

A PALADIN'S HEART

Chapter 1

"Stupid doesn't even come close to describing this."

Lonzo Jones shifted around trying to find a comfortable position on the cold concrete. He could've used Penn's stuff to pad his ass, but he had no desire to pick up whatever cooties had taken up residence in those flea-bitten blankets. It was bad enough part of the bet was that he had to wear Penn's filthy clothes.

His cell phone buzzed. Before answering it, he looked around to make sure no one was watching. One glance at the caller I.D. had him considering ignoring the call altogether, but even listening to Penn gloat was better than sitting there talking to himself. He got up and walked down the alley that led to the Paladin headquarters.

"Okay, Penn, what the hell do you want?"

"Gee, Lonzo, I don't want anything. I'm just calling to make sure you're all right out there. Sadly, you've still got a couple of hours left to go, and you should know the weatherman just predicted the rain will be arriving early."

The barely controlled glee in Penn's voice had Lonzo curling his free hand into a fist and imagining how sweet it would feel to knock the smirk right off Penn's face. Maybe he was a poor loser, but he still wasn't convinced that Penn hadn't cheated somehow. There was no way that Penn should've been able to predict the outcome of fourteen out of sixteen preseason football games last weekend.

Nobody was that good.

"I'm fine. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm busy holding the sidewalk down out here."

Evidently Penn wasn't done gloating. "Well, I'll be sure to let Devlin know that you've found a job you have a real talent for. And did I mention that your replacement called in sick? Devlin's scrambling to find someone else to fill in, but so far no luck."

He hung up before Lonzo had a chance to respond, which was probably a good thing. As much as Lonzo hated pulling guard duty, at least he didn't have to do it often. Paladins were too few and far between to waste their talents out sitting here on the street. That wasn't true for Penn Sebastian; not since he'd almost lost hand when an Other got in a lucky swing with a sword. Thanks to the other Paladins, the Other had died that night, their retribution swift and merciless. While Penn had survived the battle, the injury had left his wrist too weak to wield a sword. No longer able to do what Paladins were hardwired to do—defend the world from the crazies who came boiling across the barrier from Kalithia. Disguised as one of the homeless men who lived on the streets of Seattle, Penn sat outside headquarters day after day pulling guard duty.

And dying by inches.

Time to get back to work. Lonzo shoved the phone back in his pocket and parked himself back in the spot he'd staked out for himself. Normally, he wouldn't have minded soaking up some rays, but the sun had yet to put in appearance all day. One glance up at the sky made it

clear the weather guy had it right. Those clouds rolling in from over Puget Sound were clearly heavy with rain. There was no way he was going to finish up his shift dry, especially if he had to pull a double.

Perfect. Another reason to swear off stupid bets. Meanwhile, he started a mental list of all the ways he'd get even with Penn if he figured out how the jerk had managed to cheat. When that palled, he hunched his shoulders and just let his mind wander. It's not like he had anything better to do anyway. His roommate had moved out recently, so going home to an empty apartment held little appeal. Lonzo was happy for Larem. He really was, but he'd gotten used to having the Kalith warrior underfoot.

Now that Larem had hooked up with Sasha, Lonzo's own lack of a social life was even more evident. Hell, ever since Devlin, the head honcho among the Paladins, had fallen hard for their Handler, one guy after another had found happiness with some damn fine women. And shocker of shockers, even DJ had someone in his life now. It all boiled down to Lonzo being the odd man out now whenever the gang got together outside of work.

He wanted some of that action for himself, but Paladins had a hard time in the dating world. It was hard to maintain a relationship with someone when he had to lie about who he was, not to mention what he was.

It came as no surprise his mind wandered straight back to the one bright spot in his life. If he tried hard enough, he could almost remember what it felt like to be happy, to be excited about something or, more accurately, someone.

He savored the feel of her name on his tongue: Harper Cavanaugh.

They'd met at a local café that he liked for both its rustic fare and the fact that he almost always ran into Harper on her lunch hour. It had taken him a couple of tries to work up the courage to ask if he could share her table. From there, it had only been a matter of time before she admitted that she'd been coming in looking for him. He had grinned for hours after that little admission.

Now a days it hurt too much to think about Harper and how good she'd made him feel. In truth, he'd known from the beginning that their short-lived connection had been going nowhere. Paladins rarely had relationships, at least not ones that lasted.

However, now change was in the air, and his friends were pairing up with good women right and left. He was happy for all of them, even if it was too late for him. If he'd ever had a chance at happiness, it would've been with Harper.

But they'd both known she'd been getting ready to shove him out of her life when Fate stepped in and took care of that little chore for her. He'd stood her up one time too many, and she'd left him a message not to bother calling her again. Of course, he'd been dead at the time, but he couldn't very well have told her that.

His one real regret was that the breakup had happened before they ever found out if sex would've been as explosive between them as he'd always suspected it would be. But Harper was the kind of woman who deserved more from the man in her life than the erratic attention Lonzo had been able to give her. He had few major regrets in his life, but she was at the top of the list.

The first fat drops of rain splatted down on the sidewalk. He tilted his face up toward the sky, letting the rain beat down on his skin. Sinking back down into his sodden nest, he tried and failed to flush his mind clear of all thoughts. His brain was caught up on a hamster wheel, spinning and spinning, and getting nowhere at all.

Then the sound of someone hurrying along his side of the street jarred him right back out of his comfortable stupor. Instead of giving him the usual wide berth, these decidedly feminine footsteps were headed straight for him.

When a pair of pricy looking shoes stopped right smack in front of him, he thought about

ignoring their owner. But then his eyes lifted high enough to note a shapely pair of ankles and he was lost. He'd always been a unapologetic leg man. Since whoever she was obviously didn't have the good sense to get in out of the rain, he'd settle for leering at her long enough to drive her off. He took a good long time on the journey from her ankles to her well-muscled calves, but before he got any higher, she leaned down and shoved a venti-sized cup of coffee toward him.

"Here, I thought you might appreciate something hot to drink. This day isn't fit for man nor beast."

His heart stopped at the familiar huskiness in that voice, sending a chill straight through him that had nothing at all to do with the weather. The air in his lungs whooshed out in one big rush, robbing him of the ability to breathe, much less speak. Holy crap, it couldn't be, but his eyes were working just fine and gave lie to that hope.

"Here, I bought this for you."

She leaned down into his line of vision and tried to shove the cup into his fisted hands. "It's too cold to be out here for long. Maybe one of the shelters can take you in for the night. I can't stand the thought..."

Then her voice trailed off as she got her first good look at him. Recognition wasn't long in coming. If he lived a hundred lifetimes, he'd never forget the dawning horror in her expression as she backed away as quickly as she'd approached, dropping the coffee cup on the sidewalk. He was dimly aware of the sting of hot liquid splashing on his hands, but that was the least of his pain.

"Lonzo Jones?" She paused to draw a ragged breath. "Lonzo, is that really you?"

He'd lied to her enough before. He wouldn't now. "Hi, Harper. It's been awhile."

Those dark chocolate eyes of hers always did see too much. In one quick glance she took in the dirt and the rags and then settled firmly on his face.

"Dear God, what happened to you?"

Her pity and his own embarrassment made him lash out. "I'd think the answer to that would be obvious, especially for someone as bright as you. Things took a bit of a downturn."

Finally he forced a smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get back to my nap." Picking up the empty coffee cup, he held it up to her. "Nice thought, even if the execution left a little to be desired."

She backed away in a hurry, just as he wanted her to even as it made him even madder. When she didn't take the cup, he tossed it over his shoulder before leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes. After a few seconds, she fled on down the sidewalk.

When he was sure she was gone, he allowed himself one last glance. God, what a day. Turning his face back up to the rain, he growled, "Oh, yeah, I am really going to kill Penn."

Chapter 2

God, Harper wanted to throw up. Or scream. Or go rushing right back down the street to drag Lonzo Jones to some kind of shelter from the hellish weather outside. Something. Anything that would help rid her of the memory of how the vibrant, sexy man she'd known had deteriorated into that shambles of a human being she'd just spilled hot coffee on.

Only the desire to cut some distance off her walk back to the office had sent her down that side street. Although she was supposed to be off for the evening, one of the senior partners had asked her to come back in to finish up a brief that he needed for a trial that had been moved up. So instead of being tucked up at home on her overstuffed couch with a cup of hot tea, she'd given into the urge to take pity on someone else who had to be out in the elements.

She paused in the shelter of a handy doorway. One glance in the window had her scrubbing her face with a tissue. Although she'd like to blame the rain for huge black streaks of mascara running down her cheeks, she'd been crying from the second she'd walked away from Lonzo.

Walked, hell. She'd run as fast as her stupid heels could carry her.

What must he think of her? At the very least that she was a coward. They may never have made it past the threshold of her bedroom door, but the two of them had been more than casual friends. He certainly deserved better of her than a spilled cup of coffee and an all-out retreat. He'd always been closemouthed and evasive about his job, but how had he gone from the handsome man she'd known to one so down on his luck?

She had to go back. He might not like it, but she couldn't live with herself if she didn't at least try to help. If he rejected her efforts, fine. In fact, knowing him, that's exactly what he'd do. But there had to be something she could do. Some social agency that could step in and help him get back on his feet. Surely a few months on the street could be overcome with the right help.

Bracing herself for the fight she knew was coming, she marched right back down the street and turned the corner. Then the brief surge of courage faltered and her feet stuttered to a halt. From the safety of the shadows, she allowed herself a few seconds to drink in the sight of Lonzo Jones before making her final approach.

Despite the dirt and shabby clothes, he still had that same uncanny strength of personality that had burned so bright in his deep blue eyes and in the energy that seemed to vibrate along the lean lines of his build. Back when they'd been together, how many times had women stopped to stare at him before giving Harper a look of pure envy? She'd never felt quite so alive in any man's company before or since.

She missed it. She missed him and had been since the day he'd disappeared from her life with no explanation. Even if she couldn't have him back, she wanted to know the truth of what had happened. Surely she deserved that much closure.

Standing here and getting soaked to the bone wasn't going to do either of them any good. She started forward only to stop again when a man appeared out of the alley next to where

Lonzo was sitting. He sidled along, keeping a wary eye on Lonzo. At first, Lonzo remained sunk down in his blankets, unmoving and unaware that he was no longer alone and maybe in danger.

Before she could shout out a warning, though, he exploded out of his blankets and surged to his feet in one powerful motion. From somewhere in the sodden pile, he'd palmed a gun. In only seconds, he had the intruder smashed up against the wall, the gun at the back of his prisoner's head. With an economy of effort that spoke of years of practice, he had the other man's arm twisted up behind him.

