything in your pockets?"

"Shit." The kid cursed and turned to run. Since Luke had anticipated the boy's next move he was already one step ahead of him and had him by the scruff before he could round the corner and bolt.

Luke turned him around and nudged him toward the market, hoping to find a quiet place inside. "How about we have a little talk?"

"How about you go fuck yourself."

"That's a nice mouth you've got there," Luke said. "Do you kiss your mother good night with it?"

"I kiss lots of girls with it." He smirked and struggled against Luke's grip, but this wasn't Luke's first rodeo. In fact, a little over a decade ago, many of his friends had stood where the boy was right now—and Luke had spent three years in juvenile detention because of it.

Luke practically dragged him inside and when he found a handful of customers staring at him, he searched for Emery. The commotion must have caught her attention. She rushed from the back of the store and when she saw him with the struggling boy, her eyes went wide.

"Is there an office around here I can use for a minute?" Luke asked.

"What's going on?"

"What's going on is this kid has a pocket full of goods."

“Oh, I didn’t...” When she pushed her curls from her face, Luke noticed a worried frown creasing her forehead. She pointed toward the back. “I was busy. I didn’t see.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got it under control,” Luke explained, not wanting her to think the blame was hers. It was management’s job to train the staff and put theft prevention measures in place.

“Are you a cop?” she asked.

“Something like that.” The kid elbowed Luke in the gut and Luke tensed. “About that room,” he said between gritted teeth.

She nodded and he followed her to the back of the store. She pulled a ring full of keys from her pocket and unlocked the door with shaky fingers. Luke stepped past her and she followed him. Once inside the small office, Luke shoved the kid into a chair and leaned against the desk, taking an authoritative, high-powered position over him, a tactic he’d learned in the army. Emery stood by the door, looking completely unsure of herself—of Luke—and the situation she’d suddenly found herself in. Luke could have told her to leave, but he needed her there for two reasons. One, she would be a witness to what he was about to do, and two, he was a selfish prick and liked being around her. And of course, he couldn’t forget that he’d yet to get her number.

“What’s your name?” Luke asked the boy, lowering his voice slightly.

“Captain America,” the kid responded with a smirk.

Luke let that statement stand for a while as he assessed the boy. One thing was for sure, he wasn’t as tough as he wanted Luke to think he was. He took in his ratty shirt, jeans that were two sizes too big, and sneakers that had seen better days. As the puzzle known as Captain America clicked together, Luke felt his heart pinch, but he kept his face hard, his voice deep.

“So what are you, some kind of street thug?”

The kid slouched in his chair, his nonchalant body language belying the worry backlighting his dark eyes. As a former military security specialist, Luke knew all about reading people, and despite trying to appear unfazed, the kid was scared shitless. Which meant Luke had him right where he wanted him. If the kid really was a badass, there was no way Luke could get him to agree to the terms he was about to lay out.

Captain American folded his arms—a protective measure to shield himself, and a sure sign of his anxiety. “Yeah, that’s what I am,” he answered. “A street thug with superpowers.”

Luke gave him his best hard-assed glare and stared at him for longer than was comfortable. Eventually the boy shifted, straightening slightly in his seat. Good. At least somewhere deep inside he still held a degree of respect for authority and wasn’t a lost cause.

Luke met his gaze unflinchingly. “Did someone put you up to this?”

After a long moment, the boy tore his gaze away and stared at his sneakers, ending the uncomfortable stare down. “Here, just take the stuff.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out two pieces of red licorice and tossed them onto the desk.

“You don’t seem like a stupid kid.” Luke picked up the candy and slapped it against his palm. Behind the boy’s nervousness he had a solid determination about him, an intelligence that ran deep. “In fact, I’d say you’re pretty smart, which makes me wonder why you’re willing to ruin your life for two pieces of licorice.”

“I’m not... I didn’t... I don’t...” He pushed agitated fingers through dark, shoulder-length hair that looked like it hadn’t been shampooed in weeks.

“This can go down one of two ways,” Luke began. “I call

in backup and you end up in juvie for stealing..." He paused to give the kid a moment to chew on that, even though he had no intention of ever calling the cops.

