

In Jack's Arms
By Roxie Rivera

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Chapter One

Exhausted and suffering from an aching back, I rubbed my blurry eyes and tried to focus on the serial number etched into the bottom of the DVD player so I could compare it to the pawn ticket tag. Conducting a spur of the moment inventory on thousands of items in our storeroom? It wasn't exactly the way I had wanted to spend my Monday, but an overnight break-in and burglary had pretty much scuttled my plans.

"Hey, Abby?" Mark, one of my brokers, poked his head into the backroom. "One of our regulars is here. He's trying to pawn a silver chain but..."

"It's under weight?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't bother you with it, but he's one of our best customers. I know you like to give them a break every now and then."

"Who is it?"

"Big Carl."

"Oh." I thought of the sweet older man who took care of his ailing mama. She was torn up with diabetes and on dialysis, and he was barely scraping by with his hardware store job. "What's he want?"

"He wants eighty, but I was thinking of giving him, like, thirty-five or forty."

"It's the end of the month, Mark. I bet he's trying to scrape together enough money for his mama's meds. Give him the eighty. He's good for it."

I didn't say what we were both thinking. On the first, Carl would start receiving the disability and Social Security deposits that kept their household just this side of the poverty line. Like many pawn shops, Kirkwood's Jewelry and Loan provided a needed service to folks who required a little extra money to tie together the ends of their dwindling budgets.

There weren't a lot of choices for households on the fringe. They could come through my front door, pawn a television or watch and walk out with some cash to be repaid at a high but fair interest rate, or they could take their chances with one of the payday loan places that were popping up all over the place. The really desperate ones visited loan sharks like Besian Beciraj or John Hagen, although the latter was rumored to be winding up the illicit side of his business.

Mark looked less than thrilled with my decision but shrugged. "Whatever you say, boss lady."

He didn't say it meanly, but I sensed he didn't approve of the small favors I did for our regular customers every now and then. He had been at the shop only a few years and had come from a personal finance place across town that did things differently. I had learned the business by trailing my granddad around the store as a kid. Customer loyalty and word of mouth were huge in this trade, and I leapt at any chance to ensure both.

Letting it go, I got back to work comparing the serial numbers and pawn tags in our company database to the items remaining on our shelves. Since being called up to the shop just after six that morning, I had crawled and climbed and sifted through hundreds of items. I had never been more thankful for Granddad insisting on upgrading to barcodes and scanners a few years ago. This ordeal had been bad enough that the thought of having to manually flip through the inventory logs made me want to weep!

A knock at the storeroom door interrupted my work. The police and insurance crew had been in and out of the shop all day, but it was nearly seven in the evening so I

doubted it was either of those two paying me a visit at this hour. Wiping my dusty hands on the towel slung over my shoulder, I crossed to the door and wrenched it open. The jovial, handsome face of Detective Eric Santos greeted me. "Hey!"

"Hi, Abby." He gestured to the storeroom behind me. "Would it be all right if I came in to chat for a few minutes?"

"Sure." I stepped aside and motioned for him to join me. "It's been a while since you've visited the shop. Not since those punks in the 1-8-7 crew tried to unload all those stolen cell phones, right?"

"Has it been that long?" He shook his head and raised his eyebrows. "Man, that's been seven months? Eight?"

"About that," I said. "Granddad was still puttering around the place."

The corners of his mouth dipped with sadness. "I still have a hard time believing Mr. K is gone. I walked in the door and expected to see him behind the counter, to hear him laughing and telling his stories."

"It's been five months, and I still do the same thing, Eric." Feeling a fresh wave of grief welling up inside me, I quickly changed the subject. "So are you working the robbery beat now?"

He leaned back against one of the sturdy shelves. "No, I'm still working guns and gangs."

"But this was a robbery. Unless..." I put two-and-two together and exhaled roughly. "You think this break-in last night was gang related?"

"I do."

"Eric, they didn't take anything useful. They totally bypassed the big-ticket items like jewelry and electronics. They didn't even try to get to the firearms. All they took were the video cameras and cell phones."

He frowned. "That's all?"

I nodded. "So far that's the only thing that's missing back here. What kind of a gang robs a store full of expensive, easy to fence jewelry and doesn't even take a single gold chain?"

"You've seen some of the dumbasses who run with the crews around here." Eric shot me a troubling look. "Of course, this might have been a message."

"From?"

"You're in a tricky spot here, Abby. You've got the Hermanos that way and the 1-8-7 crew that way." He gestured to his left and right with his thumb. "Now that John Hagen is getting out of the sharking game, the word is that the Albanians are pushing down into this territory."

Nothing that Eric said was a revelation to me. I had lived and worked in this neighborhood long enough to know all the angles and all the power players. "I doubt it's the Albanians."

"Yeah, because they're such warm and fuzzy guys."

"I don't know about warm and fuzzy but I've never had problems with any of them."