She must have made some sound because Lonzo's head whipped around. Even from that distance, the power of his gaze held her every bit as captive as the man he had at gunpoint. Then he turned away, releasing her to retreat back around the corner to safety.

What had just gone down back there? The only answer she could come up with made a whole lot of sense and answered a lot of questions she'd always had about the secret life of Lonzo Jones. Through her job at the law firm, she'd met enough cops to recognize the breed. How had she missed seeing all those same qualities in him? Easy. He hadn't wanted her to.

Only one kind of cop developed such a talent for being a chameleon—one who spent weeks and even months at a time hiding in plain sight.

Lonzo Jones was an undercover cop.

Chapter 3

Her burst of euphoria over seeing Lonzo's sudden resurgence carried Harper as far as the front door of the law offices where she worked. She was genuinely relieved that his life hadn't really gone down the toilet, but her temper started making itself known as she keyed in the security code.

Granted they'd had no official understanding, but she'd certainly considered their relationship to be something special. If he hadn't felt that way about her, he'd done a fine job of hiding it. But the bottom line was, even if he'd been ordered undercover suddenly, he could've at least found a few seconds at some point to leave her a "Dear Jane" voice mail. The inconsiderate jerk.

Lonzo might not have been an easy man to pin down, but he hadn't seemed cruel. When she saw him again, and she vowed she would, she was definitely going to give him a piece of her mind on the subject. Maybe several.

Inside the building, she headed straight for her desk to drop off her purse and boot up her computer. The paperwork she needed had been left in a folder propped up against her telephone, right where she expected to find it. But before settling into to work, a trip to the restroom to clean up a bit was definitely in order. On the way, she zapped a cup of water in the microwave to make some tea. After the eventful trip in to the office, she definitely wanted something to take off the chill.

Even though there was light showing under her boss's door, his office was silent. Maybe he'd stepped out to grab a sandwich at the deli down the street. If so, he'd most likely bring her something, too. He was that kind of guy—thoughtful and considerate. Not like someone else she could mention.

In the restroom, she wrung the worst of the rain out of her hair with paper towels and then finished the job with the hand dryer. There wasn't time to tame her curls, so she settled for pulling her hair back into a messy ponytail. There wasn't much she could do to salvage her makeup, but it wasn't like she was going to be dealing with the public tonight. Right now all she wanted to do was finish the brief, hand it off to her boss, and then get back home to sulk and think bad thoughts about Lonzo Jones.

Feeling better for having both a plan and dry hair, she stepped back out in the hallway and paused to listen again. This time she could hear voices coming from Mr. Cody's office. Figuring on letting him know she was there, she started toward his door. But as she got closer, she realized there was something off about the tone of the discussion behind the closed door.

The voices were too muffled for her to pick out individual words, but her normally calm boss was practically yelling. When the other man responded, the calm fury in his voice had her backing away from the door. It took a few seconds, but she finally recognized the other voice as belonging to an ex-cop who had retained the firm's services to defend him against a work-related civil suit. The last thing she needed right then was to waltz right into the middle of another

confrontation. She'd had enough of that for one night.

It was puzzling, though. Mr. Cody hadn't said anything about expecting a late appointment. It wasn't unheard of for one of the partners to meet with an important client after hours, but there had to be a pretty compelling reason for it. Shrugging it off, she headed back toward her office to get started. If the two men had need of her services, they would let her know.

She'd gone no more than a handful of steps down the hallway when the volume of the argument increased geometrically. She turned back, considering her options. What was going on in there? If the man didn't like what his attorney had to say about his case, he was free to look for legal counsel elsewhere. It wouldn't be the first client they'd lost and wouldn't be the last. No one liked the loss of revenue, but the firm's income and reputation were certainly steady enough to survive.

Besides, who wanted a total jackass for a client?

When the door started to open, she ducked into the nearby staircase that led to the back entrance of the building, figuring on staying out of the irate cop's way. Once he was gone, she'd go check in with her boss. No doubt Mr. Cody could use a sympathetic ear after dealing with a jerk like that cop.

As she stepped through to the dimly lit landing, a loud crack rang out. At first she thought it was a door slamming, but then her boss screamed as a second shot rang out.

God in heaven, what had just happened? And why? What could Mr. Cody have done to drive the ex-cop to violence?

None that it mattered, and the last thing the shooter would want was a witness to his crime. Thankful that fate had stopped her from making her presence known, she stopped the door from clicking shut, fearing the noise would carry in the ominous silence that had settled over the office. Her heart pounded so hard that she feared the killer would hear it echoing from the stairwell.

She kept a wary eye on him through the slight crack in the door. The hallway should've been too dim for her to see much, but instead she could see every stark detail of his grim expression. His nostrils were flared wide, a predator scenting the wind. He carried the gun in his right hand, making no effort to hide it from view, leaving no doubt that he had no qualms about using it again.

After he'd passed by the door, she quietly kicked off her heels and picked them up. She needed to be surefooted on the steep staircase if she was going to make it to the exit before the killer realized he wasn't alone in the building. Leaving the shoes behind would only point him in the right direction.

She struggled to think clearly, the adrenalin pumping through her veins making it difficult to do anything but just run for the nearest door. The main exit was a straight shot across the lobby, but the cop would be sure to see her.

No, the back route would be a safer choice. Maybe she could make it outside without him even knowing she'd been there. But had she left a trail? Closing her eyes, she mentally retraced her steps since entering the building. The immediate answer to that question made her sick. There was no way he'd miss the glow of her computer screen and the cup of hot tea on her desk. When he checked on it, he'd also find her purse and then know exactly who she was and where she lived.

Through the thick door she heard the muffled sound of slow moving footsteps. He was coming back. With her chances for making a clean getaway fading rapidly, she needed get a move on. Turning the knob, she eased the door the rest of the way closed and slowly released the handle.

Then panic sent her scampering down the steps faster than was wise. But the risk of a sprained ankle seemed paltry in comparison to a bullet in the back of her head. Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, she immediately reached out to shove the door open. At the last second she jerked her hand back. The security code had to be disabled or the alarm would go off.

On the other hand, if she did sound the alarm, the security company would immediately summon the police to the scene. It didn't take long for her to reject that idea. Could she trust them to protect her against one of their own? Even if the guy had been forced to resign, he could still have friends on the force.

The floor overhead creaked as he crisscrossed the office, this time his steps moving faster. No time left to debate the issue. If she didn't get out of the building now, she would die. The knot in her stomach knew that to be the simple truth. Her fingers shook to the point that she had to really concentrate just to hit the correct keys. When the light blinked off, she pushed the door open and stepped out into the damp night air.

Where to go? Home was out of the question. So was the police station. And to bypass the local law enforcement to talk to the feds, she'd have to get someplace safe before calling them. The bottom line was she needed a sanctuary and fast.

Keeping to the side streets, she prayed the shadows would shield her from view. Once the killer realized that she'd already vacated the building, he'd be hot on her trail. Before she was even aware that she'd made a decision, her footsteps took her directly back to where she'd last seen Lonzo. She might be furious with him, but she trusted him to keep her safe.

Half a block down the street, the sound of running footsteps immobilized her. She managed to reach the uncertain safety behind a Dumpster. Ignoring the overpowering stench of garbage that had her gagging, she stayed hidden until she spotted the runner pounding down the sidewalk a short distance away: a twenty-something woman dressed in sweats. Safe for the moment, Harper left her refuge behind and hustled the rest of the way down the street.

A slow moving car turned the corner a block away and nosed its way in her direction. It was possible the driver was lost or looking for an address, but she didn't think so. From where she huddled in a dark patch of shadow, she could see his head swiveling back and forth as he studied both sides of the road. When the car was well past her, she backtracked, trying to find a way to reach the next block without being spotted.

The nearest alley was bathed in darkness at either end, but the middle had a distressing number of security lights trained right where there were no obstacles to hide her movements. Trapped between the light and the street behind her where the killer could return at any second, she stood poised to make a run for the darkness beyond.

Throwing caution to the wind, she took off running. When she came down hard on a rock with her bare foot, she cursed but kept going. Making a mental note to throw all of her heels in the trash if she survived the night, she limped on as fast as she could. At the edge of the light, she didn't hesitate and charged forward, running full out.

Her chest hurt with the need to catch her breath, but a glance back the way she came showed the same car cruising past the end of the alley. This time he was driving marginally faster. It would only be a matter of time before he gave up on the main streets and began crisscrossing the alleys.

At the corner, she turned to the right and broke cover long enough to cross to the other side. Pelting down the last little way to the corner, she drew a ragged breath, ready to alert Lonzo that she was bringing danger down on both their heads. Before she could utter a single word, though, all hope for rescue disappeared.

Not only was Lonzo gone, but even his ragtag blankets and other detritus he'd collected around him had disappeared completely. Where to now? She cautiously approached his vacated

perch, hoping for some sign of where he'd gone. If she couldn't locate him in the few minutes, she'd have to give up and throw herself on the mercy of the police and hope for the best.

They couldn't all be crooked, but she'd be a sitting duck for those who were. Besides, that scenario was predicated on her making to the police station alive in the first place. With no money or purse, she couldn't take a cab. And with the killer cruising the area looking for her, she might as well be wearing a target on her back.

Just beyond Lonzo's former hangout, there was a narrow entrance to an alley. She had no idea where it led, but the man that Lonzo had attacked had come from that direction. Maybe the bad guys hid out back there, but it seemed more likely that Lonzo was guarding the entrance to someplace. Otherwise, why would he have picked to sit in plain view?

The alley dead-ended, but there was a heavy steel door leading into the building beyond. Judging from the location, the unknown facility inside was perched right on top of part of the fabled Seattle Underground. However, there were no signs posted to identify what the building was used for.

As she knocked on the door, a flash of light at the far end of the alley had her dropping to the ground. She bit back a cry as her knee came down on a piece of glass. A little blood was the least of her problems. The dark car moved on past the entrance. It was impossible to know whether or not she'd been spotted. Cautiously, she stood up and then pounded on the door with all her strength.

"Lonzo! Lonzo Jones!"

Out of frustration, she used the heel of her shoe to bang on the door, not caring if she left dents or not. If she were going to die, she would damn well leave a mark that showed this was where she made her last stand. The squeal of tires and the slamming of a car door at the end of the alley made it clear that her time had run out.

The ex-cop had found her.

Rather than surrender without a fight, she renewed her attack on the door. Even if Lonzo wasn't on the other side, maybe someone was. Once she was inside and out of the line of fire, she could figure out her next step. Using both shoes this time, she beat out a desperate rhythm on the heavy steel and screamed out the name of the one man who might just save her skin.