"Fuck," the boy mumbled, his voice cracking slightly. "Look, the licorice wasn't even for me."

"So someone did put you up to this."

He stared at the floor, and fisted his hair. "It's for my little brother, okay? He likes licorice."

"Your little brother?"

"Yeah, he's only three and doesn't get..." He stopped talking, like he didn't want to give away too much.

"What else do you have in your pockets?" The boy hesitated, and Luke reached for the phone.

"Okay, fine." He pulled out a tube of deli meats and slapped it on the table.

Luke picked up the package and exchanged a look with Emery. Troubled eyes full of mixed emotions stared back, a clear sign that she knew what was going on. Taylor's Market might have been in Austin's trendiest neighborhood, but just a few blocks away things went south fast. Luke knew first-hand what it was like to live in the city's poverty district, where food and candy were hard to come by.

"Is this for your brother too?" he asked, keeping his face hard. A kid like Captain America here would never want his pity.

"Yeah." He emptied his other pocket and placed a couple of crusty rolls on the desk. "So what's the other way?"

"The other way?" Luke asked.

"You said this could go down one of two ways."

"The other way is you spend every weekend this summer at the community center out in Sheffield."

"Fuck. Isn't that where old people hang out?"

Old people, young people, therapy dogs. Luke picked the phone up.

“Don’t. I’ll do it,” the boy said. Luke continued to glare at him, waiting for a stronger reaction. The boy cursed under his breath, held his hands up, palms out. “I’ll do it, okay. Just put the damn phone down.”

Luke took his hand off the receiver. “Get up, kid.”

The boy stood. “It’s Trent, and I’m not a kid.”

“Okay, Trent,” he began, giving him that much, despite the fact that he *was* a kid—one who not only needed, but was craving guidance in the worst way. “Where do you live?”

He narrowed suspicious eyes. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to walk you home so I’ll know where to find you if you don’t show up on Saturday.”

“Fine,” he mumbled.

After he gave the address, Luke nudged him toward the door, but didn’t miss Emery jotting the address down on a whiteboard hung near the desk. For a moment he thought she might report him, but he’d seen the look in her eyes. She felt for the kid every bit as much as Luke did. “And don’t think you’re getting off easy. Juvie might look like a day in the park after a weekend at the center.”

He moved to the door and the sweet floral scent of Emery hit him as she stood there nibbling her bottom lip, looking at him with an equal mixture of worry and relief. “Listen, will you tell the owner that I’ll be late for my appointment?”

As if a light bulb had just gone off, her big eyes went wide. She shook her head, her long curls bouncing around her shoulders. “You’re...you’re Mr. Phillips...from...” Her words fell off and she finished with, “I should have known.”

He stopped dead in his tracks and took a moment to look at her. She really was gorgeous, but there was something in her eyes that told him she wore the weight of the world on her shoulders. Damned if he didn’t want to help lighten that load too.

“Yeah. I’m Luke Phillips, from Phillips Security.” He gave

her a suggestive smile, along with a teasing wink, determined to loosen her up and put a smile on that lush mouth of hers. He pitched his voice low, for her ears only and said, “Which means I’ll be hanging out here for the next few weeks and while I’m here, you’ll never again have to juggle your melons alone.”

Emery Vincent tried to quiet her racing heart as she watched Mr. Phillips, or rather Luke-o-licious, escort the boy from her office. Surprised that her legs could actually move, she crossed the small tile floor and plopped herself down in her old leather chair, her mind racing with this unexpected turn of events. When she’d called Phillips Security and talked to his receptionist, she expected a hardened soldier to show up, not sex in a formfitting T-shirt.

You’ll never again have to juggle your melons alone.

Oh, God!

He’d been teasing her, flirting with her, but she’d been too focused on her upcoming meeting—on losing the business her ailing father had left her in hands—to partake in his sexy banter.

Unable to help herself she stole a glance at him as he walked down the deli aisle with delinquent Trent in tow. As she thanked her lucky stars that he was good at his job and had stopped one more theft, she took in his long, hard legs and low-slung jeans that cradled his backside to perfection—and oh what a backside it was.