"Probably because your granddad used to play nice with Afrim Barisha before he got himself shot and stuffed in a trunk," Eric brusquely replied. "Don't think I don't know about all that under the table dealing those two did."

"I wouldn't know a thing about that." I did, actually, know quite a bit about the way Granddad used to take payments for the Albanian loan shark who operated out of

the backroom of a bar a few blocks over from us. After inheriting the business, I put a stop to it, but I had managed to maintain a cordial relationship with Besian Beciraj, the mob captain who had stepped in to fill the power void.

"You had better not," Eric gently warned. "That's not a world you want to get mixed up in, Abby. It's dark and dangerous business. Stick to pawning and making loans. It's safer."

I considered some of the violent and threatening customers who came through the front door. "Some days."

"Fair enough." He conceded that fact with a smile. "Look, I'm going to keep an eye on this case. To me, this burglary was part of a bigger pattern. You had an attempted break-in a few weeks ago and then this real break-in last night. They stole from you but not enough to hurt you. Someone is trying to intimidate you—and who is more likely than Besian?"

"He doesn't need to intimidate me. Our business models are totally different. I operate on the right side of the law, and he operates on the wrong one."

"It could be about a protection tax."

"Well, I'm a skilled negotiator, Eric. I've got this one."

"Don't be so cocky, Abby. You can't do everything on your own."

"I've done a pretty good job so far." Eric knew only too well what sort of childhood I had survived before Granddad had stepped in to adopt me and my older brother. At a very early age, I had learned that I could count on no one but myself—and that I needed to be able to talk my way out of any situation. "We'll be fine, but I really appreciate you showing so much concern."

"This pawn shop has been around since the fifties, and your family is one of the oldest in this neighborhood. The businesses on this block are the main reason this area has stayed safe and prosperous. I want it to stay that way."

"So do I."

Eric signaled the end of that discussion with a short bob of his head. "So how is Mattie doing? I'll admit I was upset that he wasn't placed on my baseball team this year. I really miss him at short stop, and no one trash talks from the dugout like Mattie."

I grinned at the funny memories Eric evoked. For the last four years, the detective had been coaching a special needs baseball team every summer. The program had gotten so popular that they had added two more coaches and teams this year. "Mattie was sad that he didn't make your team, but he seems to really enjoy Jack and Finn's coaching style."

Eric issued a throaty sound of annoyance and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Everyone loves those Connolly brothers." He gave a snort of amusement. "At the rate the bleachers are filling with single ladies, these games are going to be standing room only soon. If the women hanging around the parking lot after the games are any indication, Jack might be the hottest bachelor in Houston this summer."

I ignored the sharp bite of jealousy that Eric's words inspired. The mere mention of Jack Connolly sent a wicked swooping sensation through my belly. Like his two younger brothers Finn and Kelly, Jack was something of a legend around this neighborhood. He had been an officer in the Marine Corps and had completed two tours in Afghanistan and two in Iraq before his convoy rolled over an IED and he sustained a head injury that forced him out of the job he had loved so much.

Four years ago, he had returned to Houston to take over the family gym. Granddad had given him a series of small loans over that first year to help Jack make payroll and improvements. Since that first morning he had walked into the shop to pawn that motorcycle he had loved so much, I hadn't been able to shake my immediate and incredibly strong attraction to the dark-haired, green-eyed fighter. I had absolutely no business at all fantasizing about the smolderingly sexy former Marine who taught my weekly self-defense class, but I couldn't help myself.

Hiding my interest in Jack, I said simply, "He's a nice guy. They both are."

"They are," he agreed. "I think it's important for our players to see someone like Finn living a full, happy life. He doesn't let his missing leg stop him from going after life full-force, you know?"

"Absolutely." I couldn't help but smile as I remembered the Saturday morning practice session when Mattie had gotten his first look at Finn's prosthesis. "I almost died from embarrassment when Mattie asked Finn if he was a cyborg."

Eric laughed. "That sounds like Mattie all right. What did Finn say?"

"He told Mattie to keep his secret because the government didn't want everyone to know about their super soldiers."

"I bet Mattie just ate that right up."

"He loved it. I don't think I've seen him laugh that hard in a long time." Ever since our granddad had finally succumbed to his congestive heart failure, Mattie had been withdrawn and temperamental. All that changed when the baseball team had started practicing in early May. "He's happier lately and spending a lot of time at Connolly Fitness."

"I doubt Jack or Finn mind that at all."

"At first, I was worried he would overstay his welcome, but Jack assured me they all enjoy Mattie's company."

"That's good. I know Mattie is in that odd phase where he's too old for school—and he loved high school—and too young and independent for the residential programs around town."

My younger brother's Down Syndrome diagnosis had hampered his earliest years, when our mother was more concerned about finding her next fix than getting him to occupational or physical therapy. After moving in with Granddad, Mattie had finally gotten the help he had needed to thrive. "I'm thrilled he's making new friends and feeling out the real world in his own way. I don't worry nearly as much because I trust that Jack and Finn will keep an eye on him."