"Lonzo! Damn it, open this door!"

Chapter 4

DJ looked up from the bank of screens he used to monitor security around the center. “Hey, Lonzo! Did you manage to piss off some woman while you were on duty?”

Moving a bit slow after a brutal workout with Trahern, Lonzo obligingly glanced over DJ's shoulder only to have his blood run cold. “How long has she been out there?”

“I just sat down, but I'd only stepped away for a minute. Do you know her?”

Lonzo didn't bother to answer. His bruises forgotten, he pelted down the hallway toward the door to the alley. Harper didn't look pissed; she looked terrified. He shoved his way past Trahern and a couple of new recruits to get to the entrance. Ignoring whatever Trahern called after him, he concentrated on the only thing that mattered: getting to Harper.

He drew his gun and clicked off the safety as he pushed the release on the door. It banged into Harper, who jumped back behind the door as a shot rang out. Lonzo didn't wait to ask questions. He pulled the trigger, spraying the open end of the alley with a short burst of bullets, buying a precious second or two of time to get Harper inside of the building and out of the line of fire. Once she was safe, he could figure out what the hell was going on.

He grabbed her arm to yank her back around the door, careful to keep his body between her and her assailants. If anyone was going to get shot, it should be him. He'd survive anything but a head shot. Harper might not be that lucky.

Harper was in full panic, operating in fight or flight mode. Rather than diving inside the door to safety, she fought to keep the heavy steel door between her and all comers, even Lonzo. He gave up on any hope of easing her way into the center and settled for wrapping an arm around her waist and manhandling her through the door. Once inside, he shoved her toward Trahern, who'd come running at the sound of gunfire.

“Keep her here while I go kill the bastard.”

He charged out into the night, determined to eradicate the soon-to-be-dead fool for trying to hurt Harper. Ordinarily, Lonzo would've taken great pleasure in making sure his intended victim suffered a good long while before breathing his last, but he needed to get back her. Short and sweet would have to do.

Unfortunately, as he stepped outside, the shooter was already back in his car and peeling away from the curb. Lonzo charged down the alley, hoping to get off at least one shot. Barring that, he'd settle for a license plate number for DJ to trace. Once they had the man's address, Lonzo would hunt the bastard down.

Returning to the entrance, he keyed in his security number and yanked the door open. He was greeted by the comforting sight of half a dozen of his nearest and dearest friends among the Paladins. They were all armed to the teeth and ready to charge into battle with him if necessary.

Only trouble was, they'd formed a barricade between him and Harper. Shoving his way through to her, he was gratified by the way she immediately pulled free of Trahern's grasp to dive into the sanctuary of Lonzo's waiting arms.

DJ grinned at Lonzo over her head and nodded toward the door. "Need a clean-up on aisle three?"

"Someone ought to gather up any shell casings in case the cops get curious, but otherwise no. The son of a bitch got away."

Trahern motioned for the others to stand down. When the hallway had emptied, he asked, "Any idea who it was?"

"Not yet. I'll talk to her and let you know. DJ, check the tapes and see if you can get a clean shot of the license plate. Maybe we can track him down that way."

DJ shifted from foot to foot, doing his usual adrenalin rush dance. "Will do. Hey, how about an introduction?"

Lonzo didn't hesitate. "Not now. She's already had enough excitement for one evening."

Trahern's mouth tilted up in a half smile. "Come on, DJ, give the man a break. Let's go check the tapes. Devlin's going to want a bead on whoever was shooting up our alley."

Lonzo shot Trahern a look, saying without words that he owed him one. Harper was trembling, and her breath came in short, staccato bursts. Even so, he suspected any second now she'd want to put some space between them.

Considering the shock she must have felt earlier at seeing Lonzo in all of his grubby glory, followed by his subsequent confrontation with Penn, she must have felt pretty damn desperate to come pounding on a door looking for him. Even with a gunman hot on her trail, surely one of those lawyer types she worked for would've been higher on her list of possible rescuers than Lonzo.

Of course, considering how he'd disappeared from her life with no word, a dead rat probably outranked him.

"Harper, let's get out of this hallway."

If she did go into meltdown, he figured she'd appreciate some privacy. And if she lashed out at him, he'd just as soon DJ and Trahern weren't around to see it.

He gently disengaged her arms from around his waist and stepped back. Glancing around, he settled on the geology lab down the hallway. If Lacey happened to be in, she wouldn't mind if Lonzo borrowed her office for a while. And if she wasn't, it would be a quiet spot out of the prying eyes of others until he could figure out what to do about whatever mess Harper had gotten herself into.

The door to the lab was locked, so he pounded on it. After a few seconds, Barak opened it. He gave Lonzo a questioning look as he stepped back to let them in.

Lonzo looked around the lab for Penn's sister. "Is Lacey here?"

Barak shook his head. "She left an hour ago. She's meeting me at home. Do you have need of her?"

He looked past Lonzo at Harper. "Or can I do something to help?"

Lonzo considered the offer. "No, not now. I'm looking for a quiet spot to talk before we head out of here."

"Lacey's office is unlocked. I'll tell her I said it was okay."

Then with his usual quiet dignity, he nodded at Harper and left without asking any questions. Once again, Lonzo owed the man big time. Taking Harper by the arm, he led her into Lacey's office and pulled two chairs closer together. Harper took the closest one without comment. She was shivering, probably from the combination of getting soaked in the rain while being terrorized.

Lonzo rooted through Lacey's desk, knowing she often kept some sweats around in case she got called out to the field unexpectedly. She was taller than Harper, but right now style wasn't a priority. Keeping her from going into shock was.

“Harper, put these on while I step out to get you something hot to drink. Don't leave this office. Nod if you understand.”

After a second, she jerked her head up and down. He set the clothes on the other chair, figuring he'd give her a few minutes of privacy. If she hadn't changed out of her wet clothes when he returned, he'd do it for her. He'd dreamed for months of getting Harper naked. Those happy thoughts hadn't included her being shot at and almost killed.

Trahern was waiting outside in the hall. “Whoever she is, she can't be here. You know that. Besides, how the hell did she know to pound on that door?”

Lonzo did not need this right now. Planting his feet in a wide fighting stance and clenching his hands into fists, he glared up at the taller Paladin. “Yeah, like Brenna not being part of the organization kept you from bringing her inside headquarters in Missouri to keep her safe.”

Trahern backed up a step. “Hell, Lonzo, I didn't say you had to shove her back out into a hail of bullets. I'm just saying Lacey's office isn't a long term solution.”

“Damn it, Trahern, I know that.” He ran his hands through his hair. “Look, Harper and I used to have a thing. We haven't seen each other since the last time I got killed. Earlier this evening, she saw me sitting out in the alley earlier when I had a run in with Penn. She saw me pull my gun, so she must have figured out I was guarding the alley and ran to me for help. Right now I need to get her calmed down and find out what the hell's going on. Once I've got a plan, we'll get out of here.”

Trahern nodded. “Okay, I'll fill Devlin in for you, so he can run interference. There's no way to keep this quiet—not with a security breach like this.”

Like Lonzo gave a rat's ass about the security breach. He'd break every rule in the book if that's what it took to keep Harper out of the line of fire. Neither Devlin nor Trahern could point fingers either, considering the similar tricks they'd pulled themselves.

Lonzo headed down to the break room to heat up a cup of tea in the microwave. After dumping three sugars in it, he hustled back to the geology lab. He was relieved to see Harper had used his absence to change clothes, if a little bit disappointed. He'd really wanted to help. She accepted the tea without comment, wrapping her hands around the mug to better absorb its heat. After a bit, she risked a sip and wrinkled her nose at the taste.

“Think you got enough sugar in it?”

“Right now, you need it. Finish that cup and I'll fix you another anyway you like.” He straddled the extra chair and crossed his arm on the back. “When you're ready, tell me what the hell happened out there in the alley.”

Harper focused on her tea and tried to slow her racing pulse. Right now, she wasn't sure if she was still suffering from the threat to her life or if Lonzo's proximity was having its usual effect on her. Right now it didn't matter.

After a few soothing sips, she eased back in the chair and forced her muscles to relax. Finally, she knew she couldn't put off talking to Lonzo any longer. How hard could it be to describe what she'd seen and heard back that office?

No, the difficulty would be in explaining why she came running straight to back to Lonzo. She had no real claim on him, certainly not enough to justify involving him in a life and death situation that could get them both killed.

Still, it was time.

Lonzo reached out to stroke her cheek with his fingertips. “You're making it harder than it has to be, Harper. Start with when you left me and go from there.”

A bit of her earlier resentment about him resurfaced. “If you'll recall, I didn't leave you.

You're the one who stopped coming around and then changed your number so I couldn't even call to find out what scared you off."

Lonzo jerked back. "I was talking about when you saw me out on the street today."

Dear God, of course that what he meant. Now wasn't the time to rehash old history.

Blushing, she tried again.

"Sorry, I knew that." She closed her eyes and relived the nightmare. "When I saw you, I was on my way back to the law office to finish a rush job on a legal brief for one of the partners. Mr. Cody wasn't there when I first arrived, but then I heard him arguing with a client. When shots were fired, I took off running for the rear exit. You know, the one that leads to the alley."

Lonzo nodded. "Did you recognize the client's voice?"

"Leo Timms, an ex-cop that Mr. Cody is"—she swallowed hard—"That is, Mr. Cody was supposed to represent the guy in a civil suit."

"Does this shooter know who you are or did he follow you back to the alley?"

She took another sip of tea, hoping to ease the tightness in her throat. "Could be either or both. My purse was sitting out on my desk. I had to leave it there. If I had tried to retrieve it, he would've seen me for sure. But when I was trying to get here, he was already driving up and down the streets looking for me."

"Do you know anything about the guy? Where he lives or anything that will help us track him down?"

Cocking her head to the side, she studied Lonzo's face, trying to gauge his reaction. He was taking all of this pretty calmly, no doubt because of his own law enforcement background. She told him so.

"I appreciate your taking this in stride, Lonzo. I guess considering what you obviously do for living, you probably see a lot of this sort of thing."

He gave her a quizzical look. "I don't remember telling you what I do for a living."

"You didn't, but I saw you arrest that guy earlier. I assumed you're working as an undercover cop."

To her surprise, he laughed. "Not exactly, but that's not important right now. We need to get you to a safe place while I go after this guy."

In the space of those few sentences, the easy going man she'd dated all those months ago was gone. In his place was a cold-eyed stranger with his hand on the gun he wore at his side. How had she missed seeing this warrior under the thin veneer of civilization that Lonzo had worn around her? Maybe she hadn't been looking beyond the sexy eyes and his lean build that had her hormones sitting up and taking notice.