After a good, long look, her gaze traveled up to take in a wide back and even wider shoulders. She caught a glimpse of his tattoo peeking out from the short sleeves of his T-shirt, and her fingers itched to explore the rest of him to see if he had any more ink. She continued to stare, unable to help herself, but when he turned back and caught her ogling, he

gave her a sexy, lopsided smile—one that spoke of hot nights and even hotter sex.

Oh my...

Okay, so she totally knew what his teasing was all about. The man wanted her between the sheets. Hell, who was she kidding? She wanted that too. The last time she'd crawled into bed with a guy was a little over two years ago. That lust-affair hadn't ended well. Then again, for as long as she could remember, none of her relationships ever had. In kindergarten no one wanted to play with the girl who had a "retarded" brother, as they called him, because they thought it might rub off. God, kids were so damn cruel, twisting that clinical word to make it so ugly and offensive when all it really meant was that he had special needs. It was wrong to call people names, any kind of name. Simple as that.

In Emery's later years, kids started talking to her when they found out her folks ran the market. They befriended her, only to score free candy and soda in their middle school years, and alcohol and smokes in their later ones—which she ended up paying for.

She'd learned the hard way that people hung out with her for one reason and one reason only—they wanted something. And that something was never a lifelong friendship, or a lasting romantic love affair, like she really wanted.

From his outwardly flirtatious personality, she assumed Luke was a player, which was fine by her. She wasn't opposed to a night of sex with a hot guy like him—no strings attached. Hey, at least her eyes were wide open and she knew never to trust, never to set herself up for failure. And, hell, a night in the sack would undoubtedly help ease the tension that had been building inside her since taking over the business two years ago—and watching it go downhill. Things had been good for the first year, but then over the last twelve months she started losing thousands of dollars every pay period. With

an expanding neighborhood, and a busier store, she chalked the losses up to theft, but lack of cash flow meant she had to lay off employees. Less staff meant fewer people to watch the store, which only compounded the problem.

She exhaled slowly, her mind going back to Luke and the reason she'd called his company in the first place. From his teasing banter she guessed he had no idea she was the owner of the market. She'd always gone by Vincent-Taylor and had dropped the Taylor from her last name a few years ago, keeping her mother's name only. Partly to honor her after she died, and partly because, well, everyone wanted something from a Taylor. Her father had numerous connections in high places, and many favors were traded. Emery just wanted people to like her for who she was, not for what she could give them—or do for them.

Regardless, now was not the time to be thinking about that, not when her father had trusted her with the business and she needed to make it a success not only for him, but also for her older brother. The residential health facility where he received around-the-clock nursing care was expensive, but it was also the best facility in the state, and she wasn't about to jeopardize his well-being due to lack of funds. He was counting on her and she wouldn't let him down, which meant all her focus had to go into saving the market.

She took a crisp twenty-dollar bill from her purse and jotted Trent's address down on a sticky note. Pushing to her feet, she made her way into the market with the product Luke had left on her desk.

Luke...

Hot, hard, so nice to look at. She thought about the way he'd shifted gears with Trent, and in seconds flat had gone from flirtatious to deadly serious. She'd caught the intense glint in his steel-gray eyes as he hardened himself, and suspected there was more to him than met the eye. Beneath

all the charm and charisma she suspected that ex-soldier Luke Phillips had a past that continued to haunt him. Behind the charming grin, and flirty smile, there was a darker part of him.

Even still, her body was screaming at her to cut loose and have some much-needed fun with the guy who oozed sex. But she had a business to fix, she reminded herself. Which meant she needed to concentrate on running the market, and not on what her body craved.

Then again, look how that had turned out for her.

Yeah, some inner voice yelled—probably the one calling the shots from between her legs—look where that got you. Go ahead, have some fun with Luke-o-licious. Let him juggle your melons. You know you want to.