"Hell, with two Marines as his bodyguards, he's the safest kid in town."

"Let's hope."

Eric's phone began to ring and he fished it out of his pocket. When he glanced at the screen, he frowned but didn't answer before shoving it away. "I've got to run. I'll follow up with you in a day or two. When are you submitting your final report to the station?"

"Wednesday morning," I said, trailing him to the door. "I should have the inventory completed by tomorrow night." Even though I was certain he was overreaching on his gang tie suspicion, I asked, "Would you like a copy?"

He shook his head. "I'll grab one from the detectives on this case. I'd like to come by and look at the security footage."

"There isn't any."

Eric looked taken aback. "How is that possible?"

"Dan forgot to switch on the security system when he closed down the store on Sunday evening. That's how these thieves were able to get in and out unnoticed."

"I hope you're going to dock his pay for that."

"It was an honest mistake."

Eric didn't look convinced. "I'll follow up with you if I hear anything troubling on the street."

"I would appreciate that." I opened the door and leaned against it. "Thanks for checking on us, Eric."

"Happy to serve," he said with a grin. Two steps into the office area of the shop, he paused and turned back to me. "There was a warrant roundup this morning. You know what that means."

"Ugh." My shoulders dropped as I imagined the crowd that would be waiting at my door in the morning. "It means I'm going to have a line of mamas and girlfriends trying to pawn everything they own in the morning to raise bail money."

He smirked teasingly. "Hey, that's your bread and butter, right?"

"Get out of here," I said and shooed him. "Or else I'll call the cops on you for criminal mischief."

Chuckling, Eric waved at me and disappeared into the main area of the shop. I popped into our finance manager's office and waited for her to finish up the note she was making before asking her to request extra cash from the bank before she clocked out. In the final days of the month, we always experienced an upswing in loan demand, and with the added surge of customers who typically came to us when they needed to bond out their relatives, I hated the idea of running low on cash when we needed it most.

After a quick chat with the employees on the night shift, I returned to the storeroom and picked up where I'd left off on the inventory. Just as I was getting really sick of numbers and barcodes, Dan, the night manager, called out to me. "Abby, you in here somewhere?"

"At the back, in stereos and speakers," I shouted. "What do you need?"

"Where is Mattie?"

"His shift ended at four. He's probably at the gym. Why?"

Shuffling feet on concrete heralded Dan's arrival at the line of shelves behind me. "Was Mattie pulling past due tickets today?"

"Yes. I asked him to go through and pull everything that was a week beyond the grace period. Those customers have had ample time to come in and renew the loan or pay off the balance."

I scanned a barcode and steeled myself for the inevitable disagreement I knew was coming. Dan had been with the shop for nearly as long as I had been alive, but he didn't agree with my decision to allow Mattie to work with us. If Dan had his way, Mattie would only be allowed to clean the glass cases or sweep the place. My brother could do so much more—and I intended to make sure he got the chance to prove himself.

"Well, he seems to have taken some of the merchandise from the shop."

"What?" I stepped into the small walking space between shelves so I could see Dan. "What did he take?"

"A watch."

"Whose watch was it?"

"Nick Connolly's."

"Oh." The elder Connolly had been a longtime customer of the shop, and a few months earlier, he had come in to pawn a watch to raise some quick cash. To pay his light bill, he had said, but I had suspected it was for a card game. Between his alcoholism and gambling addiction, the old guy was a damned mess, but I hoped the bullet he had recently taken while trying to save his youngest son's girlfriend might put him on the wagon for good. "I'm sure he thought he was helping friends."

"He can't do that, Abby. It's property of the shop, and that's on our books. We can't keep the doors open if your brother is skipping off with inventory whenever he pleases. This is why I don't like him messing with my stuff. He isn't smart enough to—"

"Dan," I interrupted him as respectfully as possible even though I was steaming inside. "First it's not *your* stuff. It's the store's stuff. Second, I'm quite aware of how the pawn business works and how to balance our books and inventory. My business degree sort of covered all that. As for Mattie taking the watch, I'm sure this was an isolated case. He's never taken a thing from this store, not even a pencil from my desk, without asking permission two or three times. That's just the way he is."

"Well—I don't like it."

I bit my tongue rather than reminding him where he could go if he didn't. "Mattie is a Kirkwood, and this is our family's business. He belongs here. End of story. Okay?"

Dan sighed. "Sure. Fine."

"I'll sort out the watch situation."

"I'm sure you will," he grumbled on his way back to the front of the shop.

Setting aside the barcode scanner and logbook, I found a stack of crates to sit on and rubbed my temples for a few seconds. Exhaling with frustration, I tugged my cell phone from the pocket of my jeans and dialed Mattie's number. Five rings later, someone finally answered, but it wasn't my brother.

"Hi, Abby."

I blinked as the gruff, rumbling waves of Jack Connolly's voice rolled through me. A girlish quiver of giddiness filtered through my belly and into my chest. "Hey, Jack. Um...I guess that answers my question about Mattie's whereabouts."