"I don't want you to go after him, Lonzo. He's already killed one man tonight."

For some reason that comment had Lonzo smiling, although the expression had little to do with happiness. "He'll find that I'm harder to kill than your average attorney, Harper. And my usual prey is a lot more dangerous than any ex-cop could imagine."

Prey? Her shivers were back and not because the room was cold.

"Lonzo, you're scaring me."

Once again his demeanor changed, softening around the edges a bit. "Sorry, I'm not a cop, but I am trained to protect. This has ramped up all those instincts. You have to believe that no matter what happened or didn't happen between us, I would never hurt you."

She studied his face for several seconds, and what she saw there reassured her. Even if she didn't know all of Lonzo's deep, dark secrets, she believed he was telling her the truth. He had already put himself between danger out there in the alley and the steely resolve in his expression was a promise to do so again if necessary.

"I believe it, but I need to know who you really are, Lonzo. And don't try to lie to me. I'll

know.”

She would, too. She prided herself on being a good judge of character. Even the law partners she worked for often relied on her input in determining which clients would make good witnesses and which would best serve their own cases by remaining silent.

Lonzo shifted his gaze to beyond her shoulder while she finished off her tea. When she held the empty mug out to him, he set it on the desk. It was obvious that he wasn't going to answer her, at least not yet. Casting around for a suitable subject, she spied the name on the desk.

“Who is Lacey Sebastian?”

“The geologist who runs this lab. The man who let us in is her fiancé.” Lonzo reached over to the desk and snagged a picture frame and handed it over. “His name is Barak q'Young.”

Harper studied the handsome couple smiling up from the picture. Lacey had bright blue eyes and a sweet smile. Barak had unusually light colored eyes and his hair was streaked with gray, although judging by his face he wasn't much older than Lonzo.

“They're a handsome couple. His looks are a bit unusual, but then so is his name.”

Lonzo chuckled. “He's not from around here originally. You'll have to get him to tell you his story sometime.”

Before she could ask another question, Lonzo's cell phone rang. He flipped it open to check the number and grimaced.

“Yeah, Devlin, we're still here, but we'll be on the move soon.”

His eyebrows slammed down, clearly not liking what he was hearing. “That son of a bitch. We'll just see about that.”

Trying not to be obvious about listening to the one sided conversation, she looked around the office, wondering what Lacey Sebastian would think about Lonzo loaning out her clothes to a total stranger.

Since he was encouraging her to ask Barak for his story herself, maybe that was Lonzo's way of asking her back into his life. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Right now probably wasn't the best time to make even short term plans, not with an armed gunman on her trail.

“Okay, thanks, Devlin.” Lonzo disconnected the call and shoved the phone back in his pocket.

“Are we being evicted?” Even though she didn't know what kind of place they were hiding in, she liked having a large number of heavily armed men between her and the outside world.

“Not quite. He gave me some information about Leo Timms, your shooter. I've got his address and a better description of his car. My buddy is going to locate his picture and email it to me.”

“What else did this Devlin tell you? I'd rather know everything, even if it's bad.”

“The shooting has already hit the news. Your name is being broadcast as being a person of interest in the case.”

“But they can't possibly think I killed my boss! Why would I?” She blinked furiously, determined not to give in to tears.

“They didn't exactly say that. But if they found your purse, they've got to figure you might know something about what went down.”

He stood up. “Look, don't sweat it. Right now, I'm going to take you somewhere safe. We both could use some sleep and something to eat. Then we can make plans.”

“You say you're not a cop yourself, so why aren't you suggesting we call the police? I mean, that would seem like a logical step.”

His eyes softened as he offered her a hand up out of the chair. “If you'd trusted the regular cops to handle this, you'd have headed for the nearest police station instead of here. Until

we know who's behind all of this, I'm not about to trust anyone else to keep you safe.”

She accepted his hand and liked that he didn't immediately let go. He was right. She was tired and hungry, even if Lonzo's rock solid presence had done a lot to hold her terror at bay. Maybe a good night's sleep would help her think more clearly about what to do next.

Besides, spending the night with Lonzo Jones, even under such awful circumstances, had a definite appeal.

Chapter 5

Lonzo had to get Harper out of the center. Right now. Even if Devlin would turn a blind eye, that wouldn't last if any of the guards came nosing around. It was likely they'd heard the gunfire. If so, they'd be sure to report it just to protect their own asses.

"We should go."

Harper gathered up her wet clothes and shoved them into a plastic bag he'd found for her. She followed him without question, a good thing considering he hadn't yet figured out where to take her. Obviously her place was out of the question. His apartment wasn't a much better choice. If either the killer or the police had her cell phone, they might be able track him down even though he'd changed his number.

A short stop there, though, was a necessary risk. He'd need more than his sidearm to keep Harper safe. If they were careful, he could pick up his cache of weapons as well as some currency he kept on hand for just such an emergency.

He hated taking her back out through the alley in case it was being watched, but they'd run a greater risk of exposure to the guards if he led her through the center to one of the other exits. As they approached the alley door, he rang DJ's number again.

"Any action out on the street or in the alley I should know about?"

He waited impatiently as DJ did another full scan. For the moment, the way was clear, at least as far as the cameras could see. Of course, they were focused only a short distance north and south of the mouth of the alley.

Lonzo drew his gun and opened the door. "Wait here while I take a closer look. When you hear me whistle, come running."

"Okay." She let go of his hand and stepped back, her eyes huge and worried.

"Don't worry, Harper. We'll be fine."

On impulse, he gave her something else to think about other than their stalker. Crowding her close against the wall, he cupped the side of her face and gave in to the temptation he'd been fighting since she'd first appeared in front of him with that hot cup of coffee in her hand. As soon as his lips brushed across hers, she drew a sharp breath. He moved slowly, giving her every chance to protest. When she didn't, he settled his mouth firmly over hers and savored the unique flavor of her kiss, something he'd been missing for months. Craving for months.

She tasted so damn good, wholesome and hot and everything he'd ever wanted in a woman. For both of their sakes, he needed to keep this brief, but he wasn't sure he was strong enough to step away. Finally common sense asserted itself. Now wasn't the time, not with DJ and the others no doubt getting an eyeful on the surveillance cameras. He eased back, shooting a withering glance at the nearest lens, warning his friends that this was not a subject for one of their gossip sessions.

"We've got to get moving. Wait here for a second."

Harper remained in the doorway as he sidled down the wall, his gun up and ready for

action. At the end of the alley, he ducked down to stay in the shadows and studied the street in both directions. Even with the rain slacking off, most folks had the good sense to be home, tucked up safe and dry. He closed his eyes to enhance his hearing, listening for any heartbeats other than his and Harper's.

The street was blessedly silent. He whistled softly, knowing the sound would carry to where Harper stood waiting. When she joined him, he checked the street again as he explained the plan, such as it was. "We're going to my place, but we can't risk staying there for more than a few minutes. Just long enough for me to pick up a few things before we hole up for the night."

He took her hand, partly to make sure she kept up with him, but mostly because he was grateful for any excuse to touch her. She had to be nearly exhausted, but she gamely hurried to match her steps to his. They'd both feel better when they put some distance between them and the earlier events.

Luckily, his apartment was only a few blocks away from the center. When they reached the street he lived on, he stopped to check for anyone who didn't belong. If the enemy was nearby, he was well-hidden.

"Let's go."

They crossed mid-block and rushed up the stairs to the second floor. Luckily, his neighbors were the kind who kept to themselves. Even if the police were to ask questions, none of them knew him well enough to provide much in the way of useful information. The Regents made sure that the truth about the Paladins remained a well-hidden secret.

With DJ and Cullen on the job, no one stood a chance at breaking through their security measures to hack into the organization's computer files. Anyone checking into Lonzo's background would find only the fiction the Regents had created in his name. Any effort to dig deeper would sound the alarm and DJ would go on the attack. Whoever was on the other end would pay dearly for that little mistake.

Opening the door to his apartment, he motioned for Harper to wait. Without turning on a light, he scoped out the living room for any sign that someone had been there. Rather than leave Harper exposed out on the landing any longer, he ushered her inside while he checked out the rest of the place.

"All clear. I'd like to avoid turning on any lights as long the darkness doesn't bother you."

She pitched her voice low, with only the slightest hint of fear coming through. "Keep talking so I can track you."

"I'm about eight feet away, directly in front of you." He met her halfway, once again enjoying the touch of her hand on his arm as he led her into his bedroom.

Damn, wasn't it just his luck that he finally had Harper right where he'd always wanted her, and they weren't going to spend any quality time there. He gently pushed her down to sit on the edge of his bed, grateful that she couldn't see what a mess the room was in the dark.

"I'm going to get a few things out of the closet and be right back."

"I appreciate your doing all this for me, Lonzo. It's not like I had any claim on you or anything."

He hated the hurt in her voice. She'd had a claim all right, but the single stroke of an Other's sword had been a harsh reminder that he had no right to try to live a normal life. He'd been lucky to come back at all that time, but the real pain had been the realization that he had to let Harper go. He cared too much about her to keep on lying about who and what he was.

Now wasn't the time for second thoughts or lengthy explanations, so he kept it short.

"You had a claim, Harper. You still do."

Even in the dim glow from the streetlight outside his window, he could see her head jerk

up to look at him with an equal mix of shock and doubt. He couldn't blame her for feeling either one. But again, now wasn't the time.

"Look, you can ask all the questions you want, and I'll answer them if I can. But I'll feel a lot more like talking when we get where we're going."

She stood up, staring at him right in the eye. "I'll hold you to that, Lonzo. I thought the two of us had a chance at something special, but you just walked away. I think I deserve some answers."

True enough, but it would be interesting to find out if she be any happier when she had them.

Lonzo had changed or maybe she was just seeing the real man behind the façade for the first time. She wasn't second guessing her decision to turn to him for help. He'd kept her safe so far. At least he had a plan; that's more than she'd been able to come up with beyond finding him.

Outside, he went down the steps first and then led her toward the row of garage doors located behind the apartment building. "My car is too distinctive to use for long, but it will get us where we're going."

At the click of a button, the garage door rolled up to reveal Lonzo's car, but not the one she'd been expecting. She couldn't be sure, but she was afraid she was drooling.

"What happened to that sedan you used to drive?"

Although it had been a nice enough car, there was no comparison between it and this beauty. Low slung and coal black, it was all sleek lines and built for power and speed, a perfect fit for this new Lonzo Jones.

He shrugged. "Sometimes priorities change."

Danger had a way of doing that to a person. She grinned at him. "It's a shame we're not out for a pleasure drive. I'd love to see what she can do."