Luke drove his hands into his pockets and leaned against the doorjamb, his gaze raking over sweet yet sexy Emery as she sat at the same desk where he'd recently interrogated Trent. She was so focused on the sheet of paper in front of her that she hadn't noticed him watching. It was nearing twelve thirty and he wondered what she was still doing here. Didn't she have to be somewhere?

Wait...was she? Nah, she couldn't be. Could she?

Shit.

"Oh," she said, her cheeks turning a pretty shade of pink as she glanced up at him. "I didn't realize you were back."

He angled his head, an uneasy feeling searing his gut as he looked at her ring finger. Even though it was empty, he said, "Mrs. Vincent, right?"

"Miss Vincent," she corrected.

Christ, how could he have missed it? Probably because he'd been too busy flirting with her to realize *why* she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. This was her business—her upscale market—which meant that technically she was his boss.

What the hell was it he'd said about her melons?

Never mind that, he'd been lusting after her and she was one of *them*. Rich, elite, never one to give second chances. Anger moved through him and he wondered if he'd read her wrong earlier where Trent was concerned. Maybe she'd taken his address down because she planned on turning him in.

"Now that you've seen firsthand on what's going on here..." she paused and seemed a bit breathless as she gestured toward the chair on the other side of her desk, "...I guess you know why I called your company?"

With his defenses in place, he hardened himself and sat across from her. "Are you going turn him in?"

Her brow furrowed, and the pink tinge on her cheeks spread. "Why would I do that?"

"Why did you take down his information?"

She blinked rapidly and looked at the white board. "I...just."

"What the hell?" A sharp voice boomed from the doorway.

Luke turned to see Winston Taylor glaring at him, as in Winston Taylor, the man who used to own Taylor's Market and had connections in very high places. Well fuck if his day didn't just go from bad to worse. He gripped the arms of his chair hard enough to break them, and even though he was no longer in the army, every muscle in his body tensed, ready for battle.

Emery stood up. "Dad, what's going on?"

Dad?

Her father jerked his head toward Luke, his gaze razor sharp. "What's going on?" he spouted, spittle flying from his mouth. "I could be asking you the same question."

Emery cast a confused look Luke's way, then turned back to her father.

In that moment, Luke's mind raced back to a little over

twelve years ago. He vaguely remembered hearing that the man who wanted to crucify him had a daughter around Luke's age. Not that they ran in the same circles or went to the same schools. They didn't. Even though she went by a different last name, it should have occurred to him that Taylor would have handed the business down to his offspring after his wife had died—yeah, Luke remembered hearing about her death just before he was put away.

"You're not making any sense," Emery said.

Her father scowled, his eyes full of hate as he glared at Luke. He pointed his cane Luke's way. "Do you have any idea who that...that is?" he spat out, like he couldn't bring himself to voice Luke's name.

"Luke Phillips," she said. "I hired his company to set up a new security system for the store."

"Security system?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously and spun back toward Emery. "What's wrong with our old one?"

"Insurance purposes." She gave an easy shrug, the fib rolling off her tongue like she'd spent hours practicing it. "Changes in the policy, that's all."

Luke angled his head, curious about her lie, but said nothing.

The old man waved a dismissive hand in Luke's direction. "So you hired him?" With that he laughed out loud. Not a humorous kind of laugh, more like a cynical one. "Well I guess it takes one to know one."

Emery shook her head as Luke climbed to his feet. Okay, enough of this. He wasn't a frightened sixteen-year-old boy anymore, and very little scared or intimidated him these days. Juvie did that to a guy. So did the army.

He glared at the man who'd taken so much from him—his father, his sister, his teenage years. "What he's trying to say," Luke began, "is that I'm the guy he put away for stealing."

"That's right," Taylor said. He jutted his chest out, and if

he didn't look so old, so pathetic, Luke might have considered clocking him. "Someone had to teach you and the rest of those hooligans you ran with that you just couldn't walk in here and take what you wanted without consequences."