"He's here. I've got him doing circuits. Do you need him?"

"No, it can wait." I suddenly found myself wishing I had some other reason to keep Jack on the line. Man, how pathetic! I was pining over a man who only saw me as a client of his gym and the big sister of one of his players. Jack was so outrageously sexy that women were literally falling at his feet. A girl like me? I had no chance with a man like that.

I had seen the women he chatted up after class and around the baseball fields. They were blue or green-eyed beauties with killer curves and mega sex appeal. Me? I was basically the exact opposite of those girls with my cocoa skin, dark eyes and jet black curly hair. Instead of a knockout figure, I had a petite body with breasts that barely filled a B cup and a tiny booty that no amount of squats had yet to make big or delicious despite all the promises of those fitness DVDs.

"Abby?"

"Yes?"

"Are you okay? Mattie told me about the robbery." He hesitated. "If you need anything—"

"They only took some video cameras. It was nothing big. We've already had the doors and locks replaced and our security system has been revamped. We'll bounce back."

"I wasn't talking about the store, Abby. I was talking about *you*. Are you okay?"

The concern deepening his voice knocked me for a loop. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You know it's okay to *not* be fine sometimes, Abby. It doesn't make you weak to ask for some support from close friends."

"Like you?" The words rushed out of my mouth before I could even reconsider them. Were we close friends? I hoped so but...

"Of course like me, Abby." He paused for a few seconds. "You and Mattie are very important to me."

"We are?" God, I hated how stupid I sounded. *Get a grip, Abs!*

"Yes, you are. If you didn't know that, I'm obviously doing something wrong."

I swallowed hard and tried not to read into his comment. With my stress-fried brain, it would be only too easy to misinterpret this and make a real jackass of myself.

"Listen, when Mattie is finished working out, I'll bring him back to the shop. I'll swing by and grab some takeout, okay? Let me treat you guys to dinner. It's been a long day."

"Oh, Jack, you don't have to—"

"I want to, Abby," he cut in gently. "I'll send you a text when we leave. All right?"

"Um...sure."

"Great. See you later."

"Bye."

Staring at my phone, I tried to make sense of what had just happened. *We're important to him?* My fatigued brain dredged up all the run-ins I'd had with Jack over the last four years as he dragged his family's gym out of near bankruptcy to make it a raging success. After Granddad's health had started to go downhill, I seemed to see more of Jack. Now that I thought about it, I wondered if that was by design—*his* design.

All those late nights he had turned up at the shop to browse the firearms and go through our sports inventory suddenly seemed less than coincidental. How many times had he just happened to swing by when I was working late by myself or with only one other employee? How many times had he picked up a broom or mop to help me finish with closing?

I glanced up at the fluorescent light bulbs overhead and remembered the way he had taken it upon himself to install them after running into me at the hardware store a few weeks ago. Never in my wildest dreams would I have dared to think that simple act of kindness was something else.

Was it really possible that devastatingly handsome Jack wanted *me*?

Chapter Two

Swinging side to side in his office chair, Jack Connolly stared at Mattie's phone. Abby's sweet voice ricocheted round and round in his head. How the hell had he screwed up things so badly that Abby didn't even realize how much her safety meant to him?

Still clutching Mattie's phone, he shoved out of his chair and crossed his office to the window that gave him an unimpeded view of the gym. He braced his palm against the cool glass and watched the two dozen or so clients moving through the various stations. Unlike some of the gyms that catered to high-end clientele with their sleek machines and expensive trainers, Connolly Fitness embraced an old-school feel with its minimalist design and wide open space.

Most clients followed a challenging conditioning and strengthening regimen that consisted of cardio, weight lifting and flexibility work. He made use of his contacts from his military days to hire instructors to teach self-defense and fighting classes like Krav Maga, kickboxing, Muay Thai and Eskrima. They had a mixed-martial arts program that was just over a year old and more popular than ever. Finally, after years of busting his ass, the gym was operating fully in the black.

But a few weeks earlier, they had come uncomfortably close to losing it all. Their father had gotten them tangled up in a mess of debts to two different loan sharks, one of them with a claim on the building itself. Jack's chest tightened when he thought of the way his younger brother's girlfriend had saved their backsides by giving the loan shark the building she had planned to use as the headquarters for her growing tech business.

The tightness in his chest increased when he remembered the night he and Kelly had barely managed to save her from that psycho stalker while their dad bled out on the floor of her apartment after taking a bullet to protect her. Their old man had held on through a night of surgeries and was now in recovery at home. Though he respected his father for risking his life for Bee's, Jack still had incredibly complicated feelings toward him. The years of abuse their family had suffered under that alcoholic bastard's hands were too much for him to forgive and forget.

Mattie's deep belly laugh drew Jack from his thoughts. The laughter punctuated the heavy metal Finn liked to play over the sound system in the evenings. Abby's baby brother hugged his stomach as he guffawed at something funny he had heard from the three guys he had been doing burpees beside. No doubt the joke or story he had just been told was dirty and wholly inappropriate. He had asked the guys who worked out with Mattie to watch their language but his request didn't seem to stick for very long.