His answering smile was all bad boy evil. "She handles like a dream, the faster the better."

"Have any run-ins with the cops over that?"

"Not so far. So far the traffic control cameras haven't caught up with me."

He unlocked the trunk and dropped in his duffel and then took her sad sack of wet clothes and added them to the pile. The big engine purred to life as soon as he turned the key in the ignition. Seconds later they were driving through town, keeping to side streets and backtracking every few blocks to watch for any tails they might have picked up.

"I think we're in the clear."

He glanced in her direction. "I'm taking you where few people outside of those I work with know about. We'll be okay there tonight, but I need your word that you'll keep our secret. I'm walking a narrow line with my employers as it is. If they think I've betrayed them ..."

His voice trailed off as he turned into an underground parking lot and drove to the farthest corner and stopped the car. Harper laid her hand on his arm. "Lonzo, I don't want to get you into trouble. Would it be better if we went to a hotel?"

"No, until we know who all is after us, we'll be safer here. Once we get some rest, we'll both be in better shape to figure out the next step."

In short order, he retrieved their stuff from the trunk and led her toward the exit in the far corner of the garage. After climbing the stairs to the street level, he dialed his cell phone. "DJ, I need another favor."

Harper looked a bit frustrated, probably because she could only hear his side of the conversation. He offered her a reassuring smile as he continued talking to DJ. "I need to slip a certain someone past security, and I'm feeling pretty exposed out here. If you can distract the

guards for about two minutes so we can get inside and out of sight, I'd appreciate it."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Thanks, buddy. I owe you."

He hung up and started toward the building next door. "We need to make it quick. If we get caught, all hell will break loose. Once we reach the staircase, we're safe."

He stood at the edge of the entrance to the building and listened. All of a sudden, a commotion broke out. He immediately yanked the door open and led the way down a short hallway to where a steep set of stairs plunged down to the floor below.

"Let's go," he whispered.

The way he moved in almost pure silence was spooky, but she did her best to copy his movements. At the bottom of the steps, he punched in a series of numbers on a keypad. The door opened with a soft click.

"We're in."

Harper followed along behind as Lonzo moved forward into the room beyond. A series of lights flashed on as they walked, revealing an incredible number of filing cabinets, obviously the records storage for the mysterious organization that Lonzo worked for. The way the lights flickered on as they needed them and off behind them was fascinating. In the far back corner, Lonzo stopped in front of an elevator.

"Okay, this is it, Harper. Remember, anything you see past this point is secret. Okay?"

She followed him into the elevator. "I promise."

Although his insistence was beginning to scare her more than a little. What kind of mess had Lonzo gotten himself into that he had to fear his employer? Why didn't he just walk away? The elevator dropped suddenly, going down and down until she thought it would never stop. Obviously, this mysterious facility was located far below ground. How could someone build a place like that without anyone noticing? Finally, their downward ride ended with a soft bump, and the doors slid open to reveal a passageway that looked as if it had been carved out of stone.

"This way."

Lonzo turned to the right, following another path lit by more of the on-and-off again lights. About fifty yards down the passage, they reached an area that showed more modern touches—a hallway lined with doors, a small kitchen, some banks of computers. For the moment, it appeared that she and Lonzo had the place to themselves.

"Pick any room. They're all about the same."

She opened the first door and turned on the light. Although the furniture had a institutional look about it, all the basics were there: a double bed, a dresser, and a bedside table with an ugly brown lamp sitting on it. An open door on the far side revealed a bathroom.

"There should be clean towels and some toiletries under the sink if you'd like to take a shower. The clothes in the dresser are all men's sizes, but they'll be comfortable and warm. Help yourself."

When he started to walk away, she stopped him. "Where will you be?"

"I'll fix us both something to eat. I'm not much of a cook, but I can heat soup with the best of them."

His eyes crinkled up at the corners, for the first time looking much more like the Lonzo she'd known before. He'd always had a way of letting her know that he didn't take himself too seriously. She'd liked that about him. But now that she'd seen his hard edges, she knew there was far more depth to him.

The kiss they'd shared earlier had only serve to stir up more of those old desires. It would be foolish to let adrenalin and a healthy dose of fear make her forget the hurt she's suffered when he'd deserted her with no warning, no explanation.

Maybe it was time to put all little distance between them.

“I’ll take you up on the offer of a shower. I won’t be long.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

She walked away wondering why his words seemed to carry far more weight than a simple promise to be there when she got back. Telling herself it was only wishful thinking on her part, she walked back into the bedroom and closed the door.

Chapter 6

The stone walls were too thick for the noise of the shower running to carry through to where Lonzo stood over the stove stirring soup and making sandwiches. That hadn't kept his mind from imagining the sound and picturing Harper in there, her skin water-slick and rosy from the heat. He'd give anything to join her.

Damn, he had it bad.

Maybe he would've eventually gotten up the courage to approach Harper again, but now he'd never know for sure. No matter what the circumstances, he wasn't about to question his good luck that their paths had crossed once again. First, he'd take care of the bastard who'd made the fatal mistake of trying to hurt her. When that was done, he'd do his best to convince her to let him back into her life for good, not just when she had a death threat hanging over her head.

The door behind him clicked open. He slowly turned to face Harper, drinking in the sight of her. She looked adorable in the oversized men's sweats. Her efforts to roll up the sleeves and pants legs had only met with minimal success. He couldn't help but laugh, but quickly thought better of it and tried to stop when she scowled.

Then she relented and shot him a wry look. "Feed me and I might even forgive you for snickering."

"It's a deal."

He poured them each a mug of soup and offered her first choice of the sandwiches. They both concentrated on eating, letting a companionable silence settle over them. It wouldn't last once their makeshift meal was over, not with the way she studied their surroundings as she ate. Soon her questions would come at him fast and furious until her curiosity was satisfied.

For the first time he understood how Trahern must have felt back when he'd charged off to Missouri to save Brenna, the woman he'd apparently loved since they'd met in high school. No price was too great to pay when the right woman was threatened. Lonzo's loyalty to his fellow Paladins went without question. But he couldn't, wouldn't lie to Harper. Not anymore. If there couldn't be anything else between them, there should at least be honesty.

"Lonzo?"

Her voice was tentative, as if unsure where to start or even what it was she wanted to know. Rather than make her ferret out all the answers she needed, he took control of the conversation.

"Why don't I start at the beginning, and then you can ask any questions when I'm done?" She studied his face for a heartbeat before nodding. "Maybe that would be easier."

So he told her about growing up with his sister, mother, and a father who was rarely around. How on his thirteenth birthday, his dad had taken him aside and explained how the men in their family were genetically different than normal humans. What it meant to be a Paladin and the whole package that came with it: the volatile temper, the need to fight, the need to protect,

and the ability to heal quickly.

As he spoke, her expression ran the full gamut from disbelief, to shock, and finally to sympathy. He wouldn't have blamed her for running back to the elevator to get away from such an insane tale. Finally, he lifted his shirt to show her his most recent scar, still red but fading.

"Like I said, we can come back from almost anything."

He fell quiet for a few seconds. "All Paladins become attuned to the barrier they defend, to the point we can feel when it's growing unstable. When that happens, we're drawn to it, the need to protect it overruling all other instincts.

"Even when we're wounded, we feel it. Every time the barrier fails, I go a little crazy until I get there. Afterward, I have a hard time regaining control."

He kept his eyes down on the table. "All those times I cancelled a date or didn't call, I was fighting down here or at any number of other locations in the area."

It took a couple of long breaths before he could continue. "There's more. The last time I stood you up, I was dead. Literally."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Dead? For real?"

"Yeah, believe me. Dying is as real as it gets."

She looked completely horrified, her face pale.

He kept forging on, laying it all out there for her. "It's happened a few times in the last couple of years. There's a price to be paid for the ability. Each time I get killed means it's less likely that I'll make it all the way back again the next time. We don't know why, but we each only get so many get-out-of-jail-free cards before we burn up what's left of our humanity."

"What happens then?"

She sounded remarkably calm, more so than he felt. It was incredibly gut-wrenching to admit how far beyond normal he was. "The docs keep a special syringe full of toxins handy."

One thing he'd always liked about Harper was how smart she was. It didn't take her long to connect the dots. "They'd actually kill you? That's murder! Why hasn't somebody stopped them?"

"Harper, believe me when I tell you that they're doing the right thing, the humane thing. If I don't make it back, the man I've always been is already dead and gone. What's left is a monster that will kill anything in sight."

"And all of this is why you quit calling me?"

He nodded. "I hated lying to you and didn't want to draw you into my world. You deserved better."

Harper laid her hand on his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Lonzo, look at me."

He didn't want to see either pity or horror in her eyes, but he forced himself to look up. To his surprise, her gaze reflected red hot anger.

She glared at him and snarled, "Lonzo, that's pure hogwash!"

When he started to protest that he'd told her nothing less than the truth, but she shook her head. "I'm not talking about what you are. It would be hard to doubt what you've told me when I can see all of this."

She waved her free hand around to indicate their surroundings. "I'm talking about your letting me think you were a jerk for walking out on me, thinking I deserved better. You had no right to make that decision for me. What we had was special, and you threw it all away because you were afraid I wouldn't be able to handle the truth. Maybe I couldn't have, but you robbed me of the right to choose. Don't ever do that again. No more secrets between us."

There was only one thing he could say to that. "I'm was an idiot."

Her mouth softened into a smile. "No, what you are is a hero in every sense of the word. For Pete's sake, you threw yourself in between me and bullets! When I dumped my predicament

in your lap, you leapt into action, no questions asked.”

Then she sat back. “Now, take me to see this barrier of yours that I’ve been hearing so much about. I need to see it for myself.”

Lonzo stood up even though he was still reeling from the two-fold punch of her revelations. First, that she believed everything he’d told her, and second, that the two of them were part of an ‘us.’

Amazing.

Without hesitation, he took her hand and led her down the passageway to where the barrier shimmered in the darkness. The look of awe on Harper’s face as she gazed at the swirling colors was everything he could’ve wished for. Despite spending far too many years dancing to the tune of the barrier’s ups and downs, he’d never ceased to feel its beauty clear through to his bones. He had died to protect it and would do so again without hesitation.

But he wanted more; he wanted someone special in his life. He used to think that wasn’t possible, but things had changed for the Paladins. Look at Devlin, Trahern, and Hunter. Hell, even DJ had found a woman who loved him. Maybe it was too soon to be thinking along those lines, especially with Harper still in danger. But after he made sure she was safe, they had some serious talking to do.