Emery's eyes widened, but Luke just stood there, the things he felt for this man burning a hole in his gut. There was no point in telling Emery the truth. That he wasn't the one who'd taken a loaf of crusty bread and a jar of peanut butter to feed a pregnant girlfriend. Or that he'd taken the fall for his buddy because unlike Luke, Shane was of legal age and there was no way in hell he'd have made it in jail. Yeah, stealing was wrong. Luke knew that. His father was a religious man and had drilled that into him and his sister when they were young. But sometimes desperation drove a guy to do desperate things. He could tell her all that but why bother?

Few people believed him—believed in him—so why would she?

"Don't hire him, Emery. Once a thief always a thief and nothing good can come from this," Taylor said.

Luke glared at the man as Emery's head bobbed back and forth between the two, like she had no idea what to do next. Financially, Luke needed this job, but he wasn't about to stand here and take any more shit from the Taylor family. Nor was he going to come between a daughter and her father. Not ever again. It wasn't that he thought father knew best. He didn't. But a girl needed her dad, especially when she didn't have a mother. Of that he was certain, and it was the reason he hadn't spoken to his kid sister in over twelve years.

With that last thought in mind, he took a step toward the door, figuring he'd somehow find another way to support the community center. Maybe he'd even dip into his savings. Expanding his business could wait a little longer, although

he'd been hoping to give a few of his army buddies a steady paycheck when they discharged next month.

Luke clamped his hands behind his neck, ready to walk away from the contract. He'd never quit a job before. He'd never quit at anything. But in this case he didn't expect he'd have to. He fully expected Emery to fire him on the spot after finding out about his past. But what she said next not only surprised him, it shocked him to his core.

"Well that was a long time ago."

"You have got to be kidding me," her father said, practically frothing at the mouth as he banged his cane on the floor.

There was a real sadness on Emery's face, a deep worry in her eyes as she sat back down in her chair, indicating that Luke do the same. Mumbling curses under his breath, her father stormed off, cracking his cane hard against the floor.

"I'm open to hearing all your ideas," she said. "After what happened here earlier, I'm sure you can see that I really need help."

He looked over her face, assessing her, and as she gave him an almost pleading look, something inside him gave, softened. He wasn't sure what it was about her, and even though she was one of *them*, he found himself wanting to help her, wanting to protect her. He could tell she was strong, had been strong for a long time, and wasn't the kind of girl to ask for help. But she was asking him right now.

He listened to her talk, and when she placed a paper in front of him, the layout of the store, he scanned it.

Emery looked at him. "My father," she began. "He doesn't usually come around too much anymore. His health, it's failing."

"Emery..." he said even though he had no idea what it was he wanted to say to her.

Walk away, Luke. Just walk away.

He glanced at the store's layout again, then looked into her big hopeful eyes. When he opened his mouth, to tell her he couldn't take the job, he suddenly found himself saying, "We have a lot of work to do."

Shit.

He thought he caught a flicker of a smile on her face before she switched into full business mode. "Okay, what's our first order of business?"

"First I'd like to hang around the store to observe, then I'd like to set up surveillance cameras and get my team to watch from the monitors in my truck. Once I see the thieves in action, I'll know where we have to make changes in the layout, cameras, et cetera."

She nodded, and once again the smell of her sweet floral shampoo reached his nostrils. His fingers curled around the arms of the chair as his cock shifted.

Easy, boy. She's not the one for you.

"I'll give you a rundown of the store and then let you and your team get to work." She climbed from her seat. "If you have any questions or need anything, you know where to find me."

Luke followed her into the market, and after a tour, he spent the rest of the afternoon pretending to shop so he could observe the flow of customers and the areas that were cut off from view. By the time night rolled around, he hopped onto his motorcycle and made his way to the bar, in need of a drink, and maybe a fist to the face from one of his comrades. Yeah, perhaps a punch to the head would knock some sense back into him. What the hell was he thinking agreeing to stay on?

He pushed his way through the heavy front door and plunked himself down next to his buddy, Garrett Andersen. "Hey," he said to the former military security specialist turned city cop.

After a long moment Garrett nudged him with his elbow. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

Twisting restlessly on his stool at Sky Bar, his favorite after work hangout, Luke looked up from the beer he was nursing and said, “Nothing, just thinking about the new job I just contracted.”