Though he wanted to shield Mattie from the coarser side of male camaraderie, he was glad that the gym's clients all respected and accepted the younger man. Jack had made it perfectly clear that he would kick the ass of any person who spoke badly of or rudely toward Mattie and that Kelly and Finn would take turns whooping some ass when he was finished. So far, he hadn't had to follow through on that threat. Mattie's friendliness and sense of humor were so damned endearing even the roughest ex-Special Forces guys who trained at the gym couldn't help but smile when he was near.

Jack stepped into the gym. "Mattie! Do your cool down and hit the showers, man."

Mattie waved to let him know that he'd received his order and started the final phase of his workout. Jack slipped back inside his office and tidied up his desk. As they

inevitably did, his thoughts circled back to Abby. Like him, she was a workaholic, but he had his two brothers to keep him in line. Who did Abby have to watch her back and keep her from burning out with exhaustion?

From the moment Mr. Kirkwood had gotten sick and started the long, slow slide toward hospice, Jack had been constantly worried about Abby. His stomach just churned when he thought of the burdens she silently bore. Supporting her granddad as he started the final journey of his life, stepping into the old man's shoes to run the pawn shop, taking over as Mattie's guardian—it was a whole hell of a lot of stress for one woman to endure.

Not for the first time, he questioned his decision to give her some space and approach her slowly. He would be a damned liar if he said he hadn't been head over heels for Abby since the moment he spied her in the pawn shop that morning he had come in to beg for a short-term loan from her grandfather. That mega-watt smile of hers had nearly knocked him on his ass. Falling for a college student had been the very last thing he had ever expected that morning.

Her age and his respect for her grandfather had been the two main reasons he hadn't pursued his interest in her at the time. Newly discharged from the Corps he had loved so much, he hadn't been in the best place emotionally or mentally back then. She had deserved better than a short-tempered, rough bastard who couldn't sleep through the night.

But watching her date other men hadn't been easy. Every time he worked up the courage to finally make a move, the timing was wrong. When she had been free for the asking, he had been committed to saving their family's legacy, building a loyal clientele and helping Finn get off the booze and into a treatment program. She had been dating some hotshot law school guy when he finally had some room in his schedule and his life to do right by wooing her. Just when he thought the universe had aligned, her granddad got sick and passed away and then his own father was mired in some messy shit with the Albanians and John Hagen.

What if there wasn't a perfect time? What if he had fucked it all up by not going after the woman he wanted? Jack swiped his keys and wallet from his drawer and gruffly swore, "Shit!"

"We're not supposed to use that word, Jack." Freshly showered and holding his gym bag, Mattie stood in the doorway of the office with a censorious expression. "You owe a dollar to the swear jar."

"A dollar!" Jack reacted with mock outrage. "Jesus, when I was a kid, it was a quarter."

"Well, you're old and that's the cost of inflation."

"I'm not *that* old, Mattie."

"You're thirty."

"Thirty-three," he corrected. "And that's still not old."

"It's older than me."

"Fair enough." Jack reached for his own gym bag and handed over Mattie's phone. "Your sister called earlier. Did you forget to tell her that you were coming here?"

"Uh-oh." Mattie made a face. "Was she mad?"

"No. She sounded concerned."

"You're sure she wasn't mad?"

"Why would she be mad at you?"

"I broke a rule."

"What rule?"

"A shop rule." Mattie hesitated and then unzipped a side pouch on his bag. He produced a watch that was only too familiar to Jack. "I took this from the shop."

Jack fought the urge to snatch the watch his mother had worked so hard to buy for their father all those Christmases ago. Instead he held out his hand and let Mattie gently place it on his palm. He turned it over and ran his finger across the inscription there. The memories of his gentle, sweet mother created a throbbing ball of pain that choked off his throat. The guilt of missing her funeral while he was away a war still ate at him.

"Did Pop pawn this?"

Mattie nodded. "He forgot to pay."

"So you took it?"

"Nick is my friend. He always brings me those sour candies I like."

Jack made a mental note to remind his father to stop doing that. Mattie went through life thinking the very best of everyone when reality was so much meaner. He hated the idea of Nick conditioning Mattie to accept gifts in exchange for favors. It could lead to some dangerous places.

"Abby put four extensions on the loan," Mattie continued, "but it was in the pull stack for this week."

"The pull stack?"

"It's what we call the stuff we take out of the back and put up for sale in the store."

Irritation raced through him as he realized how close their family had come to losing this watch because of their father's reckless selfishness. "We'll swing by the shop and I'll make this right."

Seeing the uncertainty on Mattie's face, he reached out and squeezed the younger's man's shoulder. "I appreciate what you did, but next time, talk to Abby first. There are laws and rules that the business has to follow."

"I understand."