Meanwhile, Harper slipped her arm through his and leaned her head against his shoulder. “It’s stunning, Lonzo. It’s almost criminal that something this beautiful has to be kept secret.”

He turned to pull her back against his chest, wrapping her in his arms and resting his chin on her head. “I know, but most folks aren’t ready to accept that humans aren’t alone in the universe. My former roommate is from Kalithia, and he’s a good guy. Larem’s not the only one, but most of his kind that cross over are out of their heads with the need to kill. You can imagine what kind of chaos would follow if news of that got out.”

She looked up over her shoulder at him. “Surely the military could help. From what you’ve said, there are too few of you as it is.”

He shook his head. “Right now the military has its own hands full. Besides, if the world governments found out about us, they’d turn us into lab rats trying to figure out how to splice our DNA into the regular human gene sequence. No thanks.”

For the next few minutes, they watched the barrier’s light show in quiet wonder. They were both tired, but the soft buzz of the healthy barrier soothed his tightly stretched nerves. The feel of the warm woman who fit his arms so perfectly also helped.

Either way, it was past time to let Harper get some rest. They had some major decisions to make at first light. Clear heads would make that easier even if he didn’t know how he was supposed to think clearly with Harper overwhelming his senses.

“Time for bed, don’t you think?”

She nodded. As they walked back to the barracks, she kept her arm looped through his. A wise man wouldn’t let himself get too attached to the wonder of her touch, but right then Lonzo wasn’t feeling all that smart. He’d stay in contact right up until the second he left her at her chosen bedroom door. When he knew she was settled in, he’d seek out his own lonely bed next door.

Once again she surprised him. When he started to step away, she stopped him.

“Where are you going?”

Did she think he’d abandon her now? “I’ll be right next door.”

If he weren’t mistaken, she looked disappointed as if she wanted him to join her. Most likely the evening’s events had left her more rattled than she was letting on, and she was afraid to be alone in a strange place.

He offered her another option. “I promise that you’re safe down here, Harper, but I can

sleep on the floor in your room if you're afraid to be alone." Even if it killed him having her that close but still out of reach.

"Won't the floor be cold and hard?"

Yeah, and so would he, but he left that unsaid. Instead, he lied. "I'll be fine. I've slept on the floor down here more often than I care to remember."

Her cheeks flushed rosy and her eyes shifted to the side. "I was thinking we could share the bed. We're both adults."

Okay, so was she offering him a soft place to sleep so he'd stay close by or did she want more from him than that? Rather than assume anything, he could only follow her lead. When they stepped inside the room, he immediately headed straight for the bathroom to pull himself together. He didn't try to explain because his mouth was too dry to speak even if he could've strung together a coherent thought. Inside, he leaned against the wall and took deep breaths, trying to regain some control.

Harper stared at the bathroom door. No wonder Lonzo looked confused, considering the mixed signals she was sending. Yes, she wanted to know he was nearby so she could feel safe. Yes, she believed everything he'd told her, no matter how crazy it all sounded. And yes, she still felt that powerful draw to him that she'd been missing since he'd disappeared from her life.

Being shot at had a way of helping a person focus on what was important in life, clarifying for her what decisions she might live to regret and those she'd always cherish. She'd lost Lonzo once without having ever given into the smoking hot attraction that they'd felt for each other. Even when she'd had doubts about his feelings for her, she'd always known how she felt about him.

Her heart ached realizing he could've died, in fact had died, bleeding out in this cold stone tunnel without her ever letting him know how much she cared about him.

Life didn't often give people a second chance to make the right decision. If it turned out that this night was the only one they shared, she wasn't going to spend it wondering what it would be like to make love with Lonzo Jones. She should be exhausted after everything that had happened, but right now a new kind of energy was zinging along her nerve endings.

By the time he came back into the room, she was on the verge of jumping out of her skin. Rather than try to explain the barrage of emotions she was fighting, she stepped right in front of him, fisted his shirt with both hands and yanked him down for a kiss.

She might have caught him off guard, but Lonzo had already proven himself to be a man of action. He immediately took charge of the embrace, but kept his hands gentle as he pulled her into his arms. If she'd had any doubts, he burned them away with a sizzling kiss. No one before or since Lonzo Jones had made her feel this way with just the touch of his lips, even with the buffer of all their clothes between them. She couldn't wait to rid them both of that barrier, to be skin-to-skin and soul-to-soul with him.

She stepped away, tugging free of his arms and retreating to stand at the edge of the bed. When he didn't immediately follow, she froze. He ran his hand across the day's growth of whiskers on his face and gave her a considering look.

"Harper, you don't have to...I mean, I want to, but I don't want you to feel...um, obligated."

She couldn't decide if she thank him for being considerate or strangle him for being so damn noble. The hunger in his dark eyes gave her courage. Putting her hands on her hips, she gave him a mock glare. "Lonzo Jones, have I ever struck you as a woman who doesn't know her own mind?"

His eyes crinkled and smiled back at hers. "Honey, I'd be a fool to admit that even if I

did. As far as I know, my mama never raised any fools.”

“Then why are you standing way over there when I want you over here?”

He swallowed hard. “Well, okay then.”

Still he hesitated. “Hold that thought and I’ll be right back. I left my duffel in the other room.”

She watched him leave, wondering what he could’ve in that bag that clunked every time he set it down than he needed right that minute. When he came back, he tossed a handful of foil packets down on the ugly green table next to the bed. Bless the man, he really had thought of everything.

“Don’t think I presumed that we’d need those.” He shifted from foot to foot as he waited for her response.

A meaner woman would’ve let him stew a bit, but right now she was too anxious to pick up where they’d left off. Even so, she couldn’t resist tweaking him a bit.

“I don’t mind you being prepared, but do you really think we’re going to need that many?”

He laughed. “A man can hope, can’t he?”

She grinned right back at him. “So can a woman.”

When Lonzo held out his arms, she didn’t hesitate.

Harper lost track of how many packets they’d gone through during the night, but it was plenty. She was a little worse for the wear, but in no way was she complaining. She might have all that much experience in the love making department, but she knew enough to recognize what extraordinary night they’d shared.

Right now, Lonzo was lying behind her, his arm draped over her waist as he snored softly near her ear. All too soon the world outside would intrude. But for now, she was safe, and she was sated. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep in the arms of the man she loved.

Chapter 7

Sometime later, Harper stirred again. What time was it? Considering how far underground they were, how would they even know when the sun came up? She shivered, suddenly feeling the press of all that weight bearing down on them.

“You’re thinking way too hard.” Lonzo’s arm tightened around her as his touch banished the darkness that threatened to overwhelm her.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He nuzzled the back of her neck. “That’s okay, but if you really want to make it up to me, I can make some suggestions.”

His hand slid down the length of her back. Whoa, momma, that felt good. Even so, she trapped his fingers in hers to stop the sensual assault, not sure she was ready for the distraction. He didn’t fight her, but neither did he move back to give her any space.

“What time do you think it is?”

He rolled back to snag his watch off the bedside table. She heard it clunk back down. “It’s early. We’ve got time.”

“For what?” Although she had her suspicions. She’d be hard pressed to ignore the evidence when snuggled up behind her again.

“Well, lots of things: breakfast, showers, making plans, making love.”

He punctuated each word with a kiss, the last one sending shivers up and down her spine as he nibbled on her ear. Despite the night they’d just shared, her body responded to each sensation, to each touch as something brand new in her life and infinitely precious.

She turned in Lonzo’s arms and pushed him over onto his back. He grinned and went willingly, letting her take charge. How had she lived this long without ever appreciating the texture of a lover’s skin or that his muscles radiated such strength but handled her with such care? A worried voice in the back of her mind asked how she’d live without him her life if—or more likely when—Lonzo disappeared again.

But now wasn’t the time for that thought. If now was all she had of him, she was going to make it memorable for both of them. Smiling at her lover, she set about doing just that.

Lonzo studied his reflection in the mirror as he shaved. He shook his head. By all rights, he should be dead, a dried out husk of a man. But despite the demanding night he’d put in, his energy level was at an all-time high, like he’d been hooked up to a battery charger and taken on a full load. Hot damn, in bed Harper had been everything he’d expected and a helluva lot more.

Now if only he could concentrate on solving her problem with the killer cop so that the two of them could get on with their lives. Together, if she’d have him.

Would she be foolish enough to even consider it?

Sometime during the wee hours of the morning Harper had fallen asleep in his arms; then she’d given him a wakeup call that should go down in the record books. Afterward, though,

she'd withdrawn a bit, acting skittish for the first time since she'd invited him to share her bed. Of course, her change in mood might be due to the looming problem of her attacker, but Lonzo didn't think so.

Second thoughts could be a bitch to deal with.

"Breakfast is ready!"

He wiped the last bit of shaving gel off his face with a towel before heading out to the kitchen area. He drew a deep breath and smiled. Was there anything better than the smell of pancakes and maple syrup combined with the acrid scent of strong coffee?

Yeah, there was one thing: warm woman fresh from his bed.

"Have a seat." Harmer was just setting down a plate heaped high with flapjacks. "Sorry there's no bacon or eggs to go with this."

Lonzo picked up his fork. "Heck, I would've been happy with cold cereal."

She snatched the syrup back out of his reach. "Now you tell me!"

He held up his hands in surrender. "Come on, Harper, you didn't give me a chance to finish. What I was going to say was that while I would've been satisfied with cereal, you have earned my eternal gratitude for preparing such an amazing feast for me, unworthy as I am."

"Oh, brother." She rolled her eyes and handed back the bottle, but not before she grinned and served herself first.

Lonzo loved this teasing side of her. Laughter had been in short supply in his life for a long time. It felt pretty damn good.

They both concentrated on their meal, neither one in a hurry to set the day's agenda. Finally, though, they'd run out of both pancakes and time. They worked together to clear the dishes, the silence growing heavier by the minute.

After drying the last plate, she tossed the dish towel on the counter. "Can we get this over with? The waiting is killing me."

Lonzo dried his hands on his jeans. "The waiting for what, Harper? You know I'm going to make sure you're safe from this guy."

When she didn't immediately respond, he frowned. "You do know that, don't you? There's no way I'm letting you take one step out of my sight until we both know the killer is in custody...or better yet, dead."

She shuddered. "I don't want you to kill anybody, Lonzo."

So now it started. "It's what I do, Harper, and I'm damned good at it."

Harper ignored his comment and went into full denial. "I've been thinking about this since I got up this morning."

She picked up the dish cloth and began scrubbing the already clean counter top. "I overreacted yesterday."

He gripped his coffee cup hard enough to make his hand ache. "Hearing your boss get killed and then running like hell doesn't sound like an overreaction to me. Short of trying to take the bastard down by yourself, what else could you have done?"