“Oh yeah, is she hot?”

Luke laughed. “Fuck off.”

“Is who hot?” Matt James asked as he came through the back door and took the empty seat beside Luke at the end of bar. He unzipped his backpack and slapped his books onto the bar top.

“The girl at the new job site,” Garrett provided.

“Ah,” Matt said. “So that’s why you’re all mopey?”

“Mopey? Christ, Matt. You sound like your grandmother.”

Matt shrugged, reached back into his bag and pulled out a jar of peanut butter and a plastic spoon.

Luke shook his head. For as long as he’d known Matt, the guy had been eating peanut butter from a jar. At least he’d upgraded to a spoon than from his damn finger. “You know you’re not twelve anymore, right?”

“I’m a poor college kid now,” Matt said. “I just got out of class so I eat what I can, when I can.”

Just then, Sky, the owner of the bar, came sauntering over. “Then eat this.” She slid a whole-wheat ham and cheese sandwich, along with a garden salad, in front of Matt.

The smile that lit up Matt’s face damn near blinded Luke, and made him wonder why his friend had never made a move on Sky. They all went way back—Caleb and Shane making up the fourth and fifth members of their group—and Matt lit up like a kid on Christmas morning whenever she was around. After Matt, Caleb, Shane and Luke had returned from overseas, and Matt enrolled in college, Sky gave him a job at the bar, allowing him to work around his classes. The two were

tight, but Luke had the feeling that Sky had something for Caleb—who was down in San Antonio working in the medical clinic.

Despite the sandwich, Matt opened the jar of peanut butter and stuck in the spoon. He held it out to Luke. “Want some?”

“Get that shit away from me.” Luke shoved Matt’s arm. “You know I’m allergic.”

Matt laughed, and flipped open his MCAT book. “Yeah, but I thought it would be good to see firsthand what an allergic swelling looks like. You know, in case it’s on the test.”

“Piss off, Matt.” Luke offered him his best hard-assed face, and made a fist. “Or I’ll teach you a thing or two about swelling.”

Matt grinned and turned his attention to his sandwich and thick book. Garrett asked Sky to bring two more beers. After she delivered them, he turned to Luke.

“So who is she?” he asked, keeping his voice low since Matt was studying beside them.

“Don’t you have a pretty wife and little girl waiting for you at home?” he asked, not wanting to talk about Emery or how curious he was about her. *Why did she lie to her father? Why did she still hire him for security, of all things, after finding out about his past?*

“Hey, don’t be jealous, man,” Garrett teased.

Luke laughed. “Me? Jealous? No way.” He looked at the cute blonde who had just sauntered in the door. “I’m good right where I am.” Truthfully, it wasn’t that he was opposed to marriage, but he enjoyed dating different women. He wasn’t a man whore, but he liked variety. Nothing wrong with that as far as he was concerned. Maybe someday when he found the right one he’d consider settling down. Although he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to find his soul mate at Sky Bar. Most of

the singles that came there were simply looking for a good time.

“Okay, so tell me about this job,” Garrett said, all teasing gone from his voice. “What’s the name of the company, and why do you look like you’re standing on the front line about to take a direct hit from the enemy?”

“Because I am.” Luke looked at his friend, his comrade. As a fellow army security specialist, he’d worked closely with Garrett in the field. And even though Garrett had demons, and had learned to overcome them thanks to Tallulah, he was a guy Luke trusted with his life. They spent many nights talking in the field, and Garrett was one of a handful of guys who knew about his past.

“Go on.”

Luke twisted off his beer cap, took a long pull from the bottle and set it down. He let loose a breath, gave a hard shake of his head, and said, “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

“Try me.”

He met Garrett’s glance. “Taylor’s Market.”

Garrett planted his elbows on the table, and blew out a slow breath. “What the hell were you thinking? Wait, let me guess...” He paused and smacked Luke on the side of the head. “You weren’t thinking with this.”

“I thought the owners had changed over the years, then I found out it was Taylor’s daughter Emery running the show.”

“You could have walked away.”