"Good." He smacked Mattie's back and drew the kid in for a hug. "Let's get out here. We'll visit the shop first and then grab dinner somewhere."

"Tacos?" Mattie hopefully asked.

Jack laughed. "You want me to chase down Thai and Chuy's truck again, don't you?"

"I have an app on my phone." Mattie tapped at the screen. "It tells me where my favorite food trucks are. Kelly's Bee made it."

He smiled at the way Mattie described his brother's girlfriend. To his mind, the ownership in that relationship was totally reversed. It was Bee who had owned Kelly—heart and soul—since she was a teenager. Though they were taking things slowly now and rebuilding the broken trust that existed between them after that clusterfuck stalker situation, Jack had no concerns about the couple. Given time, their relationship would heal.

As he walked Mattie out of the gym and waved at Finn to let him know that he was heading home for the evening, Jack decided it was time to put some time and effort into the relationship he wanted with Abby. The gym was doing great. His brothers were both in good places. Even Pop was safe and out of trouble for the moment. There might

not ever be a more perfect time than this one—and he was grabbing it with both hands and refusing to let go.

Mattie chatted his ear off on the ride to the pawn shop and clued him in on the filthy joke his workout buddies had told. Knowing Abby would flip if she heard Mattie repeat it, he launched into a quick lesson on locker room and boys-only talk. While some people tried to shield Mattie from everything, Jack took the view that Mattie was a grown man with the same interests as every other hot-blooded guy. He just needed to be told in clear-cut language what was and wasn't socially acceptable.

"Is that a boundary, Jack?"

Familiar with the boundaries talks Abby had with her brother, he nodded. "Yes, it's one of those social boundaries that we all have to learn."

"So I can laugh at dirty jokes at the gym?"

"Yes."

"But I can't tell them at the shop?"

"Exactly," he said, hoping to hell Mattie would follow through on the lesson. He found a parking spot in the lot across the street from the pawn store and killed his engine.

"You don't tell dirty stories at the gym, Jack."

"No, I don't."

"Why?"

"Because it's my business and it's unprofessional," he answered matter-of-factly. "It's also juvenile and can be disrespectful, especially toward women."

Mattie unbuckled his seatbelt and seemed to be considering what he had said. "I don't want to be disrespectful." With a broad grin, he reached for his door handle. "And I love women."

"So do I. They deserve to be treated with respect and protected, not talked about in locker rooms, gyms and man caves, okay?"

"Okay, Jack."

They left the truck and crossed the street. For a Monday evening, the shop seemed to be rather slow. He chalked it up to news of the robbery. By tomorrow night, the place would be teeming with customers. With the current economy and the expenses of a typical summer, people wouldn't stay away long.

When they stepped inside, the chimes sounded nice and loud to alert the floor staff. With the practiced eyes of a Marine, he scanned the shop and instantly detected Abby, the two security guards, her two brokers and Dan, the night manager. The two employees and Dan were helping customers in different areas of the store. One security guard hovered just to his left, watching the door, while another was at the rear of the shop, keeping an eye on the customers and transactions. Nothing about them pinged his internal radar so he moved on to the only person who interested him.

Abby stood at the jewelry counter in her usual outfit of jeans and a bright green polo shirt embroidered with the company logo. Gold and silver chevrons dangled from her ears and glinted every time she moved. She had taken out the braids she had been wearing the last time he had seen her and now had curls spilling around her shoulders.

What he wouldn't give to be able to wake up every morning and nuzzle in close to those dark waves! She would fit perfectly in his arms, her lithe ballerina-like body molded against his heat and strength. Throbbing need uncurled in his stomach at the

idea of seeing her smiling face in the early morning sunshine. He doubted there could be anything more beautiful than that.

Tearing his gaze away from the object of his desire, Jack examined the younger guy, probably close to Mattie's age, who had his pants hanging down below his ass and his boxers in full view. Jack zeroed in on the colors of the basketball jersey the guy wore. The little gangster wannabe had one leg bent with his full weight resting on his toes. The easily visible sole of his white sneaker had three hand-drawn numbers marking it.

1-8-7. It was the police code for a homicide and the name of the upstart gang that was trying to make a name for themselves in the area. The youngest, newest members were only allowed to show their affiliation by marking the bottoms of their shoes and wearing the gang's colors. Later, they would earn the rights to tattoos and bolder markings.

Eyes narrowed, Jack carefully watched the interaction. The moment he had heard about the robbery, he had suspected the 1-8-7 crew might be behind it. His second thought? The same Albanian outfit that had caused his family such a headache in early June. Jack would never forgive that bastard Besian for forcing Kelly to fight as his champion in the underground bare-knuckle tournament. Kelly could have been killed by the Russian giant who fought for Russian mob boss Nikolai Kalasnikov—and for what?

Money.

The same thing the guy hassling Abby wanted.

"Look, lady, I'm telling you this is real gold."

"I didn't say it wasn't. I said that all I can do with this is scrap it."