Harper was still not looking at him. "I could've called the police and let them handle the situation. If I had, they might even have the guy in jail by now."

"Or you could've gotten one of his friends and been dead, lo, these many hours." He grabbed the dish cloth from her hand before she wore the pattern off the countertop. "Now, why don't you tell me what's really bothering you? Do you think I can't handle one pitiful excuse for a cop by myself?"

For a second, she looked past him before finally dragging her gaze back up to meet his. "No, that's not it at all."

"Then what is it, Harper? If you trust me to keep you safe, let me do my job."

“No, I can't do that, Lonzo. I won't let you risk your life for me.”

“Why the hell not? Did you not listen to what I told you last night? I risk my life all the time, just like the cops and the military do. The only difference is that I'm a lot harder to kill because I don't stay dead.”

For the first time, she looked at him as if he were some kind of alien freak. While half true, it still pissed him off. Maybe he wasn't exactly human, she sure hadn't complained about that last night. At least he managed to keep that thought to himself.

He reached out to touch her arm, letting his fingers trail slowly down to her hand. When she didn't immediately pull away, he entwined his fingers with hers. “Harper, the longer we let the killer walk the streets, the more time he has to either escape or set someone else up to take the fall for your boss's death. Even if you weren't the most likely candidate to fill that role in this little play of his, I wouldn't let that happen, not to anyone. It's not in me to let the bad guys win.”

She stared down at their hands for the longest time. There was no missing the worry in her dark eyes, but this one issue he wouldn't back down on. No way.

Finally she murmured, “What do we do?”

Good. She was going to be reasonable. “First, we check out your office and your apartment. Also, we need to get someplace where we can watch the local news and pick up the local papers to see what's been reported. Once we know where we stand, we can make plans.”

She tugged on the oversized sweatshirt she was wearing. “I need something different new to wear out in public. Some shoes would be nice, too.”

He grinned. “Luckily these deluxe accommodations come with all the amenities. I ran the sweats we borrowed from Lacey through the wash last night and threw them in the dryer this morning before I got in the shower. They should be ready by now, so at least you don't have to go out wearing those.”

He tilted his head to the side and smile as he gave her the once over. “Although I'll miss them.”

“Why? Because they do so much to show off my figure?” She twirled around, letting him look his fill.

“No, because they were so much fun to take off of you last night.” He kissed her, keeping the fires carefully banked. There was nothing he wanted more than to head right back to the bed with her, but now wasn't the time.

He reluctantly released her, worrying the minute he was out of sight she would start thinking of all kinds of reasons they shouldn't go after the cop themselves. If he thought she'd stay put, he'd leave her right where she was and deal with the bastard by himself.

But there was no use in thinking along those lines. Lately, the barrier had remained stable for days on end, but there was no telling how long it would stay that way. Even a small blip might allow a handful of Others to slip across. The thought of Harper running into a bunch of those crazies was the stuff of nightmares.

He could hear Harper moving around in the next room as she dressed. All in all, she was handling all of this pretty well. One way or the other, he was going to fix this for her. And once she had her life back, he'd see if maybe there wasn't room in it for him.

With that happy thought, he drank the last of his coffee and put on his game face. It was time to put his weapons to good use and make the world a safer place for Harper.

Chapter 8

Harper clumped along in oversized flip-flops and borrowed sweats. At least Lonzo had had the good sense not to laugh—much. He'd promised to stop at the nearest discount store to pick up more suitable attire for her. They reached his truck without mishap after once again getting his mysterious friend to distract the guards.

"I appreciate this DJ helping us out. I hope he doesn't mind being dragged into my problems."

"Don't sweat it. DJ lives to play cat-and-mouse with the guards, and he's taken computer hacking to an art form. He's only ever found one person talented enough to follow his cyber-trail."

Something about Lonzo's smile had her asking, "What did he do when that happened?"

Lonzo's smile grew bigger. "He married her."

Okay, then. So Paladins did get married. Interesting. As that thought danced through her mind, Lonzo merged into traffic. He wound through the streets of Seattle, frequently making turns and keeping one eye on the rearview mirror.

"We seem to be in the clear. Let's cruise by your office first and then your apartment. Once we've checked them for any obvious police activity, we'll head for the store."

Her heart lodged in her throat as they drove past the law offices. Strips of yellow crime scene tape cordoned off the sidewalk. Policemen could be seen moving around inside.

"Mr. Cody was a nice man. He didn't deserve this." Tears stung her eyes before trailing down her cheeks. "I feel so bad for his wife and their two kids."

"I'm sorry, Harper. We'll make sure the bastard who did this won't get away with killing him."

She could only nod as she turned to watch until the building was no longer in sight. Next, they did a quick drive-by of her apartment building, but there was no sign of the police in the area. If they'd ever been there, they were gone now. That didn't mean the place wasn't being watched.

"Why do you think he left my purse for the police to find instead of taking it himself?"

Lonzo waited until they'd turned the next corner to answer. His voice had the same deep growl as the truck's powerful engine. "Do you want the truth or the feel-good answer?"

"The truth." Maybe.

"This cop has already proven himself to be a killer. Another death won't mean much in the grand scheme of things as far as he's concerned. I'm guessing he left the purse to distract the police while he hunts for you himself. He's betting on finding you first."

Once again Lonzo's face was set in hard lines. She hardly recognized him as the man who'd held her all night long.

"Why do you think that?"

He glanced at her. "Because that's what I'd do."

There wasn't much she could say to that. With a sudden surge of power, the car shot forward into a break in the traffic ahead as they veered off onto the ramp leading to the interstate going northbound. They rode in silence until they'd left the highway behind to stop in a crowded parking lot.

Lonzo pulled out his wallet and handed her a stack of cash. "Get whatever you need."

She reluctantly accepted the money. "I promise to pay you back."

"Don't sweat it, Harper. There's plenty more where that came from." He used the remote to unlock her door. "Now let's get going."

Inside the store, Harper took a cart and headed for the shoe department first before moving on to pick out two T-shirts and some jeans. While she made her selections, Lonzo prowled the area, glaring at anyone who came too near her. When she stopped to buy a bra and some panties, he slipped up behind her and grabbed the package of practical cotton ones from her hand.

She tried to steal them back. "Hey, I wanted those."

He grinned at her. "My money, my choice."

After checking the size, he tossed them back in the bin and reached for another package filled with bright colored lace. The teasing light in his eyes was impossible to resist.

"Since when do you have any say about my underwear?" She tried hard to be stern, but feared she sounded more flirtatious.

He leaned in close to whisper, "Since I'm hoping to be there when you take them off."

Her face flushed hot, although not entirely out of embarrassment. The memories of last night and earlier that morning were too fresh.

"Damn it, Harper, quit looking at me like that!" His smile was all male temptation. "Unless, of course, you want to find out how private those dressing rooms are. Because I'm telling you right now, I'm definitely up for it."

She laughed and grabbed the package out of his hand. "Behave."

He wiggled his eyebrows and leered at her. Thank goodness the effect was more comical than seductive. "That's not what you said last night or this morning."

There was no winning this argument, so she didn't even try. "I have everything I need."

"We need to take a swing through the men's department."

She turned the cart in that direction, but as she swept past him, she smiled, "I don't see why. I already have one."

Her comment obviously pleased him. "And how is that working for you?"

Harper pretended to give the matter some serious thought as she gave Lonzo a long look from head to toe and back. "So far, so good. Certainly no shortcomings that I've noticed."

She liked making him laugh. "That's good to hear, Harper. Real good."

Lonzo did his best to keep the mood light while they were in the store. It wouldn't last once they walked back outside and into the real world.

He'd already made a decision about what they should do next, but he wasn't sure how Harper would feel about it. What he really wanted to do was to park her back at headquarters with Laurel while he and his friends went hunting. For a few seconds he let himself savor the idea of cornering his prey and letting that dirty cop see his death reflected in the depths of Lonzo's gaze.

But that wouldn't clear the taint on Harper's name after her name being flashed on the evening news as a person of interest in the murder of her boss. No, they'd have to bring the cop to justice, making sure he couldn't wiggle off the hook. But for that to happen, Lonzo would need backup.

The Regents might not like it, but Lonzo was going to ask Devlin Bane and the rest of the Paladins for help. They'd have to tread carefully because none of them could risk drawing attention to the secret world in which they lived. He was willing to risk everything for Harper, but he couldn't ask his friends to do the same. They'd all taken the same vow of secrecy, and their honor demanded they honor that promise.

"You're looking pretty fierce there, Lonzo."

The slight tremor in Harper's voice had him tamping down his predatory nature. "Sorry, guess I got lost in thought."

Her eyes narrowed. "Those must have been some pretty dark thoughts."

They had reached the checkout line where too many people were standing too close. This was no place to carry on this conversation. "I'll explain outside."

The last bit of humor faded from her eyes, but she accepted the delay and began unloading their cart.

Lonzo waited until they were safely back in the car before speaking again.

"Before we do anything, I want to talk to Devlin Bane. He's the top Paladin the area, and I trust him with my life. Even more important, I'd trust him with yours."

Harper had been staring out of the windshield, but now she turned her worried eyes in his direction. "I'm thinking you should drop me at the closest police station. There's no reason for you to get any more tangled up in my mess."

His temper flared hot. He slammed his fist down on the steering wheel. "No reason, Harper? After the night we spent together and you want me to walk away now?"

She reached out to touch his arm. "No, the last thing I want to do is watch you walk away. But I also don't want you getting in trouble with the police for hiding me when they were looking for me. We both know you can't afford for them to find out where I spent the night."

He hated that she was right. "Let's not panic. We'll talk to Devlin first and go from there."

"All right, but if he says I should turn myself in, promise you won't try to stop me."

He reluctantly nodded, hating this whole conversation. "Don't worry, Harper. We'll get through this together."

And hopefully they'd stay together, but he left that part unsaid.

Half an hour later, the two of them were in Devlin's living room. Harper had accepted the seat Dev had offered her and a cup of tea from Laurel. Lonzo positioned himself right behind his woman, his hands on her shoulders as the two of them faced his grim-faced friend.

"Okay, Lonzo, I get what you did and why."

Blake Trahern, who stood at the window looking out at Puget Sound, nodded in agreement. "So do I."

That came as no surprise. Devlin leaned back on the couch, his own hand tangled with his pregnant wife's. Each man had bent or broken every rule imaginable to keep the woman they loved safe. Now they were married with children on the way.

It gave Lonzo hope, something that had been missing from his life for far too long.

Devlin continued, "But I've got to tell you that this is a cluster f—"

He caught himself before finishing the expression. After shooting an apologetic look at Laurel, he tried again. "This has the potential of being a major problem for us."