“I could have. But I need all the work I can get,” he said, although deep in his gut he knew Emery was the reason... Emery with the big pleading eyes...

Garrett nodded, because he knew Luke was financially tapped, every spare cent he made going into the scholarship fund. “How is Allison?”

His heart tightened at the mention of his sister. He drew

a breath and let it out slowly. “She’s good. She graduated the top of her class and is now in law school.”

“Law school, huh?” Garrett twirled his beer bottle on the tabletop. “Maybe she wants to right some wrongs.”

“Hopefully,” Luke said.

“She still doesn’t know.”

“Of course not. The scholarship fund was set up anonymously for a reason. If she knew it came from me she wouldn’t take it.” He looked into his beer bottle, his stomach in knots. He might not have talked to his sister in ages, but he still kept close tabs on her. “She hates me, Garrett.”

“You did what you had to do, Luke. I get that. And I bet she doesn’t hate you.” He took a sip of beer and went quiet for a moment, like he was deep in thought. “Maybe you should try talking to her.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, and even though he knew Garrett was right—he had to do what he had to do—it didn’t make pushing his sister away from him, or turning her against him any easier. But he couldn’t let their father turn his back on her too, all because she wanted to visit her big brother in juvie.

The old man was disgusted with Luke after the incident and wanted nothing more to do with him. Nor did he want Allison visiting or having any connection with a Phillips who would shame his entire family. The bastard had given Luke an ultimatum—either he put Allison out of his life and stopped her from visiting or the old man would disown her as well. Luke had no choice but to push her away—for her own good.

When Luke took the blame he never thought Taylor’s connections ran deep and he’d end up in juvie. Community service yes, but never locked in a hellhole where he was forced to use his fists more than once to survive. Another kick to the teeth was that Dear Old Dad had turned against him. He sure found out who had his back—and more impor-

tantly who didn't—when he found himself in trouble. His father had died a few years ago, never knowing the truth, because he refused to speak to his only son, deeming him unworthy. Jesus, they'd all lost so much.

“So speaking of doing what you have to do, what are you going to do about Taylor's daughter?”

“I don't know.”

“You like her?”

“I did before I found out who she was.”

“And now you don't like her.”

“Yeah, no, I don't know.” Okay, now he sounded like Trent.

“I messed in the wrong sandbox once,” Garrett said, grinning. He held his hand up to show off his wedding ring. “And look how that turned out.”

“Didn't you get your ass kicked by Ving over that?”

“Yeah, but it was worth it. I married the sweetest girl in the world and she gave me a beautiful daughter.”

“I wanted to sleep with Emery, not marry her,” Luke said.

“Yeah, that's what I thought about Tallulah too.”

Luke scoffed. “Whose side are you on here anyway?”

“Come on.” Garrett nudged him with his elbow. “You know I've got your back.”

“Then maybe you should try to give advice that's actually useful.”

Garrett laughed, then glanced at his watch and stood. “How about this. If you want to get her out of your head—” he paused and gestured toward the cute blonde girl who was casting glances Luke's way, “—she's just the girl to help.” Garrett dropped a few bills on the bar, then put his hand on Luke's shoulder. “But you know, it wasn't her that did wrong by you.”

“Ah, about that *good* advice...”

Garrett twirled the ring on his finger. “Look, all I'm saying

is you never know what you can *build* when playing with someone else's sand."

He wasn't looking to *build* anything with Emery. "It wasn't her sand I wanted to play with, Garrett. Now go home to your girls and stop pissing me off with your fucked-up analogies. You're starting to sound like Jack."

"And how could that be a bad thing?" Jack Barnes asked as he took over Garrett's seat.

As Garrett laughed and headed for the door, his buddy Jack ordered a drink. Jack was the guy who'd called in a few favors and managed to open the old military base on the outskirts of town where they all trained service dogs.

"So what was Garrett talking to you about?"

"Her," Luke said as he turned his attention to the blonde. Yeah, maybe he would take her home. Maybe she was just the girl to help him get Emery out of his head.

Sweet and sexy, yet strong and stubborn Emery.

Emery who needed him.

Shit.