"Scrap? Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm a businesswoman. Do you honestly think I have a line of customers coming into my shop asking for a gold chain that says *PIMP*?" She gave the necklace a jiggle. "If I buy this, it goes into the scrap heap to be melted."

"Baby, you cold."

Jack's fingers curled at his sides. He didn't want anyone calling her baby but him. Holding himself back, he waited to see how she would react. One thing Abby had always made clear was her ability to handle even the toughest situations herself.

Abby cast an annoyed glare at the man. "I'm not your baby. Cut the crap and tell me what you want for all this." She gestured to the pile of jewelry on the counter. "And don't tell me three grand again because that number is a dream."

"Give me fifteen hundred."

She shook her head and poked through the rings and chains. "I'll give you eight."

"Eight! That's robbery."

Abby's lips pursed. "Sir, you came in here to ask me to buy your jewelry. I didn't ask you to come into my shop and cause a ruckus. All right? Now," she blew out a breath and sorted through the jewelry. "I'll give you two for this one, fifty for both of these, two for this one and three for this ring. That's it. Take it or leave it."

"Well I need more than that!"

"If you want to pawn instead of sell, I can go to twelve."

He considered her offer and then reached up to his mouth. He pried free his gold grill and held it out to her. "What about this?"

Abby stared at the slimy jewelry thrust toward her face. "Are you for real? You want me to price your grill?"

"It's gold."

She stared at the item for a few seconds before sliding to the left and crouching down to retrieve a roll of paper towels. After ripping a handful free, she reached out for the grill and wiped it clean. Holding it with another towel, she lifted her jeweler's loupe from the chain around her neck and examined the item. "How much did you pay for this?"

"Two thousand."

She lifted her gaze. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Why? You gonna tell me those ain't real diamonds or gold now?"

"The diamonds are real," she said, "but they're small. We're talking ten points and low quality." She dropped the loupe and took the grill to the gold testing spot along the counter behind her. With the ease and efficiency of a skilled appraiser, she scraped the metal and dripped nitric acid onto it. "The gold is real but it is ten carat."

"What? No. No. No. That's fourteen carat."

Abby sighed and carried the grill back to the customer. "It's not. It's exactly what I said it is, and the retail value is probably five or six hundred bucks. I'd offer you, like, two hundred if you want to sell and maybe three hundred to loan."

"This is bullshit! You're a thief! Trying to rip me off and take my gold!"

"I'm a thief?" Shaking her head, Abby dropped the grill onto the pile of jewelry. "You know what? Take your stuff and get out of my store."

"I ain't going nowhere, lady. You're gonna give me what I want."

Abby chortled and rolled those gorgeous brown eyes. "Or what?"

"You don't wanna see what I got under here, bitch." That scrawny bastard reached toward the front of his pants, sliding his hand under his shirt.

Seeing red, Jack reacted on instinct. He bolted across the shop, snatched the back of the guy's jersey and jerked him upright. Gripping the little shit's wrist, he dragged it toward the center of his back. A loud *thunk* echoed amid gasps as a wicked looking knife dropped to the floor. Jack kicked it behind him and then smashed the threatening prick's face down against the glass of the jewelry case.

"Man, get off me!"

Dropping his mouth close to the other man's ear, he hissed, "No one talks to Abby that way." He pushed the bastard's thumb back and drew a yowl of pain. "You're going to take your cheap ass chains and get the hell out of here."

The man slapped at the counter with his free hand and gathered up his goods. Still holding him by the back of the shirt, Jack walked him out of the shop. The security guard closest to the door held it open for him. Jack jerked his head toward the knife on the ground. "Put that away some place safe and call the police."

Out in the night, he dragged the would-be attacker to the corner. Before he let go, he made sure to give the man one final warning. "If I ever see you around here again, I'll rip that nasty grill out of your mouth and shove it up your ass. Understood?"

With a rough shove, he sent the skinny asshole stumbling forward. The kid straightened up and fixed Jack with a menacing stare. "You done made a big mistake, man. Huge!"

A harsh laugh erupted from Jack's throat. "Kid, I lived through two tours in Iraq and another two in Afghanistan. I've been shot. I've been blown up. I've survived a helicopter crash and a firefight. There ain't shit that you and your loser friends can do that scares me."

All bravado fled from the kid's face. Had he finally realized that he was dealing with a different breed of man? Jack meant every word he had said. He didn't make idle threats, not when it came to the safety of the people he cared for most. This prick was lucky he was getting away this easily after trying to hurt Abby.

My Abby. The possessive thought burned through him. It was one he could no longer deny. It was one he was determined to make a reality.

Hitching up his pants, the wannabe gangster pivoted on his heel. Jack watched him walk away until he disappeared around a corner. Heading back into the shop, he discovered Abby in a heated discussion with Dan while Mattie methodically cleaned the smudge created by that jerk's face on the glass case. Not liking the way Dan talked down to Abby, Jack forced his feet to remain frozen to the spot. Abby didn't need him riding to her rescue all the time. She was perfectly capable of handling her employee.