Harper looked up over her shoulder at Lonzo. "He did this out of friendship for me, Mr. Bane. If you need to blame someone, blame me."

Friendship, his ass. He didn't need to explain to Devlin what he was feeling, and now wasn't the time to tell Harper.

“We need to track this guy down and make sure he takes the fall for what he did.”

Devlin's green eyes had that rock hard look they got when he was about to go into battle. “I assume you've already sicced DJ and Cullen on his trail.”

Lonzo swallowed hard and nodded. “I figured it would save time if they were hunting while we worked out the rest of the details.”

Devlin smiled and shook his head. He glanced over his shoulder toward Trahern. “I'm assuming you'll want to be invited to this party, too.”

Trahern walked around the couch and sat down. “Wouldn't miss it.”

Before they could get started, the doorbell rang. Laurel looked at Devlin as she stood up. “I'm guessing I should up the order on the pizza?”

Her husband shrugged. “Yeah, you'd better triple it. I called Larem, Barak, and Hunter in. I doubt their women stayed behind.”

As the rest of Lonzo's friends filed into the room, he grinned. That rogue cop didn't know what he'd done when he messed with Lonzo's woman. The full wrath of the Paladins was about to come down on his head.

Lonzo was a big man, and Harper liked that about him. But surrounded by all of his friends, she was feeling a bit overwhelmed. They were all dressed in casual clothes, mostly jeans and T-shirts, but there was no mistaking them for anything but the warriors they were. Somehow Devlin's comfortable living room had somehow morphed into a war room, complete with several computers set up in the adjoining dining room while the other men checked their weapons.

DJ, the guy who'd gotten them past the guards last night, was pounding on the keys of a laptop. His wife sat next to him, her expression as intense as his as they hunted for Leo Timms. The man at the third computer seemed calmer until she got a look at the fierce expression on his face. Another hunter following a trail.

“Are you all right?”

She looked up at Lonzo, his handsome face the one comfort in this whole room. “This is all a bit much for me.”

“Don't worry. It will over soon. DJ, Cullen, and Reggie over there have made real progress. They've downloaded camera feeds from the area around the law office showing Timms was in the area around the time of the shooting. But there weren't any at the entrance of the building so we can't prove he actually went inside. They got into Mr. Cody's computer, too. There's no mention of an appointment on his calendar, so either he didn't record it or Timms showed up unannounced. Cullen also hacked his cell phone account and is trying to track it. Right now Timms must have his phone turned off, but the minute he makes a call, we'll have him.”

“And then what?”

Lonzo nodded toward the far corner where the man she'd met briefly yesterday and another who shared his same pale eyes and gray streaked hair were checking their guns. “Then we get him to confess and turn it all over to the cops.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

Lonzo's smile turned wolfish. “I'm going to blackmail him and get it on tape.”

Rather than being reassured, she was more frightened. “Why would he believe you have any proof of what he did?”

“Because I'm going to tell him you told me everything and offer to make sure you disappear for good if he pays me enough money.”

He knelt down in front of her, taking her cold hands in his. “If that doesn't work, we'll find some other way to make him talk. I can be very persuasive when I want to be.”

A shiver of fear rippled over her skin as once again she saw past Lonzo's charming exterior to the trained killer inside. He knew it, too. If she wasn't mistaken, that was hurt that had flashed through his eyes.

"Once we nail his ass, you'll be safe, Harper. That's all I care about. Then you can go back to your life and forget I was ever in it."

When he started to pull away, she held on tighter. "And if I don't want my old life back?"

He studied her face for several seconds. "There's nothing I'd like better, but one thing at a time. Let's get past today and then see what the future holds."

Before she could respond, DJ yelled, "Lonzo, get over here! I think we've got him!"

Lonzo kissed her and then stood up. "Game time."

She followed after him, grabbing his arm to make him stop and listen. "I'm going to be the bait, Lonzo. You can come with me as protection, but he's more likely to believe me than you."

Lonzo was already shaking his head. "No way I'm letting you within a hundred miles of this guy. He's already tried to kill you once."

"I'm going with you or I'm going out the door. Your choice."

Then she crossed her arms over her chest and waited for Lonzo to make up his mind.

"I hate this."

Harper did, too. If she admitted it now Lonzo would drag her back to his car and handcuff her to the steering wheel like he'd threatened to at least half a dozen times already. Instead, she concentrated on tugging her shirt down to make sure it covered her body armor completely.

Body armor. Never in a million years would she have believed she'd have need of such a thing. But considering she was about to enter a parking garage surrounded by a dozen heavily armed men to face a murderer, she was glad to have it.

In the end, she'd managed to convince Lonzo and his friends to involve the police. Devlin had made the call, bringing in an agent from the FBI by posing as a security expert who specialized in providing bodyguards for his clients. It had taken a call from one of the Regents to convince the agent that Devlin was on the level about wanting to prove that Leo Timms, and not Harper, was responsible for the death of a local attorney.

Lonzo still hadn't given up. "It's not too late to turn back."

"Yes, it is."

They both turned to face the man who had stepped out of the shadows. "The smart thing would've been to leave town, not try to shake me down. Her boss tried it and see what happened to him."

His gun looked huge to Harper, but Lonzo only smiled and held up his hands. "No reason for this to turn ugly. We're only asking for enough to get out of town. Once we hit the highway, you'll never hear from us again."

Time to play her part. "You're right about Mr. Cody. He deserved what he got. He had a habit of using his client's secrets against them. You can bet that money never showed up on the books or in my paychecks."

Lonzo stepped in again. "Yeah, the bastard made her help him. If she hadn't, he would've made sure some pictures of her went public."

Simms studied Harper with his reptilian eyes. "I wouldn't mind seeing those myself. Maybe I won't shoot you if you promise to send me copies."

Then he laughed. "No, they might a nice keepsake, but I really can't afford to leave you two alive. I've got too much to lose. My current boss is no one to mess with, and I don't want to

end up on his list of loose ends.”

He aimed his gun right at Harper's chest. “But at least I will make your death quick. That's more than he'd do for me.”

Before he could pull the trigger, the FBI agent charged in shouting, “FBI! Drop your weapon.”

The rest of Lonzo's friends appeared out of nowhere, surrounding Timms. But like any cornered predator, he attacked instead of surrendering. As he pulled the trigger, Lonzo threw himself in front of Harper, taking the shot himself. She screamed as he hit the ground in a puddle of his own blood.

She ignored the chaos around them as she cradled Lonzo's head tried to stop the flow of blood from Lonzo's side with her hands.

“Lonzo Jones, don't you dare die on me. You belong to me, and I keep what's mine. Do you hear me! I keep what's mine!”

His eye opened briefly as his mouth quirked up in a small smile. “I hear you, Harper. I'm yours.”

Damn, he hurt. Lonzo forced his eyes open to glare up at the latest poster Laurel had taped on the ceiling over the steel table he was strapped down on. She'd gone back to puppies and kittens.

“You're awake.”

He turned his head to the right. “Not sure. I might be dreaming if you're here.”

Harper brushed his hair back from his face, the gentle touch warming him more than the thin blanket that covered his naked body. “Where else would I be? As I recall, we settled this in the parking garage. I said I keep what's mine, you agreed you were mine, so I'm here protecting my interests.”

The pain in his gut faded considerably. “All of that wasn't too much for you? I wouldn't have blamed you for running as far and fast from me as you could go.”

“I'd never do anything so foolish.”

Okay, that was good. He frowned. “What happened after I, uh, checked out.”

“The FBI guy took custody of Timms and said the recording Cullen made of everything was enough to charge him with Mr. Cody's murder. I feel guilty that everyone will hear me talking bad about my boss, though. He was a good man.”

“When you testify, you can correct that.”

“What about you, Lonzo? What will the Regents do if you're called to testify, too?”

Devlin walked out of Laurel's office in time to answer that one. “The FBI has agreed to leave us out of it for letting them take credit for the investigation and arrest. Timms has been convinced to flip on that mysterious boss he mentioned, so there won't even be a trial.”

Harper took Lonzo's hand in hers. “That's all the good news. I'm safe even if I'm out of a job.”

“What the hell? Those bastards fired you?”

Lonzo's surge of temper had all the machines beeping like crazy as he struggled against the chains that kept him tethered to the surgical table beneath him. Laurel immediately charged out of her office and headed for the syringe she'd learned to keep handy whenever he was in. More than once, he'd raged out of control in the aftermath of a wound. Lately, the road back to normal had taken him way longer than it used to.

Meanwhile, Harper did her best to shove him back down flat as she got right up in his face, “Lonzo, calm down and let me finish. I left because I wanted to. I've been thinking about looking for a different line of work for some time now. It helps that the law partners were nice

enough to offer me a nice severance package, so I don't have to be any huge rush to find a new job."

The machines settled back down before Laurel could inject the tranquilizer she'd been about to give him. After studying the readings for several seconds, she set the syringe aside.

"Nice job, Harper. If you have this calming effect on all of the Paladins, I'll hire you to help keep them in line. None of them like being patients, and sadly Lonzo is one of the worst."

Lonzo clearly didn't like this turn in the conversation. "Sorry, Doc, but I'm the only one she has that effect on."

Devlin spoke up again. "You sound pretty sure of that, Lonzo."

"I am." Then he turned to Harper. "Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, it is. I don't know what comes next, but I do know we'll be finding out together." She smiled down at Lonzo and brushed his hair back off his forehead. "Now get some sleep, big guy. I can't show you my proper gratitude for saving me until you're out of this hospital bed."

He waggled his eyebrows, trying to look flirtatious. "I'll be good as new by tomorrow."

Harper looked a bit doubtful as she glanced at all the beeping machines and the IVs dripping into his arm. "Really?"

Devlin and Laurel had been headed back toward her office, but Dev stopped to look back at the two of them. "Yeah, really. Having said that, I figure he'll need a week or two off duty to recuperate completely. What you two choose to do with that time is strictly up to you."

Lonzo waited to speak until the other couple disappeared into Laurel's office and closed the door. "So, what do you think? A quick trip to Vegas for a wedding and honeymoon? Of course we can always do the honeymoon first, if you'd prefer, and then get married. Either way is fine with me as long as they're both on the agenda."

Then he frowned. "That is if you love me. I mean, I love you, but maybe you don't..."

She hushed him with a finger across his lips. "I love you, Lonzo, and have since that first day you worked up the courage to sit at my table."

Then she gave him a smile that was everything he could've hoped for. "Now, I'll tell you what. While you get some sleep, I'll get us some reservations."

"It's a deal."