"We'll discuss this tomorrow, Dan. It's been a long day, and we're all on edge."

"It's theft, Abby."

Back ramrod straight, Abby looked like a viper ready to strike. "Are you seriously going to stand there and say that?"

Jack quickly read the situation and realized it was about the watch now tucked into the pocket of his jeans. He quickly ate up the floor with long strides and retrieved the watch. Holding it out, he said, "It wasn't theft. It was an honest mistake. I'm happy to pay for it."

"It's already been paid for," Abby informed him. "I covered the full retail price of the watch we would have assigned to it when it went onto the floor. The shop made plenty of money off this watch." Glancing at Dan, she added, "Which you would have known if you had let me speak to you in the morning."

The older man's ears turned red. "You could have said—"

"I don't have to say anything, Dan. It's my shop. I don't have to clear every single move I make with you." With an irritated huff, she spun away from the night manager and stalked back to her brother.

With his face puffed out and just as red as his ears, Dan muttered under his breath and stormed away to the line of cash registers. Still surprised by that waspish tone Abby had used, Jack slipped the watch back into his pocket and made his way to the jewelry counter Mattie had just finished cleaning. Taking in Abby's tired eyes and tense posture, Jack decided that she needed dinner, a hot bath and a massage.

"Abby." He spoke firmly but softly. "Get your purse and head home. Mattie and I are going to grab dinner. We'll meet you there."

"Jack, I don't need—"

"You need to get some rest. You need a hot meal and some time to unwind." He cupped her beautiful face with one hand, loving the way her darker skin looked against his tanned fingers, and gently brushed his thumb along the apple of her cheek. Her eyes widened fractionally, and she inhaled a surprised breath. In all the years they had been friends, it was the first time he had ever touched her so intimately.

It wouldn't be the last.

"Let me take care of you tonight."

An expression that seemed suspiciously close to panic crossed her face. "I can take care of myself, Jack."

"I never said you couldn't." He let his thumb trace that pouty lower lip of hers. He wanted nothing more than to dip his head and finally claim her mouth but this wasn't

the time or place. Later, he would get that kiss he wanted so badly. It would be the sort of kiss that left her trembling and panting. "Abby?"

She swallowed hard. "All right. I'll get my stuff and meet you at the house." She glanced back at her brother who looked on curiously. With a slant to her mouth, she added, "I'm sure he's going to make you chase down that taco truck he loves so much but don't let him bamboozle you into believing that it's okay for him to order that atomic hot sauce. He'll be up all night with heartburn."

Jack smiled. "I'll take that under advisement."

Abby dared to touch his chest. Her small hand felt so damned good rubbing that circle. He wanted to feel her skin against his without the thin cotton barrier between them. "Thank you, Jack. I appreciate you stepping in with that loser."

"He won't bother you again."

"I hope not."

"I'll make sure of it." He had never wanted to draw her close and kiss her forehead more. Fighting the urge to claim her so publicly, he let his hand fall from her face. "Where's the knife?"

"Pete locked it away in the safe and called Santos while you were dragging that guy outside. He'll pick it up in the morning and review the security tapes. He has a feeling he knows who that jerk was."

Jack had always been impressed with the detective and trusted he would handle the problem. "Get your stuff. I'll walk you out to your car."

She nodded, disappeared into the back and returned with her purse a short time later. He noticed the way she gave Dan a wide berth. He suspected the friction there existed because the older man had expected to take a more prominent role in the business after Mr. Kirkwood had passed. Jack wasn't sure why the man would have thought such a thing. It had been clear to anyone who had known Abby's grandfather that he had always planned for Abby to take his place, just as he had taken his father's in the family business.

With Mattie and Abby in front of him, Jack trailed them outside. He tried to keep his needy gaze from lingering on that fine, taut ass of Abby's but those jeans she wore were too tempting. Every Wednesday night during his self-defense class, she tormented him in workout pants that hugged her bottom so tightly. More than once, he had been forced to move to the back of the class while the women practiced their moves because Abby caused such a wild response in him.

He made sure Abby got into her car before sliding behind the wheel of his truck. Mattie was already buckled in and tapping at his phone screen, no doubt using that app Bee had created to help him track down the food truck. "Jack?"

"Yeah, bud?" He eased out of the parking space.

"Do you like Abby?"

His gut clenched. *Shit*. What if Mattie didn't approve? "Yeah, I like Abby."

Mattie was silent for a moment so long that Jack's stomach actually pitched with anxiety. "That's good."

Releasing a pent-up breath, he said, "I'm glad you think so. Now—where's this truck?"

Mattie showed him the map and the blinking icon. Jack quickly oriented himself and turned right at the next stoplight. They drove along for another minute or so before Mattie spoke again. "Hey, Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"You owe two dollars to the swear jar now. You said a-s-s."
Remembering some of the language he had used outdoors, Jack laughed. "We better make it five bucks, kid."